

Continuity, conscious dreaming and dying: Implications of dream-travel to the afterlife

Raymond L. M. Lee

Anthropology & Sociology, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Summary. The continuity hypothesis poses the waking state as hegemonic to that of dreaming with hardly any reference to the relationship between dreaming and dying. In the revival of shamanic dreaming as conscious dreaming, the traditional shamanic journey to the afterlife is repackaged as dream-travel for the discovery of otherworldly realms beyond death. Conscious dreamers are guided to construct personal geographies of the afterlife. If this form of dream discovery comes to make a difference in people's waking lives, it would also lead to a reappraisal of the continuity hypothesis for including the meaning of dying in the nexus between waking and dreaming.

Keywords: Afterlife, consciousness, continuity, dream-travel, dying, shamanism

1. Introduction

Continuity between waking and dreaming concerns the question of whether the dream-state is a derivative one that is contingent on the perceived dominance of the waking world (Lee, 2015). It tends to dispute the notion that dreaming can arise quite independently as a set of events and experiences without being fully influenced by actions in the waking state. The assumption is that the waking state is likely to be temporally prior to the dream-state, which suggests the meaning of continuity to be a sequentially determined condition based on diachronic rather than synchronic phenomena. It can be said, without going into details, the standard view of dreaming infrequently calls into question this assumption but instead reinforces the diachronic position by addressing how and when prior waking events are incorporated into current dreaming activities. We may refer to the classic Freudian approach to dreaming as showing the indispensability of knowing the meanings of past actions in order to understand present dream experiences. Schredl (2003) also suggests the time interval between waking experiences and dream events as one of the important factors in demonstrating continuity. In short, continuity is seen to be irreversible since its flow may be synonymous with the arrow of time. However, in the light of the debate between Hobson and Schredl (2011), we may ask if this arrow of time can be bent or become reversible, i.e. whether dream events can develop independently of waking actions to affect our waking lives at a later time. Here we are not speaking of a discontinuity between waking and dreaming but of rethinking continuity as a complex relationship between the two states in which neither is always prior to one another. I propose to depict this relationship diagrammatically (Figure 1).

In Figure 1, waking and dreaming are represented as parallel unidirectional lines moving from already completed actions toward new scenarios that have yet to be formed. The two vertical arrows running from waking to dreaming and vice versa depict, respectively, continuity as past waking moments impacting on current dreaming and futuristic dreaming reshaping waking behavior as it unfolds beyond the present. There is no breakage between waking and dreaming because the two vertical lines provide the link between the two temporal states of consciousness. It implies that continuity is premised on a future state that may or may not be anticipated. In waking life, people routinely conduct themselves with the firm belief, or perhaps some inkling, that what they do now would affect some or all aspects of their future selves. Memory of completed waking actions may manifest in different ways as later dream events. But in dreaming, there could be moments in which premonitory events are experienced and later recalled in the waking state to affect the future outcome of a person's life and thinking. A good example is Kekule's snake dream in 1890 that supposedly resulted in his later conception of the benzene molecule (see MacKenzie, 1965). Thus, a corollary of the continuity hypothesis would pose the human concern with behavioral outcomes for the future state as a catalyst for bridging the flow of waking and dreaming events. In particular, we may speak of this concern in terms of the transcendental-future. The concept of transcendental-future concerns people's projection of their existence beyond the present world and how it may come to influence their present behavior (Boyd & Zimbardo, 1997). In the present discussion, it represents the construal of mortality not only as physical termination but also the continuity of the self in ex-

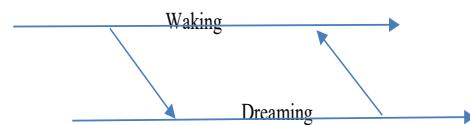
Corresponding address:

Raymond L.M. Lee, c/o Anthropology & Sociology, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: rmllee@hotmail.com

Submitted for publication: September 2016

Accepted for publication: December 2016

Figure 1. Waking - Dreaming



istences not defined by the conventional ideas of time and space. It suggests that confrontation with one's mortality is not merely an intellectual exercise for managing the fear of death but more poignantly an inquiry into preparation for the eventual end of waking life and the uncertainties that may follow. These uncertainties underlie the need of most people to speculate or ruminate about their transcendental-futures, i.e. to wonder what awaits them when they no longer exist in waking bodies.

