Dream Cultures

EXPLORATIONS IN THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF DREAMING

EDITED BY

DAVID SHULMAN

GUY G. STROUMSA

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and

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For our friend Charles Malamoud
and in memory of Catherine Malamoud

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Dream Cultures

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1

Introduction

David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa

1

This volume attempts to draw out some elements of a comparative, cross-cultural history of dreams. We treat dreaming as a cultural act, for while we by no means assume that we can make direct contact with the dream itself, in any of our texts, there is no doubt that the dream report and all subsequent interpretation and decoding are expressive of culturally specific themes, patterns, tensions, and meanings. Every dream culture articulates issues and makes assumptions, implicitly or otherwise, about the relatively private or public nature of dreams; the conditions in which dreams may reveal the future (or the past); the boundaries between the individual and society; the composition of the dreaming subject; and so on. To tell one's dream—first, perhaps, to oneself, then to another (perhaps a professional interpreter), and finally to still wider circles—is *always* an overdetermined act or statement, at once situating the self in relation to a rich universe of cultural meanings and implied metaphysical intuitions and creating, or re-creating, that same universe from within.

The essays included in this volume were initially presented at a workshop held at the Jagdschloss Hubertusstock in Markt Brandenburg in September, 1995, under the auspices of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam and the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The workshop was held exactly one hundred years after Freud finished the redaction of his *Traumdeutung* (although the book appeared only in 1900). Yet as *Kulturforscher*, we sought to understand the significance of dreams in different religious contexts in a way rather alien to the psychoanalytical tradition. Our primary assumption—that the place and role of dreams, and the very status of dreaming, are strongly influenced by cultural traditions and religious attitudes—led us to search for conspicuous differences in

cross-cultural patterns of dreaming and of dream interpretation, rather than for their universal elements. The modern assumption that dreaming is the most private and personal of modes is not shared by many of the cultures represented here, which sometimes see dreams as highly objectified, even capable of appearing in the consciousness of disparate subjects. We make no commitment to either of these views; our efforts have focused on the dream as witnessed, transmitted linguistically, framed as text, and interpreted, always in a culturally specific context. Such a context inevitably situates dreaming within an organized ecology of cultural forms and assigns its value. Some cultures (for example, the Maya peoples of Central America) make dreaming one of the most central and powerful of all expressive and ontic domains, while others may relegate dreaming to the periphery of the truly real. Theories of dream-communication—the modes of encoding, decoding, and interpretation—are always keyed to the semantics of such articulated cultural space.

The chapters in this volume thus deal with the comparative cultures of dreaming. As such, they build upon earlier cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies, and reflect certain assumptions and emphases that we shall attempt to make explicit here. Various collective efforts have been devoted in recent years to the place of dreams in different cultures. There have been excellent studies by anthropologists and medievalists, for example, and several important collections have been published. We wish to mention the volumes edited by Barbara Tedlock and Tulio Gregory.[1] Most recently we have *Il sogno raccontato*, a rich volume of essays on the various literary expressions of dreams in Western culture.[2]

Perhaps the most influential collective enterprise in this domain remains that of Roger Caillois and Gustav von Grunebaum, which appeared a generation ago.[3] The authors attempted a wide-ranging analysis of dreams within various cultures, but the focus of their essays is not on the differentiated, culture-specific (or religion-specific) perception of dreams in a comparative mode. Islam is well treated, with six essays, but relatively little attention is devoted to other religious traditions. The main methodological assumption of the volume, it seems, was the recognition that in the age of modernity ushered in by Descartes, "We have less need of our dreams," in von Grunebaum's lapidary formulation.[4]

We do not intend to discuss this assumption. Our approach is at once less broad and more encompassing. On one hand, we did not seek to be as interdisciplinary as Caillois and von Grunebaum, and did not attempt to include here any contemporary physiological or psychological studies of dreaming. On the other hand, we have sought to cover as varied a cultural and religious ground as possible. We have not forged a single approach, nor have we concentrated on any single civilization; and this is not, by any means, an encyclopedic effort. Obviously, our collection of articles is far from being exhaustive. We have three papers on India, for instance, but Africa remains a missing continent.

We cannot pretend that our collective investigation has led us to any clear-cut conclusions—nor to generalizations free of context, of universal implication.

It may be possible, however, to point to some problems that we felt could be formulated more sharply, or more intensely, through our common endeavor.

Since we approached the comparative history of dreams from the perspective of the history of religions, the first question to be asked is whether we can draw a taxonomy of dreams established upon the different types of religions. (Of course, the relation between concepts such as "culture" and "religion" is not always constant: in China, for example, we find several competing religions within a single overriding cultural frame, in contrast to the situation in medieval Christian Europe.) Can we perceive a clear difference between the nature, importance, and role of dreams within religions established upon revelation and those, as in Greece, where such a single revelation, emerging from a precise moment and locus, does not play a role? Prima facie, it would seem that while in polytheistic systems contact flows rather freely between the divine realm and the human world, no place is left for an infinite series of private revelations in a revealed religion, where the borders are much more closely guarded. In a monotheistic system, moreover, significant dreams can come either from the divine world or from the realm of Satan. We do not mean to imply that all so-called polytheistic systems attribute the same degree of religious significance to dreaming. As Hubert Cancik shows in his chapter, public Roman religion almost ignores dreaming, in striking contrast to the central importance of dreams in Greek myth and cult.

