

## CHAPTER 6

### GENDER, IDEOLOGY AND CHANGE

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

An ideological analysis of gender relations is essential in a study of social change encountered and experienced by the Semai. Ideology here could be defined as "cultural beliefs and value systems, which shape people's perception of gender, class and race" (Hew, 1990:163 citing Bourgue & Warren, 1981:77). This was important as the ideological constructions of the Semai would be transformed into social action and determined how the Semai act and behave within the context of gender. Therefore, any gender egalitarianism or lack of it in Semai ideology would be translated into Semai behavior and actions. As argued by Hew, "women's subordination not only has a material base but is also a product of ideological processes" (1990:163). In addition to that it also legitimised existing gender relations and in the process, recreated them.

Signe Howell (1983) with her work on the Chewong of Peninsula Malaysia also acknowledged and stressed that unequal gender relations and women's subordinate position could not be explained by economic factors alone. She went on to examine that mainstream gender ideology has affected Chewong ideology, saying that the fundamentally egalitarian Chewong ideology was upset due to an increased interaction with the Malaysian mainstream society. Furthermore, "an awareness of attitudes and practices of their neighbours, as perceived by the Chewong over a long period of time, has prepared them for changes in attitudes to equality between the sexes" (1983:46).

In this chapter, I would use the framework introduced by Hew (1990) in her study on the Iban. Firstly, this chapter would begin by exploring Semai traditional beliefs and practices that likely reflected gender relations and sex roles within the Semai society in the past and might even have played a significant role in determining them. Next, it would examine the actualization of cultural conceptions in present Semai reality, in terms of patterns of decision-making between men and women and female leadership, participation and mobility.

## **6.2 TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

### **6.2.1 Semai folklore: An analysis of sex roles and gender relations**

In this section, I would use the thematic categorization developed by Howell (1982) for classifying the different types of OA legends and folklore. This categorization included hero/heroine legends and myths concerning origins, hidden identities, harmful beings and rules. The first category contained stories about the youngest child in the family and his/her heroic adventures. The second contained myths about “(the) origins of life, of society, or why things are as they are” (Howell, 1982:xxi) and the third set of stories was about beings which took on the identities of other beings on pretence. Meanwhile, the fourth category concerned beings that were harmful to humans, and the last was about societal rules or taboos that led to disastrous repercussions when transgressed upon. In addition to these, there were also stories that did not fall into any of the above categories and were termed miscellaneous.

The villagers often referred to these tales as actual events and happenings that took place a long time ago and mentioned that such was the way men and women behaved, went about their living and related to one another in those times. Thereby, such folklore could give a valuable insight on sex roles and gender relations among the Semai in ages past. Ten of these tales<sup>1</sup> were chosen for their insight on Semai sex roles and gender relations and each would be given a gender analysis in turn.

### **Han Luid and the Tiger 1**

This was a story about the local heroine, Han Luid.<sup>2</sup> In this tale, Han Luid and her sisters took on active roles in searching for husbands when they wanted to get married. They went into the forest on the pretense of collecting *mengkuang* leaves for weaving, when in actuality their aim was to meet prospective husbands in the forest.

We could see that their desire for husbands were expressed openly and strongly. So much so, that Han Luid had to warn her sisters not to break the taboo or *ci-ai* by responding directly and verbally to certain noises in the forest in their impatience to meet young men. This would be tantamount to disturbing the beings that emitted the sounds, and these beings could be evil spirits. However, an elder sister dared go against the taboo when she heard the sound of the *ngek-ngek* bird by saying,

“Le...le...how nice it would be if the *ngek-ngek* bird becomes a male youth. We then can make him our husband.”

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<sup>1</sup> These tales are found in full in Appendix J.

<sup>2</sup> Here, the term *Luid* referred to the youngest child in the family, where Han Luid would refer to the youngest daughter and Yok Luid, to the youngest son.

When the *ngek-ngek* bird, who was actually an evil tiger spirit, took on the semblance of a youth and approached their shelter in the forest, the girls were full of excitement. This was very evident in their behavior and demeanor:

“The girls exclaimed, ‘Eh, there is someone coming.’ They were very happy for a handsome man in striped clothing was approaching them ...they were truly excited. They greeted him excitedly, ‘Eh, come up, come up. Where are you going?’”

We could also see how the girls played the active role in courtship and sexual play:

“Soon, they started playing with the man. Hugging him and joking. When it was night and time for sleep, they placed him in their midst and he slept with them. The girls slept around him.”

In this story, Han Luid was seen to be unattractive, for she had a skin disease known as *penyakit puru*. In spite of this, she was gifted supernaturally for she had *ilmu* or magical knowledge. She was able to sense danger when they were in the forest, which made her warn her sisters against *chi-ai*. She knew that the man who approached them was evil. She was also *halak* as she had a *gunig* or spirit guide, the *chemtaa*q bird who came to her in her dream to disclose the true nature of the stranger they met. She was the bright one who thought of a way to get rid of the evil tiger and mobilized her siblings to protect themselves by building a strong and high house with a ladder that could be pulled up. It was also the heroic Han Luid who killed the tiger with her heated spear. In spite of the above, she forwardly acknowledged her need for a husband. After the episode with the tiger, she openly invited the benign *ngek-ngek* birds which they later met to come forward, for she knew them to be good men in disguise. This was also an invitation to marriage, for a woman who brought home a man married him. Thus, it was



socially acceptable for a woman to make advances in courtship and bring him home as a life partner:

"If there are men, if there are a few men who are here, come, you can accompany us home, for we are afraid to go home through the forest".

In addition to this, the story also recounted certain sex-roles clearly. For example, collecting *mengkuang* was seen to be a woman's work while hunting was men's responsibility.

### **Han Luid and the Tiger 2**

In this story, Han Luid and her sister were wives to the same man. It recounted how the two sisters managed to trick and kill the tiger that was trying to eat the elder sister's baby. They did this by pretending that they had dropped the baby through the bamboo flooring while letting him defecate through the slats. They then threw a red-hot fruit into the waiting tiger's mouth instead. Gender roles were portrayed with the husband looking for fish and frogs at the river while the women wove mats at home.

### **Han Luid and the Python**

In this tale, Han Luid met a python that was actually a handsome, wealthy and magical man in disguise. Han Luid was attracted to the man and brought him home, eventually marrying him. Matches, then were based on mutual liking and were often accepted by their parents:

"Among the Orang Asli in those days, there was no case of *pinang-meminang* (engagement). When a woman met a man she liked, she brought him home. And so, the python-man followed Han Luid home. "Eh," Han Luid's mother said,

"Han Luid has brought a man home. Whose son is it?" Han Luid replied, "Eh, whatever it is, it doesn't matter, mother. This man likes me."

After that, Han Luid's sister asked her new brother-in-law to find her a man from among his relatives. However, this match proved unfortunate for the man found was an evil cobra-man who ate the sister up after marrying her. Nonetheless, Han Luid's husband managed to save her and bring her back to life.

In this story, Han Luid was seen to be sexually assertive in having her choice of partner. She invited the man she liked back to her home, with the intention of marrying him. Here, the man would follow the woman home if he agreed to marry her. Like Han Luid, her sister too actively asserted herself in getting a husband and choosing her own match.

