"Senoi Dream Theory," Chapter 2

Chapter 2: What Do We Know About the Senoi?

The word "Senoi" means "human being" or "person" in the language of the aboriginal people who still managed to practice their traditional way of life into the 1980s in the mountainous central area of mainland Malaysia. The people called "the Senoi" by dream researchers are actually two groups, the *Temiar* and the *Semai*, who are very closely related culturally. The Temiar tended to live in the highest and most isolated regions, at the headwaters of the various rivers, whereas the Semai live a little closer to farming areas. (In 1994, a census report estimated that there were 15,000 Temiar and 26,000 Semai in the country.) There is sometimes a little mutual suspicion between Temiar and Semai villages, but there is also a considerable amount of interaction and intermarriage in some regions of the jungle.[1]

Senoi groups are most readily distinguishable from two neighboring aboriginal groups by their practice of a shifting form of agriculture -- called "swidden" agriculture by anthropologists -- in which they prepare new fields every three or four years within those areas that are more or less theirs by tradition and common consent. In some parts of the jungle interiors, their settlements border on the traditional areas of a few thousand seminomadic hunters and foragers called the *Semang*, who may be descended from some of the first human beings to leave Africa tens of thousands of years ago. At the edges of the jungle, closer to civilization, Senoi groups mingle with aboriginal *proto-Malays*, who are traditional farmers.[2] These three general groupings of native peoples share many concepts and beliefs in common, including many beliefs about dreams. There also has been a great deal of intermarriage over the centuries, but their cultures are distinctive enough that the three general groupings appear to be defined at least in part by an attempt to remain different from each other and to retain a unique style of life. They are now collectively called "Orang Asli," a term in the Malay language that means "original people."[3]

It seems likely that these three native cultures were pushed off their original lands as many as 4,000 years ago by people who migrated from the south of China and became what are today called *Malaysians*. These modern Malaysians make up almost 60% of the current population of Malaysia, with immigrant Chinese accounting for another 30%, and immigrants from Indian and Pakistan another 10%. In a country with a population of nearly 9 million in the 1980s, the aboriginal populations are truly miniscule, and they must be seen first of all as subjugated and marginalized people.

Indeed, the Senoi were long called *saki* by the Malaysians, which means "bestial aborigine" or "slave."[4] Until the turn of the century, when the British finally put a stop to the practice, Senoi often were captured by Malaysians and sold as slaves. Moreover,

many Semai and some Temiar suffered at the hands of both sides between 1948 and 1952 when the British and the majority Malay population fought a counterinsurgency war against the Malaysian Communist Party, which was based primarily in the Chinese immigrant population.[5] Since that time, the government seems to have adopted a more enlightened attitude toward the Senoi and the other indigenous groups, but their members still remain suspicious of Malay intentions and government practices.

There is considerable physical isolation and cultural variation among Semai and Temiar groups. Most Senoi are unlikely to travel more than a few dozen miles from their place of birth. The fact that Semai speak forty different dialects provides one good indication of this relative isolation. Because it is so difficult to cross the rain forests and mountains, most contacts are among villages along one of the several rivers that run east and west from the highlands. There are more frequent contacts at the headwaters in the somewhat more open highlands, and these areas are seen as the purest regions of Senoi culture.

Although there was some important descriptive anthropological work on the Temiar and Semai as early as the 1920s and 1930s, very little was published about Senoi culture until the 1960s. Since then several anthropologists have settled among Senoi peoples and become fluent in their difficult language, which is part of the Austro-Asiatic family that includes Cambodian and some of the languages spoken by Vietnamese hill people. Robert Dentan, as a graduate student in anthropology at Yale University, spent seven months in 1962 in a mixed settlement of Temiar and Semai. He also lived with other Semai for another seven months in 1963, and then returned for a brief stay in 1975 during a sabbatical from his professorial position at SUNY Buffalo. A British anthropologist, Geoffrey Benjamin, who trained at Cambridge University and teaches at the National University of Singapore, lived among the Temiar for eighteen months in 1964-65 and on several later occasions. Clayton Robarchek, who studied at the University of California, Riverside, and teaches at Chico State University, lived with the Semai in two different settlements for fourteen months in 1973-74 and visited them again in 1980. It is from the work of these three anthropologists that we have our primary information about Senoi culture and their dream practices when the people were still practicing their traditional ways of life.

As noted briefly in Chapter 1, the Temiar and Semai live in loose-knit settlements of from fifteen to 100 people. In the most remote areas, where the dangers from wild elephants and tigers seem greatest, the settlement often consists of a single "long house," which has compartments for a dozen or more families as well as a communal area. However, in other areas there are usually two or three smaller houses, and the number varies over the space of several months as people move into the village or depart. Built on wooden poles from four to twenty feet above the ground, the houses are made out of bamboo and are covered with thatched jungle palms.

Historically, the material culture of the Senoi was built around bamboo. "To describe the material culture of the Temiars," says H. D. "Pat" Noone, the first anthropologist to study the Senoi at any length in the 1930s," is to tell the uses to which bamboo may be

put." Bamboo is indispensable for "houses, household utensils, vessels, tools, weapons, fences, baskets, waterpipes, rafts, musical instruments and ornaments."[6] (Noone and his work are especially important in terms of Stewart's later claims because it was Noone who took Stewart with him to visit Senoi groups in 1934 and 1938).

