

# *Conflict, Emotion, and Abreaction:*

*Resolution of Conflict  
among the Semai Senoi*

CLAYTON A. ROBARCHEK

Because of the disruptive potential inherent in conflict situations, all societies have devised some mechanisms for their resolution. Universal functions of these mechanisms include the resolution of the substantive issues of disputes and the restoration of the integrity of the social fabric. The means used to realize these objectives, however, vary widely cross-culturally and are intimately related to other aspects of personality, society, and culture. In this paper, I analyze one such process of conflict resolution as it occurs among the Semai Senoi of West Malaysia and trace some of contextual relationships.

The Semai Senoi are an aboriginal population numbering some 15,000 individuals. They live for the most part in small, relatively isolated hamlets of fewer than 100 people, the settlements scattered along the deep valleys that dissect the mountainous spine of the central Malay Peninsula. Although the degree of acculturation to and integration into the national socioeconomic system varies from area to area within the Semai region, the traditional Semai pattern is one of politically autonomous settlements. Each village exploits a defined territory and subsists by swidden cultivation of manioc and hill rice supplemented by hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering. This pattern persists in the less accessible highland and deep forest areas and characterizes the settlement — a tiny hamlet of four houses and sixty-five men, women, and children — where the bulk of the research for this paper was conducted.

The Semai are best known in the anthropological literature for

---

CLAYTON A. ROBARCHEK is Lecturer in Anthropology at California State College at Bakersfield.

Published as Robarchek, Clayton A. "Conflict, Emotion, and Abreaction: Resolution of Conflict among the Semai Senoi," *Ethos*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1979): 104-123. Copyright © 1979 by the American Anthropological Association

their nonaggressiveness and aversion to interpersonal violence of any sort. Robert Dentan (1968) characterized them as a "nonviolent people of Malaysia," and my own observations, obtained over a period of some fourteen months' residence in two Semai settlements, were entirely in accord. I found Semai social life remarkably free of interpersonal violence or overt expressions of hostility. Nonetheless, conflicts do occasionally occur among the Semai, as they will within any group of human beings living closely together: husbands or wives are unfaithful, someone is slandered by a neighbor, one's spirit familiars are offended by the words or deeds of another, a swidden is invaded by a kinsman's marauding goats, and so on.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines the meanings that such conflicts hold for individuals in this society and the relationships of these meanings to the cultural processes that have been devised for conflict resolution.

In such a society, based on cognatic kinship and having no structure of superordinate social control, disputes between individuals constitute a threat to the unity and integrity of the residence group. The potential exists that the litigants, as they call on their ramifying kindreds for support, will split the group into opposing camps. This prospect is rendered especially threatening by certain aspects of Semai world view and personality. I have previously described the Semai view of the world as a threatening and unpredictable place and emphasized the psychodynamic importance of strivings for nurturance and security, the role of residence group as the primary source of satisfaction of these strivings, and the Semai perception of affective arousal as threatening (Robarchek 1977a, 1977b). Given this complex, one would expect a conflict situation to be especially threatening, both because of the threat it poses to the integrity of the group — the source of individual security — and because of its potential for arousing strong feelings. To find that the process of conflict resolution has a uniquely Semai character reflecting these concerns, then, should come as no surprise.

The generic Semai term for any kind of open dispute or conflict is the Malay word *hal* (circumstances, case, matter). In Semai usage the word is roughly equivalent to the English "affair," but with a strongly negative connotation. Semai are usually very reluctant to become involved in a *hal* because doing so threatens the very foundations of personal security: the amicable and nurturant relations

---

<sup>1</sup> Each of these, in fact, precipitated formal legal proceedings during my stay in the field.

with one's kinsmen and with the residence group as a whole. Thus tolerating annoyances and sacrificing personal interests rather than becoming embroiled in a *hal* are the rule, rather than the exception. In this regard, the Semai are at the opposite pole from peoples such as the Yanomamo (Chagnon 1968) or the Ifugao, of whom Barton says "pride as well as his self-interest — one might almost say his self preservation — demands that he shall collect debts that are owed him, and that he shall punish injuries or crimes against himself" (1967: 164). For Semai, the objective is rather to avoid open confrontation and conflict whenever possible.

This orientation is exemplified by an incident that occurred during my fieldwork, involving the headman of our hamlet and the theft of fruit from his *durian* trees. The sale to traders of the fruit from the individually owned *durian* trees is a major source of cash income for Semai in this area. Each day the owner must visit each of his trees, which are often widely scattered through the forest, to collect the ripe fruit that has fallen. Occasionally, however, the fallen fruit is stolen during the night. When the headman discovered that his *durian* were being stolen, he set about building a temporary shelter in the forest where he could sleep and guard his trees. He made certain first, however, that everyone in the hamlet knew about his plans, so that the thief would not be surprised in the act. He wished only to stop the theft, not to discover or catch the thief; for if he were to confront the thief, their relations would be disrupted, and a *hal* would result.

