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'Surrender', peacekeeping and internal colonialism A Malaysian instance

The Austroasiatic-speaking Sengoi Semai people of central peninsular Malaysia are among the most peaceful peoples whose lives anthropologists have documented. Semai themselves typically attribute their peaceability to the town meeting or *bicaraa'* (Edo 2004; A. Williams-Hunt 2007) as do outsiders (such as Robarchek 1979). This institution, however, is of fairly recent origin among Semai; furthermore, not all Semai people hold *bicaraa'* to settle disputes. To judge its actual importance in Semai peaceability requires understanding the history of this institution which has, as Gomes (2004:33-4) points out, received only cursory attention.

In 2007 Semai numbered about 43,500. Most live in the hills of the central West Malaysian states of Pahang and Perak. Traditional Semai lived by

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agroforestry, dry rice farming and small scale trade. The ruling class Malays who lived in coastal areas deemed the Semai's jungle homelands wild and dangerous territory, and called the inhabitants 'Sakai', a derogatory term implying savages and infidels. Malay elites often organized raids against the defenceless Semai and took their women and children as slaves (Dentan 1997). In the twentieth century, slave raids declined under British pressure. Semai began turning to small-scale commodity production and occasional day labour (Gomes 1988, 1989, 1990, 2004). Although a few Semai have 'succeeded' in globalized Malaysian society, the overall standard of living of the people has not improved in the last half century (Dentan et al. 1997; Nicholas 1990, 1994, 2000, 2001).

Semai today live in a Malay milieu. They know how Malays perceive them yet retain their identity as Semai. However, Malaysian historiography skips over Semai as actors in their own history. We argue that Semai modified but did not abandon their traditions or customary relationships with their land in response to external pressures; they were not merely objects and sock puppets of their masters,² the Malays, and ultimately the colonial British. We will use the idea of 'double consciousness', to help explain their identification with, yet resistance to, the Malays.³

Our claim that Semai were also actors in their own interests, not merely submissive, rests on the story of Bah Busu. Bah Juli heard the history of Bah Busu directly from Busu's grandsons Bah Tilot k. Gemuk and Shamsudin k. Pgh. (Bah) Bulat in 1991. Bah Toni interviewed Bulat, Busu's son, at Bulat's home in Teiw Bòòt. Bulat was born in 1934 and from 1998 to 2003 Bulat was the headman of Teiw Bòòt along the Cameron Highlands-Tapah Road. Bulat's two sons inherited the ten acres of rubber their grandfather Bah Busu planted before Bulat was born. The authors collected other stories from Williams-Hunt's home settlement of Cang Kuaa' on the upper Waar (A. Williams-Hunt 2007), Juli's in 'Irok in 1991 and Dentan's temporary residences along the Waar River in 1991 and the R'eiis in 1992. They describe how, as an unintended, indirect consequence of British imperialism, a particular subgroup among the Semai changed the way in which they kept the peace. This process led to the creation of private real property, which in itself became an unintended new threat to peace.

² In current US political discourse the metaphor 'sock puppet', as with 'puppet', refers to ostensibly independent agents whose actions serve the interests of more powerful people who remain 'invisible' to the public.

³ This idea was first formulated by Du Bois (1994) in his account of African-American life.

The British move in

The British believed that the disorder and economic decline in the Malay sultanates of their colony could be resolved only by imposing a centralized administration (Noor 2002:39; Banks 1983:9). Therefore, in the state of Perak in 1874 they established the Residency system, with the signing of the Pangkor Treaty. When the signatory Sultan Idris and his allies in Perak realized that the provisions of the treaty reduced the Sultan to an ornamental sock puppet, the Malays revolted. The British suppressed the uprisings and placed Sultan Idris on the throne in Kuala Kangsar, the coastal city where the sultanate in Perak was situated. The British bestowed the title of Shah on Sultan Idris in a ceremony wonderfully described by Farish A. Noor (2002:36-8); redolent of splendour but with no accompanying bestowal of political power.

Soon the cold colonialist gaze turned to the untidy borderlands of their puppet sultanate. This was Semai country which had always been beyond the control of the sultanates in both Perak and Pahang states. In the self-effacing but always centralizing style of 'indirect rule', the British urged Sultan Idris to extend his nominal sway over the marginal areas, including the valley that led from the little city of Tapah in Batang Padang parish,⁴ central south Perak, to the cool Cameron Highlands, which were suitable for planting tea and building colonial bungalows. Under British 'indirect rule', Sultan Idris placated his masters and extended his influence by bestowing titles and honours on local Malay chiefs, just as the British had done to him. These titled chiefs would in their turn help Idris subdue his domain.

Semai: a once rich, peaceful people

We Semai prefer to keep out of trouble. We avoid confrontation among ourselves and with outsiders. If we don't agree with something, we don't speak out. We don't fight aloud. (Semai man, quoted anonymously in Nah 2003:119-20).

We were always rich. If we needed anything, we could get it from the jungle. If our fields were worked out, there was always more land... Now we are being impoverished. In the old days people worked hard, though. I remember my mom and dad getting up at 4 a.m. so they could go off to work at first light while it was still cool. In the morning they'd go out and check their noose-and-spear traps, in the afternoon they'd work in the fields or gather firewood, and in the evening they'd make mats. Of course it's different nowadays for kids. They go to school. They're gone all morning and when they get home a meal's ready for them without their having to work. So they get lazy. The [salaried Semai medical assistants] at

⁴ A Malaysian administrative unit (*mukim*), roughly similar to a county in the US or Britain.

