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Overwhelming Terror

Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence
among Semai of Malaysia

Robert Knox Dentan

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Inconclusion

He finds himself a place to sleep, maybe, sheltered between two great buttress roots that prop up an unscalable, unthinkable white *puley* tree. Above this place where light and kindness never reach loom the lattice-work of vines, the straight vertical gray-green tree trunks. Stunned by fear, he can hear the monsoonal wind, perhaps, sweeping down through the leaves at him like time to come, the first blast speeding by him and the rest still coming, buffeting the enormous leaves, making the bamboos clack together. He sits hugging himself, keeping himself from coming apart, everything once clear having slipped away from him, afraid that if he opens his eyes, he will disintegrate, waiting for the brilliant ancient darkness.

He can remember the clarity outside from whose menace he now flees: the bright pastel heat, shiny expensive cars, beautiful Chinese *minaleh*, money, knowledge, respect. *I used to be happy*, he thinks; but that was never true. Police, poverty, ignorance, scorn, no love at all. A sour mouthful of crippled hopes, fear ripping at his heart.

In traditional Semai cautionary tales, ambiguities move into clarity: most stories end with the phrase "if you are Human, be humane; if Monster, be monstrous." But Juny's choices were never so clear.

You'd be surprised at how much even a dishonest brutal stupid person can hurt.

PRELUDE: SUMMARY INTERPRETATION

I would fain advance naught but substantiated facts. But after embattling his facts, an advocate who should wholly suppress a not unreasonable surmise, which might tell eloquently upon his cause—such an advocate, would he not be blameworthy?

—Melville (1989:113)

Here I need, like some nineteenth-century novelist, to "crave the reader's indulgence." Ethnography grows out of the way ethnographers make sense of their experiences with a particular set of people. People mostly make sense out of experiences by referring back to other experiences they've had or read about, organizing the total in a way that makes sense according to the narrative style of their friends and associates. I think people make narratives out of their recollections of the more or less random neuronal discharges that constitute the raw stuff of dreams in pretty much the same way (Dentan 1988). Experiences don't make sense: we make sense out of them.

The original version of this book included specific details from life in America, and experiences that seemed to clarify what Semai did and said. They took up too much space for this book, though they're on the accompanying website (<http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com/isbn/0742553302>). Still, to know enough to retrace how I came to my current understanding of Semai peaceability, you need to know a little of my personal history, just enough to gauge how much it colored my analysis. It was, after all, a

failure to attend to history as much as any other facet of my ignorance, that led me to misunderstand Senai in the first place. I had to meet a lot of other people and undergo some uncomfortable changes myself before the Senai achievement seemed more than odd and exotic, admirable perhaps, but quaint and, well, primitive.

1960s: Intellectual Errors

[O]ur contact with another is not accomplished through analysis. Rather, we apprehend him in his entirety. From the outset, we can sketch our view of him using an outline of symbolic detail, which contains a whole in itself, and evokes the true form of his being. The latter is what escapes us if we approach our fellow creature using only the categories of our intellect. (Leenhardt 1937:2)

When I first visited Senai, in the early 1960s, I wasn't ready professionally or spiritually to understand Senai nonviolence. I suffered the delusion that I could approach other humans using only the categories of my intellect even after, on a personal level, it was clear I couldn't do that while living with Senai. People just won't sit still for that. But back home, writing up my "field experience," I tried to replay that delusion, the way I had learned to in grad school. For example, I presented the "ceremonies of innocence" (chapter 5) as "taboos" that originated in horror of violence, a Senai notion of themselves as "nonviolent people." Several people tried to explain these customs to me, but, since Senai lacks a sophisticated vocabulary of probability and a word for "stress," I didn't understand that the various words I translated as "taboo" or "forbidden act" might refer to stress and stressors. I was thinking about bestial demons and glittering flying souls, the filigrees with which Senai explain these notions to themselves. The concreteness of the examples they gave ("Tiger'll eat her") misled me. When I asked, people would say, "Well, maybe once in a hundred [or thousand] times," and add some other possible misfortune, like falling and getting hurt. What they meant, I should have understood, was that stressed-out people are likely to get upset or depressed and become distracted and accident prone. Back then, my own people didn't understand stress as subtly as Senai did, so perhaps, I tell myself, it wasn't only youthful arrogance and ethnocentrism that clouded my understanding, but also cultural deprivation.

1970s: Academic "Radicalism"

Since any and all events can be lifted by men of bad faith out of their normal contexts and projected onto others and thus consequently condemned, since one's thoughts can be interpreted in terms of such extreme implications as to reduce them to absurdity or subversion, obviously a mere declaration of good faith is not enough. In an all-pervading climate of intellectual evasion or dishonesty, everything becomes dishonest. . . . To imagine straight com-

munication is no longer possible is to declare that the world we seek to defend is no longer worth defending, that the battle for human freedom is already lost. . . . Have you taken your passions, your illusions, your time, and your circumstances into account? . . . More than that no reasonable man of good will can demand. (Wright 1993:428-29)

The first revisionary experience came during "the sixties," most of which happened in the 1970s. George Appell, a scholar-activist who had worked in Malaysian Borneo, was the first to link my work with the study of nonviolence, not my concern until my thesis (on food restrictions) and first book were complete: he suggested the subtitle "a nonviolent people of Malaya" for the book. Working with colleagues in a "radical" academic department—gay and lesbian activist, Marxist feminists, Native American traditionalists, Puerto Rican activists, and the like—forced me to consider power and "oppression" as general phenomena: what brought these disparate people together as often touchy and uneasy allies? Departmental activism and focus on oppression was to lead to the eventual dissolution of the department and its reconstitution in a form less politically troublesome to the academy; but not before I came to see the similarities between the Senai/Malay relationship and the Native American/European or African American/European one. The dynamics of other forms of oppression suggested several avenues to explore.

