

Dreams and Visions as Religious Experiences in a Polynesian Setting:

Three Cases of Pastoral Counselling

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This paper attempts to relate how one person sought to cope with the problems posed for some Polynesian people who experienced psychic disturbances that threatened them and their families. In the three cases to be outlined below there had occurred distressing dream-visions. While each person concerned believed the dream-vision to be some type of supernatural warning, all the occurrences were capable of other than supernatural explanation. In the counselling situation, however, they can fairly be termed "religious experiences". In his counselling, the author attempted to use "Gestalt" techniques in conjunction with Polynesian symbolism and Christian insights to seek a resolution of the conflicts which emerged during the sessions.

Dreams: Some Preliminary Observations

Dreams are what transpire during sleep and among Polynesian people they are considered to be of great importance. If a dream leaves a person troubled, then it is common for him or her to seek out someone who can explain its significance.

In the Polynesian context dreams are considered to be things seen by and revealed to the spirit. A person's *wairua* (spirit) can travel from the body during sleep, hence it is important to wake a person gently to enable the *wairua* to return to the body.

Dreams are considered to be vehicles of warning, assaults by a spirit and also sources of help. In Hawaii they are referred to as 'the little death' and are among those experiences which reveal the division between body and spirit. Maori *matakite* (seers) frequently claimed that matters requiring divination were revealed to them in sleep.

Dreaming became an art in Polynesia and premeditated dreaming was considered essential to expert craftsmen, healers, planters, fishermen and even dancers. In Samoa (as elsewhere in Polynesia) the spirits of the dead were believed to return to the land of the living to warn or instruct members of their family in dreams.

Obviously, these understandings of the role of dreams are shaped by the world view of the people, one in which there are no rigid boundaries between the natural world and the supernatural. Dreams, therefore, are considered alternative forms of reality.

In the Western world with its modern world-view, psychological explanations for dreams have become the norm. For a considerable time this led to the tendency to dismiss dreams as 'indigestion' i.e. unrelated to the life situation of the individual.

The work of *Freud* helped to re-establish dreams as of significance in that they reflect unconscious thought processes, especially with regard to sex drives. His preoccupation with analysis and the supreme role of trauma from early childhood resulted in this interpretation becoming chiefly the preserve of the psychoanalyst. While not wishing to deny the validity of the findings of Freud and his disciples, yet these are not the last word. *Adler* showed that besides sex the drive may be towards power. This is not to be ignored in understanding dreams. *Jung* relates dreams to the collective unconscious, and also suggested that the dream can be a reflection of some part of the self. For Jung there are three systems which interact: the conscious, the unconscious and the collective unconscious. The latter he describes as basic inherited ideas which he terms 'archetypes', universal ideas, the original of a type. These are inherited rather than learned. Thus, according to Jung, these archetypes are a reflection of ourselves and frequently have a religious basis. Jung also developed the idea of the 'archetype of the shadow', the hidden self which is concealed even from ourselves and can be either good or bad, reflecting the opposite sides of our nature. *J. A. Hadfield* later proposed that dreams, especially recurring dreams, were problem-solving mechanisms. These can be a warning when things are going wrong and also supply the 'why'. *Fritz Perls* (a psychoanalyst) developed from this and from Jung the approach now termed Gestalt, and rather than interpret the dream would have the dreamer talk to each part of the dream with often dramatic results.

As we have indicated, dreams among Maori and Polynesian people are considered omens, or messages of encouragement or warning, frequently from the dead or dying. In 1971 the writer had the opportunity to attend a series of seminars in Gestalt techniques and decided that this system would possibly be useful when relating to Polynesian people. It would avoid the approach of the analyst - since the person was not undertaking analysis and was not calling for interpretation - and concentrate upon enabling the dreamer to explain the meaning of his/her own dream.

In the following accounts of using these techniques in pastoral counselling with Maori and Pacific Island people, I wish to make clear that I am not saying that this is the only method. It is simply a method I have found useful and one that appears to reflect much of the technique used by Maori and Pacific Island *tohungas*. Nowadays, the Maori term *tohunga* in a pastoral context means 'healer', using that word in its broader pastoral sense. I prefer this to the more usual 'shaman', in that shamanism has come to have overtones suggesting trickery etc., - incorrectly, I believe.

