A sense of space: land struggles of the Semai of peninsular Malaysia

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Chapter Five: Making a Living in a Contested Place as observed in 1993-4

For centuries now the Semai were able to make a living in the Malayan forests on the basis of strategies I have briefly described in Chapters Two and Three. They had developed a broad-spectrum economy and a specific mode of production as well as an organizational structure to match both. In the course of the colonial period and especially during the last decades, their prime resource base viz. their forest habitat became disputed space. Although the Semai still have access to forest lands their tenural rights have never been recognized neither by the colonial state nor by the post-colonial state. State-supported projects and private enterprise increasingly restrict their access to the primary source of their material existence and social reproduction, the vast forest.

How did the Semai continue to make a living in the face of these circumstances? What strategies had they adopted over these past decades and what consequences did they have for the Semai? I shall address these questions in this chapter.

Orang Asli economics in general has been popularly and officially described in a negative way as pindah-randah (shifting) (Zawawi, 1995:6) to reproduce what is an equally "misleading assumption of... [their] weak links to land" (Gomes, 1990:23). The state-sponsored development projects for the Orang Asli, therefore, were aimed at "settling" the latter and "stabilizing" their economy. In the face of these measures the Semai have developed an economy which is mobile yet firmly centred around their customary lands. Moreover, it is a way of making a living that is much embedded in their social life and needs to be understood in terms of Semai tenurial concepts which I have outlined in Chapter Two.

In answering these questions, I shall focus my attention on one of the three villages organized around the customary land of the Darat Legep Semai. To examine the socio-economic developments of all the three villages in their particular differences would require more than one chapter. Nevertheless, where necessary, I shall discuss the linkages of these three villages, which have come to share in a common customary territory.
The Making of Kampung Canu

In this section, I shall briefly discuss some of the major efforts by the Semai as well as the JHEOA to rebuild the former's livelihood following the Emergency period. By 1959, all the Semai of Sungai Nam had returned from the detention camp to their settlement sites located at the fringe of the forests. They re-built their houses in two clustered settlements; one around Atuk Jok's tmpaat and the other further upstream where Atuk Jenang's homestead was located (Map...). Prior to their detention, the swidden farms the Semai had opened near their settlement sites were taken over by some Chinese farmers and converted into vegetable farms. A new Malay settlement had also sprouted up which ate away into part of their productive land. A Canu villager who was old enough to remember those events expressed the mood of the Semai situation at the time:

...what remained of our houses, when we left, were all torn down when we returned... our farms we opened up were taken over by others... we had to start all over again and it was difficult. If the JOA did not help us with food and money and if not for our fruit orchards we would surely have starved...

Although the Semai were faced with the difficult task of re-establishing their livelihood there were two factors working in their favour. First, they received financial, food and medical aid not only from the JHEOA but as I shall discuss in the next chapter, from other charitable organizations. Second, although their swidden farms were occupied by others, much of the Semai fruit and rubber trees, though unattended during the war years, were still in their productive life. For instance, the rubber smallholding which Atuk Pendue's descent group had begun in 1910 with twenty five seedlings measured 64 acres when the JHEOA surveyed it in 1969. Moreover, given that the Malaysian smallholdings generally benefited from rubber prices during the 1960s to the early 70s (Rudner, 1994) it was not long before the Semai began reworking these plots and receiving the returns. Although the rubber smallholding was the "property" of Atuk Jok's descent group its resources were shared with members of the other descent groups who had come to settle in the former's tmpaat and depend on the common resources. The grand-daughter of Atuk Pendue (the grand-father of the descent group which "owns" the rubber smallholding) explained the Semai custom underlying this practice of sharing resources in difficult times:

...genhaaq...it means that the Semai who has sufficient land and food must help another who is suffering or starving without land and food. This is how the Orang Asli lived
through the Japanese Occupation and the Emergency years...after the Emergency we could return to our sakaa lands and our fruit and rubber trees... Just as other Semai shared their land and food with us when we fled during the war, we need to share with those who have lost their land.

That which was more promising than the rubber smallholding for the Semai were their fruit orchards located in the forests. To this day, these orchards are valuable to the Semai not only for the subsistence as well as the cash incomes they provide but they also represent the major portion of the Semai's sakaa (inheritance) landholdings. Although there are no exact figures on the number and sizes of the Semai orchards for the 1960s, there are two telling indicators of their extent and productive viability. First, before their displacements in the 1940s and 50s the Darat Legep Semai descent groups had established fruit orchards from "Atuk Jok's settlement to Bukit Dalam", a land area that measures some 60,000 hectares, and the same land area they returned to after the Emergency. Given that the total population of Canu and Pendue (the Darat Legep Semai unit) numbered 224 in 1969, even if only one quarter of the aforementioned land area was cultivated with fruits the person to productive orchard-land ratio would have been almost 70 acres. The second indicator of the extent and economic viability of the Semai orchard land was the decision made by the Canu-Pendue villagers in 1964 to take in the Ini villagers to share in the former's lengriik space. As a result of this intake by 1969 an additional 95 persons from the Ini village had to share in the Canu-Pendue land resources. In Table... I show the estimated availability of customary land on a per capita basis for the three Semai villagers in the 1960s. Even with the addition of the Ini villagers each Semai of all the villagers would have enjoyed about 190 acres of customary land.