For example, Malaysian histories of the time ignored Malaysian indigenous like Senai. Combating the invisibility of "subaltern" peoples was a major concern of my historian colleagues. I'd read early accounts of Senai for ethnographic data but not as causally relevant to the present. Scholarly analyses of histories of "submerged" peoples, by people like Vine Deloria and W. E. B. Du Bois, helped inform my rereading of the early accounts. I began to pay more attention to the inequality between Senai and other Malaysians. Most other Malaysians, for example, had never heard of Senai, just as most New Yorkers in the 1970s didn't know the state had a large Native American population. Invisibility was part of their submerision. One reason Malaysian indigenes generally do not share the aversion of, say, Native Americans to anthropologists is that in Malaysia (as Bah Tony said to me in the 1970s), "You made us *known*."

I hadn't thought about the effect of slaving on people. Most accounts I had read treated it as a deplorable but abstract condition, discussion of which was too embarrassing to the former perpetrators to be proper "liberal" academic discourse. The then rising generation of indigenous Malaysian activist scholars, notably Tan Chee Beng, Colin Nicholas and Alberto Gomes, sharpened my perceptions of Senai history and current predicament. Slavocratic terrorism seemed to have something to do with the widespread nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reports of Senai "timidity" in the presence of outsiders. That avoidance of conflict, I

thought, might evolve into general nonviolence. The first couple of chapters in the book attempt to clarify the documented Semai historical experience as experience rather than abstraction.

Finally, Marxist-feminist "deconstruction" of "hegemonic discourse" pointed up unwitting biases in my work. In the academy, that insight ultimately devolved into an extreme cultural relativism that deconstructed Marxism and feminism as well in the process delegitimizing ideas like "oppression" (Graeber 2007b). It also so valued "resistance," broadly construed, that just talking about accommodation with, resignation to, or identification with oppressors seemed like betraying the people with whom you'd worked. I couldn't integrate into my analysis wry phrases like "Lime [as body paint] you sweat off, Malays, what are you gonna do?" (*Kop hi pluh, Gop haroo' hi-lu-broh?*). But I still think power differences determine great swatches of human behavior so that surrender to the greater power of the Malay state and rejection of subordination are what gives Semai life its distinctive flavor. Totalizing relativism, by contrast, takes the old Italian proverb *traduttore traditore*, translators are traitors, to such an extreme that we reject any understanding of each other on the grounds that all understanding is biased and imperfect. What I learned is what Richard Wright asserted in defiance of McCarthyite attack in the passage that opens this section. We should produce biased accounts that state our biases as honestly as we can because that's the best we can do. Perfection is beyond us: but imperfect communication beats no communication at all. We're not going to get to "final accounts" but we'll get better as long as we keep talking with each other.

Hence this brief confessional.

1980s: Surrendering

Why should they care about the plots, the hatred and heroism, of the world?
Their deep core is the love of a soul guide. (Rumi 2001:162)

I don't know if Semai would use their word *guniik* to gloss the word that Rumi's wonderful translator Englishes as "soul guide" or how they would construe the terminological similarity between the Roman Catholic litany *Sanguis Christi, inebria me* (Christ's blood, intoxicate me) and their own *binul bhiip*, "blood drunkenness." But by the end of the 1970s, I needed spiritual guidance of the sort these epigraphs seem to be talking about. My multiple chemical addictions had become a vortex that was swallowing all the rest of my life. I tried all the ways of controlling them that I'd heard of except suicide, which I thought about a lot. Utterly disabled and more terrified than I've ever been before or since, I finally sought refuge in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). At the time, I regarded AA as a society of Holy Rollers, losers, not a program of any potential use to me. But by 1980, there

was nothing else left to try. That experience of terror and powerlessness, accepting which is essential to successful AA praxis, gave me new insight into the terror that seemed to overwhelm Semai during violent thundersqualls, flash floods, and landslips: I too no longer felt safe, felt everything I valued slipping away. And I began to wonder whether there was a connection between my "bottom" (as AAs call that experience), slavocratic terrorism (chapter 2), and the terror of being overpowered by the stupid violent Thunder Lord (chapter 3). Was a sense of being overwhelmed part of the ethos, the emotional background, of Semai life?

Now, AA social and political structure is a lot like that of rain-forest foraging bands and of "simple" Southeast Asian swideners like Semai. I won't belabor the similarities here since I've done so elsewhere (Dentan 1992, 1994). Thomas Lechner (2003) has written a definitive study of AA as an egalitarian "band." The point relevant here is that the AA program for surviving sobriety involves accepting one's powerlessness over addiction and eventually "in all our affairs." The sensation is not of an effortful controlling of one's urges. It's just relief: "I don't have to try to do *that* any more. Whew!" Stressful lives get much easier if you take things as they come, not as you'd like them to be. *Ma lu'-uuy?* ask Semai in Perak state, *jaluu' hem-broh?* in Pahang: "What you gonna do?" Meaning: there's nothing to do. *To' ma i ma*, "no matter." Give up, move on.

