

PRE-SCIENTIFIC AND SCIENTIFIC THEORIES OF HUMAN DREAM: AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The concept and attitude towards human dream and what it means, mutates between the pre-scientific and scientific views. The pre-scientific view, basically, believes that dreams are possible channels by which God talks to humans. On the other hand, the scientific view, in general, holds that dreams are purely human psychic activity with no relation whatsoever to divine messages. The question is; what about African philosophical perspectives? This paper hypothesizes that while most African traditional societies embrace the pre-scientific view of dreams, African philosophy is much more complex in regards to the concept of dreams. This is because; African philosophy embraces some elements of the pre-scientific as well as the scientific views. Centrally, African philosophical perspective is based on African ontology, which underscores the ontological relationship between beings. In this ontology, humans are related to God, ancestors, nature, and fellow humans. Dreams can only be understood from this perspective. Thus, African philosophy does not insulate divine interventions from human dreams and as well incorporates human mental consciousness.

Keywords: Pre-scientific, scientific, theories, human dream, African philosophy, perspective

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Dreams have been defined by Niiniluoto (1992:1) as “those internal mental processes and experiences that are regularly or frequently conjoined with our sleeping”. After a long discussion on the different views held about dreams, Niiniluoto believes that dream is the “access to our mental life from an internal, subjective, qualitative perspective” (1992:7). In particular, he insists that “dreams are not merely neurophysiological processes, but they also have an experienced content” (1992:7).

Whether these internal mental processes or experienced contents do also have extramental influences or messages is what creates a stiff barrier between the views of various authors on dreams. In general, pre-scientific authors think, the content of these mental processes contains divine messages (Van de Castle, 1994). On the other hand, scientific authors think that this is not possible, since dreams are experiences that are purely internal, subjective and qualitative (Freud, 1899; Hem, 2002; Hobson 1976, 2002; Sohins, 2000).

African ontology, on the other hand, presents human experiences as deeply permeated by their interactions with the material and spiritual world, plus the interactions among humans

themselves, personally and communally. If this is the case, then what the scientific thinkers present as purely internal and subjective experiences cannot be dissociated from the influences of these interactions. In these interactions, human mental processes conjoined with sleep cannot insulate itself from the influences from the beings with which humans are in touch. Notwithstanding, we cannot equate dream experiences with channels by which God talks to humans, nor completely negate the possibility of such influences.

Consequently, the hypothesis in this paper is that human dream is truly a human mental process associated with sleep, but the content of these experiences are both purely human experiences, but they can also be messages conveyed to humans from the spiritual world.

In this paper, we shall investigate into the theories of human dreams, both pre-scientific and scientific. We shall also look into African perspective on human dream, before making deeper analysis and discussions of these theories, from which we shall derive our findings, before making conclusions.

2.0 METHOD

The methods we shall use will be basically analytical, taking into considerations the divergent theories and views on human dreams. We shall take special note of the views derived from the pre-scientific and the scientific authors, and African metaphysical thinkers.

These views are stiffly divided about human dreams, with the pre-scientific theories acknowledging the possibility of external influence into the process and content of human dream, while the other side is deeply skeptical about such possibility. Some of these pre-scientific authors are; Virkler & Kayembe (2016), and Olsen (2012). The scientific theorists, on the other hand, see dreams as purely a human affair that begins in an individual and ends in an individual. Some of them are; Freud (1899), Jung (1962), Crick & Mitchison (1982), Hobson (2012), and Domhoff (2007). In between these extremes, we have the African philosophical perspectives, and authors like Senghor (1966), Tempels (1969), Ruch (1975), Ngunane (1977), and Schweizer (1983), are key representatives.

3.0 RESULT

3.1. Pre-scientific theories of human dream

Virkler and Kayembe (2016) in their book titled *Hearing God through your Dreams: Understanding the Language God Speaks at Night*, clearly affirms the theory that dreams can be channels of God's voice. In the Introduction of the above work, Kayembe (2016: 32) underlines that while we should try to understand the language of God at night, dream itself can be identified with night vision. She writes;

In the Bible, the words dream and vision are used almost interchangeably. In Job it says: "In a dream, a vision of the night, when sound sleep falls on men..." (Job 33:15). Again, in Isaiah, the same phrase is used: it "will be like a dream, a vision of the night" (Isa. 29:7). Scripture also says that "the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision," and later, "I kept looking in the night visions..." (Dan. 2:19; 7:13).

