

## Forest Products for Market: Rattan and the Semaq Beri of Ulu Tembeling

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### ABSTRAK

*Secara umum artikel ini membincang tentang konteks sosial kegiatan mengumpul rotan sebagai satu komoditi untuk pasaran, sebagaimana diamalkan oleh golongan Semaq Beri di Ulu Tembeling. Artikel ini juga merupakan satu usaha untuk memahami beberapa dinamik sistem yang mereka amalkan dan cara sistem itu dikaitkan dengan alam sekitar serta masyarakat yang lebih luas lagi dominan. Perbincangan juga menyentuh sumbangan pengeluaran jenis-jenis komoditi dan sara diri kepada pengekalan dan penghasilan semula golongan Semaq Beri serta hubungan jenis-jenis pengeluaran itu kepada ekonomi nasional.*

### ABSTRACT

*This article generally discusses the social context of the collection of rattan as a commodity for market by the Semaq Beri of Ulu Tembeling. It is also an attempt to understand some of the dynamics of their system and the manner in which they relate to the environment and the larger, dominant society. The discussion also touches on the contribution of the commodity production and subsistence production to the maintenance and reproduction of the Semaq Beri as well as their relations to the national economy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Rattan is a renewable resource and as such if sustainable yields can be managed, it will supply Malaysia with an important source of revenue for years to come. Clearly problems of over-harvesting and a diminishing ecological environment for rattan have become pressing in Malaysia.

Rattan is also very important to the Orang Asli in Malaysia as is the environment it grows in. The subject of this article is the social context of the collection of rattan as a commodity for market by the Semaq Beri of Ulu Tembeling. Much work remains to be done, particularly with regard to the contribution to their economy from not only rattan but a huge variety of other harvestable and renewable forest products. The preliminary findings presented here are meant to represent a beginning

in the attempt to understand some of the dynamics of their system and the manner in which they relate to the larger, dominant and encapsulating society. This article is an initial beginning in this direction.

The Orang Asli in Malaysia have been trading forest products with other groups no doubt for some thousands of years. Dunn (1975), in his monograph on rainforest traders and collectors in Malaysia, has argued from archaeological evidence that there was collecting and trading of forest products as far back as 20,000 B.P. Although the evidence for the period about 20,000 B.P. is speculative, Dunn assumed that trade was internal and inland. However, about 10,000 B.P. reasonably firm evidence exists for trade in forest products between inland and more sedentary coastal groups (Dunn 1975:134-135). During the period of 5,000 B.P. Dunn argued that coastal people were probably in contact with other people in insular Malaysia and that by 3,000-2500 B.P. the coastal people were trading with Chinese middlemen. A great deal of Dunn's evidence is sparse (archaeological) and speculative but certainly from the beginning of this century trade with China was a growing concern, (Wheatley 1964). The earliest records of the trading of forest products is to China in the 5th century (Wang 1958). Wheatley (1961) listed *gaharu* wood, amber, ivory, rhino horns, tortoise shells, and cowries. During the period 960-1126, Chinese records listed ebony, *gaharu* wood, laka wood, *pandan* matting, ivory, rhino horns, bee's wax, and lac as products acquired by Chinese middlemen from the Malay Peninsula (Wheatley 1959). Other products, not necessarily acquired from the Malay peninsula, included products indigenous to this area such as rattans, bezoin, dammars, civet glands, bird feathers, and sapan wood. (Wheatley 1959). Arab traders listed similar products from Malaysia from as early as 850 A.D. The trade in forest products has continued to this day. It is safe to assume that the Orang Asli were probably the main providers of forest products and that the trade has been going on for several millenium. It is also safe, I believe, to assume that the production of these goods was not a full-time concern, was occasional and that there was little dependence on this kind of production.

The rainforests of Malaysia contain a variety of commercially exchangeable objects which provide cash to Orang Asli collectors. For the most part, groups of Orang Asli in the more inaccessible areas are the major producers of these products, although up-country Malays, traditionally middlemen, often collect some products to acquire cash to supplement their subsistence economy.

Trade in forest products has featured significantly in relations between the Orang Asli and the Malays as they worked out territoriality and an economic division of labour. Dunn (1975) had convincingly argued that trade has been an important element for thousands of years

in Orang Asli economic life. Wheatley (1961) provided ample evidence of trade in forest products with the Chinese as early as the first century.