The Ini villagers were not the only Semai to be displaced by some development scheme or another in the 1960s, and who came to share in the customary land and resources of the Canu-Pendue lengriik. Prior to the JHEOA re-grouping of these Semai villages, in the latter half of the 1960s, five other families had migrated into the Canu settlement itself. They came from two different places, one a settlement near the town of Teluk Intan and the other was Kampung Lama. Of the three families from Kampung Lama,

Wah Jai, a widow in her sixties, had moved into Canu in the early 1960s. She came with her husband and three young children from Kampung Lama, which is some 40 kilometres away. They came with two other families from the same kampung. These families were not related to any of the Canu-Pendue descent groups. They had come to
know some Canu villagers when some of them had sought refuge in the former’s settlement during the Japanese Occupation. They decided to move to Canu when their previous forestlands were cleared by FELDA for the setting up of a Malay rural-development settlement scheme. The JHEOA had promised to resettle them but like many other villagers of Kampung Lama, Wah Jai and her family decided to move into other Semai settlements. Presently Wah Jai and her unmarried daughter live in one household while her two married sons and their families have their own household. They all presently share *sakaa* rights in Atuk Jok’s kampok lands.

Semai mobility in the 1960s was not limited to in-migration of families into the Canu-Pendue territory. I came across at least three other Semai villages - one located about 3 kilometres from Canu and the other two some 40 kilometres to the north of Canu - which received new families into their villages in the 1960s. In one of those villages, Kg. Sana, four Semai families had in-migrated from as far as the state of Pahang.

The aforementioned examples of Semai movements were based on the links that were created in earlier movements between Semai groups. In the case of the Ini villagers and the five families, their movements were a reverse flow of the earlier Darat Legep Semai movements during the Emergency into the previous territories of the Ini and Kg. Lama families. The same was the case of the Semai from Pahang who had migrated into Kg. Sana. However, there were Semai families whose migration to the Canu area represented a re-activating of their land rights based on kinship links. For example, two of the other five families who had moved into Canu in the mid-1960s had ambilineal ties with some members of Canu. In the case of one family for instance -

Wah Nor had originally belonged to one of the Canu descent groups. She is the daughter of Atuk Zam who opened the settlement of Bukit Empad. However, when she married, sometime in the 1930s, she followed her husband to his ramage group territory located near the town of Sungkai. Then, in 1963, she, her husband and two children moved into Canu. Their reason for moving - Chinese farmers had encroached on their landholdings while they were in detention.

There were other productive activities, apart from the rubber and fruit landholdings, which were possible on the extensive Semai-customary land and which made their place an attractive site for other displaced Semai. These included subsistence-cash oriented activities such as hunting, fishing, gathering, etc. Again, access to the primary means of production - the forest-*lengriik* land - resided in the kinship practice which original descent group members and the new Semai settlers negotiated and constructed among themselves. I have
mentioned these practices briefly in Chapters Two and Three, and I shall return to them in a later section. The point I wish to make here is that, despite their displacements in the 1940s and 1950s, in the 1960s the Semai were able to return to the range and mix of productive activities, which they had established in the decades before. They were able to do so for three reasons. First, the Semai continued to have access to and use of the vast tracks of their productive forest-based "landholdings". That these were more than sufficient for their needs is attested by the fact that they were able to share their resources with other Semai who were displaced from their lands. The second reason was their flexible kinship practice that allowed for an equality of producers, or the same access of all the Semai to the main factors of production. Semai tenurial patterns are not something fixed and given and neither are they recognized by the state. Semai land and natural resources tenure are part of a socio-spatial universe negotiated by Semai persons in their everyday relations with others, and not limited to only those belonging to the same ambilineal descent group, band or village but other Orang Asli and non-Orang Asli groups who have come to share, or have encroached on the same geographical space. Finally, in the 1960s there was an established market for all the major commodities produced by the Semai viz. rubber, fruits and rattan. There are no data on actual production figures but the recollections of older Semai suggest that the 1960s were productive years for them despite "having to start all over again". According to the Canu headman, for instance,

...in a few years, [after the Semai returned to their settlements] we stopped depending on the handouts of the JOA. The petai prices were good and together with the rubber we tapped we were able to live as we did before the war... there were regular kenduri (Malay for feast) in the village... In those days, only a few villagers went out to look for work... If we did not make enough money, we could collect sufficient food from the forest.

