The implicit theory of dreams: An exploratory study in the cultural context of Malabar

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Summary. While dreaming is a universal psychological activity, the implicit theories of dreams – defined as the lay beliefs and cognitive schemas regarding the nature and function of dreaming – are embedded in local cultural epistemologies. This study employs a Grounded Theory approach to explore the implicit theories of dreams in Malabar, a historically and culturally distinct region in Northern Kerala, on the southwestern coast of India. The study's data was acquired from semi-structured interviews with 13 participants; all of them, born and raised in Malabar. The data was then supplemented with secondary accounts from history, mythology, and religion. The findings reveal a dual-model typology consisting of (1) a *Meaningful/Functional register* and (2) a *Physiological/Irrelevant register*. These registers coexist within a *Syncretic Complex Model* – a cognitive framework where mythologies, religious beliefs, and modern scientific narratives intersect. This research suggests that such implicit theories function as a psychological strategy for navigating ambivalent modernity where traditional and scientific epistemologies coexist. The outcome of the study is relevant for cultural oneirology, psychotherapy, and cultural-psychological investigations into the culture and dreams of Malabar.

Keywords: Implicit theory, Grounded theory, Malabar, Syncretic Complex Model, ambivalent modernity, cultural oneirology, cultural psychology

1. Introduction

Dreaming is a common psychological activity. It is intimate to the dreamer, both in terms of mystery and meaning. Dreams are deeply familiar and strange at the same time; familiar, because the contents of dreams are arguably derived from a person's experiences; and strange, because they undergo an alchemy of sorts often beyond recognition. The dream content is a restructured symphony of experiences, operating in multiple sensory modalities, with or without alterations in time and space. It uses symbols familiar to the person and tells a story or conveys an experience that is often strange and not commonsensical. It is strange in terms of the felt experience, dream story, theme, space, and time. How does a person make sense of a dream that is both familiar and strange?

Despite dreams being a universal human experience, cultures vary dramatically in how they interpret and value dreams. Some societies dismiss dreams as "unreal figments" irrelevant to waking life, while others treat them as important messages about the future or spiritual world. Anthropologists have long noted that belief in the reality and meaning of dreams underlies many religious and mythological systems. In recent decades, the "new anthropology of dreaming" emphasises that dreams are culturally embedded communicative events, not just personal brain phenomena. This perspective aligns with our focus on people's *implicit theories of dreams* – that is, their lay beliefs and models about what dreams are and what they signify. Literary and historical texts use dreams as social instruments; literary analyses particularly show how dream narratives can instantiate and circulate cultural models of prophetic agency and social change (Chatterjee, 2020).

Previous research on dream beliefs has shown, for example, that dreams are widely regarded as prophetic or omens in many cultures. Large surveys (Valásek & Watt 2015) find that a majority of adults worldwide believe dreams can predict the future. Smaller ethnographic studies (e.g. Tedlock 1981, 1991 on Maya dream interpreters; Kracke 1981 on Amazonian peoples) reveal rich local mythologies of dream spirits and messages. However, there has been little empirical study of dream beliefs in contemporary Indian contexts. Malabar—a demographically diverse region of Kerala—has its own folklore and religious traditions involving dreams (e.g. the legendary prophetic dream of King Cheraman Perumal that precipitated Islam's spread, which we explain below). This study uses qualitative grounded theory to explore how Malabar residents today think about dreams.

Experimental approaches to studying dreams—using physiological markers such as REM sleep (McCarley & Hoffman, 1981), EEG signals (Voss et al., 2014), sleep disorders (Schredl, 2009), and other neuropsychological measures (Solms, 2014)—have tended to ignore the depths of lived experience and personal understanding of dreams. "Experimental work demonstrates that dream states can be manipulated in the lab (for instance, by inducing lucidity via external stimulation), highlighting the difference between laboratory control and culturally mediated understandings of dream origin (Paul, Schädlich, & Erlacher, 2014). An individual develops a personal understanding of dreams: their origin, content, purpose, or purposelessness. Debates

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about continuity between waking experiences and dream contents continue in contemporary dream research and shape methodological choices for studying dream content (Bulkeley, 2011). These approaches also lack an appreciation of semiotic mediation in the content and experience of dreams. Understanding this personal experience leads to two questions: What is the nature of personal experience of dreams, and how is it constructed?

Many experimental approaches have tried to investigate the nomological and universal principles of dreaming. In some studies, the psychologization of dreaming has led to conceptualising it as a trait-impacted variable (e.g., Blagrove & Pace-Schott, 2010; Samson-Daoust et al., 2019). This represents a step toward locating the dynamics of dreaming within the person—an approach we refer to as person-centrism.

