

**Comments on “The Selling of the Senoi” (LL, 1984, 3(1), 1—3)****Patric V. Giesler***Institute for Parapsychology  
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It is always pleasing to me to get the ethnographic record straight, albeit of course disconcerting that it need be gotten straight in the first place! Thus I applaud the work of Faraday and Wren—Lewis. I am sure that their work will join De Mille’s in revealing Castaneda or Carneiro’s exposure of Cordova—Rios and Lamb Wizard of the Upper Amazon. But I do have a question concerning methodology. Please understand that in regard to the Senoi and dreams, I am neutral. I’ve taken no “Senoi workshops,” nor have I read Stewart’s dissertation nor the offshoot literature.

My question has to do with the problematic employment of interpreters in fieldwork, and with or without them, the more crucial but related issue of how a question is framed to an informant. My rationale for the query in relation to your work will become clear in a moment, but first, I ask: Did you rely on interpreters? And if so, or even if not, and even if you are both fluent in the native language, what measures did you take to assure the cultural applicability of the particular framing of your questions? The well—renown anthropologist Kluckhohn (1944) reported difficulties eliciting basic witchcraft information from Navajo informants. Whenever he would try, the informants would respond somewhat alarmed and suspicious: “Why do you ask me?” “I don’t know anything about such matters.” Twenty years later, Werner and Fenton (1970) asked the Navajo for witchcraft information and had no difficulties. It could be that the Navajos became more open to discussing their historically highly sensitive subject area. But Werner and Fenton argue that Kluckhohn’s problem was that he had not discovered the culturally appropriate ways for asking for witchcraft information without at the same time inferring that the informant was a witch! If the sequence were reversed, and Werner and Fenton had written a fascinating dissertation on Navajo witchcraft followed by Navajo workshops and pop enthusiasm, then Kluckhohn would come along and based on his experiences debunk the whole affair, claiming the Navajo have no such beliefs or practices!

I spent several years with Afro—Brazilian shamans of the Jurema Cult and learned that what parapsychologists call spontaneous psychokinesis (SPK) and recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK; poltergeists) were frequent events in the lives of the cultists. For stories abounded in the cult circles to which I was apprenticed. I returned to these circles five years after my initial three year jaunt with them, and this time to collect systematically the details on these accounts or experiences. Now, although thoroughly familiar with their interpretation of the SPK and RSPK events, I wanted to be neutral—  
—to ask my questions in a relatively open—ended way. Therefore, “Have you ever seen an object move by itself?” I asked for example. Cultists consistently denied having had

the experience. I was appalled. I gave examples, used props and to no avail. I was perfectly fluent in the language. Finally, the topic of SPK and RSPK events came spontaneously in cult conversations, and many exchanged their experiences! Suddenly I realized the problem. I had framed my question neutrally (re: our culture), but for cultists the question was biased of course. For cultists, objects in SPK and RSPK events don't move by themselves; that's impossible! Spirits or magical forces move them. Had I asked the question in a culturally appropriate way (not move by "itself" but by, say, the spirit Romaozinho), I would not have had the difficulty, and I did not thereafter.

Based on these kinds of experiences and insights, I am led to wonder when two or more anthropologists report on the same culture, and specifically, on the same sensitive/sacred topics for the natives, and when there are major discrepancies in the reports, whether the "framing of the key questions" may have generated the discrepancies. Certainly you have taken all this into account. But then in my experience one year in the field is hardly enough to assure me that such errors could not have been made. Add interpreters and data quality control becomes greatly limited. The assumption that an interpreter/native assistant will control for the problem is a flawed assumption, especially when the assistant is struggling to ask what you want and not what he or she wants or thinks will be best!

### References

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