While the Canu Semai were opening up and sharing their forest-located landholdings with new settlers in the 1960s, the JHEOA was beginning to implement programmes to remove the Semai from the forest economy altogether. As part of their "sedentarization and integration" policies (Nicholas, 1990:71), the JHEOA began in 1968 to organize Orang Asli settlements, especially "those Orang Asli groups living within the fringe of rural areas" (Jimin, 1983:55) into what was called "pattern settlements". As subsequent JHEOA Directors explained this process, in and through these "pattern settlements" the Orang Asli would be:
... housed in new Malay-type dwellings and provided with a piped water supply and facilities such as a school, community hall, health clinic and sanitary conveniences... [therein]... Orang Asli are encouraged to cultivate cash crops such as rubber, oil palm, and fruit trees in specially designated plots of land... (Carey, 1976)

...that the Orang Asli may participate effectively in the socio-economic development process... improve their standard of living through the improvement and modification of their agriculture... increase their earning capacity and income level by getting them directly involved with the market economy... (Jimin, 1983:113f)

The re-organizing of Orang Asli groups, such as the Canu Semai into pattern settlements, represented a rural development programme aimed at shifting Semai reliance on a forest-based economy to a "modern" agricultural productivity centred around the village. More concretely, in terms of a re-organization of production, the main thrust of the JHEOA was to gradually replace the Semai subsistence-oriented pursuits such as hunting-gathering, swidden-farming, etc. with a more efficient, market-oriented cultivation of rubber, oil palm and fruits (Jimin: 1972:6). Given that the Canu Semai were already engaged in the cultivation of rubber around their settlements, the JHEOA focused their attention to the upgrading of rubber production in Canu. As I mentioned earlier, the JHEOA carried out a survey of the rubber-planted areas around Canu demarcating them into household-held plots. Villagers were provided with new-technology training by RISDA (Rubber Industry Smallholders' Development Authority) officials accompanied by JHEOA fieldstaff. Agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, rubber pressing machines, etc. were also provided. Moreover, to ensure that the Semai persists in rubber production and not "return to the forest" the JHEOA took on some added measures. First, they provided monthly cash allowances to Canu heads of households to supplement their subsistence needs. Second, as a longer-term measure, the JHEOA assisted the villagers to replant the fringe tracks of their rubber plots with high yielding rubber seedlings. Thus, the production from original plots, supplemented by cash allowances, were to ensure that the Semai could meet their subsistence needs until the fringe blocks of high-yielding rubber matured. The villagers were promised that as soon as the new trees matured the original plots would also be replanted with new high-yielding rubber.

In line with government policy the Canu Semai were also allocated a specially designated "Orang Asli Area" with the promise that the JHEOA will apply to the Perak State Government for the land to be gazetted as an Orang Asli Reserve. 270 acres of land around

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the Semai settlement were marked out for this purpose. The villagers were also encouraged to cultivate within these allocated land short-term vegetables and fruits both for their own use as well as for sale. To this end, the JHEOA provided them with seeds, fertilizers and other agricultural inputs.

**Canu Village in 1994**

The village of Canu in 1994 was not the same settlement it was in the 1960s. The population of the village had more than doubled from 178 in 1969 to 456 in 1994 (Table...). The growth in the number of households and population is not only the result of marriages and births but because new families had moved into the village. In total, twelve new Semai families had moved into Canu since the 1960s. As for out-migration, five families have left the village because their men are employed in salaried positions in the towns. Those who are away from the village as individuals include about 15 young men who are full-time employed in urban-based blue-collar work. However, it is in their range of productive activities that the major changes and continuities of the economic life of Canu can be detected. It is also in this area that some important aspects of their contemporary *masalah tanah* can be illustrated. I shall examine these issues in the following sections.

**Kerjak Kampok**

The Semai use the term *kerjak kampok* to refer to the range of productive activities they engage in at different levels of their customary land. These activities include hunting, fishing, gathering, agricultural production, etc. Although most of the Canu villagers also frequently engage in temporary waged-labour, referred to as *kerjak bandar* (town work), they identify the kerjak kampok as the mainstay of their mixed subsistence-cash economy. It is more than economic reasons that constitutes *kerjak kampok* as an important place in the lives of the Semai. For example, all the families who have moved out of Canu and earn salaries make it a point to return to the village at least once or twice a year to engage in *kerjak kampok*. The reason for this is that by engaging in these activities they demonstrate that they
have not forgotten (inseep) their lengriik or customary territory. Among those who engage in waged-labour, the young men who are employed in salaried positions some 100 kilometres away return to the village more frequently. Almost all of them own a motorbike and would visit their village at least every fortnight, during weekends and holidays. The reason for their frequent returning as one young men put it is, again,

...to join in the kerjak kampok... especially during the fruit season or there is an order for rattan - then we will take our annual leave from our employer and return to the village to join in the collecting

One young man even quit his job at a tourist resort in 1993 in order to be around the village for the whole fruit season, explaining that he could always find another "cooie's job" the following year.

The Canu Semai do not follow the same tenurial patterns in the carrying out of their different kerjak kampok productive activities. As such, I shall continue this discussion in terms of the different ways the Semai organize their kerjak kampok activities.