That's not an unusual response to relative powerlessness. Impoverished Malay peasants say much the same thing: *apa nak buat?* for "what you gonna do?" and *tidak apa* for "no matter." Malay "tidak apathy" frustrated colonialist British efforts to introduce capitalism. As one old Malay fisherman told me over coffee, with a shrug and a smile, *Kita orang melayu tak berapa rajin*, "We Malay people don't spend a lot of energy [on money-making]." Max Weber noticed similar behavior among medieval European peasants; it led him to sketch capitalist insatiability for money as a theologically induced obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Semai say explicitly that too much concern with wealth makes you unhappy and undermines *silamand*, serenity, peace, social harmony. From an egalitarian viewpoint like that of Semai, making money isn't worth subordinating yourself to cold contemptuous outlanders, at least no longer than you need to. For Btisi', another Asian people, "work" (a Malay word) is what you do on someone else's plantation; what you do on your own is "playing."

No one who has ever watched Semai or Malay peasants working would call them lazy or apathetic. They work hard at tasks they choose. Indeed, there is a Semai epic about how they learned to work hard and submit to the cycle of time (Dentan 2006). But since they usually don't work to earn more money than they need to be comfortable, they strike outsiders as indolent—a word whose Latin root means "not suffering." Refusal to suffer

and an aversion to subordination makes coercive "economic development" difficult, even when you relocate the people into rows of mutually identical stifling tin-roofed houses (chapter 8).

Another similarity between AA and Semai traditions is that, rather like the first three Steps of AA, Semai séances involve embracing terror, a skill they say they learned from the violent Thunder Lord. Usually Semai don't remember much about the trances, but afterward, they say, life goes more smoothly, with fewer quarrels and demonic attacks. It's a relief, like "letting go" in AA.

In their séances, Semai temporarily reject violence—killing, wounding, mockery—and instead love and nurture their demonic spirit guides, of whom Thunder Lord is the greatest. The Perak word for séance, *n'asik*, remember, comes from an Arabic word for erotic surrender and thus for the Sufi surrender to the God of Love that Rumi celebrates. The original plan for AA was to culminate in a similar mystical experience of the sort William James describes, a surrender to a more or less Christian God. There are significant "cultural" differences between Sufi *asyyik*, Christian mysticism, and Semai *n'asik*, of course. But the second historically derives from the first, in the waning days of El 'Andalus, and Semai, Sufi missionaries, or both saw enough mutual similarity between each other's rituals to give them the same name. That perception and my own needs led me into the literature of mysticism, which I had theretofore found unintelligible and repellent.

One apparent difference between AA and Semai ideology is that Semai imagine that, as they surrender to the demonic powers, those powers surrender to them (chapter 4). I'm not sure the difference is important. Who is the Lover and who the Beloved in Sufism and Catholic Christianity is also pretty ambiguous. In the end, they're the same. The difference in emphasis may reflect Semai stress on individual autonomy and rejection of subordination.

But again, participation in AA social structure is explicitly individualistic and egalitarian. Mutual aid and identification with the fellowship are important values in AA, as among Semai, but neither group has any mechanism other than peer pressure for coercing conformity (chapter 6). The identity between people and *guniik* is always transient. Individual autonomy always reasserts itself.

1990s: Children

What the children hadn't learned to do was to modulate or translate, their thoughts into the refined, socially coded answers of adults. It was true that their moral logic was occasionally skewed, but their opinions were still considered.

And I wanted to know what they thought. (Hooper 2002:51–52)

An interest in the notion of relief by surrender to what overwhelms you with pain and terror began to lead me into unfamiliar territory. For one thing, I began to think about children. I hadn't paid much intellectual attention to Semai children. They were always around, in my house, sometimes on my lap while I was trying to work, but not of any significance, you know, more like the chicks whose constant omnipresent peeppeeppeep turned my tape recordings into baby chicken soundscapes. Early on, I had been struck by Semai indifference to obedience and their horror at the idea of corporal punishment. "We don't *ajar* our kids," one man explained, using a Malay word that means *teach, instruct, advise, correct and guide, scold, beat*. "We don't hit our kids. Malays are always hitting hitting hitting their kids. That's why our kids are strong and healthy, and Malay kids are like baby rats." His wife expressed shock at the very idea of corporal punishment: "Suppose you hit your child and it DIED?" Very different from my childhood. But I mentally dismissed noncoercive child rearing, as a facet of a nonviolent and egalitarian ethos, ignoring the way Semai taught their children to fear strangers and seek solace from adults they knew.

By the 1990s, though, I had become more interested in children. Americans were beginning an intense and obsessive concern with child abuse. The corporate media began to feature stories about child sexual abuse by strangers, as Semai child rearing featured the fear of kidnapping and mutilation by strangers, although the people most likely to hurt children are everywhere their kinsmen and neighbors. But "conservatives" in America also began to advocate increasingly severe forms of corporal punishment for children, giving rise to a brisk cottage industry in guides to "discipline" and instruments like whips and paddles. The idea that caressing children is evil and beating them good seemed almost the opposite of Semai praxis (Dentan 2001a).

I should have paid attention to children earlier, of course. The relationship between children and adults seems to be a "natural metaphor" for power relations in most societies (Juli and Dentan 2008). The invisibility of children to me in the 1960s and 1970s was an instance of the invisibility of "subalterns" to their fellow citizens. The way Semai treated and thought about children and the way children learned to be Semai began to seem increasingly important aspects of Semai peaceability (Dentan 2001a). I began to pay intellectual attention to ideas of child rearing in the abstract and to children in my neighborhood, my children's friends in particular. The kids' consequent affection and shared analyses of their lives helped me personally and professionally.

