

THE SENOI OF PERAK

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The Senoi is one of three major groups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Administratively, the Senoi is divided into six sub-groups comprising the Semai, Temiar, Chewong, Jah Hut, Semoq Beri and Mah Meri, and live in communities across Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Selangor. Of the six sub-groups, only the Semai and Temiar traditionally occupy settlements in Perak. However, as a whole, the Semai can be found across a much larger area, ranging from the central parts of Perak to the areas further south occupying areas along the boundary of Selangor. The Temiar settlement begins from central Perak and stretches up to the northeastern part of the state. According to the 1991 Census, the total population of the Semai people in Perak numbered approximately 17,973 but the Census for the Temiar people showed that they numbered approximately 10,010.¹

The term Senoi is derived from a Semai and Temiar word, *sen-oi* and *seng-oi* respectively, which transliterated means people. In their interaction with non-Orang Asli people, the Semai and Temiar would refer to themselves as *sen-oi* or *seng-oi* which is a direct reference to themselves as the indigenous people or the original inhabitants of the country. This term was first used by British officials towards the end of the British administration in the country. It was probably Major P.D.R. Williams-Hunt who first used it to replace the derogatory term *Sakai* which had negative connotations.

The Senoi language which is closely related to the Mon-Khmer language is a branch of the Austro-Asiatic language. From a pre-historical perspective, the Senoi is believed to have originated from the mixed marriages between the Hoabinhian people, the earliest

inhabitants of the "Golden Peninsula" (Peninsular Malaysia), and the Neolithic people who brought along Ban Kao culture from central Thailand to the Golden Peninsula in about 2500 B.C.² The traditional Senoi society therefore inherited both the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic cultures consisting of a mixture of hunting and gathering as well as swidden farming.

In Perak, the Semai community is larger than the Temiar community and is divided by anthropologists into two groups, referred to as the highland and lowland Semai. The highland Semai is more adapted to activities based on exploiting the forests resources such as hunting, fishing, gathering and engaging in swidden farming. The lowland Semai traditionally adopted a peasant way of life, being involved in the labour force and seeking employment in small-scale trading of jungle produce and today are more exposed to the modern economy.

The Temiar, on the other hand, live mainly in the interior except for one village Kampung Bendang Kering in Kuala Kangsar that is located in the lowland. Traditionally, the Temiar practised hunting and gathering, and swidden agriculture. Both the Semai and Temiar traditionally engaged in free trade activity; they were the main suppliers of jungle produce. Their role in this respect appeared in Chinese records, in which it was stated that the Golden Peninsula was the main supplier of jungle produce such as honey, pandan mate, birds' nest, raisin, rattan, horn, etc.

Academically, these people are an important source of social, cultural and psychological studies. The Semai are better known as the non-violent people and the people who practise total sharing while the Temiar are known for their dream theory, in which they can control and manipulate their dreams to fulfill their socio-psycho and political needs.

Traditional leadership at the local level for both the Semai and Temiar are basically led by a body made up of elderly members of the society known as the council of elders. The members of the council

will then appoint one of their members, normally the one who possesses and is recognised as a good traditional healer, knowledgeable in *adat* law and well connected with headmen from other groups and with local Malay chiefs, to lead the council. In Semai, the head of the council of elders is called *raknaak* and in Temiar *tuaak*. When the influence of Siam and Malay came into the region prior to European colonialism, the Semai and Temiar people came under their direct rule, albeit under different authorities. The Semai became the subject of the ancient Malay state. The sultan, rajas and local Malay chiefs had appointed Semai headmen to administer the interior area. To justify the expansion of power, Semai headmen were empowered through titles conferred upon them by the Malay rulers (such as Tok Maharaja, Tok Singa Merban, Tok Singa Merjan, Tok Sang Lela Pujangga, Tok Lela Perkasa, etc.) and regalia (such as songkok, keris, spears, swords, gong, etc.). The main role of the appointed headmen was to liaise between the people of the interior (Semai) and the local Malay chiefs, raja or sultan. In addition, there were Semai who served in the palace as royal healers, servants, fighters, hunters and suppliers of forest goods, house builders, etc.³ The Temiar, on the other hand, came under the influence of Siam.

