

**AMBIVALENCES IN CHILD TRAINING  
BY THE SEMAI OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA AND OTHER  
PEOPLES**

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*This paper focuses on how a Malaysian people famous for their peaceable ways teaches children to fear and flee outsiders, despite the fact that strangers control many things children (and adults) desire. The analytical section discusses the disturbing ambivalences and ambiguities of this process and draws a comparison with the also disturbing ambivalences and ambiguities of similar practices, like teaching children about “stranger danger,” in modern America.*

**Introduction**

The Mon-Khmer-speaking Semai are a loosely knit group of almost 30,000 ‘Orang Asli,’ West Malaysian indigenes<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally they lived by agroforestry, swiddening, and trade. For many years they have lived in the shadow of their powerful neighbors, the Malays. Until well into the twentieth century, Malay slavers and their agents raided Semai settlements, stealing children, and often killing the

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<sup>1</sup> I lived with Semai for almost two years 1962-1963, a few months in 1975 and over a year in 1991-1992. I have had casual meetings and correspondence with Semai leaders since then. The Ford and H. F. Guggenheim Foundations, the American, Peabody and Field Museums of Natural History and the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology helped fund my work. The Department of Indigenous People’s Affairs, JHEOA, permitted me to visit Semai. Most of my Malaysian sponsors no longer live in Malaysia. I have named and thanked my Semai collaborators elsewhere (1993b); here I use pseudonyms. Carol Laderman, Michael Peletz, Ronald Provencher, James Scott and Edwin Zehner read this paper and suggested many changes, for which I owe them a large debt of gratitude. I only regret that considerations of length made it impossible to make all the changes suggested.

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adults, whose lives seemed valueless to them (for Malay attitudes, see Dentan 1997; Peletz 1996:192, 223). Killing the Semai, the Malay simile went, was “like killing ants.” Enslaved children became domestic helpers and objects of sexual abuse, conferring prestige on their owners but not providing noticeable economic benefits.

Malays thus held the key to power and wealth, which Semai, like most people, desire. At the same time, Malays murdered the people and stole their children. To keep the children safe from kidnappers, Semai taught their children to fear strangers. The ethnographic section of this paper focuses on how Semai teach their kids about “stranger danger.” The analytical section discusses the disturbing ambivalences and ambiguities of this process and draws a comparison with the also disturbing ambivalences and ambiguities of similar practices in modern America.

The three theses of this essay are as follows: (1) Modern Malay-Semai relations are a variant of traditional ones, as far as power goes. The new situation is “internal colonialism” (Sellato 1999:128). The “right to development,” which Malaysian rulers contrast with “Western” human rights, is largely the right of the ruling classes to exploit and colonize hitherto marginal areas, like those where Semai used to live (Dentan et al. 1997). Peoples like Semai, on the periphery of the expanding capitalist state, must sacrifice their freedom and well-being, their culture and their children, to increase the wealth and well-being of their more powerful neighbors. In return, they hope for economic benefits. That’s what abstractions like “export-driven development” mean in Semai life. Still, the developers promise that Semai life will improve. The ancient ambivalence thus remains (Dentan 1997).

(2) Most people everywhere have difficulty with abstractions like these. Even intellectuals use concrete metaphors to think with, and these metaphors easily become partly unconscious. For example, on one level Semai adults know that the ‘headchoppers’ discussed later in this article are fictional; but they also know that ‘headchoppers’ represent something, perhaps something connected with Malays, which remains frightening. This ambiguity did not prevent their using the notion of headchoppers to maintain traditional fear and a sense of helplessness among their children.

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(3) Fortuitously, the relations between Semai adults and children mirror Malay/Semai relations. As Malays want Semai to join the globalizing Malay mainstream “for their own good,” so Semai parents want their children to be afraid of apparently benevolent outsiders. Both groups seek to protect their dependents, and as part of their ostensibly protective tactics, both consciously seek to monopolize their subalterns’ love by making the subalterns fear other people. Within these praxes, I want to suggest, there is a disturbing ambivalence towards the subordinates who are supposed to benefit, one which has clear and equally disturbing analogs in modern American society.

#### *A History of Helplessness in the Face of Violence*

It is hard for armchair historians to appreciate the demoralizing horror of the slaving the Semai endured. The bureaucratic prose many social scientists favor can obfuscate what actually happens to people (Mohawk 1985:166-167; Orwell 1956). “Political correctness” favors “thin description” of nonWestern atrocities (Ortner 1995; Wright 1993[1957]).<sup>2</sup> Still,

for the people affected, the reality of the events that in the narrative are summarised with expository detachment meant in fact sudden death, separation of spouses, abduction of children, wholesale robbery, the burning of homes and possessions and means of livelihood. . . . We can be incited by such incidents to try to conceive, also, the grief and distress and hopeless despondency of those who were enslaved, and their abject fate at the hands of foreign masters. . . . Somehow, the adjuration to be fair to the marauders. . . , to consider these matters not in “unflattering terms” but in their proper “context,” seems out of any humane scale with what was really done to the people. . . (Needham 1983:41-42).

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<sup>2</sup> I have been struggling with the question of how to represent violence, e.g., Dentan 1995:228-230, 1999b: 22-24, 1999c: 425-427, 2000b.

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The ethos of the pirates who set up Malay statelets manifested itself in ideology by representing the state as the embodiment of Siva the Destroyer and in practice by testing the rulers' weapons on the bodies of their subjects (e.g., Abdullah 1996:13-14; Conti 1996:2-4; Earl 1996: 32-34), an ethos of masculine cruelty to whose persistence Vietnamese "boat people" and the tourists kidnapped from Sabah in April 2000 can testify (cf. Dentan 1997). By the time traditional slavery died out in the early twentieth century, Semai were stereotypically "wild-eyed," timid, and skittish in the presence of outsiders. The cruelty of the Japanese Occupation during World War II, the Communist terrorism and British counterterrorism during the Emergency of the 1950s, and the land-grabs and "relocations" that followed make it still reasonable for Semai to fear outsiders (Dentan 1976, 1997; Dentan et al. 1997; Nicholas 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Traditional Semai society and its ideology are in large part a response to this sporadic slavocratic terrorism (Dentan 1992, 1994). Part of that response is a pervasive attitude akin to the "learned helplessness" that psychologists attribute to battered women (Gelles and Straus 1988:141-143; Walker 1979; cf. Bales 1999: 61-62). Psychologists use the phrase "learned helplessness" to refer to (a) the sense of generalized powerlessness that follows experience of (b) uncontrollable, often traumatic events, e.g., when brutal outsiders routinely steal one's children for physical and sexual abuse (Peterson, Maier and Seligman 1993: 228-229). Semai

tended to feel that the world is unsafe . . . that no one is ever available to help when it is needed . . . that bad things will always happen and that they will happen to you regardless of your behavior. . . . (Arata 1999:73).

Recent social scientific studies of oppression have focused on resistance, an antidote to characterizing subalterns as helpless victims (e.g., Gelles and Straus 1988:141-146, 156, 159; Kleinman 1995; Nicholas 2000; Scott 1985:327-328). This focus is a useful corrective to the gloomy notion that subalterns are usually passive or

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<sup>3</sup> In fairness, I should add that the Prime Minister recently instructed his ambassadors, especially to Western countries, to tell the foreign leaders that "we do not kill our aborigines as they do" (Pillai 2000a).