Modern ethnologists provided much evidence of trade (Schebesta 1973; Endicott 1974). Skeats and Blagden described the silent trade (1906 vol 1:27) although this information is anecdotal. The products gathered by the Semaq Beri are considered as minor forest products, major products being timber and firewood. They are by no means insignificant to the national economy and are the major source of cash for Semaq Beri, and many other Orang Asli peoples. Forest products are collected at the instigation of the middlemen who have either received orders from downstream middlemen or who by monitoring prices for various commodities in demand decided that a profit might be made at specific time. More will be said later of the relationship between the middlemen and Semaq Beri forest collectors.

Traditionally the Semaq Beri have collected an enormous variety of forest products including rattan, gutta percha, dammar, gums and oils, fibres, incense woods, fruits and other foods, medicinal and poisonous plants, rhinoceros horns, ivory, hornbill casque and numerous birds for plumage, bezoar stones, turtle carapaces, honey and beeswax, dragon's blood and *kemenyan*. Today the largest source of revenue comes from rattan, honey and *gaharu*. The other above-mentioned plants are occasionally harvested for exchange today, although there has been talk of tapping keruing for sale. They have been replaced by petroleum products, various synthetics and cheaper oils and gums. It is clear that the Semaq Beri do not rely on any one commodity to produce for the market.

## SUBSISTENCE PRODUCTION

The Semaq Beri are a group of Orang Asli numbering about 2,000 people (JHEOA Census 1986). They speak a language which belongs to the Southern Aslian branch of a Proto Mon-Khmer language family likely spoken in Indo-China by indigenous hill tribes in ancient time.<sup>1</sup> They live mostly in Pahang along the Pahang river and its tributaries, but are also to be found in Ulu Kelantan and areas in Ulu Trengganu. Their territory extends north of the Pahang River and east of the Tembeling River. In the northern edges of Pahang they use and occupy a large area extending east of Sg. Sat to border areas in Kelantan and Trengganu.

My area of research interest include the four groups of Semaq Beri in the Ulu Tembeling area and those living in Ulu Tekel, Sg. Tiang (10 miles south of Taman Negara headquarters at Kuala Tahan), Sg. Kucing and Ulu Sepia. These latter two groups use and occupy the northern section

of Pahang north and east of Gunung Tahan and east of the Sg. Tembeling above Sg. Pahang. The four groups are fairly homogeneous with regard to subsistence activities and can be classified as hunters and gatherers.

People classified as hunters and gatherers live in many marginal areas of the world and in a variety of environmental conditions. Although there is considerable variation in the ecological adaptation some broad features allow grouping into a single class. In general the outlines of this ecological adaptation are small groups (8-10 families) exploiting naturally occurring resources by foraging over large tracts of land harvesting necessary subsistence and raw materials for tools. They do not practice agriculture or animals husbandry in any systematic way. Several related groups, generally referred to as bands, occupy and use a well defined territory. These small groups are usually exogamous, that is that they follow certain kinship principles which makes them out-marrying. By marrying-out each group circulates its own kin throughout the territory thereby establishing relations to land and resources. This demographic movement is an important feature of hunters and gatherers. It is a successful adaptation particularly in areas of periodic scarcity since people can essentially move in with their relatives and thereby gain access to resources. Hunter-gatherers employ a fairly specialized but simple technology, although in modern times the tools may include shotguns, plaxtid fishing line, motors, and boats. Division of labour is simple and usually based on age and sex. Hunter-gatherer groups are also characterized as egalitarian. They are well known for achieving an equitable distribution of wealth (Woodburn 1980; Leacock 1978; 1982). Relations of kinship as well as other intergrating relations (ritual, reciprocity etc.) provide each and every person access to resources in all other areas of the territory associated with a particular band.

The focus of this article is the Semaq Beri of Sg. Kucing, but much of what I have to say about them can be generalized to the other three groups in the Ulu Tembeling area. There are some reasons to suspect that the two northern most groups, those living at Sg. Kucing and Ulu Sepia, were in the past more dispersed in the Northeastern section of Pahang. In 1965, through efforts of the government to resettle them, they have concentrated in these two areas. These settlement schemes have contributed to the amalgamation of several bands in one community. However, these bands try to maintain a fiction of separation (which among other things allows inter-marriage between these bands located in one settlement) by laying out the village to reflect their divisions. In the past eight years some boundaries have disappeared as some groups have been absorbed into others and as other groups have moved away. It is more proper to talk about these two groups as a whole since all of the

Semaq Beri in this north western area of Pahang use and occupy at different times the whole area. Differences in dialect and belief (social, symbolic classification) may indicate an historical separation between the northern (Sepia, Kuching) and southern group (Tiang, Tekel) in Ulu Tembeling.

