

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This study had set out to examine the gender dimension of environmental, economic and ideological change among the Semai with the onset of development and modernisation. Kampung Chang Sungai Gepai in Bidor, Perak was selected as it was located at the periphery of Bidor town and was exposed to varied external economic and social forces. This process accelerated in the past few decades and had significant impact on natural resources traditionally available to villagers, and local dynamics, including gender relations. Since such social change and its effects had been much studied among the OA in general (Endicott, 1979, McLellan, 1985, Gomes, 1987, 1990, 1991, Nicholas, 1985, 1990, 1994, Williams-Hunt, 1995), this study has specifically focussed on these issues with regards to women. As no gender study had been done in an extensive manner on Semai women and change, this study would fill that void and add on to other work done on OA women and change, such as Howell's (1983) work on the Chewong, Nowak's (1986) study of the Hmak Btsisi? and Thambiah's (1997a) work on the Jakun.

Firstly, the government's resettlement policy and encroachment by state agencies, especially the Forestry Department and other agents (namely loggers, orchard owners and vegetable, cattle and pig farmers) have caused the villagers to be converged into a limited land area. This was in contrast to their access to vast traditional lands before. With this, villagers were eventually pushed out of their main subsistence activity, paddy cultivation, which was traditionally undertaken by both men and women significantly.

As paddy cultivation was forsaken, supplementary crops such as cassava and maize were grown to reinforce food supply. As women were the traditional cultivators of these crops, they became mainly responsible for subsistence farming. However, such cultivation was limited to a few small plots, and could not sustain them and their families adequately. Nevertheless, these women played a significant role in feeding their families, especially in difficult economic times, when work was scarce. However, due to increasing encroachment, which further limited farming land, women might even lose this role.

Men, on the other hand, were pushed into the cash economy to earn income to buy rice and other food supply for their families, and devoted much time to it. As the consumerist culture spread in the village and the desire for consumer goods increased, this trend escalated. Some women were also involved, but their work was limited to mainly rubber production and wage labour in vegetable farms nearby.¹ However, income from such work was meagre for the rubber trees were old and unproductive and farm work was inconsistent. Furthermore, their wages were less than that received by men. In contrast, men in exchange-value production generally had more work opportunities which gave higher cash returns than women's work. Thus, men generally brought in the major earnings within the family.

Most males in exchange-value production participated in simple commodity production by gathering and selling traditional resources such as *petai*, durian, wood and rattan. In fact, males dominated those types of commodity production that earned better cash returns. However, such production had its problems as villagers depended on prices

determined by merchant capital, which fluctuated tremendously based on market forces beyond the control of villagers. Cash returns were also minimal so as to earn bigger surpluses for the traders and any taxes to be paid by traders on produces was transferred to villagers. Meanwhile, the majority of those involved in wage labor were into contract labor which was inconsistent. Wages received were often much lower than those paid to non-OA. Due to these factors, men often had to work hard within the cash economy to earn enough to sustain their families. In addition to that, these villagers often took loans from the traders or employers and were obliged to continue work with them due to this. These factors further enmeshed villagers, especially males in the cash economy.

Men eventually began to forgo some major subsistence production and reproductive activities such as gathering food and firewood and domestic work, and left these in the hands of women, since women were getting a worse deal within the cash economy than they were in terms of opportunities and income level. However, as natural resources diminished with encroachment and new consumer items were introduced which had to be washed, cleaned and tidied, women's subsistence and reproductive work grew more burdensome. Furthermore, women grew less able to sustain themselves or pay for the consumer goods they desired and depended on men for this.

Thus, grew a dichotomy between subsistence production which became a predominantly female affair centred in the village area and *nenggrik*, and exchange- value production, a predominantly male domain centred in the *nenggrik* and public arena. In addition, as men became the major income earners and women grew less able to produce or earn enough to sustain themselves, women grew reliant on men economically. This was in

¹ This was so as few work opportunities were available close to the village and women seldom ventured

contrast to traditional patterns where men and women often worked together as conjugal couples and there was sexual integration in most production activities, which were geared towards subsistence. There was also little dichotomy between public and domestic spheres during this time.

Secondly, with the DOA parceling out some land to individual male owners between 1959 and 1962, women have lost all rights to this land area. New conditions to land ownership and tenure arose and the first generation of male owners eventually bestowed partial rights onto their daughters. However, even these partial rights have put these daughters very much at the mercy of their fathers, brothers and husbands. This was so for a single woman or a woman divorced from her *mai pasak* husband was dependent on the land of her father and brother to sustain her. On the other hand, a woman married to a *mai pasak* husband was dependent on the husband's land. Due to this, women who traditionally enjoyed equitable land rights had to relinquish these. This was significant for women who depended on their land and its resources for their economic autonomy, as they had few work options. Finally, this system of land tenure was increasingly adopted for *nenggrik* land as well, thereby intensifying the above trends.