According to Sternberg (1985), Implicit theories are constructions by people that reside within their minds. Individuals can have implicit theories on intelligence, creativity and/or personality. Such lay knowledge is often contrasted against explicit theories, which are formal knowledge frameworks constructed, tested and debated by scientists or researchers through the scientific method. We define implicit theories of dreams as tacit, culturally mediated, individual cognitive schemas about the causal and explanatory aspects of dreams, encompassing their origin, meaning, relevance and their functional implications. This concept is distinct from three related terms used in dream research. Unlike folk theories, which are explicitly taught or passed down to the next generation, implicit theories are schemas which are not explicitly stated as a formal doctrine or evaluated as propositional content. It is enacted through practice and shape how an individual engages with the personal experience of dreaming. Implicit theories are not just attitudes towards dreams; they often convey a causal structure, an in-depth cognitive-affective and behavioural frame, going beyond a simple evaluation of the phenomenon. Further, the implicit theory of dreams is distinct from individual cognitive schemas, as it is culturally distributed: it is shaped by socio-cultural factors such as mythology, religion, modernity, and science. At the same time, these theories are deeply personalised; this is reflected in the individual differences in the recognition, selection and adoption of specific framework components of implicit theory within their personal contexts. This study, while adopting this framework, tries to take into account the cultural specificities of the lived experiences of people from the Malabar and their consequent subjectivity.

Implicit theories of dreams are a relatively less-studied area. The present approach is significant in that it paves the way for studies into subjective spaces and the dynamics of semiotic mediation in oneiric experiences. The sociocultural milieu can be said to provide a structural affordance that activates a finite scheme of subjective experiences (Glăveanu, 2013). Culture is not merely another variable; it is a constitutive force that shapes individual experience.

According to Lohmann (2019), “Culture and dreams are mutually instantiating aspects of the process by which humans make models of and for reality.” In *Culture and Dreams*, Lohmann (2019) explains how culture and dreams are inseparable, and how dream beliefs (here referred to as implicit theories) have shaped societies across history and cultures. Lincoln (1935/2003) recorded numerous dreams and dream contents from Native American and other historical cultures; this multidisciplinary work demonstrates the substantial role of dreams in shaping ancient societies. Sir Edward Tylor, often considered the founder of cultural anthropology, was among the first to present evidence that early religious beliefs arose from images seen in dreams (Lincoln, 1935/2003). Recent empirical evidence also shows that socio-demographic and religious variables shape how people value dreams: religious affiliation predicts stronger beliefs in prophetic or spiritual meanings (Bulkeley & Schredl, 2019).

Together, these accounts suggest that studying implicit theories of dreams within a culture may pave the way to understanding that culture’s practices, values, and historical development. As evidence suggests a relationship between a dreamer’s culture and dream content (Roll et al., 1974), exploring a specific culture’s dream beliefs could provide insight into how culture shapes conceptualisations of dreams.

Present Study

The study offers three significant theoretical contributions. First, the empirical typology derived from the study—meaningful/functional and physiological/irrelevant registers—can be used to evaluate various dream-related psychological positions across different cultures. It can be used as a potential thematic category to study dream beliefs in future qualitative and mixed studies. Second, it proposes a culturally distributed model, with specific mechanisms—such as ritual framing, religious and popular science influences, as well as personal dream salience—that decide the individual choice of this empirical typology. Third, the tension between continuity/meaning-focused and neurophysiological/meaning-sceptical scientific accounts is also reflected in the layperson’s implicit theories. The model repositions continuity and neurophysiological accounts as internal psychological categories and explanatory registers within the subjective space of an individual, rather than seeing them as external researcher typologies. The study advances an integrative explanatory hypothesis, which acknowledges cultural mediation as a core component in how individuals construct dream meaning.

The proposed model in the study departs from Bulkeley’s (2016) cognitive-evolutionary conception of dreams. It proposes an immediate and contextual psychological mechanism that operates to make sense of dreams. The socio-cultural mechanisms determine the interpretive fate of the dream rather than the intrinsic dream content deciding the explanatory value or empirical typology- as posited in the theory of big dreams. While Bulkeley’s (2016) black swan approach treated highly memorable dreams or special dreams as the centre of enquiry, our approach was an open, multi-dimensional enquiry into a layperson’s complete dream world. It examines everyday reflections, religious beliefs, nightmares, and personal significance, and their relation to waking-day concerns, irrespective of divisions based on dream content, such as everyday dreams or highly memorable dreams.