Gombak are rich so they forget rural values. They have glass fronted cases where they display the expensive things they've bought, things that have no practical value.⁵

The Austroasiatic-speaking Semai are the largest of about 13 different groups of West Malaysian indigenous people (Orang Asli). They settled the peninsula long before Malays arrived. Semai were swiddeners and agroforesters. They also hunted and collected jungle produce for their own use and to exchange. The British considered them 'wild' but harmless and docile (Swettenham 1894:89). From the 1850s to the 1900s, some Semai worked in tin mines or on rubber plantations owned by the British. In the 1900s they began to grow commercial fruits such as durian, petai and jering beans (Dentan 2001; Dentan and Ong Hean Chooi 1995).

The relationship between Malays and Semai is complex. Local rural Malays traditionally adopted a *laissez faire* attitude, *lain padang lain belalang* (other fields, other grasshoppers) towards Semai, although Malays simultaneously despised and sometimes exploited them (Swift 2001:76). The two peoples traded with each other, exchanging jungle produce and iron tools, salt and cloth. From Sumatra the British imported Malays who were more industrious and docile than the locals. The idea was that the immigrants would clear the land and plant rice to feed the indentured Indian and Chinese miners and plantation workers. One such Sumatran group, the Rawas, embarked on ethnic cleansing of Semai territory, killing the people or taking women and children prisoner to sell to Malay coastal elites for enslavement as sex objects or housekeepers (Dentan 1997; Harper 1997:3-4).

Traditional Semai society was egalitarian. No one had the right to coerce anyone else. Especially in Perak, the people tended to defer to elders of both genders, *maay ra'na'*.⁶ But the role of elder was fluid, depending on personal and other circumstances, and there was little consensus about who was an elder, when, and with respect to whom and in relation to what (Dentan 1979). People worked at maintaining peace, *slamaad* (from Arabic-Malay *selamat*), by cooperating and sharing freely with each other, rather than by reciprocity. Such sharing did not incur obligations or create debts. *Slamaad* was usually accompanied by mutual affection or at least tolerance.

⁵ Rahu k. Pgh. Hassan, 8 May 1992. For Bah Rahu, see Means and Means 1981:67, 69, 72, 76-84, 88-90.

⁶ Women elders were *jnaja'* addressed as *jaa'*, with *jajaa'* as the title. Men were *tnataa'* or *kna-taa'*, with *tataa'* as the title (Dentan 2006c).

Introducing Busu; Bringing Semai under the colonial umbrella

Understanding the position of Semai in today's Malaysia requires understanding how British policy brought them under the British-Malay diarchy. One Semai man, Bah Busu, played a significant role. Busu lived at Bòòt settlement, one of 35 Semai settlements in the Batang Padang district in Pahang state. The settlements are in Bukit Tapah Forest Reserve on both sides of the Teiw Gòòl (in Malay, the Batang Padang River). They extend from the 3rd milestone to the 27.5th milestone of the Tapah Road which runs from Tapah town⁷ to the Cameron Highlands. In this paper 'Batang Padang area' refers to Bòòt proper and the nearby settlement of Tiduuk at the 8th milestone where Bah Busu lived.

Busu was born in the Brtaak area (Malay, Ulu Bertam), of the Cameron Highlands, a day's travel on foot upstream along the Teiw Waar (Malay, Sungai Woh) from Bòòt. In the last generation, Semai who lived in this area had defeated the Rawa attempt at ethnic cleansing. Semai still celebrate their victory in this *Praak Sangkiil* (guerilla war) over a century later.⁸ Their success seems to have left them a little more assertive and gruff than other Semai, who gossip that Brtaak people – and Semai from the Cameron Highlands in general – are more rough-spoken and self-assertive than other Semai.

As is customary for young marriageable men, called *litaaw* by the Semai, Busu decided to leave his home settlement to look for adventure, a wife and maybe a new life in some other place. At the same time other Semai from the Cameron Highlands were looking to live in the Teiw Waar area in Batang Padang where the agonizingly delayed British abolition of the slave trade was beginning to have an effect and which the Rawas' failed ethnic cleansing had depopulated. Other adventurous *litaaw* from Ruil – Terisu, Mnson and Tlanok – like Busu, also immigrated downstream into Bòòt. But the *litaaw* from the Bòòt area were concerned about possible abuse of local women by outsiders. Busu and other Brtaak *litaaw* were involved in quarrels about women, and even feud-style revenge killing. The example of Ataak (not his real name) is illustrative. Ataak was born at Skòòp on the Tapah Road. One of his kinsmen 'stole' the wife of a man from Gòòl. In revenge the wronged Gòòl man killed one of Ataak's kinsman, the kinsman's wife and Ataak's grandmother. The 'big headman', probably the Tok Bayas we discuss in the next paragraph, sent machetes as emoluments to the quarrelling groups and summoned the disputants to his headquarters to talk. He urged them to stop

⁷ Although we use 'Gòòl' for convenience to refer to the town of Tapah, as some Semai from outside our focus area do, the term properly refers to the area around the 14th-16th milestones of the Tapah-Cameron Highlands trunk road.

⁸ Dentan 1999a; Edo 1990:50-4; Akiya 2007.

feuding and sent Ataak's family to Bòt, near where the Waar River crosses the road. From there they eventually moved to Lngkuuk, far up the road.⁹ Eventually Busu married a Bòt woman and settled down to live there with her family. By this time the British pressure on Sultan Idris was beginning to affect rural Batang Padang parish.

Chief Tok Bayas was one of the Malay chiefs in the region who had been given his title by Idris Shah. Semai people we talked with told us that they believed that Chief Bayas was wise, familiar with all kinds of *ilmu* (knowledge). As chief of Bòt, he (or someone with that title) helped end the ethnic cleansing of Semai. At a meeting of Rawas headmen Bayas stressed that Semai deserved respect and protection (Dentan 1999a:412, 428).

