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An Analysis of Dreams and Their Meaning in African Culture

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Abstract

This paper offers a philosophical analysis of dreams in African culture, arguing that dreams are not random psychological events but significant phenomena that bridge the physical and non-physical/spiritual realms. The paper argues that in the African worldview, these experiences are intrinsically linked to individual lives, communal values, and spiritual beliefs. This African perspective integrates personal psychic experiences with external, transcendental influences, reflecting a holistic interconnectedness among humans, the material world, and spiritual entities. Distinct from Western individualistic paradigms, African traditions emphasize communal and intersubjective dimensions, with dreams often conveying messages for the wider community, interpreted by traditional authorities. Mythological narratives, such as dreams in Akan cosmology or the prophetic visions of Zulu shamans, exemplify dreams' central role in shaping cultural values, inspiring action, and facilitating healing. Ultimately, this analysis positions dreams within a comprehensive African ontological framework, where human existence is defined by profound relationships, reinforcing a worldview of interconnectedness and continuous dialogue between visible and invisible

worlds. This highlights the distinctiveness of African approaches to dreams, offering valuable insights that challenge Western reductionism and broaden philosophical understandings of consciousness, reality, and human experience.

Keywords: *African Philosophy, Communalism, Dreams, Ontology, Spiritual Realms, Traditional Authority.*

Introduction

Dreams, as phenomena of consciousness during sleep, are subjects to diverse interpretations across cultures and historical periods. While Western thought, particularly since the Enlightenment, has largely approached dreams through psychological reductionism (attributing them to manifestations of the unconscious mind, individual desires, fears, or neural activity confined primarily to the dreamer's personal experience), African cultures present a contrasting philosophical perspective. This paper offers a philosophical analysis of dreams and their meaning within African cultures, proposing a different paradigm. Here, dreams transcend individual psychological events to become pivotal phenomena, bridging the physical and spiritual realms. This perspective highlights a complex interplay between personal experience, communal values, and spiritual beliefs, transforming dreams from subjective thoughts into vital communicative events.

In many African societies, dreams are not viewed as random or purely psychological phenomena. Instead, they are regarded as profound channels of communication – often direct messages from ancestors, deities, or spirits – that offer guidance, prophecy, warnings, and even healing. This dual understanding reflects a holistic African ontological framework where human existence is deeply interwoven with the material, spiritual, and social worlds. Unlike the prevailing individualism in Western thought, African traditions emphasize the communal and intersubjective dimensions of dreaming. A dream, therefore, frequently carries messages not just for the individual, but for the wider family, community, or even society, often necessitating interpretation by traditional authorities or elders. Mythological narratives, such as the dreams associated with Nyame in Akan cosmology or the prophetic visions of Zulu shamans, powerfully illustrate how dreams are central to shaping cultural values, inspiring collective action, and facilitating spiritual well-being.

Methodologically, this paper employs a critical philosophical approach, drawing on conceptual analysis and comparative philosophy. It

systematically examines indigenous African conceptualizations of dreams, consciousness, personhood, and reality, primarily through engagement with established African philosophical literature and ethnographic accounts (Balogun, 2023; KeteAsante & Mazama, 2005; Omoge, 2022). By contrasting these African perspectives with dominant Western reductionist paradigms, this study aims to highlight the distinctiveness and explanatory power of African thought (Abspoel, 2021; Agad , 2020; Ude, 2024). Further, it uses hermeneutic interpretation to unpack the rich symbolism and narrative structures embedded within select cultural practices and mythological examples, particularly from Southern Africa, where literature allows us to illustrate how dreams function as epistemological tools and communally significant experiences (Mort, 2003; Sa’adu, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). Ultimately, this analysis aims to illuminate the richness, distinctiveness, and enduring importance of African philosophical approaches to dreams. By exploring how dreams are embedded in a relational, spiritually infused reality, this paper seeks to broaden contemporary philosophical understandings of consciousness, reality, and human experience. It offers a compelling challenge to Western reductionism and advocates for a more inclusive discourse on ways of knowing and being.

Ontological Framework: Interconnectedness and the Spiritual Fabric of Reality.

