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

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Chapter Six: Political Places, Communities of Resistance, Contested Spaces and Interactions

In the last chapter, I discussed how the Semai in the face of inequalities in resource distribution and control responded by way of re-establishing a mobile and broad-spectrum economy. They persisted in a range of productive activities centred on their customary lands and organized themselves around flexible "kinship" practices. Contemporaneously, they were regularly moving out into temporary waged labour to supplement their means of livelihood. In terms of village politics as well the Semai were entering new locations, establishing new alliances and taking up new strategies to assert their political identity and articulate and organize their masalah tanah. These Semai relocations and repoliticisations were taking place in the context of a specific Orang Asli politics of the state, established since the 1950s, which emphasised a confinement/consignment of the Orang Asli to the "restricted Orang Asli Reserves/Areas/Places of inhabitation". In these places Orang Asli relations with all but specified state agencies were discouraged, if not altogether forbidden. One state agency, the JHEOA, was mandated to represent the Orang Asli in the latter's external relations. The Orang Asli themselves were not expected to be politically informed but instead were protected from "public" politics. As the state agencies penetrated Orang Asli places to reorganize their relations, the Orang Asli moved into new political locations to articulate their concerns and organize their struggles.

In this chapter I examine the various political locations the Semai moved into, the linkages created between different agencies in different places and the effects these interconnections have for the Semai land struggles and social relations? In the first section, I look at how religious places in the urban areas provided a political space for the Semai to articulate their concerns and assert a new "hybrid" identity. However, neither the Semai nor the Orang Asli in general, organised their struggles on a religious platform. In the following section, I give a brief account of the network of groups and individuals that emerged or coalesced around the Orang Asli cause. It is a brief account because my concern is the specificity of the interactions and interconnections that occurred in the Semai villages under
study which I shall discuss in detail in the following section. Finally, I shall focus on some prospects from these political realignments.

**Articulating the masalah tanah in religious spaces**

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, the Semai were embracing other world religions viz. Christianity and Bahai'ism in the face of governmental campaigns to impose a certain Malay identity upon them. This strategy of converting into Christianity and Bahai'ism was not limited to the Canu-Pendue-I'ni villagers alone. As Table ...shows, the total number of Orang Asli who had converted into Christianity by 1960 was less than a hundred in Perak. The number of conversions was significantly small then despite the presence of Christian missionaries among the Orang Asli of Perak for three decades. State-sponsored Islamic-missionary campaigns initiated in the latter half of the 1950s succeeded in converting some 108 Orang Asli by 1957 (14.12.57 in Nicholas, Williams-Hunt and Sabak, 1989:227). The Baha'is did not begin proselytizing the Orang Asli until the 1960s. However, in less than a decade and a half later, the number of Orang Asli in Perak who registered themselves as Christians were 1,467, a fifteen fold increase from 1960. During this same period some 1800 Orang Asli also embraced the Baha'i religion. As for Muslim conversions, the number of Orang Asli registered between 1960 and 1974 had increased about four-fold. From a number of 108 Muslim converts in 1957, Orang Asli registered 422 as Muslim by 1974.

What is significant about the Semai conversions is not merely the numbers but the ways they went about embracing these non-Islamic world religions and the role these religious activities played in their land struggles. Beh Tua is in his sixties. He is one of the first Semai of Canu to convert into Christianity and he recalls how he and several others from the village went about their embracing Christianity:

...the Christian lay-leader from the village brought us to the church center at Kampar. We would go there once in two weeks, some times once a month... there we were taught about Christianity... it was difficult for the Christian missionaries to enter our villages because they needed permission from the authorities... They [the missionaries] will come one time and tell us that they will return the following week but this does not happen. Later we find out that they could not get the "pass"...Most of us who are Christians now were instructed and baptized either in Bidor, Kampar,
Sungkai or Tapah. Only in the last few years the priest or the pastor can now baptise Orang Asli in their villages...

Muslim missionaries sponsored by the state were allowed free access into Orang Asli Areas. But as other scholars and the statistics have suggested, Muslim evangelising in Orang Asli settlements met with very little success (Abdullah, 1979/80). Islamic appeals were frequently met with a negative response by the Orang Asli except for some groups in the south of the Peninsular who were already nominal Muslims since early this century (Ibid.; Means, 1985; Carey, 1976). The Christian and Baha'i missionary campaigns, however, despite having to labour under restrictive conditions were drawing in hundreds of Orang Asli into their churches. Unlike their Muslim counterparts the Christian/Baha'i missionaries did not enjoy such easy access to the Orang Asli Areas. There were curfew restrictions on the area to contend with and as Beh Tua explained, if and when the Christian/Bahai missionaries wished to visit the Semai in the villages they had first to obtain visiting permits from the relevant authorities to enter these "restricted areas". The missionaries were allowed entry not as religious agents but under the guise of members of a social-welfare or humanitarian organization. During the course of their "humanitarian" visits to the villages the Christian/Baha'i workers would distribute food provisions, clothes and run literacy classes and health clinics. Religion was introduced "on the quiet" and villagers were encouraged and invited to visit the Baha'i/Christian centers in the nearby towns for proper instruction and initiation into the religion. The Baha'i workers needed to be particularly cautious as their organization was not legally registered until in 1974 (Murthi, 1969).

The main means of interaction between the Christian/Baha'i religious workers and the Semai was secured by the latter's travelling to the Baha'i/Christian centres in the nearby towns. All three religious organizations (Catholics, Methodist and Baha'i) active in Semai areas provided guest-quarters at their urban centers for their Orang Asli visitors. Moreover, it was at these centres that religious instruction and the conversion rites took place. More than 80% of the adult-Christian/Baha'i members of Canu and I'ni were initiated at these urban centres between 1960 and the mid-1970s.

One Muslim scholar had suggested that a major reason for the success of the Christian/Baha'i proselytizing campaigns, in contrast to the less successful Muslim efforts, was that the former missionaries were generous on "handouts" while at the same time "bad-
mouthing" the Malays/Muslims to the Orang Asli (Abdullah, 1979/80). This is perhaps simplifying what was a combination of "push" and "pull" factors that contributed to the pattern of Semai conversions. Muslim missionary activities among the Orang Asli were also strongly humanitarian in character. The reason the Semai identified with and entered into Christian/Baha'i places may be explained by the former's negative perceptions of the Islamic campaigns, i.e. as "Malay-izing" impositions from the state. But there were "pull factors" as well or rather "push factors" on the part of the Christian/Baha'i groups in their particular forms of outreach to Orang Asli groups. In the post-independence period, the enshrinement of Islam as the state religion or as Lee & Ackerman (1988) put it, the "marriage between the mosque and the state" (149), affected the religious liberties of the non-Malays in general (Means, 1978:390). Between 1952 and 1960 stringent changes in the law were effected in most of the Malayan states with the explicit purpose of defining the religious obligations of Muslims as well as controlling the activities of non-Muslims (Ibid.). These intrusions of Islam into non-Muslim affairs provoked a re-thinking, especially among the mainline hierarchy of the Christian churches, about the identity and mission of the church in this new Malaysian situation (Williams, 1976; Lee & Ackerman, 1988). One common theme of change in the 1960s and 1970s articulated by the mainline Christian churches viz. the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic and Lutheran, was the "indigenizing of the local church" (Ibid.). Two aspects of this "indigenizing" campaign were; first, the training of local clergy to "indigenize" church leadership and second, to incorporate local cultural forms into church liturgical services. Christian missionary activity in the 1960s and 70s, therefore, saw a high degree of experimentation and innovation that was largely due to intrusions of Islam into non-Muslim affairs (Fleming, 1962; Thomas, 1978; Williams, 1976). While taking on this new "indigenous" character, Christian missionary activities did not lose its "original" objective, which was to bring more converts into the fold. In the post-independence period, this need for numbers to assert their indigenous-Christian identity in the face of Muslim domination took on a more serious urgency. Not only the Christians but also the Baha'i first began intensive missionary activities in the 1960s (Murthi, 1969).

