Dreams and the Construction of Reality

Symbolic Transformations of the Seen and the Unseen
in the Egyptian Imagination

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Abstract. – Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in urban and rural communities in Egypt's Nile Delta, this research explicates, within a broad perspective, the significance of dreams to Egyptians encompassing their relationship to the world with its seen and unseen dimensions. It also demonstrates the sociocultural and cosmological conditions that bring about moral and social support to certain dreams for constructing and reconstructing reality. There is a mutual substantiation between the dreamworld and Egyptian cosmology in the sense that certain dream visions are justified or sanctified by religious worldviews, while some significant aspects of worldviews, especially those related to invisible domains, are validated and substantiated by dreams. *[Egypt, Middle East, dreams, worldviews, cosmology, Islam]*

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Introduction

Little attention has been given to the ethnography of invisible domains in the Middle East, in general, and Egypt, in particular, though they overwhelmingly infiltrate people's everyday lives. This article aims at showing the debate among Egyptians concerning the reliability of dreams as a source of information about the unseen world and its symbolic transformations. It is also concerned with the

social conditions that bring about moral and social support to certain dreams or imaginary construction. The study, drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the city of Tanta and two of its adjacent villages,[1] presents an anthropological holistic insight incorporating objective description and subjective interpretation and as such comprises a phenomenological or symbolic–hermeneutic inquiry.[2] Departing from inquiries that focus largely on psychological[3] or/and religious[4] interpretations

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1 Tanta, the capital city of the al-Gharbiyya province located 95 km north of Cairo, is the largest and most active commercial center located in the middle Delta and comprises a mixed urban-rural population. Tanta is also known as a center for religious festivals related to the revered Sufi Sidi Ahmad al-Badawi. The two villages are Shibshir al-Hissa (located 8 km north of Tanta) and al-Rajdiyya (located 6 km northeast of Tanta).

2 I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 persons (of both genders) from different social, economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. In addition to interviewing the article focuses on 12 case studies extensively examined and chosen as representatives of various initial ethnographic studies. However, the criteria on which the choice is made are related to the local classifications of dreams: dream-vision, ordinary dream, and intentional or predictive dream.

3 Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1950), viewing dreams as forms of fulfillment of unconscious wishes and unfulfilled sexual desires, overlooks the symbolic basis of dream-work lay in culture, transformed into language for dream reports and not mere privates fantasies (Herdt 1987: 81). For Jung (2002: 78f.), however, there are two kinds of unconscious: a *personal* unconscious, causing "little" dreams or nightly fragments of subjective impressions and fantasies; and a

of dreams, the study attempts to explicate the significance of the dreams to Egyptians within a broad perspective encompassing their relationship to the world with its seen and unseen dimensions.[5] It is inevitable then, the ethnographic material suggests, taking seriously the triple dimensions of Egyptian worldview: the person, society, and cosmos

Egyptians and people in several Muslim countries hold dreaming in a much higher regard than is generally true anywhere in the West.[6] In their discussion of medieval Muslim culture scholars such as Corbin (1966), Hughes (2002), Katz (1997), Lecerf (1966), Smith (1980), Sviri (1999), and von Grunebaum (1966), among others, state that dreams were used by Muslims to elucidate theological doctrines, elaborate eschatological issues, reveal historical events, and employ political actions.[7] More than a century ago Lane observed that the "Egyptians place great faith in dreams, which often direct them in some of the most important actions of life" (Lane 1966: 261).[8] This statement holds contemporary relevance. Valerie J. Hoffman (1997) argues that religiously significant dreams are a widespread phenomenon in contemporary Egyptian religious life.

Dreams embody multidimensional aspects and as such serve as cultural means of dialoging with the visible or invisible, constructing and reconstructing the reality. The claim that dreams are excluded from the scientific inquiry because they are not observable is unjustified. As far as dreams can function as cultural representations like myths or rituals and as far as they are dealt with in relation to people's worldviews, belief systems, and epistemological orientations they are considered social facts.[9] Though dreams form personal experiences, they can be socially narrated, discussed, and interpreted as a cosmic entryway into differing realms of reality as well as a symbolic means of transforming that reality.[10]

Dreamworlds and Worldviews

In this study dreams are examined within a larger context of Egyptian (Muslim) cognitive orientations or worldviews. Worldviews are taken to denote inner-meaning systems made of assumptions

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collective unconscious, causing "big" or archetypal dreams concerned with symbolical images or general ideas (containing the accumulating experience of all humanity) whose significance lies in their intrinsic meaning and not in any personal experience and its association. Jung (2002: 9) said, "the human psyche is unique and subjective or personal only in part, and for the rest is collective and objective." It is worth to note that what Jung calls collective unconscious is essentially the realm of the "Active Imagination" of Ibn ʿArabi (Halligan 2001: 277).

4 Dreams and visions have been extensively studied within religious contexts. For the religious role of dreams and visions in Islam, see for instance, Corbin (1966); Ewing (1990, 1994); Green (2003); Hermansen (1997a, 1997b); Katz (1997); and Sirriyeh (2000). For the impact of religion on dream visions in contemporary Egypt, see Hoffman (1997); Mittermaier (2007).

5 The earliest known records of dreams can be found on Egyptian papyri dating from the 12th dynasty around 2000 and 1790 B.C. (Mahrer 1989: 3 f.).

