

# Encountering the 'true dream' in Islam: a Journey to Turkey and Pakistan

AS AN anthropologist I have been studying the relationship between night dreams and culture, between dream imagery and human behaviour for twenty-five years. More recently I have focused on the phenomena of 'true dreams', al-Ruya, in Islam and how these appear to have influenced Muslims throughout Islamic history and contemporaneously across the Islamic world. In particular, I have studied media reports as to how reported 'true dreams' have apparently inspired and guided leading Islamic Jihadist leaders including Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, and many others.

At the end of February 2005 I set out on a two month journey, funded by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy to study dreams in the Islamic world. I principally stayed in Aydin, western Turkey, courtesy of the University of Adnan Menderes, and then in and around Islamabad and Peshawar in Northern Pakistan. Finally I spent a few days in Northern Cyprus waiting to interview the well known Sufi Sheikh Nazim of the



Sheikh Nazim in Northern Cyprus

Naqshbandi Tariqa (order). These choices of Islamic countries were partly determined

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**Dr Iain R Edgar, University of Durham, recounts his findings from a research trip undertaken in 2005 to investigate the significance of dreams in a sample of Islamic cultures.**

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through personal and professional contacts. In my three weeks in Turkey I interviewed dozens of people about their dreams and dream interpretive practices. Briefly, I found that almost all the people I had interviewed, from market traders to senior academics, related purposefully to their dreams in one way or another. I found a general consistency in dream interpretive practices based on the threefold Islamic dream classification of there being true dreams from Allah, false dreams from Shatan, and largely meaningless dreams from the Nafs (mixture of Freudian Id and Ego, or the lower self as described in Islamic psychology).

The dream in Islam can be very significant as the Prophet Mohammed reportedly dreamt parts of the Koran (1/46th is usually stated) and was a notable dream interpreter, starting each day by asking his companions if they had any dreams for him to interpret. In the Hadiths (the reported sayings and actions of the Prophet) there are many references to dream interpretation. Bukhari, one of the most reliable Hadiths, writes, reporting the words of Aisha (the Prophet's wife), that the 'commencement of the divine inspiration was in the form of good righteous (true) dreams in his sleep. He never had a dream but that it came true like bright day of light' (1979: 91). In Islam, major prophecy is believed to have finished with the revelation contained in the Koran, but spiritual guidance can still be gained through true dreams.

Throughout Islamic history 'true dreams' are perceived as having been received by political and religious leaders as well as ordinary people. In Sufism, the mystical branch of

Islam, dreams are considered very important and followers of a Sheikh may regularly experience guidance dreams from him. I had previously studied a Naqshbandi Sufi centre in England and many members reported receiving guidance dreams from Sheikh Nazim, which they acted on when making key life decisions. So, I wanted to see how common and important dreaming is in a sample of Islamic cultures, to understand how dreams are interpreted and particularly how 'true dreams' are interpreted. I was particularly interested in how militant Jihadist claims to true dreams were understood; also I was interested in finding out more about the Islamic dream incubation practice, Istikhara.

In Turkey, I found an almost visible tension between the secularist tradition promoted by Ataturk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, and the Islamic belief system of a large number of my informants. This tension was most evident when I attended a Sufi Zikra (remembering and singing the names of God) and the two academics with me would only attend if in the role of translators, as otherwise their academic integrity would be endangered, a situation inconceivable in the UK. Dream examples included a hospital medical consultant who was expecting a baby and was watching her dreams so as to help her name her offspring; seeing a flower in a dream would provide a girl's name; a quality, such as strength, a boy's name. An academic colleague confided in me at the end of a meal that because I was a dream researcher she would tell me dreams that she had told no-one but her family. Then she told me how at very difficult periods of her life she had dreamt of the Prophet Mohammed and Angels and these images had sustained her. I asked a gardener in a small town if he had ever had a memorable dream and he said, 'Yes. Once I had a dream of crying and the next day I killed my neighbour over a land dispute and spent eight years in jail for murder.'