Chief Bayas recruited the admiring Busu as a client. As a feudal lord, Bayas understood patronage. Traditional Semai maintained no stable unequal relationships among themselves. Relationships with Malays, however, were likely to be asymmetric, for example, Malay patrons and Semai slaves or serfs. We suspect that Busu responded to the attention of his patron with the sort of love and respect which Semai offer, and that the chief seemed to him more father-figure than feudal patron. Busu apparently felt as safe with the chief as Semai children feel with their parents – their haven in an outsider's world they construe as heartless. The sultan and Tok Bayas promised Busu and his people protection from Malay depredations and expansionism.¹⁰ Even today, older people trust the sultan more than the Malay bureaucrats of the Department of Indigenous Affairs.¹¹

Under Chief Bayas's tutorship Busu stopped acting like a *litaaw*. Instead of being inconsiderate, irresponsible, foolish and aggressive he became courteous and deferential. The chief even took him to audiences with Idris Shah at the Sultan's palace. On 30 April 1909 the Sultan gave Busu the name Dewa Angsa and the title Lela Negara. As official regalia the Sultan gave Busu a kris, a gong, several swords and a signed surat kuasa (letter of authority), that formalized Busu's status but showed it derived from Sultanic authority. Busu thereby had 'umbrella' authority over all the Semai in the Batang Padang Forest Reserve, transmuting them from free people into subjects. Sultan Idris had learned from his experience with British protection, that the 'most effec-

⁹ Clayton Robarchek, field notes from Lngkuuk, high up the Tapah Road, 19 and 29 October 1974. With typical generosity, he shared his notes. The text version is Dentan's summary. There is some confusion about the actors and victims of the killings and which community intervened.

¹⁰ For Semai-Rawa relationships, see Dentan 1999; for racist concepts involved in slaving, which was particularly brutal in Perak, see Dentan 1997. There was a major south Perak slave market in Durian Sebatang at Teluk Intan; and several Semai at Teiw Mncaak, near Kampar town and north of the area we discuss, said that the Malay name for Mncaak, *Batu Berangkai*, that is, 'enchained rock', referred to the slave market there.

¹¹ Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli.

tive means of forceful intervention was that which was sweetened with gifts' (Noor 2002:38).

Busu's new rules; A system like Russian nested dolls

Bah Busu appointed a representative in each of the three dozen or so Semai communities under his umbrella control. The territory stretched from Tapah town to the 25th milestone of the Tapah Road. These representatives, mostly local community *ra'naa'* (elders), were Busu's go-betweens with the rest of the people. Their association, via Busu, with powerful outsiders, boosted their status in their own communities. Initially they were first among equals, *primus inter pares*. Eventually they became simply headmen, *primus* (Benjamin 1968; Dentan 1979:65-8). Headman – *penghulu* in Perak, *batin* in Pahang – are now firmly entrenched in Semai life, especially since the establishment of the Department of Indigenous Affairs by the British in 1953 as a counterinsurgency measure to provide surveillance and control against a Communist insurrection. Nowadays a Perak *penghulu* has a *sten*, assistant, who does the routine work while the *penghulu* concentrates on politics and policies.

Under Busu the headmen's main role was to collect produce from the forests, fields and orchards for Busu to present to Sultan Idris at his palace in Kuala Kangsar, as a token of Semai fealty and subordination. Swidden produce was due at harvest time, between February and April; agroforestry produce during *musib breck*, the fruit season, between August and September. As the sultan's representative, Busu himself received a share of the tribute. Usually Tok Bayas, the Malay intermediary between Busu and the Sultan, would accompany the line of Semai, laden with heavy open-weave back-baskets, along the long difficult road to Kuala Kangsar. But sometimes Busu and 'his people' (he used the Malay term *anak buah*) made the trip of several days without supervision. As the journey was arduous, some years there was just one presentation to the sultan.¹²

In the redistributive feudal manner, the Sultan responded with presentations of ocean products like salt and salt fish, and ironware such as axes, adzes and machetes – all scarce and valuable items in Batang Padang. Tok Bayas also asked Busu for local artifacts. In return he gave the Semai milled rice, machetes, axes, cloths and cigarette lighters (Dentan 1999a:428). Busu

¹² According to our informants, swidden goods consisted of pounded swidden rice, maize, fowl, amaranth, gourds, cucumbers, aroids, bamboo shoots, bayas fan palm nuts and so on. Fruits included durian, langsung, tampoi, petai beans, rambai and rambutan. The late Bah Tiluuk, the headman of Baruuh Kangat near the 7th milestone – famous for his role in the killing of Bah Plankin, the notorious Semai Communist leader – said that Semai from his area would raft down the Gòl River to Tapah bringing loads of fruit and jungle produce to 'Malay chieftains' in Tapah.

then redistributed these items to the headmen, who re-redistributed them to the people. With some of the tribute he collected Busu also bought ironware in the shops at Tapah, three or four hours away by foot, and redistributed them.¹³ So the state sock-puppet structure multiplied itself like Russian nested dolls: British>Sultan Idris>Bayas>Busu> headmen>subordinates.

It was a subtle nonviolent colonial conquest, with which everyone seems initially to have been pleased. The British benefited when they began to develop the Cameron Highlands into a hill station and built a tarred road through the Batang Padang area. Local Semai worked as day laborers on the road, an opportunity to earn money to buy market goods. Around 1912, when the road was finished, Tok Bayas gave Busu some rubber seedlings and materials to construct a permanent house. Sedentization was part of the British policy that Sultan Idris wanted Tok Bayas to introduce. Settled populations are easier to surveil and govern than swiddeners, who can easily flee (as Semai and peasant Malays used to) from inordinate oppression (Dentan 1999a:421-2). Busu's ten acres of rubber presaged a revolution.