6 As von Grunebaum (1966: 20) points out, "we have less need of our dreams than had the Muslims ... For one thing, we are no longer so deeply concerned with the Hereafter and the supernatural." Such a statement, differentiating between scientific and superstitious worldviews, is ethnocentric and insensitive toward religious experiences. This ethnocentric attitude is extended to value system and personality construction where a scholar, addressing dream experience of a Pakistani Sufi saint (*pir*), points out a "psychoanalytic theory has embedded within it an ideology of independence as a sign of maturity. Sufi theory and Islam, in contrast, rest on an ideology of maturity manifested in submission and relationship" (Ewing 1994: 578). Even the latter scholar has tried to bridge the two outlooks utilizing Heinz Kohut's statement that mature, independent Westerners retain a lifelong need for the support of others, she asserts that "Islam and Western thought represent two hegemonic forms of discourse, two incompatible realities" (Ewing 1994: 576).

7 Dreams played a significant role in the lives of medieval Muslim communities. They were considered decisive elements in changing reality. For example, the caliph al-Maʾmun's decision to translate Greek philosophical texts into Arabic was made after he had a dream conversation with the Greek philosopher Aristotle (von Grunebaum 1966: 12). "In 1169 Aad ad-Din Shirkuh, the Zengid general in Egypt, has a dream which he interprets as foretelling that he would arrest and replace his rival, the Fatimid commander Shawar. Encouraged by his dream he proceeds with his plot which leads to the capture and execution of his opponent" (von Grunebaum 1966: 13).

8 It is worthy to note that Ammar (1954: 279), in an appendix, points out that dreams "are considered to be of value as a means of obtaining useful ethnological material, and thus could serve purposes similar to those of tests. The significance of dreams is hence relevant data for our study. It must be pointed out here that the writer was not fully aware of the importance of such data while he was in the field, and for this reason he did not collect enough dreams, and the ones recorded here are all those collected, without any selection."

9 See Basso (1987); Herdt (1987); Kilborne (1981, 1987); Price-Williams (1987); Tedlock (1987, 1992). Basso argues that the basic cosmological and ontological propositions of Kalapo people's world view "can just easily govern the manner of dream interpretation. The specific content of that world view – upon which the daily fears, anticipations, and joys of participants avidly feed – in turn affects the manifest content of the dreaming experience and conditions how it is to be communicated" (1987: 102).

10 Jung (2001: 22) states, "I prefer to regard the symbol as the announcement of something unknown, hard to recognize and not to be fully determined."

and images in accordance with which the universe, including society and person, is constructed (el-Aswad 2004: 72).[11] This means that dreams are not confined to the dreamworld as such; rather they are related to a broader world of cultural representations at the level of beliefs, folk narrations, practices, and rituals.[12] In "all dreams, a dreamer draws upon the cultural concepts and signs in terms of which he has learned to organize his world" (Ewing 1990: 57). Beyond the scope of the visible and tangible world of experience lies the invisible, imaginary, and unknowable reality (ʿalam al-ghaib) from which possible realities emerge. These realities differ from each other in *ontological*, *attributional*, and *relational* terms.

Ontologically, there are multiple worlds of which the natural world, including that of human beings, is the only one visible. Other realities, mainly unseen, encompass those of spirits, ʿalam al-rūh; of angels, ʿalam al-mlaʾika; of *jinn*; and of eschatology, *barzakh*. Although most of these invisible entities are inaccessible in normal waking life, individuals may see and communicate with them in dreams.[13]

Attributionally, multiple realities encompass positive and negative attributes related to specific unseen beings and forces. Positive attributes, for example, are associated with angels, blessing (*baraka*), and wonders (*karamat*) made by those who are believed to possess hidden-constructive knowledge (religion), while negative attributes are associated with devils, demonic-negative forces, and hidden-destructive knowledge (magic).

Relationally, the dreamworld deals simultaneously with seen and unseen worlds including this world, the eschatological world, and the other world. These perceived realities, however, are interpenetrating domains and points of reference correlating with cultural constructs that render different levels of experience, real or imaginary, intelligible. The specific features and contents of their worldviews affect people's dreamworld or dreaming experience and condition how it is to be communicated.

The thrust of dreams lies in the attribute of mediation (medium). As the *barzakh* (eschatology) in Muslim cosmology bridges this life with the other life, dreams also constitute the *barzakh* linking the seen with the unseen (see Fig. 1).

I take "cosmology" to mean "assumptions concerning the structure of the universe, and is extended here to include ecology and society as well as human and nonhuman beings and forces, both perceptible and imperceptible, as constituting integrated parts of that universe" (el-Aswad 2002: 2). Though the *barzakh* in Muslim cosmology indicates the intermediate realm between this world and the other world where the souls of the dead wait till the Day of Resurrection, it goes beyond this restricted notion to encompass a broader meaning as mediating between differing realities including those of the waking, the sleeping, or dreaming, and the dead. Put differently, with reference to dreaming, the *barzakh* here encompasses spirits of living persons interacting in dreams with unseen entities as well as with spirits of other living persons and not just with those of the dead.[14]

Semiotics and the Hierarchy of Dreams

Dreams are dealt with as encompassing cosmological and semiotic implications. In his semiotic analysis, Peirce (1931–58) provides triple classification of signs (icon, index, and symbol) based on three categories of relations a sign might have to its object or what it stands for. Resemblance or similarity is necessary for the icon. A sign is considered iconic, such as a photo or image, when it resembles what it refers to. Contiguity or the relationship between a part and a whole turns a sign into an index such as knocking on a door. An index demonstrates the existence of its object. Finally, a sign becomes a symbol when nothing but convention determines its relationship with what it stands for.[15] Peirce's classification implies a hierarchy of meanings, utilized in anthropological literature. For example, Rappaport (1999: 70–73), drawing on Peirce's tri-

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11 For further discussion of the concept of worldview, see el-Aswad (1990, 1994, 1999, 2002); Kearney (1975, 1984); Redfield (1952, 1968); and Wagner (2001).