In the title of this address I have linked *dreams* and *visions*. While these are distinct phenomena it has been my experience that frequently the informant is not always clear whether he/she experienced a dream or a vision. In working with Polynesian people who were troubled by a dream-vision experience, resolution was found by treating both in much the same way, i.e. as a dream.

Case 1

A Cook Islander permanently residing in NZ asked for help with his marriage. He had begun to find himself unable to cope with a difficult home situation and the whole family was exhibiting signs of dis-ease. The wife complained that her husband was acting in bizarre ways (e.g. rushing through various rooms of the home and ending up beating his head against a wall; he had also talked of destroying himself). The man was about 40 years of age. Although his English was limited, he was able to express himself quite clearly.

Earlier, I had had dealings with the family when the wife's mother and father had died within a short time of each other. The wife had not been able to return to the islands for either funeral, and at that time I suspected that she would probably continue to show disturbance unless some way of fulfilling the necessary Cook Island funerary rituals could be found.

Now, the husband revealed when I raised again the question of the deaths of the wife's parents, that shortly before the first death he had experienced an extremely disturbing dream. He related the dream so vividly that it was difficult to know whether in fact it had been a "vision".

It was low tide in the evening and he, along with the parents and

others, had gone to spear fish in the pools on the reef. Petrol lamps were being used for illumination; good fortune attended their endeavours until the relator saw a huge wave bearing down on the reef. There was no time to take cover or retreat. Shouting a warning he held up both lanterns so that they would not be doused. The wave broke over him and one light was extinguished, the second flickered badly for a few minutes and then recovered. The party then returned to shore. At this point, the second light died out.

Two days later a cable was received from Rarotonga to say that the wife's father had died. His wife was considerably distressed and over the next few weeks began to exhibit psychosomatic symptoms, collapsing when coming home from work, and unable to carry out preparation of meals etc. Three weeks from the receipt of the first cable a second was received telling of the death of the mother. This time, the wife showed little signs of disturbance apart from an initial outburst of grief. However, from now on she became increasingly difficult to live with. From later information, I learned that she began to drink quite frequently to excess. The children became difficult and showed signs of disturbance. Their school work deteriorated and the lad became involved with the police. The family, which up till now had been a happy, close-knit group, showed increasing signs of disintegration.

Although I had little knowledge of pre-European life of the Cook Islands, a brief visit there had led me to conclude that there are strong similarities in belief and practices among the Cook Islanders and the NZ Maoris. Especially is this so of the people of Mangaia and Rarotonga. The languages are very close to each other. The word *tohunga* in Cook Maori is *ta'unga* and means the same i.e. 'healer'.

I decided that some straight forward marriage counselling following reasonably the non-directive model was called for. After this, I formed the opinion that the man's wife was still disturbed because she had not fulfilled the funerary rites for her parents. We talked about this at great length, and I asked them to tell me how they thought a Cook Island *ta'unga* might deal with the matter. In the light of their reply, I then directed attention to the deaths of the parents of the wife and suggested that as the husband had explained that his dream had been the reaching out of the father in his moment before death to say goodbye to them, and as they had not flown back for the funeral, they should now say 'goodbye' to both deceased. I further suggested that they should do this in the form they would have used had they been at the funerals. As a model, I then spoke in NZ Maori following customary Maori forms. The husband and wife then in their own language followed suit.

Immediately following this, once the flowing tears had ceased, there were obvious signs of relief and both expressed satisfaction at what had been done. I then offered a Christian prayer for the family.

In the course of the earlier discussions I gained the impression that the matter might not be quite as simple as indicated, and that underlying the whole matter was some other disturbance. In reply to a question the husband then revealed that there had been a good deal of tension between the father and his daughter. In the light of this, I then outlined the Gestalt approach to resolving such a situation by using an empty chair to represent the father, and having the daughter speak to him saying in detail exactly how she felt. While she showed some interest, she obviously was not at ease and I dropped the matter, suggesting that should she continue to be troubled the procedure could be used in private. We then had a cup of tea and I concluded the session.