Still, the evidence shows that dreams retain a major place in cultures formed under the impact of monotheistic, revelatory religions. Although we can detect a clear shrinking of the *poiesis* expressed in dreams in the transition from late-classical to Christian culture, dreams retain a crucial, although new role in the latter. As for Islam, there is no need to repeat, after the various studies in *The Dream in Human Societies*, that dreaming and dream interpretation play remarkably rich and differentiated roles in various Islamic cultures. What this shows, at the least, is that even in revelatory religions, the gates of revelation can never become hermetically closed. Here dreams play a central role. It should be emphasized that since dreaming is usually, in some sense, a personal phenomenon, the individual can develop a direct link to the divinity through dreams—hence the great danger of dreams for religious hierarchies and orthodoxies. Dreams are often the direct path to heresy. Indeed, the hallmark of a heretic is often the revelatory dreams which, as in the case of Mani, he experiences already in his childhood, and which set him apart from the traditional religious hierarchy. It is in this context that we can understand the constant shying away from—indeed, often fierce opposition to—dreams on the part of religious authorities, who are motivated by a wish to contain, as much as possible, the power of divination. In the pervasive religious system of medieval Europe, as we learn from the essay by Jean-Claude Schmitt, we find both a remarkable efflorescence of popular dream culture and a consistent effort on the part of the ecclesiastic authorities to take control of this potentially subversive domain.

We have looked for new ways of understanding the role of dreams in cultures

shaped by different religious worldviews. Dreams are not only directly connected to divination; they also reflect on other segments of culture. It is here that the core of our analysis should be focused. By their very liminality, dreams are at the confluence of theology, cosmology, and anthropology. In a sense, they permit, where other media fail, a way of intracultural communication of great flexibility. In particular, dreams offer a constant balance between the private world of latent images, fears, and hopes, and outside reality, cosmic as well as social. Dreams present the means to reestablish the constantly shattered equilibrium between these two realms. They accomplish this essential task in different ways, always directly related to the individual religious cultures. Such, at least, is the assumption underlining our work.

An important key—by no means the only one—for understanding the parameters through which this equilibrium is established and broken is the nature of the subject and its boundaries. Religious traditions with a predominant view of the person as a well-defined entity, set in opposition to the outside world, will encourage a dream culture of a certain nature. A religious tradition for which the self is not real in the deepest ontological sense, or is ultimately to be dissolved, or is thoroughly interpenetrated with nonself elements, will undoubtedly produce a dream culture of a rather different nature. Different dreams will be noticed, emphasized as significant, described, memorized, singled out in the literary tradition, and presented as models. In a crude way, dreams can be perceived as coming from "outside" or from "inside"—and this choice has far-reaching cultural implications. The relationship between dreams and myths, although too complex an issue to be treated in passing, might be mentioned as an analogous problem for differential, comparative analysis. Dennis Tedlock discusses a highly unusual pattern of dreams reported within myths in Mayan texts.

Although one should be careful not to draw direct analogies between linguistic patterns and religious perceptions, variation in the ontological status of dreams is also reflected in language. *Blepô oneiron* ("I see a dream," Greek), *ḥalamti ḥalom* ("I dreamt a dream," Hebrew), *es träumt mir/ich traume, je rève*: these are very different ways, chosen almost at random, of referring to the simple act of dreaming. Does the Greek way of speaking of dreams, with its insistence upon vision, reflect a universal pattern? It is hard to imagine a dream culture in which vision would not play a central role, but one should also mention the importance of *hearing* in dreams (particularly emphasized by Dennis Tedlock with reference to the Mayan corpus). It might be interesting to check whether voice and sound are more prominent in a certain kind of religious culture, for instance in those that stem from aniconic religions. But we tread here on very thin ground, and historical reality is too complex to allow for any easy categorization. We can, at least, state that dreams reflect the fundamental diglossia of humans. The thought expressed in dreams, or more precisely in the representation of dreams, is figurative rather than abstract, and here too, it complements diurnal ways of relating to the outside world and organizing it.

When we speak of the outside world and of the cosmos, we also refer to the

temporal dimension. Do dreams suppress or create time? Do they prolong or shorten it? Dreams can refer to the past, either real or mythical. They can also refer to the future, either as divination (which usually means the immediate future, which can be predicted and often also manipulated) or as Utopia, the dream of an ideal future, parallel in a sense to the original ideal time, the *Urzeit* or mythical beginnings of history. The notion of utopia also reflects the passage from dreaming *stricto sensu*, that is, fundamentally a personal activity, to the metaphorical use of the term, which refers to collective representations. Do different cultures relate these two areas differently? How does dreaming, in the utopian mode, but also in other respects, link with specific eschatologies?

2

Dreaming is a language—like all language, more or less displaced; like all language, both over- and underdetermined. To read the dream, or to hear it, or to know it, or to understand it, is to address oneself to the existence of one or more active codes. There is, perhaps, a near-universal experience of dreaming as communication, a more or less enigmatic presentation of meaningful messages to the self (and *from* the self, or from some profound dimension of reality, or from God). This experience, however, reaches us only in modes pregnant with the axiology and anxieties of a given, usually complex, usually multivocal cultural world.

None of this is new: earlier studies have departed from the same point; comparative typologies of dreams, as culturally perceived and interpreted, have been offered; illuminating parallels and divergences among dream cultures have been noted. We have tried to go a step farther by addressing, above all, primary issues of integration—that is, the integration of dream culture, and the peculiar expressivity of dreams, into the wider arenas where major cultural themes, obsessions, and choices are always present; then, the integration of dream interpretation into the culture's ontological and semiotic maps; and finally, the integration of dream theory into the culturally specific economies of consciousness and the notions of personality, so that dreaming can be seen in the context of an implicit or explicit anthropology and metapsychology. We seek, in short, to explore where dreaming belongs within a given cognitive and expressive universe; within a given metaphysical range; and within a given understanding of the dreaming subject. Can the dream dream the dreamer? Is the dream internal to the dreamer, or to his god?