Changes to land ownership

We can't sustain being tied down to one place. Malays will come and take all our *tei' saka'*, hereditary land. Or, there'll be a war, and we'll lose everything... If we keep moving, people will have a hard time getting at us. We don't like killing people, and we hate being killed. Settling down is just asking for trouble. (Batin Jraan, Teiw Jnteer, Teiw Tluup, northwest Pahang, 1962).

Bayas' 'gift' of rubber to Busu in 1912 reflected and stimulated the change in land tenure that facilitated incorporating Semai into the colonial feudal polity. As swiddeners and targets of slave raids, Semai did not invest heavily in houses. Traditional house materials were cheap and plentiful. Women wove the leaves of the then very common fan palm, *brtaak*, into shingles for the roof and walls. Men flattened bamboo, preferably the large tough *awaad rngrook* or *lngrook*, to make the walls, and they split the stems to make slats an inch or so wide for the springy floors. Sturdy poles formed the frame, and the whole was lashed together with rattan, usually the common *cook stòò*. Inexpensive disposable housing was a mainstay of Semai freedom. As agroforesters they knew the way through the forest to their trees in a way that outsiders did not. Flight, the tactic that had traditionally saved them from violence and oppression, often meant abandoning their houses, though not the claim to the *tei'*

¹³ If Semai ever knew how to work iron, a matter of debate, they had lost the art by this time. The iron ware involved included curved chopping machetes, *parang golok*; long machetes, *parang panjang*; and small adzes that Semai used as ax heads, *mata beliung*.

Illustration 1

A modern Semai house and its surroundings

by

Wa' Ella knoon Bei' Trus, [Miss Ella child of Terus' Father], aged 9 (from Ang 2002:17)

Ella labels the items near her house in her sedentized community. We give, as she does, first the Malay word, then the Semai (in our spelling rather than hers), and finally the English and/or, in parentheses, the tentative Latin taxon. Thus the community is Chang Kuah, a Malay rendition of Semai Cak Kua', Branch of Kuak-[Tree] (*Saraca triandra*, *S. thaipingensis*). Citation goes from left to right, top to bottom.

Mengkuang	Skii' mengkuang	Screwpine (<i>Pandanus</i> cf. <i>odoratus</i>)	= skii' ctnvt, cultivated s.
Pokok rotan	Cook bantak	Rattan (? <i>Plectocomia elongata</i>) ¹	see Hood and Kiew (1990:51-2)
[Pokok meranti] [Bertam]	Cah Spaal	(<i>Shorea</i> sp.) Stemless palm (<i>Eugeissona tristis</i>)	common hardwood formerly of great impor- tance
Pokok tahuk	Cah	(<i>Shorea</i> sp.)	<i>lalaw</i> = tree
Ladang	[Slaay]	Swidden	slash and burn field
Padi	Ba'	Field rice	
Tempat jenur kain		Place to sundry clothes	
Daun atap	[slaa' plook]	Attap leaves	woven roof shingles
Rumah buluh	[dook awaad?]	House of bamboo?	but it looks like a plank house
Air	Teiw	Water	pump
Pokok [mahang?]	Lalaw cnraat	(<i>Macaranga ?triloba</i>)	lalaw here = trunk
Bunga kumbang	Bunga' kumbaak	'Swelling flower' <i>Hyptis brevipes</i>	demon-bath; see Dentan (1999b:30)
Serai	Sreey	lemongrass, <i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>	food and ritual
Bunga	Bunga'	flower	
Padang balai		meeting-house field	

1 Calamus ornatus.

saka', hereditary land, the area to which all members of the group had usufruct rights.¹⁴ Abandoning a house did not entail moving to a new *tei' saka*. The household's relationship with the land was continuous and unbroken. Semai have never been nomads but moved around within the *tei' saka'*, as political, ecological and economic circumstances dictated (Dentan 1971).

The new road facilitated transporting the bulky materials for Busu's new, permanent house – heavy planks, corrugated iron roofing – so that Busu and 'his people' only had to lug them a mile or so through the forest. They also cleared about three acres (later ten) to plant the rubber seedlings and install the rubber press that Tok Bayas supplied. Busu then gave seeds from his plantation to other Bòt people. The road in turn also facilitated bringing Semai under state surveillance (Gomes 1989; Hood and Noor 1984). Although the British administration claimed to own all land for which there was no legal paperwork, Semai did not have to ask permission from the Batang Padang district chief or the Sultan to farm areas on which they had lived for centuries. In fact, since state officials initiated the sedentizing enterprise, one could argue that their permission for Semai to settle where they did was supererogatory. From the moment the seedlings sprouted, Bòt Semai became inextricably involved in cash cropping and the wider market economy.¹⁵

In traditional agroforestry, individual nuclear families owned the produce of the trees; the land was owned by the community. However, planting rubber changed land ownership. Within the hereditary land ownership system individuals had access to a particular resource as long as they actively used it. If a field had lain fallow for a couple of years any member of the group could make use of it. Land belonged to everyone but to no one in particular, unless it was in use. That flexibility buttressed Semai mobility and

¹⁴ The Sanskrit origin of the Semai term for hereditary property may reflect the antiquity of this concept of land tenure: *upasaka*. Swiddening is optimal agriculture when land is abundant and labour is scarce, the opposite of the wet rice agriculture which the British were trying to introduce. Rice from a particular family's swidden belonged to the family that cleared it, a family in Semai custom being a husband-wife pair, *klamin*, and their children. If several families cooperated in clearing a large plot, they would mark off each family area with unburned logs. Hunters and fishermen kept what they had collected, sharing with other *klamin* members of the hunting or fishing party rather than with the whole settlement, unless the catch or quarry was huge, a giant python say, in which case the meat was divided carefully by *klamin* for all the *klamin* in the settlement (Dentan 1979:48-50).