Selai Nyeng

Although they do not possess any legal titles over any of their lands, all Canu households operate agriculturally productive customary land holdings. These land holdings are located both within their settlement sites i.e. the JHEOA-allocated Orang Asli Area as well as on State Forest Reserve lands. These land holdings fall into two categories. The first is the selai nyeng. These are small plots of land ranging in size from 0.25 to 1 acre and located in an around their settlement area. By their very name itself, selai refers to the swidden farms the Semai used to cultivate as a single or group of households in previous times. However, since the 1970s the Canu Semai have ceased to practise swidden farming due to pressures from the state. Today, the selai nyeng refers to these fixed, small farming plots held and operated by each household. Table... shows the mix of crops the Semai cultivate at one time on their selai nyeng. These crops are mainly grown for the villagers' own consumption. Occasionally, a particular household may decide to cultivate a single cash crop on their selai nyeng. This was the case in Beh/Wah Kenyet's household where they planted cassava, a four-month crop, on their 0.75-acre plot, the sale of which earned them RM$600.
Overall, however, as Tables... and ... illustrate, selai nyeng production does not figure as a main source of cash income for the villagers.

Work on the selai nyeng has become, as some villagers put it, "more and more the women's work". This was also apparent in a usual daily routine of the villagers. One of the first morning tasks for the women was the tending to these gardens and the feeding of chickens, the only livestock reared by the villagers. It is not surprising therefore that several women, from different households in the village, had recently begun to work together in each others’ selai plots with the intention of increasing productivity. And, in 1993, another group of women from all three villagers got together to set up a common selai for the cultivation of cash crops.

Kebun/Dusun production

The second form of landholdings held/operated by the Semai is the kebun and dusun. These are Malay terms, the former means "plantation/garden" and the latter "orchard". For the Semai, these terms are used to distinguish certain plots of land cultivated with different crops but following similar tenurial patterns. The kebun, therefore, refers to those plots of land grown primarily with rubber and the dusun to their fruit groves. Prior to the displacements the Semai experienced in the 1940s and 50s, these kebun/dusun plots were part of larger territories (tmpaat) on which individual Semai settlements were also located. These tmpaat which also contained what is now marked out as kebun/dusun were in turn located within the larger Semai country or lengriik. However, with the regroupment and resettlement of the Darat Legep Semai in the 1960s into the villages of Canu and Pendue, most of the villagers were removed from the immediate vicinity of what is now their kebun/dusun plots. However, they have continued to maintain their kebun/dusun landholdings, most of which are located on State Forest Reserves. Currently, the kebun/dusun maintained by the Canu Semai consists of 83 plots of land ranging from about 1 acre to about 30 acres. 28 of these plots, measuring altogether 64 acres, are to be found in the Orang Asli Area marked out for the Canu villagers while 55 plots are located on State Forest Reserves. Of the 28 plots within the settlement area, 24 of them are kebun getah or rubber-grown plots while 4 are dusun or orchards. All the 55
forest-located plots are *dusun* (orchard) landholdings. The nearest forest-located Canu *dusun* plot is about a twenty-minute walk away while the furthest plot is some two hours walking distance from the village. No statistics are available on the acreage of the different *dusun* located on Forestland. When I left the field the Canu villagers were engaged in a project to map out and survey their *dusun* plots located on Forest Reserve lands (see sketch Map...).

While the *selai nyeng* plots are held/operated by individual Semai households, the *kebun/dusun* landholdings are owned and operated by Semai ambilineal descent groups. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, members of an ambilineal descent group are those who can trace descent from a common grandparent as well as outgroupers who have become incorporated (*hii*) into the group. Through their membership in the descent group the Semai claim rights of access to and use of *kebun/dusun* lands. Moreover, the Semai practise ambilocal residence/inheritance, which implies that villagers also enjoy rights of access to the produce of another *kebun/dusun*, located in a different river valley altogether. Although the *kebun/dusun* landholdings are owned collectively, fruit trees can be owned individually. In other words, for the Semai, land tenure is not the same as tree tenure. Villagers claim exclusive ownership rights over fruit trees they have inherited (*sakaa*) as well as trees they have planted themselves. This form of tree tenure is distinguished as a practice of *cha' halior* (to eat alone) while the practice of communal ownership over orchard lands/trees are characterized as *cha' samak* (to eat together). However, the social recognition and practice of these land/tree rights are predicated upon the group member or individual contributing to the reproduction of the *kebun/dusun* landholdings as a whole. In concrete terms, this means the regular clearing of undergrowth around the trees, replanting and, more importantly, harvesting and sale of the *kebun/dusun* produce. Thus, if for some reason a person cannot personally be involved in the harvesting/sale of *kebun/dusun* produce s/he may give another individual the right to do so on the former's behalf. This arrangement of granting rights of harvest/sale to another is a temporary one varying in periods from a day to the whole harvesting season or to several seasons depending on how long the particular member remains indisposed to tend to his/her *kebun/dusun*. For example, one of the villagers who works full time waged labour in the city is only able to join his co-ramage members in the harvest/sale of their *dusun* produce for about two to three weeks a year. Thus, in his absence
he has allowed his neighbour who is not a member to the former's descent group to harvest and sell fruits from his ramage's dusun.