To fully understand dreams in African culture, it is important to first grasp the basic ideas about existence that form this worldview. Unlike Western thought, which often separates the physical and spiritual into distinct categories, African ontology holds a more comprehensive view where these realms are continuous and closely linked (Ekeh, 2020; Essel, 2018). In this way of thinking, the universe is not merely a collection of separate things, but a lively, continuous whole that encompasses both natural and supernatural elements (Lougheed et al., 2024). As noted by various scholars, African ontology rejects the idea of separate substances, instead envisioning reality as a “spider’s web” where no single part can vibrate without affecting the whole network (Ekeh 2020). This holistic and integrated worldview sees all beings, including minerals, plants, animals, humans, ancestors, spirits, and gods, as interconnected and interdependent, with a constant “two-way traffic” between the visible and invisible worlds (Nwoye, 2017; Umezurike, 2019). African thought embraces both the natural and supernatural as part of a single reality,

characterized by a duality of properties rather than a strict dualism, reflecting a “both/and” rather than “either/or” approach to categories (Lougheed et al., 2024). This unified worldview highly values human life, seeing it as a continuous flow where all beings are always interacting.

A main part of this view of existence is the active role of spirits in daily life. Ancestors, spirits, and gods are not distant or abstract ideas, but living forces that actively take part in, and influence, the human world (Podolecka, 2021; Umezurike, 2019). In many African cultures, dreams are regarded as a primary link to the spirits of deceased ancestors (Nell, 2012). Ancestors are benevolent mentors and protectors, but they may also cause misfortune and hardships if neglected (Podolecka, 2021). Showing respect for ancestors reflects a belief that those who have died are still a key part of the community. They continue to affect life on earth, offering advice, warnings, or even disapproval, and their intentions contribute to how African people make sense of their life-worlds (Masola, 2025). Indeed, the main parts of African Traditional Religion, including beliefs in God, divinities, ancestors, spirits, magic, and medicine, touch every part of African life, making religion an essential component of the African worldview. Africans often link health and sickness, for instance, to spiritual forces such as ancestral curses or witchcraft. This shows that whatever happens in life, whether good or bad, can be perceived as the result of actions by either the living or the ancestors (Ewuoso, 2024; Podolecka, 2021). This also shows the mystical aspects of well-being that go beyond purely scientific explanations. The African universe encompasses both spiritual and physical worlds. People maintain balance by considering both the living physical community and the deceased, whom society still views as active members.

This deep interconnectedness also applies to the African idea of personhood. In many African philosophies, especially those influenced by Ubuntu, being a person is not something one is born with, but something gained and continually developed through involvement with the community (Horsthemke, 2018; Koali, 2020; Sanni, 2022). As Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously articulated, “We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘a person is a person through other people’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong’. I participate, I share...” (Tutu 1998:2). The well-known saying, “I am because we are; and therefore I am,” clearly captures this understanding of self that is based on relationships (Khasoane, 2019; Koali, 2020). This aphorism, unique to sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizes how a person’s existence and identity tie strongly to their social relationships and dependence on others in the

community (Sanni, 2022). African thought views the individual as part of a group, connecting the self to communal well-being, unlike Western philosophies, which often focus on an isolated self (Koali, 2020; Mashau & Kgatle, 2019). The community defines the person, not some static individual quality (Horsthemke, 2018; Koali, 2020). The community thrives on well-being, where people achieve and enhance their humanity through a network of relationships. This fosters harmonious interactions, mutual respect, and care (Koali, 2020). This strong community bond means that the individual and the community exist in a shared relationship, rejecting any strict separation between them. In an African community, individuals actively interconnect through profound relational bonds, weaving their lives together in a dynamic web of mutual interdependence and shared humanity (Koali, 2020). This understanding of existence shapes how Africans view and interpret dreams, not as isolated personal experiences, but as vital components of our shared, spiritually vibrant reality.

