

ORANG ASLI WOMEN OF MALAYSIA

Perceptions, Situations & Aspirations



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It is the stealthy, relentless erosion of Orang Asli life in general, and the life of Orang Asli women in particular, that provides a true account of the problems of Orang Asli life today.

This book provides the context in which the “ordinary” problems of Orang Asli women can be seen to be, in reality, severe. These problems are not only meaningful to them. When we think carefully about this issue, we may safely conclude that the problems of Orang Asli women, while extreme, highlight problems that can beset other women in Malaysia, and indeed elsewhere. These problems typically arise from a failure to achieve needed reforms in old institutions.

The views of a variety of writers on Orang Asli women are presented in this book. From these writings, and also from what Orang Asli women themselves have said, we can explore key features of Orang Asli women’s lives in the past, the present, and what this means for the future.



CENTER FOR
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Adela Baer
Karen Endicott • Rosemary Gianni
Signe Howell • Barbara S. Nowak
Cornelia van der Sluys

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Three generations of Chewong women at Kalaw in the Krau Game Reserve.
The oldest, Modn, was Signe Howell's fieldwork-mother
in the late 1970s. [Colin Nicholas 2003]

PREFACE

Orang Asli women once had important responsibilities and functions that are now labeled “male-only.” This discrimination spread throughout Orang Asli society during the last few centuries as Orang Asli came into contact with male-dominated cultures and internalized these alien norms for gender roles. Since Malaysian independence from Britain in 1957, government officials, business people, and television itself have carried the twin messages of female subordination to men and of Orang Asli cultural inferiority in general. These two messages are believed by many non-Orang Asli. Such beliefs help explain why today, daily and hourly, Orang Asli women face serious problems. In addition, Orang Asli are now forced to live in deteriorated and constricted environments and are extremely poor. And Orang Asli women are even poorer and in poorer health than Orang Asli men. Thus, while it might seem that Orang Asli women have the same problems as other Malaysian women—as wives, mothers, and workers—in fact their problems are far worse.

Not only do Orang Asli women face a lack of respect from other ethnic groups, they have also lost much of their social-cultural system and have been defrauded of their natural resource base. These basic difficulties in their lives are not easy to see. All an outsider may notice is that the conditions of life for Orang Asli women today are different—many would say better—than before motorbikes, “resettlement schemes,” and political parties appeared in the country.

It is the stealthy, relentless erosion of Orang Asli life in general, and the life of Orang Asli women in particular, that provides a true account of the problems of Orang Asli life today. This book provides the context in which the “ordinary” problems of Orang Asli women can be seen to be, in reality, severe. These problems

are not only meaningful to them. When we think carefully about this issue, we may safely conclude that the problems of Orang Asli women, while extreme, highlight problems that can beset other women in Malaysia, and indeed elsewhere. These problems typically arise from a failure to achieve needed reforms in old institutions.

Although women hold up half the sky, too little public attention has been given to their enormous importance in all aspects of society. Assumptions that women have the same problems as men, or that women's contributions to society are minor ones, are not healthy for the character of any society. The sunshine of human life comes from recognizing the worth of young and old, we and they, men and women.

The views of a variety of writers on Orang Asli women are presented in this book. From these writings, and also from what Orang Asli women themselves have said, we can explore key features of Orang Asli women's lives in the past, the present, and what this means for the future.

A.B.

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GLOSSARY • ABBREVIATIONS

Aslian	A group of Orang Asli languages found only on the Malaysian peninsula; they are part of the larger Mon-Khmer subset of Austroasiatic languages. Austroasiatic languages extend throughout mainland Southeast Asia into India.
Austronesian	A large group of languages centered in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, of which the Malayo-Polynesian subset is most numerous. The Temuan and Jakun groups of Orang Asli, among others, speak Austronesian languages closely related to Malay.
Batek	A small and splintered group of Orang Asli living in Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan states who were traditionally hunter-gatherers; their language is categorized as northern Aslian.
Besisi, Btsisi', Mah Meri	A small group of Orang Asli in Selangor state traditionally coastal fisherpeople who also practiced land foraging and swidden farming; their language is categorized as southern Aslian.
Biduanda	An old name for Orang Asli in the southern part of the Malaysian Peninsula, most likely Temuan or Jakun.
Chewong	A small Orang Asli group in Pahang state, traditionally hunter-gatherers; their language is categorized as northern Aslian.
Jahai	A small Orang Asli group throughout northern West Malaysia (except Perlis) and into southern Thailand, traditionally hunter-gatherers; their language is categorized as northern Aslian.
Jah Hut	A small Orang Asli group in Pahang state, traditionally foragers and swidden farmers; their language is categorized as central Aslian.

Jakun, Orang Hulu	A medium-sized group of Orang Asli living in the southern part of the Malaysian peninsula (Johor and Pahang states) who traditionally were foragers and swidden farmers; their Austronesian language is akin to Malay.
JHEOA	Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli, or the Department of Orang Asli Affairs of the Malaysian government, headquartered in Kuala Lumpur.
JOA	Jabatan Orang Asli, or the Orang Asli Department; JOA was an earlier designation for the JHEOA of today.
JOAS	Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia, or the Indigenous Peoples' Network of Malaysia. This organization includes both East and West Malaysia.
Kensiu	A small group of Orang Asli in Kedah state, traditionally hunters and gatherers; their language is categorized as northern Aslian.
Kintak	A small group of Orang Asli in Perak state, traditionally hunters and gatherers; their language is categorized as northern Aslian.
Lanoh	A small and splintered group of Orang Asli in Perak and Pahang states whose language is categorized as central Aslian. At least some Lanoh practiced swiddening traditionally, as well as hunting and gathering.
Mah Meri	<i>see</i> Besisi.
Mantra	An old term for Temuan.
Menik Kaien	An old Malay name for the Jahai of Krian.
MOH	Ministry of Health of the Malaysian government.
Negrito	A vague, foreign term for small, dark-skinned people. It was once used in West Malaysia to mean Semang.
Orang Asli	“Original peoples.” This is an umbrella term for the 18 or more indigenous ethno-linguistic groups in West Malaysia. (Small, related groups live in southern Thailand.) In addition to their subsistence economies, all Orang Asli groups have long engaged in some form of trade in forest products.

Orang Kuala	A small, maritime Orang Asli group in Johor state, also called Duano; their Austronesian language is akin to Malay.
POASM	Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia, or the Orang Asli Association of Peninsular Malaysia, an Orang Asli organization that represents their social-political interests. Its membership is voluntary and its representatives are elected.
PUSPANITA	Persatuan Suri dan Anggota Wanita Perkhidmatan Awam, the association for wives and women in the Malaysian civil service.
RM	Ringgit Malaysia, the national currency of Malaysia. One US dollar was equal to RM3.80 in 2004.
Sakai	This once-common term used by outsiders for most Orang Asli, especially before the 1960s, means variously “slave” or “dependent.” It is considered derogatory by Orang Asli.
Seletar	A small, maritime group of Orang Asli living in the south of Johor state; their Austronesian language is akin to Malay.
Semai	The largest group of Orang Asli, mainly inhabitants of Perak and Pahang states. Their central Aslian language is closely related to that of their neighbors, the Temiar. Traditionally, the Semai practiced foraging and swidden farming.
Semang	An old term for northern Orang Asli groups, still used by some linguists for speakers of northern Aslian languages.
Semaq Beri	A small group of Orang Asli, traditionally hunter-gatherers, who are centered in Terengganu and Pahang states; their language is categorized as central Aslian.
Semelai	A small group of Orang Asli, traditionally fresh-water fisherpeople who also practiced foraging and swidden farming; most of them live in the vicinity of Tasek Bera, a swampy lake in Pahang state.
Senoi	“People” in Aslian. All Aslian-speaking Orang Asli, or at least those speaking central Aslian, can be categorized as Senoi.

SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, the exam taken in the fifth year of secondary school (Form 5).
STD	sexually transmitted disease.
Temiar	A large group of Orang Asli, mainly living in the north-eastern area of the Malaysian peninsula, in Pahang, Perak and Kelantan states; their language is categorized as central Aslian. Traditionally, they practiced foraging and swidden farming.
Temuan	A medium-sized group of Orang Asli, largely inhabitants of Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Malacca states; their Austronesian language is akin to Malay. Traditionally, they practiced foraging and swidden farming.
UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia, a public university located in Serdang, Selangor.

/
Orang Asli Women
in History • Part I





Orang Asli Women in History • Part I

Adela Baer

The past has consequences for Orang Asli women. While the past can illuminate the present, it can also be a burden—especially for women who are poor and powerless. Old observations on Orang Asli women can help us better understand their lives today. This chapter and the next one, then, provide a background for later chapters that cover recent studies and eye-witness accounts of changing social and economic conditions for Orang Asli women.

Slavery, matrimony, motherhood, and culture

Most early European authors who wrote about Malaya were not short on imagination. And yet, their general view was that Orang Asli women were of no interest or did not exist—in which case they saw no reason to invent them. Tome Pires, writing in the 16th century, took this approach. He described the “Celates” (Seletar) as men who fish and fight, “sometimes on land and sometimes at sea,” and whose blowpipe darts killed many Portuguese during their battles over Malacca.¹

Yet these seafarers undoubtedly had families hidden on remote islands in the Malacca Straits, or among mangrove thickets on the mainland, when they went off to harass the Portuguese.

By the 17th century, the Dutch were governing Malacca. A Dutch official named Menie wrote that the local Orang Asli, called Benua, refused to live in Malacca, even though they were given food and clothing whenever they visited it. Within a few years the Benua had retreated inland, because encroaching Minangkabau colonists from

Sumatra took to capturing them, carrying them off, and keeping them in bondage.

Going by similar reports, captured Benua girls or women would have ended up as house or farm slaves, with some becoming mothers who swelled the ranks of the next generation of Minangkabaus.² In Perak, for instance, “Sakai” women were “very common in the houses of better class Malays before the emancipation of slaves in 1893, and many of them remained after that date in the houses of their former masters.”³

It may seem odd that these women stayed on. Outside of possible coercion, the most likely reason was that they had children there which the father (whoever he was) objected to having taken away.⁴ Then too, when captured Orang Asli children grew up in slave households, few of them would know, as adults, the route to take back to their homeland, or even if their parents were still living. Many also would have forgotten their first language and customs, a source of estrangement if they did return home.

Menie, the Dutchman, contacted the retreating Benua inland from Malacca and noted, among other things, that both fathers and mothers carried their small children in a barkcloth sling worn over the shoulder, with the child supported on the hips. He also reported that the women “are whitish yellow in colour, have a swaying gait, almost as if they were dancing, and run at a trot.”⁵ Although the Benua told him that “they” often visited other Orang Asli on the opposite coast near Pahang, and even traveled as far as Patani, Menie did not say if the women—whether carrying children or not—also went on these treks. Probably they did go, since Orang Asli men would not leave families behind who were vulnerable to slave-raiding in a region infested with Malay colonists.

By the 19th century, Europeans wrote more extensively about Orang Asli, but little was devoted to Orang Asli women. Anderson, writing in 1824, virtually ignored them. Even when they were mentioned, depictions of them based on direct experience, instead of hearsay, were rare. Begbie, writing a decade after Anderson, only felt it necessary to mention them in describing marriage and its aftermath. According to him:



Plate 1.1 Kensiu women and children in their settlement in Baling, Kedah. They have lost their former wide-ranging mobility as their forest territory is now largely used by others. (Colin Nicholas 2003)

When a young woman has allowed a man to pay his addresses to her, the parties proceed to a hillock round which she runs three times, pursued by him; and if he succeeds in catching her before the termination of the chase she becomes his wife, but not otherwise.⁶ When a woman is in labor, the Jacoons take a round piece of wood, which they fasten at both ends in a shed. The woman is laid upon this, with her face downward, pressing upon the abdomen, until the child is born. Meanwhile the husband kindles a fire before her, which is supposed to be of essential service, and performs the office of midwife; after the child is born, the woman is put close to the fire.⁷

Unlikely as this face-down story seems today, Newbold, a British colonial official who wrote five years after Begbie, likewise noted that Orang Asli women gave birth without help “except occasionally by the husband.” In the case of a difficult birth, “the woman is laid upon her stomach, and a fire kindled near her to excite the pains.”⁸ Newbold, however, may only have been echoing what Begbie had

written earlier. Such copycatting was not uncommon in the 19th century.

A writer with more grassroots knowledge was Cerruti, an Italian adventurer who later became a “superintendent” of Orang Asli for the British in Perak. He lived among the Semai, and by 1904 knew them well enough to report that husbands of pregnant women prepared the birthing site and that the wives had female midwives attending them during childbirth.⁹

In addition, another grassroots observer wrote in 1915 that the Perak Semai provided a leafy hut for birthing, as it was forbidden to give birth in the family house. In the hut, the laboring mother was attended by a midwife. After the birth the midwife bathed the mother with purifying water during the next three days. Then the mother and child returned home, and the midwife departed.¹⁰

Orang Asli women married to, or slaves of, non-Orang Asli men were noticed by European writers. Newbold, for one, accepted the view of “well-informed Natives” (meaning Malays, since Orang Asli were not respected enough to be called natives).

These men endorsed Newbold’s belief that most of the local Malays were descended from “Jakun females and the early colonists from Sumatra, with a subsequent sprinkling of Arab blood.”¹¹ Newbold then continued with his version of Minangkabau colonization. It seems a Minangkabau chief crossed the Malacca Straits from Sumatra to the Naning area and settling at Tabu. He reportedly married a Jakun “damsel,” perhaps as a ruse to gain local legitimacy. His “numerous retinue” married Jakun women likewise.

The rest of the Jakuns retreated to the uplands “as the intruders encroached.”¹² Newbold did not say if this was a tale of slave-raiding or if the Jakun men missed their women (as wives or co-workers). In any case, the retreat of the remaining Jakun was obviously a strategic move.

In reporting on the Semang, Newbold mentioned that Semang women “are said to be in common like their other property.”¹³ This statement is unlikely to be based on first-hand observation and, as with much else once written by European men about Orang Asli women, reflects a male and ethnic bias. Indeed, recent studies do not



Plate 1.2 (left) Orang Asli groups spill over from West Malaysia into southern Thailand, where this photograph of a Kensiu mother was taken in the 1950s (John Brandt). **Plate 1.3** (right) A Kensiu mother in Baling, northern Peninsular Malaysia in 2003 (Colin Nicholas). Both groups still acknowledge their kin ties to the other and make occasional cross-border visits.

confirm this statement—rather, they say the opposite. Furthermore, if Semang women were “in common,” this implies that Semang men were also “in common”—just as a polygamist today is “in common” from his wives’ point of view.

With a similar bias, a British colonial officer stationed in Temuan country noted that Orang Asli men’s jealousy of intimacy between an Orang Asli woman and an outsider man was just as strong as “their indifference to the relationships between their wives and other [Orang Asli] men.”

Quarrels between Orang Asli and Malay men over Orang Asli women were evidently frequent.¹⁴ Another British report seems to confirm this anxiety, stating that Orang Asli men in Perak “were jealous of the honour of their women. . . and instances have occurred of Malays having been wounded, if not killed, on this account.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, by 1892 the Orang Asli censused in the Jasin district of Malacca included at least six Orang Asli women living in villages “with Chinese or Malays as wives or as concubines, viz: at Ayer Panas, Kesang, Bukit Senggeh, Batang Melaka, Nyalas, and possibly elsewhere.”¹⁶ And the Semang told Schebesta that the Temengor Malays had arrived there by journeying inland from the east coast. The Semang grew to tolerate the leader of the Malays because he took a Semang wife, but by “cunning and force” he soon became all-powerful in the area. Schebesta went on: “The Malays will have nothing to do with this story. What Malay in these days would take a Semang wife!”¹⁷

Rathbone, who “camped and tramped” throughout Malaya at the end of the 19th century, criticized “the ubiquitous and pushing Chinaman” for exploiting Orang Asli in general and Orang Asli women in particular. The Chinaman, it was said, bartered cheap merchandise and opium for Orang Asli tin ore, fish, resins, and valuable incense wood (gaharu). He gained the confidence of the Orang Asli, took an Orang Asli wife, and became the Orang Asli’s middleman to the outside world, “much to his own advantage.”¹⁸ In contrast, Evans railed against “certain Malays” who swindled Negrito groups, judging that the Chinese swindled the Negritos less than the Malays did.¹⁹

Another report held that Chinese men treated “Sakais” with some generosity, thereby obtaining good bargains from them in terms of forest produce and tin.²⁰ About the same time, Machado likewise wrote that Jakun fathers in the interior of Johore agreed to their daughters marrying Chinese pepper and gambier planters, “such unions usually assuring to them and their relations some measure of certainty of a regular supply of food.”²¹

Among other matrimonial concerns of early writers, Anderson said that polygamy was rare and that husbands treated their wives well. Perhaps today one could say, instead, that spouses treated each other well. He also wrote that it was not a problem for women to divorce their husbands, except that, if the husband resented his wife’s infidelity, “he may kill her and her partner without any apprehension of the result, further than of their relatives avenging the dead. . . .”²² Just so: killing one’s kith and kin was not a whim indulged by Orang Asli.²³



Plate 1.4 Batek-Negritos at Kampung Kuala Sat, Taman Negara, Pahang, waiting for the medical team to set up their clinic. (J.M. Bolton 1956)

Miklucho Maclay, a “scientific traveler” from Czarist Russia, denied that Orang Asli practiced polygamy but noted that while some wives had six children, many remained childless.²⁴ By childlessness, he might have meant the family had no living children, since childhood mortality was high then, as a result of introduced diseases and other misfortunes.

While several European writers were curious about polygamy among the Orang Asli, polyandry was largely beyond their ken. However, polyandry did catch the interest of one District Officer during British rule. He noted that while in rare cases a Besisi man may have two wives, no Besisi woman ever had more than one husband; yet the Ulu Langat “Sakais” seemed to have the opposite tradition—with polyandry, not polygamy, being practiced.²⁵ While polyandry may still occur today, it is unlikely to be disclosed to officials of any sort, especially census takers. Polyandry is not an accepted form of household to the Malaysian government.

During World War II, when the Japanese occupied Malaya, a few British military men remained there. They did some sabotage work but spent most of their time hiding out from the Japanese and their local allies. One British group, along with some anti-Japanese guerrillas, camped for a time in abandoned Jakun houses on the upper Lenggui

River in Johor. The Jakun had moved inland from the river, out of terror of the Japanese. Relations between these nearby Jakun and the British group were good, and after the British held a party for the Jakun, the Jakun held one for them a few evenings later. At that party British male ideas of feminine modesty became entangled with Jakun cultural norms, as suggested in the following passage:

... “Waggy” fixed up electric lights under which the tribe did one of their dances, becoming more and more abandoned until they started to tear off their clothes. At this point “Waggy” switched off the lights, fearing that their easy friendship with the Sakai might be endangered if the latter had remembered, in the sober light of dawn, that the British had seen their women dancing around stark naked!²⁶

Months later, the British group left the area, and left Japanese-occupied Malaya for good:

When the time came to say goodbye... Lee Boon had organized his Sakai girls’ singing class to “sing them out” and, as the sampan left the landing stage, the choir, drawn up on the bank at the first bend of the river, broke out into “Will ye no come back again?” and then changed to “Auld Lang Syne.” All recognized that these were remarkable additions to their normal repertoire of political songs.²⁷

Orang Asli women have long enjoyed music. Cerruti complimented Orang Asli women on their musical talents and, indirectly, on the attentions of their husbands. He wrote that a “Sakai” woman:

... begins to decline soon after her first confinement; [by the age of 17] she is but a ghost of her former self. But what does that matter to her? Her husband is faithful to her... she is proud of her maternity; she can still dance and strike chords upon her *krob* [a lyre], modulate a plaintive ditty on her *ciniloi* [nose flute] and sing whilst she beats on her bamboo sticks an accompaniment that tortures the well-tuned ears.²⁸

Cerruti also remarked on the spirited attitude of Orang Asli women

on another occasion. He had told a boy to do a task but the boy refused. This led to Cerruti being rebuked by the boy's mother:

I turned to his mother...and told her the boy ought to have his ears boxed. She gave me a look of mingled wonder and irritation, then said: "You are a bad man if you would hurt my son when he did not mean any harm!" [This] answer...was only the decisive affirmation of that indomitable spirit of freedom that animates the Sakai...²⁹ ...the female sex in the jungle...is good, laborious and incorruptible...Among these uncivilized people there are no chivalrous traditions, it is true, but neither have their women been driven to seek emancipation because, sharing with perfect equality the rights of the men, none remain for them to claim, and they have no wrongs to revenge! [Among] the Sakais the one sex is not the slave of the other. The man provides food by hunting...and cultivating a little land...the woman helps him in the work of agriculture, sometimes follows him into the jungle, prepares his meals and...looks well after her children. When they are too little to walk, she straps them on her back with long strips of bark... This burden does not prevent her from moving about and working.³⁰

In agreement with Cerruti, other European observers also wrote that Orang Asli women had the same social rights as the men. Indeed, this is an important hallmark of traditional Orang Asli society. For example, Carey (1970) described divorce among the Kensiu as based on mutual agreement. Any common property was divided equally and the children lived thereafter with either parent, again by mutual agreement. Also, sexual equality existed in terms of inheritance of fruit trees. When a Kensiu father or mother died, both daughters and sons could, and did, inherit.³¹

Orang Asli women, alluring or not?

In today's world, it may be considered proper to ask if European

colonial writers on Orang Asli subjects were misogynists—either in general or, more narrowly, in respect to Orang Asli women. Women haters or not, it is important to recall that until British rule was firmly established, well into the 20th century, most Europeans arriving at Malayan ports and sojourning in the country were men without wives or families. If they had them, they left them at home. Until these men became somewhat knowledgeable about the alien world all about them, they were—by custom and necessity—largely in the company of men. They saw other European men in their work and at “the club,” saw Asian male helpers at home (including the cook), and saw Malay male tutors of the Malay language. They were thus largely homo-social, some even having a monastic outlook. Later, many of the European men “brought out” wives or whole families from England or elsewhere. None of the early European writers on Orang Asli were much smitten with Orang Asli women, with the exception of two who had an anthropological bent (H. D. “Pat” Noone and Peter Williams-Hunt).

Ainsworth, a colonial plantation developer, thought the Orang Asli unpleasant to look at. He complained that their hair “was matted and completely neglected,” with the women being even worse than the men, “quite unlike the attractive, sleek, well-groomed Malay women.” To him, Orang Asli women “looked almost bestial.”³²

In more diplomatic tones, Swettenham, a prominent official in British Malaya, described a young Orang Asli woman he saw as having arms covered with many brass rings. She wore a dozen necklaces of colored beads, brass rings, shells, and boars’ teeth. Through her nasal septum, she wore a long porcupine quill and her face was painted in red and black stripes. He remarked, “She is a belle, no doubt, and amongst the *orang Sakei*, I dare say irresistible.”³³

Orang Asli women did like to appear comely. For example, when two early scientific adventurers measured the heads of Orang Asli—a rite among the scientifically minded at that time—they discovered that most of the hair of a Temuan woman was false, much to her embarrassment: “She had purchased the combings of a Chinaman’s pigtail and fastened them among her own locks.”³⁴ Notably, Skeat found the Batang Padang Semai women coming into the towns “very



Plate 1.5. A young Jahai mother (originally from Jeli, Kelantan) and her first-born in the Belum-PITC forest in Northern Perak. The child succumbed to fever a few weeks after the photo was taken. (Colin Nicholas 2003)

much smarter and better dressed than the average Malay woman.”³⁵ And many Orang Asli women tucked a hibiscus blossom over one ear, which an English tourist in the 1920s found “barbaric and bizarre [but] very charming.”³⁶

Shortly before the Japanese invasion of Malaya, Batak missionary men from Sumatra were trying to convert Orang Asli in Perak to Christianity. Some Temiar took to visiting the nearby hut of one Batak. Among them was a young woman well dressed in a silk sarong, blouse, beads, earrings, and gold anklets. Her hair was well-groomed, with a red hibiscus propped over one ear. Evidently her demeanor was not modest enough for the missionaries, who called her wicked. A visiting Englishman observing the scene thought that she was deliberately flouting her prosperity in the face of the Batak. The Englishman heard that she was the mistress of an anthropologist who was then studying the Orang Asli.³⁷ But from later accounts, it is clear that she was, or soon was about to be, the wife of that anthropologist (and sometime government advisor), namely “Pat” Noone.

Hervey, another roamer in the hinterlands, noted that one young Jakun woman amused the Malay men in his retinue “by the affectation

of concealing her face with her *kain tudong kepala* [headcloth], after the Malay fashion.”³⁸ This group of Endau Jakuns also imitated the Malays by interjecting an occasional *Allah* into their conversation.

Even female spirits, such as Chinoi Sagar, liked to be comely. She was said by the Menik Kaien to live at the far end of the bridge of souls, by the island of Belet, and “to wreath her head” with the Bacham fern.³⁹

Borie, a French Catholic priest, related a Mantra story about a rock called Batu-tre in the Klam district of southern Malaya. It was said to have the “chinkani” flower growing on it. Only women had the privilege of picking it, and through its magical virtue a woman became “greatly famed” and was “followed by an endless number of lovers.” While a man could not pick it, he could steal it. Then he too would have many lovers.⁴⁰

However, Orang Asli women sometimes had other priorities. Arlech, who lived in the Ulu Plus, was delegated by an her group’s headman to assist a British traveler camping with them, carrying water up from the river for him, collecting his firewood, and the like. But it seemed she lacked “maidenly modesty,” since she wore only a loincloth and was embellished with face paint, a nose quill, a monkey-teeth necklace, and earplugs of dried leaves. The headman considered her a beautiful virgin but Knocker, the visitor, was not impressed. Before Knocker left the group four days later, he displayed his store-bought treasury of beads, sarongs, dried fish, milk tins, candy, box matches, cheroots, and chunks of Java tobacco. He offered these to the group for having provided him with aid and with souvenirs—including Arlech’s necklace. When Arlech was invited to take something from the display, she grabbed a chunk of tobacco. This displeased the Orang Asli onlookers, who wanted her to choose a sarong, but Arlech ignored them. For her second choice, Arlech grabbed a packet of cheroots. Knocker, the traveler, thought her behavior shockingly independent and unfeminine.⁴¹

Earlier, a girl of Sungei Kerbau had traded her seed necklace to a European but then insisted on having it back, because of the copper rings on it. He offered her a large quantity of tobacco but finally had to return the necklace. The village chief told him “with evident

conviction” that the girl needed to wear the rings to avoid falling ill.⁴² In fact, much of what looked to Europeans as adornment was, for the Orang Asli, the means to prevent illness.