These areas are closely correlated. Let us take an example. A South Indian folktale tells us of a king who dreams of an amazing silver tree, its leaves of emerald, with ruby fruits; an emerald parrot is perched, singing, on a golden swing hanging from its branches. The king, in his dream, casts a serpent jewel at the parrot, and the vision vanishes. As in so many Indian stories, the king, on awaking, has one overriding wish—he wants to see this tree in waking reality. He sends his three sons in search of it. The elder two soon give up the quest, but the youngest persists. Aided by advice from an old woman, he finds the tree of his father's dream inside

a fortress that has no gates. He steals a jewel from a serpent who lives near the fortress, and watches as the serpent kills himself in rage; then, with the aid of the jewel, he enters the fortress and sees the tree turn into four lovely princesses, who ask him to marry them. He agrees—but first he must seek the emerald parrot, who is "really" the sister of these princesses; she is kept captive on a lotus in a lake across the seven seas. The prince makes his way across the water, shines the jewel on the sleeping princess, and wakes her. Now they can rejoin her sisters and, together, return to the prince's home. But the king, seeing his son surrounded by five radiant women, is still dissatisfied; he had sent him, after all, to find his dream. The prince stands the five princesses in a row and, to everyone's horror, beheads them all with a single stroke of his sword. Suddenly, right there in the palace, the dream is reenacted: the miraculous tree stands, with emerald leaves, ruby fruits, the golden swing, the parrot, in his father's presence. The prince casts the serpent jewel at the parrot, and the apparition disappears, leaving in its place the five women who will become his wives, as he assumes the kingship.[5]

The basic pattern of this story is well represented in Indian literature. The dream is an objective "fact" that can be found or recovered in the outer world, and that makes itself present in consciousness through mechanisms, say, of karmic memory or intersubjective sensitivity. Thus the king in effect is dreaming for his son—a dream of sexual and psychological maturation that entails the quest, its various acts of violence and faith, and the final reintegration of the prince and his new brides into his father's reality. The dream establishes an ambiguous channel of communication, not so much between parts of the father's self or selves (as we might expect in a Western ontology) as between the father and his child, and between both these figures and a tantalizing but accessible, visionary world outside them. In this sense, above all others, the dream speaks a powerful truth. If we think in terms of the three domains outlined above, we would say: this story uses the dream, as a heavily determined trope or expressive device, to articulate a pattern of generational conflict and psychic growth; it fixes the dream firmly at the center of a fluid ontological continuum, where an internal experience demands external reexperiencing, confirmation, or conditional concretization—or where it may even be impossible to locate a clear innerness as opposed to a clearly differentiated outside; and it emerges from an understanding of subject or self as deeply involved in negotiating precisely this slippery boundary, in which the objectified dream in some sense repeatedly forms or shapes the dreamer and his or her evolving and expanding selves. There is also the fascinating problem, implicit in the structure of this tale, of the status of the dream narrative in relation to the wider narrative frame. The father makes his dream into a story that actualizes itself, in unexpected ways, in the story the son tells of himself, or, we may assume, *to* himself. Here full maturation into an adult mode of being—marriage, mature sexuality, the assumption of power and a public role—requires the son to live out (and also, perhaps, ultimately to uproot) his father's dream.

Even in this slight example we note a standard feature from the domain of encoding: the striking dream image is opaque, a veil for the human reality of

falling in love and marrying. This image has to be destroyed, within the story itself (in fact, within the dream itself), before the underlying process can be complete. In most dream cultures, dreaming is a language that, like other languages, needs deciphering. The following chapters offer differing examples of this process which, taken together, suggest a rough typology: there are dreams that present the dreamer with a clear-cut message, seemingly entirely transparent (e.g., the materials relating to Alemano, al-Tirmidhi, and pseudo-Maimonides, discussed by Moshe Idel and Sara Sviri); others present encoded messages of varying levels of ambiguity (e.g., the Roman examples set out in Hubert Cancik's chapter).

In certain cultures, the encoded dream can be unambiguously decoded, leaving us again with a clear-cut message; in others, a residue of ambiguity is a structural feature of dreaming per se. Contextual features, relating in particular to the identity and existential situation of the dreamer, may be decisive in decoding, as we can see in Artemidorus and the other Greek materials discussed by Cristiano Grottanelli. Coded dreams include the false messages sent by the devil (as Guy G. Stroumsa and Jean-Claude Schmitt show in many Christian materials)—although we might also allow for the possibility that true messages could come from this demonic source. And within this wide range of encoded dream communications, there is a variation in the role of the interpreter. Galit Hasan-Rokem shows that in Midrashic materials the dream follows the interpretation (so that the responsibility of the decoder is enormous, literally one of life and death); in other cases, the message exists *only* within its interpretation, the two domains being so interpenetrated that the linguistic formation of the dream could almost be said to preexist, to antedate its imagery and its narrativized report. Language enters into this process at different points in different cultures: at the very beginning, or even before the beginning, in many Indian dream materials; very late, after the fact of dreaming and its remembrance, in Talmudic dream culture; somewhere between these two poles in Artemidorus, or the Mesoamerican materials, or, perhaps, in Freud (see the chapter by Christine Walde).

There is also a third possibility in terms of coding and decoding, alongside the options of transparent and opaque messages embedded in the dream. There are dreams with no message, in any "real," semantically weighty sense—dreams that, rather than communicate contents, represent existential states or transformations. At least one set of Chinese dreams presented by Wai-yee Li seems to fit this category, as do most of the Indian materials studied in this volume. Vasavadatta's dream, discussed by Wendy Doniger, is a concrete waking experience encoded only in the sense that all perception is subject to disguise. The dream of the parrot-messenger, from Kerala in south India, discussed by Shulman, seems primarily aimed at effecting the rare coincidence of selves, or of language and identity, that is perhaps most possible in the dream domain. Here a dream of lovers' separation ends by a realignment, a tautology of existence that finds expression in the repeated trope called *śleṣa*, literally an "embrace," a superimposition. The trope encapsulates and triggers the shift in state inherent in the process unfolding through the dream.

