
THE SENOI DREAMS OR FANTASIES ?

by

John Rowan

In the current issue of 'AHP Perspective' issued from San Francisco, there is an advertisement by Clara Stewart Flagg which offers a range of 'Senoi Dream Education Workshops' under the general headline - HOW TO EDUCATE YOUR DREAMS TO WORK FOR YOU.

The Senoi of Malaya, a primitive group living in a crimeless, violence-free society, used dreams as psychological forces that the dreamer can learn to control through a process of dream education. . . . Dr Kilton Stewart, the first psychologist to live with the Senoi and study their dream theories . . . translated their system into a methodology applicable to our Western society. Clara Stewart Flagg, his widow, trained under his personal guidance for twenty years, and continues his work as the only dream educator practicing Senoi Dream Education.

This seems clear enough, and most of us have heard of the Senoi and their dreams - how they held a community meeting every day, at which dreams were brought in and discussed, and the whole community was guided and lived by these

dream discussions. The whole of the fifth chapter of the well-known book Creative Dreaming by Patricia Garfield (Futura 1976) is devoted to describing how this was supposed to work: Garfield says, for example, "The question 'What did you dream last night?' is actually the most important question of Senoi life'. And you may have seen in the shops a workbook showing how this Senoi practice can be linked to Jungian ideas on dreams. The whole idea is that the Senoi learned how to control their dreams, so as to use them for community purposes. 'Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Senoi is their extraordinary psychological adjustment. Neuroses and psychoses as we know them are reported to be non-existent among the Senoi.'

Unfortunately none of this is true. There is not, and has never been, any such Senoi practice. It was all an invention of Kilton Stewart, who wanted to turn people on to his own ideas about dreams, and found this the easiest way of doing it.

The people who discovered this deception were known to some of us quite well in the early seventies. John Wren-Lewis was the first

Chairperson of the AHP in Britain, and Ann Faraday, his wife, was active in London speaking and writing on dream work. Her two books, *Dream Power* and *The Dream Game*, can still be seen in the shops.

In the 1960's and the 1970's a couple of anthropologists and some film makers visited the Senoi and failed to find any of the phenomena which Kilton Stewart had written about. However, there was some dispute as to whether they had talked to the right people, and even of whether they had been deliberately deceived by a Government which wanted to hide the harmonious Senoi because such things would upset the Army.

So in 1982 Ann Faraday was asked to write something on dreams, and since she was already in India with her husband, they both decided to visit the Senoi and see for themselves. In Perak they met educated Senoi who invited them to stay in their jungle villages. During the next year the two of them visited dozens of Senoi villages, living with the people and joining in their trance dance sessions. They found no practice and no recollection of the type of dream control which Garfield and others had talked about. And when asked directly about it, the Senoi were horrified at the idea of coercing their dreams in any way - their whole attitude was passive and accepting rather than active and masterful.

The Senoi are a very peaceful and gentle people, Ann and John found, but Stewart's claim about

their extraordinary mental and physical health were simply not true. They die as young as most people in primitive tribes, and have their fair share of neurosis.

So how did all this happen? Kilton Stewart was an American psychologist who met an anthropologist named Pat Noone, who was very taken with the Senoi and later married a Senoi wife and lived with her in the jungle. Noone took him for a three-month visit to the Senoi in 1934, and Stewart fell in love with the people too. Noone's account of this trip does not mention dream control at all, and neither does Stewart's unpublished manuscript written at the time. Stewart then took a brief Rankian psychoanalytic training in Paris in 1935, and this turned him on tremendously - he got very excited by his own dreams and their analysis. In China later that year he wrote a whole theory of dream control.

A year later he and Claudia Parsons visited Noone and the Senoi again, and Parsons wrote up the experience in a book called *Vagabondage*. They spent seven weeks in the jungle, where they did not live with the Senoi but stayed in separate huts outside the village. Stewart then came back to England and again took up psychoanalysis. It was not until after his death that his ideas came into prominence.

John Wren-Lewis says that Stewart was once described to him as a 'proto-hippie-guru'. He was a charismatic man, especially to women; everybody liked him. He

was a creative thinker and had a gift for seeing in things what he wanted to see in them.

This is an interesting story because it is yet one more instance of how easy we find it to believe what fits in with our own ideas and interests. Like the story of the Hundredth Monkey (Self and Society Vol XII

No3), or the tales of Carlos Castaneda (Self and Society Vol XII No 4) we hang on to fiction because it fulfils our needs and helps us to do what we wanted to do anyway. But it is important to know the difference between truth and lies, even if we find the lies more useful than some of the truths with which we are presented.



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