DREAM AS VALIDATOR IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CULTURES

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In lands where the dividing line between the so-called “real” and “unreal” shrinks to a vanishing point; where water sprites lurk beneath the surface of every pool or stream, and dryads flit through the shadows, visions of the night seem as real as the sights of waking hours.¹

In traditional Africa, the dream has long been accepted as a vital and regularly consulted source of knowledge and as a reliable channel of communication among the living, the dead, and the divine. Far from the personal, subjective and introspective experience of our psychologically sophisticated culture, the dream is reality, whether in the memory of a soul’s wanderings in distant lands, separated from the sleeping body, or of a visitation from the supernatural. Its message is to be understood, and shared when necessary for the welfare of the community. As Thomas Mbiti has pointed out,

In a tightly-knit group, where every member is answerable to every other and visible at all times, no phenomenon is private. Every sickness or sorrow, omen or dream is a communal affair and must be externalized to be understood and controlled.²

Edward Tylor,³ in his pioneering study of primitive cultures, attributed the beginning of religion to speculations about dreams. What, he reasoned, were the universally observed biological phenomena which demanded explanation? Certainly one must be the distinction between a living body and a dead one, and the nature of the interim states of waking, sleeping, trance and disease. Another is the nature of the human shapes that appear in dreams and visions. Tylor distilled descriptions of this “dream phantom” as a

thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapor, film or shadow; the cause of life and thought in the individual it animates; independently possessing the personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner, past or present; capable of leaving the body far behind, to flash swiftly from place to place; mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power...able to enter into, possess, and act in the bodies of other men, of animals, even of things.⁴
Gustav Jung was deeply stirred by both the suffering and beauty of Africa when he travelled there in 1925 and disappointed that his questions about dreams elicited so few responses. He felt a deep affinity to the cultures he visited, as if returning to a nostalgically recalled homeland, from which he was separated only in time.

It was as if I were this moment returning to the land of my youth, and as if I knew that dark-skinned man who had been waiting for me for five thousand years. . . . I could not guess what string within myself was plucked at the sight of that solitary dark hunter. 8

Jung experienced a “psychic liberation” from the “demons” of European rationalism, a flowing “blissfully back to the primeval expanses.” To a degree, he was fearful of his own fascination with Africa, with the temptation he felt to abandon Europe forever for what he perceived as this primal, maternal source. When he planned his Tower for Bollingen as the expression of wholeness, it was to be modelled on the circular African hut with a central hearth and space assigned to human and animal groups about the fire. Eagerly seeking information about dreams, Jung was saddened by the response of an aged Bugandan medicine man, a “laibon.” Wrapped in a splendid cloak of blue monkey skins, the ancient mourned that since the coming of the white man, dreams no longer provided their customary counsel. No longer, as in the old days, could the laibon determine from his dreams “whether there is war or sickness or whether rain comes and where the herds should be driven.” Dreams, he explained, were no longer needed because “the English knew everything.” 9 This loss of faith in the “divine voice” of dreams, Jung noted regretfully, had reduced the sage to a “living embodiment of the spreading disintegration of an undermined, outmoded, unrestorable world.”

Like Jung, Evans-Pritchard in his classic study of religion among the Sudanic Nuer, observed informants’ reluctance to disclose the substance of their dreams to the European. 8 Since these cattle-herding peoples feared death and the frequency with which dreams were its prognosticator, they preferred to speak of them as little as possible. By means of dreams, the dead were believed able to return to harrass the living, possibly to command their presence or at least to exact a sacrificial penance. Any recognition which aroused the deads’ attention to the affairs of the living was best avoided.

Since the dream in traditional Africa was conceived as a real experience, it could evoke reward or punishment. Among the Asante of Ghana, according to Rattray, dreaming of adultery was treated as a deed in fact and punished accordingly. 9 The dream could take the form of a journey undertaken by a soul separated from the sleeping body. The Asante believed the soul or “kra” of the woman was weaker than a man’s and given to deceptive philandering. At night, although apparently sleeping peacefully at her husband’s side, the woman’s soul may be travelling afar to

fleat about on the nefarious missions of witches, spearing through the air like a flame to inflict injury, illness or death . . . miles away, secretly covorting with other souls or conspiring with them at sorcery or skullduggery. 10

