

‘IN SLEEP A KING...’
The politics of dreaming in a cross-cultural perspective*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns a phenomenon or activity that is typically associated with the night: dreams or dreaming. This phenomenon or activity may occur during the day as well, but then it is often prefixed with the word ‘day’, as in ‘day-dreaming’ and ‘day-dreams’. This paper is not concerned with these, though ultimately it deals with the day, inasmuch as it deals with the night. How can this be? Dreams and dreaming, though typically belonging to the night, may have a great impact on human daytime activities. Conversely, experiences during the day undoubtedly influence our dreams. Thus, in what follows, I would like to investigate the complex interdependencies and mutual influences of night-time dreams and waking life.

In order to throw some light on these diurnal and nocturnal exchanges, I shall concentrate on cases and exemplars which, in a sense, form extremes: these cases belong to what could be called the politics of dreaming. Let me explain what I mean by this. The title of my paper begins with the first part of a sonnet (no. 87) by Shakespeare, which ends with the words, ‘but waking no such matter’. This rather melancholic statement seems to express the disappointment of someone who wakes up and realises that his or her status or situation in waking life diverges drastically from what he or she dreamed of during the night. As a consequence, some dreamers may despair, while others just accept their fate. But occasionally the dreamer may view the dream as a message concerning his or her true calling and as a request, even a divine order, to make the vision of the dream come into existence in waking life as well. And if the dream is to be made true in waking, it will there initiate, support and legitimise actions directed towards achieving this goal. This is what I mean by ‘the politics of dreaming’.

In the following my argument will proceed in three steps. In the next section, I shall give some examples, from around the world, of the politics of dreaming, identifying three ‘models’ according to which they can be systematised. In Section III, I shall make some general comments on the possibility of a cross-cultural comparison of dreams and dreaming, while in Section IV, I shall return more directly to the politics of dreaming, arguing that there is a complex dialectical relationship between agency and ‘passio’ or ‘patency’.

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II. THE POLITICS OF DREAMING COMPARED: THREE BASIC MODELS

Let me give some examples of the politics of dreaming from around the world, which, as space is scarce, can sketch out some continuities and variations. All in all, we shall see that the cultural forms and manifestations of the politics of dreaming presented here allow three basic models to be recognised. First, dreams legitimise already existing positions of power, especially when explaining and justifying extraordinary measures (for example, military campaigns) or when rejecting and suppressing competing claims. Secondly, dreams also initiate and justify changes of power, or at least attempts to achieve them. Thirdly, dream experiences may be diametrically opposed to the second variant, when they result in passivity, lethargy, unworldliness, escapism, apathy and the acceptance of existing conditions by subaltern groups.

Let me start with the first model. In the Islamic world, there is evidence for the existence of political dreams right from the beginning. Mohammed dreamt of the conquest of Mecca. After the Prophet had died, he is said to have appeared to numerous caliphs. Their dreams often explained and legitimated their existing status, as well as military campaigns and other exceptional measures. Nearer the present day too, during the Gulf Wars Saddam Hussein claimed to have received an instruction from the Prophet in a dream to declare the conflict a *jihad* or 'religious struggle' (Corbin 1966, Schimmel 1998). In Europe in the Middle Ages, dreams of biblical characters such as Joseph, Jacob, Pharaoh and Daniel were well known. In this period, great dreams were also attributed to contemporary historical figures, especially political rulers, popes and saints. Henry I of England, Pope Innocent III, Francis of Assisi, Charles IV and Pope Sixtus IV were just some of the recipients of dreams whose significance went beyond the individual well-being and woes of the dreamer and which contained a politico-religious programme and legitimacy potential. Especially to be mentioned here are the corresponding dreams of Constantine and Charles the Great, the *Novus Constantinus*. The Apostles Peter and Paul are supposed to have appeared in a dream to the former and to have moved him to conversion to Christianity, while the Apostle Jacob is said to have given a dream message to Charles the Great. Obviously in both cases, the alliance between imperial power and ecclesiastical power was stressed and strengthened through dreams, or rather by appealing to dreams. In addition, these dreams were succeeded by radical proselytising campaigns (Bagliane and Stabile 1989).