Talking with the kids, I began to see that children are almost always overwhelmed. Almost half a dozen of them lived in situations that seemed to me in some ways abusive. The kids swore me to secrecy: better the familiar and painful than life among strangers. Bruno Bettelheim's insight

into the phenomenon of "identification with the oppressor," the Stockholm syndrome, as a response to intense terror, seemed disturbingly relevant to some of the kids' experiences and to their responses. Such identification, said Anna Freud, was a fundamental ego defense mechanism, the way children learn who they are and so escape condemnation and punishment by adults. It seemed also to explain the less stark response of "social identification" that social psychologists talk about in which people in the lower strata of society identify with their "betters." Like several other researchers, I had been surprised by Semai "double consciousness," their way of seeing the world not only through their own eyes but simultaneously through what they conceived the Malay view to be. Now it seemed to make sense.

And the kids' problems reminded me of my own response to beatings, which I hadn't thought about for years. There comes a point during a prolonged beating when you stop struggling, your muscles relax, and you enter a detachment that feels like floating in a pale yellow void, the color I suppose from the blood in your eyelids, aware of the pain but somehow not involved, indifferent. Surrender, letting-go, see?

But even identification with the oppressor, the most complete surrender imaginable, need not lead to subordination (Lechner 2003). Max Weber suggests that a concern with obedience emerges in human societies only after the development of militarism. In the United States, advocates of corporal punishment sometimes talk about the importance of "discipline" in producing "Christian soldiers." That's what Semai see as *n'ajiar* and reject, perhaps because they lack a militaristic tradition.

Recently

People are, after all, capable of bellicose behavior. But bellicosity, although it may be an asset for warriors, only hampers soldiers, whose primary virtues are discipline and obedience. However uncomfortable the terminology has become in recent decades, primitive warfare really is distinct from civilized warfare, and the difference between bellicosity and obedience is crucial. . . . Armies are complex, hierarchical, and disciplined social organizations of soldiers, not ephemeral gatherings of more-or-less independent warriors. (Hacker 2004:153)

Finally, in time of war, I've recently become more sympathetic with the plight of young men. It's easy not to like them. They are everywhere prone to bellicosity, more likely to commit acts of brutality than any other age cohort. It's hard not to imagine that they have chromosomal, hormonal, or neurological predispositions, if not to physical violence, then to uncontrolled energy and the resulting wild behavior that prompt American authorities to drug so many of their boy-children with amphetamines like



Lang with submachine gun. Just entering his teens, Lang was like most Iitaaw, indeed like most young men everywhere, anxious to be as cool and hip as imaginable. In early 1992, he and a couple of other boys carved themselves an array of weapons from the soft, light, and easily shaped wood of a giant pulley tree (*Astonia* sp.), which Semai traditionally use for disposable ritual utensils like the sickness figures some subgroups use during séances. The paraphernalia of violent oppression is glamorous for Iitaaw. That's what social psychologists mean when they talk about "identification with the oppressor/ aggressor" (just as in the hairdo of the mnaaleh in illustration 2.1). AK-47s and Nikes, what a vision! River Waar, 1992. Photograph by R. K. Dentan.

and to jail so many others. It's easy to blame young men for their disconnectedness, their irresponsibility. Semai and Americans do it routinely. Young men are an affliction in most societies. Social pathologies flourish among them: violence, suicide, the dark pestilence of addictions. "Testosterone crazed," say Americans. "No brains," say Semai, and mock their preening and self-importance.

Semai are just beginning to reward belligerence the way we do. Young men, *lithaw*, are just beginning to join complex, hierarchical, and disciplined social organizations of soldiers. It's there, say Semai, that violence and drunkenness flourish. The discipline, *n'ajiar*, that Max Weber says stems from such organization is not yet a salient part of child rearing, though the battering that accompanies it is beginning to appear, facilitated by drinking alcohol. But in the old days, this belligerence was focused on hunting and its spiritual equivalent, trancing, *n'asik*.

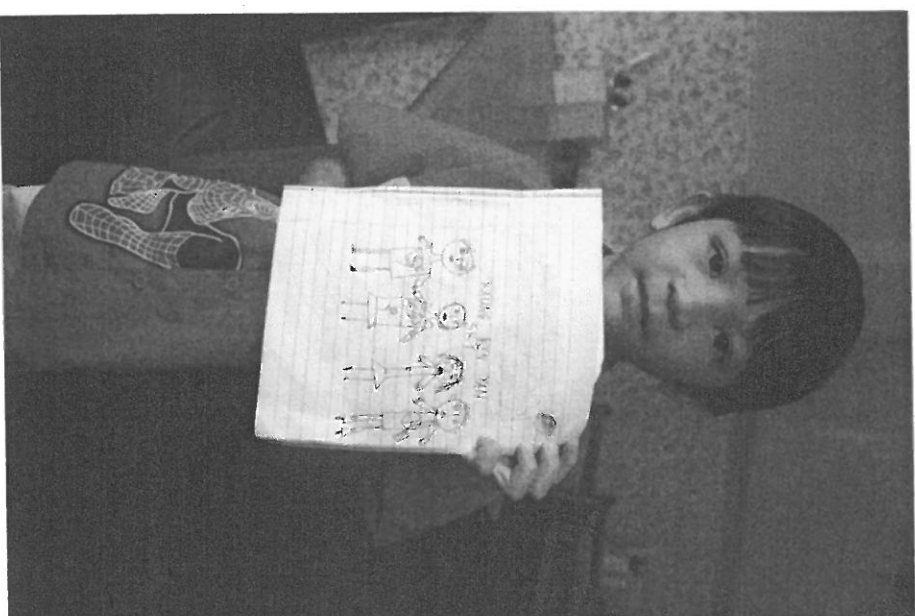
WHAT CAN "WE" LEARN FROM SEMAI?