Kayembe concludes that “dreams are essentially visions we have at night. Since that is the case, why wouldn’t we want to give them just as much credence as visions we have during the day? Considering that in the night our analytical mind is out of the way, we have the potential to receive purer revelation much more readily through our dreams” (2016:32).

This means, dreams are visions of the night. Just as human religious experiences show and acknowledge the existence of visions during the day; so Kayembe argues, we should also acknowledge visions in the night. As visions are channels through which God reveals himself and his will to men, so must the visions of the night be the same. However, Kayembe thinks, visions of the night are even purer than the visions of the day.

Kayembe confirms that “I used to compare dream life versus real life, but I don’t think that is quite right. Dream life is still real. God is still speaking. We are still engaging the supernatural realm. If visions are real life, then dreams are real life” (2016:32).

Olsen, summarizes the pre-scientific view of dreams in the following words.

In ancient history (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, ~3000 BC), it was strongly believed that Gods were talking to humans in dreams, and that dreams therefore were paramount for decision making, and had prophetic properties (Van de Castle, 1994). In classical history (~400 BC), Asians believed that dreaming is what happens when the soul is leaving the body to journey elsewhere. Hippocrates had a simple theory of dreams; during the day the soul receives images, during the night it produces images. Aristotle believed that dreams could predict and warn about diseases, just as has been supported by modern time researchers (Van de Castle, 1994). In postclassical/medieval times (~200 AC -1700 AC), American and Mexican tribes believed dreams to be a way of having contact with ancestors. For a longer part of this period however, dreams were seen as messages from the devil, filling the mind with corrupting and harmful thoughts. For Muslims, dreams were in this period seen as a vehicle for receiving revelations from God after the death of the last Prophet Muhammad (Van de Castle, 1994) (Olsen, 2012:4).

In the above text, we can see that there are six basic pre-scientific theories about dreams:

1. The first one is the theory that dreams are divine voices to humans. This theory was dominant among the people of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece up to the period of -3000 BC, according to Olsen.
2. The second theory maintains that dreams are activities of the human soul, by which the soul recounts what it has learned during the time when it has left the body to tour the world, when the body is in the state of rest or sleep. This view was prominent during the classical period of history (up to about -400 BC).
3. The third theory is that advanced by Hippocrates, who maintains that dreams are reproduced night images received by the soul during the day.
4. While Aristotle gives the fourth theory saying, dreams are predictive and warning signs of incoming problems, like diseases. According to Olsen, this theory is supported by modern time researchers.

5. The fifth theory, presented by post-classical/medieval times (-200 AC – 1700 AC), maintains that dreams are medium of human contact with their ancestors, including messages from the devils.
6. Lastly, Olsen opines that, the sixth theory of dreams was presented by the Muslims, saying dreams are vehicles for receiving divine messages.

The views of Vickler and Mayembe correspond to the first theory mentioned by Olsen. In my view, this view is centered on dreams as a channel of divine revelation, which is not quite different from the view of the Muslims. While the second and third theories are not quite different from each other, since they all insist on the activity of the human soul. The view that dreams are predictive and warning signs of incoming problems is unique, though it is basically a one-sided view, since it relates dreams to problems and never with positive messages. The fourth theory, in my view, is also unique and quite close to African perspective, though not identical with it as we shall later see, since it hints at dreams as product of human relationship with their ancestors.

3.2 Scientific theories of human dream

Olsen (2012) identified several scientific theories of human dreams. The following are some of them.

1. The first one is that dreams are mostly expressions of unconscious wishes (Freud, 1899).
2. Dreams should be seen as revelations from ourselves, as to how we can solve personal problems, and gain personal insights, in order to develop as individuals (Jung, 1962).
3. Dreams have no meaning as such; they are merely the result of random chemical messaging in the brain coming from the brain stem (Hobson, 2002).
4. Dreams serve the purpose of cleaning up among all perceptual inputs (Crick & Mitchison, 1983).
5. Dreams as consolidating memory (e.g. Hennevin & Leconte, 1971, Diekelmann & Born, 2010).
6. Dreams serve the purpose of solving our problems, emotional as well as non-emotional (Cartwright, 1974, later supported by Wagner, Geis, Haider, Verleger & Born, 2004).
7. That dreams are a “continuation” of waking life thoughts and events (Hall & Van de Castle 1966). Much of the research done, for instance by Domhoff (2007) supports the so-called continuity hypothesis, stating that what we do or think about while awake is reflected in the content of our dreams – in other words, there is continuity between waking life and dreams.

