



Dreams

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Dreams are commonly defined as involuntary, sporadic events that occur to individuals during their sleep and that encompass visual images, cognitive activity, as well as a range of emotions, reactions, and sensations. Situated at the interstices of the real and the imagined, the meaningful and meaningless, the conscious and subconscious, and the sleeping and waking worlds, they have often been approached—if not always formally recognised—as sources of interpretive insight into the everyday lives, social relationships, psychological landscapes, and cultural worlds of those who experience them. This entry examines three prominent themes in the anthropological study of dreams as experience and dreaming as process. The first section considers dreams as manifestations of the subconscious and interior dimensions of individuals through the lens of ethnopsychology and attendant constructs of selfhood and identity. The second section considers dreams as cultural artefacts and practices through the lens of their ritualised or expert-led interpretation. The third section considers dreams through their relationship to religiosity, spirituality, and the transcendent, examining in particular dreams' morality and function as sources of knowledge, divination, and power. The conclusion considers the methodological opportunities and challenges that arise in taking dreams seriously as objects of ethnographic analysis in light of the limits they appear to pose to the classical anthropological approach of 'participant-observation'.

Introduction

There is perhaps no activity more private, individual, or interior than dreaming. Dreams tend to occur as involuntary, sporadic events during slumber, encompassing visual images, cognitive activity, and a range of emotions, reactions, and sensations. They are often remembered and recounted in scattered fragments or fleeting impressions rather than coherent or structured events. Their significance can seem glaringly evident, or thoroughly opaque. Some we deem meaningful, others trivial. Some dreams we are happy to share, others we would rather not reveal. Dreams, as such, sit somewhere at the interstices of the experienced and narrated, real and imagined, meaningful and meaningless, conscious and subconscious, and disclosed and concealed. Yet despite (or perhaps precisely because of) their nebulous nature, dreams have often been approached—if not always recognised—as sources of interpretive insight into the everyday lives, relationships, affects, and environments of those who experience them.¹

Dreams were long considered the primary terrain of psychoanalytic theory, which centres the role of unconscious mental processes in shaping human behavioural and mental states. Anthropological approaches have shed vital light on the socially and historically shaped ways that different communities understand the origins, causes, contents, contexts, and meanings of dreams, both as individual psychic experiences and as culturally situated practices, and in ways that do not necessarily correspond to

scientific definitions (Lohmann 2007). The earliest reference to dreams within anthropology can be traced to the late nineteenth century scholar Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), who argued that dreaming, as a universally experienced state of reality-transcending and altered consciousness, enabled the emergence of human mythologies, cosmological frameworks, and religious beliefs worldwide. For Tylor, dreams in many non-modern societies were held to put people in touch with objectively existing souls or ghosts, while modern societies understood souls and ghosts to be the result of psychology and biology ([1871] 1920). His theories reflected a broader understanding among Victorian anthropologists that belief in the reality of dreams characterised earlier stages in the development of human society, within a three-part evolution of culture from ‘savage’ to ‘barbarian’ to ‘civilised’.

Early twentieth century dreaming studies, conducted primarily in non-Western settings and often tied to psychiatric interventions, tended to focus on the collection, classification, and comparison of similarities and differences in dream contents, or what was known as ‘dream data reports’ (e.g. Lincoln 1935).¹⁴ However, post-war scholars in psychological anthropology, and particularly those affiliated with the US-borne ‘Culture and Personality School’—an influential current concerned with how psychological and cultural forces shape human experience—were critical of the abstraction of dreams from their specific lived and interpretive contexts. They posited that dreams should instead be approached as expressions of collectively shaped personality traits and emotive dispositions shared by particular social groups (e.g. Eggan 1952).

