Commodification and Social Relations among the Semai of Malaysia

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In this paper I will document the impact of commodification on intracommunity social relations amongst a group of people known as the Semai whose longstanding involvement with the market economy has greatly increased in the last few decades. Out of this intensification of market links emerged petty commodity production (PCP)[1] as the primary form of production in the Semai economy. The development and internalisation of PCP has not only resulted in major economic transformations such as the shift of the production focus from subsistence production to commodity production and progressive market dependence but has also crystallised certain changes in Semai intracommunity social relations.

There is considerable ethnographic evidence on the salience and significance of such features as egalitarianism, gender equality, communal ownership, and generalised labour and material sharing in the Semai community[2]. These norms and values are apparently not only expressed at the ideological level but are also commonly lived out in everyday social praxis. Interestingly these are the very cultural values that have been considered to be incompatible with the prerequisites of PCP. The question I intend to deal with here is what are the effects of PCP and its attendant process of commoditisation on these norms and values that are of paramount significance in directing Semai social relations. If these norms and

1) In recent years there has been much research and debate concerning the concept of petty commodity production. This concept was initially formulated by Marx and Engels and later developed by Lenin and Kautsky in their analyses of capitalist penetration in "peasant" societies. For a more detailed discussion of this concept see, for example, Bernstein [1979, 1988], Cook [1976], Chevalier [1982], Ennew *et al.* [1977], Friedmann [1980], Goodman and Redclift [1981], Kahn [1980], Scott [1986], C. Smith [1984], G. Smith [1985].

2) The Semai community has received considerable ethnographic attention in recent years by several anthropologists notably Dentan, Fix, Clayton Robarchek, Carole Robarchek, Nicholas, and Anthony Williams-Hunt (Bah Tony) and Bah Juli Edo who are both Semai. Dentan's book [DENTAN 1968, reprinted in 1979] entitled "The Semai: a Non-Violent People of Malaya" and numerous papers which are based on his impressive field research carried out in 1961–1963 among two groups of Semai contain a large corpus of ethnographic data which facilitated the other studies. Some of the publications derived from these researches are cited in the bibliography.

values are inimical to PCP are they then discarded or are they transformed or do they persist albeit in a less significant way?[3] Before I begin to address these questions I shall provide a cursory description of the economy of the Tapah Semai which is based on a detailed study[4] that I conducted on the economy of Semai villages in the Tapah region in the State of Perak in Malaysia.

TAPAH SEMAI ECONOMY

The economy of the Tapah Semai is typically flexible and mixed. People engage in a broad range of productive activities for both cash income as well as subsistence. While some activities are performed all year around others are limited to certain seasons. Often people combine several activities which are carried out sequentially or even simultaneously in a day. Over the past three decades the subsistence-oriented activities of swiddening, foraging, hunting, and fishing, which the Semai are noted for in the literature, have been relegated to secondary economic status. Today, of primary economic significance are their commodity productive activities of cash cropping, forest collecting, and wage employment that they keenly undertake to earn money.

Given the fairly extensive range of activities that they can choose from at most times of the year, Semai continually have to decide on how to allocate their working time to various productive activities. From a detailed time allocation study of six Semai households for a calendar year, it seems that people place greater emphasis on commodity production. While subsistence production in the form of swiddening, hunting and fishing was still carried out and yielded invaluable

3) There has been considerable attention given to these questions by researchers of tribal communities. See, for examble, Murphy and Steward's study [MURPHY and STEWARD 1956] on the effects of market integration in two different societies—Canadian Montagnais and Mundurucu of Brazil—experiencing similar economic processes arising from market involvement, and Bohannan's paper [BOHANNAN 1959] on the effects of monetisation in the economy of the Tiv of Africa.

4) Field research upon which this paper is based was carried out in 1982–1984 mainly in one Tapah Semai village where I monitored the production activities, income earnings, and expenditure of six households for one year (November 1982–October 1983). I then conducted socio-economic surveys in all the 27 villages located along and serviced by the Tapah-Cameron Highlands road and its side roads which branch off at 3rd mile, 7th mile, 8th mile, and 17th mile. These surveys were done in January–February 1984, November 1986 (in 10 villages) and November 1987 (in 10 villages). Much of the quantitative data derived from this research was presented in my Ph.D. thesis [GOMES 1986]. I am very grateful to the Semai in the region, particularly the people at Batu Sembilan village and several individuals especially Bah Akeh and Bah Tony (Anthony Williams-Hunt) for giving me their much appreciated cooperation and assistance which greatly facilitated my research, and to the Dept. of Prehistory and Anthropology at the Australian National University which sponsored my research. Personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms for people in the study village.