In the oral and written traditions of India a frequently occurring motif is the dream that gives a king advice and instructions for action, or shows him the future, whether fortunate or unfortunate. 'The interpretation of dreams to enlighten a king', writes O'Flaherty (1984:37), 'is a recurrent Buddhist motif. In a Kashmiri text that contains many dream adventures, a Buddhist monk interprets a king's dreams in order to convert him'. In the Buddha's hagiography too, dreams play an important role before his enlightenment (O'Flaherty 1984:37). As far as Hindu India is concerned, the Mahabharata relates that the Pandava brothers dreamt of their victory before their

decisive battle against the Kauravas (O'Flaherty 1984:32). Numerous other pieces of evidence for a politics of dreaming from India could be given which show that dreams in India have often formed the basis and stimulus for actions in waking life right up to the present day, for example, in building temples at particular places or in adopting a goddess as one's personal protective deity (Schnepel 2001a).

This is not the place to judge whether these dreams were really dreamed and contained the actual words of the Prophet or the Apostles or of Shiva and other Hindu deities, or whether they were merely 'inventions'. The very fact that dreams were repeatedly appealed to in the Islamic world, medieval Christianity and in India up to the present day with respect to politico-religious questions shows that the existence, significance and legitimacy potential of dream messages were believed in and accordingly acted upon and reacted to.

A further important aspect in connection with the politics of dreaming is the revolutionary force that dreams and the appeal made publicly to dreams may sometimes bring forth in oppressed classes (races, ethnic groups, castes etc.). Hence we have reached our second model or cultural form of political dreams. In the Islamic world, again, Muhammed appeared not only to numerous caliphs but also to numerous individuals who desired to be such. Their dreams, then, legitimated usurpations, assassinations, palace revolutions and changes of dynasty. The number of such legitimacy dreams increased especially after the take-over of power by the Abbasids around 750, when the Alids, followers of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, fought for recognition and to win back power. The best-known example of the 'revolutionary dreams' in our cultural circle is certainly the 'I have a dream' manifesto of Martin Luther King, which to some extent made a dream-vision or metaphor the foundation of the Afro-American freedom movement. The eschatological and millenarian freedom movement of American Indians around 1900, of which the so-called 'Ghost Dance Religion' is probably the best known (Irwin 1984, Mooney 1965), and the emancipatory ideology of Rastafarians (Homiak 1987) are based to a considerable extent on dreams. Similar phenomena can be documented for the movements of charismatic prophets in Africa (Sundkler 1961). In present-day Australia too, the politico-legal claims of the Aborigines to land are often traced back to predecessors in the 'Dreamtime' (Kölig 1998). These examples also show that investigations into the 'politics of dreaming' should have as their starting point, not a clear distinction between dreaming and wakefulness, but a scale on which the phenomena of the dream, the daydream, the vision and the dream metaphor merge fluidly into one another (Price-Williams 1987).

We may obtain a totally different picture of the social and political functions of dreams by considering the third model of political dreams, the 'dream flight' model, which can be illustrated by referring to cases from China and early modern Europe. In China, the reality or truthfulness of the dream was often made the topic of philosophical treatises. As Bauer (1997:197) has shown, collections of dreams and discussions of

the meanings of dreams experienced their high point towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, when the internal collapse and conquest of the empire by the Manchu in 1642 were already imminent. Li-Zhi, a neo-Confucian author of the sixteenth century, wrote: 'There is not a moment when we do not dream' (cited in Bauer 1997:219). Half a century later, however, after the victory of the Manchu, Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), who belonged to a different strand of neo-Confucianism, wrote in unmistakably negative words about the dream: 'The dream [...] is neither truthful nor concealed, and behaves as if it were divine' (cited in Bauer 1997:214). Wang thus denounced the adoration of dreams, which to him were far too remote from reality and responsible for the fact that no effective resistance was mounted against the Manchu.

Camporesi (1990) has shown that in early modern Europe, in the lower strata of society who were dogged by hunger, poverty and sickness, there was a strong orientation towards dreams, hallucinations, trances and emotions. These conditions were partly induced voluntarily through the ingestion of hallucinogenic herbs, mushrooms, grains, opiates and alcoholic drinks. However, they were also the natural concomitants of chronic disease, under-nourishment, hunger and rotten food, especially bread, which was contaminated with low-quality, even poisonous corn. However, all these dream flights, whether occurring voluntarily or not, as well as the utopian and chiliaristic fantasies that accompanied them, did not lead to social revolutionary movements of the sort that could be found among Afro-Americans, Amerindians or Rastafarians. Even though these dreams may have provided some temporary relief and hope of improvement, ultimately they did not possess any power of liberation. 'Dreams', says Camporesi (1990:37), '[...] were just excursions into the realm of highly imaginative diversions'. Camporesi's assessment of dreams is thus, in a sense, similar to that of Wang regarding the dream culture of the late Ming period. While for Wang the excessive involvement with dreams led to a situation in which the attacks of the Manchu could not be countered, for Camporesi the emancipation of oppressed population strata in pre-industrial Europe was halted precisely because excessive dreaming took place. Camporesi (1990:179) even goes so far as to suggest that the anti-revolutionary potential of the dream can be traced back to a clever strategy of the rulers. The apathy concerning dreams that he (and Wang) complain about is thus diametrically opposed to the social revolutionary power of dreams that has been recognised elsewhere. In a nutshell, Wang's and Camporesi's statements refer to two further important aspects of the politics of dreaming: remaining inactive in the realm of dreams, and the provision of measures and media for the (soothing) creation of dream worlds by rulers.