If considerations of the transcendental-future were indeed basic to all or most of human striving, then it would not be implausible to ask whether dreaming consciously of a future state can reshape continuity by rearranging the direction of waking lives in tandem with the remembered scenarios of specific futuristic dreams. My aim is to examine this aspect of continuity by addressing the quest for conscious dreaming that allegedly creates new understandings of the transcendental-future through the discovery of the afterlife. First, I would like to place in context the meaning of conscious dreaming in relation to shamanism. Then I discuss some of the writings of Robert Moss (1996, 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2011) as a leading advocate of conscious dreaming and his claims to offer understandings of the transcendental-future through dream-travel to the afterlife. The implications of these claims for the continuity hypothesis are reviewed in the final section.

2. Shamanism and conscious dreaming

The quest for conscious dreaming can be located in shamanism that propagates beliefs and practices aimed at healing and promoting visionary contact with otherworldly powers (see Eliade, 1964). Originating in small-scale hunting-gathering societies, shamanism was the focus of thaumaturgy and spirituality among peoples with limited technological skills that banded together for communal support and survival. Anthropological works have shown the widespread patterns of shamanism in the world but anthropologists themselves have not fully agreed on whether they demonstrate a unitary or homogeneous form (Atkinson, 1992, p.308). However, research on shamanism has consistently addressed the fundamentals of shamanic behavior and their relationship to a cluster of psychological or mental experiences termed altered states of consciousness or ASC (e.g. Bourguignon, 1973; Peters & Price-Williams, 1980). This focus on shamanism and ASC has also produced a new term, shamanic states of consciousness or SSC (Harner, 1980) to resonate with the idea of shamanism as a learned art or profession (Rogers, 1976, p.15). It suggests that SSC are not necessarily spontaneous but develop through a period of training in which the novice becomes attuned to otherworldly communication such as vision seeing and clairvoyance. Embarking on arduous vision quests forms a training device for the novice to attain new experiences in consciousness exploration. One of these experiences relates to the cultivation of acute awareness in dreaming in order to complete a spiritual journey. In the example of the Warao Indians given by Moss (1996, p.129), a novice is expected to make such a journey in a trance where he faces terrifying ordeals. If he survives he progresses to several magical waterholes, one of which becomes his selected power spot where he returns in dreaming to cleanse and revitalize his energy. The power to dream consciously symbolizes his transition to a new role as healer and psychopomp.

Shamanic dreaming was therefore perceived as a form of privileged consciousness because they implied entry into the "pure sacred life" for reaffirming connections with gods, spirits and ancestors (Eliade, 1964, p.103). This form of transaction between shamans and the dream world drew attention to the ability of the shaman to enter "the dream world as if it were a space of heightened consciousness filled with varieties of knowledge to be utilized in the waking world" (Lee & Ackerman, 2002, p.103). There was no lack of faith among followers and thaumaturgy seekers who only saw shamanic dreaming as the gateway to better health and personal well-being. Shamanic dreaming can be thought of as a bridge of consciousness created by the shaman to bring the dream world into the lives of followers and believers. To many outsiders unaccustomed to the practice of shamanic dreaming, the faith of these followers and believers became a reminder of a time when flights of fancy went unquestioned. Yet various anthropologists from modern societies researching healing cultures among native peoples did not disregard the meaning and power of shamanic dreaming. They not only addressed the personal and cultural meanings inherent to the dreams of native peoples but also placed the significance of their own dreams in those contexts they studied (e.g. Tedlock, 1991). By making known how their dreams worked and what they meant in the natives' frame of reference, they enabled the quest for relevancy of shamanic dreaming in their own societies.

Among these anthropologists, Castenada (1972) and Harner (1980) became recognized for their works that popularized the use of shamanic techniques in dreaming. They came to epitomize the increasing number of researchers and laypeople paying attention to native forms of dream communication that allegedly improved lifestyles in the waking world. Popularity of these dreaming techniques in modern society suggests a scenario of dreamers learning to become self-aware in the dream-state and exploring it in a manner contrary to the conventional assumption that dreaming is not waking. It implies that within populations that make clear distinctions between waking and non-waking consciousness, there are cultural interstices for deemphasizing these distinctions to enable the discourse and practice of waking up in dreams. These interstices have also facilitated systematic inquiry of lucid dreaming (LaBerge, 1985) as a parallel development to shamanic dreaming, although both forms do not always share a common focus. Whereas the latter seeks to promote native traditions of dreaming in modern society, lucid dreaming poses the paradox of being awake in dreams as a psychological question addressing the perceptual processes that create mental representations of the world (LaBerge & Rheingold, 1990, p.287).

