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ANTH 797: The Anthropology of Dreams and Dreaming

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Dreaming is not a fixed experience around the world. Instead, within each culture, dreaming and the experiences during this period are explained and valued differently. By examining how an individual culture understands the phenomenon of dreaming, ontological assumptions and theories of self can be revealed. Ontological assumptions are the ideas regarding the nature of reality that arise within each culture. These concepts are unique to each culture and reveal how people understand how the world works, how they interact with their reality and the connections between themselves and others. To individuals within western cultures, such as Americans, the connection between ontological assumptions and dreaming may appear to be tenuous. However, this is the result of our own ontological assumptions. In western cultures, dreaming is not considered part of reality. Meaning, that although it is recognized that dreaming occurs and that there are memories connected to this phenomenon, it does not impact the 'real' world. However, this is an ontological assumption challenged by many Indigenous cultures within the Americas. Within these groups dreaming is not nonsensical and separate from reality; instead, dreaming is simply experiencing a different form of reality. Because of this lack of separation, dreaming within these cultures is an integral aspect of their understanding of the reality of their world.

One such group that does not clearly distinguish between dreaming and the waking world are the Ojibwa, an Indigenous cultural group located in Canada. A. Irving Hallowell conducted ethnographic research throughout the 1930s that focused on Ojibwa cultural practices surrounding dreaming. During his research, he found that the Ojibwa's traditional means of survival, hunting, and gathering, as well as their egalitarian social structure, were tied closely with their understanding of dreams and their functions (Hallowell 1966). A significant ontological assumption of the Ojibwa is dreams are not a separate experience from everyday

waking reality and are instead a continuation of this reality in one's sleep (Hallowell 1966). In essence, experiences that occur when one is wide awake are just as important and impactful as their experiences within their dreams. In fact, the Ojibwa believe that to live a full life, or *pīmadazīwin*, they must rely on both forms of reality to cultivate their interpersonal relationships (Hallowell 1966).

To the Ojibwa, these interpersonal relationships are not only between humans but other persons as well. These other persons include animals, plants, mythical beings, as well as other beings that have personhood (Hallowell 1966). Personhood is not viewed as a characteristic exclusive to human beings. Instead, it is something that every being has, even if they are not alive in the western sense of the word. Without the medium of dreaming, the interactions necessary to maintain social relationships with non-human persons would not be possible. These interpersonal relationships are important, not only for the well-being and happiness of the individual but also for the survival of the entire group.

Dreaming, while recognized as a personal experience, in that the relationships that one builds within their dreams are dependent on their actions, also impacts others within the group. If the relationship between an individual and an animal master, for example, is not maintained, then the consequences affect the entire community (Hallowell 1966). An animal master is an Ojibwa concept used to describe an animal that does not simply represent an individual animal but rather a being in charge of an entire species (Hallowell 1966). Being the master of an entire species, the relationship that one has with an animal master is extremely important to successfully hunt that animal in the future (Hallowell 1966). However, if the animal master is wronged somehow, an individual will have difficulty hunting that species until the relationship has been mended. An important aspect of the Ojibwa understanding of dreaming, and their world in general, is that

their dreams are current. This means that a dream where an animal master confronts an individual responds to past actions on the part of the human and reveals consequences that will occur in the future (Hallowell 1966). This is no different from how a relationship may be negotiated in waking life because to the Ojibwa, the only difference is when the interaction happened.

The view that dreams are simply an extension of reality with Ojibwa culture means that when an individual is constructing their identity, the idea of who they are has a solid basis not only in their daily lives but their dreams as well (Hallowell 1966). The dream fast ceremony is important for the foundation of young men's idea of self. This ceremony is used to mark the transition from boyhood to adulthood, during which a young man will receive a dream that indicates the other than human grandfathers that they will receive a blessing of (Hallowell 1966). The dream fast creates and affirms the identity of a young man is through the reception of a blessing from non-human grandfathers, or *pawágank* (Hallowell 1966). These grandfathers approach the young man out of pity, either in the form of an animal or human, and offer him a blessing related to the being they represent (Hallowell 1966). For example, a man who was challenged to an archery competition by a being who embodied an insect was then gifted the ability to move quickly and dodge things that had the potential to kill him, much like an insect (Hallowell 1966). These gifts change the individual in the moment and shape their identity throughout their life. The gift that is received often plays a role in how that specific individual will contribute to the overall wellbeing of the community, attaching their idea of self to a specific role beyond that of a man (Hallowell 1966). Additionally, this gift often is connected to expectations that these non-human grandfathers have for the recipients. These can range from food taboos related to the animal they are now associated with to being forbidden from sexual

intercourse for a particular period (Hallowell 1966). Each of these expectations adds to the creation of an identity for an individual, placing them not only within the broad role of a man but also within a specific role where expectations define their actions, and their gift informs their role within the community.