It's a mutual joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians. (Melville 1989:72)

Theory

In summary, what may most usefully be said of the Semai is that they do not deny human nature, but do their very best to hobble it wherever necessary, in the interest of balance and human welfare. 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 1995:157)

Lyall Watson's assessment of the Semai adaptation to violence is unusually generous. Most physical anthropologists dismiss them as "losers," as if "losing" were an unusual and vaguely shameful experience for human beings and not an environmental stress like other environmental stresses to which people need to adapt. I suspect that this dismissal comes out of social Darwinism, not Darwinian evolutionary theory. It reflects 1) capitalist values, which, as Weber argues, construe riches as a measure of Divine favor and the market as the universal measure of worth, and 2) macho militaristic inequality, according to which beaten people should (and do) feel unworthy and ashamed. But temporary defeat in war or economic struggle is not the same as extinction or even relative lack of fitness. What Darwin says in this matter is that



Today, ethnographers come from all over to learn about West Malaysian indigenous peoples. The back-and-forth with the publisher somehow led to the disappearance of the names of this set of ethnographers, of the young Burmese refugee artist who sketched them, and of the Japanese ethnographer who took this picture, but perhaps it's as well that we all remain generic. We descended on the restaurant, where no one spoke Malay or English, none of us able to speak Burmese, but with many gestures and a lot of goodwill on all sides were able to communicate well enough that we could all congratulate ourselves on our abilities in that area. From left to right in the sketch we are (bald bespectacled) American, (dress-wearing) Semelai (a people related to Semai), Malay (with head scarf), and Japanese (with camera). The isolation has broken in which apolitical terrorists flourished and peaceful ways of life could sustain themselves, making new forms of community possible, at least in theory.

at all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase. (quoted in de Waal 1996:23)

Computer modeling suggests, in fact, that among egalitarian peoples like Semai and most pre-Neolithic societies (except for specialized big-game hunters), violence and feuding reduce survival rates and, for surviving populations, replace hunger as the second-leading cause of death after old age. Excluding large segments of the population from violence and revenge significantly improves survival rates. So does nonviolent conflict resolution. Flight from known aggressors enhances the survival of the total population at the cost of social cohesion (Dentan 2008; Younger 2005). The model, in other words, reproduces a segment of Semai history as, in evolutionary terms, a success (cf. Dentan 1992).

And there's a certain parochialism in assuming that stratified militaristic states are, in the same terms, successful. Depending on how you define "human," you can measure human evolution in millions, hundreds of thousands, or, at least, tens of thousands of years. For such states to be demonstrably successful, a conservative would want them to last, say, 50,000 years, the minimum estimate of how long egalitarian human societies have lasted. There are some indications, indeed, that stratified militaristic states threaten the survival of the human species, let alone of statist social organization, and that's after only 6,000 years or so. Maybe states will be the "noble failure."

Cultural adaptation involves changes of all sorts that continually affect our relationship to our environment. It results in changes that can never be ideal, as the environment itself is constantly changing. No adaptation or response is a perfect or final solution . . . each carries with it certain costs and hazards.

Adaptation is always opportunistic: We take advantage of whatever resources are available to us at a particular time. . . . Adaptation is at once the solution of a particular problem and the source of unanticipated changes and, inevitably, new problems. (Bates 1998:9)

The good news, if there is good news in such a prospect, is that, in the ruins of state societies, people, even children, often spontaneously create new societies on the egalitarian sharing model of societies like Semai. As I've pointed out, these humane inventions usually get short shrift from statist conflict resolution specialists (chapter 6). The wiring seems built in, at least as much as the wiring for violence. Like all other adaptations, including violence, it works when conditions are right and not when they aren't.

Practice

Readers have a right to expect authors to make sense of what they have forced on the readers. I've indicated how tentative I feel about doing that, how inadequate, how much I fear what Arthur Kleinman (1985) awkwardly calls "delegitimizing" individual Semai experience. But I'm a dutiful type. So what can we learn—and from now on by "we," I mean "we in the bosom of industrialized states"—what can we learn by reading about Semai?

We need to set aside some prejudices. In America, now, it is a truism that violence not only works but works better under any circumstances than anything else. One of the most appealing things about violence is that it *feels* like a simplification, especially with frustrating "impossible" problems. When your children are being "impossible," you "pop 'em one"—just to "get their attention"—*That'll learn ya*. Confronted with the impossibly complex Gordian knot, Alexander the Great, that model soldier, cuts it in two. Indiana Jones, faced with an menacing Arab warrior demonstrating *silat*, the complex and beautiful Arab martial art, shoots him. "How can we tell heretics from Christians?" asks the captain. "Kill 'em all," says the despicable Simon de Montfort. "God'll sort 'em out." At the Army-Navy store downtown, you can buy T-shirts with that as a slogan. When you do yield to the simplifying impulse, even when you read anecdotes like these, you get a little gasp of (sometimes guilty) relief and pleasure.