After World War II, during the so-called Malayan Emergency, the British government relocated many Orang Asli from their forest homes to more urban environs. The idea was to insulate them from the Communist insurgents living in rural areas, who forced the Orang Asli to help them. Some of these relocation sites were virtual concentration camps, with barbed wire and guards, but others allowed egress of the inhabitants to nearby towns, where they came into contact with all sorts of outsiders. Holman contended that Orang Asli could sometimes be seen in Ipoh and other large towns promoting themselves as a tourist attraction “in full ceremonial dance regalia” and, he had heard, some of the women offered to be photographed with breasts exposed, upon payment of a dollar. Pimps, he added, had eagerly recruited pretty Orang Asli girls as brothel prostitutes. The men also succumbed to the towns’ attractions. Venereal disease, he said, soon spread quickly in some Orang Asli groups.⁴³

Although tourists might have been taking snapshots of topless Orang Asli women in Ipoh at that time, Orang Asli women living near government “forts” were being exhorted to wear brassieres above their sarong skirts. Because the urbanized relocation camps had been a huge failure, such forts were erected deep in the rainforest to guard Orang Asli groups there from Communist influences. The exhortations originated from English women who had official connections. They evidently thought bare breasts were unseemly because the forts had policemen and soldiers stationed at them (Malays, British, and others). Unfortunately, wearing brassieres in the ever-wet tropical rainforest led to many skin irritations and even respiratory problems. Prudery aside, toplessness was a more sensible way to dress, for both men and women.

But if toplessness or other attributes of Orang Asli women made them sexually attractive, this could lead to trouble. According to one writer, an official report stated that Malays during the Emergency era threatened to turn Semai men over to the British as Communist sympathizers unless the Semai let the Malays sleep with their unwilling

women.⁴⁴

In another account, a Besisi girl was engaged to be married to her cousin. Then a Malay schoolteacher fell in love with her and wanted to marry her, but he refused to eat monkey meat with the Besisi, saying Moslems did not do it. The incensed Besisi thought him a hypocrite, or worse, since he did not respect their culture. The Besisi felt that such unions would drain them of both women and their culture, because their future depended “on their ability to keep their women to reproduce the next generation,” especially since Malay women did not want Besisi men, thinking them “backward and dirty.”⁴⁵

However, it was not only women among the Orang Asli who liked to look their best. Formerly, both sexes often wore “bands of plaited palm leaves across their bodies, as well as garlands...made from palm leaves or of scented grasses.”⁴⁶ Men also wore hibiscus blossoms in their hair at times.

But what is a woman? As biologists and social scientists know, this can be a difficult question to answer. Collings considered this question in relation to the Orang Asli. After noting that their “men are bodily men and the women are bodily women,” he went on to describe three Temiar (among the 400 he saw) who were questionable:

One was a middle aged man with narrow shoulders and broad hips. His face and body were smooth and plump with breasts that had a strong suggestion of femininity; he was thus in contrast to the usual slim, wiry, and muscular hill men. The other two were women, and the first one lived in a longhouse on the Minchar river. She was married and about thirty years old; her breasts were rather small and she had the heavy shoulders, slim waist and hips and highly muscled legs and small ankles of a man... The other woman, seen at Kuala Blatim on the Yai, may have been a true hermaphrodite... She had the wrinkled face of an elderly woman but her voice was deep. Her body was smooth with underdeveloped breasts... and she wore a man's breech clout. She was said to be married to a woman taller than herself and, not unnaturally, had no children, for I was told that the penis was no bigger than “a stalk of thick grass” and that sexual relations



Plate 1.6 Batek-Negrito lass adorned with flowers. Men also liked to look their best at times and wore flower blossoms in their hair. (Colin Nicholas 1996)

were “just playing about.” She does all of a man’s tasks and is very good at the heavy work of clearing the jungle for gardens...⁴⁷

To sum up, in this chapter we have seen that some outsiders considered Orang Asli women mainly—or exclusively—in terms of their economic, sexual, and reproductive potential. Inside Orang Asli society, however, women were considered as normal, independent human beings, no different from men in this respect, as shown in the following chapter.

ENDNOTES

1. Leary, 1994, p. 93.
2. “The Sakai women seem to have been frequently hunted down like wild beasts, becoming with their children slaves through generation after generation” (McNair, 1878, p. 194). Sultanate law in Perak held that if a newly-bought female slave was found to be pregnant, the owner could return her to the seller “as damaged goods,” but the infant, when born, became his property (Winstedt and Wilkinson, p. 91).

3. Annandale and Robinson, 1903, p. 180. Couillard (1984) discussed Orang Asli slaves during this period, and also earlier. The Sumatran Rawa in the 19th century once killed many Temuan men and took more than 100 women and girls to Pahang where they sold them as slaves (Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, 1906, p. 539).
4. However, Cerruti (1908, p. 152) reported that Perak “Sakai” women brought back with them “the children born of their masters.”
5. Leary, 1994, p. 101.
6. Other 19th century writers continued this theme. Newbold (1839, vol.2, p. 407) claimed that in a wedding dance, “the bride elect darts off...into the forest, followed by her inamorato...should the youth fall...or return unsuccessful, he is met with the jeers and merriment of the whole party, and the match is declared off. It generally happens, though, that the lady contrives to stumble...and falls (fortuitously of course) into the outstretched arms of her pursuer.” And Cameron (1865, p. 116) wrote that if the wedding is by a lake or river, “the damsel is given a canoe and a double-bladed paddle, and allowed a start of some distance; the suitor, similarly equipped, starts off in chase.” If he cannot overtake her, the match is off, but the chase is usually short: “the maiden’s arms are strong, but her heart is soft...and she soon becomes a willing captive.” Elsewhere, a circle may be formed: “the damsel is...given half the circle’s start in advance, and if she succeed in running three times round before her suitor comes up with her, she is entitled to remain a virgin...but few outstrip their lovers.”
7. Begbie, 1834, pp. 13-14.
8. Newbold, 1839, vol. 2, pp. 406-407.
9. Cerruti, 1904, p. 116. However, in his 1908 book he denied anyone assisted in childbirth and made the fanciful statement that the mother and infant stayed isolated from everyone else for six months.
10. Evans, 1915, p. 97.
11. Newbold, 1839, vol. 1, pp. 421-422. This statement is echoed by Bird, 1883, pp. 155-156.
12. Newbold, 1839, vol. 2, pp. 77-78.
13. Newbold, 1839, vol. 2, p. 379.
14. Maxwell, 1896, p. 21. In contrast, the more knowledgeable Skeat reported that Perak “Sakai” imposed high fines for any Orang Asli who enticed away a married woman, and that adultery among them, and also among the Temuan, was considered a great crime (Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, 1906, p. 501).
15. Annandale and Robinson, 1903, p. 47.
16. Blagden, 1903, p. 179.
17. Schebesta, 1929, pp. 41-42.

18. Rathbone, 1898, p. 191. According to Bagot (1934, p. 210), a “brave” Dayak worker on a survey crew in Johore bought an Orang Asli wife to take back to Borneo with him.
19. Evans, 1937, pp. 34-35.
20. Annandale and Robinson, 1903, p. 48.
21. Machado, 1902, p. 29.
22. Anderson, 1850, p. 430.
23. A feud between two Temiar groups started over a “fickle young woman.” The feud was finally stopped by a consortium of elders, with the score being two young men dead on each side (Noone and Holman, 1972, pp. 34-35).
24. Miklucho Maclay, 1878, p. 215. Evans (1916, p. 82), wrote that Kinta “Sakai” men were allowed two wives, but not three.
25. Maxwell, 1896, p. 21.
26. Hamond, 1985, p. 224.
27. Hamond, 1985, pp. 253-254.
28. Cerruti, 1908, p. 119.
29. Cerruti, 1908, p. 121.
30. Cerruti, 1908, pp. 125-127.
31. Indeed, this has long been the case for other groups, including Temuan and Semai.
32. Ainsworth, 1933, p. 161.
33. Swettenham, 1880, p. 59.
34. Annandale and Robinson, 1902, pp. 416-417.
35. Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, 1906, p. 529.
36. Banner, 1929, p. 28. Clifford (1916, pp. 6-7) also described, in great detail, an alluring “Sakai” maiden with a blossom in her hair, with whom a young upcountry Malay trader fell in love.
37. Wells, 1940, pp. 217-218. This anthropologist, Noone, took her and other Temiar to Singapore before World War II for an “exhibition of Sakai culture” (Chapman, 1949, pp. 277-278).
38. Hervey, 1881, p. 103.
39. Evans, 1923, p. 156.
40. Borie, 1887, p. 301. There are many other allusions to chinduai, as it is usually called. In one case it was said to be a root on which small blossoms appear, the most fragrant in the world, but the plant grew under a rocky ledge on a mountain in Ulu Klang. Any Orang Asli who wanted it had to climb up on the ledge and then fast until a kite, “which uses the chinduai as medicine for its young,” dropped a piece while flying overhead (Skeat, 1896, p. 14).

41. Knocker, 1924, pp. 83-87.
42. Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, p. 141.
43. Holman, 1958, pp. 222-223.
44. Dentan, 1979, p. 82.
45. Wazir, 1993, p. 85.
46. Collings, 1949 B, p. 96.
47. Collings, 1949 B, p. 99.

2

Orang Asli Women
in History • Part II



2 Orang Asli Women in History • Part II

Adela Baer

Orang Asli women today experience problems in being considered equal to men, any men.¹ Many of these problems are not new, but they are more severe now than in the past. Although outsider men have always devalued Orang Asli women, Orang Asli men and women formerly respected each other as equals. Global and local forces of autocratic paternalism have eroded the rights of Orang Asli women, their information base, and their self-confidence.

Women in Orang Asli myths and legends

If European writers assumed that Orang Asli women were of little general importance, they may have overlooked the prominence of female figures in myths and legends. A few writers on Orang Asli assumed that every creator, god, spirit, ogre, and supernatural animal was male unless they were told otherwise. Or unless the being's behavior was patently female, such as being pregnant. To Evans, for example, the legendary leaders of the gibbons, the siamangs, the pig-tailed macaques, and the dragons were all kings, not queens. Kuwap, the legendary bear, was male. And Mempas, the guardian of the bridge of souls, was male.²

The supposition that Orang Asli women were inconsequential in lore and legend agrees with the mindset of a patriarchal society. In fact, such European influences—and European writings on Orang Asli—nurtured the trend toward the strong subordination of Orang Asli women that exists today.

As is well known, many Orang Asli origin legends do not start with one human male and one human female. The progenitors of people

might be monkeys and gibbons, a white alligator and a porpoise, supernatural beings, or even a drop of water.³ In one legend a founding pair of monkeys cut off their tails and then discovered they could walk upright, freeing their hands for all sorts of clever tricks. These advantages were passed down to their descendents.

And yet, whatever slant a writer or storyteller might have taken, women were unavoidable in legends of human origins. In some Orang Asli accounts women came into being in ways influenced by Christian or Islamic thought.⁴ In other accounts a supernatural being, whether named Pirman or Peruman or something else, made a pair of human beings, one female and one male.⁵ In a Kenta (Kintak) story the first human was a girl, made by two supernatural beings. Manoid requested her. She and her supernatural grandson, Kaei, made the girl out of clay and the next day made a boy. The supernatural but human children later married.⁶

A Temiar account has a female creator. A supernatural shaman-ancestress, Chingkai, dreamt two fruits into the first human forms: Cultivated Pepper became the Temiar brother and Wild Brinjal the Temiar sister. They later produced nine children.⁷ In contrast, a Semelai story relates that the first man was made from clay, but the first woman was a transformed bird. This couple had 44 children.⁸ A later Temuan account even surpassed this, with the couple having 99 children.⁹

In another origin legend, the last daughter of the first human couple was chopped up by her father and the pieces strewn on a field. They turned into many kinds of food plants.¹⁰ A related Kintak story is about two *Huyak* (snakes), who were once Semang. One of the *Huyak* cut open his youngest child's stomach, strewed the blood about, and it turned into rice. The child's ears became the betel vine, its spine became sugarcane, and other body parts became green beans, onions, betel nut, cucumbers, gourds, and tobacco.¹¹

Once humans were created, Orang Asli origin legends had to deal with the mode of human reproduction—not always in the usual way. In the Kenta legend of the clay-originated pair, they first produced a daughter, from a stone found in a flower, and then a boy, also from a stone. This was the first human couple on earth—rather than in otherworldly space. However, according to a Kensiu legend, the first



Plate 2.1 A Semai elder leads a *pensol* (nose-flute) musical session at Woh, Perak. (Colin Nicholas 1996)

human couple was not exactly human. In fact, the girl was a tortoise and the boy a speckled rhinoceros bird.¹²

In many Orang Asli stories, the first humans were immortal. They and other early ancestors still are immortal, but their descendants are not. For the Jahai, the immortals live on fruits and other plant foods. A nectar-like substance, instead of hot blood, flows through their bodies. They know not sexual acts but produce children from the juice of ginger leaves.¹³

A Binna (Benua) legend from Johor collected in the 19th century had the first woman becoming pregnant in the calves of her legs, producing a boy from the right one and a girl from the left.¹⁴ Whether the mode of reproduction was the same thereafter the legend did not reveal, but this family was said to give rise to all the world's people. Notably, well over a hundred years *after* the Binna legend was recorded, a Chewong myth from Pahang spoke of two girls who became pregnant in their calves.¹⁵ This idea of a fantastic pregnancy was evidently widespread and persistent, at least over the southern part of the Malaysian Peninsula.

After pregnancy comes childbirth. The question of the earliest mode of childbirth also entered into Orang Asli stories, often in extraordinary fashion. In a Chewong story, the first human couple did not know about proper childbirth, so the husband cut open the wife's stomach and extracted the living child. The wife of course died. This went on for some time until the ghost of tree trunks, named Yinlugen Bud, happened on a man about to extract a child. He explained about the body opening for childbirth and showed how to press on the mother's stomach to facilitate the birth. When the father started to feed the newborn infant from his elbow, Yinlugen Bud had to educate him to the fact that the mother had breast milk.¹⁶

Among legends of later times, the best known one is of the Orang Asli mother whose son became a successful sea captain and married a Malay woman. The son disowned his mother, which caused him to die at sea—or in another version to have his ship become a hill. His mother became a mango tree, at least in one account.¹⁷

A common literary device in Orang Asli legends told today is for the youngest of seven brothers to outwit an adversary. The Mah Meri have a similar story, but in this case it is the youngest of seven sisters who was the smart one. She outwits and kills a were-tiger.¹⁸

Several Orang Asli legends deal with the supernatural being who causes thunder, described as being male. But for the Semelai, this male being, Itai Malim, had a daughter acting as a sort of policewoman. Ger-ang-ah watched humans to see if they were disrespectful to animals. If so, she informed her father who punished the miscreants “with rain, thunder, and lightning accompanied by a subsidence of the ground, which swallowed up their houses.”¹⁹

The Semelai also held that the underworld (for the souls of the dead) was ruled by a male and a female spirit, collectively called Gayak.²⁰ Here, as in some other Orang Asli accounts, it may be that two separate individual had the same name, or shared it between them, or even that the two beings were fused together in some way. And in Johor, the Jakun told H. D. Noone (1939) about a powerful woman, called Mak Boreg, who lives in the land of spirits. She takes the spirits of those who have died to this spirit-land.

More than one Orang Asli group has a story of a woman living



Plate 2.2 Semai women weaving attap fronds—and child-minding at the same time in Woh, Perak. (Colin Nicholas 1998)

underground. The Jah Hut have a woman named *bungsu lirang* living below the earth. When a child's mother dies, the child's soul tries to follow her. It wanders, eventually reaching the underworld. If a feast is held a week after the mother's death, the child's soul is recovered. If no feast is held, the child dies and *bungsu lirang* keeps the soul and takes care of it.²¹

Evans visited some Negritos who told him about three supernatural grandmothers, Yak Takel, the mother of Tapern; Yak Lepeh; and Yak Manoid. They live underground and “guard the roots of the *Batu Herem*, the stone which supports the heavens...and they can make the waters under the earth rise [causing *henweh*] and destroy any of the Negritos who give great offence to Tapern.”²²

However, not all female supernatural beings live underground. When Evans visited the Lanoh at Lenggong, he heard about Yara-meng, who lives in the sky:

She is white and very aged, just skin and bone. Her granddaughter, Jamoi, looks after her, and, when she has reached the extreme limits of old age, Jamoi makes as if to strike her from afar with some wild ginger (*beurn*) leaves. The sap, coming from the stalks of the leaves, falls upon Yara-



Plate 2.3 At Sungei Klubi, Selangor, a temporary pavilion is going up, the centerpiece for a three-day wedding ceremony. A Temuan woman is weaving attap for the pavilion roof. (Adela Baer 1972)

meng, who feels cold when thus besprinkled and immediately becomes young again.²³

Clearly, the numerous reports of important women in Orang Asli myths and legends give an egalitarian flavor to the past. Women were integral to legends just as in mundane life. Later accretions of details that followed Christian or Islamic traditions tended to demote women, even supernatural women. Gods became men and their helpers also were men; the first human was a man, not a woman. Leadership in legend became male-dominated. As we shall see in the next section, women also lost leadership roles and social prominence in the mundane world over time.

Women as leaders

For writers like Newbold in the 19th century, the general idea was that all noteworthy people, including Orang Asli people, were men. For the Orang Asli, this included shamans, whom he called poyangs. Moreover, he implied that the role of poyang is hereditary, from father to son. However, according to both Newbold and some later authors, a poyang would have two spectral helpers, both beautiful women, who would unfold “the secrets of nature” to him.²⁴



Plate 2.4 At Peretak, Selangor, Temuan women bring home firewood that they have collected. (Colin Nicholas 1997)

Anderson, writing in 1850, thought otherwise. According to him, religious specialists were husband-and-wife teams. The pair went into “an arbor of thorns” while the neighbors sang outside. When a strange noise was heard—a sign that the invoked spirit had possessed the enclosed pair—they exited their arbor and whatever they said at that point “was considered the will of the spirits.”²⁵ And among the Chewong in Pahang, Needham discovered that shamans were either male or female. These so-called *putau* were said to cure illnesses and deliver babies.²⁶

Likewise, early European writers invariably assumed that Orang Asli village leaders or spokespersons were men. It was usually stated that the role of *batin* or other position of leadership descended from father to son, or at least to some close relative who was male. But Miklucho Maclay wrote that when a “Sakai” leader died, his wife could succeed him, this being “characteristic of the position of Sakai women as compared to Malay women.”²⁷ Schebesta also discovered, much to his surprise, that an Orang Asli group in southern Thailand had a headwoman.²⁸ And Hervey recounted a Mentra (Mantra) tradition that the first ruler at “Kuala Moar” was To’ Mutan Jantan, a woman, and that to preserve her memory, the Dato’ of Johol wore his hair long, “down to his waist.”²⁹



Plate 2.5 A Semai swidden ricefield with a fallow field on the hillside that is now regenerating into forest. (Colin Nicholas 2004)

Further testimony to the important status of Orang Asli women was given by Collings. When he visited a group of “Desin Dolaq” (Orang Kuala), near Batu Pahat, he found that although the group professed to be Muslim, “the women seem to have kept the position and freedom of former times.”³⁰ They were not subordinate to men.

Even the legendary “White Semang,” Tan Puteh Purba, was a leader—in this case a leader for all of the country of Perak.³¹ And the Seletar of Simpang Arang in Johor told a visitor that they worship an ancient queen who once ruled them, at her kramat (sacred spot), inland at Segamat.³²

Wilkinson did not take kindly to any report that Orang Asli women were leaders, especially the notion that the founders of the ruling houses of the states of Rembau, Sungei Ujong, and Pahang were women—reportedly all sisters of each other. Moreover, their father’s sisters were said to be the founders of Jelebu and Johol. Even less did Wilkinson like the story that a fairy-child was found by a Biduanda couple. She was reported to have married the Sultan of Johore and become the mother of Bendahara Sekundai, an important leader. As “a student of serious history,” Wilkinson dismissed these traditional accounts.³³

Among the Semai studied more recently by Dentan, older men greatly influence public opinion:

No rule prevents women from being influential, and some women are. Most of the time, however, Semai women are primarily concerned with the petty affairs of hearth and home... Furthermore, Semai women feel “embarrassed” to take a prominent position in public debate, although a woman often exercises influence through her husband. For example, prophetic dreams are a sign of wisdom, and gossip has it that one headman routinely presents his wife’s dreams as his own.³⁴

Today, the subordinate role of Orang Asli women in social affairs is continued officially by the nation-state, especially by the policies and actions of the JHEOA, the governmental department of Orang Asli affairs. This department appoints official Orang Asli leaders, such as village headmen. It does not appoint headwomen. The department also “recognizes” heads of households as men, rather than as a husband and wife combination, unless of course the household lacks a man in it. Moreover, women are not invited to JHEOA meetings or JHEOA-sponsored junkets.³⁵

When it comes to midwifery, early European authors were usually silent on the subject. Even if they mentioned a woman being a midwife, they did not consider this fact as indicating any leadership role, either social or spiritual. Status in a male-dominated world was important to Europeans—at home and abroad—and no midwife anywhere made it into the limelight. (Their Florence Nightingale was iconic for other reasons.) However, we have already seen that a shaman-ancestress named Chingkai actually created the first people on earth, the Temiar. She was a shaman because she was a midwife. That is, midwives had strong leadership roles.

According to Dentan, when a Semai woman missed her menstrual period, she would call a midwife to palpate her abdomen to determine if she was pregnant. Most midwives were older women, knowledgeable about pregnancy and childbirth:

They are normally “a little *halaa*” because they have to deal with such mysterious dangers of this period as *nyani*’ [disease agents]... [and] they must be somewhat *halaa*’ in order to

seek aid from the “First Midwife” who dwells in the uppermost tier of the seven-layered heavens...³⁶

Women were also valued as healers in a more general sense. Nearly a century ago Evans recounted how a Jeram Kawan man fell from a tree, badly bruising himself. When a message was sent to the Semai near Sungkai, three healers came from there to attend to him—all three being women “skilled in medicine.”³⁷

According to Carey, writing in the 1970s, any Jakun could in theory become a healer but the position usually descended from father to son or, less frequently, to a daughter. In either case the healer enjoyed “considerable influence and prestige.” Male healers were often also the headmen of their groups, but female healers were not. Jakun women were not allowed to be headmen, it seems. Likewise among the Temuan, the healing arts were usually passed down from father to son, but a few Temuan women were also healers.³⁸ According to Dentan, Semai women usually have minor talents as healers (*halaa*): “...but a really *halaa*’ woman is more successful than most male *halaa*’ in the diagnosis and cure of disease.”³⁹

Influential women shaman, healers, and elders are well known from recent times. A notable Semai woman shaman-healer (or *halaa*’) died in Sahom in Perak in the 1960s. A notable Temuan woman shaman died in Selangor in the 1990s. But few women shaman seem to exist today—most are men.⁴⁰

Women were traditionally needed as officiants in the farming cycle.⁴¹ For “taking” the millet-soul at the beginning of the harvest period in Ulu Temengor, an old woman cut a gallon of the grain heads on the first day and again on the second day. The millet-soul was then hung up in the house and later mixed with grain set aside to plant the next year. After a day of rest, general reaping then began.

Likewise among Negri Sembilan Orang Asli, before the rice harvest started, an old woman was delegated to cut seven panicles of rice; these were the rice-soul. They were put in a basket and hung up in the house, later to be mixed with the seed for the next year’s sowing. Three days after the rice-soul was saved, general reaping began.

Today, with far too little land left to Orang Asli for them to survive



Plate 2.6 Jakun women and the children under their care in their temporary fishing shelter in the peat-swamp forests, Kampung Simpai, Pahang. (Colin Nicholas 2002)

on home-grown rice, the important roles of women in the rice-cycle have largely been lost. The same fate has hit the traditional role of healers who depended on herbal remedies for their treatments. In many places no natural environment is left for foraging either for medicinal or food plants. Orang Asli lands have been wrested away by governmental authority for its own uses, not those of Orang Asli.

However, some Orang Asli women have enjoyed new positions of responsibility and prestige away from home over the past four decades, in the field of modern medicine. At least in the 1960s and 1970s Orang Asli women made up about a third of the workforce associated with Gombak Hospital, outside of Kuala Lumpur. This facility was started by the British during the Emergency era for the exclusive benefit of Orang Asli. Many Orang Asli were trained to provide a wide variety of medical services.⁴²

Some older reports by foreigners either stating, or implying, that women had lesser status than men in Orang Asli societies may have been a figment of the reporters' imaginations. But the eventual low status of women may have become a reality as the *result* of foreign influence.

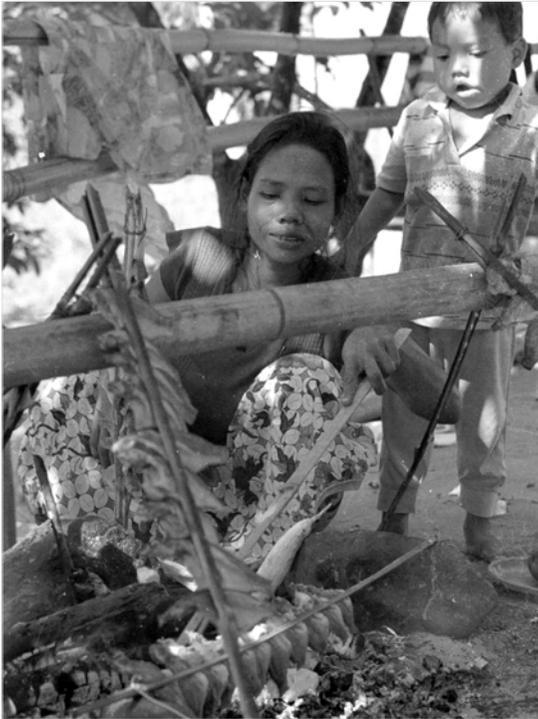


Plate 2.7 At the Temuan village of Ulu Serendah in Selangor, Biah cooks river fish on a spit as her son watches. (Colin Nicholas 1990)

The irony is that before these foreigners showed up and started to write about Orang Asli, matters seem to have been quite different. It was patriarchal foreigners, after all, who insisted that Orang Asli groups have designated headmen, rather than a democratic assembly—often of all the elders—that met to make important decisions for the group. This insistence on male domination might even explain the burial customs of the Chewong during the British era. It seems that at that time only old men could be placed in a special tree house (a sanrong) when they died.⁴³ All women and young people were simply buried in shallow graves.

Despite the impact of numerous alien influences, any leadership in Orang Asli society was, and still is, a tenuous condition. Leaders have few, if any, ways to enforce their authority. Leaders might lead but followers might not follow. As Benjamin said of a Temiar headman, “One word from him and everyone does as he pleases.”⁴⁴ And as she pleases, too.

