

Senoi Dream Praxis

Robert Knox Dentan

*Department of Anthropology
State University of New York at Buffalo¹*



A burial party.

Anthropologists who work with the people Kilton Stewart called ‘senoi’ agree that his account of how those people talk about and use dreams is rather idealized. The inaccuracies seem to stem from unconscious but systematic methodological biases which Domhoff and I have discussed at length elsewhere (Ed. Note: See note at end of article). The following account of Senoi dream praxis draws on discussions I have had with other anthropologists, notably Geoffrey Benjamin of the University of Singapore and Clay Robarchek of the University of California. Senoi themselves, however, supplied most of the information, during conversations with me

while I was Living with them in 1961—1963 and 1975. This article is therefore a critique neither of Stewart’s work nor of the therapy he promoted, merely a presentation of dream theory in Malaya.

Stewart’s ‘Senoi’ are the 10,000 Temiar, indigenous people of Western Malaysia who speak a language related to Cambodian but not to that of the Malays who dominate the peninsula and have reduced the indigenous people to a status like that of Native Americans. Immediately south of the Temiar are 16,000 Semai, culturally and linguistically as close to them as Spanish to Portuguese. In both languages the word for person is a variant of *sn’ooy* hence, both are known together as ‘Senoi,’ the sense in which I will use that word. Between Semai and Temiar, despite mutual suspicion, there is much contact, intermarriage and intermixture, since ethnicity is an alien concept of little importance in their daily lives. I spent a couple of years living with Semai, including over seven months in a mixed Semai—Temiar settlement in the state of Pahang.

The Varieties of Dreaming Experience

Senoi tend to take dreams more seriously than most Euroamericans do. They discriminate between several sorts of dreams. Like people everywhere, Senoi do not respond directly to the world, but to the world as they categorize it. Therefore, understanding Senoi dream categories is prerequisite to understanding their dream theory. Senoi themselves must decide what sort of dream is involved before they can deal with it.

Gunig dreams. The most significant but least common type of dream is one in which a familiar (gunig) adopts the dreamer as its “father” by giving him a melody with which he can lure it to help him during curative or diagnostic song ceremonies. People with gunig, having the ability to deal with other supernatural entities from “gunig country,” are ‘adept’ (halaa’). Women can become adepts and are then usually more adept than men, but Senoi say, their bodies are not strong enough to withstand the rigors of trance, so that female adepts are rare. I only heard of two or three.

Although gunig are so timid that song ceremonies must be held in darkness, some Semai and Temiar saw that an adept can send gunig on errands during the daytime, for instance to pick up something its “father” left behind on a trip or to steal things from Malay stores. Some Semai say that, since Temiar gunig are often tigers, one should be careful about waking a Temiar up, lest he change into a tiger. They also say some Temiar are furry, with claws between their fingers.

The word for gunig dreams (mpo’) also refers to the appearance of the gunig itself in dream or trance. Moreover, mpo’ is the generic term for “dream.” That is, mpo’ refers both to dreams in general and also to gunig dreams, ‘true mpo’’, in particular. To linguists, mpo’ is an “unmarked” category, both generic and specific. Culturally less important categories must be “marked” off from the specific use of mpo’ in the meaning “gunig dream” by the use of other words. An English analog which has attracted some attention recently is the use of “man” as an unmarked category covering both “people” and “male people.” Feminists are linguistically correct in protesting that such usage implies that “men” are culturally more significant than “women,” just as “true mpo’” are more meaningful than others dreams.

—Pipuuy. When a man bitterly regrets having no mpo’ he means he never dreamed a gunig, so that his dreams are unlikely to carry much weight with his fellows. Most dreams are —Pipuuy, with no gunig melody and probably meaningless. There are many sorts of —pipuuy, like nightmares and wish fulfillment dreams. Pahang Semai in the Semai—Temiar settlement used —raiyeh to designate nightmares of falling, said to be common among children, and -yeiyah to refer to dreams of sex or aggression, said to be an early symptom of madness. Both, however, are nonpredictive and can be caused by eating tabu foods or by midnight snacks. The commonest and worst nightmare is of an old bearded man who threatens to eat the dreamer.

Most people do not trust dreams “unless you dream them three times.” We used to have true dreams, but no more.” Obvious wish fulfillment in dreams is always —pipuuy: “You dream of sleeping with a pretty girl and the next day you don’t even see her,” complained Temiar adept. A Semai man pointed out that “When you go away, people dream of you but wake to find you gone.”

Often people do not know or do not claim that a dream is predictive until after the event, as Case 1 illustrates:

Ngah, a Semai man about 40, dreamed often but never had a *gunig* dreams. One dream: His father told him to study the inner workings of a car, but Ngah flubbed the task. A couple of quail appeared, and Ngah grabbed the male. A Semai man unknown to Ngah threatened to eat the quail, stole it and ate it. Ngah then played with some Jungle fowl chicks.

