

THE ETHNIC SHADOW: JUNG, DREAMS AND THE COLONIAL OTHER

JO COLLINS

When a man is in the wilderness, the darkness brings the dreams [...] that guide him. It has always been so. I have not been led by any kind of wisdom; I have been led by dreams, like any primitive. (Jung, qtd. in Dalal 272)¹

In the dream, the psyche speaks in images, and gives expression to instincts, which derive from the most primitive levels of nature. (Jung, qtd. in Storr 188)

For Jung, dreams are inexorably connected to the ‘primitive.’² Dreams correctly interpreted provided access to ‘primitive’ levels of the psyche.³ Dreams, in Jung’s thinking, also constituted the surroundings and worldview of the so called ‘primitive’ peoples he encountered in Africa.⁴ In seeing Africa as primitive, and Africans as backward “‘simple’ souls” without consciousness (Jung “Memories” 293), Jung represents Africa as dream-world, and affirms the civilised and rational status of the Westerner. Thus Jung’s interpretation of his experiences in Tunisia and Algeria in 1920, and Kenya and Uganda in 1926 – expeditions that Jung believed would allow him to consolidate his hypotheses – were all fundamentally conditioned by his own psychological theories. By venturing into realms in which he believed he could explore the ‘otherness’ of dreaming, Jung repeatedly encounters the alterity of colonial Africa: the ‘ethnic shadow’ which returns in his own dreams.⁵

Freud, Jung and Dreams

Dreams were central to the development of Jungian Analytical Psychology. Once a close associate of Freud, Jung was ejected from the psychoanalytic movement in 1913 for his interest in the occult, and for having developed a conception of the libido which challenged Freud’s sexually-based notion.⁶ After his expulsion, Jung found himself in a “state of disorientation” (Jung “Memories” 194). In order to re-orientate himself and to develop new theories to fill the gap left by Freudian thinking, Jung travelled into the realm of dreams. Between 1913 and 1918 Jung was preoccupied with an incessant stream of fantasies and dreams (201). This period, which represented a kind of mental breakdown, also allowed him to develop the theories which would replace the core of the Freudian doctrine in his thinking.

Jung disagreed with Freud’s view that dreams communicated wishes that the unconscious desired to fulfil (Jung “Dream Psychology” 40). Rather, he saw dreams as a way in which consciousness could be reconciled with the unconscious to achieve what

he called ‘individuation,’ or psychical wholeness (Jung “On the Nature of Dreams” 77-8). For Jung the disparate aspects of the self could be constructively unified by learning to read the symbolic text of the dream and act upon its message. It was through his dream explorations that he came to theorise the collective unconscious. For him, the collective unconscious signified something deeper and more archaic than the individual unconscious. It was a storehouse of atavistic memories, primordial images and mythologies which united all human beings, but which the European, in his advanced state of civilisation, had substantially forgotten. The notion of the collective unconscious also derived from Jung’s theory of ‘the shadow,’ the hidden unconscious personality, situated in the (collective) unconscious and suppressed by the conscious. These ideas motivated Jung to travel to colonial locales to test his theories. By seeing these colonial environments as primitive, Jung hoped to encounter (in them) the living remnants of these unconscious mythologies which the European had forgotten. His journeys would provide him with material to better understand the European psyche, whilst indirectly affirming the advanced cultural sophistication of the European.

It was precisely this confidence that Africa would yield the ‘immemorially known’ (Jung “Memories” 283) which proved problematic for Jung. The notion that Africa would reveal the unconscious and primitive in the European psyche threatened the binary opposition of Africa/primitive/unconscious and Europe/civilised/conscious upon which Jung premised his schema. These dualisms were threatened because in colonial otherworlds the dream appeared to be played out in the external world for the Westerner, and European conceptions of reality began to dissolve. In Kenya, for example, Jung found himself wondering “whether I had been transported from reality into a dream, or from a dream to reality” (286). Jung discovered that his paradigms of interpretation proved insufficient to render the dream environment in a straightforward way. This is suggested in that, being unconscious, dreams may be seen as something which will not be rendered in a coherent form. Indeed, Jung himself suggests: “the recollected dream is . . . extremely unstable . . . ideas in dreams . . . are linked together in a sequence which . . . is quite foreign to our ‘reality thinking’” (Jung ‘Dream Psychology’ 26). These difficulties of interpretation were compounded for Jung by his decision to investigate dreams within foreign terrains which he saw as ‘dream-worlds.’ Jung’s dual task of deciphering dreams, whilst interpreting ‘Africa’ resulted in tautology, as for him ‘Africa’ was always already a ‘dream.’⁷