I suspect that little rush of relief, often denied almost as soon as felt, underlies the old learning theorists' postulate that "aggression" always came from "frustration." Turns out that's not true. Not universally, anyway. There's an apocryphal story that at the Battle of Manila in 1898, Admiral Dewey rebuked his sailors for cheering as a Spanish battleship sank: "Don't cheer, boys. Those poor fellows are *dying*." I hope he said that. But the joy that made the American sailors cheer was mostly from the warriors' prayer: *they die, not us*. Power feels good. Violence unchecked, pure force, "raw power," as we say: hey, that's *real* power. It's the terrorists' creed: "Only violence is pure and uncorrupted and uncompromising" (Dingley 2001:453).

The justifications and rationalizations come later: they're animals, she's sleeping around, he asked for it, it's my kid. I remember reading a slaver's diary: he said he didn't doubt that Africans were the intellectual equals of Europeans, that he had carried Socrates or Plato in the holds of his ships. But, he said, it made no difference to him one way or the other. He was just making a buck, right? On *In the Life*, a PBS series, a young man who had killed a gay man for no special reason said, in effect, "Tell the truth, it sort of slipped my mind. I don't mean it wasn't a big deal or anything.

But I didn't think about it." Once the victims are available, in the chilling Malay simile, "it's like killing ants."

To think that we can ward off violence and the chaos it causes by *reading about it* is as pathetic as to think we can accomplish the same end by eating meat off different plates from fish. The mid-twentieth-century Marxist Adorno says that exercises like this book constitute the knee-jerk ideological response of the capitalist state to the threat of proletarian unrest, which capitalism constructs as chaotic violence. The cure would be "scientific management" of conflict, coupled with "social engineering" to eliminate the injustices that feed violence (e.g., Luke 1998:57-63). Conservatives could embrace the former, liberals the latter. Who could object? It's all so *zweckrational*, "instrumentally reasonable," as bureaucracy should be.

We don't have stateless societies any more. If the people are on this planet and have no state, they're in a "failed state." Restore order (by force if necessary), ship in the conflict-resolution mavens, we can bring "peace" by the use of violence or the threat of violence: "*Potentially, war can be eliminated and replaced by effective and just conflict management procedures and institutions*" (Fry 2006:262; italics in the original).

But then you need a bureaucracy with enforcement powers. That's where reactionary capitalist America and neofeudal capitalist Malaysia agree and even the old social fascist Soviet Union. And intellectuals like myself rush, as Benedict Anderson and Max Weber said we would, to provide the information that will strengthen the hand of the *zweckrational* bureaucrats. If people like Semai, from whose ranks administrators hardly ever arise, should object? "Scientific managers" and social engineers have, at their backs and out of sight, willy-not-to-know-nilly, the threat of violence.

Most would-be managers and social engineers are fundamentally decent folk. Douglas Fry, who advocates a bureaucratic Final Solution to violence, is one of the most fundamentally decent people I know. People like this, mostly from the post-Christian Western bourgeoisie, don't believe in violence as a disciplinary measure. Most grown-ups, even nasty ones and patriarchal Abrahamic fundamentalists, are not consistently cruel to children. Usually, we're indifferent or even kind. We're not *that* hard to love and trust. But it's not *zweckrational* to let one's subordinates gun up the program, is it? To let children throw snits or "act out" when they need to do or learn what adults know is good for them? When appeals to gentle reason fail, what else is there to do but cause a little pain? Lovingly, maybe. They'll thank you for it later.

So violence ultimately isn't the problem, is it? As two longtime students of violence declare, people hurt each other "because they can" (Gelles and Straus 1988: 17-51). You don't need to have been an abused child to be-

come an abuser. All you need is 1) to be a little stressed out, 2) to have people less powerful than you are *available*, and 3) to be unaware of more powerful disapproving people watching. Rationalizations, justifications, and obfuscations help make violence happen, but it happens without them, too.

The problem is letting some people be more powerful than others. Semai know that: it's stupid to hurt others when you can get hurt doing so. For thousands of years, almost all human societies recognized the danger of letting some people have more power than others and took active steps to maintain equality. Semai still did that in the 1960s. The danger, of course, comes from the calculus of violence: people are much more likely to resort to violence when they are the powerful ones because the consequences are much less likely to hurt them. They will tend to reject conflict resolution techniques, however sophisticated. Inequality breeds violence. Any schoolchild can tell you that. That's the paradox inherent in bureaucratic "solutions" to violence.

The more or less simultaneous rise of the state, state religion and capitalist mercantilism (the "globalization" of the Neolithic) was a social disaster for most people. Inequality became the rule. Instead of coordination, you had subordination and superordination. Only marginalized people, people like Semai, could maintain anything like the old freedoms. For millennia, peasant revolutionaries in Europe strove to overthrow the ever-strengthening hierarchies, hearkening back to a vaguely remembered, idealized, egalitarian past:

When Adam delved
And Eve span,
Who was then
The gentle-man?

The problem with violent revolution, however, is that it mostly fails, and when it succeeds, it succeeds only in creating new inequalities. In America today, egalitarians seek to "empower" the oppressed. But all these struggles reek of "identification with the aggressor." The State is a kind of cancer that spreads itself everywhere by imperialism or by reproducing itself among previously state-free peoples, whom we now call "failed states." Overthrowing the State, one state at a time, is impossible. And states don't "wither away."

