

African-Americans and Predictive Dreams

Anthony Shafon tarafından yazıldı.
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Belief in psychic events such as precognitive dreams runs quite high in the general population of the U.S.—between 25% and 50% in most surveys. But among blacks here, the rate of belief is still higher. Belief in predictive dreaming was affirmed by 92% of the 116 African-Americans I interviewed (as well as by 84% of 25 black male prisoners who responded to questionnaires), but by a much lower 57% of a matching white sample of 80. Thus in my samples all but a small percentage of blacks believe in predictive dreams, while only something over half of whites do. Above and beyond the yes-or-no question of belief, many more blacks than whites think prediction is the thing about dreams. It tops the list of dream functions for blacks, whereas for whites, it holds an uncertain position along with psychological insight, problem-solving, and the proposition that dreams have no function at all.

Africa. North American slavery bulldozed virtually all specific customs from the homelands. But there are enough similarities between African and African-American beliefs and attitudes about dreams to suggest that African heritage still has an influence. These similarities include the importance placed on ancestor visitation dreams, the fluidity of boundaries between dreaming and other states of consciousness such as waking vision, and the spirituality of dreams as expressed in religion and in other ways. As for dreams and precognition (or divination), notice how similar these two statements are, one African, one American:

...dreams convey warnings or messages pertaining to one's future. In this process, ancestor spirits act as intermediaries [for the] Supreme Being.

Sometimes the ancestors deem certain information so important that they send it to the subconscious mind without being consciously asked. Then we have prophetic dreams, rich in symbolism and unforgettable!

The first is from *The Usefulness of Dreams* by West African Mary Chinkwita. The second is from *Jambalaya*, a popular recipe book of African-American spirituality by Luisah Teish. Teish may labor a little to sound African by playing up the ancestors, but she's genuinely drawing on her African-American experience. Some of my interviewees also made the connection between prophetic dreams and Africa. Maisha Hamilton-Bennett was Deputy Commissioner of Health for Harold Washington in Chicago, and has taken over a dozen trips to Africa to study indigenous healing. When I asked her why she thinks African-American dream beliefs retain African features, she replied, "The most important thing is that many African-Americans think that there's something in the dream that's going to tell you what's going to happen."

Slavery days and folklore. The little we can know directly about dream beliefs in slavery days comes from a few stories out of the lives of heroes of black history. Frederick Douglass wrote about a dream foretelling the failure of his first attempt to escape from slavery. A confederate in the plan, "Sandy, the root man," dreamed some troubling dreams, one of which "somewhat damped" Douglass's spirits:

"I saw you, Frederick, in the claws of a huge bird, surrounded by a large number of birds, of all colors and sizes. These were all picking at you, while you, with your arms, seemed to be trying to protect your eyes...."

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I confess I did not like this dream.... Sandy was unusually emphatic and oracular, and his manner had much to do with the impression made upon me.

Harriet Tubman (who had dreams showing her the routes for the underground railroad) accounted for her calmness when emancipation was proclaimed in 1863 by explaining that she had already done her celebrating three years earlier. One morning in 1860, the unerring conductress had arisen singing

..."My people are free! My people are free!" She came down to breakfast singing the words in sort of ecstasy. She could not eat. The dream or vision filled her whole soul, and physical needs were forgotten.

Stories like these suggest that prophetic dreaming was widely taken for granted by African-Americans in slavery days.

Folklore is a bridge between those times and the present. Puckett in the 1920s collected items about the causes for dreams coming true (such as sleeping under a new quilt) and about means to prevent that (such as throwing salt into the fire). Hyatt in the 1930s found many individuals who "lay down to sleep and see different things before they come to pass." Dorson's collections from Northern blacks in the 1950s also contain predictive dreams, including a "Treasure Dream." These folkloric sources all suggest widespread belief in precognitive dreaming.

The present day. Sculptor Preston Jackson was raised by parents from Tennessee in Decatur, Illinois. His father was a Baptist minister:

If you started this conversation in my family, you wouldn't get out of here, because they would have dreams. My brothers and sisters and parents believed in dreams.... It's a prophecy. It's something you better follow up on, because it means something. And this is the educated part of my family. All of us went to college. And they still talk the same way about dreams.

Nearly every interview I conducted brought out evidence of this kind. People would say, "I always think about dreams as something that's gonna happen in the future," and "As a child, I believed that my mother was shown, through dreams, things that were gonna happen to people," and "I think everyone has dreams that are prophetic." Gwen Robinson, a scholar of African-American culture, affirmed that "dreams are regarded in the way of predicting the future." Barbara Pulliam, a psychoanalyst with many black clients, likewise observed that predictive dreams "have long been a vital part of black culture."

Even the ways some interviewees expressed their doubts testify to the prevalence of the belief. Journalist and "concrete thinker" Richard Steele [88] said:

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When discussion about dreams comes up in our culture, there are some people who view that as a kind of harbinger of something that's gonna happen, or there's a premonition somewhere in the dream. And I'm very much a skeptic about that.