¹⁵ The situation in relation to land tenure has not changed much, although recent court cases are eroding the Torrens Doctrine. Much Semai traditional land is defined as: *Tanah lurus belum diwartu*, 'land not registered or claimed'. In 1982, for example, Semai at Kuuy Geruntòb formally requested that 2300 acres of its land be gazetted, but, despite subsequent written requests, the land remains in the limbo the Malay phrase denotes (Headman, 8 May 1992). In fact, almost all Semai requests to gazette land are rejected, and the area of land gazetted for them has declined since independence (Nicholas 2000:33-4).

thus freedom. However, rubber plantations remain fertile for long periods of time, requiring sedentization and the dismemberment of the commons. Busu did not share the proceeds from his rubber. There was no way he could have, say, more rubber than he 'needed', because he was raising rubber for profit. By contrast, if a Semai household has more rice than they need, any fellow band member has a right to demand a share. Busu's sharing consisted of giving seeds to other people so they could establish individual/familial ownership of their own trees. The land on which Busu's rubber trees grew belonged to him personally, not to the community. On Busu's death, his son inherited his plantation. As far as rubber went, the commons was dead. With it died Semai ability to move away from oppressors without incurring serious loss of livelihood.

However, sedentism and individualized land tenure did not secure Semai land. Before World War II, few Semai paid rent. Malay-British land offices had no record of their claims. 'Privileges had been granted [...] by name and numbers or by location, but very few were gazetted. Communities had, moreover, been displaced or moved on' (Harper 1997:24-5; see also Dentan 1999a:427-8). Indeed, planting rubber threatened Semai land security (Harper 1997:26-8). It also fostered other problems such as increased violence, which Semai attribute to overcrowding as a result of sedentism.

Changes to traditional peacekeeping

Nudy's-father: Let me give one answer to your question about why Semai do so little violence. When someone does something wrong, like stealing, we don't beat them up badly or kill them. We bring them to judgment under our laws. We are one family, one people. Maybe we fine them, but only a little. And we *-lees* (harangue) them, urge them to change their ways and not to set a bad example for the children. We don't want to kill or beat people. We would be ashamed. And, number two, we would be like the beasts that kill or hurt people.

Jnang-Puk: Right. What we think is, if we hurt them, we lose out, we lose a friend. So, we withdraw and suffer in private (*kra'dii'*). We feel bad.

But we need help in clearing swiddens, in feeding ourselves. We realize that if we hurt our friends we lose.¹⁶

[...] crime was so rare that Pahang Semai said that accusing someone of theft was a good way to cure hiccups, the accusation was so shocking (Skeat and Blagden 1906, I: 501; P.D.R. Williams-Hunt 1952:95).

Prompted by his sponsors, Busu introduced a code of conduct for the people

¹⁶ Waar River, 1991.

under his 'umbrella'. This code rested fundamentally on Semai customs, but included some innovations in conflict resolution that came from the practices of Malay aristocrats. This new code included three basic elements: people's courts, *bicaraa'*; sentencing and the payment of fines, *hukum denda'*; and individual ownership of property. Busu's genius lay in adapting the codes to pre-existing Semai praxis.

Bicaraa'

We don't fight and squabble like other peoples because we're all spread out. There aren't many of us, and we live scattered around. Those other peoples, there're lots of them. If we all lived crowded together like them, we'd fight too. [*pounds his clenched fists together*.] (Man in his late twenties from the 16th milestone on Tapah Road, 13 May 1992).

In the past, when we had conflicts, we had our own court system. Our way was to have a meeting and to discuss the issues, to use language that avoids direct confrontation. Sometimes our meetings would last for two to three nights! The atmosphere was very amiable. Even with outsiders, we don't fight (Anonymous educated Semai, quoted in Nah 2003:119-20).

To understand how Semai traditionally kept the peace, consider the case of Lgòòs in Cba'Jnteer, a mixed Semai-Temiar¹⁷ settlement on the upper Teiw Tluup in Pahang, still fairly free of Malay incursions in 1962. The resolution did not involve the community formally, just as a congeries of individuals.

Lgòòs, a respected Temiar traditional elder, lacked the formal 'letter of authority' issued by the British colonial authorities to all Orang Asli headmen, a sore point with him. One day he took charge of a burial party (Dentan 1979: photos pp. 91, 120). A few days later, the wife of Stiib, an irascible man who had served in the Malaysian parapolice during the Communist insurgency of the 1950s but who remained gentle in daily affairs, began to complain to people that their house was haunted. At night, she said, red eyes peered at her from the rafters and she heard suspicious rustlings in the thatch. Stiib claimed that it must be a *kcmooc*, a ghost, revenant because Lgòòs had buried the corpse too close to the settlement. (Ghosts yearn for the people they love, but, having crossed over to the demonic dimension, they devour the souls of living people they still yearn for.) Stiib told everyone in town that he had approached Lgòòs about the issue, not asking for compensation, simply voicing the complaint. According to Stiib, when he spoke to Lgòòs, the latter pulled his ear and replied, *Tò' am-grtei'* (I'm not listening). Stiib also claimed that Lgòòs threatened him with a spear.

¹⁷ The Temiar are indigenous Orang Asli living in an adjacent area in Pahang.