There are a few more "rules" or concepts which underpin the kebun/dusun-related practices of sharing and exchange among the Semai. In an earlier section I mentioned the concept of genhak which requires those with more land resources to share them with other villagers who have less. And through the longer term process of cultivating hii or kinship relations, this sharing of land resources can take the form of a descent group granting permission to a non-members to grow their own fruit trees or establish their own dusun. Another form it may take is the shorter term granting of harvesting/selling rights by one villager to another who has less land resources or who may be experiencing a shortfall in the latter's own kebun/dusun production. Perhaps an example of one Canu household may help illustrate some of these kebun/kampok-related practices. There are two families in this household, that of Beh/Wah A and Beh/Wah B. Beh A and Beh B are cousins who together with twelve other Canu families belong to a common descent group which holds/operates about 70 acres of orchard land. Wah A belongs to another Canu descent group of five families, which has about 50 acres of orchard land. Wah B hails from another natal settlement altogether, some thirty kilometres away from Canu, and she too has access rights to several orchards of her descent group in that river valley. All these individuals have maintained their links with their ramage landholdings and, therefore, in the petai fruit season of 1993 (August to October) each of them joined in the harvests of their different orchards. Beh/Wah A together earned about RM$500 in petai sales while Beh/Wah B earned about RM$650. A different situation occurred for this same household in the durian fruit season of December 1993 - February 1994. The durian trees of Beh A and Beh B's ramage-orchards, together with those of a few other groups, were especially affected by the heavy monsoon rains of that season. In this event both Beh A and Beh B approached another Canu descent-group leader for permission to join the latter's durian-harvesting party. They both earned about RM$150 each from being a (temporary) member of the other descent group's durian-harvesting party, an amount which was about half of what they had earned from their own orchards the previous season.
In general, the granting of harvesting/selling rights by a "land owner" with more kebun/dusun resources to another villager with less is a temporary arrangement. However, there are instances when this arrangement becomes a regular affair at every harvesting season that the usual requesting/granting of permission is no longer required but presumed. Yet, the arrangement is such that both parties continue to acknowledge between "ownership" and "use" rights. This was the case with another Canu household which, along with about five other households, had lost most of their fruit trees about ten years earlier when their dusun lands were cleared by a non-Orang Asli individual who started a cattle ranch. With only a few trees to their name the Canu household had since then regularly sought permission from other ramage group leaders to harvest/sell produce from the latter's dusun. A member of this household explained,

...every fruit season we would ask Beh Tani to join his group to collect the fruits from their dusun and sell them. Sometimes we don't even need to ask because he will invite us to join them... but whatever fruits we collect we can keep the proceeds of the sale. We give some money to Beh Tani for allowing us to use his dusun but he gives it back to us... but we insist that he takes something after all it is his dusun not ours... in the end he does keep some of the money, maybe a few sen or a few ringgit.

As Robarchek (1980) had observed in another Semai group elsewhere in Perak, two other Semai "rules" come into play in arrangements such as these. First, in the actual negotiation of such arrangements there is an understanding among the parties that irrespective of ownership rights "the person who does the work has the major claim to the proceeds of the labour" (Ibid. p.96). Second, whatever the arrangement "the important thing for maintaining claims is for an owner of fruit trees to continue to have an active interest by making some arrangements concerning the fruit" (Ibid.).

Having mentioned some important aspects of the Semai's kebun/dusun-related tenurial practices I move on to discuss the productive activities themselves. As I mentioned earlier, of the 83 kebun/dusun landholdings of the Canu Semai 59 are cultivated mainly with fruit trees while the other 24 are mainly rubber-grown plots. First, then, the Canu Semai fruit production. As Table... shows, the Canu villagers cultivate about 34 different species of fruit trees all of them local to the Malayan hinterland. While most of these fruit types are harvested by the Semai for their own consumption or occasional selling, five types of fruit trees are still seriously cultivated as cash crops. The reason for this is simply that there is a generally good
demand for fruits especially from the local market (Gomes, 1990). Orang Asli-grown fruits have an added appeal among local traders and consumers in nearby towns in that, as one trader put it, "the Asli fruits taste better because they don't put carbide on their trees" (other fruit-growers are reputed to use calcium carbide, a carbon compound, to hasten the maturing of fruits).

As for the Canu kebun getah (rubber landholdings), productivity has been declining for several years. There are several reasons for this. Rubber prices have been quite erratic leading the Semai to invest more of their time and labour in other productive activities. One villager, in his fifties, is one of the few Canu men who still tap rubber on a regular basis, outside the two main fruit seasons. According to him,

... we spend more than half a day tapping and preparing the rubber. Sometimes we may receive 70 sen a kati [weight measurement equivalent to about 0.5 kg] for our rubber, the next week it can be 20 sen... these days only a few old men like me and the younger women are the ones who still tap rubber. The others prefer to go hunting, collect rattan or take on contract work.

That the rubber smallholder sector in Malaysia, in general, is affected by declining prices since the mid-1970s is evident in the fact that this "sector is already one of the most depressed sectors of the economy" (Nicholas, 1995:81). However, in the case of the Semai, as with other Orang Asli groups, they face an added problem in rubber production. More than half the acreage of the Canu rubber trees have gone beyond their 35-year productive life. Moreover, promises by the JHEOA to assist the Semai in replanting the old trees have yet to be fulfilled. When in 1993 the Canu headman approached RISDA, the state agency set up to assist rubber smallholders, to provide Canu villagers with rubber seedlings his request was turned down. The reason given by RISDA was that the Canu villagers did not possess legal titles over their rubber land and were, therefore, not entitled to state subsidies or agricultural inputs.