12 Crapanzano (1980, 2004); Foster (1973); Ewing (1994); George (1995), Stewart (1997); Tedlock (1992, 2007); Wautischer (1994).

13 Some Muslim scholars interpret the Qurʾanic verse: "No human being can communicate with Allah except through inspiration, or from behind a veil" (al-Shura, 42: 51), by suggesting the word "veil" connotes "dream" (al-ʿAsqalani 1959: 354).

14 Some verses of the Qurʾan, especially al-Zumar (39: 42) affirm that Allah takes the souls of people at death and during their sleep. He keeps the souls of those on whom He has passed the decree of death and returns the souls of the sleepers until their assigned period of life is fulfilled. The interpretation of this verse, however, "led to the view that the souls or spirits during sleep share a condition with those of the dead, and that by means of that shared circumstance they are said to interact and communicate" (Smith 1980: 225).

15 For further discussion of Peirce' contribution, see Mitchell (1986); Parmentier (1994); Singer (1984).
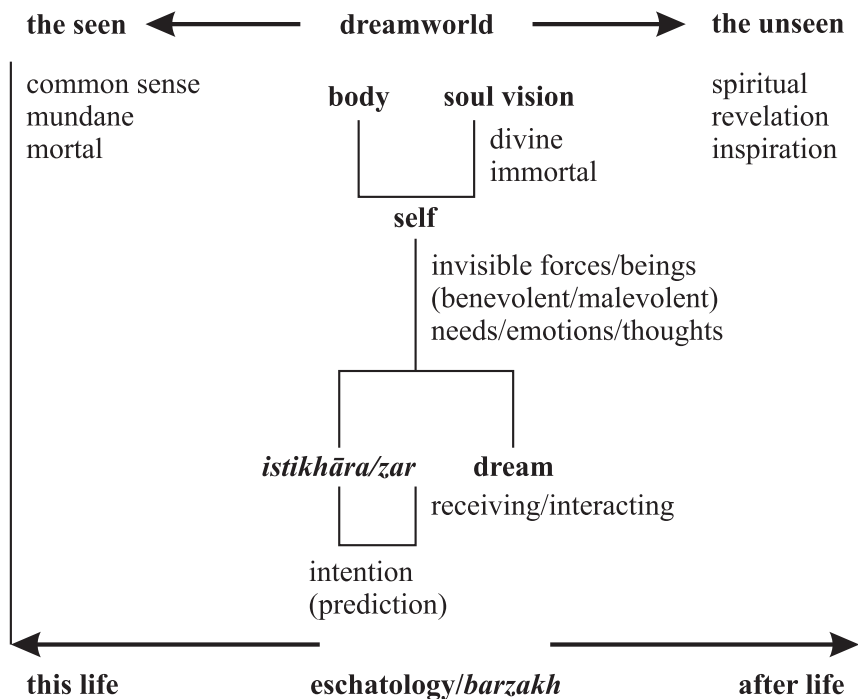
Fig. 1: Dreamworld, the Seen, and the Unseen.

partite classification of signs, makes a distinction between three hierarchical levels of meaning. They are high-order meaning, which is grounded in indexicalty, identity, or unity (as in the identification of self with other), middle-order meaning, which is founded upon similarity (as in metaphor), and low-order meaning, which is based on distinction (as in taxonomy).[16]

As the universe is hierarchically ordered, so is the world of dream. According to local exegeses, dreams are defined and classified in three hierarchical categories. First, is the dream-vision (ru'yā), that enjoys higher-order meaning and differs from both regular dream and waking vision (ru'ya). Second, is the regular dream that has two Arabic words: *manam* (derived from the word *naum* that means sleeping), and *ḥulm*.[17] However, a demonic dream or terrible nightmare is called *kabus*. Third, are the intentional and predictive dreams that take place after certain rituals; one, known as *istikhara*, implies religious significance, the other, related to *zar*, embodies religious and magical implications.

This classification implies Egyptian theories concerning which components of the person such as the soul and/or self among other entities, within and without the dreamer, participate in the dreaming, and will be subsequently discussed.

Dream Visions and the Transformation of Reality

High-order meaning, based on participation or unification with the other, the cosmos, or the divine, may be experienced "as effects of or as *parts* of, that which they signify" (Rappaport 1999: 72; emphasis in original). As being of higher-order meaning, dream visions can be a source of spiritual and religious experiences, connecting people with sacred forces, beings, and realities that go beyond the ordinary boundaries of space and linear time (Casto et al. 1999; Bulkeley 1996). Supernatural presence is created or transmitted through dream visions allowing for the possibility of receiving divine inspiration resulting in spiritual awakening. Egyptians consider dream visions to be sharper, stronger, more veracious, and higher in dignity than other kinds of dreams.[18] They are interpreted by

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16 Concerning the contribution of Arab and Muslim intellectuals to the symbolic interpretation of dreams see Al-Akili (1992) and Ayoub (1992).