The primary concern of the Senoi are their fields, which are "owned" by the families that clear them. It takes from two weeks to a month to clear a new field, which then will be used for two or three years in most areas before it is allowed to return to jungle. The Senoi plant a mixture of tapioca, manioc, maize, and hill rice, along with vegetables and a few fruit trees. Little time is spent in weeding the field or keeping it free of pests, almost hopeless tasks in the jungle in any case, and much of the harvest is lost to the elements and predators.

Although the Senoi obviously love their fields, they also delight in the hunt. Hunting is done with poisonous darts, which are shot out of eight-foot bamboo blowpipes. Blowpipes are sources of great pride among Senoi men. They are decorated and polished with great care and affection; more time is spent in fashioning the perfect blowpipe than in building a new house. Dentan believes that blowpipes are clearly a symbol of virility for Senoi males.[7]

The objects of a Senoi hunt are such relatively small animals as squirrels, monkeys, and wild pigs. Returning hunters are greeted with enthusiasm and gleeful dancing, and the meat is shared equally with everyone in the settlement. Although they subsist in good part on their crops and fruits, the Senoi say they have not really eaten unless the meal includes fish, meat, or fowl.

Senoi women are largely responsible for looking after the children and taking care of household chores. They also spend time making baskets and mats, gathering fruit in the jungle, helping with the fields, and fishing with baskets. There is no rigid division of labor and no strong taboos upon women during pregnancy or menstruation, but women do most of the cooking, and men usually take the leadership roles in healing ceremonies or village councils.[8]

Stewart reports that the Senoi have a peaceful way of life, and other Americans and Europeans who have spent time with them have found their culture extremely attractive. Noone married a Temiar woman; and P. D. R. Williams-Hunt, a British colonial officer who wrote a book on the aborigines of Malaysia in 1952, married a Semai woman. (A son from this marriage, who grew up in his mother's village after his father was killed in an accident, became a spokesperson for aboriginal peoples in Malaysia.)

The Senoi are extremely tolerant, sexually permissive, and unaggressive. Couples move slowly and informally into permanent relationships that involve no elaborate marriage ceremonies. Children are deeply cared for, and there is no rigid system of religious beliefs and rituals. The Senoi prefer withdrawal to conflict, and they are not ashamed to admit when they are afraid. Reserved to the point of timidity with strangers, including other Senoi they do not know, they love to discuss and argue with great rhetorical flourishes in the company of friends. They are quick with puns and put-ons, and they use

self-deprecation with great finesse in arguments. The Senoi have an open-minded perspective that Dentan characterizes as skeptical, eclectic, and pragmatic.[9]

However, contrary to Stewart and Garfield, it is not true that they are never violent or that their physical and mental health is exceptional. In fact, interactions with the dominant culture have led the Senoi into violent activities. Some Temiar, for example, used to guide slave raiders to Semai and other Temiar settlements, knowing that the raiders would murder many of the adults.[10] During the counterinsurgency war in the highlands in the late 1940s and early 1950s, some Temiar were members of the counterinsurgency unit called Senoi Praak, or War People. Organized in good part by Richard Noone, the younger brother of Pat Noone, they played a role in the fighting, which included some killing.[11] Similarly, Dentan reports that the Semai told him of fighting in Senoi Praak:

> For example, Semai say that when they were recruited into the Malaysian government's counterinsurgency forces during the Communist uprisings of the 1950's, they were fiercer than people from other ethnic groups, partly in reprisal for terrorist acts committed against Semai. Some former troops say, "We were drunk on blood."[12]

Closer to home, the Senoi on rare occasions become violent in dealing with frustrated love or passion. Ironically, it was learned in the late fifties by Richard Noone that his brother Pat (the anthropologist who befriended Stewart, recall) probably was the victim of a violent love triangle. When Pat refused to let his Temiar wife and his young adopted Temiar "brother" sleep together, which would not be that unusual among the Senoi, the young man allegedly murdered Noone with a dart shot from a blowpipe.[13] Pat Noone himself certainly did not share Stewart's optimistic claim that the Temiar were never violent. He made the following assertion based on his several months of observations and discussion in Temiar settlements: "A husband whose wife has run away and is living permanently with another man may either revenge himself indirectly by gaining the aid of a sorcerer or directly by blowpiping or spearing the man who has supplanted him.[14]

As for the Semai, Dentan also notes crimes of passion: "At least two murders have been committed between 1955 and 1977, and there is gossip about a couple of others." Nor does the relative lack of violence mean a lack of quarrels and threats. Thus, the fact that the Senoi are nonviolent does not mean they are gentle and benign. As Dentan explains:

> No Semai, and no one who has spent much time with Semai, thinks of them that way [as gentle]. For example, Semai backbiting, which is frequent, is almost a dramatic art. Six months in a Semai settlement will see at least three or four serious quarrels in which voices are raised and threats of physical violence are at least alleged, if not actually made.[15]

Nor are sickness and mental illness absent from the Temiar and Semai people. The jungle is described like a Garden of Eden by both Stewart and Garfield, but it is in fact a harsh taskmaster that takes its toll on Senoi health. The climate is extremely hot and damp, malaria is rampant in most areas, and there are numerous dangerous insects,

leeches, worms, large snakes, and poisonous plants. The people are extremely afraid of tigers. Until recently, most babies died in the first year, and many young children contract malaria or a serious respiratory disease. According to Noone, the Temiar do not give children a formal name until their second or third year, when they are sure the child is going to live. They say that this will make it easier for them to forget if the child dies and they will not be so sad.[16] Information such as this shows that Senoi people are very admirable, but not for the reasons claimed by Stewart and Garfield.

