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A Community of Interests:
Semai Conflict Resolution

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In this chapter, Robarchek describes the becharaa', a conflict-resolution process used by the Semai Senoi people of Malaysia. The Semai are one of the most nonviolent cultures in existence. The author first provides a description of the Semai world view, noting the key values of nurturance, dependency, and nonviolence. An analysis is then presented of how the community headman, disputants accompanied by their kin, and any other interested community members meet to resolve conflicts through the becharaa' process, and how this procedure deals with both emotional and social-relational aspects of conflict. Robarchek concludes by considering implications for reducing violence in modern, complex societies. He suggests that attempts could be made to restore the psychological salience of local communities, which support the development of individual identities, in order to promote prosocial behavior among members, via enhancing meaningful reference groups (relationships) and communicating shared prosocial expectations of behavior.

—The Editors

My objective is to describe and analyze a process of conflict-resolution utilized by a group of Malaysian Aborigines, the Semai Senoi, one of the least violent societies known to anthropology. I also explore implications that are possibly relevant to our own urban societies. As we shall see, the Semai process is closely tied to cultural assumptions and values and to the structure and content of social relations. It is unlikely, therefore, that this process simply could be transplanted to a complex urban industrial society such as our own. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the Semai approach to conflict is merely an interesting but ultimately irrelevant bit of ethnographic trivia. To the contrary, understanding how and why this process works in Semai society may illuminate some of the reasons why conflict so often eventuates in violence in our own society.

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The chapter is based on ethnographic research conducted by my wife and myself among the Semai in 1973-1974 and 1979-1980. The analysis is also informed, at least implicitly, by research that we conducted in 1987 and 1992-1993 among the Waorani of Ecuadorian Amazonia. That society was, until quite recently, the most violent known to anthropology, with a homicide rate of more than 60%. Although this paper does not explicitly deal with the Waorani case, the analysis is informed by the inevitable comparisons and contrasts that highlighted the striking differences between these two societies.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

There are around 15,000 Semai living in small hamlets scattered along the deeply dissected and heavily forested mountainous spine of the Malay Peninsula. They and a number of smaller groups, all linguistically related, are the aboriginal occupants of the peninsula, probably descended from the Hoabihnian peoples who populated mainland Southeast Asia some 12,000 years ago. In the past two millennia, they have been displaced by technologically more advanced peoples, especially Malays from Sumatra and, like many of their cultural and linguistic relatives throughout the region, they are now largely confined to the mountainous interior, which is largely unsuitable for padi rice agriculture.

Each band is a politically autonomous unit occupying a traditional territory, usually a small river valley or a segment of a larger one. Traditionally, residence groups seldom numbered more than 100. Social organization is highly egalitarian. Each band has a headman, usually (but not always) a member of the kindred that claims descent from a founding resident of the band territory. The headman is the classic "first among equals," who exercises some moral authority as spokesman for the group but who wields no institutional power beyond his own powers of persuasion. The society is gender-egalitarian as well. The ideal social personalities of men and women are essentially the same, and there is no rigid gender role dichotomy. Although most headmen are men, a few are women.

The traditional subsistence economy was based on swidden gardening, hunting, fishing and gathering. The rainforest soils are low in fertility and new areas of forest must be felled each year for gardens. When all the arable land in the vicinity of a settlement has been exhausted, the band moves to a new location, leaving the previous gardens to be reclaimed by the forest. After a fallow period of 30 to 40 years, the process can be repeated. This was the system that was in operation during our first fieldwork in the early 1970s, but it is now rapidly being transformed, largely as a consequence of government policies, into a peasant economy based on commodity production and wage labor.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEMAI REALITY

Every cultural system is in part a culturally constructed reality. What follows is a very brief synopsis of Semai world view and values, of Semai experiential reality as

it is culturally constituted. (Methodological issues associated with the derivation of such abstractions have been discussed at length elsewhere, e.g., Robarchek, 1986, and will not be addressed here).

The Semai look at the world as a hostile and dangerous place filled with innumerable dangers, human and nonhuman, known and unknown, nearly all of which are entirely beyond human control. There is a fundamental division in the human world into *hii'* and *mai:* we and they, kin and nonkin, band members and outsiders. Within the first of each pair of categories, one finds nurturance and security; among the second, danger and death.