### Cuckoo Bird

This story was a tale of origin for it explained how the *penyeh*, *tekukur*, *benbakoh* and *beruleh* birds came about. The story told of how a young child turned into a bird when her parents refused to bring her along to the swidden, so she could see the swidden for herself. The story ended with her family dying of sorrow at her fate and she turned them into birds to accompany her in the swidden. This tale depicted clearly that married couples were the main units of production. We could see that the husband and wife in the story worked as a team in the process of clearing the swidden, torching it, planting it with paddy, maize and other crops, weeding and harvesting the crops. Although they might be involved in different activities in the process of planting, they were both active participants in the swiddening process. Older children by the age of ten or so meanwhile often took care of younger siblings when their parents were away.

### **Dog-man**

This was a story about hidden identities. Here, a Malay princess agreed to marry a dog born of an OA woman who worked for her father, the king. However, the dog was actually a handsome and wealthy man who possessed magical powers.

We could see that when the dog-man's mother asked the king for the hand of one of his daughters in marriage, the king requested the woman to ask his daughters instead. This again reflected the free choice that women had in choosing their husbands. Furthermore, the heroine, the Princess was also a person with magical powers for she was *halak* and held secret knowledge. For example, she knew that her dog-husband was actually a prince in disguise. Thereby, the heroine was portrayed as a strong-minded woman who asserted her decision to marry the dog in spite of her sisters' ridicule.

### **Deer *Penalik***

This was a story of harmful beings and the food taboo known as *penalik*. When one mentioned the name of the game which was being eaten, or did not cook for some time the meat of game hunted, the person was inviting *penalik*. This would cause bad things to happen to him, i.e. natural disasters, accidents or being haunted by the *penalik* spirit. The latter happened in this story where some meat given was not cooked by the father character and turned into an evil spirit to haunt his two daughters. They managed to run to a village where the *halaks* destroyed it.

This story showed that communal sharing of game meat was strong in traditional Semai society and that men could cook for their families. Furthermore, the husband-wife team was the main unit of production as they foraged for food in the forest whilst their

daughters washed their clothes and kitchen utensils at the river. This story reflected to a certain extent, the lack of clear delineation of sex typing in certain tasks such as procuring food for the family and cooking.

### **Brass Tale**

This story fell under the miscellaneous category used by Howell (1982) as mentioned above. It told of a poor OA couple who was threatened by some Malay traders that their daughter would be taken if they could not pay them for some tobacco and salt taken. The brass spirit came to the help of the family by giving them riches and destroying the traders. Here, one could note that it was often the men who traded forest produces with traders that came into the villages.

### **The Wife and the Tiger**

This story also belonged to the miscellaneous category mentioned above. In it, a man abandoned his wife to marry another. His wife meanwhile managed to overpower a tiger on her journey to her father's home and befriend it. The tiger then punished the husband for leaving his wife by eating him up, and later became her familiar spirit. Thus, in this story, the wife was shown to be a brave and strong woman for being able to overcome the tiger, which wanted to eat her up and got him to be her guardian.

### **The Seven Children and the Tiger**

This story was about harmful beings. It showed how the eldest adolescent daughter of seven children, was left alone with her siblings while her parents went to look for tapioca. This girl managed to save her brothers and sisters from a tiger by tricking and killing it.

### **The *Palei* Youth**

This was another tale of origins about a couple who stayed in the forest but deserted their two young daughters and returned to the village when they felt the girls were being naughty. The girls grew up in the forest and married the *Palei* spirit and lived happily till their parents found them again. Soon, their mother broke a taboo, which turned their husband into a *palei* tree. Upon seeing that, the daughter cursed her mother and turned her into a bird. The two daughters died of broken hearts and their husband turned them each into a beetle and grub that lived in the *palei* tree so they could be his companions forever.

From this story, we could observe that the main unit of production was again the conjugal couple as they worked the swidden together, whilst older children were often left behind to take care of younger siblings. However, the Father and Mother characters here seemed inconsistent with other male and female characters generally found in Semai folklore. This might be due to more modern influence from mainstream patriarchal society. However, it was more likely that these characters were created as anti-heroes to discourage the Semai from emulating the bad qualities these characters possessed, which were actually abhorred in real Semai society.

The Father was a controlling and cruel figure who abandoned his children in the forest to punish them for not being home enough. He also threatened his wife with violence when she resisted doing the same. In addition, he was a liar for he told the villagers his children did not want to accompany them back when they asked where the two girls were. He was ill mannered, making himself at home in his daughters and son-in-law's house soon after arriving. He also made a fire and cooked the game brought back by the

son-in-law without being invited to do so. Furthermore, during a spiritual ritual, he purposely tested the magical knowledge of his son-in-law. Such behaviour was considered by the Semai to be extremely rude and ill mannered. Meanwhile, the Mother was seen to be a weak figure, submitting to her husband in abandoning their girls and keeping quiet in the midst of her husbands' lies. She seemed to be the archetype of the longsuffering wife. Again, the Semai traditionally frowned upon such characteristics. Even now, villagers would have little respect for such a woman.

On the other hand, the *Palei* youth was elevated as a hero and role model for all males. He was hardworking and responsible in opening and working the swiddens and procuring meat for this family. Yet, he was also modest and humble, declining praises even though he danced and sang extraordinarily well at the ritual. His wives were also hardworking and responsible women, working hard with their husband in the swiddens, rearing poultry and cooking for the family. They were also friendly and hospitable to strangers by welcoming them to their home and feeding them. All these qualities were respected and valued in both men and women in Semai society to this day.

### **Gender analysis of Semai folklore: An overview**

Of all the different types of folklore, the tales of Han Luid and Yok Luid gave the best representation of what an ideal man and woman should be like. They were thereby significant role models for the Semai. This was so for their characters were well known, honoured and respected by many and their exploits were often recounted with much appeal, inspiration and awe.

In the Iban culture, the characters of Keling and Kumang played the same role of being exemplary characters for all to emulate, embodying all that Iban men and women should be. However, just as Keling was constantly shown to be “rich, handsome, strong, fearless, resourceful, clever and powerful...brave and good in battle... (and full of sexual prowess, executing incredible feats”, Kumang was shown to be “beautiful...virtuous... hardworking, independent...an excellent weaver...a loyal and faithful wife, (yet) naïve, and easily cheated...impetuous and the cause of much trouble” (Hew, 1990:165-6).

Although Han Luid and Yok Luid embodied many similar characteristics as Keling and Kumang, their characters reflected less a dichotomy of “maleness” and “femaleness”. The character of Yok Luid was not depicted as the strong and macho male and Han Luid as the weak female as were Keling and Kumang. In the tales and escapades of Han Luid and Yok Luid, both were seen to be quick-witted, courageous and heroic in finding ingenious ways and means to overcome their evil opponents, often fighting them in a hand-to-hand combat. In addition to that, both also possessed great magical knowledge and were often *halak*, with their *gunig* or familiar spirits. They might not be good looking but were often powerful individuals.

The characters of Han Luid and Yok Luid were parallel to the *Bongso* hero and heroine of the Chewong people mentioned by Howell (1982). Like Han Luid and Yok Luid, *Bongso* was the youngest male or female child who had “unusual powers and abilities” for “it is (believed by the Chewong) that in the old days every last-born child was a shaman and hence, whenever someone is called *Bongso* in a legend, the audience knows that they are to expect unusual and superhuman acts from him or her” (1982: xxiv-xxiv).

Apart from the legends of Han Luid and Yok Luid, the other folk tales also gave a good reflection on sex roles and gender relations in the olden days. From the above stories, we see that the women were portrayed as playing active roles in choosing their husbands, sometimes actively looking for them and bringing their choice of husbands home. Matches were often based on mutual liking. In addition, although husbands sometimes had more than one wife, the wives often played active sexual roles and were strong and independent. Heroines were also usually courageous, hardworking, responsible, friendly and hospitable. Heroes meanwhile were often also depicted as being hard working, responsible, modest and humble of heart. The antithesis of the hero was seen to possess all the opposite qualities of the hero: he was violent and abusive, ill mannered, controlling, egotistical, abandoning wife or children and telling untruths. The antithesis of the heroine was often seen to be weak and submissive, not being able to determine her own life and future.