As the third category in the new dreaming consciousness, conscious dreaming does not depart radically from the principles of induced awakening in dreams as found in the shamanic and lucid types. Moss (1996, pp.116-7) specifies it as a phenomenon that not only produces heightened self-awareness in dreaming but also alters the normative perception of the waking world like a person descending from a mountaintop through a series of base camps. In his view, these experiences may make it unnecessary for aspiring conscious dreamers to apply stringently techniques for exercising full control over the dream-state as emphasized in lucid dreaming. His criticism of lucid dreaming techniques brings him closer to the shamanic type that stresses spontaneity and spirituality (Moss, 1996, p.125). In particular, his

preference for drumming as a method for inducing dreams suggests that the age-old shaman's technique for entering trances forms a backbone of conscious dreaming. In addition to initiating dream journeys, drumming is also seen as an effective way to summon spirits of the departed. As with the belief in the shaman's ability to visit the afterlife in dreams, assisting dreamers to become conscious in their dreams is also believed to be a means to cultivate for them the opportunity to converse with the dead as well as travel to the afterlife. It is this goal of conscious dreaming that seemingly distinguishes it from the scope of lucid dreaming. While the aim of training to become lucid is primarily directed toward maintaining lucidity in order to manipulate the dreamscape, one of the purposes of conscious dreaming is journeying to the afterlife to explore the conditions there. What meanings might such discovery have for conscious dreamers?

3. Dream-travel and the afterlife

Belief in the afterlife is intrinsic to the human concern with mortality. Since time immemorial, this belief has been the template for human anticipation of rebirth in other worlds. Even in prehistoric times, death was not just treated as physical termination but a passage to another existence. Later association of this existence with a dark subterranean region became the mythological Sheol for the ancient Hebrews and Hades for the ancient Greeks. By the time of early medieval Christianity, this journey was no longer portrayed as simply a path of descent but one made toward the grandeur of the Celestial City (Hick, 1980, pp.57, 210). But the perceived pervasion of sin in Christian thought also made it necessary for this portrayal to exemplify the consequence of human actions as culminating in separate journeys to heaven, hell and purgatory (for a history of thought on these journeys, see Le Goff, 1984; McDannell & Lang, 2001; Segal, 2004). This idea of post-death peregrination suggests a perspective of the transcendental-future with many imagined levels of existence. Present studies of afterlife belief (Miller, 1998; Fontana, 2009; Frohock, 2010; Vanolo, 2016) not only demonstrate the old themes of heaven and hell but also suggest multi-dimensional explorations of the self after death. What this implies is that belief in the afterlife may be undergoing transformation for re-imagining it as a realm of discovery. In this respect, the emerging discourse on conscious dreaming as a portal to alternative experiences can be treated as a practical guide to personal explorations of the afterlife. It represents an attempt to frame the afterlife as a ground of new experiences in the non-waking state. In this effort, the afterlife is once again brought to the fore as a direct experience of otherworldly realms and not as a vicarious brush with the unknown.

Moss (1998, p.184) approaches this experience through conscious dreaming as *ars moriendi* or the art of dying. It is meant to help people allay their fear of dying by teaching them to dream consciously and travel to the afterlife to see what lies there. This type of soporific journeying forms one of the key areas of conscious dreaming: to develop a personal geography of the afterlife. It also introduces an alternative means of addressing the transcendental-future in space-time discoveries not governed by the parameters of the commonsensical world. Constructing a personal geography of the afterlife necessitates planned explorations of certain stable locales in the dreamscape. Moss (1996, pp.128-9) argues that not all dreamscapes lack stability. What is important to him is that one can learn to dream-

travel to afterlife locales that are already in place for discovery. Accordingly, some of these locales have a manufactured quality, like movie sets, created by other people who predeceased us. Once set up in the dreamscape, these locales are treated as autonomous realms and invite exploration by dream-travelers who may also observe the processes of transition between different after-death states (Moss, 1998, pp.185-6). It suggests that dreamers need not assume as givens the narratives of heaven and hell. Instead of clinging to pre-determined notions, each dreamer is encouraged to assess individually the nature of dream-travel to the afterlife. Some of these practices are taught in death workshops conducted by Moss (1998, pp.194-202) to "produce a personal source of inner certainty and continuing guidance on issues of death, dying, and the afterlife...as an Upper World journey."