Interspersed along the Tembeling river in the Semaq Beri territory are Malay *kampungs*. Most of the potential *sawah* land in this area is taken up by the Malays. Smallholder rubber plantation are also dotted along the Tembeling river. Essentially agricultural people, Malays' economic life, restricted by agricultural rhythms, confined them to riverine settlements (Kato 1989). Traders and middlemen settled along and at the conflux of rivers which facilitated and consolidated their monopoly on trade of forest products. Historically Malays have distinguished habitation areas and agriculturally productive land from the deep jungle (Endicott 1975; Hood 1979) with the deep jungle being a source of danger (Kato 1989). There must have been long historical relations between the Semaq Beri as forest people and Malays as riverine settlers with each party supplying exchangeable goods from their own ecological niche. Whatever the historical and cultural reasons for this separation it should not be over emphasized. Malays do and did harvest forest produce both as commodities and for subsistence. However, agricultural rhythms and inability to subsist in the deep jungle without provisioning limited the time, as well as the distances, they could travel in the deep jungle. This leave large relatively inaccessible areas free to the Orang Asli to exploit.

For the Semaq Beri the rainforest is their home. The forest for them is cool, provides subsistence, and is valued above the disease and hotness associated with riverine settlements. The Semaq Beri consider the whole forest as their garden they do not make symbolic distinctions between *rumah*, *kebun*, *sawah*, *dusun* and *hutan* as their neighbours do. These symbolic distinctions of Malay traditional thought may have at one time served to symbolize the division between people, that is between forest dwellers and riverine of land in the Malay Peninsula. Many modern Malaysians have grown up believing the deep forest to be uninhabited. This is clearly a distorted picture. The deep forest is and has always been used and occupied since man's first arrival to the Malay Peninsula probably 30,000 years ago.

The Semaq Beri of Sg. Kuching depend exclusively on the forest for their livelihood. They do not engage in agriculture or swidden farming. Despite considerable effort and pressure by the JHEOA to settle and transform the Semaq Beri into agriculturalists they remain committed to the forest and dependent on its resources.

The JHEOA have tried to encourage the Semaq Beri to settle down in one place but this has met with little success. In the mid-sixties the JHEOA provided eight water buffalos as part of an incentive to settle at Sg. Kuching. They also built houses and provided rubber seedlings and help with developing some padi cultivation. Unfortunately, the water buffalo promptly ate all the rubber seedlings and destroyed the padi fields. The water buffalos do provide a small but irregular income. The Semaq Beri themselves do not eat water buffalos because they find the meat unpalatable and the habits of water buffalo unclean. Some chickens are raised but they also are rarely eaten. There are considerable number of fruit trees now maturing in the village but these provide a small portion of the fruits collected in the jungle.

The forest for the Semaq Beri is where they feel most comfortable. The forest is cool, safe, and provides ample resources for adequate nutrition. Indeed studies have shown that jungle dweller's intake of proteins and carbohydrates far exceeds minimum requirements (Kuchikura 1987). Orang Asli living at the fringes of jungles or other habitations do not fare as well (Khoo Theam Eng 1979:177) due to depletion of resources close to the settled areas.

The importance of the forest for the Semaq Beri cannot be over-estimated. It provides not only all of their subsistence needs (supplemented with store bought goods such as tea, sugar, canned milk, rice and tobacco) but provides medicine, materials for houses, and house wares, tools of production, blow guns, digging sticks, poisons for darts and fishing. In terms of subsistence it provides a huge variety of animals for proteins and an enormous supply of carbohydrate and vegetable stuffs. The rainforest in Malaysia is incredibly rich in food resources and for the Semaq Beri the forest is a well stocked and classified storehouse. It is not surprising that the Semaq Beri have an intimate knowledge of their territory and the resources contained therein.

The Semaq Beri employ very simple tools to harvest forest products. Digging sticks for harvesting tubers, blowguns, shotguns and traps for harvesting various animals and birds, hook and line as well as nets and poisons for catching fish. In some cases fish are simply caught by hand.