This Semai folklore could also reflect gender roles appropriate for males and females. One could see that women gathered *mengkuang*, wove mats and cooked whilst men hunted and looked for fishes and frogs at the river. However, the conjugal couple was seen to be the main unit of production, often being involved together in opening and working the swidden and foraging for food in the forest.

### 6.2.2 Prestige system for men and women

The prestige system referred to social characteristics and practices that would enable a man or woman to achieve status within a social system. For the Semai of the study village, a man or woman could acquire social status or prestige by inculcating certain



personal attributes or traits that were valued in their society. Therefore, a man or woman was highly esteemed if s/he was hardworking, friendly and *menghar* (generous) with time, labor and material goods.

In addition to these qualities, a man or woman would receive higher status if the person was *halak*. There was the state of being *halak* and there was the position of being a *Halak*. The former would be emphasised here, where a person had some ability to be in relationship with the spiritual realm and deal with it. This was sometimes termed as *sikit halak* or a little bit *halak*. The position of being a *Halak* meanwhile referred to a more instituted position where the *Halak* would perform spiritual rituals and ceremonies such as the *kebut* and *neasik*.<sup>3</sup> This could be referred to as *sangat halak* or very *halak*. The latter would be discussed in further detail below. However, if a person was not *halak*, s/he could redeem her/himself by being knowledgeable and actively involved in the religious rituals and ceremonies such as the *kebut* and *neasik* and the processes involved. Age was also another factor in determining status in society, for the elderly were generally more respected. Married men and women also had a higher status than unmarried individuals.

Furthermore, a man would be much respected the more *berias* or competent he was in hunting and trapping as this would reflect how well he could support his family. This nonetheless was true only on the ideological plane for in reality, both husband and wife were the main unit of subsistence production and the female regularly played a very significant role in cultivation and foraging. In addition to that, the male would be more

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<sup>3</sup> The *neasik* or *sewang terang* was the ritual where the ceremony to call onto familiar spirits (usually spirits of deceased townsfolk or OA exposed to towns) to entertain or assist in healing was done in a lighted space. Meanwhile, the *kebut* was a similar ritual but done in total darkness, involving mainly

respected the more proficient he was in daily activities, especially the predominantly male ones, such as building homes and clearing swidden plots. It must also be noted that some women were known to be *berias* in the sense they were good at trapping animals or catching fish. They were also respected for their abilities. However, it was more often men who were *berias* than women.

Females meanwhile, could acquire status by being accomplished and adept at weaving, especially that of the *ten-naid kerawog* which was a woven headband with great religious significance. However, there were not many who were skilled in producing this fine and intricately woven band. A woman also gained esteem by being efficient and skilled in daily subsistence activities, especially in foraging and the female tasks in paddy cultivation.

However, there were also certain positions of prestige among the Semai, that of leaders and specialists in the physical or spiritual realm. In the physical domain, the *Mairaknak* and his council of elders held the highest esteem. Most of the time the *Mairaknak* and his main assistants were also big *Halaks* who were instituted leaders in the spiritual realm. In the history of the villagers of Kampung Chang, they have not known of a woman *Mairaknak* but many knew of women *Halaks*. The main criteria for access to the position of *Mairaknak* included being good natured, wise, fair, eloquent, diplomatic and well-versed in Semai culture, traditions and customary laws.

For a person to be a big *Halak*, s/he had to possess a very *le-ap* or cool body to enable him/her to relate successfully with the spiritual realm. This trait could be innate or

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spirits from the forest. These were considered their most powerful rituals in healing persons and the village.

developed by being a kind and generous person and learning about the spiritual world. How powerful a *Halak* was also depended on how many *gunigs* or familiar spirits s/he had and how well s/he could heal. Furthermore, though the institution of *Halak*-ism was accessible to both males and females, women had the innate ability to be very powerful *Halaks* as they were seen to be naturally more *le-ap* than males. Dentan mentioned that "There are varying degrees of *halaa'*. Women are very rarely more than just a little *halaa'*, but a really *halaa'* woman is more successful than most male *halaa'* in the diagnosis and cure of diseases" (1968:85).

Today, there is one woman *Halak* in the village who is in the same league as the other two "official" male *Halaks* in the village. She took on the knowledge from her second husband and father who were powerful *Halaks* in their time. Before her husband died, she often performed the ritual singing or *berjulak*<sup>4</sup> with him in the *neasik* ritual. However, currently, she plays a more passive role by assisting the officiating *Halak* in the *neasik* and no longer sings the ritual songs. She said that singing her *nyenulak* reminded her of the days she performed with her husband which made her miss him terribly. Such a reason for women to stop performing in such ceremonies was common among women *Halaks* whose *Halak* partners had passed away.

Meanwhile, a woman had another avenue to high prestige, which was the possession of midwifery skills and the knowledge of the spiritual and healthcare practices associated with it. However, the skills and role of a midwife or *Bidan* were fast disappearing in the village. Currently, the only surviving *Bidan* is too old to practice and for some time the

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<sup>4</sup> Each *halak* had different songs or *nyenulak* given by their respective familiar spirits. Singing a particular song (*berjulak*) would summon the spirit that gave that song. Therefore, a *halak* who had more songs also had more familiar spirits, which made him/her a stronger *halak*. Thus, singing the *nyenulak* was the crucial activity in a *neasik* or *kebut* ritual.

village women have depended on the Missy or official midwife from the clinics and hospitals. There was a *Bidan* in Kampung Chang Baru, however, who took over the skills, spells, familiar spirits and powers of the previous *Bidan* when she passed away. The deceased *Bidan* when alive possessed much power and knowledge of the *Jaq Bidat* or Grandmother Midwife who was the first and original midwife, a supernatural being. This knowledge and power was with regards to midwifery and illnesses, especially those related to mothers and children. According to villagers, she became *Jaq Bidat* when she died, meaning that her soul had reached the level of the *Jaq Bidat* and became her high and powerful follower.

In conclusion, one could see that males and females could attain prestige through acquiring certain respected personal traits that were socially valued, such as friendliness, generosity, diligence and being industrious. In addition, another significant avenue to social prestige for males and females was the adept implementation of normal, daily chores and subsistence activities. The male gained prestige through being *berias* or proficient in hunting and trapping whilst females were highly esteemed when they were excellent weavers and paddy cultivators. Furthermore, one could achieve high regard through being *halak*, a state of being that could be cultivated and learnt, or generally being knowledgeable of religious rituals and ceremonies. Age and marriage were other factors that could earn a person respectability. It was significant to note here that all the above avenues to achieving social prestige were easily available to men and women alike, without any prejudice against one or the other. Here, the more esteemed qualities, knowledge and skills a person could acquire, the more status s/he would receive. Normally, one would have to possess all the above qualities to a significant level to be truly respected in society.

On the other hand there were certain special social positions which accorded high standing and honor such as the *Mairaknak*, *Halak* and *Bidan*. Although the position of *Mairaknak* was available only to males in the study village nonetheless the important position of *Halak* was accessible to males and females alike, and there had been a number of great *Halak* women. Furthermore, just as men dominated the position of *Mairaknak* so was the highly respected position of *Bidan* dominated by women. However, it must be noted that although these social positions accorded the *Mairaknak*, *Halak* and *Bidan* potential power and influence, nonetheless, a person was only acknowledged as great and was highly esteemed when she or he had all the other qualities mentioned earlier. Therefore, one could conclude that the traditional prestige system of the Semai of the study village was highly egalitarian in nature.