#### THE BCARAA'

There are occasions, however, when conflict cannot be avoided, when feelings are too strong or the issues too intractable, and only a public airing of the matter will resolve it. In such cases the formal procedures are invoked, and a *bcaraa'* is convened. This involves calling together the disputants and their respective cognatic kindreds, their *waris*, for a debate and discussion of the entire affair. All types of quarrels and disputes are handled within this framework, from cases of slander, disputes over territory or the ownership of fruit trees, and damage claims for injury, to cases of adultery and divorce.

In the event of a *hal*, each of the disputants seeks the support of his *waris*. This is an ego-centered kindred, which constitutes itself around a particular ego and has no corporate existence or common

interests apart from him. The male members of this kindred will accompany their kinsman to the *bcaraa'* and help him to argue his case. While one's *waris* is obliged to give its support in a dispute, the members are seldom enthusiastic about the prospect since the dispute can disrupt their own amicable relations with the group, which includes, in all probability, members of their own *waris*. Moreover, if their kinsman is assessed a substantial fine or damages, they may have to help him pay it. Finally, the *bcaraa'* itself is a time consuming and exhausting ordeal that disrupts the planned activities of all involved. One who embroils his *waris* in a *hal*, then, strains his relations with his kinsmen as well as with his opponents, and he can expect to be reprimanded by his own *waris* for any fault that he may be found to have in the matter.

Evidence of the anxiety engendered by the prospect of disruption of relations with the *waris* can be seen in the response to the following item from a sentence-completion test that I administered: "more than anything else, (s)he is afraid of. . . ." Of nineteen responses, the largest number (nine) referred to being reprimanded by the *waris*. (The next most frequent response [eight] cited physical danger: tigers, malevolent spirits, death.) There is, therefore, a great reluctance to become involved in a *hal* except under extreme provocation.

If, however, a Semai feels that he (or she, since women may also initiate the process) has been seriously wronged and wishes to seek redress through a *bcaraa'*, he or she first informs the elders of his or her *waris* of the affair. The elders, in turn, go to the band headman and request a *bcaraa'*. Because people are so often reluctant to take this step to become enmeshed in a full-fledged *hal* (especially if they have some fault in the matter), conflicts and animosities could conceivably remain submerged indefinitely. It is, therefore, the responsibility of any villager who sees a conflict developing to report it to the headman so that it can be brought into the open and settled. If, for example, quarreling or malicious gossip were occurring between two co-villagers, any bystander would (and ideally should) report it to the headman. From the very beginning, then, a dispute becomes the concern and responsibility of the entire community.

A *bcaraa'* usually begins about dusk.<sup>2</sup> The principals and their

---

<sup>2</sup> This description is based on an analysis of five *bcaraa'* that I witnessed and several more that were described to me by participants and observers.

kinsmen, together with any interested spectators, begin to gather at the headman's house. The headman's wife places banana leaves on the floor and heaps them with boiled rice or manioc. Tobacco and *nipa* leaves are exchanged; areca nut, betel leaf, and lime are passed around, and an hour or two is spent in leisurely conversation with co-villagers and with kinsmen arriving from other settlements.

After a time, those men most directly involved in a dispute — the principals, the elder members of their *waris*, and the most skilled debaters — begin to congregate in the center of the house, where they seat themselves on pandanus mats that the headman's wife has unrolled on the floor. Women, children, and other spectators, including kinsmen not taking direct part in the *bcaraa'*, sit around the cooking fires or lie on the bamboo floor talking, sleeping, or listening to the discussions. If one of the principals is a woman, she usually speaks from where she sits at the periphery, and her male relatives sit in the central area. The headman sits with the other spectators and is not involved in the substantive discussions unless he is a member of one of the principals' *waris*.

The structure of the *bcaraa'* is somewhat flexible, and the sequence of events may vary, but typically it begins with a statement by one of those taking a major role in the debate — usually a senior member of one of the *waris* but not one of the principals. When all those who wish to take part have assembled, the speaker begins a long, formal monologue reaffirming the interdependence of group members and the necessity of maintaining the group's unity. He emphasizes how each of the villagers depends on the others; how all must help and care for one another; how, if one is without food, the others must feed him, and so on. Numerous instances of such assistance in the past are recounted in detail. The speech is interspersed with humorous asides and anecdotes and is buttressed with references to folklore and to the wishes of the "old ones" (the hamlet's spirit familiars). This is usually followed by several more speeches in the same vein given by others, who all stress the interdependence of the group and the necessity of maintaining mutual assistance and harmony within it.

