

Things are Not What They Seem: Semai Economy in the 1980s

ALBERTO G. GOMES

ABSTRACT

This article attempts a re-evaluation of the general view that Orang Asli society consists of nomadic peasants, hunters, and gatherers who are very minimally involved with the wider economic market. Because of this, it has been argued that the society continues to be backward. This writer rejects this view and cites the example of the Semai of Tapah in the state of Perak, Malaysia who are no longer dependent on subsistence activities. It is pointed out that in fact they are very greatly dependent on the market outside. This is evidenced by the finding that at least 88% of the food is bought from outside the community.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini cuba memberikan penilaian semula terhadap tanggapan umum berhubung dengan status ekonomi masyarakat Orang Asli yang biasanya digambarkan sebagai masyarakat petani pindah, pemburu dan pengumpul hasil hutan yang sedikit sekali terlibat dengan ekonomi pasaran. Justeru keadaan yang demikian masyarakat tersebut dianggap mundur. Kajian ini menolak tanggapan tersebut. Penulis telah membuktikan bahawa masyarakat Semai di Tapah, Perak, Malaysia yang dikajinya tidak lagi merupakan kumpulan masyarakat yang bergantung kepada kegiatan ekonomi sara diri. Sebaliknya dengan penemuan yang menunjukkan lebih daripada 88% bahan-bahan keperluan makanan mereka dibeli dari pasar.

INTRODUCTION

The Semai are the most widely known Orang Asli people. They are presented as a text-book case of a "primitive" tribal people who abhor aggression and live a peaceful and non-violent existence by adopting a unique cultural system (see Dentan 1968) and Robarchek 1977). To a group of American psychologists, the Semai together with the Temiar are more popularly known as the "dream people" on the basis of their purported ability to control their dreams and to perform a particular sort of dream therapy that has been linked to their observed superb mental

health (see Domhoff 1985). The Semai are also well known amongst some physical anthropologists as a result of a seminal research by Alan Fix (1974) on "genetic microdifferentiation." The economic system of the Semai has received little attention. However, until recently, data on how Semai really make a living was conspicuously lacking. The earlier literature in fact gives a distorted picture of the Semai economy which is perhaps a consequence of the lack of attention given to Semai economic behaviour.

The Semai are invariably described as swidden horticulturists. Their tribal existence is often linked to their so claimed "backwardness." Almost any Malaysian and for that matter foreigner would imagine the Semai (and perhaps most other orang Asli) as forest dwellers making a frugal living from primitive farming and foraging and who know next to nothing about money or markets. Subscribing to such an image is, however, understandable given the fact that it pervades in the literature as well as in the channels (including school textbooks) of mass communication.

Written accounts on the Orang Asli carry this portrayal implicitly as well as explicitly. Dentan (1968), who has carried out extensive field research with the Semai in 1962-3, seems to describe the Semai as subsistence oriented farmers with limited involvement in the market economy. It is possible that Dentan's depiction accurately reflected the economy of Semai in the 1960s. But it seems surprising if not absurd that such a state of affairs should persist in Semai communities now in spite of the fact that capitalism (or "modernisation" as some would put it) has penetrated at such an accelerating pace into almost every quarter of rural Malaysia. Unless, of course, the Semai have been thoroughly successful in resisting the advance of capital. It is also astonishing and hard to accept that the Semai have remained relatively "untouched" and independent from a market economy despite the centuries of their involvement in forest product trading with outsiders as documented in the historical accounts (see Dunn 1975 and Gomes 1986 for a detailed discussion). Although the image of the Semai would seem tenuous in light of these historical developments and current realities, it prevails and is perpetuated and has yet remained publicly unchallenged. For instance, in his introductory book on the Orang Asli, Carey (1976: 177, 196) generalised the Senoi (which includes the Semai) as "shifting cultivators" and described them to be "largely independent from an economic point of view." In another general work on the Orang Asli, Rambo (1979: 9) writes:

The Senoi are shifting cultivators living in small villages scattered widely through the forest. Although agriculture provides the bulk of their caloric needs they also engage in considerable hunting and collecting of forest products both for self-consumption and for trade with the outside world. Although trade has been carried on for thousands of years and is important to their survival, particularly as the means for obtaining iron tools and salt, the Senoi are economically far more autonomous than the seemingly more primitive Semang.

