Senoi, Kilton Stewart and The Mystique of Dreams: Further Thoughts on an Allegory About an Allegory

G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF
University of California, Santa Cruz

"Senoi" dream theory, which is centered around the idea that we should share and control our dreams for spiritual development, is an attractive theory said to derive from an appealing, non-violent people living simply in the highlands of Malaysia. But the real story of "Senoi" dream theory can be a painful one for at least two reasons that go beyond the usual academic conflicts over the validity and usefulness of ideas. First, some people in the United States and elsewhere make their living off of it by leading dream groups; they therefore have more at stake than do professors who are secure in their jobs whether their ideas pan out or not. Second, the theory resonates with deeply held cultural and spiritual values that almost compel people to believe it; they therefore become very upset when it is questioned.

So, to say that this essay discusses my book on "Senoi" dream theory and vari-ous reactions to it is to assert that the essay concerns a very touchy subject. Although I will begin by telling about what is in The Mystique of Dreams, for those who have not gotten to it yet, my main point here is to use reactions to the book to state more explicitly what I see as its underlying themes and messages. That the book is an allegory about the study of dreams seems to be lost on some people, as is the fact that it suggests an attitudinal stance for the scientific investigator that has a playful-ness to it. Finally, I also will use this occasion to report some new perspectives on the fascinating life of Kilton Stewart, the anthropologist who originally brought us "Senoi" dream theory.

At the level of appearances, The Mystique of Dreams sets itself four main tasks. First, it brings together all available anthropological information to show that the real Senoi do not practice our version of "Senoi" dream theory in any way, shape, or form—not now, and not in the 30s when Stewart visited them. Contrary to popular belief, there is no talk of dreams around breakfast—in fact, there is no breakfast. Nor are there dream clinics during the day; group meetings are about personal disputes that have reached the point where they threaten to disrupt community life. They go on and on, like committee meetings in America, and people dread them. Furthermore, there is no thought of controlling dreams—quite the opposite. Spirits choose whether or not to come into dreams, to adopt the dreamer. There is no teaching of rules of dream control to children; Senoi say it is bad to teach children anything. Finally, dream life is not full of gifts, friendship, and sensuality—Senoi usually have dreams of failure,

frustration, chase, and falling, just like the rest of us.

Secondly, my book traces the charmed existence of Stewart for clues as to why he said things others didn't. I learned that he happened on the Senoi by accident, had no knowledge of them when he first visited their settlements, never learned their language, and spent no more than several weeks with them on two different occasions that were separated by four years—two weeks during the first visit in 1934 while on a census march from settlement to settlement, seven weeks the second time in 1938. Moreover, some things he says in his famous 1951 article on "Dream Theory in Malaya" are not said in his 1948 dissertation for the London School of Economics, or are contradicted by what he wrote in the dissertation.

The information I gathered on Stewart provides insight into these problems. For a characterization of Stewart, there is no beating the first glance of him in 1937 by a woman on an around-the-world trip who recorded the meeting in her diary. This woman, Claudia Parsons, is alive and well today in England. She is in her eighties, still traveling, and one of my key informants. In what follows she compares Stewart with a young man named Christian she met earlier in her journey:

> He had the same attractive air of deviltry, the same stocky figure. But he was broader than Christian and rather older. He wore sandals on his feet, and his linen suit was that of the beachcomber hero in an American film who is either about to reform or is slowly sinking to a living death. . . . There was more than idle curiosity in that academic forehead, in that Bible history head. One felt that John the Baptist had just caught the bus.

If Stewart was a bit of a character, he was a generous character, as Parsons also reports in talking about their later automobile trip from India to London in a two-seater Studebaker:

> Stewart's whole wealth was a rapidly dwindling 60 pounds with hope of another 20 pounds in Cairo, but instead of pondering on the hiatus between here and England, he was concerned only with how to support the beggar population of the countries through which we passed.

In addition, Stewart was a renowned womanizer. Two women mentioned that fact in the first moments of our interview, then said, "But he never seduced me." His brother Omer, a highly productive empirical anthropologist who taught at the Univer-sity of Colorado until his retirement, explained Kilton's technique: he'd approach up to a dozen women a day and ask them if they wanted to make love. Eleven would slap him away, but the twelfth eventually would say yes. Stewart obviously tolerated rejection

better than most men do. More seriously, making love and expounding on dreams, values, and morality were closely intertwined for Stewart.