The present study was conducted in India, in the cultural context of Malabar. Malabar was formerly a district under the British Presidency of Madras. Today’s districts of the state of Kerala—Calicut (Kozhikode), Kannur, Malappuram, Wayanad, Kasargod, and parts of Palakkad and Thrissur—were historically referred to as Malabar. The culture of these districts can be collectively described as the culture of Mal-

abar. Historically, Malabar was a major spice-trade centre and the port at which Vasco da Gama—the first European to reach India by sea—landed (Logan, 1887/2000). Malabar was home to Hindus, Muslims, Persians, Arabs, Jains, Portuguese, and others.

The major religions in Malabar are Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. However, many studies of the region's religious and cultural traditions show how Muslim and Christian practices incorporated traditional Hindu customs into local life—despite differing belief systems—and vice versa. The matrilineal features observed in some Muslim marriages in Malabar are adaptations of local Hindu customs (Narayanan, 2006).

Christianity arrived in Malabar mainly through trade relations, producing a mixture of cultures and lifestyles. The monotheistic message and the social status Christianity offered to lower-caste Hindus contributed to mass conversions and the spread of Christianity (Narayanan, 2006). However, people did not fully abandon traditional practices; rituals and customs reappeared within Christian and Muslim life, producing an acculturation process. The resulting culture is an amalgamated coexistence of the region's religions.

A similar process of cultural change and adaptation occurred as a result of colonialism. Colonialism and postcolonial developments produced important cultural and intellectual shifts in Malabar. Those who received Western education were often impressed by Western material and scientific progress and its rational spirit. Middle-class responses to colonial modernity were not homogenous, however, and were marked by cultural ambivalence (Sreejith 2013). As is also true elsewhere in India, without any discernible conflict between tradition and modernity, middle-class Keralites tended to selectively adapt aspects of Western civilisation that they found contingently beneficial, while overtly staying rooted in their local traditions. This complex cultural strategy—of amalgamating religious diversity, globalising traits, traditional practices, and privileges of modernity—can be seen as characterising Malabar, even today. This cultural background ought to be underscored as the light in which the present study was conducted to explore implicit theories of dreams among Malabar's residents of today.

Meanwhile, Malabar's cultural milieu, specifically with respect to its history of dream experiences, is itself noteworthy. Some folk traditions link the origin and spread of Islam in Malabar to a dream experience of the last king of Malabar, Cheraman Perumal. According to legend, the king dreamed that the moon split into two halves along the meridian. After consulting seers and astrologers without satisfactory explanation, he encountered Muslim pilgrims who described a miracle attributed to Prophet Muhammad that matched his dream. Perumal then secretly joined the pilgrims and travelled to Arabia. It was through Perumal that Malik Ibn Dinar and his followers—pioneers of Islam in Malabar—arrived, and the spread of Islam began (Logan, 1887/2000). Although conclusive historical evidence is lacking, many historians have recorded this tradition. If so, the episode illustrates the cultural-historical significance of dreams: a king's dream catalysed major cultural change through the introduction of a new religion. Kerala's mythology is also rich with dream reports, visions, and their interpretations. Religious traditions in the region each have their own ways of explaining dreams and dream content.

This study elucidates the implicit theories of dreams held by the people of Malabar by identifying the components of those theories and their constitutive forces—including the region's religions, traditions, and customs. Although similar studies have been conducted in ancient cultures worldwide, few contemporary investigations address this topic in the Malabar context. Existing research tends to focus on particular aspects of archaic or religious dream beliefs and their prevalence. For example, Kunzendorf et al. (2007) examined whether the archaic belief in external dream visitations persists in Germany and found that it does. Valasek and Watt (2015), using an online international sample, examined individual differences in prophetic-dream beliefs and experiences and found that a large proportion of the general population believes dreams can predict the future. However, these studies did not investigate the cultural underpinnings of such beliefs—a primary focus of the present study. The current study aimed to explore implicit theories of dreams among Malabar residents and the components of those theories.

2. Method

This qualitative study explored implicit theories of dreams using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Primary data were collected in-person via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Our data was supplemented with secondary sources—ranging from cultural-historical, to religious, to mythological accounts of dreams—acquired in addition to primary data. Analysing regional legends and folklore in tandem with contemporary narratives, we identified those inherited symbolic frameworks through which participants derived meanings out of their dreams. It helped us in drawing comparisons between primary interview data and textual accounts. It also paved an understanding of cultural subjectivity in participant responses. In our coding and content analysis, we tried to draw from recommendations extant in dream studies (Schredl, 2010). These included open coding and independent blind ratings of themes. We used grounded theory in order to develop a theoretical understanding organically grounded in the responses. In our secondary sources, we tried to avoid assumptions from prior theories or inferences.