In this paper I shall document that this image is misleading for a large section of the Semai population on the basis of research done by Gomes (1986) and Nicholas (1985).

Before embarking on my doctoral research on the Semai, I held this image of the people although I was prepared to encounter "changes" after reviewing the writings of Robarchek (1977) and Fix (1974). Although the view perpetuated in the works of these writers, they do indicate that there had been "changes" in some Semai villages. Fix (1977: 10), for instance, writes:

Currently, several villages no longer have enough land remaining to practise swidden cultivation and depend almost entirely on cash received from rubber holdings for subsistence.

And Clayton Robarchek (1977: 10) asserts:

A major consequence of these developments (rubber planting and JOA sponsored economic development projects), especially in the west where transportation is relatively good, has been a decreasing reliance on subsistence-gardening in favor of wage labor, the cultivation of rubber, the gathering and sale of various forest products, most notably rattan and bamboo, and the expansion of aborigiculture...

THE STUDY

UNMAKING THE MYTH

In a pilot survey to select villages for indepth study, I searched the Tapah region for Semai settlements that combined swiddening with the trading of forest products. The guiding objective of the study was to examine the articulation of Semai economies with the larger market economy. I aimed to investigate and understand the nature of this articulation. I found several villages that appeared highly suitable for the study. I chose to stay in one of these. What drew my attention to this village was the piles of rattan by the roadside that the villagers had collected for sale and the rubber trees around the settlement. These were, at least to me, visible evidences of market integration. The question then was what is the extent of this integration? How dependent are the Semai on the market for their livelihood? I had assumed, of course, that the villagers cultivated swiddens. Upon further inspection, I found my assumption to be correct; there were several swidden fields in the vicinity. Five had hill rice grown to near maturity, a few were "old swiddens" (*selai manah*) and several apparently abandoned. The rice swiddens were small (0.05 ha - 0.21 ha) by normal standards for swiddening groups. As the Semai are well known for their swiddening, I had expected to find larger and far more swiddens. It was all more surprising that a hamlet of 10 households could manage to cultivate only four small swidden plots (one was planted by a Semai from another

village). It was apparent that most of the villagers were no longer interested in swiddening. To ascertain the frequency of swidden planting over a longer period, I asked the villagers about their plantings of rice swiddens in the previous ten years (1972 - 1982). Of the ten households, two had planted seven swiddens each, 1 six swiddens, 2 three swiddens each, 3 one each and 2 none ever. Furthermore, they all claimed that the size of fields has reduced over the years. During the period of field research (October 1982 - January 1984), no rice swiddens were planted in the village. Two households, however, cultivated tapioca swiddens (*menchar*) with a fairly wide range of other cultigens. In terms of production and time allocation, swidden activities (mainly harvesting) constituted less than 5 percent of the total production time of 12 individuals (6 couples) whose production activities were monitored for a period of one year. A survey of all the Semai villages (27 of them) in the Tapah area (Upper Batang Padang valley) seems to indicate that this is the current state of affairs among Semai living there. This is by no means a development found only among Tapah Semai. Recent studies on Semai elsewhere have also come up with similar findings. Nicholas (1985) found that swiddening has declined in importance (although not as marked as among the Tapah Semai) amongst Betau and Raub Semai in Pahang and Williams-Hunt (personal communication) revealed that Semai in the Slim district (*Mai Slim*) no longer swiddened, a practice they had given up for at least a decade if not two ago. It is thus clear that many if not most of the present day Semai do not engage in much swiddening. While some have totally given up this activity for other economic activities, others do it on a lower scale and irregularly and only a few still continue with swiddening as traditionally done. To most, swiddening has become an "activity of our forefathers." Although there is much talk among Semai of not forsaking it, there are few attempts to underscore the trend of its decline. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to reason out the decline of swidden agriculture in the Semai economy. I shall instead turn my attention to the question of how do Semai (at least those in the Tapah region) nowadays make a living.