Initially Ngah thought this dream referred to the salmonella which wiped out his settlement's chickens. Later, however, a neighbor's child suffered "soul loss" (see below). Quail, shy and short of stature, are natural symbols for children and their "soft" souls. The Semai man must have been a malign entity which snatched the child's dream soul, said Ngah,

On the other hand, even an obvious wish fulfillment fantasy becomes a "real mpo" if a melody is present, as Case 2 shows:

A Semai-Temiar man, infatuated with Temiar girl whose influential father refused to let him see her, mooned around in misery. Like many Senoi unLucky in love, he spent a lot of time steeping and dreaming of her. At last he dreamed that she appeared and gave him a melody.

His depression lifted at once, for, as he would say, grinning, "Another man has her body, but I have her dream soul."

This case demonstrates the flexibility of Senoi dream theory. Without the melody, the dream is —pipuuy. Indeed, Senoi say that, parted from ones beloved, one should not sleep in the usual place, since his or her fragrance will linger and call up dreams of the absent one from which the dreamer will awake depressed and weeping bitterly.



Temair women preparing for an evening sing ceremony at which gunig ("familiar" obtained in dreams) should appear.

Some words don't translate, even between Indoeuropean languages. Euroamericans recog-nize that "the French have a word for it" (but the Germans don't) and so on. The float serious criticism Semai made of my book about them was of the use of "soul" as a gloss for their word ruwaay. In fact, ruwaay are not much Like Christian "souls." The five aspects of the psychic for which Semai and Temiar have words are no more "souls," than are the psy-chic phenomena Americans label "will," "consciousness" or "personality." The easiest way to understand them, said Ngah of Case 1. is to think of a person as a car. The ruwaay, localized behind the center of the forehead, would be the battery. Kloog, "awareness" or "perception" or "will," pervades the body but focuses in the pupil of the eye and is the driver. The other three--I'll gloss the "breath," "glow of health" and "conscious-ness"--pervade the person but are concen-trated respectively in the respiratory sys-tem, skin and heart, serving as the car's gas, paint job and running of the engine.

With the understanding that "dream soul" is a convenience rather than an adequate translation, I will use that phrase to embrace ruwaay or kloog. They may leave the body when a person is asleep or in trance, so that his or her "blood stops running." In their travels they encounter other dream souls belonging to animals, supernaturals or the like.

Ruwaay travel much of oftener than kloog, appearing in dreams as birds, butterflies, homunculi or children. All ruwaay may follow the setting sun, so that the sleeper wakes up lopy and depressed. Wandering ruwaay vulnerable to malevolent entities in gunig country but can only be lured back by song ceremonies.

What's in a Dream?

Most Senoi are skeptical empiricists. As a people they lack centralized authority structures and respond to coercion by flight. No Senoi tell another what to do. Parents deny teaching their children, since such coercion would damage the child spiritually and sooner or later, physically. The result is that they display a lot of individual variation and flexibility in interpreting dreams.

Talking about dreams. There are no formal discussions of dreams. The topic arises in one of two ways. The commoner has to do with the fact that not much happens in any small rural settlement anywhere. Dreams, like travellers' tales, spice up the usual conversational diet of weather and back-biting. Such dream narratives are not serious. Listeners may tease the narrator: "Aha! Those coconuts in your dream are testicles!" Since most dreams are 'pipuuy, people tend to keep ominous dreams to themselves: "You wouldn't tell people you dreamed they died. Why scare them?" Wise Senoi wait until dreams come true before reporting them.

Having reliable diagnostic or predictive dreams, however, is one of several prerequisites

to becoming influential. Senoi dislike of status seeking, however, entrails discretion about publicizing one's dream "like some social climbing Malay." Malicious gossip may assert that an influential man does not have reliable dreams but narrates his wife's. Anyhow, nowadays dreams don't come true often people say, though always true in the old days.

Symbolism. Senoi dream interpretation is as flexible as that practiced by any Freudian Jungian. There are some common correspondences but no fixed symbolism. Thus dogs may connote bellyache; fire, fever; maize pustules; durian, sniffles or coryza; the moon death; fish scales, money (coins); elephants dropsy or inguinal hernia or genital filariasis. A fat Malay may presage elephants. Killing people may mean good hunting but killing pigs may mean that people will die. Turtles may stand for women, carabao for the evil bird spirit associated with childbirth and so on.

Some correspondence require explanation. Deer, for instance, may stand for yaws or (T.B., a disease Senoi regard as similar) explication of this connection runs like this:

Shortly after his mother died of yaws a man found a sambar deer in his spear trap. As he and his friends were carrying the sambar home, they passed through the settlement they had abandoned, following Semai custom, after the death. The sambar said: That's my house. They ate it anyway, but the son began to suspect that they had eaten his mother. He inspected her grave. The grave was, empty. He saw human footprints all around it. He returned home and told everyone what happened. They all went to look at the grave. They followed the footprints to the site of the spear trap.

