Domhoff: "Senoi Dream Theory"

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

Senoi Dream Theory is a set of claims about how people can learn to control their dreams to reduce fear and increase pleasure -- especially sexual pleasure. It was a key element in a whole new orientation toward dreams that first became popular as one small strand of the human potential movement in the 1960s. Since then this new approach has grown to the point where it is now a separate movement, called the "dreamwork movement." It has its own in-group vocabulary, bulletins, workshops, and meeting places. Books on "creative dreaming" and "dream power," often invoking the wisdom of other cultures and classical Greece, have sold in the tens of thousands.

The practitioners and leaders in this movement call themselves "dream workers." They draw on several different theories and traditions, which are weaved together in different ways by different dream workers. One key source is the work of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961), whose theory claims that dreams are a source of wisdom and personal growth. There's also the Gestalt therapist Frederick (Fritz) Perls (1893-1970), who argued that the emotional re-experiencing and dramatization of dreams by members of groups can lead to the creative integration of the personality. Then, too, the beliefs and practices of various Native American groups, as well as the general use of dreams in spiritual healing by tribal peoples all over the world, have also been incorporated into the dreamwork movement.

Very crucially, but now taken for granted, the movement is based on an accidental discovery about sleep and dreams that emerged from a physiology laboratory in 1953. This research showed that sleep is very different from the passive, inactive brain state it had been thought to be by all the experts up until that time, including the expert in whose laboratory the contradictory discover was made. Instead, sleep has several periodic active phases, now known as Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, in which the eyes dart about underneath the eyelids and respiration rate changes, along with numerous other physiological and behavioral changes. Most of all, it was soon discovered that the most vivid dreaming occurs during this stage of sleep, which means that most people spend at least 20-25 percent of each night dreaming, far more than

ever had been imagined in the past. (I say "most" people, not everyone, because evidence has emerged that adults with certain kinds of brain lesions and pre-school children do not dream.) These laboratory studies gave a material reality to what hitherto had appeared to be an ephemeral and irregular phenomenon, and thereby reinforced the inclination to believe that dreams are somehow of deep and fundamental importance.[1]

Within this context, Senoi Dream Theory was the crucial final ingredient -- as shown in great detail in Chapter 3 -- in the creation of the dreamwork movement. That's because it added the idea that dreams can be shaped and controlled through positive group experiences. It isn't just that dreams contain wisdom in esoteric symbolic form, as Jung claimed, or that they can be used in an aggressive fashion in therapy groups to deal with personal problems, as Perls said. In addition, according to Senoi Dream Theory, dreams can be shared and shaped in groups in a positive and supportive fashion for the benefit of everyone, not just specific individuals with problems. As the literature of the now-defunct Jungian-Senoi Institute in Berkeley put it in the early 1980s, "Senoi dreamwork emphasizes the deliberate alteration of dream states, the resolution in dreams of problems encountered in waking consciousness, dream 'rehearsal' for activity while awake, and the application of dreams to creative individual and community projects."[2] The new theory sees dreams as an open and positive phenomenon which can be shared and shaped for maximum human development. The human potential movement has long since disappeared, but the dreamwork movement lives on.

The people who were said to first practice this new way of thinking about and using dreams, the Senoi, are an aboriginal people who live in the jungle highlands of Malaysia. Numbering between 30,000 and 45,000 for the past 50 years, they live near rivers in loose-knit settlements of fifteen to 100 people. The Senoi are characterized by the dreamwork movement as an easygoing and nonviolent people. Their ideas about dreams are so appealing because they are believed to be among the healthiest and happiest people in the world. There is reportedly no mental illness or violence precisely because they have a theory of dream control and dream utilization unlike anything ever heard of in Western history.

The main source on the Senoi use of dreams is the work of Kilton Stewart (1902-1965), who first learned about the Senoi during a stay in Malaya (now Malaysia) in 1934. His articles in *Complex* and *Mental Hygiene* provide the basis for the discussion of the Senoi in such widely read dream books as Ann Faraday's *Dream Power* (1972) and *The Dream Game* (1974).[3] Moreover, three different articles in *Psychology Today*, one in 1970, another in 1972, and a final one in 1978, discuss his work in a favorable light.[4] Then, too, his 1951 article in *Complex*, "Dream Theory in Malaya," later was reprinted in such once-influential collections on human possibilities as Charles Tart's *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969) and Theodore Roszak's *Sources* (1972).

