

Snakes

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2. Snakes

Animals of various kinds appear in spiritually meaningful dreams. Birds, dogs, bears, wolves, fish, and even insects have come in people's dreams to deliver important messages from the divine. But the animal that makes perhaps the most powerful spiritual impact in dreams is the snake. People from cultures all over the world report dreams in which they have intensely vivid encounters with snakes. Content analysis studies performed by Robert Van de Castle indicate that even in the dreams of modern Americans, who presumably have little direct contact with snakes, these animals appear with surprising frequency.^[1] Many reports of snake dreams emphasize their strange, uncanny quality; the dreamer feels both attracted to and yet repelled by the serpent. As the following examples suggest, many people through history have regarded snake dreams as deeply spiritual experiences--for these dreams reveal the ambivalent nature of the sacred, its capacity to be a force of joyful creativity and violent destructiveness in human life.

1) A fifty year-old woman named Rosie Plummer, of the Paviotso people living on the Walker river reservation in Nevada, told anthropologist Willard Park of her shaman father. Rattlesnakes frequently came to him in his dreams and told him how to cure snake bites and other illnesses. Eighteen years after his death, Rosie started to dream about her father. "She dreamed that he came to her and told her to be a shaman. Then a rattlesnake came to her in dreams and told her to get eagle feathers, white paint, wild tobacco. The

snake gave her the songs that she sings when she is curing. The snake appeared three or four times before she believed that she would be a shaman. Now she dreams about the rattlesnake quite frequently and she learns new songs and is told how to cure sick people in this way.[\[ii\]](#)

2) Lilius Trotter, a Christian missionary who worked in Algeria in the early part of the twentieth century, had these two dreams reported to her by Muslims who were converting to Christianity. A) Trotter says that an Algerian she knew named Boualem had been involved in an angry conflict with a neighbor. She wanted to help Boualem, but didn't know how; then she says, "now God has dealt with the matter. Boualem told us that a dream had come. 'I dreamed that a great snake was coiling round my foot and leg, and you [Trotter] were there, and in horror I called to you. You said to the snake: "In the name of Jesus, let go." It uncoiled and fell like a rope, and I woke almost dead with joy.' And the shining of his face told that his soul had got free." B) Trotter says, "Blind Houriya came this morning with 'I want to tell you something that has frightened me very much. I dreamt it Saturday night, but I was too frightened to tell you yesterday. To-day my husband told me, "You must tell them." I dreamed that a great snake was twisting round my throat and strangling me. I called to you [Trotter] but you said: "I cannot save you, for you are not following our road." I went on calling for help, and one came up to me and loosened the snake from off my neck. I said: "And who is it that is saving me, and what is this snake?" A voice said: "I am Jesus and this snake is Ramadan [the Muslim ritual fasting period].'"[\[iii\]](#)

3) Henry Shipes was the son of an English father and a mother from the Maidu Indians of the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. He grew up at the end of the nineteenth century, during the gold rush era, when the indigenous Maidu culture was coming into conflict with white culture. Henry told anthropologist Arden King of various dreams in which he fought against native shamans who were jealous

of his power. In one of these dreams, Henry "had a dream contest with a shaman who was also the headman at Quincy [a Sierra Nevada town]. In this dream Henry and the shaman were contesting with each other to see who had the most power. This was a fight to the death. The shaman acted first. He loosed a snake which pursued Henry Shipes, but was unable to catch him. Henry then tried his white power. This was stated by him to be specifically white. By ruse he caused the shaman to attempt the lifting of a bucket. The bucket exploded and the dream ended." [\[iv\]](#)

4) The Egyptian Pharaoh Tanutamun is reported to have had the following dream experience in the first year of his reign, as presented by philologist A. Leo Oppenheim in his work on dreams in the ancient Near East: "His majesty saw a dream in the night: two serpents, one on his right, the other on his left. His majesty awoke, but he did not find them. His majesty said: 'Why has this happened to me?'" His interpreters told him that the dream means that both Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt now belong to him. "Then his majesty said: "True indeed is the dream; it is beneficial to him who places his heart in it but evil for him who does not know it." [\[v\]](#)

