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Cautious, Alert, Polite, and Elusive: The Semai of Central Peninsular Malaysia

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The real test of peace occurs not in social isolation, but in the face of violence. There are many who assume that violence can only be countered by violence. This creates mutual pain, and that in itself can perpetuate the violence. Colombia, once the most democratic of Latin American countries, is now in a cycle of violence and counterviolence, ravaged for more than five decades by civil war. However, in the past decade or so, peace communities have been set up in Colombia, to try to address the violence in a different way. In this chapter, Robert Dentan reveals how the Semai of Malaysia have used nonviolence in the face of violence as a successful long-term survival strategy. Dentan emphasizes that peace is a practical solution, not a utopian myth. Those campaigning for nonviolence in other societies may find much to encourage them in this chapter.

—GK

Introduction

Who Are “Semai”?

“Semai” is the official name of the largest linguistic group of Orang Asli. Orang Asli are the indigenous people of peninsular Malaysia in Southeast Asia. Like most indigenous peoples Semai call themselves simply “people” (*Seng’oi* or *Sen’oi*). As of 2003, there are about 30,000 Semai. Traditionally, they lived by agroforestry, dry rice farming, and trading forest produce.

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They were also subject to a particularly brutal form of slaving, which, I will argue, played a salient role in the development of their peaceable lifestyle. Increasingly nowadays, they are becoming small-scale commodity producers and unskilled occasional laborers (Gomes 1988, 1990, 1999). Although globalization, the end of British colonialism, and Malaysian economic development have changed many aspects of the Semai way of life, and although some Semai have successfully made it into the globalized mainstream, they (and Orang Asli in general) are worse off than ever; by almost any measure, they are the poorest people in the country. Their standard of living has not improved in the half century I have worked with them (Dentan 2000a, 2001c; Nicholas 1990, 1994, 2000, 2001). The shift of political control from British colonialism to domination by Malays, the ethnic group which now controls the government, has created fewer beneficial changes than first appearances might suggest (Dentan 1997).

Why Call Semai Nonviolent?

Characterizing a whole society as globally nonviolent is inaccurate and silly if you take the label to mean there is no individual or circumstantial variation (Endicott 1997; Heelas 1989).

There are three major justifications for calling the Semai “nonviolent” in the face of their own indifference on the matter. . . . [1] They do not brawl . . . or feud like many other . . . peoples. . . . [2] [T]hey openly and often express fear that outsiders will attack them. They . . . teach their children to fear and shun strangers, especially non-Semai. . . . [3] [T]he Semai concept of violence is very broad. . . . (Dentan 1978:97)

Their notion of impermissible violence includes acts which increase personal (psychological) stress, as well as acts in which the physical harm is immediate and palpable (Dentan 2000b).

I spent more than four years actually living with Semai (in 1961–1963, 1975–1976, 1991–1992, 1993) with permission from the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, the local equivalent of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. I keep up with developments in Malaysia and stay in contact with friends and colleagues there. My last research visit, in the 1990s, involved a strenuous effort to uncover as many fights, murders, and suicides as I could. Semai are close-mouthed about violence, fearing that they will get in trouble. But I don’t think I’m off by more than an order of magnitude (cf. Leyton 1997: 21–22). I found one murder in the 1970s, two in the 1990s, and have heard of one since 2000. The last victim had claimed to have killed someone by using Malay black magic and was then killed by the victim’s son. One of the other three may have been accidental (Dentan and Williams-Hunt 1999). The other two were by young men of Semai origin who had rejected Semai

identity. Since I wrote the foregoing part of this paragraph in 2001, there have been two or three murders by Orang Asli who seem to have been Semai: one involved a teenage boy trying to protect his mother from his drunken and abusive father. There were far more suicides, although Semai seem almost equally reluctant to discuss suicide (Dentan 2000c).

I have never observed serious physical fighting among Semai adults. Interviews uncovered only a handful of cases. Most involved young men briefly fighting with non-Semai. These young men blamed non-Semai who assaulted them without provocation, who called them insulting names, or who harassed Semai women. The rest involved alcohol, either drunken brawling between spouses or between young men whose friends easily subdued them after *ki-kawboy*, “he was acting like a cowboy [in the movies].” Increasing contact with Malay Muslim and Chinese patriarchal values seems to be encouraging aggression by young men (Thambiah 1999; Tjah, Thambiah, and Leong 2000): for example, in the 1990s, I first heard the phrase “be a man-child,” a gloss I believe of Malay usage, to describe cocky bellicosity (Dentan and Williams-Hunt 1999). Some fragments of a conversation I had with two young men on 6 June 1992 illustrate this complicated change:

Yahyah, 24 years old, from the Cameron Highlands: There wouldn’t be any fights at our *ronggeng* [Malay-style dance parties, with lots of flirting and drinking] if it wasn’t for outsiders [*maay*]. Everybody comes to our *ronggeng*—Malays, Chinese, Tamils, everybody.

