



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS**

COLIN G. NICHOLAS

FEP 1995 1

FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS

Colin G. Nicholas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the
Faculty of Resource Economics and Agribusiness
Universiti Pertanian Malaysia

November 1985



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Whatever credit that can be attributed to this thesis is rightfully the result of the collective contributions of a number of individuals and organizations. It would have been impossible to complete the project had it not been for this collaborative effort.

Firstly, I must express my gratitude to Dr. Mohd. Ariff Hussein for agreeing to be my thesis supervisor in spite of his rather busy schedule as Dean of the faculty. I am particularly appreciative of the fact that he permitted me to pursue a topic of my own choosing, despite it being a rather unorthodox one as far as the norm in the faculty was concerned. The thesis has also been greatly improved as a result of the keen interest shown by Prof. E.T. Gibbons whose editing skills helped remove many of the inconsistencies in logic and form. His guidance and assistance (as well as his hospitality) often went beyond my normal expectations.

The Department for Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) -- in the person of Dr. Baharom Raffie'i, En. Jailani Mohd. Tap and Puan Sarinan -- was very cooperative in acceding to my request to do fieldwork among the Orang Asli. The JHEOA



field staff at Raub (particularly En. Rahim Endut) and at the Betau Regroupment Scheme (especially Sazali, Sembunyi and Bakar), were also very hospitable and obliging.

Being a novice to the field of Social Anthropology, I benefitted from discussions with anthropologists Dr. Peter Laird, then of the University of Malaya, and Alberto Gomes, doctoral candidate at the Australian National University. I am especially indebted to the latter for initiating me to the method of participation-observation and for leading me to the many useful references on topics related to the Semai and other Orang Asli. Albert's willingness to share his knowledge and experience -- within the general philosophy of being of service to the Semai and other Orang Asli -- is admired and appreciated.

My association and discussions (though not always on topics directly related to the thesis) with Dr. Tan Chee Beng, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, Geoff Harris, Chew Geok Luan and Anthony Williams-Hunt have also been both beneficial and stimulating. The *tete-a-tetes* with Cecilia Ng, particularly in the area involving the analysis of class and surplus appropriation, were most helpful. However, while it is acknowledged that the opinions of the above-mentioned individuals and many others have largely been incorporated into the thesis, the normal disclaimer still applies.



I am grateful to Dr. Kirk Endicott for including me in his U.S.-based Orang Asli Studies Group, whose newsletter provided a useful update on research being conducted in areas related to the Orang Asli. I am also appreciative of the invitation of Dr. Hood Salleh of the National University of Malaysia, to a symposium on the 'Development of the Orang Asli' -- which was perhaps the first-ever occasion when the Orang Asli themselves were members of the panel.

A number of other individuals have also contributed in a variety of ways: Tutu Dutta (who kept me informed of the many enlightening seminars at the Institute of Higher Studies, University of Malaya), Andrew Lee (for assistance concerning the use of library facilities at the University of Malaya), V. Kuperan and Siow Kiat Foo (for arranging the use of the faculty's computer facilities), Abdullah Naib (for assistance with the topographical maps), Dr. Lim Boo Liat (for introductions to Muzium Negara officials), Francis Ryan (for the loan of his motorcycle during the wet season), Yii Tan (for the use of his share of the personal computer) and Carol Yong (for retrieving materials from The Star and Universiti Kebangsaan libraries).

Anthony Rogers, George Villegas, Fr. Nipot and Chris Tremewan provided opportunities to visit and learn from the experience of tribal groups in Northern Thailand and South India; while Francis Otigil and Madius Tangau provided the



same for the interior parts of Sabah. These visits were helpful in broadening my understanding of the plight of indigenous peoples on a wider perspective.

General financial support was provided by my employers, Malayan Banking Berhad. I am particularly grateful to En. Kamarulzaman Johari, Mr. Yeoh Lian Khoo and Ms. Eunice Lee and for their efforts and also for their patience in dealing with an admittedly difficult member of their staff.