### 6.2.3 Courtship, marriage and divorce

#### Courtship and marriage

In the olden days, marriages were mostly arranged or semi-arranged by parents with their child's agreement. Youths of marriageable age would not be forced into arranged marriages but they often agreed with their parents' choice, as obedience (*patuh*) to parents was a trait that was socially valued. Parents normally chose partners that have acquired some measure of social prestige. The more socially respectable s/he was, the more s/he was in demand as a marriage partner. Girls often married young, around twelve to sixteen years old, sometimes as young as ten though this was not common. Boys often did not marry till much later, usually in their later teens. However, they did not commonly have sexual relations till the girl started menstruating and girls often did not conceive till a couple of years after their first menstruation.

Sometimes, the boy would be enamoured of a girl and wish her for his wife. He could then get his parents to make a match with the girl's parents or approach them himself, an option not usually open to girls. Here, the boy would seldom have an opportunity to really get to know or speak to the girl as she was commonly in the company of parents or female relatives, and it would not be deemed correct for him to court the girl in their presence. His choice would be based on what he saw and heard about the person. If the girl's parents agreed, the girl would usually follow the will of the parents and marry the boy in question for again obedience to one's parents was of prime importance.

Marriage arrangements were often determined by the parents on both sides (Dentan et al., 1997:44), as the couple was usually too young, inexperienced and shy to do so. The marriage date would be decided upon and if it was soon, the couple usually slept together for three nights before holding the ceremony immediately after. This practice was called *manjat tubuh* (Juli, 1988:54). If he refused to marry the girl after sleeping with her, he would be fined the *belanja tubuh* or bride-price, though this has not yet happened in the history of the study village as social pressure would prove too strong.

However, when the girl was still young, they might marry at a later date. Then the boy would assist in *tanggung* or supporting the intended and her family till they were married. He did this by buying goods, giving food or working in her family's swidden. This proved his sincerity and honourable purpose. The girl would also help her future mother-in-law in the swidden, or at home. This practice usually took place if the couple was of the same village and could go on for a few weeks to a few years. When the time was ripe they would hold the wedding ceremony and the feast before settling in together. Here, the couple did not sleep together before the marriage ceremony. This

practice of *tanggung* was similar to that of *petehaven* practiced by the Bukhet people of Central Borneo. According to Thambiah,

“...*petehaven*...is a way for two individuals to express interest in each other and also have their relationship as a couple enhanced. It involves performance of services, which both the men and women do prior to marriage. For example, a man would build a hut for his future in-laws and a woman would help her future mother-in-law collect firewood or weave a mat for her. The duration of the *petehaven* is not fixed but will usually end in marriage” (1997b:112).

Marriage arrangements in current times have changed somewhat. These days, couples no longer practiced the *tanggung* custom but that of *manjat tubuh* instead. Marriages were now seldom arranged but were based on mutual attraction as couples had more opportunities to get to know one another. When a couple decided to get married after a period of courtship, the girl would tell her parents that a particular boy would like to spend the night with her. If the parents objected to the match, this was the best time to voice it. However, they could not stop their child from marrying the person by force. If the boy had already arrived at the house and the parents refused to allow him in, this was considered very ill mannered and they could be fined by the *Penghulu*, his assistant or the village official. Before a boy slept with a girl in her house, he would already have told his parents that he would be spending the night with the girl. Thus, these days a girl had more say in her marriage partner.

The marriage procedures after this stage were more or less in line with *adat*. The morning after the couple has spent their first night together at the girl's home, the girl's parents would tell the girl's *waris mas* or maternal uncles that the boy has slept with their daughter. The *waris mas* would then inform all the other *waris* or maternal male relatives (of the mother's generation or older) of the girl. The morning after the third

night, the *waris mas* of the girl would go to her house and question the couple. They would ask the girl if she was forced into sleeping with the boy and why she slept with him. She would reply that the boy wanted to marry her and that she was not forced into doing so. The *waris mas* would then question the boy and asked why he slept with the woman, whether he was pulled (*tarik*) into doing it. The boy would say that he liked the girl and wanted to marry her and was not coerced into doing it.

That very night, the girl would give her *waris mas* a sarong, a symbol of womanhood, and the boy would give a shirt, a symbol of manhood. These would be put inside a kerchief together as a sign of their wish to be together as husband and wife. The *waris mas* of the girl would then bring the kerchief as a *tanda* or sign to the Assistant *Penghulu*. The next morning, the Assistant *Penghulu* would bring the *tanda* or sign to the boy's *waris mas*, telling them that the boy concerned wished to marry that particular girl. The boy's *waris mas* would then pass the news to all the other *waris* of the boy's. On a certain night, all the boy's *waris* would gather with him and question him, asking him if he had enough money to get married, meaning if he could substantially finance the wedding feast and ritual.

If everything was satisfactory, the girl and boy's *waris mas* and *waris* would meet with the Assistant *Penghulu* in the girl's home with the girl and boy concerned. They would settle the *belanja tubuh* or bride-price which was 31 *suku* (RM31.25) for a daughter of a common person and RM60 for the daughter of the *Penghulu* or Assistant *Penghulu*. According to *adat*, this was in payment for the *sekoog* (compensation money) of the girl's body. This was because every person's body had a *semangat* or spirit. When a girl married, she became *hak lelaki* or the right of the husband, although the husband must



have respect for the wife. Therefore, he had to pay the *sekoog* as compensation to the *semangat* of the girl's body for that right. More money was added to this amount later on to buy the girl a gold ring, necklace or bracelet as a sign of her new status. The *waris mas* of both sides also determined the *belanja dapur* (kitchen expenses for the wedding feast) which was RM25, and *langkah mendul* or the price for crossing the threshold of the girl's home, which was RM6. Finally, there was the *belanja adat* or "customary expenses" which was the money paid to the *Penghulu* of the bride's village (only if the bride was from another village) for holding some affair under his jurisdiction. This amounted to RM13.25. The boy would pay for all the above expenses, the amount of which was already determined by *adat*.

The *waris mas* on both sides then discussed the additional kitchen expenses, as the sum determined by *adat* was not enough to pay for a wedding feast in modern times. The boy's *waris mas* would ask the girl's *waris mas* how much extra money was needed. The girl's mother determined the amount, which was then equally split between both sides. The *waris mas* of the boy then gave him a lecture on how to be a good husband and a close female relative would also agree to advise the girl.

The *waris mas* on both sides then separately discussed among themselves at a later time how much the immediate families of the boy and girl could pay. This amount was usually a quarter of the total sum. Relatives would contribute the rest, with closer relatives giving more. Here, according to *adat*, all relatives, close or distant must contribute an amount, however small. The *waris mas* on either side then put in the contribution to make up the sum needed. After that, the wedding date was fixed.

Preparations were then set for the marriage ritual and feast. These were always done in the bride's house. After marriage, the couple would stay at the bride's house for some time and then spend some time at the husband's parent's house. Later, they would move back and forth till they decided to settle in one place. Such a system was in line with Carole Robarchek's (1980:94) observation and typified ambilocal residence.