2.1. Participants

The study was based on a purposive sample of 13 adults (N = 13; 9 females, 4 males) native to the Malabar region. As shown in Table 1, they represent diverse demographic indices. The participants were aged 22 to 74 years (M= 40.5), and came from heterogeneous religious affiliations (Hindu, Muslim, and non-religious). Their educational backgrounds ranged from zero years of formal schooling to university post-graduation. Participants took part voluntarily and offered their informed consent, and received no financial compensation.

Primary data were gathered using a fixed semi-structured interview that was conducted in Malayalam. The questionnaire was designed to address some specific dimensions of an ad hoc implicit theory of dreams. Sample questions included: What do you think dreams are? Why do we dream? What is the significance of your dreams for your personal life?

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 13).

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Religious Affiliation	Years of Formal Education
P1	23	Female	No affiliation	15
P2	22	Male	Hindu	15
P3	40	Female	No affiliation	12
P4	43	Female	Hindu	10
P5	22	Male	No affiliation	15
P6	61	Female	Muslim	4
P7	66	Male	Hindu	4
P8	74	Female	Muslim	0
P9	55	Female	Christian	10
P10	69	Female	Christian	10
P11	23	Male	Muslim	15
P12	22	Female	Christian	15
P13	23	Female	No affiliation	15

2.2. Procedure

Participants were selected through theoretical sampling, and data collection ceased upon reaching theoretical saturation. Interviews were conducted by the researcher at locations convenient to participants and followed ethical procedures. Interviews averaged 22 minutes.

2.3. Interview analysis

Data collection and analysis were iterative: the researcher moved repeatedly between collection and analysis. Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, open coding broke the data into conceptual components. Relevant open codes were grouped into focused codes. Axial coding then organised focused codes into subcategories, producing two conceptual categories with multiple subcategories. A parallel inductive analysis of the open codes identified latent content and yielded an alternate set of focused codes; axial coding of these produced four subcategories and one conceptual category, which was identified as the central theoretical category during selective coding. Finally, a theoretical model was constructed from the three categories, and the grounded-theory statement was formulated. To ensure credibility and reliability, findings were peer debriefed with other experts.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis reveals an implicit theory of dreams structured around a dual-model typology which is integrated within an overarching framework: the *Syncretic Complex Model*. Dual-model typology consists of two registers: (1) a *meaningful/functional register* and (2) a *physiological/irrelevant register*. The Syncretic Complex Model explains how religious traditions, local mythologies, modern scientific ideas, and individual life experience interact to privilege one register or the other. Within this framework, the implicit theory of dreams in Malabar is structured such that dreams are interpreted as personally and culturally meaningful processes with actionable consequences, or as transient, physiological events rooted in brain activity.

3.1. The Meaningful/Functional Model

The first component of the dual-model typology is the Meaningful/Functional register. It conceptualises dreams as a personally meaningful process that occurs during sleep, which results in behavioural, affective, or cognitive consequences. These outcomes are attributed to a syncretic interplay between endogenous factors—comprising the brain, the mind, and the self—and transcendent factors, identified in the data as external sources such as God, demons, or the souls of the deceased. This model was prevalent among participants who identified themselves as religious. Further, participants primarily assess the significance of a dream through two evaluative filters: Valence (the emotional quality) and Relevance (the degree of personal connection).

3.1.1 Valence

The dreams were labelled as "good" (pleasant content) or "bad" (unpleasant content) based on the emotions and subjective experience that they invoked in the dreamer. A "good" dream is often associated with divine protection and positive emotional outcomes. Example of a good dream:

> *"One example of a good dream is the dream of my son. In his dream, he was on the top of a mountain about to fall. But God appeared before him and saved him. God then blessed him, and he was happy. This is an example of a good dream."*

Conversely, "bad" dreams are defined by distressing dream contents. It could be anxiety inducing contents or warnings of potential harm. Example of a bad dream:

> *"When I am worried about my children travelling on two wheelers at night, I see them in my dreams. I see them meeting with accidents with severe injury. This is the bad dream that I always have when I sleep."*

3.1.2 Relevance

Participants distinguished between dreams that are *relevant* (connected to self) and those that are *irrelevant*. Irrelevant dreams are characterised by a lack of personal connection or involvement. A participant described an irrelevant dream:

> *"Sometimes I see dreams of fantasy film characters; I won't even be present in the dream, I would be just watching. Such dreams are not connected to us. They are irrelevant dreams."*

3.1.3 Ego and Prophetic dreams

Participants categorise dreams, based on their attributed source, into two distinct types—Ego and Prophetic—which correspond to Endogenous and Transcendent source attributions, respectively. Participants identify "Ego dreams" as those originating from within the self. This endogenous pathway attributes dream content to internal psychological or biological processes. This framework sees the dreamer as the primary author and meaning-maker of the subjective experience and the dream is a reflection of their adjacent mental or physical state.

