Reclaiming the Eclipsed Female in the Sacred

*Semai Women's Religious Knowledge and Its Connection to Their Rights to the Land, in Malaysia**

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Abstract

This article examines an indigenous religion in Malaysia—that of the Semai of Kampung Chang, Sungai Gepai in Bidor, Perak—and expounds the changes in women's position in Semai cosmology, rituals, and roles. We show that the Bidor Semai religion is neither hierarchical nor egalitarian in terms of the position of women and men;

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rather, a much more complex situation exists. However, while male authority is becoming more prevalent, the existence of transmutable spirits and an ungendered creator allows men to actively participate, but does not give them religious power. However, due to outside pressure we are beginning to see a breakdown in these social features. The broader implication of reclaiming the female in the sacred is that it makes a strong social-justice argument for Semai women's rights and, by so doing, gives us a richer understanding of Semai connections to their land and their rights to that land.

Keywords

Semai – women – cosmology – myths – rituals – religious roles – rights to land

Introduction

This article examines an indigenous religion in Malaysia—that of the Semai of Kampung Chang, Sungai Gepai in Bidor, Perak. Kampung Chang is a Semai village situated about five miles east of Bidor town in South Perak, Malaysia. The Semai are the largest Orang Asli tribe and are among those that have had extensive contact with mainstream society, as many of their settlements are situated closer to the town. As such they have been much more exposed to modern economic and social forces than other Orang Asli tribes.

The Semai are currently engaged in diverse economic activities. Gomes (1990) showed that the Semai were increasingly producing commodities in order to acquire cash to purchase consumer goods, upon which they were becoming increasingly dependent. As a consequence of this, their subsistence activities have decreased and they have become heavily dependent on the market economy. In addition, the Aboriginal Peoples Act (Act 134) also led to the Orang Asli being dispossessed of their traditional lands. However, as maintained by Williams Hunt (1995), the existence of Act 134 turned the Orang Asli into 'tenants-at-will', meaning that their rights to land are temporary and they could be asked to leave for any project or reason that the government saw fit to use. Although the Act recognizes the Orang Asli's ancestral lands which includes aboriginal areas, aboriginal reserve and aboriginal inhabited places as defined in Section 2 of the Act, however, these were excluded from the National Land Code (Williams Hunt 1995) except for reserve land. The current systems of administering land, is governed by the National Land Code of 1965, which is based on the Australian Torrens system of registration. According to the Code, all un-alienated land is under the management of state authority. This legisla-

tion is the principle statute that regulates titles and matters pertaining to land in Peninsular Malaysia. The Aboriginal Peoples Act provides for the setting up and establishment of Orang Asli areas and reserve land. Unlike areas declared as an aboriginal reserve, other Aboriginal areas may be subsumed as state land in the National Land Code in that it grants the state authority the right to order any Orang Asli community to leave and stay out of an area. In addition, not all inhabited Orang Asli land have been declared aboriginal reserves, leaving them unprotected from governmental acquisition or third party encroachment. In relation to land, the provisions of the Aboriginal Peoples Act grant to Orang Asli a limited form of state-controlled occupancy. Thus, the combination of the exercise of federal and state authority over land matters makes the Orang Asli rights to the land extremely weak. Due to this vulnerability experienced by the Orang Asli their traditional knowledge and connection to land is fading under pressure of insecurity to tenure. It is within this context that we have explored the need to make women's roles and rights in their religion visible and, by so doing, have gained a richer understanding of Semai connections to their land and their rights to that land.

The ethnographic account presented in this article refers to the Bidor Semai, but we have contextualized it within existing work on the Semai religion to establish complementarity or divergence from extant ethnographic knowledge. This research is also in line with the 'methods from the margins' approach proposed by Kirby and McKenn (1989:28), according to which 'research from the margins is not research on people from the margin but research by, for and with them'. Such an approach to carrying out research emerged because two of the co-authors are not academics. One is a Semai activist and the other a former community organizer in Kampung Chang (she is also a former post-graduate student of the first author). The three of us decided to collaborate to salvage as much information as possible from the few remaining shamans and elders with religious knowledge in the community. This we did by documenting what remains in the memories (myths) of our key informants and by observing what is still being practised (rituals) in the community. The salvage work was urgently needed, for if it had not been carried out, the knowledge would have been lost. For this reason, we felt that it was our responsibility to cover as much ground as possible. This approach was particularly important to our Semai activist co-author, because for her research should empower the people who are normally its object. By exploring the religious realm of women, we gained a clearer appreciation of women's importance in society, and also their significance in reconnecting the Semai to their land.

Several female-focused studies of the Orang Asli (the indigenous minority groups of Peninsular Malaysia) have been published, including articles and

books as well as studies focusing in detail on gender issues. Some of these studies emphasize the egalitarianism, individual autonomy, and non-violence of these groups (see Dentan 1978; Robarchek 1977, 1980; Howell 1984). Their egalitarianism extends into the realm of gender relations.¹ In more recent research, systematic examinations of gender relations have been carried out in areas such as leadership (K.M. Endicott and K.L. Endicott 2012), female subordination, and the internalization of alien gender norms (Baer et al. 2006); the impact of resource depletion on gender relations (Nicholas, Chopil, and Sabak 2003); why social roles become gendered (Gianno 2004); environmental degradation and its gendered impact on livelihood (Nowak 2008); and how Orang Asli women negotiate education and identity (Thambiah, Man and Idrus 2016).

The authors wish to lift women's voices to show Semai women's contributions to religious life. We look at the Semai religion from the Semai women's perspective. Our reappraisal, which shows women as social actors in their own right, reclaims the female in the sacred.

Semai religion responds to the social and psychological needs of the people, particularly in response to natural forces. Their praxis is mostly centred on the sacred relationship with the environment. The degree of institutionalization is minimal or non-existent. By this we mean that there is no concept of prayer to a supreme being, and that religious practices are not standardized, structured, or monitored by an institution. The need for organization is minimal in such a system, because religion is an immediate response to the social and psychological needs of the people. Such a religious system is very flexible, so variations can be observed in religious knowledge, roles, and practices.