Dreams as Epistemological Tools: Channels of Guidance, Prophecy, and Warning

In African cultures, dreams are more than mere night-time experiences; they are profound sources of knowledge and communication, serving as vital epistemological tools. They transcend individual psychological events to become significant ways of knowing, directly linking the human and spiritual realms (Masola, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). The holistic African worldview connects the physical and spiritual realms intrinsically, establishing dreams as a natural conduit between them (Masola, 2025). Dreams and their interpretation represent a fundamental mechanism through which many Africans make sense of their world (Masola, 2025). As noted earlier, ancestors play a pivotal role in the day-to-day lives of the African experience. It is not surprising, then, that many African traditions view dreams as a primary means through which ancestors, spirits, or deities communicate with living people. This spiritual exchange is often teleological, meaning dreams occur for a specific purpose, conveying messages that people have a duty to follow (Masola, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). This communication can take many forms and serve different purposes.

Dreams as Guidance for Life Decisions

Dreams frequently provide direction for individuals or the community when faced with important choices, life paths, or necessary actions. This guidance helps maintain social order and individual well-being, reflecting the communal focus of African thought (Umezurike, 2019). For instance, a dream might advise a person on a course of action for a difficult situation or a communal problem, acting as reassurance or a divine oracle (Umezurike, 2019). The wisdom gained from dreams, often interpreted by traditional priests or divine agents, helps individuals understand their place and make decisions beneficial, not only to themselves, but to their wider social group as well (Umezurike, 2019). Notably, traditional healthcare practitioners often use dreams as a diagnostic tool. For example, they often attribute mental illness in African culture to spiritual causes, like witchcraft or ancestral punishment. Dreams, as a diagnostic tool, can reveal the source of a mental condition and guide the course of therapy, including the identification of specific medicinal herbs (Masola, 2025).

Dreams as Prophecy and the Foretelling of Future Events

Dreams reveal future events and offer glimpses of what lies ahead. Africans cherish this prophetic power, using it to prepare, intervene, and shape outcomes (Masola, 2025). The spiritual insights conveyed through dreams can have a transcendental potential, suggesting how the future is likely to unfold (Mokgoatsana & Sebola, 2022). For example, a person facing a serious illness might dream of a future healing, such as singing a hymn, which they interpret as a sign of impending recovery, providing hope and encouragement (Agwu et al., 2024). In some African perspectives, a phenomenon called “triangulation in dreaming” occurs, where dreams originate from an external source to deliver messages benefiting others in the community, not just the dreamer (Nwoye, 2015).

Warnings against Danger and Misfortune

Dreams frequently warn people of impending dangers, bad luck, or wrongdoings, and people take these warnings seriously (Agwu et al., 2024). Such dreams often prompt individuals or communities to perform rituals, seek advice, or alter their behaviour to avoid potential harm (Agwu et al., 2024). Specific dream images can foretell misfortune; for instance, a snake might signify enemies, or a whirlwind might warn of impending trouble.

Dreams of chameleons can signal sickness, while a pit might symbolize death. Occurrences like “strange lights, small people, and unknown white persons could indicate the presence of witchcraft” (Niehaus, 2019:7). Dreams hold profound prophetic power, unveiling future events and offering vital glimpses of what lies ahead. Across African cultures, people cherish this mystical ability, interpreting visions as divine signals to prepare for blessings or avert harm (Niehaus, 2019). In response to negative dream interpretations, communities perform communal healing practices such as prayers, purification ceremonies, offerings, and ritualistic sacrifices to avert misfortune (Agwu et al., 2024). This highlights their critical role in social and personal protection.

The information received through dreams is real and relevant to daily life, providing objective knowledge that enhances understanding and aids in navigating real-world events (Masola, 2025). Dreams also play a crucial part in traditional practices, including spiritual teaching and divination (African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing, 1991; Turner, 1975; Zuesse, 1975). For instance, during initiation ceremonies, dreams can introduce the initiates to the unseen spiritual world, teaching them important rites and customs believed to appease gods and ancestors (Dragani, 2018). Traditional healthcare practitioners often receive ancestral wisdom and guidance for healing through visions and dreams, which inform the identification of medicinal herbs and the customization of therapies (Masola, 2025). This spiritual education through dreams strengthens communal values and traditions, maintaining their importance even amidst modern influences.