In summary, we can say, the scientific theory of dreams like; expressions of unconscious wishes, revelations from ourselves, brain chemical messaging, clean-up process of our perceptual inputs, memory consolidation, solving our emotional and non-emotional problems, and as continuation of the waking life thoughts, all point to processes that take place within an individual person. It does not make any reference to external material or immaterial influences, like divine messages. This creates the sharp difference between the pre-scientific and the scientific theories of dreams.

3.3 African philosophical perspective of human dream

Writing about A phenomenological explication of dream interpretation among the rural and urban Nguni people, Schweitzer (1983), contends that to understand human dream and its interpretation, we have to understand African cosmology and ontology. For him, “Human experience occurs and assumes meaning within a context which is shaped by an implicit world-view or cosmology” (1983:124). He expresses African ontology, which is the basis of understanding and interpreting human dreams, in the following words.

Traditional Xhosa cultural beliefs incorporate a Supreme Being, uQamatha, responsible for the creation of the world. But ancestors are of much greater significance in the person’s daily affairs than uQamatha. The ancestors can communicate with their descendants and influence their lives. They might express their approval of, or their dissatisfaction with, their descendant’s conduct by exerting a positive or negative influence on their welfare. The ancestors communicate with the living by means of dreams, visions, omens and synchronistic events (Schweitzer, 1983:124-125).

What is important in the above text is the acknowledgement that dreams can be used as means of communicating divine will, or in the view of Schweitzer, the will of human ancestors. Both God and the ancestors live in the spiritual world, so we can say; dreams can be channels of divine messages. Schweitzer does not think dreams are the only means of passing such messages, since other channels are visions, and other omens that befall human beings.

Picking from Tempels (1969), Schweitzer places the context of dreams in the ontological understanding of most Africans. In this metaphysics, he insists, “Bantu ontology is opposed to concepts which divide man into body and soul, as well as to the European concept of the individual self” (Schweitzer, 1983:126).

Tempels, writing about the human person states that an individual is a vital force that does not exist in isolation. He asks; is an individual:

[...] a force existing by itself apart from its ontological relationships with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it [...]. No, he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this very time to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above him and below him in a hierarchy of forces (Tempels, 1969:103; see also Schweitzer, 1983:126).

In the above texts, Tempels is insisting that humans are in intimate ontological relationship with the vital forces hierarchically above him, like the gods and his ancestors, other human beings (at the same levels with him), and other beings that are hierarchically below him like the other animals, plants and other inanimate beings.

Schweitzer concludes by saying, in trying to understand African ontology, the individual’s “relationship amongst independent vital forces (life forces) elders, ancestors and God need to be fully appreciated in individual situation” (Schweitzer, 1983:126; See also Ngunane, 1977; Senghor, 1966; Ruch, 1975).

The point being emphasized here is that, human dreams and their interpretation cannot take place outside this ontological context. Since humans are dynamically and ontologically in communication with these various vital forces, dreams, as part of human experiences, cannot

be devoid of them. In these experiences, dreams are part and parcel of human experiences, whether through day visions or night visions. In the words of Schweitzer, “Dreams are regularly accorded respect as signifying communication between the ancestors and the individual” (1983:134-135).

4.0 DISCUSSION

We shall center our discussion on two issues; the relationship between pre-scientific and African philosophical perspectives of dreams, and the scientific and African perspective of dreams.

4.1 The Pre-scientific and the African perspectives

As regards the pre-scientific concept of dreams, there seems to be four major theories involved. These are: dreams as channels of divine revelation, dreams as activity of the human soul, dreams as predictive and warning signs of incoming problems, and lastly dreams as products of human relationship with their ancestors.

These theories can still be sub-divided into two on the basis of their origins; whether dreams originate from within the human mind or from outside of the human mind. The first and the last of these four theories indicate that dreams originate from outside the human mind. This is because, if dreams are channels of divine revelation or products of human relationship with their ancestors, then such dreams cannot depend entirely on the human resources. On the other hand, if dreams are just activities of the human soul, or predictive warning signs of incoming problems, then dreams have their origin from within humans themselves.

This ‘either’, ‘or’ situation is problematic, in my view, in this paper. This is because such theories cut off the possibilities that dreams could have origins from both outside or within humans. The problems may be to identify with certitude the origin of particular dreams. The view in this paper is that it is wrong to deny the origin of dreams to one of these alternatives, since both are quite possible from the African philosophical perspective, as we have seen.