Finally, one of the principals presents his case to the assembly. He does not address his adversary directly but rather directs his argument to the group seated around him. In a formal style using numbered points, simile, metaphors, and other rhetorical devices, he attempts to put the best possible light on his own actions and to

show the errors of his opponent's behavior. Since, in most cases, the details of the actual events are well known to all, he concentrates on the motives for his actions, explaining why he acted as he did and why his opponent's actions were wrong. He may offer a variety of sometimes contradictory explanations without arousing any apparent cognitive dissonance in either the speaker or his audience (see also Dentan 1968:94).

The other principal then states his case in the same manner. He may address the points raised by his opponent, or he may ignore them completely and take an entirely different view of the situation. One by one, the members of each *waris* argue the case for their kinsman, perhaps questioning him to bring out particular points. It should be emphasized that these kinsmen participate as advocates, not as witnesses. No testimony is ordinarily taken, except that offered by the principals. If a third party were to act as a witness for one side or the other, he would then become involved as a principal in the matter; this would be extremely foolhardy, unless his own interests were directly involved. The antagonists make no cross-examination or direct confrontation; rather, each participant states his own conception of the affair and of the actions of each party. It often seems, therefore, that the disputants talk past each other, concentrating on a series of "red herrings" rather than addressing the same issues. In one such discussion in which I was involved, after I had completed what I thought was a masterfully reasoned advocative argument, a proponent for the other side replied, "That's right, you speak the truth." He then proceeded to ignore every point that I had made as he stated his own, totally contradictory, view.

Although the issues taken up in the *bcaraa'* may be of vital concern, at least to the principals, anger or other emotion is rarely displayed. The emphasis is on the clarity and forcefulness of the principals' presentation. Verbal facility and the ability to debate well are highly valued. A good debater is admired and respected, especially by his relatives, because those kinsmen less skilled in the forensic arts depend on him to argue their cases.

While it is well recognized that debating skills are a great asset in a *bcaraa'*, Semai also believe that a person who is in the right will be able to make a better case for himself than one who is in the wrong and that the truth is easier to defend than a lie. The winning side in a *bcaraa'*, then, is the side that presents the best case. That side is, by these assumptions, right as well (it is perhaps worth noting that

American jurisprudence, while acknowledging the desirability of having a good lawyer, rests on the same assumption).

This process of argument and counterargument may continue for a few hours, or it may continue non-stop for several days and nights. In the latter case, the headman's household provides food for the participants, who catch a bit of sleep on the floor when they can, then wake up to resume the *bcaraa'*. All the events leading up to and surrounding the dispute are examined and reexamined from every conceivable perspective, over and over again, ad nauseam. Every possible explanation is offered, every imaginable motive laid bare, every mitigating circumstance examined. Past chains of events and squabbles may be rehashed. In the course of all this, arguments are rebutted and points are answered, although not systematically, until finally a point is reached where there is simply nothing more to say. It must be emphasized that a *bcaraa'* does not end when all the arguments have been logically rebutted; it ends when *no one* has anything more to say. A fully discredited argument or claim may be repeated over and over again, as long as the speaker wishes. In fact, a proper *bcaraa'* cannot end while anyone still has anything to say about the issue. Informants emphasize that the participants must speak until they are sated. When the debate lags, the participants are asked by the elders of the *waris* if they are still angry or if they have more to say. As long as anyone is willing or feels the need to talk, the *bcaraa'* continues. When at last no one has anything more to say, the elders of the two *waris* call upon the headman, who has been listening all this time, to render his "judgment" to the principals.

Although described as a judgment, the headman's contribution is more precisely the voicing of an achieved consensus. After all charges and countercharges have been aired and examined thoroughly and all competing explanations have been dissected, there still remains a residue of indefensible actions by one or both parties. By this time, these have been recognized and discussed by all. The headman gives voice to the group's consensus. Lecturing one or both parties concerning their guilt in the matter, he may assess a fine (usually small; half — or sometimes all — of which he returns to the guilty party) or damages, or both, against one or both principals. He instructs them in proper behavior, in the courses of action that they should have followed, and orders them not to repeat the offense or to raise this dispute again. The elders of the *waris* of

each of the disputants then lecture their own kinsman in the same vein, and they and the headman again reaffirm, in long monologues, the necessity of maintaining the unity and interdependence of the group. With that, the matter is deemed closed forever. Since all concerned are urged repeatedly to speak their minds during the *bcaraa'*, all should have had their say. Thus, if anyone raises the matter again, he or she is subject to another, larger, fine.

### THE PSYCHOCULTURAL DYNAMICS OF SEMAI CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Before I attempt an analysis of the *bcaraa'*, it is necessary to consider again briefly some of the special problems that conflict presents in Semai society. While conflict among individuals probably always poses a threat to individual and social stability, the structure of Semai personality and society make conflict especially threatening.