As a new art of dying, conscious dreaming prioritizes knowledge of the dream world as equivalent to maps of the afterlife. Knowing how to dream also means knowing how to die. Training to dream in this way involves mind relaxation and cultivation of dream awareness to meet the appropriate escort to the afterlife. The escort is the dream figure who assists the dreamer in exploring the environments of the afterlife. By shifting preparation for dying to the dream-state, practitioners of this art redefine sleep as an ideal condition for confronting death since it supposedly frees the mind to connect with the dream world and to reach the afterlife. Yet the idea that anyone can access the afterlife through conscious dreaming may not be regarded as appealing to everyone. Modern skeptics would be reluctant to suspend disbelief of such practice largely because the uncertainties of dreaming cannot always be articulated as a vehicle for confronting or overcoming the certainty of death. However, what has become permissible in a re-enchanted world is the creation of new cultural spaces for amalgamating recondite beliefs and practices with conventional ideas of self-development. Beliefs and practices such as those found in shamanic dreaming proliferate as a new form of guidance for the self to discover and nurture its inner potentialities. Since the advocacy to develop these potentialities as part of creative dreaming (Garfield, 1976), the search for new interpretations of dream experiences has extended beyond the Freudian unconscious into the imagination of other realms (e.g. Norbu, 1992). These other realms have also come to be considered as coinciding with the afterlife because they are seen as existing in dimensions not governed by the conditions and conventions of the present world. In the new cultural spaces, the afterlife is no longer restricted to heaven, hell and purgatory but extended to other worlds that have yet to be explored. Dream explorers are treating this redefinition of the afterlife as a way to transform the uncertainties of dreaming into a new art of dying. Confronting death through dreaming is not simply promoted as a panacea for death fears but also taught as a form of self-discovery in which the dream becomes the medium for encountering other worlds represented as the vistas of the transcendental-future.

The growing number of dream websites and workshops attest to an expanding market that caters to the curious as well as seekers of new worlds. In this market, the visibility of conscious dreaming suggests that the opening initially created by anthropologists proactive in traditional dream-work has now blossomed into a subculture of dream explorations dovetailing with the new concerns of consciousness transformation in death and dying. It implies a new situation

where the quest for self-discovery in dream explorations reactivates the need for knowing the meaning of the afterlife. This also opens up the question of whether dream-travel to the afterlife can reshape the contours of waking behavior, i.e. is dream-travel a prescient component of waking life? Moss's adage (1996, p.131) that "as you become more conscious in dreams, you become more conscious in life" would suggest another view of continuity as a form of synchronicity in which dreaming and waking knowledge are simultaneously connected. His reference to the classic tale of the researcher Herman Hilprecht who in 1883 solved the puzzle of two fragments of agate at a temple excavation through a dream encounter with a long deceased priest (Moss, 2005a, p.73) serves as a memorable example of such synchronous connections. If training to dream-travel to the afterlife could provide new ideas on our discernment of dream consciousness, in what ways would it also affect our conception of the continuity between waking and dreaming?

4. Implications for the continuity hypothesis

The most obvious implication of dream-travel is its indication of the continuing tradition in shamanic practices of vision seeing and otherworldly sojourns. Even in a high-tech world of instant jet travel and mobile communication, the techniques developed by shamans for dream-travel have not become obsolete or lost to the passage of time. Although traditional shamans are gradually becoming an anachronism, the acolyte of conscious dreaming depicts a rebirth of practices carried by shamans for knowing the afterlife. In this sense, the relevancy of shamanism for understanding modern death and dying should not be underestimated but be applied to the debate on the relationship between waking and dreaming. If the quest for conscious dreaming were indeed a renewed shamanic means to dream-travel to various transcendental-futures, it would also undeniably reset the parameters for thinking about the nature of continuity between waking and dreaming. It may suggest that we need not always feel compelled to assume the hegemony of the waking state in order to make sense of all our dream memories. Dream-travel experiences could be treated alternatively as a *sine qua non* of waking behavior which the dreamer, like the shaman, performs as if it were a script of the dream itself.