Therefore, the role of dreams in African epistemology is extensive, acting as critical communication channels that bring forth knowledge from the spiritual realm into human experience. They guide, predict, and warn, influencing individual and collective behaviour in meaningful ways. The trust placed in dreams as reliable sources of information reflects a deep philosophical belief in the interconnectedness of all existence, where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual are permeable and constantly in dialogue.

The Communal and Intersubjective Dimensions of Dreaming

A distinguishing feature of African perspectives on dreams is their communal and intersubjective nature. Unlike Western psychological frameworks, which often emphasize the individual dreamer and their personal subconscious, African thought frequently sees dreams as shared

experiences or messages meant for the collective (Nwoye, 2015; Umezurike, 2019). This means a dream is not solely the property of the person who had it, but belongs to a larger context in which the dreamer plays a part. Individuals dream, not just for themselves, but also for others, reflecting a concept of self that is deeply embedded in community (Nwoye, 2015; Umezurike, 2019). As described by Umezurike, this is an “intersubjective triangulation” where dreams “cut across individuals” and come to “one for another,” marking a three-point movement of dream, dreamer, and the dreamed, profoundly relational and a revelation for another’s well-being (Umezurike, 2019).

This collective understanding of dreams stems from the African ontological framework. In it, relationships and interdependence within the community define personhood. The foundational principle of Ubuntu, “I am because we are” (or “a person is a person because of others”) discussed earlier, anchors African communities and posits that when any member passes on, they continue to provide spiritual guidance to the family and community, with dreams serving as a medium of communication between these worlds (Nare et al., 2018; Ward & Lortan, 2021). What happens to one member of the group affects the whole group, and vice versa. This means that the impact of a dream can extend beyond the individual, influencing family, clan, or even the entire society. The community plays a central role in shaping the moral character of individuals, helping them to act humanely towards others. The sharing of dreams, in this context, can even create a “social mycelium,” connecting people associatively and fostering a sense of oneness and communication (Pule & Gibney, 2023).

Dreams can therefore serve as a mechanism for strengthening communal bonds and transmitting shared cultural values. When a dream carries a message for the community, its interpretation often becomes a collective activity, sometimes involving elders, diviners, or spiritual leaders. This communal engagement ensures that the meaning of the dream aligns with the group’s traditions and values. Notably, when individuals receive messages in dreams for the community, these revelations are often “subject to confirmation by traditional priests for validity” (Umezurike, 2019). For instance, in times of crisis, an entire village might need to come together to address a perceived evil, reflecting the understanding that the health of one affects the health of all in an interconnected society. Such collective actions, sometimes prompted by dream messages, reinforce social cohesion and the importance of group identity.

The intersubjective dimension of dreams appears in how they foster a shared understanding of reality. They offer insights that enable groups to

solve problems, make key decisions, or ease collective anxieties. For example, studies by Nare (2018) and Ward (2021) suggest that dream content in certain African groups shows a greater focus on community matters compared to samples from other global populations. This highlights how dreams are not just individual reflections, but actively take part in shaping the social world. Even during times of grief, dreams can play a role in communal healing, offering comfort, encouragement, or spiritual presence to a grieving community. Dreams suggesting negative outcomes may lead to collective healing practices, such as prayers, purification ceremonies, offerings, and ritualistic sacrifices.

Ultimately, the communal and intersubjective dimensions of dreaming in African cultures underscore the idea that dreams are not random personal experiences. Instead, social norms weave into the fabric of social life and serve as vital channels for communication, guidance, and collective well-being. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness that defines African philosophy, where the individual and community are in constant dialogue, even within the dreamscape.

Case Studies and Mythological Narratives: Illustrating Dream Significance

To further illustrate the profound role of dreams in African philosophical thought, it is helpful to examine specific cultural examples and mythological narratives where dreams are central to understanding cosmic order, spiritual communication, and societal practices. These case studies reveal how African communities integrate dreams into their daily lives, belief systems, and social structures.