Dream tropes of this sort require attention. Many of the authors have isolated

and defined such figures, which constitute, in specific dream cultures, the peculiar language of both dreaming and interpretation. In this area of culturally specific figuration, we feel we have progressed beyond Freud's original definition of four major forms of dream symbolism (condensation, displacement, considerations of representability, and secondary revision; see Aleida Assmann's presentation of still earlier syntheses in Chapter 15). A notion of overdetermination remains in a remarkable number of cases. The dream-message is reinforced internally by a series of potential markers, by the characteristic tropes or figures, by verbal and visual images strongly keyed to individual dream cultures. As in all linguistic forms, principles of selection operate powerfully to express the genre broadly defined as "dream," and to clue the listener or interpreter about the boundaries and peculiar intensities and textures of the dream text. We have also suggested that more attention needs to be paid, in general, to issues of "marking"—poetic, syntactic, or generally linguistic—with relation to dream texts; Barbara Tedlock's explication of evidentials in dream reports shows just how critical, and informative, this area can be. Evidentials, like other elements in the linguistic texturing of dreams, also speak to ontic issues: the dream's "as-if" quality is set off by such markers, which may also have an impact on the recurrent question of where, if the dream is "subjunctive," the indicative or objective reality forms are to be sought. Both Freud and the Talmudic tractate *Berachot* suggest, for example, that the key to this problem lies in the payment offered the interpreter—the rock-bottom reality that ensures a link between dream and world.

Typologies, in themselves, and especially in cross-cultural contexts, may be barren. At best, they may suggest lines of force that require study in a given case. The simple division we have presented in the above forms of dream expressivity, in relation to encoding, may be correlated to other domains—for example, that of the dream's ontological status, which varies from fully objectified externality to pure subjective fantasy ("it was *only* a dream"), with a third possibility, that of dreaming as an act of linguistic creativity, mediating between the two poles. Dreams with no message, our third category above, seem most closely linked to the third ontic option. Even more fertile, perhaps, is an attempt to correlate the dream communication with theories of self-organization or self-presentation, as we find in Moshe Idel's chapter on astral dreams. Idel distinguishes between the loosely organized "centrifugal" personality and a much more severely delimited and controlled "centripetal" structure. It would appear, in general, that the centrifugal type is broadly aligned with the relatively more objectified (and transparent) dream, while a centripetal vision of self and person puts dreaming further along the continuum toward the subjective pole. And in both cases—indeed in most dream cultures—one finds a latent or implied division within the self, which reproduces itself in the strange forms of self-conscious doubling that we find in so many reported dreams. The dreamer dreams, and watches himself dreaming. Often a series of embedded frames is present, the dreamer knowing within the dream that he is dreaming—although such cases of what is called "lucid dreaming" seem to require a paradoxical kind of knowing, knowledge that is itself a dream. In the

more intense and sophisticated dream cultures, such as in Mesoamerica, these forms of lucid dreaming may reach almost unimaginable complexity, with multiple dreams within dreams within dreams. (These patterns are discussed by Barbara and Dennis Tedlock.) But lucid dreaming also seems to be a universal phenomenon, differently conceived and understood within the varying civilizational contexts.

Everywhere, dreaming speaks to the composition, or decomposition, of the self. Markers, tropes, frames, and ontic presuppositions are all relevant to any analysis of this domain, which offers tremendous potential for unlocking the hidden metaphysic of cultural intuitions, perhaps too deeply buried to be formulated explicitly from within. From an analytical, external perspective, we can see very striking contours: for example, the deep division in the self that seems to find expression in late antiquity, and especially in Christian dream-culture—and that continues right up through Freud, as Stephane Moses shows in his nuanced essay. This splitting illuminates, by way of contrast, the subtle and striking problem of internal doubling that we see, for example, in the Indian materials (in the chapters by Wendy Doniger and David Shulman). There are further aspects open to comparative analysis—to mention only one more, the role of time and memory relative to dreaming. Thus we find an evolving, future-oriented (divinatory) dream culture in the Midrashic materials, and in Artemidorus, in contrast with a retrospective trend evident in the Christian materials; the same division, broadly stated, seems present in India between the future-oriented Hindu dreams and the eerily retrospective Buddhist ones of the Tamil *Maṇimekalai.* These distinctions have meaning and, at times, a rich resonance and—such is our hope—give color and purpose to intercultural comparisons.

Such comparisons emerge partly through intertextual resonances in these essays. We have referred above to the common theme of lucid dreaming, where the dreamer's awareness of the dream is embedded within the dream itself. In one way or another, every system of dream interpretation faces this issue of the dream's frame and the transitions it makes possible, within the totality of consciousness, from nondream to dream states and back again, or from one dream level to another. Several of the essays attempt to characterize the dream frame and its markers, and to formulate the relation between this frame and other ontic realities recognized by the culture (see Wai-yee Li, Shulman, Barbara and Dennis Tedlock, Assmann). Indeed, there is reason to argue that the articulation of the frame for dream narrative and dream interpretation is the central diagnostic key for a differential typology of dream cultures. The frame not only enables and structures the transition to and from dreaming; it also shapes the contours of time, space, and consciousness within which the dream can be said, or felt, to exist. When the frame is strongly embedded within the dream, as in various types of lucid dreaming, a restless inner movement, leading toward transformation, tends to emerge, sometimes overwhelming the subject and catapulting her or him to new forms of awareness. When the frame is relatively rigid, or implanted firmly in the waking world, the impact of the dream may be partly neutralized (both in individual and social terms), and the dreamer rendered relatively passive, a spectator at an idiosyncratic internal drama.