Women as workers

When a painter or photographer composes a picture, much is left outside the frame. The emphasis is on what is inside. Likewise, Orang Asli women have been largely left out of the frame in Malaysia. For example, some earlier writers had lapses when it came to describing Orang Asli as workers: they mentioned only the men. Carey wrote that when Kensiu men go into the forest to collect rattan and other resources, “The old people and very young children are left behind...and only these form the permanent core of the village population.”⁴⁵ Undoubtedly Kensiu women existed, and undoubtedly some of them were working members of the rattan-collecting groups. This is also known to have been the case for other Orang Asli groups, such as the Jakun and Chewong.

Orang Asli women did become known to some Europeans as hard workers. For example, it was reported that on a journey they carried children, household necessities, and perhaps even some chickens or a puppy. Some English expedition men were impressed that young Orang Asli women “tenderly” carried the family dogs on their treks.⁴⁶ Skeat wrote that the men do the necessary brute-force work and the women “do all the rest.”⁴⁷

In general, female work started at a young age. In Perak, a Semai girl traditionally was taught to help inside and outside the house:

She goes with her mother to plant and pull up [cassava] and yams, to gather fire-wood, and fill the bamboo buckets with water; she learns to cook and take care of the little ones...Her arms are still weak and she can scarcely lift some of the weights allotted to her, but they gradually become nerved for heavier ones. Her fatiguing duties always increase, and yet...she accepts [them] all with a light heart...⁴⁸

In the 19th century, Favre received some ill-treatment from non-Orang Asli in his excursions on the Malaysian Peninsula. In contrast, he noticed that whenever he entered a Jakun house on his travels, “at once a woman of the family took a basket, went away, and a few minutes [later] entered again with some kladees or other vegetable,

which were [soon] cooked and presented to me.”⁴⁹ That is, Orang Asli women (and men) were hospitable to innocuous visitors.

Today hunting is a “male-only” activity among Orang Asli, but formerly women also hunted. Semai women made their own blowpipes and hunted with them. Chewong women also hunted with blowpipes. Jakun women taught their children to climb trees and use blowpipes to hunt, at least in the 19th century, but now these are male-only activities.⁵⁰ In the mid-20th century Shutleworth observed a Jakun method of hunting mouse deer in the Endau area that required husband-and-wife teamwork. As he noted, the husband walks parallel to a river with the family dogs:

while his wife poles [a boat] along the river, keeping level with her husband. She gauges his position by the shouts he utters as he walks through the jungle... Once the dogs pick up the scent of the mouse deer they never give up. Finally the harried animal makes for the river where, being a good swimmer, it hopes to escape; alas, it goes to almost certain death [by the wife spearing it]. Sometimes when the river is shallow the mouse deer is caught alive, the intention being to kill it later. Instead of spearing it, the woman... jumps into the shallow water and catches it...⁵¹

An amusing incident about Orang Asli women farmers was told by an American nurse visiting Chabang Tiga Post during the Emergency era. She found most of the Temiar there were men. When asked where their wives were, the men said their wives were working in the farm:

“You don’t work the land?” They seemed a bit surprised to hear the question.
 “No, we take care of the children while they work in the field.”

The nurse later found that while the men complained about chest pains, headache, and no tobacco, “the hard-working ladies seemed to be all right.”⁵²

Besisi (Mah Meri) women have been described as expert at fishing with a light rod and line: “They stand in the shallows and throw the



Plate 2.8 Older Orang Asli women work as long as they are able. Here Temuan women at Sungai Temir, Kelau, teach the younger generation the finer points of weaving pandanus leaves. (Colin Nicholas 2002)

bait similarly to fly-fishing, whipping the fish out with great skill.”⁵³ Besides being the main fishers, Bেসisi women were the main fruit gatherers. They collected mangosteens and the like without having to climb trees. To prevent the fruit falling to the ground and becoming bruised, the women used a long bamboo pole cut and woven at the top into a ribbed basket with several ribbed claws (much like implements sold in American hardware stores today for the same purpose).⁵⁴

Besides hunting, fishing, and farming, Orang Asli women traditionally did a great deal of foraging. Chewong women, for instance, knew at least five kinds of edible tubers, called wau, tagat, renteh, tiag, and degudn. To dig them up required “a great deal of work with digging sticks.”⁵⁵ Pregnant Semang women also did this work every day. They went into the forest with the other women up to the day of birth.⁵⁶

Women were, and are, also attuned to the uses of medicinal plants, often obtained by foraging, especially those useful in terms of pregnancy and childbirth. Among the Orang Asli of southern Thailand, a women specialist in herbal remedies and incantations ministers to pregnant women and children.⁵⁷ In a study of the Orang Hulu (Jakun) of Kampung Peta in the 1980s, midwives, the batin, and most village

elders were found to be knowledgeable about medicinal plants. They freely gave information to others on the proper usage of these plants—over 52 different kinds. Many of the plants were foraged, but the villagers also had herb gardens. There was also a common practice of exchanging plants when people visited other Jakun villages. Eleven of the medicinal plants identified in the study were related to midwifery: three species were used for contraception, four as abortifacients, and four others for post-natal complications.⁵⁸ Women would have been especially knowledgeable about these eleven species.

Dunn (1975) did a thorough study of Orang Asli usage of foraged and garden plants. He studied an area in northern Selangor where elderly Temuan could identify virtually all the living species in their forest environment: at least 1,500 species of plants, some 340 species of vertebrate animals, and thousands of invertebrates. Children started learning about these resources at a young age, with men eventually attaining more ecological knowledge than women. Males learned more about forest resources while females learned more about those in swidden fields (*ladangs*) and orchards (*dusuns*). Girls mainly learned about forest products when they were brought into the house by others. Although the girls frequently traveled through the forest, they usually collected forest plants only along their route. The girls' collecting skills were largely honed in work parties when they accompanied older women. This experience provided a rich education of local natural history:

In addition to cultigens of many varieties, the swidden clearing supports...for example, many species of gingers...that are able to grow profusely only under the shade-free conditions that the clearing provides. These invaders gradually choke the growth of cultigens so that a three or four year old *ladang* supports little planted vegetation other than *ubi kayu* [cassava]. At this stage of the natural succession, a woman visits a *ladang* primarily to harvest a...“natural crop” of wild plant invaders...

In the traditional mold, older Temuan men and women continue to assimilate new ecological information throughout their lives. [While] elderly females are...very well-informed

about many categories of forest products...their greatest expertise lies in their knowledge of *ladang* and village *dusun* resources...Sex differentials in knowledge are...conspicuous in certain domains; thus basketry and matting terminology is rich in the women's vocabulary...⁵⁹

As Dunn pointed out, floor mats themselves were made with at least nine kinds of *mengkuang* leaves (*Pandanus spp.*), the choice of leaf being determined by the size and quality of the matting desired. Curiously, however, Dunn did not comment on any midwife's knowledge of foraged plants for medicinal purposes.

Orang Asli women also became inured to working for outsiders during the British era. In an early episode of this sort, Cerruti succeeded in enticing Semai women to make Panama hats for sale. At his first mention of this scheme, they laughed at him. He laughed with them, "remarking however that as they were so clever, they would have no difficulty [in doing this] if they would...try." Later the women became discontented with his persistent talk about hats. Finally one day:

a girl, accompanied by a group of inquisitive, mocking companions, presented herself at my hut...with something in the shape of a hat...It was full of knots, puckers and other defects. The little artist was...mortified but I praised her work...and after showing her the mistakes...I gave her several bead necklaces. In a few days the hats multiplied...When some were finished they brought them to me and throwing them on the ground with a gesture of scorn cried: "There! Take your hats!" But a generous distribution of beads soon made their good temper return...and the goods produced, after having been awarded a silver medal...at Penang, were the object of general admiration at the Milan Exhibition of 1906.⁶⁰

For most of the 20th century, Orang Asli women had too little formal education or any other qualification for town employment—except perhaps in a brothel.⁶¹ By the 1970s, however, a few Orang Asli women had ventured even as far as Penang, a highly urbanized island that had not seen an Orang Asli settlement at least for several centuries.

These women were said to be nightclub hostesses (sometimes a euphemistic term for prostitutes).⁶²

Conclusion about historical writings on Orang Asli women

The real history of Malaysia contains many chapters, but here and there pieces have been lost over time, or never written at all. The historical writings on Orang Asli women presented here offer important glimpses into Malaysia's past. As seen in this chapter, Orang Asli women have been largely undervalued in the realm of leadership, work, and human dignity in general. These vignettes of the past foreshadow events of importance to the question of human dignity today in Malaysia and elsewhere.

ENDNOTES

1. See Nicholas et al., 2003, especially Chapter 3.
2. Evans, 1923, *passim*.
3. Nicholas ms., 2004.
4. Nicholas ms., 2004.
5. In a Temuan account, the first two humans turned out to be male. After they were destroyed, a reproductive pair was created, female and male (Lee Kok Joo, 1976, pp. 62-63).
6. Schebesta, 1973, pp. 220-221. A Besisi story also has an older sister (Pagar Buyuh), and a younger brother (Busuh) as the original human couple (Nowak, 2000, pp. 338-339).
7. Benjamin, 1967, pp. 39-40; Jennings, 1995, pp. 109-111. Ching kai was the first midwife. For the Semang, Ple's sister, Simei, was the first midwife and healer for women. She gave fireflies their lights so that she could see her way at night on "house calls" to women in travail (Skeat and Blagden, vol. 2, 1906, p. 213).
8. Collings, 1949 A, p. 41.
9. Azizah Kassim, 1976.
10. Laird, 1978, p. 33. A Jah Hut legend has a similar motif, but with a son as the victim (Nicholas ms., 2004).
11. Evans, 1937, pp. 167-168. However, the Batek say that two *hala'* brothers blowpiped an enormous bearcat. As they butchered it, they tossed pieces of it about, calling out the names of edible plants and animals. Wheat

- arose from blood, rice chaff from the animal's hair, and so on. The discarded veins and tendons became leeches, snakes, and millipedes—and others that cannot be eaten (Endicott, 1979, pp. 62-63).
12. Schebesta, 1973, p. 251. In another Kintak legend, Yak Kampeh, a grandmother who lived with her son Piagok, dreamt she had a son named Kebeurk Yikuk (tree fruit). When she saw a fruit on a tree the next day, Piagok climbed up to it and threw it down. The fruit cried out and a child was found in it (Evans, 1937, p. 232).
 13. van der Sluys, 2000, p. 435.
 14. Cameron, 1865, pp. 112-114.
 15. Howell, 1989, p. 253. In a Jakun version, men became pregnant in their calf and nine months later the calf was cut open to deliver the infant (Thambiah, 1999, p. 273).
 16. Howell, 1989, pp. 68-69. See also Thambiah, 1999, for women being cut open abdominally when pregnancy was mysteriously transferred to them.
 17. Maxwell, 1885-1887, pp. 62-63; see also Nicholas, 1997.
 18. Wazir, 1981.
 19. Evans, 1923, p. 206.
 20. Evans, 1923, p. 209.
 21. Couillard, 1980, p. 29-36 *passim*.
 22. Evans, 1937, p. 142. According to the Batek, when Gobar (the thunder god) went to live on Batu Keñam (the stone pillar of myth), his aunt went underground and became the earth deity; when people laugh at certain animals, she burrows up to the offenders' camp and punishes them with a spate of upwelling water (Endicott, 1979, 164-167).
 23. Evans, 1937, pp. 145-146.
 24. Newbold, 1839, vol. 2, pp. 388-389.
 25. Anderson, 1850, p. 430.
 26. Needham, 1956, p. 67.
 27. Miklucho Maclay, 1878, pp. 215-216.
 28. Schebesta, 1925.
 29. Hervey, 1882, pp. 192-193.
 30. Collings, 1949 B, p. 100.
 31. See Roseman, 1979 for a full discussion of this legend.
 32. Pelras, 1972, p. 9. Similarly, Puteri Sadung, was said to be a historical queen of the "Sakai" in Kelantan (Rentse, 1934).
 33. Wilkinson, 1911, pp. 283-289. Nathans and Winstedt (1920) recounted a traditional story that a "Sakai" batin, or chief, called Nenek Kerbau, was a woman. She was the foundress of the state of Johol.

34. Dentan, 1968, p. 68.
35. Nicholas et al., 2003.
36. Dentan, 1968, p. 96. Likewise for the Lebir Batek, being a shaman is a potentiality developed to some extent in both men and women. Batek adults can play many social roles, including the role of shaman (Endicott, 1979).
37. Evans, 1915, p. 93.
38. Carey, 1976, pp. 235 and 248.
39. Dentan, 1968, p. 85.
40. Nicholas et al., 2003, p. 21.
41. Evans, 1923, p. 244.
42. Bolton, 1973.
43. Ogilvie, 1949. A sanrong was a house with a thatched roof and a floor made of bark supported by timbers, but lacking doors or windows.
44. Benjamin, 1968, p. 34.
45. Carey, 1970, p. 145.
46. Annandale and Robinson, 1902, pp. 415-416.
47. Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, 1906, p. 374.
48. Cerruti, 1908, pp. 127-128.
49. Favre, 1865, p. 99.
50. Nicholas et al., 2003, pp. 80 and 21.
51. Shuttleworth, 1965, pp. 69-70.
52. Sjafireoddin, 1968, p. 42.
53. Skeat and Blagden, vol. 1, 1906, pp. 217-218.
54. Ibid. Pp. 359-360.
55. Ogilvie, 1948, p. 20.
56. Schebesta, 1929, p. 101.
57. Surin Pookajorn, 1991.
58. Taylor and Wong, 1987.
59. Dunn, 1975, pp. 63-64.
60. Cerruti, 1908, pp. 172-173.
61. Schebesta (1929, p. 148) heard that a European man from the Ipoh tin mines offered a Semang man 200 Mexican dollars to sell him all the Semang women in Tadoh. Immediately thereafter, all the Tadoh Semang decamped far into the forest. Schebesta suspected that this European was looking to buy the women "for the Chinese coolies in the mines."
62. Carey, 1976, p. 24.

3

Are the Jahai a
Non-Violent
People?



3 Are the Jahai a Non-Violent People?

Cornelia van der Sluys

When I went to study non-violence among the Jahai, I was very lucky to be adopted as a sister by Abong, the wife of Sennebreb, a Jahai headman on the Bukek River. He is a famous healer and singer, a *halak* (shaman) as well as a successful hunter.

The absence of quarrels or fighting among the Jahai is obvious to any outsider like myself who stays for a long time in a Jahai settlement. I never witnessed any scolding, any open quarrel, or violence against another person, although people did sometimes gossip with me about their dissatisfaction with others.

Open expressions of anger do occur, but rarely. They are never aimed at human beings. Sennebreb, for example, once took his blowpipe and ran after his wife's cat, which retreated into the bushes nearby. Whether Sennebreb really wanted to kill the cat is not clear. He did not get it, however, and eventually his anger cooled down.

This cat was the first in the village. Abong had got it from some Temiar at Tekam River, where her daughter from a previous marriage was living. Sennebreb had run after the cat because it had bitten his pet rat (*soelong*), which he kept in a large bamboo container, closed with a stone. At night the stone had rolled away, and the rat had escaped and moved freely about the house while people were sleeping. Then the cat stalked it and bit it, but it was still alive when Sennebreb woke up because of the noise. He caught his pet and protectively put it back into the bamboo.

Sennebreb also once ran into the forest in an angry mood, after his wife had rebuked him that there was no firewood to cook on, and that he was only lazing about, playing his flute. (In fact, we had just



Plate 3.1 The Jahai camp on the Bukek River. (Corry van der Sluys, ca. 1992)

recorded a beautiful piece of music by him and he was listening to it over and over.)

“Corry wants to eat,” his wife added.

On hearing his wife grumble, Sennebreg quickly packed a towel in a small shoulder bag, took his blowpipe and dart quiver, and left at a fast pace with a stern face. After he had crossed the nearby river, he obviously discovered that he had forgotten to bring his tobacco pouch. As walking in the forest without a self-rolled cigarette to smoke is almost unthinkable for a Jahai, he came back to get it but avoided calling his wife. Instead, he called me from across the river and asked me to fetch it for him, which I did.

After he had been gone for two nights, some women in the camp asked me to sing some songs in order to bring Sennebreg back. His soul would be able to listen to them, they said. I indeed sang some Dutch songs and Sennebreg came back that evening with two squirrels that he had hunted. He threw them down on the house platform in front of his wife and me. Nobody ever mentioned anything about the incident.



Plate 3.2 (left) Abong, wife of Sennebreb, at Camp Bukek. **Plate 3.3** (right) Abong with her cat. (Corry van der Sluys, ca. 1992)

Once when I was ill with a piercing pain in my chest that made it difficult to breathe, Sennebreb diagnosed this as *pacok*. *Pacok* is the piercing of the heart by small wooden needles that fly freely through the air, sent by shamans from other Orang Asli groups, such as the Temiar and Semai. They can hit a person arbitrarily. *Pacok* is dangerous and may cause death in a few days if no curing ritual occurs. Sennebreb cured me by rubbing his hands on his chest to gather an invisible cooling liquid, called *cebooh*, then blowing the *cebooh* in my chest to strengthen my heart. *Halak* obtain this *cebooh* from their spirit helpers, the *cenoi*-elves, who reside in a their own layer of the heavens.

After this curing ritual, the Jahai became closer to me, as I now also had a bit of *cebooh* in my chest. They gave me a title, *Jaja*. The meaning literally is “grandmother,” and the title is given both to elderly ladies and to someone who is respected and whom they expect to care for them.

The Jahai have many rules to avoid violence in their society. One of them is that sexual intercourse is not allowed in the daytime. While



Plate 3.4 Sennebreb with blowpipe and quiver (at waist) returning from the forest. Note cassava plants in background. (Corry van der Sluys, ca. 1992)

dogs or macaque monkeys do copulate at any time of the day, in Jahai society time is structured. The daytime is for hunting, gathering, and other activities, and the nighttime is for sleeping with one's spouse, to *tig wong* (to sleep together in order to get children). This *telan*, or taboo, on sleeping together during the daytime makes it likely that a couple will sleep together at night and not be sexually promiscuous—with a spouse of someone else. This taboo, then, promotes group harmony, by avoiding jealousy and rage. Breaking this or other taboos can lead to a thunderstorm.

Violent thunderstorms are caused by Karei, who lives above the clouds. Some Jahai say Karei makes the thunder by rolling a large spinning top, like those used by the Kelantan Malays, over bamboo platforms up in the sky, but others say he just roars with his mouth. Karei is not a 'high god,' but rather an crazy, asocial, stupid being—depicted as an enormous black monkey or ape.

When distant thunder is heard, people say, "*Karei o gurr*" (Karei, he roars). They check if their thatch roofs are rain-proof and extinguish



Plate 3.5 Abong de-lousing Sennebreb's head. (Corry van der Sluys, ca. 1992)

their fires, so as not to enrage Karei further. Then families squat close together on their bamboo platforms, waiting for the ordeal to come. And such a thunderstorm can indeed be an ordeal. Trees are wildly shaken by the howling wind, and often a healthy forest giant is felled by the storm, falling with a tremendous noise and pulling smaller trees down with it. Afterwards it lies helpless, with its big roots sticking up towards the sky. If such a tree falls on a hut, it will surely kill the inmates, and that is what Karei is after, according to the Jahai.

Karei's anger can be appeased by a blood sacrifice, in which case rainwater is collected in a bamboo container, after which a small cut is made with a sharp bamboo knife in the calf of the leg of the trespasser of a taboo. A bit of this mixture of water and blood is first sprinkled on the ground, and Talik, Karei's wife, is appealed to—to stop the storm. She has a body like a human being and is thought to live in the first layer underground. Then the rest of the mixture is thrown upwards. This is called *se' ba utuh* (to throw to the sky).

Once when a thunderstorm broke out over the camp where I was

staying, it was attributed to me photographing a *hoj*-fruit in the forest. The camera flash was supposed to have aroused Karei. Jersem, another adopted sister of mine, who was also my host, asked me to wash my hands above a plate. She and her daughter both did this too, because the three of us had been wandering in the forest looking for the *hoj*. This water was not mixed with blood, however.

“We will first try water alone,” Jersem said. “Karei is stupid, he may not notice that it does not contain blood.”

While throwing the water up, she said, “*Oh Don, Oh Ya de moh, darah kome’. Berleh kerping galong beluh.*” This roughly means, “Oh grandfather, oh grandmother, you. Blood for compensation. Take it to your dwelling place in the sky.”

According to Men’on, Jersem’s husband, Karei drinks the blood, but according to others he anoints himself with it, quite the same way that the Jahai sometimes anoint themselves with the red juice of certain berries.

In my opinion Karei can be seen as a non-human example of the danger of uncontrolled anger, which should by all means be avoided in Jahai society so that it can function smoothly without strong leadership. By depicting Karei as a despised outsider, belonging to the world of dead souls and the animal world, the idea is maintained that Jahai differ from him in all respects, and thus the non-violent character of Jahai society is upheld.

4

Under Her Wing: Portrait of a Batek Leader



4



Under Her Wings: Portrait of a Batek Leader

Karen Endicott

In 1975 Kirk Endicott and I had the good fortune to meet Tanyogn, a Batek De' woman who would teach us a great deal about life, leadership, and gender relations in a small hunting and gathering society in the rainforest of peninsular Malaysia. We didn't realize at first just how much influence she had on other Batek—and how deeply she would affect us. That knowledge came later.

We had headed up the Lebir River in the state of Kelantan to find a group of Batek De' who would be willing to let us live with them and study their way of life. We stopped at Post Lebir, a government-run settlement, and the Malay boatman who motored us upriver introduced us to a man he called *Penghulu* (headman) Peng. A member of a Batek De' group camped further upriver, *Penghulu* Peng agreed to guide us to that group, and we continued upriver together. We thought we were lucky to have run into *Penghulu* Peng—not just any Batek, but a leader.

When the boat finally stopped, *Penghulu* Peng led us up a path to a *ladang*, a clearing where several families were attempting to grow corn and the Malaysian staple root crop *ubi kayu* (cassava). The four-walled, bamboo house he shared with his wife and three young sons was larger than the eight other Malay-style houses at the clearing and certainly grander than the simple thatched lean-to shelters, *haya'*, that two of the families occupied. We gave our gifts of rice, tea, and other goods to him first, then to the other families, and we turned to him for advice and help as we pitched our tent and settled in for our fieldwork.

Within days the whole group moved from the clearing into the forest to search for wild foods and for rattan to trade. In the new setting,

the contrast between Peng and the others disappeared. He lived in a lean-to like everyone else. When people were relaxing in camp, Kirk asked Peng and some of the other men about various matters of kinship and religion. But the person who provided most of the answers was a middle-aged woman named Tanyogn. She corrected other people and added new points. Unlike many of the men and women, she displayed no hesitation or reticence. No one seemed to resent the way she took over the conversation. People let her talk.

By the time we moved to a fourth camp, more of the social dynamics emerged. Peng and Tanyogn took us with them. Only a few other families came along to this new site, a high bluff overlooking the Lebir. There was easy access to the surrounding forest, but the walk down to the river was long and steep. One afternoon we trudged downhill to bathe in the river. Swollen by the previous night's heavy rains, the river ran fast, high, and muddy. We'd have to be careful. We were about to get wet when we heard a woman screaming. Turning around, we saw Tanyogn tearing downhill toward us. "Stop! Danger!" she yelled. When she caught up to us, she warned us not to swim, that she was afraid that we would drown. We assured her we only wanted to wash off, and that we would be extra cautious. She warned us again to be careful, then headed back uphill.

It was Tanyogn, we realized, who had taken us under her wing. She was the one who orchestrated where we moved and who made sure there were enough other people around to help us and keep us safe. It wasn't long before Peng and his family went their own way, linking up with other relatives. Tanyogn and her family always took us with them.

Tanyogn was one of the approximately 350 Batek De' living in the Lebir and Aring river watersheds in 1975. Rainforest still blanketed the area, making it possible for the Batek to live by an eclectic mixture of gathering a variety of wild tubers, hunting monkeys and other game, selling rattan and other forest products to Malay and Chinese traders, and planting crops in small swiddens. The term Batek De' refers to the Batek dialect they spoke. Some also knew various other Batek dialects, and people spoke enough Malay to communicate with rural Malays, traders, shop owners, and government officials. Some Batek



Plate 4.1 Tanyogn at home. (Karen Endicott 1975)

De' lived at government settlements on the Lebir and Aring, but most preferred to keep their distance from government control by living in the forest.

During the five months we spent in the forest with Tanyogn and her husband, Langsat, we tracked the pattern of nomadic Batek life. People moved approximately once a week. Usually closely related nuclear families camped together, each family occupying a separate lean-to. Camp size averaged 36 people, but not every camp consisted of the same people. Families and individuals moved at will to link up with other relatives or pursue different economic activities. Men and women shared these decisions.

Tanyogn and Langsat normally camped with all six of their children. Their oldest son lived in a separate shelter with his wife. Their oldest daughter shared a shelter with her husband and three young children. Tanyogn and Langsat's teenaged daughter and son were old enough to live in separate lean-tos with other adolescents. Their seven- and ten-year-old sons lived with them. Much of the time Tanyogn's sister's family and several of Langsat's relatives also camped with them, sharing food and helping one another in the good times and the bad.

In some respects Tanyogn was luckier than many Batek. She had

lost only one husband and one child to disease. Some people had lost two or three spouses, and with a child mortality rate climbing at least as high as 25 percent, most had buried several children. Tanyong, approximately 48, and Langsat, in his 50s, seemed well-suited and happy together. They often worked together as they shared the responsibility for feeding and raising their children. At this point in their lives, Tanyogn was the heartier of the two. She told us that Langsat's eyesight was not as keen as it had been, so he didn't hunt or fish as often or as successfully as he had done in his younger days. It's because he's old, she explained. He could still dig for tubers, but Tanyogn was clearly the main food producer at this point in their lives. She told us with pride that Langsat was a master craftsman of blowpipes. Their respect for each other was obvious. Among their few possessions were two silver rings that Langsat kept in a pandanus pouch Tanyogn had made for him. The rings, they said, would help them find each other in the afterlife.

Born on the Relai River, Tanyogn had spent some of her childhood on the Lebir. At the time, many Malays lived in the area, cultivating swiddens along the riverbanks, and Tanyogn and her family sometimes worked for them, weeding, and harvesting rice and *ubi kayu* tubers in return for food, tobacco, and salt. Her family also traded with the Malays, supplying them with resins, rattans, thatch, medicines, and wild rubber from the forest. For a while she worked for wages cutting rice at the villages of Limau Kasturi and Gua Musang to the west along the railway line. When the Japanese war (World War II) broke out, she lived at Kuala Betis on the Nenggiri River for three months, then moved to upper Perak. After the war she married her first husband at Jeli in northern Kelantan. Their only child died at age three. After her husband died, she moved back to the Relai River and married Langsat.