Currently, therefore, rubber production activities in Canu are treated as kerjak sambilan (work of secondary importance). A few elderly men and the younger women of the village who usually do not take on contract work outside the village carry out rubber tapping. Moreover, even this group of villagers only engage themselves in rubber tapping outside the main fruit seasons (August-September and November-January). Although most of their rubber trees are old and the yield is of a low-grade quality, traders and shopkeepers in the
town were willing to purchase these small quantities of un-processed rubber or exchange them with market goods the villagers required such as rice and other dried foodstuff.

**Lengriik production**

Apart from their productive activities centred around the *selai nyeng* and *kebun/dusun* landholdings, the Canu Semai also engage in other forest-based subsistence-cash pursuits. These activities include hunting, gathering and use of the natural forest resources, the list of which is found in Table.... Again, in contrast to the *selai nyeng* and *kampok* landholdings, a different tenurial practice applies to these productive activities related to the forest resources. There are few basic aspects to this tenurial pattern. First, the area of the forest the Canu Semai have access to and use of is limited to the geography of their *lengriik*, a territory which is shared by the villagers of Pendue and Ini. To extract resources beyond the markers of their *lengriik* the Canu-Pendue-Ini villagers are required to obtain the permission of the elders of the other *lengriik*. In a sense, it may be more appropriate to describe the conditions of use and access to these *lengriik* resources as Semai natural resource tenure than land tenure. This means that any Semai from the three villages of Canu, Pendue and Ini can hunt, fish, collect, etc. forest resources provided these resources are confined within their *lengriik* area. These Semai-recognised rights of access to and use of forest resources have also been curbed somewhat by forestry policies. For instance, the Semai are not allowed to fell any trees, hunt certain species of animals and collect some types of forest plants which are considered as protected items.

In Table... I have listed the produce of the forests that the Semai currently extract under the different categories of: (1) food items, (2) material-culture items, (3) medicinal items, (4) religious-culture items and (5) market-exchange items (Table...). The reason for this categorization is to illustrate the range of products which the Semai have access to when the need arises for their use or exchange values. As one Semai put it:

> Our *lengriik* forest is to us like the supermarket is to the *orang bandar*. Almost everything we need to live on can be found there and what more we need from the towns we can buy with money we earned from selling the products of the forest.
The Canu Semai also produce mats, bags, baskets, fish-traps and other household items for their own use as well as for sale. These items are made from materials gathered from the forest such as rattan, bamboo, mengkuang and bertam leaves, etc. Occasionally, they sell these products to petty traders who visit the village, to neighbouring Malay villages or in the market at the town of Kota. While the JHEOA and RISDA have assisted other Semai villages in the Batang Padang District in marketing their handicraft for the tourist industry, the same project did not succeed in Canu. According to Canu villagers the reasons for their lack of success in this venture are a combination of; one, the quality of the handicraft they produced was not good enough and two, the producers did not trust the JHEOA and RISDA officers to market their products.

In 1991-92, however, a few individuals from a Catholic-Church based NGO and some urban-based NGOs engaged themselves in trying to market the handicrafts produced by several Semai villages in the Batang Padang District including Canu. These were informal arrangements whereby the NGO individuals would regularly collect the surplus handicraft the Semai produced, market them through various channels in the cities and then pay the producers the full proceeds of the sale upon their following visits. The production and supply of the handicrafts, however, are extremely erratic not least because payment is not immediately received and producers need to engage in other productive activities to maintain their livelihood. Three women from different households in Canu who were most regular in producing handicraft for sale through these individuals, earned an average of about RM 450 in the year 1993 from the sale of handicrafts. To date, however, this project does not appear to be an attractive source of revenue for the Canu Semai although the aforementioned individuals are maintaining the project.

Kerjak Bandar

The Semai refer to waged employment outside the village as kerjak bandar or "town work". In 1994, thirty-one Canu villagers were employed full-time in salaried positions. Of this number, five are salariat in the public sector and all of them men. The remaining twenty-six (twenty men and six women) are employed as salaried blue-collar workers in various
industries located in urban areas. Full-time waged labour is generally unattractive to the Canu Semai. One of the men, in his forties, described his experience, "I'm just waiting to retire and return to the village". As mentioned earlier, the younger men who are salaried workers are also often returning to the village to engage themselves in the kerjak kampok. Some of them even resigned from their jobs to be present for a harvest and thereafter returned to the towns to look for new employment.

*Makan gaji* (earning wages), however, is a necessary and regular part of the Canu economy. Almost all the adult Canu villagers take on temporary wage employment to supplement their income. They do so when the need for cash arises and this is usually outside the major fruit seasons as Tables ... show. Canu women would work between five days to two weeks at a time in nearby Chinese-owned vegetable plantations. The women usually work between twenty to sixty days per year as contract labourers of this sort. Their labour is sought by Chinese farm-owners who approach them in their village at different stages of vegetable cultivation: planting, weeding, pruning and harvesting. They are paid on a daily basis. The wages paid is about RM$10 per day and lunch is usually provided. The men also work in the nearby vegetable farms but less often than the women do. They are sought for the "heavier" tasks of ploughing and transporting and earn about RM$15 a day. More often, the men work as contract labourers in construction work and estate-type plantations farther away from the village. When they accept contract work in construction or in estate-type plantations, the men reside at their place of work and do not return home from between four to twelve weeks at a time. They are also paid on a daily basis and their average income is about RM$20 a day. Men villagers who engage in this form of economic activity estimate that they work between two to six months a year as contract labourers.