However, there are some common basic social features that we will try to explain in this article. These social features are related to cosmology, myths, rituals, and roles. We investigate gender relations within these interrelated features and hope that this does not present an overly systematized picture of Semai religion. We also attempt to explain the direction of changes, particularly changes in women's and men's religious participation. We predict that men's and women's participation in their religion will become differentially evaluated if their religious practices become institutionalized. We show that Bidor Semai religion is currently neither hierarchical nor egalitarian in terms of the position of women and men. Rather, a much more complex situation exists. The complex, flexible, and non-institutionalized nature of their religion has not allowed for the formalization of male dominance in the Semai belief sys-

1 See K.M. Endicott 1979; K.L. Endicott 1981, 1984; Howell, 1983; Nowak 1983, 1986, 1988, 2003; Thambiah 1999.

tem. Although male authority is becoming more prevalent in Semai cosmology, rituals, and roles, the existence of transmutable spirits and an ungendered creator allows men to actively participate, but does not give them religious power. We conclude that the Semai are losing sight of their female heroines and, by reclaiming the female in the sacred, we demonstrate the importance of women in the cosmology, myths, and rituals of Semai religion, and how this is related to their rights to land.

Ŋənaŋ: The Ungendered Supreme Being in Semai Cosmology

Ŋənaŋ, according to the Bidor Semai, means ‘ancestors’, and Ŋənaŋ is not accorded a gender. The association of Ŋənaŋ with ancestors does not mean that Ŋənaŋ is the embodiment of all those who have lived and died. Rather, Ŋənaŋ refers to a primeval, original force, which has no ending. This force came into being naturally. One feels close to this force through association with the environment and all of Creation. If one has respect for everything in the environment, it is also a sign of respect for this force. For example, our key informants said that if one is in harmony with the trees, one is in harmony with Ŋənaŋ.

Let us now look at how Ŋənaŋ has been described by early observers and anthropologists.²

Evans (1923:198) indicated that the Sungkai Senoi (Semai) ‘have a hazy belief in a Supreme Being, whom they call Yenang’. He also mentions that the ‘Sakai who live around the Kampar River above Gopeng, too, acknowledge Yenong (Jenong) as their god’ (1923:198). Evans continues to explain in a footnote that ‘Yenang, Yenong or Jenong may possibly mean chief and be of the same derivation as Jenang, a tribal officer among some of the Sakai-Jakun [Semai] and Jakun tribes’ (1923:198).³ He refers to Yenang as a male god who guards the

2 The term for ‘original ancestor’ in Bidor Semai is cognate with the term for a political position in some Aslian languages (*jinang~nyinang, jinay~jinay*). Skeat and Blagden (1906, 1:505–7) refer to the ‘Jinang’ as an administrator or representative of the ‘Batin’, the ‘chief’ of a group of villages among some Perak Semai. They imply that the term Jinang was borrowed from the Jakun (aboriginal Malays).

3 The Besisi, as reported by Skeat and Blagden (1906, 1:510), kept a hierarchy of positions, namely *batin, jinang, jukrah, penghulu balei*, and *panglima*. The Bermun, according to Logan (1847), were much more stratified, and the Mintira (Temuan) had a hierarchical order, including the positions of *batin, jinang, jukra (jorokra), panglima*, and *ulubalang*. Thus, we see that Logan, and Skeat and Blagden, refer to the term *jinang* as a political position.

bridge that takes the souls of the dead to heaven (1923:198, 209). Below is Evans's (1923:209) description of what Nənaŋ does to the souls of the dead:

Yenang takes these souls from the cauldron and plunges them into the fire until they are reduced to powder. Then he weighs them in a pair of scales. If they weigh lightly he passes them over into heaven, but if they are heavy, he puts them into the fire again until they are sufficiently purified.

It is obvious from the above quote that Evans's description of Nənaŋ is that he is a male god and deserving of fear and respect.

Dentan approaches his understanding of Nənaŋ in a different way. According to him, the Semai idea that old people have more spiritual power, *hnalaa'*, than younger ones, may explain why they are thought to elicit greater fear and respect. Thus, when old people appear in dreams, they usually represent great powers. People refer to such powers by using kinship terms such as 'parents' or 'grandparents'. Therefore, in Dentan's ethnographic account, the name of the Perak Semai high god, *Jnaang* or *Ynaang*, means 'grandparents' or 'ancestors' as well as 'Lord' (2000:206). By referring to Nənaŋ as 'Lord', he gives Nənaŋ the male gender. However, Dentan was close to attributing an ungendered nature to Nənaŋ, as he also used the terms 'grandparents' and 'ancestors'.

A more recent observation by Edo (1998:67) states that the highest supernatural being in the belief system of the Semai he studied is Nənaŋ. Edo (1998), like Dentan (1968), also refers to Nənaŋ as an elder. In the context of social relations, Nənaŋ can mean elderly parents, grandparents, or earlier generations (ancestors) (Edo 1998:68). In a later work by Arabestani and Edo (2011:9), Nənaŋ is mentioned as the highest supernatural being in Semai cosmology, and one who is almost out of reach and does not interfere in everyday life. These authors do not accord a gender to Nənaŋ.

According to our key informants—Ken Merja, Bah Rintang, Ken Pri, Wak Yam, Bah Chekedoi, Wak Nami, and Wak Simin—Nənaŋ is the creating force that puts life, or the essence of life, into all that exists; Nənaŋ is not assigned a gender identity. They note that all creatures in the environment are interconnected and interrelated, and this connection can be seen in the relationship between human actions and nature's retribution if the other creations are not respected. For example, if a dog or monkey is laughed at or mocked by humans, nature will react and send a storm as retribution for the lack of respect for the animal. All that exists in the world today has good and bad elements. Nənaŋ is not a force that wants to control everything. For example, a tree has the right to choose whether or not to communicate with a person through its spirit or *kəloog*. Nənaŋ does not like to show or prove itself or to take control. It has four

angels (*kəloog*) to guard the four corners of the universe. Its power was used to create the world and human beings. Nənaŋ cares for humans in the sense that it has given humans the ability to take care of themselves. It has provided medicine, food, and a livelihood. It is up to humans to be responsible for themselves.

To conclude, we can say that as the creator, Nənaŋ, points neither to maleness nor femaleness as an essential characteristic of the divine being itself.⁴ There are no exclusively male or female metaphors with which to interpret Nənaŋ's relationship to humans and the other creatures. The mystery of Nənaŋ transcends all gender. Nənaŋ's saving and caring solidarity with humanity and other creatures is crucial for the symbolic representation of equality as a universal tenet. Mutual responsibility and reciprocity are the prevalent values or principles of Nənaŋ.⁵

In the following section the Bidor Semai story about the creation of humans, as conveyed to us by our key informants, is analysed.