Sarip, 28, his covillager: We fight with Malays because they molest our women. The Police Field Force [Malay parapolice] kidnapped a woman from near our place and kept her naked for days and days while they gang-raped her. . . . The case was “settled” [using the English word.] Nobody went to jail. Not for raping a Semai woman. Just paid a few dollars. The usual. You know.

Yahyah: Listen, we’re not *maay manah ntum*, old-time people. If somebody knocks us down, what’re we supposed to do? Just lie there and smile? [laughs].

Sarip: Hey, if we had weapons, we’d drive the Malays off our land [aims an imaginary rifle, squinting and grinning]. We’re not *maay manah ntum*.

But, youthful male boasting aside, acts of masculine *kawboy* aggression remain rare.

East Semai, those from northeast Pahang state, said in 1962 that sometimes an angry person might burn down the house of a person he or she was angry at, but I never uncovered an actual case of arson. More recently, fear of witchcraft seems to be on the rise, as a result of contact with Malay and Methodist Christian notions of witchcraft. But witches are not a salient part

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of traditional Semai cosmology. Mutual trust and dependence is easier in the absence of the belief that one's neighbor may be a witch; for traditional Semai, ghosts and outsiders (especially Malays) fill the role that witches or other deviants play elsewhere (Dentan 1992:219, 2001a; Robarchek 1988). But Semai ghosts are motivated by love, yearning to rejoin the people they loved in life. And Semai suicide seems to be just an escape from the pain of bereavement: loss of love, not an expression of anger (Dentan 2000c).

Semai still teach their children to be afraid/cautious, *-sng>>h* (Dentan 1978, 2001a). This word *-sng>>h* refers both to an emotion, which people find unpleasant, and to an attitude, which they say is desirable. Despite young men's posturing, traditional Semai say it is much smarter and safer to be cautious than to be brave. Children do squabble sometimes, but I have never seen anything like the violence that I see among American middle-class kids in my neighborhood. The highest incidence of squabbling occurs among Waar River Semai, who say that "children are like dogs, always snapping at each other." Elsewhere, where Semai adults do not expect children to be violent, the kids do not get hurt in even the most apparently violent games (Dentan 1978); and adults will intervene, especially in the latter communities, whenever childish quarrels seem to be getting out of hand.

But Semai do get angry, though they may sometimes deny it. Then they may deliver an angry harangue, *or-lees*, not necessarily to the offender but to the community at large, detailing how they have been wronged. They are likely then to launch into a campaign to win support by spreading malicious gossip, a tactic at which Semai excel. They also usually break off contact with the person at whom they are angry, a tactic called "withdrawal" (*kra'dii*). This response is not always instrumental. Sometimes Semai are just so depressed by how badly another person has treated them that they avoid social contact with anyone as much as they can (Dentan 2000c). When they can not avoid the offenders entirely, angry people will simply not speak to them and will avoid meeting their eyes. The loss of love, of warm social ties, is acutely painful for both parties and threatens the mutual aid and comfort on which traditional Semai society depends.

Still, the rarity of violence within the community also results in people having little experience with handling their own violent impulses. Semai think of violence as abnormal, unlike antiviolence campaigns in the United States, which normalize violence (cf. Devine 1997:30–31). Thus, my mentor, Ngah Hari, said in 1992 that macaques go around in gangs (*geng*) like people, "but they fight," not like people. Terror and rage, emotions which are two sides of the same dark coin, could produce what Semai call "blood intoxication" and psychologists call a "dissociative state." This sort of dissociation, which Bah Tony Williams-Hunt, a Semai anthropologist, told

me is “like spirit possession” (using the English phrase), is characteristic of long-suffering, peaceable people anywhere (Katz 1988:48–51). Then, when opportunity arose, Semai could kill mindlessly, compulsively, “like doves” as they say (Dentan 1995, 1999; Leary 1995).