Unlike most human populations, there were until recently more males than females in every adult age group. A physical anthropologist who studied the Senoi in the late sixties suspects that this is because so many women die in childbirth, but he cannot support this explanation with certainty because of the problems of gathering reliable data. However, the wide prevalence of hookworm infestation, which is very dangerous for pregnant women, is an indirect piece of evidence for this suspicion.[17]

By this point, it probably comes as no surprise that there is also mental illness among the Senoi. Dentan reports as follows: "Robarchek and I, who collected case histories, both have the impression that in most Semai settlements there will be one to three people whom we and most of the people in the settlement think are crazy."[18]

These anthropological findings are supported by the observations of a psychiatrist and a medical director in the early 1970s at the aborigine hospital in Gombak, a small town several miles from the jungle. Among twenty aboriginal psychiatric patients seen there in the course of a year, nine were Senoi, and all nine were psychotic. The patients were brought to the hospital in each case by relatives who had become concerned about their disruptive and unpredictable behavior. In keeping with the non-aggressiveness of the Senoi, the most frequent symptoms of these patients were withdrawal and running away. They were not likely to be aggressive, and only one, a manic depressive, had suicidal thoughts. Generally speaking, the schizophrenic patients were strikingly similar in their symptom patterns to those seen in Western Societies.[19] I think these findings are a damming commentary on Garfield's credibility, because she made her implausible claims about the wonderful mental health of Senoi peoples on the basis of a very brief visit to this same aboriginal hospital during the same time period covered in the 1972 paper just cited.

Illness and psychiatric problems aside, it must be remembered that the Senoi way of life is not entirely carefree and of their own choosing. As people who were forced to live in the most remote jungles if they wanted any autonomy, they are in many ways subjugated, and as such they have the mixture of admiration and fear toward their more powerful neighbors that is found in many people in their situation. They adopt a cautious and passive style toward outsiders in order to make the best of a difficult situation.

The Senoi are taught very early in life to fear outsiders. When strangers approach a village, parents yell "fear, fear" to their children and cover the heads of the infants they are holding. Although it was known up and down the valley that he was harmless, Dentan reports that when he approached, some mothers nonetheless did this with their

infants merely as an object lesson.[20] Similarly, Robarchek notes that this practice made it very difficult for him to approach children even after he had been there for some time: "I was constantly thwarted in my attempts to establish contact with infants and small children by mothers who, even after we had lived in the village for months, would snatch them away and cry 'afraid.'"[21]

Children also learn to be extremely frightened through the behavior of their parents during the violent thunderstorms that suddenly and unexpectedly occur from time to time. These storms bring with them almost continuous crashes of thunder, winds of up to forty or fifty miles an hour, and the danger of flooding even for settlements on high ground. Senoi adults become very upset during these storms, sometimes running wildly into the jungles. They scream and shout, and they yell "fear, fear" to their children. According to what Semai informants told Dentan and Robarchek, these storms are the product of "Thunder," a spiritual entity who sends storms because he is angry over some misbehavior or another by the Senoi. In order to appease him, people sometimes slash themselves with a bamboo knife or machete, collect the blood in bamboo containers filled with water, and then toss the mixture into the wind, shouting *terlaid*, *terlaid*, which means they have acted "in a way that might bring on a natural calamity."[22]

In Robarchek's observation, however, the people most frequently blame the storm on the misbehavior of children. During the storm adults seek out children and ask them what wrong they have done to cause such a calamity. When the guilty child is found, a piece of his or her hair is cut off and burned as a kind of sacrifice to Thunder. "Often," reports Robarchek, "hair from all the children is burned just in case they may have unknowingly committed some 'terlaid' offense." Robarchek believes that these practices teach children to fear their emotions and seek control of them:

> When a severe storm occurs, it is the children who are questioned about and forced to reflect upon their actions. This interrogation, taking place in the fear-charged atmosphere of the storm, serves to impress further upon the children their responsibility for maintaining emotional control, for not to do so endangers the entire community.[23]

As children grow older, the concept of *terlaid* is used to restrain them in other contexts. The Senoi claim they do not instruct their children; to do so might make them sick or cause their souls to flee. Nor do they discipline children in any physical way except by carrying them back to their houses if the annoying behavior persists. However, they do yell *terlaid* when children become too loud or boisterous. They tell children there are various kinds of "bogeymen" who come in the night to cut off people's heads. Children also learn of ubiquitous "evil spirits" that often take the form of tigers or other dangerous creatures.[24]