Though Tanyogn was not the only Batek who grew up interacting with Malays, she seemed particularly comfortable dealing with them, and they with her. Malay traders who came to Batek camps regarded her as a *penghulu* and sought her out. If she was away from camp working in the forest, they waited for her to return, even when other Batek were present. One trader who became lost wanted her to

show him where the main path was. She did. Other traders proposed work contracts to her. She negotiated various deals whereby the Batek would supply rattans and resins in return for cash, food, knives, and various other goods.

While she was helpful to Malays, Tanyogn made sure to look after the interests and safety of the Batek. She kept a watchful eye on the traders and a protective eye on the Batek. For example, fearing that some traders would detain one of her sons and nephews who were working for them, she and Langsat went after them and brought them home. When Malays stole corn from a Batek woman's garden, Tanyogn and Langsat went to them and demanded payment on her behalf and succeeded in getting the money for her. When traders ordered the Batek to get more rattan to replace numerous bundles of rattan that had floated away in a heavy rainstorm, Tanyogn refused. They were foolish to leave the rattan in the stream, she bellowed. The Batek, she said, would have stored the rattan in the forest as they always do so it couldn't possibly wash away. She won the argument. There were plenty of other times when unscrupulous traders cheated the Batek through false measurements and inflated prices, but when Tanyogn could find a way to intervene, she did, including getting us to independently weigh trade goods on our own scales.

Despite the fact that Malays who interacted with Tanyogn acknowledged her as a *penghulu*, the government's office of aboriginal affairs, the Jabatan Orang Asli (JOA), did not for one simple reason: she was a woman. The JOA reserved the title *penghulu* for men. JOA did not dispute that there was a Batek *penghulu* named Tanyogn, but in the department's official records, this particular Tanyogn was listed as a man. The Batek were fully aware of the JOA's stance. Tanyogn and Langsat explicitly told us the JOA did not want or accept women as *penghulu*.

The Batek themselves distinguished between people the JOA designated as *penghulu*, such as Peng, and people like Tanyogn who emerged as natural leaders because of their actions and attitudes. In keeping with the egalitarian ethic that permeated Batek social, economic, and religious life, the gender of a natural leader made no difference to them.



Plate 4.2 Part of the day's work for Tanyogn. (Karen Endicott 1975)

Tanyogn exhibited natural leadership in many ways. If something needed doing, she did it, encouraging others to pitch in as well. She routinely worked hard. When she and other women dug wild tubers, she usually came back to camp with more than anyone else. When she collected rattan for trade, she hauled as much as some of men and most of the other women. Because the Batek shared the food they procured, Tanyogn's industriousness benefited the camp as a whole. She could have chosen to do less work, but that did not seem to be her nature. When she and others collected 100 or more pounds of the poisonous tuber *gadong*, she was often the primary person, and sometimes the only one, to laboriously slice, boil, and leach it to make it edible, despite the fact that everyone would eat it. She showed no resentment. She just got on with the work.

Tanyogn helped everyone in camp. She and Langsat took care of two orphaned boys. When she heard unattended children crying she rushed over to take care of them. She helped sick parents by looking after their young children. When one of her nieces arrived in camp one day, Tanyogn built a shelter for her. When she saw us slip on a muddy path, she shoveled the dirt into steps. In isolation such actions may seem small and insignificant. But, they suggest a reason why

many Batek, who believe that individuals can do and go where they please, viewed Tanyogn as a leader. People knew they could count on her. Tanyogn took everyone under her wing.

People also knew Tanyogn's advice was worth seeking. Her intelligence was obvious, her knowledge prodigious. When we asked questions about Batek life, people often referred us to her. One of the many things she knew was her own limitations. If she felt she was out of her element, she told us to put our questions to Langsat or another expert. Although she was a midwife and also treated various medical ailments, she didn't hesitate to call upon people who knew spells she didn't know. Like other Batek, she believed that when people dream they receive spells and other specialized knowledge from superhuman beings, *hala'*. She told us, for example, that one of the other women in camp was a *hala' angin*, someone who knew the spells for stopping the dangerous winds that topple trees during thunderstorms. Tanyogn said she herself was not a *hala' angin*. She did what she could during storms, which the Batek thought the thundergod Gobar unleashed as punishment against whoever broke any of a wide set of prohibitions called *lawac*. Like other Batek, Tanyogn sometimes performed a blood sacrifice, tapping her leg with a knife just enough to draw blood, then mixing the blood with water, and throwing it upward toward Gobar to propitiate him into stopping the storm. If she thought Gobar was in the wrong, she screamed at him that no one had broken any rules and that he should take the storm away.

Tanyogn had less success imposing her wishes on children. She became extremely nervous when children climbed trees and would call to them to come down before they fell. She cited a case of a man who fell out of a tree and broke his leg. The children always ignored her and everyone else who urged them to come down. Since independence was part of Batek life, she and the other adults accepted that the children didn't obey them. Rather than punishing the children, they tried to make them aware of the dangers and hoped for the best.

Tanyogn and Langsat had influence on their children in other ways. All six of the children worked energetically and capably. Even though no one expected young children to contribute to the food supply,

Tanyogn's youngest sons often accompanied her when she dug tubers or collected rattan, and they joined in the work. When Tanyogn and Langsat visited Malay traders or went downriver to towns, their sons and daughters often went with them, getting useful exposure to how to deal with the non-Batek world.

In a sense Tanyogn took the entirety of the Batek way of life under her protective wing. In an attempt to stop loggers from clearcutting the rainforest, she dictated a letter to Kirk to send to the JOA. In it she warned the JOA of a guiding principle of Batek life: that if the rain forest is destroyed, Gobar will destroy the world.

To the end, Tanyogn lived in a way that drew the admiration of the people around her, her family and the extended Batek network. In 1990, Kirk learned of her death a few years earlier. After refusing to sell a pandanus mat to a Malay who had contracted for it for RM 20 but who wanted to pay her only RM 2, she developed throat and stomach problems. Within a month she was dead. There are any number of plausible medical reasons for her death: a massive infection or even cancer from her incessant cigarette smoking. The Batek had their own explanation; people said the trader had put a fatal curse on her.

Death has not ended Tanyogn's influence. By the late 1990s her reputation had actually spread. According to anthropologist Lye Tuck Po (personal communication), other Batek groups talked of Tanyogn as the Batek who stood up to the Malays.

Tanyogn lives on in other ways as well. The Batek believe in an afterlife and that the living can communicate with the deceased through dreams. I have no doubt that she holds regular conversations with the people she cared about so much during her life. Kirk and I have certainly continued to feel the strength of Tanyogn's wisdom and caring, her sense of responsibility, and her pride in her family and the Batek way of life. We, like the Batek, continue to be under her wing.¹

ENDNOTE

1. I am indebted to Kirk Endicott for the information he contributed to this paper. To read more about the Batek see Dentan et al., 1997; Endicott, 1979; and Lye, 2004.

5

Chewong Women in Transition



5



Chewong Women in Transition:

The Effects of Monetization on a Hunter-Gatherer Society

Signe Howell¹

Chewong ideology is fundamentally egalitarian. Principles of equality underlie all their social relationships—those between individuals, between the sexes, and between humans and the many conscious non-humans in the Chewong cosmos. However, Chewong society is changing as a result of its increased interaction with other Malaysians. These changes erode the traditional egalitarian basis of Chewong society. Because Chewong men have recently acquired large windfalls of money by collecting and selling forest resources, the society has tilted to inequality between the sexes.

The social imbalance now emerging is also due to the attitudes and practices of the Chewong's neighbors, as observed by the Chewong over a long period of time. Against this background, the sudden increase in men's earnings which led directly to inequalities was easily accommodated.

Most of the recent anthropological literature on male-female relations accepts an inequality between the sexes. Most writers focus upon sex roles and the division of labor in order to understand sexual inequality. A good example can be found in Johnson and Johnson's proposition that cross-cultural differences in male-female relations can be explained as a result of work organization. Taking four South American Indian groups for comparative purposes, they assert that "...where men and women engage in complementary labor, the husband-wife bond is reinforced through cooperation and interdependence, resulting in mutuality and respect between the sexes"



Plate 5.1 Chewong women relaxing in their settlement within the Krau Wildlife Reserve. (Signe Howell 1978)

(1975, p. 646). However, this causal explanation has no necessary foundation. There is no *a priori* reason why the assumed causal link could not be reversed: What determines whether A causes B, or vice versa? In a reversed form the statement would read: “Mutuality and respect between the sexes results in complementary and reciprocal labor.”

In order to avoid such circular arguments, I will try to show that among the Chewong the relationship between the sexes, as well as the organization of labor, are manifestations of a worldview and correspond to other aspects of their culture. Rather than assuming causal relations, I will try to identify the indigenous system of rationality, its internal propositions, and its coherence. In this approach, the relationship between the sexes, and the role of women, cannot be divorced from the collective representations of the society as a whole.

First, a brief introduction to the Chewong. They are a small group of Orang Asli (indigenous people) who live deep in the tropical rain forest of the Malay Peninsula. They are hunters, gatherers, and shifting cultivators. The outside world knows them as Chewong, and they acknowledge this name in their dealings with outsiders, but among themselves they have no group name except “forest people” or just “us.”



Plate 5.2 (Left) Chewong widower in sole charge of his small children, 1981. (Right) A young couple, 1979. (Signe Howell, both)

They speak an Aslian language of the Mon-Khmer language family and are ethnically classified as Senoi. Today the Chewong number about 260 individuals, but they are split into two sections that have virtually no contact with each other. I spent most of my time with the section that continues to lead a traditional life style.

The Chewong live in small settlements scattered throughout an area of about 190 square miles inside the Krau Game Reserve of Pahang, which they regard as their traditional territory. The settlements are moved every one to three years when they clear new farm fields. A small extension may be cleared annually to an existing field, but when the field becomes large they prefer to move altogether and start afresh, rather than having to go the longer distance to collect their crops.

The main crop is tapioca (cassava), but they also cultivate bananas and plantains, sweet potatoes, chilies, tobacco, and occasionally a little hill rice and maize when a field is first cleared. They have no domestic animals except for guard dogs, which are also used for hunting. The composition of Chewong settlements changes frequently, but a settlement often consists of one or two houses occupied by an elderly couple plus one or two of their married children and their offspring.

Classification of humans and of non-human beings

Chewong social organization lacks stratification or permanent group formations. Thus there are no lineages, clans, or other formal groups. The kinship system is cognatic with bilateral terminology reflecting close genealogical rather than classificatory relations. Marriage rules do not mention either ideal or actual preferred unions. The chief social and productive unit is the nuclear family. No structural principles underlie the formation of any group or individual social relationship.

There are no leaders of any kind. The nuclear family is a self-sufficient, self-determining unit that works alongside other such units. The Chewong, then, do not acknowledge any authority beyond the individual. Although older people command a certain amount of respect, this does not mean that they can assert any authority; nor do they try to do so. People, even youngsters, frequently refuse requests for help, simply saying that they are feeling lazy. Husbands and wives discuss their activities, but if one spouse wants to do something that the other does not, he or she will either do it alone or wait until the other spouse also feels like doing it. Potentially tense situations in a household or settlement are solved long before confrontation occurs by one or more people leaving. Sometimes this involves a permanent change of residence.

The task of maintaining and recreating society as a whole rests ultimately on the individual, whose behavior is informed by a number of rules governing personal conduct and social interaction. Transgression of these rules leads to retaliation by superhuman beings in the form of disease or mishap, but never to punishment or retaliation by other Chewong.

At one level of discourse, Chewong society is co-extensive with their cosmos (Howell, 1984). I am referring to the numerous non-human beings attributed with consciousness, all of whom are said to be “our people” or “people like us.” Humans maintain temporary or permanent relationships with these beings, drawing them into most of their activities, feeding the relationships through processes of exchange. As a result, no useful distinction can be drawn between sacred and profane activities in Chewong society.



Plate 5.3 Modn, the senior woman elder in the settlement and 'fieldwork mother' of the author, making bark cloth. (Signe Howell 1978)

Although many kinds of these non-human beings exist, each is named and juxtaposed alongside the rest, rather than being organized and classified according to relative importance or status, or to attributed qualities. All are allocated a particular place in Chewong cosmology and are not compared to each other. The "self" of each category is perceived as identical to that of humans, and identical motivations, intentions, and constraints on actions are attributed to all of them (Howell, 1984, 1996). Relationships between human and non-human beings are established and maintained on an individual basis. Contact is made in dreams or induced in trance states. Both men and women make such contacts and thereby obtain spirit-guides, but men do it more often than women.

Non-violence and non-competition

One of the most striking characteristics of Chewong society is the peaceful way in which they live and conduct their affairs. This has also been commented upon by anthropologists working with other Orang Asli groups. For the Semai, Dentan (1968) called it their "non-violent image." None of the Orang Asli of the Malaysian forest has

any history of warfare, either recorded by outsiders or represented in their myths. The Chewong language has no indigenous word for war, fight, quarrel, crime, or punishment. Their reaction to encountered violence in the past has been to flee. They still live in constant fear of the outside world, but they make no preparation for defense or counterattack. In all respects the Chewong conceive of themselves as a non-violent people. This image is not an ideal to strive for, it is a social fact. They do not say “anger is bad,” but say “we do not get angry.” This is part of their conception of the Chewong person (see also Howell, 1984, 1989).

Another manifestation of non-violence is a total absence of interpersonal competition. No value is placed on being better than others at something. By the time adulthood is reached, one is expected to be proficient in all the tasks of an adult of their own sex, and most are. However, some individuals are clearly better at some things than others, or are stronger, harder working, or more successful with the blowpipe. But whenever superior abilities are manifested, these are never commented upon, nor do they give the person in question any special status within the community. Children’s games are not competitive. They play with, or alongside, each other.

Chewong culture can be understood only within the context of this overriding value placed on equality and non-aggressive interaction.

Patterns of male-female relations

I now turn to the question of the relationship between the sexes and try to show how the elements of equality and non-aggression are brought into play. In their creation myth, the shapes of a man and a woman were molded out of earth and then given breath. Because they did not know about conception and childbirth, when their first child was born, the mother died. The father was left with the baby. His wife’s ghost told him to suckle the baby at his elbow, where milk appeared. She also informed him of the taboos and restrictions connected with childbirth. Many interesting themes can be developed on the basis of this myth (see Howell, 1984), but here I restrict myself to pointing to the significance of both sexes being created



Plate 5.4 A young man making a basket while watching over his paralysed son. (Signe Howell 1981)

simultaneously and in identical fashion, as well as to the fact that rearing the first child was a shared activity. This myth exemplifies the attitudes permeating male-female relations today. The perceived significant attributes of a Chewong person are identical for men and women. Also, naming practices do not fall into gender-related categories.

Marriage is primarily regarded as a cooperative union in which the couple form a self-sufficient economic unit. Together they can accomplish all the tasks necessary for survival: clearing and planting new fields, hunting, fishing, gathering, house-building, cooking, and child rearing. Even when more than one couple lives in a settlement—and this is the usual case—each married couple performs these tasks separately, rather than forming work groups based on gender. Some jobs tend to be regarded as predominantly female or male tasks, but there is nothing that structurally prevents overlap. Hunting is the main male domain and food preparation and child-rearing the female one. Men spend at least half their time in hunting-related activities. When not on a hunting trip, they work at home repairing their blowpipes, making darts, preparing dart poison, or working on the animal traps that are erected around the farm field. Blowpipe hunting is a solitary

occupation, although sometimes boys accompany a man in order to learn the craft. Women with small children rarely join their husbands on a day-long hunting trip, but when it is decided to spend a few nights in the forest, the wife and children go as well.

Women give birth roughly every eighteen months. Although the infant mortality rate is very high, women are kept busy looking after babies and children. Babies are suckled until the next one arrives, and a woman never leaves her child by itself and rarely with female relatives. This means that most of the time she works with a small child strapped to her body. This significance of this will become apparent in the next section of this paper.

The preparation and cooking of tapioca bread is primarily a woman's responsibility. However, both sexes can, and do, participate in all activities. While women rarely went blowpipe hunting during my stay, I was told that within living memory women often hunted, and some women were said to be as good with the blowpipe as most men. Whenever women come across small animals in the forest, such as a tortoise, monitor lizard, or porcupine, they go for them with their machetes. Women help in the erection and inspection of the pig traps in the fields. Fishing and turtle hunting is done by both sexes, as is all kinds of gathering. Fathers can be seen regularly looking after their small children, strapping them to their bodies just as women do. When small children are sick, the father usually stays at home, doing his equal share in looking after them. During my stay, two middle-aged widowers had the sole responsibility of providing and caring for their small children, without any help from female relatives.

The clearing of a new field is worked shared by the couple, usually in conjunction with other couples. The men cut the larger trees and the women clear and burn off the field. The produce of the field is largely a female concern, but men frequently participate in the making of the staple, tapioca bread. They may dig the tubers, grate or bake them, or collect firewood or bamboo containers for baking the bread.

Mat weaving and basketry are again mainly female tasks, seen as analogous to the blowpipe and dart-making of men. But just as women help their husbands in preparing darts, so most men know how to weave mats and make baskets. Both men and women can erect a



Plate 5.5 Chewong women at Kuala Gandah working on the flooring of a new house during the house-building season in early 2005. (Anja Lillegraven)

lean-to in the forest. While building and repairing houses are generally shared jobs, with the husband doing the heavier work, women without husbands are perfectly able to build their own house.

A married couple spends a lot of time together. When the husband is working at home, he usually does so inside the house with his wife, keeping her company. When a woman is heavily pregnant, or just after a birth, it is the husband who helps her with the daily chores, rather than her mother or other women. During birthing, the husband acts as midwife.

The usual pattern of male-female relations goes through four stages during the lifespan. Small children spend most of their time with their mothers, as she does her daily tasks. Their playmates are children of both sexes. From age six to eight, they begin to move away from the parents towards peer groups of same-sex children, with whom they spend most of their time until they get married (Howell, 1988). After marriage, the focal point of each party's social life is that of spouse and children. Finally, as a couple grows old, they cease sleeping together, and although they fulfill their productive duties as well as they can, they no longer spend much time in each other's company, preferring that of their own sex.



Plate 5.6 Chewong with back-basket containing forest fruits lowered by male collectors in the tree above. (Colin Nicholas 2000)

What we find is that no one labor or task carries any special status among the Chewong. Unlike many other hunter-gatherer societies where, according to the literature, the activities connected with hunting are most prestigious, the Chewong make no such distinction (see also Endicott, 1980). Hunting is important, but no more so than gathering, planting, cooking, or childbearing. Some division of labor is based on a cultural acceptance of physiological fact. While men perform the tasks requiring heavy physical exertion, it is not *better* to be physically strong—it is just a fact of life. Likewise, only women may give birth and suckle babies, but this gives them no special status. In other words, while Chewong recognize differences between the sexes, they do not apply value judgments to these differences.

The main conclusion that I draw from this discussion is that in Chewong social and symbolic classification, hierarchical principles are absent. Instead, the Chewong tend to separate ideas, “things,” persons, and to juxtapose them, rather than placing them in a formalized order expressing relative value. Each is identified and named, and for the life-giving order to be achieved, it is imperative to maintain their equality. Elsewhere (Howell, 1985), I have suggested that Chewong

ideology is based on equality. Here I use the term equality as a principle of classification, as opposed to that of hierarchy.

Development and the Chewong

Given Chewong society and values, the question arises of outside influences and their effect on social organization, and, in particular, on women's place in the society's ideology. I begin by considering the impact of "development" in the sense of deliberate attempts by the national government to effect socio-economic change. In this respect, the experience of the Chewong has been rather different from that of many other Orang Asli groups in Malaysia. The government's explicit policy for Orang Asli is to integrate them into the wider society. To this end, much money and effort has been spent under the auspices of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, which has many regional offices in those parts of the country where Orang Asli live.

The Department's first task, as it sees it, is to encourage Orang Asli to abandon their small, scattered settlements, to move them to stationary villages, and to introduce them to settled agriculture. To achieve this, aid may be given in the form of plank housing, small plantations, and livestock. Educational facilities may be provided for the children, and medical services supplied. Very little of this has affected the Chewong.

When I first went to them in 1977, only one person, a woman, had ever visited the hospital outside Kuala Lumpur built specifically for Orang Asli, and no mobile medical service had ever reached them. One official from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs had visited a deep-forest settlement in the 1960's, and officials made sporadic visits later, but only to those settlements near the forest edge. No attempts had been made to move the Chewong, and no Chewong child had ever been to school. Some chickens, apparently given to outlying settlements several years before my arrival, had multiplied and found their way to the deep-forest settlements. These were reared exclusively for sale to Malay villagers. The money thus obtained belonged to the owner, either a man or a woman. When I returned to



Plate 5.7 Chewong women, with Modn in the middle, splitting rattan for sale. The women still do such work today, and for the same low prices. (Signe Howell 1981)

the Chewong in the autumn of 1981 they had stopped rearing chickens, saying it was too much trouble.

During this same period, the Department of Orang Asli Affairs made more concerted efforts to persuade the Chewong to accept their “aid.” They paid them to clear a field close to the forest boundary and plant the fruit trees they provided. The idea was that the Chewong should tend the trees and sell the fruit, thus initiating a cash-crop economy. It was envisioned that new permanent villages would be built and that small rubber plantations would be given to them. However, the Chewong were not interested in becoming settled farmers.

“This is not our way,” they explained anxiously to me, adding, “We do not look after our crops. We like to move around, to hunt, and to go to the wild fruit trees when they are in season.” The field that had been cleared under the supervision of the Department had been abandoned and was overgrown by the time I arrived. The Chewong thus showed little interest in changing their traditional way of life. However, they appeared to be interested in obtaining money—as long as this was on their own terms, without interference from outsiders.²



Plate 5.8 Young Chewong mother processing (low-value) rattan into strips for sale. The harvesting of the heavier, higher-valued Malacca cane solely by the men has had an impact on Chewong gender relations. (Colin Nicholas 2000)

Traditional economic activities and the Malacca cane trade

Apart from two Chewong men who received a monthly salary from the Game Department to maintain a small hut for use by employees on tours of duty, the only means available to the rest for obtaining cash is by selling forest produce. For the first year after my original arrival, the only produce sold was a species of rattan, about half an inch in diameter, which they collected in long strips and cut into seven-foot lengths. Each piece was then cut lengthwise into quarters and stripped. These canes were gathered into bundles of 100 lengths and sold for RM 1.60 a bundle. This cane grows in abundance in the forest, and men, women, and older children can gather it and prepare it for sale without much difficulty. The person who collects and prepares the cane also sells it and keeps the money for him/herself. People usually work alongside each other to produce between 10 and 20 bundles each and go together to the trading station to sell their produce and purchase goods there.

Everyone obtained roughly the same amount of cash, between RM 16 and RM 32 each time. People also tended to buy the same goods:

salt, a sarong or shorts, some rice, biscuits, kerosene for their lamps, tobacco, and sometimes a knife, axe-head, or machete. Occasionally all the money was spent on a more expensive item, such as an iron cooking pot. Whereas durables belong to the individual, all foodstuffs were shared out among members of the settlement upon the return of the sellers.

Members of the settlement closest to the forest edge sold rattan more regularly, and as a result ate rice more frequently and had more saucepans and clothes than those living deeper in the forest, who visited the shops less often. This produced an inequality between settlements, but not between individuals within a settlement. It certainly did not establish differences between the sexes.

Towards the end of my first year with the Chewong (1978), a major change occurred in their economic activities that had structural ramifications. A different species of cane was now sold, Malacca cane, which is about two inches in diameter and very supple. It is used for making furniture, and the demands of the Malaysian furniture industry have made it largely extinct in the Peninsula. It does grow, however, in large quantities in the Krau Game Reserve, and Chinese traders had long tried to persuade the Chewong to collect it for sale. Even though traders offered the same price for one length of Malacca cane as for 100 strips of the other kind, Chewong refused to cut it down on the grounds that it had *ruwai*, i.e., was a conscious non-human being, "people." To cut it would be to kill a person, and this, it was believed, would lead to human illness and death.

One day, however, two young men succumbed to the temptation of easy money, and the first fruits of their transgression were readily visible in the shape of radios, cassette recorders, and clothing. The rest of the Chewong community observed their behavior with horror, and news of it spread rapidly to all settlements. Everywhere it was discussed in terms of imminent disaster. But nothing appeared to happen, and the men sold another lot the next week and brought other undreamed-of goods back with them. The third week saw some older men from the same settlement also collecting and selling the cane. A few days later, a man met a superhuman being in a dream who informed him that the Chewong were mistaken in believing

Malacca canes were “people;” rather they were the sweet potatoes of some kinds of non-human conscious beings of the forest. Thus, cutting the cane deprived these beings of their food, but it did not constitute killing people, and the cutting could be compensated for by offering these beings substitute food in the form of incense smoke. Cutting thereby lost its serious implications, and within the next two weeks all Chewong men were busily selling the cane. Each evening, before going out to cut it, they would make a ritual offering of incense smoke to the beings whose food they were about to take.

I have mentioned only the men’s participation in this activity. This requires some elaboration. The work involved in collecting Malacca cane is more arduous than that required for the other types of cane, which everyone could manage. Malacca cane is much larger and heavier. Since it is sold in 10-foot lengths that are not quartered or stripped, it is also cumbersome to carry long distances. Further, Malacca cane grows more sparsely over large areas. These two factors meant that physical strength became paramount in this work, and hence women became excluded. It was difficult for them to carry the cane and their infants at the same time, and pregnant women could not cope either. Unable to search for it themselves, women could not even assist their husbands by splitting and stripping it, as they sometimes did with the smaller cane if they were pregnant or had small children, in order to secure a share of any money earned. Malacca cane is just cut, carried, and sold. The women were therefore excluded from this new-found wealth from the start. But other factors also contributed to their exclusion, and to understand these it is necessary to examine the history of Chewong interaction with the outside world.

Relations with non-Chewong

It is a well-documented fact that until as late as the end of the 19th century, it was the practice of Malays “to hunt the Sakais like wild beasts and endeavour to catch and enslave them” (Wray, 1890). The captured Orang Asli were sold as slaves and, according to Endicott (1983), slave labor—especially in agriculture before British



Plate 5.9 Chewong boy singing along to the tune on the radio, one of the many desired items that prompt the Chewong to seek new ways to earn cash. (Colin Nicholas 2005)

intervention—was a crucial underpinning to the traditional social-political system, providing the surplus necessary to maintain the ruling class. Usually only the women and children were captured. The men were considered as having no value, “being untamable” (Maxwell 1880: 46).