Earlier I described certain features of Semai personality that are of particular importance in regard to conflict: the fear of strong affective arousal, the view of the world as hostile and threatening, and the intense strivings for security, nurturance, and affiliation that are centered on the group as a whole. In conflict situations, strong emotions — fear, anger, jealousy — may be induced, and for a Semai this affective arousal is in itself threatening. Conflict also disrupts the individual's relationship with his fellows. Because the residence group is a major focus of strivings for nurturance and affiliation, this disruption, too, is threatening, because of its potential for leaving one isolated and helpless, shorn of nurturance and security in a hostile world. Finally, conflict runs counter to fundamental Semai values and calls into question both the cultural ideal and the carefully nurtured image of one's self and one's fellows as friendly, helpful, cooperative and generous.

The key to an understanding of the psychodynamics of the *bcaraa'* is, I believe, to be found in the process that Freud called abreaction, that is, the dissipation of emotion accomplished by confronting and reexperiencing an affect-inducing situation. What is probably the same phenomenon has been employed (although with a different theoretical interpretation) by behaviorist psychologists in the treatment of phobias. In essence, the process is one of emotional

desensitization. Over a period of time, the patient is repeatedly exposed to the fear-inducing stimulus at ever-increasing levels of intensity until the stimulus no longer has the capacity to evoke the response of fear.

A similar desensitization process was examined in an experiment reported by Folkins et al. (1968), in which a process of "cognitive rehearsal" was employed wherein subjects were instructed to imagine vividly scenes of wood-mill accidents that were described to them. After this, they were shown a film graphically depicting the accidents, and their subjective and physiological stress reactions were measured. Cognitive rehearsal significantly lowered the level of stress response of this group as compared with a control group, suggesting that the subjects had been desensitized to the emotion-arousing potential of the event by "mentally" experiencing it.

Precisely the same process, I believe, occurs during the *bcaraa'*. The story of the dispute and of all the events leading up to it is told and retold from every conceivable angle by the principals themselves and by their kinsmen. Over and over again they tell their stories, for as long as they feel the *need* to do so. The fact that a particular point has been successfully countered or explained (or conceded) does not inhibit the other party from pressing it again and again if he or she still feels angry or jealous or unhappy about it. The emotionally arousing events are reexperienced again and again, the process continuing until the issues no longer have the capacity to elicit any emotional reaction from anyone — until no one *wants* to say anything else and the conflict has been "talked to death." Such a process is entirely consistent with the Semai fear of emotional arousal. The *bcaraa'* provides an institutionalized procedure that drains the emotion out of conflict situations. The dissipation of the affective content of the dispute alleviates the secondary threat and the subjective fear produced by the perception of one's own arousal.

This process facilitates the resolution of the substantive issues of the dispute as well and permits a more or less equitable settlement that is acceptable to all. In such a small and closely related community, it is almost certain that some people will be members of both *waris* and that members of the opposing *waris* will be members of each other's *waris*. These cross-cutting loyalties of the two kindreds ensure that neither principal will be egregiously exploited. Because the issues no longer arouse strong feelings in the disputants, the headman can voice the consensus that has been achieved, and

all parties are then ready to accept the new state of affairs. The situation is legitimized with the consent of all, permitting a rapprochement between the antagonists and an ending of their estrangement from the group.

The process is completed with the positive reintegration of the disputants into the group, alleviating the dependency anxiety that their estrangement has induced. This reintegration is accomplished by according forgiveness to the errant co-villager upon his passive acknowledgement of his errors and acceptance of chastisement and instruction from his *waris* and from the headman. This reacceptance and the nurturance of the individual by the group are expressed in the seemingly paradoxical practice of assessing the wrongdoer a fine and then returning all or part of it to him. The headman, through his "judgment" (actually a voicing of the consensus), represents the unity of the group. The individual's dependent relationship to the group is expressed in his mute acceptance of the chastisement and in his acceptance of the headman's "gift" of a part of his fine. In accepting the money, he accepts the nurturance of the group and affirms his reintegration into the community.

In sum, then, the *bcaraa'* has a number of consequences that reduce the likelihood of hostile and aggressive behavior and that work to restore social relations:

1. It removes much of the motivation for individual, idiosyncratic action by dissipating the emotional content of disputes.
2. It facilitates the resolution of the substantive issues that precipitated the dispute through a compromise of interests growing out of the debate of all claims and positions.
3. It permits reconciliation between the disputants.
4. It restates and reemphasizes the basic cultural values of interdependence, generosity, and mutual aid that were called into question by the dispute.
5. It demonstrates the truth of these cultural values and thus demonstrates the desirability of proper behavior. These are subjectively confirmed and reinforced by the alleviation of threat that accompanies the dissipation of affect and the reintegration of the wrongdoer into the community. By submitting to the will of the group, the wrongdoer is accorded forgiveness and reacceptance and thus *feels* a great relief. In the words of one of the Semai, "when one commits an offense, he should inform his *waris* and be reprimanded by the elders; then he can *feel good* again" (emphasis added).