After my book appeared, I asked Omer to see if any of his many, many Mormon relatives might send me their impressions and memories of Kilton (yes, this carefree wanderer was an elder of the Mormon Church). Of relevance here are comments by two female relatives, one eight years younger than Kilton, the other 22 years younger. It is noteworthy that seduction and spiritual concerns come up together in both reminiscences; the second also shows that even incest taboos were not a barrier to Stewart's love of the chase:

> Although Kilton was eight years my senior we were both students at the University of Utah at the same time for a couple of years. He was a source of pride and embarrassment to me—already controversial and too outspoken. My sorority sisters and girl friends found him handsome, strange and fascinating, and I never knew how many of them lost their virginity and religion through him. We loved to have all night discussions, Kilton at the center, and the participants not daring to believe him and not quite able to completely disbelieve. He stirred us up and made us think and question. He was a guru who needed followers and found them.

The second relative wrote:

> On the occasion of the annual hike, my aunt and uncle and other guests were treated to a sort of hula dance Kilton claimed he had learned in a Tibetan monastery to make him more holy, but it was obvious to us all that he had unholy thoughts on his mind, and when one of the men asked, "Are you sure you didn't learn it to make yourself better in bed?" He just laughed. I can't remember whether that gathering was the night before the hike or the night after, but I do know that when I came down the mountain the afternoon following the hike, Kilton met me and took me to some natural hot springs to bathe, and tried to seduce me. I was only seventeen at the time [he was 39], but his chances of seducing me were so remote that it was my turn to laugh. But I feel sure that Kilton made many, many women happy, if only briefly, with his ardent and uncritical, warm and open, happy-go-lucky acceptance of any pleasures that life might put in his path.
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> I never saw Kilton after I was out of college, so I never really knew him as an adult. But he was unforgettable, one of the gentlest and sweetest people on earth—if he hadn't had such wicked thoughts he could have been called Christlike. Thank heaven for those wicked thoughts!

More to the point, as hinted in the above accounts, Stewart was widely recog-nized among those who knew him to be a notorious storyteller. As his brother Omer wrote to me, "Kilton was a great storyteller and I often had the impression that he would not worry about the exactness of details if it might interfere with his narra-tive." People never knew what to believe. Two different people, one a very old friend, actually asked me, "Did he really get his Ph.D.?" One of his friends from the 30s finally reacted to my persistent request for details by writing in exasperation that he couldn't understand what the fuss was all about because no one who knew Kilton personally had taken his theoretical claims seriously.

I also should say there was a darker or shadow side to Kilton Stewart. In many ways he was maddening for his friends to deal with because he was so disorganized, casual, and unpunctual, and several of the women who loved him said or wrote that they could not think of staying with him. As one of these women, not Claudia Parsons, wrote in her diary in the 30s upon parting with Stewart after several intensive weeks of study and travel:

> Life seems very good tonight—sort of stable again. I feel so well, as though I could never be tired again or cross. What is it about [Kilton] that is so disturbing? Why should a person who takes life so joyously and calmly be so provocative of storm?

Since my book is an allegory about "Senoi" dream theory, and not a biography of Stewart, the underside of his life is not in it. But this underside may be another reason why there can be strong emotional reactions to "Senoi" dream theory. Maybe no one can really be that nice and happy. Maybe we get very angry when we have to face that possibility. Certainly Senoi are not as nice as Stewart made them out to be, and Stewart hid his dark side in his writings and his dealings with most people.

The third goal of my book is to explain why "Senoi" dream theory became so at-tractive to Americans in the 60s and 70s. My first answer is that Stewart was a quintessential American, almost a caricature of American values—optimistic, open-handed, adventurous, a believer in self improvement and spiritual uplift. He appealed to basic American beliefs, and especially the idea that society and people can be changed and controlled. We can become better and better. "Senoi" dream theory is American can-do. We can conquer inner space as well as outer space. I call Stewart the B. F. Skinner of dreams. Only an American like Skinner could insist that all behavior can be controlled through rewards and punishments, and only Stewart, not Europeans like Freud or Jung, could even begin to think that dreams, of all things, could be controlled through social learning and encouragement by the moral author-ities and leaders of a society. It's as American as apple pie, which doesn't make it

wrong, of course, but it should never be forgotten that there was a near-obsession with mind control and self-improvement at many times in American history before prophets like Skinner and Stewart came along. Furthermore, I think it is a very different kind of mind control from the inward-turning meditational efforts we see in some Eastern religions. From my vantage point, they don't practice improvement and can-do, but self-denial.