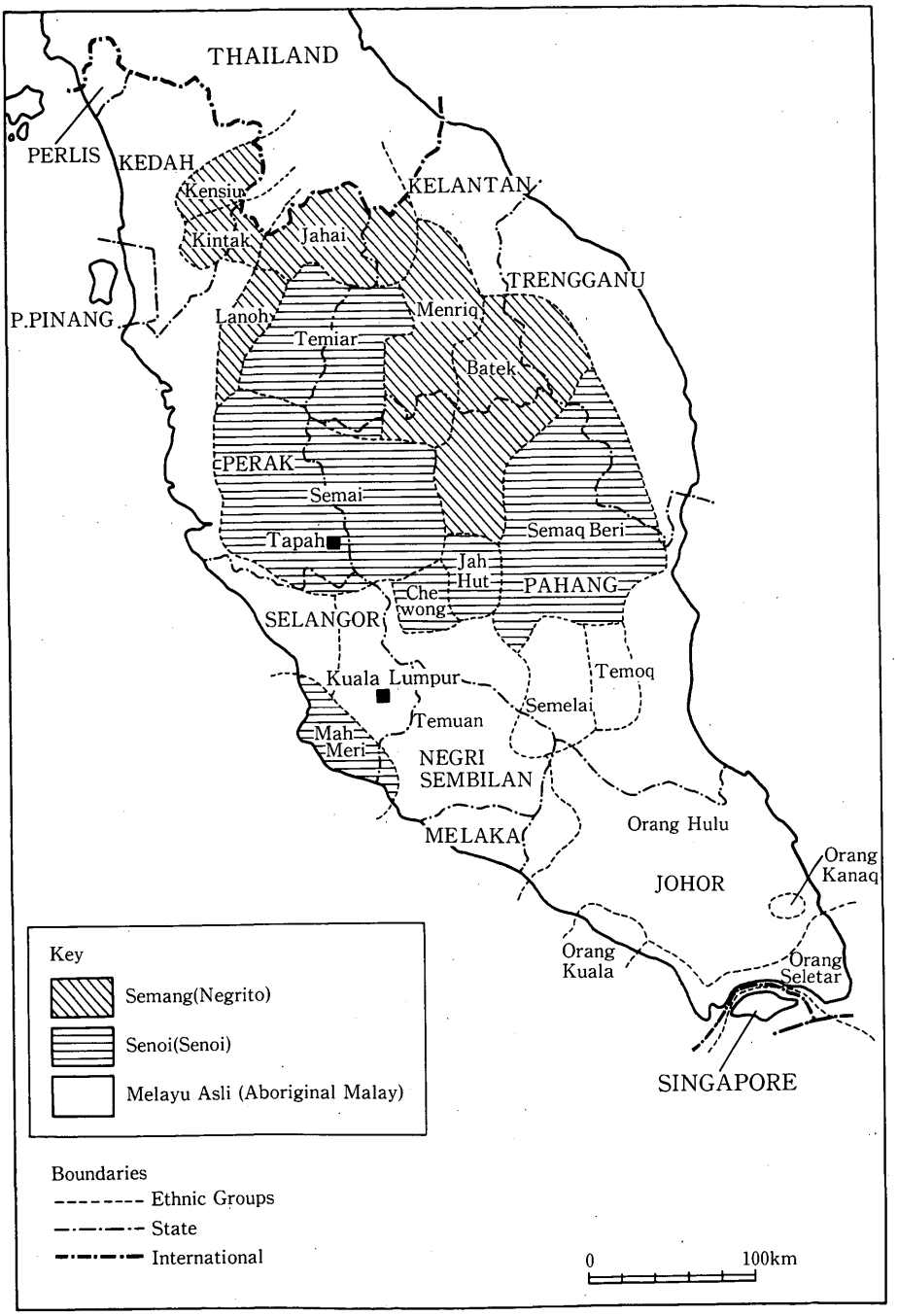

Figure 1. Orang Asli groups of the Malay Peninsula.

products which were generally difficult, if not impossible, to obtain from the market, people tended to focus their work effort on commodity production. Commodity production absorbed almost treble the number of hours people allocated to subsistence production. The six households whose time allocation was monitored for one year devoted 74 per cent of their total production time to commodity production and only 26 per cent to subsistence production. From the analysis of several cases of how people budget their labour time, I found that cash returns to labour were foremost in people's minds when they decided on how to allocate their labour time to production. This is not surprising given the fact that commodity production was estimated as eight times more productive (in terms of cash returns to labour) than subsistence production. Economic rationality is however not the only factor underlying this change. The people's current emphasis on commodity production can also be explained as a response to their ever increasing dependence on the market for most of their food requirements and their growing demand for manufactured consumable products. Nowadays, Semai villages in the Tapah region purchase the bulk of their food from the nearby shops or the several itinerant retailers who frequently visit the villages. In my village study I found that about 90 per cent of the sample households' food came from the market. On average, each household spent about $M170 per month on foodstuff and between $M30 and $M70 on each of the other four expenditure categories which include personal items, household goods, tobacco/betel/alcoholic drinks, and other items.

Tapah Semai are involved in several types of activities that link them to the cash economy in different ways. The more important of these activities include cash cropping, minor forest product collecting, commercial fishing, commerce and wage labour. Cash cropping is by far the most popular commodity production activity.

I observed that almost all Tapah Semai villages grow cash crops such as Hevea

Photo. 1. Semai women buying things from an itinerant trader.

rubber, fruits, oil palm, coffee, cocoa, corn, vegetables and flowering plants. Fruit production yields sufficient revenues to make it the most attractive source of income in most Tapah Semai villages. The two major fruit collected for market consumption are *petai* (*Parkia speciosa*) and *durian* (*Durio* spp.) and the minor fruit which are harvested intermittently and in relatively small quantities for sale include *larah* (*Baccaurea griffithii*), *rambai* (*Baccaurea motleyana*), *jering* (*Pithecellobium jiringa*), and *langsat* (*Lansium domesticum*). In the time allocation study, I found that fruit collecting took up almost 64 percent of the sample's total time spent on commodity production. In return, the households earned an average of $M5,100 during that year with a range of $M2,551 to $M9,979. The village survey indicates that while these figures are certainly representative of cash earnings from arboriculture for the Tapah Semai, several households in other villages actually received more than $M10,000 per annum from fruit sales. Arboriculture-for-exchange is gaining so much popularity among the Tapah Semai that people devote a great deal of effort and time to expanding their orchards and are becoming more concerned with the maintenance of their ownership rights to fruit trees.

Rubber tapping is another important cash earning activity in most villages, particularly those situated near the road or town. In many villages people tap their rubber trees regularly earning about $M10 to $M15 a day but in most, trees are tapped only sporadically, particularly when the need for cash arises or when prices are attractive. While in one or two villages, particularly government-sponsored resettlements, rubber tapping owes its development to state projects, most, especially those in the lowlands, have taken up this activity on their own accord.

Most Semai villages have easy access to forests which serve as a source of trade products and as a refuge for Semai wanting to escape the unbearable heat in their settlements during the dry season for their relative coolness. The forest is also an important link in the cultural heritage and identity of the Semai as it has provided the people trade goods and protection from their enemies for centuries and served as an important repository in their religious beliefs and practices. It is highly possible that the Semai were one of the primary suppliers of forest products such as rattans, bamboos, damars, gharu wood, ivory, rhino horns and bee's wax in the long standing maritime commerce in the Malay archipelago. As Dunn avers:

> The forest aboriginals were, until the 19th century, the only people available to exploit most of Malaya's forest land. As forest-adapted people, they were also the only people armed with the necessary experience and knowledge to seek out and wisely exploit the resources of their forest subsistence zones [1975: 108].

Nowadays Semai engage in forest collecting only when there are no other less arduous cash earning options or when there are direct requests for certain products. The main products which are collected for sale include rattan, butterflies and other insects, bamboo, gharu, and wild resins in declining order of importance