17 The word *ḥulm* that means dream is colloquially pronounced *ḥilm*. It is worthy to note that the Arabic word *istiḥlām* (derived from the root *ḥ-l-m*) locally connotes sexual sensation a person experiences in dreams.

18 The prophet Mohammad said that a good dream is one of forty-six parts of prophecy (al-Bukhari 1966: *Kitab al-Ta'bir*, chap. 2, no. 6983; chap. 4, nos. 6987, 6988, 6989;

Egyptians as related to the activity of a person's soul (*rūḥ*) that transcends all psychosocial boundaries. The soul is a significant element in dreams related to nearing death experience (Sanders 2007). The soul is depicted as a divine secret (*sirr ilahi*) made of the light of God (*qabas min nur Allah*), enabling human beings to participate in the unseen, transcendental, divine, and sacred reality. It must be noted that sacred reality or sanctity is defined here as "*the quality of unquestionableness imputed by congregations to postulates in their nature objectively unverifiable and absolutely unfalsifiable*" (Rappaport 1999: 281; emphasis in original).

The soul is accessible through such means as dream vision, prayer, and meditation. Dream visions, justified or sanctified by the sacred text or the Holy Qurʾan (8: 43; 12: 6, 36–37, 41, 43, 46; 30: 23; 37: 102, 105; 48: 27),[19] separate reality from illusion that might occur in regular dreams or ill-received reality. In brief, though some regular dreams might be contested, dream visions, recounted to me by those whom I interviewed, were never doubted or questioned.

Dream visions, especially those with spiritual and religious contents, imply visitations from unseen worlds and, therefore, give the person spiritual strength and mystical power over others. Dream visions are interpreted by reference to the status of religious imagery appearing in them. For instance, the appearance and message from the dream vision of an angel would have a higher potential truth-value than a message received from the dream image of a local saint. Hierarchically, highly revered and holy persons such as prophets and *wali*s (friends of Allah) have powerful souls (el-Aswad 2006). Seeing sanctified beings (such as prophets, specifically prophet Muhammad) in dreams, is interpreted both iconically and indexically.[20]

There are two forms of transformations, dream transformation and awakening transformation. Dream transformation means that dreams enable individuals to unveil the hidden and unseen dimensions of the universe and the person transformed into signs or symbols. I take awakening transformation to mean the attempt to change the reality through interpreting dreams and relating them to that reality. Across the polarities of subjective–objective and unseen–seen, dreams are viewed as vehicles for symbolic transformation of inner or incorporeal and spiritual experiences to be outward or corporeal realities, socially or collectively communicated and discussed. In other words, if the unseen is to become seen in the world, individuals should take their dream visions seriously.

The following case studies show how dream visions caused the persons to transform or change the reality through making judicious decisions in dealing with critical incidents.

Fikry, a 56 year old man raised in the Delta countryside, is renown not only for his political power, holding the position of general in the interior ministry, but also as a *sharif* or a descendant of the prophet. He experienced a dream vision that he cannot forget or dismiss. The dream vision and related events Fikry experienced (during terror activities in Egypt in 1997) were recounted as follows:

I saw the prophet Muhammad looking toward the other side in a gesture that he was unsatisfied with something. I was worried about what he saw. However, next day I unexpectedly received a call from a higher rank ordering me to march, aided with police forces, to a place where a group of people were designated as belonging to a militant or terrorist Muslim group. I led the forces to the alleged location and proceeded to arrest the suspect. However, I arrested an innocent man whom I knew very well. He would be the last person to be a fanatic Muslim

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chap. 10, no. 6994). He also said that nothing would be left after his death except good dream visions or glad tidings, *mubashshirat* (al-Bukhari 1966: *Kitab al-Taʿbir*, chap. 5, no. 6990).

19 "The reality of the objective significance of the dream is guaranteed by the Holy Book" (von Grunebaum 1966: 7).

20 Regarding the matter of seeing different images of the prophet Muhammad in a dream vision, Muslim scholars' views, according to al-ʿAsqalani (1959: 386f.), can be summed up as follows. In all cases the images of the prophet as seen in dream visions are true, but the differences of images are related to the inner state or condition of the dreamer. If the image of the prophet appears in a dream vision as being identical to his real or actual image (as described in the authentic classical tradition such as those of Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim), it means that the dreamer is in peaceful and perfect state of mind. If otherwise (seeing a different image of the prophet), it means that the dreamers' state of mind is imperfect or troubled. This latter case necessitates

a deeper interpretation of the dream vision (al-ʿAsqalani 1959: 387). Lane pointed out how dreams can be interpreted literally. He referred to an incident in which a religious leader announced publicly that the head of the revered Imam al-Husayn, grandson of the prophet Muhammad, was not in al-Husayn mosque in Cairo. However, a disciple had a vision in which he saw the prophet accompanied with ʿAli ibn Abi Talib (cousin and son-in-law of the prophet and father of al-Husayn), and intimate companions had come to visit the head of the Imam al-Husayn (in his shrine or mosque in Cairo). The religious leader, being informed of the dream vision, took the disciple and went, together, to visit the shrine of al-Husayn. When they entered the mosque, the religious leader said: "Peace be on thee, O son of the daughter of the Apostle of God. I believe that the noble head is here, by reason of the vision which this person has seen; for the vision of the Prophet is true; since he hath said, 'Who sees me in his sleep sees me truly; for Satan cannot assume the similitude of my form'" (Lane 1966: 216).

or terrorist. The man looked at me and without a word and, then, turned his face looked toward the other side in a manner similar if not identical to the way the prophet did to me in the dream.