Steele's very skepticism reflected his acquaintance with the prevailing theory. What's more, a shadow of that theory fell over a memorable dream of his. He dreamed of being shot in the stomach and then bleeding to death in an emergency room:

And as a matter of fact, I said to my wife, even though I'm not a great believer in dreaming the thing that's gonna happen, I said, "You know, the thing was so strong, I have this feeling that I'm gonna be somewhere and somebody's gonna shoot a gun, I'm gonna get shot in the stomach and bleed to death."

Administrator Darryl Burrows' mother, a devout Methodist, is a different sort of skeptic. Dreams, she thinks, might come from God and "probably do have some predictive power," but they're so difficult to understand that we're "wrong, often, in how we use them." Therefore, we should ignore them. Writer Daniel Wideman (son of John Edgar Wideman) holds that African-Americans actually dream more about their painful "collective history" than about the future. He acknowledges, however, that people talk less about dreams from the past than about dreams reaching into the future—as he himself believes dreams do.

Prediction and psychological insight. When hospital worker Diane Dugger told me about the gruesome accidental death of her boyfriend from a pistol shot through the head, I asked, "Did you dream about that?" I wondered if she'd gone through the sort of nightmares which often follow major traumas. She assumed, however, that I wanted to know about predictive dreams, and replied, "I didn't dream that anything like that would happen." But Dugger did have an unrelated series of dreams in which she shoots her racist boss. And these dreams she understood, not as predictions but as the dramatized expression of her resentment.

Most dream experts nowadays think the main benefit we can gain from dreams is insight into our true state of mind. So it's important to realize: the fact that African-Americans use dreams as predictions doesn't mean they don't also use them as tools for gaining psychological insight. The two ways of looking at dreams don't necessarily exclude one another.

The following story, told by an interviewee, is a wonderful example of the wedding of predictive and psychological interpretation of a single dream:

I had a friend who ended up having an affair with my husband. And we had our little words, and I said, "I really want you to leave," and she did, she actually left this city. Then there was a time when she returned or something. And I had a dream that I went to this concert. I walk into the auditorium, and sitting in the audience is a friend of mine whose name is Maya. Maya has on a royal blue hat with a feather. And I go join her. And I say to her, "Oh, where did you get this

hat?" You know, "It's wonderful." And she tells me she bought it at this store, and it was on sale. I said, "Cool." Then I look around and I see this person, this woman. And I just had this sensation of anger, and I tell Maya, I say, "Excuse me." Anyway, I end up...in the bathroom, and I say to her, I say, "You really just didn't believe me when I told you that I would kill you, did you?" I said, "I'm just gonna have to do it." And I grab her, and I stick her head in the toilet and just flush the toilet, just flush the toilet, just flush her drowned. She disappears, she's gone.

Okay. Reality. I go to a concert, at a time my husband's performing. In the same auditorium. Now, I'm very apprehensive because I'm told that this person is back in town. So I look in the audience, and I don't see Maya in this damn hat, so I'm like, "Whew! Great!" 'Cause the dream was so real, so vivid. So I go and I sit down. I'll be darned! Maya comes and sits next to me, and she has on this damn blue hat! And I am like, "Where'd you get that hat from?" She said the same thing she said in the dream! Then, of course, I see this other woman. And I am trying to understand what is going on. I'm talking about, as a conscious human being. So, what doesn't happen is, I don't get that sensation that I had in the dream, I don't have any anger. And when I actually face her, confront her later, all of that had dissipated and had basically disappeared.

And I just explained to my mother, and my mother said, "Oh, you just worked it out in your dream. You took care of the anger there."

There's an old prejudice of white psychiatry which says that African-Americans are not "psychologically-minded." The reality is that African-Americans are especially good at operating in more than a single interpretive mode toward dreams. I asked psychoanalyst Barbara Pulliam if she had any problem getting black clients with an extraspsychic orientation to look at dreams intrapsychically:

No, I haven't had a problem with it at all. They're very willing to associate to the various elements in the dream. You just have to train them about day residue and teach them what's expected, and they go right along with it. And that's notwithstanding I do have some people who say that they will go to readers and all. And that's not pooh-poohed.

After talking about her visitation dreams, one woman added, "Sometimes something I dreamed about will have some reference to what I'm doing today. Sometimes it plays out my fears, or I work a lot of stuff out, in my sleep, that I maybe couldn't deal with." To a list of dream functions such as prediction, Yoruba priestess Osuurete Adesanya added, "On the other side, like all the Freudian thinkers think, it's some subconscious either desires or fears coming out, or you're working out a fantasy that you couldn't do while you were conscious." A dream of publisher Hermene Hartman's, about a new office she was thinking of moving her newspaper to, was interpreted for her by friend and employee Kai EL Zabar both as a premonition of a real threat—fulfilled when their present office was broken into a week later—and as a psychological indication: "'You really don't like that [new] space.'" Finally, poet Angela Jackson had this reaction to seeing Gayle Delaney on Oprah Winfrey:

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[Oprah brought up] the old-way traditional African-American interpretations of dreams. Oprah said she grew up being taught snakes meant a certain thing, you know, and all this. Then the woman went on to say that only you can interpret your own dreams within, you know, how they apply to your own consciousness, and your own life. And this made me kinda angry, because I know what she said is true, but it's—it's narrow. It's not the whole truth. Because I know people who have lived in the African-American cultural traditional way of interpreting dreams, and they have proven accurate.