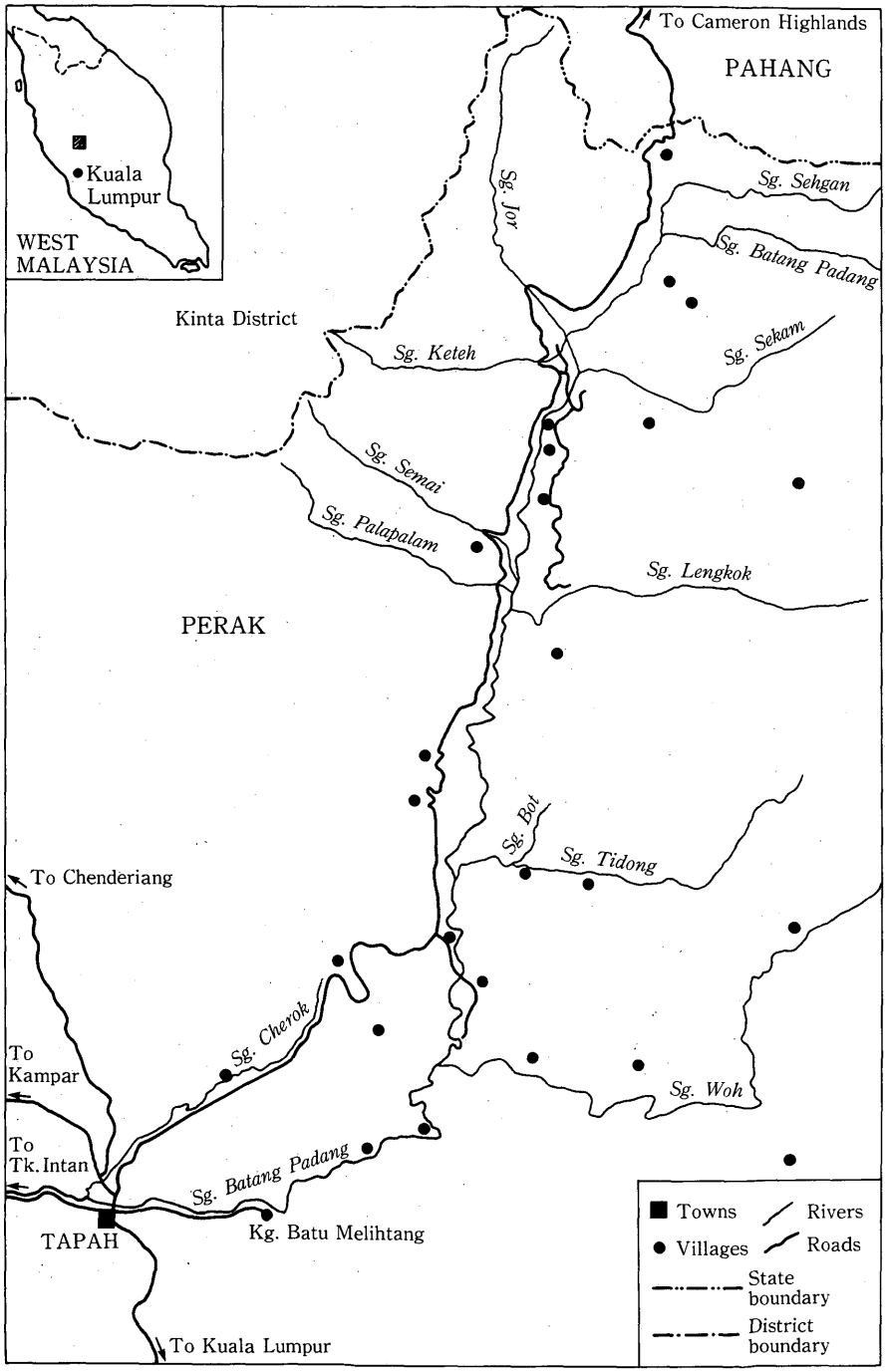

Figure 2. Semai villages in Upper Batang Padang River Basin.

Photo. 2. Semai hamlet with rubber trees in the background.

in terms of time allocation and cash earning potential. In some villages I have come across people selling their game such as feral pig, deer and frogs obtained in their hunting and trapping activities.

In the few villages near ponds and lakes especially Kampong Batu Tujuh Belas I have observed people engaging in commercial fishing whereby nets are used to catch mainly tilapia for sale to fellow Semai in the region. Although I do not have reliable data on the productivity of this activity, I estimate, on the basis of the relatively low catches in several fishing outings that I have witnessed, that incomes from commercial fishing are low. Several villages with some assistance from the government have begun fish farming. As yet there are no indications of its viability or success but it has good potential of turning into a lucrative cash-earning activity in the future as certain kinds of fresh-water fish are becoming highly sought delicacies in the local market.

It appears that petty commerce has intensified in recent years. At the time of the regional village survey in January 1984, there were 12 Semai-run shops in the Tapah region. These shops were generally small and received modest earnings. They had a limited potential since local markets were small. Also, it is difficult to make a good income from storekeeping because of the small profit margin on each item, the demands for credit from kin and other villagers and the low inventory found in most stores. Apart from storekeeping, I have also observed some enterprising Semai engage in the buying and selling of local produce especially durian and petai for profit. I know of a few individuals who have secured government permits to trade in forest products. They buy mostly petai from their fellow villages and sell them to traders in the nearby towns.

Growing numbers of Semai are resorting to wage employment, especially when in desperate need of cash. Most worked for wages only intermittently. There are many who are employed in salaried positions in the government service, mainly in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and in the security forces. In some villages

especially those nearby towns, Semai have gained employment as menial labourers for non-Semai farmers, cash-crop plantation companies, and tin-mining concerns. They are generally lowly paid. The few Semai working for a plantation company operating in the region were paid a daily wage of $M10.

The Tapah Semai are clearly petty commodity producers[5] as they produce goods for market consumption and depend enormously on the market for their subsistence. They devote most of their labour to the production of exchange-values but still engage in some subsistence-oriented activities. Subsistence production persists, but it functions within an economy oriented towards commodity production especially commercial cropping. However, it should be pointed out that the relative importance of subsistence production to commodity production varies from year to year. Although subsistence production was very low during the time of my survey I found in subsequent field visits in 1986 that people devoted much more time to foraging and swiddening than they did in the 1982–1984 period because of the poor fruit season. Nonetheless it is clear that subsistence production is on the decline.

Many scholars using a Marxist framework have indicated that commodity production tends to stimulate certain interrelated processes such as the privatisation of property ownership, exploitation of labour, individuation of production and consumption and social and gender differentiation[6]. I will discuss these in turn and examine how they affect social and ideological practices especially generalised sharing, communal ownership, and egalitarianism among the Semai. Despite the long involvement with commodity production it is only with its recent intensification that these processes have become more evident and effective.

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5) Petty commodity producers produce goods for a market but still continue to produce use-values for their direct consumption. They are in a way *partially* integrated into a market economy as they still need to participate in subsistence production given that not all their food requirements are obtained from the market. Furthermore, as Bernstein points out:

Simple (petty) commodity production is distinguished from capitalist commodity production by its 'logic' of subsistence (meeting the needs of simple reproduction) as opposed to the logic of the appropriation and realisation of surplus-value and the accumulation of capital [1979: 425].

In further contrast to producers in capitalist commodity production, petty commodity producers own or control the means of production needed to produce the commodities and do not depend on wage labour in their production. Labour required for production is primarily recruited from the household which is mainly of the nuclear-family type. For this reason the household is the main unit of production and consumption in this form of production.

6) For example, as Ennew *et al.* argue:

commodity production...supposes private property, a social division of labour, and production for sale by individual producers (and their families) who own the means of production [1977: 309].

