Thu Mystique of Dreams: A Search for Utopia through Senoi Dream Theory
By G. William Domhoff
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This book begins with an analysis of "Senoi dream theory," a therapeutic praxis introduced to Americans by Kilton Stewart, allegedly on the basis of his ethnographic work with indigenous hill peoples of Malaysia. (The theory is that a nonhierarchical supportive community in which people freely discuss their dreams can teach dreamers to confront and overcome their own destructive feelings in lucid dreams, resulting in complete sanity and the abolition of social strife.) Domhoff's discussion moves on to consider the place of dreams in American life and science.

This little book is wide-ranging, intelligent and intellectually stimulating. Anyone seriously interested in understanding dreaming should read it. It is not, as some people seem to fear, reactionary Sixties-bashing or redundant demystification of the ethnographic fieldwork on which Kilton Stewart claimed to base the techniques of dream control which until a couple of years ago went under the name of "Senoi dream therapy" or "Senoi dream theory". Like his distinguished mentor, the late Calvin S. Hall, Domhoff tends to err, when he does err, on the side of tolerance and generosity in evaluating other people's work. There's a lot to disagree with in this book, but nothing tendentious nor malicious.

After a brief introductory chapter defining the issues he intends to treat, Domhoff discusses, in sequence, the ethnography of the "Senoi," the character of Kilton Stewart, the spread of Stewart's "Senoi dream therapy" during the 1960s and 1970s, the efficacy of "Senoi dream principles." His conclusion is that, as scientists, we know little about dreams.

I was too closely involved in writing the second chapter, as Domhoff acknowledges, to be comfortable evaluating it. There are a couple of minor ethnographic slips. The derogatory Malay term for Senoi is 'Sakai," not 'Saki" (p. 14). The discussion of Senoi "soul" concepts on p. 23 conflates Semai Senoi and Temiar Senoi notions in a way that neither people would find correct. For readers concerned with dreaming rather than with the minutiae of Malaysian ethnography, however, the chapter is more than adequate.

Stewart was an attractive character, even to people like Domhoff and myself, who know him only indirectly. That attractiveness, plus Domhoff's aforementioned generosity, paradoxically make this chapter the least accurate in the book. The inaccuracy comes from omitting any discussion of material which might seem to reflect discredit on Stewart, even when the material is Stewart's own words and when the discredit could

only spring from retroactively and stupidly imposing 1980s political verities only the 1930s. For example, Domhoff's discussion of Stewart's political liberalism (pp. 52-53) would leave the impression that Stewart never in his life had a thought which people today would characterize as racist." Such immunity to a dominant ideological tendency of his time would have been extraordinary, especially for someone of Stewart's background. It is surely creditable enough that, although at the time of his first fieldwork Stewart thought "Negritoes" were intellectually inferior for biological reasons [quoted in Porteus 1937), be shortly afterwards changed his mind and asserted (on the basis of the same data) that there were no serious intellectual differences between human "races." My own feeling is that the ability to change one's mind on a basic issue is rare enough a virtue that to protect Stewart's reputation Domhoff's way is to make him seem more a kneejerk liberal and less a thoughtful person, albeit one with a fairly freewheeling attitude towards data, than he was. The Biblical story of the prodigal son tells us that a person who sees the error of his or her ways is more admirable than one who never errs. Stewart was in many ways a prodigal son.

Similarly, Domhoff so downplays the importance of Stewart's Mormonism in the formulation of "Senoi dream theory" that a casual reader might miss it entirely. Stewart in this case again was much more forthright. In "Pygmies and Dream Giants" (1954), he states clearly that he was attempting to rediscover in his research the Mormon community he remembered growing up in, in which "Dreams and visions made it possible to maintain a community where no adult had spiritual authority over anyone else, since each could communicate with the supreme authority in his dreams and visions." As Domhoff's friend and colleague, James Clifford, has demonstrated in a number of wonderful articles, this sort of motivation is not uncommon among ethnographers. People, after all, have reasons for what they do, and there's nothing disreputable in that fact. We're not machines. Personally, I think Domhoff's squeamishness about these matters is laudable but patronizing. Professionally, I think it distorts the sociology of knowledge he's trying to write.

Discussing the appeal of "Senoi dream theory" for Americans during the 1960s, Domhoff correctly points out that it fit squarely into the American tradition of self-improvement that runs from Benjamin Franklin through Norman Vincent Peale. His interpretation, which I believe substantially correct, is not as cogent as it could be. The televised horrors of the Vietnam War no doubt made the peaceful and technologically simple life Senoi lead appealing, but I don't think the fact they also lived in Southeast Asia had much effect. The appeal of mystified Senoi life, I think, is far more intimately tied to Americans' on-again-off-again love affair with Native Americans, which Domhoff also cites. In fact, at least one popular dream book refers to Senoi a "Indians." It would have been illuminating to have winkled out the similarities between the "Sixties" and the other times in which white people's imaginings of Indian lives became intertwined with reformist or revolutionary American politics. (I'm thinking of the period immediately after the continent was discovered, described by the historians Commager and

Giordanetti in "Was America a Mistake?;" the early middle nineteenth century, beginning with the Leatherstocking tales and culminating in "Hiawatha," "The League of the Iroquois" and "Moby Dick"; and the 1920s, particularly in the community at Taos, where Jung and the feminist ethnographer Elsie Clews Parsons worked with Pueblo peoples, D. H. Lawrence studied American character and Mabel Dodge Luhan took an Indian husband. Leslie Fieldler's studies of the role of Indians in American literature would be a good starting place). Since Domhoff is a sociologist and student of dreams rather than a literary critic or historian, it would be unfair to suggest that he grapple with this issue, but some his colleagues in the History of Consciousness Department might find the project intriguing.

In a chapter of particular interest to readers of this journal, Domhoff suggests that, considered simply as a therapeutic technique, Senoi dream therapy doesn't work. In a couple of recent articles in the Lucidity Letter and the ASD Newsletter Myrna Walters and I suggested that Chinese lucid dreams might be a way of avoiding problems rather than of dealing with them, and some psychotherapists consider "Senoi" praxis detrimental to therapy. Domhoff's survey of the literature seems extensive, although he spends little time on lucid dreams per se (pp. 89-90). What he has to say about REM sleep may surprise the reader familiar only with the popular literature on the subject.

Like Stewart, Domhoff concludes that Western dream theory is not far advanced over Senoi theory. Domhoff, however, believes not that Senoi theory is advanced but that Western theory is rudimentary. Moreover, even his defense of the two bodies of Euroamerican method and data he thinks reliable lacks the trenchancy of his earlier critiques. He argues that, despite hermeneutic heterogeneity, interpretive psychology has shown that dreams have meaning. He further expresses confidence in the content analysis of dreams, the technique at which he is especially experienced. These assertions are debatable, but since I've examined them in more detail in a chapter in Gackenbach's forthcoming Sourcebook on Sleep and Dreams, I'll spare the reader a discussion here. The book ends on an upbeat, celebrating American optimism, openness to change and utopian idealists like Stewart who, however wrongheaded they may be, expand our horizons. It's a fitting conclusion to a book whose main weakness is its generosity.

A final note: Domhoff's style is forthright and unpretentious. Despite the complexity of its subject this little book is easy and fun to read. I recommend it highly.

References

Porteus, S. D. (1937). Primitive intelligence. New York: Macmillan.
Stewart, Kilton Riggs (1954). Pygmies and dream giants. New York: W. W. Norton.

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