Fikry released the man, interpreting his dream vision not just as a sign of fantasy or mere act of seeing but as an actual event or message, showing the prophet's disapproval of injustice and aggression against innocent people. Fikry would never had changed his view of the whole police operation had he not experienced his dream vision disclosing a segment of the unseen reality. Fikry's interpretations of his dream vision not only indicated the struggle against injustice, but also motivated him to change or challenge any ideological or materialistic power that precludes individuals from their rights. In brief, by narrating and interpreting his dream vision Fikry, like many other persons, responded to the reality and reconstructed it.

The second case study concerns Shaikh Hamid, an *al-Azhar* graduate who works as a religious leader (*imam*) of a mosque at Tanta. He had a dream vision in 2004 that changed him to be a Sufi.

I was in the holy mosque of the prophet (in Medina). After evening prayer I saw lots of people gathering around a spacious place. They were reciting the Qur'an in a humming melodic fashion. I walked till I reached a place with a high ceiling from which a huge splendid shining crystal was hanging. When I get closer to people I saw the prophet exactly as I read in the classic books of al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim among others: the white skin face mixed with red color, the turban, on his head, long eyelashes, large mouth. Meanwhile, the prophet – in the dream – points to a fellow sitting close to him who, in turn, offered me a cup of water.

Shaikh Hamid explains the vision of the prophet and the cup of water (offered to him) in a context of broad picture encompassing what is beyond apparent or physical things. For Shaikh Hamid, water is not only the main source of life but indicates purity and knowledge, more specifically the mystic knowledge of Sufism (*tasawwuf*). Shaikh Hamid recounts that after the vision he was changed from a mere religious leader, formally serving the Islamic law (*shari'a*), to a mystic or Sufi seeking the hidden truth (*ḥaqīqa*) of life. He has become a member of the Sufi order of al-Shinnawiyya originated at Tanta.[21] He relates the "water" to the story of al-Khidr or the "Pious Slave" (known for his divine mystic knowledge, *'ilm ladunni*, imparted to

him by Allah), whom Moses met at a place where two seas conjunct (Qur'an 18: 60–82). For the Sufi, dream visions are as real and objective as corporeal matter or daily action. Shaikh Hamid has devoted the rest of his life to charitable deeds helping the needy. Dream visions, viewed by Shaikh Hamid as belonging to spiritual realm, provide him with inspiration (*ilhām*) and help him to be receptive to signs coming from the unseen because they free him from fantasies and illusions.[22] He recounts that he sees everything in the world through the eyes of mercy, *raḥma*, which is a divine bless radiated from Allah, Most Gracious (*Raḥman*), and Most Merciful (*Raḥīm*). Shaikh Hamid, confessing a Sufi experience evoking extraterrestrial life and cosmic insight, said, "in the waking time I live in the world, but in the sleep or dream time the world, seen and unseen, lives in me."

The third case study relates to a university professor, holding his Ph. D. from a reputable Western Institute, who recounts the following dream vision:

In summer 2001, I dreamt that the prophet appeared to me as a very tall, masculine, and dark skinned man wearing Arab costume. He was standing away looking at me in a serious way, but not angry. I was afraid and said: "Prophet!" Then I wake up. Next day I discovered that a project that was given to a colleague to review, was stolen by that person who posted it in the university web as his own "work-in progress."

The dream motivated the professor to publish a major part of his project in a reputable journal so as to protect his right and change an unjust discourse. He has since gone on to become very prolific in his field.

The fourth case study concerns 'Atiyyat, an illiterate, old woman from the village of Shabshir al-Hissa (in the vicinity of Tanta), who supported five children after the martyrdom of her husband in the October War, 1973. She said,

One day I felt empty, alone, and abandoned. I cried because I felt pity about myself, having to take care of my little children with no help. I felt that I had been uprooted (*maqtu'a min shajara*) and asked myself why Allah did not show mercy to me and my children, oh God forgive me. When I went to sleep that night, I dreamt that

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21 For more on the Sufi order of al-Shinnawiyya, see el-Aswad (2006).

22 In his discussion of Sufi experiences of Sohrawardi and Ibn Arabi, among other Sufis, Corbin refers to an ontological reality called *mundus imaginalis* or the imaginal world that "is a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state. The existence of this world presupposes an imaginative power that makes possible to leave the sensible state without leaving physical extension" (Corbin 1966: 407).

I was standing in my small kitchen looking for something to cook for my children. I felt the door of the kitchen slowly opening. I looked and saw a bright, aluminous light coming from the crack in the door, and heard a deep voice say, "You are never alone." I was overwhelmed by the mixed feelings of awe, happiness and hope. I woke to find myself holding my little baby in my arms.

When I asked ʿAtiyyat about the significance of her dream, she corrected me saying,

It was not just a dream, but a dream vision (*ruʾyā*) because Allah showed me His mercy not only in my sleep but also in my wakefulness. I had convinced myself that the opened door, the light, and the voice I experienced in the vision were a divine response to my prayer. At noon on the day after the dream vision, I heard a man call my name. The man had a deep voice similar to the voice I had heard in my dream. He approached the door that was *ajar*, opened it, and called my name. As I saw the light coming through the door, I instantly recalled the dream vision. I hurried to see who was calling me. He was a representative from the army bringing a check of substantial amount money as compensation for the death of my late husband. I used part of the money to establish a small grocery store through which I supported my children who completed their university education and now hold decent jobs in the government.