The support and encouragement of my mother and that of Betty Teo is also acknowledged.

However, despite all the help and assistance received from the above-mentioned and others, I am conscious of the fact that the whole project would not have been successfully completed had it not been for the warm hospitality and friendship extended by the Semai of Kampung Kuala Tual and Kampung Sungei Buntu. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the friendship of Yok Lang, Batin Pak Langsai, Pak Charak, Yok Budiq and Yok Met of Kampung Kuala Tual and Tataq Tahir, Batin Lat and Yok Tap of Kampung Sungei Buntu. Working and living with them had been a personally-enriching experience for me. The question now remains: How will they benefit from all of this?



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF MAPS	xi
ABSTRACT	xii
ABSTRAK	xiv
GLOSSARY OF SEMAI TERMS	xvii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem in Historical Perspective	1
Statement of the Problem	9
Objective of the Study	10
Research Questions and Working Hypotheses	10
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL	
FRAME OF REFERENCE	13
The Orang Asli and Change	13
The Development Debate	20
Economic Growth and Modernization Theories. .. .	20



Structuralist Theories	25
Underdevelopment and Dependency Theories	27
Mode of Production and Articulation Theories ..	30
Theoretical Frame of Reference	34
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION ..	38
Why the Semai?	38
Selection of Settlements	40
Timing and Duration of Fieldwork	43
Data Collection	44
CHAPTER 4 THE SETTLEMENTS AND THEIR POPULATION ..	47
Kampung Sungei Buntu	47
Kampung Kuala Tual	52
Comparative Observations	57
CHAPTER 5 THE NATURAL ECONOMY: CONTENT AND	
CHARACTER	59
Production and Reproduction in the	
Natural Economy	65
Forms of Subsistence Production	67
Gathering	68
Fishing	69
Trapping	71
Hunting	72
The <u>Selai Baq</u> Cycle	74



Other Food Crop Production	80
Material Culture	82
Relations with Non-Semai	83
Conditions for Social Reproduction	84
Kinship and Social Organization	85
Leadership and Authority	89
Religio-spirituality and Ideology	92
<u>Hoin</u>	93
<u>Nggern-haq</u>	95
Production and Reproduction: A Summary	97
Nature of Production	97
The Level of the Productive Forces	99
Relations of Production	102
 CHAPTER 6 COMMODITY RELATIONS AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE NATURAL ECONOMY	 105
Products, Commodities and Commodity Relations:	
Conceptual Definitions	106
The State, the Semai and National Security	109
The State and the Genesis of Commodity Relations	115
Policy of Sedentarization	116
Policy of Integration	123
Merchant Capital and the Development of Commodity Relations	127



The Internalizing of Simple Commodity Production.	142
Consumption of Commodities	143
Utilization of Labour	147
Other Manifestations	151
The Dissolution of the Natural Economy	154
CHAPTER 7 ORGANIZATION AND REGULATION OF SEMAI	
PRODUCTION	162
Organization of Production	163
The State and Semai Production	163
Merchant Capital and Semai Production	167
Mechanisms for Surplus Appropriation	174
Unequal Exchange and Surplus Appropriation .. .	175
The Semai as Wage-Labour Equivalents	178
The Simple Reproduction Squeeze and Surplus	
Appropriation	180
Response of the Semai	186
The Semai and Expropriation	190
CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION	195
Summary of Findings	195
Implications and Recommendations	198
BIBLIOGRAPHY	205



LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
1	Population distribution of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (1983) 2
2	Kampung Sungei Buntu: Population composition as at 25th August 1983 51
3	Kampung Kuala Tual: Population composition as at 19th November 1983 56
4	Stages of Semai Development 62
5	The <u>Selai Bag</u> Cycle 76
6	Post-harvest padi-processing activities .. 79
7	Comparison of subsistence and population density before and after regroupment in 1979 118
8a	Mercantile interests in Kampung Sungei Buntu 130
8b	Mercantile interests in Kampung Kuala Tual 131
9	Comparison of prices of selected commodit- ies in Kampung Kuala Tual and Kampung Sungei Buntu 133
10a	Kampung Kuala Tual: Income received by 16 male adults, September-December 1983 135
10b	Kampung Sungei Buntu: Income received by 18 male adults, September-December 1983 .. 136