In short, Semai values and normal behavior are nonviolent. But their nonviolence is not a lack, some sort of deficiency of essence. It is not an incapacity, but an unwillingness. It is a continuing choice, and, like people anywhere, Semai are capable of changing their minds. As Nudy’s-Father, a shaman on the Waar River, said on 13 March 1991:

At present violence isn’t a problem here. By 2020 [when the Malaysian government plans to have industrialized the whole country] the Humans [Semai] will probably be violent. We’re not violent now because we’re still *primitif* [using the Dutch-Indonesian word]. We still have places to flee to now, but by then we’ll be shut out of all those places [by dispossession and “development”]. We don’t want to fight, but when we have no alternative, no place to flee to, we’ll be forced to. (Dentan 2001c:5)

Conjectural History

Slaving

Beginning almost a thousand years ago and lasting, in Malaysia, well into the twentieth-century, slaving underlay the political economy of the indigenous states of Southeast Asia, which were frankly terroristic (Endicott 1983; Hoskins 1996). When I first talked with Semai in 1962, everyone knew about the slaving. They, like many other Southeast Asian hill peoples, had long been targets. The terrorism worked. In 1962 even adults fled the approach of strangers the way young children still did thirty years later. Many Semai women are still afraid to travel except in groups, for fear of kidnapping or rape.

The Hinduized coastal states of medieval Malaysia were mostly oriented toward trade, toward the ocean, and India. Even the Malay word for “west” comes from the Sanskrit word for “India.” But when the states turned toward their hinterlands, they manifested themselves as phallocratic agents of the thunder god Indra or Siva the Destroyer, after whom the founders of dynasties named themselves, whose lingams (phallic megaliths) dotted the landscape, whose destructive power brought fear and death to those who resisted state power (Coedes 1968:23–24, 58, 64–69, 85, 110–29, 174, 187–88, 212, 249, 275n3).

Buddhist rulers as well as Hindu princes frequently identified themselves as agents or reincarnations of the ancient storm god . . . representing kingly authority and power (Cady 1964:37–38). For a thousand years these petty despots showed off their power by killing and slaving (Coedes 1968:58;

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Dentan 2002b; Maxwell 1996), creating a “culture of state terror” (Hoskins 1996:3).

Slave raids and other incursions prompted the outnumbered and outgunned Semai to respond by scattering and fleeing invaders and raiders, to regroup later. They might ambush invaders bent on genocide, but there was no way to resist raiders’ sporadic and temporary incursions (Dentan 1999). The jargon phrase for the resulting pattern of settlement is *fission-fusion*. To pursue this tactic, children had to learn that adulthood involved being willing and able to move around freely, to make decisions on their own: freedom. The constant movement undermined local hierarchies and left people dependent on their neighbors for security and love. This dependence required peaceability and made the threat of disapproval a powerful sanction.

The slaver state rested on a notion of power unfamiliar to Westerners. In that conception, power exists independently of the people who wield it; it is like electricity or gravity (Anderson 1990:22; McWilliam 1996). Without power of one’s own, the intelligent thing to do, confronted with a person who has power, is to submit or flee (Anderson 1990:74), a combination I call “surrender.” The resulting social relations work like patriarchy or protection rackets, in which subordinates “often feel bound to those they serve through misplaced gratitude for a ‘protection’ that is mostly only a withholding of abuse” (Card 1996:7, 10). The Semai response to the slaver state, their general deference to Malay culture, for example, makes sense in these terms. Unable to flee, Semai adopted a response rather like the Stockholm syndrome (in which hostages come to support their kidnappers) or “identification with the aggressor” (or “oppressor”), in which battered children take on some of the attitudes of their abusers (Freud 1966).

As long as state penetration involving slave raids and kidnapping was only sporadic a pervasive nonviolence was adaptive: Semai response was flight, not confrontation; and, when flight was impossible, submission (Adas 1992:89–90; Dentan 1992, 2002b; Trankell and Ovesen 1998:12–13). Overwhelming power of this sort is not subject to control by the governed, any more than a child can control its abuse by a parent. The question of legitimacy does not arise. Resistance is futile, like “hitting a stone with an egg,” as Khmers say (Fisher-Nguyen 1994:99).

Here I need to interject a caveat. The analogy between slaver state-Semai relationships on the one hand and abusive parent-abused child relationships on the other does not mean that Semai, on their own, are like children. That equation would not only be foolish but, in a Western context, disrespectful. Western tradition does not respect children; on the contrary, it regards them as not fully human (Aronowitz 2001; Dentan 2001a, 2001b). The question in this essay is not of content but of structure: in most contexts, the disjunction

between Semai power and the power of their Malay compatriots is as stark as the disjunction between children's power and the power of adults, the disjunction which may underlie the covert Western contempt for kids. By analogy, it is possible, indeed necessary, to say that 16 is to 8 as 4 is to 2, $16:8 = 4:2$; the relationships (“:” and “:”) are identical. But that does not mean that $8 = 2$. The same holds for the power relationship “slaver state:Semai = abusive parent:abused child.” The relationship is at issue, not its content.