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even complicitous in their own subjugation. On the other hand, the urge to redress this imbalance can be one-dimensional and may lead to jettisoning useful ideas like “learned helplessness,” “ideological hegemony,” and “identification with the oppressor” (e.g., Gelles and Straus 1986; Scott 1985; cf. Ortner 1995).

Any either/or characterization of complicated situations in which complex groups respond to complex pressures is likely to be incorrect (e.g., Peletz 1996, 1997). The human condition is usually ambiguous, and people respond to it with ambivalence. In this sense, Semai stories about headchoppers may be as accurate a representation of reality as is social science. To a political ecologist (in the sense of Dentan 1992), the Islamicizing and assimilationist policies of the Malaysian government constitute an environmental stress, to which Semai respond with the entire continuum of possible adaptations, depending on how particular individuals or groups construe particular situations at particular times: resistance, “passivity,” acceptance. Indeed, the distinction between these three responses is pretty arbitrary. A Semai leader told me in 1993 that he tells people “not to resist” *Islamisasi*. “‘Don’t argue,’ I say. ‘Just. . . .’” He folds his arms and turns his back. Passive resistance, like passive aggression, is consistent with Semai “learned helplessness.” Is it resistance, passivity or acceptance? Or all three?

### **Modern Malay-Semai Relations**

The modern Malaysian state continues the feudal tradition in which the state not only threatens Semai existence but simultaneously remains the only source of protection for the people it exploits. Thus the state may steal your land, take your children off to far away ashrams to inculcate in them an alien ideology and so on; but the only people to whom one can appeal for help are also agents of the state, most notably the JHEOA, Bureau of Indigenous Peoples’ Affairs (Dentan et al. 1997; Nicholas 2000).

State policy, broadly construed, has always been to bring Semai into the lowest stratum of Malay society, formerly as slaves, nowadays as impoverished rural lumpenproletarians. At the same time, the government aims to increase the standard of living for Semai, as for everyone else, by participating in global capitalist markets. Both strategies entail the disappearance of Semai as a distinct ethnic group.

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The economic planners . . . envisage the systematic elimination of the peasant [or “tribal” people]. . . . For short-term political reasons, they do not use the word elimination but the word modernization. Modernization entails the disappearance of the small peasant (the majority) and the transformation of the remaining minority into totally different social and economic beings (Berger 1975:209).

One tactic to accomplish this end is *Islamisasi*, the transformation of Semai into Muslims and thus into Malays.

All the Malay parties share this goal. A member of the opposition PAS (Islamic) party says [I]nstead of being recognised as Orang Asli, they should be assimilated into the Malay race. Their culture should be integrated so that they will no longer be considered separated from Malays. (Mohamed Sabu, quoted in Nicholas 2000:101).<sup>4</sup>

The special privileges Malays have in Malaysia stem from the legal fiction that they are the original inhabitants, *bumiputera*, of the country. But Orang Asli settlement unquestionably came before Malays arrived. Thus the existence of Orang Asli as a distinct group is an implicit challenge to Malay hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Currently PAS rules two north-eastern states on the peninsula: Kelantan, which it won in 1990, and Trengganu, which it took in the last election. In both states it applies different rules to Muslims and non-Muslims. Legislation buttresses Koranic taboos on alcohol, pork and gambling, for example, but does not apply to ethnic Chinese or to Orang Asli like the Temiar, indigenous northern neighbors of Semai.

<sup>5</sup> The current prime minister justifies Malay hegemony by averring that Orang Asli lacked a “government,” by which he apparently means a “state” (Mahathir 1970:126-129). Thus Malays are the “definitive” indigenous people of Malaysia because Indians, Iranians, Indonesians, Mons, and Khmers established coastal statelets in the peninsula. Recognition of this “definitive” status by foreigners buttresses the Prime Minister’s contention that Malays are the peninsular indigenes. Indeed, foreign political scientists typically treat Malay “indigency” as unproblematic and unambiguous (e.g.,

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The state is also the agency of economic development. Most Semai want development (see, e.g., Majid Suhut 1999, Zawawi 1996), but they say the kind of economic development that is being foisted on them often consists more of expropriation than of modernization (e.g., Nicholas 2000; Zawawi 1995). Statistics confirm their assessment: for example, there has been no significant improvement in Semai health or nutrition since Malaysia became independent (e.g., Baer 1999; Khor 1997; Nicholas 2000:30-32). When Semai object to the expropriation, officials accuse them of being *anti-pembangunan*, “against development” (Dentan et al. 1997; Zawawi 1996), since the state is both developer and expropriator. The sense that real economic development is passing the Semai by is so strong that, in a recent speech, a minister had to reassure Orang Asli that they “were not excluded” from development; ironically, a deputy read the speech, because the minister had more important things to do (*Utusan Konsumer* 2000). Thus, in Semai experience, “inclusion” in “development” often involves broken promises and a net loss of resources.

Civilization and Islam are closely linked in Malay history and consciousness (Dentan et al. 1997). “Spiritual development,” as the authorities call it, is linked to “economic development” by “positive discrimination,” in which converted Orang Asli settlements get more aid than Christians or pagans. But, despite the spiritual richness of the religion, Islam as an assimilative ideology manifests itself in Semai life only as deprivation: food taboos, fasting, circumcision, prudery, heavy clothing, and subjection of women and girls. “It’s

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Crouch 1996). The irony here is that Malay notions of government and state, *negara* and *kerajaan*, like the associated vocabulary, are of extrapeninsular (Indian) origin—as is the Prime Minister. So important was India to preIslamic Malays that the word for “west,” *barat*, is from the Sanskrit word for India. The traditional aristocracy even denied being Malay.

The Prime Minister also argues that Malays should rule because they are a “majority.” This assertion contravenes the official UN definition of “indigenous people” and involves a lot of fancy footwork with the notion of ethnicity. The majority are actually *bumiputera*, a term which includes Bornean indigenes but usually not Orang Asli. About 80% of Malaysian civil servants are Malays, however, not other kinds of “bumis.”

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more than we can stand,” Semai say repeatedly. Conversion “would make us *-jaap*” (weep, mourn a loss).

Nevertheless, Semai continue to integrate into Malaysian society as they have always done, becoming more and more like Malays, though they continue to define Semai as opposite to Malays (Benjamin 1966:5; Dentan 1976; Gomes 1990; Hasan 1989:107; Hood 1989:77-79; Skeat and Blagden 1906, I:562-564).<sup>6</sup> The children increasingly refuse to speak Semai, say the old folks, because they regard it as the language of *orang miskin*, poor and pathetic people (Dentan 1999c:418). The adults perform shamanic ceremonies in secret, often without singing, so as not to offend the religious sensibilities of the neighbors, whose electronically amplified call to prayer smashes Semai soundscapes five times a day (Dentan 1999b). As early as 1962 whole settlements had stopped eating pork, without admitting any accommodation to Malay food taboos.

Thus, culturally, the Semai already meet two of the three legal criteria of Malayness: they follow Malay custom, which varies widely from place to place; and they speak Malay, the national language. Becoming Muslim would meet the final criterion.

