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Understanding Dream and its Causes: European and African Continental Experience

Grace Umezurike

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Email: graceumez@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This research aims at understanding dream, causes and interpretation from an African background as influenced by the African cosmology of spirito-triangulation and as distinguished from the European and American individuocentric cosmology. Using the method of cultural hermeneutics, this paper studies the dynamism in the understanding of causes and interpretations of dreams both in the European and American psychological discoveries and African cosmogony. In the bid to actualize the stated aim, this paper studies the tenets of one irology minding the individuocentric interpretation of western psychologists. Also, the paper studies African intersubjective/triangulation and transcendental interpretations of dreams. Our findings reveal that dream occurs for some reasons such as physical/biological, emotional, mental, spiritual, processes. In the same vein, dream presents opportunity for growth, health, creativity, fear, excitement, adventure, etc. On appraisal, it is obvious that both the Africans to a small extent and Euro-Americans have a unanimous definition of dream from an individuocentric perspective. This occurs mostly during the rapid eye movement (REM) lasting for the intervals of 20-30minutes. Nevertheless, minding their peculiar culture and traditional religion, the Africans have extra perspectives to dream such as the bidirectional/intersubjective/triangulation and transcendental or mystical perspectives to dream. The implication of the study shows that the poly-polar nature of dream in Africa is warranted by the African cosmology. This cosmology is community oriented and divinely manipulated such that human existence is intersubjectively affective and spiritually controlled by the gods. Unfortunately, this form of cosmology is chiefly responsible for the ongoing deceptions and religious criminality in many parts of Africa today in the guise of dream interpretation. Hence this study would go a long way towards better clarity and to reduce the false interpretations and deception that bedevil dream and dreaming in the African milieu.

Keywords: Dream, Africa, triangulation, individuocentric, abuses.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding dream has been a subject of great concern to philosophical studies, evolutionary psychology, cognitive neuroscience and different world religions. Thus each group vies for superiority in the understanding of dream. In spite of these claims, humanity is still challenged with lots of deep insight to the world of dream and dreaming. These claims testify to the fact

that there are different perspectives to the understanding of dream. In an ordinary sense, dream can be said to mean the manifestation of cherished aspiration, ambition or hopes. Philosophy of mind and different fields of psychology define dream as a series of thought, images and sensations occurring in the mind while sleeping or in the state of unconsciousness.

According to [1], dream can be *enhynion* or *oneiron*. Dream is referred as *enhynion* when dream reflects the dreamer's current bodily or psychological state. In this case, dream can be said to give personal insight to the world of the dreamer or a product of the random brain stem driven activation of the brain during sleep. Dream is said to mean *oneiron* where dream connotes some symbolic and meaningful experience of divine origin. It is a situation where dream is said to have been warranted as a result of divine intervention in human affairs/conditions. In general, oneirology can be said to mean the study of dream and dreaming [2]

Different religions of the world understand dream as a means of religious experience and divine intervention in human activities. It is for them a medium of divine-human communication and revelation of divine designs to humanity through some privileged persons. In this case according to Artemidorus, dream is referred as *oneiron* where dream manifests some symbolic interventions of divine origin. [3] Nevertheless, Aristotle rejected the idea that dreams are of divine origin. According to Aristotle, diagnostic or prophetic dreams are caused by small affections drowned in wakefulness but have a much more radically pronounced effect in the quiet

hours of sleep so much so that one can perceive distant events [4].

It is scientifically proven that human beings dream for about 30minutes and above while asleep. The story line of this dream follow a narrative and smooth transition from one scene to another which may seem nonsensical, haphazard associations of events, lacking coherence and order. [5];[6] In some cases the individual persons take active part in the dream while in order cases the individual is a mere bystander without playing an active role in the events of dream.

This paper makes an attempt on studying the disparity in the understanding of dream both from Euro-American and African perspectives. [7] For European and American psychologists, dream is strictly an interpretation of a subjective or personal experience relating to mental functioning. Nevertheless, for the Africans, dream is anchored on the Africans' world view and way of life. African world is community oriented such that the meaningfulness of existence is in the other or community. [8] This sense of community is the design of the gods who do whatever they will. Hence for the Africans, the gods take the centre stage in African cosmogony. Conscious of this background, dream in the African world cannot be relativized to an individualistic understanding prevalent among the

western world rather in African understanding; dream has both

individualistic, intersubjective and spiritual orientations [9].

