Amira Mittermaier


Dream visions and their interpretation have a long tradition and great importance in both the history and the present practice of Islam, and yet dreams have received far less than their due share of scholarly attention as compared to the more exoteric and tangible issues of ritual practice, ethics, and politics. And yet dreams matter because also under conditions of modernity, Muslims (as well as Christians) in contemporary Egypt resort to them as the site of an encounter with a prophetic or divine Elsewhere, a world that for the dreamers is imaginary yet real, with a moral power of guidance and with ritual, ethical and political consequences.

Based on her ethnographic fieldwork among dream interpreters, their clients, and the followers of the Sufi-minded spiritual community of Sheikh Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ẓāhirī in Cairo around the time of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, an “undreamy time” of economical and political pressures and global confrontations, Mittermaier offers an interesting, important, and inspiring account of dreams and visions. Looking, among others, at the connections between textual traditions of dream interpretation and contemporary interpretative practice, the relationship of visionary poetry and prophecy, and the encounter of Freudian and Islamic theories of the dream, Mittermaier argues that we should resist the temptation to reduce dreams to the psychological when our interlocutors explicitly argue that their dreams are encounters with a real world elsewhere, a different order of reality that matters for the way one lives in this world.

The dream, or more specifically the dream-vision, Mittermaier argues, is an in-between space (*barzakh*) that troubles all kinds of binary constructions, instead compelling us to look at the ambiguities and openings involved. Dream visions are at once “highly orthodox, and highly contested”, their truth, meaning and consequences open to discussion and interpretation. Because of this openness, they also point at a way of understanding moral subjectivity that is restricted to neither the liberal fiction of the autonomous subject nor the religious revivalist imperative of the disciplined pious subject, but instead highlights the dialogical dimension of the moral and ethical as based on encounters – be it the visionary encounters of the dreamer with saints and the Prophet Muḥammad, or the encounters where the dream is narrated and interpreted, or the encounters of different traditions of dream interpretation. Far from being unreal, “mere” psychology, dream visions “matter” because they point beyond the dream to the lived material world.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2015 | DOI 10.1163/15700607-00552P07
Mittermaier develops a theory of dreams that avoids some of the pitfalls involved in the hierarchy of the researcher and the researched. Instead of claiming to profess objective truth about the “real” nature of dreams (such as, for example, offered by psychoanalysis) and therefore a priori disqualifying other theories of dreams, she lets the dreamers and dream interpreters of contemporary enter in conversation with western theoretical approaches to dreams, subjectivity and the unconscious. Rather than being relegated to mere objects of study, Islamic traditions of dream interpretation emerge as voices worth listening alongside with the Freudian tradition.

This suspension of (dis)belief about the true nature of dreams is a powerful methodological and theoretical devise in service of Mittermaier’s “barzakhian” approach, but it also raises some theoretical and methodological questions. For one thing, the way Mittermaier pits the visionary “dreams that matter” against the psychological reduction of dreams to mere hallucination may not quite do justice to the degree to which the psychologically interpreted dream matters in the western world where, after Freud, it has become a critical site of self-reflection that, while not located in a prophetic Elsewhere, nevertheless greatly matters to the constitution of our subjective and social lives. Furthermore, Mittermaier’s approach gains its capacity to take seriously the dream vision at a cost. Foregrounding people’s narratives and interpretations of their and others’ dreams, Mittermaier carefully abstains from judging the truthfulness and falsity of different dream theories, and especially from speculating about the possibly manipulated character of some dream accounts. This makes good sense, because the question of truthfulness would lead the researcher to a path of scepticism that would not be fruitful if one is to understand the importance and significance of dreams in context. At the same time, it also removes an important question from the scope of analysis, which is that of manipulation. Because we can only take the dreamer’s word for their truthfulness, dreams are notoriously suspect to manipulation; and the more dreams matter the more the issue arises. Especially when it comes to political and wartime visions – Mittermaier mentions politicians running for elections inspired by a dream vision (or so they say), as well as the historical cases of the apparition of Virgin Mary in Cairo in 1968 and an appearance of the Prophet Muḥammad to Egyptian soldiers crossing the Suez Canal in 1973 – it is very difficult not to be sceptical about the manipulative ends of some dream narratives. This may be an unsolvable problem when it comes to something so elusive and unsettling as dreams – a different order of reality that is present in everybody’s life yet communicable only with difficulty by means of a translation into the narrative language of the waking world. Mittermaier’s solution is to focus on the moments of narrative translation. It is a fruitful solution but it