However, not all Indigenous communities see dreaming as a direct extension of their reality, but rather as a place specifically for gaining knowledge that would otherwise be unknown to them. This is the perception of the function of dreaming within Ese Eja culture. The Ese Eja are Indigenous to the Peruvian Amazon, practicing horticulture, fishing, and hunting as their primary means of survival (Peluso 2004). Daniela Peluso's (2004) ethnographic research on the Ese Eja in the mid-1990s focused on two specific forms of knowledge transference within dreams, omens and dream names. Unlike the Ojibwa, the Ese Eja view dreams as a separate reality to which their *eschwa* travels (Peluso 2004). An *eschwa* is the embodiment of agency or consciousness that every being has, and it is the links that hold the *eschwa* together that constitute the spirit world as a whole (Peluso 2004). Like the Ojibwa, the Ese Eja do not reserve personhood solely for humans, meaning that *eschwas* exist for animals, plants, and other beings as well. This theme of non-human personhood highlights the ontological assumption within both cultures that knowledge is not the sole domain of humans, but rather that humans are often the recipient of knowledge from non-human persons. However, contrary to how the Ojibwa perceive dreams, to the Ese Eja, their dreams are not a continuation of their waking reality. Instead, their dreams are used to gain knowledge from a world outside of the one that they live in (Peluso 2004). This difference in ontological assumptions between the Ojibwa and Ese Eja is the root of their diverging perceptions on dreaming.

One way that dreams are integrated into daily Ese Eja life is through the interpretation of dreams. The content of dreams is often used to determine an individual's course of action moving forward (Peluso 2004). Whereas the dreams of the Ojibwa can only illuminate the dreamer of the state of their social relationships at the moment, the dreams of the Ese Eja reveal information that can prevent something from occurring in the future (Hallowell 1966; Peluso 2004). Dreams can indicate potential events to the dreamer, whether that be successful fishing through the appearance of a white-lipped peccary, running away or the danger of a stingray through the image of a palm with large spikes (Peluso 2004). In both these interpretations of these dreams, the Ese Eja use the images and scenes presented to them to gain insight into how they should act in the future to be successful.

The knowledge that dreams reveal is not only about the survival of the community as a whole but also about the identity of individuals. The primary category of dreams that Peluso (2004) focused on in her research are name dreams. These are dreams in which the true name of an infant is revealed to their relatives through the animal that the child embodies in the dream (Peluso 2004). These dreams help the dreamer to further develop their sense of self and provide the foundation for the child to develop their sense of self as well. For the dreamers, these dreams confirm their relationship to the child; this confirmation is especially important with reference to the Ese Eja's view of fertility. To the Ese Eja, a child is the product of the accumulation of more than one man's sperm, meaning that the child may have multiple fathers (Peluso 2004). Because of this belief, the dreams in which a potential father dreams about a child giving him their name affirms and solidifies his identity as a father (Peluso 2004). While providing children with a true name, these dreams also provide a basis for their construction for their idea of self. The animal that an individual transformed from in their naming dream often reappears in the characteristics

or behaviors of that person later on. For example, one young woman was named after an armadillo, and like an armadillo, she slept on top of a pile of bedding (Peluso 2004). While only one characteristic of a person, this example demonstrates that the animal present within these naming dreams exerts a level of influence over the formation of self, to the point where animal attributes appear in adulthood.

The quality of providing information regarding the future is also present within the dreams of the Makiritare. The Makiritare are an Indigenous group in southern Venezuela who practice horticulture, hunting, and gathering to support themselves (Guss 1980). In the late 1970s, David Guss conducted ethnographic research on the Makiritare, focusing on the integration of dreams in their daily lives (Guss 1980). Like the Ese Eja, the Makiritare believe that their dreams allow them to receive knowledge that will aid them in their survival. Ese Eja view dreams as the product of the experiences of a spirit that resides within the body (Guss 1980; Peluso 2004). The Makiritare's concept of a spirit is referred to as an *akato*, or double (Guss 1980). The meaning behind the name indicates a foundational ontological assumption at the center of the Makiritare's perception of dreaming – a mirror world (Guss 1980). The Makiritare view the world as one half of a mirror image. Humans live within the tangible realm, but when we dream, we travel to the mirror world, where everything has an intangible duplicate (Guss 1980). This travel between worlds works in both directions. For humans, when we cross that threshold, the Makiritare believe that we receive knowledge that is only available to us in the mirror world (Guss 1980). However, when the gods of the Makiritare dream, their dreams cross into the physical world, bringing things into being (Guss 1980). Therefore, the *akato* travels upwards into the domain of the gods and spirits, resulting in intangible knowledge, whereas the gods' dreams travel downwards, resulting in physical creation.

