

Dream Interpretation: Ancient Cultures and Scientific Research

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ABSTRACT

This review paper explores the complex realm of dreams and nightmares, tracing their significance through the lenses of philosophy, psychology, and the interpretative frameworks of ancient civilizations. Delving into the works of Freud, Jung, and others, it examines the evolution of dream interpretation from mystical and cultural perspectives to scientific inquiry. The review paper explores the animistic essence of dreams, studying their influence on cultural practices, societal norms, and the transmission of cultural heritage. Through in-depth analyses of dream interpretation in ancient Egyptian, Hindu, Mayan, and Greek civilizations, the intricate connections between dreams, spirituality, and the human psyche are explored. The interdisciplinary exploration underscores the enduring fascination with dreams, bridging the realms of psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies.

Keywords: *Ancient civilizations' Dream Interpretation, Animism and Dreams, Cultural Symbolism in Dream Interpretation, Dream Interpretation, Neuroscientific Approaches*

The exploration of dreams and nightmares, as integral components of human experience, has intrigued philosophers, psychologists, and scientists throughout history. Descartes, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, provocatively questioned the very essence of existence by contemplating the possibility of being a mere figment of a dream (Descartes & Cress, 1993). Dreams, often considered gateways to the unconscious, encompass narratives, sensations, and symbols created during sleep, occasionally leading to emotionally disturbing experiences known as nightmares (Nour Foundation, 2016; Tshifhumulo, 2016).

As human evolution progressed, curiosity became a driving force, leading to the excavation of ancient clay tablets containing dream books from civilizations such as Assyrians, Babylonians, and Sumerians (O'Connell, Airey & Craze, 2008). These findings marked the inception of a burgeoning field in science and psychology dedicated to understanding the intricacies of dreams. While some perceive dreams as mystical experiences intertwined with supernaturalism, others view them as psychological constructs exploring unconscious desires, as posited by Freud (1899/1994) (Kligler, 2014).

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The cultural dimension of dreams is a dynamic and intricate association. Ancient cultures revered dream interpretation as an art requiring divine inspiration (Hughes, 2000). Temples dedicated to the Gods of Dreams underscored the significance of dreams in societies such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India (O'Connell et al., 2008). The ancient practice of sharing dream experiences in public social performances, known as dream accounts, exemplified the communicative nature attributed to dreams (Tedlock, 1991). Beliefs in the transformative power of dreams were deeply ingrained, with some considering certain dreams as pivotal in altering the course of history (O'Connell et al., 2008).

Historical interpretations of dreams revealed a dichotomy between good dreams, seen as messages from gods or insights into the future, and nightmares, perceived as portals for demonic possession (Morgese, 2019; McNamara, 2008). This intricate phenomenon of dream interpretation, known as Oneiromancy, was exemplified by the Ancient Greek philosopher Artemidorus' work, distinguishing between forward-pointing dreams (Oneiroi) and those indicating present states of affairs (Enhypnia) (Artemidorus, 2020).

The transition from spiritual to scientific interpretations of dreams was marked by Freud's psychoanalytic approach and Jung's contrasting perspective, emphasizing the healthy functioning of the psyche (O'Connell et al., 2008). Freud's notion of dreams as symbolic depictions of unconscious compulsions and desires paved the way for the scientific study of dreams, known as Oneirology, overlapping with neurology and utilizing technologies like MRI and PET scans (Linden, 2011). This evolution underscores the comprehensive nature of the interpretation of dreams, ranging from spiritual and cultural significance to scientific exploration.

Animism and Dreams

The concept of animism, rooted in the belief that all entities possess consciousness and living souls, has been fundamental in shaping diverse cultural perspectives on the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and spirituality (Overview, undated). Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's introduction of animism in *Primitive Culture* (2010b) emphasised the attribution of mental and physical life to an energy distinct from the body, leading to the belief in spiritual beings and souls. Animism served as a framework for understanding the origins of religions and the universality of human intellect (Harvey, 2005; Whitten Jr., undated).

Dreams in animistic cultures have been subject to various theories and interpretations. The Ojibwe tribe, for instance, developed the concept of dreamcatchers ('asabikeshiinh'), symbolising the protective role of a spider-woman named Asibikaashi. Dreamcatchers were believed to filter out evil dreams, allowing only positive ones to reach the dreamer (NativeAmericanVault.com, n.d.). Australian Aboriginal cosmology associates dreams with the spirit world, emphasising their significance in understanding one's environment and spiritual journey (den Boer, 2012).