THE NEW IMAGE

After several months in the field, I discovered that the Semai villagers concentrated their work effort (measured in time allocation) on collecting fruit, rattan, bamboo and insects for sale. They also spent some but not much effort in hunting and fishing. They, however, against my expectations allotted no time to rubber tapping even though rubber trees were within easy access and they were occasionally short of cash. As I at that moment had not completely shrugged off my human ecology bias, I interpreted what I observed as a case of negative progression in cultural evolution on the part of the Semai. With their current emphasis on forest collecting, it seemed to me that the Semai had de-evolved from the

purportedly more advanced form of adaptation, swidden horticulture to a lesser one in hunting and gathering. Utilising a neo-Marxist analytical framework where a distinction is drawn between production-for-use and production-for-exchange, my interpretation changed. It seemed very clear to me that what was taking place was a continual shift from subsistence (vis-a-vis swidden cultivation) to commodity production. As a Semai might put it, unlike in the past people are nowadays more interested in "looking-for-money" work than "looking-for-food" work. The Semai (at least those living in the Tapah, Betau and Slim areas) are in fact simple commodity producers. They are by no means subsistence oriented, non market people. They produce things for a market from which they obtain most of their subsistence. In technical terms, they are now deeply enmeshed in commodity production as well as commodity consumption. They depend on a market for their products as well as the goods and services that they require. It seems their very survival is largely determined by market relations.

From a detailed examination of time allocation in production in a Semai village it was observed that the sample (12 individuals) spent treble the time on commodity production such as the collecting of fruit (mainly durian and petai), forest products (chiefly rattan, bamboo and insects) for sale mostly to traders, and rubber tapping, than on subsistence production such as swiddening, fishing and hunting. It was very apparent that Semai preferred to engage in any sort of cash generating activity. As observed they even sold things produced for their own use when direct requests were made for these. In some villages especially those at higher altitudes where durian and petai do not thrive, people grew corn, vegetables and flowers by swiddening primarily for sale. This presents us with an interesting case whereby swiddening, which has always been associated with a subsistence oriented economy, has become commoditised. Similarly, fishing, frog catching and hunting which were performed solely for personal (and household) consumption in the past have now become commoditised. Several villagers, particularly those living close to lakes and large rivers, engage in regular fishing mainly for cash income. In almost all villages in the Tapah region it is not uncommon for hunters to sell their game rather than share it with their fellow villagers. While some Semai have expressed their disgust in regard to this practice, many have accepted it as in keeping with the times. This is perhaps indicative of how Semai thinking has changed to suit ever increasing desire to "seek for money."

"Looking-for-money" has become a primary and common concern of Semai. Money, which was not long ago a valueless item to Semai, is now the driving force as it is in most Semai enterprises and ventures. The Semai quest for money stems primarily from their dependence on the market for almost all of their food supply. Sample households in the study village obtained from the market 97 percent, 88 percent 93 percent of their

consumption of rice, meat and fish respectively. Semai diverse money making (or generating) operations and their keen eye for lucrative opportunities to earn cash has resulted in many of them getting relatively high incomes. Several cash generating practices previously unknown to Semai have gradually gained roots in the contemporary Semai economy. The question that comes to mind now is how much money do Semai earn. A record of income earned by six Semai households for one year revealed an average household cash income of \$5372 per annum with a range of \$2686 to \$10427. It may however be justifiably argued that income statistics for only six households may not be representative for the whole Semai population. Undeniably, it is possible that many Semai are earning much lower cash incomes; it is likely that many are living below the poverty level. But the fact remains that in a randomly selected sample (though small) of Semai households a figure as high as \$10427 per annum was computed as the annual household cash income. There are indications that some Semai villagers earn even higher cash incomes in the Tapah region. If we were to accept \$5372 as the average figure for Semai household income, it is noteworthy that this figure is not substantially lower than the average Malaysian rural households' yearly income of \$7080 per annum and is slightly more than half of the average Malaysian annual household income of \$9156 for 1982. The household that received \$10427 had earned 14 percent more than the average Malaysian household annual income. It must be stressed, however, that I am not arguing that the Semai are now rich. Many are in fact relatively poor and maintain an appreciably much lower standard of living than the average for rural Malaysia. It is however evident that those who have adopted and are actively engaged in the diversified form of simple commodity production (that was observed in many Semai villages) are far more affluent than their subsistence oriented counterparts. This relative affluence was by no means attained without costs. The most evident of these costs is their increased dependence on the market and related to this, their loss of relative autonomy. In the context of social relations, the growing commoditisation of the economy has engendered several changes such as the development of private property with the attendant decline in communal ownership, the ascendancy of appropriative practices, the commoditisation and decline in sharing and labour cooperation, all of which are creating incipient social differentiation among the Semai. With increased monetisation, long-term social relationships among Semai usually expressed in a kinship idiom and governed by practices of reciprocity are becoming those of the cash nexus. In many Semai settlements, enterprising villagers have set up small shops selling basic groceries and drinks to mostly fellow Semai. Another common form of trading is the buying and selling of fruit by Semai which they call *pajak*. This is particularly common during the durian season when some enterprising villagers would buy durians from other Semai to sell for profit