Myths of Origin: The Creation of Humans⁶

Of all creations, the creation of humans was the most difficult, and Nənaŋ created a force that was not born of humans but created from Nənaŋ. It made the first couple and then it disappeared into nothingness. This primordial force created a man and a woman from wax. However, after they were created they melted away. This force then took some earth and again created the form of a man and a woman. After carrying out this request from Nənaŋ, it went back to Nənaŋ and said that this job had been completed and that it was ready to receive life (*ruai*) from Nənaŋ

4 The existence of beings of uncertain sex can be found in many other Southeast Asian societies. For example, Covarrubias (1938:121) provides Balinese tales and myths populated by an uncountable number of beings of uncertain sex. Dentan and Ong (1995) also mentioned an elder bird god, androgynous in at least some cases, who brought arboriculture and agriculture to Semai along the Waar and Tluup Rivers between Perak and Pahang (also cited in Dentan 2002).

5 Mutual responsibility and reciprocity are also important elements in the Semai complex of taboos, such as *trlaac*, *punan*, *pnalii*, *tnghaan*, *gnghaanh*, and *tolaah* (for more on this, see Dentan 2000:200–6).

6 These myths of origin are paraphrased from stories told to us by Ken Merja, Bah Rintang, Ken Pri, Wak Yam, Bah Chekedoi, Wak Uni, and Wak Simin. There were some variations in the origin stories as told by different storytellers.

for them. Nənaŋ asked it to open its hands, and Nənaŋ put life into its hands. This primordial force found that life was very heavy, and on its way back to earth it was very curious to see what life was like. It did not see when Nənaŋ put life into its hands because life was like the wind. It wondered how something so intangible could be so heavy. When this thought appeared in its mind, its middle finger started to open up and life escaped. Today this escaped life is the source of all forms of illness, and is called *kicmòj* and *janiŋ*.⁷ Disappointed, this primordial force went back to Nənaŋ to convey what had happened. This time around Nənaŋ asked it to take a flower of the banana tree (*jantug telèi*),⁸ which is shaped like a heart, and Nənaŋ filled this with life. The primordial force brought it back to earth and filled the two humans with life. The first couple was Semai. From them were born one couple each of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Negro⁹ people. This is why these different ethnic groups have great similarities in their physical appearance and in their cultures. After that the primordial force created another couple from clay. They were the original white couple, and from them were born Arabs, Europeans, Bengalis, and all other white people.

Creation stories tell us something about how people conceive the nature and origin of the creative power. The main actors in this myth can be interpreted as metaphors for ancient sexual identities. Whether the creator is conceived as masculine or feminine has important consequences for the evolution of the authority relationship between the sexes (Sanday 1981). In the Bidor Semai creation story Nənaŋ is sexually ambiguous.¹⁰ A primordial force was given the task of creating humans by Nənaŋ. This force is nameless and, like Nənaŋ, is ungendered. Therefore, among the Bidor Semai, metaphors of ancient sexual identities cannot be derived from the creation stories, either in terms of drawing on the creator's gender or from the sequence of creation, for it does not say whether a male or female human was created first. For the Semai, the ungendered creator and the simultaneous creation of the first woman and man means that an authority relationship between the sexes is not supported.

7 According to Edo (1998:67–75), *kicmòj* include human ghosts and *janiŋ* are the ghosts of non-human beings.

8 The Semang also have a plant-oriented mentality in their ritual thought and practice (Schebesta 1963, II-2:154).

9 The Semai used the word 'Negro' to refer to people of African origin.

10 Among the Semang, the female creator Manoj plays a mediator role both in ritual and in the story of creation (Schebesta 1963, II-2:132–3).

Semai Cosmology¹¹

The Semai cosmos is multi-regional. The regions that are close to humans contain spirits. Nkuu' lives in the uppermost region of the human world, which is the sky. The second region comprises the earth and the sea, and is the dwelling place of Naga and his wife (Ipoh Bernei). Ipoh Bernei is the spirit of the *ipoh* plant (the source of blowpipe dart poison) and is believed to have come from the Mambang seas. The third region is the forest in the east, where the sun rises, and it is called Jentun Bereg. This is the dwelling place of Kaloog Ming Lot, the tiger spirit, who is married to Naga's sister.

Nkuu' and Naga are brothers. Nkuu' is the eldest and Naga is the youngest. They have a sister whose name has been forgotten, who is married to Kaloog Ming Lot, the tiger spirit. Naga sent Nkuu' to the sky because he was always angry. Nkuu' is also associated with the thunder spirit. Naga, although the youngest, is said to be wise and gentle, and to possess vast supernatural knowledge.¹² He taught Kaloog Ming Lot how to heal. This made the tiger spirit the first *halaa?* (adept, shaman, or religious specialist). Table 1 shows the relationship between the three main deities/spirits in the Bidor Semai cosmology.

The Bidor Semai believe that there is a parallel dimension that coexists with the world and that its inhabitants are like humans. They are called *maay lemag* and are sometimes visible to humans. *Gunig* (familiar spirits), *kaloog* (spirits), *hi rengyaag* (spirits of the ancestors), and *bajik* (spirits of nature and natural formations) live close to humans in this parallel dimension on the surface of this earth.

In addition, there are four guardian spirits or angels who guard the four corners of the earth. They are called Kaloog Kabul, Kaloog Mengkah, Kaloog Njenlel, and Kaloog Pias. Kaloog Kabul is the spirit that fulfils or grants wishes; Kaloog Mengkah is the spirit that is in the east and is the source of all goodness; Kaloog Njenlel is the spirit of twilight; and Kaloog Pias is the spirit of blessings. These four guardian spirits are called upon to protect and assist with rice planting.

11 The same key informants from Kampung Chang, Bidor, provided the information on Semai cosmology.

12 The notion that the youngest child has unusual powers and abilities is common amongst the Orang Asli. Howell (1982:24–26) mentions for the Chewong that every last-born child is a shaman and, thus, whenever someone is called *bongso* (the youngest male or female child), we can expect unusual and superhuman acts from him or her.