**Masalah Tanah**

The form of production which has developed in Canu as a result of their confrontation with the forces of capitalism, the market economy, state interventions and their own social production-reproduction needs may be described as a type of simple commodity production. This form of production has been associated with the economics of peasant societies.
(Bernstein, 1979; Cook, 1976; Chevalier, 1982; Friedman, 1980; Kahn, 1980; Smith, 1979; Smith, 1984) and more recently some scholars have drawn upon these theoretical frameworks to describe the current development of Orang Asli economies (Nicholas, 1985; Gomes, 1986). As Gomes summarizes it:

Simple commodity producers produce goods for a market but continue to produce use-values for their direct consumption. They are in a way partially integrated into a market economy as they still need to participate in subsistence production given that not all their food is obtained from the market. Further, unlike the case in capitalist commodity production, simple commodity producers have control over their productive means. The unit of production in SCP (simple commodity production) is mostly household. And the conditions recognised as prerequisites for SCP include a well-developed commodity market, competition among units of production which makes producers price responsive, free contractual relations among producers and labour mobility.

In the case of the Canu villages their form of SCP, centred around kerjak kampok, is a preferred form of village economics because it not only provides them a livelihood but in its practice they are able to ensure their social reproduction. Table... shows the range of items the Semai derive from their lengriik resource base in the course of their kerjak kampok activities which contribute to their social reproduction. Table... shows that during a four-month period between 1993-1994 a sample of Semai households in Canu-Pendue-I’ni earned an average household income of RM1258.57 with a range of RM$1025 to RM$1470. These calculations are taken from a small sample (N=7) but given that the villagers have fairly equal access to factors of production, it can be assumed that these statistics are generally representative of the Canu households. Moreover, two qualifications are necessary in considering these income statistics. First, these calculations were based on the villagers’ cash returns during a fruit-productivity season that was adversely affected by a bad monsoon. Given that fruit production accounts for about 75% of the villagers’ cash income, we can assume that they have earned better incomes. A second consideration is that the income statistics do not indicate the use-values, in terms of both food and non-food items, the Semai receive from their cash-related as well as other subsistence activities. One way to assess the value of their subsistence production is to examine the consumption pattern of the Canu villagers. Tables... illustrate the pattern of commodity consumption by the same sample of households from which the income statistics were calculated. The figures were collected for a two-week period outside the major
fruit seasons when the villagers were earning a major portion of their cash incomes from waged labour. The average expenditure on food items is only 27% of the total they spend on market commodities indicating that they still obtain most of their food through subsistence production. Although the Semai are dependent on market goods and have the means to procure them, they still prefer the food products from the forest. The reason given by villagers is that there are many dietary restrictions (punan) practiced by the Semai at various times which require that they consume certain food only available in the forest.

There are other features of the Canu economy, which make it a preferred form of SCP for the Semai, in contrast to what is proffered them by the state. Productive activities related to kerjak kampok relies on a low level of technology and is labour intensive. As with other Semai units (Nicholas, 1994; Leong, 1991; Gomes, 1990) Canu villagers' fruit production, agricultural pursuits on their selai nyeng, gathering, hunting, fishing and trapping require only a set of techniques, tools and other inputs derived from the forests and the creative labour of the Semai. One exception to this productive pattern is the case of rubber. With the introduction of high-yielding rubber seedlings and the use of fertilizers by the JHEOA, the villagers have now become dependent on continued inputs in this sector of their economy. This is one contributing factor to the decline in Canu rubber productivity, as mentioned earlier.

The Canu economy which is centred around kerjak kampok, is also characterized with diversity, flexibility and mobility which makes it fairly resilient especially in periods of production shortfall. For example, during the fruit season of 1993 which was a period of production shortfall for Canu households, strong monsoon winds and rains had adversely affected the petai and durian productivity for that season. Cash incomes from the sale of these fruits usually constitute a major portion of their earnings from kerjak kampok production activities. Thus, due to the shortfall in production the Semai resorted to various other productive options. Men from several households decided to trek farther up into the forests in search of rattan and bamboo, while women stepped up their food gathering activities. It was also at this time that the informal network of women decided to clear up a common plot of land to begin the cultivation of short-term cash crop vegetables. Individual households opened similar cash crop plots as they had done before in previous periods of shortfall in fruit
production or shortage of cash. Some women also stepped up or took up again, the daily tapping of rubber while other young men accepted temporary waged labour with urban employers. In addition, as mentioned in an earlier example, there were villagers who traveled to their kin's river valleys to engage in *kerjak kampok* there.