In addition, Stewart's writings on the Senoi are supplemented by the work of psychologist Patricia Garfield, author of the best-selling *Creative Dreaming* (1974), which was reprinted with a new introduction in 1995. Although her book has chapters on the dream practices of Native Americans, ancient Greeks, and Eastern mystics, it is in

fact built around her chapter on how to learn and utilize what are said to be Senoi principles for controlling dreams. Garfield visited with some Senoi at the aborigine hospital in Gombak, Malaysia, in 1972. Until the early 1980s, Garfield was the only dream researcher besides Stewart claiming direct knowledge of Senoi dream practices. She was that crucial "second opinion" that helped solidify belief in the reality of Senoi Dream Theory. Moreover, she tantalized readers by reporting that her personal use of Senoi techniques led to a decline in the number of dreams in which she was a helpless victim and an increase in the number of dreams in which she had orgasms.

According to Stewart: "The Senoi make their dreams the major focus of their intellectual and social interest, and have solved the problem of violent crime and destructive economic conflict, and largely eliminated insanity, neurosis, and psychogenic illness." Although highly cooperative, they are nonetheless individualistic and creative, with each person developing his or her unique personality characteristics. As Stewart puts it in a particularly well-turned phrase: "The freest type of psychic play occurs in sleep, and the social acceptance of the dream would therefore constitute the deepest possible acceptance of the individual."[5]

Most of all, Senoi have near-perfect mental health. "Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Senoi is their extraordinary psychological adjustment," says Garfield. "Neurosis and psychosis as we know them are reported to be nonexistent among the Senoi," she continues. "Western therapists find this statement hard to believe, yet it is documented by researchers who spent considerable time directly observing the Senoi. The Senoi show remarkable emotional maturity."[6]

Those in the dreamwork movement who write about the Senoi accept Stewart's claim that this unusual level of health and happiness can be attributed to the way in which the Senoi use and interpret dreams. "There are no well-controlled scientific studies to prove that peacefulness, cooperativeness, and creativeness, mental health, and emotional maturity are the result of the Senoi's unique use of dream material," Garfield admits. "However, there is much to strongly suggest that, at the very least, their use of dreams is a basic element in developing these characteristics."[7]

For the Senoi, life is a veritable dream clinic. The concern with dreams begins at the break of day. "The Senoi parent inquires of his child's dream at breakfast, praises the child for having the dream, and discusses the significance of it," reports Stewart. "He asks about past incidences and tells the child how to change his behavior and attitude in future dreams. He also recommends certain social activities or gestures which the dream makes necessary or advisable."[8]

The dreamwork continues after breakfast at the village council. "Here the serious work of dream discussion continues," says Garfield, picking up the story. "The men, adolescent boys, and some of the women share their dreams with the larger group. They discuss the significance of each dream symbol and situation. Each council member expresses his opinion of its meanings. Those of the tribe who agree on the meaning of a dream will adopt it as a group project."[9]

The frank discussion of dreams is especially important in the promotion of social harmony. Negative actions in dreams are discussed with the people who were part of these interactions in order to resolve the problems that might have caused these images. "If the dreamer injures the dream images of his fellows or refuses to cooperate with them in dreams," writes Stewart, "he should go out of his way to express friendship and cooperation on awakening, since hostile dream characters can only use the image of people for whom his good will is running low." By the same token, "if the image of a friend hurts him in a dream, the friend should be advised of the fact, so he can repair his damage or negative dream image by friendly social intercourse."[10]

But the Senoi, it is claimed, not only share and interpret their dreams. Even more significantly, they shape and control them. They are able to have the kinds of dreams they want to have, free of fearful chases and frightening falls, and full of sensuality and creativity. They do so through three basic principles that are taught to children as they report their dreams around the breakfast table. These principles, which are unique in the dream literature and greatly appeal to modern readers, can be paraphrased from Stewart and Garfield as follows:

1. Always confront and conquer danger in dreams. If an animal looms out of the jungle, go toward it. If someone attacks you, fight back.