5) In Carthage in 203 A.D. Vibia Perpetua, a newly married woman of twenty-two years, and mother to an infant son, was imprisoned and sentenced to death for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. As she waited in prison for the day when she and other Christians would be cast into the arena and killed by wild beasts, her brother came and told her to ask God for a vision to reveal her fate. Perpetua agrees, and says she'll tell him what she learns tomorrow. "And I asked for a vision, and this was shown to me: I saw a bronze ladder, marvellously long, reaching as far as heaven, and narrow too: people could climb it only one at a time. And on the sides of the ladder every kind of iron implement was fixed: there were swords, lances, hooks, cutlasses, javelins, so that if anyone went up carelessly or not looking upwards, he would be torn and his flesh caught on the sharp iron. And beneath the ladder lurked a serpent of wondrous size, who laid

ambushes for those mounting, making them terrified of the ascent. But Saturus [a fellow martyr] climbed up first... And he reached the top of the ladder, and turned and said to me: 'Perpetua, I'm waiting for you--but watch out that the serpent doesn't bite you!' And I said: 'He won't hurt me, in Christ's name!' And under that ladder, almost, it seemed, afraid of me, the serpent slowly thrust out its head--and, as if I were treading on the first rung, I trod on it, and I climbed. And I saw an immense space of garden, and in the middle of it a white-haired man sitting in shepherd's garb, vast, milking sheep, with many thousands of people dressed in shining white standing all round. And he raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'You are welcome, child.' And he called me, and gave me, it seemed, a mouthful of the cheese he was milking; and I accepted it in both my hands together, and ate it, and all those standing around said: 'Amen.' At the sound of that word I awoke, still chewing something indefinable and sweet." Perpetua tells her dream to her brother, and they both understand that she is to die for her faith.[\[vi\]](#)

6) In the 1930's anthropologist Dorothy Eggan collected a number of dreams from a Hopi Indian man she calls "Sam". This is one of Sam's dreams, as recorded by Eggan: He becomes aware of a woman's dance being performed in the plaza. This bothers him, because he believes that performing this dance at this time of year can harm the crops. The people in the plaza ask him to join them, but he refuses and goes to sit under a tree. A crowd gathers around him, whispering curiously, and finally an old man tells Sam that behind him there is something that the people fear. Sam says he isn't afraid of anything, but he gets up and looks: "There I saw a huge snake coiled up. His head must be the size of the mountain lion and around the neck I saw four Pahos (prayer feathers) hanging down. It seems to me that [it] is a sacred snake. "Lay down," said a voice. "Sir, is that you speaking, Snake?" "Yes, I am not going to harm you. You must obey me." I lay down again in the shade and didn't pay any attention to that snake. Well the snake stuck his tongue out and began licking my face and hands. At first I [was] kind of scared, but

remembered that the snake would not harm me. Soon the snake put his body over my belly button and was very still. The snake must be around four hundred pounds. Well the snake began to move up to my head and put his nose close to my mouth, but I have to stand it. I remember he is not going to harm me. Well by and by X___ came along, and he must have seen that huge snake over my body. He ran to me and took a stick and try to chase that snake away, but the snake is too quick for him. He bound X___ round and round and was ready to crush him, but instead of killing X___, he sank down into the earth. I get up quickly and look down in the hole where the snake sank down into. I can see the movement of the water, a wave, like a boiling water. I notice the ground is shaking and the wind coming up. Everybody who has seen the snake take X___ down into the hole, they get after me. Some are crying. Then the people are running away in order to get away from me. Well I left that hole and went into my house for I wanted to be with my wife and see if the world has come to end. I woke up and find that it is windy." [vii]

7) In his trilogy of plays known as *The Orestia*, the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright Aeschylus told the story of Orestes, whose mother Clytemnestra killed his father Agammemnon for having sacrificed their daughter (and Orestes' sister) Iphigenia on the eve of the Trojan war. The following dialogue is from the middle play, *The Libation Bearers*, after Orestes has watched his other sister Electra reluctantly bring offerings from Clytemnestra to the grave of Agammemnon:

Chorus: That godless woman [Clytemnestra] was driven by dreams and by night-wandering terrors to send these offerings.