Examples of the politics of dreaming should not be restricted to literate cultures and 'Great Traditions', though it is then necessary to use the term 'politics' in a wider sense. As has already been pointed out, dreams play a large role in many Amerindian cultures (Graham 1995, Maranhão 2001). Among the Parintintin of the Amazon region, for example, the telling of dreams is a fixed element of human interaction, which one might always encounter, whether in the depths of the night, during one's

daily work or in social get-togethers around the camp fire in the evening. This telling is linked to particular rules depending on the content and prophetic nature of the dream. Thus one tells a dream prophesying bad luck as quickly as possible around the fire in the hope of thus depriving it of its power, while a dream prophesying good luck is often only told after it has been fulfilled, and at all events at a good distance from the fire. Among the Parintintin, dreams contain messages and information concerning the future and the nature of the world and its puzzles; they represent a special form of perception, which is distinguished from the perceptions made in wakefulness and which, according to the actors, is able to recognise another type of reality (Kracke 1987).

In traditional African societies too, we often find that, against the background of the idea of the existence of multiple worlds with beings specifically belonging to them, dream experiences and interpretations are accorded some significance (Jedrej and Shaw 1992b). Thus the Temne of Guinea (West Africa) distinguish between four worlds: (1) the visible world inhabited by humans (*no-ru*); (2) the world of spirits (*ro-soki*); (3) the world of the ancestors (*ro-kerfi*); and (4) the world of witches (*ro-seron*). Dreams represent media and spaces through and in which these separate regions and their inhabitants may be made manifest. As a consequence, among the Temne, soothsayers, healers and prophets often count as people who are particularly capable with respect to dreams and who understand how to interpret dream messages and how to transform these interpretations into practical action for the purposes of healing or the fulfilment of a desire. These dream experts may acquire a certain hegemony over the dreams of others, which occasionally goes so far that they not only interpret the dreams of clients, but also tell them what they have dreamed (Shaw 1992).

III. PROBLEMS OF UNDERSTANDING DREAMS CROSS-CULTURALLY

The examples discussed here may have indicated that there is a basic problem in understanding dreams cross-culturally: in a scientific and rationalist (and 'western') perspective, the relationship between dreams and wakefulness (and between the characteristics supposedly linked to these two conditions) appears as a chain of unbridgeable oppositions, which can be marked as follows:

| <i>Dream experiences</i> | <i>Experiences while awake</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| internal | external |
| subjective | objective |
| false | true |
| individual | collective |
| private | public |
| fleeting | permanent |

In this perspective, dreams appear as the private, inner experiences of an individual; they have no objective reality, in contrast to the experiences and visions of wakefulness, which are made in public by many and which can be checked and measured by means of objective criteria.

The above-mentioned series of dichotomies was often also seen as being intrinsically connected with different cultures or stages in human history. Members of non-western cultures or earlier stages of human history supposedly saw dreams in the categories that are to be found on the right-hand side of the above table. This produces the following table:

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Dreams (supposedly) among 'primitives'</i> | <i>Dreams (supposedly) among the 'civilised'</i> |
| external sources (God, spirits, demons, etc.) | internal sources (body, psyche) |
| true | false |
| prospective | retrospective |
| relevant for individuals and the whole | relevant only for the dreamer |

In this 'western' view of dreams in 'other cultures', members of non-western or past cultures see (saw) dreams as messages that must be taken seriously: They are regarded as having been sent by external, supernatural powers, revealing something about the future, and determining the life of the dreamer (as well as his family, his clan or his nation) for good or ill. Members of western cultures, on the other hand, see in dreams phenomena called forth by the body or psyche of the dreamer; they only have relevance (if at all) with reference to the individual and his or her past experiences.