Everyone who has contact with Orang Asli is told about Malay slave hunting in the old days, and indeed it was among the first pieces of information I collected. According to the Chewong, the Malays mainly wanted women as concubines, but they also took small children of either sex. The men were killed or they fled. They never fought back, being—according to most—too frightened. These stories are kept alive in everyone’s memory, and children are constantly threatened by tales of how Malays will come and take them away.

Elsewhere I have suggested that these continued references to Malay raids encourage Chewong fearfulness (Howell, 1981, 1989). What is important here is that Chewong maintain, and feed, their fear of the outside world by retelling how they were (and are) exploited by it, and that Chewong women have most to fear.

Thus when I first came to live with the Chewong, the women were



Plate 5.10 Chewong women helping out in the birthing at home. The husband has initially acted as the midwife before giving the task to the women. Despite the changing economic relations, some traditional practices still persist.³ (Anja Lillegraven 2005)

more shy of me than were the men, and the women disliked, even more so than the men, to descend to the trading station. Some women had never ventured outside the forest and refused to do so on the grounds that Malay and Chinese men would try to attack or harass them. When the occasional Malay or Chinese (always men) entered the forest, all the people of a settlement fled in panic at their approach. If taken unawares by intruders, the women immediately pull up their sarongs to cover their breasts. They know that naked breasts are regarded as unacceptable by Malays and Chinese, and they believe that the sight of them is likely to provoke the men to attack.

Similarly, while rape and prostitution are unknown among the Chewong themselves, stories circulate of Chinese men willing to pay to have sexual intercourse with Orang Asli women.

These examples suggest that Chewong women have learned, through received ideas and their experience of the outside male world, to regard themselves as particularly vulnerable in it, in ways qualitatively different from that experienced by the men. This affects the way the women perceive themselves as a group, relative to Chewong men.

Other factors, too, have contributed towards a differentiation between the sexes within Chewong culture. Chewong are not ignorant of many of the customs of their neighbors. They know that headmen exist in the political system of the Malay villages. Furthermore, government offices, the army, and Malay royal courts are not only stratified, they are dominated by men. The Chewong talk about these situations among themselves, usually contrasting them to their own traditions and practices. Moreover, after they were contacted by the British, first by a game warden in 1936, they saw only British men for decades, mostly officials and soldiers during the Emergency period of Communist rebellion in the early 1950s. They had not seen a European woman until I arrived.

The British officials, in accordance with their policy towards Orang Asli, appointed a headman of each “tribe” and gave him a small stipend. They automatically appointed a man, usually one who could speak some Malay and was assumed to be the group leader. Their focus on male authority was continued by the Malaysian government after independence in 1957. Furthermore, the British wished to census all Orang Asli, and they issued identity cards to everyone they met. In the 1950s the card bearers were listed by their name, followed by daughter/son of their father’s name, as was the Malay practice, e.g., Modn binti Jareng. The Chewong proffer these names when names are requested by outsiders. They do not, however, use these names among themselves. Only the personal name is used. But the mere existence of official patronyms, I argue, reinforces an orientation towards male importance.

Let me restate the main points that laid the foundation, as it were, for a development towards a dichotomization of Chewong gender, with authority devolving upon men. First, women felt particularly vulnerable to attacks from the outside in the past when they, and not men, were taken as slaves. Second, women continue to feel vulnerable in their dealings with the outside world—represented as it is by men (Malay and Chinese). They believe, with some justification, that these men regard them as sexual objects to be taken advantage of should the opportunity arise. This leads them to avoid going to the trading station, for fear of sexual harassment. Third, Chewong knowledge of



Plate 5.11 Chewong women packing fern shoots for sale to a middleman. Previously consumed as subsistence foods, vegetables such as these are now turned into commodities by the women. (Anja Lillegraven 2005)

male prominence in the public domain among Malays and Chinese has implicitly provided them with a model for their own behavior. Only indigenous men were named as leaders, and everyone was given a patronym. Fourth, contact with the British, although not constituting a sexual threat, nevertheless reinforced the male-oriented bias in that no British women were seen.

Despite these forces, Chewong ideology continued to be permeated by the principle of equality. As long as they led their traditional life, having little contact with outsiders, indigenous values and practices were not seriously threatened. The idea of equality not only endured in gender relations, it also shaped the relations between individuals, between humans and superhumans, and between the various categories of superhuman beings. The emergence of the Malacca cane trade, however, introduced changes affecting Chewong ideology. I will examine these next.

Effects of the Malacca cane trade

Within four weeks of the first sale of Malacca cane, every Chewong man was engaged in collecting and selling it. Its procurement dominated

their whole working life. They abandoned hunting, gathering, and all their other normal tasks. They were up early every morning in search of cane and returned home late in the evening with their “haul.” In contrast to traditional work, including hunting, all of which were carried out singly or at most in pairs, all the men of each settlement searched for cane together. As they exhausted the supply close to the settlements, they began to stay away for several days and nights, erecting lean-tos and carrying their bundles in stages back home. They did not begin to cooperate, but they worked together in much larger groups than before, each man collecting and carrying his own lengths of cane. The men who lived in the forest-edge settlements went to the trading stations every week for the first few weeks, bringing back with them radios and other consumer goods.

As the cane in their vicinity disappeared, the men had to search deeper inside the forest, and bringing out the cane became increasingly difficult. Men who lived in the remote forest settlements alternated between bringing cane all the way out by carrying it in stages, building rafts to transport it on the rivers, or joining other Chewong in their search nearer the edge. Everyone had equal access to all the cane inside the Chewong territory; it is communal property (see below).

While this activity was going on, the women and children found themselves left to their own devices. They continued their activities as before, but much of their conversation began to center on the cane-collecting work of the men. For the first time I became aware of blanket, gender-based generalizations. “The men are going to buy radios,” or “Women cannot obtain such sums of money,” and similar remarks began to abound. Two distinct spheres of interest became explicit. Furthermore, the women seemed to accept their new, passive role with no resentment. Suddenly the role of husband took on a new meaning, that of a provider of gifts. Whereas women until then had collected their own money to buy themselves a new sarong or saucepan, I began to hear them expressing hopes that their husbands would do so. Chewong women were beginning to see themselves less as independent agents and more as dependents on their husbands.

At the same time, a concept of “bridewealth” was taking on importance. For example, younger people began to talk in terms of

what goods, and even money, should be paid by a prospective husband to his parents-in-law, as well as to his bride. Old people were uneasy whenever this topic was discussed. "This was not how it was in our time," they would say. "If people liked each other, they slept together and became husband and wife. There was no problem about weddings or things being given." It was my impression that, traditionally, a young man would request a daughter from both parents, usually after agreement had been reached between the young people. A small gift might accompany this request.

The question of exchange of goods brings us to another point of interest in the present context, namely the Chewong practice of sharing food. A rule governing behavior, and one that is instilled early in children and strictly adhered to by adults, is the rule of *punén*, by which it is prescribed that one must bring back all foodstuffs caught or found in the forest and distribute them in equal portions among all those present. Conversely, it is forbidden to nurture or provoke unfulfilled desires. Transgression leads to illness or attack by a tiger, snake, or poisonous centipede. The Chewong are diligent in adhering to this rule, the one "sin" in their eyes is to "eat alone." Also, other forest produce brought "from afar," as opposed to "close by," is subject to the *punén* injunction. Examples are bamboo used for baking tapioca bread, and water, whenever the nearby river dries out. Even the smallest amount brought back has to be shared out. This is in contrast to what we are told about other hunting societies, whereby only the large animals must be shared. I have seen one squirrel being shared amongst eleven people, and one durian fruit similarly cut into minute pieces. The produce procured by men and women is equally subject to the rule of *punén*, and no status can be obtained by one gender group in favor of another in these terms. The rule specifies the necessity to share, not who does the sharing or who receives.

Goods bought in shops are not incorporated into the *punén* category. Money is not *punén*, nor are goods obtained with money. Bought food occupies a slightly ambivalent position. Chewong seem to feel that rice and biscuits, the two commodities bought in large quantities, should be shared amongst members of the same settlement, but this is not done in the guise of *punén*. Everyone does not receive



Plate 5.12. Chewong woman showing young girls how to open the durian fruit. They were visiting the hamlet of a relative in order to have a share of the durian harvest. (Colin Nicholas 2005)

equal shares, and the owner keeps a much larger quantity to himself. This gives rise to some mutterings, but people seem unable to rectify the situation. This problem does not arise for other kinds of purchased goods. It does not occur to anyone to suggest that a person should share his radio or his clothes. These belong exclusively to the person who bought them. It seemed that those who had money preferred to buy the kinds of goods that did not present a problem in terms of ownership, although no one stated this explicitly.

A few remarks must be made about Chewong notions of property. The forest in which they live belongs to everyone. Anyone may live anywhere, clear fields anywhere, hunt anywhere, and gather anywhere. Appropriation of areas, or produce, of the land is impossible. Wild fruit trees can be harvested by anyone. The only restriction concerns sharing foraged food. For cultivated food, there is some ambiguity in Chewong attitudes. While they state unequivocally that even visitors from other settlements may help themselves to planted tapioca or to fruits or vegetables, they nevertheless know who cleared and planted which area or which trees. The onus is upon the “owner” to give freely rather than for

visitors to just help themselves, but there is no rule that forbids taking produce from cultivated land. The degree of casualness with which people help themselves to such produce seems to be related to the informality of the personal relationship. That is, members of the same settlement dig tapioca anywhere, whenever they need it, although they always make a public statement of their intention. When Chewong visited less familiar settlements, I noticed that their behavior was much more restrained in these and other respects, than was the case in places they visited frequently.

The fruits of nature are thus freely available with the proviso that they are shared out when harvested, while those of cultivation occupy a slightly ambiguous position.⁴ Tools and hunting equipment, as well as clothing, are individually owned, and to help oneself to any of them would constitute theft. While people do respect each others' personal property, such goods were, prior to the Malacca cane trade, fairly evenly distributed amongst all adult Chewong.

To conclude this section, let us examine the situation as it was when the Malacca cane trade had existed for about eight months—the time that I left the field. By this time every Chewong man was active in the trade and had acquired at least one radio and cassette recorder. The men had several shirts and pairs of pants, and their stock of knives, axe heads, and so on, had multiplied dramatically.

The women, by contrast, did not own a single piece of audio equipment. If their personal belongings had increased, it was because their husbands had chosen to give them things. With few exceptions, the women had stopped producing the smaller cane for sale, saying that it was not worth it. In real financial terms, the women were thus worse off than before. From the point of view of social relations, it was too soon to say if men began to exercise authority over women. Certainly, selling Malacca cane had eclipsed all other economic activities, and as this work was exclusively male and resulted in a large amount of goods owned exclusively by men, all members of the society were focused on this trade and the amazing goods that resulted from it. While women were preoccupied with these goods as well, they were spectators, not participants.

Another effect can be discerned. Not only did the categories of

male and female thereby become dichotomized, but also among the men the prevailing egalitarian status began to be upset. Some men, either because they chose to live closer to the forest boundary or because they were more eager to work hard, acquired more goods than other men. Again, it was too soon to say what the social effects of this difference would be, but it is a recognized fact that certain men were more energetic in obtaining money than others. These men, whether as a cause or effect, were also able to interact with the Malay and Chinese traders in a more relaxed way than the rest, a fact that elicited comment by others (see Howell, 2002 for an update on this situation).

When I returned to the Chewong in September 1981, the Malacca cane trade had ceased almost entirely. Its place had been taken by a trade in agila wood, a commodity for which the Arabs pay very high prices. This wood is found in diseased agila trees, and a tree has to be chopped down and then hacked to bits in search of the diseased parts. A small chunk of well-scented agila wood yields its finder up to RM 500. Such sums were much higher than the amount obtained from the Malacca cane trade, and this was the main reason given to me why the Chewong had turned to searching for this wood. Also, the latter involved much less hard work. This meant that Chewong women were able to participate on a par with the men. The procedure for obtaining agila wood was as follows: whenever anyone came across an agila tree in the forest, s/he would either chop it down if they had an axe at hand, or they would inform the settlement that they had found it. Depending on how far away the tree was, someone—not necessarily the person who had found or felled it—would go the next day and hack it up for diseased parts. Sometimes a whole settlement would go—men, women, and children—with their axes and machetes. They would all position themselves along the trunk and start hacking. As soon as someone found a dark (diseased) bit s/he summoned the rest and a frantic search began at that spot. Whoever actually cut loose a piece became its owner.

Three features emerged from the agila trade. First, the men seemed to find larger quantities than the women. I did not measure actual time spent by different people, but it seemed that men spent more



Plate 5.13. Chewong selling Grade B agarwood (the aromatic heartwood of *Aguilár* or *gaharu* trees) to a trader. This small quantity (1.4kg) earned the work-team of four men a sum of RM2,328. (Colin Nicholas 2005)

time looking for the wood than the women did, although not sufficiently more to account for their larger hauls. Second, I noticed a slightly patronizing tone in men's discussion of women's finds. This was a totally new phenomenon. Third, consumer durables continued to be a male preoccupation. Even when women obtained fairly large sums of money, they never bought radios, records, or the like, but spent all their money on rice, tinned food, biscuits, and sarongs. These foodstuffs continued to be subject to some form of uneasy distribution. Shop-bought food took on a new status. It was no longer shared equally among all settlement inhabitants, only some was distributed; the main part was kept for the buyer's family.

Future of Chewong male-female relations

It is difficult to draw conclusions about general trends from what has happened so far. It is still too soon to determine what actually is changing, if anything. Nevertheless, there are sufficient indications to allow a few tentative predictions. We have seen that Chewong ideas and practices conform to a strong egalitarian model. There are no

leaders or chiefs of any kind, and while men and women are socially recognized as different, the opposition is complementary rather than hierarchical, and no further symbolic divisions are made on the basis of it. That is, Chewong society was traditionally egalitarian in the sense that no individuals or groups were in any way subordinate—either politically, economically, or symbolically—to other individuals or groups. Everyone could be said to participate in the production of life, with no one task being more highly valued than any other.

While Chewong live sociably together, social organization is based on the nuclear family. Rather than the community being the main productive unit, the family is. It is linked to other families through an informal system of exchange and general distribution. And private property has long existed, albeit to a limited extent. Indeed, there is a strong emphasis on the individual and on individual ownership among the Chewong. Although all members of a group could apparently always help themselves to cultivated crops and to food brought back from the forest, in practice I found this required first asking permission from the cultivator or gatherer, always referred to as the owner. The onus lay on the owner to share, not on the others to help themselves, and there was never any doubt as to who had cleared a field or planted a particular tree. I was constantly alerted during our walks through the forest by remarks like: “This is where my grandmother had tapioca fields,” or “X’s uncle planted tobacco on this spot.” Indeed, both men and women might claim ownership of cultivated produce or the tools of production, and no person stood out over time as having significantly more than anyone else. As I have shown, everyone participated freely in all activities and there was no division into a public and a private domain; the two were intertwined.

It remains to examine the effects of monetization on Chewong society. It is clear that Chewong men rather than women have been able to take advantage of the new economic opportunities. Only men participated in the Malacca cane trade, and they continued to dominate the subsequent sale of agila wood. As a result, they accumulated large quantities of individually owned consumer goods. This new kind of male property has attracted everyone’s attention and colors all social intercourse. And the new kind of labor has led to a sexually

based division in which, implicitly, the male domain is becoming the most important. Furthermore, imbalances in property ownership and in the ability to deal with outsiders are also becoming apparent among the men themselves. It is unclear if the former egalitarian ideology will give way to some form of political hierarchy based on the new economic hierarchy, but it is clear that some men take it upon themselves to negotiate on behalf of the rest. They are the ones who have entered most actively into the new cash economy.

All this seems to be leading to an asymmetry in gender relations. This may eventually lead to a separation of a private domain from a public one, with the women being allocated to the former at a subordinate level in terms of ideology. In addition, we have seen that through their interaction with outsiders over a long period of time, Chewong men and women were provided with alien models in which domestic and private domains were clearly differentiated. The domestic, represented by women, was seen to be subordinated to the public one, represented by men. Furthermore, historically in their dealings with members of outside societies—Malays, Chinese, and British—Chewong women more than the men were made to feel insecure and vulnerable.

In summary, there are indications that Chewong society is becoming stratified among sexual lines, and that some men are beginning to emerge as leaders. If the interaction between the Chewong and the outside world continues, I believe this process of stratification will continue, perhaps irreversibly.⁵

ENDNOTES

1. This is a revised versions of a paper originally published in: *Women and Development in Southeast Asia*, Occasional Papers 1. Centre of South-East Asian Studies, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK, 1983, pp. 46-80. I originally conducted fieldwork among the Chewong for 18 months between 1977 and 1979 and made subsequent visits in 1981, 1990, 1994, 1997, and 2001.
2. For a description and analysis of the more recent situation among Chewong, see Howell, 2003.

3. This photo is used with the expressed consent of the Chewong mother concerned.
4. While all Chewong may help themselves freely to the produce of the forest area that they regard as their traditional territory, this right does not extend to other Orang Asli or to outsiders.
5. Recent fieldwork has shown that, while my predictions have been largely borne out, the situation has developed in unexpected ways. While it looked for a while as if the encounter with the national and global economy, coupled to official policy of settling Chewong and introducing the children to (second-rate) education would lead to a commonly observed scenario of poverty and marginalisation, recent events among Chewong belie this. During the 1990s Chewong made a cultural choice to return to their old ways. How long they will be able to continue this remains an open question (Howell, 2002).

6

What Happened to the Female Midwives?



6 What Happened to the Female Midwives? Gender, Childbirth, and Change in Semelai Society

Rosemary Gianno

In July, 1980, soon after I began fieldwork in Semelai communities at Tasek Bera, a huge wetland in southwestern Pahang, I was invited to attend a home birth. Several people were already sitting in the little house chewing betel when I arrived. Moni was about to give birth. She was being aided by Nyek, an elderly female midwife who was married to the chief headman for the complex of villages around the government post, Pos Iskandar at Tasek Bera. Moni alternately sat up with her back against the wall and lay down with her knees bent. The lower part of her torso was covered by a sarong at all times. Nyek periodically massaged Moni's abdomen. Initially, Linau, Moni's husband, was underneath the house, digging a hole below where Moni was sitting so that any bodily fluids would fall through the bamboo-slat floor and into the hole. He placed thorny leaves and branches over the hole to prevent access to roving dogs and chickens. All of a sudden (or at least it appeared that way to me), a healthy infant girl was born. But no one touched her. Soon after, the placenta appeared. Only then could the umbilical cord be cut by Nyek and the child picked up and bathed. The mother and child were out of danger; the birth had gone well.

At the time, I knew that there were both female and male Semelai midwives (also known as traditional birth attendants), but I didn't think much about it. The focus of my anthropological study was the collection of resins and other rainforest products by the Semelai.

When I returned to Tasek Bera for two months in 1992, my research interests had changed from forest-products to gender roles and

ideology in Semelai society. By that time, Nyek had died. In fact, I learned that there were no longer *any* practicing female midwives at Tasek Bera. I was told that after the older female midwives had died, younger women had not taken their place “because women are not brave enough.” When I asked why women in the past were brave while women of today were not, people were at a loss for an answer.

While having male and female midwives is very unusual cross-culturally, having only male midwives is even more unusual. This chapter presents some of the results of my study. A fuller analysis and discussion can be found in Gianni (2004).

The Semelai of Peninsular Malaysia

Historically, the Semelai (about 5,000 people) were shifting cultivators as well as traders of forest products (Gianno, 1990) who lived in the low-lying, swampy region that straddles eastern Negeri Sembilan and southwestern Pahang. As an Orang Asli cultural group speaking an Aslian (Mon-Khmer, Austroasiatic) language, Semelai share cultural and linguistic roots with the Semai, Temiar, and some other egalitarian swiddening or hunting-gathering societies in Peninsular Malaysia (Benjamin, 1985). However, although not Muslim, Semelai culture—like that of the Orang Hulu (Jakun) and other southern Orang Asli groups—also has features in common with Muslim Malay culture, both in general orientation (Benjamin, 2002) and in terms of gender relations. In terms of political structure, while oral histories emphasize hereditary political offices, generally speaking, there appears to have been little political integration among Semelai speakers.

During the last 150 years, the period for which we have records, Semelai have had to adapt to a series of external forces, including slave raiding (Endicott, 1983), World War II, the Malayan Communist Emergency (1948-1960), logging, and the expropriation of their land for plantations and homesteaders. Prior to the 1950s, very small clusters of Semelai households with adjoining swiddens were spread thinly over the landscape. Individual households were fairly autonomous and subsistence-oriented. From the time of the

Emergency, however, there has been government pressure to establish permanent villages, thus allowing outsiders to colonize and exploit the vacated land. As the insulation afforded by the forests and swamps disappeared, Semelai came even more within the sphere of governmental control.

Since 1980, each time I returned and traveled on the road leading to Pos Iskandar, I saw that additional forest had been cleared, replaced by miles and miles of oil palm and rubber tree stands, mostly in governmental FELDA (subsidized plantation) schemes for Malay homesteaders. As a result, most Semelai today cannot practice subsistence agriculture or access the resources left in diminishing forests. They must now depend upon cash income, in most cases from their own rubber holdings or wage labor. Many younger Semelai now live away from their homeland.

A Semelai child is born

Because of my findings in 1992, I returned to Malaysia in 1997-1998 to conduct an investigation of Semelai childbirth, midwifery, and gender. Unfortunately, I was unable to proceed with the study as designed because it had become far more difficult to obtain research permission from the state of Pahang to conduct research with Orang Asli groups, including the Semelai. Because the neighboring state of Negeri Sembilan did allow such research, I instead spent seven months in Sungai Sampo, a Semelai settlement located near the Pahang border. Subsequent to that, I spent two months at Tasek Bera as a consultant for Wetlands International.

While my stay in Sungai Sampo was informative and valuable, I was only able to witness one home birth there: the birth of Samjil. Because the Sungai Sampo area has never been as isolated and inaccessible as Tasek Bera, over the years it has been much more influenced by the outside world. For example, in Sungai Sampo most Semelai women receive some form of family planning and most now give birth in hospitals or are attended by government midwives. Some of these women welcome these options. However, a few have resisted this outside pressure and have chosen to deliver their children in their



Plate 6.1 Yanah Sujin making sticky rice with tumeric for a circumcision feast, Kampong Bapak, Tasek Bera, Pahang, 1982. (Rosemary Gianni)

own homes with a birth attendant with whom they are familiar. Here is a brief description of one such instance: the birth of Samjil.¹

Jumah was eighteen years old when she married Wim. Jumah had had her first child, a boy, the following year. He was born at Kuala Pilah Hospital, about an hour away from her village. Her second child, a girl, had been born at home with the assistance of Ranil, her father-in-law, and Tung, her uncle. Jumah said she preferred giving birth in the village because the midwives there massage and help push the baby out of the womb. Also, the village midwives have a lot of incantations that can help in the event of complications. Samjil was born to Jumah and Wim in March, 1998, in Sungai Sampo when Jumah was twenty-one years old.

Wim's father, Ranil, was a midwife of long standing. Tung, also an older man, was apprenticing with Ranil. While there had been both male and female midwives at Sungai Sampo in the past, by 1997 Ranil was the only experienced midwife remaining in the village of about 650 people. (He died in September, 2003.)

Jumah also said that she preferred giving birth at home because, at the hospital, an episiotomy (a cut in the vaginal opening) is routinely



Plate 6.2 Baby 'Samjil' having his head shaven in accordance with Semelai tradition. Both boys and girls have their heads shaved, but in different styles. (Rosemary Gianni 1998)

performed and women are left alone to labor until the final moments. For home births, in contrast, there is plenty of social support and no cutting is done. Jumah also had great faith in the abilities of her father-in-law.

Jumah's labor pains began on a morning in March. A neighbor from across the way came over for a while with her children. Wim was around most of the time. That evening, Wim and his cousins, Rajim and Do'ham—three men—made dinner. After dinner, Jumah's older sister and female cousin came for a brief visit, as did Wim's mother, sister, and his nieces from next door. Ranil was called over to check Jumah's progress, which he did by external examination only. He said that the birth probably would not be until the next day. Jumah's mother did not come to see her. I was told that she was restricted to her home because of prohibitions associated with a *typpuy* (a healing ritual that uses a ball of rice flour to extract illness) that Wim had performed on her the night before.

Subsequently, Jumah's mother told me that she didn't go there because she does not like Wim's family. She felt that they are very ungenerous and that Wim gives most of the money he earns to his

parents instead of spending it on his wife and children. It became clear to me that there was a history of mutual suspicion between the two families. Wim and Jumah's marriage had brought these families into greater proximity, exacerbating their resentments and making the conduct of the marriage within the context of affinal relations that much more difficult.

Jumah was perspiring and in great pain through the course of the night. Wim, Rajim, the two children, and I all stayed in the house with her. At 5 a.m. the next morning, Wim went to get Ranil again. Ranil applied pressure to the right side of Jumah's abdomen to insure that the baby was aligned correctly in the birth canal. Palong, Jumah's uncle, arrived soon thereafter. He was still learning about childbirth attendance from Ranil.

At about 6:15 a.m., Samjil, a boy, was born. Again, no one touched the child or celebrated the birth until the placenta was expelled from the womb. Palong cut the umbilical cord. Only then did Wim's sisters and mother, in the house immediately next door, return to help bathe the newborn and celebrate the birth.

What to make of this male-dominated birth event? Are the Semelai so sexist in their ideology and practices that even birth assistance is outside of the realm of female competence or power? It is difficult to analyze a particular instance like this when opportunities to witness the social processes surrounding actual births are so limited. However, I will try to provide some cultural context for what transpired.

Gender, social status, and midwifery in Semelai society

Assessing the distribution of power and authority relative to gender in a society is problematic. Much of what goes on between husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, or parents and children is private, difficult to elicit and even more difficult to interpret. What is said publicly may be distorted for social advantage. As an outsider, I'm not sure I can say exactly where women stand relative to men. But it seems fairly clear that Semelai women have been losing status relative to Semelai men.

Semelai men, in order to marry, must be circumcised sometime around puberty. There is usually a large feast and, traditionally, extended drinking parties associated with the occasion. In addition to being a sign of ethnicity (see Gianni, 1997), Semelai circumcision provides an occasion for young men to display their courage in the face of pain and blood. While one could point out that giving birth gives young Semelai women a comparable opportunity to demonstrate their courage, little is said about women having to have courage in order to give birth. This point has implications for our discussion later on.

