

From dreams to the psychology of the pre-animist

Pierre Ruyneau de Saint George

Lyon, France

Summary. The author draws a striking parallel between the functioning of the Oneiric-I (the real “I” who reappears in dreams as the main protagonist), as presented in his previous publications, and the mental functioning of the pre-animist, as presented by Lévy-Bruhl (1922). He suggests that our “Oneiric-I” could be the imprint of the “I” that once governed the pre-animist mind. He presents the broad outlines of a psychogenetic vision compatible with his approach to dreams.

Keywords: Dream, animism, participation, Oneiric-I, pre-animist

1. Introduction

In our previous publications, we have presented and justified an approach that views dreams as a replay of certain experiences actually lived the day before. These experiences are described as barely mentalised, since they consist of introspectible content of a spontaneous nature—evolving outside of conscious governance—and, in modern humans, they operate largely in the background (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2024b).

Because dream experiences (the affects and physical sensations felt during the dream) “adhere” closely to the barely mentalised experiences of the preceding day, it is possible to trace back from dreams to the underlying barely mentalised psychological functioning. As we will show, this psychological functioning exhibits numerous parallels with phenomena characteristic of pre-animist societies, as identified by Lévy-Bruhl (1922).

2. Background

Linking dreams to real-life experiences by superimposing dream experiences onto barely mentalised real-life experiences (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2024b) led us to consider a model in which a highly mentalised subject, the HM-I (the “I” of philosophers), coexists with a subject integrated within the barely mentalised layer: the BM-I (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022). This differentiation proved necessary because these two subjects belong to fundamentally distinct worlds: the world associated with the BM-I presents peculiarities that surprise our habitual thinking, which remains dominated by the HM-I.

For example, in the case of the “biting cat” dream (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022), we identified the existence of a phenomenon of affiliation occurring without our awareness, which led us to feel guilt over an act, seemingly

blameworthy, committed by a third party—as if we ourselves had carried out the act. As in this case, and it was far from exceptional, everything occurred as though we were simultaneously ourselves and the other; the other was also us.

At first glance, this clearly corresponds to the typical case of “participation” described by Lévy-Bruhl (1922). He writes: *“In primitive collective representations, objects, beings, and phenomena can, in a way incomprehensible to us, be both themselves and something other than themselves”* (p. 77), noting that “primitive” is an improper term used for lack of a better one. He gives the example of the Bororo, *“who boast of being red araras (parrots)... who are presently araras.”*

Furthermore, other similarities exist between the pre-animist mentality as described by Lévy-Bruhl and the BM-I, or rather, we should say the Oneiric-I—the component of the BM-I capable of reappearing in dreams under the guise of the dream hero—since it is this “I” that dreams ultimately translate.

We have identified:

- **Our conception of Cognitive-Affective Units** (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2016a). Linking dreams to the real-life experiences they replay led us to consider contents that fuse representations with affect. A dreamed tsunami, for example, was seen as reproducing a real representation carrying anxiety and, in doing so, generating the fear of being penetrated and overwhelmed by that anxiety. This echoes Lévy-Bruhl’s remark that the pre-animist’s mental activity is *“too little differentiated for it to be possible to consider ideas or images of objects separately from the feelings, emotions, and passions that evoke these ideas and images, or are evoked by them”* (p. 28).
- **The lack of differentiation between real and imaginary:** the actual perception of an object or person produces the same effect as, for example, their memory (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022)—a phenomenon also observed in pre-animists.
- **The erasure of temporal positions** (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022). The Oneiric-I does not distinguish between present, past, and future. It experiences in the same way an act currently taking place, the memory of the same act performed in the past, or its projection into the future. The same appears to hold for the pre-animist, for whom specifying temporal position is unnecessary: *“As in many other languages, there are only two tense forms: one for the completed act or state, and one for the incomplete act or state.”* (p. 162). Lévy-

Corresponding address:

Pierre Ruyneau de Saint George, Lyon, France.

