

Dream Theory in Malaya

ALBUM NOTES

Dream Theory in Malaya is titled after a paper by a visionary anthropologist, Kilton Stewart, who in 1935 visited a remarkable highland tribe of Malayan aborigines, the Senoi, whose happiness and well-being were linked to their morning custom of family dream-telling – where a child's fearful dream of falling was praised as a gift to learn to fly the next night and where a dream-song or dance was taught to a neighboring tribe to create a common bond beyond differences of custom.

The Semelai are another tribe not far from the Senoi but who live in the largest swamp area of Malaya. A recorded fragment of their joy-filled watersplash rhythm was re-structured and became the generating force for the composition, *Malay*, as well as providing a thematic guide for the entire recording.

Jon Hassell

DREAM THEORY IN MALAYA

by **KILTON STEWART**

If you should hear that a flying saucer from another planet had landed on Culangra, a lonely mountain peak in the Central Mountain Range of the Malay Peninsula a hundred years ago, you would want to know how the space ship was constructed and what kind of power propelled it, but most of all you would want to know about the people who navigated it and the society from which they came. If they lived in a world without crime and war and destructive conflict, and if they were comparatively free from chronic mental and physical ailments, you would want to know about their methods of healing and education, and whether these methods would work as well with the inhabitants of the earth. If you heard further that the navigators of the ship had found a group of 12,000 people living as an isolated community among the mountains, and had demonstrated that these pre-literate people could utilize their methods of healing and education, and reproduce the society from which the celestial navigators came, you would probably be more curious about these psychological and social methods that conquered space inside the individual, than you would about the mechanics of the ship which conquered outside space.

As a member of a scientific expedition traveling through the unexplored equatorial rain forest of the Central Range of the Malay Peninsula in 1935, I was introduced to an isolated tribe of jungle folk, who employed methods of psychology and interpersonal relations so astonishing that they might have come from another planet. These people, the Senoi, lived in long community houses, skillfully constructed of bamboo, rattan, and thatch, and held away from the ground on poles. They maintained themselves by practicing dry-land, shifting agriculture, and by hunting and fishing. Their language, partly Indonesian and partly Non-Kamian, relates them to the peoples of Indonesia to the south and west, and to the Highlanders of Indo-China and Burma, as do their physical characteristics.

Study of their political and social organization indicates that the political authority in their communities was originally in the hands of the oldest members of patrilineal clans, somewhat as in the social structure of China and other parts of the world. But the major authority in all their communities is now held by their primitive psychologists whom they call *halaks*. The only honorary title in the society is that of *Tohat*, which is equivalent to a doctor who is both a healer and an educator, in our terms.

The Senoi claim there has not been a violent crime or an intercommunal conflict for a space of two or three hundred years because of the insight and inventiveness of the *Tohats* of their various communities. The foothill tribes which surround the Central Mountain Range have such a firm belief in the magical powers of this Highland group that they give the territory a wide berth. From all we could learn, their psychological knowledge of strangers in their territory, the Senoi said they could very easily devise means of scaring them off. They did not practice black magic, but allowed the nomadic hill-folk surrounding them to think that they did if strangers invaded their territory.

This fear of Senoi magic accounts for the fact that they have not, over a long period, had to fight with outsiders. But the absence of violent crime, armed conflict, and mental and physical diseases in their own society can only be explained on the basis of institutions which produce a high state of psychological integration and emotional maturity, along with social skills and attitudes which promote creative, rather than destructive, interpersonal relations. They are, perhaps, the most democratic group reported in anthropological literature. In the realms of family, economics, and politics, their society operates smoothly on the principle of contract, agreement, and democratic consensus, with no need of police force, jail, psychiatric hospital to reinforce the agreements or to confine those who are not willing or able to reach consensus.

Study of their society seems to indicate that they have arrived at this high state of social and physical cooperation and integration through the system of psychology which they discovered, invented, and developed, and that the principles of this system of psychology are understandable in terms of Western scientific thinking.

It was the late H. D. Noone, the Government Ethnologist of the Federated Malay States, who introduced me to this astonishing group. He agreed with me that they have built a system of inter-personal relations which, in the field of psychology, is perhaps on a level with our attainments in such areas as television and nuclear physics. From a year's experience with these people working as a research psychologist, and another year with Noone in England integrating his seven years of anthropological research with my own findings, I am able to make the following formulations of the principles of Senoi psychology.

Being a pre-literate group, the principles of their psychology are simple and easy to learn, understand, and even employ. Fifteen years of experimentation with these Senoi principles have convinced me that all men, regardless of their actual cultural development, might profit by studying them.

