

# Commentary on “Spiritual and religious imagery in dreams: A cross cultural analysis“

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Islamic societies have great interest in dreams and dream interpretation because of religious reasons. Muslims consider dreams to be a medium of supernatural perception conveying news from the future and provide Divine guidance. The importance of dreams has been emphasized in the Islamic Holy Scriptures (Qur'an and Hadith). Twenty four verses of the Holy Koran discuss dreams and dreaming in five chapters, including description and comments on 7 dreams. These chapters are: *Joseph, Yunus, the Spoils, the Ranks, and the Victory* (Saheeh International, 1997).

The Hadith is the collection of accounts given by the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and are gathered in Hadith books. In Hadith books these accounts are classified according to categories, and one of these categories is devoted to accounts related to dreams. Around 100 prophetic accounts refer to dreams and dreaming. These Hadith chapters usually start with the story of the beginning of revelation. They recount the Hadith that: “The commencement of the divine inspiration to Allah’s apostle was in the form of good dreams which came like bright daylight (i.e. true) and then the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him.” This experience of literal truthful dreaming was occurring over the 6 month preceding the revelation of Koran which was revealed over 23 years in wakefulness. No verses of Koran were revealed during sleep or in dreams or as part of a dream. (Twaijry, 1992).

According to the Islamic teachings, dreams are classified into three subtypes. The first group is called Ru’ya; meaning visions, or truthful dreams. These are dreams of Divine origin and serve as glad tidings from God, or premonitions. The warning dream is a message to the dreamer to warn him/her of some impending threat or danger in the near future, or to prepare him/her for some bad news.

The second group is called self-talk dreams, which reflects the dreamer’s concerns and preoccupations.

The third group comprises the bizarre and jumbled dreams that are of no significance.

According to Islamic teachings, truthful dreams are a human faculty that occur to believers and non-believers alike (Salem, 2010). However, the phenomenon is more common and is valued to be some portion of prophecy in believers. One *Hadith* states that the Prophet (pbuh) said, “A good dream vision of a pious man is a forty-sixth part of prophecy” [SM 2263].

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Tabir is the Muslim science of dream interpretation, that emerged very early in the history of Islam. Following the dawn prayer in the mosque, the prophet used to ask his followers whether anyone had seen a dream. He would then provide an interpretation of the images and symbols of their dreams, and also of his own. Word association was one of the Prophet’s techniques in interpreting some dreams.

From approximately the ninth century AD, “Tabir” materialized as a dynamic body of knowledge integrating Islamic faith with the classical heritage of the Greeks and Romans. These interpreting principles continue to guide the dream practices of present-day Muslims. It is interesting to note that Muslims’ insights and observations have many significant points of contact with the theories developed by Western psychologists over the past 150 years (Bulkeley, 2002)

According to the principles of Tabir, the dream should be recounted accurately and truthfully, as there is a warning to those who lie about their dreams. If someone sees a bad dream he is advised to say a certain prayer. A dream in which Prophet Muhammad appears as a character is a true dream because Satan does not have the power to assume the shape of God’s Prophet. The only restriction is that his figure in the dream should be similar to his known reported physical description. Apparently dreaming of God, the prophets and aspects of the afterlife (including visitation dreams of the dead) are highly valued by Muslims.

## Origin of dreams according to Muslim philosophers

Ibn Khaldun, in his work “An Introduction to History” (1332-1402), classified three types of dreams: (i) dreams from Allah (God), which are clear and unmistakable in their meaning and content; (ii) dreams from Angels, which are received in the form of allegory and require interpretation; and (iii) dreams from Satan, which are confused dreams that are futile.[2,37]. He postulated that God created sleep as an opportunity for humans to “lift the veil of the senses” and gain access to divine realities and higher forms of knowing. So, when sleep becomes deeper, the soul can be liberated from the constraints of the external sensations and receive reflections from the unseen spiritual world. When that veil is lifted, the soul is ready to learn the things it desires to. At times, it catches a glimpse of what it seeks. The more clear the reflections, the more literal the dream would be.

Another Islamic scholar, Al-Qurtubī (1214-1273 C.E.), noted that true dreams are visions experienced while the soul is separated from the body during sleep, whereas nightmares and lying dreams occur when the soul has returned to the body, but before it has again taken firm root.[11]

This begs the question: could this liberation of the soul correspond to the states of rapid eye movements (REM) sleep episodes, when most dreams occur? Also, science

does not tell us why REM occurs during this type of sleep; however one of the Prophet's sayings (Hadith) can give an explanation. This Hadith mentions that: "the eyes follow the movement of the soul". So, it has been postulated that these eye movements could be following the vibration of the soul during its spiritual journey (Salem, 2010).

### Religious images

In our UAE sample, various religious images and figures were reported. Categories included religious activity, religious places and religious figures and religious destinations in the afterlife. It is interesting that God can be seen or perceived in some Muslim dreams. According to Islamic teaching Allah is different from his creation "there is nothing whatever like unto Him", but because dreams have transcendent qualities, He can be perceived in some dreams in His glory and majesty and it would be an indication of glad tidings for both this world and the hereafter. In Tabir books there is an account on the meaning and significance of seeing Him across various perspectives of the dreamer and the dream content.

Hoffman's work on the role of visions in contemporary Egypt (1997) offers striking evidence that dreams continue to play an important part in the religious lives of present-day "modernized" Muslims. According to Hoffman, dreams provide Muslims with direct experiential affirmation for their faith, connecting them with divine powers and realities and reassuring them of the living presence of God in their lives.

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