The government has therefore slated Semai for conversion to Islam, and any suggestion that the people might want other options provokes an almost hysterical response from Malays. Since 1991, at enormous expense, over seven million US dollars, the government has built almost 300 “village halls” in most settlements, including some without adequate roads, safe water supplies or electricity. Each hall includes a Muslim chapel, to be staffed by a Malay social worker to “guide the Orang Asli toward embracing Islam.” There were about 250 such workers actually in place by the end of 1997. (Dentan 2000a:223)

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<sup>6</sup> Malays reciprocally define Orang Asli as opposite to Malays, although they valorize the opposition differently (e.g., Dentan 1997; Peletz 1996: 223, 317).

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This process of *Islamisasi* (officially “spiritual development”) began surreptitiously (Nicholas 2000:98-104; Shamila 2000:17).<sup>7</sup>

In late 1997 the outgoing head of the JHEOA denied that there was a program to Islamize or assimilate Orang Asli (Ikram 1997). But in 1983 the department circulated a secret plan, in Malay but not in English, which was to cost about five and a half million US dollars. The title was “Strategy for the Development of Islamic Religion among Orang Asli Groups,” of which the stated two objectives were “Islamization throughout Orang Asli society” and “Integration/assimilation between Orang Asli and Malay society.” In the Malay version of the JHEOA “Program Summary,” objective 5(d) is “energizing efforts to inculcate a system of values based on Islamic values among Orang Asli societies so that they may be brought into integration with the general public, especially with Malay society.” This language is absent from the English version. . . . (Dentan 2000a:223)

Thus fundamental JHEOA policy envisages eliminating Semai as an identifiable ethnic group, the way the census has already eliminated them (cf. Dentan 1998a and 2000a; Endicott 2000:111-114; Nicholas 2000).<sup>8</sup>

### *The Special Relationship between Malays and Semai*

As noted, most Semai accept their helplessness to escape Malay domination. Some even accept the legitimacy of Malay rule. The result is a feudal sort of patron-client relationship between Malays

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<sup>7</sup> The salience of “things not being what they seem” in Semai ideology (Dentan 2000c; Skeat and Blagden 1906,I:552, 557-558, 565) gives this surreptitiousness a more sinister cast for Semai, perhaps, than for Malays.

<sup>8</sup> The only question is how much of this assimilationism originates in political unease and how much in desire to facilitate uncompensated transfer of land from Orang Asli to Malays. Nicholas (2000) stresses the latter, Endicott (2000) the former. Under Malaysian rules of political discourse, talking about dispossession and ethnocide as *Islamisasi* has the effect of making it difficult for non-Muslims to protest the policy.

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and Semai, one which excludes the other non-Asli peoples of the peninsula (Dentan 1997; cf. Skeat and Blagden 1906,I: 537, 557-558). The dilemma Semai have always faced is whether to accede to Malay assimilative pressures and cease to exist; or resist it and suffer the consequences. Similarly, in the late nineteenth century, Semai threatened with extermination had to try to enslave themselves in the service of somewhat less ferocious outsiders (Skeat and Blagden 1906, I: 537). The logic is the logic of “protection rackets,” in which protectors protect you from themselves, for a price.

The relationship has few concrete payoffs for Semai or other Orang Asli. Clayton Robarchek, an expert on peace who has worked extensively with the Semai, expressed amazement at the Semai’s cooperation with this system:

I couldn’t understand why people were always willing to believe that the government really had their best interests at heart. No matter how many times and in how many ways they had been fucked, they still wanted to believe that the Pejabat [JHEOA] was trying to take care of them. (Clayton Robarchek, e-mail of April 1998)

The apparent trust Semai have in their supposed patrons is hopeful rather than credulous. People speak often of the duplicity and greed of “Malays” in general, meaning mostly those in immediate authority over Semai. But they accept that they have no power themselves, that they have no allies. They therefore turn to the people in power, hoping that, this time, the promises will be kept. For example, Semai traditionally support UMNO, the United Malay Nationalists’ Organization, which dominates the current Malaysian regime. But this support does not gain them anything useful. UMNO pays lip-service to Orang Asli concerns just before crucial elections and afterwards ignores them (for details, see Nicholas 2000: 157-170). Responding to the appearance of a politician during the November 1999 general election, a Semai remarked, “We [Orang Asli] are like umbrellas, we become very important when it rains” (*Utusan Konsumer* 2000). When it’s not raining [= between elections], he implied, you don’t need umbrellas.

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During the runup to the most recent general election,<sup>9</sup> in January 1999, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Welfare announced several economic development programs targeted to Orang Asli. The Rural Development Ministry followed suit in February. The Finance Minister urged peninsular states to gazette (officially recognize) Orang Asli traditional occupation of particular lands, apparently unaware that the process ground to a halt and went into reverse over thirty years ago (Dentan 2000a:216-218; Endicott 2000:108-110; *New Straits Times* 1999; Shamila 2000). At a jamboree for government-appointed Asli headmen in June, the Prime Minister contrasted the happy dependency of Malaysian indigenes with that imposed by “Western” countries, where indigenes “are herded onto reserves and taught to become drunks.” His observation gains poignancy from the fact that, during a by-election in March 2000, the (Malay) state head of Orang Asli affairs camped out in two Orang Asli settlements, furnishing them with Hindi movies and cases of booze.<sup>10</sup> This concern will presumably disappear now that the election is over, as it always has in the past (Dentan et al. 1997:157-158).

**Stealing Children’s Heads, Slashing their Hearts, Gouging out their Eyes**

Wa’ Saiyah, 44,unmarried woman, draped in other people’s children: Is your house [at another settlement] near other people’s houses?

Robert K. Dentan (RKD): [nods and grunts yes].

Saiyah: Is it away from the road?

RKD: [nods and grunts yes].

Saiyah: So you don’t need to be afraid of Malays.

RKD: [smiles].

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the following paragraph is from Colin Nicholas (in press). In the 1999 election, there were signs that this political dependency and passivity may be on the wane (Majid Suhut 1999; Nicholas 2000:187-204), signs that included the campaign of the first Orang Asli to stand for office.

<sup>10</sup> According to a personal and confidential communication by a person involved in the election, whom I have known and trusted for years.

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Saiyah: [also smiles] I know, Malays aren't really evil. They're like *maay -k>h kuuy*, the people who chop off heads, just something we talk about, not something real. But I'm still afraid of them. [Conversation at Mncaak, 12 February 1992]

*Introduction: How Concrete Metaphors Represent Abstractions like "Assimilation"*

Regardless of their “culture,” most people find “concrete” metaphorical representations of relationships easier to think than abstract ones (Levi-Strauss 1963, 1966). The tendency to represent abstract relations between people, like “assimilation,” in terms of sensuous ones between concrete things is particularly commonplace in ambiguous and ambivalent contexts like Semai-Malay contacts, which create cognitive dissonances that concrete metaphors may seem to resolve. However, it is important not to confuse people’s social status with their intellectual status. From a Malay standpoint, Semai thought and culture is *kasar*, crude. But Semai thinking is subtle and complex. For outsiders to understand Semai thinking requires more attention to language and particular details than non-anthropological social science narratives normally provide.