In the course of the next fortnight there were increasing signs that the family was re-united although the wife still was not totally at ease. At the end of that period she told me all was now well and she was at peace. Later the husband told me that in the course of the fortnight several times his wife had risen in the night and gone into the sitting room. Finally he followed her in and found her sitting in a chair looking at the enlarged photograph of her dead father and talking to him; he was surprised to hear her pouring out a great deal of anger at her father because of a number of childhood conflicts. She then returned to bed saying that the matter was now concluded.

Since that time the husband reports that they are a happier family than for many years, and that the wife is a happy outgoing person fully supporting him.

Case 2

Following a serious but unsuccessful operation in 1973, a young Maori woman from the local prison showed signs of severe deterioration. Medical investigation revealed no organic cause, and the prison staff suggested to the doctor that I be asked to talk with her.

Although seriously ill and able to speak only with frequent rests the following information emerged.

When born she had a very light skin and her grandmother accused her mother of having had relations with a European. The mother denied this vigorously but the grandmother pronounced a curse on the newly born child. Subsequently, she was so unpleasant to the child that the parents sent the child to live with relatives.

In late adolescence the girl had several imprisonments for vagrancy, theft and violence. Towards the end of her current sentence she had seriously been trying to find "a way to go straight".

Following her operation she had a dream (vision) in which she saw her grandmother maliciously pointing to a coffin saying, "This is for you." She was sure that the grandmother's *makutu* (curse, illwish) was in force and that she was dying. She had no wish to die but felt there was no escape.

We discussed Christian healing and *mate Maori* (illness beyond the reach of normal medical care i.e. from supernatural causes) and how a Maori *tohunga* might deal with such sickness. When she showed interest in this I then offered to conduct a Christian service of healing following the pattern of the *tohunga*.

The woman was now extremely weak and I said I would return in a couple of hours. When I returned she was on intravenous drip and occasional oxygen but signified her desire for the service. A bowl of water was brought, and we talked of the symbolism of water as cleansing and life-giving, and its use in Maori ceremonies and in the Christian church. I suggested that she dip her hand in the water explaining that it remained ordinary water though now it was to be used in a religious context, and offered a brief prayer setting it apart to its special use. Then followed a brief prayer in short phrases repeated by the patient, committing her into God's care in the assurance that none can be lost from Him. She was then led to talk directly to the grandmother, saying that she refused to accept responsibility for the circumstances of her own birth. The ceremony concluded with the blessing as I laid hands upon her head.

The next day the patient was much improved, no longer on oxygen or drip, and able to talk freely though still weak. She expressed some doubts as to the efficacy of the ceremony over a long period. I suggested a modified Gestalt technique for handling any recurrence of the dream.

Two days later she reported that granny had reappeared, and said, "I looked at her and told her to 'frig off'," - vulgar colloquial expression for "go away" - "and she did." The following day she was discharged from hospital.

Contact was maintained during the remaining three weeks of the woman's sentence and on discharge she was fully restored to health. She took employment away from the city to escape her associates, and I have been told by the prison counsellor who has kept in touch with her (the woman rings her from time to time) that she is cheerful, much quieter and has shown no further inclination towards crime.

Case 3

The local Emergency Advice Bureau rang one day to ask if I could give help to a distressed woman. I travelled to a nearby town and interviewed her and the following information is taken from my notes. The material is summarised, as it was a lengthy interview.

Woman of about 30 - 35 years. Born in a southern town where there is no Maori population. Had slight traces of Maori descent and explained that her father had some Maori blood, but that they lived and thought as Europeans. She had brown eyes, dark reddish hair, and a high colour on the cheek bones. She considered herself to be a European and had no knowledge of the Maori language.

In appearance she was about 5 feet 8 inches, rather plump but not obese (well built). Not well educated but adequate (three years secondary education). She was rather of 'the earth-mother' type.

In personality she was friendly, reasonably outgoing, rather compliant. Describes herself as shy and does not have a good self-image. Thinks of herself as one of life's 'losers'. ("That's the story of my life. Everything in the end turns out bad.") Has a great need to be loved.