PRIVATISATION OF OWNERSHIP

The impression given in the literature on the Semai in respect to land ownership is that the people do not have an elaborate system of land ownership and rights. For example, Dentan states:

> The bond between a band and its "land" is less a matter of ownership than of sentiment. This is where one's parents and children are buried, or where one was born, the place for which one feels the bittersweet yearning the Semai call *rəniag*. The land is home, not a commodity to be owned. No one has exclusive rights over the land. Anyone, whether a band member or not, can clear a field on it [1979: 80].

This description is not directly applicable to the Tapah Semai who adhere to a relatively well defined system of land ownership. According to the Tapah Semai land ownership system, a person claims rights of ownership to a specific territory referred to as *ngnriik* (or *lngrii'*), a term which is possibly derived from the Malay word (*negeri*) for state or country. A *ngnriik* is demarcated by rivers and ridges and usually named after the main river of its drainage system and is considered to be collectively owned by a group of people known as *mai pasak* ("land owning" people). Rights to a *ngnriik* are acquired by birth into the group owning the land. Tapah Semai do not regard their place of birth or the place of their parents' burial as their *ngnriik* unless it is their parents' *ngnriik*. I was also told that one cannot claim land rights on the basis of long term residence.

Recruitment into the "land owning" group is based on the principles of ambilineal cognatic descent[7]. In such a system, individuals regardless of gender can claim rights to a village territory on the basis of their father's and/or mother's membership in a "land owning" group. However, these rights must be activated in order for them to be validated or socially recognised. One way by which a person can do this is to show a keen interest in the affairs of the village. Ideally, the person should maintain constant close ties and frequent interactions with the other residents in the village. Some Semai have told me that a person should also take care of his/her inherited property particularly tree crops in the village territory to activate property rights. Those who do not reside permanently in their *ngnriik* usually make extended visits to their *ngnriik* to "keep their rights alive."

Cognatic descent theoretically allows an individual to claim land rights to more than one *ngnriik*. However, I found that most people exercised their rights in one or two villages at most and voluntarily excluded themselves from others that they are entitled to through a mechanism known as "forgetting." This is actually done by allowing their ties to lapse and by cutting down on their interactions with people in the other villages. In Semai terms this amounts to a shift from *hii'* ("we people" or "us") to *mai* ("outsiders" or "them") to refer to people in one's "forgotten"

7) See Carole Robarchek [1980] for a detailed discussion of this system among the Semai.

ngnriik.

Semai say that according to their *adat* (customary law), individuals can hunt, gather, fish, collect forest products, and cultivate crops but do not have exclusive rights to land unless it is a swidden that they have cleared and are still using. Individuals possess rigths to use the land in their *ngnriik* in the way they desire but they hold these in common with other members of the "land owning" group. This system of land ownership is apparently appropriate for a swiddening population with access to only a small territory. In a swiddening system, a plot of forestland is cleared, burned, and planted with several crops and utilised for about one or two seasons at most. Once the crops have all been harvested and the field overgrown with weeds and small scrubs, the swidden is left to fallow. A long fallow period, which allows for proper forest regeneration, is crucial for the re-fertilisation of the land. At this point, the cultivator relinquishes his/her rights to the swidden and the field reverts as part of public domain. Semai will then clear swiddens in other parts of their *ngnriik*. Thus, no permanent rights to land are accorded to its initial cultivator. Dentan also mentions this:

> There is no permanent ownership of fields among the Semai. A nuclear family "owns" land which they have cleared and from which they are still getting crops [1979: 43].

Having permanent personal rights to a swidden may have certain adverse ecological and social implications. A person, less well endowed with land rights than other villagers, may be forced to cultivate his land far too frequently leading to declining yields and adverse land degradation. As for social implications, permanent rights to land may lead to intravillage disparities and inequalities in land distribution and holdings. People who have cleared less land or who have inherited only small parcels of land may end up impoverished in terms of land ownership and food resources.

The principle of usufruct which determines the land tenure of swiddens generally underlies most property ownership rights. In animal trapping, for instance, a trapper has exclusive rights over the snares he sets and the quarry that may be trapped in them but once he leaves them unattended for some time, he relinquishes these rights; the snares or the trapping line may be used by anyone else. However, Semai aver that as proper etiquette, a person wishing to re-use snares should seek the previous owner's consent.

The question now is what are the implications of the development of PCP on this system of property ownership which is essentially based on the requirements of a swiddening and subsistence-oriented economy. There are several indications that point to the fact that this system of land ownership is in the process of major change. It seems that people are consciously modifying and replacing certain principles in this land tenurial system to complement PCP. Nowadays there is a growing tendency for people to establish exclusive control over the area on which their tree crops thrive. It is now considered imperative for anyone wishing to use

an area for any purpose to obtain the permission of the custodian of that area. The custodian is usually the person who owns the grove of tree crops standing on the piece of land in question. As tree crops, which are the primary means of production, have become very important to Semai in their economic survival, people have become increasingly concerned with the protection and maintenance of their plantations. They now generally keep a close eye on their tree crops to prevent theft of their products or damage to their trees. This concern has led to the development of individual ownership of specific areas in the *ngnriik* on the basis of tree crop ownership. This new development has been a source of some intravillage tension and squabbles and even fights. In one village, for example, individual ownership of a piece of land on which the village was sited has caused the residents much inconvenience and was a source of tension and general uneasiness. According to my informants, when the villagers had decided to move to the present site years ago, the headman had requested the permission of the owner of the grove of fruit trees standing on the land to site the settlement there. The owner in a typical Semai gesture gave his permission. Recently when he died, however, his wife who inherited the fruit trees asked the people to move out of "her" land. They initially refused but with the help and influence of her son-in-law who works for the government, she managed to drive the people out of the settlement. The reason she gave for her action is that she wanted to protect her fruit trees.

In some villages that are well advanced in the process of commoditisation, village land have been parceled out into family-owned "estates"[8]. The families possess exclusive rights to their respective "estates." People are expected to cultivate crops only on their own land (*tii'*). There have been several cases of dispute arising from ambiguous demarcation of "estate" boundaries and planting of tree crops on other people's land. Apparently, village moots (*bicaraa'*) to resolve such disputes have become more common in several villages these days.

The demise of communal ownership and the privatisation of property ownership is no where more obvious than in the system of tree crop ownership among the Semai. The principles of ownership and control of tree crops especially those that have cash earning potential are well defined by comparison to other Semai property. Non-cash earning wild trees, with the possible exception of the *ipoh* tree from which the poison for blowpipe hunting is derived, are usually communally owned[9]. People only claim exclusive rights over tree crops that they themselves planted (*cɜt halɔɔy*) or they have inherited (*sakaa'*) from their relatives. Inheritance is bilateral and every child inherits tree crops and other property regardless of gender. However, it appears that the distribution of fruit trees is unequal with the older children receiving more. In the division of a deceased's estate, the owners (or a mediator they choose) will count the crop trees and then

8) Anthony Williams-Hunt directed my attention to this practice.