It was primarily in the late 1980s and early 1990s that dreams came to figure more prominently as objects of ethnographic inquiry and cross-cultural comparison in their own right within the work of social anthropologists, some of whom bring their social scientific analyses into conversation with neuropsychology, evolutionary biology, and cognitive science (e.g. Nordin 2011; Laughlin 2011). Sometimes referred to as the ‘new anthropology of dreaming’ (Tedlock 1991), albeit not thoroughly systematised or integrated, this current recognises dreams as communicative events and legitimate modes of interpreting, inhabiting, and effecting change in the world. It draws attention to dreams as both interiorly experienced and culturally contextual social facts, often requiring multi-disciplinary analysis and attention to local psychodynamics. It also considers dreaming as a fruitful way to conduct research. Dreams can help build [relations](#) between field interlocutors and fieldworkers as dreamers themselves, allowing them to connect across different sociocultural worlds.¹⁵

Drawing on [ethnographic](#) examples from diverse regions, this entry considers dreams as manifestations of the subconscious and interior dimensions of individuals through the lens of ethnopsychology and attendant constructs of self, personhood, and identity. It then approaches dreams as cultural artefacts and practices through the lens of their ritualised or expert-led interpretation. The third section examines dreams through their relationship to religiosity, spirituality, and the transcendent, examining dreams’ functions as sources

of knowledge, [divination](#), and power. The conclusion assesses the opportunities and challenges entailed in taking dreams seriously as objects of ethnographic analysis, particularly given their often-opaque nature and the limits they appear to pose to the classical anthropological method of ‘participant-observation’.

Self, identity, and psyche

Dreams play a central role within anthropological investigations into constructions of the self, identity, and psyche across individuals, collectives, and cultures, or what is referred to alternately as the field of ‘ethnopsychology’ (White 2012) or ‘cultural psychodynamics’ (Mageo 2015). Freudian psychoanalysis was instrumental in rehabilitating dreams as objects of legitimate scholarly inquiry and therapeutic intervention in the West and had a profound influence on early anthropologies of dreaming. Its influence manifests, for instance, in analyses of dreams as the disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes and as expressions of trauma, anxiety, and guilt. It also surfaces in the distinction identified by researchers between dreams’ manifest or conscious content and their latent or subconscious content, and an attention to the multiple symbolic valences of recurring dream motifs or patterns.

Exemplary of this approach is an ethnographic study conducted in the 1980s that centred on the dreams of Jovenil, a recently bereaved father among the Kagwahiv people of the Brazilian Amazon (Kracke 1981). In these dreams, Jovenil witnesses the engorged penis of a man that is snapped off as punishment for the man having slept with his own sister. Jovenil also dreams of suffering the wrath of his wife for inadvertently hunting and killing a monkey and of overturning a canoe that drowns his son, Alonzo. These events, according to anthropologist Waud Kracke, manifest Jovenil’s curiosity in the large penis of a fellow villager he beheld as a child and for which he was later castigated by his mother, resulting in sexual trauma. They also show his repressed guilt for engaging in taboo incestuous relations with a parallel cousin earlier in life, and the blame he places upon himself for the consequent death of his children as a form of punishment. In a society that prescribes that the [dead](#) must be forgotten and all memories of them eradicated, it was through the subconscious experience of dreams that Jovenil was able to work through the emotional process of mourning the loss of his children, facing his guilty conscience, and acknowledge his complicity in the tragedy.

If the example above centres on a single individuals’ multiple dreams, other early studies of an ethnopsychological bent took as their primary data a wider array of subjects and dreams to identify basic personality traits and worldviews that are shared by particular social groups, or what was then called ‘culture patterns’ (Eggan 1952, 478). For instance, ‘dream charts’ were deployed to analyse the manifest content of 334 dreams collected from men and women aged 6 to 75 years in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico (Foster 1973). Recurring symbols within these dreams, and particularly among men, include a threatening environment, impotence and loneliness, fear of embarrassment, and unpredictable futures. These repeated motifs point to anxiety over what people will say, or of being found out, as central dimensions of

Tzintzuntzan cultural and gendered norms. They suggest that Tzintzuntzan people's adherence to principles of good behaviour in waking life is driven less by their sense of guilt than by their conformity to what anthropologist George Foster calls a 'shame culture'. Importantly, dreams' manifest content directs attention not only to the basic tenets of 'shame culture' as a shared disposition among Tzintzuntzan people, but also to the disharmony or tensions that exist between this cultural ideal on the one hand, and the repression of desires that sustaining this ideal demands (Eggan 1952, 478).