DREAM FROM EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY

Generally European and American psychological discoveries understand dream to be typically subjective in character and a personal experience thereby making an objective interpretation of dream a herculean task [10]. It relates to mental functioning, random neural activity or the activation synthesis. Even though dream is typically subjective, the efforts of neuroscientific discoveries have made it possible to attempt an objective insight to dreaming through neuroimaging. Nevertheless, the study of dream has posed great difficulty among psychologists in these regions. Hence in an attempt to resolve this great puzzle posed by understanding the world of dreams; different experts in psychology have made series of attempts towards understanding dream [11].

Dream occurs at different stages of sleep. Generally, there are about five stages of sleep which can be categorized as Rapid Eye Movement (REM) and the other four stages are referred as Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) stages [12]. Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep is a stage of sleep that is very commonly experienced among mammals. It is a peculiar stage of sleep that is accompanied by rapid

movement of the eyes. Rather than being a static process, sleep contains some discrete states or stages defined by various physiological measures. Though dream occurs during NREM sleep like it does in REM sleep, it should be noted that the dreams that occur during the NREM sleep lack vivid imagery and often contains simple reoccurring themes. REM sleep is sometimes referred as Paradoxical Sleep or Desynchronized Sleep. REM sleep is accompanied by body paralysis with cerebral neurons firing with the same intensity as in wakefulness [13].

Discoveries show that people experience REM sleep within the first 90 minutes of sleep and this occurs severally in the different phases or stages of sleep. It happens for about 20-25% of adult sleeping hours while this increases to over 50% for infants' sleeping hours. REM sleep is accompanied by the following characteristics:

1. The brain is as active as if one is awake
2. Rapid movement of the eye
3. Breathing becomes faster and irregular

4. Increased blood pressure
5. Changes in body temperature
6. Twisting of face and limbs
7. Sexual arousal
8. Increased oxygen consumption by the brain.
9. Atonia or temporal paralysis because the brain signals the spinal cord to seize movement of arms and legs to avoid possible injuries while acting out the content of the dream.

Very much unlike the REM sleep, the Non-REM sleep state is accompanied by the relaxation of the muscles, increase in supply of blood to the muscles, release of hormones and energy stores are replenished [14]

One of the most distressing experiences of the REM sleep is the REM sleep behavior disorder (RBD). This is an

experience of acting out dreams by physical movement of limbs or arms or even getting up and engaging in activities associated with waking. Some of these activities include: sleep walking, screaming, hitting or punching, disturbances to bed partners, e.t.c.

The activities of the body during REM sleep are measured with the use of electroencephalography (EEG), electro-oculography (EOG), and electromyography (EMG). These parameters of measurement measure and distinguish between arousal states. They measure brain activities, eye movement, and muscular activities respectively during REM sleep. [15], [16] [17] As already stated above, this measurement helps to determine and check the electrical activities of the brain while it mimics waking brain. REM sleep is characterized by hyperactivity in the brain and eye movement since the muscular paralysis does not extend to the eye muscles. Also, REM sleep is characterized by inhibition of muscular activities in the central nervous system and systems that elicit motor output.

THEORIES OF DREAMING

Activation Synthesis Hypothesis

The activation synthesis theory explains that dreams are the result of the forebrain

responding to random activity initiated at the brainstem. It is obvious that neuropsychological evidence shows that

at the point of this random activation synthesis, there is the tendency of formulation of stories that we believe to be true in order to fit disparate piece of information together. Hence if there is no bias towards a particular type of information processed during REM sleep, then it becomes difficult to fit the piece of information together [18].

In spite of the claims of activation synthesis, Foulkes states that dreams are certainly not as disjointed as claimed. There are reported cases of dreams whereupon the individuals see their dreams as realistic with connected storylines.

Threat Rehearsal

Generally this theory is attributed to Revonsuo. It describes a situation where threatening dream content serve to better

prepare us for an actual and real world threat or event by activating comparable brain regions. Hence by the rehearsal of threatening scenarios or events individuals are better equipped with adaptive skills so as to enhance individuals' chance of survival in actual events [19].