Women were also deemed to be ignorant of land matters, both by their men and state officials. Thereby, it was the males who often made decisions regarding land and other natural resources, such as water. At times, these decisions were unwise and had brought extra burdens for the females. One example was the water issue where male decisions on the water source had produced a weak supply of water. This made it more difficult

far for work, as most were wary of outsiders. Furthermore, most women had by now taken responsibility over childcare and housework and preferred to be close to home to fulfill these responsibilities.

for women to carry out their daily work of washing, carrying water and bathing the children.

Thirdly, large tracts of land became commoditized as males insisted on planting more cash crops. Men increasingly became more interested in exploiting the land for their own gains and were more interested in how much income they could get from it. Some simply ignored it, being too busy with wage labour. These factors and the fact that they were constantly told by government officials that the land was not theirs only deteriorated men's relationship with the land. They acted less as guardians and caretakers of the land and the resources on it, responsibilities passed down through the generations. As men commoditized substantial areas of the land, women were left with less land for their subsistence activities such as cultivating subsistence crops or gathering forest produces. In spite of that, these activities still enabled many women to help feed their families. As a consequence, women generally tended to be more concerned about its use and management in a more sustainable manner. Thus, they often had a closer relationship with the land, compared to the men. However, as land became less and less available, and as some men were able to support their families with their income, some of their wives have forsaken these subsistence activities. They preferred to depend on their men economically to buy food from town. This was especially true of women with husbands who earned substantial amounts from trading in commodities or wage labour.

Fourthly, males eventually controlled other productive resources such as rubber, and later oil palm in terms of ownership and production. Again DOA (later JHEOA) played a major role in placing ownership of rubber and oil palm trees either totally or largely in

male hands without much, if any consultation with the womenfolk. However, women later regained some control of the rubber trees though for the past few years it could offer them little economic independence due to limited productivity. A few women also had ownership of oil palm smallholdings, though they were in the minority. Even then, these women had to depend on male labour which they had to hire, as oil palm production demanded hard physical labour, such as trimming the leaves and transporting the fruits which was too demanding physically for women. Other more traditional productive resources, such as *petai*, durian and other fruit crops were also appropriated by males as the produces were transformed into commodities to be sold in the market to pacify the increasing desire for cash and consumer goods. However, women also owned some *petai*, durian and fruit trees, though often less than men. They were usually involved in the gathering and sales of durians and other fruits, especially of trees that grew closer to the village, thereby earning some income. Nonetheless, *petai* owned by women were harvested by hired male labour.

Fifthly, individualization of resources has occurred. Traditionally, there was the unwritten rule that the strong helped the weak in terms of sharing resources, whether food, material or labour. This system was especially beneficial to widows or divorcees with dependent children or families with weak-bodied members. However, now there was competition where the strong strove to acquire more for themselves, sometimes at the expense of the weak. The strong planted more cash crops on communal land to appropriate the land as they adopted the new tenure system. Families without many strong males often lost out to those who had. Meanwhile, sharing of food has also decreased and commodities were sold and seldom shared. Since men often controlled the latter, women had less access to these.

Sixthly, with regards to water and its use and management, encroachment in the form of picnickers, cattle and pig farms, oil palm plantations have caused a major deterioration in the quality of water. Women have suffered more as they have, especially in later times, taken over responsibility of domestic chores, including carrying water, washing and bathing the children.

Seventhly, in terms of traditional Semai ideology, a general analysis of Semai folklore showed that Semai cultural heroes and heroines were equally intelligent, courageous, magically potent and proved to be strong characters. Where economic production was mentioned, the conjugal couple was usually the main unit of production, especially in the major activities of swiddening and foraging for food. Meanwhile, traditional prestige systems conferred social honor to both men and women who have acquired certain personal traits and qualities. These included diligence, respectfulness, friendliness, generosity and, knowledgeable in religious and spiritual matters and competency in daily subsistence activities. In addition, certain social positions accorded high status such as the position of *Mairaknak*, which was available to males, and *Bidan*, which was available to females and *Halak*, which was available to both sexes. Thereby, both men and women generally had equal access to social prestige. Children then were socialized to acquire these qualities. Although, there was some gender division in the socialization of certain roles, where girls were to a larger extent taught domestic work and childcare whilst boys were taught hunting and trapping, these roles were nonetheless flexible. Furthermore, there were many other roles, which could be easily taken on by males and females alike. Meanwhile, in terms of courtship and marriage, the choice of marriage partners were traditionally determined by parents, though males often had the opportunity to make courtship advances, decide on marriage dates and the form of

marriage to be had. In conclusion, in traditional ideology, Semai men and women were perceived to be different in many aspects yet generally equal in status.