More recent ethnopsychological scholarship has distanced itself from Freudian and Culture and Personality approaches to studying dreams. It recognised that such approaches risked being ethnocentric, i.e. that they often misinterpreted dreams because they stuck too closely to the cultural understandings of the analysts. Previous approaches had also assumed that cultures were largely static and that insights from one culture were widely generalisable. Working against these assumptions, contemporary ethnopsychological studies consider how cultural transformation, including processes of globalisation, colonisation, and modernisation, reconfigures the ability of individuals and collectives to reorganise their sense of self. They study, for example, how dreams that reflect back to the dreamer how their organisation of self relates to them, their body, and other beings and entities in the world (so-called 'selfscape dreams') relate to people's interpretive frameworks (Hollan 2004). While such dreams may be universal in their basic orienting functions, their content varies within and across both cultures and individuals, conjuring cultural contexts that are more-than-local in their scope, sites, and subjects (e.g. Lattas 1993; Hollan 2005).

In American Samoa, for example, the dreams of young students, and their own reflections on these dreams' significance, express their efforts to situate their selves in the context of imposed cultural shifts over a century of Christian conversion and Americanisation (Mageo 2004). In one such dream, a female Samoan's muteness, compounded with her inability or refusal to speak either English or Samoan and her appearance as a White, blond-haired, blue-eyed three-year-old, point to communication problems, existential confusions, and forms of cultural [resistance](#) linked to Samoan girls' shifting sexuality and gender roles. They reflect enduring traditional hierarchies on the one hand and notions of social equality and racial categories introduced by [colonialism](#) on the other. In another dream, the violent silencing and injury suffered by a male dreamer's girlfriend embodies the challenge of reconciling the customary authority of higher-status Samoan males with the [values](#) of romantic engagement, [care](#), and sincerity introduced by Christian missionaries, and American soldiers in WWI. In both instances, dreams and their interpretation by dreamers themselves come to constitute experiences that are creative rather than purely passive, conscious rather than purely unconscious, and generative rather than purely reflective. It is through these experiences that Samoans engage emotionally and discursively in the effects and affects of socio-cultural change and attendant forms of meaning-making.

Cultural artefacts, ritual acts, and interpretive practices

The sociocultural dimensions of dreams accrue particular prominence when dream ritualisation, communication, and interpretation form part of an established local knowledge system. Such insider or local knowledge systems offer valuable insights into how dream experiences are defined, classified, and valued across different communities as significant or mundane, empowering or perilous, or pragmatic or supernatural. They showcase how and when dreams should be communicated to others, or not, and who has the authority to elucidate their meanings. They also shed light on the diverse functions and causes of dreams, including as momentary and revelatory journeys deep into parts of the self or beyond (Mittermaier 2015; Groark 2009); as products of the intentions of the dreamer or unsolicited visitations by outside entities (George 1995; Heneise 2017); as pathways to or predicaments of past and future events (Stewart 2017; Basso 1987); as deliberately induced expressions of creative imagination or unwilling forms of external control (Herdt and Stephen 1989; Chao 2022); as guides to behaviour or reflections thereof (Ingold 2013; Pandya 2004); as experiences of diagnostic, therapeutic, anxiogenic, or punitive valences (Devereux 2023; Traphagan 2003); as expressions of [resilience](#) or rupture in the face of change (Graham 1995; Glaskin 2005); and as continuous extensions of, or radical breaks from, waking thoughts (Kracke 1981; Rubenstein 2012).

Ethnographic studies of dreams among the Yolmo of north-central Nepal illustrate the value of attending to local understandings of dreams' sociocultural significance as categories of experience and modes of practice (Desjarlais 1991). According to one study, conducted in the late 1980s, dreams do not exist for Yolmo as a unitary entity, but rather in three distinctive forms—auspicious, inauspicious, and seemingly insignificant—that manifest in particular dream events. While villagers can articulate these basic distinctions, it is primarily [Buddhist](#) spiritual leaders and priests, such as lamas and shamans, who have the authority and expertise to determine what particular dreams signify and to heal those who experience them. They do so by drawing on a 'dictionary of dream symbols' (Desjarlais 1991, 215) that identifies and indexes a wide, complex, yet finite range of dream images and meanings that are collectively recognised but also vary in significance depending on the dreamer in question.

