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Dreams that Matter by Amira Mittermaier is the 2011 recipient of the Clifford Geertz Book Prize from the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, selected from over 40 submissions. Mittermaier, an anthropologist, is an assistant professor of religion at the University of Toronto. This is her first book.

*Dreams that Matter* is born from her dissertation research on discourses, interpretations and experiences of dreams in contemporary Egypt. Despite the Revivalist/Islamist/modernist state’s circumscription of popular modes of dream interpretation in canceling television broadcasts on the topic, Mittermaier suggests that concern for understanding dreams has increased in recent years. Dreams matter in a person’s everyday life, “because they insert the dreamer into a wider network of symbolic debts, relationships, and meanings. They place the dreamer in relation to the Divine, offer guidance, and enable a mode of being in the world that disrupts the illusion of the autonomous self-possessed subject” (2011:3). Taking this stance, Mittermaier both dovetails and challenges psychologistic paradigms employed in anthropological and Middle Eastern studies of dreams in her use of *barzakh* as an heuristic. *Barzakh* is an emic Islamic concept connoting: the realm of spirits and dead between this world and Judgment Day; a space between the material and the physical; an in-betweenness; and an analytic “Elsewhere.” Dreams are pre-eminently ethical in that they portend encounters with an “Other,” broadly defined. Others of this world, and her main interlocutors, include dream interpreting *shaykhs* (spiritual leaders), Sufistic devotional communities, and other living persons who listen to dream re-tellings. Otherworldly “others” are the Prophet Muhammad, saints, and the dead. Including a broader set of encounters with myriad “Others” permits Mittermaier to claim expanded conceptualizations of the imagination, ethics, and agency. Indeed, “it is the dream’s agency that matters, more so than the dreamer’s” (2011:5), pushing the studies of Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2005) on Egyptians’ agency and self-cultivation in a fresh direction.

Following her lucid introduction of theoretical and topical concepts, Mittermaier situates the Egyptian state’s recent reformist projects to bound dream interpretation as superstitious, drawing on Orientalist, sectarian, and political ideologies in its justification. This is difficult, however, as dreamers and dream interpreters draw their own legitimacy from authoritative Qur’anic references (*hadith*) on the same topic. Chapter 2 colorfully introduces one of the author’s four principal interlocutors, Shaykh Nabil, who tends a saintly shrine and interprets visitors’ dreams; interpretations of which Mittermaier contrasts classificatory and ideal types with her observations of Nabil’s work for the shrine’s mostly middle-aged women visitors. In chapter 3 she expands and questions the very capacity and concept of observation, eschewing an ocular-centric epistemology by recounting the dynamics of the book’s focus on “dream-vision”- *ru’yā*. Dream-vision are contingent on a “sincere gaze” toward otherworldly “others,” an imaginative attunement to *barzakh*. Dreamers cultivate this attunement in nonobligatory prayers called *istikhāra* to overcome indecision about an important choice, the more widespread ritualistic and invocational *dhikr* prayers conventional in Islamic worship, and manuals describing *hadith*-based rules of conduct and mannerisms for successful dreaming. However, analytically for Mittermaier and conceptually for her interlocutors, dream-vision “are above all encounters” (2011: 18) with spiritual entities who come upon and visit dreamers, and “rupture the very system of self-discipline that aims at invoking [dream-vision]” (2011:103). Two case
studies follow of unlikely dreamers who come to encounter the divine, but whose observed and reported behaviors and narration of their dream-vision might otherwise lead one to characterize their sincerity as charlatanry. Chapter 4 introduces another principal interlocutor Shaykh Qusi whose popularity derives from poetic writing describing his encounters with the Prophet. His disciples experience dream-visions by way of reading his poetry, and they document these encounters in a “Book of Visions.” The case leads Mittermaier to question what we mean by causality, authorship and creativity, claiming finally, that “a pious dreamer… is both the cause and the outcome of the ‘dream-vision’” (2011:139, emphasis original).

For many Egyptians, dreams are a major conduit for dialogical and experiential relationships with their deceased relatives and friends, which she contrasts to Freud’s argument that dreams of the dead indicate one’s unconscious reflections of oneself. This makes Egyptian, and other culture groups’ dreams, both moral and ethical. The dead, along with saints and the Prophet, are primary figures in “visitational dreams” described in chapter 5, and they invite dreamers to “counter-visitations” in pilgrimages to ancestral tombs and saints’ shrines and the hajj to Mecca. Mittermaier continues with Freud in the subsequent chapter by detailing the history of psychoanalysis and cognitive-behavioral psychology in Egypt and describing the contemporary interaction of these systems and their concepts like desire, the unconscious, and hallucinations as re-imagined and deployed in dream interpretations. Today, re-imagination and interpretation of dreams are especially contingent on mediation, namely mass-mediation in journals, photographs, television, telephone hotlines, and cyberspace. The final ethnographic chapter on “virtual” and “visionary realities” describes how dreamers and interpreters understand and represent dreams to themselves in these media, renegotiating form and content of the Divine in the process.

Students will find this book particularly appealing. The book concludes with a lengthy glossary of Egyptian and Arabic terms, which is useful for non area-studies specialists. Many will find Mittermaier’s depiction of the ins and outs of dissertation fieldwork experience familiar and assuring: meeting interlocutors to speak over tea or coffee; justifying one’s seemingly esoteric research to interlocutors; getting in from a long and exhausting day’s work only to be called up for a not-to-be-missed event; the troubles of reconciling one’s first impressions of interlocutors with where and how they come to inhabit the greater ethnographic narrative; and calling upon one’s friends and family for moral and practical support, namely that her mother played an important role in fieldwork interlocution. Indeed, Mittermaier consistently traces her subjective position as a researcher and the influence of the project to her family: her mother is an Egyptian Jungian psychoanalyst and her father a psychiatrist. While the initial project motivation then comes off as less than original or serendipitous given these affinities, the monograph is nicely structured, clearly written, and a prime example for students to evidence the transformation of a dissertation into a first book with a rewarding outcome.

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