Learning Helplessness

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

The feeling basis of Semai nonviolence rests on what Bateson (1958) would call an *eidōs* of caution. An *eidōs* is a sort of emotional background (cf. Robarchek 1980). The emotional background against which Semai make choices is one of what psychologists call *learned helplessness*. This *eidōs* seems to arise from the people's historical inability to resist slaving. Traditional Semai history involves intermittent merciless raids by bands of slavers who raped the women, slaughtered adults, and took children and young women to sell to Malay aristocrats, who tortured and sexually abused them (e.g., Bird 1883:14–16, 330; Dentan 1992, 1997, 2002b; Endicott 1983; Robarchek 1979, 1986).

Semai have learned that in most cases counterviolence is useless; one just gets hurt again, they say. That does not mean that people like the young men I have already quoted never fantasize about fighting against Malay incursions, dispossessions, and abuse (Robarchek 1977). In fact, in the past, when conditions were favorable, they have actually mounted violent resistance against people who tried to kill them (Dentan 1995, 1999; Leary 1995). Most of the time, though, they just do not think physical violence will work. Why get hurt for nothing? This learned helplessness is similar in many ways to that which abused women and children endure. The oppressor is always present in the mind in what W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” (Dentan 1976). But accepting one's helplessness brings a kind of peace: one no longer needs to struggle, and, since the oppressor is not always present in fact, one can get on with the business of living life (Dentan 1992, 1994).

In some ways, learned helplessness overlaps with clinical depression, and there is some evidence that Semai are susceptible to depression. But, as a Buddhist anthropologist (Obeyesekere 1985) remarks, the difference between the description of Buddhist serenity and the description of depression

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is not clear. Similarly, the surrender in Semai eidos resembles the surrender central to the beliefs and practices of some therapeutic groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and of some deviant Christian communities like Mennonites or Amish (Dentan 1994). In other words, it can provide a serenity not otherwise available.

Learned Helplessness as a Successful Evolutionary Adaptation

In evolutionary terms, violence and peace seem to have evolved as flexible, facultative adaptations to particular situations (Fry in preparation). Here and below, I use the word “adaptation” in this specifically Darwinian sense. Adaptation results from differential reproduction over many generations, wherein organisms manifesting a particular trait leave relatively more offspring than do organisms lacking the trait. Individual human responses to stress reflect evolutionary strategies successful in the past: fight, flight, caring for children, and making alliances (Dentan 2001d, 2002a).

Capitalist cost-benefit analysis suggests that games are a useful metaphor for situations in which individuals have to make such choices. People will be violent when they can gain something by doing so without getting badly hurt: bullies, generals, and abusers of children know that. Similarly, they will shun violence when they would lose by it and/or risk getting hurt. The Semai assessment of their political environment is a realistic one, and the response—surrender or flight—has been far more adaptive in a personal *and* evolutionary sense than futile painful resistance would have been. Like any beneficial behavior, the resulting underlying eidos has consequences in other areas of Semai life, which this chapter will discuss.

Also, like any adaptive behavior, surrender is adaptive only under particular conditions. When those conditions change, people begin, by fits and starts and individual by individual, to change their behavior. Semai culture does not incapacitate Semai for violence (Dentan 1995, 1999; Robarchek and Dentan 1987): it foregrounds other ways of handling stress, such as flight, caring for children, or making friends and allies (“networking”). But all four possibilities, what the social psychologists call *fight, flight, tend, and befriend* (Dentan 2002a), are always available to all people at all times. When conditions change, so that violence has benefits and the associated risks dwindle, even peaceable people like Semai may find it more attractive. No human choice is final. Flight, the dominant Semai adaptation to predation by outsiders, at least from about 1800 to about 1950, requires what ecologists call a *refugium*, a place to which people can safely flee and in which they can focus on protecting their children and strengthening their social ties. Occasional incursions into the refugium by outsiders, slavers in this case, only strengthen the traditional response. But increasing penetration by outsiders in the 1950s made flight less successful as a reaction to violence. Evasive

neutrality became difficult. Alliances with powerful invaders, like the occasional self-enslavement of half a century earlier, offers some promise of safety, although at the cost of becoming dependent and involved in their violence.