TABLE 1 *Relationship between the spirits/deities in Bidor Semai cosmology*

Spirits/deities	Nkuu'	Wife of Kəloog Ming Lot (tiger spirit)	Naga (husband of Ipoh Bernei)
Sibling order and relationship	Eldest sibling (always angry; thunder)	Middle sibling to Nkuu' and Naga	Youngest sibling (wise)
Location	Sky	Forest (east); Jentun Bereg (place where the sun rises)	Earth/sea; Mambang seas

There are both male and female spirits in Semai cosmology, but the four guardian spirits are ungendered or genderless. However, the three main mythical characters that possess supernatural power and knowledge—Nkuu', Naga, and Kəloog Ming Lot—are described by our informants as male spirits, metaphorically representing the sky earth, sea, and forest. However, we need to compare this information with other ethnographies of the Semai. Clayton Robarchek mentions that Nkuu's wife is Naga. According to him, Nkuu's wife is an enormous horned dragon who brings with her a torrent of mud and water during thunderstorms (Robarchek 1979:558). In the footnote of another article, Robarchek (1987a) mentions that Naga is usually referred to as a female spirit dwelling in the ground. However, according to our informants, Naga's dwelling place is the sea but Naga is also connected to the earth, and he is a male spirit. So here we can see that a previously female spirit is today regarded as a male spirit.

Furthermore, although the tiger spirit Kəloog Ming Lot is said to be male, women are said to transform into tigers (of unspecified gender) if they break the taboo on poisoning fish while menstruating (Dentan 1968:99, 2000:210). All this shows a certain lack of rigidity in the gender of Semai spirits and deities. Both gender and species transformations are considered possible. In the dynamic sense of reality in 'traditional' Semai culture, there is no contradiction in a being appearing as male or female and human or animal. The Semai do not discriminate between species where inter-species sociality and mutual-ity prevails. This undermines human centrism and portrays a cosmos that is deeply interconnected—one in which the animal world passes religious wisdom down to humans. Below we elaborate on the lack of rigidity in the gender of spirits and deities in Bidor Semai cosmology, and the interconnectedness of the human and animal world in terms of the transmission of religious knowledge through inter-species communication and marriage.

Rituals: Women and Men in *kəbut* and *nəʼasik*

In the beginning, humans did not have any special spiritual knowledge, mantras, or skills to communicate with the spiritual world. Bidor Semai tell of the role played by Naga (dragon/large serpent) in teaching Kəloog Ming Lot (tiger spirit) about the supernatural world and the ways in which humans can communicate with the spirit world. This communication with the spirit world became the basis for the rituals performed by the Semai today. Collectively, the rituals are called *seway*, but there are two types of *seway*. One, the *kəbut* or *seway gelap*, is said to be a more ancient ritual. The other is called *nəʼasik* or *seway terang*, and it was inherited from the Malay people. Neither the *kəbut* nor the *nəʼasik* invoke Nənanə the creator, but call upon familiar spirits to help and aid in ritual healing or for other ritual purposes. However, the *halaaʔ* will ask Nənanə to bless the proceedings of rituals. Below the myths of origin related to these rituals are explained and analysed.

Kəbut (seway gelap)

The *kəbut* originated among the Semai. There are two myths about the origin of the *kəbut* among the Bidor Semai:

*Kəloog Ming Lot (Tiger) and Yók Luj*¹³

The *kəbut* was given to the Semai a very long time ago. At that time, Nkuu' and Naga (who were brothers) and their sister's husband, Kəloog Ming Lot (who was a tiger), were said to be the first animals that existed on this earth. Of all Nənanə's creation, Kəloog Ming Lot was the most spiritually gifted *halaaʔ*, having received this gift from Naga. Naga had very good spiritual knowledge and skills (*ne'alt*) and could communicate with anything and everything that existed in the physical and spiritual dimension. Kəloog Ming Lot became the first *halaaʔ* in this world and he taught the art of becoming *halaaʔ* to the Semai. Kəloog Ming Lot taught this knowledge to Yók Luj in a *kəbut* ritual in which he disguised himself as an old man and appeared to Yók Luj in a dream. In the dream the old

13 The term *luj* refers to the youngest child in the family: *yók luj* refers to the youngest son and *han luj* to the youngest daughter. The tales and adventures of Han Luj and Yok Luj are oral stories called *cərməor* by the Semai, and little has been written about them (for more on this, see Leong Yoke Lian 1999:193–7).

man asked Yók Luj if he possessed any supernatural knowledge, and when Yók Luj said he did not, Kəloog Ming Lot offered to teach him. When Yók Luj awoke, Kəloog Ming Lot, in the form of an old man, appeared in front of him and taught him about the spirits used for healing and for other purposes. Yók Luj was then taught how to start the *kəbut* ritual. In the ritual Yók Luj succeeded in calling the familiar spirit (*gunig*), which appeared in the form of the tiger *gunig*, and Yók Luj was pronounced a *halaaʔ*. Kəloog Ming Lot told Yók Luj to teach six more Semai this knowledge. All six became equal to Yók Luj in their knowledge. He went on to teach a further eight Semai, but these eight were not able to summon the spirits (*gunig*) during the *kəbut*. The *gunig* did not appear in their own forms, but in the forms of a nail, ring, chain, hair, and tooth, among others. However, these too had powers. These last eight students were ʔatoʔ Churog, ʔatoʔ Curas, ʔatoʔ Cawog, ʔatoʔ Camut, ʔatoʔ Penjel, ʔatoʔ Cencog, ʔatoʔ Pegpeg, and ʔatoʔ Kemaleg. All eight of these elders must be invoked in a *kəbut* ritual today.

Ken Tatau and the Tiger

Once upon a time there was a woman named Ken Tatau. She was married to a man from another village. One day her husband went back to his parents' village and promised that he would return in a couple of days. When her husband did not return as promised, Ken Tatau went looking for him in his parents' village. When she reached his village, he did not welcome her. When she asked him if he wanted to return home, he did not reply. So she walked home to her parents' village all by herself, carrying a blunt machete. One night, in the middle of her journey, it began to get dark and so she found a huge tree to sleep in. She climbed up and slept there to protect herself from tigers and bad spirits. At midnight she heard a voice resembling her husband's, calling her name. When she looked down she saw a tiger climbing up the tree. She threatened to cut off the tiger's legs with her machete, and the tiger fell to the ground. The tiger pleaded with Ken Tatau and promised not to eat her. The tiger offered to accompany her back to her parents' village and promised to take good care of her. The tiger took care of Ken Tatau every day on the journey back to her parents' village and considered her to be his wife. When they approached the village, the tiger told her to enter the village alone. The tiger also told her that the following day the villagers should collect leaves from the forest for a *kəbut* ritual. When Ken Tatau informed the villagers of the planned ritual they were surprised and frightened, for it had never

been performed before. After she had explained the procedure and the reason for the *kəbut*, the villagers helped her to organize it. Ken Tatau was the first person to perform the *kəbut*, having acquired the knowledge of it from her tiger husband. While she was performing the *kəbut* the tiger *gunig* appeared. Ken Tatau was the first *halaaʔ* for her village, and she was married to her *gunig*, the tiger. After a while she followed her husband back to his land in Jentun Bereg.