Jung’s Journey in North Africa

Algeria and Tunisia were the first colonial testing grounds for Jung’s theory that indigenous dreams would reveal the contents of the collective unconscious. In order to competently investigate the terrain of dreams, Jung believed it was necessary that the

dream specialist had contact with ‘primitives.’ In “On the Nature of Dreams” (1945), he wrote: “I consider it impossible for anyone without knowledge of mythology and folklore and without some understanding of the psychology of primitives [to diagnose dreams correctly]” (78).

Jung’s journey to North Africa had important ramifications for the consolidation of his theories on dreams. In North Africa, Jung felt that he would find in the ‘primitive culture’ access to the mythology and unconscious contents which had become inaccessible to the civilised European. As he wrote in his autobiography (first published 1961): “In travelling to Africa [I wanted] to find a psychic observation post outside the sphere of the European” (Jung “Memories” 273). In Algeria and Tunisia, Jung hoped “to see the European from outside, his image reflected back at him by an altogether foreign milieu” (266). Not only was his trip to provide him with material for dream interpretation – it would also reconfirm the superiority of the European. In North Africa Jung experienced the sensation of “being cast back many centuries to an infinitely more naïve world,” where the inhabitants of North Africa were living in what he termed “a state of twilight consciousness” (267). Believing himself to be “caught up in this dream of a static, age-old existence,” Jung bemoaned the irrelevance of his pocket watch, a symbol of what he called the “European’s accelerated tempo” (268). The African locale becomes timeless. Jung relates that: “the deeper we penetrated into the Sahara, the more time slowed down for me; it even threatened to move backwards. The shimmering heat waves rising up contributed a good deal to my dreamy state, and . . . it seemed to me that everything here was exactly the way . . . it had always been” (268-9). While this regression is tinged with regret for what has been lost to the European, it is also framed by Jung’s insistence that North Africa is nonetheless a “naïve world of adolescents” inhabited by those who lack “aware[ness] of their own existence” (267).

In his autobiography, Jung outlines his interpretation of the dream world of North Africa through a dream. For Jung, his experiences could only be understood by a descent into the unconscious. He wrote: “[I was] living on two planes simultaneously, one conscious, which attempted to understand and could not, and one unconscious, which wanted to express something and could not formulate it any better than a dream” (270). Consequently Jung experienced a dream on the night before his departure from Africa in which he fought a “dusky-complexioned” Arab “self.” In the dream the Arab “self” attempts to make Jung *unconscious* by submerging his head under water, but Jung triumphs and forces the other to (become ‘civilised’ and) read a book which Jung feels he has written (270-1). His interpretation of the dream saw the Arab self as a *shadow*, an excavation of a “part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European” (273). The dream Jung presents shows a triumph of the civilised self in a scenario which also represents a successful process of

colonisation. However, Jung theorised that his dream revealed “the danger that my European consciousness would be overwhelmed by an unexpectedly violent assault of the unconscious psyche” (273). But the triumph of the unconscious self is never a possibility in the dream, and the victory of the European consciousness never seems in doubt in Jung’s presentation. Strangely, Jung’s account of the dream ignores its colonial resonances. The dream narrates colonial desire, with Jung assuming an unquestioned role as coloniser, invading and mastering an Arab citadel and subjugating the Arab inhabitant (271). Jung’s interpretation of the dream as an encounter with his menacing Arab self who subsequently becomes colonised undermines his contention that his 1920 trip to Africa was in order to “find a psychic observation post outside the sphere of the European” (273). The outpost Jung establishes in Africa ultimately reinforces the European colonial outlook, as he concludes “I could not help feeling superior, as I was reminded at every step of my European nature” (273). It is interesting that while Jung’s dream is unconscious, he is able to produce a cohesive narrative which reinforces his own conceptual suppositions. Dreams are precisely that which subvert narrative, and it seems that the version which Jung presents has been constructed and censored by consciousness.⁸