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, given the historical situation in which the Senoi find themselves, and the way in which children are raised, that the Senoi people are in general very restrained. After commenting on their lack of interpersonal violence or overt hostility, Robarchek notes that this is but one aspect of a general emotional reserve:

> This is, however, only one manifestation of what is perhaps the most fundamental feature of Semai temperament: a low level of emotionality in general. With the exception of fearful behavior, emotional outbursts seldom occur. In addition to the virtual absence of strong expressions of anger, mourning is subdued, expression of joy is muted, and even laughter is restrained. Low affective involvement is characteristic of interpersonal relationships as well.... One sees few overt expressions of affection, empathy, or sympathy.[25]

This resistance to strong emotions is also seen in the fact that the Senoi will even deny being angry. "The Semai do not say, 'Anger is bad,'" writes Dentan. "They say, 'we do not get angry,' and an obviously angry man will flatly deny his anger."[26]

To say the least, then, it seems likely that Senoi psychology is far more complex and typically human than the impression conveyed by Stewart and Garfield. Moreover, Senoi share many of the characteristics developed by subjugated groups, suggesting that they are just about the opposite of the carefree and happy people portrayed by Stewart and Garfield.

But is there such a thing as Senoi Dream Theory? And what do the Senoi do with their dreams?

The Senoi do have a dream theory, and dreams are far more important in their culture than in any Western society. However, the Senoi theory is not psychological in the way that Stewart claimed, and it does not have the practical applications that he suggested. The account that follows is based primarily on Dentan's fieldwork in the mixed Temiar-Semai settlement in 1962 and the Semai settlement in 1963, supplemented by the writings of Robarchek and personal communications from Benjamin and Robarchek. (Specifically, I interviewed both Benjamin and Robarchek in person, and corresponded with both of them as well.)

Given the variations in Senoi beliefs from river valley to river valley and the subtlety of the concepts involved, it has been far more difficult for anthropologists to understand Senoi Dream Theory than Senoi daily life. Nevertheless, some commonality has emerged in what anthropologists have learned about Senoi views on the psyche and dreams.

The Semai with whom Dentan discussed the nature of the psyche seem to have five basic concepts covering the entities that make up the personality.[27] Benjamin found among the Temiar he spoke with that these may reduce to two "souls" that are linked in a complex and interactive fashion.[28] Either way, the Semai and Temiar agreed that the two most important psychic entities, one localized behind the center of the forehead, the other focused in the pupil of the eye, are able to leave the body when a person is asleep or in a trance. It is these two psychic entities that account for dreaming, as Noone first suggested.

Dreams, then, are the experiences that one or the other of these "souls" has when it encounters other souls belonging to animals, trees, waterfalls, people, or supernaturals.

Ruwaay, the soul at the center of the forehead, is by far the more important of the two when it comes to dreaming and is sometimes referred to as the "dream soul" by the Temiar.[29] Ruwaay appear in dreams as birds, butterflies, homunculi, or children. All ruwaay are timid, childlike, and a little irrational. The "soft" ruwaay of children are so easily frightened that the slightest thing can scare them off Sometimes wandering ruwaay are so fearful of malevolent entities that they can only be lured back by special healing ceremonies called "singing ceremonies."[30] Although this theory of dreaming may not be credible to psychologically oriented Americans, it would not seem strange to many tribal people around the world. The oldest and most widespread theory of dreaming is that it is the actual experience of the soul or self while the body is asleep.[31]

Dreams can be important in many different ways in Senoi culture. They can reveal that a woman is pregnant or why a child is sick. They can tell a man whether or not his new field will be productive. Dreams are essential in contacting the supernatural world, and they play a role in healing ceremonies. It is even claimed that dreams can predict the weather. Still, most Senoi are very reluctant to make very many predictions on the basis of their dreams. They tend not to mention a predictive dream to anyone until the prediction has come true. "Thus," says Dentan, "no one ever told us about having a weather forecast dream until after the prophesied weather had occurred."[32]

For all this emphasis on dreams, the Semai and Temiar with whom Dentan lived attached no importance to most dreams. Like many Western dream theorists, the ancient Greeks, and other tribal societies with a strong interest in dreams, they discriminate between "little" dreams and "big" dreams, dreams that are insignificant and dreams that are important.[33] Insignificant dreams are *piypuuy*. They involve no contact with friendly or evil supernatural spirits, and they are generally meaningless. Obvious wish fulfillment dreams are always piypuuy. "You dream of sleeping with a pretty girl and the next day you don't even see her," complained a Temiar dream expert in explaining this point to Dentan.[34]

Typical dreams, such as falling dreams, are piypuuy. "Kids always dream about falling. They usually grow out of it," one person explained. Another person said: "It's like dreams about fighting or burning someone's house down. It never happens. Anyway, the child usually wakes up before he hits the ground."[35]

When frightening sex dreams occur, one person claimed, the best thing to do is tell your spouse or lover about it so the alien dream soul will be too embarrassed to return. This places the blame for the dream on the dream soul of somebody else. Others deal with such dreams in an emotional way that might occur in any society; for example, a young woman and her new husband told Dentan the following:

WOMAN: About three weeks after we were married, I dreamed he'd married another woman. I lay half awake, crying and crying, until he woke me up and asked what was wrong. I hugged him and told him, crying and crying.

