

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There have been dynamic and massive social changes within many different Orang Asli (OA) communities in South Perak. The processes of modernization and development sweeping across Peninsula Malaysia have generally brought these about. These changes have been studied and recorded by a number of academicians; prominent among them were Kirk Endicott (1979), Colin Nicholas (1985), S. McLellan (1985) and A.G. Gomes (1990, 1991).

However, few of the above researches have forwarded a comprehensive gender analysis to the whole issue of social change among the OA. In the above studies, women were either completely ignored or given a passing thought, with Gomes (1991) as an exception with his inclusion of a sub-section on gender differentiation in his article.

Nonetheless, there have been a few studies on OA women and change, which were gender-specific. These included researches done by Karen Endicott (1979, 1981), Signe Howell (1983), B. Nowak (1986) and Shanthi Thambiah (1997a). These studies focussed on the Batek Negrito, Chewong, Hmak Btsisi and Jakun or on OA women in general. However, to date, no in-depth study has been done on Semai women and change. This study aims to fill that void, with the hope that the production of extensive studies of OA women from

different social groups and contexts would allow academicians to piece together a more accurate picture of the OA women's situation as a whole.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The focus of this research would firstly be to identify and analyse sociologically the changes that have been happening among the OA. This was confined to three main areas: the environmental, economic and ideological. In addition, the roles of the state, merchant capital¹ and land-appropriating agents in the above changes would be analyzed as these have been seen to be important agents of change in these areas (Kirk Endicott:1979, Nicholas:1985, McLellan:1985, Gomes:1991). This would lead on to a study of the effects of such changes on the OA, specifically the women. Finally, any responses that have developed from the OA women would be looked at.

All these would be done within the context of a case study on the OA women in Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai, a Semai village in South Perak, which has found itself in the throes of massive social change. It could then be assumed that the social changes that have happened in Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai and the consequences to the villagers,

¹ Nicholas notes that "Merchant capital is a particular type of circulation capital which is restricted to the sphere of the buying and selling of commodities. The circuit of merchant capital involves two transactions but only one commodity. Furthermore, there is nothing which merchant capital does to this commodity between the moment of its purchase and its subsequent sale, which increases its value. This circuit can be represented in the following form: M-C-M' (where M represents the money expended by the merchant to purchase commodities (C), and M' the amount of money received on resale of the same commodity). Because the merchant's motive in engaging in such a transaction is to make a profit, his selling price (M') must be greater than his purchase price (M), otherwise he would be making a loss. That is to say, the merchant must engage in 'unequal exchange' in order to receive a profit. However, since there is no change in the value of the commodity that is being traded, the source of profit for merchant capital must lie in the sphere of production – as the unrewarded product of labour. By engaging in unequal exchange, as such, merchant capital is able to appropriate part of the surplus product of a society. It is not necessary for production to be organised along a capitalist basis for merchant capital to exist. The only condition that merchant capital requires is that part of the social product should regularly consist of commodities" (1991:81).

especially among the women, could represent similar phenomenon in other Semai villages in South Perak.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEMS

In order to study the above, the following questions would be useful in guiding the research effort towards meeting the objective of the study:

1. In a historical context, what were the social changes (environmental, economic and ideological) that have developed in Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai with the onset of development and modernisation especially with the involvement of the state and merchant capital, and the private appropriation of land?
2. What were the roles of the state, merchant capital and land-appropriating agents in such changes?
3. What were the effects of these social changes, especially on the women? Have they brought holistic development or marginalisation to the villagers concerned especially the women in terms of bringing betterment or degradation in lifestyle and standard of living? How have these changes influenced local gender relations?
4. If the villagers, especially women have experienced more marginalisation than development, what were the factors that have created such a situation?
5. How have the villagers responded to these changes and its effects, specifically the women?
6. What was the traditional position and status of women in OA society and ideology? How was this reflected in everyday practice? How were these affected by the above environmental, economic and ideological changes?