I repeat these platitudes at some length because Western values celebrate violence, whether or not they oppose it (e.g., Kappeler 1995:252). Even some anthropologists seem to think violence is always more adaptive than surrender or flight, although it seems plausible that organisms that avoid violence entirely are less likely to get hurt and thus more likely to produce fertile offspring than glorious fighters are: “Natural selection designs different kinds of animals and plants that *avoid* competition. A fit animal is not one that fights well, but one that avoids fighting all together” (Colinvaux 1978:144; see also Sommer, Denham, and Little 2002). Winning a fight and differential reproductive success are entirely distinct phenomena. To repeat: successful violence involves a calculation of risks and benefits. That is why domestic violence, by men against women or adults against children, is the most common form violence takes cross-culturally: it is the safest for the violent (Leyton 1997:43). We must not confuse violence with bravery; when violence is not safe, as in the Semai case, it is stupid, just as Semai say it is. The Semai people’s reluctance to celebrate or engage in “stupid violence” is the reason it seems appropriate to call Semai nonviolent—under normal circumstances.

Responding To Slaving as an Environmental Stress

I theorize that the historical experience of slaving lies at the roots of Semai peaceability. Slaving generated fears—for one’s life, for one’s children—and led to a sense that outsiders in general and Malays in particular always threatened the peace and safety in which Semai, like most people most of the time, wanted to live. The fear probably did not reflect how often attacks happened. A single raid or kidnapping would demonstrate a whole river basin community’s vulnerability (cf. Colvard 1997:21). Their territories, which they could until recently defend against organized invasion, were open to raiders (cf. Taylor, Gottfredson, and Bower 1984). Criminologists (e.g., McGarrell, Giacomazzi, and Thurman 1997) say that people’s fear of being hurt reflects how vulnerable people feel. Semai felt, and feel, vulnerable.

Moreover, outsiders, who always represented the power that Semai in general lacked, tended to hold Semai customs and the people themselves in contempt. Meetings with outsiders threatened to produce the kind of social disorder that traditional Semai found particularly scary. Peace is the normal state of humankind; violence is unusual and frightening, even in wartime (Dentan 2001d; Fry in preparation; Nordstrom 1997; Sponsel

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1996). The contrast between fearsome slavers and fearful prey made Semai think of themselves as helpless and nonviolent (Dentan 1979:61–64; Robarchek 1980) and of nonviolence as not merely a moral good, but a practical one.

Raising Cautious Children

If the kids don't go to school, if [my husband] doesn't take them [to school on his motorbike, as it's a mile to the . . . terminus of Malay settlement and bus service], if he doesn't chew them out, I'll *-lees* [harangue] him. They get in trouble if they don't go to school. If the kids pick fights with their friends, I tell them, "Don't mess with your friends, be good to your friends, [if you aren't] you'll be sorry. If you're a bad friend, people won't want you around.

I *-lees* about the Malay school kids. . . . They bully Semai kids all the time. They hit them, they take their books and papers. "Malay kids are bad," I say. "They'll pick fights with you. Don't you hit them back, you'll just get in trouble." (Kyah Graang's-Mother, R'eis River, 1992 [Dentan 2001c:13])

Social psychologists say that looking after children is one of the ways people (especially women) deal with stress: the "tend" in fight, flight, tend, or befriend. Baboon studies (Maggioncalda and Sapolsky 2002: 64) suggest that demonstrating "strong male-female affiliation and parental behavior rather than male-male competition" is at least as likely to result in a male leaving viable offspring as is striving for dominance. Indeed, prolonged, stressful agonistic behavior seems to impair health and reduce fertility even if an individual is not harmed. The glucocorticoid stress results in impaired growth and tissue repair. Too much testosterone can be bad for one's health.

In evolutionary terms, this tending of offspring feeds into the generally successful human *K-reproductive strategy* of having few offspring but seeing them through to maturity (Taylor 2002). Preserving one's children from kidnapping by slavers is a reflection of this strategy.

Semai taught children to find refuge among their own kind, among Semai whom they knew (Dentan 2001a). In the Semai eidos, warning children about the dangers they face is one of the few tactics of resistance to Malay power that is available (see fig. 11.1). Semai children develop learned helplessness and nonviolence in part because (1) Semai adults expect and encourage children to be fearful, for example, by telling terrifying stories about outsiders (Dentan 2001a); and (2) Semai adults do not expect, model, or condone violence, for example, by beating, hitting, or spanking children (Dentan 1978, 2001b). Traditionally, Semai avoided disrespecting or abusing children, whose love they needed, thus offering the children no model for committing violence. Unlike Americans, they expected kids to be "soft" and timid (Dentan 1978). They said that hurting children risked killing



Figure 11.1. Semai girls at *'Icek* along the *Teiw R'eiiis*, in 1992, try to control their giggling, having learned that self-restraint is a good thing. The two smaller girls are watching the tallest, to the back of whose head a pet macaque is clinging, to see if she is going to manage the task—the sort of social surveillance which helps keep Semai society peaceful. Photograph by Robert K. Dentan.

them, and that abused or neglected children made particularly fearsome ghosts.