The difference between the pre-scientific and scientific theories of dreams is that the latter is a total denial of the involvement of the spiritual or extra-human world in the occurrence of dreams. Instead, the former accepts that possibility, though from different perspectives; either by identifying dreams with the divine world, or with the combination of some involvement of the human psychic activities and the divine world.

4.2 Scientific and the African perspective

Schweitzer in discussing theories of dreams, concluded with four basic theories; the Freudian, Jungian, phenomenological approach and the African indigenous theories. He summarized Freudian theory as reductionist because it reduced human “consciousness to psychic acts which in turn are derived from unconscious drives or instincts” (1983:376). In this theory, “The dream is regarded as a product of unconscious mental acts which are usually determined by past events. In interpreting the dream, the manifest or remembered content needs to be reduced to the latent unconscious content” (1983:377). Schweitzer criticizes this theory by saying, “Within the cosmology explicated [earlier], dreams are inherently meaningful and cannot be

reduced to a single construct such as incorporation in the wish-fulfilment hypothesis or any other abstract model” (Schweitzer, 1983:377).

Referring to the Jungian theory, Schweitzer acknowledges that Jung deviating from Freud brings in the doctrine of individuation as a process of psychological development. He does this by introducing the two principles “synchronicity and his theory of the archetypes and the unconscious” (Schweitzer, 1983:379). Schweitzer concludes that “both approaches recognize anticipatory or prophetic perception as well as the practical usefulness of dreams as message carries” (1983:379). Implying, not all scientific thinkers disregard dreams as message carriers. The difference may be about the source of such messages; whether it is from within the individual or outside the individual? This has not been the main concern of Schweitzer, but it is the main concern in this paper.

Jung (1962) explained that dreams should be seen as revelations from ourselves. This clearly shows that, even though Schweitzer thinks dreams are message carries, it does not place Jung theory among the pre-scientific thinkers who clearly acknowledge dreams as possible message carries from the immaterial world. Jung would insist, if there is any message carried through dreams, then it can only be from ourselves, and never from outside an individual.

On the other hand, Schweitzer thinks, the phenomenological is rather an approach other than a theory of dream interpretation. In this approach, there is an emphasis on “the validity of dreaming-existence as constituting a valid mode of human existence. Schweitzer adds that “The phenomenological approach is primarily interested in meaning” (1983:383). Though Schweitzer is interested in both the meaning and interpretation of human dreams, this paper is limiting itself to the meaning and origin as contained in the different theories of human dreams.

Lastly, talking about African indigenous approach, Schweitzer believes that “The Nguni approach to dreams is not based upon any theory or any rules but nevertheless reflect an epistemological basis significant feature of which are interdependence, continuity and undivided existence. What is important for our discussion is Schweitzer’s emphasis that the meaning-structures of dreams as revealed within the interpretation are based on the life-world of experience. As he clearly puts it; “The dream is thus appreciated within the complexity and unity of the cosmos as a totality” (Schweitzer, 1983:385).

In my view, though Schweitzer thinks the Nguni conception of dreams and its interpretation should be considered an approach and not a theory, I would respect his view, but disagree with him. By placing the concept of dreams within the African cosmology or ontology, is to go beyond mere approach. This African worldview or cosmology is already a good parameter to begin from. Even when he defines dreams as regularly accorded respect signifying communication between the ancestors and the individual, he goes already beyond mere approach. This regularity of communication is rooted in the African ontology, which is a philosophical theory that humans are not isolated, autonomous, self-propelling individuals, as perceived in Western philosophy. Individuals, from the African philosophical perspective, are vital forces that are personally and communally linked to one another, and linked to the material and spiritual world of the gods and the ancestors. This ontological theory is the basis for understanding human experiences in general and human dream experiences in particular. Human dream experience is engulfed within this ontological theoretical reality.

5.0 FINDINGS

In this paper, we have found out that, dreams, whether in the pre-scientific or scientific period, has to do with human experience connected with human sleep. Carskadon et al define sleep as “a reversible behavior state of perceptual disengagement from and unresponsiveness to the environment” (2005:13). They add that sleep is “usually (but not necessarily) accompanied by postural recumbency, quiescence, closed eyes, and all other indicators one commonly associates with sleeping” (2003:13). What is more important is not about sleep, but what takes place to an individual during sleep. Among the many things an individual experiences during sleep are the phenomena of dreams. We have found out that dream experiences are much richer than what the psychoanalysts attribute to human experiences. Dreams can be channels through which humans learnt from their own experiences, but also from human intimate association with other beings, including God.