In Pakistan, I found all but one person I spoke to (a national poet) fervently believed in the power of dreams, and everywhere I went with

my dream questions, people from all walks and classes of life would tell me how dreams had changed their lives. A textile shopkeeper in Peshawar spoke of how his life had been transformed by a dream of the Prophet that had advised him to pray five times a day, and then his continual unsatisfied thirst, as expressed in the dream imagery, would be met, and that since this dream and his commitment to praying five times a day, he said he had been happy. A close companion told me how his illiterate father had been made literate following a dream. A close relative of a very senior Afghani politician and religious leader described how this man had been advised by dreams whilst in prison under the communists. Istikhara, Islamic dream incubation, I found was practised by young and old alike, especially in marriage choices, but also in business deals and in political choices. Istikhara involves reciting special ritual prayers before going to bed and meditation upon life choices, such as marriage, before sleeping. In the morning the dreamer will, sometimes with specialist assistance from an Imam, interpret the meaning of their dream through using specialist Islamic dream interpretation codes; an example would be that dream imagery portrayed in green and white would signify a favourable outcome to that choice, whilst dreaming of red and black an unfavourable outcome. One woman who did Istikhara around her daughter's future marriage, dreamt of a good looking bowl of dates which however in the event didn't taste very nice. She told me how this imagery anticipated the outcome of the marriage.

In Peshawar, Pakistan, I talked to the BBC journalist, Rahimullah Yusufzai, about Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader. Yusufzai had interviewed Mullah Omar a dozen times and was the first journalist to interview him; Yusufzai writes for *Time* and *Newsweek* and almost all the stories about Omar from a web search will source them from Yusufzai. Yusufzai told me that Omar was a reclusive and wholly unexceptional and uncharismatic half-trained Mullah, indistinguishable from a thousand others apart from his dreaming. Whilst Yusufzai didn't interview Omar directly about his dreams he did confirm that the Taliban came from nowhere, and that the Taliban commanders and followers believed in Omar as a Holy Man on account of his



*Dr Iain Edgar and Sufis near Islamabad*

dreams, which included a dream of a sacred figure which commanded Omar to 'save Afghanistan' and implement Sharia law. It was apparently inspired by this dream that Omar founded the Taliban. Moreover Yusufzai confirmed for me that Omar had dreams during the Taliban campaigns which inspired his military strategy. Yusufzai told me, 'I was told by so many Taliban leaders, commanders, fighters, look you know, Mullah Omar is a holy man and he gets instructions in his dream and he follows them up. The genesis of the Taliban Islamic movement was this vision, this night dream that Mullah Omar had'. On one occasion, moreover, Omar telephoned Yusufzai in Peshawar before 9/11 and said that his (Omar's) brother, also a dreamer, had had a dream of a 'white palace burning', and Omar knew that Yusufzai had officially visited the White House in Washington and wanted to know about its construction and whether it was built from wood. This reported phone call verifies the importance of dreaming to Omar.

Sufis, particularly, seemed to inhabit an alternative mystical universe, co-existing with our understanding of this reality, in which very significant and often precognitive dream experiences of and by Sheiks/Pirs and their followers were commonplace. When I visited Sheikh Nazim and his community in Lefte, Northern Cyprus, I waited three days for a ten

minute interview with the Sheikh. Nearly two hundred of his followers, called Mureeds, from many countries, including the UK, were there also. To his Mureeds, Sheikh Nazim is literally in constant contact with Allah. I had never seen such devotion and love expressed to any person; he was 84 years old and becoming frail; he walked with support from two Mureeds, and all the time other Mureeds would throng around him, just to touch him and kiss his feet and hands, to receive his (Allah's) Baraka (blessing). In my interview with the Sheikh I asked him about the many accounts I had heard in the UK and in his Turkish Cypriot community of his 'sending' his followers dreams; he replied that when he sent his 'power' to his Mureeds he sometimes would do so in dreams, 'when necessary'. I ventured to ask how, and he replied that it 'was all a matter of spiritual knowledge as there were hundreds and thousands of inner worlds' and the Sufis had ways to access these. A technology apparently available only to those who had moved away from immersion in material existence.