1.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although a complete and comprehensive study of social change on the Semai and the response experienced would include an economic, political and cultural analysis, the study was confined to the domains of the environmental, economic and ideological. This was so as a complete and full blown study would demand extensive research and fieldwork which was beyond the capacity of this study if it hoped to explore these areas in an in-depth manner. Furthermore, environmental, economical and ideological changes have been blatant and have had tremendous implications on the OA and therefore could not be ignored. The works of Kirk Endicott (1979), Colin Nicholas (1985), S. McLellan (1985) and A.G. Gomes (1990, 1991) could testify to the economic aspect of this. Meanwhile, Signe Howell (1983) has stressed the importance of ideological factors in the process of change and the need to study these further. Finally, the transformations in the ecology have led to a massive impact on indigenous people, often creating a double burden for women (Mies and Shiva, 1993, Dankelman and Davidson, 1988 and Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler and Wieringa, 1994). This would be even truer for indigenous women who still significantly depended upon the environment for their subsistence needs.

Another limitation, which has occurred during the research process, concerned sampling size. In Sample 1, the number of respondents was limited to the heads of twelve families. This was due to the fact that this sample was to be used for a very detailed survey to analyse in an in-depth and reliable manner the utilization of labor for economic production and income received for a single month in their lives. In order to do this, I had to question and requestion the respondents at the end of every week for a month so that the information collected would be fresh in their memory. As many of them were not literate, this was the

only viable method to obtain the data needed. Furthermore, as I was the only researcher on the field and due to the lack of funds, the number of respondents had to be limited to the heads of these twelve families.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF KAMPUNG CHANG SUNGAI GEPAI

Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai is a Semai village situated around five miles east of Bidor town in the Batang Padang District in South Perak. According to a survey done in 1998, Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai had a population of 368 villagers with 181 males and 187 females. These were from seventy-six families housed in sixty-five houses.² Tables 1 and 2 refer to the age cohort and household composition of village residents.

TABLE 1

**HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION OF VILLAGE RESIDENTS
IN THE STUDY VILLAGE**

Types of households	No. of households	Percentage
Nuclear families	24	36.9
Extended families	17	26.2
Single parent	3	4.6
Single parent extended	5	7.7
Couple	4	6.2
Uninhabited homes	5	7.7
Others	7	10.5
Total	65	100.0

² These figures held true as at 23 March 1998.

TABLE 2**AGE COHORT OF RESIDENTS IN THE STUDY VILLAGE**

Age cohort	Males	Females
70+	3	1
60 – 69	5	2
50 – 59	12	9
40 – 49	14	14
30 – 39	33	27
20 – 29	28	32
10 – 19	37	51
0 – 9	49	51
Total	181	187

There were a few reasons why this particular village was chosen for this case study to look at Semai women in transition in the midst of massive social changes. First and foremost, the Semai tribe was chosen from among the nineteen OA tribal groups that exist in Peninsular Malaysia. This was done as the Semai tribe is the largest with 26,076 people or 28% of the total OA population of 106,131 in 1997 (JHEOA, 1997). Also, ever since independence, they have been among those who have had extensive contact with mainstream society due to the processes of development and modernisation, as many of their settlements were in the lowlands and situated closer to the towns. With that, they have been much more exposed to modern economic and social forces. Therefore, a study on this tribe would give a good indication of what was happening and what might happen to other tribal groups which were lesser in number or located further in the interior which were nevertheless also increasingly undergoing social change due to the same factors. In addition, a study of change among Semai women had a good chance of reflecting how women of other tribes were affected as well.

Secondly, Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai was significant as its easy accessibility - having a tarred road connecting it to Bidor town and being only a ten to fifteen minute drive from town - has allowed easy exposure to the modern external forces mentioned above. Therefore, it would be a good choice for a study done on social changes brought about by such forces, how these have affected villagers, especially the women and their responses.

Finally, a strong basis for trust has been developed between the villagers and myself as I have spent fifteen months of full-time work and around two years of part time work as a community organiser³ with the community. As such, little time needed to be spent to build this foundation of trust which was essential for this study as it was much dependent on participatory observation as an approach. Also, in order to identify and analyse the social changes that have occurred in the village and the responses they have brought, a deep understanding of the lifestyle and culture of the community had to exist. This has already been solidly built up through the years and these would enable a more accurate identification, interpretation and analysis of the situation.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

As far as possible, this research aimed to be non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian in nature where the community members were also active collaborators and beneficiaries from the research. This was in line with the "methods from the margins" as proposed by Kirby and McKenn where "(re)search from the margins is not research on people from the margins, but research **by, for, and with them**" (1989:28). In fact, according to them,

³ I worked as a full-time community organiser for fifteen months from 1993-1994 in a team called the Concern for the Orang Asli Team under the auspices of the Catholic Church, where Ijah was my colleague. My responsibilities were specifically to work on socio-economic projects with the villagers of Kg. Chang Sungai Gepai to improve their standard of living. After leaving the team, I worked two years part-time as a volunteer with the same concerns within the same community.

