

# THE IMAGE OF NONVIOLENCE: WORLD VIEW OF THE SEMAI SENOI <sup>1</sup>

by

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## Introduction

The Semai Senoi are an *Orang Asli (aboriginal)* population numbering some 15,000 individuals who live, for the most part, in small hamlets scattered along the deep valleys that dissect the mountainous spine of the central Malay Peninsula. There is no indigenous political integration above the level of the band and, although these bands are subject to state and federal authority, they remain relatively autonomous politically. While the degree of acculturation to and integration into Malaysian society varies from area to area, the traditional Semai pattern is one of relatively isolated settlements, each exploiting a specific territory and subsisting by the 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 where my research was conducted.

The Semai are perhaps best known in the anthropological literature for their nonaggressiveness and aversion to interpersonal violence of any sort. Robert Dentan characterized them as "a nonviolent people of Malaya," and Alexander Alland and others have used them as examples to counter arguments alleging man's innate aggressiveness. My own observations, obtained over a period of some fourteen month's residence in two Semai settlements, were entirely in accord with these characterizations. I found Semai social life to be almost totally free of interpersonal violence or overt expressions of hostility. In this paper, I want to examine some of the cognitive and affective underpinnings of this nonviolent way of life, focusing on some of ways in which Semai beliefs and values interact to constitute an image of man and the universe that largely precludes violence as a behavioral option in everyday life.

## World View

Every sociocultural system imposes order and meaning on the chaotic

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reality that surrounds it. The members of every society, in the course of their enculturation, acquire representations of their world; they learn what the world is like and how to deal effectively with it. This system of knowledge that we call "culture" is the plan for a society's adaptive response to the environment it inhabits; it defines worthwhile goals for individuals and for the society, and prescribes the means for their achievement. Basic to this adaptation are fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality and about its relationships to human beings: ideas about what exists in the world, what is good and to be sought, and what is bad and to be rejected. On these underlying assumptions and values, the rest of the cultural edifice is constructed.

These fundamental conceptions, often referred to as a society's world view, are seldom explicitly stated in any cultural system, that is, few if any people could put many of them into words. They are, in this regard, perhaps analogous to the grammatical and phonological "rules" that give structure to a language. These, too, can seldom be explicitly stated by native speakers but they nonetheless constitute a tacit knowledge that structures linguistic behavior and gives it meaning. So also do the basic shared assumptions about the nature of reality give consistency, coherence, and meaning to the behavior of the members of a society. The members of each new generation born into this culturally-constituted reality incorporate some of these assumptions into their individual conceptions of reality. These cultural assumptions, then, become components of individual personalities, part of the adaptations of individuals to their unique environments, and elements of the motivational complexes that channel individual behavior. This paper examines some of these fundamental cultural assumptions among the Semai, the interrelationships among them and the images that they inform, in order to see how they may influence individual behavior in the direction of nonviolence.

In earlier papers, (Robarchek 1977b, 1979a) I have discussed the development of several aspects of a peculiarly Semai image of the world and of man's place in it. Perhaps the most fundamental of these Semai world view assumptions are:

- 1) The world is a dangerous and unpredictable place.
- 2) The individual is helpless and dependent.
- 3) Situations arousing strong affect are threatening.

These and other assumptions inform the images employed by individuals in their day-to-day interactions with their environments. They are the cognitive representations of reality, the cognitive maps, that define legitimate objectives for individuals and that show the way to their realization. A similar notion is the "mazeway" concept proposed by Wallace, which he says

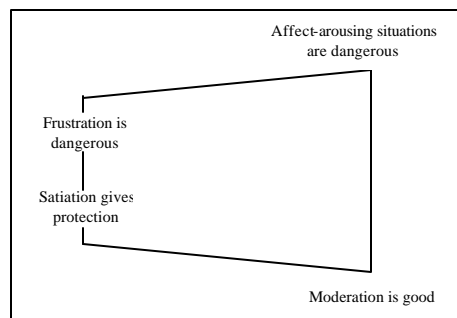
. . . may be compared to a map of a gigantic maze with an elaborate key or legend and many insets. On this map are represented three types of assemblages: (1) goals and pitfalls (values, or desirable and undesirable states); (2) the "self" and other objects (people and things); and (3) ways (plans, processes, or techniques) that may be circumvented or used, according to their characteristics, to facilitate the self's attainment or avoidance of values (1970: 15-16).