During the post-independence period, therefore, there was not only a Semai identifying with non-Muslim-places but a Christian-Baha'i identifying with the "indigenous
situation" such as those of the Orang Asli. This Christian/Baha'i "solidarity" with the Orang Asli showed itself in the extra-religious projects initiated by these churches. Education of the Semai in vocational skills and literacy were an important part of the activities conducted at the Christian/Baha'i urban centres in Perak. These centres served as places where Semai language, arts and crafts were promoted and preserved. The Methodist centre, The Sengoi Workers Training Centre, for instance, played a big part in compiling the first Sengoi-English Dictionary in 1986, a work which first began in 1960. These centres also provided the technical knowledge and financial aid to assist Semai families in initiating several income-generating projects at village levels. Villagers from Sg. Nam who had resisted sending their children to JHEOA-sponsored schools were encouraged to enrol their children in the regular urban-based schools operated by the Department of Education. To facilitate this the Methodist church set up a "Sengoi hostel" in 1960, in the town of Kampar which by 1974 housed some sixty Orang Asli students from various settlements in the region (Means, 1985:649). Although the Catholic and Baha'i groups did not set up special hostels for the Orang Asli children they provided lodging for the latter in their church buildings. By 1963, some Semai villages had set up their own hostels in nearby towns where children from Orang Asli settlements in deeper-jungle areas could be sent.

Beh Dara, in his late 30s, hails from Pendue and was one of the participants at the Orang Asli youth conference of 1980 - the first public meeting of the Orang Asli "movement". He is still active in the land rights campaigns of his village. As a student he was a boarder in one of the hostels, set up by Christian missionaries in the early 1960s, to cater for Orang Asli children who were enrolled at regular urban-based government schools. He had wanted to become a Methodist Pastor but due to differences with church colleagues, in the mid-1980s, he has since left the church altogether... As he speaks of the Orang Asli Youth Conference he explains: ...already in these hostels and ... centres we began discussing our masalah tanah [land problem]... we realised that we could not wait for the government to give us back our land. We had to do something ourselves. According to them [the government] we had to become Gob [Malay] first then we will enjoy land rights. The Gob and the Asli are like the sun and moon, we could never come together... we organized the conference to bring Orang Asli youth from all over the place, young people who are educated like the orang bandar (city folk)... to talk about our future, the future of our land... when we returned from the meeting in Port Dickson [a seaside town some 200 kilometres south of the Canu village] we began to organize more meetings with different villages. We wanted especially for our headmen to organize themselves, so we persuaded them to do so... some of them were afraid saying that if we organize ourselves and speak out the government will accuse of us of being influenced by the communists. But
there were other headmen who were not afraid... finally, they agreed to a special conference of Orang Asli headmen...

Political and cultural resistance, especially in postcolonial situations, emerges from the hybridization of identities (Bhabha, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1995; Pieterse, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987; Sandoval, 1991). Put in more concrete geo-political terms, if identity is the articulation of changing social relations of a particular person/group (de Lauretis, 1986; Mouffe, 1988) in particular places (Massey, 1994) then strategic political alliances can and will be constructed across and between these varying place-based articulations (identities). The relations forged between the Semai and the Christian/Baha'i churches, in the context of post-independence Malaysia, represented this hybridization of identity and resistance for the Semai. The Semai moving into "other" religions was construed as a politics of identity developed in opposition to the state. This is evident in the state's response to these Semai articulations. For example, in August of 1990 the Semai of Kampung Serigala, where thirty of its forty inhabitants are Christians, began the construction of church building in their village. When the District authorities discovered the project, they required that the Semai obtain official permission to build the church. The Semai complied with this condition but their request for permission to build the church was rejected on grounds that such construction contravened certain laws. The District Office, however, did not specify the exact laws that were being violated. The Semai appealed against this decision emphasising that the church was to serve not only religious purposes but also preschool classes to benefit all the villagers. The Semai appeal was rejected by the District Office and the villagers continued with the construction of the building. In November of 1990 officers from the District Office, the JHEOA, heavily-armed police personnel and bulldozers from the Public Works Department all convened at Kampung Serigala. In less than half and hour the church building was reduced to rubble by these government officers. Beh Supeh, the Christian lay-leader of the village, in commenting on this incident said:

Why do we need to ask for permission? This is our land. Our people were here even before the [town] Tanjung Malim was opened. Horse-carts were still being used then. We've built our houses here, and cultivated rubber for generations. It makes no sense now telling us that we are occupying the land illegally... We are sad not because of the money that is lost. No, we are sad because this is God's house. I pray to God to forgive them... they were worse than the communists ... we are a peaceful people. We are not
religious extremists. This is not Memali or Batu Pahat [these were two towns where extremist Islamic groups had clashed violently with the police]. There was no need to bring in the military with machine guns. This is like the Japanese Occupation... [we are going to] build a bigger and better church... we are still treated like dirt. Not as humans. We have a right to our land and to practise our faith. (Pernloi-Gah, Dec. 1990:10)

Following the incident at Kg. Serigala, a "Special Unit for the Conversion of Orang Asli" was set up under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Department (this link between the Kg. Serigala incident and the setting of the special unit was made by a Special Branch Police Officer). Among other measures, this unit spent twenty million Ringgit for the building of Islamic prayer houses in 265 Orang Asli villages throughout the country. In the same report which declared these facts (Berita Harian, 24.7.93) the Director of the Islamic Religious Affairs Division in the Prime Minister's Department stated that religious officials would be placed at all 265 prayer houses beginning 1993 as part of the "Government's effort to convert 80 000 Orang Asli in the span of the coming 10 years".