“...(research) should empower the people who are normally just the objects of research, to develop their capacity to research their own situations and evolve their own solutions” (Kirby and McKenn, 1989:26, citing Connell et al., 1982:216).

Such a slant in doing research emerged from my experiences as a former community organizer in Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai and currently as volunteer/activist in Orang Asli issues. In these capacities, I have evolved much. Initially, I thought it was my role as a graduate from an urban middle class background to recommend solutions to the many problems of this marginalized community. It was through the process of many deliberations and disputes with Ijah, a close friend and ex-colleague that I eventually learnt that I can never be of any positive value to her community if I did not let go of this ill-conceived perception.

Ijah is a villager in Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai and was my colleague when I was working full-time as a community worker in her village. We have remained very close friends since then. I have very frequently discussed, debated and analyzed the OA situation with her, especially that of her village. These have very much shaped both our own thoughts and analysis of the situation, which were often a synergy of these debates and discussions.

She taught me that the way to be of any worth to the OA depended on my ability to allow, in her own words, “my soul to touch theirs”. Together, we sought to learn a way of “community organizing” that empowers and enables her people to research into, analyze and solve their problems in their own unique manner, which is rooted in their historical and cultural contexts. In this way, we could also mobilize her people to retrospection and

decisions of what they want for themselves as a community in relation to the larger Malaysian society. This approach emanated very much from our own experiences and involvement with her people and learning from past mistakes.

Such an approach was also influenced by our involvement with other non-governmental organizations, which sought to do the same. One significant organization was *Pusat Komus*, which aimed at using popular communications as a learning methodology based on community organizing efforts in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Here, “Popular Communication (PC) methods are not just creative processes but they actually contribute effectively to the learning process of grassroots communities because they are very action-oriented, based on experiences and allows first-hand practice. Everyone is considered an expert at least in his/her own field of work and life experiences. PC processes can effectively draw out this wisdom of the people, help them to understand their own situation and explore means to overcome their problems. This creative and participatory methodology takes into consideration the people’s culture, their available resources and helps them to strategize for action” (SEA-PCP, 1997: 1).

This orientation has shaped my role as a researcher so that I eventually rejected the orthodox way of doing research on a community. Instead, I opted for the “method from the margins” and saw myself doing research in a participatory manner to empower those I did research with. Thus, I learnt to understand that my role was not to solve their problems but to use research as a tool to assist the community in scrutinizing their problems, with their active involvement in the process of their empowerment.

This study attempts to reflect this and eventually act as a means of empowerment for the community with which and for which the research was done. In line with this, some villagers have participated in the research by giving their own analysis of the situation, which were often apt and insightful. One of the main persons who have done so was Ijah, whose insights I have often quoted.

In this research, Ijah has consented to act as my key informant. As she is also a full-time community worker in her village, she is sensitive to and in touch with the feelings, thoughts and needs of her co-villagers, many of whom are also her relatives. Throughout her time as a community worker, she has become increasingly aware of the dynamics going on in her village and this was much reflected in her quotes. As such, she was indeed very valuable as a key informant in giving information on the situation of her village. According to her, there was a need to analyze the social changes that were occurring in her village and how these affected villagers. However, since many such studies have been done, I opted to do a similar study focussing on gender instead. She was also closely informed of every step taken in the research process.

In fact, we worked together on some analysis with regard to OA women.⁴ I have included some of this data in this thesis with Ijah's permission. Finally, at the end of the whole process, the research is to be translated in Bahasa Malaysia so villagers could use it in an empowering manner. I hope also to eventually organize a workshop using popular methods to discuss the issues brought up in the research so that information collected and analyzed could be channeled back to the villagers.

⁴ See Tijah a/p Yok Chopil (1997a, b and c).

Finally, it should be noted here that all the names of respondents mentioned in this study were fictitious, in order to protect their identities.

1.6.1 Timing and duration of the fieldwork

The fieldwork duration amounted to a total of three and a half months, spread out from January 1997 to January 1998. Data collection was most intensive between September 1997 to January 1998 where sixty days were spent at the field during five trips made in close succession which ended with a twenty-day stay. However, as mentioned earlier, my period of full and part-time work as a community organiser in the study village proved useful in understanding the socio-economic dynamics in the village, which eventually enabled me to gather more reliable data during the fieldwork.