In Aboriginal Australia, the interpretation of dreams was intertwined with totemism, serving as a bridge between the dreaming and the present and future. Dreams were considered crucial for storytelling and transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and knowledge (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, undated; Jang, 2011). The belief that the soul could travel during sleep contributed to the caution against abruptly waking someone, as it was thought to endanger the soul's return to the body (Elkin, 1970).

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These animistic perspectives on dreams and their interpretations have not only influenced cultural practices but also played a role in shaping social and spiritual aspects of life in these communities. The stories derived from dreaming have become a means of passing down cultural heritage, reflecting values, beliefs, and the creation of the natural world by ancestral spirits (Artlandish Aboriginal Art Gallery, 2020). In essence, animism and dream interpretation are intertwined elements that have contributed significantly to the cultural fabric of various societies, fostering a profound connection between the physical and spiritual realms.

Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient Egyptian Civilization

Ancient Egyptian civilization placed a profound emphasis on dream interpretation, considering dreams as a conduit to a divine realm inhabited by gods and the deceased. In Egyptian culture, the act of dreaming was not viewed as a conscious action but rather as an uncontrollable phenomenon, where individuals would "see a dream" or "see something in a dream" (Szpakowska, 2010). Dreams were believed to hold significant predictive value, influencing decisions in medicine, politics, and even the construction of sacred temples.

One notable piece of evidence, dating back to 1770 BC, suggests that dream interpretation in ancient Egypt often employed the concept of 'opposites.' For instance, if a woman dreamed of kissing her husband, it was interpreted as a forewarning of impending trouble (O'Connell et al., 2008). This approach reflects a belief in the reverse symbolism of dreams, where the apparent meaning may signify its opposite.

Dream Books, compiled by Lector Priests, served as valuable references for dream interpreters. These texts, such as the Papyrus Chester Beatty III found in Deir el-Medina, contained plausible dream scenarios and their corresponding interpretations. The Dream Book included associations between dream content and prophecies, utilising puns as a potent form of magic (Khan, 2011; Oakes & Gahlin, 2015).

Ancient Egyptians engaged in Dream Incubation, a ritualistic practice involving purification through devotion to gods, fasting, and abstaining from certain activities. Temples dedicated to the god of dreams, Serapis, facilitated this practice, with Memphis and Thebes being prominent ritual sites. The fear of nightmares led Egyptians to use protective spells, including the utilization of headrests adorned with deities like Bes and Taweret, believed to safeguard against malevolent dreams associated with the god Seth (Lewis, 1995; O'Connell et al., 2008; Szpakowska, 2010). Ancient Egyptian dream interpretation was deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural beliefs, shaping various aspects of their lives and influencing their decisions through divine messages received in dreams.

Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient Hindu Civilization

Ancient Hindu civilization is renowned for its profound cultural, philosophical, mythological, and spiritual heritage, with dreams holding a significant place in its ethos. The interpretation of dreams dates back to the legendary 52 great Rishis, who, seeking guidance, journeyed to the Himalayas and compiled their knowledge into the sacred Vedas (Dhanya et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2008). These Vedas, namely the Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda, provide insights into the nature of dreams (Mark, 2021).

In Rigveda, dreams are termed "demonic dreams" (duhsvapna), while Atharvaveda classifies dreams into good and evil, symbolising various entities such as the 'minister of Yama,' 'Child of Gods' Consorts,' 'Black Bird,' and 'Horse'. Hindu texts delineate Swapna as the dreaming

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state where the mind operates independently, creating dream images (Eranimos & Funkhouser, 2017; Philosophy of Dreams – the Divine Life Society, n.d).

The Upanishads, pivotal Hindu philosophical texts, propose two perspectives on dreams: one aligns with Freudian wish-fulfilment, suggesting inner desires, while the other posits the departure of the soul during dreams, guided by spiritual forces (Eranimos et al., 2017; Khan, 2011). The symbolic representation of dreams in the Upanishads is termed Maya, an intermediary level of manifestation between the spiritual and mortal worlds (Radpour, 2015).

Acharya Charaka, a prominent figure in ancient Indian medicine, introduced the seven-fold classification of dreams, incorporating waking experiences, somatic impulses, imagination, and supernatural influences (Gupta, 2017; Ramesh, 2019). Notably, personality factors were considered in dream interpretation, linking a person's temperament to the nature of their dreams.

Ancient Hinduism attributes diverse roles to dreaming, including prophetic warnings, medical insights, religious and spiritual experiences, prophecies related to rebirth, and access to knowledge beyond waking consciousness. The Vedas suggest that crucial dreams occur towards the end of the dreaming cycle, potentially bearing significant meaning (O'Connell et al., 2008). Overall, the rich complexity of Hindu beliefs reveals a profound connection between dreams and various aspects of human existence.

Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient Mayan Civilization

The enigmatic nature of the Mayan civilization has intrigued scholars for centuries, and their beliefs surrounding dreams provide a unique lens through which to understand their cultural and spiritual practices. The Mayans perceived the world as a vast dream, suggesting a profound connection between the waking and dream states. Even in contemporary Mayan communities, the importance of dreaming persists, with dreams often seen as a means of communing with the cosmos and paying homage to gods through various rituals (Medina, 2021).

Among the Tzotzil Maya, an indigenous community within the Mayan civilization, dreams are considered a pathway to "live a full life" and "stay alive," representing a medium for seeing with the soul. Children are encouraged to dream and share their dreams, as this is seen as a way to guide them towards a fulfilling existence. Nightmares are interpreted not only as psychological experiences but also as indications of a need for healing or cleansing from negative energy, with dreams potentially revealing insights from the spiritual realm (Medina, 2021).

The Mayan worldview is deeply intertwined with nature, with spiritual beings, often referred to as Earth Lords, appearing in dreams and visions as guardians of the forest, controllers of weather, and bestowers of wealth (Laughlin, 1975; Tedlock, 1992). Shamanism, a practice widespread in ancient cultures, was also embraced by the Mayans, with shamans residing in natural settings such as forests, caves, and hills and serving as healers and interpreters of dreams. Public dream narration and interpretation were part of Mayan society, demonstrating the communal significance of dreams (Vogt, 1962; Sexton, 1986; Tedlock, 1987).

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Dreams held religious and prophetic significance for the ancient Mayans, offering insights into one's destiny, the concept of Nahual (a personal guardian spirit or alter ego), and one's calling (Jang, 2011; Cohort, 2020). Mayan art depicted the co-essence, a blend of various animals symbolising an individual's spirit alive during dreaming (Coe & Stone, 2005; Levi, Maya & Levi, 2010). Basso (1987) emphasises that Mayan interpretation of dreams is "progressive," focusing more on the future than the past, aligning with their unique worldview (Tedlock, 1987).

Interpretation of Dreams in Ancient Greece Civilization

The ancient Greeks attached great significance to dreams, considering them as a means to discern the will of the gods, foresee the future, and gain insights into an enigmatic realm. In Greek literature, the earliest mention of dreams is found in Homer's works, where he distinguishes between true and false dreams, represented by gates of horn and ivory, respectively (Harrisson, 2009). Dreams, personified as divine beings, played a crucial role in the Homeric epics, advancing the plot and serving as a tool for divination, often initiated by gods such as Zeus or Athena during critical moments (Redfield, 2014; O'Connell et al., 2008).

Beyond their spiritual significance, dreams were utilised for practical purposes in ancient Greece. Sleep temples dedicated to the god of medicine, Asclepius, were established at Epidaurus and Oropos. Asclepius was believed to visit worshippers in dreams, providing medical information and cures, leading to practices like sleep induction (enkoimesis) and dream incubations for healing purposes (Kamil, 2014; Askitopoulo, 2015). Around 300 BC, Hippocrates, considered the father of modern medicine, acknowledged dreams as a form of divination and prophecy, using them for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes by correlating dream symbolism with internal conditions (Askitopoulo, 2015; O'Connell et al., 2008).

Aristotle, a prominent philosopher, contributed to the understanding of dreams through his works like "De Somno et Vigilia" and "De Divinatione Per Somnum," emphasising the role of imagination and subjective judgement in dreaming (Woods, 1992). Artemidorus Daldianus, a recorder of dreams in the second century AD, distinguished between meaningful dreams (Oneiroi) and meaningless dreams (Enhypmia), asserting that animals could also dream, a view challenged by Aristotle (Coolidge et al., 2006).

Modern Approaches and Scientific Research

Dreaming has been a universal phenomenon throughout human existence, yet the scientific explanation for its occurrence during sleep remains elusive (Revonsuo, 2000). Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of psychoanalysis, proposed that dreams, particularly their meaningful content, are intricately linked to mental functioning (Freud, 1994). However, the empirical validation of Freud's claims has been challenging due to the elusive nature of dreams, leading some researchers to view them as products of random neural activity (Hobson & McCarley, 1977).

Freud posited that dreams originate from the unconscious, representing repressed psychological elements such as desires and conflicts (Freud, 1994). He classified dreams into manifest and latent, with the latter being the true dream and the focus of dream interpretation. Freud introduced mechanisms like condensation, displacement, symbols, and secondary revision to unveil the latent content of dreams (Zhang, 2018).