This conception of the human world is mirrored in the nonmaterial world in the dichotomy of *gunik* and *mara'. Gunik* are protective "spirit" kin, who can be called upon to aid their human kin in resisting the attacks of *mara',* the malevolent "spirits" associated with various aspects of the natural world—wind, thunder, waterfalls, hilltops, trees, boulders, and so on. *Mara'* besiege the human community, attacking human beings because it is their nature to do so, bringing injury, illness and death. People must be constantly on guard to avoid precipitating attacks by these forces, and nearly every activity, from gardening to children's play, is hedged with taboos and rituals to aid in warding off these ubiquitous dangers.

> The only real defense, however, is provided by the community and its *gunik,* "spirits" who were once *mara'* but who have come to humans in dreams and asked to join the dreamer's family. Henceforth, the *gunik* calls the dreamer "mother" or "father" and is called "child" by its new parent, "sibling" by his or her other children, and so on, ramifying throughout the kindred. A *gunik* teaches its parent a song, and this song can be sung at a three-night "sing" to summon the spirit to aid its human kin in warding off or curing the attack of malevolent *mara'.*

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

In such a world, surrounded by implacable malevolence and danger, nurturance and security are to be found only within the company of kindred and community. In time of trouble, they will be called upon for support and assistance; in time of sickness, they will summon their spirit kin to drive away the attacking mara'. Without them, individual survival is impossible, and anything that calls into question or threatens to disrupt these relations of dependence and nurturance within the community is intensely threatening to individuals.

This is reflected in the two core values of nurturance (the giving of material or emotional support) and affiliation (the maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relations). Good and bad are defined primarily in terms of behaviors associated with these values, with goodness defined positively in terms of nurturance (helping, giving, sharing, feeding, and so on) and badness in terms of behaviors disruptive of affiliation (getting angry, quarreling, and fighting). Good people are generous and nurturant; bad people are aggressive and violent. These values come to constitute central components of a Semai ego ideal, and individuals are judged against these standards by their neighbors and by themselves. Conflict, then, is intensely threat-

ening because it calls into question both individual self-image and the integrity of the group, the only refuge in an otherwise hostile world.

In response to an oral sentence-completion test item: "more than anything else, he/she is afraid of. . . ," the most common response—more common than *"mara',"* "tigers," and "death" combined—was "a conflict." People go to great lengths to avoid conflict and will usually tolerate annoyances and sacrifice personal interests rather than precipitate an open confrontation.

THE *BECHARAA':* A FORMALIZED CONFLICT-RESOLUTION PROCESS

Occasionally, however, feelings are too intense or issues too important or intractable, and conflict cannot be avoided. In such cases, it is the responsibility of anyone in the community who is aware of the conflict to bring it to the attention of the headman, who will convene a *becharaa',* a formal assembly to resolve the dispute. From its onset, a dispute between individuals thus becomes the concern and responsibility of the entire community.

The headman summons the principals and their kindreds for a full debate and discussion of the matter. Although kindreds are obligated to support their members in disputes, this does not divide and polarize the community. Descent is bilateral and band endogamy is common; thus the opposing kindreds virtually always overlap to a significant degree. This means that some people will be members of both kindreds, and that members of one kindred will have members of *their* kindreds in the other group. A person who embroils himself in a dispute thus strains relations not only with his opponent's kin, but with his own as well, and he can expect to be reprimanded by them if he is found to have been at fault in any way.

The *becharaa'* usually begins in the late afternoon. The principals and their kindreds, along with interested spectators, assemble at the headman's house where they sit discussing recent events, hunting, gardening—anything but the dispute that has brought them together. At some point, an elder member of one of the kindreds begins a long monologue in which he reaffirms the interdependence of the community and the dependence of each upon the others for his or her very survival. He recalls past incidents of aid given and received, and he stresses the need for maintaining unity and harmony within the community. Several others follow with similar declamations, all emphasizing that the current conflict is an aberration, and that it must be resolved so that the natural state of amity can be restored.