Senoi psychology falls into two categories. The first deals with dream interpretation; the second with dream expression in the agreement trance or cooperative reverie. The cooperative reverie is not participated in until adolescence and serves to initiate the child into the states of adulthood. After adolescence, if he spends a great deal of time in the trance state, a Senoi is considered a specialist in healing or in the use of extra-sensory powers.

Dream interpretation, however, is a feature of child education and is the common knowledge of all Senoi adults. The average Senoi layman practices the psychotherapy of dream interpretation of his family and associates as a regular feature of education and daily social intercourse. Breakfast in the Senoi house is like a dream clinic, with the father and older brothers listening to and analyzing the dreams of all the children. At the end of the family clinic the male population gathers in the council, at which the dreams of the older children and all the men in the community are reported, discussed, and analyzed.

While the Senoi do not of course employ our system of terminology, their psychology of dream interpretation might be summed up as follows: man creates features or images of the outside world in his own mind as part of

the adaptive process. Some of these features are in conflict with him and with each other. Once internalized, these hostile images turn man against himself and against his fellows. In dreams man has the power to see these facts of his psyche, which have been disguised in external forms, associated with his own fearful emotions, and turned against him and the internal images of other people. If the individual does not receive social aid through education and therapy, these hostile images, built up by man's normal receptiveness to the outside world, get tied together and associated with one another in a way which makes him physically, socially, and psychologically abnormal.

Unaided, these dream beings, which man creates to reproduce inside himself the external socio-physical environment, tend to remain against him the way the environment was against him, or to become disassociated from his major personality and tied up in wasteful psychic, organic, and muscular tensions. With the help of dream interpretations, these psychological replicas of the socio-physical environment can be redirected and reorganized and again become useful to the major personality.

The Senoi believes that any human being, with the aid of his fellows, can outface, master, and actually utilize all beings and forces in the dream universe. His experience leads him to believe that, if you cooperate with your fellows or oppose them with good will in the day time, their images will help you in your dreams, and that every person should be the supreme ruler and master of his own dream or spiritual universe, and can demand and receive the help and cooperation of all the forces there.

In order to evaluate these principles of dream interpretation and social action, I made a collection of the dreams of younger and older Senoi children, adolescents, and adults, and compared them with similar collections made in other societies where they had different social attitudes towards the dream and different methods of dream interpretation. I found through this larger study that the dream process evolved differently in the various societies, and that the evolution of the dream process seemed to be related to the adaptability and individual creative output of the various societies. It may be of interest to the reader to examine in detail the methods of Senoi dream interpretation:

The simplest anxiety or terror dream I found among the Senoi was the falling dream. When the Senoi child reports a falling dream, the adult answers with enthusiasm, "That is a wonderful dream, one of the best dreams a man can have. Where did you fall to, and what did you discover?" He makes the same comment when the child reports a climbing, traveling, flying, or soaring dream. The child at first answers, as

he would in our society, that it did not seem so wonderful, and that he was so frightened that he awoke before he had fallen anywhere.

"That was a mistake," answers the adult-authority. "Everything you do in a dream has a purpose, beyond your understanding while you are asleep. You must relax and enjoy yourself when you fall in a dream. Falling is the quickest way to get in contact with the powers of the spirit world, the powers laid open to you through your dreams. Soon, when you have a falling dream, you will remember what I am saying, and as you do, you will feel that you are traveling to the source of the power which has caused you to fall.

"The falling spirits love you. They are attracting you to their land, and you have but to relax and remain asleep in order to come to grips with them. When you meet them, you may be frightened of their terrific power, but go on. When you think you are dying in a dream, you are only receiving the powers of the other world, your own spiritual power which has been turned against you, and which now wishes to become one with you if you will accept it."

The astonishing thing is that over a period of time, with this type of social interaction, praise, or criticism, imperatives, and advice, the dream which starts out with fear of falling changes into the joy of flying. This happens to everyone in the Senoi society. That which was an indwelling fear or anxiety, becomes an indwelling joy or act of will; that which was ill esteem toward the forces which caused the child to fall in his dream, becomes good will towards the denizens of the dream world, because he relaxes in his dream and finds pleasurable adventures, rather than waking up with a clammy skin and a crawling scalp.

The Senoi believe and teach that the dreamer – the "I" of the dream – should always advance and attack in the teeth of danger, calling on the dream images of his fellows if necessary, but fighting by himself until they arrive. In bad dreams the Senoi believe real friends will never attack the dreamer or refuse help. If any dream character who looks like a friend is hostile or uncooperative in a dream, he is only wearing the mask of a friend.

If the dreamer attacks and kills the hostile dream character, the spirit or essence of this dream character will always emerge as a servant or ally. Dream characters are bad only as long as one is afraid and retreating from them, and will continue to seem bad and fearful as long as one refuses to come to grips with them.