But there is more to why Americans came to like "Senoi" dream theory. After all, the idea sat around from 1951 to 1965 before it began to catch on. There was a new context—the civil rights movement and Kennedy Administration, both of which created the stirrings that made the human potential movement possible. Then, too, "Senoi" dream theory achieved an institutional base through use at the famed Esalen institute, where much less was done with it than was later claimed. Finally, legitimacy was given to the theory by the various dream experts who wrote about it —the American public tends to trust medical and scientific experts in the way it used to trust preachers. Put more generally, "Senoi" dream theory is an American allegory about the self-improvement that is possible in quiet country communes like the real Senoi seem to live in, and like some Americans tried to live in during the late 60s and early 70s, when the war in Vietnam made the new search for rebirth and authenticity all the more poignant.

Now, these generalizations need to be qualified a bit. "Senoi" dream theory is only one aspect of the new dreamwork, which in turn is but a small part of a human potential movement that embraces only a minority of the overall population. In that sense, the movement has been confined primarily to the young, the college-educated, the searchers and seekers, and the mind workers of the upper-middle class. "Senoi" dream theory is not a mass movement.

"Senoi" dream theory is an American allegory about the search for authenticity and self-improvement that plays on basic American values projected onto the Senoi, but it is not a hoax. Kilton Stewart was not a hoaxer as Carlos Castaneda is, but a true believer, albeit a true believer with more humor and impishness than most. Claudia Parsons wrote me the following pertinent comments after reading the pub-lished version of my research. They are not in response to a question by me, but are one of her reactions to the fact that Senoi do not have the dream practices Stewart imputed to them:

> To what extent, then, was Kilton a charlatan? With his good looks, charisma, fund of experience and roving eye, one might be forgiven on first meeting him to class him as an attractive rogue, a playboy. I was certainly doubtful of his having the necessary qual-ifications for practicing psychotherapy when I met

> him on that bus, though he seemed imbued with knowledge of it, and later I was to see instances of favorable results. But one had not to be long in his company to discover that his interest in humanity lay far deeper than sex or profit. He was deeply serious and beyond words charitable. A friend to whom I introduced him described him as "God, gone wrong." And it wasn't a bad description.

As for the several other dream theorists such as Ann Faraday and Patricia Garfield who contributed in one way or another to spreading the allegory of "Senoi" dream theory, they are decent people who did not realize their comments would be seen as part of a larger mosaic of verification by the reading public; they did not realize their repetitions of Stewart's ideas would give his claims greater legitimacy. None saw it as his or her responsibility to check out the claims before writing them into popular books, and no one else thought "Senoi" dream theory worth the time and effort of the proverbial "hard look" until it became a growth industry. But once a few doubts were raised in the late 70s, it was only a matter of time until someone like me contacted anthropologists who were experts on the Senoi, or someone like Faraday went to the Malaysian Highlands to see Senoi dream practices firsthand.

The fourth thing my book does is to search the clinical and research literature for evidence on the efficacy of "Senoi" dream practices in the United States. After all, the origins of an idea tell us nothing about its validity or usefulness. An idea has to be dealt with on its own merits. This I did, presenting all the evidence on both sides of the question, and then concluding that aside from some striking claims by a few people, there is no reason to believe that "Senoi" dream theory works very well for very many people. I did not say the idea has fared so badly that further study of it should be disbanded forthwith, but I did say that supporters of "Senoi" dream the-ory have not brought forth the kind of systematic scientific evidence that it is incum-bent upon them to produce if we are to believe their large claims for the power of "Senoi" dream theory.

So much by way of summary and brief commentary on the four ostensible aims of The Mystique of Dreams. I turn now to how people reacted to it, and I am happy to report that most have found it balanced and enjoyable. However, there are a few critics of two very different types that I would like to call the hard-line scientists and the spiritualists. Hard-line scientific critics disliked the book because they thought I was too easy on Stewart. They felt he had led the scientific community down the garden path with half-baked research, and they wanted him exposed for perpetrating a fraud. Here is one example of this type of reaction from an anonymous reader of the manuscript for the University of California Press:

> There is another matter that I feel uneasy about, and addressing it might lead the author to enlarge the manuscript in a different direction. I think most readers will feel that he is far too lenient with Kilton Stewart. The author says that Stewart "misunder-stood the Senoi and mistakenly attributed his own ideas to them." But why shouldn't we conclude, rather, that Stewart was a con artist? The excellent detective work in the first part of the book makes him out a genial liar, and I was sometimes bothered that the author refused to say as much.