Orestes: Did you find out about her dream, to be able to tell it rightly?

Chorus: She thought that she gave birth to a snake--that is how she told it.

Orestes: How did her story end? How did it come out?

Chorus: She wrapped the snake in swaddling clothes, like a baby.

Orestes: What food did it need, this newborn monster?

Chorus: She gave it the breast, in her dream.

Orestes: How did the hateful thing not hurt the nipple?

Chorus: It did. It drew clots of blood with the milk.

Orestes: This is not meaningless! It is a vision of man.

Chorus: She started out of her sleep and cried in terror, and many a lamp that was blinded in darkness blazed in the palace walls to pleasure its mistress. And after that, she sent these funeral offerings; she hoped that they would cure all that was wrong.

Orestes: This is my prayer, by this land, by my father's grave: may this dream find fulfillment for me! I judge it will, too; all of it fits. For if the snake came from the same place I did, and wore my swaddling clothes, and sucked the breast that gave me sustenance, mixed the dear milk with clots of blood, and she was terrified at what happened--then, it must be so that, as she raised this fearful monster, she must die violently! For I that became that very snake will kill her, even as the dream has said."[\[viii\]](#)

The snakes in these dreams are powerful--in every case the snake is a figure of strength, energy, and potency. Sometimes, the dreamer struggles against the snake, trying to fight its power. The Algerian Muslims fight to free themselves from the grip of the snake (2.2), Perpetua confronts a dragon-like creature blocking her way up a ladder to the heavens (2.5), and Henry Shipes fends off the snake loosed at him by an antagonistic shaman (2.3). But sometimes the dreamer becomes an ally of the snake, and is allowed to draw upon

the snake's power. Rosie learns how to become a shaman from a rattlesnake (2.1), Sam is physically cared for and protected by the sacred snake (2.6), and Pharaoh Tanutamón extends the range of his kingdom by "plac[ing] his heart" in his dream of the two snakes lying beside him (2.4). But even in these latter cases, where the snake's power has a positive quality, the dreamer feels wary of the snake: it takes three or four dreams for Rosie to trust the rattlesnake's message, Sam must continually remind himself in the dream that the great snake promised not to harm him, and Tanutamón notes that such a dream would bring evil if it was misunderstood or ignored.

Turning to the various interpretations that the world's cultural and religious traditions have attached to snake dreams, we find this same complex of reactions:

8) The Temne of West Africa believe that if a person has sought the aid of a personal river spirit to gain wealth or children, the spirit may appear in a dream as a snake and reveal its name.[\[ix\]](#)

9) A Muslim treatise on dream interpretation dating from eighth-century Persia states that "If you see a small snake in a dream know that you will be in the midst of treasure; and if you see a big snake, you will be at war with your enemies."[\[x\]](#)

10) Among the Berti of Africa, snakes in dreams are interpreted as indicating enemies. To dream of killing a snake indicates that the dreamer will defeat an enemy or win a dispute. This dream can also indicate that a village child will die or a pregnant woman will miscarry. To dream of being bitten by a snake means that the dreamer will lose a dispute or fall to an enemy.[\[xi\]](#)

11) For the Tzintzuntzan people of Michoacán, Mexico, to dream of "a serpent means one is 'in a state of mortal sin'."[\[xii\]](#)

12) The Lotuko-speaking Lango of Africa believe that "to dream that a snake bites one is a very bad omen. Immediately on waking

one bites a piece of charcoal and spits it out and pricks oneself with a thorn. This will avert the omen and even if one meets a snake, as one surely will, it will not bite one."[\[xiii\]](#)