Nyame in Akan Cosmology

In Akan cosmology, particularly among the Akan people of Ghana, Nyame stands as the Supreme Being, the Creator God. Nyame is often associated with the sky and, through various intermediaries, maintains a connection with the human world. While direct mythological narratives explicitly detailing Nyame's communication through dreams are less commonly documented in academic discourses, the broader African understanding confirms that divine beings frequently communicate with humans through dreams (Umezurike, 2019). In Akan society, it is widely believed that dreams carry specific messages from the gods. These often require interpretation by traditional priests or divine agents to uncover

their meaning and guide human expectations or responsibilities (Umezurike, 2019). Nyame's will or warnings likely flow through ancestors or minor deities. They convey messages in dreams, which communities grasp as pivotal moments of insight or instruction. These dreams carry significant weight, shaping communal understanding and guiding behaviour, and reinforcing the idea that the divine directly interacts with human existence through nocturnal messages, establishing and upholding the moral foundations of society.

Zulu Shamans and Prophetic Visions

Among the Zulu people of Southern Africa, shamans, known as sangomas and inyangas, play a critical role as spiritual healers, diviners, and intermediaries between the living and the ancestral spirits. Dreams are central to their calling, training, and practice, serving as a direct form of communication from the ancestors (Chidester, 2008; Hackett, 2018; Podolecka, 2023). The process of becoming a sangoma often starts through "Ukuthwasa" or "Intwaso," an ancestral calling that manifests profoundly through dreams and visions (Booi & Edwards, 2014; Kubeka, 2016; Zeijst et al., 2020). A prospective shaman might experience recurring dreams of being called by the ancestors, perhaps seeing specific animals, natural phenomena, or being taken to sacred places. These vivid dreams serve as an undeniable sign of their spiritual gift and the expectation to undergo initiation. In this context, dreams are typically viewed as direct visitations or transcendent interventions featuring explicit communication. Traditional healthcare practitioners report that ancestors or God communicate through these dream states frequently as "symbolic visions or monologues" or "delivering a message that provides an instruction" (Masola, 2025). Some accounts even describe visions within dreams appearing "exactly" as they later manifest in waking life (Masola, 2025). During the long and challenging training period, dreams continue to be a primary teaching method, with ancestors guiding the shaman in identifying herbs, understanding illnesses, and learning a variety of healing rituals (Hirst, 2005; Masola, 2025).

Once fully initiated, a shaman's ability to interpret dreams, both their own and those of their clients, is essential for their practice. People seek the shaman's help to understand the meaning of their own dreams, especially those that are troubling, unusual, or seem to carry important messages. The shaman's interpretation is not a guess but a skilled process informed by their spiritual connection and deep knowledge of cultural

symbolism (Chidester, 2008). Through these prophetic visions, shamans can diagnose illnesses, identify causes of misfortune, and prescribe remedies, which often include specific rituals or offerings to appease spirits. Dreams, therefore, empower the shaman's healing and divinatory abilities, making them central to the community's spiritual and physical well-being. This engagement with dreams requires embodied practices of sacrificial exchange and ancestral orientation, firmly rooting these experiences in a material religion (Chidester, 2008).

Basotho Dreams and Ancestral Communication

Among the Basotho people of Lesotho and South Africa, dreams serve as crucial conduits for ancestral communication and spiritual guidance (Nell, 2012; Podolecka, 2021). Basotho revere their deceased ancestors, and maintaining a connection with them is paramount (Podolecka, 2021). Ancestors primarily communicate with the living through dreams, providing answers, guidance, and warnings (Nell, 2012; Podolecka, 2021). This communication can be quite direct, providing reassurance, delivering important messages for living relatives, expressing ancestral needs or wishes, or even preparing the dreamer for an impending death (Nell, 2012).

For traditional healers among the Basotho, known as mathuela (a Basotho term for healers), dreams are fundamental to their calling and practice, as they provide a way to contact the spiritual realm and seek help there (Podolecka, 2021). Mathuela are often called to their profession through dreams, experiencing what is sometimes a transformative "sickness" that leads them to their vocation (Podolecka, 2021). These dreams can be prophetic, and while ancestors sometimes speak in metaphors, the mathuela's duty is to interpret these messages and explain them to their patients (Podolecka, 2021). The spiritual insights gained through dreams are integral to their healing practices, which combine knowledge of plant medicines with spiritual healing involving ancestral spirits (Podolecka, 2021). Dreams guide traditional health practitioners in identifying appropriate treatments, including specific herbs and therapeutic rites (Masola, 2025).