These narratives of dream visions and imagined cosmologies share some significant features anchored in the theme that the persons, empowered by spiritual support, transform and reconstruct their reality.

Dream Communication and Symbolic Transformation

A dream indicates a sequence of images, ideas, and emotions that someone experiences during sleep (Casto et al. 1999: 45). Regular dreams, however, are taken here to indicate simultaneously psychological, social, and spiritual realities.[23] Though the soul, that can move independently and communicate with other beings, spirits, and angels, plays a significant role in dreams (especially dream visions), the self (*nafs*) or psyche inseparable from the body, is the core agency in regular dreams that serve as symbolic ways for expressing individuals' emotions and ideas as well as satisfying their needs (Fig. 1).

For the Egyptians, the self encompasses two aspects indicating that good exists side by side with evil.[24] Man has been given the ability to distinguish between right and wrong as represented in having, respectively, a righteous self (*nafs mutmaʾinna*) and an evil or domineering self (*nafs ammara*). Both contrary aspects have opposite effects on dreaming. Other unseen entities and forces including angels or good spirits and devils or evil spirits are believed by Egyptians to be present in dreams. Also, dream interpretation involves an assessment of whether the dream image and its apparent meaning emanated from benevolent or malevolent beings and forces.

The line dividing the self from the "other" and the transnatural from the natural is emphasized through dream experience. Dreams help people to become aware of themselves and of "others" as well as of events that occur in their lives. The differentiation between the self and the other or nonself, a basic component of "worldview" (Redfield 1962: 95), is created not only through daily social interactions but also through dreams. Unlike the Moroccan Tuhami who is "usually not so careful to differentiate the waking world from the world of dreams" (Crapanzano 1980: 116), Egyptians are careful in maintaining the distinction between the two worlds. However, the core meaning of self-awareness is the ability to distinguish self from non-self, and this can be done through dreams. Simply put, "dreaming is the process required to form the most basic distinction that exists in the universe: I and it, subject and object" (Wolf 1994: 22).

Furthermore, dreams highlight the dialectic relationship between processes of "inner," "unseen" subjectivity or spirituality and external forms of narration or presentation. In brief, dreams take place in the individual consciousness, draw from cultural and social circumstances, and are publicly expressed in socially interpretable forms (Graham 1994: 725). Also, they are transformed into practices. The Egyptians constantly talk about dreams as significant aspects of concern for them. They speak of seeing a dream (*raʾa* or *shāf*), or of being visited by a being (person or supernatural entity) in the dream.[25] Also, they speak of a caller *hātif* that might be spirit, or ghost, or a person.[26]

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23 In Egypt, books on dream and their interpretations, written in Arabic by various authors with different perspectives, circulate in cheap and accessible editions such as al-ʿAfifi (1993); ʿAli (1987); Ibn Sīrīn (2000); al-Nābulusī (1972); al-Qardawi (1966).

24 Persons I interviewed frequently mentioned the verses of the Quran (91: 7–9) accentuating this statement.

25 Among the Kalapalo Indians of central Brazil dreaming is said to occur as well when a sleeper is visited by a powerful being (Basso 1987: 88 f.).

26 In addition to *hatif*, the word *khayāl*, that means image or imaginary, is used with reference to dreaming.

Regular dreams, however, are subject to different interpretations depending on differing experiences, the knowledge, social status, and piety of dreamers and interpreters. They are interpreted metaphorically or iconically, using Peirce's word, where iconic images may be analogous but not identical. Dreams allow Egyptians to converse about hidden and unconscious motives through shared symbolism of imagination. Imagination is not unreal and does not have any significance independent of social and material processes individuals experience in their daily lives. Imagination, through generating mental images, provides meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge. Dream interactions involve complex communication about future social action.

Huda, a high school teacher who claims to have a special gift in interpreting dreams, recounts:

When I have a dream, I experience a sense of being alert to persons and events that occur to me or around me. Though this sense of being alert becomes very tense in the first day [following the dream], it stays with me for two or three days, sometimes longer. The dream becomes true when I manage to relate certain events to it. My awareness of my identity becomes intensified during the process of relating entities or events of the outside and inside worlds together.

Huda states that when the images and events seen in the dream are decoded based on real or waking events, she can announce, "the dream has been interpreted" (*al-ḥulm itfassar*). This phrase implies interrelated meanings. First, it connotes an anticipation of certain events related to the dream to occur in the sense that the dreamers look for certain symbols in mundane events that can be related to the dream events. Second, it implies a belief that dreams carry messages that can be discerned or realized if people take them seriously. Briefly, dreams can be interpreted through events taking place in people's daily lives. This might be a reason, Huda recounts, that some individuals do not convey their good dreams to other persons, except for the trusted, for fear of loosing the promised or good signs implicit in them.[27]

It is very common for Egyptian women to share their dreams immediately, or the day after they have experienced them. Huda elaborates further about the way she listens to people narrating their dreams.