Incest, matricide or patricide, yaws and thundersqualls seem alike to Senoi, since each involves terrifying disruption of the natural order, with hideous consequences. The presance of one implies the others. Thus in dreams a snake or deer in or near a house suggest incest, but outdoors yaws or a thundersquall. Incest dream, are -yaiyah night-mares, symptoms of horrible underlying mental or social disorder. A dream that one has sex with parent or sibling means death for the dreamer, "in a week or two." A dream that a sibling has such sex similarly entails that sibling's death.

Senoi, however, find in dreams what they want, as in Case 2 above and in Case 3, which involved Merloh, a Semai man in his 20s:

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 asks if Merloh wants to commit incest.) 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 will get you later... Maybe if someone else dreamed like that, it'd be his own

dream soul wanting incest.



A mixed Semai-Temiar settlement in Ulu Telmon

Controlling dreams. Normally Senoi do not try to control their dreams. They do say that pissing in the river makes one forget one's dreams, so that, if one wanted to remember, one might piss on land. Nightmares might make a person more cautious about flouting tabus or eating midnight snacks. Waking Semai and Temiar may rap the nape or the small of the back of a sleeper who is twitching, crying out or weeping in a bad dream, in order to pop the mpo' out of the sleeper's mouth. Most Senoi say familiars cannot be lured or coerced into choosing a particular person as their "father," After a "father's" death, his gunig may split up, choosing new "fathers" but often picking one or more of the dead man's sons or nephews. West Semai say that the appearance of a dead adept's gunig in someone else's dreams show that the dead man consciously or unconsciously "deputized" his heir.

From this notion, the conscious choice of a "deputy" seems to have evolved along the upper Geruntom River in Central Perak state, near the porous Semai—Temiar boundary. There, an adept could deliberately transfer his gunig to a candidate, if the gunig agreed. In 1963 I spent a few days there and talked matters over with a man from "my" settlement who was then a candidate; in 1975 I spent a couple of weeks with people from Geruntom, which had converted to Methodism in the interim. Acquiring a gunig from

someone else involved a series of song ceremonies held over a period of about a month in order to win the familiar's gratitude by giving it prestige "in its own country." The candidate made a token ritual payment to the adept who instructed him. Even so, gunig remained uncoerced. Oftener than not the candidate's body was not "good" enough to coax the gunig away. Adepts, for instance, should have "cool" bodies. A euphemism for adepts is the "cool—bodied ones," perhaps because, in contrast with sick and feverish people, an adept's body becomes cool when the trembling comes upon it in the darkness of song ceremony as the gunig prepares to speak in slurred gutturals through his mouth. Strength and good looks are also important.

Outside Geruntom, Senoi dismissed this technique as "foolishness." A Geruntom adept acknowledged that gunig were too skittish to control. For instance, he pointed out, they get angry at their "father," even when the "father" himself has done no wrong. e.g., when a third party scares the gunig dream soul away during a song ceremony by sneezing or lighting a match. I think gunig embody Senoi cautiousness but also that this projected timidity serves to explain the empirical fact that such distracting influences as lights, loud noises and the presence of strangers tend to inhibit an adept's trance.

Summary and Conclusions

For reader, interested in Stewart's dream theory, it seems proper to supplement the foregoing account of what Senoi do with a summary of what they do not do. Senoi theory ascribes little or no significance to most dreams. Trying to control entities which "cause" dream content is the sort of coercion Senoi say would scare such entities away. There are not dream clinics nor, outside Geruntom, any deliberate instruction in dreaming. The instruction at Geruntom has little to do with the techniques described by Stewart, some of which, like having sexual relations with one's kinsmen in dreams, Senoi find hideously repellent. I talked about Stewart's dream therapy in 1962. A typical response, from a man I'll call Yung:

It might be a good way to work out the problems of several people in the community, I've never heard of such a custom and people here wouldn't know how to do it. Hamid's dreams (Hamid was the most aggressive child in town) are never about hitting someone but always about people hitting Hamid.

Stewart's Senoi dream therapy awaits ethno-graphic confirmation still.

Note for Lucidity Letter Readers:

The readers or Lucidity Letter might want to know that Professor G. Wm. Domhoff, a sociologist at Stevenson College, University of California, Santa Cruz, is working with me on a longer article on Stewart and Senoi, The International Studies Program at the State University of New York at Buffalo is to publish a more comprehensive and technical

account of Senoi dreams I wrote a while ago,

The photos herein were taken on Ulu Telom in 1962. Stewart remarks explicitly in his thesis (p. 56) that his account refers to Ulu Telom people as well as to the “extension” of Temiar (p. 50) culture among hill Semai, like these Ulu Telom people. Settlements there are all mixed. Ethnic distinctions are fluid.

I mention the Ulu Telom references in Stewart’s thesis to indicate that the people involved are the same he worked with. I should add that there wasn’t sufficient time between his work and mine for so central, praxis to vanish without trace, as a couple of folks have claimed, People still talk about events which occurred 300 years ago. Not much happens in the country, just like here.

¹Reprinted with permission from Dream Network Bulletin, 1983, 2(5) Pictures and note original to this printing.

Original source: *Lucidity Letter Back Issues*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July, 1983, page 61.