
Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination.

Amira Mittermaier. Los Angeles and Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011.

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When picking up *Dreams that Matter*, it should be impossible to forget that Egypt right now is not quite the same Egypt in which this text was written. The extent to which Egypt has changed, and the nature and content of those changes, is still, at this point, in a constant state of flux. But this is a unique text, one that speaks both to an Egyptian winter that preceded the Spring, and offers interesting possibilities for thinking about the politics of imagination in post-Tahrir Egypt. This is not a book about the content of dreams, for a number of solid theoretical and practical reasons, but it is a book about the work that dreams do, and the way people interact around dreams. And since dreams are unlikely to disappear, neither will their power, and their importance, in Egypt today.

Mittermaier takes care to organize this text carefully, acknowledging from the outset that an analysis of dreams, or more precisely the landscape in which dreams have power both in themselves through their interpretation, is complicated and multi-layered. Chapter One, “Dream Trouble,” lays out the historical background of dream interpretation within Islam, and specifically in the Muslim context. The primary focus of the chapter is on the nature of authority in dream interpretation and the extent to which dreams, and their interpretation, have been understood as a part of “true Islam.” Dreams appear, in this chapter, to pose challenges to both reformists and strict traditionalists: to reformists because dreams operate outside the system of conventionally understood rationality, and to strict traditionalists because dreams and the ways that they can be interpreted can give rise to understandings of religious practices that differ from the understanding advocated by orthodox religious institutions. Introduced in this chapter, the particular challenges that dreams and their interpretations pose to both reformists and the strictly orthodox is a theme that continues throughout the book. Chapter Two focuses primarily on the dream interpreters themselves, their personal, intellectual, and religious background as well as their physical location in the geography of Cairo and the community concerned with the interpretation of dreams, including the physical location of dream interpreters, and the ways that dream interpretation often takes places in spaces that are simultaneously both public and private. Chapters Three and Four focus specifically on the ways that dreaming, both when awake and when asleep, challenges the primacy of visual evidence. Chapter Five has a more specific focus, and looks specifically at the ways that visitational dreams inform people’s behaviour,

not only with the dead but with the living; visitational dreams, Mittermaier suggests, have the practical effect of reinforcing the necessity of important social behaviours. Chapter Six examines Western theory concerning the role and importance of dreams, and particularly the seminal role of Freud in defining the European understanding of dreams. Importantly, this chapter lays out the ways that Egyptian interpretations of Freud have rendered the relationship between Muslim dreams and Freudian psychoanalysis more complicated than a simple binary opposition. In the Afterward, Mittermaier begins to address explicitly what she calls there “The Politics of Dreaming,” in a short conclusion whose thrust is largely to the point that the politics of dreaming do not simply concern those conditions in which dreams speak directly to those in power, but also to all the dreams that bear upon the relations between people.

Mittermaier describes her work not as an ethnography of dreams themselves—an analysis of their content—but as an “anthropology of the imagination” (15). Western thought, typified by Aristotle, Rousseau, and perhaps most importantly, Freud, understands the imagination “as a faculty anchored within the individual subject” (17). As a faculty of an independent and autonomous subject, an examination of the imagination reveals, at most, things about the subject that condition the possibility and meaning of that imagination. The writings of Foucault, Mittermaier suggests, shifts the focus on imagination from understanding the nature of imagination (i.e., as a faculty) to understanding the work that imagination does. Rather than interpreting dreams as indicative of psychological features, this approach anchors the meaning of dreams in the social, interpersonal, and political contexts and effects of their interpretation.

The interpretation of dreams, it seems, is simultaneously highly personal and highly public. It is personal in the sense that, ideally, the dream interpreter should be intimately familiar with the dreamer and because the dreamer is to keep that dream private from all but the appropriate interpreter. Dreams are not to be told, because they achieve a sort of inevitability through their enunciation. Yet at the same time dreams are extremely public; not simply because modern media provides for the interpretation of dreams on satellite television shows and via websites—after all, one of the more traditional sites of dream interpretation for Mittermaier is a shrine in which dreams are often presented semi-publicly—but also because the interpretation of dreams in the modern context are not limited in their effect to the locality in which they are interpreted (a shrine, for example) and often become public in ways that greatly amplify their political effect.