Hunter-gatherers have been called 'affluent societies' (Sahlins 1974) because they seem able to produce all of their subsistence needs with as little as three hours on average per day. These statistics are based on a group of hunters that live in the Kalahari desert in Southern Africa, (Lee 1982). In rich tropical environments such as Malaysia this average is reduced considerably.

Division of labour in Semaq Beri society is loosely based on age and sex but this division is not strictly adhered to and supported by no ideology of inferiority or separation of production tasks. Women do and

have been known to hunt with blow guns but this is exceptional. For the most part women collect tubers or go fishing in small groups. Men form small hunting groups (2-3 men) for daily forays and larger group (10-15) for longer forays into the jungle (fishing/turtle hunting group, as well as commodity collecting groups). These production groups are formed *ad hoc* based on individual choices and preferences, usually that morning. These groups are formed for a specific task, hunting, collecting etc and are not enduring. Produce from hunting and gathering is divided at the end of the day and thus nothing obligates people to work together again. Binding ties of personal dependence, such as that which must exist in an agricultural community where division of the product is delayed thus requiring people to stick together in order to share the harvest, do not exist in the Semaq Beri community (Meillasoux 1981; Woodburn 1980). People change work groups and even village associations regularly. The Semaq Beri are not tied to a particular piece of land, rather they are associated with a large piece of territory, which is used and occupied, and whose resources all Semaq Beri have access. Band flexibility is the term used to describe the movement of people from one group to another within a territory (Turnbull 1968). However, the implications of this flexibility goes far beyond a simple demographic movement or ecological adjustment. It is an important feature in understanding the social organization of Semaq Beri. This flexibility creates and maintains personal social relations with bands in the territory thereby affirming a relation to the land. It allows access to people and thus to resources. Moreover it reduces the possibility of ties of personal dependence and forecloses on any chance of developing a political hierarchy with inevitable inequalities. Thus leadership is extremely weak in these communities. There are leaders but people follow them because they are wise or skilled. Leaders have no power over allocation of labour, women or organization and the Semaq Beri use one of the most democratic means for disposing of leaders. They vote with their feet. In order words they just pack up and leave. A leader with no followers is no leader at all. All of these features of social organizing have conspired to produce an extremely egalitarian society.

The manner in which goods get distributed in any society is an indicator of social inequality and I would like to turn now to a discussion of modes of distribution of product in Semaq Beri society. Hunter-gatherer societies have been recognized as one of the most egalitarian types of societies we know of in the historical and ethnographic record (Leacock 1978 1982; Woodburn 1980). They have achieved a remarkable and equitable distribution of goods within their social groupings.

The social obligation to share is deeply embedded in the ideology and social practice of Semaq Beri culture. When a hunter returns with a

kill the animal is divided and immediately distributed to a network which usually include only five or six families. However, each of these families have ties in one way or another with all members of the community and in this way food items are dispersed throughout the community. Those who may, for one reason or another, have been missed out in initial and secondary distributions usually receive cooked food after making their needs felt. Part of this equalitarian distribution rests on values of sharing and giving.

However, the moral imperative to share is also supported by two powerful notions that determine, to a great extent, equitable distributions. The Semaq Beri recognize that people have needs and desires. Further, they believe that should these needs and desires remain unfulfilled a person may enter into a dangerous and vulnerable state. The two states are called *kioy* and *punun*.<sup>2</sup> These states produce a number of consequences, all quite deadly. Thus every person has a social responsibility to make needs and wants known as well as to help satisfy needs and wants of others.

In Semaq Beri society one cannot refuse to give assistance. The only response to requests is to deny that you have any of the items they desired. To refuse would amount to murder. These notions (*kioy*, *punun*) are often employed as leveling mechanisms. When someone in the community is seen to possess more than he needs for immediate consumption or has accumulated expensive objects such as radio, tape player, watches etc. people in the community will simply go and ask for the object and the owner must part with it. In this way people are regularly detached from material possessions. This form of distribution guarantees, to each and every Semaq Beri, access to food, and other objects which may include productive tools such as blowguns, knives, decorative and luxury items( radios, watches are some of the objects which have been given away). The system achieves an extremely high level of equal distribution. It also functions to integrate individual families through constant food exchanges.

