# "Senoi Dream Theory," Chapter 6

## Chapter 6: What Should We Make of All This, If Anything?

I believe that the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters can be summarized as follows. First, the Senoi are indeed people worthy of great admiration, and they do have a detailed dream theory, but they do not practice Senoi Dream Theory as Americans know it. Second, Kilton Stewart was a charmer and storyteller who misunderstood Senoi psychology and dream practices, and incorrectly attributed his own ideas to them. Third, Senoi Dream Theory has seemed plausible to many Americans since it caught hold during the turbulent 1960s, but that is because it combined a new application of traditional American ideas about the malleability of human nature with a story about a lost authenticity. Fourth, there is some evidence that dream sharing can be useful, but that's because any kind of intimate sharing tends to be judged positively by group participants. Fifth, there is no good evidence that dream control is possible using Stewart's techniques. Sixth, there is evidence that the frequency of nightmares can be reduced, which can be construed as a form of dream control, but the techniques are very different than those proposed by Stewart.

Specific issues about the Senoi, Stewart, and dream control to one side, are there any general morals that we can draw from the research about Senoi Dream Theory? Maybe. First, it is very difficult to study dreams. That's because it is not possible to make them happen (thus rendering the experimental method less useful), and they can't be seen by others or reported by dreamers while they are happening. For the most part, then, researchers have to take people's word for what they dream about, which can be an iffy proposition in many instances. If awakenings in the sleep laboratory are taken as a kind of normative baseline, then

many claims about dreaming and dream control outside the laboratory seem to be a product of poetic license.

Second, the human capacity for self-deception and the American need to believe in happy endings loom very large. Third, it is always necessary to be skeptical about ideas that have not been tested in systematic ways. Fourth, the unwillingness of the dreamwork movement to reject the claims by Stewart and Garfield about the Senoi suggests that the movement is not open to scientific criticisms and standards.

On a more hopeful note, small advances sometimes occur in the study of dreams, often in unforeseen ways. Physiologists stumbled across REM sleep in 1953, which has led to huge further discoveries and, in the case of sleep research, helpful therapeutic interventions that have benefited millions of people. Foulkes unexpectedly found that children do not dream often or well before ages 7-8, which turns dream theorizing in a cognitive direction. Recent work in neuropsychology and neuroimaging suggests there may be a fairly specific neural network for dreaming that can be studied in a variety of ways. Nearly forty years of dream content analysis using the Hall/Van de Castle system has led to some systematic findings that are discussed on this web site, especially in articles and chapters in its dream library. The cognitive-behavioral therapy technique known as imagery rehearsal may be useful in reducing the frequency of nightmares, which would be of real benefit for a large number of people if it is perfected and becomes more generally known.

But if the persistence of Senoi Dream Theory is any indication, progress in dream studies will remain slow.

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