



The Achuar: A Present-Day Dream People

Back in 1969, in his landmark collection of readings, *Altered States of Consciousness*, Charles Tart included an article by Kilton Stewart called “Dream Theory in Malaya.” The article described the dream practices of a tribe called the Senoi, hunter gatherers who lived in the jungles of Malaysia, shared their dreams over communal breakfast each morning, and, thanks to their dream-based lifestyle, enjoyed sound mental health and a non-violent society. Patricia Garfield devoted a chapter of her seminal book, *Creative Dreaming* (1974), to the Senoi, and for a while, Senoi dream practices were a hot topic within the burgeoning dreamwork movement. Eventually, though, Faraday, Domhoff, and others began to question the accuracy of Stewart’s account. Sadly, the controversies surrounding the Senoi will probably never be fully resolved, because the culture that Stewart visited in the 1930s no longer exists.

The Achuar are an indigenous people living in the rain forests of southeastern Ecuador. As was the case for the Senoi and many other shamanic peoples, dreams are an important part of daily life for the Achuar. However, unlike most of these other cultures, the Achuar lived in relative isolation from the outside world until the latter part of the twentieth century. As a result, their dream-based culture has survived in its traditional form, though the survival of the

tribe is now being threatened by the destruction of the rain forest.

Recently I had the opportunity to meet with two psychoanalysts, Chuck Fisher and Beth Kalish-Weiss, who have visited with and studied the Achuar. I found it fascinating to learn about this authentic, present-day dream culture.

Dreams are central to the world view of the Achuar. Daily life is built upon dream-sharing (*wayusa*). Just as the Senoi were purported to do, each morning, several hours before dawn, the Achuar gather in small groups in family households to drink an herbal infusion called *wayús*, a mild stimulant. After a ritual purging brought on by drinking copious amounts of *wayús*, both men and women take turns sharing their dreams, which will then affect the decisions they make and shape their waking activities. Children tell their dreams, too, and learn how to understand their meaning by listening to the discussions of the adults. If no interpretation for a given dream is agreed upon during the *wayusa*, the Achuar actively seek to understand the dream during the day, by conferring with people they interact with and carefully noting any unusual occurrences (what Jung might call “synchronicities”). In this way, dreaming and the understanding of dreams becomes an intersubjective activity woven into the life of the community.

The close interrelation between dream life and waking life implicit in the practice

of *wayusa* affects how the Achuar understand both dreams and waking events. For example, the fact that sometimes events described in foretelling dreams do not come to pass is understood to be confirmation of their world view. Since the actions of the tribe are shaped by information given in their dreams, the failure of some predictive dreams to “come true” confirms that the dream was accurate and as a result, the correct course of action was followed.

The Achuar distinguish different types of dreams, including dreams that foretell future events; dreams that announce a successful hunt; dreams that presage illness, conflict, or misfortune; and dreams in which spirits, ancestors, or absent relatives communicate important messages for the tribe. Because they believe that individuals dream not only for themselves but also for the community, some dreams are taken to the tribal elders or the shaman for further interpretation. The Achuar also distinguish night dreams from vision-dreams, which are induced by ingesting hallucinogenic plants, including *ayahuasca*. Vision-dreams are considered sacred and are always shared with the community.

Today, the survival of the Achuar and their traditional way of life is threatened by the destruction of the rain forest, as proponents of oil development (including key Ecuadorian politicians) press for rights to exploit their land.

The Achuar were one of the last of the rain forest tribes to

be contacted by outsiders (Catholic missionaries who arrived in the 1960s). By the early '90s, they began having dreams about an imminent threat coming from the external world. They soon learned that the western edge of their homeland had been given over to Arco as an oil concession. At the same time, they saw how northern tribes had tried, unsuccessfully, to resist the big oil companies. The situation looked dire.

Prompted by their dreams, the Achuar followed a novel course of action: they sought partnership, first by organizing the neighboring tribes (historically warring amongst themselves) into a unified political entity with a common purpose, then, by seeking outside allies sympathetic to their plight. These efforts resulted in the creation of the Pachamama Alliance, whose mission is to “empower indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest to preserve their lands and culture.” In this way, the Achuar have managed to maintain control of their land for the past fifteen years.

For more information about the Pachamama Alliance, visit their web site at: <http://www.pachamama.org/>.