Perhaps an example will help to demonstrate how, even on a very general and abstract level, these kinds of constructs can channel behavior in a particular direction, and how understanding these relationships can contribute to an understanding of behavior. I have previously described how situations producing frustration of a want are perceived by Semai to be dangerous, and how the satisfaction of the want eliminates the danger and the attendant anxiety (Robarchek 1977). In fact, the Semai notion of satisfaction implies that activities should always be carried through to complete satisfaction, and that this is a desired state. Such a set of assumptions might reasonably be expected to eventuate in an ethos of hedonism, in a seeking after sensation and sensual gratification, in a desire to derive the utmost physical satisfaction from every experience. In fact, however, precisely the opposite is the case; Semai are among the most "apollonian" of people, valuing moderation and restraint and eschewing excess in all areas of life.<sup>2</sup>

This seemingly paradoxical situation is understandable when we recall that there exists another fundamental assumption to the effect that situations producing strong affective arousal are dangerous. The excitement of hedonistic pleasure-seeking would itself, therefore, be perceived as threatening. Thus, in the Semai view, wants should be satisfied, but not to excess, not to the point where gratification itself becomes exciting. For instance, when a wild pig or other large animal is killed, one doesn't see the extravagant "gormandizing" that is often described for similar peoples; and a wise man can say "one should not want a woman too much, there is danger. . ."

We can visualize the relationships among these assumptions as being of the form shown in figure 1:

Figure 1



2. I know of only a single exception to this generalization, that is the *b'asik*, a dance held perhaps once a year in which the participants may dance into trance. Even here, however, behavior is only seldom "frenzied," and this is carefully controlled by bystanders.

thus generating the value of moderation and channeling behavior into moderate forms.

My major objective here, however, is to examine some of the ways that such fundamental cultural assumptions can influence the patterning of social behavior in nonviolent directions. One of these ways is similar to the previous example: by defining cultural ideals of behavior, i.e., cultural values, Figure 2 represents some of the possible logical relations among certain fundamental Semai cultural assumptions and some characteristic Semai values.<sup>3</sup> At the top are the most general assumptions, at the bottom, specific values.

Figure 2



3. This figure represents possible logical, not casual, relations. There is no way, with the data available, of determining casual sequences in the generation of these assumptions. It should also be emphasized that I do not claim this to be a "true" picture of "how the natives think". I offer this as a model which is, I believe, consistent with a good deal of observed behavior.

These and other values are cultural ideals of behavior, expressed daily in a variety of contexts in religion, folklore, and in the everyday interactions of individuals. They are the expectations that Semai society has of its members, the social norms that structure individual behavior, and the standard against which individuals are judged by their neighbours and by themselves.

The relevance of these values as behavioral standards is emphasized by the responses to six items of a sentence completion test that I administered. These items were intended to elicit both positive and negative values by seeking their expression in both approved and disapproved behaviors. The six items are:

Item No;

- 12) "They praise him/her because (s) he . . . "
- 32) "If (s)he is a true friend, (s)he... ."
- 40) "(S)he is a good person, (s)he always... ."
- 23) "(S)he is angry at her/his friend/relative because.... "
- 41) "(S) he is a bad/evil person, (s)he always... ."
- 47) "His/her friends/kinsmen reject him/her because (s)he... ."

The first three were intended to elicit positive values; the last three, negative values. All the items, in Semai, could be completed with statements either about what people do, or what they do not do, For example, in English, statements 40 and 41 would seem to call for a statement of what people do. In Semai, however, it is perfectly acceptable to say "he always doesn't do such-and-such." The items were given to 19 informants (29% of the total population of the hamlet where we lived). In the tabulation of responses (Appendix), the parenthetical notation of "respondents" refers to the number of persons who gave "informative" responses. There were always several "uninformative" responses to each item, responses such as "he is a good person," "he behaves well," or "he's no good." Since these merely restate the items they were not tabulated. Additionally, the total number of responses often exceeds the number of respondents; this is because informants often cited more than one behavior in their response, and all were tabulated. The No. in ( ) indicates the No. of responses of that type.