In contrast to the notion of dreams as reflective of the individual's self, psyche, and past, many Yolmo believe that dreams predict events that will impact those *around* the dreamer in the course of their *future* waking life. For instance, a tree falling in one person's dream indicates that one of their close relatives will imminently die (Desjarlais 1991, 216). Another key facet of Yolmo dream knowledge systems pertains to the sustained enculturation in editing, remembering, communicating, and thus in some ways creating dream stories that begin in the early stages of life. Throughout this process, Yolmo not only come to terms with the distresses expressed in their dreams, but also actively 'make their dreams mean what they want them to mean' (Desjarlais 1991, 221). What this study offers is an approach to dreams anchored first and foremost in the knowledge systems of dreamers *themselves*—one that uncovers dreams' divinatory functions as well as their positioning with local structures of expertise, processes of skill acquisition, and

understandings of meaning-making as a concomitantly symbolic and strategic endeavour.

Other ethnographic accounts attend the embodied and ritualised dimensions and protocols of dreams and dream-sharing as *collective*—rather than individuated—practices that serve to guide everyday social activities. One such case centres on dreaming among the Ongee people of Little Andaman Island and its role in determining communal [hunting and gathering](#) practices in daily life (Pandya 2004). Within these dreams, shared sensations of smells help to inform conscious and practical decisions by Ongee groups around what plants or [animals](#) should be sought out in the forest, where, and when.⁴⁴ This olfactory dimension stems from the Ongee perception of dreams as moments where individuals' internal bodies (*enteeah*) collect the smells left behind or imprinted upon their external bodies (*mateeah*) in waking life, in a process known as *dane korale*, which translates literally as 'a spider making its web' and is also the Ongee term for 'dreaming' (Pandya 2004, 143).

Ongee practice a ritualised form of dream-sharing by participating in lengthy and highly stylised discussions and singing before falling asleep on concentric and mutually facing platforms, in which they describe what they did in the day and what they dreamt of the previous night. Olfactory references identified across different individuals' dreams, such as the smell of ripe jackfruit, bring these individuals to form groups and look for jackfruit in the forest together. The discovery of ripe jackfruit validates the dreams shared, producing what Ongee call 'dream success' (*eneyemaga-tegebe*) (Pandya 2004, 140). The collective, rather than individuated, nature of dream images and smells thus works hand in hand with Ongee's collective interpretation of these dreams' meanings and their implications for shared daily activities. While Ongee have since experienced a transition from circular open campgrounds to private enclosed quarters, and from forest-based subsistence to plantation [labour](#), this ritualised, sensory, and collective ethos persists. People no longer dream or discuss the familiar scents of plants and animals. Instead, their collective dream-sharing rituals speak to experiences of, and guidance found in, the novel smells of plantation foremen and buzzing helicopters.

If symbolism and sensoriality play an important role within some cultural understandings of dreaming, other anthropological approaches invite a more radical appraisal of the primacy of acts and processes of interpretation. They focus less on the instances and categories of imagery and meaning and more on the activities involved in determining and consolidating dreams' social significance. One example of this are the new dreams of 'being eaten by oil palm' (*dimakan sawit*) experienced by the Marind people of West Papua, Indonesia (Chao 2022, 183–200), wherein sleeping individuals become violently possessed by an introduced cash crop that is rapidly taking over their lands and forests in waking life. These dreams act as cultural critiques of the plantation as a newly established mode of economic production in the region, and they resonate with the new sensory experiences of Ongee community members.

Rather than focusing their discourses on the contents or events of these dreams, or attributing a

therapeutic or cathartic value to dream experiences, Marind affirm it is primarily through the oral transmission of dream narratives to and with others that collective healing takes place. For instance, knowledge of kith and kin who have recently been 'eaten by oil palm' brings people to travel the [landscape](#) to their encounter. Shared dream experiences prompt villagers who are in conflictual relations over land rights to reconcile with one another, or enable starcrossed lovers whose marriage is proscribed by customary law to sustain a different kind of intimate relationship through dream story-telling. In contrast to traditional dreams, whose significance was arbitrated by medicine-men (*messav*) (Chao 2022, 188-9), new dreams of being eaten by oil palm are open to each and everyone's interpretation, creating an [egalitarian](#) ethos that in turn allows for the participation of women, children, youth, and elders across rural and urban divides. What dream experiences *mean*, in other words, matters less than what dream sharing *does* as an exercise in mutual trust-building and as an acknowledgement of shared vulnerability to the attritive forces of plantation capitalism across waking and sleeping worlds.