Belief in the kra’s wanderings in dreams persisted among the Bush-negroes of Surinam, descendants of West Africans, whose principal religion is called “winti.” Even plants, according to these cultivators, possessed souls which could leave them in nocturnal wandering. 11
Dreams are often conceived as the vehicles of witchcraft. A common conviction held by the Yoruba of Nigeria is that woman can transform her “heart-soul” (“okedo”) into a night bird, usually one with a long red beak which can pierce the sleeper’s skull. A woman who sleeps on her back with her mouth open and arms outstretched is suspected of witchcraft. Witchery is a nocturnal enterprise and witches are believed most active between 12 and 3 A.M. in the realm of dream and nightmare. A protection against such violation, a wrought iron staff surmounted by birds, has been shown by Robert Thompson to be a metaphor of the rational mind. To guard against the deadly visitation, it must be kept beside the bed and manipulated each night before sleep. Images of birds surmounting heads are ubiquitous in African art. Often the beak is pressed to the lips or forehead as in the Senufo mask from the Ivory Coast.

The Ibibio of southern Nigeria believe that the peripatetic dream-soul can return with palpable injury. Wounds suffered by the soul outside the body remain painful in the corresponding part upon awakening. Of three souls possessed by every human being, the spirit, the ethereal body and the soul proper, the latter two can leave the body. The shadow as emanation of the soul is particularly vulnerable to injury of destruction. A wandering soul may be captured by an enemy and prevented from returning to the body. For this reason, it is considered dangerous to wake a sleeper too abruptly lest his soul not have time to return.

Various remedies have been recorded to repress this itinerant behavior. Since the soul is believed most often located in the head, the sleeper may be advised to cover the nose and mouth. The Ibibio believe the soul enters and leaves through the nostrils. The motif of serpents or lizards emanating from the nostrils recurs in southern Nigerian art, as seen in the bronze head from Benin.

When attractive food or other desirable material reappears in dreams, the Ibibio is advised to refuse it, reassuring the potential donor that

I have all that I want in my house, loving wives and children in plenty, delicate food and comfortable furnishings. I will not therefore leave these and go forth in a dream to enjoy the goods of another, lest an enemy snare my soul and prevent it from returning to me.
Talbot reported a case heard in the Idua Native Court of a man accused of snaring the “dream soul” of a woman, thus bringing about her death. Under oath, the woman’s son testified that the man had come to his mother in her dream and cut off some of her hair with scissors. She had come to him the next day, disclosing the dream and demanding the return of her soul. Mary Kingsley, travelling in the same region at the turn of the century, reported that “the dream-soul is the cause of woes unnumbered to our African friends...” Not only was it given to wandering capriciously, it often refused to be summoned by even the most ingenious healer. It then must be replaced by a fresh one. Fresh ones were obtained by concealing something attractive in a pot containing a hook. Persistent dreams of a desirable object could signify the preparation of such a trap by an enemy.

The Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola, in My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, terminates the protagonist’s long wandering in the nightmarish Deads’ Land with a series of dreams in which he is summoned by the living to return. Twenty-four years of bizarre adventures had dulled his memory of the mortal world and his desire to go back to his proper sphere. Only a powerful magnetic “juru”, manipulated by a diviner hired by his family, forces his withdrawal from the Bush of Ghosts. Leaving almost regrettfully, he assures himself that he will be able to return because I dreamed a dream that I am present when this “Secret Society of Ghosts” is performing and I believe so, because my dream always comes to the truth in future, however it may be.

In Haitian “voudoun,” a religious system rooted in African beliefs, man is believed dominated by two spiritual principles: the little angel (“ti-bon-anje”) and the big angel (“gros-bon-anje”), located in the head. The big angel is the source of all mental and physical energy and can be seen in the cast shadow. At night it can leave the body, its adventures accounting for dreams. If the body is nurtured adequately, the big angel can provide such useful services as securing information about one’s enemies. If not, the dreamer is warned, the big angel can spend precious energies at night simply hunting for food. A mixture of wine, flour, nuts, cassava, maize and chicken, wrapped in a white headcloth and placed upon the forehead for a few hours, can satisfy the wandering spirit’s hunger. Vulnerable to capture by sorcerers, loss of the big angel can cause the person to sink into a profound lethargy. Unprincipled sorcerers may sell it to clients as a “zombi”, a willless slave.

Souls of the sick are the most vulnerable to capture by wizards who the Ibibio informant described as sending dream-shapes into the night, robed in long garments with “faces covered like the masked Eyo,” an example of which is shown here.

Through window or door they glide, though locked and bolted never so surely, till at length they reach the room where the man whom they wish to injure lies sleeping. Here they wind their long garments about him, covering his eyes that he may be unable to recognize them, striving all the time to draw forth his soul and snare it by evil charms, so that it can never return again to its place.