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Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, offered a distinct perspective on dreams. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious emphasised universal symbols known as archetypes, which carry meanings across cultures and contribute to a more profound understanding of dreams (Jung, 1947). Jung believed that dreams played a role in restoring psychological balance (James, 2016).

Building on Freud and Jung, other theorists like Wilfred Bion and Thomas Ogden explored the therapeutic aspects of dreaming. Bion introduced the concept of alpha function, linking dreaming with the continuous processing of emotional experiences (Bion, 1962). Ogden further emphasised the continuous nature of dreaming, occurring both during sleep and waking life (Ogden, 2004).

Thomas M. French and Erika Fromm proposed a relationship-oriented approach to dream interpretation, highlighting the influence of dreams on personal relationships (O'Connell et al., 2008). Montague Ullman expanded the scope by connecting dreams to species consciousness, suggesting that dreams urge individuals towards greater wholeness and collective survival (Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979).

In more recent times, scientific advancements, including EEGs, PET scans, and fMRI, have enabled researchers to explore the neural correlates of dreaming (Franklin & Zyphur, 2005). Revonsuo's Threat Simulation Theory (TST) of Dreaming posits that dream consciousness serves as an evolutionary defense mechanism, simulating threatening events for enhanced cognitive preparedness (Revonsuo, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This review paper incorporates a diverse selection of literature, encompassing articles sourced from reputable academic journals and pertinent books like "The Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud, "The Ultimate Illustrated Guide to Dreams, Signs, and Symbols" by Mark O'Connell, Raje Airey, and Richard Craze, and "The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religions, Pyramids, and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs" by Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin. Additionally, various online resources, including scholarly databases and reputable websites, were consulted. The inclusion of these materials was based on their authoritative perspectives on their relevance to the subject of dream interpretation. The decision to incorporate internet sources was influenced by their accessibility and up-to-date information.

DISCUSSION

The exploration of dreams and nightmares unveils a captivating journey across philosophy, psychology, and ancient civilizations. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, dream interpretation was revered as an art requiring divine insight, with temples dedicated to dream gods and public performances highlighting the communicative nature of dreams. Animism, attributing consciousness to all entities, shapes cultural perspectives on dreams, as seen in the Ojibwe tribe's dreamcatchers and Australian Aboriginal cosmology, influencing beliefs about protection and spiritual journeys. The ancient Egyptians emphasised dream interpretation, using dream books and incubation rituals to shape decisions in medicine, politics, and sacred architecture. Hindu civilization displayed rich complexity in interpreting dreams, aligning with Freudian wish fulfilment or emphasising soul departure during dreams. Mayans perceived the world as a vast dream, integral to their cultural fabric, with dreams offering guidance and insights through a connection with nature and spirituality. In

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ancient Greece, dreams were a means to discern divine will, foresee the future, and hold therapeutic significance in sleep temples dedicated to Asclepius.

The exploration of dreams has evolved through diverse approaches and technological advancements, encompassing Freud's psychoanalytic perspective and Jung's universal symbols. Modern neuroscientific methods like EEGs and fMRI have provided insights into dream generation and neural correlates. Dreams have profound cultural influences, shaping individuals' perceptions and societal norms. The investigation into dreams persists as a dynamic interdisciplinary domain, unifying the realms of psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies in the pursuit of unravelling the intricacies of the human mind.

CONCLUSION

Dream interpretation is a complex field that is influenced by both cultural beliefs and scientific inquiry. Ancient civilizations saw dream interpretation as an art requiring intelligence and divine inspiration, which laid the groundwork for contemporary theories. Animism, originating from religious beliefs, extended its influence across various domains, including religion, spirituality, language, art, literature, mythology, and magic. This cultural perspective has continued to evolve and is significant in fields like science, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, and philosophy.

Exploring dreams within primitive cultures revealed intricate connections between dreams and communication, societal laws, cosmology, and views of human existence. The study of soulness or spirits across indigenous cultures deepened the understanding of these ideologies, opening avenues for further research. As dreams transitioned from windows to supernaturalism in classical times to peepholes in modern psychological structures, the complexity of understanding dreams and nightmares has grown. Researchers and scientists continue to explore the structural and functional aspects of sleep and dreams, acknowledging the evolutionary history of the dreaming brain. The ongoing dialogue between cultural traditions and scientific exploration ensures that the fascination with dreams remains an enduring aspect of the human experience.

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Conflict of Interest

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