All of this means, of course, that there is no possibility of what could be called primitive accumulation of capital. Let me give an example. During fieldwork in 1982 one of the Semaq Beri, a shaman and nominal leader, of the community planted about a quarter hectare of corn. When the corn ripened other members of the community began to harvest it as it came available. The person who had planted the corn was unable to prevent access to the corn and soon all of the corn was harvested and consumed. *Not one ear of corn was left for replanting*. No political mechanism existed to deny access to the corn and thus no possibility of reproducing the crop next season. Given this system of values it is not surprising that efforts to transform the Semaq Beri into agricultural



people were doomed to failure. Also the attention settled agriculture requires, planting, weeding, guarding, harvesting, storing precludes or, at least, seriously limits harvesting of forest resources. Forest products differ in their harvesting requirements from agricultural requirements.

Before discussing forest products and in particular rattan production another implication for the sharing patterns of the Semaq Beri should be drawn. If people are unable to, because of the system of sharing, accumulate a surplus they are unlikely to produce one. Thus for the Semaq Beri as well as many non-capitalist societies under-production is the norm. This is as true for rural Malay society as it is for hunters and gatherers. Without discussing the reasons for this state of affairs it should be noted that for the Semaq Beri under-production guarantees the continued reproduction of their environment and thus through this, as well as other factors, acts as a conservation technique preserving the forest as a renewable resources.

### RATTAN COLLECTION

Rattans are spiny climbing plants which belong to the Lepidocaryoid group of the Palm Family. Peninsular Malaysia is the hub of Southeast Asian rattan distribution. There are 12 genera of rattan comprising about 600 species (Dransfield 1979). In Malaysia, of the 220 wild species of palms 123 species are rattans (Whitemore 1979:98). These palms are ethnobotanically important and have been utilized, perhaps since man first entered Southeast Asia (Dransfield 1979), as a source of cane for basketry, binding, cordage and a wealth of other purposes. Fruits of a variety of rattans are edible but are often sour tasting. One species of rattan *Daemonorops* (jerenang) has resin crystals in the fruit wall which can be extracted and was sold anciently as Dragon's Blood (see Burkill 1935) but used locally for blowpipe mouthpieces and traditional medicine. *Calamus catinueus* is used to thatch roofs.

The principal use of rattan when produced for exchange is as a source of cane either split for binding and basketry or used whole for furniture. For centuries Chinese entrepreneurs particularly in Singapore have controlled and developed this industry. Malaysia, in hopes of developing a rattan industry imposed a high export tariff on raw rattan and recently a total ban on all raw rattan/exports in the hope of developing a domestic industry.

According to Dransfield (1979), Peninsular Malaysia contributes about 4% of the world trade which in 1977 amounted to about RM116 million in raw rattan exports. In terms of manufactured rattan articles, Dransfield estimates about RM2,744 million. It is by no means an

insignificant trade and although much less income accrues to the primary collector (a standard rate would be half of the market value in the nearest town), a substantial amount of money can be derived from this activity. The Industrial Master Plan (IMP) has set a target of RM400 million in exports, for rattan furniture alone, by 1995 (*New Straits Times* Dec 26, 1989:8).

The rattan trade is a multi-million dollar business but, as Dransfield (1979) notes, it is often extremely loosely and chaotically organized. As in most trade in forest products it is an ancient trade and long lines of middlemen protect their interests by keeping sources and contacts secret.

Botanists have long struggled to sort out the relationship between trade names and scientific taxonomy with little success (Ridley 1903; Foxworthy 1922:157 Dransfield 1979; and Whitmore 1979:101). Species collected have local names but once collected the rattan's name may change from hand to hand or with each sorting. Further confusion may exist because the scientific nomenclature; as Dransfield (1979:1) notes, is probably not yet on a sound footing.

It would be hard to imagine a world without rattan in Semaq Beri society. Species of rattan provide cordage for house construction, body decoration, and manufacture of tools including fish and animal traps, blow guns, and even fly swatters. Rattan is used whole or split for a variety of containers, basket ware, backpacks etc. Several species of rattan produce a resin collected from their fruits known as jernang or Dragon's blood. It was traded anciently but is still used as a dye, as a mouthpiece on blowguns (sumpitan), as well as medicine for stomach aches. Rattan is also used for food-its fruit, which can be eaten range from sour to sweet, and young shoots are eaten as a vegetable. Rattan features in their mythology and certain taboos surround its collection and use. Today, and well in the past, rattan is an important commodity collected and exchanged for money or in kind.