In Dahomey (now Benin), a dream interpreter must be consulted to determine the wishes of the “Da,” embodiment of an individual’s destiny and essential human-ness. For some reason restless or dissatisfied, the “Da” in dreams may demand of its possessor certain offerings. If unresponsive to these demands, the
individual risks poverty, misfortune or dependence unto slavery upon the demands of others. The “Da” is represented by the umbilicus and associated with roots of all plant forms, especially trees. A newborn’s umbilicus is buried beneath a tree which becomes the child’s inalienable property. 24

The tree, “axis mundi,” has been used by many cultures as metaphor of the bridge between natural and supernatural. Jung interpreted its appearance in dreams as a symbolic reference to the Self in process of conscious growth. The all-embracing centering image of the Cosmic Tree, roots and boughs uniting heaven and earth was the most fitting symbol for the unconscious source (the root), the conscious realization (the trunk) and the trans-conscious goal (the crown) of individuation. 25 The Haitian artist, Jean-Claude Robuste, in his painting, situated the image of diabolical possession within a swelling tree trunk.

The dream journey can sanction, even introduce, innovations into the culture. A Mambila woman of northern Nigeria described a journey taken in a dream when she was seriously ill. She had died and was taken to the world of shades. The Mambila believe the dead live in villages similar to those occupied by the living. There, products considered desirable by her society were plentiful. Fine houses, abundant food and beer, and large quantities of imported cloth awaited the dead who merited them. The cloth, which had only recently been brought to the isolated Mambila village, had been incorporated into the reward system communicated from the dream. Rethfisch noted in his study that by means of dreams, new ideas, values and aspirations could be reconciled with the traditional belief system without shaking the foundations of the society. 26

Reporting recent research among the Dan of Liberia, Eberhard Fischer indicates that new dances and mask types are introduced there every year which are created from dreams. 27 Each principal type of mask, together with a body of symbolic
meaning and regulations for its use, is said to be “born through a dream.” The mask-spirit reveals itself to the prospective masker, telling him the name to be applied to the mask and several songs and dance patterns. In this competitive society, prestige is gained by such revelations and innovations. Masks are believed to belong to the untamed forest, a hazardous region of unpredictable and uncontrolled forces. The masker completes his costume with materials related to the forest and its creatures: fibers, fur, feathers and animal teeth. He does not speak, but makes animal sounds which must be interpreted for the audience. Many masks are “dreamed” in forest camps, where young men are secluded for circumcision and preparation for manhood. The Dan believe that masks enable invisible spirits, dissatisfied with their immateriality, to take an active physical role in the affairs of men. These spirits may also bestow gifts of divination or healing or political power by means of dreams. When a member of “makka,” a particularly ferocious secret society of warriors, is visited by its spirit in a dream, he places a miniature brass bow on his threshold. It is a signal for the society’s members to gather for war or ceremonial. Dreams, among the Dan, provide sanction for prestigious innovation and achievement, as well as directions for specific action.

A few theorists have gone so far as to ascribe a major source of innovation in primitive cultures to the inspiration of the dream. New rituals, dances, cults have been more readily accepted when validated by dreams. Even today, as one author writing on Aladura, a contemporary religious movement among the Yoruba of Nigeria, noted, it is “an unquestioned assumption among most Yorubas that dreams are attempts of the numinous world to get in touch with the dreamer.” The West African Students Union, cradle of Nigerian nationalism, was founded by an Egb student, Ledip Solanke, after a dream in which he was so commanded by God. Chief Awolowo, once Premier of western Nigeria, said in court under oath that a dream informed him he was to become Prime Minister of Nigeria.

Visitations in dreams by dead relatives or friends are treated as tangible encounters. Such dreams often require ritual aid for interpretation and advice. Although the attitude of the visitor may indicate a benign purpose, the dead’s restlessness suggests a need for action. Sacrifices or other oblations may be required. Pains are taken to soothe the departed ones. Sleep well, the deceased is enjoined in obituary notices in modern African newspapers. When ghosts have not received proper burial, such as hunters who were lost in the forest or fishermen at sea, or people burnt by fire or struck by lightning, additional funeral rituals may be called for.

Sick people were thought by the Ibibio to converse with the ghosts of their departed loved ones who sometimes brought them medicine or led them out to the bush to point out curative herbs or roots. Among the Lunda, visits to the sick from dead relatives in dreams meant that the illness had been inflicted by an ancestral shade. Among the Bush-negroes of Surinam, the simplest and most common way to diagnose disease is through dreams. A deity or ghost visits the patient in his sleep to reveal the cause of illness or its imminence. Since disease is considered in traditional African societies as caused, not accidentally suffered, knowledge is required to root out the source of suffering in the actions of others.