According to the Senoi, pleasurable dreams, such as of flying or sexual love, should be continued until they arrive at a resolution which, on awakening, leaves one with something of beauty or use to the group. For example, one should arrive somewhere when he flies, meet the beings there, hear their music, see their designs, their dances, and learn their useful knowledge.

Dreams of sexual love should always move through orgasm, and the dreamer should then demand from his dream lover the poem, the song, the dance, the useful knowledge which will express the beauty of his spiritual lover to a group. If this is done, no dream man or woman can take the love which belongs to human beings. If the dream character demanding love looks like a brother or sister, with whom love would be abnormal or incestuous in reality, one need have no fear of expressing love in the dream, since these dream beings are not, in fact, brother or sister, but have only chosen these taboo images as a disguise. Such dream beings are only facets of one's own spiritual or psychic makeup, disguised as brother or sister, and useless until they are reclaimed or possessed through the free expression of love in the dream universe.

If the dreamer demands and receives from his love partners a contribution which he can express to the group on awakening, he cannot express or receive too much love in dreams. A rich love life in dreams indicates the favor of the beings of the spiritual or emotional universe. If the dreamer injures the dream images of his fellows or refuses to cooperate with them in dreams he should go out of his way to express friendship and cooperation on awakening, since hostile dream characters can only use the image of people for whom his good will is running low. If the image of a friend hurts him in a dream, the friend should be advised of the fact, so he can repair his damaged or negative dream image by friendly social intercourse.

Let us examine some of the elements of the social and psychological processes involved in this type of dream interpretation:

First, the child receives social recognition and esteem for discovering and relating what might be called an anxiety-motivated psychic reaction. This is the first step among the Senoi toward convincing the child that he is acceptable to authority even when he reveals how he is inside.

Second, it describes the working of his mind as rational, even when he is asleep. To the Senoi it is just as reasonable for the child to adjust his inner tension states for himself as it is for a Western child to do his homework for the teacher.

Third, the interpretation characterizes the force which the child feels in the dream as a power which he can control through a process of relaxation and mental set, a force which is his as soon as he can reclaim it and learn to direct it.

Fourth, the Senoi education indicates that anxiety is not only important in itself, but that it blocks the free play of imaginative thinking and creative activity to which dreams could otherwise give rise.

Fifth, it establishes the principle that the child should make decisions and arrive at resolutions in his night-time thinking as well as in that of the day, and should assume a responsible attitude toward all his psychic reactions and forces.

Sixth, it acquaints the child with the fact that he can better control his psychic reactions by expressing them and taking thought upon them, than by concealing and repressing them.

Seventh, it initiates the child into a way of thinking which will be strengthened and developed throughout the rest of his life, and which assumes that a human being who retains good will for his fellows and communicates his psychic reactions to them for approval and criticism, is the supreme ruler of all the individual forces of the spirit – subjective – world whatsoever.

Man discovers his deepest self and reveals his greatest creative power at times when his psychic processes are most free from immediate involvement with the environment and most under the control of his indwelling balancing or homeostatic power. The freest type of psychic play occurs in sleep, and the social acceptance of the dream world, therefore, constitute the deepest possible acceptance of the individual.

Among the Senoi one accumulates good will for people because they encourage on every hand the free exercise and expression of that which is most basically himself, either directly or indirectly, through the acceptance of the dream process. At the same time, the child is told that he must refuse to settle with the denizens of the dream world unless they make some contribution which is socially meaningful and constructive as determined by social consensus on awakening. Thus his dream reorganization is guided in a way which makes his adult aggressive action socially constructive.

Among the Senoi where the authority tells the child that every dream

force and character is real and important, and in essence permanent, that it can and must be outfaced, subdued, and forced to make a socially meaningful contribution, the wisdom of the body operating in sleep, seems in fact to reorganize the accumulating experience of the child in such a way that the natural tendency of the higher nervous system to perpetuate unpleasant experiences is first neutralized and then reversed.

We could call this simple type of interpretation dream analysis. It says to the child that there is a manifest content of the dream, the root he stubbed his toe on, or the fire that burned him, or the composite individual that disciplined him. But there is also a latent content of the dream, a force which is potentially useful, but which will plague him until he outfaces. the manifest content in a future dream, and either persuades or forces it to make a contribution which will be judged useful or beautiful by the group, after he awakes.