More porous or malleable frames may allow for startling effects, as when the future, for example, infiltrates the present in a backward movement—time flowing, as it were, upstream.

Such frames, which determine how the dream is molded into cultural form, might even, for all we know, determine how the dream is dreamt, as an act of cultural creativity. And each such frame has a spatial aspect capable of analytical formulation: we can sometimes distinguish dreams dreamt at the outer margin of the subject, as if split away from his or her inner core, from those in which the subject is poised at the margins of the dream, seen as an overriding reality from outside the bounds of the individual. Such spatial configurations are always contingent and colored by social meaning. Moreover, the cultural framing of the dream always and inevitably evokes the cultural framing of consciousness itself—its structure, internal dynamics, and situation vis-à-vis the subject and all forms of reality that this subject confronts. These two frames—of dream and consciousness—may overlap, to the point of isomorphism, or one may cut across the other in various unusual and surprising ways. Usually, however they may intersect, they tend to replicate one another in terms of their organizing principles of composition, which are always cultural creations, laden with axiological and metaphysical concerns.

It is this fact of consistent intracultural replication that allows us to conceive of a differentiated, comparative, nonuniversal syntax of dreaming, and of dream interpretation. Only such a syntax can make sense of the discrete morphologies of dream contents, of symbols, markers, and the lineaments of interpretation, all of these elements being integrated in unique expressive patterns flowing out of each specific frame. The essays gathered here may be seen as steps toward the future elaboration of such a context-sensitive, historicized syntax, or as examples of what such a syntax might look like in the case of particular dream cultures.

Dream interpreters also frequently echo one another: The uncanny connection between Artemidorus and Freud is well known, even explicitly affirmed by Freud himself; but the essays by Walde, Grottanelli, and Moses highlight the differing internal organization of these respective dream cultures and their distinct axiological bases. We might also note an implicit parameter of richness in dealing with these distinct traditions, and its potentially paradoxical dimension. Thus it appears that Artemidorus applies a remarkably rich interpretative spectrum to a relatively limited or even impoverished corpus of dream texts, in contrast to the luxuriance of modern dream texts together with the relative marginalization of dream interpretation in the modern West. For Freud, as for modern Western civilization as a whole, the dream has been fully subjectivized: it no longer refers to another world, outside the individual, nor has it any legitimate location within the public sphere. Even notions such as that of a shared dream—between husband and wife, for example, as we find in the examples of Al-Tirmidhi and his wife and Milton's Adam and Eve (cited by Sviri and Assmann, respectively), or in many parallel examples from India[6]—have become attenuated in the extreme and now appear rather exotic (as in the case of the analyst who dreams counter-transferentially of his patient). Nevertheless, the underlying, fundamental problem of the relation between existen-

tial realms, and the role of the dream as a tissue of potential connectivity, remain common to all the dream cultures discussed in this volume. The variation in articulating or conceptualizing this linkage is enormous; the following essays are meant to exemplify specific cases and, by their juxtaposition and intertextuality, to suggest a common problematic.

Certain basic, relatively simple questions arise naturally as we move through the dreams of one civilization after another. If dreams are perceived, almost universally, as inherently communicative (though not necessarily in referential ways), then we need to ask in each case: when do people tell their dreams, and where, and to whom? How is the telling structured? How does the dream content relate to narration, and to the social and cultural context? What images of authority reside in the act of interpretation, or of narrating the dream? Where is the dream situated in relation to the entire ecology of cultural forms? And, again: who is it who dreams, or is dreamed, or who dreams within the dream? What claims does that person make for the dream, the self, the world? How are these claims organized within the available domains of language, thought, and feeling?

Such questions informed the discussions that formed the essays included here. They are not meant to be exhaustive; but it is our hope that they trace, however fleetingly, a new agenda for the study of dream cultures, and of the dream of culture.

Notes

1. Tedlock: 1987; Gregory: 1985. Also see Kruger: 1992.
2. Merola and Verbaro: 1995.
3. Caillois and von Grunebaum: 1966.
4. See also the collection of essays, Caillois and von Grunebaum: 1959, which deals with a multiplicity of non-Western cultures.
5. Kannada story recorded by A. K. Ramanujan: 1997.
6. See O'Flaherty: 1984.

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I

China and India

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2

Dreams of Interpretation in Early Chinese Historical and Philosophical Writings

Wai-yee Li

The Readability of the World

In the *Zuo zhuan*[1] (*Zuo Commentary Tradition*, ca. fifth to fourth centuries B.C.?), the earliest narrative history in China, the representation of dreams emerges as one way to structure events and to impose order on human experience. Dreams establish causality—on the symbolic level, as a sign that is fulfilled, unravelled, or betrayed; on the literal level, as advice or warning heeded or defied. The representation of dreams is motivated by the need to interpret and define causes and consequences. In this sense it asserts or questions the "readability" of the world and shapes our understanding of causality, human agency, and possible "reason in history" (be it a moral scheme rewarding good and punishing evil, or a certain vision of order or teleology). I suggest that themes of control and order, or lack thereof, are dominant. Thus with dreams that realize ritual disorder or improper relations between the human world and the realm of the spirits, interpretation restores ritual equilibrium. Even when the message of the dream, often about the dreamer's death, is implacable, the struggle of control over its meaning is evident in the dream itself and/or its interpretation. Arbitrary injunctions in dreams and equivocal dreams that invite different decoding augur moments of loss of control, which are often overcome with interpretive ingenuity, but which nevertheless lead us to consider the scope and meaning of skepticism.