Naturally, the broad opposition between 'western-modern' and 'old-alien' cultures is problematic and can represent no more than an initial mental aid or ordering scheme for a more penetrating cross-cultural investigation of dreams and dreaming. In addition, naturally not all members of this or that half of humanity (if one may maintain the distinction) are the same. It must also be stressed that in all cultures, including cultures alien to us, human beings are able to distinguish between the respective properties of the given schemes of opposition, that is, between appearance and reality, waking and dreaming, etc. Otherwise, from a purely practical point of view, survival could no longer be assured.

Yet, the oppositions outlined above may have some heuristic value as the starting point for a cross-cultural, social anthropological understanding of dreams. However, this is so only if it is recognised that in some cultures, perhaps even in most, the boundary or boundaries between the two sides is or are not drawn so sharply. Rather, the boundaries and transitions are often seen as fleeting and changeable. In many cultures, dreaming and wakefulness are seen as flowing into one another, and the attributes of one side may sometimes also appear on the other. Or else intermediate zones emerge, for example daydreams and trances, that are ascribed important functions as intermediaries between this world and other worlds. Or it is accepted that both dream and waking experiences are able to recognise realities, though it is then also often argued

that different types of reality are involved. Dreams are then accorded the ability to open up access to areas and dimensions of reality that are closed off to the senses of wakefulness, and that the predominant or sole use of these latter senses even blocks. In other words, even though dream experiences and waking experiences (as well as the other associated oppositions) are distinguished in all human societies, in most cultures there is no strict and unbridgeable opposition between the two sides. And this softening of the boundary or boundaries, this positive perceiving of transitions, is probably the main difference between 'the west and the rest' when it comes to evaluating the epistemological status or reality of the dream when seen from the actors' points of view.

This difference (which now appears less radical than the dichotomies indicated above, but which nevertheless still exists) is to be understood less as an outcome of the mental confusion of the 'savage' than as a capacity that has largely been lost to the 'western' perception. What is involved in this soft approach to dreams is the ability, first, to accept that there are diverse forms of perception, experience and reality which merge into one another and change, and secondly also to grasp these in all their complex contexts, points of contact, intersections and interdependencies. Dreamlike thought represents a metaphorical, freely associating, predominantly visual form of perception and reflection, of the sort one also finds in the fine arts and in poetry. As a result, it is in some sense a form of thought that refines and supplements rational thought, for, like myths, dreams have a characteristic sensory structure in which the fixed and limiting boundaries of causality, space, time, gravity, morality and everyday reality are rendered powerless and have been overcome.¹ Dreams are believed to have the ability to express and develop highly complex and subtle ideas, not although but because they occur in a different form than in the rational thought of one's waking existence.²

All in all, therefore, research into dreaming from a cross-cultural perspective is confronted with the problem of the relationship between dreams and wakefulness, true and false, unconscious and conscious, mythical and logical, sensory-pictorial object-orientation and rational speech-orientation, hard and soft reality, and similar oppositions. However, this problem does not consist in how and whether one side developed into the other or not. Rather, what is worth examining is how the two sides are seen by the actors as being linked to and supplementing one another, or whether they are partitioned off from one another, as is the case in most 'western' societies.³

¹ On the affinity between myth and dream, see Kracke (1987), Kohl (2001).

² Even in the 'west', recently a softening of what O'Flaherty (1984:14, 311–312) has called the 'hard' point of view can be recognised. See also Crapanzano (2001).

³ For recent publications seeking to examine dreams in a cross-cultural perspective, see Kea (2000), Schnepel (2001b), Shulman and Stroumsa (1999). This paper was completed after Lohman (2003) came to my attention. For a discussion of this book, see my review (Schnepel 2005).

IV. AGENCY AND PATIENCY IN THE POLITICS OF DREAMING

Coming back more closely to somnambulistic paths to power or to the politics of dreaming, it should therefore be emphasised that, even in cultures in which dreams are accorded great significance, not all dreams are important; or rather, not all dream-narrators (and their audiences) endow every dream at every place and every time with the same weight. Even in explicit 'dream cultures', there exist complex and differentiating strategic approaches to dreams. When actors see a dream as being equipped with a meaning which transcends the life of the individual dreamer, it may well happen that this dream is not only recognised as having a certain degree of truth; in the eyes of the actors, it even has a greater reality or truth than what is experienced in wakefulness. If this is so, such dreams may initiate and legitimise actions in wakefulness, especially when the waking life strongly differs from the dreamt life, or when an alternative is sketched out in a dream, or when the dream contains an explicit demand for action.