2. Always move toward pleasurable experiences in dreams. If you are attracted to someone in a dream, feel free to turn the attraction into a full sexual experience. If you are enjoying the pleasurable sensations of flying or swimming, relax and experience them fully.

3. Always make your dreams have a positive outcome and extract a creative product from them. Best of all in this regard, try to obtain a gift from the dream images, such as a poem, a song, a dance, a design, or a painting.[11]

These accounts of the Senoi people and their use of dreams have an otherworldly, utopian quality about them. They seem almost too good to be true. Indeed, Stewart's 1951 article, "Dream Theory in Malaya," begins by talking about a hypothetical "flying saucer from another planet" that lands on a "lonely mountain peak" in Malaysia. After playing with the image for another sentence or two by noting that we would be curious about the people who could make such a craft, he then turns the tables by telling us that in 1934: "I was introduced to an isolated tribe of jungle folk, who employed methods of psychology and interpersonal relations so astonishing that they might have come from another planet." Stewart thus moves from "outer space" to "inner space" in such a way that the reader is prepared to be enchanted by these fascinating people:

> If you heard further that the navigators of the ship had found a group of 12,000 people living as an isolated community among the mountains, and had demonstrated that these preliterate people could utilize their methods of healing and education, and reproduce the society from which the celestial navigators came, you would probably be more curious about these psychological and social methods that conquered space inside the individual,

than you would about the mechanics of the ship which conquered outer space. [12]

Mention of flying saucers, other planets, and outer space gives Stewart's article a literary quality. In fact, the more one contemplates how really remarkable and atypical these people are, the more one is likely to ask: how much of this is true? Could such healthy and happy people really exist, and if they do, are their principles of dream control and their practices of dream sharing actually the basis for their wonderful culture and superb mental health?

In fact, none of this is true. It is all a fairy tale. It is not a hoax, but it does show how gullible most people can be due to persuasive dream hucksters and the general American will to believe that there must be some good and pure people somewhere in the world. As I show in Chapter 2, drawing on detailed field work by anthropologists that has been totally ignored by the dreamwork movement, the Senoi do not practice Senoi Dream Theory. Senoi peoples certainly have a dream theory and a dream practice, but it is nothing like what American dreamworkers believe. If anything, it is just the opposite.

Following the chapter showing the truth about the Senoi, who are in reality a subjugated aboriginal people doing the best they can under very difficult circumstances, Chapter 3 turns to Stewart's life story in an attempt to understand how he came to conclusions that are very different from those of trained anthropologists. Drawing on many different sources, but especially interviews and materials shared with me by the sibling who admired him the most, I show that the American version of Senoi Dream Theory is the product of the fertile imagination and messianic hopes of a romantic wanderer with no previous training in anthropology. He happened on the Senoi quite by accident in the 1930s, knew nothing of the language or culture, and spent at most eight weeks with them in the course of two different visits. I further show that his dissertation, completed years after his visit to the Malaysian highlands, did not make the extravagant claims made in his later papers.

Why did so many people uncritically accept the claims by Stewart and Garfield, and why have they persisted in believing these claims despite all the contradictory evidence that has been available since I brought it together in a 1985 book, *The Mystique of Dreams*. The answer to this question is discussed in Chapter 4. It involves the hopefulness of the early 1960s, when everything was considered possible, but it also relates to the later rejection of all things American by many young and liberal Americans in the late 1960s due to the Vietnam War. Most of all, it is based on the general American attitude toward the world: the spirit of "can-do," the idea that everything can be shaped and controlled, which is then unwittingly built into Senoi Dream Theory.

But whatever the theory's origins, and whatever the weaknesses of Kilton Stewart as an observer and thinker, the bigger question is whether or not his theory has any validity. That is, the theory has to be judged on the evidence for and against it, not on the basis of Stewart's romantic claims about its alleged Senoi origins. This judgment is undertaken in Chapter 5. According to several studies in the 1970s and 1980s, there may be some benefit to sharing dreams, just as there may be benefit to sharing any intimate thoughts

in a supportive group. However, Stewart's ideas about dream control do not work. People aren't likely to be able to confront and conquer danger, go toward pleasure, or extract a creative gift from one or another dream character.