For instance, when a relative or friend tells her a dream, she frequently intersects saying, "may Allah make it [the dream] good" (*Allahumma ijʿalahu Khair*) to show the dream teller her moral support and encouragement. Meantime, she advices the dream teller to utter, before narrating the dream, a protective phrase saying: "Allah bless the prophet, I have dreamt a dream, its beginning was Muhammad, and its end was ʿAli"[28] (*ḥalamtu ḥulm bi-assalatu ʿala annabi, awwalahu Muhammad wa akhirahu ʿAli*). Such an utterance, Huda asserts, is to convey the dreamer's deep concern or hope of having a positive outcome from the dream. However, Huda insists that not all dreams can be easily decoded. Some of these dreams are mere fantasies or illusions caused by evil forces or the bad side of the self. She, pointing out that anything can happen in a dream, gave an example of her sixteen-year-old son who approached her to help him interpreting a dream he had. With an ironic gesture she said that her young man dreamt that he saw a lion holding a sword in its mouth and wanted to kill him. She told the dreamer, her son, while laughing, that his "rear was uncovered while asleep," indicating that the dream was nonsense (*aḍghath aḥlām*). This statement, however, indicates that not all dreams are to be taken seriously.

Dreams are an important source of information that guide people in their daily interactions and help them to cope with difficult and challenging realities. Egyptians use certain dream symbols and interpretations to elaborate their culturally constructed social and interpersonal relations (Herdt 1987; Mannheim 1987). For example, Amal, a secretary working in an export company recounted a dream about Said, a colleague who had a problem with the company's administration. The secretary said that she saw her colleague, Said, crying intensely in her dream. The next day she met him and told him that she was sure that he would pass the problem with no harm, whispering to him that she saw him crying in a dream indicating a good sign. The colleague's mood subsequently changed for the better. The sense of reality is reinforced by not only participating in the imaginative or inner experiences, but by acting out the internal events (Price-Williams 1987: 255).

The social significance of dreams is that they are interpreted as messages coming from people, dead or alive, seeking or demanding certain things. In

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27 Crapanzano (2004: 21) argues, "Moroccans with whom I worked saw great and potentially dangerous power in the dream. In telling a dream for the first time, they said, the dreams transferred its power – good or evil – to his or her audience."

28 In this phrase the name "Muhammad" refers to the prophet of Islam, while that of "ʾAli" indicates ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, the prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law and the fourth of the "Rightly Guided Sunni Caliphs."

dreams people are networking with relatives and friends among others asking, or being asked by, them to do certain things. For instance, the deceased, through dreams, show their need for many things including praying or reading the Qurʾan for their souls. Although some interviewees pointed out that they just saw images of dead persons in dreams without talking to them, they were able to infer from these images the emotional conditions of the dead as being calm, happy, healthy, sad, or disappointed. Also, it is common to hear that certain saints appear in persons' dreams asking them to build shrines or mosques carrying their names.[29] Although symbolic communication can make the invisible visible and the private public, it is the visible, public, and social activities that bind people together.

Some dreams serve as cultural means for maintaining social relationships. For instance, Mansur, an educated man, holding a high rank in the government hierarchy, severed his relationship with his younger brother Fathi because the latter, being a humble *fallāḥ*, had persuaded his dying father to dictate a will by which he inherited the whole land of the family (almost 6 acres). After almost two years of hostility and dispute between the two brothers, the younger brother started seeing his father in dreams several times asking him to reinstate his relationship with the elder brother. When Fathi went to visit his brother Mansur to compensate him, he was surprised and pleased to hear that his brother forgave him and did not demand his share of the land any more. When Fathi asked for the reason, Mansur replied saying that he saw his father in the dream asking for forgiveness reminding him that he was blessed by good education, wisdom and respectable career. For both brothers dreams have changed the reality for the better. The concealed or invisible allows for possibility rendering cosmos or reality a dynamic structure. What is significant here is that the individual is part not only of the society but also of the total cosmological system. Though the invisible world is imaginary and imperceptible, it is thought to be real and have its own existence that can be traced by certain clues given in dreams.

Possible Worlds: Seeing the Unseen and Knowing the Unknown

The invisible allows for possibility, a core concept in Egyptian worldview, and renders the whole cosmos a dynamic structure. Anything is possible, because there is always room for the invisible, benevolent or malevolent, to work. This explains their dynamic, open, and flexible worldview and attitude of alertness for any possible event, peculiar or normal, to occur (el-Aswad 2002: 62). This section addresses the predictive or intentional (potential) dreams that encompass two categories generating possible imaginary realities. The first category is the *istikhāra,* which relates to the sacred realm. The second category is the *zar* that is contingent on certain practices related to the profane notwithstanding some sacred elements being dealt with. When the imaginary is sanctified through association with an unquestionable and transcendental reality, it becomes not just an idea or ideology but as real as a perceptible object. The "imaginary is the birthplace of all beliefs, and at the same time the origin of the distinction between the sacred and the profane" (Godelier 1999: 27).