Almost all Semai stories involve things not being what they seem to be. Even the headchoppers discussed below *seem* normal. Transforming oneself into a monster is an ability that Semai say inheres in shamanic power, which tradition says they got by trickery from a demonic and stupid God who seems to embody the slaver state (Dentan 1999a). Powerful Semai have this power, as do the demonic forces arrayed against them, which often appear as attractive people. In daily life Semai devote a lot of energy to keeping their conceptual categories tidy, averting cognitive dissonance by not mixing foods of different sorts, for example (Dentan 1970, 1988, 2000c). Transformation risks the chaos Semai seek to avert.

The notion of “stranger danger” fits comfortably into this context. Children are the most vulnerable members of any society. They have “soft souls,” Semai say, which leaves them open to demonic attack.

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The cosmos is full of forces which seek to hurt Semai children. They are safe only with Semai adults whom they know personally.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Cautionary Tales<sup>12</sup>*

The persistence of Semai xenophobia after slaving died out needs explaining. The cultural transmission of learned helplessness—a supercautious attitude rather than a raw emotion—seems to depend in part on stories which involve transformations that move from the normal secure/human world into the abnormal demonic/animal one (Dentan 1988). For example, in “Old Lady Deer Monster and the Fern Demon” (Juli 1990:76-86, 105,107), a deer becomes a monster, a pagoda-flower becomes a fern demon, the ashes of the cremated monster which rise into the air become mosquitoes, those which fall onto the earth become land leeches and those which fall into the water become buffalo leeches—all disgusting demonic creatures that

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<sup>11</sup> Like other egalitarian peoples, Semai practice cooperative child care, to which anthropologists attribute part of hominine evolutionary success (Hrdy 2001:52). Besides biological mothers, children have ‘allomothers’ who can and will look after them if for some reason the biological mother is unavailable. And primate mothers are in general less likely to abandon their young if they have help caring for them. As Hrdy says, “Genetic relatedness alone . . . is a surprisingly poor predictor of love. What matters are cues from the infant and how these cues are processed emotionally” (Hrdy 2001:57).

As among African foragers, Semai midwives, usually postmenopausal women, remain emotionally close to children they have delivered (Dentan 1978). Semai males also help care for children, and this child-caring role may be related to low levels of aggression among Semai. Anglo-American folk science attributes male violence to testosterone madness. Primate males who tend the young develop lower levels of testosterone than other males (Hrdy 2001). Therefore, to the degree that testosterone facilitates violence, childcare by men, in the Semai style, should reduce aggression.

<sup>12</sup> See Dentan (1999a:130-132) for an abbreviated earlier version of this section. Semai cautionary tales are a different genre from “trauma stories,” which Semai also tell. The latter are accounts of victimization which you’ve suffered and are designed to win you moral and perhaps material aid (Kleinman 1995:176); Semai trauma stories also serve to contrast Semai with Malays (Dentan 1976).

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suck human blood. As in early Hinduism, animals are the physical manifestations of the demons who bring sickness but also, in dreams, may become the “concubines” (=supernatural powers) of the shamans who heal the gravely sick. Shamanic healing power is amoral, inspiring ambivalence. Semai find these transformations, which require this ambiguous power, unnerving (Dentan 1988). Semai narrators often end such tales with the adjuration: “If you are a *this*, stay a *this*; if you are a *that*, stay a *that*.” In the discussion that follows, I suggest some ways of understanding this theme, which pervades Semai life (e.g., Dentan 2000c). But the stories are polysemic, I think, with layers and layers of meaning.

Stories also rationalize the fear of strangers and celebrate traditional social ties by detailing the woeful effects of violating them. Older adults sit around telling stories and drinking tea or coffee in the evening, when the day is cool and most work is over.

We tell stories in the evening. My mother’s mother used to tell stories that made even grown-ups weep. Like the story of Tailorbird, which lasts all night. We have many many stories (‘Ilah, a *mnaleeh*, nubile woman, Teiw Waar, 1992).<sup>13</sup>

The story of tailorbird, “summoner bird,” “a ghost, made of grave dirt, exemplifies such cautionary stories. The story explains that it embodies a neglected child. The worst dream, the most dangerous ghost, is of such children after they have died. Traditional Semai appeased the bird/child/ghost’s piteous cries by tossing a gift, a bit of tobacco say, into the undergrowth where the birds live, to appease its horrible yearning for its abusive or neglectful family, for any family, whom it would otherwise devour. A common theme of these stories is the terrible consequences that ensue when Semai fail to love and protect each other. The implicit threat, I think, is that otherwise the society will dissolve—as government assimilationist policies intend that it should.

Younger adults listen to the stories with some skepticism. “I like listening to old folks tell these stories,” said Bah ‘Apel, 30. “I get a kick out of comparing one version with another.” But the people

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<sup>13</sup> Malay and Semai characters in the text are pseudonymous.

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most sensitive to these stories are Semai children, who often hear them as bedtime stories told by elder siblings or other caregivers.

#### *A Cautionary Tale to Frighten/Protect Wa' Lisbet*

In the following story, Semai fail to provide the heroine with the social support that is fundamental to Semai values (e.g., Dentan 2000c). This failure forces her to turn to the forces of chaos in order to survive, and the forces of chaos in turn destroy the Semai who failed her. This story was told our daughter Elizabeth, "Wa' Lisbet" in Semai, then age 5, who lived with us along the upper Teiw Waar river in the mountains of Batang Padang District in Perak in 1991-1992. I overheard the story in the course of doing other things, and recorded it only later that evening in a mixture of Semai and English. I therefore present it in the form of edited field notes.

The Semai family we lived with treated Lisbet much like one of their own children. Cat, her Semai mom, and Ilah, Cat's younger sister, told Lisbet the sort of story they tell all children, warning her of the dangers that face the children of the poor. Like Semai children hearing the stories for the first time, Lisbet wept with vicarious sorrow for the protagonists and fear for herself. Children should weep, should be fearful, said Cat. Indeed, she and 'Ilah would modify the story to make sure Lisbet identified with the protagonist. For example, the character Luuc, Youngest Son, the standard hero of Semai tales, would become Youngest Daughter or even "Wa' Lisbet." Here are my annotated and edited notes on Lisbet and the rich Python/Malay.

[Arriving home one evening, after supper, I missed the beginning of the story, in which] Lisbet's father and mother go away for some reason, and she is left to get fire from her *tnee'*, older siblings. [Semai *manah ntum*, in olden times, had no efficient way to make fire. You had to slip a piece of rattan under a dry stick on the ends of which you stood, sawing the rattan back and forth, until the friction generated enough heat to kindle dry Caryota-palm cotton. People normally kept a brand burning, and slavers sometimes tracked Semai bands from one place to another by watching for the trail of ash dropped from the tip of the torch they had to carry (cf. Skeat and Blagden 1906, I:114)].

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[One after another, the *tnee'* turn her down in a repeated set piece in which Lisbet asks: “Please give me some fire to cook my tapioca,” and her *tnee'* rejects her. By then, the real life Lisbet was weeping copiously: why were the *tnee'* so mean? Paternal reassurance, “it’s only a story, sweetie,” had little effect.]