An examination of these responses discloses several interesting patterns. First, nearly all of the responses are related to two core values, nurturance and affiliation, represented in figure 3. A total of 19 informants made 102 value-related statements in which they judged as positive or negative 22 named behaviors of which 19 can be classed as relating to either nurturance

or affiliation (By "nurturance" I mean the giving and receiving of physical, material, or emotional support; by "affiliation," the maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relations.):

Figure 3

Nurturance	Affiliation
giving/not giving	slander/gossip quarreling
helping/not helping	getting angry fighting
loving	causing trouble/disruption stealing
making friends	lying ignoring advice, <i>bcaraa'</i> being reprimanded by <i>Waris</i> (kindred) being reported to headman living with friends agreeing with friends rejecting

While I believe that the rationale behind the classification of these behaviors as relating primarily to either nurturance (eg., giving, helping) or affiliation (eg., fighting, quarreling) is clear in most cases, several require additional explanation. "Loving", it might be argued, is more an affiliative than a nurturant behavior. However the Semai word "*ho*", which I have glossed as "love" includes nurturance as a major component of its meaning (my wife argues that "to cherish" comes closer to the Semai connotation). Similarly, since stealing is the opposite of giving, it could be seen as negatively nurturant, rather than negatively affiliative. Semai, however, seem to view stealing more as an antisocial act inimical to good relations among covillagers. The behavior "making friends", which I have classed as relating primarily to nurturance may, at first glance, appear to be either an "uniformative" response akin to "being a good person" or to be related more closely to the value of affiliation. However, if we examine the responses to item 32 (Appendix), it is clear that, for Semai, a "true friend" is defined largely in terms of the giving of nurturance: caring for, loving, helping, giving food.

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Ignoring advice and ignoring the decision of a *bcaraa'* (an institution for dispute resolution) imply ignoring social norms of behavior, which brings the transgressor into direct conflict with his kinsmen in the first case, and with the group as a whole in the second. Similarly, being reprimanded by the *waris* (kindred) and being reported to the headman are both consequences only of conflict with other members of the group.

The remaining three behaviors mentioned ("gives good advice," "is hardworking," and "is lazy") do not fit easily into either of these categories. They appear to be relatively insignificant in any case, having been mentioned only once each. The fact that nearly all of the behaviors mentioned by informants as being characteristic of good or bad people are related to nurturance and affiliation indicates the centrality of these values in Semai world view and their importance in the structuring of social behavior.

A further patterning emerges when we compare the responses to the items that were intended to elicit positive values with those intended to elicit negative values. The three positive items were "They praise him/her because. . .", "(s)he is a true friend, (s)he . . .", and "(S) he is a good person, (s)he always. . . ." If we arrange the responses to these items in terms of the values of nurturance and affiliation, and in terms of how "good people" are said to behave, we get the following (figure 4):

Figure 4

		Good People	
		do	do not
Nurturance	give	9	be stingy <u>1</u>
	help	8	1
	love	5	
	make friends	<u>5</u>	
		27	
Affiliation	agree with friends	1	slander/gossip 6
	live with friends	<u>1</u>	disturb/trouble 4
		2	quarrel 1
			get angry 1
			fight 1
			lie 1
			steal <u>1</u>
		15	

The three statements intended to elicit negative values were: "(S)he is angry at her/his friend/relative because. . ." (S)he is a bad/evil person, (s)he always. . .," and "His/her friends/kinsmen reject him/her because (s)he. . . ." Organizing these in a similar manner, we have (figure 5):