13) In the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus, the second-century Greek text that has so profoundly influenced Western dream studies, it says that "a serpent signifies a king because of its strength. It also signifies time because of its length and because it casts off its old skin and becomes young again.... It also means wealth and possessions, since the serpent guards treasures..." Artemidorus says that if a serpent approaches the dreamer and gives, speaks, or reveals something that is not bad, it means good fortune from the gods. But if the serpent does the opposite, this means bad fortune. Serpents in dreams can portend death, because the snake is a "child of the earth" and thus suggests the burial of the dead. He goes on to say that "A snake signifies sickness and an enemy. The way in which the snake treats the dreamer determines the way in which the sickness or enemy will also treat him." Artemidorus also gives a long list of possible interpretations for a pregnant woman's dream that she gives birth to a serpent.[\[xiv\]](#)

14) According to the *Oneirocriticon* of Achmet, a Christian from tenth-century Byzantium who patterned much of his work on that of Artemidorus, "The dragon signifies a king, while snakes denote enemies who are very powerful or insignificant in proportion to the snake's size...If someone dreams that he was fighting with a snake and killed it, he will cut down an enemy whose power is proportionate to the mightiness of the snake he saw in his dream; if he dreams that he cut or split the snake in two, he will receive from his enemies wealth in proportion to the cut...If someone dreams that he was eating snake meat, he will find increase of wealth and exult over his enemies."[\[xv\]](#)

These different interpretations of snake dreams correspond closely to what we find in the dream experiences themselves. There is, first

and foremost, a recognition of the power of the snakes that appear in dreams; there is a tendency to regard such dreams as very negative, as indicating strife, illness, and defeat by one's enemies; there is also a tendency to see snake dreams more positively, as portending wealth, success, and victory; and there is almost always an undercurrent of wariness, fear, and even dread regarding the appearance of snakes in dreams.

So why snakes? Why have snakes made such a powerful impact on the human religious imagination, and what exactly is the spiritual significance of their frequent appearances in people's dreams? What is it about this particular animal that has made it so prominent a figure not only in dreams but in myths, folklore, and art from all over the world?[\[xvi\]](#)

Looking at their "natural" characteristics, snakes are genuine dangers to people, posing a deadly threat either from the quick, poisonous bite of a rattlesnake or the slow, suffocating squeeze of a boa constrictor. At the same time, the capacity of snakes to shed their skins conjures up the image of regeneration, rebirth, and new life.[\[xvii\]](#) Thus, snakes combine the threat of death with the promise of life. Another "natural" feature of serpents is their lidless eyes; humans find the unblinking gaze of snakes to be both captivating and horrifying, both transcendent and inhuman. This unnerving stare evokes in many people feelings of awe, mystery, and dread.

An obvious explanation refers to the central role that the serpent plays in the book of Genesis. Anyone who is at all familiar with the Bible knows that the serpent is the great tempter, the one whose seductive promises of power persuaded Eve to taste the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent brings evil into the Garden of Eden, but also brings the possibility of knowledge: "when you eat [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."[\[xviii\]](#) When God discovers what has happened, he ordains that man and serpent shall be eternal enemies.

Another, more "modern" explanation draws on the psychoanalytic theory that snakes symbolize the phallus. Ernest Jones, one of Freud's early followers, says with customary psychoanalytic modesty,

"The idea of a snake, which is never consciously associated with that of the phallus, is regularly so in dreams, being one of the most constant and invariable symbols: in primitive religions the two ideas are quite obviously interchangeable, so that it is often hard to distinguish between phallic from ophitic worship...very rarely can it also symbolize the intestine and its contents, but as far as I know, nothing else."[\[xix\]](#)

For Jones, the snake is such a common dream symbol because it enables us to express our strong unconscious feelings about the phallus: the phallus is at once an object of desire and of fear, an object of proud potency and of dreaded impotency, an object that brings great pleasure but that can also bring great pain if it is cut off (as psychoanalysts say men continually fear it will be). The snake's physical shape makes it a uniquely convenient way of representing (and yet disguising) the phallus in dreams, myths, and art.