Finally, as Lisbet wanders in the jungle, she meets a reticulated python, Bah Lapan [Mr. Eight, a by-name, from the pattern of blotches that give it its English and scientific names, Python reticulatus. The snake is in human form]. He falls in love with her and marries her. But their house burns down! Bah Lapan metamorphoses into a handsome Malay [i.e., a rich man, like all Malays] and has Wa’ Lisbet rub the ashes of the house on the walls, which transmute into silver and gold. The [stingy antisocial] *tnee'* visit them. They bed down together. In the night Wa’ Lisbet and her serpentine in-laws turn into snakes, devour her *tnee'* and take them to the bottom of the sea. [Wails from the real Lisbet, who is very sleepy but insists on hearing the end of the story]. But then Bah Lapan gives them medicine and the spitting cobras [sic] vomit up the *tnee'* and they all live together [as happily ever after as Semai stories get].<sup>14</sup>

The python in this story is not just the reticulated python, 30'-35' long. Cat’s “mistake,” in which the Malay/python family became cobras, suggests that any snake could represent this character. Pythons and cobras, along with crocodiles and giant monitors (*Varanus salvator*), are “children” of the Dragon, its manifestations in the ordinary human world (Dentan 1988). And the Dragon represents the forces of chaos in which all categories are swept away. The kindly Malay (rich, powerful) state promises houses of gold at the cost of everything safe and familiar, requiring that Semai abandon each other and “marry” Malays, which would in the real world require conversion to Islam; if Semai cease to support each other, the Dragon/Malay will come, for better or worse.

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<sup>14</sup> This story resembles certain T’ang Dynasty Chinese stories, particularly in its notion of a snake (=dragon) Malay (=prince) who lives beneath the sea.

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Notice, please, the ambivalence in this scene. The python, a traditional synecdoche for the all-destroying demonic subterranean world (Dentan 1970, 1988), is here also a helpful (rich, powerful) Malay, who intervenes when Semai have not lived up to their traditional obligations; yet the explicit function of telling the story is to keep children xenophobic, making them fearful and aware of their dependence on the storytellers, and safe from Malays.

To my ear, such stories seem skeletal. But the thin description is sufficient for its end. Any narrator, not just a skilled one, can produce the desired effect of making children fear, especially of making them fear strangers.

You tell Wa' Lisbet she shouldn't get on his motorbike with the Malay [Ahmad Rafik, whom the Bureau of Indigenous People's Affairs had licensed to market the people's crops]. He'll take her to Tapah [the nearest market town], and there . . . *[knowing look]*. He always gives her things to eat [*symbolically slitting throat* ]. We can't *srng'>h* her [warn her, literally "make her fear"]. You have to do it.<sup>15</sup>

An American reader asks, "Tell us what you think she is warning about." But, as in the conversation with Wa' Saiyah at the beginning of this paper, it is not that simple. Cat believes that bad things happen to children who associate with Malays. She talks (and

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<sup>15</sup> For appalled parents, I should say that Elizabeth, now 14, seems sane to me, saner than most people. Her first letter, written shortly after she got back from Malaysia, was a request to Boris Yeltsin to spare a serial killer from the death penalty. She is pro-life for the same reason, though her parents aren't, and hates war. She detests but does not fear violence. One time, she interposed herself between a classmate and a bunch of kids who wanted to beat the classmate up, just blocking them, not fighting but not backing down. It's very Semai-like.

In Malaysia, she spoke Semai, Malay, and some Chinese. She says she doesn't remember any of those languages, nor much about her time with Semai. She's always been resilient, since I met her when she was just beginning to talk. So I don't know how much, if anything, of the Elizabeth who's living with me as I write has roots along the Waar and R'eis Rivers in the early 1990s.

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gestures) about it as cutting off heads. But I think she doesn't really believe that Ahmad would kill Lisbet, just "do something bad." The warning is "stranger danger" (as, I will suggest later, in stories told American schoolchildren). It's a way of expressing her feelings, her fears about Malays, about seduction and betrayal, and about the fate of poor children in the power of outsiders. Ambiguity is everywhere.

*Invasion of the Headchoppers*

As a result of hearing such stories, the first three complete Semai phrases Lisbet learned were references to *maay* ("people" or "strangers") who chop off heads, *k>h kuuy*, claw out eyes, *-klooh mad*, and slash hearts, *-blah nuus*. People use the terms almost interchangeably. These evil people, Lisbet learned ("Dad, is that *true*?"), lurked around the settlement. For Semai, fear of headchoppers is part of everyday life. Assurances in English ("Well, it's probably not true, but people here believe it anyway") weren't always convincing enough to keep Lisbet from tears as she sat on the storyteller's lap.<sup>16</sup> The next story concerns these evil people, and I tell it as it occurred.

One day in 1991 Cat, 'Ilah and Bun, their aunt, are chatting about headchoppers. A couple had come to a settlement at the sixth

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<sup>16</sup> It is not only Semai who worry about headchoppers, as illustrated by the following news story:

PAGO PAGO (American Samoa): Police in the South Pacific islands are on alert for body parts snatchers, a report here said on Monday.

The alert comes after a Samoan woman in New Zealand claimed that her brother in Samoa had been abducted by a group of people who wanted to take his body.

He reportedly managed to escape.

"We can't treat it as a hoax . . . because it can happen and may happen," South Pacific Islands Criminal Intelligence Network (Spicin) director Michael Sala told the Samoa Post newspaper.

"We can't take this matter lightly," he said.

Spicin has alerted parents in particular to watch out for "a supposed group of individuals traveling throughout the Pacific in search of human body parts."—AFP

(*The Star* 1999 [thanks to Lye Tuck-Po])

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milestone of the Cameron Highlands Road, a Malay man and a Bengali woman, and threatened the headman, says 'Ilah.

"That's the sort of thing that happens when you live near a city like Tapah," responds Cat, 'Ilah's oldest sister, in her usual soft jittery staccato. Cat is sitting crosslegged, weaving a mat with precise repetitive movements, never looking up. She's become a compulsive worker since a botched caesarean by a Malay doctor at the Orang Asli Hospital made it impossible for her to do the heavy work other women do, like collecting firewood or fruit. The experience confirmed her distrust of Malays. "You have headchoppers at the first and sixth milestones [settlements along the road from Tapah town to the Cameron Highlands resorts], and in Tapah."

'Ilah, Wa' Lisbet on her lap as usual, agrees and adds earnestly. "They [headchoppers] don't come up here often, but it's the first thing we think about when we see Pale People ['caucasoids,' who, like Malays, represent alien powers]. They shoot people. No use going up against them with your bare hands, and no use blowpiping them either. They shoot you anyway. We need to watch Wa' Lisbet so they don't snatch her."

At supper a week later Cat relays a report from her younger brother's wife, who heard it from someone at Mile Eight, a dozen miles downriver on the Tapah-Cameron Highlands Road: "They say some *mnaleeh*, nubile girls, near Kampar [a flatlands town] are part of a headchopper gang who gouge out people's eyes and sell them to rich Malays and Chinese. The Bureau [of Indigenous People's Affairs] made a report. Anybody going to Kampar should *watch out*."

"Especially men," says 'Ilah pointedly, looking at me and Cat's oldest boy, Faisul, a guitar-playing 15 year old *litaw*, nubile man. Semai presume adolescents are foolish and randy. Faisul paints his face and wears his hair long like Malay rock stars. Plays the guitar. Is (would like to be) really hip in the Malay style. He took my earlier suggestion that he was wearing his hair the way people did "in olden days," with bad grace. He's very handsome, and preens a lot, the way Semai expect *litaw* to do. He would like to go to town, to places like Tapah and Kampar, show off to the girls. But he's still a little unsure of himself with girls and town life. Normally, you'd trust flirty teenage girls not to hurt you, not to steal your organs.