### A CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Having described and discussed an idealized *bcaraa'*, I would now like to employ this analysis in an examination of an actual *bcaraa'* that I observed during the course of my fieldwork. I chose this particular case because it is atypical in several ways, and, as often happens, the atypical example is particularly instructive, providing a unique opportunity for comparison with the "normal" case and illuminating aspects of the process that might otherwise go unnoticed.

This dispute involves two half-brothers whom I shall designate, in the Semai form, as Elder and Younger. They had the same father, a former headman (now deceased), but different mothers. Elder's mother is dead, and Younger's is now married to the current village headman. Elder, about twenty-two years old,<sup>3</sup> is married to a woman from another valley some six miles distant and is the father of an infant child. He is in the Aborigine regiment of the Malaysian Army and is stationed outside the Semai region. Younger, about sixteen, is unmarried and has been working on tea plantations some twenty miles to the north. Both have attended school and can read and write Malay.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict between them developed as follows: some months previously, Elder's wife was visiting in her own village. One day she came to our hamlet to visit her in-laws and asked her husband's half-sister (Younger's full sister), a girl of about twelve, to accompany her back to her own hamlet for a visit and to help her care for her infant.<sup>5</sup> A day or two later Elder returned on leave to his wife's hamlet and took her, their child, and his half-sister back to his military station with him. There the situation rested for some time.

Several months later Younger returned home from the tea plantations to visit his mother, who was suffering from advanced pulmonary tuberculosis. She told him that she was ill and that she wanted him to write to his older brother and ask him to bring her daughter home. Younger thereupon sent a scurrilous letter to Elder

<sup>3</sup> These ages are only approximate, since few Semai know their actual ages.

<sup>4</sup> While there is no standard written form of Semai, some young Semai, such as these two, write the language more or less phonetically using the standard English alphabet taught in Malaysian schools.

<sup>5</sup> This practice of a younger sibling going to live for a time with a married brother or sister in another settlement is quite common. It provides an opportunity for the unmarried sibling to meet eligible potential mates (which are likely to be lacking in the home village because of the high degree of interrelatedness of these bands).

accusing him of spiriting their sister away without telling anyone,<sup>6</sup> of not feeding her, not providing her with clothes, and not giving her a place to sleep. He accused Elder's wife of promiscuity and of leaving their sister alone to care for the infant when Elder was away.<sup>7</sup> He also cursed his elder brother, saying "I want you to rot" (that is, die). While such a curse is not believed to cause illness or death, it is nonetheless a serious insult. Upon receipt of the letter, Elder immediately returned to his home hamlet and demanded a *bcaraa'*, which was set for two days later.

I noted previously that this was an atypical case in several regards that are worthy of note. First, the disputants are siblings. (Multiple marriages are extremely common, and Semai make little distinction between full and half-siblings. There is not even a simple way of distinguishing them terminologically.) Siblings are members of each other's *waris* and are expected to support one another. Disputes arising between siblings are ordinarily settled within their *waris* without resort to a *bcaraa'*. In this case, however, because of Elder's anger and the seriousness of the allegations made by Younger and because Elder's wife, an outsider, had also been slandered, Elder demanded a full-scale *bcaraa'*. The fact that his wife had also been slandered opened the possibility that the affair could widen into a conflict with outsiders, a much more serious prospect than an intravillage dispute. In addition, Elder did not know the source of the accusations made by Younger, and he suspected that there might have been others involved in the spreading of slanderous rumors — a serious matter indeed.

A second unusual feature of this case is a consequence of the fact that the principals were half-siblings: their *waris* overlapped extensively (but were not identical). Since the *waris* is an ego-centered bilateral kindred, collateral relatives on their father's side were members of both principals' *waris*, while the collateral relatives on the mothers' sides were members of only one *waris*. Thus there were not two, largely mutually exclusive groups of kinsmen, each supporting one of the disputants, but rather an extensive overlapping of the kindreds.

<sup>6</sup> No important decision, such as a long-term change of residence, should ever be made without consulting the *waris*.

<sup>7</sup> The sexual nature of Younger's verbal attack on his brother's wife is perhaps illuminated by the fact that Semai tolerate, or expect, a certain amount of sexual activity between younger sibling and older sibling's spouse (cf. Dentan 1968). This was precluded in the present case, however, by the siblings' residence in different parts of the country.