Going Public

Although religious places provided a space for Orang Asli groups to articulate their problems, they did not organize their land struggles on a religious platform. The first public meetings of the Orang Asli Movement, the Youth Conference in 1980 and the Headmen's Conference a year and a half later, represented participants from different religious persuasions who came together to assert their "Orang Asli" identity and concerns. This "Asli" identity was clearly asserted in the Memorandum the headmen presented to the parliamentarians and the press, following their conference:

...appeal that the Government seriously consider granting... one public holiday, preferably during our harvest festival, so as to give us a chance to share our culture and celebration with the other races in our country... that the freedom of religion be respected among our people and that no one be forced to accept any religion against one's own wishes... the government ensure that all forms of social prejudice against Orang Asli found in literature, mass media, exhibitions, tourism and the rest, be wiped out through positive measures. (Memorandum 1982)

These first public meetings of the Orang Asli leaders were followed up by regional meetings that led to the setting up of such regional organizations as the Batang Padang Semai
Association. Then in 1984 several regional Orang Asli leaders came together to establish a national-level organization, the Orang Asli Association of Peninsular Malaysia (POASM). By 1991, POASM had set up several state branches of their association and their membership stood at 11,000. While POASM has become the formal non-governmental representative of the Orang Asli, both POASM itself as well as Orang Asli issues in general have been supported by a range of concerned individuals, NGOs of sorts and public-interest groups. For example, just before the Orang Asli Headmen's Conference, the leader of the main opposition party lent his support to the Orang Asli cause. He did so by writing several articles in the major newspapers to highlight Orang Asli issues. In addition, researchers from different local universities have become involved in Orang Asli campaigns. They include members of the Orang Asli Studies Group from the National University who are seriously contributing their consultancy skills to POASM's many campaigns. Of the several NGOs and public interest groups that are involved in varying extents in Orang Asli issues, there is one, which is wholly directed to Orang Asli campaigns - the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns.

Through the alliances forged between Orang Asli leaders and these various support-groups and individuals, the Orang Asli were, by the end of the 1980s, represented in a number of transnational organizations such as the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact and the Peoples' Plan for the 21st Century. But how did the Semai of Canu, Pendue and Ini figure in this extended network of the Orang Asli movement and what consequences did it have for the former's land struggles and social relations on the ground as it were? I shall examine this in the following sections.

The Case

While Orang Asli leaders and the support-groups are engaged in an on-going, long-term land-rights campaign, local Orang Asli groups have had to continually respond to more immediate threats to their land or the competition for resources therein. In the Canu-Pendue-Ini villagers, for instance, Malay settlers from nearby villages, not recognizing the Semai ownership of fruit trees, regularly expropriated these forest-products. A cattle farm set up on part of Semai customary land is polluting the villagers' water supply while the farm-owners
have often blocked the Semai access route into the forests. A pig-farm also situated on Semai customary land pollutes not only the waters but its foul smell fills the air. There is a quarrying operation also sited on Semai lengriik territory and whose heavy trucks are damaging the only access road into the town. In May of 1994, a group of Semai men, while gathering rattan in the forests stumbled upon a team of surveyors who were marking out "blocks" in the forest. These "blocks", measuring 100 acres each represent the units of forestland licensed out by the Forestry Department for the purposes of logging. Upon inquiry, the Semai men were informed by the surveyors that the Forestry Department had granted a concession of 500 hectares of forestland to a private logging company and that felling of the trees was supposed to commence by the end of the year. If carried out this logging will destroy not only the Semai's main resource base but also their ancestral burial sites. During the same year, the Semai discovered that the state government had granted permission to a federal government agency to survey a waterfall site for the construction of a tourist resort. This waterfall is the main source of water supply for the Semai.

The news of this upcoming logging project in their forests soon dominated the discussions and conversations of the Semai. Anxieties were expressed among groups of men who went hunting/gathering together, or as they worked together in contract-labour groups, or as they met in the coffee-shops in the nearby town; and among women who worked as contract-labour in Chinese vegetable farms, or as they engaged in fishing trips, or when they gathered at each others' wal (fire-place), or selai nyeng [vegetable plots]; and among men and women who visited other villages in the District. "What do we do... if our land is logged over then that is the end of our livelihood... all our fruit trees are located in the forests". This is how Wah Kawat explained the dilemma the Semai were discussing.

The Headman's House

In the days that followed their discovery of the logging project, many villagers visited their respective headman's house to register their concerns and propose that village meetings be convened to discuss and decide what ought to be their course of action. During the Canu meeting a few days later, the villagers gathered at the headman's house. At this meeting, many
questions were asked of the headman. Fears were expressed but no course of action was
decided save for the suggestion, from Wah Kawat, to consult the POASM and NGO leaders.
The fears expressed at this meeting were threefold. There were many stories of previous
encroachment to their land as well as stories of other Semai kampungs in the Batang Padang
District that had lost out on their land due to some development project or another. The latest
incident was that of Kg. Keroi, a Semai settlement just five kilometres from Canu. Their
kampuk plots were destroyed when that part of the forest reserve was leased out for cattle
rearing. They were offered no compensation on their loss of fruit trees. Thus, the villagers
decided to poison the trees rather than allow the cattle rearers to benefit from the sale of the
fruits. There was also a fear expressed toward the government, more specifically the Police,
should the villagers embark on a course of action that may appear "subversive". Wah Kawat
recalled the incident the previous year when Special Branch officers questioned her on the
pre-school education programme which she had initiated in the village. As she put it, "It was
either the Forestry Department workers over there or the JOA field-workers that must have
informed the police".

In this meeting, the Canu villagers also expressed their apprehension about the
JHEOA, which as the headman assured them "are supposed to look after the welfare of the
Orang Asli". He suggested that the matter of the logging be brought to the Pejabat JHEOA
(JHEOA Office) at Tapah, so that JHEOA "may appeal to the Forest Department on our
behalf" to revoke the licence or otherwise ensure proper compensation. However, several
villagers reminded him of the many instances they were given the run-around at the JHEOA
office or "cheated by JHEOA officials". "If they were really looking out for our welfare", one
woman remarked, "they should have informed us of these projects before we came to
discover them by accident"

Meetings in the headman's house had become increasingly characterized by these fears
and the general inability to work out a course of action with regard to a village problem, and
the referral of the problem to POASM or some other NGO. Since the setting up of these
villages as administrative units in the 1960s, the headmen are the formal links between the
JHEOA office located in Tapah and the villagers. He receives a monthly allowance from the
JHEOA, and is expected to attend monthly meetings where he communicates JHEOA plans
for the villagers or villagers' problems to the JHEOA. In fact the headman in his links to the
JHEOA represents the main channel by which the villagers have access to information with
regard to their lands i.e. information regarding the application of reserve land, matters
regarding encroachment of their customary lands, compensations to be negotiated and paid,
etc. However, such information from the JHEOA has not only been made increasingly
inaccessible to the headmen but was deceptive in character. For example, four months before
this logging event, there was a similar meeting in Pendue but to discuss the issue of clearing
and replanting their rubber trees. In December of 1993 JHEOA officers had approached the
Pendue headman to propose that the Pendue's aged rubber trees be felled and new trees be
planted with seedlings and subsidies from RISDA and Bank Pertanian (Agricultural Bank).
The JHEOA officers also proposed that they will arrange for a private contractor to clear the
trees, sell the rubber wood and pay the Pendue villagers the proceeds of the sale after the
necessary deductions for the contract-labour charges. The Pendue headman informed the
JHEOA officers that he would first consult the Pendue villagers about the matter. The
headman's reason for doing so was that he had heard of similar JHEOA proposals to other
Orang Asli villages in the district that had resulted in failures. In one instance, the Pendue
headman recalled,

...the JOA people visited the headman of Kampung... to put forward the suggestion to
clear and replant their rubber trees... the headman agreed and the contractors came to
cut the trees, but after some weeks the people in the village did not hear or see the
JOA people about their money from the sale of the rubber trees. When Penghulu...
gone to the RISDA office to ask them when they will start the replanting the RISDA
people told him that they were not informed by the JOA about this project. The
RISDA people also told Penghulu... that even if the JOA had informed them about the
project RISDA cannot help the village in replanting because the people in the village
do not have titles to their land.