MAN: The first few weeks we were married, I was always dreaming she didn't love me, that she was chasing after other men. But then I decided it was because I

was just a little bit jealous, so I didn't believe them.

WOMAN: When I dream he's dead or with another woman, I wake him up to tell me it isn't true.

As many people do the world over, the Senoi often deny that upsetting dreams reflect their own desires. The following dialogue took place in the Semai language in 1962. Merloh is a man in his forties:

MERLOH: I dreamed last night a huge python was in my father's house. I was sitting on a log by the hearth and saw it over my shoulder, like this. I yelled "Dad, dad, come hit this python!" He came over and hit it, and it shrunk until it was tiny.... People in the old days would say that was the dream soul of incest.

DENTAN: You mean, you wanted to commit incest?

MERLOH: Hey, it's not my dream soul! Someone else is thinking about incest. Anyway, if the python is killed in the dream, the incest dream soul is killed, so you don't have to worry that it'll get you later.... Maybe if someone else had a dream like that, it'd be his own dream soul wanting incest.[36]

But incest dreams are not automatically threatening. One Semai explained to Robarchek that the actions and experiences of the ruwaay soul do not always have to be taken seriously because it is so often childlike or irrational. Dreams are often silly or trivial precisely because the ruwaay soul is the childish and somewhat irrational part of us.[37]

Nor are ordinary dreams seen as particularly positive. When Dentan asked one Semai what he dreamed about most often, he said "falling, stabbing people, swimming, fleeing, and dying." But he added that the dream about dying meant that he would live for a long time.[38]

The important dreams that do occur from time to time have to be understood in the context of a fundamental dichotomy that exists for the Senoi within the realm of the nonmaterial. This is the dichotomy between "they that kill us" (called *mara'* by some Semai) and "those who help us" (*gunik*). In the words of Robarchek, *mara'* are "dangerous beings that may or may not have material form at any given time."[39] Included in this category are the beings that cause illness, accidents, and other misfortunes. *Mara'* are unpredictable and malevolent. They may attack at any time for no reason at all, although doing something wrong or offending a neighbor may increase the chances of being attacked.

The only protection against a *mara'* is another *mara'* who has become friendly to a person or group. Such a *mara'* is called a *gunik*, a kind of protector or familiar, and it may be called upon in times of trouble. It is precisely at this point that dreams become significant, as Stewart recognized, but not through any conscious actions or principles of dream control. Instead, it is a matter of luck or chance that a person acquires a protector through his dreams. As Robarchek explains:

> A *mara'* becomes a *gunik* by coming to a person in a dream and stating his

> desire to make friends. One must, however, be wary of these *mara'* because they may be deceiving the dreamer in preparation for an attack upon him. The proof that a *mara'* truly wants to become a *gunik* lies in his telling the dreamer his name and giving him a song. This song becomes the property of the dreamer, who may use it to summon the *gunik*. The *gunik* may then be called upon to assist the singer and his kinsmen and co-villagers in a variety of ways, but especially in curing illnesses and warding off other kinds of attacks by *mara'* of the same type as the *gunik*. Thus, a tiger *gunik* will protect the villagers from attack by "foreign" or "stranger" tigers, and a wind *gunik* protects the hamlet from destruction by "stranger" winds.[40]

Senoi who acquire a *gunik* summon him to help by means of curative singing ceremonies that can last for as long as three consecutive nights. These ceremonies are necessary to summon *gunik* because they are shy and hard to reach. Singing, dancing, and the rhythmic striking of bamboo sticks to produce a musical accompaniment are necessary to assure the *gunik* that they are indeed welcome. The extremely important role of music in Senoi culture has been demonstrated in a detailed anthropological study by anthropologist Marina Roseman, published in 1991. Generally speaking, she corroborates the earlier work on Senoi culture reported so far in this chapter. She also explicitly refutes the notion that Senoi dreamers ever demand a gift in their dreams:

> In my study of Temiar dreams and encounters with familiars, I never found an instance where a Temiar requested a song or any other gift. When questioned about the possibility, Temiars explicitly stated that such a request would be unacceptable.[41]

From an American point of view, the long and complicated singing ceremonies might seem to include a combination of religion, partying, flirting, and healing. They can be a time of great merriment even when someone is ill. Their most important element is the trance state in which the individual Semai or Temiar relates to the *gunik*. It is while a person is in a trance state that the *gunik* speaks through his human "father" and is sent into the body of the patient to search out the cause of illness. (This entry into the body of the patient is very common in aboriginal cultures around the world.)