Only after the akato returns to the body can the individual remember the journey their akato completed while they slept and the knowledge that accompanies it. The experiences of the akato in the mirror world are more similar to the reception of knowledge by the eschwa than the dream experiences of a member of the Ojibwa culture. What is meant by this is that the travel of the akato is not viewed as being a continuation of travels during the day but is instead the reception of knowledge from the travels (Guss 1980). The dreams of the Makiritare are interpreted similarly to those of the Ese Eja. The men of the community gather together in the morning to discuss the dreams that they had received the night before (Guss 1980). The group then analyzes these dreams, and the shaman in particular is looked to for guidance to navigate the next steps an individual should take (Guss 1980). For example, if a person dreams that they are swimming and are unable to stop even when they begin to drown, it is a sign that they might be sick and might require the shaman to look at them.

However, the journeys of the akato are not simply the one-way reception of knowledge, as the dreams of the Ese Eja are. The Makiritare view how their akato steps out of their body at night as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows their akato to travel the mirror world and receive warnings about the future that will allow them to protect themselves and the community (Guss 1980). However, as the akato travels the mirror world, it runs the risk of being permanently separated from their body through the mechanisms of grandfather spirits (Guss 1980). These spirits will attempt to hold the akato captive, forcing it to forget its body in the physical world, leaving it trapped in the mirror world while the body sleeps on (Guss 1980). The presence of these dangers speaks to the Makiritare's perception of self, The akato exists outside of the body to the point where it can be permanently separated from it. Yet, the person will still be themselves, even after the separation (Guss 1980). This points to the idea that the Makiritare

do not necessarily think of themselves in terms of their body, but rather in reference to their akato; their body is instead viewed as simply a vessel (Peluso 2004).

Throughout the three cultures examined, two basic ontological assumptions are shared between them; the first is that humans are not the only beings with personhood; rather, we are just one of many with this quality (Hallowell 1966; Guss 1980; Peluso 2004). The second is that at their very core, the ontological assumption that these three cultures have about dreaming is that it is a real experience that imparts knowledge or blessings on the dreamer and is an important component to living fulfilling and avoiding danger (Hallowell 1966; Guss 1980; Peluso 2004). These are the two ontological assumptions that dreaming culture within the United States differs from Indigenous cultures. Instead, "dreams in our culture are recognized as self-related" and frivolous, thought to not aid in the life of the dreamer, let alone the wellbeing of the community that they belong to (Hallowell 1966, 270). Dreams are seen as frivolous not because they significantly differ in overall content from dreams that are seen in Indigenous communities, but rather because in the United States, dreams are viewed as self-contained. The dreamer is the creator and recipient of the dream; no knowledge is added that they didn't already know. Even if other beings appear in the dream and seem to communicate, they are simply seen as extensions of the dreamer. This is the result of human exceptionalism because while in Indigenous communities' humans are not the sole producers of knowledge and do receive knowledge or blessings through dreams from other non-human persons, in the United States, humans are the beginning and end of all knowledge and the only individuals with personhood. With human exceptionalism in place, there is no other source from which the information within the dreams can originate, relegating the beings within the dreams to extensions of the dreamer's mind. In Indigenous communities like the Ojibwa, Ese Eja, and Makiritare, their world views are based

around the idea that dreams are a version of reality. While the exact type of reality differs between them, dreams are acknowledged as real experiences. Because of this acknowledgment, people within these groups can integrate the knowledge they receive from these dreams into their daily lives to improve their success and that of the community. In addition to this, the experiences that occur within dreams, because they are deemed real, can be used to develop an individual's sense of self around the experiences within their dreams. These common ontological differences that separate Indigenous communities from the United States allow for more opportunities to receive knowledge and develop a greater sense of self through the real experiences of dreams.

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