The Pendue headman recounted a similar incident in yet another village. In that case
not only did the villagers lose out on the sale of their rubber trees but their headman was later
approached by the contractor who demanded that the headman pay for the costs of clearing
the trees. The JHEOA officers had sold the rubber wood but not paid the contractor for his
services. Thus, the Pendue headman called for a village meeting to discuss this matter of the
rubber trees. "Should they trust the JOA and risk being cheated, or do the clearing themselves
and risk the vengeance of the JOA". This was the main question discussed and again,
villagers expressed their fears, their indecision regarding what to do and later suggested that the movement leaders be consulted.

The headman's house is the formal and therefore necessary political place not only for the villagers' dealings with the JHEOA but a place for non-governmental extra-village agencies to meet with and mobilize villagers for political action. Thus, when the POASM representatives visited Canu another meeting was convened at the headman's house, this time with the AJKK (Ahli Jawatankuasa Kampung or Village-Committee Members) of the three villages. On this occasion, the three headmen and their AJKK were advised to produce a memorandum to be submitted to the Perak State Government. In the memorandum, they were to compile details of the history, demography and geography of the Semai settlement, their traditional ties as well as economic use of the land. These details and facts were to make for a strong case for their application. The memorandum served as an application for their land to be gazetted as an Orang Asli Reserve. It was suggested that, in view of the upcoming general elections and politicians intensely campaigning for voter support, this was a good time for local Orang Asli communities to go over the heads of the JHEOA officials and engage the government politicians directly in their land campaigns.

This strategy to document the history and map out the geography of the indigenous settlements had its origins in the First Conference of the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact in Chiangmai, Thailand, in 1992 (AIPP, 1995). The Orang Asli of West Malaysia as well as the indigenous peoples of East Malaysia were represented in that meeting. Following that, local NGOs in Thailand and East Malaysia held follow-up workshops to train indigenous leaders with the skills of surveying, mapping, etc. Beh Sengor who lives in a neighbouring village in the District was one such person to participate in those workshops. Two persons from Canu had also attended such workshops in East Malaysia. As such, to help assist them in memorandum project the POASM representative also suggested that the Canu-Pendue-Tni villagers seek the assistance of these people.

In the same meeting at the headman's house, the POASM representatives also advised the villagers to consider the option of applying for individual titled land-lots instead of Orang Asli Reserves. The reasons given were, first, that the Perak State Government had announced in September of 1993 a new policy concerning land allocation to the Orang Asli. In this new
policy, the Orang Asli will not be granted land as Aboriginal Reserve but on an individual-title basis. The second reason put forward by the movement leaders is that, even if the Semai did succeed in obtaining Aboriginal Reserve land there is still no security of land tenure according to Akta 134. This proposal, however, was not resolved at this meeting. The pros and the cons of both options were discussed but the majority of the villagers who did speak out voiced their dissatisfaction with the option of individual titled land lots. Their main argument was that, as Orang Asli they possessed the right to own their land as a Semai collective. Moreover, if they applied for titled lots, they would be required to pay land tax like every other Malaysian. However, a smaller group of villagers argued that if they opted for individual-titled land lots it would be more in keeping with the government's plan of development-integration for the Orang Asli, ensuring security of land tenure and a better chance of the application being approved.

In articulating their differing land demands it was clear that villagers were not only expressing differences among themselves. They were articulating where they were coming from in terms of their various links with extra-village agencies.

Beh A, who argued for the applying of individual-titled plots, is actively engaged in POASM activities. He is in frequent communication with one of the POASM member who is currently engaged in negotiations between the Perak State Exco and Orang Asli leaders. Moreover, this particular POASM member is a supporter of the Perak Government's new land policy for the Orang Asli. And, as Beh A quoted his POASM colleague, "if the villagers can afford to pay for their T.V./Radio licenses every year, I'm sure they can afford the land tax". In contrast to Beh A, Beh B who also supported the option of applying for individually titled lands is not a member of POASM. He is a devout Baha'i and like a number of other villagers are regularly visiting the Baha'i center in Ipoh. His reasons for opting for the individually titled plots are clearly religious: "our religion teaches us to be obedient to the government, if the government proposes that we do this then we should... don't get involved in worldly matters like these political activities..." Among those who insisted on applying for Orang Asli Reserves, it is Beh C who stood out as the strongest voice. He had attended the NGO-sponsored workshop in East Malaysia, following the Chiangmai Conference, and gave many examples of the indigenous peoples there who are persevering in their land struggles especially against the logging projects. He also participated in Perjuangan Kenyalang (Struggle of the Hornbill) a 1992-campaign of the Sarawakian indigenous peoples for their Native Customary Rights-lands to be upheld. As part of this campaign, indigenous representatives from Sarawak with the assistance of local NGOs and opposition political parties had traveled around Peninsular to advertise their cause and gain public support. Several Orang Asli met up with this delegation, one of them being Beh C.
Following upon the meeting with the movement leaders, individual village meetings were held at the respective headmen's houses to appoint representatives from each Semai village to a special committee that would be responsible for producing the memorandum. The committee, which comprises six men (two from each Semai village), was to engage small groups of villagers to assist them in the collection of the necessary data for the compilation of the memorandum. At this meeting also, the headmen were delegated the tasks of visiting the JHEOA, Land and Forest Offices in Tapah to obtain the required documentation and survey maps of their settlement and forest sites. They needed this documentation first, to substantiate the fact that this area was formally recognized and allocated as an Orang Asli area; second, to ascertain that the application was previously drawn up and submitted by the JHEOA to the State Executive for the gazetting of the land as an Orang Asli reserve. They also needed the survey maps from the Land Office to provide the exact topographical contours of the land area they were applying for.

In the subsequent days and weeks, the small groups, under the supervision of the committee members were actively involved in the collection of data for the memorandum. However, there were problems. There were the frustrating and unsuccessful results of the headmen's visits to the JHEOA, Land and Forestry Offices at Tapah.