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The next morning a group of women setting out to collect firewood runs into the Semai schoolteacher and his family coming downstream, two adults and two children. The two little groups spend 45 minutes sitting by the roadside eating betel and exchanging misinformation about eyegougers. There are three eyegougers, says the teacher: a Malay, a Bengali and a Chinese, like a Bahai missionary team. They put eyes and hearts in a Styrofoam cooler and export them overseas. This story alarms everyone. By the end of the day, people in our settlement are carrying machetes or blowpipes wherever they go.

Cat's husband Lwey, 35, seems unperturbed. Puffing on his stubby homemade pipe in his kitchen, he advises his wife's younger brother Panda' to take a blowpipe with him if he goes off by himself. "Maybe you should take a machete, too. And a spear. And a club. Do you have a gun? And a machine gun. And a tank."

Panda', recently married but still a *litaw*, with a faint spotting of pimples across his forehead, leaves the house. He and a group of other *litaw* get together under Alang's house to plan how to defend the settlement against the headchoppers, discussing who'll hold what position and what weapons they'll carry. "Then we'll see who's afraid and who isn't," says Panda', nodding, apparently quoting from the epic tale of how Semai defeated the genocidal Rawas, which his father can recite (Dentan 1999c). But, like many *litaw* schemes, this one doesn't get off the ground.

Next morning, at breakfast in the house of Cat and Lwey, we hear someone outside warning a child about eyegougers. Cat's mother Bun is visiting from a downhill settlement. On Bun's lap sits her granddaughter, Wa' Mnjuun', about 7 years old, who accompanied Bun. Mnjuun', unused to Pale People, clings tightly to her grandmother, who smiles and says to her:

"That's right. There are people who gouge out the eyes of our people and sell them to Pale People like Lisbet's father. Maybe he wants a pair for Lisbet."

"It's true. Your gramma herself bought her left eye in Tapah," I say to Mnjuun', making Bun smile.

"They tie you up," says Cat seriously, adding a detail I hadn't heard before, "then they claw your eyes out," making a clawing gesture.

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“They particularly like little girls’ eyes,” adds Lwey, her husband, glaring directly at Wa’ Mnjuun’. By this time the little girl is clinging so tightly to her grandmother that she’s almost vanishing into her plump bosom.

“Pale People especially,” says Bun grimly, indicating me with her chin. “This one buys eyes all the time.” Mnjuun’ buries her face in her gramma’s soft shoulder, and the old woman gives us a faint smile.

Lwey and Faisul grin widely. But that night, out frog-hunting by torchlight, Lwey, Faisul, Panda’, and one of Panda’’s *litaw* younger brothers begin talking about headchoppers. Each ratchets up the others’ fears. The shadows along the river teem with menace and sinister rustlings. There seems to be someone with a flashlight up on the road that passes through the settlement, but it’s too far away to see who it is, or if it’s human. Finally, it seems only prudent to come home, though they’ve caught only half a dozen little frogs.

The fear lasts a couple of weeks. Faisul’s younger brother, Lang, about 13, has a nightmare in which three Bengalis claw his eyes out. Finally the fear is replaced by worry that the Bureau is going to relocate the settlement downstream, in another settlement where people are bound to resent being crowded by outsiders. The Bureau denies the rumor: “We are not the Los Angeles Police Department,” the Director General writes me crossly. But such forced relocations are common, and the Director General was later removed for corruption, as supplies had been diverted from Orang Asli to profit Malay bureaucrats. Incidents like these foster fear and distrust of Malays.

Rumor-driven panics like these recur regularly in Semai settlements. In some ways they resemble the “panic disorders” which may follow extreme fear (Turner et al. 1986). The general atmosphere in which Semai live is one of vague and multivariate threats, to which rumors like the attack of the headchoppers give concreteness. You can at least imagine doing something about headchoppers.

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### **Interpretation: Enduring Scars<sup>17</sup>**

One way to understand these stories is as ways Semai interpret the political ecology in which they find themselves. The first subsection of this interpretation considers the salience of headchopping rumors among Semai, first the factual basis of fearing headhunters and then headhunting as a concrete metaphor. The next subsection is on the ambiguity and ambivalence in the stories.

#### *Headhunting as Fact*

Whatever the real-world news, it does not justify the salience of head-choppers in Semai life. In the Indianized statelets of Malaysia a thousand years ago, taking heads, like “taking women and children without bothering to ask,” symbolized and demonstrated state power (Maxwell 1996:101). Modern Malaysians remember the custom:

In the less affluent archipelagoes that surround us, there is a lively traffic in human heads. The heads are smuggled back across the border by Teochew [immigrants from south China] business men. They are destined for the cornerstones of new high-rises. . . . It is the vestige of an old and vaguely illegal custom: to inter the bodies of the lower castes under the threshold of a royal household. Traditionally, the lower castes delivered themselves willingly, in exchange for the promise of elevation, a higher social position in the next life. In the ruins of our dreams, the power of architecture is always overestimated. . . . Every day we travel through its ruins. . . . A city is not a place where people come to live. Its architecture was never about homes. Even the most superficial excavation will reveal its ancient heart began with the building of tombs (Chua 1998:23-26).<sup>18</sup>

You might think, from the stories about organnappers and headchoppers, that Semai had encountered headhunting in reality.

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<sup>17</sup> “Enduring scars” refers to the Malay proverb *hilang luka tinggal parut*, (when) “wounds disappear, scars remain.”

<sup>18</sup> Chua, a Teochew-Malaysian become American, is himself an avatar of transformation.

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But headhunting hasn't been a west Malaysian institution for centuries, if it ever was. There were headhunters nearby, in Indonesia and Borneo, so Semai might have heard of it, the way they could have heard of organnapping. There was a headhunting mass massacre in Borneo in the mid-1990s (Parry 1998); Indonesian newspapers throughout the 90's featured horrific photos of young men waving severed heads. The question is why the image of headhunting would catch in Semai imagination and why it seems more salient now than it used to be.

Although Malaysian media are less absorbed with organnapping than their American counterparts are with child abuse, the macabre trade in organ transplants does get some press of much the same kind (e.g., *Utusan Konsumer* 1997). Several educated non-Semai friends in Kuala Lumpur, hearing me recount Semai organnapper stories in 1992, protested my dismissive attitude. They'd heard similar stories themselves, sometimes with Orang Asli as the headchoppers (e.g., Nicholas 1993:42). Lye Tuck-Po, a Malaysian anthropologist who has worked with another group of Orang Asli, points out:

There is another, probably unrelated, rumor, but one that's very present in the minds of urban parents: the threat of children being kidnapped by traders for the Thai begging trade. I first heard the story almost 15 years ago: that when the kids are bought up by the begging syndicates in Thailand, their tongues are cut out or they're deliberately lamed to make them more "pathetic." A year or two ago, a similar fear was expressed in the papers (*The Star*) by the parents of one of those kidnapped kids. It's not too far-fetched [e-mail of 2 March 1998].

And other Southeast Asian countries have kept up the ancient tradition of kidnapping children from highland peoples in order to terrorize them into becoming sexual objects or unpaid servants, the latter practice often now described as "adoption" rather than "enslavement" (e.g., Bales 1999; Headland and Headland 1997), the way apologists for Malay slaving claim that slave children became just like other children in the family.