In all the above affairs, the *waris mas* on both sides played a very significant role in the marriage activities and process. However, the *waris mas* had to include and inform the *wali* (brothers and male cousins of the father) as well. Here the *waris mas* was considered more important than the *wali* for although the *waris mas* included the *wali* in all marriage matters, the *wali* should not overstep their position. It must be noted here, too that the *waris* of a person, especially the *waris mas*, was responsible for the person's general welfare. In fact, the *waris mas* seemed to have more responsibility over the person than his or her own parents. As stated by a female villager, "The ones mainly responsible for a child is not the child's parents but the *waris*, who is from the mother's side." When a parent, especially the mother has passed away, the *waris* of the children had a significant responsibility in ensuring their welfare.

Furthermore, the bride and groom were not to rely on their own kin after marriage but that of their spouse. Any problems and complains were to be taken to them first before approaching their own family and relatives. As Dentan put it:

"...the bride and groom are forcefully told that they are not to rely on their own consanguineal kinsmen in case of a marital spat. The angry wife is told not to go home to mother. She must rely on *mai*, on her husband's consanguineal kinsmen, as he must rely on hers. The kinsmen, in turn, have obligated themselves to care for *mai*, their kinsman's spouse. Should a newlywed

complain to her own people first, they are likely to be unsympathetic, since they have to pay the fine involved" (1968:76).

I observed this being put into practice when a male villager who was unhappy with his wife's behaviour went back to her village to discuss the matter with her kinsmen.

In conclusion, we could say that traditional Semai courtship and marriage practices were egalitarian in most aspects though they were also biased towards the males in certain areas. We have seen how the parents of both the boy and girl often had the most say in traditional marriage arrangements, as they were the ones who decided on the choice of partners for their children and the form of marriage to be had. They also dominated in the ceremonies and procedures. However, we should note here that the boy at times had the option of choosing his own match, which was not available to the girl.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the consent of both was always required in marriage, though this was often given out of a sense of duty. If the marriage was postponed and the *tanggung* system opted for, both the girl and boy would work for their future parents-in-law. Furthermore, the wedding ceremony and feast were held at the bride's home and the husband often stayed with the bride's family for some time before they moved on to his parent's home. Finally, a spouse who found serious quarrel with his/her partner was to bring it up with the partner's kin rather than their own and this applied to both husband and wife. We could thus observe a high degree of equality and reciprocation in the above practices. What Thambiah (1997b:113) surmised from the *petehaven* practice among the Bhuket could also be applicable here, where reciprocation "shows they are egalitarian with respect to gender, for the practice does not lead to the control or subjugation of either males or females."

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<sup>5</sup> However, one could hypothesize that this might not always have been so in the history of the Semai people for their folk tales spoke of heroines who actively chose their husbands (refer to Section 6.2.1).

On the other hand, we found that the groom practiced the inegalitarian custom of paying the bride-price as compensation for the right to the bride. He also had to pay for the *belanja dapur*, *langkah mendul* and *belanja adat*, although all these expenses would amount to a mere RM75.50 in current times though this might be a significant amount in days past. This custom, like most of the marriage practices mentioned above were based on those found in Malay weddings (Dentan, 1968:75, Dentan et al, 1997:44). The practices that were most likely indigenous in origin were the more egalitarian practices of *manjat tubuh*, which was similar to the Iban practice of *ngayap* (Hew, 1990:175), *tanggung* and post-marital ambilocal residence.

According to Dentan (1968:73) and Dentan et al. (1997:35), the Semai residing deeper in the interiors of Pahang who had less exposure to outside influence, had no wedding ceremonies whatsoever; they merely lived together based on mutual consent and thereafter related as husband and wife. Meanwhile temporary premarital and extramarital affairs were common on both sides. Even the villagers of the study village mentioned that this was how it was in the olden days. Thus we could say that practices which were indigenous in origin were more egalitarian than those adopted from other cultures.

We could even detect some level of gender egalitarianism in the current pre-marital lectures given by relatives. A man to be married was advised not to spend too much time lounging around with friends and thus neglecting his wife. He was to bring her along to town with him every now and then and was to provide for his family. Meanwhile, a wife also should not spend too much time out visiting and thus neglecting her husband and children. However, the husband should not make a fuss if his wife sometimes took time

off from her household chores to visit family and friends, and should not be angry with her even if she did not come back home at times to cook. The husband was expected to be independent and cook his own meals at times like these. Wives should also not always defer to her husband in everything, for then she would be deemed weak in character. She was expected to disagree with him on certain counts, as long as neither resorted to abusive behaviour. If men were too dependent on their wives, they would also be deemed weak.

### Divorce

Divorce was relatively common these days as in ages past. Most likely, in the days of old, when marriage was not yet formalised, men and women terminated their relationships simply by leaving each other, as did the East Semai of Pahang (Dentan, 1968:74). The act of taking a new spouse on either side also meant the loss of the former.

However, nowadays, it was usually the man who divorced his wife. Currently, there were four female and two male divorcees in the study village. In all but one of these cases, men initiated the divorce, and most of them opted for *cerai lenyap* or divorce by deserting their wives and children. Normally, men preferred to leave their children with their ex-wives so they could more easily start lives anew with new partners, though they had a right to the children in mutual divorces. Only one woman divorced her husband and this was for another man. Divorcees usually went back to settle in their own village. There was also little social stigma attached to divorcees who often had no problems in getting new partners.

#### 6.2.4 Socialisation of children<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, a Semai woman would have to possess certain characteristics for her to be deemed a “good” woman, and a mother and her female relatives would attempt to inculcate these in a female child from a very young age.

These characteristics included respect for and obedience to one’s parents, generosity, friendliness, diligence in helping one’s parents in their daily work in the swiddens and at home, and proficiency in the tasks of paddy cultivation which included planting, weeding, harvesting, husking and winnowing and the cultivation of other supplementary crops. A female child should also be good at foraging for edible and medicinal shoots and plants in the forest, knowing the different types of leaves needed for religious rituals and ceremonies and making the ritual apparatuses needed in them. A mother would also teach her daughter to care for her younger siblings, collect water and cook in bamboo containers and grill meat and cassava. In addition to that, she also learnt to weave *attap* used as roofing, sleeping and kitchen mats and the mats, baskets, and rice containers used to dry, transport and store paddy.

Daughters were also taught the village taboos, especially that concerning the birthing process, sickness and the use of forest and water resources. Important was also taboos associated with food (such as the *penalik* or *terlaid* mentioned in Chapter 5, Section 5.2.6) and visits with one’s relatives, friends and neighbors. They were also encouraged to approach the *halak*’s world by participating in religious ceremonies and learn folk medicine. All this knowledge was passed on from mother or relative to child through the latter’s involvement in daily activities.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Nicholas, Tijah and Tiah (1998).

Meanwhile, a male child was ingrained with similar characteristics. Apart from being trained to be respectful of elders and obedient to them, he was also instructed to be generous in sharing his goods, sociable and hardworking in assisting his parents, especially his father in his daily work. This included clearing the swidden, dibbling the plot and harvesting the crops or foraging for food and other resources in the forest, in addition to hunting and trapping. He was also instructed in the knowledge of edible and medicinal roots and plants, in addition to the different kinds of leaves and flowers needed for religious ceremonies. He learnt to make the instruments needed for religious ceremonies, such as the spirit houses or *balai*, and was encouraged to approach the spiritual world. He was also educated on the various taboos existing in their community. However, unlike the female child, a male child was taught how to make and use the bush ax (*beliung*), certain animal snares, fish traps and hunting instruments such as the blowpipe (*belau*) and spear (*tarog*). He learnt the skills of house building and was taught the different types of hardy wood that could be used for this purpose. All this knowledge was passed down from father to son as the former involved the latter in his daily activities.