The relatively few people with *gunik* thus have the ability to deal with other supernatural entities. They are often called upon for help by other members of the settlement. Dentan used the word *adepts* to describe such people; Noone and Stewart called them medicine men or shamans. It is claimed that women can become adepts, and that they are usually better adepts than men when they do. However, female adepts are rare, supposedly because their bodies are not strong enough to withstand the rigors of trance.[42]

The presence of a melody can turn a seemingly straightforward wish-fulfillment dream into an important dream. A Semai man whom Dentan knew in 1962 desired to sleep with a Temiar woman, but she spurned him. He moped around for a few days and then dreamed that her soul had given him a melody. It was not, he insisted, a wish-fulfillment dream like dreaming of a winning number in a lottery, which everyone knows merely reflects your desires. Instead, this was a *gunik*-type dream. "The other man has her

body," he said, "but I have her dream soul."[43]

Although dreams have a central role as the medium through which *gunik* announce themselves, no researcher has encountered the morning dream clinics described by Stewart. Since the Semai and the Temiar work at tasks they choose, they do not usually wake up at the same time. The aforementioned Williams-Hunt, who lived among the Semai and the Temiar in the 1940s, describes the morning scene:

> Before first light in the communal house, people begin to stir. The fires are kicked into a glow, some of the more energetic young men seize their blowpipes and hurry off into the jungle, others remove the cats and dogs from their vantage points and huddle close up by the fires, for early mornings in the hills can be very chilly and a few souls grunt and groan, turn over and wrap themselves up more snugly in their sleeping clothes. But by half past six everyone is up. Sleeping mats and sheets are shaken out, rolled up and put away. Protesting babies are washed and fed, dogs shooed out of the house and a few hopefuls delve into the pots for a handful of rice left over from the previous night. Usually the cockroaches have got there first. Once the house is clean, everyone goes about their daily tasks. Fowls are fed, the women go down to the waterhole to fill up their bamboos and wash clothes, and themselves, and the men who have not gone out hunting repair blowpipes or make traps or collect firewood.[44]

What a wonderfully human scene this is. It is far more believable, and moving, than anything Stewart or Garfield ever wrote in their fairy tale accounts. Moreover, it is supported by another observer from that time period, John D. Leary, who was active on the British side in the counterinsurgency war. In 1995 he used government documents and interviews to write a detailed book on the role of the Orang Asli in that war. As one small part of that book, he commented on a key aspect of Stewart's claims: "On a number of occasions when I had cause to stay overnight in Senoi huts, either on ambush, for the tribal groups' protection, or just for shelter, I did not see any of the after-breakfast gathering of parents and children to discuss their previous night's dreams; most Orang Asli did not seem to have any kind of formal meal in the morning."[45]

Perhaps even more important than the lack of breakfast dream discussions, Dentan found that adults deny that they ever instruct children about dreaming. According to the Senoi, asserting authority makes children sick. Even trying to persuade a child to do something it does not want to do risks scaring its ruwaay soul, perhaps killing the child in the process. If there is one thing that seems certain to Dentan, Benjamin, and Robarchek, it is that there is no deliberate attempt to teach children principles of dream control.[46]. Nor did the drama therapist and anthropologist Sue Jennings find any sign of Senoi use of dreams when she and her three young children spent four months in the highlands while doing fieldwork on healing ceremonies in the 1970s:

> I found it very disconcerting during my fieldwork that I was unable to verify the practice which Stewart had described. After a discussion with Benjamin I discovered that he, too, had not discovered anything as formalized in his

> fieldwork as Stewart had described. Reassured, I continued my research and collected whatever dream information I could gather.[47]

When Dentan explained some of the principles of Stewart's theory to a young Semai man in 1962, he had the following reaction, as recorded in Dentan's field notes. Why something like this does not sink Senoi Dream Theory all by itself is a mystery to me:

> Yung thinks it might be a good way to work out the problems of several people in the community, but has never heard of such a custom and thinks the people here would not know how to do it. He says also that the dreams of Hamid, the most aggressive child in the community, are never about hitting someone but always about someone hitting Hamid.[48]

The Semai and Temiar do hold village councils from time to time in which everyone can participate regardless of age or gender. Older men tend to dominate the proceedings, however, and the discussions involve serious disputes, not dreams. The councils can go on for many hours or even several days until everyone is satisfied. Most people find them exhausting and unpleasant, not the occasions of joy and cooperation fantasized by Stewart. For this reason, only a serious threat to the whole settlement or a general quarrel can induce everyone to participate.

Councils begin with a monologue by one of the village elders, who recounts the necessity of maintaining the group's unity in spite of the present disagreement. "He emphasizes how each of the villagers depends on the others; how all must help and care for one another; how, if one is without food, the others must feed him; and so on," writes Robarchek. "Numerous instances of such assistance in the past are recounted in detail."[49]

After several more speeches in the same vein, one of the disputants presents his or her case to the group. There is great emphasis on the style with which the argument is presented, but little concern with whether or not one part of the argument contradicts another. Robarchek stresses that the councils do not involve a discussion or trial in our sense of the word. Instead, there is a repetition of the same stories by the disputants and their respective kinsmen until all emotion has been dissipated. The problem is not so much solved as it is talked to death:

> The story of the dispute and all the events leading up to it is told and retold from every conceivable angle by the principals themselves and by their kinsmen. Over and over again they tell their stories, for as long as they feel the need to do so. The fact that a particular point has been successfully countered or explained (or conceded) does not inhibit the other party from pressing it again and again if he or she feels angry or jealous or unhappy about it.[50]

Finally, one of the older male leaders will express the consensus that slowly and quietly has emerged among the listeners. He will lecture one or both of the principals about their guilt in the matter, and he may assess a small fine. But half of the fine, if not all of it, will be returned to the guilty party, once again revealing the overwhelming

importance of group solidarity.