Some Malaysian charitable work may evoke similar feelings. In Kelantan and Trengganu, the two most predominantly Malay and

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Muslim states in Malaysia, the JHEOA instituted a “fosterage” program under which Malay families would “take in” Orang Asli kids, to civilize them. The motive was ostensibly to benefit the kids, not their masters. But the effects of being taken away by strangers from everything safe and familiar may feel like kidnapping and enslavement to the children involved. In societies run by and for the urban rich, such uprooted rural children have little recourse in fact, however enlightened the laws protecting them (e.g., Bales 1999:34-79).

And I don’t mean that individuals in west Malaysia never took heads as trophies or tools to instill fear. People do that everywhere, spontaneously. Americans hear about a man who kept heads in a refrigerator, or of finding the head of a little boy whose body has never been found; and we think: *pervert! weirdo! monster!* Not us, right? Soldiers do it too. In Bosnia in the 1990s, for example. It’s a human thing to do, not as sick and alien as we might like.<sup>19</sup> It is generically human enough to be a “natural symbol” (Douglas 1970).

#### *Headhunting as a “Natural” Metaphor*

Cautionary headhunting stories like these occur all over “postcolonial” southeast Asia, [in] regions where heads were never systematically taken, attributed to agents who would not acknowledge it as part of their ancestral traditions . . . headhunting as a trope . . . is employed to speak metaphorically about . . . inequality, economic exploitation, and an unequal voice in political decision-making (Hoskins 1996:37).

Thus, as a trope, headhunting seems to represent incorporation into the state, as in ancient times, but this time through assimilationist policies and imposed “economic development.” The trope both

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<sup>19</sup> And, of course, I’ve often been wrong when I dismissed Semai stories as myth. Chua, himself a Malaysian-American of Teochew gangster stock, knows that old customs die hard. Perhaps they’re right; the Semai along the R’eiis said that, beneath each of the electric pylons that stalk through their valley, there is a human head, not Semai, but imported from those “impoverished islands” by the “German” engineers (Dentan 2001c).

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expresses and generates that fear of outsiders which the history of Semai justifies.

“Development” and “the state” are abstractions. Most people everywhere use metaphors, usually concrete models, for abstract relationships. We give the abstractions a local habitation and a name. We talk about murderers as “monsters,” for example, or “animals,” though they’re just humans like us. But people lose track of the fact that they’re thinking metaphorically, and the metaphors substitute themselves for reality. I think this kind of comfortable concrete thinking is where Semai headchoppers come from.

What do you *see* when you see “export-driven development” or Islamicization? Who but Ahmad Rafik, the Malay middleman, a friendly mustached smiling man, who contributes money to marriages, comes to wedding parties, flirts with the adolescent girls, and gives kids rides on his motorbike if they’re not too scared? And “the state” appears as the head of the local JHEOA branch office, who speaks a little Semai and worries about the people’s reluctance to tell him their concerns. They *seem* okay. Not like bad guys at all (cf. Scott 1985).

“Power,” says an influential student of violence, “is embedded in the situated practices of agents” (Feldman 1991:4). But not these agents, not comprehensibly. Somehow the forces they represent—“development,” “assimilation”—perpetuate what happened during the days of slaving. It’s easier, more human, to think not about “integration into the mainstream” or “participation in export-driven development projects” but instead about imagined monsters who look like friendly humans, monsters who rip out your children’s hearts, blind their eyes, and sell their organs, the way disguised demons devour humans beguiled by their beautiful seductive human semblances. Outsiders, shapeshifters feigning concern, kidnap your children intellectually and culturally, just as they used to steal them physically.

For Semai, physical and spiritual loss are pretty much the same (Dentan 2000c). Besides, assimilated children usually move away, into the Outside. As the Indonesian poet Ajip Rosidi puts it:

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people go to the rainforest, felling trees  
and return heavy laden;  
and people go into the city, to throw a net around their fantasies  
and not a single person returns (1995a[1972]).<sup>20</sup>

There they either become Outsiders or, more likely, encounter the prejudice and exploitation normal in hierarchic globalized Malaysian society. To Semai, such contemptuous social relations constitute physical violence (Dentan 2000c). As the memory of slave raids fades and the promise/threat of “development” looms larger and larger, stories of headchoppers and transformations not only become plausible but keep the children from wandering away from the safety of Semai who love them into places where seductive monsters may snatch them away and mutilate them.

Telling these tales is one of those “inexplicable subjective practices” that “confuse and to some extent refuse the appropriations of rationalized legitimacy” (Redding 1998:10). Usually Semai accept the legitimacy or at least the inevitability of their dependency on the Malay-dominated government. Conceding their loss of freedom constricts their opportunity for political or even ideological resistance. The concession is part of their “learned helplessness.” But the stories teach the children to distrust the promises of attractive outsiders.

### **Storytelling in Semai Social Life**

Children don’t need actually to experience kidnapping or eye-gouging to fear them. As Cook et al. note, “Observational or vicarious conditioning accounts for the origins of a greater proportion of humans’ fears and phobias than does direct classical conditioning” (Cook et al. 1985:591 [also see Cook et al. 1985:607; Mineka et al. (1984)]).

Semai fear originates in slaving, I think. But nowadays the fear rises not from how often they are victims but from how vulnerable they feel to victimization, that is, from what criminologists call

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<sup>20</sup> . . . orang-orang berangkat ke hutan, menebang kayu  
dan pulang dengan beban yang berat;  
dan orang-orang masuk kota, menjerat angan-angan  
tak seorang pun pulang kembali.

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“indirect victimization” (McGarrell, Giacomazzi and Thurman 1997). Fear doesn’t reflect how bad things are but how vulnerable you feel. In the face of *Islamisasi* and expropriation via “economic development,” the Semai, the poorest people in Malaysia, are stereotyped by themselves and others as timid and weak, with no secure connections to protectors in the government. They feel vulnerable and helpless.

A person need not actually experience repeated [uncontrollable] events in order for them to produce [learned] helplessness. All that is needed is for the person to expect that events will be uncontrollable. . . . This expectation may come from a variety of sources besides induction: for instance, observation of others, cultural stereotypes, specific information. . . . (Peterson, Maier and Seligman 1993:147)

Semai children, the weakest and most timid Semai, the most vulnerable, become the focus of protective measures, because (1) the adults love them and feel that they are threatened by the vaguely defined forces which, I have argued, the stories concretize, and (2) enculturation of children is one of the few areas of life over which adults retain control. Raising children is one of the few areas of life in which even the most powerless adults can get the taste of power.<sup>21</sup>

*Ambivalences*

The notion of “stranger danger” pervades Semai life. Stories convert the adults’ fear into threats that are real to children. All a child needs to do is to hear stories about kidnappers and eye-gougers, and to watch adults panic, as they were still doing in the 1990s. That the fear is vicarious rather than direct seems to make little difference for Semai children. And Semai adults think that children need to learn

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<sup>21</sup> I have developed this argument in a couple of nonacademic articles in the “popular press” (for example, Dentan 1998b, 2001a, 2001b). People abuse children, when they do, because the children are available and can’t retaliate effectively, following the same rules that bullies do in choosing their victims (Gelles and Straus 1988; Olweus 1997).