As in many other Southeast Asian societies, the Semelai define the roles of husbands and wives in marriage as complementary. Women do much more childcare and are associated to a larger extent with the domestic realm and the swidden field. Women collect firewood and materials from the forest to make baskets and mats. Men dominate in terms of the forest: they are the hunters, they tend to be the makers and users of animal traps (although women sometimes use fish traps made for them by men), and they do most of the collecting of forest products for sale (although women, if they have no small child to care for, often go with their husbands to collect resin or rattan).

In agriculture, a gendered division of labor is also important: men fell the large trees, women slash the underbrush; men fire the swidden; men use dibble sticks to punch holes in the soil for the rice and legume seeds while women follow with a small seed basket attached to a string around their waists and drop a few grains into each hole. Both sexes plant cuttings from vegetatively propagated plants, such as cassava, banana, and tuba (*Derris* spp.). Both weed—to the extent that weeding is done.

Women are considered to be more nimble at reaping the ripening rice. They do it (out in the blazing sun) with finger-knives while, most of the time, men stay home caring for the children and threshing the rice panicles by stomping on them. When infants need to nurse they are carried out, with an umbrella to shield them from the sun, to the mothers cutting the rice.

Even though the division of labor is clear, an important dimension of it is the fact that men can, if needed, cross over to do any of the women's jobs (witness the three men cooking dinner), and vice versa.

If there were no women to reap the harvest, men would use the finger-knives, and so on.

However, in the realm of decision-making, it is not always clear who really has the power in a marriage. In the case of Jumah and Wim, for example, Jumah seemed uncomfortable with Wim's family and yet was happy to have Wim's father as her midwife. While she claimed that having Ranil attend the birth was her decision, it is possible that this was also partly driven by aspirations on Wim's part to become a midwife as well as being an incantor (magician). When his father was not there, Wim had been the person primarily in attendance.

In the realm of achieved social status in Semelai society, gender complementarity or equality was not evident. While women were not prohibited from being shamans, circumcisors, incantors, or shamanic drummers, or prohibited from holding political offices (*baten*, *mentri'*, and *jrukrah*), there were few women if any in these roles. No gender prohibitions existed on any achieved statuses but men tended to dominate all of them except, until recently, midwifery. However, there is some evidence that there had been women in these status roles in the past.

Orang Asli interactions with state biomedicine

During the same period that Semelai midwives have become predominantly male, the Malaysian government has had a policy of expanding state-sponsored biomedicine into rural (mostly Muslim Malay) areas. Is there a causal relationship here? Let us briefly review some of the history of interaction between Semelai and other Orang Asli with colonial and post-colonial state biomedicine.

According to Dentan and coauthors (1997: 129), "The JHEOA has provided medical care to Orang Asli since the Emergency, when its field assistants at jungle forts began dispensing simple remedies.² The hub of the system was (and still is) the 450-bed Orang Asli hospital at Gombak, in a forest valley twelve miles outside Kuala Lumpur. The hospital also serves as a training center where Orang

Asli take courses like house-building and midwifery.” The JHEOA was established during the Malayan Emergency because the Communist insurgents often relied on Orang Asli for food supplies.

According to Chee (1995: 62-63), “The medical service run by the [JHEOA] has played an effective role in Orang Asli medical and health care, providing routine out-patient care as well as emergency services and having succeeded in eradicating yaws, bringing down the incidence of tuberculosis, and controlling malaria (more or less).” Fix (1989, 1991) corroborated this in regard to childbirth in Semai. He noted, based on changes in sex-ratio mortality between 1969 and 1987, that female mortality declined at a higher rate than male mortality. The greatest female improvement occurred in the 15-44 year age group, that is, in women of reproductive age. Fix also found that maternal deaths, a major factor in the pre-1969 population, fell dramatically due to greater use of the Orang Asli medical service for obstetrical purposes. No similar studies have been done with the Semelai, but presumably they have experienced a similar decrease in female mortality.

Baer (1999) copiously documented the past and present extent of Orang Asli ill health. For example, the Ministry of Health announced in 1997 that among Malaysian women giving birth at home in 1994, 42 had died; 60% of these (25) were Orang Asli (Baer, 1999: 4). However, as she pointed out, in 1994 a much higher proportion of Orang Asli women than those of other ethnic groups gave birth at home, so this announcement does not prove that Orang Asli women were more likely than other women to die as a result of home births. According to her, if there is a higher rate of maternal death among Orang Asli women, it may be more a result of malnutrition than of home birthing.

As has been exhaustively documented by feminists and others, home births are no more dangerous than hospital births (and in fact may be beneficial), as long as appropriate prenatal care is provided. Nevertheless, because of the 1994 statistics, in 1997 the Ministry of Health began a push to encourage, if not require, Orang Asli women, especially those in remote areas, to give birth in institutional settings.

Semelai interactions with state biomedicine

Because the Semelai area experienced a concentration of Communist insurgents during the Malayan Emergency, the colonial British military expended considerable effort there. The British strategy was to sever support lines between the Semelai and Communist insurgents. Semelai at Tasek Bera were required to stay in resettlement zones surrounding the newly-established Fort Iskandar (now Pos Iskandar). During the first year, the British military provided them with food so that they would not need to venture into the forest to grow their crops. Semelai at Sungai Sampo were relocated to Langkap, in the hills above Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, for four years. Medical attention was provided at these relocation sites as well.

As a result, the Semelai developed positive memories and nostalgia for the British era and, in many cases, a positive orientation toward the biomedical care provided. This orientation continued after Malaysian independence in the following way: the Semelai generally feel that some illnesses can be better treated in clinics and hospitals, but others require their own incantations and healing rituals. This eclectic approach (cf. Dentan 1979: 94-95) shows little suspicion of biomedicine itself. However, in contrast with their memories of the British era, the Semelai at Tasek Bera found the Malaysian government to be much less responsive to their needs, at least during the 1980s when I first worked there. They felt that the quality of government medical care had declined during the post-colonial period. For example, Gombak Hospital was not exclusively for Orang Asli anymore, and transportation to it was no longer readily available. In fairness to the Malaysian government, the insurgency was no longer a threat by that time, and therefore one could argue that the strategic stimulus that had motivated the British authorities no longer existed.

However, in recent years the Ministry of Health has established periodic maternity clinics at Sungai Sampo as well as weekly visits by a doctor to Pos Iskandar, to provide maternal care as well as general medical care. There is also a nurse-midwife stationed full-time at Pos Iskandar, because it is quite remote. The Ministry has



Plate 6.3 Semelai women and children wait to be seen at the health clinic at Sungai Sampo, Negeri Sembilan. (Rosemary Gianni 1998)

also provided training for village midwives to learn basic biomedical practices. Some Semelai traditional midwives have participated in these sessions. At Sungai Sampo, an ambulance can now be summoned by phone from the government health clinic several miles away, to take women in labor to the hospital.

Semelai culture, biomedicine, and the transition to male midwives

What do the Semelai expect from a traditional midwife attending a home birth? It is the midwife who cuts the umbilical cord at Semelai births. The midwife should also be skilled in massage and know important incantations, in case complications arise. However, a Semelai midwife's primary objective or responsibility is to instill confidence in the efficacy of his or her skills. Semelai frequently said that they found childbirth to be quite frightening. They seem to define birth as a "dangerous and frightening event," at least when someone else is giving birth. Therefore, a midwife must be brave.

I questioned Semelai, male and female, young and old, intensively about the disappearance of female midwives. It was very difficult to



Plate 6.4 The health clinic at Sungei Sampo. (Rosemary Gianni 1998)

find any Semelai women who viewed (or were willing to admit to viewing) male birth attendance as a problem. After being asked leading questions, women would agree that they preferred having a woman midwife—just for the sake of modesty, not because they believed a woman would be more adept. But if the only available midwife was a man, then fine—it was not a big issue for them.

Many Semelai women said they saw an advantage in terms of safety by going to the hospital. At Sungai Sampo there had been a woman about fifteen years ago who, after giving birth to a son, could not expel the placenta. Her family and the midwife eventually took her to the hospital but she died en route. People still mention that incident as a reason for deciding against a home birth.

As a result of the hegemony of governmental education/discourse, Semelai thinking about home births may be moving from a sense of their routineness to a dread of crisis situations developing far from government services. Alarming messages from the Ministry of Health have, in fact, convinced many Semelai that clinics and hospitals are the way to go. The association of “dangerous and frightening event” with the ascendance of male midwives seems parallel to the medicalization of midwifery in Western cultures. In the West, male specialists appropriated oversight of the birth process partly by

redefining it as “dangerous” rather than “normal.”

Government pressure to bio-medicalize birth seems to go a long way toward explaining the masculinization of Semelai midwifery. This has been happening simultaneously with the increase of governmental intervention in the context and process of birth. Most births to women at Sungai Sampo now occur in hospitals or are attended by government midwives. At Tasek Bera, more and more Semelai women are giving birth in hospitals or with a government midwife in attendance.

I learned in my interviews with a cross-section of Semelai that everyone now knows the Ministry of Health considers it is quite dangerous to give birth with a village midwife in attendance. At Tasek Bera in 1998, one woman really did not want to go to the hospital to give birth but the male midwife, who had assisted with all her previous deliveries and those of her sisters and mother, refused to attend in this case. He feared he would be sued or prosecuted by the government if there were complications. She finally hired a car, at significant expense, to drive her to the hospital while in labor. Therefore, even if a woman prefers to give birth at home, she may not be able to find a village midwife of either gender to attend her. (On the other hand, during a brief visit to Tasek Bera in 2004, I was told that even when the resident government midwife was called to attend a birth, she was often unavailable.) This state of affairs makes the whole situation that much more uncertain and frightening. Midwives can easily lose confidence in themselves.

An additional consequence of this pressure is that the level of anxiety has increased for those Semelai who continue to resist the government’s efforts. The possibility that something bad *could* happen and that the government *might* punish the midwife or the parents for it, is much more in the general consciousness. To the extent that Semelai women have been disappearing from the ranks of Semelai midwives, the idea that women are less “brave” would certainly contribute to that. Therefore, when Semelai say that “women are not brave enough,” it should be understood that village midwives practicing in the current chilly climate probably *do* need more courage and self-confidence than in the past.

Conclusion

Evidence indicates that influence from governmental agencies has caused Semelai to perceive home births attended by traditional midwives as more dangerous and fraught with risks than in the past. Semelai men are more likely to take on a role that has inherent risk and that requires the practitioner to exude great confidence. Paradoxically, *because* the Semelai have a tradition of little gender segregation and a considerable degree of crossing over in terms of gender roles, this has allowed men to become dominant and flow into a social role that has been, in most societies, a female domain.

The future of Semelai midwifery as an autonomous enterprise, whether male or female, is not bright. Semelai traditional birth attendance is being overpowered by the biomedical practices promulgated by the government. But, as I found out, the past and present situation of Semelai midwifery can help us better understand gender dynamics in the realm of reproduction and beyond.

ENDNOTES

1. All names provided here are pseudonyms.
2. Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli or Department of Orang Asli Affairs.



The Health of Orang Asli Women



7 The Health of Orang Asli Women

Adela Baer

The earliest reports on the health of Orang Asli women appeared after 1945. By the 1960s maternal health care was a thriving part of the Gombak Hospital scene and problems such as maternal anemia, undernutrition, and associated perinatal deaths were obvious. By the 1990s critical problems in Orang Asli women's health had been well documented. Apparently few of these problems have been effectively addressed by the health-care system, according to many reports.

In a report on rural nutrition, two Malaysians that in many developing countries women are still considered to be “dependents”—they experience gender discrimination, may be economically vulnerable and politically powerless, are less educated than men, and may work longer hours and harder than men, even though their work is undervalued. Moreover, as women are the mainstay in child care, their health directly affects child health. As these two authors pointed out, successful pregnancy itself depends on good maternal nutrition. Beyond that, “Women need nutritious food from birth to maturity, adequate medical care, sufficient rest, more educational opportunities, and less sexual discrimination” (Osman and Zaleha, 1995, p. 322). A similar message about the importance of women's health was publicized by United Nations officials (Mongella, 1995). Notably, problems associated with maternity are the leading cause of ill health for women in developing countries (Nowak, 1995).¹

These conclusions deserve wide circulation. While Orang Asli women have serious health problems, many are readily solvable by thoughtful policies, good planning, small expense, and a spirit of cooperation. For non-Orang Asli who think about these problems, it needs to be stressed that Orang Asli groups have conceptual

frameworks for promoting health that differ from those of outsiders. For Orang Asli, the boundaries, or meanings, of well-being and illness are situational (such as during pregnancy). The causes of illness are conceived by them in much broader (holistic) terms than by clinical, cure-focused medical practice. *Awareness* of these factors is necessary for understanding and solving many Orang Asli health issues. Health, after all, is an affirmation of life, which is culturally constructed.

Published data on Orang Asli are not available by gender for most health issues. Data may be presented for women and men combined, or even for all ages and both sexes combined. Nevertheless, some general data are indicative of women's health problems. Pertinent findings, including four specifically on women, are listed in the accompanying table.

As the table shows, the health status of all Orang Asli—children, men, and women—is poor compared to others in West Malaysia. Many problems urgently need attention. For example, tuberculosis is not only much more common in Orang Asli than in other Malaysian groups, it is more severe, including meningeal cases (Jeyakumar Devaraj, 1999). The main *known* problems that especially plague Orang Asli women—compared to men—are poor nutrition, anemia, goiter, and intestinal worms. However, some *possible* problems have not been well studied in Orang Asli, or have not been reported on at all. For this reason, many unanswered questions exist about their current health situation. For example, little has been written about their vision defects, their dental problems, sexually transmitted diseases, chronic conditions of the Orang Asli elderly, scrub typhus, or about hepatitis and other viral diseases that afflict them.² Research on Orang Asli health was more pervasive in past decades than it is today, but some of the earlier findings are still informative.

Some health history

According to Cerruti, few Perak Orang Asli women a century ago had more than five children. The women were neither sterile nor excessively fertile. They always nursed their infants, unless they lacked milk or had a weak constitution, and weaned them by the age of two

Some Orang Asli health considerations

	Orang Asli	Reference
Medical clinics	Only 67 of 774 Orang Asli villages (9%) had a clinic (1990s).	H. F. Lim, 1997
Crude death rate per year	1%, twice that for all West Malaysia (1984-87); Jahai: 4.5% (1978-88).	Ng et al., 1992; Gomes, 1990
Tuberculosis	Children: 3 times the Perak state average (1995); all ages: 5.5 times the Perak state average (1999).	Fadzillah, 1997; Jeyakumar Devaraj, 1999
Malaria	>70% of all cases recorded in West Malaysia (1993-1996).	Roslan, 1997; Jeyakumar Devaraj, 1999
Dengue	82% of Orang Asli had had viral exposure (1980s).	Rudnick et al., 1986
Leprosy	A rate 23 times higher than for others in West Malaysia (1994).	Fadzillah, 1997
Diarrhea	50% of Negri Sembilan Orang Asli had diarrhea over 4 months in 1986.	Lonergan and Vansickle, 1991
Under-nutrition	Semai women in Pahang: 35% had protein-energy malnutrition (1990s).	Osman and Zaleha, 1995
Anemia	Semai women in Perak: 64% of pregnant and 40% of non-pregnant women were anemic; 23% of men were anemic.	Khor, 1985
Goiter	Semai women in Pahang: 64% were goiterous vs. 35% for men.	Osman and Zaleha, 1995
Intestinal worms	Temiar females in Perak: 73% had worms, vs. 48% for males.	Karim et al., 1995
Maternal deaths	Women: 60% of the 42 West Malaysians who died during home	Sunday Star, 29 September, 1996

years. The first pregnancy and nursing period of a woman ended her blooming youth, because the child added to her other heavy duties. She became overworked and tired: “When thirty years old she looks as old...as [a hardworking European farm] woman at fifty” (Cerruti, 1908, pp. 172-173).

Although a few health reports appeared on Orang Asli prior to World War II, women’s health was largely ignored. After the war, Polunin (1953) undertook a health survey of Orang Asli for the colonial government. He reported on child mortality, malnutrition, goiter, malaria, filariasis, intestinal worms, pulmonary disease, anemia, viral and bacterial epidemics, and forced resettlement in crowded camps. He also noted that Orang Asli males outnumbered females, with the age-adjusted sex ratio showing a higher death rate in women. Such unusual sex ratios were also common in later studies, a clear indication of long-term women’s health problems predisposing to early death.

In the 1950s Gouldsbury organized and carried out efforts to provide volunteer medical services to Orang Asli in southern Perak, and she developed a cooperative work spirit with village healers (*hala*), including midwives. One of her special efforts was to encourage a good diet for menstruating, pregnant, and postpartum women, who often had problems compounded by food taboos. She wrote (1960, p. 57):

A newly-delivered woman and a menstruating woman were for two weeks not allowed any meat, fresh fish, tapioca...and oddly enough they were not allowed pineapple either. All this complicated...the dietary treatment in many cases. But...once I had found it possible to consult the Headman Hala of the group, a particular patient who needed feeding up...was allowed to take the tabu dish. All was well when I had explained to the Hala that my medical ritual needed a certain food to be eaten, tabu or not, if the patient was to recover. The Hala would hold a little ceremony to make all well with the spirits of good, so busy battling on our behalf, and we were all satisfied.

Food taboos were an important consideration for Orang Asli women’s



Plate 7.1 A Semai woman at Woh, Perak, helps 'dress' a young girl for a ritual ceremony. (Colin Nicholas 2004)

health (Bolton, 1972b; Khor 1985). Jennings (1995) wrote that menstruating, pregnant, and postpartum Temiar women, as well as those with small children, have the strictest food taboos, with meat being most frequently tabooed. Also, traditional midwives often share the same food taboos as their patients.

During the 1960s the government hospital for Orang Asli at Gombak became a center for reproductive care for women. Writing in 1971, McLeod described this maternal service from her vantage point as an English volunteer nurse. Her duties at the hospital included supervising the work of the Orang Asli midwives there and supervising births. She estimated that about 25% of all Orang Asli babies were born in hospital at that time, rather than in home villages. At the hospital Orang Asli midwives took brief obstetric histories from pregnant patients upon their arrival. These histories revealed high infant mortality rates, rates "which seemed to be taken so much for granted" (p. 28). Each patient's blood was tested for blood type, anemia, and malaria. Routine tests were also performed on urine samples. If hematocrits were low, stool samples were tested for intestinal infestations. Iron and multivitamin tablets were given daily and a good diet was

provided. Chest x-rays were taken, to test for tuberculosis. Malaria infections were treated with chloroquine. Further tests or treatments were ordered as necessary, such as Alcopar for hookworm and Antepar for *Ascaris*. Midwives provided routine care, and accompanying family members were also routinely tested, treated, housed, and fed. After delivery, discharged mothers were given a month's supply of iron and vitamin tablets and a vitamin syrup for the baby.

Anemia was the most common problem in pregnant Orang Asli women in the maternity ward (McLeod, 1971). Mild anemia was counteracted by the hospital diet, combined with iron and folate supplements. Severe anemia sometimes required transfusions. Since the hospital had no anesthetic equipment or surgical theater, the patients with obstetric emergencies were transferred to a better-equipped hospital in Kuala Lumpur. The most common problem during labor was postpartum hemorrhage (about 14% of all deliveries), often requiring transfusions. Later, Ong (1975a) reported that 4% of deliveries at Gombak Hospital had hemorrhages, that is, a blood loss of at least 500 ml during or after delivery. Whether practices and problems at the hospital maternity ward today are the same as in the past is unknown, since no recent publications exist on this subject.

The Orang Asli midwives at Gombak, McLeod (1971) wrote, were given formal classes in obstetrics, gynecology, and pediatrics and their work was closely supervised. As they gained confidence and authority, however, the "apparently indispensable supervision" by the overseas nurses became increasingly dispensable. McLeod concluded that most overseas nurses "gained far more than they had ever given" through their experience at Gombak. Also in the 1970s, Gombak Hospital was training midwives for in-village deliveries, at least for some locations (Jennings, 1995). This practice apparently waned some time later.

Khoo (1977) reported that for Fort Kemar Temiar a third of non-pregnant women and over half of the pregnant ones were anemic. Ong (1974b, 1975b) reported that 71 of 278 pregnant mothers tested at Gombak Hospital (26%) were anemic, due to iron and folate deficiencies. That is, they had hemoglobin levels below 10 g/dl of

blood.³ Among the 71 anemic mothers, 54 had had 5 or more pregnancies.⁴ All 71 were said to be malnourished, 69% had contributory intestinal worms (mainly hookworm, *Ascaris*, and *Trichuris*), and 13% had contributory malaria. Unfortunately, these extra problems of the 71 anemics were not likewise studied in any control group of non-anemic pregnant women, to provide a comparison. This author also reported that more mothers from semi-urban or forest-fringe villages, including government-imposed resettlement areas, were anemic than mothers from remote areas that could rely on forest food resources. The semi-urban mothers also had higher intestinal worm loads than did those from remote areas, perhaps related to the crowded conditions in the more accessible areas (Ong, 1975b).

These findings of high rates of anemia are particularly important because anemia—combined with other factors common in Orang Asli—lowers a woman’s ability to resist infection and to survive hemorrhaging during pregnancy or childbirth. It also lowers work capacity. Late-pregnancy women who are anemic are four times more likely to die during labor than non-anemics are (Walsh et al., 1993). Anemia can also lead to newborn death. Anemia, then, can be an insidious cause of tragedy that affects an entire Orang Asli family or an entire interrelated hamlet.

Since maternal health has repercussions on infant health and survival, it is not surprising that the rate for stillbirths plus miscarriages at Gombak Hospital in the 1970s was 7.4%, and the neonatal mortality rate was 2.4% (Ong, 1975b). That is, about 10% of the pregnancies in the hospital resulted in death of the offspring by early infancy, if not sooner. A similar level of deaths was found by Tan (1973) for a Temiar-Lanoh village; 6 of 47 offspring of 18 mothers died at birth or by the age of 1 month (13%).

Another report dealt with offspring survival in the 1970s, albeit in a far different way (Baer, 1988). The findings of this genetic-plus-health study on Temuan suggested that women who have the inherited trait called ovalocytosis, i.e., oval red blood cells, live longer and have more surviving offspring, on average, than women who lack this trait. This genetic difference was linked to the demonstrated ability of

oval red cells to resist the development of malarial parasites inside them, thus minimizing the effects of malaria infections. In other words, ovalocytosis provides hereditary resistance to malaria, promoting health and survival.

Ong (1974a) studied another inherited trait, hemoglobin E (Hb E), in relation to women's health. Among 124 pregnant women at Gombak Hospital, 96 had no Hb E, but 46 of these 96 were anemic (48%). Of the women who were Hb E carriers, 55% were anemic—much like the 48% of their non-Hb E counterparts. These similar levels of anemia are obviously not “explained” by the inherited Hb E condition. More importantly, they are disastrously high.

In the 1970s, a plan was put forth for governmental medical services for the Orang Asli (Khoo, 1979). Because of chronic shortcomings, it still is relevant today. The first-priority in the plan was community education. Second was maternal and child health, in view of the high death rate of infants and toddlers, rampant malnutrition, “maternal depletion,” and other problems. Third was the control of communicable diseases, given that tuberculosis and malaria were widespread and caused many deaths. Fourth was environmental sanitation, including the provision of potable water. Fifth was the improvement of “curative services” and the referral system. Sixth and last was the gathering of health statistics.

Nevertheless, in the 1970s medical facilities for Orang Asli were better than ever before. By 1972 there were 139 inland medical posts for Orang Asli, all staffed by trained Orang Asli personnel (Bolton, 1973). Moreover, the facilities were cheap. For example, the daily cost for a patient at Gombak Hospital was only 28% of that at other government hospitals (Bolton & Snelling, 1975).

In the 1980s several reports stated that the medical service for Orang Asli was inadequate. For example, Veeman (1986/87), a nurse who had worked in this service, wrote that the attitude of the government toward the Orang Asli and vice versa was a large problem, as was the scarcity of medical personnel. As one indicator of inadequate service, she noted that maternal and infant mortality rates were still high. Moreover, primary health care was not accessible to many Orang Asli, and it failed to elicit their involvement in health-



Plate 7.2 “How old is Halus?” a visitor asked in 2002 at the Temuan village of Ulu Serendah. “About a hundred, I think,” Bumi replied. (Colin Nicholas 2002)

related processes. She also noted that, although some 300 babies were born per year at Gombak at that time, the hospital had no gynecologist on the staff and no facilities for emergency caesarians or other complicated deliveries (unlike Kuala Lumpur hospitals).

Veeman (1986/87) also acknowledged that medical posts did exist in some remote areas, “flying doctors” did provide curative services, malaria teams did go out to villages at times, and field trips were made from Gombak Hospital to accessible sites for outpatient services, immunizations, health education, and maternal and child care. I might note that, despite these efforts, during my own fieldwork in two accessible Orang Asli villages in the 1970s, no medical personnel of any kind ever appeared there for routine duties. More recently, “health screeners” from Gombak reportedly visited some Orang Asli areas only once or twice a year (Hema Apparau, 2001), although monthly visits should be the standard. In addition, it is commonly known that static rural medical posts may stand empty, with no medical personnel present (Mohamed Idris, 2000).

In the 1980s investigators continued to report problems in women’s health. For example, Khor (1985) reported that 40% of Semai women in Batang Padang district of Perak were anemic, versus 23% of the

men, and that 64% of the pregnant women were anemic. Dietary iron deficiency was also prevalent. Khor's findings substantiated and also extended those of Ong in the 1970s and McLeod in the 1960s. Anemia was becoming more common.

Women's health in the 1990s

Overview

In 1993 the Malaysian Medical Association, among others, adopted a "patient's charter" (Shila Rani Kaur and Herxheimer, 1994). It was based on the principle that patients have a right to competent health care and human dignity, without discrimination. It stated that patients have a major role in decision-making which affects their health and well-being, including—among other things—the right to refuse treatment and the right to choose medical experts.

Medical matters for Orang Asli are not up to these standards. Roslan (1997) mentioned the lack of an efficient and effective disease control service, the inability of the medical services to provide adequate and effective coverage for Orang Asli, and the underutilization of medical facilities by Orang Asli for various reasons, including the "staff attitude" at the facilities.⁵

Fadzillah (1997) went further, urging greater efforts be made for health education, the training of "field assistants" in leprosy and tuberculosis control, the need to work closely with village healers in promoting Orang Asli health, and the need to ensure quality control at clinics. The recommendation with respect to leprosy and tuberculosis was based on the facts that leprosy among Orang Asli was 23 times more prevalent than for West Malaysians overall and the tuberculosis rate was three to five times that of other ethnic groups.

A basic problem in Orang Asli health issues today is that top-down policies and practices often work poorly. Bottom-up planning, policies, and practices have rarely been tried by Malaysian bureaucrats, although elsewhere they have proved to be beneficial.