Figure 5

Bad People

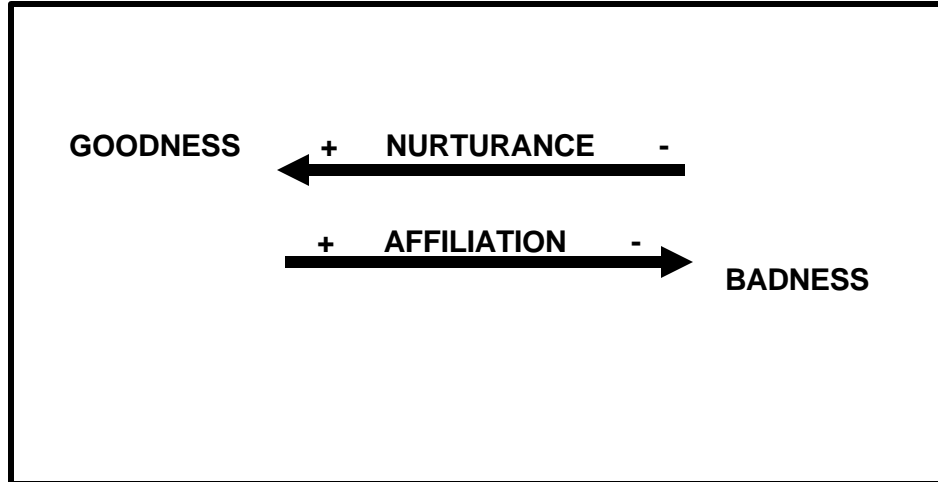
	do	do not
Nurturance		help      2 give <u>2</u> 4
Affiliation	slander/gossip      11 fight, hit            7 steal                    5 quarrel                4 disturb                 3 get angry              3 lie                        1 ignore advice        10 rep. by waris         1 rep. to hdman        2 reject others         2 <hr style="width: 10%; margin-left: auto; margin-right: 0;"/> 49	

The distributions of these responses have several interesting implications. First, it appears that "goodness" (figure 4) is defined primarily positively in terms of nurturance (upper left quadrant), that is, good people are those who give, who help, and who love. To a lesser degree, goodness is also defined negatively by the absence of behaviors inimicable to affiliation (lower right), that is, good people are also those who do not gossip, slander, quarrel, and so on. "Badness" on the other hand, seems to be defined almost entirely in terms of behaviors inimicable to affiliation (figure 5, lower left quadrant). It appears, then, that at least in ideal conceptions of the extremes of goodness and badness, "badness" is not merely the absence of "goodness", or vice versa. Rather, they are defined largely in terms of different values: "goodness", positively in terms of nurturance, and "badness", negatively in terms of affiliation. Thus, the ideals of "goodness" and "badness," rather than being opposite poles on a single dimension, are instead largely the ex-



treme points on different, overlapping dimensions (figure 6):

Figure 6



The roots of this conception of good and evil lie, I believe, in the personalities of the individual members of the society. Although the values we have been examining are cultural values, normative ideals of behavior, they are also meaningful for individuals; they are felt to be self-evidently true, and they are lived to a remarkable degree. An explanation of the meaningfulness, of why people *believe in* them and exemplify them in daily life, must be sought in the functional relationships that they have with individual wants, needs, fears, goals, and dispositions. Spiro (1971 :28) makes the same point when he holds that:

“... society and culture are not only the producers . . . , but they are also the products of human cognitive orientations and motivational dispositions. Which is to say that they are the products of . . . human beings with aspirations and anxieties, depressions and elations, conflicts and goals.”

Let us, then, examine the relationships between this value set and some of the "aspirations and anxieties, depressions and elations, conflicts and goals" of individual Semai.

I have described elsewhere (Robarchek 1977a, 1979a, b) certain personality features that are especially characteristic of Semai. These include feelings of helplessness and insecurity coupled with a striving for depen-

dency, a seeking for nurturance and care from others.<sup>4</sup> If this characterization is accurate, if individual Semai are powerfully motivated to seek nurturance, then we would expect that (in absence of any countervailing disposition or value) others' provision of nurturance would be seen as virtue of a high order, satisfying as it does a deeply-felt personal need. This is consistent with the conception of "goodness" shown in Figure 4, where the giving of nurturance is shown to be the major defining attribute of human virtue.