Email: stgeorgepierre@hotmail.com

Submitted for publication: August 2025

Accepted for publication: November 2025

Online first: January 12, 2026

Bruhl clarifies that “*what relates to time is expressed by words that were originally applied to spatial relations*”. Indeed, temporality as actually lived can reappear in dreams in the form of distances. For instance, in a dream, I moved an object threatened by flooding, echoing a real decision to postpone dealing with a problem. Similarly, waves succeeding each other geographically can echo difficulties succeeding each other temporally.

- **Because the pre-animist lives in a rhythm of “ongoing/completed,” time does not appear as a continuum;** life is phased, just as in dreams, which are readily structured into scenes of situations in an “ongoing” mode.
- **The use of small numbers.** “*Names exist only for one, two, and sometimes three. Beyond that, the natives say ‘many,’ ‘a crowd,’ or ‘a multitude.’ Or for three they say ‘two one’; for four ‘two two’; for five ‘two two one.’*” (Lévy-Bruhl, 1922, p. 204). In our dreams, numbers appear under two logics: counting (“*There are so many people, so many objects...*”) and as data (a schedule, a date, an age, a monetary value, a phone number, an address...). In counting, we never went beyond five. We encountered “5” only twice, and even then it was not really constituted as such (once as 2+2+1, and once as a cluster of “4 or 5 plants”). Beyond this, we dealt with a crowd, “some,” “several,” “a group,” “a few”, etc.

It should be noted, however, that the reporting of some dreams may require the use of the past tense, for example: “*I remember that previously I had...*” Yet this does not undermine the hypothesis that the barely mentalised functioning of modern humans, accessible through dreams, corresponds to a dimension of pre-animist functioning stripped of its mystical aspect (its belief in the influence of things, without these being deified).

3. Remarks

If it turns out that the Oneiric-I of modern humans is indeed the imprint of the pre-animist I that once prevailed, then linking our dreams to the real-life experiences they replay would allow access to a part of pre-animist psychology. In other words, what was incomprehensible to Lévy-Bruhl would become apprehensible not only conceptually, but also subjectively and existentially.

Of course, the pre-animist subject also possesses a voluntary dimension, a capacity to govern their mind—a sort of pre-HM-I, one could say—with these two “I”s coexisting, including through the mechanisms of participation (voluntary mentalisation processes are then heavily infused with spontaneous inspirations, while the Oneiric-I directly experiences the repercussions of governed activity) and its counterpart: differentiation (in which case the Oneiric-I is felt with its own life).

Finally, it is worth recalling that in modern humans, both a logic of participation and a logic of differentiation exist within barely mentalised functioning. For example, the characters populating a dream may reflect the barely mentalised repercussions of perceiving a real third party (the axis of participation in Lévy-Bruhl’s sense), but they may also replay the perception of inner segregation (the axis of differentiation). In the “intruder” dream (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022), one character represents an internal inciter to action (a “voice of conscience”), while another represents an actual “external” intruder. The Oneiric-I, however, made

no distinction between the interiority/exteriority of these two influencers. For it, both entities belonged to the same world, unlike the perception of our HM-I—the “I” dominating the subject we are—which distinguished an element of subjectivity from one belonging to the objective world. The HM-I ousted the logic of participation.

If we consider a subject under the sway of the psychological functioning known to our Oneiric-I, which could well describe the pre-animist, it is easy to conceive that their way of life is built around participations. We can also readily imagine that their identity—identity being nothing other than a product of participation between a present I and a past I—does not correspond to ours, and that their external world is not the same as ours. To echo Lévy-Bruhl (p. 452), who states that “*To know, in general, is to objectify, objectify is to project outside oneself, as something foreign, what is to know*”: “*The essence of participation is precisely that all duality disappears.*”

4. Discussion

In psychology, we view mental life as composed of Cognitive-Affective-Drive Units, varying in intensity, magnitude, and degree of embedding (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2024a). These psychological states arise from identifiable mechanisms that are more or less directed. From this perspective, dreaming, for instance, appears as a flow of psychological states—some more salient than others depending on the dream’s intensity—unembedded (they vanish as the dream ends) and generated by a spontaneous mechanism that replays earlier psychological states.