However, even this kind of change would be insufficient to correct past mistakes, since the main cause of Orang Asli health problems has long been overweening interference with their land resources and

their social systems. This interference continues today (Nicholas, 2000).

*The 1990s: goiter, health,
and a pinch of salt*

Health problems persist today, particularly for Orang Asli women. The most obvious is goiter. Orang Asli in inland areas often suffer from goiter, an enlargement of the thyroid gland in the neck due to iodine deficiency. Maternal iodine deficiency has repercussions on the fetus and can lead to abortion, stillbirth, mental defect, and other problems.⁶ Body iodine is also depleted during lactation. This helps explain why older, multiparous women with large goiters are rather common among inland Orang Asli.

Goiter has been documented in Orang Asli ever since Polunin (1953) first surveyed them—and has undoubtedly existed long before that. Polunin estimated that 41% of inland Orang Asli were goiterous, with the rate being 73% in women, compared to the 27% rate in men, 32% in girls, and 24% in boys. More recently, iodine levels in inland Kensiu females were only 70% of those for coastal Besis females on Carey Island (Osman et al., 1995). A similar low, inland level of iodine was found at Lanai among Semai (Osman et al., 1994). Such low values are correlated with high prevalences of goiter: for example, at “posts” in Pahang, 64% of Orang Asli women were goiterous, versus 35% of men, 33% of girls, and 25% of boys (Osman and Zaleha 1995). Based on these data, one might reasonably conclude that little or no improvement has occurred for over 50 years.

Food is the major source of iodine. Coastal people rarely have goiters since seafood contains iodine. Food grown in the iodine-poor soils of inland areas is a major determinant of goiter for Orang Asli, especially when combined with a lack of animal protein. Another determinant of goiter for these areas is reliance on cassava as a staple and an anti-famine food (Osman, 1995). While cassava leaves are a good source of protein, both the tubers and the leaves contain chemical compounds, called goitrogens, that leach iodine from the body. According to Osman and coworkers (1992), among the Temuan of

Kuala Pangsoon, Selangor, 59% of those 7 years of age or older ate cassava tubers or leaves at least once a week. Moreover, chronic malnutrition—a particular problem in Orang Asli women—interferes with normal thyroid function.

The cure for goiter is simple and cheap. UNICEF estimated that the cost of salt iodization is just 5 US cents per person per year (Pennington, 1995). In the past, many inland Orang Asli villages were provided with iodized salt by the government (Bolton, 1972a). More recently, while iodized salt is available at some rural shops, it sometimes is sold at a higher price than uniodized salt. Even then, salt labeled as being iodized may not be so, or may lack a standardized amount of iodine if laws for standardization are not enforced.

Remarkably, Malaysia has no program to control iodine deficiency and “it is timely that Malaysia begin its national program” (Osman, 1995, p. 519). Publicity about the iodine-rich value of dried anchovies might also help alleviate the high incidence of goiter among Orang Asli.

*The 1990s: iron,
worms, and anemia*

Dietary iron deficiency, often associated with malnutrition, can lead to anemia. Intestinal worms, malaria, and other blood-destroying infections are common secondary causes of iron-deficient anemia. Food and parasites interact most directly in the case of intestinal worm infestations. The worms increase nutritional needs and interfere with the gut’s ability to absorb food. Hookworms cause loss of blood and destroy gut tissue, both of which must be replaced. With intestinal infestations, overall protein levels decline and iron-deficiency anemia often ensues. As mentioned earlier, 69% of anemic Orang Asli mothers had intestinal worms (Ong, 1974b).

Because of menstruation and the high metabolic requirements of pregnancy and lactation, women have a general tendency toward iron deficiency. Iron intake is quite low in Orang Asli. A comparison of Temuans and Malays in Kuala Pangsoon as to daily iron intake showed that the Temuans averaged 7.4 grams versus 11.3 for the



Plate 7.3 Temiar woman in Kampung Rantau, RPS Kemar, Perak harvesting cassava tubers. Goitrogens in the tubers and leaves leach iodine from the body increasing the chances of goiter among those whose staple is cassava. (Colin Nicholas 2005)

Malays, a significant difference (Osman et al., 1992). Also, H. M. Lim (1997) estimated that the average iron intake of reproductive-age Jakun women in Pahang was no more than 33% of the required level. Hema Apparau (2001) found that in a sample of 42 pregnant Orang Asli women, 23 (55%) were anemic. These reports confirm earlier work: for example, Khoo (1977) reported that a significant percentage of Temiar women at Fort Kemar, Perak were anemic due to iron deficiency.

Some Malaysian food plants, such as dark green leafy vegetables, have quite high iron bioavailability that could help counter anemia. These foods are especially effective against anemia when they are accompanied by citrus or red peppers, or other sources of vitamin C (Strickland, 1991). Since many Orang Asli are no longer able to find game to supply themselves with iron-rich meat dishes at meals due to land loss, health education on the value of these plant foods could be beneficial.

Iron and folate supplementation, both before and during pregnancy, were emphasized by Walsh and colleagues (1993) as being not only low-cost but easy to add to health-care programs for women. Jakun women receiving antenatal care were reported by H. M. Lim (1997)

to be given multivitamins and iron tablets. However, many people, including Orang Asli, are reluctant to take “medicine” such as vitamins if they are not ill, and Orang Asli are especially reluctant to do so if they have had little to eat.

The 1990s: nutrition

Orang Asli women are today quite malnourished, more so than other rural dwellers. Zalilah and Tham (2002) found that over a third of Temuan mothers of young children studied in Hulu Langat, Selangor, did not get enough to eat on a continuous basis—they lacked “food security.” Not surprisingly, over two-thirds of these families were below the official Malaysian poverty line.⁷

For Semai, Osman and Zaleha (1995) found protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) was over 35% for women and about 12% for men, versus about 8% for Malay women and 6% for Malay men in their study. H. M. Lim (1997) reported that reproductive-age Jakun women averaged 86% of the official RDA (recommended daily allowance) for protein intake, although *all* women studied were iron deficient and many were also vitamin and calcium deficient. Lactating women were worse off than others in these respects. Among non-pregnant, non-lactating women, a third had a body mass index (BMI) less than 19, indicating chronic energy deficiency.⁸

The high level of PEM in Orang Asli results from a mix of lost foraging and farm land, increases in river pollution (decreasing fish catches), food shortages, the level and frequency of infectious diseases and intestinal parasites, barriers to education, and cultural discrimination. Hard physical labor also contributes to PEM. Comparing Temuans and Malays 7 years and older living in Kuala Pangsoon, Osman and coworkers (1991) reported that 30% of the Temuans engaged in hard physical labor on a daily basis while only 9% of the Malays did so.

For Orang Asli women, additional predispositions to malnutrition include the number and spacing of pregnancies and the length of breastfeeding. Osman and Zaleha (1995) reported that over 95% of Orang Asli women breastfed their infants, for an average of about 18

months—a considerable boon to their offspring but a likely metabolic stress to themselves. Khor (1985) found an even longer breastfeeding duration for 189 Semai women, averaging 23 months.

According to Tee and Cavalli-Sforza (1993), pregnant Malaysian women who are malnourished are given, gratis, 1 kg of instant milk powder per month for three months. Lactating mothers who had received the supplement during pregnancy, or who had had twins, are also given the milk. Yet no report seems to be available on the number of Orang Asli women receiving this supplement, even though large numbers of them are malnourished.

Osman and coworkers (1992) found that Temuan women had an average hemoglobin concentration of 9.9 g/dl, an anemic level. This and other recent work show that anemia is still widespread among Orang Asli women, just as it was in earlier decades. While Osman's group did not analyze all possible contributions to ill health and malnutrition (for example, worm burdens and malaria), their general finding that Orang Asli women are in poor health cannot be ignored. Indeed, if female reproductive health is an indicator of the quality of a health-care system, as Walsh and coauthors (1993) maintain, then the governmental health system for Orang Asli is far from functional and improvement is long overdue.

With the Malaysian ethos increasingly insisting that Orang Asli become dependent on a cash economy, another nutritional problem particular to women and children may be growing. As poor men engage in wage labor, commercial rattan collecting, and other arduous work lasting long hours on a sustained basis, their need for energy foods increases. This may lead to a greater family allocation of food to men, at the expense of women and children. Such a maldistribution of food “would cause or amplify nutritional degradation among the most vulnerable groups in the community, that is, women of childbearing age and young children” (Kuchikura, 1988, p. 26). Elderly women are likewise vulnerable.

Orang Asli groups have always foraged for a myriad of food resources in their home environments, even when they were “full-time” farmers. The total Orang Asli diet thus provided high-quality food with interesting variety, if seldom in large quantities. Foraged

green plants are nutrient-rich, especially in vitamin A, niacin, calcium, iron, and protein.

As Orang Asli have been forced to move away from foraging toward storable, staple crops and store-bought foods, the quality and variety of food has been lost to unbalanced quantity, or often unbalanced scarcity (Khor 1994). Gomes (1989) found that Semai in Tapah, Perak, buy at least 88% of their food from the market. Kuchikura (1988) pointed out that for the Semaq Beri of Terengganu, cash resources led to purchases of carbohydrates (rice) and fats (cooking oil) but not to better nutrition.

Gomes (1990) also reported that so-called resettled Jahai now buy much of their food because “extensive logging and the land clearing by new Malay settlers of the surrounding forests...has driven off potential game and reduced the fish population in the rivers” (pp. 135-136). They now buy rice, but meat is rarely affordable, so their current diet is high in starch but low in protein.

The 1990s: malaria

Malaria is transmitted by anopheline mosquitoes mainly found today in the rainforest and forest fringes. It remains a life-threatening disease for many Orang Asli, far more so than for other West Malaysians. Once symptoms develop, malaria can kill in a few days from cerebral infection or from association with severe anemia. Orang Asli women are especially vulnerable to this latter situation because of their malnutrition and anemia.

Another aspect of the malaria problem, largely disregarded, is that DDT has been sprayed inside houses for mosquito control for more than 30 years in Malaysia. One curious outcome of this program is that Malaysian head lice have developed DDT-resistance (Sinniah and Sinniah, 1982). A more ominous outcome arises from the fact that DDT and other organochloride insecticides persist in the soil and the food chain. This means that high levels of DDT—far exceeding safe levels—accumulate in meat, fish, hen’s eggs, and breast milk, especially in malnourished people like Orang Asli women (Baer, 1999). Breast-fed Orang Asli infants, then, are quite vulnerable to DDT

toxicity. Moreover, the persistence of DDT in the soil means that even if DDT usage were stopped today in Malaysia, DDT exposure will continue for years to come for Orang Asli village sites routinely sprayed with DDT in the past.

The 1990s: women and STDs

Reliable records of syphilis cases are not available for Malaysia (Lim, 1993). Serological testing indicated that 2% of expectant mothers and almost 5% of blood donors in Malaysia had syphilis antibodies in the mid-1970s. Gonorrhoea is more prevalent than syphilis in Malaysia but is widely unreported in the present antibiotic era.⁹

It seems to be generally assumed in Malaysia that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are rare in Orang Asli. Perhaps this is linked to the erroneous belief that Orang Asli are remote and “untouched.” This false premise may account for the scarcity of studies on STDs in Orang Asli, despite the fact that inexpensive diagnostic tests exist in Malaysia for syphilis and gonorrhoea.

Long ago Williams-Hunt (1952, p. 35) noted that serious STDs were rare in Orang Asli, although a brothel containing Orang Asli had been discovered in a town: a business enterprise run by a non-Orang Asli. Also one case of gonorrhoea had been identified.

The only lengthy STD report has been on hospitalized pregnant women at Gombak (Ong 1973b); no men were studied. However, syphilis and gonorrhoea were not mentioned. Only vaginal yeast infections (candidiasis) and trichomoniasis were studied, which are far from life-threatening.¹⁰ Among the 94 women tested, 67% had candidiasis and 13% had trichomoniasis, with the vast majority of positive cases being asymptomatic.¹¹ Remarkably, no causative factor was elucidated, or even suggested, for these high levels of vaginal infections.

Since the 1970s, the question of AIDS, caused by the HIV virus, has come to the fore. Although an epidemic is developing in Malaysia, no official report exists on the infection rate in the general population, let alone in Orang Asli. Roslan (1997) reported a few data on STDs at Gombak Hospital, but without providing any information on the



Plate 7.4 Semai women are integral to the healing ceremonies. Here, at Woh, Perak, they play the musical bamboo stampers. (Colin Nicholas 2004)

number of people tested. Among 14 HIV carriers detected over a period of six years, 12 were male and 2 were female, all were between 20 and 40 years of age, and one was a prostitute.¹² Of relevance to this report, prostitution is one of the few avenues open to impoverished Orang Asli women for unskilled “jobs,” whether at a multiethnic relocation “scheme” or in a city (Dentan et al., 1997). Can a STD explosion be far behind?

The 1990s: mortality

The maternal death rate for Orang Asli women in 1995 was higher than for other groups in Malaysia. Orang Asli suffered 4.8% of these deaths although they make up far less than 1% of the population.¹³ Much evidence suggests that both maternal mortality and women’s overall mortality are very high for Orang Asli.

Life expectancy at birth is lower for Orang Asli females than for males and also lower than that for either sex in the West Malaysian population as a whole. In 1985 the life expectancy for Orang Asli females was 52 years, versus 54 years for males (Ng et al., 1992).

Since the studies of Polunin (1953), aberrant sex ratios have commonly been reported for Orang Asli adults, with women surviving less well than men. For example, Ramle (1991) showed that for Semaq Beri ages 35 and older, the sex ratio was 1.55 (155 men to 100 women) and for ages 45 and older it was 2.0. That is, for the latter group, there were twice as many men as women. Osman and Zaleha (1995) reported that the sex ratio for 249 Semai adults at Lanai and Batau (18 years and older) was 1.42, while the ratio was 1.04 for children age 2 to 6 years—within the normal range.

Other published sex ratios include 1.20 for Pahang Semai in 1987 (Fix, 1989). For these Semai over 15 years of age the ratio was 1.32, attributed particularly to female mortality associated with childbirth. For Perak Semai with a subsistence economy, the sex ratio for those over 59 years of age was 1.67, versus a national average of 0.96 for this age group (Khor, 1985).

For all Orang Asli groups combined, census data for 1991 show that the death rate for women exploded upward after age 35. By age 55 the Orang Asli sex ratio was 1.20. For those 65 or older, the ratio topped 1.43 (Department of Statistics, 1997).

All these data show that Orang Asli women have a high risk of dying from birth complications and related factors, including long-term “maternal depletion.”¹⁴ In general, maternal deaths are caused by hemorrhage, obstructed labor, infections and other complications of pregnancy. Hemorrhage can cause death in less than an hour (Walsh *et al.*, 1993). Hema Apparau (2001) reported that Orang Asli have the highest recorded rates of postpartum hemorrhage and puerperal sepsis, far above the rates for Malays or Chinese.

According to a World Bank study, deaths associated with childbirth in many countries basically result from political apathy and strategic misjudgment (Nowak, 1995), since emergency obstetric care is both affordable and cost-effective. Emergency care is needed in addition to routine care during pregnancy because neither alone is sufficient. Upgrading hospitals and clinics and training traditional midwives are both necessary parts of this “package.”

*The 1990s: women and
the health-care system*

In the 1990s UNICEF and the Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) were said to have turned their attention to fostering in-home births in Orang Asli villages, including the training of traditional midwives for this purpose.¹⁵ This approach was in vogue in earlier decades and was beneficial. If this approach again becomes popular and if it takes a bottoms-up perspective, it will situate traditional healers and midwives as full partners, not just recipients, in both planning and policies. This is important because the indigenous knowledge system of the healers, midwives, and the whole community is the people's information base that facilitates communication and decision-making on health issues.

Working with and through the local system of knowledge, values, and traditions to improve health increases the chance of long-range success of health initiatives. Indeed, to be effective, such an initiative requires an on-going commitment both by Orang Asli health specialists and by the MOH. In this regard, policies and processes need to be reviewed and evaluated regularly. Training programs, *by* Orang Asli *for* Orang Asli, need to be given at regular intervals in villages. First-aid or paramedic supplies need to be delivered to villages predictably. The supervision and monitoring of medical personnel working in villages—whether residents or outsiders—need to be of a high quality. Information from patients, paramedics, government officials, and others needs to be well circulated to all relevant groups. In effect, the process requires transparency in order to be effective and long lasting.

If such a program takes hold, it will have many benefits. When Orang Asli women are pressured, or coerced, to go to an urban (and alien) transit ward or birth center a month or more before delivery, problems arise: child care suffers, much farming and foraging work does not get done, and families and kin-support groups are sundered.

Moreover, some of these urban facilities also house patients with communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, thereby putting pregnant women at risk of contracting new infections in these close quarters.¹⁶ Fostering in-village deliveries with trained Orang Asli midwives in

attendance circumvents such problems. Providing and maintaining telephones would also be a boon, especially for emergencies, whether for accident cases or for complications arising in birthing.

Moreover, it is important that general health programs be gender-sensitive. For example, since Orang Asli women spend far more hours in their villages than the men do, and since women are the primary care-takers in their families, it is the women—not the men—who could provide the most vigilant and stable workers as resident medical aides, such as the resident *wakil* found in rural Sarawak.

Notably, in 1997 the MOH announced it would review the entire health-care system for Orang Asli, to ensure safe procedures are used and to improve the system (*The Sun*, 31 May, 1997). A report would ensue from this review that, according to the health minister, “will detail what the current system is like, what the defects are, and how we can improve it” (*New Straits Times*, 31 May, 1997). A non-governmental organisation—COAC—said that the Orang Asli community, or its association leaders, must be involved in conducting this review, both to guarantee that health-care workers for Orang Asli are competent and that Orang Asli are treated with courtesy and respect (*The Sun*, 2 June, 1997). Nothing further has been publicized about this possible review.

To achieve the goal of good health for Orang Asli women would require changes in bureaucratic policies, procedures, information flow, roles, and responsibilities. If Malaysia achieves this, the country will become a role model on the global stage.

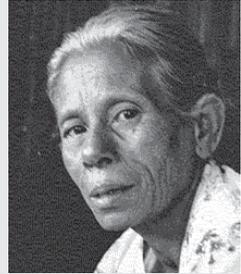
ENDNOTES

1. Regrettably, a new book on maternal health from the World Bank (Pathmanathan et al., 2003) does not mention the indigenous peoples (Orang Asli) in its coverage of West Malaysia.
2. Dental services for Orang Asli are poor; restorative treatment is rare. Older Orang Asli women often have many teeth missing. This condition impairs mastication and contributes to undernutrition, emaciation, and morbidity.
3. Different authors have used other values; some use a value below 11 or 12 g/dl. This more accurately reflects the burden of anemia.

4. Sumithran reported in 1977 that Orang Asli women ages 16-60 years averaged 5 pregnancies, with 7% having more than 9 pregnancies. Not all of these pregnancies would result in surviving offspring, however.
5. Orang Asli have said that they are often not treated with respect.
6. Hema Apparau (2001) found that well over 20% of the Orang Asli women interviewed had experienced a miscarriage or stillbirth.
7. In these families, averaging 6.7 people, 41% of the mothers had never had any schooling. Compared to this 67% poverty rate for Orang Asli, only 8% were in this category for all of West Malaysia in 1999 (Pathmanathan et al., 2003). That is, the Orang Asli are not simply poor, they are ultra-poor.
8. See also Lim and Chee, 1998.
9. Despite widespread antibiotic-resistance for gonorrhea in Southeast Asia, some antibiotics can still clear these infections. Without medication, transmission of the bacterial parasite can occur for several months. After that time, sexually active people can become reinfected.
10. While trichomoniasis is transmitted sexually, candidiasis is not a STD.
11. Worldwide, 50% of women infected with STDs have no external symptoms (Nowak 1995).
12. A later statement from Gombak Hospital, in 2004, put the number of HIV/AIDS cases in Orang Asli at 31, more than double the number reported in 1997.
13. Ravindran Jegasothy, pers. comm. Pathmanathan et al. (2003, pp. 68-69) reported that the official maternal mortality rate for West Malaysia overall in the 1990's was 20 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. This figure—for Malays, Indians, and Chinese—is remarkably lower than the maternal death rate calculated for all *indigenous* groups in West and East Malaysia for 1995, namely, 47 per 100,000 (Ravindran Jegasothy, pers. comm.). The maternal death rate for Orang Asli alone is not available—perhaps not known—but it is likely to be over 47 per 100,000 because the health services in East Malaysia are generally more comprehensive and accessible than are those for Orang Asli in West Malaysia.
14. Orang Asli mothers at Tapah Hospital had more complications in childbirth than did other women (Jeyakumar Devaraj, 1999).
15. In the 1990s several Semelai midwives said they had attended MOH classes and received some basic equipment, which they used (R. Gianno, pers. comm.).
16. Orang Asli women are stigmatized by being the only group in Malaysia to be coerced into “transit wards” or “birthing centers.”

8

A Story of Btsisi' Women in Marriage and the Household



8 A Story of Btsisi' Women in Marriage and the Household

Barbara S. Nowak

Preface¹

This is a composite story made up of the lives on three generations of Hma' Btsisi' women.² It is drawn from my observations on Btsisi' and the conversations I have had with them over the years, especially with Btsisi' women.³ It is not biographical. Rather, this portrait is composed of the stories I have been told about women. For purposes of narration I have combined the stories about women from many families and households into a story about one lineage of women. Thus, while the people I am talking about are fictitious, the events described are events that actually occurred in women's lives.

I have chosen to present the stories in the first person. The narrator, Sinah, relates stories that tell about Btsisi' women's lives as if they were stories which happened to her and her female kin. For this story, Sinah's age is about 65. This allows me to speak about Btsisi' life as early as the 1920s through her mother's life stories, when life was still fairly traditional. Through her daughters and granddaughters, I can speak about some of the issues younger women are facing in the new millennium.

Most of the stories revolve around the family and household because the household is the central institution in Btsisi' society. Most events have their locus of activity in the household. The interrelationships between women and men are also most pronounced within the household, thus it is the ideal location to talk about women and their lives.

Sinah's story

I, Sinah, was born on Carey Island at Telok Gunyek, a small mangrove community occupied by my mother's *opoh*.⁴ I was my parent's first-born child. It is good for the first born to be a girl (Nowak, 1987). The elders say girls are cooler than boys. Due to their biological role as reproducers, females have differing needs than males so they are born with one more rib; they have one more *nabi* (prophet) than males. This gives girls extra strength (Nowak, 2004: 444). Boys are so hot they are likely to die if born first. My parents and their families rejoiced when I was born. No matter what a baby's sex, parents rejoice at its birth; we rejoice at the birth of all babies. Babies are a gift from God no matter if they are girls or boys.

My childhood was uneventful. It was no different than the childhood of any other Btsisi' girl. As I grew up I helped my mother take care of my younger siblings. By the time I was six or so I was carrying one or another of my younger brothers and sisters around on my back, babysitting them when my parents went off fishing or were cultivating in the swidden. There were adults around in case I got into trouble but I took care of them, playing with them and changing their clothes when necessary. My mother had many more children; three of them survived and four died. I helped my mother cook and bathe the younger children. And as I grew up I helped her collect and transport water. I even helped her in the swiddens, clearing the land to plant. My favourite job was sitting out in the swiddens pulling a string attached to noise-makers to scare the birds away from the ripening rice. But I liked it best when I went off with my friends to play. We would just find a place to go and talk quietly amongst ourselves. We talked about everything, including boys and who we liked!

We lived only part time at Gunyek. Part of the year we spent away on our boat wandering through the mangroves fishing and crabbing. We went off on our own as a family, but we would meet other families and tie the boats up together for the night. My parents would talk with the adults from the other boat late into the night. On the rising tide, we would go our separate ways.

Living on the boat was all right. I would get lonely for my friends, for my mother's sister's children—my *adik* whom I would leave

behind in the village. But the boat was time away. Mother and I would cook rice and fish on the boat. We had a small hearth and we stowed enough dry mangrove wood for fuel. We would be away for many weeks at a time. We ate fresh fish at every meal. When I wasn't helping mother cook I would watch my younger sisters and brothers or help my parents with long-line fishing or snailing.

Nuclear families oftentimes went off on their own into the mangroves. This kind of isolation required husbands and wives to have an ethos of cooperation. Many of the tasks mother and father performed required them to work in concert; one person alone could not do the task. For example, seine-net fishing requires two people's labour, one to anchor the net close to shore and the other to pull the net out to sea and then drag it back onto the beach. Usually for a married couple the woman acts as the anchor and the man does the more physical part. Two people can also more easily do crabbing with a *gnto*.⁵ One person throws the crab traps out and pulls them in while the other steers the boat. My parents would also long-line fish together, to make the work easier; my mother would throw the line out or pull it in while my father steered the boat (Nowak, 1987: 340; Nowak, 1988: 55).

Thus, couples traditionally worked together. Even if an adult could do a task by herself such as snailing, or crabbing with *gdanj*, or even hook and line fishing *ηayel*, who wanted to go off on her own?⁶ Going off alone to do tasks is lonely and no fun, and in the past it was potentially dangerous. My parents taught me that everyone wants a friend to share their time with, and who is your best friend but your spouse? Btsisi' elders say if your best friend is not your spouse, well then, you should find someone else who could be your best friend and then make that person your spouse!

Belief in the partnership between husband and wife is deeply rooted in Btsisi' culture. God is not male or female, but both. How could God be anything other than both, it would be incomplete. Btsisi' believe that the world is not whole without both a female/wife and male/husband aspect.⁷ A complete musical sonic unit is composed of a male/husband bamboo stamper and the shorter female/wife stamper (*dik tenkej*). One pair of stampers is insufficient. At least

two pairs are necessary. The larger of the two pairs is referred to as the “male” pair and the shorter as the “female” pair.⁸ Similarly, this dichotomy appears with blowpipe construction. My grandfather taught my brother how to make a blowpipe. I would listen when he described the process. There are two inner tubes of differing lengths in a blowpipe. The longer tube is called *lmol* and the shorter is the *kdoh* tube. For the blowpipe to work, the ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ tubes must be fused into a continuous, joined tube. The fusion of the two tubes allows the blowpipe to work (Nowak, 1987: 303; Nowak, 1988: 53). Men and women, husbands and wives, are both necessary, and it is critical that they work together, whether it is for a blowpipe to function properly or to play the bamboo stampers properly.

Even when we marry, the elders reinforce the belief in the couple as a single, cooperating unit. Part of the wedding ceremony, the *nyampak*, for those never before married, teaches the couple about how they are to work in unison. The *nyampak* is a ritual which reinforces the concept of working in unison through the metaphor of physical movement (Nowak, 1987: 122).