How though does Islam, and Muslims in general, recognise a true dream, when in their belief system, Shatan has such power to delude humanity? The Hadiths say that if the Prophet appears in a dream then this is a true dream, and generally, the many people I

spoke to confirmed this belief about the status of seeing the Prophet in a dream. However, one important Pakistani Imam qualified this apparently absolute view and argued that not all inner sightings of the Prophet in dreams could be regarded as true dreams and he gave me two examples from his dream interpretation experience. The first involved a lawyer coming to him for help interpreting a dream of the Prophet rolled up in a carpet and the Imam responded by saying 'you are a corrupt lawyer', presumably as the body and energy of the Prophet was circumscribed. This Imam told me that for a dream of the Prophet to be regarded as true, then the image of the Prophet must be complete and in his proper shape. The Hadith written by Bukhari speaks of when the Prophet is seen in a dream the Prophet needs to be in his 'real shape' (1979: 104). The second example the Imam told me was of a man who came to him with a dream in which the Prophet had said he could drink alcohol. The Imam asked him if he was a 'drinker' and the man said 'yes', to which the Imam replied that that was not the Prophet but a self-justification. It is not perceived as a true dream in Islam if the dream message or content contradicts the Koran or Hadiths. Dream interpretation in Islam, even given the apparently simple classificatory system, is complex. I was told by religious scholars that only a Prophet can truly determine a true from a false dream; even spiritual leaders such as Sheikhs may disagree about interpretations.

Dream interpretation in Islam is not solely about the dream but about the relationship between dreams and events as in the famous Joseph Sura in the Koran (ie Joseph's interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream of the seven fat cows and the seven thin cows). In

Islamic dream interpretation, people who dream need to be careful who they tell their dream to; if it is a good dream they should not tell it to anyone but only to the one they love; likewise if it is a bad dream they should not tell anyone and pray to Allah (and also spit three times on the left side). This practice is because an incorrect interpretation, and especially a negative interpretation, can facilitate misfortune. Perhaps our western psychological idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy is similar.

In Islam, Muslims understand dreams as they understand and interpret reality. In night dreams, the Soul is freed from the material world and can traverse, without limit, the past and the future. The real world and the unseen world, such as can be manifest in dreams, are all created by the one God, Allah. Allah also authorised Shatan to delude and misguide humanity, to snare their spiritual strivings in the desires of the material world. This or these unseen, but manifest, powers sustain and created the universe and spiritual guidance can be given through dreams, even to the lowliest of souls. To lie about a dream is a serious sin in Islam.

Dream interpretation, though, in Islam as everywhere, is a tricky business. You could say that the devil is in the detail. Whilst the overall pattern of Islamic dream interpretation is based on the already presented threefold classification of dreams as being true, false or worldly (nafs), the practice itself is extremely sophisticated and takes into account the following factors: the piety and spiritual rank of the dreamer; their social position in the world; the time of night of the dream and the time of year; Islamic dream

dictionaries, unlike their western counterparts, may contain many interpretations for the same symbol. In Islam, dream interpretation, as with self-fulfilling prophecies, can lead to delusion, error and worse. Correct dream interpretation though is understood to help believers in the pursuit of spiritual guidance and correct Islamic behaviour.

The story of Islam is founded on the Prophet Mohammed's revelation more than 1300 hundred years ago. This revelation, perfectly wrought to the believer, finds itself embodied in the Koran, supplemented by the Hadiths. The exalted status of this revelation includes the special place given to the true dream, al-Ruya, in Islam. The mind set of the Muslim is tuned to the possibility of true dreams appearing to any human. The fact that the Taliban revolution may have been, at least in part, motivated by a pious, reclusive, unknown and half trained Mullah in Afghanistan, who was believed to have had true dreams, is a contemporary example of the numinous and problematic nature of dream experience and interpretation.

#### Reference

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**Dr Iain R Edgar** is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Durham. He has published extensively on imagination and dreaming. His research trip to Turkey and Pakistan was funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant.

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