Embodying Dreams:

An Exploration of Native American and Western Approaches

Daniel Rekshan

California Institute of Integral Studies

Dreams are an incredibly interesting phenomenon. Dreaming is recognized as one of the major state of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. They have influenced entire civilizations, such as the dreams of Xeres, Nebuchadnezzar, and more contemporarily, Lincoln. However, a daily practice of honoring or embodying dreams is not so ubiquitous as the influence of such big dreams.

While it is undoubtable that dreams exert an unconscious influence over the dreamer, I wonder how else they may find connection with waking life in concrete ways? How have people traditionally connected waking like with dreaming through action? I am specifically interested in patterns of waking action that invite the numinous energies of dreaming into waking life. Rather than asking what a dream means, I would rather ask how to embody it in waking life.

This question falls under the domain of transpersonal psychology because a number of transpersonal phenomenon occur when dreams are embodied. First and foremost, healing can take place. For example, supplicants to Asclepius would occasionally be given instructions to either perform a deed or give a specific thank offering. When the deed was complete, their ailments would miraculously heal (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945/1998). Parapsychological phenomenon such as dream clairvoyance is often demonstrated, for example, the Blackfoot Native Americans will dream of an object, then find it in waking life (Lincoln, 1935/2003). Finally, shamanic healing power may be uncovered and expressed through embodying dreams (Devereux, 1957).

I will set out two constraint to my research. First, I will examine only those patterns of actions that actively bring the power of dreams directly into waking life. For example, I will prefer to look at a creative act such as painting a dream instead of looking at the analysis of dream content in a therapeutic session because the later case is mediated by a therapist. Second, I

will examine only those patterns that I find personally exciting, as it is outside of my scope to be comprehensive.

Orientation

I will used a model proposed by Krippner and Thompson (1996) in order to orient my research. They expanded an 8-facet model used by Ullman and Zimmerman to compare the three Western psychodynamic systems. They added two facets and revised others, then applied it to the dream systems of 16 groups of native Americans. While this systems as many interesting questions, I will focus on the question "What approaches are used to work with dreams?"

In their summary of this question, they write "Dreamwork can consist of acting out the dream, sharing, exchanging, and/or selling the dream" (Krippner & Thompson, 1996). Frequently, the dream will be interpreted as either good or bad, which determines what course of action the dreamer takes. In addition to these methods, ceremony and ritual may be involved. It is interesting to note that "acting out the dream" may involve finding objects in waking life that were dreamed or singing songs that were dreamed.

In summary, there seems to be several categories of responses to dreams: interpretation, sharing, ritual, enactment, exchange, and expression. These are not strictly defined categories, a single action may span several. For example, the Iroquois have a midwinter ceremony that involves interpretation, sharing, ritual, and enactment. They may have community members guess the bad or unfulfilled dreams, then enact it through gifts in order to bring the dream action to completion (Wallace, 1958). I will now offer examples of these responses from native people.

Examples

Interpretation

Tedlock writes, “Zunis classify all dreams as either 'good' or 'bad' depending on their emotional reactions upon waking from a dream” (1987, p. 144). She then reports that Zunis “view dreams as actions in themselves and not as mere statements of possible actions. Dream actions are not complete until their waking-life counterparts have taken place” (1987, p. 119).

If the dream is good, they will “keep them inside their hearts silently, but nevertheless verbally, dreaming them along in order to help continue the dream actions in the waking world” (Tedlock, 1987, p. 119). A common means of curing or preventing a bad dream is “for the dreamer to tell the dream while inhaling the fumes of burning pinon gum and then plant prayer sticks to the dead, asking them not to present themselves to the living” (Tedlock, 1987, p. 118).

It is interesting that most native interpretation focuses on whether the dream is good or bad and what must be done. It is further interesting to note that the interpretation is done generally by the dreamer and not a specialist. There are exceptions, for example, the Iroquois dream specialist would scry in water or place herbs under head in order to clarify another's dream (Krippner & Thompson, 1996).

Sharing

We have already seen an example of Native American dream sharing. However, it is simply one example among many. Each culture has specific taboos and rites about how and when a dream can be shared. These taboos are mostly guides to help facilitate the completion of a dream action for good dreams or prevent its completion in the case of bad dreams (Krippner & Thompson, 1996).

In contrast, the notion that sharing dreams influence their ontology is not ubiquitous in Western culture. To be sure, we have taboos surrounding when and how dreams are shared. However, our taboos are mostly psychological. I observe that people are reluctant to share their

dreams because they are not sure what they will disclose about themselves.

Ritual

The Crow believe that certain dreams demand certain rituals. For example, if a person dreams of an ill relative, then the individual will cut off a lock of hair and throw it into a body of water with meat and tobacco as an offering (Krippner & Thompson, 1996). As we will see in the section on dream enactment, the Iroquois have ceremonies and rites for specific dreams. The Navajo will sing specific “Chantways” for specific dreams. For example, Krippner and Thompson note, “reams of death require that the shaman perform the 'Chantway of Terrestrial Beauty,' as do dreams of buzzards, hawks, snakes, and bird spirits” (1996, p. 87).

Enactments

Wallace (1958) describes many means by which the Iroquois reenact their dreams. They believe that dreams events require correspondence in waking life. He quotes Father Fremin, an early missionary, “What peril we are in every day, among people who will murder us in cold blood if they have dreamed of doing so” (Wallace, 1958, p. 235).