Well, as I tried to make clear earlier in this essay, I think that Stewart is best characterized as a romantic storyteller who stumbled on to some potentially interesting ideas about dreams. Given the meager stock of new ideas within the area of dream study, and the lack of interest in dreams within the behaviorist and cognitivist schools that predominate in psychology, I thought it more important in this instance that Stewart was provocative than that he mistakenly imputed his own ideas to Senoi. Then, too, I didn't want to fall into what could be interpreted as an indirect attack on the 60s, which expressed some of the best there is in American values. I loved the 60s, at least up through 1968 or 1969 when the Jerry Rubins, Eldridge Cleavers, and Marxists took over.

Spiritualist critics reacted negatively to a different aspect of the book. They saw it as one part of an overall academic attack on both the usefulness of "Senoi" dream theory and the spiritual rebirth or awakening of which it is one aspect. They said that the testimony to positive results by those who have taken part in "Senoi"-based dreamwork groups in the United States is quite enough in the way of evidence for its usefulness. This view is symbolized by Strephon Williams' review of The Mystique of Dreams in The Dream Network Bulletin.

In my view, Williams misreads and undervalues the scientific stance. To say "the evidence that dream sharing may be useful or dream control possible is only suggestive at this time," which he rightly quotes me as writing, is not to say the idea is wrong or disproved. However, it does make crystal clear that to believe in "Senoi" dream theory is a leap of faith. From a scientific point of view, it is not the responsibility of skeptics to disprove a new idea, but of proponents to support the idea. Moreover, that an idea is part of a spiritual movement that makes some people feel good, at least for a time, is no systematic evidence for that usefulness. There are many religious, political, and spiritual movements that make the same claims, and they too judge their validity in terms of personal testimony or their number of followers. But the rise and fall of these movements, and the cycling of people in and out of them, is well documented. There is also the widely-known fact of placebo effects in the investigation of new medicines or therapeutic practices. Given these lessons of history

and earlier experimental studies, I do not think there is any substitute for a scientific examination of new ideas, however slow or difficult or annoying that approach may be in some situations.

However, the criticisms raised by the hard-line scientists and the spiritualists do not touch upon the main messages of The Mystique of Dreams, so in conclusion I want to return to the theme of allegory. I earlier said "Senoi" dream theory is an alle-gory about the reaffirmation of American values through a search for an allegedly-lost authenticity. That, I think, is a more important conclusion of my book than the truthfulness of Kilton Stewart on the usefulness of ideas about dream control. But beyond that I had an even more important point to make, at least from my perspec-tive. My book is in fact an allegory too. It is not only a story about Americans and their beliefs, but a cautionary tale about the difficulties of studying dreams in a systematic way. In that sense, it is a scientific allegory about a spiritual allegory.
It was not only Stewart who sold us a bill of goods about dreams in the ever-hopeful 60s. He was not the only one who got carried away with himself. We were uncritical in the face of other theorists besides Stewart. The rise and fall of "Senoi" dream theory parallels the rise and fall of the "new science of dreams," also known as the "new biology of dreaming." That dreams only occur in a stage of sleep called REM, that eye movements track dream content, that there is a need to dream—all these claims and more were fully believed and communicated to an eager public by many people, including me, before they were replicated and carefully checked. And all of them have proven to be false. We dream during both non-REM and REM sleep, eye movements do not always follow dream content, and REM deprivation does not have the drastic effects it was first thought to have. Apparently, then (and here is my punch line) it was as difficult for hard-nosed physiologists, physicians, and psychologists working in scientific sleep laboratories to avoid creating myths about dreams as it was for an American adventurer in the jungles of Malaysia. Who are we, who created laboratory myths, to look down our noses at Kilton Stewart?

Ah, but I do not close now, nor in my book, on a critical note. I claim that both Stewart and the laboratory scientists had the virtue of stimulating new interest in dreams, and of leading to new ideas and findings thereby. After all, Stewart's ideas about dream control seem to work for at least a few people who report fantastic, orgasmic sex dreams and a decline in chase dreams. Thus, I take a stance of gentle, scientific skepticism rather than harsh scientific rejection.

Beyond that, I believe we ought to learn to enjoy our scientific myths once they unravel rather than becoming upset and embarrassed about them. They are fun to believe while we are believing them, and scandalous to read about when we begin to see through them. They tell us about ourselves in a whimsical kind of way. Such a

stance puts me somewhere between the two types of critics mentioned earlier, and leaves me wondering which of our current scientific certainties will give us our next chuckle at our own expense.