The story spread rapidly. Lgòòs made the rounds talking to everyone, saying that Stiib was lying. His version was that he went to Stiib's house to talk things over, but as he was clambering up the house ladder, Stiib thrust a burning brand at his face, yelling 'Don't come up here!' Lgòòs defended with classic Semai persuasive rhetoric: 'One, there's no such thing as *kcmooc*. And, two, how would they get across the river?' Gossip raged. Stiib finally felt the tide of public opinion turning against him. People began to gossip about his bad temper. Shamed, he left town and built a new house a mile or so upstream from the main settlement.

If the Stiib-Lgòòs affair happened in Batang Padang after the introduction of the *bicaraa'* people's court, it would metamorphose from a civil dispute between two parties into not just a tort, but also an offence against the peace of the community, a thitherto unfamiliar concept. Stiib would have to lodge a formal complaint (*sguu*) with the *sten*. The *sten* would then travel around the settlement, hearing all sides of the case, basically conducting an informal poll to determine the consensus on the conflict. He would then report his findings to the headman. If someone from a different settlement was involved, the headmen of both settlements would confer until they agreed on the facts of the case, especially who was in the wrong. The headmen would also determine whether there was sufficient consensus to make their judgments acceptable to all the parties involved. They would then try for an informal resolution of the case between the concerned parties (A.T. Williams-Hunt 2007).

If they had conducted a Malay-style *bicaraa'*, a meeting in which peers arrive at legal resolution of disputes, the resolution of the conflict would have proceeded as follows.

They would call for a Malay-style *bicaraa'*, a meeting in which peers arrive at legal resolution of disputes. If no resolution was possible, they would hold a formal *bicaraa'* court. Since the relatively egalitarian Semai had no rationale for keeping anyone out, their *bicaraa'* was open to everyone, like traditional town meetings, *ngroo'* (talks), not just male aristocrats, as in Malay practice (Andaya and Andaya 1982:159, 173). Semai of all ages and genders should attend, so that dissenters would have no reason to harbour resentment, 'to store it in his/her mind/heart' (*de' ku i sngii/nòòs*).

The headmen and then the elders begin with flowery speeches about how important consensus and goodwill are to community. They describe the case and list the offences involved. Everyone would discuss everything connected with the case until the officials decide that they can sum up public sentiment. The leaders then state the penalties in terms of a complex schedule of fines, *dndaa'* (see next section). Ideally, the guilty parties then admit their guilt by agreeing to pay the fine, and the meeting is over (Robarchek 1979; A. Williams-Hunt 2007). Often, however, everyone just gets sick of spending their time, night after night, in unresolvable bickering and the court simply

dissolves without a formal resolution to the conflict but with everyone thoroughly sick of hearing about it.

Bicaraa' nowadays occur only when a quarrel begins to escalate and threaten the general peace, *slamaad*, within a community or between communities. Semai seek to maintain *slamaad*. They try to avoid fighting, since they believe that fighting hurts everyone involved. Tactics like avoidance, joking, temporary withdrawal and so on are the rule (Dentan 2004). These tactics generally serve to prevent violence, and maintain *slamaad*. Only if ill-will continues to fester even after the mutual disengagement of the parties involved do people resort to time-consuming and burdensome *bicaraa'*. However, it is important to remember that for all the esteem in which ordinary Semai hold the *bicaraa'*, the *bicaraa'* is not a big change from the traditional tactics of last resort used by the Semai in maintaining *slamaad*. Semai who have not adopted *bicaraa'* respond to persistent quarrels with long, often inconclusive meetings. The difference is that they lack the complicated fine system (Hood 2004). Indeed Fry (2006) makes the observation that such communal meetings to 'cool off', if not resolve disputes, are a common characteristic of societies based on foraging or simple swiddening.

Although most Batang Padang Semai attribute their remarkable peaceability to the institution of *bicaraa'*, in fact it seems to work about as well as the several other peacekeeping techniques all Semai use (see Dentan 2004). The main difference is that in the *bicaraa'*, the state casts its shadow over a once free people. Using a technique introduced by a Malay overlord himself subject to a British master allows Semai to placate outsiders.

Fines

As the *bicaraa'* shows, Semai stress harmonious intra-communal relationships. They have always been sensitive to the psychophysical concomitants of stress (Dentan 2004, 2006a, 2006b). Moreover, they recognize that social solidarity underpins their economic system. So if someone has made you unhappy there is a formally recognized way of healing your psychological trauma (*lukaa' sngii*). A token gift as a sign of love will heal the hurt.¹⁸ Traditionally Semai who had been wronged went to the offender and asked for the gift. Usually a brisk negotiation followed during which the request (initially often a huge sum of money) dropped to something the offender could afford (such as an old cooking pot). If that was unsuccessful the plaintiff took something (*hayvvt*

¹⁸ Sometimes more extensive shamanic intervention is required, but that issue goes beyond the limitations of this text (see Dentan 2000, 2008b).

'*arab*') without further ado. Semai sometimes use the Malay word *rampas* (confiscate) for this sort of compensation.

What Busu introduced into this system of egalitarian negotiation was an extremely complicated bureaucratic-hieratic schedule of fines, with a particular fine for a particular offence. Negotiation morphed into a mix of mediation and arbitration (Fry 2006:23, 27-9, 32-5). The system of fines was so complicated that even the headmen in charge of assessing and administering them often disagreed about what the fines should be. The confusion was inconsequential, since agreeing to pay was not actually an agreement to pay but an acknowledgement of culpability, as noted. After fining, everyone begged forgiveness of all others present, in particular for involving them in such unseemliness. A good headman took about half the fine of a first offender, gave half to the victim and returned the rest to the offender, with a public lecture about proper behaviour. Repeat offences showed that offenders had not learnt their lesson, that their hearts were *bi-luti' i nuus*, swollen with self-righteousness or arrogance; therefore, they were required to pay the fine in full.

