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Art, dreams and miracles reflections and representations

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This special issue on *Art, Dreams and Miracles* presents a series of contributions, drawing primarily from a panel at the 2018 conference of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. Lying at the core of this issue are studies which treat the relationships between art, people and oneiric experiences (dreams and miracles, broadly, in this case). The contributions consider how dreams and miracles are manifested in various forms of art, and in certain cases the other way around, the agency of art for oneiric experiences.

The issue brings together a rich and diverse interdisciplinary content, both geographically and in terms of contribution format, including research articles, but also visual essays and position essays. They investigate cultural cases and contexts from around the globe. The kind of artistic expression may vary and there is no explicit intention to define what art is or means, but to be clear, each contribution informs on a type of making and artistic and creative endeavour. What constitutes art is kept wide open (which abides by this journal's tradition); and what is being investigated as 'art' in this issue can involve street murals, paintings, texts, photography, writing, tattooing, carving, and others.

Generally speaking, the subconscious mind is known to harbour deeply ingrained beliefs, although it is not the case everywhere. And art is seen as famous for representing, in material form, human emotions and ideas. What can we learn about human beings when we combine the subconscious mind (mainly represented through dreams) with art? There has been much significant research on dreams and miracles before, yet what this issue adds is fresh perspectives and new engagements with creativity from around the world. Given the original source, the RAI conference panel, most of the contributions contain ethnographic content regarding dreams and miracles, studied in different parts of the world. The various articles also how the dreams or miraculous experiences drive different modes of expression.

The reader will benefit by bearing in mind several questions as they proceed through the issue: 1) what type of knowledge do dreams and miracles produce? And 2) what role does art play in learning about dreams and miracles? The different papers have been ordered into three broad sections. The first three contributions are case studies demonstrating, cross-culturally, the relevance of dreams in making art and imagery. The second section centres on historical narratives and reflections on dreams. The third concentrates on miracles and their artistic expressions and social contexts. But there is considerable overlap in content, and like dreams themselves, the coverage and insights of individual papers can flow across countless boundaries (e.g., subject, disciplinary, geographical, methodological).

Dreams and art

Lydia Nakashima Degarrod provides a rich analysis of how she developed artworks, or 'maps,' to connect, learn about and image people's dreams in the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States. Her piece introduces us to the ongoing project, *Atlas of Dreams*, which researches how dream experiences help to reveal significant (spatial) 'interactional' relations between dreamers, culture and society. It is a multimodal ethnographic project, involving the author's own art practice and hundreds of dream accounts collected in the Bay Area. Her practice entails different ethnographic methods for retrieving and translating

observational data: traditional interviewing, mapping, *derivé* (or drifting), and art making techniques. The study maps out research participants' dreams of the city and paints/assembles them works that she later exhibits. Degarrod examines the importance of art when working with dreams (e.g., nightmares) as it provides a medium to express emotions that are not easily captured through written or spoken media. Thus, she locates the experience, distribution and movements of dream-led emotions.

D.S. Farrer chronicles how one painter's vision-inspired works can reveal deep-seated beliefs about Malay society and cosmology. The article details the oneiric inspirations, shadow ontology and the supernatural potency of Mohammad Din Mohammad's artwork. How does a painted shadow warrior figure spring to life? Is the late artist's supernatural agency deposited in his artwork? Farrer traces the emergence of 'power', *potentia* versus *potestas*, as configured through dreamworks, and set in the context of Malay folk religion, where spiritual practices connect physical and unseen worlds through oneiric experiences.

Cons. Tri Handoko and Geff Green shed light on a different medium, namely tattoo imagery, which arises from dream inspiration. The cases derive from urban Indonesian contexts, especially people on the island of Java. It studies how both tattoo artists and tattoo wearers draw upon a diverse reservoir of imagery based on (but not limited to) Javanese legends and traditions of spiritual and magical belief. Depicting specific experiences, especially religious ones, are of great importance. Beyond the aesthetic and symbolic value of the tattoos, they serve as amulets for protection and blessings. This study also provides basis to connect contemporary practice with the historical, even ancient, practices of tattooing; motivation from dreams is seen to be vital.