11a	Consumption of commodities by 7 male household heads during January 2-11, 1984 in Kampung Kuala Tual	144
11b	Consumption of commodities by 8 male household heads during August 22-31, 1983 in Kampung Sungei Buntu	145
12a	Kampung Kuala Tual: Utilization of labour by 7 male household heads, from November 19 to December 18, 1983 (mandays)	148
12b	Kampung Sungei Buntu: Utilization of labour by 8 male household heads for the month of December, 1983 (mandays)	149
13	Kampung Kuala Tual: Sources and quantum of loans received during September 1983 to January 1984	171
14	Petai production in Kampung Sungei Buntu: Quantity produced and labour-time utilized by 4 selected individuals, August-December 1983	184

LIST OF MAPS

<u>Map</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Perspective map of the research settlements	41
2	Kampung Sungei Buntu	48
3	Kampung Kuala Tual	53



An abstract of the thesis presented to the Senate of
Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS

by

Colin G. Nicholas

November 1985

Supervisor : Dr. Mohd Ariff Hussein
Faculty : Resource economics and Agribusiness

This study documents and analyzes the changes occurring in the Semai settlements of Kampung Kuala Tual and Kampung Sungei Buntu since the early 1950s. In particular, the focus is on the transformation of their economies from one which was subsistence-oriented to another which was dominated by production for exchange.

Information and data pertaining to the change in the form of Semai production -- gathered by the participant-observation method -- are analyzed within a theoretical framework which emphasizes the struggle for the effective control of their production.



The contention is that the changes in Semai production were primarily effected by two parties: the state, on the one hand and merchant capital on the other, who were interested in the Semai for their own respective needs. More specifically, the state was preoccupied with the preservation of national security while merchant capital was interested in the gains which could be made from unequal exchange. In order to realize their objectives, both parties sought to establish and reinforce the necessary conditions for the introduction of commodity relations -- a prelude to their effective regulation and re-organization of Semai production along the lines of simple commodity production.

For the Semai, this resulted in a gradual erosion of the humanizing features of their natural economy, including that of a loss of their autonomy. Much of their investible surplus were also appropriated through the operation of the 'simple reproduction squeeze'. This resulted in the Semai being reduced to a position of dependency and relative impoverishment.

In its conclusion, the thesis calls for a radical re-conceptualization of the development paradigm; one in which minority groups such as the Semai would be given their right to self-determination and which would allow the rightful development of their full potential.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat
Universiti Pertanian Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian
daripada syarat keperluan untuk Ijazah Sarjana Sains

FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS

oleh

Colin G. Nicholas

Nobember 1985

Penyelia : Dr. Mohd. Ariff Hussein
Fakulti : Ekonomi Sumber dan Perniagaantani

Kajian ini mendokumentasikan dan menganalisisan perubahan-perubahan yang telah berlaku di dua perkampungan Semai -- iaitu, Kampung Kuala Tual dan Kampung Sungei Buntu -- sejak awal 1950an. Fokus, terutamanya, adalah pada perubahan sistem ekonomi mereka daripada suatu sistem di mana pengeluaran bercorak 'subsistence-oriented' kepada sistem di mana pengeluaran untuk pertukaran, ataupun 'production for exchange' diutamakan.

Maklumat dan data tentang perubahan dalam sistem pengeluaran Semai dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan kaedah 'participation-observation'. Rangka teori yang digunakan



menitikberatkan faktor persaingan antara beberapa pihak untuk mengawal pengeluaran Semai.