While immediate relief from the existential anxiety generated by perceptions of helplessness may be found in the nurturance of others, the ultimate source of all nurturance and security is the residence group, the band itself (cf. Robarchek 1977a). Only through a close and continuing affiliation with the band can security be achieved and anxiety relieved. From such a perspective, positively affiliative behaviors, behaviors that strengthen one's ties with the band, are not so much virtuous as they are simply good sense and self-preservative, providing a refuge and reducing one's own anxiety and insecurity, and, as we see in Figure 4 and 5, little moral note is taken of positively affiliative behaviors. Negatively affiliative behaviors, on the other hand, attack the unity and coherence of the band, thereby threatening the sole source of individual security and the only bulwark against a menacing world in which the lone individual is powerless. Small wonder, then, that Figures 4 and 5 show evil defined almost entirely in terms of behaviors subversive of affiliation, and define these kinds of behaviors as the antithesis of virtue.

These two paramount values, then, provide the most important standard against which individual behavior is judged. They are basic to the expectations that Semai society has of its members and they inform the social norms that pattern individual behavior. Behavior incompatible with these values is morally disapproved and sanctioned by the legal system. Thus, the strivings for nurturance and affiliation that characterize individual personality and that militate against the expression of antisocial and especially aggressive behavior are reinforced and supported by the weight of society's moral and legal authority.

The all-pervasive nature of this value-set has other consequences as well: it provides the standards, expressed in the responses of others to him, against which the developing child evaluates himself. The mirror in which the child sees himself reflected is the responses of others to him, and these responses are guided by the fundamental assumptions and values in the society. When a child's behavior is inconsistent with these values, this is reflected in others' responses to him: they express their disapproval by scolding him and pointing out the potential consequences of such actions. When his behavior is consistent with these values, he is praised. The child, then, comes to evaluate

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4. The ontogenesis of this motivational complex is examined in Robarchek 1977a, Chapter 5.

himself in terms of these cultural values and they become incorporated as aspects of his self-image.

Semai, then, have an image of themselves, developed during enculturation as nurturant, dependent, affiliative, and non aggressive (cf. Robarchek 1977 a). Such an image largely precludes aggression as a behavioral alternative, in part because such behavior would be radically incompatible with the cultural definition of virtue, and with individuals' images of themselves and in part because of the intense anxiety generated by the disruption of interpersonal relationships within the group which would follow from such an intensely anti-affiliative behavior (cf. Robarchek 1979a.)

This cultural ideal and self-image also constitutes a significant part of the image which the Semai use to set themselves apart from other groups and to establish their moral superiority. It is regularly expressed in statements such as "The Malays and Chinese are always fighting, but we sit quietly" or my own favorite statement of the image, from a very traditional old man: "We don't fight people, we fight the trees and the animals of the forest."

The expression of these and other values in the behavior of adults and children, moreover, constitutes the child's experiential field, the behavioral environment within which he matures. Such a value set, then, helps to determine the kinds of behavior that are available for the child to learn. Spiro (1967) makes a distinction between "cognitive learning" and "behavioral learning," i.e., between learning what to do and learning to do it. Thus far, I have concentrated on the effects of values on cognitive learning, on the child's learning *about* behavior, his acquisition of knowledge concerning what behaviors are acceptable and proper. We must not overlook, however, the influence of Semai values on behavioral learning as well, on the child's learning (or in this case, non-learning) of particular behavioral habits, i.e., aggressive habits.

Bandura (1973), in his exposition of a social learning theory of aggression, sees the acquisition of aggressive modes of behavior deriving from observational learning (witnessing the aggressive behavior of others), and learning by direct experience (performance of aggressive acts followed by rewards). Among Semai, the expression of the cultural values of nurturance, affiliation, and non-aggression in the behaviors of adults means that children have little opportunity to learn *how* to be aggressive. Semai children have few models of aggressive behavior; they never see adults fighting, never see fathers attacking mothers. Moreover, they themselves are almost never the objects of aggression either by adults or by other children. Children are seldom corporally punished (with the exception of an occasional tweaked eyebrow). In fact, there is a widespread belief that striking a child is likely to

cause an abscess in the chest which may rupture and kill the child. Thus, for developing children, the learning of aggressive behavior by observation and imitation is almost entirely precluded.