Shona Dreams and Traditional Healers

In Shona culture, dreams hold significant epistemological weight, serving as vital channels through which spirits, particularly ancestral spirits known

as vadzimu, communicate with the living (Mwandayi, 2011; Nell, 2012). For n'angas, the traditional healers and spiritual leaders among the Shona, dreams are central to their diagnostic and healing capabilities, as spirits use their dreams to convey messages and influence their practice (Mwandayi, 2011).

Spirits use the dreams of n'angas to convey messages to the wider community, diagnose ailments in patients, and even foretell future events (Mwandayi, 2011). Dreams can also call for the rectification of neglect, caution against immoral behaviour, and establish connections between the past and the present, reinforcing communal values and traditional practices (Mwandayi 2011). Shona people regard dreams as “oracular messages from heaven, the ancestors, or both.” They consider these dreams authoritative voices that command, direct, and guide people on actions to take (Mokgoatsana & Sebola, 2022). The Shona rarely view these dream messages with suspicion. Instead, they accept them as direct communications from the spiritual world, which influence important communal and individual decisions (Mokgoatsana & Sebola, 2022).

Other African Examples

The significance of dreams as sources of spiritual knowledge and guidance is not limited to these groups. Across the African continent, diverse ethnic groups hold similar beliefs, adapted to their specific cultural contexts. For instance, in Yoruba tradition, dreams are potent messages from Orishas (deities) or ancestors, offering guidance, warnings, or revealing one's destiny (Umezurike, 2019). Dream interpretation is a specialized skill often performed by priests or elders who can discern the complex symbols and narratives within dreams to advise individuals or the community (Umezurike, 2019). The information gained through dreams can consequently influence important life decisions, spiritual practices, and responses to communal challenges. Similarly, the Dogon people of Mali, West Africa, place great importance on dreams. They believe dreams are a space where humans can communicate with the Amma (their Supreme Creator deity) and the ancestors. Dreams reveal cosmic truths, guide agricultural practices, or offer solutions to social problems (Hirt, 2012). Divinatory systems often incorporate their interpretation, as communities carefully decode these messages for their broader implications. These examples demonstrate that dreams transcend individual psychology in many African cultures. People view them as authentic encounters with the spiritual realm, which deliver knowledge, guidance, and warnings that

shape personal lives and communal actions. This perspective highlights the deep connection between the visible human world and the invisible spiritual world, with dreams acting as vital bridges between them.

The Role of Traditional Authorities and Interpretation

People experience dreams individually, yet many African cultures require traditional authorities to interpret their meaning and significance. These cultures view dreams not as isolated thoughts or random psychological events, but as profound messages from the spiritual realm or insights meant for the collective (Masola, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). These messages can be intricate, employing symbols and narratives that demand specialized knowledge and spiritual discernment to fully comprehend their true meaning and implications (Umezurike, 2019). The critical need for interpretation underscores the belief that, while an individual may experience a dream, its purpose and impact can extend far beyond them, affecting their family, clan, or society (Umezurike, 2019).

Key figures in this interpretative process include elders, diviners, and spiritual leaders. Elders are respected for their wisdom, life experience, and profound understanding of cultural traditions and history, and they often play a crucial role in helping individuals make sense of their dreams within a communal context (Umezurike, 2019). They provide guidance based on ancestral knowledge and established cultural practices.

Diviners and spiritual leaders, such as the sangomas and inyangas among the Zulu (Chidester, 2008; Hackett, 2018; Podolecka, 2023), or mathuela among the Basotho (Podolecka 2021), hold an especially important position. People believe these practitioners possess a strong connection to the spiritual world that enables them to understand and convey messages received through dreams (Masola, 2025; Mwandayi, 2011; Podolecka, 2021). For many of these spiritual authorities, dreams are not only a primary means through which they receive their spiritual calling (e.g., Ukuthwasa among the Zulu (Booi & Edwards, 2014; Kubeka, 2016; Zeijst et al., 2020) and a transformative “sickness” among the Basotho mathuela (Podolecka, 2021) but also a continuous source of knowledge for their healing and divinatory work (Masola, 2025). Their ability to dream, often of ancestors and specific medicines, is central to their intuitive and healing capabilities (Masola, 2025).