A third atypical feature is Younger's age. Since recognition of full adult status is not usually accorded until a person is married, has several children, and has assumed a responsible place in the community, youths are seen as scarcely more than children whose quarrels are not to be taken seriously by adults. Moreover, young people are ordinarily very reticent in the presence of their elders; they do not offer opinions, argue, or take part in serious discussion with adults. Nonetheless, in this case Elder demanded that a *bcaraa'* be held and that Younger be censured for his behavior. Finally, as we shall see, circumstances conspired to impose an unnatural time limit on the proceedings.

Because Younger's mother was married to the headman and because Younger had lived with the couple for about two years before going to work in the tea plantations, the headman felt some responsibility for Younger, even though he was not technically a kinsman (the headman referred to him as "stepchild"). Thus, the day before the scheduled *bcaraa'*, the headman set about coaching Younger on his argument. He went over the affair with him, exploring alternative explanations for his behavior to see which would seem the most credible and would provide the best defense. The best scenario, the headman decided, was that Younger was worried about his mother and wanted Elder to return home immediately and bring their sister; so he wrote the slanderous letter, knowing that it would make Elder angry and cause him to return at once. At the same time, Younger was to take the offensive by claiming that Elder went behind his back and took their sister far away without telling her *waris* or anyone else; in fact, Elder had deliberately misled everyone by having his wife say that they were only going to her village for a short visit. The headman told me that he coached Younger because he wanted the boy to be able to put up a good argument and make a good case for himself.

The *bcaraa'* was scheduled to begin in the early afternoon instead of in the evening as was usual. This was the season when the swiddens were being weeded. Most of the inhabitants of the hamlet had moved to temporary houses in the fields to take advantage of the coolness of early morning and late afternoon to do this onerous work. This meant that the men wanted to conclude the *bcaraa'* by dusk so that they could return to the field houses before nightfall because their wives and children were afraid to stay alone at night. Since no one saw this case as much more than a squabble between

siblings, there was little doubt that it could be concluded before darkness fell. This would, however, impose an unnatural time constraint on the proceedings rather than allowing the *bcaraa'* to run its course, as the preceding discussion suggests it must.

#### THE BCARAA'

On the day of the *bcaraa'*, people begin arriving around 11 A.M. and gather in the headman's house to gossip and discuss the affair. Participants continue to arrive for another hour or more. A number of the boys' relatives do not appear, another indication of the relatively low importance attached to this affair. Around 3 P.M., the talk begins with speeches by two senior patrilineal relatives (members of both boys' *waris*). Both say that they are not going to get really involved but just want to hear the story (a standard opening gambit).

Then Elder tells his story, which is long and embellished but boils down to a claim that he had not intended to take his sister away, it just happened that way because of circumstances beyond his control. Then he got the letter with all the accusations (which he lists), and it made him wonder who had told his brother to write those things. A kinsman says, "We want to settle this affair between siblings; is there anything more?" Elder says "No."

The two senior kinsmen speak again. Each asks Younger for his story, his explanation. Younger, silent, looks at the floor. A kinsman asks, "Did anyone tell you to write this? Did someone tell you these stories? Did your stepfather tell you this? We want to know; Elder wants to know. If it was your own idea, tell us that."

Finally Younger begins, haltingly, eyes downcast: "My mother told me to write a letter; I wrote irresponsibly because I worried."

Q: "What did you write?"

A: "I wrote what Elder said."

Q: "Who ordered you to write that?"

A: "No one."

Q: "Your stepfather?"

A: "No."

It is apparent from the obvious discomfort and exasperation of all the participants that this is not going at all well. Younger is inexperienced in public debate and is thoroughly intimidated by the

situation. He is unable to enact his role in the *bcaraa'* because he will not defend himself or explain his actions. He refuses to speak spontaneously without being asked a direct question, and he even ignores direct questions as long as he can. It is apparent that this is frustrating to the kinsmen, who want him to speak up. One of the senior members of both *waris* complains, "It's easy to settle these things among adults who know how to speak, but with children who don't know how to speak, it's difficult."

The talk continues in this vein for several hours, the *waris* trying to get Younger to state his case and Younger responding only when questioned directly. He is extremely uneasy, keeping his eyes downcast and toying with a tobacco pouch; his answers are as short as possible. At several points, one or another of the senior kinsmen summarizes; for example:

Elder might think we told those stories if we don't get it all out. He must know that there was no gossip here. Elder and his wife want to hear it clearly that Younger did it on his own, that no one told him to do it or told those stories. Younger has said that he did it himself, that there was no gossip, no one told him to do it. We want to get this settled so Elder and all of us can have our minds at ease.

The *waris* asks Elder what they should do. He says to lecture Younger, to tell him not to do such a thing again. "My wife could go to her *waris* over this too; we want him to be told that he can't do this. He must not start trouble with another *waris*."

