

Cultural Healing: The African American Dream Experience

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Our dreams are the most accessible way to communicate with the ancestors. Through our dreams we can create a “secret language.” You and your ancestors set, establish symbol systems, and agree on their meaning. The relationship becomes one of call and response
—Luisah Teish¹

The African American dreaming experience is multi-dimensional, brilliant, and dynamic. It is rooted in African spirituality and tradition which has endured the perils of slavery, abuse, mass incarceration, police brutality and all the other weapons of mass destruction targeted at African Americans. Dreaming is a gateway to reclaiming ourselves, culture, and ancestors, and ultimately our place in the matrix of cosmological existence.

Interwoven deeply into the fabric of African American’s daily lives, the social and spiritual content of dreams provides us with solace in times of despair; discernment when guidance is needed; unconditional love from our ancestors; and healing for the wounded mind, body, and spirit. Dreams are deeply revered in the African American community as the mystical link between the material and spirit realms of creation.

However, unfortunately, African American dream ideologies and experiences are often overlooked by Western mainstream dream organizations and movements and are grossly underrepresented in dream psychology studies. Dream writer, researcher, and scholar, Anthony Shafton concurs stating that “there are scarcely any African Americans among the researchers, instructors, and authors in this field...blacks are poorly represented among the dreamers they write about.”²

1. Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: HarperOne, 1985), 98.

2. Anthony Shafton, *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2002), 2.

In this article, I explore multifaceted aspects of self, community, ancestors, and spirit in the African American dream experience. These perspectives seek to demonstrate that African American dreaming is rooted in an African spiritual worldview, one which acknowledges dreams as an access point into interpenetrating realms of existence and, as such, is a powerful tool for healing. Dr. Augustine Nwoye, professor of psychology explains the primary sources of dreaming in an African worldview:³

1. Individuocentric: Dreamer addresses either the daily residue or the personal concerns and well-being of the dreamer.
2. Triangulation: Dreamer dreams about the concerns and well-being of others, not solely about oneself. Vital messages are conveyed to the dreamer for another.
3. Transcendental/Spiritualist: Agents of the spiritual (ancestral) world initiates spirit communication in dream state for healing.

Dreams are a portal to explore the vastness of inner and outer life. They are the gateway to all aspects of cosmological, material and spiritual existence. Accordingly, dreams are a sacred form of communication consisting of vital discerning messages from beyond the physical realm. While dreams may contain wisdom that arises from within, reflecting our individuality, they can be viewed as paradoxical in nature because they do so in a way that bypasses personal volition.⁴ "Dreams are both ours, in that they arise within our individual consciousness, and not ours since they mostly arise and

3. Augustine Nwoye, "The Psychology and Content of Dreaming in Africa," *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 1 (2017): 7-11.

4. Fariba Bogzaran and Daniel Deslauriers. *Integral Dreaming : A Holistic Approach to Dreams* (Albany: Suny Press, 2012), 107.

unfold of their own accord.”⁵ It is from this perspective that African Americans immerse themselves in the mysterious power of dreams.

African Americans honor, revere, and engage with dreams from a landscape that is dynamic and universal, encompassing all aspects of natural and supernatural beings, realms, and consciousness. Dream analysis expert, Kimberly M. Harmon believes that dreams are sacred and that Black people in particular understand that dreams are spiritual in nature: “Dreams come to us with power and purpose. We are talking about God power.”⁶ The African American dreaming experience deepens a connection to self, community, ancestors, and spirit; thus, placing us at the center of our own universe.

Although African American’s dream lineage is strong with roots planted firmly in West Africa, the dream journeys of Black people remain uncharted in the study of dreams. One vital explanation for this phenomena can be found amongst several black psychologists who contend that the westernized study of dream psychology is narrow in its approach to analyzing and interpreting dreams.⁷ They argue that Black culture has its own dream language and traditions that are aligned with ethnological spiritual beliefs and practices.