It seems that the emergence of new mechanisms can profoundly reshape the psychological world and thus trigger evolution. For example, the establishment of the mechanism of imaginative scenarization—that is, when its operation becomes habitual—can be seen as progress, as it better prepares the individual for possible experiences. This progress manifests itself in a substantial broadening of what can be represented and in the appearance of new affects, such as anxiety or enthusiasm. In this way, a single new mechanism can transform the psychological universe, generate new forms of subjectivity, and bring about mental mutations.

Following this line of thought, other psychological mechanisms can also be seen as evolutionary milestones in the shaping of human subjectivity. We will focus here on two of them: consciousness and, later, governed reflection

Consciousness, in its original sense of *cum scientia* — “knowing-with” — is the mechanism through which one becomes aware of one’s psychological states. From this mechanism emerges a particular Cognitive-Affective-Drive Unit, deeply embedded: the impression of being a subject. In other words, the feeling of being an “I.” One can imagine that, in the earliest stages of this mechanism, there arose a kind of primitive I, unspoken and pre-verbal. Another affective consequence of this *cum scientia* is the emergence of secondary affects tied to *how I experience my experience* — the subjective coloration that accompanies awareness itself.

Since, in our view, the dream directly replays the “how I experience my experience,” with the lived content embedded within its imagery, we are led to see dreaming as a phenomenon reflecting this primitive *cum scientia* — a non-conceptualizing consciousness.

The establishment of governed reflection, in turn, brings with it another deeply embedded Cognitive-Affective-Drive

Unit, experienced through our “usual I” — the I that says “I am dreaming”, the I of philosophers, the Highly Mentalised I (HM-I). The earlier “I” does not disappear; it is supplanted by the new one, yet continues to operate beneath the surface. It is this underlying I who, in dreams, “walks, slips, and falls” (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022).

Likewise, earlier mechanisms—typically associative and evocative cognitive processes—are supplanted by intellectual mechanics, but not extinguished. They persist beneath the surface. And since dreams appear to replay precisely these underlying experiences, we are again inclined to see in dreaming a direct link with primitive subjectivity.

It goes without saying that the Oneiric I is not identical to the primitive I; it merely carries its imprint, for the world in which it evolves is far more complex. It is confronted with the effects of mechanisms that emerged later in psychological evolution. Yet, we can understand why dreaming still guides us toward an apprehension of primitive mechanisms, when they continue to leave traces in contemporary experience. Participation is one such example. It is a mechanism that continues to operate, often unnoticed, as when we find ourselves emotionally affected by the fortunes and misfortunes of certain film characters.

We would like to conclude by noting that, although we perceive a connection between the primitive *cum scientia* and dreaming, we currently have no answer regarding which came first. We may indeed ask whether dreaming presupposes the prior emergence of *cum scientia* — since consciousness is required for the production of secondary affects — or whether dreaming, by revealing that an experience has been perceived, represents a first step toward the formation of consciousness itself.

References

- Lévy-Bruhl, L. (1922). *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. Paris : Librairie Felix Alcan.
- Ruyneau de Saint-George, P. (2016a). Regarding affects and imagery in dreams. *International Journal of Dream Research*, 9(1), 93-95.
- Ruyneau de Saint-George, P. (2022). I dreamt that I walked, slipped and fell. What is this “I”? *International Journal of Dream Research*, 15(1), 171-173.
- Ruyneau de Saint-George, P. (2024a). Dreams and the rediffusion of barely mentalized experiences: Outline of a novel modeling approach. *International Journal of Dream Research* 17(2), 235-238.
- Ruyneau de Saint-George, P. (2024b). Dream and sensory-emotional paradigm: an illustration. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385344301_Dream_and_sensory-emotional_paradigm_an_illustration.