However, in analyzing the actualization of cultural perceptions in the present by looking at the patterns of decision-making in the family, public involvement and geographical mobility in present days, we could see that there is less gender egalitarianism in the present than in the past.

An overview of the present patterns of decision-making in major issues within the family showed that men currently play a more important role than women do. In comparison to this, women played a significant or near equal role in the past.

Thus, in the present, women only have a significant influence in decision making in the private and domestic spheres such as in the purchase of small household items, the number of children to be had and the discipline of children. This is due to the fact that women have now become the persons mainly responsible for childcare and the maintenance of the household. This was in contrast to olden times when both men and women played active parts in these matters, except for deciding on the number of children. This was not relevant in the past when contraception was not available.

Meanwhile, growing vegetables and tubers, which was traditionally a female affair and decision has now included male involvement as well. In addition, although women are currently the main keepers of the family's money, where in the olden days money was little used, the ideology behind this practice remains tied to the present role of women as child caretakers and home maintainers. As they are seen to be more concerned about the

welfare of the children and the home, they are deemed less to squander the money on non-essential items as the men would. However, more men are now controlling the money purse than before.

Meanwhile, in matters, which concerned larger amounts of money and relating more to the public sphere, men have currently begun to have a more significant role in decision making. This may be due to the fact that they are now the main income earners in the family and own the family's means of transport. These decisions include bringing ill children to the doctor, purchasing food provisions and larger household items, handling their school-going children's expenditure and their school affairs. Thus, where children are concerned, fathers are involved in handling their affairs when money and transport are needed. Otherwise, they take less part in childcare than before.

Where public involvement is concerned, men predominate in attending and expressing themselves in village meets, which now often center around external matters such as state policies and government projects. This is in contrast to the past where women once took active part in these meetings when the subject usually revolved around village matters and *adat*. Where cash economy is concerned, men are presently more involved than women as they have more work opportunities and choice in types of work. This is in contrast to the Semai subsistence economy where both men and women were actively involved. Finally where communal activities at village level are concerned, both men and women are presently involved, as in the olden days. This may be due to the fact that this activity has little, if anything to do with the cash economy.

Lastly, in terms of geographical mobility, men have become more geographically mobile than women, as they are now travelling further and more frequently than women. This is in contrast to olden times when both were limited in their mobility due to lack of infrastructure and transport facilities.

Thus, although Semai traditional ideology was basically egalitarian in the gender context, reflecting a more egalitarian way of life, however, when cultural conceptions were actualized in the current context, gender egalitarianism has taken a back seat and male predominance has emerged.

We can thereby conclude that with the penetration of capitalist development and modernization with its accompanying forces, Semai men have been marginalised in terms of losing much of their land and natural resources that have sustained them in the past. They were pushed into new circumstances and a new economic mode of production, which were exploitative of them. However, women were doubly marginalised due to these external forces. They had to relinquish more resources than their men did and were left with little to support themselves. Furthermore, they had less viable alternatives, which encouraged dependency on their men. They were also left with the burden of more work at home and in the subsistence sphere. In addition to this, mainstream patriarchal ideology began to seep into Semai consciousness (see also Howell, 1983:46), which was generally egalitarian traditionally and subsequently generated more gender-biased perceptions.

We have also seen that women have not always accepted male dominance and decision-making. In some cases, women have actively responded to the situations that worked

against them. With regards to the water project in their village, they have taken the problems into their hands for whenever there was a difficulty they took the initiative to investigate and repair damages at the dam. When men grew slack in getting traditional materials to build or repair homes, women often urged them on by accompanying them or simply embarrass them by collecting the material themselves, for this was generally a male task by this time. It was also women who recently reinitiated subsistence planting to assist in feeding their families, even though the practice was stopped for many years due to limited availability of land. In addition, women pushed for rubber to be replanted instead of oil palm, so that they could have a source of income and a continuous supply of firewood. Women also, through joint effort managed to change the minds of male villagers who wanted to lease out their rubber land to a Chinese contractor without any official proceedings.

It was also a group of women who started the *Sinui Pai Nane' Sengi* group, which males eventually joined. This group has given women some political leverage as they could influence communal decisions by speaking their minds and exchanging ideas within this group, knowing that they would be taken seriously since the leaders were female. Women in this group have grown more confident and assertive in voicing their opinions. Women from this group have given the men the moral support they needed when coming out with the Memorandum (1994) to apply for their land to be gazetted. Although the process was initially participated by males and females alike and the men eventually dominated, nonetheless the women have actively supported the process. When the men had given up hope, it was the women committee members who went on with the research and encouraged the men on till they completed the Memorandum (1994). In the presentation of the Memorandum (1994), a woman explained the nature

of the appeal and the reasons why the Memorandum (1994) was done. These are some instances where women have attempted to determine their realities for themselves.