A *kəbut* is held when a *halaaʔ* calls for it. The *kəbut* is held for healing, thanksgiving, and to pay respect to the ancestors and the spirits, which are known as *hi rengyaag*. *Hi rengyaag* are the spirits of the ancestors for whom the Semai are yearning and longing to see and be with. The initiating *halaaʔ* will have a meeting with the other *halaaʔ* and inform the community of the need to perform the *kəbut*. The *halaaʔ* will invite his or her friends to join in the *kəbut*. The key informants in this study said that the *kəbut* would be more successful and merrier if there was a community effort. After an agreement has been reached, the *halaaʔ* will find people to help them gather leaves from the forest for this ritual. It is said that the preparation for the *kəbut* must not be carried out by the *halaaʔ* but by non-*halaaʔ*. Supposedly the *gunig* will not appear if the *halaaʔ* makes the preparations for the ritual, for this would indicate that the community does not respect the *gunig*. It is usually the men who go foraging in the forest for the leaves that are required for the *kəbut*, because the types of leaves needed require them to walk deep into the forest and bring back large quantities. These leaves are cut and arranged by the women. In the evening, after all the preparations are finished, both men and women use the leaves to decorate the space where the ritual will be held. All community-level rituals, including large-scale community healing rituals, are held at the *rumah adat* (a large house with a spacious hall used for communal events and rituals). An exception to this is made when the ritual is being carried out to heal a sick person, when it will be held in the house of that person.

The *kəbut* is held at night without any light. The seating arrangement in a *kəbut* is sexually segregated. The men sit around the *halaaʔ*, and the women sit in an outer circle playing bamboo instruments that provide the beat or music that accompanies the *seway* chanting. Only one woman is allowed to sit in the inner circle with the men, and she is usually the wife of the *halaaʔ*. The role of this woman is to sprinkle water on the *halaaʔ*, who is visited by the *gunig*, to bring him out of the trance state.

Our informants told us that the Semai became aware, through the tiger *gunig*'s revelations to Ken Tatau, that their world and the environment are filled

with Nənaŋ's creations and that these are equal to humans. *Kəbut* is not a ritual to worship Nənaŋ, but is performed to appease all of Nənaŋ's creations. This ritual is conducted when the community feels that there is an imbalance in nature—the idea is to appease these elements to bring nature back into balance. The ritual and chanting is a form of communication that is able to appease these natural elements. The very act of communicating with these elements pacifies the spirits. The Semai do not worship rocks, trees, mountains, or other things that are around them. Rather, they believe in communicating with the elements of nature and all non-human life through their *kəbut*, and these spirits will aid them in curing, healing, and other important tasks in order to ensure the general well-being of the community and nature.

The rituals very often act out the myth, and there is a relationship between rituals, myths, and social structure. In the above two myths on the origin of the *kəbut*, it is obvious that the first story is dominated by men—Kəloog Ming Lot, Yók Luj, and the eight male elders. The second myth tells us that the first *halaaʔ* was Ken Tatau, a woman who married her tiger *gunig*. The word *gunig* comes from the Malay *gundik* (consort or concubine) (Kroes 2002:243). Dentan (2002:164) explains that the familiar spirit gives its particular beloved a special summoning melody, and that if he or she accepts the melody then he or she becomes an adept, or *halaaʔ*, and the familiar spirit becomes a *gunig*, which connotes an erotic partnership. But he also goes on to say that the adept-familiar relationship is more than erotic (Dentan 2002:164). *Gunig* are also ancestors, and in séances shamans may address the familiars as fathers. Some also say that familiars are like adopted children and need to be protected. As such, Dentan states that this rough equality makes sexual metaphors less salient in Semai constructions of the cosmos and that traditional Semai rarely attribute particular characteristics to one gender or the other. He (2002:165) also states that:

the relationship between the shaman and his 'spirit wife' is explicitly (hetero) sexual; but the 'marriage' metaphor refers to the relationship, not to the gender of the particular parties involved; midwives and their familiars had the same relationship, and female shamans must, people said, have 'spirit husbands', although clearly no one had thought much about that. Besides, the form a familiar takes in a dream is not its 'true' form, in which gender may be irrelevant or at least not salient.

In the performance of the *kəbut* today there is no mention of Ken Tatau, but all *kəbut* performances must invoke the eight male elders. Here we are beginning

to see some level of formalization of the ritual, where men are participating more than women and standardizing the invocatory chants.

Nə'asik (seway terang)

Our Semai informants told us that the *nə'asik* is a relatively new ritual that originated from the Malays. It is practised by the Semai today because the Malays misused it, so Nənaŋ told the Semai to take over its practice. The following is the story that was told to us by our informants of the origin of the *nə'asik* ritual:

ʔato' Segandi and the Female Midu (Assistant) Who Founded the nə'asik

Once upon a time there was a king, and the king had a daughter who was very sick. The king heard that ʔato' Segandi was a very good healer. ʔato' Segandi was summoned by the king to heal his daughter, with the condition imposed that if he was not able to heal her, he and his seven assistants (*midu*) would be decapitated. ʔato' Segandi tried to heal the princess, but was not successful, for the princess was already nearing her death. ʔato' Segandi and his seven assistants ran and vanished. One of his assistants, the youngest, fell down to earth in Semai territory, as she was unable to follow ʔato' Segandi. He told her to live with the Semai and teach them the curing and healing knowledge that they today possess. Thereafter she taught both Semai men and women who were interested in knowing about the *nə'asik*. This is the reason why a *halaar* who performs the *nə'asik* is usually aided by a female *gunig* (familiar spirit).