Jung’s interpretation is determined by what he saw as the terrifying possibility of ‘psychical infection’ (270), where, by proximity, the psychology of the primitive would invade and overwhelm the consciousness of the European. He suggested that “the emotional nature of these unreflective people who are so much closer to life than we are exerts a strong suggestive influence upon those historical layers in ourselves which we have overcome and left behind” (272). But this seeming nostalgia for an abandoned way of life is dangerous as it represents the ‘spiritual peril’ of “going black under the skin” which threatens the uprooted European in Africa (274). For the European, Jung suggests: “alien and wholly different Arab surroundings awaken an archetypal memory of an only too well known prehistoric past which apparently we have entirely forgotten.” However, “to relive [this past] naïvely, . . . would constitute a relapse into barbarism” (274). For Jung, the dream seems to originate in, and be interpreted through, his concern that the externalised unconscious dreamlike world of North Africa would overwhelm the conscious psyche of the European, and turn him “black under the skin.” This conclusion effectively undermines the efficacy of Jung’s schematic bifurcation of primitive and civilised, conscious and unconscious. The basis of the psychic integrity of the European is threatened with a resurgence of the unconscious. Here, otherness is no longer a feature of the Arab, but European: the civilised psyche inseparable from its shadow.

Jung's Expedition in Kenya and Uganda

Five years after his trip to North Africa, Jung was inspired by the 1925 British Empire exhibition in Wembley to undertake a trip to Kenya and Uganda (Jung "Memories" 282). This elaborate exhibit, which was visited by over twenty-seven million people, according to Blake Burleson was "designed to show the cultures, craftsmanship, agriculture, trade and technologies of all people of the British dominions and colonies." Dominion was signified by the exhibits and in the size of the display which "covered 216 acres and fifteen miles of roadways" (Burleson 21). Thus, in part, Jung's perceptions of Kenya and Uganda were formulated through a spectacle of imperial power. Timothy Mitchell suggests that imperial exhibitions played an important role in organising the ideological and perceptual outlooks of those who visited the colonies. Colonial Europeans, he suggests: "[w]ould look for a reality which invariably they had already seen in an exhibition" (Mitchell 28). In this way the colonies represented dream or fantasy spaces before they were even encountered. However, in Jung's case such fantasies proved inadequate: Jung's preconceptions of 'Africa' failed to decipher the terrain and its peoples, and this insufficiency eventually led to disturbing experiences. Indeed, it is possible to contend that such experiences were in some sense inevitable, as while Jung seeks to understand Africa and Africans, both must always ultimately remain 'other.' Jung's theories face a logical problem, as the 'otherness' of Africa needs to be broached without losing its alterity.

These conceptual difficulties were played out in Jung's trip to Kenya, to investigate the dreams of the Elgonyi tribe. The *East African Standard* of 19 November 1925 reported on his project. It stated:

A party of scientists have come to Kenya to strengthen new theories on psychology. . . . Native dreams and beliefs will be examined in relation to similar knowledge accumulated in Europe. . . . The primitive man in the European has been found to become active when the individual is asleep – when the discipline and control imposed by the facts and influence of civilisation has been temporarily withdrawn. . . . Man has come from primitive man and there are survivals, dormant strata in the subconscious human mind, of the beginnings of the human race. The . . . scientists hope to win the confidence of the natives and get behind their mind. It is hoped that when the natives find out that the white men are in sympathy with their customs and ceremonials, the natives will gradually produce the material for which the scientists are searching. The weak point in the scheme is the reliance which has to be placed on native interpreters. (Burleson 143-4)

Here the implication is that even if Western man encountered remnants of his primitive self in his dreams (the shadow self), a tremendous gap still existed between him and the primitive man of Kenya. The Westerners were advanced scientifically and intellectually, unlike the Elgonyi, who were believed to be unconscious all of the time, not just in dreams. Jung believed that "what goes on in these simple souls is not conscious" (Jung "Memories" 293); a contention problematic not least, as Dalal argues, because "Jung is

using the modern African as evidence for his theory on the prehistoric human” (269). This divide between the civilised and primitive is emphasised in the article as a linguistic gulf between the European investigators and the ‘primitive’ Africans, a translational chasm which was to be blamed in advance in case the anticipated results were not obtained. Indeed, Jung extracted virtually no information from the tribespeople he interviewed. He recalls regretfully:

I was naturally interested in the natives’ dreams, but at first could not get them to tell me any. I offered small rewards . . . [b]ut nothing helped. I could never completely explain their shyness about telling dreams. I suspect the reason was fear and distrust . . . [a] fear that harm may come to them from anyone who has knowledge of their dreams. (Jung “Memories” 294)

What Jung neglects to outline in his explanation of the Elgonyi’s reluctance to divulge their dreams was the colonial context within which the survey was enacted. Burleson suggests that: “to the disenfranchised Elgonyi, Jung . . . looked like a colonial representative” (143). The Elgonyi distrusted Jung and his investigations were unsuccessful; he would only hear one native dream throughout his entire stay on Elgon (Burleson 142).

The Elgonyi landscape was far removed from the constraints of European society, and Jung recorded in his autobiography: “there were no telegrams, no telephone calls, no letters, no visitors” (Jung “Memories” 293). Instead, for Jung the backdrop reflected the unconscious. At night he witnessed what he called “the psychic primal night which is the same to-day as it has been for countless millions of years” (299). During the day, he described a magical ecosystem which “creates a strange atmosphere in which incredible things happen, where animals behave in most suggestive and insinuating ways” (Jung qtd. Burleson 135). However, the African bush, as well as being a dream world, was also a nightmare for Jung. On 12 December 1928, in a lecture on dreams, Jung described a scene which he subsequently omitted from his autobiography. He said:

There is a sort of fear, a panic which is typical of the collective unconscious . . . which seizes you when you are alone in the bush. It is that peculiar feeling of going astray in the bush – the most terrible thing you can imagine, people go mad in no time – or you may develop the symptom of feeling yourself looked at on all sides, of eyes everywhere looking at you, eyes that you do not see . . . Once, in the bush in Africa, I kept turning around in a small circle for half an hour so that my back would not be turned to the eyes which I felt were watching me. . . . [Y]ou are forced in upon yourself and are bound to become aware of your background. (“Lecture VI” 75)

Here the collective unconscious is externalised as a shadowy, accusing and threatening presence in the bush which envelops Jung. The unconscious contents which are normally enclosed within dreams have spilled out into Jung’s reality, the dream or the unconscious has become real. The unconsciousness of Africa undermined the integrity of the civilised European consciousness, and Jung becomes paranoid and incapacitated.

As the conventional distinction of dreams and reality dissolves, Jung is unable to narrate a coherent reality.

It was only, again, through a dream, that Jung was able to put his Kenyan experiences into perspective. Jung dreamt about an African American barber whom he had encountered in 1909 during his trip to America. His dream visualised this ‘shadow’ figure “holding a tremendous, red-hot curling iron to my head, intending to make my hair kinky – that is, to give me Negro hair. I could already feel the painful heat, and awoke with a sense of terror.” Jung records that this dream was “a warning from the unconscious; it was saying that the primitive was a danger to me. At that time I was obviously all too close to ‘going back’ [to a primitive existence]” (Jung “Memories” 302).⁹ Yet again, Jung’s schema of Africa as primitive is both the origin and the interpretation of his dream. If Africa is primitive and unconscious then the superiority of the conscious civility of the European threatens to dissolve in a location which is both alluring and terrifying in its otherness. The dreamworld of Africa became a nightmare, as European identity wavers.

Jung and the Ethnic Shadow

Jung’s autobiography suggests that key dreams functioned as interpretative devices to enable him to decipher his African experiences, specifically through his readings of ‘shadow’ figures. However, his elucidations operate within a narrow remit: the explanations of his dreams invariably reaffirm a binary opposition between Europeans and Africans and the need for consciousness to protect against the ‘shadow’ of the collective unconscious (represented by the African American barber and Arab). It is these ‘shadow’ figures which reveal the instability in Jung’s interpretative schema. In his ‘Arab’ dream Jung hypothesises:

The Arab’s dusky complexion marks him as a “shadow,” but not a personal shadow, rather an ethnic one, associated not with my persona but with the totality of my personality, that is, with the self. As master of the casbah, he must be regarded as a kind of shadow of the self. The predominantly rationalistic European finds much that is human alien to him, and he prides himself on this without realising that this rationality is won at the expense of his vitality, and that the primitive part of his personality is consequently condemned to a more or less underground existence. (273)