One could therefore conclude that male and female children had very similar socialisation in many aspects. Both were inculcated with similar respectable personal traits such as generosity, diligence, friendliness, respect and obedience. Furthermore, both males and females were taught to work the swiddens, forage for resources and instructed in village rituals and taboos. Both were also involved in house building. The difference lay in different activities for males and females in the processes of swiddening, building homes and creating religious and utility implements. The only tasks that were dichotomised as male and female were hunting and trapping which were

seen to be male activities and domestic work and childcare that were deemed female work. Nonetheless, this dichotomisation was flexible and a male or female would not be prohibited from being involved in a task deemed to be that of the opposite sex.

Finally, girls and boys were taught to be good helpers to one another, for a Semai couple would work together in most things. For example, in clearing the swidden, husbands cut down the bigger trees and their wives cut down the smaller ones. While planting paddy, the men dibbled and the wives filled in the seeds. When the seedlings emerged, the men went to hunt while the women stayed in the swidden to ensure that the crop was not damaged and both were involved in harvesting. While making homes, the husbands collected the *bertam* leaves with their wives and the latter would weave them into *attap* roofing whilst the men built the houses.

### 6.3 ACTUALISATION OF CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS IN THE PRESENT

We could safely assume that the Semai ideology in the past would have been very much determined by the ideological constructs found in traditional Semai beliefs and practices that were mentioned above. This was so because Semai contact with the outside world was still limited at that time. Since the descriptive analysis of traditional beliefs and practices in Section 6.2 reflected egalitarian gender relations, thereby, we could say that past Semai ideology was also egalitarian in the gender context.

However, we also need to study how cultural conceptions were translated into social action in the daily lives of the Semai and how they affected gender relations in the present. This section analyzed the actualization of cultural conceptions in present times



by focussing on certain significant determinants such as patterns of decision-making in the family and female leadership, participation in public affairs and mobility. In the meantime, possible reasons for any change were given.

Surveys were undertaken to determine the patterns of decision-making in the family, female leadership, participation, and mobility in the present. These surveys were based on Sample 2, which was explained in depth in Chapter 1, Section 1.6.2.2.

### **6.3.1 Patterns of decision-making**

On the issue of decision-making in the family, I have adopted a modified version of Hew's (1990) selection of the types of decisions made in the family, deeming these significant in Semai society. These would include decisions on:

- fruit crops grown in an orchard or house compound
- vegetables or tubers grown
- purchase of food provisions for the family
- purchase of household items which cost less than RM100
- purchase of household items which cost more than RM100
- expenditure on schooling
- number of children to be had
- discipline of children
- money keeping
- bringing children to the doctor or local *halak* when ill
- the management of the children's school affairs which included activities such as registering children into school and going for parent-teacher meetings

**TABLE 21**

**DECISION-MAKING IN THE FAMILY IN PRESENT TIMES**

<b>Types of decisions</b>	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>	<b>Jointly</b>	<b>Not applica- ble</b>
Fruit crops grown in orchard/house compound	10 (37.0%)	1 (3.7%)	10 (37.0%)	6 (22.3%)
Vegetables/tubers grown	2 (7.4%)	3 (11.1%)	9 (33.3%)	13 (48.1%)
Purchase of food provisions for the family	14 (51.9%)	-	13 (48.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Purchase of household items (less than RM100)	-	13 (48.1%)	14 (51.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Purchase of household items (more than RM100)	17 (63.0%)	1 (3.7%)	9 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Expenditure on schooling	13 (48.1%)	-	8 (29.6%)	6 (22.3%)
Number of children	-	16 (59.3%)	2 (7.4%)	9 (33.3%)
Discipline of children	1 (3.7%)	17 (63.0%)	8 (29.6%)	1 (3.7%)
Money keeping	5 (18.5%)	18 (66.7%)	4 (14.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Bringing children to the doctor/halak	2 (7.4%)	5 (18.5%)	20 (74.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Management of children's school affairs	12 (44.4%)	8 (29.6%)	1 (3.7%)	6 (22.2%)

**6.3.1.1 Joint decisions**

These signified decisions, which were jointly made by husbands and wives. Referring to Table 21, joint decisions were in the majority in three instances if we excluded data that was not applicable. These were decisions regarding the growing of vegetables or tubers

(33.3%), purchase of household items costing less than RM100 (51.9%) and bringing children to the doctor or *halak* when they were ill (74.1%).

Firstly, let us discuss the dominating pattern of joint decisions made in the growing of vegetables and tubers. Vegetables and tubers were traditionally grown in the swiddens in a random manner together with paddy. The planting of these vegetables and tubers was traditionally a woman's role and therefore a female decision. The planting of paddy however, was a joint affair between the sexes and was therefore a joint decision. However, since paddy was not grown in the present any more, only vegetables and tubers were grown. Since men's role in agriculture then has been taken away from them, they have joined the women in planting vegetables and tubers instead. Thus, decisions were often jointly made (refer to Chapter 5, Sections 5.2.1 and 5.3.1.10).

It was interesting to note that although most of the vegetables now grown were in the swiddens for commercial purposes, its production process and the decision-making involved had not been dominated by males as was the case with many other commercial crops. This reflected the traditional pattern of paddy planting seeping into the cultivation of other crops, even commercial ones.

Secondly, a sick child was usually brought to the *halak* in the past and this was often based on a joint decision by both parents. This was parallel to the traditional practice of having both parents participate in childcare. In present times, the mother and father were also generally involved in the decision to send their child to a doctor or *halak*, though women had become the main child caretakers by this time as seen in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1. This might be due to the fact that women in this period were often dependent on

their husbands for transport on their motorbikes and money, as the men had become the main income earner in the family. Yet, this did not explain why couples also made joint decisions to visit the local *halak* when they did not have to go far to do so. This showed that fathers often took a significant interest in the welfare of their children when they were ill, even though they did not take much part in their daily care.

Nonetheless, it was not uncommon to have women, especially those who earned an income (however limited), to make the decision themselves to bring their sick child to the doctor in town and bring them there by private taxi. This might account for 18.5% of respondents saying that this was a woman's decision.

Thirdly, on the decision of purchasing household items costing less than RM100, this was basically a decision made by both males and females in the present. According to some elderly villagers, in the past both husbands and wives could have a significant say in items bought for the home, though this often did not amount to RM100, which was a big sum in those times. Women often told the men what items were needed at home and both would go together to buy these in town. Otherwise, the women got the men to buy them. There were also frequent instances where the men would know for themselves what household items were needed at home and bought them themselves. Sometimes, the couple decided together. In these cases, it was usually the men who paid for the items, as few women earned substantially during this time.

However, it was interesting to note that presently men no longer made this decision themselves but with their wives, though a significant percentage of women could and did make this decision by themselves (48.1%). Here, the responsibility of purchasing

small household items was increasingly transferred onto women. This again was in line with the observation that women were increasingly moving into the domestic sphere as discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1. Usually, women would make the decisions on what were to be bought based on household needs. They then either went with their men to buy them as the latter had motorbikes, or went with female relatives and friends by bus or taxi. Working women often used a significant part of their income on these expenses though husbands usually carried most of the financial burden.

### **6.3.1.2 Decisions predominantly made by women**

Presently, women dominated in decision-making in three out of the eleven categories (27.3%). These were decisions in the number of children to be had (59.3%), discipline of children (63.0%) and keeping the money in the family (66.7%).