The *nə'asik* is held when the *halaar* calls for it. The *halaar* will meet with his/her helper, who will organize the ritual. This helper is usually a woman. Women are chosen by the *halaar* because they are careful and meticulous in their preparations for the *nə'asik*. This woman will find others to assist her in the work. The preparation for the *nə'asik* involves the following:

1. grinding rice to make *tepung tawar* (rice flour);
2. frying the glutinous rice;
3. mixing the rice with turmeric;
4. collecting *carag* (the type of flower used for *seway* ceremonies) and tying them together;

5. preparing the incense—*kijai* and *sukut*;
6. arranging the drummer (*tageh remana*); and
7. preparing and decorating the place where the *nəʼasik* is going to be held.

Only two of these task—that of drumming and the collection of the *carag* leaves—are done by men. But today women are also involved in collecting the *carag* leaves, and men have been relegated to the role of drummer. A couple of days before the *nəʼasik* is performed, the *halaar* will start chanting to appeal to the *gunig*; this chanting is called *chə-nagɔh*.

The seating arrangement for the *nəʼasik* is mixed: women and men can choose where they want to sit. As for the *kəbut*, for the *nəʼasik* the wife of the *halaar* is required to sit next to him and sprinkle water on him when he is ready to come out of his trance. This role is called *maay cəwcaaw* ('they who sprinkle'). Skeat and Blagden (1906, II: 251) mentioned a *chen-ow* [*cənaaw*], a sprinkling brush, being used by the *halaar* to sprinkle the demons in certain ceremonies. However, today we are also beginning to see the role of sprinkling water on the *halaar* slowly being taken over by men.

From the above descriptions of the *kəbut* and the *nəʼasik* from our informants we can see that Semai men are beginning to participate more actively in religious and ritual observances than before. Today, with the predominance of male *halaar* and the subsequent lack of emphasis on women's roles in the founding of the *kəbut* and *nəʼasik*, we can see that men tend to control the *kəbut* and *nəʼasik*. However, women are still involved at the level of preparation and by bringing the *halaar* out of his trance in some cases. But these aspects too are beginning to be carried out by men in certain instances. Women participate and are the objects of solicitude, but they do not direct the activities. In addition to this, the transmission of religious accounts is now in the hands of the male elders. The effect of this can be seen in the total eclipsing of Ken Tatau's role in today's *kəbut* performances. However, in spite of the prestige and ritual importance of men, women do have a certain freedom of religious expression, and they do have important ritual roles, such as calming the angered thunder god *Nkuu*, which will be discussed below.

Thunder, Taboos and the Blood Sacrifice Complex Revisited

We would like to revisit the much-debated thunder, taboos, and blood sacrifice complex found among various Orang Asli groups with the purpose of highlighting the role of women in it. In his response to a paper by Rodney Needham (1964) on blood, thunder, and the mockery of animals, Derek Free-

man (1968:353) was appreciative of Needham's analysis of the 'natural/primordial/universal symbols' that 'make a primordial impress upon the unconscious mind of man as a natural species' (Needham 1964:147). However, he was critical of Needham's conclusion for its failure 'to recognize that symbol formation involves the psychological process of projection', in this case onto 'an independently occurring natural phenomenon' (thunder), which draws on psychoanalytical theory (Freeman 1968:354, 355, 357). Freeman's critique of Needham prompted the intervention of Clayton Robarchek (1987a, 1987b), whose research focused on the Semai in Peninsular Malaysia.

As Robarchek pointed out, to explain thunder gods, taboos, and punishment; offerings of human blood; and the mockery of animals, Freeman draws on concepts from psychoanalytical theory in order to establish symbolic associations and their meanings, and this leads him into a world of aggressive and punishing fathers, phallic symbolism, and the sexual nature of mockery (Robarchek 1987a:278–88). Robarchek argued that Freeman's analysis was biologically reductionist and that he neglected the variety of cultural behaviour within its cultural context (Robarchek 1987a:278, 284–9). Robarchek's major criticism was that Freeman's commitment to the biologically programmed 'psychic unity of mankind' served to reduce 'cultural behaviour to the principles and processes of individual psychology or human biology' (Robarchek 1987a:278, 284–7, 290; 1987b:307; see also Dentan 2002:214, 230; also cited in King 2017:86–8).

We agree with Robarchek that such biological reductionism removes cultural behaviour from the context in which it occurs and that this search for biological causation leads to the essentialization of the male thunder god as a set of male characteristics, such as being aggressive and punishing, which is linked to male biology. We contend that the Semai beliefs concerning thunder, taboos, and blood sacrifice are part of a cultural world view and are not rigid and unchanging. For example, taboos such as *punan* or *trlaac*¹⁴ rest on the idea that actions such as incest and the mocking of animals cause natural calamity. This is consistent with the belief that people, flora, fauna, and natural phenomena are bound together in one enormous, interconnected world.

Women play an important role in maintaining the balance in this interconnected world through the blood sacrifice they perform during thunderstorms. According to Dentan (2000:210), 'blood, especially women's menstrual and puerperal blood, has special powers, akin to those symbolized by tigers and thunderstorms'. The blood sacrifice is usually performed by women (Dentan

14 Dentan 1979:23, 60; 2000. For cognate beliefs, see Endicott 1979:68–79 and Schebesta 1927.

2002:159). They take a sharp splinter of bamboo and use it to make a shallow slice across their shins, catching the blood in a bamboo ladle and throwing it towards the sky to stop the thunder. This act is known as *siwaac* in Semai (Diffloth 1976:243). Dentan (2002:178) also states that ‘one euphemism for menstruents is *maay crntòòh*, “people constrained to -*ctòòh*”, that is, to make the “blood sacrifice”’.

The phallic symbolism associated with the thunder god by scholars such as Freeman creates an ideological disjuncture between the cultural meaning from which the symbol originates and the meaning that has been given to it. Freeman’s use of psychoanalytical theory over-emphasizes male power in his analysis of the thunder complex. It is noteworthy that the blood sacrifice performed by the Semai is not a form of self-punishment, but a way ‘to trick the storm creatures into thinking that the people are actually punishing themselves’ (Dentan 1979:24). ‘Despite the manifestations of fear and guilt in the Semai response to storms, the other salient feature is that the rituals [blood sacrifices] are not entirely placatory [...] For Semai despise and trick Nkuu’ [the thunder god] as well as fear him’ (Dentan 2002:159). What has been neglected in this analysis of the thunder complex is the fact that the blood sacrifice is predominantly carried out by the women in Semai culture. Significantly, it is women who play the leading role in tricking the thunder god into stopping the storm.