Another example of how dream interpretation processes come to produce meaning, identity, and consciousness derives from studies of 'dreamwork groups' in the United Kingdom (Edgar 1999). These are groups in which six to twelve people share and interpret their dreams in a structured manner. Studying these groups showed that the ways in which dreams are discussed, embellished, and censored depend heavily on social and interactional group dynamics, such as their members' degree of mutual familiarity, friendship, and shared [values](#).

These dynamics produce dream interpretations that, over the course of conversations initiated by the dreamer but primarily shaped by the group's questions, suggestions, reservations, and encouragements, become vastly different from the originally recounted experience of the dream and also mutate when dreamwork groups' composition changes over time. It is through this situated and collective 'cultural reworking' of dreams (Edgar 1999, 39), involving the consciousness of both the dreamer and group, that new kinds of mental and affective connectedness are generated and the grounds for individual self-realisation actualised.

Transcendent encounters, spiritual power, and beyond-human knowledge

A third prevalent motif in the anthropology of dreaming pertains to its relationship to religiosity and the transcendent, notably as a source of cosmological knowledge, [divination](#), and power across time. In some contexts, dream experiences and their revelations are intrinsically connected to spiritual understandings of consciousness, cognition, and salvation (e.g. Young 1999). In other contexts, dreams are seen as tied to prophetic figures and events in the past that in turn motivate religious and political movements in the present (e.g. Edgar 2011; Mittermaier 2011). Religious authority can be premised on the ability of select individuals to travel in time in the pursuit of sacred knowledge or to access extra-human powers and entities including spirits, gods, ancestors, and the deceased (e.g. Alatas 2019). Dreams may act as informal

yet powerful ‘technologies of governmentality’ that self-regulate individuals’ conscience and conduct in everyday life (Eves 2011). They may also constitute sources of ‘liturgical novelty’ when creatively and contextually interpreted and acted upon by recognised experts (McGee 2012). While revelatory dreams may come to chosen humans through the agency of more-than-human beings, they can also be intentionally sought out and cultivated by human dreamers, including in the form of volitional or lucid dreaming, and through rituals, prayer, and trance- or vision-inducing substances, notably hallucinogenic plants (e.g. Hurd and Bulkeley 2014; Brown 1985).

One example of the cosmological and temporal dimensions of dreams is found among the Bardi Aboriginal people of the northwest Kimberley region of Western Australia (Glaskin 2005). As with many Indigenous Australian Peoples, the Bardi identify the creative period in the past during which ancestral beings gave shape to the world (or ‘Country’), as ‘the Dreaming’. Local terms for this period include *buwarra*, which translates as ‘dream’. While ‘ordinary’ dreams are experienced by ‘ordinary people’, particular individuals in the community, known as *jarlIngungurr* (Glaskin 2005, 303), can communicate with ancestral figures, as well as the spirit beings and the deceased from the Dreaming. They do so through dreams that are initiated by these other-than-human beings and through which knowledges are revealed to the human dreamer. While these knowledges have existed since time immemorial, they inform contemporary ritual and ceremonial life in novel ways, including in the form of new songs, dances, designs, and more, pointing to the integration of tradition and innovation, and past and present, in both the dream form and its real-world ramifications. It is also through the knowledges acquired through dreams from spirits, ancestors, and the deceased that *jarlIngungurr* are able to perform healing, divination, shape-shifting, and time-travel. Dreams thereby help the Bardi anticipate future calamities, notably where respect for *Country* has been violated and must be remedied or redressed.

As the example above demonstrates, dreams and their authority in producing truths play an important role in enabling the transmission of cultural and spiritual knowledge across times and generations. In other contexts, dreams have played a seminal part in encouraging societal transformation, notably in the form of religious enculturation and spiritual self-reinvention. This is the case among the Asabano of highland Papua New Guinea, for whom dreams (*aluma*) have always acted as portals to the dead, forest beings, or place spirits, and as experiential evidence through which people describe, explain, and rationalise their religious beliefs (Lohmann 2000). When Baptist missionaries sought to convert them in the late 1970s, many Asabano continued to practice their customary religion. It was only following a series of prophetic dreams experienced by villagers, in which they encountered God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, angels, apocalyptic deluges, and the fires of Hell, that Christian beliefs were truly absorbed and internalised. Christian figures that appear in villagers’ dreams to this day testify to these beings’ reality and power and remind people of the behaviours they must sustain in order to secure an afterlife in paradise, whereas traditional and familiar dream-entities like evil nature spirits and [cannibal](#) witches are now interpreted as minions of

Satan. As such, while the ability of dreams to convey information has not changed for Asabano, the *kinds* of information being received, and associated dictates of [moral](#) conduct, have significantly transformed, with dreams playing an important—potentially even determinant—role in enhancing villagers’ receptivity to the precepts of introduced Christianity.

