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The Selling of the Senoi

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Malaysia

It has been said that when religions are faced with new discoveries challenging their authority, they react in three predictable stages: first, "It's not true;" second, "It's wicked;" and third, "We knew it all along so why make a fuss about it?" A remarkably similar process is currently taking place amongst True Believers in the religion of so-called "Senoi dream control."

Their first protest, when reports began to appear in the late 1970s denying that the Senoi tribe of Malaysia really practice dream manipulation, was to accuse the "militaristic Malaysian government" of suppressing both the gentle aborigines and their secret of non—violence. It was even seriously suggested that all visitors, including professional researchers, were ushered into jungle "concentration camps" where brainwashed Temiar, speaking through government interpreters, denied all knowledge of a dream control cul-ture. Great care was taken, so the story went, to see that outsiders never penetrated to the hidden remnant of Temiar/Senoi who had escaped from government surveillance to keep their traditions alive in the jungle depths.

When all such wish—fulfillment fantasies had been exposed as nonsense — and we can

personally attest to the fact that there are no brainwashed Temiar living in concentration camps, and that anyone who is seriously interested can visit the deepest jungle villages without finding any trace of dream control — the armchair romantics progressed to stage 2. It is wicked, they now argue, to impugn the scientific reputations of these two great anthropologists, Pat Noone and Kilton Stewart, and their classic research of the 1930s; if contemporary Temiar don't practice dream manipulation, it must mean that their ancient culture has been destroyed by modernization.

Well, we have now spent over a year in Mala-ysia, living and working in Temiar villages without any government interpreters to distort the record of officials whose presence might have imposed inhibitions, and it would be hard to imagine a people more dedicated to pre-serving their traditions intact despite all the changes going on around them. We spent night after night listening to tales of olden days or joining in their frequent trance/dance sessions in which dream—inspired songs are used to call spirits, and our welcome would have been short—lived had we not scrupulously observed their time—hallowed rituals and taboos. We made a special point of talking to elders who could recall the 1930s, and one of them, who actually told his dreams to Noone and Stewart, became a key informant in our investigations. We also sought out the dreamers named by Stewart in his PhD thesis, finding two of them still living and inter-viewing the families of others.

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. There is an elaborate Temiar lore for interpreting dreams as warnings or concerns (though only the shaman's interpretations have ever been given serious credence), and great heed has always been paid to anyone receiving a song or dance in dreams, for this indicates the emergence of a new shaman to invoke spurts for healing or protection of the village.

But no—one, absolutely no-one, would ever have presumed to ask for, still less demand, such a gift from a dream—character, as Western “Senoi dream theory” advocates. This would be high heresy for Temiar religion, in which the gunig or protective spirit always chooses its human vehicle and would be repelled by any hint of coercion; in fact the Temiar abhor coercion of any kind, dreaming or waking. They dismiss as nonsense the idea that children can be trained to confront hostile dream—characters, and boggle at the idea of converting such a figure into a gunig by fighting or killing it. On a more mundane level, they deny any tradition of offering gifts the next day to neighbors who have threatened or attacked them in dreams, and they can make no sense of the notion that sex dreams “should” always end in orgasm. For some Temiar, indeed, succumbing to sex in a dream is interpreted as seduction by a bad spirit, and all our informants insisted that incestuous dream sex pretends disaster. Norm-ally a good sex dream is either taken

lit-erally or interpreted as a kill in tomorrow's hunt.

Another point we took special pains to probe was whether Temiar culture had ever given any place to what is now in the West called dream lucidity, awareness within a dream that one is dreaming. We framed our questions very care-fully (an essential precaution in any invest-igation like this) and were interested to find that many Temiars, and notably all our shaman informants, understood at once what we were asking. In other words, they had no diffi-culty in grasping that one might have such awareness in a dream — but they emphatically denied that it played any part in their trad-ition. As one old and reputedly powerful tiger—shaman put it, when a dream character speaks or touches you in a song, it seems at the time like an ordinary person or animal (and as we all know, there is nothing odd about animals speaking in dreams). Only on waking is the figure interpreted as a spirit guide, and waking interpretation — dismissed as irrelevant by many Western dream advocates

— is central to all Temiar dream lore.

As more and more evidence along these lines reaches Western literature (and there is plenty more still to come), True Believers are moving to stage 3 — “Why all the fuss? Does it matter what these little people in Malaysia do or did? They have served, through the writings of Stewart and others, to provide an inspiring myth of noble savages from whom the West might learn the art of self-improvement through dream manipulation. Now that we've gotten started, and have found that the techniques work for us, we can conveniently dump the real Senoi.”

Perhaps, if you've no qualms of conscience about committing intellectual genocide — but in any event we must put a ban on the misuse of their name, which proponents of dream control seem reluctant to do. Just enclosing the word “Senoi” in inverted commas isn't good enough, for the real Senoi have a real dream culture of which they are very proud, and they become quite indignant when they hear their name identified with concepts utterly alien from their own. Some smart leaders even suggested to us that their newly—formed tribal association could sue, or perhaps insist on a royalty from every book or workshop that takes their name in vain! Meanwhile, writings are already in the pipeline, from ourselves and others, which will bring real Senoi dream culture firmly into Western literature, nothing but confusion can come from retaining the name for psychological techniques invented in America. Howard Revic's term “American Senoi dreamwork” must surely be the ultimate confusion and the deepest ethnic insult, for the values of real Senoi dream culture are poles apart from the self—improvement cults of the contemporary West.

The argument that the word “Senoi” is so firmly entrenched in the literature as a synonym of dream control that it will have to stay is sheer evasion. There is still time to set the record straight, and we shall see that it is done in the new editions of Ann's books Dream Power and The Dream Game — in fact this was the main reason why we took

time out to visit Malaysia. Meanwhile perhaps readers of *Lucidity Letter* could suggest an alternative term. “Stewart dreamwork” has already been suggested, but this too could be misleading for many ideas found in modern so-called Senoi dream workshops have little connection with his writings. (The puzzle of how Stewart reached his conclusions is another fascinating story, to be told elsewhere in due course.) Probably the only truly honest way out will be for every group leader to take personal responsibility for whatever techniques he or she wishes to promote, and let them stand entirely on their own feet.

As for real Senoi dream culture, we believe it will be of far more than academic interest in the West, precisely because it involves concepts quite different from those of contemporary psychology. While we ourselves do not yet understand fully the experiential meaning of the communion with nature—spirits which the Senoi claim to enjoy in their dreams and trances/dances, still less what these spirits “really” mean in psychological or theological terms, there seems no doubt that the shaman, and through him the rest of the people, can tune in to the natural environment in subtle ways quite unknown to most Westerners notable exception seems to have been William Blake who anticipated Senoi shamanism in his vision of nature’s “fearful symmetry” as a tiger burning in the forests of the night.) We both had many dreams of strange mystical intensity while living in the jungle, convincing us that these gentle people and their strange religion had touched off some long—neglected faculty for “spiritual communion” with nature. And is it not just some such faculty, rather than more techniques of control, which is essential to save our planet from destruction?

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