Historical narratives

Brad Fox presents how dreaming and dream interpretation(s) were narrated in Muslim literary and religious traditions, from the prophet's lifetime to the literary renaissance of the 19th century. Sources and motivations in religious and secular frames are examined. The engagement with dreams across multiple literary (art) forms and genres was varied yet highly distinctive. Dream interpretation had been included in the Arabic tradition since the prophet's lifetime. By 19th century, traditional forms (treating dream interpreters) sought to draw critical attention to patrimonial ignorance under colonialism. By exploring the philosophical and historical basis for dream narratives and dream interpretation in Islam, it complements the papers (in this issue) that discuss dreaming in Islamic communities.

In their position essay, Aaron Martin, Gianna Eisele, Ian Hogg, Hannah Neal, and Amal Shukr trace meanings and usages of the word 'dream' over time in the Western context, and propose a pathway for considering how dreams, individually experienced, can materialise into shared understandings (through art). The authors state that the word 'dream' was originally used to express how people perceive images while asleep that provided inspiration for their art. They also draw from debates that theorize what dreams are (from psychoanalytical perspectives), and note the 16th century shift from the understanding of dreams as images to experiences. The work is especially indebted to Freudian and Rortyan perspectives, which have been influential and remain topical for modern dream interpretation studies. By advocating for Rorty's notion of contingency in dreams, Aaron and his colleagues argue that it opens possibilities for rationalising their socio-cultural role and

content. We might see relevance for various cultures like Shi`a in Kuwait (see Al-Hudaid, this issue) and Australian Aboriginals, or in experiences of dreamers in the San Francisco area (see Degarrod, this issue).

Miracles and art

In the last section of this issue, the visual essay by Myriam Lamrani draws attention to the continuing role of 'miracles' in contemporary Mexican art; it connects the street art of a Oaxacan art collective to traditional Catholic votive images (ex-votos) and beliefs, offered to divine figures. Lamrani questions what happens when devotional paintings and public art converge, and she responds by arguing that today thaumaturgical expression, through street art, tattoos and the like, may multiply the presence, potency and dissemination of the miracle experience.

David Degner's visual essay presents a sample of his photographic work among Muslims and Christians today in Egypt. As a photojournalist, Degner encountered many stories of miracles in Egypt and he was inspired and challenged to capture an incorporeal experience visually. By way of his camera lens, the images generate a different kind of materiality and connection that miracles facilitate and leave behind. This led him to make an exhibition of the photographs, which focused on the places and objects that people narrate as contiguous with the experience of a miracle. Texts and labelling become essential for communicating and enhancing the visual dimension. His work is a unique addition to the issue's theme on art, where, similar to Degarrod, he is the artist who represented the stories of miracles in his photographs.

The final contribution, by Nada Al-Hudaid, is a position essay which finds that traditional understandings of the term *Karamah*, customarily translated as 'miracle', are deficient. Firsthand observation of use by Shi`a Kuwaitis reveals a more polysemic definition, a local use centred on a special religious/divine experience (akin to 'marvel') but also associated with pious service, gift and rewards. The piece then discusses how the concept describes effort of pious artists who paint stories about the household of Prophet Mohammed. In other words, the paintings materialise the love Shi`a women have for Ahl Al-Bayt (family members of Prophet Mohammed); in return, they materialise the experience as *Karamat*. This point highlights the importance afforded to making and special, faith-inspired experiences (see Lamrani, Farrer, Handoko & Green, this issue).

We hope the reader enjoys this short and illuminating foray into art, dreams and miracles, and will agree that their study together can be enhanced by multidisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. In all the contributions, the authors provide examples of how incorporeal/oneiric experiences may materialise in the waking world. The varied art forms are both evidence and gateways to such experiences in expressions that can be seen and touched; to a certain extent, they make them as real and as pertinent as for the people who dream and experience them. It is worth recognising with thanks all those who gave us access to their (dream)lives and allowed us to share their experiences. Of course, there remains significant potential to learn more about the act of capturing and translating oneiric experiences to make them visible to others. Through art, we can see dream experiences in forms that make sense to their creators and position them in their cosmological world and social life around them. We learn about their hopes, aspirations and beliefs.