Quite ironically though, there is new evidence since the 1990s that nightmares can be reduced by writing down a new ending to the nightmare of one's own choosing, and then imagining that new ending several times each day ("imagery rehearsal," a technique of cognitive-behavioral therapy). Even here, no credit can be given to Stewart or the dreamwork movement. The successful approach to nightmare reduction -- which can be thought of as a form of "dream control" -- was developed by a physician, Barry Krakow, who based his work on an article on imagery rehearsal that appeared in a British psychiatry journal in the 1970s. Citations to two of Krakow's research studies appear at the end of Chapter 5.

When I first wrote about Senoi Dream Theory, I was very gentle, ironic, and circumspect. In effect, I said that dreams are very difficult to study and that we all make mistakes. I even noted that some of the early claims about REM sleep and dreams turned out to be slightly wrong (e.g., the eye movements do not correlate with the dreams, dreams sometimes occur in non-REM sleep towards morning, and people do not become crazy if they are deprived of REM sleep). I was generally forgiving toward Stewart as an enthusiastic, well-meaning, and creative person with liberal values.

But this approach turned out to be a big mistake for two reasons, and that is why this streamlined and updated account is so direct and frank. First, I managed to annoy some of my scientific colleagues because I did not more clearly debunk Stewart and expose him as the half-baked bounder that he was. (For example, one of the greatest anthropologists of the 20th century, Sir Edmund Leach, who knew Stewart extremely well in the 1930s, wrote me that Stewart was a blowhard and storyteller who was not taken seriously by anyone who knew him.) For my research colleagues, then, I was guilty of pulling my punches.

Second, my approach let the Senoi Dream Theory advocates slip off the hook far too easily. They were able to finesse and distort what I had said, and go right on making their absurd claims about Senoi Dream Theory. The most prominent example of this point is one of the most visible figures in the dreamwork movement, Jeremy Taylor, the author of several pop psychology books on dreams and a frequent leader at dream workshops. An eloquent and forceful speaker, Taylor tells people that the Senoi used to practice the theory Stewart put forth, but that they abandoned it or hid it from Western view due to being put in stockades during World War II.[13] Further, he says they retreated from frank interactions with Westerners in the face of the American anti-communist crusade after World War II.

Rather than basing his conclusions on the weight of the overall evidence, Taylor says there is "justification for reasonable doubt" on the issue of whether Senoi ever practiced Senoi Dream Theory. He makes this claim based on very dubious anecdotal sources. He thereby adopts the opposite approach to a scientific one, where the important issue is the comparison of rival hypotheses for their ability to explain the most systematic and

reliable evidence currently available, not whether there is some faint hope that the most unlikely hypothesis just possibly may be true. If Senoi Dream Theory is to be given the benefit of an alleged "reasonable doubt," then any unlikely hypothesis can hang on forever in the dream community, deadening the impetus to entertain new hypotheses and collect new data. The whole enterprise becomes futile, frozen in rival camps.

But it is not just Taylor. He is simply the best exemplar of what must be considered a general tendency until someone within the dreamwork movement challenges the orientation that he advocates. Moreover, Taylor's extreme position has given cover for Garfield to look like a reasonable moderate who need not change her earlier views. In the new preface to the 1995 edition of her 1974 book, she notes that my book seemingly refutes everything she claims about the Senoi. But then she notes that there are those -- namely, Taylor -- who doubt this refutation. For herself, then, there is just no way to be sure who is right, so she doesn't need to rethink anything. And thus the miseducation of the next generation of dreamworkers continues.

There is only one positive note in this litany of silence and denial. The aforementioned Ann Faraday, the author of popular dream books in 1972 and 1974, visited a Senoi group with her husband in 1982-1983 and stayed for nearly a year. When she realized that everything she had written on the basis of Stewart's account was wrong, she said so in no uncertain terms that are quoted toward the end of Chapter 2.

Now that the claims by Stewart, Garfield, and Taylor have been spelled out, it is time to look at what anthropologists who spent large periods of time with Senoi groups actually found.

Continue on to Chapter 2

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Go back to the Dream Library index.