We could call this type of interpretation suggestion. The tendency to perpetuate in sleep the negative image of a personified evil, is neutralized in the dream by a similar tendency to perpetuate the positive image of a sympathetic social authority. Thus accumulating social experience supports the organizing wisdom of the body in the dream, making the dreamer first unafraid of the negative image and its accompanying painful tension states, and later enabling him to break up that tension state and transmute the accumulated energy from anxiety into a poem, a song, a dance, a new type of trap, or some other creative product, to which an individual or the whole group will react with approval (or criticize) the following day.

The following further example from the Senoi will show how this process operates:

A child dreams that he is attacked by a friend and, on awakening, is advised by his father to inform his friend of this fact. The friend's father tells his child that it is possible that he has offended the dreamer without wishing to do so, and allowed a malignant character to use his image as a disguise in the dream. Therefore, he should give a present to the dreamer and go out of his way to be friendly toward him, to prevent such an occurrence in the future.

The aggression building up around the image of the friend in the dreamer's mind thereby becomes the basis of a friendly exchange. The dreamer is also told to fight back in the future dreams, and to conquer any dream character using the friend's image as a disguise.

Another example of what is probably a less direct tension state in the dreamer, toward another person is dealt with in an equally skillful manner. The dreamer reports seeing a tiger attack another boy of the long house. Again, he is advised to tell the boy about the dream, to describe the place where the attack occurred and, if possible, to show it to him so that he can be on his guard, and in future dreams kill the tiger before it has a chance to attack him. The parents of the boy in the dream again tell the child to give the dreamer a present, and to consider him a special friend.

Even a tendency toward unproductive fantasy is effectively dealt with in the Senoi dream education. If the child reports floating dreams, or a dream of finding food, he is told that he must float somewhere in his next dream and find something of value to his fellows, or that he must share the food he is eating; and if he has a dream of attacking someone he must apologize to them, share a delicacy with them, or make them some sort of toy. Thus, before aggression, selfishness, and jealousy can influence social behavior, the tensions expressed in the permissive dream state become the hub of social action in which they are discharged without being destructive.

My data on the dream life of the various Senoi age groups would indicate that dreaming can and does become the deepest type of creative thought. Observing the lives of the Senoi it occurred to me that modern civilization may be sick because people have sloughed off, or failed to develop, half their power to think. Perhaps the most important half. Certainly, the Senoi suffer little by intellectual comparison with ourselves. They have equal power for logical thinking while awake, considering their environmental data, whereas our capacity to solve problems in dreams is inferior compared to theirs.

In the adult Senoi a dream may start with a waking problem which has failed solution, with an accident, or a social debacle. A young man brings in some wild gourd seeds and shares them with his group. They have a purgative effect and give everyone diarrhea. The young man feels guilty and ashamed and suspects that they are poisonous. That night he has a dream, and the spirit of the gourd seeds appears, makes him vomit up the seeds, and explains that they have value only as a medicine, when a person is ill. Then the gourd spirit gives him a song and teaches him a dance which he can show his group on awakening, thereby gaining recognition and winning back his self-esteem.

Or, a falling tree which wounds a man appears in his dreams to take away the pain, and explains that it wishes to make friends with him. Then the tree spirit gives him a new and unknown rhythm which he can play on his

drums. Or, the jilted lover is visited in his dreams by the woman who rejected him, who explains that she is sick when she is awake and not good enough for him. As a token of her true feeling, she gives him a poem.

The Senoi does not exhaust the power to think while asleep with these simple social and environmental situations. The bearers who carried out our equipment under very trying conditions became dissatisfied and were ready to desert. Their leader, a Senoi shaman, had a dream in which he was visited by the spirit of the empty boxes. The song and music this dream character gave him so inspired the bearers, and the dance he directed so relaxed and rested them, that they claimed the boxes had lost their weight and finished the expedition in the best of spirits.

Even this solution of a difficult social situation, involving people who were not all members of the dreamer's group, is trivial compared with the dream solutions which occur now that the Senoi territory has been opened up to alien culture contacts.

Datu Bintung at Jelong had a dream which succeeded in breaking down the major social barriers in clothing and food habits between his group and the surrounding Chinese and Mohammedan colonies. This was accomplished chiefly through a dance which his dream prescribed. Only those who did his dance were required to change their food habits and wear the new clothing, but the dance was so good that nearly all the Senoi along the border chose to do it. In this way, the dream created social change in a democratic manner.

Another feature of Datu Bintung's dream involved the ceremonial status of women, making them more nearly the equals of men, although equality is not a feature of either Chinese or Mohammedan societies. So far as could be determined this was a pure creative action which introduced greater equality in the culture, just as reflective thought has produced more equality in our society.

In the West the thinking we do while asleep usually remains on a muddled, childish, or psychotic level because we do not respond to dreams as socially important and include dreaming in the educative process. This social neglect of the side of man's reflective thinking, when the creative process is most free, seems poor education.

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