One of the senior kinsmen asks, "Are all the questions finished?" Another answers, "We want agreement and understanding with all three of them; we must be concerned that his wife is satisfied." He wants the discussion to continue, and he wants to hear the opinions of some kinsmen who are not here, but no one wants to go and fetch them from the field houses or to stay later. He says that since it involves another *waris*, it must be done right; "If Elder were to leave his wife because of these stories, we would be to blame for not settling it here."

The headman's wife brings a pot of rice and places it on the floor. Several men begin to eat. Elder's wife, who has been sitting to one side with her child, begins to speak very softly. She tells how they all lived together and everything was fine. Then they got the letter making all these accusations, and she felt very unhappy. There is much discussion about how bad this made her feel and how she has to be satisfied. They turn back to Younger:

- Q: "I ask you directly, you didn't hear any stories?"  
 A: "No,"  
 Q: "If there were no stories, why did you write those things?"  
 A: "I was angry,"  
 Q: "Why were you angry at your sister-in-law?"  
 A: "I just wrote it."  
 "You're lucky she didn't go to her *waris!*"

The participants are uneasy because Younger will not talk willingly. They need a strong argument from both sides to get at all aspects of the affair, to get all the possible permutations out in the open. Someone else could take Younger's part and argue for him, but the participants want this settled quickly so that they can get home before dark. No one sees this dispute between siblings as particularly serious; the main concern now is to appease Elder's wife so that she won't complain to her *waris* and embroil them all in a dispute with outsiders.

Finally, as dusk approaches, the senior members of the two *waris* call the headman over from his place by the hearth, where he has been sitting and listening. He has taken no part in the discussions, not being a kinsman of either of the parties. The spokesman for the *waris* says, "We've asked him everything; the letter was written by him alone, but we're all responsible for him too." He recalls the contents of the letter, the curse, the accusations (the letter itself was never produced). The headman asks if they have finished their discussion; the spokesman says they have.

Headman: "If you haven't talked it all out, settled it among yourselves, it will reflect back on me,"

Spokesman: "If it's not all talked out, if our minds are not all at ease, it's not good. I'm not afraid because of Elder and Younger but because of the wife, if she's not satisfied."

The spokesman (a senior member of both *waris*, Elder's full sibling and Younger's half-sibling) then lectures Younger: "After you have caused trouble for him and his wife, what will you do next?" Younger replies, "I'll return to my *waris*, to my elder siblings." They ask him where he'll go if he gets into trouble again; he says, "To my *waris*." (The implication is that if he doesn't follow their instructions and behave, he will have no one to go to the next time he gets into trouble.)

The headman listens to this, but he is not satisfied with the result — all the blame has been placed on Younger. He says he

doesn't think the affair is settled yet, that he believes they are going to have to talk some more. One old man, a member of Younger's *waris* only, says he is finished, that he is not going to spend any more time on a child's affair (his wife is in a field house with a sick child, and night is falling rapidly). The headman says it is difficult to settle this since Younger won't talk and since there are other kinsmen who haven't come to take part. He says he does not approve of this settlement because there has not been enough talking yet (that is, there are issues that have not been discussed and people who have not had their say. At some future time these issues could be raised again and the dispute renewed).

Nonetheless, the two *waris* insist that the affair is settled, and because it is ultimately their affair, the headman begins his reprimand of Younger:

I'm going to lecture you; you can listen or not. You should speak and tell about it. (He asks Younger if he is listening; Younger nods.) If you speak out, there is no blame: ten or twenty times you could be guilty of something, and it will still be all right if you tell about it. There must be reasons for what you did; maybe you were worried about your mother; maybe he (Elder) did something wrong. Ask the elders; they won't abandon you. You came and asked me yesterday, and I didn't abandon you. (He is still unable to elicit a defense from Younger, even though he has now succeeded in raising the neglected issue of Elder's fault in the matter. He thus proceeds with his lecture of Younger.) I tell you, don't ever do this again or you will be guilty and in trouble. Next time, for certain, you would be charged by the wife's *waris*. Don't ever do this kind of useless thing again or you will surely be fined.

The kinsmen of the disputants are talking among themselves, relieved that the *bcaraa'* is nearly concluded. The headman tells them to listen to what he is saying: "Now I'm going to speak to Elder, but I'm not going to speak long." Elder sits in front of the headman. "There is no real offense between siblings," he begins. "I'm going to tell you the right road to be followed." He tells Elder that he should have asked before he took the girl away; he says, "Next time do it right; this wouldn't have happened then,"

Elder answers that he didn't tell his wife to bring his sister, that he did not even know about it. The headman says that that may be true and that Elder had not intended to do wrong but that he still did not tell his sister's *waris* first. Elder protests that he did not intend to take her; it just happened that he had come to get his wife and his sister was there visiting. The headman continues, outlining the procedures that should have been followed before the girl was taken

away. Then he says to the *waris*, "You all didn't talk this over enough; if you had, I could have just lectured these two; as it is, I had to raise all these other issues because the *waris* didn't. There's no blame, but the work isn't finished; I had to bring out the reasons. If the *bcaraa'* isn't finished, I'm afraid [of the consequences]."