Not all disputes are settled to the satisfaction of everyone concerned. In those cases, one of the people involved is likely to move to another settlement. The sparsely populated jungle terrain and the loose Senoi social structure make it very easy for those who have conflicts to avoid each other for years on end. Looked at from this vantage point, brief visits to Senoi settlements would no doubt give the impression of group harmony. But brief visits miss the reality that the worst conflicts -- frequently involving sexual jealousy -- are often settled because someone, or a whole family, leaves the settlement. This, too, sounds all too human, and the opposite of what Stewart and Garfield try to portray to give stature to their own beliefs about the importance of dreams.

This account of Senoi dream practice does not include any of the unique elements reported either by Stewart or by Garfield. There is no serious discussion of dreams at breakfast or at village councils, no instruction in how to control dreams, and no evidence in the singing ceremonies that the Senoi believe dreams can be controlled. In fact, these people don't even have breakfast together, which is an excellent indication of how far Stewart and Garfield have strayed from Senoi reality.

Although these conclusions are based on work in several different settlements, I realized when I wrote my book in 1985 that there are two objections that might be raised about them, and sure enough, they were raised by Taylor and other dreamworkers, even though such objections are anticipated and directly dealt with in the book. As shown in Taylor's published comments, he claims that I did not consider these points, but as I wrote in 1985:

> First, there is the possibility that undiscovered Temiar in the most remote or isolated parts of the jungle utilize dreams in the way claimed by Stewart. Second, it might be that the Senoi have lost or forgotten these dream practices since Stewart visited in the 1930s due to the disruption of Senoi culture by the jungle war with communist guerrillas in the fifties.[51]

But, in fact, there are no "secret" Temiar hideouts. All Temiar settlements are known because the jungles were thoroughly surveyed and mapped by the government in the 1940s and 1950s as part of its battle against the communists. Moreover, Benjamin has visited almost all of the most remote Temiar groups as part of his ongoing studies of Temiar religion, and he has found no evidence of a different use of dreams there.[52]

The possibility that Senoi culture was disrupted by the "Emergency" of the fifties, as the counterinsurgency was called, has greater plausibility. At first, many of the Senoi were rounded up into a few guarded camps -- called "stockades" by Taylor, who wrongly says all this happened during World War II. This drastic action was taken in an attempt to prevent the communists from receiving any help with food or information. This was a two-year internment, which led to such a high death rate among the Senoi that they were allowed to return to the jungle, with some being recruited into counterinsurgency groups as well. This experience is bitterly remembered by many Senoi, and it is still regarded by some of them as the first step in a plan to deprive them of their land.[53]

Leary's aforementioned detailed account of the Orang Asli participation in this war shows that the people were indeed mistreated, and that at least many hundreds died from various kinds of illnesses. In addition, he notes there was a large infusion of troops and military equipment. He remarks that many Orang Asli probably rode in a helicopter before they ever even saw a car or a train. However, he also concludes that their cultural was relatively untouched, which is the point that Taylor and the dreamwork movement continue to reject: "The Orang Asli were conscious of and experienced the power of modern technology while still adhering to their traditional ways."[54]

The work of several anthropologists supports Leary's first-hand observations: there is no evidence that the war had any lasting effect on Senoi beliefs or culture, or that it erased all memory of the previous use of techniques of dream control. This is demonstrated, first, in the observations of Iskander Carey, the anthropologist who knew the Temiar best in the middle and late fifties. In the introduction to his 1961 book on Temiar grammar, he wrote about the minimal effects of the emergency on the Temiar way of life:

> As a result of the Emergency, the number of contacts between Temiar and outsiders has considerably increased, and the deep jungle areas have strategically acquired considerable importance. But neither Communist Terrorists nor the Security Forces have basically altered the Temiar way of life, and their physical isolation makes any great changes unlikely in the near future.[55]

Benjamin's first paper on the Temiar, published in 1966, similarly comments on how little the outside world had impinged on the people at that time. He notes that many of them had memories of the "old days" before either World War II or the emergency and that they did not feel things had changed.[56] This continuity is also revealed in some of Benjamin's genealogical work. He notes that part of his fieldwork was done in Ressing, one of the villages reported on by Pat Noone in his only published paper in 1936. As part of his kinship work there, Benjamin succeeded in "tracing what happened to every person on Noone's genealogy, so demonstrating its continuity with my own data."[57] Such a detailed accounting thirty years later would hardly be possible if there had been serious disruptions of the traditional social structure or if the Temiar had forgotten their past. Benjamin's 1966 paper should have stopped Taylor and Garfield cold, but it didn't. Nor, contrary to Taylor, were there any government officials present to stand guard and interpret for Benjamin. Benjamin was alone, and knows the language well.

