

Do dreams come from without or within? An ethnographic exploration

"Sociology is only interested in the awake man, as if the sleeping one was dead".

(Roger Bastide, 1967)

Anthropology, from its early beginning has been interested in dreams. Edward Tylor (1871) founded his theory about animism on the oneiric experience, while Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1922) considered the incapacity to distinguish dreams from reality an attribute of the "primitive mentality". On the one hand, the anthropological interest for the dream has developed within studies of religious experience, on the other hand, we shouldn't forget how much, during the first half of the twentieth century, anthropologists were influenced by psychoanalysis. C.G. Seligman (1923) tried to validate Freud's theories by applying them to non-western culture's dreams, to substantiate therefore the hypothesis of universal symbols and types of dreams. He didn't seem to be aware, though, that the used interpretive grids were a specific cultural perspective's product, resulting, consequently, inappropriate for describing the other culture's dream experience (Crapanzano 1975, Tedlock 1987, Perrin 1992). It is precisely the problematizing of our own categories that has become a prominent feature of the anthropological approach, starting from the second half of the XXth Century. In different languages the expression "to dream" can also be related to visionary and imaginative practices experienced while being awake and recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge which are able to act on "reality" (Perrin, 1990). As a matter of fact, the split between dreaming as an "inner" and subjective experience and being awake as experience of the objective "external" world and as the only form of reality collectively accepted as such has been produced in a specific socio-cultural context and it cannot be easily

extended to other contexts (Crapanzano, 1975; Charuty, 1996). *“In western culture we place the dream within a person’s head. Many of the peoples who anthropologists study, however see dreams as an alternative social word, as much outside the person. These peoples also locate the self in social role-playing rather than inside the person”* (Mageo, 2003).

In this paper, some problematic issues that have characterized the anthropological debate on dreams - which calls into question the dream/reality dichotomy and the dialectic between the dream as an “internal” or “external” experience, “individual” or “collective” - will be analyzed in reference to two ethnographic studies that I conducted in Peru and Spain. In the first section I will explore dreams gathered in the Andean region of Ayacucho (Peru), focusing my attention on dreams considered to have come “from outside,” and, in particular, on manifestation of divinity. In the second section I will examine the dreams I encountered in the Spanish region of Extremadura, specifically the dreams in which relatives who disappeared during the civil war (1936-39) - the *desaparecidos* - appear. The comparative analysis will bring to light the differences that characterize these two contexts, but will also problematize the separation between societies that have an “enchanted” relationship with dreams (like the Amerindian) and have been studied by anthropologists, and societies that are “disenchanted” with dreams (like western society) in which the study of dreams is almost exclusively reserved to the discipline of psychology.