The methods employed for dream interpretation are diverse and deeply rooted in cultural symbolism and spiritual understanding. These traditional authorities draw upon a vast reservoir of shared cultural

knowledge, myths, and spiritual insights to decode the dream's content (Chidester, 2008). They meticulously consider the specific symbols, events, and emotions experienced in the dream, relating them to the dreamer's life circumstances, communal issues, and spiritual well-being (Podolecka, 2021). For instance, within a particular cultural group, a dream depicting certain animals or natural phenomena might carry very specific meanings, which a diviner or spiritual leader could recognize and interpret (Agwu et al., 2024). This interpretative process is not a random guess, but a highly skilled endeavour informed by their spiritual connection and profound understanding of cultural practices (Chidester, 2008).

Interpreting dreams by these traditional authorities carries significant weight and often leads to communal validation and action. Once translators interpret a dream, its message guides crucial decisions, prompts necessary rituals, or influences behaviour at both individual and collective levels (Mokgoatsana & Sebola, 2022; Umezurike, 2019). If a dream shows a warning or a need for spiritual intervention, for example, the community might engage in prayers, purification ceremonies, offerings, or other ritualistic sacrifices to avert misfortune or restore balance (Agwu et al., 2024). This communal response vividly illustrates the seriousness with which dream messages are taken, and how their interpretations are seamlessly integrated into the practical lives of the people (Mwandayi, 2011). Where dreams suggest illness, misfortune, or harmful influences, traditional healers might prescribe specific practices, medicines, or rituals to protect individuals or the entire community (Masola, 2025; Niehaus, 2019).

Ultimately, the pivotal role of traditional authorities in dream interpretation significantly underscores the collective nature of African thought. It confirms that people often share, validate, and apply knowledge gained through personal nocturnal experiences for the greater good and the community's sustained well-being (Nwoye, 2015; Umezurike, 2019). This collaborative process strengthens social cohesion and actively maintains the delicate spiritual equilibrium between the living and the spirit world (Podolecka, 2021).

Philosophical Implications: Challenging Western Reductionism

The African philosophical understanding of dreams offers a significant challenge to dominant Western perspectives, particularly those rooted in scientific materialism and psychological reductionism (Freud, 2010; Hobson & McCarley, 1977). For centuries, Western thought has largely

explained dreams through individualistic, biological, or psychological lenses, often dismissing their spiritual or communal dimensions. Western philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists view dreams as brain activity. Freudian psychology, for instance, interprets them as the unconscious mind's way of communicating with the conscious, revealing repressed thoughts, desires, and conflicts (Freud, 2010). Neuroscience invokes the activation-synthesis hypothesis, positing dreams as random neural firings during sleep that the brain attempts to interpret, devoid of inherent meaning (Hobson & McCarley, 1977). Neurons activate, and the brain weaves these signals into dream narratives. Key brain regions involved include the prefrontal cortex (logical thinking), amygdala (emotion regulation), and hippocampus (memory) (Dresler et al., 2012). Neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and acetylcholine modulate sleep cycles and dream intensity (Monti & Monti, 2004). Collectively, these neurological and psychological processes frame dreams as meaningless brain events.

However, the African worldview provides an alternative, more expansive framework that can broaden contemporary philosophical discussions on consciousness, reality, and human experience (Forster, 2021; Nwoye, 2015; Umezurike, 2019). One of the primary implications is how African dream philosophy critiques the reduction of dreams to mere physiological or unconscious psychological processes. While Western psychology, from Freud to modern neuroscience, has offered valuable insights into the individual mind and brain activity during sleep, it often struggles to account for the collective, spiritual, and communicative aspects of dreams emphasized in African traditions (Nwoye, 2015; Umezurike, 2019). The African perspective suggests that dreams are not solely products of the individual psyche or brain chemistry, but can also be experiences of spiritual realities and intersubjective communication (Masola, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). This challenges the idea that reality is limited to what we can observe or measure empirically, suggesting that there are dimensions of existence accessible through non-ordinary states of consciousness, like dreaming (Laughlin, 2013). The traditional African perspective accepts dreams as unconscious experiences but rejects the notion that they are simply a result of the forebrain responding to random activity in the brainstem (Umezurike, 2019).