Conversely, what are believed to be "Prophetic dreams" are attributable to an external, transcendent origin, as it were. Sources of such dreams are taken to be located out-

side veridical individual subjectivity, supposedly originating from what are believed to be divine or supernatural agents, deceased ancestors, or spiritual entities. Within this counterintuitive logic, the dreamer is a receptacle of an extrinsic "vision" rather than its active creator. This absolute external attribution was clearly expressed by one participant: "If you ask me why we see dreams, I don't know. God shows us dreams and we see them. That's all I know."

3.1.4 Functional Domains of Dreams

In the Meaningful/Functional register, dreams are significantly linked to their functional implications in the real world in three domains: affective, cognitive and behavioural. These effects were observed separately or in combination. One participant described a cognitive benefit:

> *"Some days when I go to sleep I might be thinking of some problems. In sleep I might have a dream of it. When I am awake after the dream and think of the dream, some solutions to the problem naturally would come to my mind. I think we get some ideas regarding solutions from our dreams."*

Dreams also prompted deliberate behaviours in the real world based on the perceived meaning and the cognitive mindset of the dreamer. The behaviours which are triggered by the dream displayed a ritualistic flavour with high affective salience. One participant describes a post-dream ritualistic behaviour:

> *"When we dream of any accidents that happen to our dear ones, what God wants us to do is to go and warn them about it. We have to engage in deep and sincere prayer to save that person from the impending danger. That is why God shows us such dreams."*

Notably, a majority of the functional consequences of dreams reported are integrated across all three domains. Participants reported that pleasant dreams induce relaxation(affective), while danger-indicating dreams serve as warnings on personally significant aspects (cognitive) which may elicit action (behavioural). The dreams of the departed remind the dreamer of the obligations to the deceased, which prompts ritualistic behaviours such as propitiatory rituals or prayer.

3.1.5 Endogenous Factors and Transcendent Factors

One of the key features of the meaningful/functional register is a dual explanatory pathway regarding the perceived origins of dreams, consisting of endogenous factors and transcendent factors. Endogenous factors represent the internal sources of dreams identified by participants as originating from brain processes, the mind or the self. For some participants, the dream occurs as a result of complex brain processes. Some participants also considered that the state of one's mind influences the variety of dreams at different times. The self is often considered the source and power of dreams. An older participant explained how her state of mind produced unpleasant dreams: "The dream occurred due to my continuous thoughts about my son travelling on [a] bike and the fear I had related to that."

Parallel to internal causes, dreams are held to originate from external sources that exist beyond the physical person. This transcendent causality is characterised by three primary agents: God, the Demons and the souls of the departed. Many participants believe that God is the ultimate source of knowledge about dreams and uses them as a means of communication—to provide blessings, happiness, warnings, revelations, guidance, and prophecies to which people are expected to respond. One participant described this process: "If we forget to pray before sleep, we may sometimes see bad dreams. God is reminding us that we have forgotten him. So, we have to wake up and pray and then sleep." Some argued that moving away from God allows Satan or demons to produce bad dreams.

The souls of the deceased are also believed to influence dreams. The dead visit the dreamer and interact with them in the dream state. One participant reported: "My first husband and I used to live very happily. His death by accident was sudden and shocking to all of us. But he often comes in my dreams to see me and spend time with me. When I married his brother a few years after his death, he stopped coming in my dreams. I think he is not happy that I married again. Even souls might have likes and dislikes."

Dreams are considered a meeting point between the realms of the living and the dead. Similarly, the souls of the living may travel during sleep, and dreams are believed to reflect the soul's experiences on such journeys. As one participant said: "When we sleep, our soul goes from our body to God and comes back, and we might see someone whom we know during the journey. That is why we feel like we saw them in our dreams."

3.2. The Physiological/Irrelevant Model

The second component of the dual-model typology is Physiological/ Irrelevant register. This cognitive framework assumes dreaming as an irrelevant and functionally insignificant mental activity. In this model, dreams are conceptualised as a product of the brain/mind that are meaningless and have no future consequences. This model was prominently articulated by participants with higher educational qualifications who identified as non-religious, as well as certain older participants who viewed dreams as distinct from their religious practice. Although such participants reported both pleasant and unpleasant dreams, they ascribed no functional value to these categories; dreams were considered transient experiences only. One participant stated: "Dreams are just something we see in sleep. There is no meaning at all. When we sleep, we dream; when we are awake, it's gone. Sometimes we don't even dream. So, I don't think there is any relevance to dreams."