Finally, it must be noted that the fieldwork period would also include the times when there were more social and economic activity within the community, for example during the *petai* and *durian* seasons or when communal projects and meetings were held. Although the activities recorded would not represent those that occurred during the whole year, this was done for two reasons. Firstly, plotting the economic activities in the village when they were most active and productive allowed me to look at the way the cash economy worked and to study its impact on the social and gender relations of the community. Secondly, being present at communal projects and meetings allowed me to observe communal dynamics in addition to dynamics at a more private and personal level.

1.6.2 The study sample

As there were two main surveys done in this research, two samples were used. These are termed Sample 1 and Sample 2 and will be explained below.

1.6.2.1 Sample 1

Sample 1 used purposive sampling to investigate in a detailed manner the income and utilisation of labour for exchange-value and use-value production by the heads of twelve families for a single month in their lives. Here, families referred to nuclear families, to look at economic activities within the most basic family structure.⁵ The heads of these families meanwhile would denote the main income earners, economic producers and decision-makers in the family. In most cases, this term rightly referred to the father figure in the family who usually played the above roles. However, as this was a gender study, I would here consciously include the wife into the definition and deem the husband-wife team as head of the family to place an equal emphasis on both man and woman. This was done to explore the often-ignored economic role of the wife in the family. Nonetheless, there were certain families, which were headed by single persons, be they widows, widowers, divorcees who did not remarry or even single men and women.

Therefore, respondents could be grouped into two categories, married couples and single persons who headed their respective families. Respondents were all aged twenty and above as only 2.2% of the village population below this age were married or acted as heads of their families. Sample 1 was made up of twenty respondents consisting of eight married

⁵ According to Dentan et.al., "The basic unit of production and consumption is the household, normally a nuclear family..." (1997:40).

couples and four single persons who headed twelve families. These twelve families made up 15.0% of the eighty families found in the village. Meanwhile, ten of these respondents were women and the other ten were men to give equal representation to both sexes in the study. Tables 3-5 verify the representation of Sample 1 of the village population at large, with respect to marital status, gender and age.

TABLE 3**REPRESENTATION OF SAMPLE 1 WITH RESPECT TO MARITAL STATUS**

Heads of families	Study village		Sample 1	
	No. of families	%	No. of families	%
Married couples	64	80.0	8	66.7
Single persons	16	20.0	4	33.3
Total	80	100.0	12	100.0

TABLE 4**REPRESENTATION OF SAMPLE 1 WITH RESPECT TO GENDER**

Gender	Study village		Sample 1	
	Unit	%	Unit	%
Female	85	47.2	10	50.0
Male	95	52.8	10	50.0
Total	180	100.0	20	100.0

TABLE 5**REPRESENTATION OF SAMPLE 1 WITH RESPECT TO AGE**

Age cohort	Study village		Sample 1	
	Unit	%	Unit	%
20 – 29	60	33.3	2	10.0
30 – 39	60	33.3	9	45.0
40 – 49	28	15.6	4	20.0
50 – 59	21	11.7	4	20.0
60 – 69	7	3.9	1	5.0
70+	4	2.2	0	0.0
Total	180	100.0	20	100.0

Meanwhile, October 1997 was chosen for the survey as it coincided with the *petai* (August to October) and durian seasons (mid-October to mid-November), the main commodities produced and main sources of income in the village. Therefore, this data would reflect the income and utilisation of labour at the higher end of the scale.

It should be noted here that these twelve families were selected and surveyed, as they were able to represent the larger population in terms of marital status, gender and age. Furthermore, these of the many others were willing to respond to the questionnaires constantly for a month. Finally, the information from this survey using Sample 1 was used extensively in Chapter 5.

1.6.2.2 Sample 2

This purposive sampling was used to investigate the present dynamics between spouses, and their respective roles and positions in the areas below within the context of family:

- gender division in reproductive tasks
- gender division in use-value production
- ownership of productive resources
- decision-making
- geographical mobility
- public involvement

As Sample 1 was too small for the above purpose, I added sixteen more respondents to the eleven respondents from Sample 1 to form Sample 2. With a larger sample, a better representation of the village population would be achieved.