A guilty party, however, could refuse to accept the judgment or pay the fine (Dentan 2004). In such cases there was no way of forcing payment. People had recourse to this cumbersome system only if informal negotiation did not work. It was always better to avoid a *bicaraa'*, because of the confrontation, ill-will and the wasted time involved. As one Pahang Semai teenager commented to Robert Dentan in 1962, 'the only *kuasa* (authority) here is shame'. Ordinary people could not devote the time and energy required to master the esoterica of the *dndaa'* fine system. Reconciliation thus required official Busu-appointed conflict resolution experts. The old style of negotiating payments between two parties fell into disuse (Colson 1971:94). And, since fines required using currency, they helped to integrate Semai into the money economy.

Significantly, these changes in Semai peacekeeping mechanisms do not seem to have had any effect on the incidence of violence. 'Pacification' by the state worked better for state expansion than for peace and quiet.

Following Busu's death

The death of Tok Bayas attenuated the ties that bound Semai to the Sultan in Kuala Kangsar. Busu died a little later, in 1920. Memories of the special ties between Semai of the Batang Padang area and the Malay puppet sultanate faded among Malays, though not among Semai (Edo 2004). By then the transformation of an egalitarian society into a hierarchical one and of free people into subjects was well under way. What Miéville calls 'concrete individualism', in which individuals within a community owe their existence to mutual

respect among all members of the group, was becoming 'abstract individualism', where it is possible to forget that one is part of a larger unit (Miéville 2003:63). In short, Semai had been integrated into the state and its economy.

The British no longer needed sock puppets, even in remote areas like Batang Padang. Before Busu's death the British had taken over the administration of the area around Tapah and their trade penetrated deep into what had been Semai country. Other traditional methods used by the Semai to maintain the peace have ceased for various reasons. For example, some communities held a special séance to restore *slamaad*. In at least one case, at Kuuy Grntòb (Malay, Ulu Geruntom), such ceremonies ceased when the people converted to Christianity in the 1970s. More often, surveillance by disapproving Malay authorities has made such communal peace-restorative séances uncomfortable for Semai, who try not to provoke their Malay overlords.¹⁹

The integration and subordination continue. The slow change from shared land tenure with individual usufruct to individually owned property is undercutting the community solidarity necessary for consensual conflict resolution. Nowadays most *bicaraa'* among Semai involve only headmen, *sten* and several elders adept in Semai customs, as well as the interested parties. Other members are still welcome to participate, should they wish to. And centralization also continues. In some communities the headman now monopolizes conflict resolution. The Malaysian government, which appoints headmen, favours such centralization. It simplifies administration, increases direct government control over and surveillance of Semai, and thus further incorporates the people into the bottom strata of Malaysian society (A. Williams-Hunt 2007).

Many Semai in Batang Padang celebrate Busu's changes and prefer having a centralized and superordinate peacekeeping hierarchy to impose conflict resolution on disputants. At first glance, it also seems to confirm Douglas Fry's Hobbesian dictum (2006:224) that 'an effective way to stop violence within an acephalous self-redress system is to create or impose a higher level of judicial authority'.

Semai as agents

The introduction of *bicaraa'* did not give Semai a significantly better tool for their peacekeeping. So why do they assert that it did and why did they make the complicated sacrifices involved in acquiring it? We venture no opinion of the ambivalences that pervaded Malay acquiescence to British rule, except

¹⁹ Dentan 2003; Dentan et al. 1997:142-50; Fauwaz 2008a, 2008b; *Star* 27-6-2006; but compare *Star* 14-5-2007.

to note that physical coercion played an explicit role, one which is much less obvious in the Semai case. But the 'surrender' of Semai to Malays seems on the face of it more complete than that of the Malays to the British. Busu seems to have thought that the Malay-style *bicaraa* had to be unequivocally good for Semai, perhaps partly because it connected them with the presumed beneficence of Malay aristocrats.

Like most people under the sway of more powerful neighbours (Malays in this case, since the British were largely invisible to Semai, from whom they were socially and geographically separated), Semai are acutely conscious not only of how those neighbours act but also of how their neighbours construe them (Dentan 1976a, 1997; Hood and Noor 1984). W.E.B. Du Bois (1994:2) called this way of regarding oneself through the eyes of others, 'double consciousness'. When oppression is acute, double consciousness can shade into what psychoanalysts used to call 'identification with the oppressor' (Freud 1966:109-21). Such adaptation disquiets Western scholars; even the admirable James C. Scott (1985:327-8) prefers to dismiss identification with the oppressor as rare. However, paleo-psychoanalysts regard it as the fundamental tactic by which all children everywhere become adults. One useful comparison might be with abused women who stay with their abusers, the 'battered woman syndrome' (Walker 1979). The woman is usually not viewed as having legitimate agency by her decision to stay in the relationship; rather she is assumed to be doing nothing. In a similar way, what weaker peoples do to keep the peace, is often regarded by outsiders as doing nothing. Du Bois (1994:3) argues that this judgmental and non-empirical bias makes the strength that subordinates demonstrate in being forced to accept loss of effectiveness, seem like absence of power and weakness. The fact that Busu chose to ingratiate himself with more powerful people who were in the process of intruding into Semai life, no matter what Semai might have done, obfuscates how this event fits into the pattern of Semai peacekeeping.