Each of these explanations makes some sense, but none of them adequately answers the question of why snake dreams so often have such a strong spiritual impact on people. The "naturalistic" explanation does not account for the vivid dreams of people who have had little direct contact with snakes. The biblical explanation says nothing about the dreams of people who have never had any contact with the Bible. And the psychoanalytic explanation merely sidesteps the question, rightly pointing to the symbolic connection between snakes, penises, and power but failing to relate any of this to people's experiences of the sacred.[\[xx\]](#)

We gain a better understanding of snake dreams when we refer to the research of historians of religion like Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade. They have found that humans universally feel an ambivalence

towards the sacred. In virtually all religious and spiritual traditions the divine is portrayed as both enchanting and terrifying; Otto says "the daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm."[\[xxi\]](#) The power of the sacred is ambivalent in the true sense of the word--it is both good and evil, creative and destructive, attractive and frightening. If we consider snake dreams in this light, we see that these dreams portray the profoundly ambivalent nature of the sacred. Dream experiences involving snakes have provided people with intensely numinous manifestations of sacred powers that can appear beneficial to the dreamer but can just as often appear evil, violent, and highly destructive. Snake dreams reveal the potential of the sacred to be both a helpful and an antagonistic force in human life.

One way to appreciate the spiritual dimension of snake dreams is to contrast them with dreams of the dead. If dreams of the dead guide us into a better relationship with the sacred, dreams of snakes confront us with the raw energy, the primal potency, and the antagonistic power of the sacred. Dreams of the dead tend to emphasize the beneficial gains that can come from contacting the sacred; dreams of snakes, by contrast, tend to emphasize the dangerous threats that can come from such contact. The contrast is not absolute, of course, because some snake dreams have quite positive aspects. But on the whole, this type of dream brings the dreamer face to face with the darker, more evil aspects of the sacred.

While pursuing my graduate studies in Chicago I made a weekly visit to a small child-care center, operated by the mother of a good friend of mine. Her English was not especially good, so I helped her by reading stories to the children. Each visit I would read two or three books to them, and then ask each child to share his or her own story to the group. The kids would usually improvise a version of one of the books we had just read, or perhaps describe what they'd eaten that morning for breakfast. One day, however, a three-year old boy

named Sam shared a dream with our little group: he said, in an even but intense voice, "I dreamed that there was a snake monster inside grandpa's back, and it broke out and killed grandpa." The other children were fascinated by this brief, powerful dream; after a moment of reflective silence, they all began clamoring to tell their own stories of dangerous snake monsters.

I later learned from my friend that Sam's grandfather had indeed died recently (although she didn't know what caused his death) and that Sam was quite upset by it. She said that Sam had told her the dream earlier in the day, with the same intensity he had expressed during story-time. I've often thought of Sam's dream of the snake monster, and of the ways that death is like a snake monster--powerful, mysterious, and ferocious, tearing the people we love away from us forever.

Notes

[i].. Van de Castle 1994, pp. 304-310.

[ii].. Park 1934, p. 101.

[iii].. Padwick 1939, pp. 208-209.

[iv].. King 1942, p. 232.

[v].. Oppenheim 1956, p. 251.

[vi].. Dronke 1984, p. 2.

[vii].. Eggan 1955, pp. 450-451.

[viii].. O'Flaherty and Greene 1989, pp. 113-114.

[ix].. Shaw 1992, p. 45.

[x].. Hosain 1932, p. 581.

[xi].. Holy 1992, pp. 93-94.

[xii].. Foster 1973, p. 111.

[xiii].. Driberg 1927, p. 142.

[xiv].. Artemidorus 1975, pp. 97, 213.

[xv].. Achmet 1991, p. 237.

[xvi].. See Mundkur 1983 for a detailed examination of snake worship around the world.

[xvii].. See Eliade 1958, pp. 164-171.

[xviii].. Genesis 3:5.

[xix].. Quoted in Mundkur 1983, pp. 263-264.

[xx].. Except, of course, in order to reduce people's experiences of the sacred to psychoanalytic categories like "wish-fulfillment", "illusion", and the "cosmic narcissism".

[xxi].. Otto 1958, p. 31.