The interpretation of dreams in the *Zuo zhuan* thus tells of dreams of interpretation. It points to the following partly overlapping questions: Why interpret? What are the grounds of interpretation? How do interpretive structures evolve and

disintegrate? What are the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge, or, put differently, the scope and meaning of skepticism? Why and how are interpretive acts represented? The interpretation of dreams is one aspect of a ubiquitous phenomenon in this text: the reading of signs, which structures events, defines narrative units, and abstracts patterns and meanings from the chronological flow. The *Zuo zhuan*'s commitment to chronology[2] forces on the reader a certain sense of totality, fluidity, and contingency, a feeling that multifarious events have no definite beginnings and endings, that everything is indeed connected to everything else. The reading of signs is what saves us from the sense of raw juxtapositions in the text.

On one level dreams do not diverge much from other signs in the *Zuo zhuan* such as results of divination, encounters with gods, ghosts, and spirits, riddles, astronomical phenomena, natural anomalies or observed details of a person's attire, speech, behavior, gestures, or movements in rituals. All are readable signs that yield prophetic or retrospective judgments. Whereas human signs, such as a gesture or a comment that captures the essence of a person and thereby explains character and destiny,[3] augment moral explanations and human agency in history, signs from the numinous realm may sometimes seem random and arbitrary and convey a determinist mood. In the dense symbolic universe of the *Zuo zhuan*, dreams function as both human and numinous signs. Decoded both in terms of the dreamer's motivations, hopes, and fears, and of a more general, "objectified" system of correspondence, dreams exemplify two parallel concerns in the *Zuo zhuan*: moral explanation, predicated on the human capacity to choose; and pansignification, whereby every human or nonhuman sign and action leads to consequences that may exceed human comprehension and control. There are tensions between these two concerns but both presume analogical thinking. Moral action implies correspondence to ritual, sociopolitical, and cosmic order, while pan-signification implies mysterious, universal correspondences.

Dreams and their interpretation often have a public and externalized dimension in the *Zuo zhuan*. Shared dreams (*tongmeng*) are sometimes presented as proof of the objective veracity of dreams. The interpretability of dreams is thus in part a function of the dream's nature as public spectacle. Thus the Jin minister Xun Yan's dream of his own decapitation is decoded by his codreamer:

> Zhongxing Xianzi (Xun Yan) was about to launch a military expedition against Qi. He dreamed of engaging in a legal disputation with Duke Li.[4] He did not win. The duke hit him with a halberd, and his head fell in front of him. He knelt down and put it back on, holding it while running. He saw shaman Gao of Gengyang. A few days later, he saw [shaman Gao] on the road. He spoke to Gao, who [it turned out] had had the same dream. The shaman said, "This year my lord will certainly die. As for affairs in the east,[5] your wish will be fulfilled." Xianzi assented. (*ZZ* Xiang 18.3)

Shaman Gao's authority as interpreter is based both on his presence in Xun Yan's dream and his status as codreamer. Xun Yan's dream acquires objectified validity

because the shaman's role as spectator persists through Xun's dream and the shaman's own dream. There is no deliberation on the moral meaning of the dream: Is Xun Yan going to die as retribution for murdering his former ruler Duke Li (*ZZ* Cheng 18.1)? Does Duke Li's original intent to eliminate Xun's clan absolve Xun Yan (*ZZ* Cheng 17.10)? Can murder of a benighted ruler be justified? The legal disputation (*song*) suggests that Xun's guilt is debatable.[6] Does Xun Yan's replacement of his head suggest vindication? Instead of dwelling on past events, however, the shaman gives a matter-of-fact prediction of future developments. Notwithstanding the horror of decapitation, shaman Gao reads in Xun Yan's dream the portent of victory in his military expedition against Qi before his death. It is not clear whether the shaman, sensing Xun Yan's imminent death, is merely encouraging him in his final effort.[7] In any case, Xun Yan accepts the predictions with dignity, which are duly fulfilled (*ZZ* Xiang 18.3, 18.4, 19.1).

A certain opacity remains. The narrative answers the question of how and why Xun Yan dies by asserting without specifying the connection between his past and his final achievement and death. The account here is not concerned with Xun Yan's pschology or the evaluation of his character. Instead, shared dreams in the *Zuo zhuan* function as public spectacle that defines choices and actions shaping the fate of the polity. In another example, Kangshu, ancestor of Wei, appears in dreams to two Wei ministers and instructs them to support "Yuan" (Duke Xiang of Wei's second son by a concubine) as ruler (*ZZ* Zhao 7.15). Subsequent debates surround the ambiguous meanings of "Yuan": does it designate a proper name or does it mean "the eldest" (i.e., Yuan's older brother Mengzhi)? (The root meaning of "Yuan" is "primary.") In this case, an injunction repeated in two dreams establishes Yuan as legitimate successor to the throne. (It is quite likely that the whole account is fabricated to establish just that.) In contrast to the public and objectified nature of shared dreams in the *Zuo zhuan*, the motif is often used in literature to affirm perfect communion and the power of subjective projection.

The public dimension of dreaming is augmented by the sense of historical continuity in the grounds of interpretation. As example we can consider Duke Zhao of Lu's dream. When he is about to visit Chu, he dreams of his father Duke Xiang sacrificing to the god of the road. (The visit implies recognition of Chu hegemony by Lu. This is significant because Chu is usually designated [against all archaeological evidence] by the heartland states as semibarbarian, whereas Lu is a state steeped in the Zhou tradition.) The Lu ministers debate the meaning of the dream. Zishen argues that Duke Zhao should not go because Duke Xiang went to Chu only upon dreaming of the Duke of Zhou, sage advisor to the early Zhou kings and ancestor of Lu, sacrificing to the god of the road.[8] In other words, none but a sage such as the Duke of Zhou can sanction a trip to Chu. In addition, the Duke of Zhou's trip to Chu supposedly demonstrated Zhou authority over Chu[9] and would allay fears that a Lu ruler's journey to Chu might indicate Lu subordination. Zifu Huibo maintains that Duke Xiang in effect takes the place of the Duke of Zhou: having once visited Chu he can sacrifice to the god of the road and lead his son (*ZZ* Zhao 7.3). Duke Xiang's authority might in turn have been derived

from his ritual competence during the visit to Chu. King Kang of Chu died while Duke Xiang was on his way, and Duke Xiang arrived only to attend his funeral. Chu officials wanted to have Duke Xiang place King Kang's clothes on his coffin, a ceremony appropriate for envoys rather than rulers from other states. Acting on the advice of Shusun Zhaozi, Duke Xiang saved Lu from humiliation by having shamans perform purification rites over the coffin with peach branches and reeds, which is due procedure when a ruler attends the funeral of a minister from another state (*ZZ* Xiang 29.1). The appeal to competing precedents, the authority of the figure in the dream, and the principle of substitution all establish the continuity, albeit construed in different ways, between past and present in defining grounds of interpretation.