The African American dream experience is distinct from other dreaming cultures when it comes to healing. Not only does the experience include dreams that address personal healing and wellness, it is also includes dreams that address individual and collective survival as the result of societal oppressions. Consequently, African

5. Ibid.

6. Kimberly M. Harmon, Phone Interview, March 4, 2019.

7. Anthony Shafton, *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2002), 2.

Americans dream more frequently about race, self-empowerment, and liberation. Dr. Nwoye's refers to these dreams of healing and empowerment as anticipatory:

Anticipatory dreams have as their main theme, the attempt to help the dreamer have a kind of symbolic/imaginative realization of what he or she consciously yearns for...The aim of such dreams is to make the dreamer...have hope that his or her present aspirations or yearnings will soon be fulfilled. The result gives rise to the notion of the hope healing function in the psychic world of the dreamer.⁸

Anticipatory dreams heal by providing inspiration to the dreamer as a coping mechanism to help prevent the depression and hopelessness that accompany oppression. This inspiration may come in the form of dream or wake state visions of liberation and empowerment for one's self and others. Community organizer Marion Stamps uses dreams as a tool for coping in our unjust world: "I know for myself, having been part of the whole black movement for self-determination, I've had to rely on spirits and dreams"⁹ for personal and collective healing and empowerment.

As African Americans continue to fight for survival in a westernized world filled with daily micro and macro aggressions, proactively engaging with dreams can provide healing, courage, wisdom and discernment required not only to survive but to empower and thrive. Thus, dreams connect us to the source of our sacred power and are an integral byproduct of African spirituality, which has endured within the African American psyche for generations.

In Africa, dreams are used by traditional healers as a means of holistic healing to diagnose illness and imbalance.¹⁰ Much like our African ancestors, African Americans can look to dreams for discernment on how to diagnose and heal mental, emotional,

8. Nwoye, "The Psychology and Content of Dreaming in Africa," 9.

9. Shafton, *Dream-Singers*, 14.

10. Nwoye, "The Psychology and Content of Dreaming in Africa," 18.

spiritual and physical ailments. Our innate sensitivity to dreams is strongly influenced by the symbolic messages we receive from our ancestors in dream state.

Ancestors are intermediaries between the physical and spirit realms. One is considered an ancestor once they have left the physical realm. However, they may or may not be venerated as reflected by the life they lived here on earth. Ancestors appear in dreams for a myriad of reasons which include but is not limited to, visiting to bring forth love, wisdom, and blessings; warning of impending danger; providing health diagnosis and advice; imparting discernment and guidance; and protecting us from ourselves.

Author, scholar, and Yoruba priestess, Luisah Teish points out that “sometimes the ancestors deem certain information so important that they send it to the subconscious mind without being consciously asked.”¹¹ However, the dreamer may or may not recognize the ancestor(s) that appear in the dream, and the dream messages may or may not be intended solely for the dreamer. African Americans analyze and interpret ancestral dreams primarily by discussing them with family members. To discern meaning, dreams are first shared with the immediate family and if no interpretation emerges they take the dream to a spiritual advisor or woman in the church with the gift of sight. To help discern ancestral dreams, Teish suggests the following: “Keep a bowl of water under or near your bed. If you are having nightmares, add a piece of camphor or a little bay rum to the water. To keep dreams sweet, add a nice oil or perfume. Change the water weekly.”¹²

11. Teish, *Jambalaya*, 80.

12. Teish, *Jambalaya*, 98.

Ancestor visitations in dreams are of paramount importance because they illicit deep feeling responses in the dreamer. My mother often shares dream experiences of visitations from her deceased mother, my grandmother. These dreams provide her not only with immense comfort and healing, but profound wisdom and guidance. Ancestral dreams are predictive in nature since, quite often, our ancestors deliver psychic messages. Dreams foretelling births and deaths are often transmitted by our ancestors. According to Teish, prophetic dreams are vital, memorable, and rich in symbolism: “They linger with us until we recognize their importance, analyze their symbolism and act on their content, do something about their meaning.”¹³

African American dreaming is culturally rich and imbued with sacred power to heal our individual and collective mind, bodies, and spirits. It is critical, now more than ever, that African diaspora peoples reclaim indigenous spiritualities rooted in African worldviews that honor the power of healing through dreaming. Probing deeper into aspects of African American dreaming will make evident the role that dreams play in enhancing our connection to self, community, nature, the ancestors, and our planet.

13. Teish, *Jambalaya*, 80.

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