This reluctance to coerce children fosters autonomy (see fig. 11.2). Children who grow up free of coercion tend, as adults, to value independence more than children who have learned to obey do. Like most egalitarian

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Figure 11.2. This 'Icek boy has been hunting for proteinaceous snack food, as Semai children routinely do to supplement their diet, which is becoming increasingly monotonous as more powerful peoples destroy their forest resources. This sort of self-reliance is characteristic of Semai children's activities. He carries a boy's blowpipe of inferior bamboo and is displaying a flying lizard (*Draco volans*), or *halvv'n* in Semai. Photograph by Robert K. Dentan.

peoples (see, for example, Boehm 2000; Clastres 2000; Wilson 1998:72–142), adult Semai value individual freedom and resist the obedience and discipline that hierarchy seeks to impose. The best way for a Semai to destroy any chance of becoming influential is by seeming to desire influence, which suggests a desire for power to coerce others. Children and adults need

to be independent within their mutually supportive community. Still, the power involved in frightening helpless and dependent people, even one's own children, may also provide an ambivalent pleasure, kept secret most of the time even from oneself, as I believe it does in America. And like Americans, Semai seem unaware of that possibility (Dentan 2001a, 2001b).

On the other hand, most adults in a Semai settlement will look after all the children in that settlement (Dentan 1978; cf. Skeat and Blagden 1906, II:81). This *allomothering* seems to be basic to human evolutionary success; for men, looking after the children with the love Semai men show may also correlate with lower testosterone levels (Hrdy 2001) and thus with less striving for dominance (Kemper 1990). Among Semai, as among Orang Asli in general, gender inequalities are traditionally minimal, despite signs that patriarchy may be increasing (Dentan 2000c; Endicott and Endicott n.d.; Thambiah 1999; Tjah, Thambiah, and Leong 2000). Human communities in which all the adults look after all the children usually show a much lower rate of violence than matched communities where the adults mind their own business (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997).

Making and Keeping Friends

Nudy's -Father: Let me give one answer to your question [about why Semai commit so little violence]. When someone does something wrong, like stealing, we don't beat them up badly or kill them. We bring them to judgment under our laws. We are one family, one people. Maybe we fine them, but only a little. And we bawl them out, urge them to change their ways, not to set a bad example for the children. We don't want to kill or beat people. We would be ashamed. And, number two, we would be like the beasts that kill/harm people.

Puk's-Grandfather: Right. What we think is, if we harm them, we lose out, we lose a friend. So, we withdraw and suffer in private [*kra'dii*]. We feel bad. But we need help in clearing swiddens, in feeding ourselves. We realize, if we harm our friends, we lose out. (fieldnotes from Waar River, 1991)

An evolutionary biologist (Bingham 2000) suggests that violence begets cooperation. The development of hunting tools made it possible for people working in groups to kill or threaten other people from a distance, lowering the costs of violence, that is, the risk of getting hurt or killed themselves. Both killers and their victims needed to form coalitions to protect themselves and their offspring. These coalitions, unlike those of other animals, are with nonkin. From the cost-benefit viewpoint of evolutionary biology, the alliance only works if nobody cheats. There has to be a way of raising the cost of cheating, not necessarily Bingham's "remote killing" but some added cost

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to cheaters. Semai social arrangements embody a number of such sanctions, social and ideological.

First, one reason traditional Semai are comfortable with each other is that they fear outsiders. To some extent, this statement is a tautology. One could say that fear of outsiders causes or facilitates love of insiders. But, to say that people fear outsiders, one has to make a distinction between insiders and outsiders. And when one says people fear outsiders, the implication is that they *do not* fear insiders. Why make the distinction otherwise? Instead of fear of outsiders *causing* love of insiders, the one is simply the flip side of the other or, in fancier language, it logically *implies* the other, at least to the extent that love is the opposite of fear. So instead of a causal one-way relationship, in empirical reality there is a two-way logical overlap in the analyst's head. It is just a matter of whether the analyst emphasizes negative peace, due to fear of violence, or positive peace, due to love of the placid and contented way of life that Semai call *slamaad*. The word *slamaad* comes from the Arabic word for peace (*salaam*) that comes from surrender (*Islam*). Anything that makes outsiders seem more fearsome makes insiders seem safer; anything that makes insiders more comfortable to be with makes outsiders more alien. There's a two-bit term for this process, *complementary schizmogogenesis* (Bateson 1958:175–77). The phrase may be an unfamiliar jawbreaker, but the process is almost universal.

