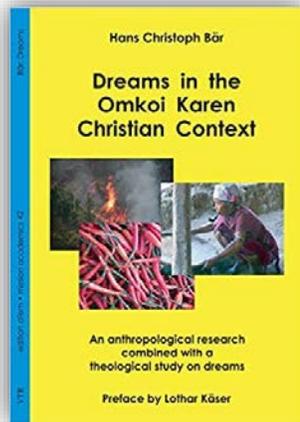


BOOK REVIEW

Dreams in the Omkoi Karen Christian Context

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Dreams in the Omkoi Karen Christian Context is a fascinating study of the way that dreams are understood throughout the Karen culture, with specific emphasis on Karen who have converted to Christianity. There is a very thorough synopsis of literature on dreams and the interpretation thereof. Bar also does an excellent job of covering the depth and breadth of biblical material through which we can understand how a Christian should view the importance of dreams. I found this book to be full of compelling evidence of the “Great Indoors,” which Holbraad and Pedersen mention in their book, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. While not specifically addressing “the real ontological challenge,”¹ the ethnography points to a clear shift in transformative ideologies and belief systems in regards to dreams.

While I found this book to be very interesting, I do have some qualms about the posture of the book from the outset. Bar states in the introduction that this book is about analyzing dreams from an emic point of view, looking specifically at the language that is used to describe dreams. Yet, in the introduction his first research question states, “Can dreams be redeemed?”

This is clearly an etic point of view that demonstrates the typical colonial view of others as something that is broken and needs to be redeemed. The author then goes on to contrast the dreams of Christians and of Animists or Buddhists from the same people group, to see if their dreams reveal any differences between the sub-sects of the Karen people. One question that is particularly interesting is the difference between the dream itself and the interpretation of said dream. Do these two elements deviate based on religion?

In the section on the biblical analysis of dreams, Bar provides a thorough exploration of both the Hebraic and Greek variants for the word dream. He specifically points out that there is an oft cited tension between the words “dream” and “vision” which results in scholars treating them synonymously. Still, there are a few scholars who identify the difference—“dreams” being in the night and “visions” being during the day—and treat them as distinct classes of revelatory occurrences. Bar specifically focuses his attention on biblical references that deal with dreams, giving much attention to the dreams of Jacob in the Old Testament. Dreams are spoken of in equal terms in both the Old and New Testaments. I appreciate that Bar treats the entire corpus of Scripture as valuable to this discussion, rather than simply limiting it to a New Testament experience. Additionally, I believe that Bar does a great job with covering a wide array of historical and denominational perspectives when studying the topic of dreams and dream interpretation. It is rare to see attention paid both to Luther and to leaders of the charismatic church.

The analysis of the dreams of the Karen people from the Buddhist, animistic and Christian heritage was fascinating. In section 5.1.2, Bar writes,

Many Karen Christians still dream in the same old ways as described above. Their old beliefs of the afterworld (‘plü kau’) or the cursing, ‘lo ta’, are still deeply anchored and through dreaming it, are reinforced again. But many Christians think like *Oelopa* who said, “If they really believe in God, they do not believe that anymore.” Another Christian said, “Sometimes when I dream about ancestor worship or

¹ An homage to the recent article written by Tanya Luhmann. 2018. HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 2018 (1/2): 79-82.

spirit doctors, then I may not feel well. When I go and pray nothing bad is going to happen.” (98)

Having researched the ontological shift that happens during conversion, I find this statement to be especially interesting. So much of the process of conversion is a transforming of the mind to believe new things and see the world from a different perspective. It is a gradual process, before conversion and after, of changing the way you think about the world around you. “In reality, people live a dynamic experience wherein each moment, emotion, and circumstance through years of living can culminate in a gradual transformation into something brand new” (Hurley 2018: 2). This process of becoming something brand new is manifested in the last sentence of the quote above, when the Christian states that after a dream, they go and pray and believe differently than before—that now nothing bad is going to happen. This is the transformative process of conversion at work.

More careful and extensive ethnography reveals that such dramatic demarcations are often the product of more gradual progressions of changing belief systems. Conversion is about transforming your thoughts and actions, and is often a long, arduous ordeal (Hurley 2018: 3).

While this book is about dreams, it displays the transformative process of Christians who have undergone an ontological shift. Holbraad and Pedersen emphasize the work of the Great Indoors in an ontological shift, and what better place to examine the context of the Great Indoors than in your dreams. Bar states,

In the Bible we find dreams which are a reflection of the human heart. Their direct source is usually neither in God nor in his adversary. Some writers see them negatively and without value, but when we look into the book of Daniel the dreams have value in “that you may know the thoughts of your mind.” The dream of Nebuchadnezzar with the great tree mirrors his own life and it was sent by God. Actually, modern psychology sees the value of dreams exactly in this, so that we may know our subconscious desires and thoughts. Even though many dreams may have their source in man’s own soul, this does not mean they are worthless. Behind dreaming we will still find God who created man so that we are dreaming every night. (80)

By making the connection of God speaking through the subconscious (The Great Indoors), Bar confirms that the internal reality is a priority for Christian converts as expressed through their dreams.

Overall, I believe this book can have a tremendous application across a variety of specific genres in

anthropology. This book will be of great importance to the anthropology of Asians, Christians, ontological and phenomenological anthropology and more. This book is also a significant example of how an interdisciplinary approach to a singular topic can bring tremendous results. By approaching the dreams of the Karen from both the biblical and the anthropological perspectives, we are able to see how these different disciplines can inform and compliment one another. Thus, I believe this book to be a valuable ethnographic resource in multiple ways.

References

- Holbraad, Martin and Morten Axel Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Hurley, Jill. 2018. Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-relational Ontological (Re)turn to Relations. *On Knowing Humanity* 2(2):2-3.



Jill Hurley has bachelor’s degrees in Religion and in Anthropology from Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, NM, and a master’s degree in Theological and Cultural Anthropology from Eastern University in the Philadelphia area. She is particularly interested in the processes of constructing and deconstructing culture, and more specifically where and how faith intersects those processes. Her most recent fieldwork was completed in Nepal in 2017, where she focused on the Anthropology of Christianity, specifically looking at conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. Jill hopes to bring her love for the world and faith, both in their beautiful complexity and diversity, to students in the near future.

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