Cadangan di sini adalah bahawa perubahan-perubahan yang berlaku dalam sistem pengeluaran Semai terutamanya diakibatkan oleh dua pihak: pihak kerajaan ('the state') dan pihak kapitalis dagangan ('merchant capital'). Kedua-dua pihak ini berminat terhadap golongan Semai untuk membela kepentingan mereka diri sendiri. Khususnya, pihak kerajaan asyik menjaga keselamatan negara. Pihak kapitalis dagangan pula berminat untuk mendapatkan keuntungan daripada pertukaran (dengan golongan Semai) yang tidak seimbang itu. Untuk mencapai matlamat masing-masing, kedua-dua pihak itu berusaha supaya membentuk dan memperkukuhkan suatu keadaan yang sesuai untuk mengujudkan perhubungan barangan ataupun 'commodity relations' dalam masyarakat Semai. Langkah ini merupakan langkah pertama dalam proses pengawalan dan organisasi semula sistem pengeluaran Semai mengikut corak pengeluaran barangan utama ('simple commodity production').

Kesannya, ciri-ciri kemanusiaan dalam sistem ekonomi semulajadi ('natural economy') Semai terkikis, termasuknya kehilangan otonomi. Lebihan ('surplus') mereka yang boleh dilabur itu pun telah diambil oleh pihak lain melalui proses 'simple reproduction squeeze'. Akhirnya, posisi golongan

Semai telah pun meruntuh. Mereka jatuh ke lembah pergantungan dan kepaparan.

Sebagai kesimpulan, tesis ini menyeru supaya paradigma pembangunan dicipta semula secara radikal. Golongan minoriti seperti golongan Semai harus diberi balik hak asasi mereka untuk menentukan masa hadapan diri sendiri dan digalakkan supaya membela potensi mereka dengan seluas-luasnya.

GLOSSARY OF SEMAI TERMS

batin	- headman of a village/settlement
bawur	- fishing with hook and line
bicaraq	- village court-in-council
chin-haq	- belief that all non-Semai always out to do harm to the Semai
dah-git	- felling of large trees for new swiddens
darq	- spear spring trap
ee choq	- fishing by spearing
ee cuci	- post-firing cleaning of the swiddens
ee den	- threshing
ee gerrm	- winnowing (vertically)
ee rorb	- fishing with bare hands
ee seh	- husking
ee seloit	- winnowing (sideways)
ee sukat	- measuring of padi (quantity)
embong	- rattan back-basket
gerrnsang	- night long 'sings'
gob	- Malay
gu	- population in a particular river basin, under a common batin
guniq	- spirit-familiar
halaq	- shaman
hee-ling	- frying (to dry damp padi)
hii	- kinsmen, fellow villagers (we,us)



hoin	- behavioural concept concerning the satisfying of wants and needs
kedeq	- spring-trap for tree-dwelling rodents
ker-kohl	- clearing of undergrowth of new swiddens
ketua baq	- head of a swidden group
kit keiq	- harvesting
mai	- outsiders, non-Semai (they)
maq	- food taboo
meriang	- large bamboo weir for trapping fish
nenggirik	- customary land (usually representing a particular river basin)
nggern-haq	- system of (food) sharing
nyoq	- weeding
pehunan	- food taboo
roke ee baq	- sowing of padi seeds
ruai baq	- padi spirit
selai	- swidden / dry padi field
selai chagol	- small swidden / garden
ser	- fishing with bamboo cage traps
tort	- burning / firing
tuai	- rice-knive (for harvesting)
tugal	- dibble-stick
tugal eek	- dibbling, making holes for the deposit of padi seeds
yuit	- machete

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia belong to at least nineteen distinct tribal groups and although they are usually categorized for administrative purposes as "Negrito", "Senoi" and "Proto-Malays", each tribal group is unique in that it has a language and a mode of living quite different from the other. Numbering 63,648 in 1983 (see Table 1), the Orang Asli¹, as they are now collectively referred to, are among the most economically backward and politically isolated peoples in the country (Government of Malaysia 1984:81).