Recruitment into the lowest stratum of the state, subjection to alien impersonal institutions of justice, corrodes egalitarianism (chapter 6; Jul, Williams-Hunt, and Dentan 2008). Competition with other Semai for scarce resources (like land, which outsider landgrabs make scarce) erodes community solidarity. The loss of refugia to which one may flee from

quarrels with neighbors or from outside oppression eliminates a safety valve:

In the past, peasant response to undue exactions or injustice had been flight, but there was no refuge in a peninsula dominated by a single colonial power (Andaya and Andaya 1982:202)

Flight, the traditional Semai response to oppression, now works against formal local institutions like the *bicarrai*; for one can flee from Semai society itself, physically or spiritually (chapter 6). Alcohol potentiates violence. Religion, despised by one's non-Semai neighbors, loses its power. The outside world is indifferent now, not murderous. Peaceability falters and fails (chapter 8; Dentan 1995, 2007; Dentan and Williams-Hunt 1999).

Life on the margins of the state, traditional Semai-style society, becomes impossible. Whatever the origins of Semai peaceability, its maintenance depended on a pervasive egalitarianism that was possible only to the degree that Semai could keep away from outsiders and outsiders were willing to let them do so. People can—and probably should—create self-marginalized peaceable enclaves in which egalitarianism can flourish as long as it doesn't threaten state or monied interests, though. It takes a lot of attention to maintaining boundaries (Dentan 1994; Lechner 2003; Niman 1997), and outsiders will always be hostile (Niman 2008)

To minimize violence, protect potential abusers from stress and keep people as equal as you can. Of course, the transition would be rough: as economic change brings some power to women in impoverished and often patriarchal societies, men become more likely to beat them, trying to terrorize them back into traditional deferent submissive behavior (e.g., McClusky 2001). Under egalitarian conditions, frustration in sexual love was the only motive that was likely to motivate Semai to risk the formal and informal penalties that violence could bring, to lose the love of their peers.

What Semai can teach us, if anything, is that "surrender" in the sense I am using the word can be a successful adaptation to the imperialism of the state, state religion, and capitalist globalizing. Caring for children and fostering one's friends also "work" in evolutionary terms: "love" we used to call that before "love" became a four-letter word.

Freedom, I suspect, is utterly negative. Kily and Melville's Bartleby had it right. If you can't flee, you can at least withdraw your consent. Power depends on consent. The consequences of saying "I prefer not to" can be vicious. Differential power permits, indeed encourages, viciousness. But if you can accept whatever consequences follow your actions or inactions, then you can be free. I think that's how traditional Semai freedom worked. People would act to accomplish their ends, knowing all the

time—and *accepting*—that success was not under their control. That's what I've been calling a "surrendered" attitude.

It would help if people would treat striving for power with the fear and contempt it deserves, as Semai do. But the opposite tendency seems to hold in industrialized societies today, nurtured by the constant capitalist generation of new unfulfilled desires and, paradoxically, by the increasing powerlessness of the mass of the people. Instead of rebuilding America's decaying schools, the powers-that-be install surveillance cameras and metal detectors; instead of fostering their children, parents turn the family itself into a "power struggle." Everything is about the bottom line: "winning" and "losing." This obsession is not good for us. It makes it hard for us to learn anything from Semai. And it doesn't make us happy. So I'm not optimistic:

I read something once, in the public library, up in St. Charles. It said . . . in your life you end up back where you started, maybe way back when you were little. The difference is you understand it the second time around. But it don't do you no good. (Burke 1996:142)

(Dis)Respect

Official sources conspire to assure us that everything is OK, that ours is, in fact, the best of all possible worlds, and that it is getting better all the time. . . . Nothing is wrong; the threat has been dealt with; there is nothing to see. . . . What is avoided is the radical price paid (usually by others, willy nilly) in order that those of us who are privileged with the status of participants may go about solving the world's problems. (Redding 1998:21)

But the theory isn't what I'm interested in here. Theories come and go in anthropology. Young scholars seeking jobs have to trash the theories of their elders and peddle new ones, and then along comes another generation to do the same to the new hegemonic ideas. The cumulative part of anthropology so far is not theory but facts, ethnography. Despite the biases in all ethnographic accounts, like the ones I've tried to sketch in this one, we can still learn from old accounts, though we curse the old authors for omitting facts that seem crucial to our new minds, as our heirs will curse us. We can still learn interesting and important things about Scythians from Herodotus and Britons and Germans from Tacitus and about Mongols from Juvaini and Marco Polo. The mere documented existence of peaceable peoples like Semai undermines theories of human nature congenial to American lives (Fry 2004). Ethnographies are mountains and endure; theories are mayflies and don't.

And the basic rule in writing or reading ethnography is "humility," a word cognate with "humus" and "human," from Sanskrit *bhumi*, earth.

We're mud, we humans, earthen wetware. We need to recognize that we're all just mudpeople, that we must not dismiss anyone's life as unworthy of our attention. No one is so despicable or stupid or depraved or pathetic that paying attention to what that person has to say and what that person does "wastes" our time. What we can learn from Semai depends on how willing we are to learn. We needn't claim to be completely open minded. Nobody is, and nobody would believe us. But we need to remember that, as Senator Pat Moynihan used to say, "Nobody knows everything. But everybody knows something."

But being willing isn't hard. I love primary sources, I love listening to people, I love ethnography: that's where you learn things the way you learned as a child, semiconsciously, in context, holistically (to use a much overused word), observations just heaping up until they overwhelm your intellectual categories and you have to admit to yourself that you got everything utterly wrong and have to start sorting and resorting again.

Semai do not exist to teach "us" moral lessons. If we, whoever "we" are, are to draw any lessons from their lives, which are as variegated and ever changing as our own, we must treat them with the same respect we owe each other, as complex individuals joined to each other in complex ways. The simple statement that they traditionally committed fewer acts of physical violence than we do opens the door to layers and layers of complexity. If you're interested in understanding violence and peaceability, you need to take Semai seriously, not as comic-strip primitives. I've tried to do that in this book.