The Siam's rulers – through their subordinate, the ruler of Kelantan – appointed a Temiar chief to the position of Tok Mikong. Since the Temiar chief of Kelantan had gained some political power from Siam, the Temiar of Perak became his subordinate despite the fact that the Temiar population in Perak was bigger than the Temiar population in Kelantan. The Siamese ruler, through its local chief, Tok Mikong, appointed another Temiar chief in Perak, referred to as Tok Pangku based in Lasah of Sungai Siput Utara. The position Tok Pangku may be subordinate to Tok Mikong based on the term used, *pangku*, a Malay word which generally means helping someone to do the job or doing a job for someone who occupies a superior position. Officially, it could mean acting on behalf of the Tok Mikong. The role of Tok Mikong, as well as the Tok Pangku, was to control the people in the interior, to supply forest goods and to get labour supply for the Siamese rulers.⁴ In order to obtain manpower, the Siamese trained “fierce” Temiar

men to be “slave raiders” known as Sakai Jinak. Their duty was to capture other Temiar men and women and enslave them according to the needs of the Siamese rulers. When the British took over the Golden Peninsula, the institution of Tok Mikong was abandoned and replaced by the position of village headmen referred to as *Penghulu*. Today, the title for village headmen for both Semai and Temiar is called *Batin*.

During much of the British period, the Semai and Temiar became isolated from the rest of society. They were, moreover, regarded as little more than museum pieces, as academic subjects only to be studied by the curious and intrepid anthropologists. In 1941, when Malaya was invaded by Japanese military forces, the Semai and Temiar became important allies to the MPAJA. When World War II ended and the British colonial authority regained control, these people became the focus of the MCP to gain support against the British. In 1953, five years after the declaration of the Malayan Emergency, about 30,000 of the Orang Asli, most of whom were the Semai and Temiar in Perak, were under the effective influence of the communist insurgents. It was only then that the BMA realised and appreciated the crucial position the Orang Asli occupied in their effort to defeat the communist insurgents.⁵ The BMA then designed a number of programmes to win the heart and minds of the Orang Asli, including establishing the Department of Aborigines Protection and the Orang Asli's Police field force of *Seng-oi praaq* (Fighting *Seng-oi*) in 1953. The establishment of these two agencies have helped many members of the Semai and Temiar communities to be involved directly in government services and paving the way for their later generation to participate more actively within the larger Malaysian society.

From the religious point of view, both the Semai and Temiar share similar traditional belief system. Both groups believe in the existence of a supreme supra-natural being responsible for the creation of the world and all of its inhabitants: plants, the seas, the mountains, trees, animals, and above all, mankind. The Semai referred to it as *Jenang* or *Nyenang*, while the Temiar referred to it as *Tak Pedn*. Both these groups believe in the existence of a thunder god known as *Engku'* by the

Semai and *Karei* by the Temiar. The Thunder God is a supra-natural being that controls human behaviour, punishing those who transgress against their own cultural norms and social mores as well as other natural laws. In addition, they also believe in other deities (known as *nyaniik* in Semai and *chinoi* in Temiar) who become the source of supernatural sanctions, such as bad luck, illness and other disasters. In order to curb such threats, the people seek protection from the *shaman* (*Halaak*), who is able to communicate with supernatural beings, as well as “possess” one or more of them as spirit guides or helpers (called *gunig*). The *balaak*, with the help of their *gunig*, protects the people from invisible threats that abound. Through the *gunig*, the *balaak* obtains their knowledge about how to cure illnesses, to avoid natural disasters, and so forth.⁶⁶ Since the colonial period, world religion such as Islam, Christianity and Bahai had penetrated the community in the interior. Today, some members from these communities have begun to adopt these religions as their way of life.

Up to this era, the Semai and Temiar people are loyal supporters of the Malaysian government. Nevertheless, despite the nation having undergone rapid economic growth since independence, they continue to languish far behind in comparison to the economic growth of other ethnic communities in Malaysia, and the reason for this state of affair can be ascribed to the fact that they are a minority group which have been described by some as an inactive political animal.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Jean, 1997.
- ² See Bellwood, 1977, pp.255-267.
- ³ See Juli Edo, 1998; Sullivan, 1982.
- ⁴ See Benjamin, 1968; Dodge, 1981.
- ⁵ Carey, 1976, p.311.
- ⁶ See Carey, (1976), pp. 90-113; Dentan (1968) ; Juli Edo (1988).