A second technique for keeping social relations peaceable, one that mirrors the way Semai deal with outsiders, is avoidance. The avoidance may be overt, as when people, especially women and children, flee at the approach of strangers. Or it may be ritual, as in east Semai *respect relationships*. There is always a potential conflict in a marriage between one's in-laws, who may expect to maintain their old relationships, and oneself, if one wants a bit of a monopoly. Therefore, for example, an east Semai man will avoid addressing, looking at, getting close to, or naming his wife's mother. Greater intimacy, for Semai, would be an incestuous violation of the natural order, which could bring on the violent dissolution of whole the settlement (Dentan 2000b, 2002b). The same restrictions apply to all one's spouse's elder siblings and, reciprocally, one's younger siblings' spouses. An alternative way to reduce the tensions that surround marriage is to make a joke of all the misbehavior that might happen, to create what anthropologists call a *joking relationship*. Insulting or making overt sexual propositions to a spouse's younger siblings and, reciprocally, to an older sibling's spouse produces a kind of familiarity that means a widow or widower can find solace with the dead spouse's kid brother or sister. Both the avoidance and the joking are ways of relieving interpersonal tension.

The third way of controlling violence involves what, for want of a better word, could be called *taboos* (Kroes 2002). Among Semai, these quite

extensive taboos involve the realization that subjecting someone else to stress, for example, by treating them with disrespect, can make them more susceptible to disease or accident. For instance, when someone demands a share in one's meal, one should share what one can afford; otherwise the hungry person will be in *punan*, likely to fall sick or to trip and fall. Not showing up for an appointment can have similar ill effects. However annoying it may be for Semai to fulfill their social obligations, they are aware of the practical and moral consequences of hurting someone else's feelings, of causing a "spiritual wound," (*lukaa' sngii'*.) Recent studies of stress in Western and non-Western societies indicate that the Semai assessment of the physical effects of disrespect is correct (Dentan 2000b; McDade 2001).

Fourth, if a person has been frustrated, suffered a *lukaa' sngii'* as a result of someone else's action or inaction, the injured person can go to the offender's house and demand a gift, to restore normal serenity and to repair the damage done to the relationship. Semai use a Sanskrit-Malay word meaning "a fine" to describe this gift. There may be some haggling about what it will take to make everything all right again, but everyone understands that the *slamaad*—the peace—which allows people to cooperate is at stake (cf. Peterson 1993; Robarchek 1997). If the offender refuses the gift, then the hurt person may simply "steal" something he feels will restore his "spiritual" health. (I put "steal" in quote marks, because Semai use a different verb for this process than for theft; and "spiritual" in quote marks because the distinction between spiritual and physical is far less clear among Semai than in the Cartesian West.)

Alternatively, the offender may hold a ritual to restore the victim to health. The ritual will usually involve bathing with fragrant flowers and leaves, to attract back the patient's souls or spiritual powers, which the insult or slight has driven off or weakened: aroma and massage therapy, an observer might say. This healing costs the offender time and also usually a gift to the presiding shaman.

Finally, besides these decentralized and informal techniques of conflict resolution, some communities in Perak state have further institutionalized what Semai call "the law of fines" into a trial or town meeting (*bicaraa'*) (Robarchek 1979, 1990, 1997). Usually, the headman and his assistant have informally polled the settlement(s) involved—household by household—before the actual meeting, so that they have an idea of what the settlement consensus is going to be. Their job is basically to voice that consensus at the end of the meeting. At the meeting, usually held in the evening, elders lecture the quarrelling parties along the lines of the epigraph for this section: the need for cooperation and mutual love, the importance of behaving in a rational rather than a disorderly way, the duty to set a good example for the children and grandchildren. Everyone gets to speak, until everyone's

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verbal resources are exhausted, and the disputants are ready to yield to the consensus as expressed by the elders. The yielding usually takes the form of agreeing to pay fines for the various offenses involved. (Elders in this area can cite an elaborate ritualized schedule of fines.) In many cases, however, the participants reach no conclusion, “or a decision is made but later ignored and seemingly forgotten” (Brison 1989:97).

Whether or not the parties actually pay the fines is far less important than the acceptance of shame (*slniil*) in order to reconnect with the community. *Slniil* is “the feeling state that accompanies emotional disconnection” (Pollack 1999:32) or fear of such rejection. The bicaraa’ institution, which has no other coercive ability, fails without *slniil*. It works, when it works, because people value social ties so highly—the same reason that similar conflict resolution programs in American schools sometimes fail. Now that the outside world both claims coercive authority over disputes and is at least potentially open as an alternative to the local community, the failures may become more frequent. Semai peaceability is resilient enough, however, that the failures rarely lead to violence. Learned helplessness and deference to individual autonomy may make it easier for Semai to accept such failures.