After family planning was introduced not too long ago in the past, the majority of male and female respondents commented that since women bore the burdens of pregnancy, birthing, and lactating, and were the main caretakers, they should decide on how many children they wanted. Men often saw this as a “women’s thing”. The fact that the discipline of children often fell in the hands of the mother also went to show that it was the mother who played the role of main caretaker in present times.

However, in the past when family planning was unavailable<sup>7</sup>, choice in the number of children to be had was not in villagers’ hands. Both men and women accepted children as gifts from God. On the matter of disciplining children, older villagers mentioned that

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<sup>7</sup> Older villagers mentioned that they did not know of traditional family planning methods used in the past.

it was usually the mothers who played the role though fathers also sometimes played an active part. Dentan, in his study of the Semai (1968:60) mentioned that the discipline of children often took the form of scolding and threats, and parents seldom, if ever, beat their children. These were the main forms of discipline among villagers in the past as well as the present.

In the past, before the introduction of the cash economy and the use of currency, the matter of safekeeping the family's money did not become an issue. However, since the use of currency was introduced, women have basically been the main money keepers though men have begun to play this role more actively in present times.

When asked why women were the main keepers of household money, many respondents answered that it was the women, especially the married ones who were more careful in keeping and spending money. This was because they were the ones who cared for the children and household and therefore were more far-sighted when using the money. They would take care to provide food for the family and buy essential household goods. Men on the other hand were said to be more reckless in spending money as they spent more time in town with other OA and non-OA men. They were more tempted to buy tobacco, cigarettes, lottery, alcohol and other unnecessary items.

However, as men were increasingly influenced by the consumerist culture, they tended to keep their own earnings, which were often higher and more constant than those of the women (refer to Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2). While this was truer for younger unmarried men, this trend was increasing among the married ones. Although women were also being influenced by this new culture, it was often the younger, single women with little

family responsibilities who tended to buy the less essential goods. Finally, as there were fewer earning women than men and they generally earned less than men, they had less opportunities to buy these goods.

### **6.3.1.3 Decisions predominantly made by men**

Presently, men predominated in decision-making in four out of the eleven categories (36.4%). These were decisions to purchase food provisions for the family (51.9%) and household items costing more than RM100 (63.0%), expenditure on schooling (48.1%) and management of children's school affairs (44.4%).

Firstly, on the matter of purchasing food provisions for the family, this was generally a joint decision in present times (48.1%). According to older villagers, in the olden days, it was common for both men and women to notice what provisions were needed for the household. Couples then often went to town together to buy these, usually walking the distance to town or buying from traders who came into the village. This was before the gender division of labour was more pronounced in present times, which dichotomised women's domain to the domestic sphere and men's to the public sphere (refer to Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1). These days, it was often the women who decided what was needed in the household as they were now normally the ones to cook and care for the household and the couple or the husband would buy the goods needed. If the wife was earning an income she would contribute some money but usually the husband as main earner would contribute the main share.

Secondly, with regard to decisions to purchase household items costing more than RM100, villagers barely bought anything that expensive in the past, if at all (RM100 was worth a lot in those times). Presently, it was predominantly a male affair because of the fact that today, men were the main income earners and the owners of vehicles that could transport the usually bulky items home. However, items costing more than RM100 were not often bought as most could not afford it. Those who were more likely to buy these were younger unmarried men who had full time jobs, earning a constant income and had no family to feed. Popular items among them lately were motorbikes, video players, televisions, cassette players, and hi-fi sets. These reflected the influence of materialist culture among the younger generation. Young women did not buy these, as they could not afford them, earning less and having less constant jobs.

When it came to the expenditure on children's schooling and management on their affairs in school, these were not applicable in the past, as schools were not available then. However, men had more say than women did in these matters today. This might be due to the fact that men generally earned more than women in present times (refer to Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2) and thus were more able to handle the financial needs of their school going children. It must be noted here that although there were no school fees incurred on OA children and they were loaned the text books needed, nonetheless schooling children incurred costs in terms of stationary, exercise books, uniforms, school bags and pocket money. In addition, men were often the ones with means of transport such as bicycles or motorcycles. Thus, it was easier for them to go to town to handle their children's school affairs and the trip would not be longer than necessary as they returned as soon as they have handled the affairs in town. On the other hand, if women were to go by themselves, they would have to pay for a private taxi or take the



school bus early in the morning and come back in the late morning with the same bus. Nevertheless, in spite of that, women still played a significant part in their children's schooling. 29.6% of respondents said that women together with men decided upon and contributed towards their children's school expenses, compared to 48.1% saying it was a male activity. In addition, 29.6% of respondents said that women predominated in managing their children's school affairs compared to 44.4% saying it was a male domain. In both cases, women often contributed a significant sum from their limited income, as mothers were often very concerned about their children's schooling and took great efforts to ensure that schooling progressed smoothly.

In conclusion, we could observe from the above data that women in the past played an important role in decision-making. This reflected gender egalitarianism in decision-making in major issues within the family context in the past. We could then see that women in general took less part in decision-making in the present as men took on a larger role. This very clearly reflected that the rather egalitarian gender relations of the past have transformed into that which was more male-biased, where males had more power to make decisions in the family.

### **6.3.2 Public involvement**

Table 22 reflects the level of public involvement of husbands and wives in present times. The types of involvement taken into consideration included attending village meetings, voicing personal opinions at these meetings, involvement in communal activities such as religious gatherings and communal labour (*gotong-royong*) and involvement in cash economy at any point in their lives.

**TABLE 22****PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OF THE SEXES IN PRESENT TIMES**

<b>Types of involvement</b>	<b>Hus- Band only</b>	<b>Wife only</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Neither/no t appli- cable</b>
<b>Attended village meetings</b>	7 (25.9%)	3 (11.1%)	15 (55.6%)	2 (7.4%)
<b>Voiced opinions in village meetings</b>	16 (59.3%)	-	5 (18.5%)	6 (22.2%)
<b>Involvement in communal activities</b>	-	-	27 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
<b>Involved in cash economy before</b>	5 (18.5%)	-	22 (81.5%)	0 (0.0%)

**6.3.2.1 Village meetings**

According to several older women, in the olden days before they had resettled and lived in close proximity to one another during the Emergency, it was difficult for them to go to such meets as houses were often far apart from each other. As these meetings often lasted a few hours, women with younger children were more inclined to stay at home to look after them. Some mentioned that due to the distance, the lack of street lamps and proper roads and the usage of jungle trails then, they felt they could not return home easily by themselves if and when their children wanted to go back home. They were also afraid of wild animals. The older women said that this fact hindered many of them from attending meetings before. However, if there were older children to care for the younger ones, they felt freer to involve themselves. Thus, women in the past were discouraged from participating in village meetings due to distance and safety reasons though they did attend when circumstances allowed it.

Meanwhile, Table 22 showed that in present times, 55.6% of respondents jointly attended meetings with their spouses. However, these figures did not reflect the frequency of such attendance.

From my observation, most of the women who did attend were older women. The older women mentioned that they were more able to attend meetings these days because they were held nearby, the path home was brightly lit and there was no longer the fear of wild animals. Younger women seemed to leave this responsibility to their husbands. This was so as the latter were often more bound to the domestic sphere.

However, it must be stated here that women did not attend the meetings as frequently as the men. Men who have reached adulthood were often present at most meetings to find out the latest in news and happenings and often dominated in the attendance. Women on the other hand, attended every now and then and only very few women would be present for any one meeting. Also, males usually went with their wives or by themselves but wives usually went with their husbands.

#### **6.3.2.2 Expressing opinions in village meetings**

According to some women villagers, in the days of old, when the Semai were not so exposed to external forces, the women had less qualms in expressing their opinions in village meetings. This was seen to be true of the East Semai (Dentan et al., 1997:36). This was because such meetings usually revolved around internal village matters and *adat*.