Dreams, as such, can be instrumental in validating, inspiring, and sustaining belief among members of religious communities. Their evocative valences can also be harnessed *beyond* the scope of those individuals who adhere to particular religious groups, as illustrated by Amira Mittermaier’s (2015) reflective account of dream-stories among Egyptian adherents to the mystic body of [Islamic](#) religious practice known as Sufism. During her fieldwork, Mittermaier was granted permission by her interlocutor, ‘Umar, to consult and select accounts from the Book of Visions, containing the records of dreams and waking visions of followers of Shaykh Qusi, a renowned inheritor and transmitter of the prophet Muhammad’s teachings. This permission, she later found out, itself stemmed from an order that had come to ‘Umar by way of a dream. However, while Mittermaier originally chose dream-visions for her research with the aim of achieving a representative sample from diverse sources and encompassing diverse themes, ‘Umar replaced these selections with a collection of accounts that, to Mittermaier’s initial disappointment, were all relatively similar in content. What drove ‘Umar’s choices was not the pursuit of neutrality or representationality, but rather the effectiveness of these particular dreams in achieving the key aims of Sufi dream-visions—namely, to communicate the shaykh’s aura, to create a sense of awe, and to buttress the shaykh’s spiritual authority. Just as anthropologists selectively deploy ethnographic examples to convince and draw in their readers, so too Sufis approach dream-stories as invitations to their audiences that enable them to communicate and connect with the Prophet, his descendants, and the dead. Dreams allow us to catch a glimpse of the inaccessible, invisible, and unknown, and to be moved both spiritually and imaginatively. And just as prophetic dreams in Sufi communities are at once highly valued and contested, so too decisions around which dreams to include and exclude in Mittermaier’s ethnographic account were never neutral, but shaped as much by anthropological considerations as by the evocative use of dreams as examples by Sufis themselves.

Conclusions

Dreams are universal as experiences yet specific in their contents, interpretations, and performances. As such, they constitute powerful resources for engaging with long-standing questions around the construction of, and relationship between, self and society, [mind](#) and body, and continuity and change, and the meaningful slippages that arise across the realms of the known and speculated, lived and narrated, practical and spiritual, and agentive and reflective. Dreams express cultural creativity, social conflict, potentialities for self-exploratory, self-transcendence or hazardous vulnerabilities. They alternately reflect, resolve, or reinforce individual and collective anxieties and desires, as people move in and across different

worlds, knowledges, and [relations](#).

Importantly, attending to dreams anthropologically challenges the notion of a single ‘reality’ and its correlative relationship to the ‘imagination’ as the ‘broader range of meanings that encompass a variety of spaces, modes of perception and conceptualizations of the real’ (Mittermaier 2011, 3). Instead, it invites us to think of dreams as a form of ‘emergent reality’ (Tedlock 1987b, 4)—or as ‘real in a different way’, as Vincent Crapanzano’s Moroccan informant, Tuhami, says when speaking about his nightly visitations by a she-demon (1980, 15). Dreams are multiply meaningful precisely in light of their inherent ambiguity and in-betweenness, or what Jeannette Mageo calls their ‘mimetic incompleteness’ (2004, 151). They also draw attention to the political, affective, and social force of the imagination as a culturally molded yet never entirely graspable or intelligible dimension of human existence (Stephen 1995; Stevenson 2014). And just as not all dreams bear the same hermeneutic weight or consensual meaning for those who experience them, so too it is critical to consider whose dream interpretations are foregrounded within anthropological accounts across insider-outsider and subjective-objective divides.