9) Couillard [1980: 84] reports the adherence of a similar system among the Jah Hut, another Orang Asli ethnolinguistic group.

distribute them among their inheritors. This type of ownership whereby each inheritor has private ownership of the crop trees is known as *caa' halɔɔy* ("eat alone") among the Semai. Another type of ownership, which is becoming less common these days, is joint ownership usually by a sibling set. In this case, the ownership rights to tree crops are transferred without division to the inheritors, commonly a sibling set, who hold these rights in common and are expected to cooperate in maintenance and harvesting and also to share the produce equitably. Semai aptly refer to this arrangement as *caa' samaa'* which literally means "eat together."

Given the fact that private property is more compatible with commodity production, there seems to be a tendency now for Semai to replace sibling or communal ownership forms with private ownership[10]. This is related to the growing desire among Semai to increase their cash income which is now generally seen as a means of improving their market purchasing power and general wellbeing. As Semai themselves point out, they need not share their income and as such will have more money for themselves if they have private ownership of the tree crops. As one person put it: "if we eat the trees alone then we can keep all the profits for ourselves." As a testimony to this trend, there was only one case of sibling set ownership in the village I stayed in 1984; two cases were dissolved during my eighteen month residence (1982–1984). The villagers have asserted that most of the tree crops in the village were sibling owned about two decades ago.

Private ownership accords the owners the exclusive right to do whatever they wish with their tree crops. Unlike land, tree crops as such can be bought and sold. Hence, they sometimes become commodities. People, however, sell their trees to other Semai but not necessarily to people from the same village. The following two cases are instances of such practices:

Case 1.
Being continually pressured by the Indian shopkeeper to repay his deceased brother's outstanding debts, Bah Apung resorted to selling some of his durian trees to raise enough money. He sold six trees for $M600 to an urban Semai who is an employee of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Having a steady income and a relatively high salary, the buyer could afford to pay for the trees immediately. Bah Apung's relative, Wa' Aleng, who owned three durian trees close to the six trees in question, also sold her's to the new owner to avoid potential dispute over the ownership of durian fruits on the ground during the fruit season. She sold her trees for $M60 each since they were relatively young.

Case 2.
Bah Buyah publicly announced his intention to sell some of his durian trees to pay off his debts. His brother, who is residing in another village, bought five trees from him for $M500. The buyer told me that he purchased his brother's

10) Carole Robarchek [1980: 99] also reports this trend which she observed in a Tapah Semai village in 1974.

> trees to avoid the possible transfer of trees once owned by his mother to an unrelated outsider. Significantly, he remarked, "We must not forsake our *sakaa'* (inherited property). It is a link with our ancestors."

It is interesting that in these cases, as in many others, indebtedness has led to rising but mostly impermanent "treelessness" which is comparable to landlessness in "peasant" societies. Having fewer trees to earn fruit income could pose serious problems for continuing in commodity production and undoubtedly lead to greater indebtedness and possibly to proletarianisation. To escape from this "cycle of indebtedness." people have to increase their tree crop holdings. One of the two ways people achieve this is by planting more trees. Some Semai have informed me that in the past ten years or so fruit tree planting has evidently become increasingly popular among most Tapah Semai. However the productive trees owned by people from the village I stayed in were inherited and only a few trees were self-planted. Nonetheless, it was observed that many people had planted trees that are yet to bear fruit. The fruit seedlings planted were specially selected taking into consideration the favourable characteristics of the parent tree such as the flavour of the fruit and the yield. This implies that people were not only concerned about increasing their tree holdings but also ensuring, by way of genetic selection, better future harvests and more marketable fruit.

It is also clear that villagers occasionally buy fruit-bearing trees from others to expand their tree holdings. Such purchases are a common form of investment by the wealthier Semai, especially those with salaried jobs. The dividends from this sort of investment are high and within a few years, the income from the fruit sale will have covered the initial cash outlay. Such investments have led and continue to lead, by way of surplus accumulation, to considerable economic differences among Tapah Semai. The person who bought Bah Apung's and Wa' Aleng's trees boasted of owning more than 100 durian trees, most of which he claims were purchased from several villagers in the region. Assuming that he arranges with some villagers to collect the durian and shares the income equally with them, I would estimate that his cash income from his durian trees would be around $M5,000 per season which is about the average Tapah Semai household annual income. This income is only a supplement to his salary.

EXPLOITATION OF LABOUR

The privatisation of property ownership among other things has stimulated greater intravillage exploitation of labour. I use the term exploitation in a Marxist sense which can be defined as "the appropriation by nonproducers of a portion of the total product of direct producers" [ROSEBERRY 1976: 45]. Basically, two forms of intravillage exploitation can be found in Semai villages. The first type is the acquisition of a share of the product by nonproducers on the basis of the ownership of the productive means: a form of exploitation that Roseberry [1976] labelled "rent." The second form is the extraction of surplus value by village

headmen and their "assistants" through what Semai call *kamsen*, which is obviously a Semai-ised version of the English word "commission." Interestingly, some villagers referred to this commission as "tax" (*cukai*). In an attempt to explain this practice, a villager pointed out that *kamsen* is "the payment of 'tax' to the headman of a *ngnriik* for the fruit harvested from the *ngnriik*." Although a large portion of the "tax" accumulated may be returned to the villagers in the form of village feasts, the remaining portion is shared among the headman and his "assistants" for their own use, particularly in carrying out their village administrative duties. Therefore, the benefits that direct producers receive from their "tax" are not equivalent to the expropriations.

Exploitation of labour is quite commonplace in fruit harvesting. I shall provide four cases of petai collecting, which have been chosen on the basis of their diversity in distribution, circumstances and extent of appropriations, for discussion:

Case 1.
Whilst walking to his grove of fruit trees, Bah Nandok noticed that his mother's sister's daughter's (MZD) petai trees had plenty of harvestable pods. He decided to pluck them and collected three bundles. He sold the petai for $M38 and then proceeded to his MZD's house. He gave all the money to his MZD who kept $M15 for herself and handed $M23 to him for his effort.

Case 2.
Bah Rahu was requested to pick petai from his wife's paternal uncle's trees. He collected and sold five bundles for $M100. Upon selling, he immediately handed the money to the tree owner who initially took $M20 and gave Bah Rahu $M80. However upon Bah Rahu's insistence that this was not a fair arrangement for the owner, he accepted the $M30 that Bah Rahu returned to him. Hence, the proceeds were eventually shared evenly.

Case 3.
Without being asked, Bah Sulong collected and sold five bundles of petai from his brother's trees. He handed the $M40 he got for them to his brother who shared it equally between them.