Mental Rehearsal

In spite of the fact that the brain functions in processing real world information for proper response to stimuli, it also consists of rehearsal in order to gain some cognitive skills for better adaptive purposes. A typical example to this effect is the imagination or dream of a visual nature which automatically activates the visual cortex and gets it ready for actual visual enhancement [20].

DREAM FROM AN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

The translation of the word person from its Greek origin is *prospon* which means a mask or disguise. African anthropology understands man to be a complex mask which has its proper self revelation and actualization in the community and by the gods [21]. From the vantage of African epistemological assumptions, it should be noted that significant human knowledge regarding the human person is approached from three principal sources such as: intrasubjective, intersubjective,

and transcendental sources. Hence African perspective to dream and dreaming is typically revelational and can be approached from the same perspectives as follows:

1. Personal, intrasubjective or individuocentric perspective
2. Intersubjective or triangulation perspective
3. Transcendental perspective.

Like European and American psychological discoveries, African

perspective to dreams has an individuocentric perspective. Here African perspective to dream is comparable to Freud's position. For Freud, dream constitutes a very important source of information regarding the dreamer's subjective reality, desires, needs and unconscious personality. Though traditional African perspective to dreaming accepts dream as unconscious fantasies but does not accept that dreams are mere result of the forebrain responding to random activity initiated at the brainstem [22].

It is worthy of note that African perspective to dreaming is always teleological. Quite unlike the European and American psychological discoveries, for the Africans, dreams do not just occur. Hence from a personal or individuocentric perspective, dream can either be anticipatory, compensatory or causative. Anticipatory perspective is a form of dream that is characterized by symbolic or imaginative actualization of expectations or promises. This is manifest in dream form when such aspirations seen fulfilled in the lives of others possibly known to the dreamer [24]. It is a form of reassurance that the dreamer's expectations have gained favour.

It is anticipatory when for the Africans' understanding; it has pleased the gods to

break-in to the interval before the full actualization of expectations. Hence it confirms the promise of the gods on some expectations through some symbolic dream manifestations and activities. This confirmation helps to reduce the emotional distress and tension warranted by anxiety and expectations [25]. Little wonder Gadamer recognized this anticipation to be therapeutic in the anxiety of fulfillment and truth. Anxiety here is motivated or induced by ones expectations but calmed by the veracity of divine intervention in dream.

Compensatory perspective to dreaming helps the dreamer derive inner emotional fulfillment of some of the pressing needs which are unachieved in real life and sometimes unachievable. Compensatory perspective to dream makes obvious the wishes or inner desires of the dreamer. Here the traditional Africans define dream as the intervention of the gods in human condition to compensate the dreamer for some unachieved or unachievable desires. Compensatory perspective to dream can be said to be therapeutic.

Causative dreaming is the third version of individuocentric definition of dream in the African perspective. Here dream experience and events grant opportunity to check ones list of life activities either to undo wrong, become proactive, or as a

reminder of omission. Most times, it comes as failures or strange experiences that lead the dreamer to introspection. Hence from particular experiences and events in one's family and life through dreams, the gods manifest what should be done or stopped. Some other times, it is in the form of punishment for offense for the dreamer or praise for a good life. An example of this dream is the story of a widow:

1. After the death of the husband and admission of her daughter into the secondary school, she kept dreaming of weir wind blowing volcanically in the whole compound every night but unable to hear any distinct sound. This experience continued till she

consulted with her mother who made further consultations with a traditional priest and she was advised to change the daughter to a better school and at the point of carrying out this assignment, the dream stopped.

2. Few months after the burial of the husband, she began to see the husband in her dreams looking very gloomy and bitten by rain. At this point she was advised to send someone to the village to inspect the husband's grave and it was discovered that the grave had collapsed so much so that the coffin was visible. After the necessary filling and repairs the dream stopped.

INTERSUBJECTIVE OR TRIANGULATION PERSPECTIVE

African world is a world of being-with. It is a world where one's life is truly fulfilled in the community than in the self. Little wonder Achebe said that fundamental to the view of reality of existence in African is the view that nothing both living and death, human or spirit lives in isolation from one another [26]. Therefore, we claim here that human existence is an ethics of mutuality, interdependence and cooperation.