The Semai Achievement

Let's pause a moment and consider the magnitude of the Semai achievement. The title of this book is ambiguous, on purpose. You can read the "overwhelming" as gerund or participle, as grammarians say. Overwhelmed by terrorism, Semai overwhelmed terror. This was a society in which people defined "violence" so broadly that they did not allow themselves the cheap, shrouded cruelties that pervade most people's lives. It was a place where people were ashamed to commit what they defined as "violence," which for them included disrespect, abandonment, and betrayal.

That doesn't mean that they never did commit violence or that they were crucially different from other peoples. The stunning achievement of Semai is not that they worked with better building materials than most people have available nor that they lived in Edenic isolation from the horrors that form the backdrop of most human lives. On the contrary, they took those horrors; added concepts from a stark proto-Saivist religion in which God was brutal, incontinent, and stupid; and transmuted the result

into a triumph for the guile and wit of ordinary decent people. And, of course, their solution didn't and doesn't always work.

That's part of what this book is about, how the system of peaceability worked, how it failed, what the stresses were in the system, what the personal costs were. Semai are people as imperfect as you find anywhere, and Semai life is not a quick fix for the problems of violence. Their achievement deserves the more respect because they are *not* "essentially" nonviolent, not better people than anyone else, and still they made the sacrifices that led to peace. One of the great barriers to creating a peaceable society in the Euroamerican world is the attempt to have everything perfect and free. Perfectionism is a sickness, and peace will cost you.

Most Semai don't respect their achievement. It's too closely associated with poverty, misery, terror, and insult. Most Malaysians have never even heard of Semai and accord them therefore the disrespect of ignorance. Of those who have heard of them, most think of them as "naked savages," the Chinese Malaysian phrase for them. To this "naked savagery," people respond according to their personal biases, with pity, contempt, or paternalism. Most Malaysians who know anything about Semai see a backward and pitiful people, living "unprogressive" (*kurang maju*) lives, needing to be awakened (*di-bangunkan*) by state or private developers. There's some contempt in this attitude, and for some people the contempt is all there is. And finally there are a few who see them through the eyes of the environmental movement, as Rousseauvian Noble Savages, an illusion that serious intimacy with the people will destroy. Of the peaceability, all these outsiders see is the timidity and weakness.

And there are Semai with all these attitudes, of course. That's how "double consciousness" and "identification with the oppressor" work. They shield people like Semai from feeling the poverty, misery, terror, and insult. But let's not blame Malays or "Malay culture" for the violent trauma in which Semai nonviolence seems to have originated nor for the more genial violation in which it is ending. Colonialism, internal or external, makes its own demands on peoples, on colonialists and their prey. The ways they respond are similar, everywhere and at all times (Dentan 1997). Their responses aren't morally edifying, but responses to power rarely are. The first thing we humans need to say to ourselves, wherever we live, is what Alain Resnais says of the Nazis at the end of *Night and Fog*, his 1955 documentary, as the camera pans slowly around the wintery death camp at Auschwitz:

Are their faces different from ours? ... There are those who sincerely look on these ruins today as if the monster was dead and buried beneath them, those who feign taking hope again as the image fades, as if there were a cure for the

sickness of these camps; those who pretend to believe that all this happened only once, at a certain time and in a certain place; those who refuse to see; who are deaf to the endless cry. (Dentan tr.)

But you, reader, have enough vignettes and information to form your own opinion, the way you would form your opinion of that family that lives across the street. I don't have any suggestion about how you should evaluate the Semai way of life: just that you should be respectful.

CODA

The era of directed change is happening everywhere, jungle and primary forest are becoming targets of the development projects that mankind is launching, directed change will happen, and happen fast, because mankind is always looking for ways to fulfill the needs of their lifestyle. (Blurb on the cover of *Nong Pai* ["New Path"], the house organ of the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli, #2, 1991)

This *Nong Pai* text accompanies two pictures, one of an old-style Semai settlement, with scattered houses of various types surrounded by green fields and forests, the other of a "relocation scheme," with a line of look-alike government-issue houses surrounded by mud bulldozed into featurelessness, the landscape of Nkuu' the Destroyer. You want to agree with Kathe Kojia (1994:204), the horror writer: "Things can always get worse; and they do." But that would be wrong. Partly.

I don't have anything else to say about Semai peace and violence, I think. The system itself grew out of injustice, and in some ways things are better now. The slave raids have stopped. The old system is falling apart so that it's hard to gather more information about it. Nothing endures, right? Not the earth itself. It's time for a different story. But we can remember, as the Chinese remembered for thousands of years, that

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. (Laozi, quoted in Le Guin 1997:20)

A collapsing star falls into itself until it reaches a critical diameter called the Schwarzschild radius. At this point, the star can transmit no more information, though the collapse continues, we think. But to an observer, the star appears frozen at the point just before the final descent into what astronomers call a naked singularity.

Writing this, I think of evenings in Malaysia, the sun just gone down, sitting on my house ladder, looking across the valley at the rain forest in the gathering darkness, greens mutating into rich blackness, hearing its white noise, insectile chirr modulating into something harsher and more staccato, knowing that if I went in, I would be lost:

We are safe here the war
is somewhere else the war is
in our heads but we are safe.
Safe. The banks open and close
and open: we are saved. (from "We Know," Goodman 1989:33)