The debate over the meaning of Duke Zhao's dream also shows how the dream is the locus of ritual uncertainty. But there is little doubt that the correct interpretation restores ritual equilibrium. Events in the *Zuo zhuan* that offend the modern rationalist bias are often represented with this interpretive confidence. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the Zheng minister Zichan, often depicted as a rationalist and a skeptic in modern accounts,[10] should also interpret dreams and explain the existence of spirits. He is merely extending reason and logic to realms receding from human consciousness and understanding. When Zichan is envoy in Jin, the Jin minister Han Xuanzi asks him how the illness of the Jin ruler may be related to his dream of a yellow bear entering through his bedroom door. Zichan explains that the yellow bear is no evil spirit, but the spirit of Gun, the mythical flood controller who failed.

> Formerly Yao [ancient sage-ruler] executed Gun at the Feather Mountain [for his failure to control the deluge]. Gun's spirit was transformed into a yellow bear, and it entered the Feather Abyss. Xia actually worshipped it, and the Three Dynasties offered sacrifices to it. Jin is the leader of the Alliance [and as such should perform the ritual role of the kings of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties]. Perhaps it has not yet offered sacrifices to it. (*ZZ* Zhao 7.7)

The sacrifices are duly performed and the Jin ruler recovers. Here the interpretation of an enigmatic dream image, based on historical knowledge, also restores ritual order.

In a similar vein, Zichan expounds on how he placates the vengeful ghost of Boyou, a Zheng nobleman murdered in a power struggle between different clans. Boyou appears in the dreams of the Zheng people vowing to kill his enemies, and his threats come true. Zichan reinstates Boyou's son, who is then in a position to offer sacrifices to his father. He explains, "When ghosts have a place to return to,[11] it will not become an evil spirit. I provide the ghost with a place to return to" (*ZZ* Zhao 7.9). The dream is the locus where ghosts and spirits can manifest their discontent; it is a moment of ritual disorder marked by uneasy tension between the realm of spirits and the human world. Dreams can be suppressed, however, because all things, including ghosts, can be assigned their proper place and mollified

through the performance of sacrifice. Again we have the motif of control and order.

The restoration of ritual equilibrium suggests the potential continuum between dreaming and wakeful states, analogous to the fluid boundaries between the realm of the spirits and the human world. Zichan explains why Boyou can be a powerful ghost: his clan was in charge of government for three generations, and the things they used were abundant, elaborate, and refined (*ZZ* Zhao 7.9). The potency of ghosts, including the power to manifest themselves in dreams, thus depends on their family history and the material conditions of their previous existence. The readability of dreams in the *Zuo zhuan* is a function of continuities between past and present, dreaming and waking states; hence the insistent appeal to ancestors and beginnings. In admonitory dreams, advice or warning are usually given by a dead father or ancestor. Dreams portending endings (for example, the end of a ruling house) often invoke beginnings or have to be explained with reference to beginnings. In one example, a man from Cao dreams of a group of noblemen discussing the demise of Cao. The ancestor of Cao asks other Cao dignitaries to wait for one Gongsun Qiang. The dreamer's son leaves Cao, following his father's advice, when Gongsun Qiang becomes minister. The dream is told as retrospective explanation in the year before the fall of the Cao house (*ZZ* Ai 7.5).

The warning of the Cao ancestor is clearly told in a dream, but even cryptic dream images can be confidently decoded because of the presumed applicability of the symbols of wakeful life to dream interpretation. In one example, spatial positions and directions, a major concern in ritual texts, determine the meaning of a dream. "De dreamed that Qi, with his head to the north, was sleeping outside the Lu Gate, and that he himself was a crow perching above Qi, with his beak resting on the South Gate and his tail resting on the Tong Gate. He said, 'My dream was good. I will succeed to the throne'" (*ZZ* Ai 26.2). De and Qi, both adopted sons of Duke Jing of Song, become rival claimants to the throne upon Duke Jing's death. De eventually wins out. According to ritual texts contemporaneous with and later than the *Zuo zhuan*,[12] the southward-facing position signifies life, exalted position, and rulership, whereas the northward-facing position indicates subjugation and death. In somewhat later lore, the crow is associated with fire and the sun and is regarded as an auspicious bird: a red crow with three feet is the sign heralding Zhou conquest of Shang. The validity of interpretation here depends on the sway of underlying cultural codes. In another example, told during the Battle of Yanling between Jin and Chu, a Jin warrior, Lu Qi, dreams of shooting an arrow at the moon and hitting it. The arrow then falls into the mud. Divination unravels the meaning of these enigmatic images. "The surname Ji is signifed by the sun; other surnames, the moon. Here it must mean the King of Chu. To shoot and hit the target, and then to fall into the mud: he [the archer] must die also" (*ZZ* Cheng 16.5). Lu Qi duly shoots King Gong of Chu in the eye and is himself shot dead. Ji is the surname of the Zhou royal house and of some enfeoffed lords, such as the Jin house, which had original clan ties with the Zhou house. The diviner's interpretation is premised on the acceptance of the hierarchy of the Jis

and rulers "of other surnames," analogous to the relations between the sun and the moon. The rules of reading here thus assume Zhou authority and the subservient allegiance of the feudatory states. It is conceivable that for both De and Lu Qi, dreams are told for propaganda purposes, to legitimize De's rulership and Jin superiority over Chu, respectively. But while the cultural meanings of positions and directions remain relatively stable during the period covered by the *Zuo zhuan*, the proper relations between the Zhou king and the feudal lords, and those between Ji-surnamed states and other states, are questioned and debated. Apparently effortless correspondences may thus be used to stake out contested positions.