'Double consciousness' is in fact double and identification is rarely complete. Among Semai, along with what sometimes seems, as in this case, to be complete capitulation to Malay culture, goes a stubborn opposition. As a Semai headman in Pahang said in a headmen's meeting in 1962, 'We should be *Snoo'y* (humans, that is 'Semai') in the forest and *maay pkan* (market folk, that is lowlanders) in the lowlands'. Subordinates' extensive knowledge of the superordinates' behaviour makes it possible for Semai to define themselves as the opposite of Malays whatever Semai actually do (Dentan 1976a). Indeed, Malays and demon beasts fill the role for Semai that witches fill in other societies, as the opposite of Semai (Robarchek 1994). The standard format for Semai to describe their own way of life is, 'We do this, Malays do that' (Dentan 1976a). For example, Risaaw s k. Jambu said on the River Tluup in 1962: 'We never hit our children. Malays are always hitting their children, hit

hit hit. That's why our children are strong and healthy and Malay children are like baby rats.' Identification with Malays, and the resulting intimate knowledge that Semai have of the Malays and of the stereotypes that Malays have of Semai, allows Semai to frustrate Malay goals for them by behaving the way Malays expect them to (Dentan 1976a:83). Thus, although Semai may adopt Malay practices, they continue to regard themselves as fundamentally very different from Malays: 'same hair, different hearts' (Kroes 2002).

In double consciousness, being the same as Malays and being the opposite of Malays are not alternatives but mutual complements. Such flexible ethnic identity used to be quite common among Southeast Asians (Dentan 1976b:74-8). So, although the peacekeeping practices discussed here seem to be of Malay origin, Semai perform them with a clear sense of their superiority to Malay praxis. This supposed contrast is more cogent now that Malays are the rulers. Maintaining a double consciousness allows Semai to 'surrender' by accepting Malay models of peaceful living, without submitting to pervasive Malay authority or assimilating to Malay culture (Dentan 1992, 1994). The apparent surrender is one way to keep the peace between Malays and Semai, as well as adding to the traditional Semai peacekeeping toolbox. Thus the sense of freedom which is central to Semai society persists.

However, some Semai leaders try within the limits set by the Malays to fight for their rights. For instance, while the institution of headman (*penghulu* or *batin*) serves the interests of outsiders, particular headmen may use the rhetorical skills that underlie their leadership to frustrate designs by outsiders. In 1962, in a public discussion with a government agent about the advisability of planting rubber, headman Batin Jraan of Jnteer in northwest Pahang, launched into an impassioned tirade against the idea: 'Rubber rubber rubber! Lots and lots of money money money! What's the use of that when we'll all be dead?' The following day, after the community turned down the offer, Jraan told Dentan privately that planting rubber was a plan to sedentize the people. Jraan thought that outsiders would seize non-plantation land and after the rubber was ready to harvest, they would seize the land on which the rubber trees were planted too. 'And what do we eat then? Wood? Sorry, I'm not a porcupine.' Several years later, the government seized the land to make a Malay settlement, and 'regrouped' the Semai far downstream 'in order to deliver government services' that never arrived (Hasan 1989). Independent minded headmen are, of course, likely to be called in for a lecture from the Department of Indigenous Affairs at their own expense; though they often refuse to go, pleading poverty.

Identification with the oppressor rests on power differentials, not empirical observation. It is easier to identify one's interests with those of powerful Malays, separated from Semai and local Malays by a class/caste system in which, as Malays say, *enggang sama enggang, pipit sama pipit*, 'hornbills [flock]

with hornbills, sparrows with sparrows'. A stratum of Malay peasants shields Semai from the reality of the Malay aristocracy who live in coastal areas. In this sort of structural sandwich, as Radcliffe-Brown (1924) noted years ago, competition between alternate strata is invisible or nonexistent. Those strata can therefore identify with each other. In the Malaysian peninsula just before Busu's time, Malay aristocrats constituted the market for kidnapped Semai women and children; but the slavers who actually and observably stole the women and children were ordinary frontier Malays. Thus Semai see themselves and Malays in several ways at once.

For instance, Semai accounts of their successful resistance to ethnic cleansing sponsored by the British but carried out by Rawas come in at least three formats: 1) a Malay aristocrat with magical powers leads the people against invaders, who are Malays but 'not from around here'; 2) Semai guerrilla tactics overwhelm conventional Malay warfare; and 3) Semai diplomacy – *cakap politik*, 'political discourse' – outwits Malay arrogance (Edo 1990; Dentan 1999a). The ideology of the first underlies the notion that Malay-style *bicaraa*' brought peace to Semai. The last corresponds more closely with humdrum day-to-day reality.

The resulting ambiguity and ambivalence of Semai thought grates on simplistic Cartesian (Manichaeic) Western thinking (Bakalaki 2005). That style of thinking makes it hard to understand why Semai always seem so hopeful when Malay authorities promise benefits and yet the promises are often not kept, and how they simultaneously facilitate and resist Malay encroachment into their territory and culture. When flight fails as a tactic to avoid violence, people try whatever comes to hand: self-surrender without subordination (Dentan 1994), counter-violence, obfuscation. The Busu story similarly involves several Semai peacekeeping mechanisms honed over years of practice in a terrorist context. First, one can ingratiate oneself with powerful outsiders who are distant enough geographically and socially that one retains significant autonomy. Recruiting presumptively powerful allies helps keep the peace by involving a party more powerful than any local disputants, a popular formula for peace in Western and Chinese imagination (Fry 2006:257-9), despite the disadvantages sketched in this article (and also in Dentan 2008a). Second, identification with the oppressor, a pole along the spectrum of double consciousness, provides one with the motive and knowledge to manage the concession of freedom involved. Third, double consciousness allows one to maintain a sense of autonomy in a difficult situation. We want to make clear our point that Semai peacekeeping is practical, not idealistic; ad hoc, not ideological; complex, not simplistic. Busu's arrangement worked on many levels for half a century to keep Semai safe from the expansion of the British-Malay diarchy. His changes had little immediate impact on peace in the daily lives of the Semai, only later would the ultimate costs become clear.

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