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fear, to flee friendly strangers, to trust no one and nothing not already intimate.

On the lap, getting the hug, after you've heard the stories time and time and again, they seem to arouse a certain frisson complexly composed of both horror and titillation that is experienced vicariously. These accounts . . . exert a certain quasi-pornographic fascination. One gets the sense that the world described within is separated from the reader in both time and space, indeed, as if the actions had taken place in 'another country' entirely. . . . (Anagnos 1994:233).

Substitute "narrator and listeners" for "reader" in this passage, and it applies to Semai cautionary tales. Adults, more skeptical about *crmmor maay manah ntum*, stories of the people of olden times, still respond to the stories' depiction of a cosmos swamped by shapeshifting ravenous obscene horrors. Only the little islet "us," where mutual love and responsibility should reign, offers any safety at all.

Unlike movies or TV, the occasionally violent imagery of these stories doesn't provide human models for violence. In the stories, violence is committed only by the humans who can slough off their human identity and become beasts. Other kinds of violent story puzzled traditional people. In 1963, Semai who had just started going to movies asked me why Americans were killing indigenous people. I tried to explain that the killing, at least the direct killing, was over long ago. "So why do you still want to see it?" an old man asked.

Telling the scary story is rewarding for the adults. The children hug them, cuddle with them, show how much they love and need the grown-ups. The storytellers put the unspeakable into words, perhaps getting a fleeting sense of controlling, at least verbally, the frightful threats among which they live their lives. And, of course, they can become, briefly, that which frightens, instead of those who fear.

Other ways of teaching children to fear strangers show this sort of ambivalent enjoyment.

In the 1970s, the first time we visited Knik, a young mom pointed us out to the little girl she was carrying in a sarong

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slung over her shoulder to make a sling, whispering *sng'>>h! sng'>>h!* fear! fear! until the child burst into tears, then covered its head so it need no longer see us and carried it away—turning her head as she went to give us big chummy smile. A gaggle of half a dozen or more curious boys, ranging from about 5 to about 12, plus a couple of little girls, followed us into the headman's house, where our friend Tandiil from Mncaak, a newly married *litaw* whose wife was about to have a baby, was to introduce us. They settled in a little crosslegged flock by the door, smiling, watching us. Seated across from them, Tandiil filled in the time while the headman's wife made tea by fixing a cold eye on the boys and leaning forward.

“*Sng'>>h!* ‘he says. Pause. “Do you *sng'>>h?*” Leaning so far forward that he has to support his weight on both hands flat on the floor in front of him, while the little boys edge away on their behinds from him and us, not rising but tensed, grinning nervously, watching intently: “The Pale People have come to stick you with HYPODERMIC NEEDLES! Whooooo *sng'>>h* the most?” A couple of the littlest children half-rise, turning towards the door, still looking at us over their shoulders. “*THAT'S THE ONE WE'LL STICK FIRST!*” cries Tandiil, and the boys break and run, giggling.

It's a game, sort of. But, even along the R'eis in 1992, an area open to outsiders for over half a century, the younger children still scattered in flight like sparrows when we Pale People first showed up in a settlement.

Besides the care and playfulness, there's a cruelty here, I think. Lisbet's tears at the stories made Ilah glance at the other Semai women. They all smiled, I think because the weeping was cute, although loud weeping and wailing represents a loss of self-control which makes adults uneasy. You should comfort a desperately unhappy child, but only if it comes to you for comfort.

There is no doubt in my mind that Ilah loved Lisbet. It was obvious in every look and gesture. When we had to leave for the last time Ilah could not see us off because she was overcome by emotion, which Semai do not like to show in public. She said what

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other Semai say, that making children -*sng>>h*, “fear”, protects them from evil by making them stay close to adults who can look after them. By evoking revulsion in one area, they foster attachment to another. But still, when Lisbet’s pet chick died, and Lisbet wailed in misery in my arms, the Semai grown-ups who loved her laughed.

Leta, my wife, says the Semai treatment of children—making children weep because they’re cute when they weep—reminds her of German childrearing practices. And the traditional German fairy tales which the Grimms collected, like *Hansel und Gretel*, are even more bloodcurdling than Semai stories. “What an irony it’d be,” she added, “if Nazis and Semai come out of the same childhood.”

I suspect that, in America, much the same feelings underlie the recent upsurge in fear of stranger pedophiles. As Americans lose control over their own lives, lose contact with their own children, they too cannot see globalizing secularizing capitalism, the speed-ups at work that take more and more of their time, the encroaching caretaker state, or at least can’t see them clearly enough to resist. But they can imagine far more easily the threat of seductive strangers luring their children away to hurt them terribly.

It is, I think, important to recognize that the complex American phenomenon is not different in kind from the Semai one. In four out of five cases, is not strangers who abuse American children, but people they know. The recently demonized stranger pedophile, like the Python or the headchopper, represents otherwise vaguely understood forces which damage American children, forces not radically different from the “economic development” or “mainstreaming” that threaten Semai. And I suspect that the sense of exercising power by threatening children “for their own good” has taken on in America the same ambivalence that it seems to have for Semai.

Americans love their children, but they are less physically protective than Semai. In America, in 22 states school authorities beat children with special implements designed to hurt children so badly that many schools require beatings to be spread out over several sessions, because the pain is otherwise insupportable. Americans are among the few industrialized peoples who still trivialize beating children. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* exemplifies this attitude: a dehumanizing “funny” caricature of a

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child in pain, a string of anecdotes instead of evidence, a generally amused and self-congratulatory tone (Costello 2000).<sup>22</sup>

Americans protect kids from sex, not violence. In the USA, if you torture a child, the authorities take the child away from you until you have had anger management training and coaching in parenting; then you get the child back. If you kill a child, you go to prison until you have served your sentence and “paid your debt to society.” If you fondle a child inappropriately, you also go to prison and do your time; then you may be incarcerated indefinitely until you receive successful treatment from people who aver that successful treatment is impossible; or you may have to go from house to house and tell your neighbors “Hi, my name is Bill, and I molest children sexually” so that they can protest your house, reveal your presence on TV, and perhaps beat you up or kill you. These penalties are so severe that intelligent pedophiles would have to consider killing their victims. Lawmakers are willing to risk that.

Why is it so much viler in America to be a pedophile than a child-batterer or a raper of adult women? Why is it worse to fondle a child inappropriately than to beat, torture, or kill it?<sup>23</sup> Semai are not the only people who treat children ambivalently.

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<sup>22</sup> Malaysia by contrast recently banned “caning,” the British equivalent of American “paddling,” thus incidentally removing a source of friction between the school system and Semai parents, who regard beating children with horror. But in 2000, on his return from the G-15 summit, the Prime Minister blamed the political demonstrations against his reign on “hooliganism,” and Tan Sri Musa Mohamed, the education minister, like others in the ruling party, “believes hooliganism would disappear with judicious use of the cane” (Pillai 2000b). Malaysia recently reinstated caning, and the “Teacher Liability Protection Act” of 2001 seemed about to extend paddling in America until opponents managed to add a line explicitly acknowledging the right of local school authorities to set the rules for beating children (*Chattanooga Times* 2001; Dentan 2001a, 2001b; *Post-Gazette* 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Referees found these closing sentences jarring, I suspect because, as Thomas Paine wrote, “a long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason” (Paine 1997[1776]:1).

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