The continuity between the thirties and sixties is also revealed in the fact that both Dentan and Benjamin did fieldwork in exactly the same mixed Temiar-Semai settlement where Noone and Stewart did part of their work twenty-five years earlier. Things couldn't be much more direct and continuous than that. Then, too, the man who "adopted" Dentan at his second field site in 1963 had been Noone's field assistant among the Temiar. Benjamin also talked with informants who had worked for or knew Noone in the thirties.[58]

How little had changed on the cultural level between the early thirties and mid-1970s

can be demonstrated very concretely by comparing Pat Noone's brief section on "The Spirit Element in Temiar Life" in his 1936 monograph with the description of Semai spirit and healing beliefs by Robarchek in his 1979 paper, "Learning to Fear," which is summarized earlier in this chapter in the discussion of Senoi beliefs about the spirit world. Noone begins: "To the Temiar the whole of nature is impregnated by spiritual forces, many of them personified in the form of evil spirits." He then describes the "medicine man" (*hala*) who leads the singing ceremonies as an "intermediary between man and the world of spirits." This "medicine man" is aided in his "combat" with "the evil spirits of which indignant nature is full" by being in the "possession" of his "tiger-familiar (*gunik*)." Noone then explains that the medicine man attains a state of "dissociation" through his dancing, in which he "forgets his own self" and "is believed to be possessed by his *gunik* or "familiar.'" Noone concludes: "It is this *gunik* which makes the *hala* "powerful to heal sickness."[59]

Unfortunately, Noone's full account of Temiar spiritual life was never written, but the correspondence between what little he wrote about healing ceremonies and what has been reported by Robarchek (and Dentan and Benjamin) is remarkable across time and settlements. If beliefs about "spirit elements" are so continuous, how can Taylor and Garfield explain the alleged disappearance of dream groups and dream control? Why would dream-sharing groups and dream-control techniques disappear, but not the spirits so central to dreams?

Nor did the long visit with the Senoi in 1982-83 by Faraday and her husband, John Wren-Lewis, lead to any evidence of cultural change or loss of older dream practices. They reported that "it would be hard to imagine a people more dedicated to preserving their traditions intact despite all the changes going on around them," and they note that "our welcome would have been short-lived had we not scrupulously observed their time-hallowed rituals and taboos." They talked to elders who recalled the thirties, including one who actually had told his dreams to Noone and to Stewart. Faraday and Wren-Lewis conclude:

> Sadly, we must report that not a single Temiar recalled any form of dream control education in childhood or any such practice amongst adults; in fact they vehemently denied that dream manipulation has ever been part of their culture. And dreams play such an integral part in their whole religious life that we cannot conceive of a major dream-practice being allowed to fade into oblivion when the religion itself is so very much alive.[60]

Given this devastating conclusion by Faraday and Wren-Lewis, perhaps it is no surprise that Faraday and her work would disappear from the discourse of the American dreamwork movement, while Garfield would continue to be a respected source of information for many dreamworkers. For readers who base their judgment on the overall weight of the available anthropological evidence, however, there seems to be no way to avoid a rather mundane conclusion: Senoi people do not have an unusual theory or practice of dreams. What they believe and do would come as no great surprise to one of the founders of anthropology, Edward Tylor, who wrote that dreams are an important

basis for a belief in a spirit world and a separable soul. Nor is Senoi Dream Theory very different from the tribal and peasant beliefs brought together by several different anthropologists. Further, it would be difficult to count the number of ethnographic field reports that have commented on the use of dreams by shamans in healing ceremonies all over the world.[61]

Since, against all this systematic evidence over decades from a number of different trained observers that there is great continuity in Senoi culture and no hint of unique dream practices, Taylor relies primarily on an impassioned memoir. This memoir was published in 1972 by Richard Noone, brother of Stewart's friend Pat, in an attempt to explain his brother's death in the Malaysian highlands in the early 1940's. The alleged knowledge of one dream by a Senoi arrested during the counterinsurgency in the 1950s is said by Taylor to be "significant evidence" of communal dream sharing. But clearly, the weight of the evidence is so overwhelming against any unique Senoi Dream Theory that an anecdote like this, recalled many years after the event by a frightened man hoping to escape imprisonment, has no standing whatsoever. Taylor is in fact grasping at straws instead of adopting the scientific attitude that is necessary here.

Taylor also adopts the technique of creating a straw man when he says Stewart's critics say he "faked his research," which is not true. However, as Chapter 3 shows, there is much evidence that Stewart was a romantic story teller with little knowledge of Senoi peoples. He confused his casual observations of a variety of small traditional societies with his own musings and theorizing. As the evidence in Chapter 3 also shows, Stewart was a guru type, and a blowhard, not a hoaxer. However, there's good evidence that Carlos Castañeda, mentioned by Taylor in the context of denying fakery by Stewart, did "fake" his research. He consciously perpetrated a fraud, cleverly recycling ideas and anecdotes from other people's writing on religion, spiritualism, mysticism, and anthropology. Amazingly, Taylor says he believes Castaneda for the same reason he believes Stewart, because some of Castaneda's ideas worked for Taylor. But the correctness or usefulness of the ideas is a separate topic, which is discussed based on research evidence in Chapter 5. For now, the simple point is that such evidence tells us nothing about whether the ideas were used by Senoi.

Although the anthropological evidence should end the matter as far as the accuracy of Stewart's claims about Senoi dream practices, there is another way to approach the problem. Kilton Stewart life and writings can be studied to see if he is credible as a scientific observer.

Continue on to Chapter 3

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