The Semaq Beri collect three grades of rattan for sale. The first is a large diameter cane in the form of nine foot lengths. A variety of species are collected in this form the most valuable being rattan *manau*. Until recently this was the only rattan species collected as cane. However, as *manau* has become over harvested, particularly along available river edges and as the rattan industry has expanded, other poorer quality species have found their way to the market. Along with rattan *manau* the Semaq Beri of Ulu Tembeling also collect rattan *mantang* (Dransfield calls this *rotan dok-* (*Calamus ornatus*). This species of rattan has not been collected by the Semaq Beri before in any quantity. It is therefore quite plentiful. These two types of rattan are further graded by diameter. *Manau* has two grades: cane under 1 3/8 inches in diameter and over 1 3/8 inches. The other cane collected (*Columus ornatus*) has larger

specification since it is probably decorticated and stained and used as a rattan *manau* substitute (Dransfield 1979:29).

The second grade of rattan is a small diameter cane known as *tali gusok*. Several species of rattan are collected for this grade including species of *calamus*, *Korthansia* and *Daemonorops*. These are bundled in packs of 20 × 10.

The third grade of rattan is split cane (*tali belah empat/enam*). A large variety of species are included together under this trade classification. The split rattan is dried before being bundled into folded packs of 100 and bundled together into 1 pack of 20 bundles. This last grade of rattan is labour intensive. The rattan is split, usually, into four (some pieces can be split into six) sections and the inner core removed with a parang or small sharp knife, by splitting it from the outer skin. In this way a thin, flat length of cordage vary slightly between 5 and 8 mm (3/8-1/4 inch) wide and nine feet long. After splitting the lengths of rattan are hung to dry for a day or two and then bundled in 20 bundles of 100 folded lengths.

Prices for cane, whole and split rattan vary considerably. However, for average prices at Sg. Kuching see Table 1.

TABLE 1. Average prices for rattan products

Whole Cane 'manau'		Whole small diameter (20 bundles of 10)		Split Cane (20 bundles of 100)
Small	Large	Small	Large	
RM1.20	RM3.60	30 sen	90 sen	RM20.00
				RM30-40.00

Before a discussion of the place of rattan production in the life of Semaq Beri Kg. Kuching, indeed all commodity production, I would like to outline some of the characteristics of the production of rattan and the mechanism of exchange.

Rattan is collected seasonally and on an ad hoc basis. The Semaq Beri are generally available for rattan collection during months between August and December as well as March to May. From May to August their activities are devoted to honey collection and fruit collection. The latter part of this season may be partly devoted to rattan or other commodity production depending on their need for cash and/or insistent demands of creditors. These are two factors which contribute to the irregular nature of commodity production.

During the flood season and the following periods of ceremonial life (December to March) rattan is rarely collected (nor are any other

commodities other than those that come to hand during the subsistence search). Rattan forms part of an array of commodities the Semaq Beri collect. As mentioned above they do not depend on any one commodity. This gives them a great latitude and choice in making production decisions.

The division of labour takes two forms in the production of rattan. Whole canes are almost exclusively collected by men in task groups varying from 2 to 20. Generally 4 to 65 men will work together. These groups may travel upriver and camp for 1-2 weeks after cutting or the canes will develop blemishes and rot. The collection of split cane is a much more labour intensive process and generally several families will travel up river or into the rainforest for a period of up to several months. Since split rattan is dried and bundled it is not necessary to transport it out as quickly as whole canes. Here the whole family participate in cutting, splitting, routing and drying the rattan. These trips are much like working holidays for the Semaq Beri and usually take place during April-May and August-September.

#### MIDDLEMEN AND THE SEMAQ BERI

The Semaq Beri, as do most Orang Asli in Malaysia, rely on a string of middlemen to bring their products to market. The relationship with various and changing middlemen that buy forest products from the Semaq Beri is a very complex one. However, some broad features of this system can be outlined.

Middlemen is an appropriate name for traders that span the distance separating forest collectors and capitalist societies. Their role is to exchange products from one mode of production to another and thus they are a connecting link that allows goods to flow from one system to another. They accumulate capital by buying cheaply and selling dearly. They do not attempt to organize production themselves and rely on each group to produce products on the basis of their own mode of production.<sup>10</sup> Exchange controlled by middlemen between two modes of production (or rather people producing in these systems) is a double movement. In the situation in Ulu Tembeling a middleman not only buys forest products as cheaply as he can but also sells dearly, to the Semaq Beri, products from the 'outside'. His relations to the outside are identical. He sells forest products dearly and buys as cheaply as he can products produced in the outside system. In this way he makes a profit each time he exchanges goods between the systems.