As a part of the seen world, society as a whole is also viewed as being imperfect. The limitation of society is manifested in its inability to satisfy its own members' needs. This shortcoming drives individuals to seek other numinous or higher means of support such as *istikhara.*

Istikhāra means seeking guidance from Allah in making a critical decision affecting peoples' lives. It is a sort of dream prediction evoking God's help (see Fig. 1). Because of its intentional character, the *istikhara* is restricted to functional purposes depending on how critical and serious the matters people wish to accomplish. Unlike dreams that occur beyond human's control or will, the *istikhara* is thought to be controllable through certain ritual or practices and utterances. The person recites a specific *duʿāʾ* or supplication through which he seeks Allah's guidance in the matter or task he intends to carry on. Then, he goes to sleep (clean or with ablution). If he sees anything white or green in the dream, this is considered a symbolic indication that the task is good and he should accept it. However, if he sees black or red signs or things, it indicates that the task is not good for the dreamer and, therefore, must be avoided. If the person does not see a dream, he should rely on his insight and intention regarding the matter under consideration. What is thought to be unobtainable in the immediate experience might be achievable in distant and different contexts. In both mundane and transcen-

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29 Among the Moroccans "saint and *jinniyya* manifest themselves in dreams, visions, and other states of consciousness" (Crapanzano 1980: 75).

dental terms, nothing is inaccessible or impossible for Allah.

In certain circumstances, however, people think twice before conducting the *istikhāra*. Fatima, a young woman who received a marriage proposal, showed a great fear of making the *istikhāra*. She pointed out that she did not like the idea of committing herself to such a practice, especially she was not sure about her feeling toward the man. She was afraid of the supernatural punishment if she would reject the man whom *istikhāra* might approve. Such a statement implies a firm belief in the effectiveness of *istikhāra*.

Individuals tend to explain unknown matter and unseen entities from such known phenomena as dreams in which they see and experience different things. The idea here is that through the notion of unknowable and mysterious spheres of the cosmos, it is very possible for a thing to be produced, reproduced, or known through dreaming.[30] The following case study relates to the way a practitioner deals with women who suffer from spirit possession or altered state of mind. Shaikha Salama is a humble woman living in Tanta and whose skills as a expert in dealing with spirit possession (*zar*) are not contested. She said, "I do not claim that I know *al-ghaib* [the unknowable] or see the unseen, but the dream for me is a screen in which I see images among other things. I might know the unknown, *insha' Allah* [God's willing], from knowing the known [revealed in dreams] and see the unseen from experiencing the seen [images in dreams]."

The *shaikha* possesses information based upon past, present, and possible future experiences. She is believed to have special capacity enabling her to communicate with extraterrestrial entities and forces through dreams. She uses intuition to infer unknown or unseen things from the known or the seen represented or enacted in dreams.

Seeing and identifying the malevolent spirits causing the illness as part of healing process is viewed as special power. When a person or woman shows the symptoms of being sick or possessed by a spirit or *jinn*, her relatives, usually females, consult a local *shaika* known for her experience in curing such a case about the problem. The practitioner requires or asks for something related to the sick woman (*athar*) such as a scarf, handkerchief, or a piece of her cloth. The *shaikha* or practitioner puts the patient's scarf or handkerchief under her

pillow for two or three nights so as to experience dreams necessary for communicating with the spirit or *jinn*. Through these dreams the *shaikha* acquires the power to see these hidden or unseen entities of forces causing the illness and, then, determines the identity of possessing spirit. The next step is to inform the patient's relatives of the causing spirits and advice them to prepare the necessary offerings and objects among other things needed for the healing process that include conducting the *zar* ceremony (el-Aswad 2002: 141 f.). She pointed out that she advised her patient to recite the verse of al-Kursy (Qur'an 2: 255) before going to sleep or put a copy of the Qur'an underneath the pillow to ward devils and evil spirits off.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the world is constructed by Egyptian worldview and imagination as a place of seen and unseen dimensions. These dimensions necessitate two kinds of knowledge. One is related to the knowledge of everyday observation, the other to the knowledge of hidden reality, religious or otherwise. Taken in their totality, as far as they indicate psychological, social, and spiritual realities, dreams necessitate the two kinds of knowledge. Dream visions or dreams belong to the unknown or unseen sphere and assert the effectiveness of that sphere in the reconstruction of people's everyday reality. Dreams serve as lenses through which individuals see or glimpse the hidden or unseen aspects of the world.

Put differently, dream experiences are open to possible interpretations generating possible worlds. Dream phenomena and related notions of spirituality and unseen realities are not dealt with here within the oppositions between tradition versus modernity, common sense reality versus dream reality, or belief versus science because such oppositions do not exist in Egyptian multidimensional worldviews, visible and invisible, in which there is always intermediate realm or *barzakh* connecting them.

Imagination facilitates symbolic innovation refracted in dream exegeses. Though the unseen and more specifically spiritual and future matters are unknown to men or known only to Allah, dreams provide significant clues for comprehending spiritual reality and are thought to be means of anticipating future events. Ordinary reality as has been explicated by case studies here can be altered or changed by serious interpretations of dreams. There is a mutual validation between dreamworld and Egyptian worldviews in the sense that dreams are

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30 "Dreams are messenger to us from the unknown ... As messenger from the unknown, dreams are often prophetic voices of the future. Hence, they have at times directed the course of the history of nations" (Ayoub 1992: xii).

justified (or sanctified as the case of some dream visions) by religious worldviews, while some significant components of worldviews, especially those related to unseen dimensions, are validated by dreams.

All in all, Egyptians do not consider the visible and tangible world as the only accessible world of experience rather; there are multiple unseen and imaginary worlds from which possible realities emerge. In effect, the notion of invisibility and related concepts of subjectivity and spirituality provides the *possibility* of a more complete social or cultural and religious experience. Without the invisible and imagined domain the visible and tangible world would be devoid of meaning. In a word, the known and the unknown, the tangible and the imagined, and the seen and the unseen can be balanced together through multiple experiences including those of dreaming.

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