The District Offices

The three Semai headmen went separately to the District offices of the JHEOA, Land and Forest Departments located in Tapah to obtain the required official documentation. From the JHEOA office, the headman from Canu succeeded in obtaining only the survey map of the Canu village-site. This map was drawn up by the JHEOA-surveyors in 1969 when applying for that site to be gazetted as an Orang Asli Reserve (see MAP...). The JHEOA officers told the other two headmen that no such survey map existed for their villages. At the land office, the headmen of Canu and Ini were able to purchase a copy of the land-Department survey map of their villages (see MAP...). In these maps, however, their village sites were categorized as "TOL," or Temporary Occupation License land. As for the Pendue headman, he was informed that the Land Office has yet to survey the Pendue area. At the Forestry Office,
meanwhile, they received no information except the assurance from the officers there that their villagers will continue to have access to their resource base in the forest reserves. Their requests for other documentation such as the survey plans of the proposed logging project from the Forest Department Office, copies of the Orang Asli Reserve applications the JHEOA had made on their behalf several years ago and specific survey plans from the Land Office were not met. According to the headmen, their experiences at these offices were disappointing and frustrating. They were either given the run around from one office to another, or they were told to be "patient" that their land will be gazetted soon and that the JHEOA will continue to appeal to the State executive. They were assured that they will not lose their land of settlement and will continue to have access to forest reserve land.

The Canu and Pendue headmen made another attempt at securing the necessary documentation from the Tapah offices but to no avail. Again, they were encouraged to be patient and to leave it to the JHEOA to handle the matter. As scholars have pointed out in the study of some "simple societies" or in the case of the construction of gender relations, spatial control to maintain subjugation entails not only the controlling of access to people, places and resources but to knowledge as well (Spain; Moore, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977). On one hand, by controlling access to knowledge, people, their places and resources through the control of space the dominant group's ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced. On the other hand, to maintain their positions dominant groups must also be able to control constructions of reality that reinforce its own status so that subordinate groups accept the social order and their own place in it. The powerful, however, cannot maintain their position without the cooperation of the less powerful. The relations between the Semai and the JHEOA, via the headmen, can be usefully explained in these terms. On one hand, the villagers are expected to rely on the JHEOA for the protection and security not only of their land but also in all matters. Even in matters of criminal acts towards the Orang Asli, when they are reported to the local police the Orang Asli are instructed to bring the matter to the JHEOA. In Kg. Tipu, for example, the village headman had engaged a private contractor to install electricity cables into the village. This is a requirement from the National Electricity Board before electricity is supplied to the village. To meet the costs of the installation of electricity cables all the village households had made contributions which amounted to RM$
3000 and this money was paid to the contractor. Subsequently, when the contractor absconded with the money without completing the installation of the cables, the village headman lodged a report with the local police station. As the headman recounts:

...the officer-in-charge told us that there is nothing they can do and that we should take the matter to the JOA office in Tapah. We have a signed contract with the contractor, and now we want to make a report of a crime but he did not even want to take our report. When I insisted that he makes the report he said that he would but still repeated that nothing would come of it. Therefore, what do we do now? If we go to the JOA they are going to tell us to go to the Police...

But on the other hand, the experience of the Semai when they go to the JHEOA office, as Wah Kawat explained, is at best ambiguous:

...they either tell us that they do not know anything about it or that we shouldn't worry because they'll look into it. When our headman approached the JOA people in Tapah about the logging project, the JOA officers said, "we weren't informed by the Forestry Department of any such project". How is it that they don't know? When we ask them about the status of our land, one time they tell us that it is gazetted then on another occasion they tell us that it is not gazetted or they don't know...

Zawawi's argument, for a similar situation in Pahang, perhaps throws some added light on the situation:

Being specially administered under the 'custody' and so-called 'protection' of the JHEOA, the Orang Asli are seen as first and foremost as being under the jurisdiction of the Department vis-a-vis their development inputs and support. At least, this is how it has been traditionally perceived by various district development authorities. Indeed, what is consistent about the Orang Asli village communities in the region is the lack and often, absence of basic needs and social amenities. Whilst the JHEOA often complains over their lack of funds, it is a known fact that at least about two-thirds of its fund allocation goes to feed its bureaucracy. But the traditional identification of Orang Asli problems with JHEOA does not help the situation. Other agencies seem to offer a helping hand not as a matter of policy or principle, but perhaps out of sympathy, or when appealed to by some politicians or influential individuals on behalf of the Orang Asli. (Zawawi, 1993:30).

It is, therefore, no surprise that a common pun among the Semai is their version of "JOA" which does not mean Jabatan Orang Asli but "jual Orang Asli" (to sell the Orang Asli).

Other observers (Hood Salleh, 1988:7; Hasan Mat Nor, 1993:9) and the JOA itself (Ishak, 1993:) have commented on this Orang Asli "negative attitude" or "antagonism" towards the JHEOA. The reasons by the JHEOA are suggested in a remark made by the Director:
... the weakness arising from the Orang Asli community is connected to, among other things, their hopes to achieve a socio-economic standing on par with the other sectors of Malaysian society and their hopes to acquire land-tenure rights or the certainty of residence in reserve areas, all the hopes which for them have not been achieved... In various situations outside influences have instigated the Orang Asli to raise certain issues which have resulted in their negative attitudes towards the government, the Department and the Malay community. (Ishak, 1993:6,8)

Other authors have suggested variant reasons for the Orang Asli's negative attitude towards the JOA. Among the reasons is the "dependent" attitude of the Orang Asli because of years of relying on the JOA as a one-stop agency for all their needs (Hasan Mat Nor, 1993:5). Or the Orang Asli experiences of the JOA's inefficiency, inefficacy, incompetence and perhaps lack of interest in the latter's affairs (Zawawi, 1993:33):

Though JHEOA, as far as the Orang Asli can remember is the organization that has been assuming the traditional role of 'protector', in times of present complexities with the accent more on development rather than social control or security, the Department has not been able to display the required leadership qualities, nor vision and commitment. It has been too caught up in bureaucracy; and lately too detached, indifferent, and no longer fired by zeal or emotion. For many, it is just a job.

_Bah Bebakti's House_

There were new problems for the memorandum campaign when, a couple of weeks later, the Ini headman announced that his village was withdrawing from the common memorandum campaign. The Ini representatives stopped working with their counterparts in the other two villages and they also stopped the data-collecting activities in Ini. What led to this decision seemed to be a combination of religious as well as land-use differences between the villagers of Canu and Ini. In recent years several Ini villagers had opened up _selai nyeng_ (individual-household vegetable garden) on Canu villagers' land. These Ini villagers had not sought permission from the Canu/Pendue villagers, for using the latter's land, nor did the Ini headmen take any action when the matter was brought to him. Another grievance Canu/Pendue villagers had against several Ini villagers was the latter's "lack of interest" in the care and maintenance of the common _kampok_ (orchards). Several Canu/Pendue households had offered Ini villagers the use of their orchards when the latter had first
relocated at this site. However, the I'ni villagers, while they shared in harvesting rights did not contribute to the maintenance of the orchards.

In I'ni, however, the land-use conflicts and the reason for pulling out of the memorandum project were viewed differently. Especially significant to the I'ni headman's decision to withdraw from the common memorandum project, were the views being expressed at the house of the Baha'i lay-leader, Bah Bebakti's house. Since the start of the data-collecting activities, the issue of the common memorandum project became a much-discussed topic among the Baha'i followers who gathered at Bah Bebakti's house. One opinion that was constantly put forward in these meetings came from members of the devout-Baha'i group. In their view, the common memorandum project was going to favour Canu villagers because Christian Canu villagers were "dominating the data-collection activities". At an earlier meeting at Bah Bakti's house it was this same small group of devout Baha'i men who were persistent that the increasing conflicts over land use between I'ni villagers and the other two Semai villages were due to the fact that Christian villagers in Canu/Pendue were "against our religion".