Case 4.
Bah Rahu was asked to pick petai from his wife's father's trees. He collected three bundles which he sold for $M60. As is the normal practice, he gave the money to the tree owner for distribution. His father-in-law gave only $M15 to Bah Rahu who expressed his disappointment to me.

These cases indicate that the amount appropriated by the tree owners varies. While in many of the cases I have observed the cash was divided equally as in Case 3, in most cases (as in Case 1 and initially in Case 2) the owners, in what is considered as a good gesture and in demonstration of their generosity gave a larger share to the petai collectors. It appears that, if the tree owners are unable to pick their own petai, they may be more generous in their distribution in order to encourage the collectors to work for them in future harvests. Conversely, they may be "stingy" in their distribution so as to discourage people from picking their

petai. In all the cases presented, as in most instances, the tree owners distributed the petai income between themselves and the producers. It is considered as proper etiquette for the collectors to hand over the petai income to the tree owners for distribution.

Exploitation may also occur in the co-operative collecting of petai involving the owner(s) of the trees and their invited relatives or friends. The distribution of output is not made *ex post facto* in the minds of the producers (or owners as in the cases discussed earlier) but may be determined by the production process itself. Petai collection involves five stages in production: searching for petai, tree climbing, picking, gathering and bundling, and transportation. If the collecting party is only able-bodied men then it is likely that everyone will perform identical tasks i.e. each one will carry out all these separate labour processes. In a mixed party, a division of labour based on gender and age (if older or younger males unable to climb trees participate) ensues with the able males doing the actual picking while the females and aged or juvenile males engage in the gathering, bundling and transportation of the petai pods. The distribution in such co-operative collecting is mostly determined by the number of petai bundles carried to the village irrespective of who climbed and picked the pods or who owns the trees. The following is a case in point:

> Bah Openg, Bah Rahu, Bah Nandok, Bah Pep and Bah Kasut picked 17 bundles of petai from Bah Openg's wife's mother's trees. Everyone performed identical tasks but Bah Pep and Bah Kasut each carried 4 bundles and the other three men carried 3 bundles each. Of the $M170 received for the petai, Bah Openg gave $M25 to the owner, $M33 each to Bah Pep and Bah Kasut who carried more bundles, $M27 each to Bah Rahu and Bah Nandok and kept the remainder ($M25) for himself.

As for durian collecting, it is common for tree owners to "hire" labour or

Photo. 3. Semai man picking *petai* (*Parkia speciosa*).

arrange with others to collect their fruit. They may do so particularly if they have a bountiful crop or if they have far too many trees to collect from on their own or if they reside elsewhere. In one exemplary case, a person's (Bah Nandok) relatives from another village arranged with him to collect the durians from their trees. Since he was not able to do so himself, he hired his sister-in-law and her friend to collect the fruit. They collected about $M1,300 worth of durians but received only 23 and 12 per cent respectively of the income of which the remainder was appropriated by the owner who kept 50 per cent of the proceeds and Bah Nandok who received the other 15 per cent. For his own trees, Bah Nandok hired a Semai youth, a distant relative from another village to collect durian from some of his trees. The youth received 44 per cent of the income from the durian he collected while Bah Nandok kept the rest.

The actual distribution of the product or money is usually the owner's prerogative, given the absence of any prescribed rules on how the money should be shared. However, the producers sometimes decided on how the money should be shared but expressed their opinion indirectly. As in Case 2 described above, the collector stated that the division of the income was unfair to the owner and returned some of the money to him to even out the shares.

Commonly, the owners kept a smaller share of the proceeds for themselves. Nowadays, there is apparently a growing tendency for owners to appropriate about half of the product or income. This is the common practice particularly in the distribution of income between owner(s) and collector(s) in durian collection. On several occasions, owners appropriated a larger share of the fruit income for themselves. There were several instances of this in petai collecting. The following case is exemplary:

> Bah Openg and Bah Leng cooperated in picking eight bundles of petai which were sold for $M131. They both carried four bundles each to the roadside where Bah Openg sold the petai to a trader. He gave Bah Leng $M49 and kept $M82 for himself.

This distribution does not comply with the usual practice where collectors receive the cash equivalent of the number of bundles they transport. In response to my question as to why he had kept a larger share for himself, Bah Openg reasoned that he deserved more being the owner of the petai trees.

This sort of practice was also evident in durian collecting, rubber tapping and fishing (particularly when nets were used). An instance in durian collecting is where Bah Rahu kept a larger portion of the income from durians that he and his friend collected on the basis of his ownership of the trees. Similarly, Bah Openg appropriated a greater part of the cash income from rubber tapping than his coworkers for the same reason. It was also observed that in cooperative cast net fishing the owner of the net was invariably allocated a larger share of the catch[11].

The tendency for owners to increase their appropriations is related to two trends. The first is the increasing emphasis people gave to the ownership of fruit

trees rather than to the labour involved in the collecting of the fruit. Many Semai related to me that more often in the past, the collectors or producers were given a larger share of the product on the basis of their labour. The owners in handing a larger share to the producers rationalised their action with a statemant such as that the "person who toiled deserves more"[12]. Nowadays, it appears that the general opinion among villagers is that tree owners should keep a larger share of the produce.

The second trend is the people's reluctance to share their fruit income. This has induced some owners to appropriate larger than usual amounts of the product with the hope of discouraging others from collecting their fruit. People are aware that they could earn higher cash incomes if they collect the fruit themselves instead of depending on appropriations. In a sense, if an owner "rents" out his trees, he would actually be sharing his fruit income with others. This fact undermines the potentiality for such exploitation to promote intravillage social differentiation. Significantly, such practices may actually prevent social differentiation by enabling women and older men who are unable to participate in the actual harvesting process (such as climbing petai trees) to earn cash-incomes. Nevertheless, the fact that some people were able to eke out a living on the basis of their ownership of the productive means by way of exploitation and without having to participate in production is significant.

It appears that such exploitation of labour which is becoming dominant in Semai internal or domestic economic relations, underlines the importance the villagers place on the ownership of the productive means. The term *tauke*, which is used to refer to the trader in external relations, refers to the owner of a resource or productive means in internal relations. It seems that when a person claims to be a *tauke* he is actually implying that he has a right to appropriate a share. A comment from a villager is telling in this regard. This villager was given a share of the money received by two of his friends from tourists for demonstrating the use of a blowpipe which belonged to him. On justifying his claim to the share, he remarked "I am the blowpipe's *tauke*."