Not much has been said in the literature on Malaysian aboriginal people regarding the evils of these traders. I do not wish to deny the

excesses that these traders are capable of but I wish to modify somewhat the rather superficial condemnation of these traders. The Semaq Beri at present deal with two traders, one at Kuala Sat, and the other in Ulu Sg. Sat. They have not always done so. The competition between middlemen in this area ensures that prices for goods from the outside remain, if not a bit artificially high, at least fairly constant. Competition in buying forest products is also high, and although the prices are somewhat low, they keep step with market prices in Jerantut. While not denying that the middlemen in Ulu Tembeling are capable of making enormous profits there are market forces that modify their ability to exploit producers.

There are as many middlemen in the Ulu Tembeling area as there are people able to attract and hold the productive services of forest commodity collectors. Thus competition between middlemen modifies the potential for excessive exploitation. The critical problem for middlemen is to try and develop long term relationships with groups of producers. They do this by advancing credit. Thus, as the debt grows so does the obligation to produce things for sale. In the Semaq Beri case the two middlemen who buy jungle produce also supply the Semaq Beri with store goods such as tea, tobacco, sugar, tinned milk, rice, pots, knives etc. and in order to discharge the debts these middlemen encourage the Semaq Beri to produce forest products for sale. This relationship endures as long as a debt remains. When a Semaq Beri pays his debt he signals to the middlemen that the relationship is at an end, no reciprocal obligation exists and he is changing to a new middleman.

A middleman in order to deal with the Semaq Beri must fulfil two conditions. First, he must supply credit in the form of goods on a regular basis and secondly, he must provide the means to discharge the debt. As Dransfield has noted (1979:30) the rattan industry is extraordinarily chaotic in its organization and in Ulu Tembeling this is reflected in an irregular demand for rattan.

The Semaq Beri are maintained as a pool of labour by the middlemen through credit relations during times when he holds no contracts for rattan. It is perhaps inaccurate to suggest that credit relations maintain the Semaq Beri, rather what should be emphasized is that *relations* between the middlemen and Semaq Beri are maintained by credit relations.

There are two ways of viewing this relationship of Semaq Beri to the national economy as mediated by middlemen. The first might view them as an impoverished labour force dependant on middlemen (and exploited) for their livelihood. As a result of producing commodities this society is in a period of transition from a traditional hunter-gatherer existence to one similar in broad outline to rural Malay commodity producers, that is a society caught between two modes of production and

increasingly dependant on commodity exchange. The problem from this perspective is how to enhance the commodity producing sector in order to raise the standard of living. This perspective views Orang Asli as primitive and backward with regard to commodity production and in need of benevolent assistance to meet the challenges of the modern world. The second perspective which I would like to begin to develop is partly a critical response to this first perspective and partly a perspective worked up from empirical research.

In order to develop this perspective we need to recall some of the nature of Semaq Beri society. I would now like to turn to a short discussion of the relations between commodity production and subsistence production and their contribution to the maintenance and reproduction of Semaq Beri society. In this way we can more clearly assess and evaluate the place of rattan as a product of exchange in this society.

Subsistence production's importance cannot be underestimated nor can the fact that the Semaq Beri rely on the rainforest for all of their needs (including of course products sold in the market for cash). The fact that they rely on the rainforest for their subsistence (including materials for housing, medicine, tools of production and storage containers etc.) allows them at *the same time* immediate access to forest products for sale. This is an important fact for a number of reasons. It means first that collection of commodities for sale can be accomplished *on the basis of* traditional subsistence activities. No reorientation to a new environment is necessary, no retooling to engage in production for exchange and they can at the same time as they are collecting products for exchange produce their own subsistence. It is not unusual to find the Semaq Beri stopping work to collect tubers or go off after monkeys in the middle of rattan collection. Subsistence production takes precedence over commodity production.<sup>11</sup> The immediate result of this fortuitous fit between the production of commodities and subsistence production is that the Semaq Beri are not required to alter their production techniques or social division of labour to produce for exchange. Secondly, they are not required to produce what may be called *exchange value* in order to subsist. Thus the incentive that increasingly drives full time commodity producers and all wage labourers to produce *exchange value*, so that they might purchase in the market the necessary means of subsistence, is absent from the Semaq Beri mode of production. This fortuitous fit also provides the Semaq Beri with a competitive edge on others, who by virtue of other obligations (agricultural rhythms, rubber tapping, gardens) and restrictions (lack of knowledge of the forest and food taboos) are generally excluded from full time commodity production. This allows the Semaq Beri not only to produce cheaper but also allows them to control their labour, that is, to refuse to collect commodities when prices are low