We do not claim to understand fully all there is to know of Semai women’s lives; much has been lost. However, their lives were not purely ones of exploitation because of their lack of a penis and attendant phallic culture, as Freeman’s 1968 psychoanalytical analysis of the thunder complex would imply. His universalist position ignores the possibility of other forms of gender systems and the myriad possible cultural interpretations of shared symbols. Patriarchal symbols, such as the thunder god Nkuu’ representing the all-powerful father figure, are not universal and are not applicable in the Bidor Semai context.

Ritual Roles: the *halaas*

The status of the *halaas* (variously spelt as *halaag*, *halaas*, and *halaak*; the correct form is *halaas*’ or *halaag*, with the *g* indicating a glottal stop) resembles that of a shaman. Dentan (1979:85) states that ‘[a] man becomes *halaas*’ by having a dream in which he is given a melody’, and he also mentions that ‘there are varying degrees of *halaas*’. The word *halaas*’ is also used extensively by other researchers (Benjamin 1967; Roseman 1984, 1993). The *halaas*, or, as they have been referred to by Skeat and Blagden (1906, 1:196–7), the ‘medicine-men’, are fittingly credited with supernatural powers. These authors say that

their tasks are to preside as chief medium at all tribal ceremonies; to instruct the youth of the tribe; to ward off as well as to heal all forms of sickness and trouble; to foretell the future; to deter when necessary the wrath of heaven; and, even, when re-embodied after death in the shape of a wild beast, to extend benevolent protection to his progeny.

A person can become a *halaaʔ* if she or he comes from a family that has had a member of their family serving the community as a *halaaʔ*. According to Dentan (1979:86), '[w]hen a *halaaʔ* dies, his *gunig* seek a new "father", sometimes en masse. Very often they appear in the dreams of a brother or son of the dead *halaaʔ* and ask him to take them on by holding a special sort of "sing"'. In addition there are also individuals who are chosen by the *gunig* to become a *halaaʔ*. Some individuals can become a *halaaʔ* because they have a *le-ap* soul, which means that they have a natural temperament for communicating with the *gunig*, as they have a pleasant and peaceful disposition. Dentan (1979:86) also states that '[*g*]unig are as erratic as people about whom they are attracted to'. The process of becoming a *halaaʔ* is not based on acquiring knowledge alone, but also requires experience and a natural disposition to communicate with the *gunig* and to heal. One is not taught in a formal way to be a *halaaʔ*, but learns through observation and personal experience, which varies for each individual.

Each *halaaʔ* has a familiar *gunig*, who is specialized in certain fields or able to heal and cure certain diseases. When one seeks a cure, one goes to see the *halaaʔ* with the *gunig* that specializes in that particular ailment. The *gunig* are said to guide the *halaaʔ*. According to Dentan (2000:195), the *gunig* are in love with the *halaaʔ*, and the Semai attribute a *halaaʔ*'s skills to the fact that he has a demonic wife, *knah*, or lover, who appears in the *halaaʔ*'s dreams and gives him the melodies which he uses in séances (Dentan 1988a). The *gunig* gives the instructions and performs the healing; therefore, the power belongs to the *gunig* and the spirits. The *halaaʔ*, man or woman, is not particularly important, but acts as the mediator for the healing. *Halaaʔ* do not like to be hailed, extolled, or celebrated. The strength of the *halaaʔ* is in her or his courage and ability to perform the rituals passed down by the ancestors, and is also based on the frequency with which he or she performs the *kabut* or the *nəʔasik*. A *halaaʔ* has a large aura (*bayag*) that is clearly visible to the spirits, including the bad spirits. A *halaaʔ* is able to effectively communicate with the ancestors' spirits and get them to stop the bad spirits from disturbing him or her. The *halaaʔ* also gets the good spirits to protect the people who are present at the *kabut* or *nəʔasik*.

Previously there were just as many female *halaaʔ* among the Semai as male ones. Dentan (1968:85) says of female *halaaʔ*: 'There are varying degrees of *halaaʔ*. Women are very rarely more than just a little *halaaʔ*, but a really *halaaʔ*'

woman is more successful than most male *halaas* in the diagnosis and cure of diseases.' Among the Temiar, Roseman (1991:72) mentions the skills of a female *halaas* who is said to be renowned and to have several types of familiar spirits. Jennings (1995:138) also describes female Temiar *halaas* as being particularly powerful, and Benjamin (1967:285) provides a fully contextualized description of one particular female Temiar *halaas*.

Today there are more male *halaas* among the Bidor Semai, and they are becoming more prominent in the performance of rituals. Female *halaas* and the wives of male *halaas* do have the ability to heal, but they are no longer practitioners. Because the strength of a *halaas* is directly related to the frequency of his or her performance of rituals, male *halaas* are becoming stronger, and the *halaas* ability of women is eroding.

Conclusion: Orang Asli Women, Religion, Land, and Their Rights

The story of Ken Tatau as the person who introduced the *seway gelap* or *kabut* to her community shows that there have always been parallel stories about the origins of the *kabut* in which women are the main figures or the founders of the ritual. It seems that the passing on of sacred knowledge and skills from Kaloog Ming Lot to Yók Luj must also have included his female counterpart, Han Luj, because in many of the Semai *carmoor* (oral stories) Yók Luj and Han Luj match each other in strength, intelligence, and spiritual knowledge, and often end up marrying each other. The *carmoor* about Han Luj and Yók Luj give the best representation of what an ideal man and woman should be like. Their characters are honoured and respected and the stories are recounted with appeal and awe (Leong 1999:193–7). They are thereby significant role models for the Semai. However, today many of the *carmoor* have been forgotten.

As we saw in the legend of Tato? Segandi, who brought the *na'asik* to the Semai, it was a strong disciple or assistant of his, a woman, who actually taught the Semai about the *na'asik*. However, while the Semai are aware of the participation of female figures, they do not recount such stories in the ritual chanting today. This is due to the central role played by men in the transmission of mythological tales, which has led to greater importance beginning to be placed on male-centred tales and stories. In addition, the Semai are fast losing sight of their female heroines and figures due to interaction with the Malay and Chinese communities, which follow hierarchical religious systems such as Islam and Christianity. Most Semai are resisting pressure from outside agencies to convert to these 'world religions', but the hierarchical religious systems with which they are confronted cannot be underestimated in terms of their influ-

ence on male-female relations amongst the Semai. Through received ideas, the Semai men and women are learning that men and women are unequal, and this is affecting the way that women perceive themselves relative to men, which is contributing towards gender differentiation within Semai culture.