According to one I'ni villager who attended several of these meetings at Bah Bebakti's house, one of the latter's arguments is that I'ni villagers will lose out anyway if the common memorandum succeeds because the land applied for gazetting is ultimately the original lengriik of the Canu and Pendue villagers. I'ni villagers do not own the land as their mai pasak (original lengriik). As such, they (the I'ni villagers) will still have to contend with the Christian elements in Canu and Pendue. Bah Reta, one of the six in the Baha'i core-group, suggested that the I'ni villagers should apply for land on their own, instead of submitting a common application, and request for individual titled-land lots.

Given that the I'ni headman is himself a Baha'i follower, and present at these meetings in Bah Bebakti's house, these religious views of the common memorandum project were known to him. When asked about his decision, however, he explained that the I'ni villagers would fare better if they applied for individual titled-land lots. He also argued that, given the Government's thrust to integrate the Orang Asli into mainstream society, this application for individual titles stands a better chance of being approved.
As the Baha'i examples indicate, Semai movements into religious places beyond the village did not mean a common repolitisation for Semai identity nor articulation of land priorities and demands. The position of Baha'i Semai, for instance, may be understood by what Gaver explains of Baha'ism in general:

...shun politics like the plague and be obedient to the government in power in the place where you reside... refrain from participation in partisan activities (1967:29)

But in articulating their land demands in terms of Aboriginal Reserves the other villagers were reproducing the discourse of "protection-segregation" which characterized their history since colonial times. This seemed to be the POASM representative's concern and dilemma. But as one pro-Reserves villager explained "POASM is mainly engaged in negotiations with the government so it is their job to change the laws governing Orang Asli... we want reserves but we want the custodial rights to be given to us not the JOA".

Wal Wah Kawat (Wah Kawat's Fireplace)

A few days after the I'nii headman decided to pull out of the common memorandum project, the Pendue headman also followed suit arguing that if the three villages could not work together then it would be better for each village to produce its own memorandum. He, however, did not pursue the idea of a memorandum for his village. Atuk Segrar, the Pendue headman, was already quite angry after his frustrating visits to the District Offices. And the I'nii decision to pull out from the campaign was but the last straw for him to feel that:

...this way won't work. The government people will not help us... look at how they treated us at their offices when we went to see them, how much worse when we are not there. We do the memorandum, we send it to their office and they will not read it even. Maybe we should try another way. Maybe we should do what the Penan are doing in Sarawak... blockade the forest when the loggers arrive.

Within a period of two months, therefore, the data collection activities were only being carried out in Canu. Although the I'nii headman argued for applying for individual titled-land lots nothing was being done about it in that village. In Pendue, as well, the villagers continued to meet at the headman's house but no alternative plans were organized. The collecting of data in Canu was going on but was fraught with problems. The villagers' morale was low and the work was, according to Wah Kawat, "moving very slow".

139
But if the memorandum activities were being hampered it did not mean that villagers had forgotten the threat of the impending logging project. The subject was a matter of everyday conversation and the places in the villages where these conversations were most abuzz were the household *wals* (fireplaces). First a few words about the *wal*.

All the villagers live in houses with a similar architectural style which betray the changes introduced by the JHEOA in 1969 as well as the "traditional" extensions put up by the villagers since then. The front raised section of the house facing the access route into the village consists of a living room and bedroom that resembles a typical Malay dwelling-place. It is made from wood and corrugated metal roof, materials provided by the JHEOA. Just behind this section of the house is a smaller room located at ground level that was designed to be the kitchen area. Members of the Semai household, however, use this "kitchen" area as a storage place. For their cooking needs the Semai have constructed their *wal* (fireplace/kitchen) as an extended back-section or another single unit located behind their house. The *wal* is raised on stilts and, in contrast to the front portion of the house, is built from forest resources such as bamboo, rattan, unprocessed wood and thatched roofs. The *wal* is more than a cooking and eating place. It is perhaps the most frequented gathering place not only for members of the household but when neighbours and friends "drop in" for visits. It is also the place where, as Wah Kawat put it,...important discussions are held"...public meetings are held in the headman's house but the issues are always discussed in someone's *wal* first; and after the public meetings we will return to someone's *wal* to discuss those issues again...usually the decisions are first made in the *wal*. There is a combination of reasons why the *wal* has become a prominent meeting-gathering place for the Semai villagers. One obvious reason, at least to this observer, is that the *wal* is the most comfortable place of the Semai house. With its raised floor and walls made from bamboo strips placed slightly apart, and its thatched roof the *wal* provides a natural "air-conditioning" in the hot and humid tropical weather. This is in stark contrast to the effect produced by the corrugated metal roofs covering the front section of the house. However, the reasons provided by villagers, for the prominence of the *wal* are somewhat different. First, traditional Semai dwelling places were longhouses where as many as ten or more families would live together. In these longhouses each nuclear family would have their separate sleeping rooms but the *wal* was the central space of the house - kitchen, living room and meeting place all rolled into one. In fact, the *wal* was the "front section" of the traditional Semai house. That the *wal* has become the "back section" of the Semai house is also telling of the other reason why it has gained prominence as a meeting-gathering place. As Wah Kawat explained it: ...it [the *wal*] gives us privacy to talk more freely...outsiders don't come to the *wal*, they will knock the front door and we will speak with them in the living room... and when we are gathered in the *wal* the slits between the bamboo [of the wall] allow us to see when strangers are approaching the house...

If there were one series of *wal*-gatherings which could be singled out for the significant role it played in the memorandum project then surely it would be those held at Wah Kawat's. Since
the first discovery of the logging project, these issues were subjects of regular discussion for
the informal women's network gathered almost daily at Wah Kawat's wal (fireplace). This
informal woman's network often met as a "core-group", of about seven women in Wah
Kawat's fireplace in between their daily chores. This group comprised of women from the
three villages who also gathered as part of the larger network, in organized fishing-gathering
trips, contract-labour groups, or daily activities of bathing and doing the laundry by the
riverside, etc. Wah Kawat's fireplace has earned a reputation for being the main meeting place
of the women. A few months earlier, for instance when one Canu woman "filed for divorce" at
the headman's house, her husband accused the women gathered at Wah Kawat's fireplace as
responsible for conspiring against him. In a sense he was right, Wah Kawat's fireplace was
that meeting place this woman had discussed her husband's refusal to allow her to use
contraceptives, one of the issues that prompted the divorce proceedings.