She is separated from a de facto Tongan husband who had been deported because he was an 'overstayer'. He had been arrested for extreme violence in a pub fracas. She was pregnant at the time of his arrest, and had two children from a previous marriage (husband had been killed in a car accident). The de facto husband was not permitted to visit her after completing his six months in a maximum security prison, so had not seen his newly born daughter. They had corresponded for some time and he asked her to come to Tonga and marry him. He wished to see his daughter and also that his parents might see their first grandchild. She refused because of his violence (she had been badly assaulted) and felt betrayed. No longer 'loved him'. He wrote an angry letter but made no threats. The child was by this time two years old.

Over a period of three months the woman had experienced what she described as 'unpleasant occurrences'. Began with a 'vision' of the de facto at the head of the stairs leading to the bedrooms. Subsequently had seen "sort of shadows of people moving about" on the walls of various rooms, especially the lounge. Had an increasing sense of oppression when in the flat. Finally, that morning (2.12.77) became extremely frightened and nearly fainted. She ran outside, calling for a neighbour. Two came and went with her into the flat (when interviewed one claimed to feel a great sense of heaviness that made her frightened. The other woman said "there was a feeling of something" but could not be more specific. That is, the experience was less intense). The woman herself collapsed on the floor. When carried outside she recovered but was unable to return inside without a recurrence of the symptoms.

In the interview the woman explained that she had no real connection with the Christian Church, although she had attended a Presbyterian Sunday School for two years. She was the fifth child of seven children and had received little affection from her mother ("too busy with the kids"). The older children had largely cared for her. Said that now she had a good relationship with her parents.

At the beginning of her de facto relationship the man had been very kind to her and her two children and she was very happy. Gradually he had formed other friendships and began to drink fairly heavily - from time to time he slapped her and once had beaten her very severely. Her feelings towards him began to change and she movingly described her feelings of disappointment and grief. In response to a question she said that she was, at the time, angry with the de facto husband; it had been a shattering experience and she was 'bitterly hurt'.

In reply to my questions she said that she had no connection with Maori people, had no knowledge of Maori customs or those of the Pacific Islands. How had she come to ask for help? A neighbour had asked a local Maori woman to come when she had been carried from the flat and had said that it was 'makutu' (a curse) from the husband at work. She herself knew nothing of such things. I probed to see if she attended any of the Pentecostal type churches, saw films about exorcism and the like. Her replies were all in the negative.

It seemed that some action was called for. She could not go back into the flat, yet soon her children would return from school and require an evening meal.

I formed the opinion that despite her lack of direct Maori connections, the dynamics of the situation were similar to those met with in a number of instances in Maori and Island settings. Accordingly I discussed with her what she expected of me. She was vague; "something" needed to be done. Then I led her back to her "angry feelings" and possible "angry feelings" of the de facto husband. We talked about the possibility that 'feelings' and 'thoughts' could be communicated other than by words. Ultimately she asked me to 'do' something. So I asked her to go back to her flat with me. This she was reluctant to do but she complied. I entered first and could not 'feel' anything. She however retreated to her neighbour's flat. I was at a loss as to what might be done. She certainly had no real Christian background that might supply a base for discussion, nor had she knowledge of Maori or Tongan ways of thinking. I therefore introduced Paul's words in Ephesians 6: 10-17, explaining something of their meaning in terms of "powers" and "darkness", indicating that I am fairly agnostic about such things; for me "darkness" is related to my own feelings. I then turned her attention to Romans 8: 38-39 as a positive affirmation of spiritual protection. We then had prayer. Following this, she felt able to enter her own flat. Here I explained that we could, if she wished, follow a pattern of "cleansing" the rooms, using Maori symbolism of sprinkling water in each room with an appropriate prayer. She then asked me to carry out this procedure. I asked her to bring me a cup of water. She went to do so but became faint and I helped her to sit down. Her breathing became heavy and laboured. Thereon I laid my hands upon her head and prayed that she might be set free from whatever was troubling her. I went on then to specifically command the de facto husband, if he were responsible, to cease from mischief and leave the woman alone. Gradually her breathing resumed in a normal way and she said that she felt a great deal better.