For example, at my first wedding ceremony, my husband and I were told to stand together by one of the female elders who acted as our helper. My helper instructed us to put our arms over each other’s shoulders. This was so difficult for me! My first husband was so much taller than I! Once we were successful in achieving this position, our helper gave us each a clump of glutinous rice. The rice was in the hands draped over each other’s shoulders. She told us to “feed” each other. We symbolically put the rice into each others’ mouth three times. While we were doing this, the helper enjoined us to make sure we cared for the each other and ensured that our spouse got a share of all food. She told us sharing with each other is what husbands and wives do.

Once we had accomplished the task of “feeding” rice to each other, the helper took it from us and threw it on to the ground. She did the same with water and then with betel. Then the woman helper, while lecturing us on how we must learn, as husband and wife, to act as a single entity, told us to squat down and stand up three times. We did this with our arms still draped over each other’s shoulders! This



Plate 8.1 Janggi throwing the *gnto'*, a net the Btsisi' use to catch crabs feeding in the rivers. (Barbara Nowak 1981-82)

symbolic task was to help us learn how difficult working in unison can be but how important it is if our marriage, our merger into a single unit, was to be successful. If we did not go in the same direction we would fail. We must work together for success.

When we marry for the first time we are also given a “married name” (*glaw odo'*) (Nowak, 1987: 129; Nowak, 1988: 52).⁹ The *glaw odo'* is a name different from our birth name. The shaman presiding over the wedding ceremony chooses the *odo'* name (sometimes with help from relatives!) and bestows it upon a couple following the ritual I just described. The *odo'* name is the name the couple use to address and refer to each other. It is also the name others should use to refer to and address the couple and the household they form. Sometimes these names stick and other times they don't. I guess it depends upon whether the community likes the name. Bestowing the name is meant to teach the young couple that they are no longer two people with separate identities but rather one, with a shared identity working for the benefit of the unit.

The philosophy of husband–wife teamwork is evident even today. While most people no longer go off for weeks at a time fishing or snailing, couples do work together day to day. I wouldn't want to go



Plate 8.2 (left) Hmen weaving a Btsisi' mat made of strips of pandanus leaves. **Plate 8.3** (right) Carrying water is often a Btsisi' woman's job. Here Janggi is the collector. (Barbara Nowak 1981-82)

to the sea for the afternoon looking for clams without companionship. My husband, Jelang, likes to clam and he too enjoys spending the day at the seaside, so we go together, even though clamming is something people can do independently. We enjoy spending time together.

Even the jobs people perform today, such as harvesting oil palm for the estate, are typically husband–wife team tasks. My daughter, Ijah, partners with her husband, Boyan, to harvest oil palm. Boyan takes responsibility for cutting down the big fruit bunches and fronds and then piles the fruit at the roadside for collection.¹⁰ Ijah neatly piles the cut palm fronds and picks up the individual nuts that drop off the bunch when falling from the tree. Her back always hurts, poor girl; the work she does is really hard, all that bending down. After awhile most women abandon this work as it is too stressful on their bodies and their wages are insufficient for a family.¹¹

Ijah and Boyan had to stop working for the estate when Boyan had an accident. One of the fruits went rogue when falling from the tree and hit Boyan in the eye. Boyan's eye was cut open and the doctor had to stitch it up. When they stopped working for the estate

Boyan and Ijah decided to move to a village closer to the sea so they could more easily carry on a livelihood of fishing.

Now Ijah and Boyan live in Telok Gunyek where I was born. They are living on the land I inherited from my mother which I gave to Ijah, as Btsisi' do. Mothers pass their land on to their daughters and fathers bequeath their land to their sons. This is not the old way because traditionally we didn't own land. We cleared and planted the land, growing rice and vegetables, but then we abandoned the swidden to plant a new one elsewhere the following year. But today, land is at a premium. Today with the oil palm plantation which has hemmed us in and destroyed all the forest, we have no opportunity to grow rice and other swidden products. Today, all we can grow are permanent crops such as fruit, rubber, coffee, bananas or oil palm. This means that land has taken on a value which it did not have traditionally. We want to be assured that the land we clear and plant with permanent cash crops is inherited by our children. If we don't pass our land on to our children they will have none tomorrow. The way we have resolved this is to follow our traditions regarding kinship in which daughters belong to their mother's *opoh* and sons to their fathers'. What we now say is that daughters inherit property from their mothers and sons from their fathers; the same way we determine membership in an *opoh* (see fn. 4).

At Telok Gunyek, on land my mother originally cleared and planted with dry rice and later with bananas and durian trees, my daughter and her husband grow bananas for a small income. Following Boyan's accident, he and Ijah realized that the wages they earned from harvesting oil palm for the estate hadn't increased in nearly fifteen years. It is no longer worth their effort and Boyan really wants his independence. They are hoping that in a few years the oil palm they plant will produce an income sufficient to supplement their fishing activities. In the mean time, they survive on the money they earn from the banana trees and the crabs and fish they catch for their subsistence and to sell.

Boyan is my mother's older brother's grandson. He is my *wali's* grandson.¹² Ijah called Boyan *ye'* (older brother), thus Boyan was in the correct relationship to her for marriage. Boyan comes from a

neighbouring village on Carey Island. His family lived in his mother's village. His father moved there when they married. My parents and my mother's older brother, Boyan's grandfather, arranged this match. Ijah and Boyan had little to say about this marriage arrangement; my husband and I had about as much to say as the children. My husband and I did not protest this arrangement because we knew Boyan was a hard worker and we knew he would treat Ijah well. We also knew Ijah would be treated well by Boyan's parents. His parents are my *ye'* and *gau'*, my older brother and older sister, they are *opoh*, and would treat Ijah as if she were their daughter. They are not strangers.

We are not wealthy and could not afford Ijah's wedding costs on our own; we needed the financial assistance of the older members of our family. We told Ijah that if she wanted to marry, she had to listen to the elders and do as they said. This is the plight of the young. It is no different for boys than it is for girls; in many instances, neither have much choice. If things don't work out, so be it, they can pay the fine to the elders and divorce. This is what I did with the help of my family and Jelang, the man who became my second husband. My first husband and I, we didn't want to marry. We both had our hearts set on others. The elders gave us no choice, they told us we had to marry, so we complied just like Ijah and Boyan.

My first marriage didn't last more than two years. My husband did not give up his love. He continued to see her. At first I didn't know this but then it became obvious, even to me. I tried to catch them but it was too difficult because she lived in another village and he would go there to visit her and I had no transport. He would tell me he was going fishing. What was I to say? He came home with fish so I could not complain. I spoke to my *wali'* and he went to my husband's *wali'*, but this did not help resolve the problem. It is the *wali'*'s role to ensure their charge is treated properly by the spouse and in-laws and also to ensure their charge treats the spouse correctly. But he could not help me.

When it became clear that my husband would not change his ways, my *wali'* requested a family meeting. The families wanted to keep the problem quiet and not involve the larger community. At the family meeting I said I wanted a divorce but the elders in my family opposed

this. They reprimanded my husband for his behaviour and told him he needed to change his ways and become the faithful and constant husband that was obligatory to all men. They told us we needed to try again. I said I would only do so if my husband stopped seeing the other woman. He said he would, so we went home.

One day not long after the family meeting my husband came home and told me the other woman was expecting a baby. I did not want to be a second wife. It was hard enough being his first wife. Why should I divide the little resources we had with her? My *wali'* said I should wait and see how things turned out once the baby was born. I didn't like this idea, but I had little choice since I didn't have the resources to divorce my husband unless my family helped me, and they were still reluctant to do so. I wasn't happy with the situation, but this more often than not is the plight of women, who typically have less access to cash than men.

A little girl was born. Then my husband told me he was going to marry his daughter's mother. The elders insisted the couple have a small wedding as compared to the weddings for most *dara*.¹³ This was in consideration of my feelings! While the wedding followed the obligatory rituals, such as the tooth-filing ceremony and the handing over of the *mnang* (bridewealth), the *yinai* ceremony was smaller and done for both the bride and groom together rather than separately.

Following the wedding, my husband and his second wife and daughter continued to reside in his wife's natal community. My husband spent most of his time there, visiting me very infrequently and providing little assistance in household activities. If I didn't make thatch to sell I wouldn't have had sufficient money to buy the food I needed. Although my biological family lived near me I still felt very alone. Then, one day I paired up with Jelang, my present husband.

At this time, Jelang was also married. His wife was embroiled in an affair and, as a result, he too was unhappy. He caught his wife cheating on him and his *wali'* called a community meeting. With evidence of her adultery, the elders fined his wife and her lover but Btsisi' *adat* does not deem adultery sufficient cause for divorce. After the meeting, Jelang was sure his wife was continuing to meet her lover. He was tired of her infidelity. We started talking to each other about our

unhappiness and one thing led to another. We quietly became a couple, and we decided we wanted to remain together and become husband and wife. We ran away and hid in the mangroves. We had Ijah, our oldest child. She was seven months old before we decided to return to the village. We thought the elders' disapproval would have subsided by then; time had passed and there was now a child.

The elders immediately called a village meeting. They required my first husband's appearance. The elders first asked him why he didn't tell them that I had disappeared. Wasn't he worried about me? Wasn't he concerned I might have been kidnapped? Didn't he love me? Then they asked my *wali*' about my disappearance. Why didn't he look for me? Why didn't he tell the elders I had disappeared? In actual fact, no one was really worried about me; everyone knew what had happened. The elder's questions were a formality.

Finally, the elders addressed me. I had never been addressed or spoken to at a council of elders meeting. I was very scared even though the elders were men I knew and treated with respect. I was so afraid to speak at the meeting. Women rarely speak at community meetings. We leave this to the men. Men have the desire to learn how to speak softly and with great refinement (*halus*) (Nowak, 2004: 445). Women also can if they try. My grandfather used to tell me this. According to Btsisi' *adat*, women have more intelligence or perspicacity (*akal*) than men. According to *adat*, women are born with one more rib than men and this aids them throughout their lives (Nowak, 2004: 444). Women could, if they wished, learn to speak *halus*, but they do not feel the compunction. They leave the formality of participation in the meetings to men. Women go to the meetings, but they sit to the side and listen.

The titled elders are the most engaged in council meetings. These elders inherit their positions. While today all the positions are held by men, there was a time when women were also *batin*, village leaders. I remember hearing about the last female *batin*. My grandparents talked about her. Sadly, she died leaving no female descendants who could inherit her position. As a consequence, women no longer hold titled positions among Btsisi' (Nowak, 1988: 66; Nowak, 2004: 447). In the past, the *batin* were the leaders within the village. They were



Plate 8.4 Janggi using a traditional finger-knife to harvest the padi stalks. (Barbara Nowak 198-82)

the elders involved in village decision-making ensuring village tranquillity. In contrast, the *pnghuhu'*, all men, were leaders involved in inter-village affairs. This made great sense since when couples married the men came to live in their wives' village. Thus, women who were from the local village took responsibility for internal village affairs while men, who were outsiders, had contacts with other villages and were thus involved in inter-community relationships. Men were also traditionally involved in economic activities which took them outside the village, such as hunting. Women were the primary group involved in cultivation—an internal, local activity. Btsisi' say women were involved in local activities whereas men were responsible for distant activities. This is symbolically demonstrated by the bamboo stampers *dik teŋkeŋ* we use in beating out the rhythms of our music, with the shorter stamper being called the female and the longer one the male (Nowak, 1987: 212; Nowak, 1988: 53; cf. Roseman, 1984: 430–431).

Everyone already knows what a council meeting is going to be about, and husbands and wives have already discussed the issue before the actual meeting occurs. So, for example, my husband Jelang and I always discuss the issues coming before the council meeting.

He always listens to my perspective. As a couple we come to a joint position which Jelang presents at the meeting. His publicly-voiced opinion is based on our joint decision. This is the way we Btsisi' do things. I remember one time when Isah got angry with her husband during a village elders' meeting when he changed his opinion. Isah beckoned her husband to the ground of the community hall and I heard her tell him off! She was very angry with him. Isah said, "Why did you change your viewpoint? We talked about this issue and came to an agreement. Why did you let people sway you? This is not what we agreed to!" Isah's husband silently went back into the hall and he returned to his initial perspective.

When the elders called me up to speak with them, I felt strong in my convictions, but I was nervous, never having been placed in this situation before. Answering their questions, I told them I did not like being married to a man who took another wife. I felt abandoned, unloved. My husband gave all his attention to his new wife and their baby and ignored me. He never visited me and I was lonely. He made very little money, and most of what he earned he gave to his other wife and baby. Jelang and I wanted to remain together. We wanted to raise our daughter together. Yes, I was willing to pay the fine. Yes, I would take the blame for the failed marriage; yes, I abandoned my husband.

Jelang had to help me pay the fine. He was also required to pay the elders' fine for abandoning his wife, even though she was unfaithful first and Jelang had already brought her to the elders' council. When we came out of hiding in the mangroves we knew this would be our fate, so we had already started saving while still living in the mangroves.

Jelang is such an excellent father. He loves Ijah. When Ijah was young, he would take her wherever he went, especially after our family started to grow with the birth of Ijah's younger siblings. Jelang would place Ijah in front of him on his bicycle and they would go everywhere together. When Jelang went off to work and left Ijah behind, she would sob and sob, running after his bicycle. They were very close.

Today Ijah and Boyan seem happy enough. They went through a rough period. Boyan had his heart set on another girl and he continued

to see her after his marriage. This upset Ijah and she ran away and would not return until she and Boyan sorted things out. They seem to have done this. Today they seem settled, although I know Ijah every once in awhile feels insecure. She and Boyan have two children, two daughters, and our family loves them very much. Ijah's older daughter, Jaliyah, lives with me and I am raising her. Btsisi' frequently do this. My youngest child, Ijah's brother, Atim, was raised by my mother. Atim and Jaliyah are very near in age.¹⁴ I hope more grandchildren will come and live with me. They will help take care of me in my old age.

While Ijah agreed to the arrangement the elders made for her, my son, Lima, had more choice. He was lucky. Jelang wanted Lima to marry his younger sister's daughter. In the old days this would be considered a terrible marriage—too hot. But today with the land shortage and the desire to keep land within the family (see Nowak, 1987: 428-436), this type of cousin marriage is the preferred marriage arrangement. Payah, the girl Jelang hoped Lima would marry, lived in a village on the mainland. My husband's older brother, my son's *wali*' as well as the girl's *wali*', arranged to bring her to our village for a visit. We kept it very simple and quiet. Payah came to see our village because she had never been here on Carey Island before, nor had she met our family. My husband came to live on Carey Island when he married his first wife. We rarely went to his natal village except for the infrequent wedding or funeral as it is too far away. So this young girl, who we hoped would be our son's wife, came for a visit. We hoped the two children would like each other—enough so that they might agree to marry! But this was not to happen.

Payah did not think she would be happy living on Carey Island. There was no potable water or electricity—basic amenities available to Btsisi' villages on the mainland. This meant filling six-gallon containers with water from the cistern connected to the school's roof, and lifting the containers onto bikes to carry back to our homes—a tedious task that Payah did not find appealing. In addition, we lived very far from shops, except for the estate shop which sold only dry goods, no clothing. To buy anything else required a ferryboat ride across the river to the mainland. Today there is greater mobility with a paved road and bridge. We can leave the island anytime of day or

night by motorbike or bicycle, although it is a long way pedalling! But in those days, it was still a long and dusty journey to the mainland.

Besides Payah not liking the prospect of living in our village or Carey Island, my son said he would not move to the mainland. He was working on the oil palm estate as a harvester with his younger brother, Sagap, helping him. He said there was no work for him on the mainland. He did not know what he could do there to earn money. He wanted to work for the estate. So, neither Lima nor Payah were interested in the match and we let the idea lapse. As it transpired, my son was involved with a girl from the neighbouring village. He didn't tell us for another two years. He is married now and he and his wife, Milah, live in our village even though her family wanted them to live in her village as most Btsisi' newlyweds do. Milah was willing to move to our village because my son's work of harvesting oil palm was much closer to our village than hers. Lima would not have been able to continue harvesting oil palm if he had moved to Milah's village.

When Lima and Milah married, Milah began working with Lima on the estate. This meant that Sagap no longer helped Lima. Sagap then began to help Seman, my older brother. His wife was expecting and she really could not bend down to pick up the oil palm fruits any longer. She preferred to stay at home to rest. Seman preferred his wife's help rather than Sagap's. Having help from outside the household means that the estate wages were not all kept within the household but rather were shared. Estate wages are too little to be shared with others, but Seman recognised that there were no alternatives other than finding a different income-generating activity such as fishing or crabbing. Many men do make this choice when their wives have young children and need to stay close to home.

My father passed away many years ago when we kids were young. The land he had cleared and planted after he married my mother went to my brother Seman. This land, however, is not enough to allow him to be a successful independent smallholder. The income he earns from it can only supplement his wages.

Only many years after my father's death did my mother remarry. It is not unusual for men and women to have a number of spouses throughout their lifetime. When we were all grown up and married,

and when my mother had already brought two grandchildren up, her fifth husband died. A few years later a man, also a widower from our village, wanted to marry my mother. She wasn't interested in marrying again. She said to me, "Why should I marry again? Now, all I have to do is care for myself. If I don't want to cook I don't have to. If I marry this man I will have to prepare his meals and help keep his clothes clean. Why would I want to do this? He wants a wife so she will take care of him. I can take care of myself and support myself on the little income I get from making *atap* (thatch) and from my fruit trees. People also pay me for helping deliver their babies. My children give me food and money if I am in need. I don't need to marry and take on any more work. I am content living by myself and having to worry only about myself."

My mother is a very strong woman. She was a midwife who learned her skills from her mother. In the past, most villages had several midwives. Midwives are very respected community members. They must be strong and not be afraid of blood, a powerful, hence scary element. Blood is such a powerful object that my grandfather, who was a shaman, told me that women rarely felt the need to become shamans because they have a direct and immediate path through their blood to speak with the spirits. Such a path is not available to men.

Returning to my earlier discussion about marriage and the desire and need for men and women to have a partner, I want to talk about my brother and sister who were both widowed when they had adolescent children to care for. My brother did not believe he could take care of his children alone. He debated whether to foster them out to our mother and me or whether to remarry quickly so the children would have a mother to care for them and a woman to do household activities. He chose to remarry. However, his children decided not to live with him and his new wife and her children. They moved in with me. My widowed sister, in contrast, opted not to remarry after her husband's death. She did not feel the need to have a man in the house. My siblings' responses to widowhood reinforce the idea that the woman is the central force which keeps the household together (Nowak, 2000: 340). House construction provides a symbolic illustration of woman's central and men's peripheral position in the

odo'. The main beam of a house is called the *kasuw kdoh* (female beam). Every room in the house must have a female beam. A large house might also have a *kasuw lmol*, a male beam.¹⁵ A structure can exist without a male beam but a house to stand requires at least one female beam (Nowak, 1987: 246). My brother did not think he could hold his household together when his wife died. He needed a wife to care for him and his children. My sister, however, did not have this same need. She believed she could keep her household strong so she did not want to rush back into marriage.

Not only is the woman the central force in a household, she is also the household controller (Nowak, 2004: 448). A woman takes responsibility for maintaining her household's finances. At a marriage ceremony for first-time newlyweds the elders instruct them that *adat* requires the man to give all his money to his wife (Nowak, 1987: 124). It is important for the wife to control *odo'* finances since a man might travel long distances and sometimes remain away from the village overnight. In an emergency, the woman might need to buy food or medicine for her children, so she needs access to money. If her husband controlled the finances, she might not be able to get hold of necessities quickly.

Although a woman should consult with her husband before making large, non-emergency purchases, Btsisi' say she has the right to go ahead without her husband's agreement. In contrast, a husband, according to *adat*, does not have this right. Since the woman has a better idea of what the household needs are than does the man, he must get her approval before he can go ahead with a major purchase. If a man buys something without his wife's agreement, *adat* allows the woman to complain to her *wali'*, who in turn must speak with the husband's *wali'*, asking him to teach his ward proper behaviour. I have been very lucky. Jelang and I have always carefully discussed how we are going to spend our savings. One time Jelang wanted to buy a motor for his boat. I thought we could continue for a few more years rowing the boat as we had done in the past. I wanted to save the money for Lima's wedding which I knew would not be far off. Jelang and I discussed this. He argued that with a motor he could go to sea and catch fish which he could not presently do. More and



Plate 8.5 Winnowing rice is another job for Btsisi' women. Here Doyah babysits and winnows at the same time. (Barbara Nowak 1981-82)

bigger fish would mean more money. We talked about this for many weeks until I spoke with Lima and asked him what his plans were regarding marriage. When I knew there was still time, I agreed to the purchase of the motor. What makes me feel good about Jelang is that he did not go ahead anyway and buy the motor as some men would have! I remember one day when Pak came home looking for her husband, Mangkut. Mangkut was nowhere to be found. A few hours later, when he reappeared, he was drunk. Not only was he drunk, but he had taken one of Pak's chickens to the shop so he could sell it to buy some food for dinner, but instead of buying food he drank the money away. Pak was furious. Mangkut had no right to take her chicken without permission. Then, rather than bringing food home for dinner, he got drunk instead! Pak is sometimes stingy with Mangkut. She doesn't give him pocket money after he hands his wages over to her. She should. Men do need some money for their entertainment.

But Mangkut should not have taken a chicken which did not belong to him. What a woman earns is her own, it is not automatically shared

with the household. A woman keeps what she wants for her own personal use. It is a man's role to support the household financially. A concerned wife, however, will help out with household finances if and when needed. People will call her selfish if she does not share her money with her husband and family. Such a woman "loves" only herself and not her family.

In the past, there were few ways for a woman to have an income separate from her husband. A woman might generate a little cash by selling fruit such as durian, rambutan or mangosteen from trees she owned, or she might make a bit of money selling thatch, and I remember grandmother talking about working for a coffee-estate nursery. But there were very few ways for a woman to make money which did not involve her husband. Today things seem to be changing. My granddaughter works as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant at the entrance to the island. I have heard talk that women in the mainland Btsisi' villages are now working as wage labourers in nearby towns, both in the large factories owned by multinational companies and also as cleaners in Malaysia's new international airport. I am not sure what impact, if any, this might have. I know my granddaughter enjoys her work and she enjoys the income it generates. She says she will quit once she decides to marry, but I am not sure when that will be. Nowadays, girls seem to be waiting longer before they do marry.

Sinah's epilogue

I have talked about the many changes in Btsisi' women's lives I have seen over the years. Women's and men's lives are hard. They suffer greatly, particularly recently with the increasing importance of income and the growing number of people who are landless. I fear more and more of our youth will search for work away from our communities and migrate to the city where there are jobs. I worry about the girls and whether the relationships they will have with their husbands will be as good as it was for our *moyang* (ancestors). I wonder whether the Btsisi' ideology of equity and cooperation will be possible, especially if husbands and wives no longer work together as partners in their daily activities. Working together every day as partners requires

respect and friendship. If husbands and wives no longer can work together and share in their daily experiences, I wonder whether the close relationship I had with Jelang and my mother had with her husbands will exist for my granddaughters.

ENDNOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA) and the Malaysia Government. I would also like to thank SUNY Buffalo, Grinnell College and Massey University which all provided financial support for my research. Most of all, I would like to thank Peter Laird for his comments on this paper and all the conversations we have had over the years about Orang Asli.
2. *Hma'* translates as "people" or "person" (cognate with *Semaq* as in *Semaq Beri*, another Orang Asli community). It is unclear what Btsisi' actually means. Some stories suggest the term refers to "scales" as in fish scales. As Btsisi' are fisherfolk it has been suggested that *Hma'* Btsisi' therefore means "people with scales" (e.g., Karim, 1981, fn. 1). Another possible explanation for the origins of Btsisi' is from the Malay word *sisi*, meaning "edge", which describes the people's location vis-à-vis the Temuan / Blandas, who Btsisi say named their language (Benjamin, 1985). Btsisi' call themselves *Hma' Heh* or "We People." They are known in the literature and officially by the JHEOA as *Mah Meri* or *Mah Mrih* (or "People of the Jungle").
3. I did the majority of the research between 1980 and 1982 with sporadic, short visits every few years. In addition, I speak with people on the telephone and we also have a written correspondence.
4. An *opoh* has two distinct meanings. The first is based on descent, the second on filiation. In the first sense, it is a locally-organised cognatic descent group (*deme*) in which all marriages are endogamous. An *opoh* based on filiation is determined through parallel descent so that a girl belongs to her mother's *opoh* and a boy belongs to his father's. In this definition, brothers and sisters belong to different *opoh* (Nowak, 1987: 429-430).
5. *Gnto'* is a spring-tide fishing technique. Crabs leave their holes to feed in the rivers making hooking impossible. Btsisi' use floated lift-nets to catch crabs during this tidal cycle (see Nowak, 1987: 340-341).
6. *Gda?* is a crabbing technique performed in the mangroves at low tide. A heavy-gauge metal pole approximately three feet long with a wooden handle

on one end and a hook on the other is poked into a crab hole. If a crab inside the hole grabs onto the hook, the pole is pulled out of the hole (see Nowak, 1987: 340).

7. The Btsisi' term for male, man and husband is the same: *lmol*, while the word for female, woman, women and wife is also one word, *kdoh*.
8. If there is an additional pair or a third stamper in one set, Btsisi' refer to this as the "child" (*knon*) (Skeat, 1897: 382).
9. A Malay word, *gelar*, means "title" (Wilkinson, 1959: 339).
10. Harvesting oil palm is both hard and potentially dangerous work. Using very sharp metal sickles on long poles, previously made of bamboo but now of a hollow metal tube, men cut down large, heavy fruit bunches which can be as high as twenty feet. The palm fronds surrounding the fruit must also be cut down in order to access the fruit.
11. A typical monthly wage working for the local oil palm plantation is RM 300.
12. *Wali'* comes from the Malay. Among Malays, girls are given a *wali* or "guardian." Among Btsisi', however, both men and women have a *wali'*. A woman's *wali'* is her mother's elder brother (*wali' kadoi*, "big guardian" or "greater guardian"). A mother's younger brothers are known as *wali' knin* ("small guardian" or "lesser guardians"). Similarly, for a man his *wali'* is determined through his father's family. A man's *wali' kadoi* is his father's older brother, for example.
13. *Dara* is a term Btsisi' use for unmarried youth, both boys and girls. It is a Malay term which in Malay is only used to indicate a virgin girl. For Btsisi' the term has lost its gender bias and does not relate to sexual activity, but rather to whether the youth has ever been married.
14. This type of fostering is very common among Btsisi'. It seems to provide a form of horizontal and vertical integration of families.
15. *Kasuw* is the Malay *kasau* for "beam." In Malay houses, the opposite holds true; all houses have a male beam (*kasau jantan*) and secondary beams are female (*kasau betina*) (Wilkinson, 1959: 514).

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