Winning and Losing, Failing and Succeeding

Semai are indeed touched with nobility and have succeeded admirably in finding ways of handling human violence. They do have something important to say to the rest of us about good and evil. . . . Their utopian solution, however, is a poor competitor in the open market. And as all ideas, all mutations, in the end all species, must be judged on their success in competing with others of their kind, the Semai experiment has to be judged a noble failure. (Watson 1995:156–57)

. . . but love’s the only engine of survival. (Cohen 1997:6)

I have argued above and elsewhere that, in evolutionary terms, Semai are as much a success as, say, French people, and are more successful than a number of warlike peoples who have disappeared from the face of the earth. Semai are doing better than the Nazis are, for example. Even sympathetic assessments, like Watson’s, confuse poverty and lack of military prowess with biological failure. That makes sense in terms of U.S. values, but not in terms of differential reproduction, the sole evolutionary criterion of success. Biologically, Semai are a success (Dentan 2002a).

But I do not want to repeat that old argument here. I want to point out that there is another kind of success that Semai amply demonstrate: the ability to live in harmony, without fear of each other. The fact that Semai history plays a role in their peaceability has a curious effect on people who

would otherwise be enthusiastic about the Semai way of life. Their sympathy immediately wanes. They want what philosophers call positive peace, based on social justice and mutual love, which Semai do manifest; but they want it untainted by negative peace, which stems from the fear of violence. This odd feeling, that peace should stem from higher motives than violence, reflects the normalization of violence in Western society: peace should be impractical and should require a level of virtue abnormal to humankind.

In the U.S., helping professionals have pathologized learned helplessness and the associated mild depression, for example, in the diagnosis “battered woman syndrome” (Walker 1979). The reasons for doing so are good and sufficient: battered women are at risk. But the insistence that learned helplessness is pathological regardless of the conditions under which it occurs is as scientifically sterile as the insistence on normalizing aggression. Just as the value-laden assumption that violence is more natural than peace limits investigation into the circumstances which favor one or the other (Dentan 2002a; Dentan and Otterbein 1996), so the denigration of learned helplessness limits investigation into whether it is ever appropriate or positively adaptive (Prosser 2000).

Such judgments reflect the contempt for “sissies” that patriarchal values entail among peoples like traditional Malays or macho Americans. The judgments support the capitalist dismissal of uncompetitive and uncommodifiable goods like contentment or *slamaad*. And they reflect the value judgment, almost universal in hierarchical societies, that people in the lower socioeconomic strata are incomplete or damaged humans. Social workers have to insist that their clients are not mere passive victims, because they know the society as a whole sees being passive or victimized as being of an inferior essence. Societies that create victims despise them. Solutions to their plight must involve resistance or empowerment. In this welter of proviolence and propower assumptions, Semai nonresistance and their rejection of power as a culturally legitimate desideratum may elicit sympathy or endearment, but must also produce pity, condescension, and contempt.

But the traditional Semai response to violence is far more radical than the palliatives pushed by less sophisticated but more “advanced” peoples (Dentan 2000b). The Semai *eidos* rejects the whole complex of power-victim-resistance-heroism. Accepting the Semai *eidos* as legitimate would be as subversive of the world-conquering, Western, capitalist social order as actually practicing Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, or any other peaceable egalitarian *eidos* (Dentan 1992, 1994; Wilson 1998). Semai ethnic identity may not survive the onslaught of globalized seduction and coercion. It may perish before scholars come to understand its complexity. Still, their sense of how the world works, and the way they live in it, may remain a possible and

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practical alternative in people's memories, like the ancient Chinese praised by Lao Tzu.

Once upon a time
people who knew the Way
were subtle, spiritual, mysterious, penetrating,
unfathomable.

Since they're inexplicable
I can only say what they seemed like:
Cautious, oh yes, as if wading through a winter river.
Alert, as if afraid of the neighbors.
Polite and quiet, like houseguests.
Elusive, like melting ice. . . .
To follow the Way
is not to need fulfillment.
Unfulfilled, one may live on
needing no renewal. Lao Tzu (Le Guin 1997:20–21)

Study Questions

1. Is Semai nonviolence adaptive? Explain why or why not.
2. Dentan writes, "Peace is the normal state of humankind." Explain the basis for his statement.
3. Does Dentan see Semai peace as *positive peace* or as *negative peace*, or as some combination of the two concepts?
4. What historical feature does Dentan see as lying at the root of Semai peacefulness? What do you think of this argument?
5. What is the *bicaraa*? Are there clear winners and losers following a *bicaraa*? How is it similar to the Paliyan *kuTTam*?