At the beginning of Mittermaier’s fieldwork, for example, a dream was making the rounds of Cairo, a dream whose principle trope was a breast-feeding moon, and it was widely understood that Shaykh Hanafi, one of Mittermaier’s interlocutors, had interpreted the dream as indicating the imminent arrival of the Mahdi (31–33).

The Mahdi is a figure who, by his very nature, supersedes the authority of those in power and indicates the arrival of a new world order. The subversive and possibly anarchic force of this dream, which had acquired an apocryphal but authoritative interpretation, was so subversive that it was actively suppressed. In the Egypt of 2003, under Mubarak, the potential political impact of this dream was such that, despite Sheikh Hanafi's protests that he had never made such an interpretation, the television show on which he had interpreted dreams was cancelled and al-Azhar issued an opinion forbidding the interpretation of dreams before the masses.

At the same time, the political force of dreams is not limited to the macro-political level concerned with the leadership of the country or its government. Insofar as one of the primary requirements of dream interpretation is that it leads towards the good, towards greater understanding and towards peace, dreams interpreters notably act as the axis of forms of informal social services (80–82). The mediations performed by dream interpreters are not simply mediations between what is visible to all and what is visible only to some, or to those in certain states, but a material mediation between those who have and those who have not—between those who are in need and those who have the ability to give. The giving of food to the poor at Ibn Sirin's shrine, the assistance that Shaykh Nabil provided to those with mental, physical, or familial problems, and the various ways in which the community of dream interpretation organized social relations, speaks to the ways the politics of dreaming takes effect at the micro level.

It is interesting to note that there is, as far as can be ascertained from this text, nothing particularly “democratic” about dream interpretation. The majority of dream interpreters are professionals—both by virtue of the study that they have devoted to the topic, and by definition—and while the interpretation of dreams may not be determined by political figures, these interpretations are certainly not arrived at via a process of majority decision-making. In that sense—and this is something that Mittermaier is entirely aware of—dreams are not an antidote to totalitarianism, at least insofar as it is theoretically possible for the structure of totalitarian authority to be reproduced within the context of dream interpretations. Insofar as the civil force of dream interpretation is inextricably linked to what Mittermaier refers to as “the shaykhs high spiritual state” (125), dream interpretation remains always inextricably linked to a particular and authoritative figure.

At the same time, Mittermaier makes an important point about the flexibility of dream interpretations and the ways that dream interpretation is focused on ethical concerns, and how, insofar as it is always political, dream interpretation is in some ways representative of the form of politics that is inextricably intertwined with ethical concerns. The challenges that the interpretation of dreams poses to political orders is not, Mittermaier seems to be suggesting, a conventional form of resistance, but

rather a form of interaction whose focus on the ethical de-centers explicit questions of power in favour of ethical concerns (161-63).

Even knowing that the Egypt of today is—one way or another—significantly different from the Egypt in which the fieldwork that grounds this text was conducted, the reader of *Dreams that Matter* is less tempted to claim that the research contained within it has been rendered irrelevant by recent events in Egypt than they are to clamour for further research. Did people dream in Tahrir Square? What dreams, if any, circulated before and during the Egyptian revolution? After the revolution, during the period of military rule and the highly contentious presidential elections that are still underway at the time of this writing, were people still going to dream interpreters? Did dreams become more or less explicitly political? And, for that matter, what posture do the candidates and parties vying for a controlling interest in post-Revolutionary Egypt take towards the interpretation of dreams? The questions that are being asked today about the future of Egypt, and the future of the Egyptian Revolution, are endless. But Mittermaier makes an important and stimulating case, whether it was her intention or not, that some part of the answer “might lie in the imagination...[because] besides revealing emergent possibilities, dream-visions contribute to their actualization” (238).

The degree to which dreams have contributed to recent transformations in Egypt remains unknown, but all readers who take this important book seriously will take seriously the possibility that in and after Tahrir, dreams and the imagination have only come to matter more.