The other form of village exploitation, *kamsen*, holds greater potential for promoting intravillage social differentiation. It is grounded in a hierarchical

11) These practices resemble the appropriation that occurs in the blacksmith operation in West Sumatra. Kahn [1980] observed that in the typical blacksmith operation, which consisted of a master (*nangkodoh*) who managed the enterprise and carried out the buying and selling, and two to four workers, the enterprise profits were divided among the workers and master with an extra share allocated to the workshop (*apa*) evidently to pay for the depreciation costs of the master's equipment. When subjected to a more detailed analysis, Kahn [1980: 91–92] found that this share was indirectly appropriated by the master; it represented "a kind of hidden profit accruing to the owner of the *apa*."

12) Carole Robarchek observes for the Tapah Semai village she studied in 1974 that: "There seems to be an implicit assumption that the person who does the work has the major claim to the proceeds of his labor" [1980: 96].

system that has developed only in the past six decades or so. Semai informed me that the *kamsen* system among Tapah Semai was evidently initiated sometime in the 1920s by the regional chief, Bah Busu. In its initial form, people evidently presented a portion of their rice and fruit produce to their chief, who kept some for a feast, where most Semai in the region attended, and presented the other portion to the Sultan of Perak as a tribute. It seems that this tribute presentation was discontinued a decade or so later. However, villagers still continued to make such contributions to their chief who redistributed these presents at feasts.

Apparently, just before the Japanese Occupation, a new *kamsen* system was established in the region. Instead of having to contribute a portion of their harvests, people were expected to pay commissions to their village headman for the fruit and forest products they sold. It seems villagers then paid 5 cents for every bundle of petai and 2 cents for every heap of durian they sold to the trader. At the time of my research, the commission was set at 20 cents for a bundle of petai and a heap of durian and $M10 per lorry load of rattan or bamboo. However, instead of the villagers paying the commissions, the traders were expected to pay them. Although the traders sometimes gave the commission directly to the village headman, the money was usually given to villagers who were expected to hand it over to him. Villagers are expected to give the commission to the headman of the *ngnriik* from where they collected the fruit. However, not all people do so. For example, in the village where I stayed, most of the people kept some of the commission for themselves and gave their headman only a small portion of it. This sort of practice had resulted in a dispute among the people in one village where several village meetings or moots were convened to resolve the matter.

Given that the traders pay the commission, it might be argued that this practice is not strictly exploitative. However, since producers are almost certainly bearing these extra costs the traders incur, it is reasonable to assume that they are indirectly paying these commissions. While most headmen redistributed a major portion of the commissions to the villagers through gifts of money and/or through feasts and only kept a small share for themselves, several headmen had appropriated large shares of the commission and in the process had accumulated considerable wealth. In one of the Tapah Semai villages, the headman accumulated enough cash, mainly from commissions, to pay a contractor to build him a concrete house costing $M14,000. Even though such an exploitative system could cause intravillage social differentiation, it is undermined by the villagers' pervasive egalitarian outlook, their desire for individual autonomy and the refusal of some villagers to hand over the commissions.

INDIVIDUATION OF PRODUCTION

A common finding in many studies on the changing productive relations in communities in the process of market integration is the progressive individuation of production which is seen as complementary to the requirements or preconditions of

PCP. In the case of the Tapah Semai, my observations indicate that production is primarily centred on nuclear-family households and is becoming increasingly individualised. Nonetheless, it is still common for Semai to perform work tasks on an exchange basis. Semai gave several reasons why they preferred cooperative labour in certain production activities. Some noted that companionship in work serves to relieve the tedium of a task. It is particularly common in fishing and insect collecting for two or three married couples to "work" together for this reason. Friendship ties play an important part in determining with whom one cooperates. Since these ties vary from time to time among villagers, the production teams are rarely permanent.

Cooperation is crucial in certain tasks such as fish drives where the labour of several people working simultaneously is required for them to be performed efficiently. For example, weir fishing (*mar33'*) requires at least two workers, one to disturb fish from beneath the rocks and other hiding places and another to catch the fish that are trapped in the weir as they are driven into it by the river current. In fishing where stupeficants are used, several people are needed to collect stupefied fish before they revive or are swept downstream.

Villagers also stated that labour cooperation is desirable among co-owners where the productive means are used. For example, in sibling ownership (*cha' samak*) of fruit trees, co-owners are expected to cooperate with each other in maintaining and harvesting the fruit trees. For this reason, Bah Rahu worked about 30 per cent of his petai collections from certain trees for the survey year with his brother with whom he shares ownership. He worked alone in almost 60 per cent of his collections mainly from trees that he owned privately. In another case, Bah Openg and Bah Cekap cooperated on several occasions in petai collecting because their wives (who are sisters) shared ownership of some of their trees.

As people also acknowledged, labour cooperation is considered desirable in the event of a good harvest in order to share the "good fortune" of some villagers with their less fortunate counterparts. It is regarded as a good gesture for cultivators or owners to invite others to cooperate in the harvesting of their crop. I observed that harvesters usually kept what they themselves harvested. In contrast to the harvesting arrangements in several other communities (for example, see Stoler [1977a] for the Javanese peasants) where owners appropriate a share of the harvests of their guest harvesters, there is no such appropriation in cooperative harvesting among the Semai villagers. In fact, it was observed that owners of the swiddens or fruit trees more often than not ended up with smaller shares of the produce in these harvesting arrangements. However, the sharing aspect of such arrangements must not be overemphasised. It is always possible that villagers may have invited others to harvest their crop not only to redistribute their produce but also to obtain the extra labour required during peak periods.

In labour cooperation some individuals are recognised as leaders by their fellow villagers on the basis of certain criteria: age, marital status, ownership of fruit trees, initiation of activities, specialisation and headmanship. Significantly,

the leader in a production team is sometimes referred as *tauke* which, as was mentioned earlier, is also the local term for owners and also for traders.

The leader of a production team or cooperative group serves a dual role as an intermediary between the direct producers and the traders and a distributor of work and products (or income). Commonly, a participating member of a working team who owns the productive means employed is regarded as the leader by others in the group. In cooperative groups where everyone has equal rights to the productive means or the owner is not a participant or is considered too young to make decisions, a leader is chosen by general consensus. Preferably, the leader must be older and married or already a village leader such as a headman or assistant headman. However, it was observed in some cases that the initiator of an idea or plan was regarded as the leader. One such case was when a villager who proposed a plan for fishing a certain river with stupeficants was unanimously chosen as the leader even though he was younger than many of the other participants. In certain activities such as those associated with ritual, the leader will invariably be the ritual specialist or shaman (*halaa'*).

In spite of the recognition of leaders in cooperative production, the participants are still autonomous and the distribution among them is fairly equitable in most situations. If they are unhappy with the leader they would press for a change and if that fails they would cease to participate in the production. The work and products are usually distributed equally among the participants regardless of their status or relative wealth. However as noted above in commodity production where one person is recognised as the owner of the fruit or rubber trees, the relations between cooperative producers are becoming increasingly unequal. The owner (*tauke*) now appropriates part of the value produced by co-workers who are sometimes referred as their "coolies" (*kuli*).