Stable correspondences become more troubled when contending forces in the context are articulated in the dream and its interpretation. This sometimes happens with the dream message of death—especially the dreamer's own death—which may issue in a struggle of control over its meaning and prophetic power. (This is not true when narrative concern is not centered on the dreamer. In the examples of Xun Yan and Lu Qi discussed earlier, the focus is on the impending and ongoing battles and the fate of the states involved.) Dreams about death and loss of self lend urgency to the act of interpretation, as if the struggle for mastery in the dream should be reenacted in interpretation. One vivid example is Duke Jing of Jin's dream of a vengeful spirit, the ancestor of the Zhao clan that he eliminated. The ultimately implacable prediction of death, which confirms the power of the vengeful spirit over the Jin ruler, may be yet another example of the role of Jin ministerial families, in this case the Zhao clan, in shaping the narratives of the *Zuo zhuan*.

> The Duke of Jin dreamed of a vengeful spirit of immense proportions, with its hair hanging to the ground, beating its chest and leaping. It said, "For you to murder my progeny was not righteous. I have already gained permission for revenge from the high gods!" Destroying the great door and the bedroom door, it made its entry. The duke was terrified, and entered the inner chamber, and the spirit destroyed its door also. The duke woke up and summoned the shaman of Mulberry Fields. What the shaman described corresponded exactly to the dream. The duke said, "What will happen?" He replied, "You will not [live to] eat the grain of the new harvest!" The duke fell ill and sought doctors from Qin. The Qin ruler sent a doctor named Huan to treat the duke. Before he arrived, the duke dreamed of his illness assuming the form of two boys and saying to each other, "He is a skilled doctor, I fear he will harm us, where can we escape?" One of them said, "We will reside above the area between the heart and the diaphram, and beneath the fat at the tip of the heart—what can he do to us?" The doctor arrived and said, "There is nothing to be done about the illness. It is above the area between the heart and the diaphram, and beneath the fat at the tip of the heart—where it can neither be attacked [with heat treatment], nor reached [through acupuncture]. Medicine will not get to it. There is nothing to be done." The duke said, "[He is] a good doctor." He gave him handsome gifts and sent him back. In the sixth month, on the *bingwu* day, the Duke of Jin wanted to taste the new grain. He had the official in charge present it and the cook prepare it. He summoned the shaman of Mulberry Fields, showed him [the new grain] and had him killed. When he was about to eat, he felt swollen, went to the privy, fell in, and died. A eunuch had dreamed in the morning of carrying

> the duke and ascending to heaven. At midday, he carried the Duke of Jin out of the privy; thereupon he was killed to attend the duke in death. (*ZZ* Cheng 10.4)

The correspondences between the Jin ruler's dreams and the accounts of the shaman and the doctor, and that constructed between his death and the eunuch's dream, establish the public dimension of dreams and their interpretation. The duke's two dreams are in some ways symmetrical opposites. One involves the sound and fury of vengeance, the other surreptitious deliberation on self-preservation. The vengeful spirit breaks one barrier after another, progressively invading the space the duke considers his own. The direction of the movement is inward. The two boys, on the other hand, are external manifestations of the duke's illness. They move outward from inner space. Hiding in recesses inside him that cannot be reached, they are nevertheless part of him. The dream of destructive agents emanating from within the boundaries of the body is then more acceptable than that of destruction by an outside force. There is a residual sense of control, of owning one's illness and possibly death. Asserting this autonomy, the duke tries to defy the threat of the spirit and the shaman's divination, but accepts the doctor's diagnosis. This concern with human agency is echoed in the dream of the eunuch. The duke, who tries to escape his dream, ends up having his grotesque death dreamed by another.

The interpretation of dreams dramatizes the passage from private to public meanings basic to all interpretive acts in the *Zuo zhuan*. Once translated into words of judgment, the meaning or message of a dream becomes implacable. Thus the Lu dignitary Shengbo tries to control the meaning of his dream, which seems to portend death, but fails as soon as he dares to seek divination. The story is told in the year of his death:

> Earlier, Shengbo dreamed of crossing the Huan River. Someone gave him agate pieces as food. He wept, and his tears became agate pieces that filled his arms. Following [these events] he sang this song: "I crossed the Huan River, / And was given agate pieces. / Return! Return! / Agate pieces filled my arms!" He was fearful and did not dare divine [the dream's meaning]. When he returned from Zheng, in the year *renshen*, he reached Lizhen and sought divination for the dream, saying: "I was afraid of death, that was why I dare not seek divination. Now a multitude of people have been following me for three years, there is no harm [in divination]." He spoke [i.e., divined] about his dream, and died by the evening. (*ZZ* Cheng 17.8)

Shengbo fears that his dream portends death, because agate pieces are put in the mouth of the dead. After three years during which the number of his followers grow, he decides that the dream is already fulfilled in his increasing following (i.e., the agate pieces symbolize his followers). In pursuing this logic, he is trying to control the meaning of his dream. The moment he is confident of mastery, however, destiny mocks him. Once Shengbo seeks divination, the meaning of his dream as death is concretized in words; it becomes public and inescapable.