Opportunities for learning aggressive modes of behavior by direct experience are similarly limited by adults' expression of cultural values. Any aggressive behavior that a child might manifest spontaneously is immediately halted by adults. Dentan (1968) notes that this is one of the few things that will bring adult intervention in children's behavior. There are, therefore, few opportunities when a child can behave aggressively and be rewarded for that behavior, few opportunities for the child to experientially learn how to be violent. The image of the world, of human goals, and of the means of attaining them that is presented to Semai children simply does not include violence as a behavioral alternative.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to draw together some of the psychological and cultural themes explored in previous papers and to use these to develop a partial representation of the world as it is apprehended by Semai. In so doing, I have attempted to trace some of the interrelationships among a number of what I believe to be fundamental cultural assumptions in order to see how certain images of man and his world, e.g., self-image, values, goals, are constituted. These images, incorporated into individual personalities as components of motivational complexes, channel and direct individual behavior choices into non-violent directions.

The collective behavior of individuals, shaped by these cultural images, in turn constitutes the learning environment of the next generation, an environment where children have little opportunity to learn to be aggressive. Semai children do not learn habits of violence nor is such behavior incorporated into their world view and self-image. Quite the contrary, it is positively incompatible with these images. Aggression is not seen as a way of settling disputes or of resolving difficulties. As a consequence, aggressive behavior is not a part of the cognitive maps devised by individuals for securing satisfaction of their wants; it is simply not perceived as a behavioral option in traditional Semai society.

**Appendix**

**Sentence Completion Items**

Item No.

- 12). "They praise him/her because (s)he. . . ."
- 32). "If (s)he is a true friend, (s)he . . . . ."
- 40). "(S)he is a good person, (s)he always. . . ."
- 23). "(S) he is angry at her/his friend/relative because. . . ."
- 41). "(S)he is a bad/evil person, (s)he always... ."
- 47). "His/her friends/kinsmen reject him/her because (s)he . . . ."

**Sentence Completion Responses**

[Number in ( ) indicates the number of responses of that type]

- 12). They praise him/her because (s)he . . . . . (9 respondents)
  - gives. . . (food, money) (6)
  - isn't stingy (1)
  - makes friends (2)
  - helps, treats people when they are sick (1)
  - doesn't cause trouble, disturbance (1)
  - doesn't gossip, slander (1)
  - is hard working (1 )
  
- 32). If (s)he is a true friend, (s)he . . . . . (14 respondents)
  - loves, takes care of (5)
  - helps (4)
  - gives food (2)
  - makes friends (1)
  - doesn't cause disturbances, trouble (2)
  - Doesn't quarrel (1), get angry (1), fight (1)
  - gossip/slander (1)
  - agrees with friends (1 )
  - lives together with his/her friend (1)
  - gives good advice (1)
  
- 41). (S)he is a good person, (s)he always. . . . . (11 respondents)
  - doesn't gossip/slander (4)
  - helps (3)

is a friend (2)  
 gives food (1)  
 doesn't lie, (1), steal, steal (1), quarrel (1), cause disturbance (1)

- 23). (S)he is angry at her/his friend/relative because (14 respondents)  
 (s)he gossips/slanders (6)  
 (s)he ignores his/her advice: (3) (this refers to the advice given to a  
 kinsman when he has or is about to become involved in an "affair").  
 (s)he doesn't give help (2), share food (1)  
 (s)he rejects her/his friend (1)  
 (s)he quarrels (2), fights (1), causes trouble, disruption (1),  
 lies (1).

- 41). (S)he is a bad/evil person, (s)he always. . . (16 respondents)  
 fights, hit people (4)  
 gossips/slanders (3)  
 ignores advice (2), ignores decision of *bcaraa'* (1), gets angry (1),  
 quarrels (1), causes trouble, disruption (1) is scolded by his  
*waris* (1), is reported to the headman (2), rejects his friends  
 and relatives (1).

- 47). His/her friends/kinsmen reject him/her because (s)he . . . (14 respondents)  
 doesn't follow their advice (4)  
 gets angry (2), fights, hits (2), gossips/slanders (2)  
 quarrels (1), causes trouble/disruption (1), steals (2)  
 refuses to give food, money (1)  
 is lazy (1).

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