

Techniques and Antecedents: A Response to Giesler

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Editor's Note: In this validation of Faraday and Wren-Lewis by an anthropologist and ethnographer, Dentan refers to "Comments on 'The Selling of the Senoi'" by Patric V. Giesler. Giesler wanted to know if Faraday and Wren-Lewis were cognizant of certain fieldwork pitfalls, since they were not ethnographers. He gives as an example a difficulty he himself had when studying Jurema shamans' beliefs about psychokinesis. When interviewing them about tales he had heard on a previous trip, he kept getting nothing but "No" answers to the question, "Have you ever seen an object move by itself?"—until he realized he had to reframe the question because of conflicting cultural assumptions. His informants didn't believe objects moved "by themselves"—spirits moved them.

The editor [Jayne Gackenbach] has asked me to respond to Giesler's insightful comment on Ann Faraday's and John Wren-Lewis's (1984; henceforward F&WL) "The Selling of the Senoi." Giesler's comment falls in two parts:

1. Questions about research methodology; and
2. An explanation about what a "yes" answer to the questions might mean in terms of the reliability of the Senoi data.

Correspondingly, my response:

1. Stresses how vital these questions are in matters of this sort, since psychologists in general are unfamiliar with the vicissitudes of ethnographic fieldwork; but
2. Concludes that, in this particular case, only an ellipsis in the original note by F&WL makes their conclusions seem debatable on these grounds.

Anthropologists who read and write ethnographies evaluate ethnographic reports by reference to two sets of criteria: the duration and conditions of fieldwork, and the way in which authors handle problems of context and translation. In the first area, ethnographic fieldwork should be intensive and holistic (Firth, 1963: 17–18). An ethnographer should reside in the community long enough, usually about a year, to become familiar at first hand with both the language and the pattern of daily life. Living elsewhere, e.g. at night, and commuting to the people ("motel ethnography") or traveling through an area without settling down ("tourist ethnography") works against the personal rapport and sense of the quotidian that mark good ethnographic writing

(Marcus, 1980; Marcus and Cushman, 1982). People's accounts of their lives and dreams simplify and generalize, and often idealize or mystify, what they actually do. Deeds are as important as creeds, but an ethnographer must be on the spot to observe how people deal with their dreams in the humdrum of daily living as well as how they talk about dreams. A knowledge of quotidian life is vital if an ethnographer is to avoid the sort of faux pas question Giesler so accurately describes. Therefore a good ethnography conveys a holistic sense of daily routines extensive enough that a reader can infer how the particular data on which an author focuses fit into people's ordinary activities.

Anthropologists also expect translation and its attendant problems to be in the foreground. This requirement entails that an ethnographer be familiar enough with the local language to put native terms into their contexts; for meaning is context. Just how true that linguists' axiom is becomes clear when one is trying to learn an unwritten language in the absence of bilingual speakers. Getting imperfectly bi-lingual informants to give one a rough gloss produces a parodic pidgin whose inadequacies may not at once be clear. I have argued elsewhere (Dentan, 1983c) that one reason for Stewart's errors is that he failed to attend properly to conceptual categories in Temiar, a language which he did not speak. My correspondence with F&WL urged that they attend to such considerations. Giesler's comment thus seems in the best tradition of constructive criticism, the cautionary suggestion made before a report assumes its final form. It is to be hoped that F&WL will address these issues.

Extensive Ethnographic Fieldwork on the Senoi

In fact, however, the conclusion that Stewart's "Senoi dreamwork" bears little relation to what real-world Senoi, past or present, do or did, does not rest solely on the adequacy of F&WL's field techniques. Ethnographers have done extensive Senoi fieldwork which does meet these criteria: Benjamin and Roseman with Temiar; Dentan, the Fixes, Gomes, Williams-Hunt and the Robarcheks with Semai. [Editor's Note: The "Senoi" generic includes both Temiar and Semai peoples.] We were aware as early as the mid-1960's that Stewart's account of Senoi dreamwork was erroneous but were unaware of how widely it was to be disseminated. Such professional boundary-keeping and other interests kept us from publishing a detailed refutation until my short article, comment and monograph of last year (Dentan, 1983a,b,c), following our discovery of American-Senoi dreamwork. It's a type case of the evils of professional specialization.

Nevertheless, anyone reading the voluminous literature on Senoi could have noticed that no mention of anything like "Senoi dream therapy" occurs. Moreover, in 1976 Peter Bloch visited Temiar and filmed their current dream praxis and found no trace

of the complex Stewart described. Dreamworks disseminated this information informally, and a number of popular authors picked it up (Rainwater, 1979: 127). F&WL, however, point out that few dreamworkers paid any attention to Block's discovery and the response followed the pattern F&WL quite properly condemn (see, e.g., Williams, 1980: 281; Randall, 1983; Garfield, quoted in Spiller, 1983: 7–8; cf. Dentan, 1983b, Faraday and Wren-Lewis, 1983; Howell, 1983).

Finally, ethnographic hermeneutics is tricky business; a wide range of interpretations are possible in many instances; but, if Giesler intends to suggest that, since disagreement is possible, anything goes, he would be mistaken. Factual statements like Stewart's assertions that dream "clinics" occur or that Senoi talk about dreams in certain ways are "falsifiable" in the sense that it is possible to imagine events which would prove them false. To the extent that Stewart's statements about Senoi dream praxis are falsifiable, F&WL, like their predecessors, have apparently found them false; and the interpretation F&WL have so far offered accords with the consensus of ethnographers. Stewart's account, I think, resembles more his imaginative reconstruction of his communitarian, dream-based Mormon childhood (Stewart, 1954: 17, 20–21). Even the dream narratives in his doctoral dissertation do not match his generalizations about Senoi dreams (Stewart, 1948). Unconstrained by formal techniques, these mingled memories and desires led him to see things that were not there. All the earlier evidence supports F&WL.

F&WL's conclusions seem correct, then. Moreover, I endorse their condemnation of the defensive tactic of describing Senoi as a "mythic" people. Senoi are more real to me than are most American Senoi dream workers. I've laughed with Senoi, quarreled with some, hugged a few, carried dead Senoi babies to the grave. When the lives of weaker peoples become part of a powerful people's mythology, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology.

Experts paint us as they would like us to be. . . . The American public feels most comfortable with the mythical Indians of stereotype-land . . . To be an Indian in modern American society is . . . to be unreal and ahistorical (Deloria, 1970: 9–10; cf. 83–104).

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