However, the Iroquois did not need to go through with the action to completion in order to satisfy their dreams. In one case, one man stripped naked, was bound, dragged through streets, and sung his death song in an imaginary captivity, and therefore believed he would never be a prisoner. Similarly, a Huron dreamed of killing French priest and was appeased by being given a coat from a dead Frenchman (Wallace, 1958, p. 240).

The Iroquois have an interesting dream-guessing ceremony, which occurred at midwinter. It involved several rites surrounding dream sharing and enactment. For example, a dream dreamed that a young woman was alone in a canoe without a paddle. He invited her along with a group of people to his house. They tried to guess the dream and, when successful, presented the

girl with a miniature canoe. They believe that this act would prevent the disaster (Wallace, 1958, p. 240).

Exchange

Krippner and Thompson report that among the Crow people, dreams may be transferred by sale. This fact is extremely interesting and seems out of place. They cite Lincoln (1935/2003), who in turn cite Benedict (1922). He reports that a vision could be bought and sold, which was the basis of the tribal economic system (Benedict, 1922, p. 17).

However, Benedict is specifically referring to visions from a vision quest and not a dream. Benedict clarifies the nature of the purchased object, "what he has really bought being the songs, the taboos, the 'power,' and the right of performing the ceremony that goes with it" (Benedict, 1922, p. 17). Interestingly, Devereux reports that among the Mohave, a song or ceremony has power only after the shaman learns it from a dream, regardless of whether he knew it from waking life or not (Deveruex, 1957).

Expression

The Mohave shamans have interesting customs surrounding expression of dream material, especially healing songs. They believe that while a healing song may be learned in the waking life, a shaman needs to dream it before it may be used in ceremony. (Deveruex, 1957) Similarly, the Klamath sing and dance in response to dreams of dead relatives (Krippner & Thompson, 1996). Finally, Margolin (1978/2003) suggests that the Ohlone basket weavers used materials from their dreams to design their patters.

It is interesting to note that there is no notion of making art for art's sake. Songs are sung in context of ceremony, with respect for their power. Likewise, baskets were used as an everyday tool. Dancing was part of the community process. In contrast, Western artists

occasionally use dreams as the material for their art making, the goal of which is to make an object of art. In this case, I would be curious to examine if there are undercurrents of ceremony, reference to spiritual power, or induction of catharsis in the viewer.

Comparison with western approaches

It is interesting that the dream of the native was generally straightforward, needing no specialized interpretation. They found a direct correlation of dreams with waking life, as Krippner and Thompson note, “Native Americans often dream about community activities, e.g., hunting, harvesting, fighting, worshiping, as well as individual concerns” (1996, p. 74). For example, songs and myths were learned from dreams and could be sung or retold as means of healing. A dreamed object could be found in waking life and added to a medicine bundle. Several cultures, such as the Iroquois, would act out their dreams, generally in physical ways, to either prevent or bring them about.

In contrast, Westerns generally see dreams as a means to discharge or disclose as aspect of the self, using imagery and metaphor to communicate meaning. Westerners, when they work with dreams, tend to use association and amplification to engage with the imagery and metaphor to uncover their meaning. It is a remarkably different process than waking up and acting out the dreams in a naïve or direct manner.

Do Westerners truly dream with more symbolic imagery than members of Native American culture? I am skeptical that the difference is so straightforward. Dreams clearly have more respect and process in Native American culture, so perhaps the additional attention and ceremony contributes to the straightforwardness of their dreams. Perhaps their use in healing and guidance suggest they are transpersonal in nature and invite a participatory approach. Native Americans simply have a culture that encourages participation, while Western culture does not

encourage participation.

A survey of western approaches to dream work is outside of the scope of this research. I personally have explored dream interpretation, sharing, ritual, enactment, and expression in Western contexts. It is interesting that I did not inherit these practices, rather I actively sought them out. My experiences of Western practices and those explored in this research essentially differ only in one aspect: the function of dreaming.

As Krippner and Thompson (1996) report, Westerners believe dreams function as either disclosures of psychological process or physical sleep process, while Native Americans believe they function as representations of present and prophecies of future. Perhaps the occurrence of healing, parapsychological, and transpersonal phenomenon are a function of belief and cultural context. I will conclude with the following question: what would Western dream practices look like if we believed they function as representations or expressions of not just our own psyche, but our world?

References

Benedict, R. (1922). The vision in plains culture. *American Anthropologist,* 24(1).

Devereux, G. (1957). Dream Learning and Individual Ritual Differences in Mohave Shamanism. *American Anthropologist*, 59(6), 1036-1045.

Edelstein, E., & Edlstein, L. (1998). *Asclepius: Collection and interpretation of the testimonies.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1945).

Lincoln, J. (2003). *The Dream: In native american and other primitive culture.* Minola, NY: Dover. (Original work published 1935)

Margolin, M. (2003). *The Ohlone way.* Berkeley: Heyday. (Original work published 1978).

Tedlock, B. (1987). *Zuni and Quiche dream sharing and interpreting*. In B. Tedlock (Ed.), Dreaming: Anthropological and psychological interpretations (pp. 105-131). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace, A. (1958). Dreams and the wishes of the soul: A type of psychoanalytic theory among the seventeenth century Iroquois. *American Anthropologist*, 60(2), 234-248.