This would imply that even when we become conscious in dreaming, the likelihood of a discontinuity between waking and dreaming does not arise because what is dreamed could come to be enacted in waking. We may consider this carryover as a waking simulation of the dream-state in which consciousness is not broken up or disrupted but re-streamed into waking life like the case of Hilprecht redeploying his dream experiences into his archeological work during waking hours. Affirmation of this continuity is based on the presence of self-reflective awareness spanning both the dreaming and waking state, as is also evident in the case of lucid dreaming (see Stumbrys, 2011, p.94).

In view of shamanic dreaming being revived as conscious dreaming, is it possible to reconsider the idea of dream-travel as a means for deconstructing the meaning of dying as the dissolution of consciousness? Rather than assuming the waking-dreaming continuum as an unequivocal part of life, we may also want to rethink it as a part of death. In other words, it would be more fruitful to reimagine dream-travel as a bridging of waking and dying consciousness than as a fantasy flight to otherworldly realms. By stepping

into the shoes of the shaman, the dream-traveler may get to experience more than just a glimpse of the transcendental-future. Opportunities for using that experience to reappraise the conventional meanings of death could arise in the wake of increased sensitivity to the continuity of consciousness across the states of waking, dreaming and dying. As yet, the quest for conscious dreaming is still unfolding and one would be too presumptuous at this stage to imagine growing receptivity to a form of dreaming that emphasizes travels to the beyond. However, the concern for human mortality never wanes and would provide an impetus for dream researchers to investigate the claims of conscious dreamers. If this comes to be a future project of dream researchers, then we would likely witness a rethinking of the continuity hypothesis as not limited to waking and dreaming but broadened to the state of dying.

References

- Atkinson, J.M. (1992). Shamanisms today. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, 307-330.
- Bourguignon, E. (1973). Religion, altered states of consciousness, and social change. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Boyd, J. & Zimbardo, P.G. (1997). Constructing time after death: The transcendental-future time perspective. *Time & Society*, 6, 35-54.
- Castenada, C. (1972). Journey to Ixtlan. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fontana, D. (2009). Life beyond death: What should we expect? London: Watkins.
- Frohock, F. (2010). Beyond: On life after death. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Garfield, P. (1976). *Creative dreaming*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Harner, M. (1980). *The way of the shaman*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Hick, J.H. (1980). *Death and eternal life*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Hobson, J.A. & Schredl, M. (2011). The continuity and discontinuity between waking and dreaming. A dialogue between Michael Schredl and Allan Hobson concerning the adequacy and completeness of these notions. *International Journal of Dream Research*, 4, 3-7.
- LaBerge, S. (1985). *Lucid dreaming*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- LaBerge, S. & Rheingold, H. (1990). Exploring the world of lucid dreaming. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Lee, R.L.M. (2015). When is dreaming waking? Continuity, lucidity and transcendence in modern contexts of dreaming. *International Journal of Dream Research*, 8, 66-71.
- Lee, R.L.M. & Ackerman, S.E. (2002). The challenge of religion after modernity: Beyond disenchantment. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Le Goff, J. (1984). *The birth of purgatory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- MacKenzie, N. (1965). *Dreams and dreaming*. London: Aldus Books.
- McDannell, C. & Lang, B. (2001). *Heaven: A history*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Miller, S. (1998). *After death: How people around the world map the journey after life*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Moss, R. (1996). *Conscious dreaming*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

- Moss, R. (1998). Dreamgates. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Moss, R. (2005a). The dreamer's book of the dead. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.
- Moss, R. (2005b). Dreamways of the Iroquois. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.
- Moss, R. (2011). Active dreaming: Journeying beyond self-limitation to a life of wild freedom. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Norbu, N. (1992). Dream yoga and the practice of natural light. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.
- Peters, L.G. & Price-Williams, D. (1980). Towards an experiential analysis of shamanism. *American Ethnologist*, 7, 398-418.
- Rogers, S.L. (1976). The shaman's healing way. Ramona, CA: Acoma Books.
- Schredl, M. (2003). Continuity between waking and dreaming: A proposal for a mathematical Model. *Sleep and Hypnosis*, 5, 26-40.
- Segal, A.F. (2004). Life after death: A history of the afterlife in western religion. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Stumbrys, T. (2011). Lucid dreaming: Discontinuity or continuity in consciousness? *International Journal of Dream Research*, 4, 93-97.
- Tedlock, B. (1991). The new anthropology of dreaming. *Dreaming*, 1, 161-178.
- Vanolo, P. (2016). Exploring the afterlife: Relational spaces, absent presences, and three fictional vignettes. *Space and Culture*, 19, 192-201.