Hence the psychology of dreaming in Africa is strongly influenced by the African people's perception of the world

as consisting of interpenetrating realms of existence. Intersubjective triangulation is an account of dreaming that is typically African oriented. It is intersubjective because it cuts across individuals quite unlike the Euro-American definition of dream which involves only the dreamer. It is triangulation because it comes to one for another marking a three point movement of dream, dreamer and dreamed. Hence quite unlike the Euro-American claims to dream as a subjective reality, African perspective to dreaming is profoundly relational, intersubjective and

a revelation for another's wellbeing. The western paradigm understands dream as typically subjective, personal and unmitigatedly individualistic from its origin to its ends such that dream only reveals one's anxieties, histories, needs, e.t.c. In contrast, African perspective to dreaming shows concern for others such

as neighbours, family members, relatives, community or friends. Thus individuals receive messages in dreams that influence the lives of others. Sometimes, individuals receive messages in dream for the community but such revelations are subject to confirmation by traditional priests for validity.

TRANSCENDENTAL DREAM ORIGIN

According to [27], the African view of life as interdependent and interpenetrating encourages the basis for the people's practice of ancestor veneration and fatalism. Hence Africans can be said to have absolute faith in the enormous potentials of spirits and gods in the *revitalization* of human life. This claim comes true in the transcendental source of dream. Hence transcendental source of dream emanates from the influences of divine agents or invisible supernatural forces in human affairs. Following the hierarchical organization of beings in the African world, above the human beings are the ancestors, spirits, gods and the Supreme Being. Indigenous Africans believe in the interconnectedness and intermingling of forces within the universe between the divine and human

beings and between the living and the dead. [28] observed that there is merely a thin line separating beings of the mundane, physical world from beings of the invisible or spirit world.

Transcendental source of dream speaks of dream as a visitation or as a transcendental intervention, orchestrated through a meeting during sleep or trance, between the dreamer and a specific agent of the ancestral or the spiritual world. During sleep, the dreamer engages in some form of dialogue or conversational monologue where the spiritual agent speaks and the dreamer listens and gives a positive response or acceptance to the divine oracle.

RELIGIOUS ABUSES AND DREAM INTERPRETATIONS IN AFRICAN CONTINENTAL EXPERIENCE

Very much unlike the European and American traditions, the traditional Africans do not really emphasize dream

as a result of psychological interpretation but a mode of revelation and communication of the gods to the human

person. Even though dream has three perspectives; individuocentric, triangulation and transcendental perspectives; these three perspectives are mere perspectives of knowing the mind of the gods. [29] They are the modes of divine-human intervention either for human favor/benefit or disfavor/calamity.

It is worthy of note that African cosmology believes that everything happening on earth is either caused by the gods, spirits or the Supreme Being. Hence the good things come from god or good spirits while the misfortunes such as punishment, calamity, sickness, bad fate, death, snatching of someone's wife, e.t.c come from the bad spirits or gods. It is unfortunate to note that human beings can implore the assistance of bad spirits to torment other human beings. However, good spirits can as well wrath punishment to an offender as a punitive measure of sanitizing the society and correcting wrongs. Believe in the supremacy of divine beings in Africa makes Africans very loyal, cowardly submissive and fearful of the gods and their activities. This complexity in divine- human relationship is sometimes revealed in dreams but needed another divine agent to unravel the corresponding human expectations from the dream in order to appease the gods.

It has been established that in the African traditional society, dreams are assumed to have particular messages from the gods. This makes it very mandatory that in the traditional African society, consultations are made for clarity of dream messages. One is to seek explanation of the oracle from some other divine beings or their representatives in the African traditional society. Such representatives are the traditional priests. Hence the traditional priests were regarded as experts in dream interpretation. The dreamer is to consult with the traditional priests to whose proper office it is to interpret dreams and reveal the mind of the gods [12].

Further consultations with the gods are made by the traditional priest in order to unravel the meaning of the dream and the corresponding expectations or responsibilities for the dreamer. This is proper to the office of the traditional priest because it is believed that the traditional priest has the monopoly of knowledge on divine affairs for the reason that he is the proper intermediary between the gods and human beings [20]. In some African countries, the traditional priests have dream houses while others use their personal shrines for the consultations with the gods. Here dream house is a sacred or special location

sometimes like a thatched house where the 'dream other' or the traditional priests go to consult with the gods in order to demystify a particular dream and to know the mind of the gods for the dreamer.