At some point, one of the principals begins to state his case. Attempting to put his own actions in the best possible light, he explains why he acted as he did and why his opponents' actions were wrong. He may offer several different, even contradictory, explanations for his actions. The other principal then states his case. He may address the points raised by his adversary, or he may ignore them completely and take an entirely different tack. At times, both parties may be speaking simultaneously, not arguing directly, but each directing his remarks to the assembly.

One by one, relatives of the principals argue their kinsmen's cases, often questioning them to bring out particular points. Other interested parties may also offer their observations and opinions. Although the issues at stake may be of vital concern—infidelity, divorce, land claims, fruit tree ownership, and so on—little anger or other emotion is displayed. The emphasis is on the clarity, forcefulness and persuasiveness of the arguments, and a good debater is respected and admired.

This discussion may go on for several hours or, more likely, continuously for several days and nights. The headman's household provides food, and participants catch a few hours sleep on the floor from time to time, then arise to rejoin the discussion. All the events leading up to the conflict are examined and reexamined from every conceivable perspective in a kind of marathon encounter group. Every possible explanation is offered, every imaginable motive introduced, every conceivable mitigating circumstance examined. Unresolved offenses and slights going back many years may be dredged up and reexamined.

In the course of all this, arguments are rebutted and assertions are answered, although not systematically, until finally a point is reached where there is simply nothing left to say. In fact, a proper *becharaa'* cannot end until no one has anything left to say. When that point is reached at last, the headman is called forward to deliver his judgment. Although his contribution is presented as a judgment, he in fact gives voice to the implicit consensus that has emerged during the discussion. After all the charges and countercharges have been examined, there remains a residue of indefensible acts, which have, by this time, been recognized and thoroughly discussed. The headman lectures one or both parties on their guilt in the matter, instructs them in proper behavior—in the courses of action that they should have pursued—and directs them not to repeat these offenses or to ever raise this dispute again. He may also assess a fine or impose damages (both usually small sums) against either or both.

The elders of each of the two kindreds then lecture their own kinsman in the same vein and, in long monologues, they and the headman again reaffirm the interdependence of the community and the necessity of maintaining unity and harmony within it. With that, the affair is deemed closed forever and, because all have had the opportunity to have their say, the community is admonished never to raise the matter again. Elsewhere I provide descriptions and analyses of specific *becharaa'* (Robarchek 1979, 1990).

PSYCHOSOCIAL DYNAMICS
OF SEMAI CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

The *becharaa'* is only one component in a well-integrated system operating on psychological, social, and cultural levels, one that is quite consciously oriented toward sustaining peaceful social relations. Nonetheless, it is an important component, and understanding how and why it works has broader relevance for us.

Human conflict has three universal components: affective, substantive, and social, and the *becharaa'* successfully addresses all three. The affective component

of a conflict—the emotions generated by it—often presents the most intractable problems. Rage, anger, jealousy, grief, envy, and so on, are often the primary experiential facts of a conflict situation. These powerful emotions can present the most formidable barriers to the restoration of social relations and, until these are resolved, it may be impossible to adequately address the others.

The extended discussion by all interested parties and from all conceivable perspectives, facilitates a kind of emotional catharsis, the process that Freud called *abreaction* and that more behavioristically inclined psychologists refer to as *desensitization* (see Robarchek, 1979 for a detailed discussion of the psychodynamics of the *becharaa').* The feelings generated by the conflict are repeatedly elicited anew and finally dissipated through the repeated recalling and reexperiencing of the events that precipitated them. The principals and their supporters tell their stories over and over, symbolically reexperiencing the precipitating incidents until they no longer have the capacity to elicit an emotional response in anyone. The Semai stress that a *becharaa'* should end only when no one feels the need to say anything more.

This dissipation of the emotional content of the dispute facilitates the resolution of the substantive and social components of the matter. In a small-scale face-to-face society such as this one, the brute facts of the matter are seldom in question, so the extended discussion concentrates on exploring, in exasperating and seemingly infinite detail, all the motives and actions of all the parties. In the process the issues are clarified and each party's fault in the matter is examined. The headman can then give voice to the community consensus that has been achieved concerning the substantive issues that precipitated the dispute. All parties are then ready to accept the new state of affairs that has been legitimated by the formal resolution process.