Later, Jackson said that dreams are "a divine source of information. It's God talking to you," then added:

But you know what? That doesn't contradict the one about it coming from inside. Our subconsciouses are attached to something greater.

The "subconscious". The word 'subconscious' came up spontaneously a number of times in my interviews. The 'unconscious' was mentioned only by a couple of individuals influenced by mainstream psychodynamic theories. Most (but not all) interviewees who used the word subconscious appeared to think of it as a spiritual organ of the mind, as our spiritual receiver: "Something larger than us...comes to us in our subconsciousness," and "In my conscious subconscious mind, I am dealing with information from the outside I'm just tapped into," and "My subconsciousness is what is in touch with everything, these spirits and everything that's around me.... My subconsciousness is my link to eternity," and "The subconscious is the spiritual self."

Psychic versus Spiritual. As normally used, the term 'precognition', like 'telepathy' and 'clairvoyance', is neutral as to the source or cause of the experience, except to imply the existence of some additional, psychic faculty of the mind.

Administrator Darryl Burrows brought up a distinction which, he said, African-Americans make between the psychic and the spiritual:

African-Americans, even the spiritual ones, tend to be very pejorative about psychics. I mean, the whole Dionne Warwick, Letoya Jackson thing, no one takes it serious.

What about readers and such?

Oh, but that's not psychic! Readers are spiritual women of God. Psychics, that's the title you use if you're not spiritual. If you claim to be able to see the future, but you don't proclaim that your power comes from God. Now we will go and see Mother So-and-so, the Seven Sisters and all this stuff, we'll go do that in a minute. But to justify it if somebody challenges us, we say, "Well, I believe this woman is a woman of God, she gets her power from God." But Dionne Warwick's psychic friends? Letoya? These are people who have commercialized this and are trying to make money off it, they're not real. They don't look anything like Mrs. Jones, that I know is a

woman of God, that does have visions.

My impression is that although the word itself—psychic—has actually entered the African-American vocabulary through the mass media, the underlying distinction made by Darryl Burrows is genuine. For example, after artist Marva Pitchford Jolly said, "I can remember being extremely psychic as a little kid," she acknowledged that the word was never used in her Mississippi childhood. She said she still is psychic, then added, "It's become common in a funny kind of way." I asked what she meant:

Well, when I watch psychic programs on television, it's always comical. Something's funny about it. It's almost like, well here comes Shirley McLaine with her extra power rings around her head. It's not a comfort level. The old people would say "funny," because "funny" and "fool" is kinda the same thing. We are using things that we don't understand, and we don't understand how precious they are. And maybe even sacred.

Most interviewees with whom I raised Darryl Burrows' distinction between psychic and spiritual agreed with him. "I don't think it's psychic," said white collar worker Frances Freeman-Williams of her predictive dreams. "It's from God." "Those messages ultimately come from the Creator," artist Ivan Watkins insisted. And writer Daniel Wideman said:

...if you have that faith, then you don't try to flash the flash cards and get into what intellectual capacity of the mind would cause you to be able to predict. And I laugh at those psychics, too, because dreams are not something to be toyed with lightly, or put on the home shopping network.

By "flash the flash cards," Wideman was referring to Rhine's famous experiment for testing psychic abilities in the laboratory. Thus he was rejecting scientific investigation along with commercial exploitation, since neither, in his view, is spiritually founded.

There were, however, some interviewees who resisted Darryl Burrows' observation. Writer Gloria Naylor said "I go to psychics" and "I'm a bit psychic myself." She denied that psychic and spiritual "are mutually exclusive. It just simply means that for the black community, they have expanded the concept." Psychologist/filmmaker Alice Stephens thinks that people who make the distinction "are just limited in their understanding of the whole phenomenon. I am not averse to the idea that the psychic is hooked up spiritually."

Furthermore, there certainly are African-Americans who accept the "Psychic Friends" and other such popular manifestations. The two points of view came head to head when a friend dropped in on hospital worker Diane Dugger during our interview. The friend attacked television psychics while Dugger defended them. The friend held up the example of her grandmother and the

generations connected to slavery days:

(Friend:) Those people had true psychic powers. Dionne Warwick is an entertainer. Why would she endorse something like that?

(Dugger:) Because she talked to one of her "psychic friends," which is the lady that's in charge of the Psychic Friends Network, okay. And she was interpreting Dionne Warwick's dreams, and that's the reason why she's promoting her friend's psychic network, because the things that were interpreted to her, she felt was true.

(Friend:) People believe in that mess! And besides that, I say if she couldn't find her way to San Jose, she certainly can't tell me about my future.

Despite such variations in viewpoint on the part of African-Americans, the picture drawn by Darryl Burrows is general accurate. Not only is there widespread belief in predictive dreams (and other "psychic" phenomena) among African-Americans, but also, the experience is widely thought to have a spiritual foundation, and not simply to display an additional faculty of the mind.

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