Unfortunately, the coming of Christianity warranted a transposition of this traditional practice regarding dream interpretations. The African Traditional Religion has the habit of absolute loyalty to the traditional priests and as such consulted with the traditional priests to know the mind of the gods since every dream is believed not to be a mere psychological process but a message from the gods. [19] Unlike the traditional African society that practiced African Traditional Religion, the modern African society has replaced the African Traditional Religion with Christianity, Islam and other western religions. It is worthy of note that Africans have only changed the name from traditional religion to Christianity or Islam but their loyalty and allegiance to God and the religious leaders respectively still remain

unhindered because it has become a habit acquired from the traditional religion.

Hence the Christians and Muslims rely solely on their pastors, Imam, 'men of God' or priests as the intermediary to God. Most unfortunate is that these men of God capitalize on the naivety and ignorance of the people to siphon and extort the people in the guise of religion and dream interpretations. Very many booklets and flyers are sold in the markets as dream interpretations. Many prayer houses are stocked with patients desiring interpretations to their dreams. Vexing to note is that these acclaimed men of God have the full knowledge that they are deceiving the people in the guise of dream interpretations but would not stop because of their material gain and cheap popularity [7] [8] [9]. The intention of this paper is achieved when these vulnerable Africans understand our background and why we are where we are today as prey in the hands of mischievous interpreters of dreams.

CONCLUSION

The attempt on understanding dream has been a subject of great concern to philosophical studies, evolutionary psychology, cognitive neuroscience and different world religions thereby making

the understanding of dream a complex-whole. This paper has put in effort towards understanding the peculiar experiences of the Africans as distinguished from European and

American psychological discoveries regarding dream and dreaming. In an ordinary sense, this paper defined dream as the manifestation of cherished aspiration, ambition or hopes. In the same vein, appeal to Philosophy of mind and different field of psychology shows that dream is a series of thought, images and sensations occurring in the mind while sleeping or in the state of unconsciousness. However, the traditional African society sees dream as a moment of religious experience and revelation from the gods.

This paper makes an attempt on studying the disparity in the understanding of dream both from Euro-American and African perspectives. Generally European and American psychological discoveries understand dream to be typically subjective in character and a personal experience thereby making an objective interpretation of dream very difficult and almost an impossible task. As already stated early, the psychological discoveries define dream as a mental functioning or random neural activity.

Nevertheless, for the Africans, dream is anchored on the Africans' world view and way of life. African world is community oriented such that the meaningfulness of existence is in the 'other' or community. This sense of community is a natural design of the gods who are fully in charge

of the world and as such direct existence as they will. Hence for the Africans, the gods take the centre stage in African cosmogony. It is very important to reiterate the reason and source of dream as earlier stated minding the African background. Dream is both a subjective/personal/individuocentric, intersubjective and transcendental reality.

Individuocentric perspective to dream can be anticipatory, compensatory or causative. Thus, following ones obsession of mind on particular events, it should be understood that the REM stage of sleep finds ones' dream be a confirmation of expectations so as to reduce emotional distress warranted by anxiety. Also, it can be for the reason of compensation and help such that the dreamer derives inner emotional fulfillment for unachieved or unachievable desires. Also, it can be causative. In this sense, dream can be a reason of revelation of divine plans for punishment or favour from the gods. Also, dream can be caused by a biological process in the body especially when the body is in danger and a necessary action is needed to rescue the danger.

It has been established that before the advent of Christianity and other religions in Nigeria, African Traditional Religion had the habit of absolute loyalty to the traditional priests and as such consulted with the traditional priests to know the

mind of the gods. It was believed that every dream bore a message from the gods and as such can be said to be a revelation. This paper established that modern African society has replaced the African Traditional Religion with Christianity, Islam and other western religions. This change did not destroy the African attitude to religious leaders such that their loyalty and allegiance to God

and the religious leaders still remain unhindered. Unfortunately, this loyalty led to a harvest of abuses, heretical teachings, extortion and simony from the religious leaders as manifest in different churches, prayer houses, self acclaimed prophets and seers who capitalize on the people's trust to lead them astray in the name of dream interpretation.

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