However, in these weeks the women were discussing the logging threat and the problems
concerning the memorandum project. They were especially displeased with the attitude or lack
of response from the Semai men, in particular the headmen, towards the issue. Some excerpts
of their remarks may well illustrate the tenor of the conversations in Wah Kawat's wal:

They are waiting for the headman [of Canu] to do something, but he is only interested in his
hunting. We are going to become like the people at Kampung ... The JOA will one day
come and tell us that we must leave this place and then it will be too late. (Wah Satu)

It is like the time when the JOA tried to cheat us in the selling of our rubber trees... if Wah
Kawat did not contact Bah Satin surely they [the headmen] and the other men would
have allowed the JOA to take our rubber wood. (Wah Dua)

We have to insist that they call another village meeting and we must say something or else
they will continue to do nothing. (Wah Tiga)

The women were also unhappy with some of the POASM and NGO leaders who were
only consulting the men or relied too much on the headmen and their all-men village
committees when they communicated or visited the villages. They expressed anxieties that
what had happened in Kg. Sabeu will be repeated in their villages. Kg. Sabeu had earlier on
produced a memorandum at the behest of the movement's leaders. Wah Kawat and some
women from Canu had visited that village to obtain advice on how to go about the
memorandum project. There they met up with some Sabeu women who expressed grievances
over what they had experienced. In negotiating alternative sites and sizes of land to be submitted for gazetting, the women of that village were neither consulted by the village committee or the movement's leaders. When the Kg. Sabeui women discovered the final settlement sites chosen by the men, it was clearly to their disadvantage. *Kampoks* (orchards) plots belonging to women were "sacrificed" in favour of men's *kampoks*. Moreover, the new settlement sites negotiated by the men were located farther away from facilities such as the clinic and market which women needed to frequent. As one woman from Kg. Sabeui remarked of the men: "They don't care about the distance because they have their motorbikes. We have to walk."

The women from I'ni who were represented in Wah Kawat's *wal* were concerned that if their headman and village committee opted for individual titled-land lots, as the headman had suggested, the whole village would be relocated to an altogether new settlement site. This would mean that the women would lose out on their *selai nyeng* (vegetable plots) which they had opened and maintained. The main concern of the Canu women, meanwhile, was that if they had no say in the negotiating process between the state agencies and the village committees, their *kampoks* may be "sacrificed" to save men's *kampoks* as it had happened in Kg. Sabeui. As for the Pendue women, they made it clear that they wanted to resume the common memorandum project because they felt their village could not succeed if they attempted a separate memorandum.

In the weeks that followed the number of meetings at Wah Kawat's fireplace increased. The women discussed at length ways of intervening into the memorandum project so that the women's interests will be adequately represented and of mobilizing the Pendue and I'ni men back into a common memorandum effort. At one of the meetings, it was decided that Wah Kawat and a few women would visit some respected and "progressive" elders from nearby villages in the district. It was hoped that these elders could persuade the Semai headmen to resume the common memo project. The women also decided to visit some of the movement leaders to introduce their specific concerns. They wanted to be assured by the leaders that the Semai women's interests will be considered in whatever negotiations that may happen.
Meanwhile, the women were also mobilized to persuade the menfolk to resume the common project. All this while, the increasing significance of the meetings in Wah Kawat's fireplace was recognized by male villagers from all three Semai villages. What further contributed to the growing importance of the meetings in Wah Kawat's fireplace was the success the women achieved in acquiring some of the necessary documentation the headmen had previously failed to obtain from the District Offices. These documents include the record of application the JHEOA had made for the gazetting of their land.

However, among the menfolk, there were mixed reactions to the changing meanings and activities attached to Wah Kawat's fireplace. Some men were mildly encouraging: "Well, at least the women are doing something." (Bah Kenyet); "... I think they are right, after all the men are working more and more in the towns and the women must look after the village so it is right that they should also be in the memorandum committee" (Bah Riang). Others, especially those belonging to the Baha'i network were openly critical: "Wah Kawat, Wah Satu, Wah Dua are influenced by their church people... it is another Christian way to convert more Orang Asli" (Bah Bebakti). Some men were simply sexist: "It is dangerous what they are doing, getting involved in politics. It is not women's place... it will surely bring us trouble from the government" (Bah Agut).

The women, however, aware of the mixed reactions to their fireplace mobilizing, took certain measures to allay fears and suspicions to encourage participation especially from the men in their activities. For example, in contrast to their usual practice, the women convened the wal meetings in the evenings so that men could walk in and join these informal meetings. Moreover, the four Christian women belonging to the core group, who were accused by Baha'i men for their presumed hidden Christian agenda, announced at one of these wal meetings that they were "quitting Christianity". And they did.

Encouraged by the growing interest of the Semai men in their efforts, the informal women's network became more active in their organizing of the campaign. For instance, they decided to organize a workshop in Canu during which they brought together several knowledgeable villagers from all the three Semai villages to draw up their own map of their forest kampoks (Map ..) to serve as the map they were unable to acquire from the Forest Department nor the JHEOA. Wah Kawat invited some individuals from a literacy-training
NGO based in Kuala Lumpur to assist the villagers in the mapping of their kampok plots. Wah Kawat had come to know of this NGO when representatives of the group had, earlier in the year, approached the Semai through the Catholic Orang Asli Team to use the Semai villages as an "exposure-immersion" site for participants in an international literacy-training programme. The Semai responded with reluctance to the idea because, as Wah Kawat put it, "there will be foreigners among the participants and the villagers could get into trouble with the authorities if the programme is discovered". This time around, however, Wah Kawat decided to take the risk though she made specific request to the NGO representative that if foreigners were to be part of the contingent to visit the village that the foreigners be chosen from the Asian participants rather than the "conspicuous" orang putih (white people).

Wah Kawat's anxiety was understandable given the Malaysian government's suggestion that when the indigenous peoples organize themselves for land campaigns "foreigners" or "outsiders" have influenced them. In the case of the Sarawak indigenous peoples' land struggle, one federal Minister went so far as to describe these "foreign agitators" as "eco-imperialists" and warned of the possible threat of "eco-terrorism" affecting the country (NRC Handelsblad, 14.5.92). Thus, on another occasion during the course of the memorandum project when finances were running short to support the village women's work, an "outsider" suggested that Wah Kawat apply for monies from the "Global Fund For Women". Wah Kawat did not entertain the suggestion. On another occasion, an offer from IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) via a Dutch agency to finance the Semai mapping project was also turned down. Details about the interconnections between "foreign" agencies and villagers during the memorandum campaign are best left unsaid due to obvious reasons.

Despite the efforts of the informal women's network mobilized around Wah Kawat's fireplace, the headmen of Pendue and Ini stuck to their decision to stay out of the memorandum project. Many villagers from Pendue and Ini, however, continued to lend their support to the project although the memorandum was finally produced and submitted to the Perak State Government as the Kg. Canu application. Although the memorandum represented the appeals of the Canu villagers, the land area they applied to be gazetted into reserves covered the customary lands of all three villages.
More significantly, the women's efforts opened up new possibilities in the land struggle or resistance itself at the grassroots level. The women have demonstrated that the Semai are not only confronting the imposed geography of the state over the Semai meanings and relations with the land, but also a specific resistance against the bounded or gendered notions of the land which were previously unchallenged. For the Semai women, the land is also peculiarly tied to their moral, social and economic relations activities and duties vis-a-vis the *selai nyeng* and access to certain facilities. It is a question of having a voice in the deliberations of so-called community politics and the possibility of entering the political space of discussion and organizing regarding the land rights campaign. In a sense, by excluding women from the official negotiations, the state, the movement leaders and the men of the village were actually defining the land as a singular space - men's space - in political as well as economic terms. The women were thus challenging the notion that the men are the symbolic trustees of the land as the men-committees were challenging the JHEOA on similar grounds.