With the anger or other strong feelings exhausted and the substantive issues resolved, a personal reconciliation of the disputants can be effected and normal social relations among the former antagonists and their kindreds can be resumed.

Since there exists no superordinate control (Whiting, 1950) in Semai society, participants in the *becharaa'* must want to abide by the community's decision, and must want to behave in accordance with the group consensus. This is accomplished in two ways: first, by eliminating much of the motivational power of the conflict through the dissipation of its emotional content; and second, by making reintegration into the group contingent upon acceptance of its will. A person who refuses to accept the group's consensus, as voiced in the headman's lecture, risks alienation both from the band as a whole and from his or her own kindred, the last source of security in an otherwise unremittingly hostile world. The *becharaa'* works because of the central place that the group holds in the psychological economy of individuals; it works because the group, and, therefore, its evaluations and objectives, matters to individuals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPLEX SOCIETIES:
THE INDISPENSABILITY OF COMMUNITY

Conflict in human societies is universal and unavoidable. We are social beings, but we also have individual self-interests. Social living thus inevitably generates jeal-

ousy, envy, rivalry, gossip, pettiness, evaded obligations, and so on. In most societies, social, cultural, and psychological constraints operate to moderate such conflicts and, in most cases, to restore normal social relations. With no countervailing force to restrain self-interest and to promote moderation, compromise and conciliation, however, conflicts and the emotions that they engender can spiral into acts of violence. This was precisely what we found among the Waorani, where even minor conflicts, propelled by unrestrained individual self-interest, often escalated into homicidal violence.

The growing problem of violence in complex societies is often treated as a problem of social control, but, in reality, our emphasis is almost entirely on the *control* aspect, with little or none on the *social* component. A great many people in our societies, especially young people, have no primary reference group to provide a sense of identity, to inculcate positive societal values, and to act to promote and reinforce behavior consistent with those values. They lack any positive group, either kin or community, whose interests take precedence over their own.

This is a primary reason why small communities are generally much less troubled by violence and other antisocial behavior than large ones: They are still communities. Networks of long-term relationships communicate a consistent set of expectations and monitor members' behavior for compliance. Regardless of their own inclinations, people are expected to conform to the community's norms. In small, face-to-face societies, the hand of community social control, through gossip, shaming, and ridicule, can be heavy if the individuals do not conform. As with the Semai, however, community control is effective only because the community has some psychological salience, because individuals define themselves in terms of it, locate their identities within it and, willingly or not, put its demands and expectations ahead of their own impulses.

An intense and acrimonious political debate currently rages over the question of what to do about violence in our society, and much of the controversy centers on the possibility of reforming those who exhibit violent behavior. Given that concern, it is not surprising that much of the discussion has focused on the individual offender and the likelihood of his successful rehabilitation. Our research among the Semai (and the Waorani; see Robarchek & Robarchek, 1992, 1996) suggests, however, that conformity to social norms—the willingness to give society's interests precedence over one's own wishes and impulses—is largely rooted in individuals' relationship to the community. But urbanization and increasing mobility have diminished or eliminated the psychological salience of the face-to-face community in the lives of most people, and urban planning and often ill-conceived social engineering have done the same in the urban neighborhood. The result has been increasing isolation, disinvolvement and normlessness. Lacking other meaningful reference groups, young people have created their own, and urban gangs are one result.

If our objective is to reorient behavior toward social goals, we must find ways to reconstitute individual identities. One way is to restore the psychological salience of local communities so that individuals locate their identities within them and put the community's demands and expectations ahead of their own impulses. Although

this may seem like little more than a utopian yearning for a return to a more noble past, there are, in fact, successful models available to us. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the Black Muslims, and the Native American Church, all demonstrate the reorientation of individual identities within reconstituted communities. (See Dentan 1992, 1994, for a discussion of the dynamics of AA and other such intentional groups and of their orientations to peacefulness.) Finally, we can take a lesson from the gangs themselves: They provide a reference group that defines and gives form to individual identities, even though the values they uphold and promote are seldom those of the wider society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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