In this sample, all respondents were aged twenty and above, again as only 2.2% of the village population below this age was married at one point or another. Since this survey intended to analyze the dynamics between husbands and wives and their roles and position, only married villagers were taken into account.

This sample consisted of twenty-seven (thirteen males and fourteen females) respondents representing twenty-seven families (33.8%) out of the village's eighty families. All twenty-seven respondents were questioned about the current dynamics between them and their spouses with regard to the issues mentioned above. Tables 6 and 7 verify the representation of Sample 2 of the larger population, in terms of gender and age.

Finally, these twenty-seven persons acted as respondents as their gender and age were generally representative of the larger population. Furthermore, these were willing to participate in the survey. The data from this survey was used in Chapters 5 and 6.

TABLE 6**REPRESENTATION OF SAMPLE 2 WITH RESPECT TO GENDER**

Gender	Study village		Sample 2	
	Unit	%	Unit	%
Female	85	47.2	14	51.9
Male	95	52.8	13	48.1
Total	180	100.0	27	100.0

TABLE 7**REPRESENTATION OF SAMPLE 2 WITH RESPECT TO AGE**

Age cohort	Study village		Sample 2	
	Unit	%	Unit	%
10 - 19	8	5.8	0	0.0
20 – 29	30	21.6	5	18.5
30 – 39	49	35.3	9	33.3
40 – 49	23	16.5	6	22.2
50 – 59	18	12.9	6	22.2
60 – 69	7	5.0	0	0.0
70+	4	2.9	1	3.7
Total	139	100.0	27	100.0

1.6.3 Methods used

As the OA would be uncomfortable with structured interviews, which were fixed and not flexible in nature, I have used informal in-depth interviews and participant observation as the main methods to collect data.

Later, a more structured survey was used to systematically investigate the economic situation of villagers, especially in the areas of gender division and utilization of labor in use and exchange value production, gender division for reproductive work, income and ownership of productive resources. From the ideological aspect, surveys were used to determine how the cultural conceptions of the past were actualized in the present through villagers' patterns of decision-making, public involvement and geographical mobility. These surveys were done with sample groups. Although these surveys were more structured, they were done verbally in an informal manner in the midst of much side talk, to ensure respondents remained in a comfortable mode. In addition to this, general surveys were made to acquire information on the prices and availability of commodities, mercantile interests, and involvement in wage labour and commodity production in the study village. These were done with the help of Ijah and a few other villagers.

Furthermore, in order to obtain the folktales used in Chapter 6, I recorded the stories narrated by five villagers⁶ while doing fieldwork in the village. Where these were narrated in Semai, Ijah offered immediate translation into Malay, which was recorded simultaneously. I later translated these tales into English.

All the above methods produced the primary data for this research. Meanwhile, secondary data was gathered from written materials such as journals, books, newspapers, etc. A particularly importance source of such data was the Memorandum (1994) produced by the villagers with the collaboration of Ijah, a few friends and myself which was used by villagers to request for land rights.

⁶ "Han Luid and the Tiger 1" was narrated by Ijah's mother; "The *Palei* Youth" and "Cuckoo Bird" were narrated by Ken Merja; "Han Luid and the Tiger 2", "The Wife and the Tiger" and "The Seven Children and the Tiger" were narrated by Wak Yam; and " Han Luid and the Python", "Brass Tale" and "Dog-

1.7 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

The thesis is organized into seven chapters with the first acting as an introduction to propose the statement of the problem, objectives and limitations of the study, the significance of the study village and methodology used. Chapter 2 meanwhile gives a literature review of the topic, analysing relevant academic material whilst Chapter 3 introduces the study village and its population, emphasising its geographical aspects, historical background, and infrastructure. Chapter 4 in turn looks at change from a gender perspective with regards to land and water. Emphasis is given to historical development at state level, the role of the state government, agents of change at the local level and the impact of these on land, water and subsequently, the villagers. Chapter 5 gives a gender analysis on the issues of economics and change, with importance given to use and exchange value production and existing gender differentiation. Meanwhile, Chapter 6 discusses the issue of ideology and gender in the midst of change, paying attention to traditional beliefs and practices and the actualisation of cultural conceptions in the present. Finally, the last chapter gives a conclusion to the whole thesis.

man" were narrated by Ken Pri. All these tales were narrated in Semai and translated into Malay by Ijah. Finally, "Deer *Penalik*" was narrated by Ijah in Malay.