Secondly, the dividing line between the pre-scientific and scientific theories lies in the origin of human dreams; with the former ascertaining the influence of extra-mental world; while the latter insists on the agency of the human mind itself or the human soul as its origin. In this paper, we think this type of dichotomizing human dreams is not accurate. There is no sufficient study, whether philosophical or experimental that has established without any trace of doubt the absence of extra-mental influences and experiences on humans. This grey area has to be taken with great caution. What seems to be acceptable by both is the fact that there is a strong link between dreams and some messaging or content. The dividing line comes in that the pre-scientific thinkers attribute the origin of this message to be extra-mental, while the scientific theorists insist that the origin is within the human mind itself. We believe that the origin of these messages is both within humans and also extra-mental.

In the above analysis, we have found out that these two views have strong credibility. This is because, as it is contained in African ontology, humans are not isolated, autonomous, self-propelling individuals. Since humans are ontologically related to one another, to God, their ancestors, and the other material and spiritual world, so they are equally influenced by these realities to which they are related. In this intimacy, we cannot confine human experiences to the material and psychic world of the individual. Humans have the ability to perceive far beyond what is within their souls.

In fact, Ribeiro et al (2008) believe dreams, which are usually experienced through human sleep, have very strong learning contents. In their own words, they wrote; “sleep is a powerful learning booster” (2008:363; see also: (Fishbein et al., 1966, Fishbein, 1971; Smith and Butler, 1982; Smith and Wong, 1991; Smith and MacNeill, 1993). Meaning, as a learning booster, there is something to learn from dreams. What we learn from dreams are more than purely human experiences that originate and end up within an individual. They are also extra-mental experiences influenced by the world outside an individual. What humans learn through human sleep, which is often infested with dreams; some we remember, while some of we do not remember, is a very strong pinnacle for learning.

While the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition focused on wish fulfilment and dream meaning (Ribeiro, et al, 2008: 363; See also: Freud, 1900; Jung, 1974; Fosshage and Loew, 1978; Solms, 2004), experimental psychologists pursued the more objective dream aspects related to sleep-

dependent memory consolidation (Ribeiro, et al, 2008: 363; See also Bryson and Schacher, 1969; Fishbein, 1971; Smith, 2001; Walker and Stickgold, 2004; Born et al., 2006). We think, from the philosophical point of view, the aspect of dreams as message carries and their origins are equally important to understand human dreams.

We have also found out that African perspective of human dreams highlights the basis of human dreams in the theory of African metaphysics. In this metaphysics, humans are not isolated individuals, but corporate social beings. This social dimension is basically ontological, in that it relates humans to one another, to the material and the spiritual world around him.

This relatedness puts human experiences beyond self-content. Whether these experiences are perceived consciously or unconsciously, during day vision or night vision or not, like that during dreams, must be taken seriously. Unlike, the view of Schweitzer (1983), dreams as message carries go beyond the human ancestors, even in African philosophy, as explained above. To limit the dream experiences of Africans only to their relationship with their ancestors is wrong, since Africans are not only in relation with their ancestors, but also in relationship with one another, the material world and the spiritual world of the gods. From this, Africans understand human dreams as human experiences that are influenced by both human experiences and extra-mental influences to which humans are related.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I can say, a lot has been discussed about human dreams, but most of it tended to place emphasis on their meanings and interpretations. Views are strongly divided between those who think dreams are purely human experiences and those who think dreams have more than mere human experiences, since they contain messages from the divine world or the spiritual world of the human ancestors. Depending on the view taken, a number of literatures have discussed the meaning and interpretation of dreams. These discussions have resulted into what we have identified as pre-scientific and scientific theories of human dreams.

We can conclude that while this way of making distinctions between pre-scientific and scientific theories of human dreams is acceptable, in strict sense, it does not add much value to our understanding of what dreams are. We have also found out that some scientific theories of human dreams still do accept that human dreams are message carries. However, the scientific theories think that such messages are originated within the human soul. Pre-scientific theories of human dreams do not necessarily deny that human dreams are also deeply human experiences, though they go beyond this assumption, by asserting human dreams can be channels of divine messages.

In this paper, I would like to conclude that the unique contribution of African philosophical thinking to human dreams is to place dreams within the African ontology. In this ontological thinking, humans are not only atomic self-propelling individuals, but corporate beings related to one another, to the material and the spiritual worlds. In this ontological relationship, humans can understand human dreams as both human experiences and channels of divine message and messages from other vital forces. Dreams are more than boosters of human learning, they are also deeply felt human experiences influenced by the gods and other beings with which humans are in ontological relations.

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