One of the senior members of both *waris* now begins his lecture to Elder: "I'm not going to say much to you; your stepfather [the headman] already has." Forced now to deal with the issues raised by the headman, he tries to continue with the closing lecture that would end the *bcaraa'*. But it is now clearly apparent to all that this affair has not been talked out, because Elder is eager to argue that he did nothing wrong. By this time, both principals (and everyone else), having said all they wanted to say, should be willing quietly to accept the lectures from the elders, but this is not the case. The *waris* had tried to rush this through and finish it so they could all return to their homes before dark. Now, since the headman has forced the issue, they resign themselves to finishing it properly and settle in for a night of talking. Because Younger still will not speak for himself, others now point out the errors of Elder's behavior in the matter.<sup>8</sup>

Later the talk again turns to the responsibilities of siblings toward one another and, beyond that, to the responsibilities of each villager to the others. The headman says, "With me and my siblings, if they have food, they give me some; if I have food, I give it to them." Others contribute on the same theme: friends must help each other, giving food and money. The dispute at hand is temporarily forgotten in this reaffirmation of the group's interdependence: "The old ones (spirit familiars) say that if there is trouble, siblings (and by implication, the hamlet) are one." Example after example is recounted of instances in which group members have helped one another (*bcaraa'* always reach this point sooner or later).

The talk continues into the night. All thoughts of an early resolution of the affair are now foregone. Other members of the *waris* who were previously silent now have their say (often they don't have anything of substance to add, but it is anyone's prerogative to speak his mind, no matter how far afield his comments may be). People

<sup>8</sup> This is, incidentally, a textbook example of how, in these kinds of societies, where it is often said that the headmen have "only the power of persuasion," a clever headman can influence the course of events in the direction he wishes, even against the desires of the majority. By carefully manipulating his clearly limited role in this affair, he was able to bring out the neglected issue of Elder's fault in the matter and to cause the *bcaraa'* to continue to a proper conclusion.

get up and come over the fire to warm up from time to time as the night chill creeps in, but the talk goes on.

The headman goes back to the fire, and the *waris* continue the discussion until early in the morning, when all are, at last, satisfied. Then, the headman is called back; he tells each of the principals not to do wrong like this again (with no arguments this time), and all the participants roll up in sarongs and go to sleep on the floor.

### CONCLUSION

The goal of any dispute-settlement process is a resolution of the issues in a manner that permits a restoration of normal social relations. The dynamics of such processes vary widely from one society to another and, presumably, are related to other aspects of psychological and sociocultural systems. This is manifestly the case among the Semai, where the goals of the process are both adjudicative and "cathartic." The *bcaraa'* addresses itself both to the substance of the dispute and to the emotions generated by the conflict. Such a process — oriented as it is toward dissipating the affective content of the dispute so that the substantive issues may be resolved — is entirely consistent with what we have already seen of the Semai.

Because there is no Semai social entity with the power to enforce decisions, participants in the dispute-settlement process must be motivated to *want* to abide by the settlement reached in the *bcaraa'*. This is accomplished in two major ways; first, by removing the motivational power of the dispute through the dissipation of the emotional content and, second, by making reintegration into the group (and the attendant satisfaction of dependency and affiliative strivings) contingent upon the acceptance of the will of the group. Thus a disputant who refuses to accept the consensus of the group as it is voiced in the headman's lecture risks alienation both from the residence group as a whole and from his own *waris*, the last bastion of security against a hostile world.

The *bcaraa'*, then, has multiple foci: The resolution of the issues in a dispute, the restatement and reaffirmation of the paramount values of the group, the reintegration of the disputants into the group, the reduction of anxiety over dependency strivings, and the abreaction of emotion and consequent reduction of the threat and fear elicited by strong emotions.

## REFERENCES

- BARTON, R. F. 1967. Procedure among the Ifugao, *Law and Warfare* (Paul Bohannon, ed.), pp. 161-181. Garden City, New York: Natural History Press.
- CHAGNON, NAPOLEON A 1968. *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- DENTAN, ROBERT K. 1968. *The Semai, a Nonviolent People of Malaya*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- FOLKINS, C. H., K. D. LAWSON, E. M. OPTON, JR., and R. S. LAZARUS. 1968. Desensitization and the Experimental Reduction of Threat. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 73(2): 100-113.
- ROBARCHEK, C. A. 1977a. Semai Nonviolence: A Systems Approach to Understanding. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside.
- . 1977b. Frustration, Aggression, and the Nonviolent Semai. *American Ethnologist* 4:762-779.