Physiological/ Irrelevant register relies on a single, endogenous pathway. According to this model, dreams have no external sources: they originate in the self as a result of brain changes during sleep or changes in one's affective and/or cognitive states such as anxiety, worry, or happiness. Despite the emphasis on physiological origins, participants' accounts also incorporated modern misconceptions, such as the folk-psychological assumptions that dreams occur exclusively in deep sleep cycles.

Despite the emphasis on physiological origins, the Physiological/Irrelevant register was identified as a component of the overarching Syncretic Complex Model. The data showed that these non-religious accounts frequently incorporated folk-psychological assumptions that participants perceived as scientific. Consequently, these interpretations were found to be rooted in a combination of modern and personal ideas, rather than strictly objective observations.

Table 2. The myths obtained from the data.

S. No.	Myths
01	Elephants in dreams are signs of goodness.
02	Snakes in dreams are bad signs.
03	Fish in dreams are signs of degradation of health.
04	When someone dreams of death or danger to one's kin, it will come true for the others. When someone dreams of death or danger to others, it will come true for one's kin.
05	Clear water in dreams is a good sign, and unclear or muddy water is a bad sign.
06	Good dreams would lose the power to come true if told to others.
07	Dreams seen at the rise of dawn may come true.
08	We dream of someone because they think of us.
09	Dreams of death are bad signs.
10	If good dreams are told out, the dreamer might go insane.

4. Discussion

The present findings are positioned within existing work on implicit theories of dreaming and the cultural study of dreams. Drawing on continuity-oriented accounts of dreaming as a reflection of waking-life concerns (e.g., Bulkeley, 2016; Bulkeley & Schredl, 2019; Lohmann, 2019), on neuropsychological and activation–synthesis perspectives that emphasize physiological origins (e.g., Schredl, 2009; Solms, 2014), and on ethnographic treatments of culturally embedded dream meaning-making (e.g., Kakar, 1982), the present grounded theory integrates these strands rather than choosing between them. Specifically, the Malabar data suggests that the *meaningful/functional* and the *physiological/irrelevant* registers are parallelly maintained or synthetically integrated within a broader *Syncretic Complex Model*. This model explains how religious traditions, local mythologies, modern scientific ideas, and individual life-experience interact within the dreamer's everyday consciousness to privilege one register over the other.

As outlined above, this study's contribution is threefold: a compact, testable typology; a cultural process model specifying the mechanisms that select between models; and an integrative hypothesis resolving the apparent tension between accounts of dreaming based on continuity and physiology at the cultural rather than the individual level. These contributions generate clear, testable predictions for subsequent work: (a) regions with stronger ritualised dream practices will show higher endorsement of the meaningful register; (b) increased exposure to popular-science narratives will correlate with endorsement of the physiological register; and (c) individuals with higher dream salience (frequency/affective intensity) will be more likely to hold hybrid or context-dependent models. Articulating the contribution as both a typology and a cultural-process model clarifies how this grounded theory extends existing literature and opens pathways for comparative, neuropsychological, and clinical research.

Based on these consequences, participants emphasised the functional value of dreams: pleasant dreams may provide relaxation, danger-indicating dreams may serve as warnings prompting action, and dreams of the departed may remind the dreamer of obligations to the deceased, prompting ritual observance and prayer. Research on lucid dreamers shows that some people actively use dreams for problem-solving and rehearsal, illustrating a person-centric model of dream agency (Schädlich & Erlacher, 2012). Although such dreams may be frightening, participants regarded them as significant. Our findings that danger-indicating dreams prompt protective behaviour are consistent with empirical links between waking-life threats and threat content in dreams (Schredl & Mathes, 2016).

The constituents of these dream theories represent highly integrated cognitive schemas. These beliefs are conceptually overlapping, making them resistant to reduction into isolated categories. As Lévi-Strauss (2013) notes, when so-called "primitive" people try to explain the world without scientific enquiry, they tend to produce concise worldviews that create an illusion of complete understanding; this pattern is also evident in the responses we garnered. The data show distinct binary units used as explanatory frameworks such as sacred/profane, good/bad, seen/unseen, which shows characteristics of an internally consistent system. The impulse to classify dreams as good or bad, that is recurrent across a wide spectrum of Malabar's religious traditions, precisely adheres to this structural logic. Therefore, these schemas are not a set of isolated beliefs but reflect a unified organising principle applied across otherwise unrelated domains of myth, ritual, and daily life- the empirical exploration of which remains beyond the scope of the present work. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism offers not just an explanation as to how lay dream theories seem complete to those who put them to work, but also a specific mechanism—that of binary structuring— that allows Malabar's syncretic beliefs to achieve such integration and structural stability.