The Canu villagers have easy access to markets. They have a choice of several sources of market goods coupled with certain informal credit facilities. Itinerant retailers visit them frequently and there are many shops in the town of Kota, which is about seven kilometres away. Middlemen and traders in forest products also act as suppliers of market goods to the Semai in order to maintain good relations. The villagers can thus readily obtain the market goods they need. But in times of production shortfall, as in the 1993 fruit season, traders and shopkeepers allowed the villagers to purchase both food and non-food items on credit with the promise to repay either in cash or in forest products especially bamboo, rattan, durian and petai. Semai villagers I spoke to, however, were reluctant to accept credit unless they feel they can repay the debts by the following fruit season. Moreover, I did not come across any instance of serious indebtedness among the Canu villagers. As one villager put it, "we have a "supermarket" of food in the forests that we can obtain without incurring *hutang* (debt)".

The Canu economy, however, is not without its problems. Chief among these is the fact that the villagers are gradually losing control over their main means of production - their customary land. Although they still have access to and use of vast tracks of their customary productive lands, these same lands and their resources are increasingly being encroached upon and exploited by other non-Orang Asli individuals and groups. Although the JHEOA had allocated about 270 acres to the Canu Semai as part of the resettlement policy, the status of the land is still that of TOL land. Moreover, the land is not formally leased to the Canu villagers. As such, a number of non-Orang Asli vegetable farmers and a cattle rancher have, over the past ten years, applied to the Perak Land Office and have obtained TOLs over some 30 acres of the Canu Orang Asli Area. Because of these happenings, some five households have lost parts of their *selai nyeng* and *dusun* landholdings. In total, as Table... shows the Canu Semai have lost about 70 acres of the land allocated to them by the JHEOA. Although the villagers protested these happenings to the JHEOA, the supposed trustee of the Orang Asli lands, no action was taken.
Another example of their land problem pertains to the villagers' *dusun* landholdings and the common *lengriik* lands in which the Semai hunt, gather forest products, etc. Most of these said lands are located on State Forest Reserves and according to the Forest policies, forestlands are accessible to Malay peasants settled on its fringes. While the Semai recognize and observe each others' *dusun* and their rights therein, the Malay villagers do not and, in fact, see the fruit trees in the forests as "wild" produce and thus free to gather. In the fruit season during the time of my fieldwork, the situation was exacerbated when unemployed Malay and Indian youth (whom the Semai suspected of being drug addicts) were also going into the forests and gathering the fruits for their own consumption as well as for sale. Malays from the neighbouring villages also compete with the Semai for the other marketable forest products, which the latter consider their "property" such as bamboo and rattan. The Semai have lodged reports with the JHEOA and the Forestry Department field officers regarding these encroachments but again no action was taken.

Perhaps the greatest threats to the Canu villagers' land resources are those posed by state-sponsored development projects. One such project set up in the mid-1980s, a FELDA land resettlement scheme for Malay peasants had already encroached into some fifty acres of the Semai forest resource base. During the period of my fieldwork, two other projects were discovered and if implemented will severely affect the Canu form of SCP. The first is a logging concession granted by the Forest Department to a private company to fell some five hundred hectares of trees. The area allocated for the logging falls squarely on Semai *lengriik* land that also holds their fruit *dusuns*. The second project is a proposed tourist resort to be built on the slope of a hill beside the waterfall, the main source of water supply for the Semai.

The decreasing land resources are also exacerbating what is still a nascent inter- and intra-village social differentiation. This growing differential access to the means of production, however, is linked closely to religious and ideological differences so I shall deal with the issue the following chapter.

**Conclusions**

In making a living for themselves in these past decades, the Semai have had to resist attempts by the state to make the former "modern" farmers in one place. The Semai have
achieved this in several interrelated ways. First, despite restrictions to the use of forestlands and resources, the Semai continued to engage in productive activities in their customary territory. They have persisted in the broad-spectrum forest-based subsistence-cash economy developed since, at least, early this century. In this forest-based economy, the Semai also maintained their customary tenurial and flexible kinship practices that govern villagers' access to and use of the forces and means of production. Apart from these forest-related productive activities, the Semai have also moved out into seasonal waged labour to supplement their cash incomes. And as discussed above, it is not merely by force of necessity that the Semai are taking on temporary worker waged labour. There is a conscious concern and willingness among the villagers to maintain their economic diversity and retain their effective control not only over their customary land but in relation to their other main means of production - their labour.

However, the continuity of the present diversified form of Semai economy and the success or failure of their productive strategies are dependent, precisely, on the Semai having independent control over their land and labour. The extant evidence shows that while the Semai still can and do make independent decisions concerning the manner in which they use and distribute their labour, they are increasingly losing effective control over their land. In the last thirty years the Canu Semai have lost about one quarter of their JHEOA-allocated land and have been experiencing increasing competition for the Semai customary-land and its resources from private and state-sponsored ventures. If the current extent of forest lands the Semai still have access to and utilize extensively, is appropriated for commercial exploitation such as the proposed Tourism Project and the logging venture, the Semai will definitely have no more room/land to manoeuvre. If this happens, and depending on what new land offers are given them, it seems likely that the Semai will be forced into becoming rural labourers.