We have seen that the political functions of dreams appear to consist in both the maintenance and the change or removal of existing structures of power, in both the spurring on and the restricting of actions. This dialectic of change and stasis becomes more understandable when one sees that, for actors, dreams are less fixed and clear messages than some kind of 'texts' which are the bearers of many-sided and occasionally conflicting messages. Individuals, social groups and even nations may dispute the proper interpretation of these dream messages and thus use a number of discursive and action-oriented strategies, which take place against the background of the existing but constantly debated and changing systems of meaning and power. In this perspective and use, dreams indicate less what will be as what may be.

When, however, a particular interpretation or mode of interpretation has achieved hegemony at the end of such processes of contestation and negotiation, dreams may become important sources of knowledge, authority and power for particular individuals or groups. They lend prestige to those to whom they appear, who are strong enough to bear them, who know how to interpret them and how to translate them into action. In this sense, dream experiences are often constitutive of the development of individuals or groups into political power-holders or ritual specialists, and of their prestige with their followers or clients. What happens, then, is that dreams are not only seen as the passive bearers of coded messages and as indirect sources of power. Rather, from the actors' points of view, dreams themselves often possess socio-political or religious energy. In other words, dreams *per se* are held to possess a strong social, cultural, political and performative power. Thus, dreams are seen as important agents in the many-sided processes of constructing social, political, religious and economic realities. They are ascribed 'agency'.

This last point may be dismissed as a mere quibble. Are we not all aware that what ultimately has agency are not the dreams but the individuals who experience dreams, narrate them and put them into practice? Nonetheless, it is important to real-

ize that actors themselves ascribe agency to their dreams (and not to themselves). For, if dreams are agents to the actors, we must relativize the kind of interpretation given above, which stresses the ability and agency of the actors to engage with their dreams in pragmatic and strategic ways.

Why is this? Our intellectual emphasis on agency is in danger of ignoring one important characteristic of the actors' experience and perception of dreams, as well as one particularity of their engagement with dreams. This is the aspect of *passio* known to us since Lienhardt's (1961) analysis of the religion of the Dinka. Lienhardt (1961:149) stresses that the Dinka 'have no conception which at all closely corresponds to our popular modern conception of the "mind" as mediating and, as it were, storing up the experiences of the self'. Against this background, the Dinka do not regard dreams as the inner processes of the remembering or imagining psyche or mind of an autonomous individual. Rather, they often consider dreams to be powers that have their origins outside the individuals who experience them. When, for example, one's deceased father appears to one in a dream, this is not traced back to an activity of the psyche triggered by feelings of guilt or sadness or of the unconscious of the dreamer, but to an external act of the father's ancestral ghost. Thus, in situations in which 'we' regard ourselves as agents (even though acting unconsciously), members of other cultures often see themselves rather as the passive recipients of the actions of external forces that influence and even take possession of them. In this latter view, the active agents are non-human powers and ultimately the dreams, while human beings are subject to the actions of these powers and dreams, experienced as in differently moulded forms of *passiones*.

Here, therefore, we encounter what seems to be a paradox. The experience of dreams often moves individuals and groups to action, turns them into agents and gives them agency. But in the actors' self-understanding, dreams are often experiences of the *passiones* type. One does not 'have' a dream – one does not dream; rather, dreams are sent, happen to one, come over one or infect one. In a somewhat old-fashioned German people would say, 'mir träumte', instead of 'ich träumte'. In this context Jędrej and Shaw (1992:11) speak of the 'duality of agency in dreaming' and suggest: 'If dreams come from someone or something outside, the actions I perform in my dream may be subsumed within the agency of another'. Furthermore, the subordination of one's own actions to the agency of another power does not just apply to actions in the dream, but also to actions when awake. People often also see their diurnal actions as the continuation and putting into practice of the dream messages and dream orders. Thus, in the words of Jędrej and Shaw (1992:12) again, 'There is no simple dichotomy of "passive" dream experiences and "active" negotiation in waking life; both strands are interwoven, and feed back into each other'.

However, instead of just speaking of a duality of agency, I would prefer to speak of the dialectic of agency and *passio*. In the politics of dreaming, these two reference points and the dialectical movement between them are hierarchically ordered in the

self-understanding of the actors. They acknowledge their own agency, but they are also convinced that their agency can only exist and be successful on the basis of, and because it is subsumed under, a previous experience of *passio*. In the politics of dreaming, then, agency, both within and outside dreaming, can be effective and successful, not although, but exactly because it is preceded and encompassed by 'patience' or *passio*.

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