¹ The term "Orang Asli", which is Malay for "original people", officially came into use in 1966. Prior to this, derogatory terms such as "savages", "sakai" (meaning slave) and "orang liar" (wild man) were used in general conversation as well as in the literature. Even the word "aborigine" was later abandoned as it was thought to be discriminatory. Significantly, it was the communist insurgents who were the first to use the word "asal" (which has the same Arabic root word as "Asli") to refer to the Orang Asli, as in their "Asal Groups" which were established to win the Orang Asli over to their side.



TABLE 1
 POPULATION DISTRIBUTION OF THE ORANG ASLI
 IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA (1983)

=====			
1.	Negrito		
	1.1	Kintaq	103
	1.2	Kensiu	101
	1.3	Jahai	882
	1.4	Mendriq	144
	1.5	Bateq	785
	1.6	Lanoh	224
			2,239
2.	Senoi		
	2.1	Semai	18,327
	2.2	Temiar	12,712
	2.3	Che Wong	203
	2.4	Jah Hut	2,442
	2.5	Semoq Beri	1,785
	2.6	Mah Meri	1,355
			36,824
3.	Proto-Malay		
	3.1	Temuan	9,312
	3.2	Semelai	2,923
	3.3	Jakun/Temoq	9,853
	3.4	Orang Kanaq	34
	3.5	Orang Seletar	541
	3.6	Orang Kuala	1,922
			24,585
		Total	63,648
=====			

Source: Jimin (1983:3-4,16)



Prior to the arrival of the later Malaysians, however, the Orang Asli were living an autonomous lifestyle based on subsistence production. In any case, they did not, at any time, live in complete isolation as there are documented accounts of varying levels of inter-tribal and tribal-alien contacts. For example, Noone (1954) found evidence of trade in blowpipes and blowpipe- bamboo among certain tribes in the states of Kedah, Perak, Kelantan and Pahang where the Department of Aborigines was in constant contact. Evidence has also been provided by Dunn (1975:109) to show that the Orang Asli have played a significant role in the Malay Peninsula's economic history as collectors and primary traders as far back as the 5th century A.D. Also, Walker (1983:460-1), citing an early 19th century report, writes of Negritos providing forest products as tribute to the Malay chiefs of the river basins they resided in.

There seemed, therefore, to be a certain amount of interaction between the Orang Asli and the other ethnic groups, particularly the Malays who resided along the jungle fringes. Jungle products such as rattan, resin and bamboo were exchanged for bush-knives, cooking pots, salt and cloth which were highly valued by the Orang Asli. Some of the initial contacts, however, were unfortunately characterized by cruelty and mutual hostility as when the Orang Asli, particularly the young children, were sought after and brought into slavery. A considerable trade in slaves soon

developed -- and even continued into the present century -- despite the official abolition of all forms of slavery in 1884 (Skeat and Blagden 1906,I:533; Jones 1968:289-90; Carey 1976b:52-3; Sullivan 1982:68). As bartering was the major mode of exchange during this period, the role played by capital (particularly merchant capital) was nevertheless insignificant.

Since the late 1940's, however, the Orang Asli have been subjected to new forces which not only threatened their traditional mode of living but which also plunged them into an era of rapid social change, over which they had virtually no control. The Emergency during 1948-60, and in particular the resettlement policy of the colonial government, was one such factor which was to radically transform the social and economic fabric of the Orang Asli. In particular, the Brigg's Plan, which involved relocating much of the rural population into "new villages", successfully prevented the insurgents from getting material help from their sympathisers there. Consequently, they were forced to operate from areas in deep jungle, where they sought the help of the Orang Asli. In an attempt to prevent the Orang Asli from giving food and information to the communist insurgents, the colonial authorities uprooted whole villages and moved the inhabitants to hastily-prepared resettlement camps. Carey (1976a:306-7) described this act as one which "showed both lack of imagination and great stupidity". In