African thought integrates subjective dream experiences with an objective spiritual reality. Dreams are not purely internal events but are genuine interactions with external spiritual entities; ancestors, deities, or spirits, that have real-world consequences for the dreamer and their

community (Masola, 2025; Umezurike, 2019). This integration blurs the sharp lines Western philosophy often draws between subjective experience and objective reality, or between mind and world. It proposes a model where consciousness is not merely confined within the individual, but is part of a larger, interconnected cosmos that includes spiritual dimensions and collective consciousness (Laughlin, 2013). This view expands the notion of what makes up “reality” and how humans can access knowledge about it, with some traditional Akan philosophy aligning with contemporary idealism in understanding spirit and soul beyond phenomenal conceptions (Tartaglia, 2023). This Afro-centric approach insists that understanding Africa requires African epistemological lenses, rather than external viewpoints that often misrepresent its cosmological world (Mokgoatsana & Sebola, 2022).

The communal aspect of African dreams also offers a powerful counterpoint to Western individualism. While individual dreams matter, African societies actively tie their interpretation and meaning to collective well-being and social harmony (Umezurike, 2019). This contrasts with Western approaches that might prioritize the individual’s personal growth, self-discovery, or emotional processing through dreams (Nwoye, 2015). The African perspective highlights how dreams can function as mechanisms for social cohesion, ethical guidance, and the transmission of cultural values, demonstrating that an individual’s dream can carry significant weight for the entire community (Umezurike, 2019). This challenges philosophies that isolate the individual, reminding us that the self is deeply relational and that personal experiences often have collective implications, reflecting an ethics of mutuality, interdependence, and cooperation (Umezurike, 2019).

African dream philosophy invites a re-evaluation of several fundamental philosophical assumptions. It suggests that the nature of consciousness is not merely an emergent property of the brain, but may have broader spiritual or cosmic connections (Laughlin, 2013). It expands the definition of reality and knowledge to include spiritual dimensions and acknowledges non-rational, experiential pathways to knowledge, derived from sources like traditional teachings and revelations from dreams (Masola, 2025; Williams & Shipley, 2023). In this context, indigenous epistemology views the search for knowledge as a spiritual journey that values spiritually derived knowledge (Williams & Shipley, 2023). African dream philosophy reinforces a relational and communal understanding of the self, intertwining individual experiences (including dreams) with the collective (Umezurike, 2019). By engaging with these perspectives,

contemporary philosophy can move towards a more complete understanding of human experience, one that respects and incorporates diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. It provides a basis for interdisciplinary dialogues that can bridge gaps between science, spirituality, and culture, fostering a richer philosophical discourse that transcends disciplinary and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

This philosophical analysis highlights the distinct African understanding of dreams, positioning them as central to an interconnected worldview where spiritual and physical realms are in constant dialogue. This framework, rooted in African ontology, emphasizes communal personhood and the active agency and influence of spiritual forces, making dreams vital channels of communication between humans and the spirit world. Dreams function as critical epistemological tools, offering guidance, prophecy, and warnings for both individuals and the collective, influencing decision-making and communal well-being. Their communal and intersubjective nature means messages often extend beyond the dreamer, with traditional authorities playing a pivotal role in their interpretation and subsequent communal action. Ultimately, African dream philosophy significantly challenges Western reductionist views, broadening our understanding of consciousness, reality, and human experience. It prompts a re-evaluation of fundamental philosophical assumptions, advocating for an inclusive discourse that acknowledges diverse ways of knowing and being. This perspective offers valuable insights for psychology, religious studies, and cross-cultural philosophy, encouraging future research into its diverse manifestations and contemporary relevance.

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