However, when the Semai began to be exposed to external forces in the more recent past, women seldom voiced their opinions although some women attended the meetings whenever they could. If women wanted to make their opinions known they would often do so through their husbands or male relatives and sometimes pushed these men to bring their opinions up in the following meetings. So, women often spoke through their men during this time (see also Dentan, 1968:68).

However, this did not explain why women did not independently take part in the discussions in present times though some of them were present. This was reflected in Table 22, which showed that 0% of the respondents mentioned that women voiced their opinions independently compared to the 59.3% of respondents mentioning that men did so. A possible explanation for this would be that by this time, the villagers were already much exposed to external forces, especially the government and its agencies and military troops. Thus, the topics of discussions would often centre on external affairs, public policies or issues. Government matters were also often important subjects for discussions, either with the presence of government officials or without. As women seldom wandered far from the village or into the towns, they had little outside contact and had little involvement with external affairs. It was usually the men who traded with outsiders and went into town. Thus, women could have felt inadequate to voice their opinions in such matters. Furthermore, government officials seldom included women in their discussions on government projects and policies and their opinions were seldom solicited. The women then would have felt embarrassed or out of place to ask questions or participate in the discussions. Such dynamics appear to be present in today's village meets when discussing official matters.

### 6.3.2.3 Communal activities

When it came to involvement in communal activities in the past, husbands and wives were often involved together. Such involvement remained the same in the present as was reflected in Table 22 for 100% of respondents mentioned that both husbands and wives were jointly involved in communal activities. These activities included *gotong-royong* activities where villagers worked together to celebrate events such as weddings and *sewangs* or religious rituals, or to repair the water pipes that supplied them with water from the streams. We could see that the active involvement from the days of old still held true today, reflecting that communal sharing of labour was still very important in activities which had not been directly influenced by the market. On the other hand, communal labour in economic activities that were now exchange-value production has declined considerably as was shown in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.4.

### 6.3.2.4 Cash economy

As was seen in Chapter 5, male and female villagers were already actively involved in the cash economy since the early twentieth century by producing tin, rubber and rattan for sale.

Referring to Table 22, many husbands and wives were involved in the cash economy (81.5%) in present times. However, currently, there was a tendency for males and females to be dichotomised into different economic activities. Men were more into producing commodities such as *petai*, durian, rattan, bamboo, wood and wild game, and

certain types of wage labour while women were more involved in rubber production and contract labour with Chinese vegetable farmers.

However, men were more actively involved in the cash economy than women. This was shown in Table 22 where 18.5% of the respondents mentioned that only the husbands were involved in the cash economy at one point or another whilst no respondent mentioned that the wives were such involved. Men also had more work opportunities and more choice in types of work during this time, compared to the women.

### 6.3.3 Geographical mobility

In the past, men and women alike did not often travel to other towns apart from Bidor, Kampar in the north or Tanjung Malim in the south. Here, Kampar and Tanjung Malim are around half an hour's drive from Bidor.

Presently, however, we could see that the majority of respondents (70.4%) mentioned that the husband in the family has travelled to Ipoh **and** Kuala Lumpur before. Here, Ipoh is about a forty-five minute drive from Bidor and Kuala Lumpur is about an hour and a half's journey from Bidor. However, only 18.5% of the respondents mentioned that the wife in the family has travelled to **both** cities before. According to 37.0% of the respondents, the wife in the family has either travelled to Ipoh **or** Kuala Lumpur at least once in their lives. A significant percentage of the respondents or 29.6% of them mentioned that the wife in the family has neither travelled to Kampar **nor** Tanjung Malim.

We could thus conclude that in the past, both men and women were not very mobile, the majority of them have only travelled to either Kampar or Tanjung Malim before in their life times. However, in the present, men are more mobile than their wives, with the majority of men having been to both the cities of Ipoh in the north and Kuala Lumpur in the south. Women, on the other hand, are more confined in their geographical mobility with the majority having travelled to either of the cities, not both and a significant percentage not having been to Kampar nor Tanjung Malim.

This is a clear indication that men in the present are not restricted in their travelling and often did so to look for job opportunities, visit friends, look for future partners, attend religious meetings and so forth. Women are more constrained in their mobility as their lives grew to revolve more around the home and hearth. As we have seen in Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1, women, especially younger women are being pushed more into the domestic domain and subsistence sphere whilst men participated more in the public sphere and exchange value production. Meanwhile, mobility for both sexes might be limited in the past due to the lack of good roads and transport system linking the towns mentioned.

**TABLE 23****GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY OF THE SEXES IN PRESENT TIMES**

<b>Indicator of geographical mobility</b>	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>
Number of respondents and spouses who have travelled to <u>Kampar or Tanjung Malim</u>	1 (3.7%)	2 (7.4%)
Number of respondents and spouses who have travelled to <u>Kampar and Tanjung Malim</u>	-	1 (3.7%)
Number of respondents and spouses who have <u>not</u> travelled to <u>Kampar or Tanjung Malim</u>	3 (11.1%)	8 (29.6%)
Number of respondents and spouses who have travelled to <u>Ipoh or Kuala Lumpur</u>	4 (14.8%)	10 (37.0%)
Number of respondents and spouses who have travelled to <u>Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur</u>	19 (70.4%)	5 (18.5%)
Not applicable	-	1 (3.7%)



## 6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Semai traditional beliefs and practices were generally egalitarian in the gender context. Semai folklore portrayed Yok Luid and Han Luid, the popular Semai hero and heroine to be equal in prowess and abilities. Both had magical knowledge and were bright and brave in encountering and defeating their enemies. Meanwhile, in other stories, female heroines were seen to take active roles in choosing their husbands, and both heroes and heroines were both shown to be courageous, hard-working, responsible and friendly individuals. The main unit of production portrayed in the stories was generally the conjugal couple. Furthermore, the traditional prestige system allowed both women and men equal and easy access to social status through the adoption of respectable traits such as friendliness, generosity and diligence, adeptness in carrying out their daily chores and subsistence activities and knowledgeable in religious rituals and ceremonies. Meanwhile, men could achieve high social status by being a Mairaknak or a Halak while women could attain this by being a Halak or Bidan. Where marriages were concerned, these were generally matched and arranged by parents whilst divorce was easily available to men and women alike. Apart from that, Semai male and female children underwent similar socialization where both were taught to be generous, diligent, friendly, respectful and obedient from a young age. They were also instructed in working the swiddens, foraging for resources and in village rituals and taboos.

In actualizing some of these cultural conceptions in the present context, by looking at decision-making in the home, public involvement and geographical mobility, it could be concluded that the generally egalitarian dynamics of the past have changed in the present. As women began to lose economic autonomy, they also lost autonomy in the

household in terms of major decision-making. Where public involvement was concerned, although both sexes were found to be involved in communal activities and in the cash economy, males participated more actively in the latter and gained more from it as they had better work and income earning opportunities. With regard to village meetings, men these days tended to dominate them with their presence and opinions. Finally, men were presently more geographically mobile than their wives. This clearly reflects the dichotomy of men's involvement in the public sphere and women's involvement in the domestic domain.

Such social trends were generally not so in the past. From in-depth interviews with older men and women of the village, it was found that in the past, men and women played complementary roles in decision making and were significantly involved in communal activities. Both sexes were also actively involved in the economy in the distant past, which was based on subsistence production. Meanwhile, both men and women were not very mobile in the past due to lack of infrastructure and vehicles.