to outsiders especially to commuters along the main roads. Semai intentions to "make money" from their fellowmen can also be adduced from the increasing popularity of gambling among Semai in the village particularly during the fruit season. It is now also not uncommon for wages to be paid to co-villagers, sometimes related, for assistance in some sort of work which in the past was regarded as reciprocal and/or obligatory among close kin and co-villagers. A case in point is when a man paid \$140 to his elder brother for gathering roofing material for his new house. In another case, a man requested \$6 from his affine for transporting an accumulator for recharging which cost \$2. Interestingly enough, the person justified his \$4 'profit' on the basis of his capital (his motorcycle) input and not the petrol nor effort he used up for the transport.

It appears that the notion of 'capital' is gradually being incorporated into Semai internal economic relationships. In one case which illustrates this, a Semai laid claim to a share of the income earned through the sale of fish caught by another Semai and his affines (his so-called 'partners') on the basis of his capital (*modal*) invested in the purchase of the fish net. Apparently, the share of the money he received is for his 'investment' since he had not directly participated in the fishing operations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the image of the Semai as swidden horticulturists with limited involvement in the market economy is somewhat misleading in light of the nature of the current economy. Drawing from the findings of recent studies on the Semai economy, it is clear that many Semai today engage in simple commodity production which has evolved as a result of the on-going incorporation of the Semai economy into the wider capitalist oriented economy. Evidently a factor in the survival of the current Semai economy is the realistic recognition of its nature by the government. The Malaysian government subscribes to the prevailing image of the Semai (and other Orang Asli) as subsistence, backward and non-market oriented people. As such they are viewed as people in need of "modernization" programmes designed to draw them into the "mainstream of society." Policies based on such a misleading conception will undoubtedly undermine the development of simple commodity production and the very independence of action in a market economy they are seeking to support. It is thus crucial that the government accepts or recognises the current form of the Semai economy in its formulation and implementation of policies in respect to the Semai (and other Orang Asli where relevant).

REFERENCES

- Carey, I. 1976. *Orang Asli: The Aboriginal Tribes of Peninsular Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Dentan, R.K. 1968. *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Domhoff, W. 1985. *The Mystique of Dreams: A Search for Utopia Through Senoi Dream Theory* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dunn, F.L. 1975. *Rain-Forest Collectors and Traders: A Study of Resource Utilization in Modern and Ancient Malaya*. Monographs of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, No. 5, Kuala Lumpur.
- Fix, A.G. 1971. Semai Senoi population structures and genetic micro-differentiation. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- _____ . 1977. The demography of the Semai Senoi. *Anthropological Papers No. 62*. Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan.
- Gomes, A.G. 1986. Looking-for-money: Simple commodity production in the economy of the Tapah Semai of Malaysia . Ph.D. dissertation, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Nicholas, C. 1985. From subsistence to simple commodity production: Economic relations in two Semai settlements. M.Sc. thesis, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Serdang.
- Rambo, T. 1970. Semang foragers, Senoi swiddeners, and Proto-Malay horticulturalists: Three Malayan aborigine strategies of sustained-yield forest land use, their relevance to contemporary problems of development. M.Sc, thesis.
- Robarchek, C, 1977. Semai nonviolence: A systems approach to understanding. Ph.D. dissertation, Riverside, University of California.

Jabatan Antropologi & Sosiologi
Universiti Malaya
Lembah Pantai
59100 Kuala Lumpur