Dreams in Africa have been traditionally used as validation of the exercise of power. Election to a special rank or office was often indicated by the transmission of special knowledge in a dream. Among the Mende of Sierra Leone, a layman could qualify as medicine man by compounding curatives as instructed by a dream. A priestess of the Mende women’s cult, Sande, could be sanctioned as leader in a
dream in which she was informed of the location of certain herbs. On the basis of this enlightenment she was eligible to form a new chapter of the cult, and lead initiation rites and subsequent instruction of novices.24

African artists, particularly those who work in valuable materials such as gold or rare wood, have described their inspiration and their skills as derived from dreams. Camara Laye, in his autobiography of a Senegalese childhood, recounted an incident in which his goldsmith father revealed a dream-serpent as source of his vocation. The small serpent first appeared to him in a dream, arranging precisely the day and time when he would appear in reality. In subsequent dreams, the snake gave him foreknowledge of events and knowledge of the skills of his artisanship.

Everything is transmitted to me in the course of the night, together with an account of all the work I shall have to perform, so that from the start, without having to cast about in my mind, I know how to repair what is brought to me; and it is these things that have established my renown as a craftsman.25

Among the Anang of southeastern Nigeria, a deity may will that a man become a carver and inform him of that election in a dream or by means of an unusual event. Only the carver among Anang craftsmen is guided and protected by a tutelary spirit appearing to him in dreams. He works close to its shrine, an impaled tortoise and clay pot placed in the corner of his workshop.26

In Liberia, a talented Gola artist is believed to be guided by a “neme,” a spiritual mentor appearing to him in dreams. The “neme” may exact a formidable price of behavioral restrictions, physical impairments, or even childlessness (the ultimate deprivation in African societies) for his guidance. Evidence of the guidance of the “neme” is observable from early childhood. The Gola draw a sharp distinction between the craftsman, however skilled, and the artist—genius inspired by the “neme.” When a carver is hired by a woman of Sande to carve a mask, she must provide food and other amenities for both him and his “neme” during the entire process. If he feels that insufficient provision has been made or that he or his spirit has been insulted, he can destroy his work at any time. Domination of the “neme” often produces a restless, irresponsible individual who prefers a private life with his “spirit spouse” to proper familial ties. As d’Azevedo has pointed out in his detailed study of Gola artistry, this provides the artist a convenient rationale for the avoidance of unwelcome social obligations, insulating him from direct public sanctions.27 The dream can be accountable for both behavioral deviancy and artistic innovation. The Gola say that “every man has his own way of dreaming.” The special genius is referred to as “he who dreams.”

Although carvers occupy the preeminent place in Gola visual artistry, certain weavers who are considered especially creative and innovative are referred to as dreamers. One craftsman observed by d’Azevedo kept a notebook of complex geometrical patterns transmitted to him in dreams. For the Gola, the exceptional artist is viewed as a passive instrument of his tutelary genius. His arduous apprenticeship and dedicated labors are considered inevitable in a daring entrepreneur who mediates between human and supernatural realms (p. 337).28

Religious vocations are frequently indicated by dreams, especially those of medicine people, diviners, priests and rain-makers. Muchona, an herbalist and ritual specialist among the Ndembu of Zambia, was studied in detail by Victor Turner. After frequent visits by his dead parents and two uncles whom Muchona
saw emerging from the grave, he was stricken by a “heavy sickness.” It was
determined that Muchona had been informed by these intermediaries of his calling
as diviner, a difficult profession demanding rigid and unassailable sanctions.29
When he accepted their demands, he was immediately cured. An exile from the
country of his birth, Muchona recounted persistent dreams of his ancestral lands. “I
dream,” he mused, “of the country of Nyamwana where I was born and used to
live. . . . It is as though I were walking there now. I talk, I chat, I dance. Does my
shadow (‘mwevulu,’ the personal life principle) go there in sleep?”30
Many more examples could be cited of the office of dreams in the validation of
special professions, roles, or behavior in traditional and modern African societies.
Accepted as authentic messages transmitted from supernatural realms, dream
content is interrogated carefully and acted upon. Dreams are believed a legitimate
demonstration of the unity of profane with sacred and a reliable means of
intercourse with a mode of being accessible in everyday life.

REFERENCES

32. Wooding, 1979, pp. 35-36.
38. d’Azevedo, 1975, p. 337.