The central finding of this paper suggests that both registers are grounded in the *Syncretic Complex model*. This framework implies that both registers do not exist as separate, isolated systems; rather, they are organised by an interpretive framework consisting of religious, mythological and personality factors. For instance, the good/bad classification of dreams is a distinct category in the meaningful/functional register. The secondary sources reveal that such classification has multiple sources. Myths in Kerala classify dreams as good or bad (Vishnunamboothiri, 2010). Islamic dream beliefs similarly distinguish good and bad dreams, where "good" dreams are those liked by the dreamer and "bad" dreams are those disliked (Hermansen, 2001).

Similarly, many elements of the *Meaningful/Functional* register are religiously grounded. For instance, Prophetic dreams, a core component of the register, are recognised in Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity (Bulkeley, 2001). Valasek and Watt (2015) report that large proportions of the global population endorse prophetic-dream beliefs. Dream narratives predicting the future are also found in Buddhism (for example, Queen Maya's dream). Concepts such as soul travel during sleep appear in Vedic literature (Young, 2001). Other supernatural explanations—such as attribution of dreams to demons or Satan—likewise have religious foundations. This conceptualisation is exemplified by the legend of King Cheraman Perumal, a foundational narrative in which the prophetic dream of a Hindu king acts as the primary catalyst for the arrival of Islam in the region (Logan, 1887/2000).

Cultural texts and literary traditions are known to preserve dream-related schemata. For example, analyses of the dreamscape across characters of Shakespeare who described their dream contents in the plays has been reported

show—despite its essential fictional nature—persistent archetypal dream patterns that shape collective expectations of dream meaning (Chatterjee, 2021). Similarly, in the context of Malabar, local mythologies behave as primers to the *syncretic complex model*. Regional folklore—specifically the accounts of Palanthai, Kannan, and Atoli Thandhri—serves as the cultural precedent apprehending divine or demonic prophecies in states of dreaming (Vishnunamboothiri, 2010). As detailed in the Results (Table 2), these myths provide the symbolic frameworks through which dreamers decode their experiences, illustrating how the inherited mythical knowledge structures dream meanings and subjective experiences.

Many explanations that attribute dreams to the self are presented as scientific but include folk-psychological elements. People acquire pseudoscientific ideas from the internet and other sources and incorporate them into their beliefs. A prime example is the widespread belief that dreams occur only during deep sleep. Alongside these influences, personal experience remains a powerful source of belief: emotionally striking past events commonly reappear in dreams, and behavioural consequences such as increased prayer after a bad dream are reinforced by experienced relief. Even those who favour scientific or pseudoscientific explanations often integrate religious or mythological ideas into their explanatory frameworks- which is a mixing of two registers. Conversely, individuals who are anchored in traditional beliefs often draw on physiological logic to rationalise their experiences. Empirical evidence shows that the two registers in the syncretic complex model are not mutually exclusive within the Malabar culture.

The source of the Physiological/Irrelevant register is an underlying materialistic, rational framework that accompanied the advent of colonial and post-colonial modernity. Ancient Indian metaphysics had materialistic schools of thought like the Charvaka philosophy, but it remained marginalised and struggled with the popular conceptions of the subcontinent's polytheistic traditions. These dominant traditions, which emphasise *Moksha* (liberation), *Dharma* (righteous duty), and *Karma* (Causal Consequence), had implications beyond materialism. However, the Physiological register prevalent in Malabar is derived exclusively from modern scientific practices and outlooks. It operates within a context of an uneasy coexistence of material and spiritualistic orientation, forming a central tension within the Syncretic Complex Model.

Strong modern ideas that are not separate from cultural and religious values characterise Malabar's modernity, shaped by colonial influence. Post-colonial Malabar displayed an *ambivalent modernity* in which people selectively adopted Western ideas seen as beneficial while remaining rooted in local tradition (Sreejith, 2013). Modernity, along with amalgamated religious and mythological traditions, has become part of Malabar culture; this hybridity is reflected in the Syncretic Complex that forms the region's implicit theories of dreams.

Regardless of educational or religious background, respondents consistently utilised the construction "seeing a dream" (*swapnam kanuka*) rather than the Western idiom of "having a dream. "This verb choice implies a passive phenomenological stance, where the dreamer is a recipient of an external vision rather than an autonomous generator of the experience. This aligns with the Sanskrit concept darshana (seeing), which is associated with dreaming. However, darshana in a prophetic sense is different, where the deity appears in dreams, and the dreamer not only sees the deity but is also seen by the deity. Such usage is common across Indian cultures. The prophetic value of dreams and the influence of demons (called *Bala* in some places) remain significant to traditional healers across the country (Kakar, 1982).