While the women were not excluded from the deliberations taking place in the headmen's houses, they were dissatisfied with the male dominance in the discussions and organization of the land campaign and the lack of concern that men showed towards peculiarly women's relations with the land. This dissatisfaction was also directed towards the Baha'i men who decided to pull out of the memorandum project altogether on religious grounds, also articulated by men. Thus, their simultaneous informal meetings and actions were assertions of their right to the land as well as assertions of their active role in the community the men presumed to represent. They reconstituted a physical political place around the fireplace - a woman's place - in a sense displacing yet via that political space entering the so-called formal political place of the headman's house with different political positions. At the same time, they opened a new symbolic political place introducing a new perspective from which the land rights issue is perceived.
What Prospects at State Level

It seems unlikely that the Canu application for their customary lands to be gazetted as Orang Asli Reserves will succeed. The Perak State Government, more precisely the Perak State Executive Council, is empowered though not obliged both by the Constitution and specifically by the Akta 134 to declare Orang Asli-occupied areas as aboriginal reserves. If we examine Table... it shows that of the 14,465.55 hectares of land applied by the JHEOA on behalf of the Semai in Batang Padang to be gazetted as Aboriginal Reserves: (1) only 3538.36 hectares have been approved and gazetted as Aboriginal Reserves; (2) 1439.46 hectares have been approved but not gazetted as Reserves, and; (3) 9,487.73 hectares have not been approved, which means they are pending a decision from the State Executive Council. Moreover, most of these applications including that for the Canu village were made almost thirty years ago (Pernloi-Gah, June, 1991). The prospects for the Semai application are also dismal in the light of announcements made by the Perak Government in 1993 that the Orang Asli of Perak will be relocated in permanent FELDA-type farmlands with the provision for them to own land as individual-titled-land lots. (Dasar dan Garis Panduan Pelupusan Tanah Kepada Orang Asli, MMK Perak, September 1993).

As for the Federal government, it has been argued by the JHEOA (Ishak, 1993:5f) as well as other scholars (Williams-Hunt, 1993; McLellan, 1985; Gomes, 1990; Hasan Mat Nor, 1993) that since all matters pertaining to land comes within the legislative and executive purview of the individual states (Ninth Schedule, State List No. 2, Malaysian Constitution), it is the failure of the individual states not the JHEOA as a Federal department nor the Federal government that the Orang Asli land problem still persists. The problem, however, is not a matter of inadequate legislation to empower the Federal government to act on Orang Asli land matters. As Rachagan (1990:103ff) demonstrates the terms of the extant legislation vis-a-vis the Orang Asli stipulates that the administration, welfare and development are the responsibilities of the Federal Government and that the Constitutional powers conferred upon the Federal Government to expedite the "land question" is also unfettered. It is thus, a lack of political will on the part of the Federal Government to intervene in the land problems of the Orang Asli. Moreover, the latest position of the Federal Government on the question of Orang Asli Reserves is suggested in a 1993 announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister:
In Malaysia... the indigenous people... would not be "protected' and designated to
confined areas similar to reservations for the indigenous people in some industrial
societies. (quoted from the New Straits Times, 30.11.93)

According to one of the Orang Asli movement leaders involved in the 1994 negotiations with
the federal government, there are no indications that the legislation governing Orang Asli-state
relations would be changed or will the JHEOA be disbanded. This would imply that if the
Semai villagers are relocated into permanent FELDA-type farms and granted individual titled-
land lots, their occupation, use and "ownership" of the land will still be governed by the
present legislation which means that they will be no more than "tenant at will" (Section
8(1)(c) of the Akta 134). Although Section 8(3) of the Akta 134 provides for the Orang Asli to
legally own land personally and have rights other than as tenant at will, the very next Section
9 prevents any dealing or transactions in such land, not only between Orang Asli and non-
Orang Asli but between Orang Asli persons without the consent of the Commissioner. Any
transaction effected without the Commissioner's consent i.e. the Director-General of the
JHEOA, shall be void and of no effect (Section 9). In Section 12 of the Act, moreover, the
rights of the Orang Asli over their land is further curtailed in the provisions made for their
compensation should revocation or any other form of encroachment happens. Revocation can
happen because it is provided for in the same legislation. In the event then of encroachment or
revocation, Section 12 does not oblige but merely provides for the state to exercise its own
discretion when it comes to compensation. Moreover, if compensation is to be paid it is also
up to the discretion of the state whether to pay it to the person it deems rightful to receive such
payment or pay the compensation directly to the Commissioner of Aborigines who is trustee
for aboriginal lands. More importantly, if the Semai are granted titled-land lots on permanent
farms they will remain wards of the state and the JHEOA trustees of their lands.

Conclusions

The masalah tanah or land problem is the central issue around which the contemporary
political struggles of the Semai are organized. In this case study, I highlighted some of the
different places or political spaces this struggle is taking place within the Semai villages: the
changing identity of the places and the changing identities within these places vis-a-vis the
land struggle. I also attempted to examine the movements and interconnections between village places and other places beyond the village. The singular vocabulary of "land" as a specific space is unpacked in terms of the plural spatialities that they connote. Consequently, the notion of that singular geography is displaced by plural geographies, avoiding relativism through the theoretical refusal to submit to the separation of the abstract and the empirical in the process of theorization.

Some of these places, like the headman's house, has a longer history as a "site of struggle" than another, the fire-place (wal) of Wah Kawat the "leader" of the informal women's network. Yet, the meaning of the headman's house and nature of activities happening there, as well as the community of resistance constituted around that place have changed considerably since forty years ago. At the same time, the wal (fireplace) in Wah Kawat's house is a more recent political space to have emerged. The fireplace, seemingly a women's place is reconstituted as a place of mobilization as well as a reconstituted community site of resistance vis-a-vis the land struggle. All the places of the village are constructed out of a particular combination of social relations that interact at a particular location but go beyond the particular locale both in terms of time and space. The identities of these places are not fixed because the social relations constructed around them are changing, not only because of their interconnections to other places, but the particular events happening in the locale.

If we move to the "larger" picture of the state and the Orang Asli leadership does not seem that the Semai application for reserved land will be approved. Both the Perak state as well as Federal Governments is insistent that the Orang Asli should be re-settled the way Malay peasants are in FELDA-type schemes. And the Orang Asli leadership at the national level seems reluctant to "push" the issue. However, at the Semai "locale" level at least the Canu and Pendue villages are determined to resist this form of resettlement. We can only assume that if they are forced to comply they will but they will also refashion their land politics but in a new place.