Since its inception, the anthropology of dreaming has continued to develop in new and exciting directions. It is no longer confined to particular ‘culture complexes’ or world-regions. Instead, comparative studies of dreams across Global North and South divides push against the romanticisation or essentialisation of non-Western dream cultures (Domhoff 1990). These studies identify recurring motifs in the dreams of American and Japanese citizens (Griffith, Miyagi, and Tago 1958), the role of conflict in the dreams of Bedouin, Irish, and Israeli children (Levine 1991), and the manifest content of dreams experienced by US-based college women of Anglo-American, Mexican-American, and African-American heritage (Kane 1994).¹⁴

Alongside a burgeoning of multi-disciplinary approaches that combine anthropological methods and theories with cutting-edge findings in neuroscience and evolutionary biology, some scholars are practicing ‘studying up’ by examining how Western-trained psychotherapists understand their own dream experiences alongside their relationship to both their patients and their profession (Dombeck 1991). Other researchers practice ‘studying in’ by harnessing auto-ethnographic methods to consider how dream-related knowledge systems learned in the field come to bear new meanings in light of their own personal, physical, and psychological traumas back home (Richman 2000). The role of [animals](#) as participants in and producers of dreams (Hallowell 1960) has seen renewed attention in emerging multispecies approaches that consider, for instance, dogs’ dreams as expressions of more-than-human perspectival agency (Kohn 2007) or the haunting apparition in dreams of wrongfully killed cows as expressions of more-than-human retributive justice (Govindrajana 2022).

At the same time, dreams continue to pose certain challenges to the classical methods of anthropology. ‘Dream-narratives’ are always fragmentary and often socially or individually motivated accounts of ‘dream-experiences’ (Kirtsoglou 2010) that themselves cannot be empirically verified and lie beyond the reach of

participant-observation. The personal nature of dreams, as well as their at-times spiritual, sacred, or supernatural dimensions, can make them a sensitive topic of discussion, often requiring a strong level of rapport between the researcher and her interlocutors. Taking dreams seriously as objects of analysis is also not devoid of risk for anthropologists themselves, whose professionalism and objectivity may consequently come under question—notably when it comes to writing and imparting their own dream experiences (George 1995, 17-8).

And yet, attending to dreams can also open meaningful spaces for conversations around the different yet interconnected worlds of researchers and their informants. Participating in dream-experiences and sharing dream-narratives can drive intersubjective dynamics of fieldwork, and create mutual trust, critical self-reflection, and openness to ambiguity.⁶¹ As a form of affective and discursive ‘involvement in the cosmology of the Other’ (Sprenger 2010, 61), delving into dreams—both one’s own and others’—can push back on the ‘anthropological taboo against going native’ (Ewing 1994, 574) and attendant assumptions around the nature of cultural belief versus empirical reality (Luhrmann 1989; Favret-Saada 1980). Rather than dismissing dreams as fictive constructs or ethnographic objects alone, it is perhaps in anthropologists’ willingness to become vulnerable to dreams’ intersubjective thrust that dreams’ agentive force as ‘wild possibilities’ (George 1995, 17) might relationally and imaginatively gain ground and grow.

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[1] On the significance of dreams and dreaming in Western history from Ancient Greece to modern times, see Pick and Roper (2004); Parman (1991). On the role of dreams in medieval world religions, including in Europe, early Asia, and Latin America, see Shulman and Stroumsa (1999); Bulkeley (2008).

[2] These studies found echo in later approaches that were concerned with identifying constant and recurring motifs underlying diverse myths across different cultural settings (e.g. Kuper 1979).

[3] For state-of-the-field syntheses of the anthropology of dreaming, see Laughlin (2011); Lohmann (2019); the edited volumes by Tedlock (1987a); Bulkeley (2001); Mageo (2003); Mageo and Sheriff (2021); and the special issues edited by Stewart (2004) and Heijnen and Edgar (2010). For region-specific anthologies of dreaming, see Lohmann (2003) on the West Pacific; Jędrej and Shaw (1992) on Africa; Bulkeley (1994) on the West; Price-Williams and Degarrod (1989) on South America.

[4] On the function of dreams as techniques for solving everyday practical matters, including in the contexts of hunting, curing, craftsmanship, and artistic production, see Brightman 2002; Rushforth 1992.

[5] On anthropologies of dreaming in the Global North, see Hollan 2005; Newsom 2021; Heijnen 2010; Sheriff 2017.

[6] On dreams as an intersubjective research method in the field, see Chao 2023; Lambek 2018.