Kakar's (1982) account of Indian dream beliefs finds that traditional and modern explanatory systems are not mutually exclusive in the minds of practitioners and patients, but they coexist. These are deployed depending on the situational context, whether devotional, medical, or interpersonal. This resonates directly with the syncretic processes observed in Malabar, where participants moved fluidly between meaningful/functional and physiological/irrelevant registers without experiencing that as a contradiction. Kakar's clinical observation that patients attribute a dream as an expression of tiredness in one instance and divine visitation in the next mirrors our participants' switching of codes between the two registers. Kakar's psychotherapeutic accommodation—where traditional healers borrow the idiom of modern medicine, and vice versa—is extended in the present study into a broader cultural-cognitive domain. Such coexistence is not a strategic accommodation limited to clinical encounters, but a stable, general feature of how implicit theory of dreaming is held in Malabar.

At a cross-cultural level, the constituents of Malabar's syncretic complex model have significant analogues in indigenous cultures worldwide. The conceptualisation of dream as a conduit to the spirit world or a site of divine revelation is observed among the Dakota (Sioux), the ancient Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians. The Babylonians even had a temple dedicated to the god of dreams called "Makhir." In the ancient Egyptian context, where deities utilised dreams to demand piety or provide prophetic guidance, these functions directly parallel the functional/meaningful register identified in Malabar. Similarly, the belief in "soul travel" during sleep corresponds to lenses known to Burma's Karen people, besides resembling discernible patterns from ancient Egyptian and Vedic epistemology.
The behavioural manifestations of dream-based directives are documented cross-culturally, as in religious accounts of certain African populations where dream instructions are known to have preceded religious conversions (Lincoln, 1935/2003). Similarly, the cognitive continuity between waking preoccupations and dream content—exemplified by the sort of creative incubations seen in Buddhist traditions (Young, 2001)—suggests that dreams may very likely be honed as pathways for consciously processing waking goals.

While these dream motifs are documented cross-culturally, their significance in Malabar lies in their syncretism. Arguably, traditional epistemologies are not stagnant relics; they manifest actively in modern experiences. As Lohmann (2019) suggests, dreams function as a dynamic cultural resource for autonomic culture updating, whereby subjects draw upon existing religious and mythological lenses to generate coherent meaning in the face of complexities of modernity.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This research provides a substantive study of how dreams are experienced and articulated within the cultural context of Malabar. The findings show that the implicit theories

about dreams are shaped by a syncretic synthesis of sociocultural elements— including religions, folklore, mythologies, and ideas from popular science—as well as personal experience. The Syncretic Complex Model identified in the study highlights culture's role as an undeniable constitutive force that provides the symbolic framework for meaning-making. Consequently, these results provide a framework for future research into how culturally specific epistemologies constrain and enable individual dream experience.

Many elements of Malabar's dream theories have clear analogues worldwide. The conceptualisation of the dream as a conduit to the spirit world- found among the Dakota (Sioux), ancient Greeks, and Egyptians—parallels the "Meaningful/Functional" register identified in our data. Universal themes of prophetic guidance(Joseph in the Bible, Corsican and Portuguese omens, etc.) and soul travel (seen in the Karen of Burma and Vedic literature) suggest that Malabar's residents are not indifferent to the global tradition of reading dreams as sites of external agency. In essence, while the individual constituents of the dual-model typology and syncretic complex model are documented cross-culturally, their idiosyncratic configuration represents a distinctive regional signature.

The proposed implicit theory of dreams in Malabar identifies a syncretic complex and the coexistence of two contrasting registers—one mystical (meaningful/functional) and one physiological (physiological/irrelevant). Rather than seeing these coexisting registers as opposing cognitive frameworks, this model demonstrates how ambivalent modernity maintains psychological continuity. This study suggests that in pluralistic societies, the "rational" and the "mystical" are not mutually exclusive; rather, they serve as parallel explanatory registers. Ultimately, the Malabar experience proves that the Syncretic Complex Model is not merely a collection of beliefs, but a sophisticated psychological strategy for navigating ambivalent modernity—one that establishes cultural subjectivity as the constitutive force through which traditional and scientific epistemologies are cognitively reconciled.

Declaration on the use of Generative AI and writing tools

For the purpose of language editing and proofreading, digital tools such as Grammarly and Gemini AI were used. The authors reviewed and verified the final content and take full responsibility for the published article.

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