or becoming overharvested. This is in contrast to full time commodity producers who when faced with falling prices of their commodity or inflation in the market of goods must produce more thereby creating a cycle, which can lead very quickly to overharvesting of resources.

There are some important theoretical points to be made here to the “destructive impact of commodity production on ‘natural economies’”,<sup>12</sup> but I cannot develop them here at length. It is sufficient to point out the outlines of an argument. Briefly, I believe social formations become dominated by the market only when they produce for exchange *in order to subsist*. There is a significant difference between those that *work to live* rather than *live to work* with regard to some very important things including control over ones own labour and labour time and the right to control the allocation of ones own labour to other productive activities that may not be financially rewarding, but may be personally or socially important to any individual.

There is however a dark side to the attachment to the market. The Semaq Beri bear the responsibility for their own reproduction costs. Whereas in the case of full time commodity producers and wage labourers in capitalism the return for labour must at least meet the minimum subsistence requirements and this must be reflected in the price of the commodities that they produce. The Semaq Beri in contrast produce their own means of subsistence and it is on this basis that they produce forest commodities. They are able to produce cheaper than other commodity producers but they do not generally get the benefit of this competitive edge. However, because they do not rely on commodity production to survive nor do they rely on any one commodity this gives them the flexibility to control their own involvement in the trade.

One sure way of impoverishing the Semaq Beri would be to destroy or seriously curtail subsistence production. Any proposed development project must be measured against the loss of value produced in the subsistence sector. We tend to forget this in our calculations and as a consequence have developed few methodological tools to measure this loss. Subsistence production I believe is always undervalued and it seldom enters into our ‘economic calculations’. Indeed, measurement itself is a problem and our economic concepts are ill-equipped to deal with anything but price. But the value this kind of production has exceed far beyond *it's economic value* for the Semaq Beri (the area is their home).

It would indeed be tragic if the means to produce their subsistence was destroyed and the greatest threat to their well being is the destruction of the forest environment. This has not happen in Ulu Tembeling, but it has happened in other areas with the consequences readily apparent to the most casual observer. It is a pressing problem for the Orang Asli in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to make a start on developing a perspective on Semaq Beri, particularly with regard to their relations with their environment and their accommodations to the encapsulating society. I have also tried to examine, in a preliminary fashion, their economic relations to the national economy in the hope that through an understanding of their society and way of life a place might be found for them in this nation to the mutual benefit of all. Our knowledge of these systems is very fragmentary. Research has yet to make much headway. Our research is, in many cases, out of date and not complete enough to make generalizations about any one group let alone the Orang Asli as an indigenous minority.

## NOTES

1. This group along with Temoq (who have disappeared from JHEOA statistics), Ma' Betistik of Carey Island and Semelai belong to the Southern Aslian Branch of the Mon Khmer family. Although Semaq Beri, Ma Betistik and Semelai belong to the same language group, they are separated by a wholly inadequate classification of Negrito, Senoi and Proto Melayu which is based, for the most part, on dubious racial classification. Since language is a repository of much of the cultural and social knowledge of people it would make a great deal of sense to reclassify these Orang Asli groups by linguistic affiliation. Some work has been done on Jakun who speak a Malay dialect showing or at least arguing convincingly that they were originally Aslian speakers (collins - 1). Further work may eliminate the need for the Proto Melayu classification altogether.
2. Punun and *Kioy* are states which you enter when some desire for an object remains unsatisfied. It is a dangerous state, one which makes you vulnerable. In the case of *punun*, you are susceptible to snake bites, tiger attacks, cutting yourself with an axe or parang, or falling out of trees; in the case of *kioy*, one is vulnerable to a variety of diseases, swollen legs, sick stomachs and fever. As can be imagined most people are interested in reducing this state. There is also a moral imperative to help others to satisfy their desires.

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