We then proceeded to move to each room of the house, sprinkling a little water and offering a short prayer appropriate for the particular room. This was even carried out in the lavatory (in Maori understanding this has special significance; in a number of rituals the latrine beam (*paepae*) is most important). Here reference was made to ridding the

body of wastes and the need to similarly 'empty out' the mind and spirit of hurtful, angry and bitter feelings. When we entered the lounge the woman seemed to falter but soon recovered. At the conclusion of the ceremony I felt constrained to talk with her about the Christian faith, saying why I had chosen these procedures, what the faith meant to me. She thanked me and indicated that she had 'heard' me.

She then asked me to have a cup of tea after which I left, leaving her my phone number should she wish to get in touch. This she has not done but through the local minister I have heard that she appears to be going about life normally. She sends the older children to Sunday School but does not attend Church. It is hoped that pastoral care will be maintained.

Comment

The above case reports indicate a mode of approach in attempting to cope with pastoral situations that would not easily respond to the more usual Western oriented counselling. The use of a form of Gestalt technique seemed to find a response similar to those of Europeans, but the framework has included symbolic actions which are rooted in Maori-Polynesian world views and rituals.

No doubt, it will have been noticed that the 'cup of tea' features in the conclusion of each case. I believe this reflects what the Maori people term *whakanoa*, rites whereby evil and misfortune caused through an ill-wish are averted and the person concerned rendered *noa* i.e. ordinary (free from all tapu). No Maori gathering ever concludes without a meal of some sort being consumed, as food is the last act of the ritual of purification and removal of any alien psychic force conveyed by an outsider.

Water is a most potent force in Maori rituals and has great symbolic importance for the Christian.

It may well be considered that I have acted as a *tohunga*. With that I have no quarrel in so far as the *tohunga* is seen as a healer. In all discussion with the people concerned, I have made it clear that I am but an intermediary and have turned their attention away from myself to God.

Care was taken to attempt to put those being helped in touch with spiritual resources of the Christian faith. Explanations were kept brief but clear, making special reference to the fact that "magic" was not involved. Always the symbols used were explained in terms of the Christian faith.

The Gestalt techniques involved were simple ones that fitted with the thinking of the people concerned.

The first case dealt with, concerned a family group. The problem posed was recognisably that of "grief symptoms" and reflected an earlier trauma in the childhood of the mother.

The second case is a fairly typical account of an "ill-wish" that nearly destroyed the person concerned. In early New Zealand accounts of *makutu*, these sorts of occurrences were common and, as a New Zealand psychiatrist shows in a recent book, are a frequent phenomenon today.

The final case is of special interest because the woman involved seems to have no knowledge of Maori life or rituals, and was at a loss to give meaning to her experience. Yet perhaps her "dream-vision" may be related to the "collective unconscious and archetypes" of Jung. I have insufficient knowledge of this to do more than mention the possibility.

Normal Christian pastoral counselling tends to avoid action and symbolism. However, Roman Catholic liturgies do make some provision in services of exorcism as does, in a more limited way, the Anglican liturgy. Recently, there has been a great upsurge of interest among many Christians whereby there is the tendency to see all illness as induced by "evil powers" and to resolve them by a form of exorcism that tends to avoid the real cause of disturbance.

In my judgement none of the people I have described could be considered emotionally neurotic. The resources of the Christian faith and the use of Gestalt techniques have been used within the counselling situation, following a framework of Maori-Polynesian rites that were understandable to the people concerned.

Suggested Readings

- E. Best *Maori Religion and Mythology*. Part 1. Wellington: Government Printer 1924, reprinted 1976.
- J. Smith *Tapu Removal in Maori Religion*. Journal of the Polynesian Society, Vol. 83 (4) 1974 and Vol. 84 (1) 1975.
- L. K. Gluckman *Tangiwai: a medical history of 19th Century NZ*, Christchurch: Whitcoulls Ltd., 1976.
- M. King (ed.) *Te ao hurihuri: the world moves on*. Wellington: Hicks Smiths & Sons, 1975.
- F. Kennett *How to Read Your Dreams*. London, Marshall Cavendish, 1975.