Today men are participating more actively than women in all aspects of Semai religious life, and they are the ones who are controlling and directing rituals. Women's participation is limited to the preparations for the rituals. Men are also actively involved in standardizing and formalizing Semai religious practices to give them more structure. This is a consequence of the need to conserve and preserve Semai religious knowledge in response to the greater external influences on Semai lives. People are afraid of losing their religious and ritual knowledge, and are making efforts to protect and salvage this knowledge and to formalize Semai religion. However, traditionally, Semai beliefs were not structured or formalized. Religious knowledge was variable and flexible, and each individual was entitled to his or her own interpretation of it. By not maintaining a rigid structure of knowledge and practice, the Semai did not have to formalize gender hierarchies or value male and female participation differently. A more fluid spiritual system is therefore more egalitarian in gender terms than a structured one. Semai say that rigidity sets in with structure, but at the same time its flexibility is considered to be weakening Semai belief systems. Unfortunately, the process of standardization is undermining women's involvement, participation, and position within their religion. Male domination of women, however, is not necessarily the automatic or immediate response to external stress. Other solutions to this pressure are possible. All such solutions depend on factors such as a people's traditional conception of power and the degree to which their group identity is endangered.

From our exploration of women's rights and responsibilities in their religion and their land as celebrated in myths and rituals, we believe that women need to reclaim their self-perception of autonomy, which is neither a fantasy nor the result of nostalgia for a bygone time. Women's perceptions of themselves present an analytical challenge for much anthropological writing, which tends to characterize male-female participation in religion in terms of male authority. This can be seen in statements such as: 'The office of halak is usually the prerogative of the elderly men, although a few women may qualify' (Carey 1976:200). It is through the cooperative endeavours of both women and men that the heritage of the Orang Asli can be maintained across space and through time. Much published ethnographic material on the Orang Asli shows how men and women work together to maintain their ways of life, and this article attempts to add to that evidence, especially with respect to religion. Women's self-image and identity are not bound up solely with their economic

contributions and child-bearing and child-rearing functions. Instead, we have found Semai women to be serious in the upholding, observance, and transmission of their religious heritage. Religion permeates every aspect of their lives. However, Semai women's religious roles are slowly being eroded.

The views of Orang Asli women are seldom solicited by outsiders, and we need to urgently fill this lacuna. One co-author of this article, a Semai activist, speaks about their lives as women and as Orang Asli in both national and international forums. We are sure that these women were not invisible within their own societies in the past, and their importance has been recognized by some researchers, such as those who note that Temiar and Semai women can become adepts and that, when they do, they are usually better adepts than the men (Roseman 1984; Jennings 1995; Dentan 1983). However, female adepts are rare, supposedly because their bodies are not strong enough to withstand the rigours of trance (Dentan 1983:2). In contrast, trance rituals have been seen amongst the Temiar as a way to restore gender equality (Roseman 1984). Questions related to the differences between female and male adepts and as to why women make better adepts have not been asked or further investigated. This is why further research into women mediums and healers among the Orang Asli needs to be urgently undertaken before all knowledge pertaining to this subject is lost.

The evaluations of male-female roles and women's opportunities to achieve status have been fundamentally altered due to centuries of intrusion. Today, as members of dominated societies, Orang Asli women no longer participate as equals in most religious and cultural processes. Women's autonomy and contributions to society are being eroded and devalued. Women have been constrained and defined by the male-dominated colonial and post-colonial administration through their interactions with their hierarchical neighbouring societies. Interrelations between the sexes are thus no longer shaped predominantly by their own culture; the forces of wider Malaysian society affect them. The activities of men and women within this new order are evaluated differently, and opportunities for participation are differentially available to them.

The lack of visibility of Orang Asli women in their religion and rituals, and the limited knowledge about women's roles and contributions to their religion, have been a major obstacle to gaining a clear understanding of women's relationships with the land and the dynamic nature of their religion. These elements of Orang Asli women's lives can be seen in their beliefs, their role in rituals, and their *pasar* identity (territorial identity). Semai relate their *pasar* identity both to the shedding of blood on the land during childbirth and to where the bodies of their ancestors are buried and mixed (*selasat*) into the soil (*behumi'*) (Edo 1998:81–2). The soil is infused with the bodies of their ancestors

and the blood of their mother, and therefore, they and their ancestors become one with the land. From an exchange he had with a midwife, Edo (1998:81) relates an understanding of the *pasaʔ* identity that links it to the shedding of blood on the soil during childbirth:

Andak Jameah agreed with this sentiment and considered that the *behumiʔ* [soil] of Perah had not only been *selasat* [absorbed] with the bodies of the dead but also included all the people who were born in the village and are still alive. As a former traditional mid-wife, she explained that during their delivery, the blood of these people was 'spilt' on the *behumiʔ* of Perah and their afterbirth[s] (*uriʔ*) were also buried in the *behumiʔ* of Perah. Andak Jameah's claim is also related to another cultural concept called *sech-behiib* [flesh and blood].

Thus, people's territorial identity is related to the shedding of their mother's blood on the land into which they are born. Here we see women contributing to establishing the group's spiritual relationship with their land, much as they contribute to maintaining the balance of nature by performing the blood sacrifice during thunderstorms.

There is still hope that women's position in the Semai religion will not suffer as a consequence of active male participation and standardization. This hope will last as long as men keep sight of the fact that the nature of the creator, Nənaŋ, the primordial force that created humans, and the four guardians of the four corners of the universe are ungendered. This fact does not point to maleness or femaleness, so the mystery of the supreme power transcends gender, and equality is the universal intent. In addition, the very nature of power is also a quality of the spirits, and Nənaŋ and Semai have always attempted to de-emphasize or disparage power in humans.

We wish to conclude by saying that if this core noble philosophy of the Semai religion is kept intact, then no matter how much men participate in, or dominate, the rituals and religious life, they will not be able to exercise power over women, for the religion does not belong only to them. In addition, the loss of land over which to forage and hunt constitutes more than an economic loss, for it is from the land that the Orang Asli draw not only their livelihood, but also their very being. The Orang Asli now live herded together in controlled settlements, which are on the margins of what was their traditional country. Because women's religious life has not been seen as a key to understanding relations with the land, the rights channelled through women have been inadequately explored.

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