The ethnic difference of the Arab for Jung symbolises unity, marks the inextricability of otherness from the self, and reveals how the civilised persona of the European self can never obscure the ‘primitive part’ of the psyche. This passage exemplifies a persistent logical problem in Jung’s thinking, as European difference and ‘superiority’ become untenable (even as Jung subsequently goes on to delineate his difference from the Arab/African). Jung’s model of the psyche suggests the suppression of primitive instincts by (civilised) conscious rationality. However, this represses the need for the

psyche to be first generated by a slippage between these two constituents, a point of cleavage which cannot be mapped. How can a civilised identity be posited if it only comes into being from a timeless and ‘primitive’ unconscious which allows for no form of self conception? The event of the spilt must pre-exist itself in order to bring itself into being – a theoretical paradox which demonstrates the unsustainability of Jung’s theoretical bifurcation of primitive and civilised.

Jung’s desire to prove his theories by using Africa as a testing ground exposes further theoretical difficulties. By seeing African locations as dreamworlds from which interpretations about the collective unconscious and European psychology could be adduced, Jung created a tautology in his own schema. By polarising civilised/primitive, and conscious/unconscious, and aligning the two sets of terms, the existence of the European within an African dream world could only again collapse these terms back into each other. The realisation of the spaces of Tunisia, Algeria and Kenya as ‘dream’ other worlds threatened the rational structures by which the European constructed social and psychic identities. In Jung’s scheme, for the European, the apparent externalisation of the ‘dream’ conversely meant that reality could never be certain, and the unconscious outside could overwhelm what Jung had posited as the rational European psyche. Africa might be a dream world, but for Jung it had real and detrimental effects on Europeans who remained there too long. He cautioned in “Mind and Earth” (1927): “[e]ven today the European, however highly developed cannot live in impunity among the Negroes in Africa; their psychology gets into him unnoticed and unconsciously he becomes a Negro” (121).

Ultimately this Jungian dream perspective became problematic, as Jung depended on his dreams to help him decipher his experiences. If dreams could make sense of the colonies for Jung it was only ever as a medium of the unconscious which had been censored by the conscious. Jung’s ‘ethnic shadow’ encapsulates this problem. If the ethnic shadow represents for Jung the collective unconscious (shared by all people), it also represents the ‘primitive,’ realised in the form of an ‘ethnic’ other who must be suppressed. In his dream interpretations Jung’s universalising impulse runs up against and is subverted by the specificities of the colonial context. Jung’s dream narratives of the ethnic shadows and of Africa serve to reconfirm his schematic expectations of what Africa ‘was.’ As such the dream was less the Africa he encountered than his own theoretical attempts to render it.

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Notes

- ¹ See Dalal (1998) for a discussion of this quote and its implications.
- ² Jung's sense of the primitive is that which is archaic, but also unambiguously non-European. Indeed, as Dalal argues, Jung's theories conflate the two, seeing Africans as archaic (269).
- ³ This is Jung's alternative to Freud's hypothesis that dream interpretation can reveal unconscious wishes (see Freud [1999]).
- ⁴ This might also be argued of Jung's views on India (which he visited in 1938). As with Africans, Jung believed that Indians lived on another, 'dreamlike' plane of consciousness. He wrote of the Indian: "the world for him is a mere show or façade, and his reality comes close to being what we would call a dream" (Jung qtd. in Clarke 167). However, Jung differentiated the tenor of his experience from that of Africa, seeing India as more 'civilised.' Unfortunately, there is insufficient space to develop these considerations further here.
- ⁵ In this article I mean to stretch the designation 'shadow' beyond the Jungian sense of a suppressed personality in the unconscious to link metaphorically with the ethnic and 'unconscious'/primitive alterity Jung finds in Africa.
- ⁶ While Freud characterised the libido as purely 'sexual,' Jung's use of term, according to Storr "is as a synonym for psychic energy in general" (54). For a discussion of the break between Freud and Jung see Collins (2008).
- ⁷ Furthermore, both terms were seemingly antithetical to 'reality.'
- ⁸ Nevertheless, the operations of conscious censorship are carried out in relation to the unconscious.
- ⁹ For an alternative reading see Vannoy Adams (1996) 74-84.