The *tauke-kuli* relations are not class relations, however. An individual who is a *tauke* in one economic relationship may be a *kuli* in another. To illustrate this, if A is owner of petai trees and B of a cast net, A will be the *tauke* of B his *kuli* in petai collecting, but in cast net fishing the relationship will be reversed. Also in contrast with capitalist relations, *kuli* are not alienated from the product of their labour. The owners may appropriate a larger share of the product for themselves but usually they allocate this to the maintenance of the household in which the *kuli* may be a member or the *kuli* may regain their losses in the form of gifts from the owners.

It appears that labour cooperation is undermined by the growing tendency towards individuation in production in most villages. People prefer to work alone or with their household members largely to prevent sharing of their limited resources with other households, even though through reciprocation they would regain more or less what they redistributed. Taking petai collecting as an example, I found that most men worked alone for about 40–50 per cent of their annual number of collections and worked with their spouse or another household member for most of the other harvesting occasions. Although Semai frequently went out to collect forest products in groups, they did so more for companionship than

economic reasons; they worked on their own and kept the products of their labour for themselves. Significantly, I observed that villagers worked with persons from other households more frequently in all subsistence production, except hunting, than in commodity production. In a comparison of labour cooperation in petai collecting, insect collecting, hunting and fishing, I discovered that villagers cooperated with persons from other households in 64 per cent of their fishing operations but only 34 per cent of their petai collections and 33 per cent in both insect collecting and hunting. Hunting is generally a solitary activity. Apparently, the villagers' inclination to keep information about their produce or cash income within the household, to avoid demands on them by others, also underlies their preference to work less with persons from other households. The following case exemplifies this point:

> Bah Nandok and his wife, Wah Andah collected 8.5 bundles of petai which they sold for $M 110 but they told their fellow villagers that they picked only 4 bundles and earned $M 40. Bah Nandok told me not to tell the other villagers how much he actually earned. He explained that people may expect food from him or make demands for money or food if they knew that he and his wife earned a lot of money.

The increased individuation in production is also related to the observation that cooperation is not required in most village production. An individual can easily perform most activities without help from others. Furthermore, in some activities such as fruit collecting, production efficiency may decline with more people working.

COMMODIFICATION OF SHARING

Sharing food and other material is still widely practiced in the Semai community. It pervades everyday intracommunity social relationships. As Robarchek observes:

> Within the settlement, food sharing is a matter of course: any large animal that is killed will be shared among the entire settlement under the direction of the elders. The same is true of a large catch of fish or a harvest of fruit. Most smaller animals or smaller catches of fish will be shared less widely, mainly with housemates and close kin, although these, in turn, often share small amounts with a still wider group of kin [1987: 181].

Semai strongly advocate the sharing ethic and inculcate their children with its importance and virtues mainly through instructive narratives and myths. Despite its moral significance, many Semai have commented that the practice of material sharing is no longer as important or as widely performed as in the past. They say that people nowadays make food gifts less frequently and less generously than "those days." Dentan [1979: 50] also reports the decline of sharing

among the more market-oriented lowland Semai at the time of his field research in 1961–63. He attributed this to the "devastating effect" of the introduction of money.

There are two key ideological and moral concepts—*phunan*[13] and *genhaa'*—which sanction the practice of sharing among Semai. As Dentan remarks, *phunan* is "...a sort of 'taboo' that keeps people from breaking the rules of food distribution" [1979: 55]. Clayton Robarchek defines *phunan* as the "state of being unfulfilled, unsatisfied, or frustrated in regard to some specific and strongly felt want..." [1977: 105]. One who has incurred *phunan* is believed to be in danger of attack by supernatural and wild animals or prone to accidental injury, illness and even death.

In order to illustrate how this concept prescribes the sharing of food and other materials, I shall present an hypothetical case involving two friends, A and B: If A had developed a craving for rodent meat upon seeing rats that B had trapped, it is imperative for him to taste some of the meat in order to avoid incurring *phunan*. A should then try to get B to give him some rats. Since Semai consider asking for food in a direct manner improper, A would probably drop hints of his desire by making such remarks as "I haven't eaten rats for quite some time" or "These rats look tasty." Since A and B are friends, B may not want A to incur any mishap, so he would offer some rats to A. If he does not do so and if anything terrible should happen to A, he would be blamed and he might be summoned to a village moot to defend himself. If found guilty, he would be fined and even ostracised from the community, which indicates the seriousness of this offence in Semai society.

The other concept, *genhaa'*[14], which complements *phunan* in prescribing sharing among the Semai, is more directly related to the practice of sharing. A person is said to commit *genhaa'* if he ceases, without any obvious reason, to share with a person with whom he has an on-going reciprocal relationship. Transgression of this norm is believed to cause similar injunctions as in *phunan*.

On the basis of the scale of the distribution, people draw a distinction between two types of food sharing namely *'ɔɔk* and *seer 'ɔɔk* which means "to give" in Semai, denotes small-scale sharing of food, both domestically produced and market purchased, involving only a few households, usually kin-related and/or neighbouring. The concept of accumulating "social credit" by being generous in times of plenty in order to draw upon it at times of relative food shortage appears to underlie this sharing practice. As Dentan notes:

13) This concept is also prevalent in many other Orang Asli communities and even among the Malays. See, for example, Howell [1984: 183–191] on the concept of *punen* among the Chewong, Couillard [1980: 80] on *punan* in the Jah Hut community, Hood [1978: 110] on *penon* among the Semelai, Endicott [1974: 180] on *pohnon* among the Batek, Kuchikura [1986: 132] on *pohnan* among the Semaq Beri.

14) Other writers on the Semai, with the exception of Nicholas [1985], surprisingly do not mention this concept. Nicholas [1985: 95] reports its role in sharing among the Betau Semai.

> ...this sharing system spaces out small portions of food over the same length of time, Since a person receives in small portions about the same amount of food he contributes in large amounts, he actually is able to cunsume more meat than he could have done if he did not share. The amount of food available to the group within which food is shared is greater than the amount that would be available to all the individual members had they tried to consume it individually. Everyone profits by this system [1979: 50].

However, this practical aspect of food sharing should not be overemphasised, as Robarchek points out, its symbolic aspect is also important:

> Many food gifts have no "practical" consequences whatsoever. A woman returns from the swiddens and sends a half-dozen manioc tubers to another household; a few minutes later, she receives a similar number in return. Neither woman needed the other's manioc, but both were allowed to express their generosity and nurturance by giving and their dependence by receiving. A similar pattern of exchange is frequently seen involving small quantities of fish or rice. The important thing about these exchanges is not their material but their symbolic content. They are public expressions of the moral imperative to share food, occasions for individual expression of dependence and nurturance, and symbolic reaffirmations of the interdependence of the band [1987: 181].

The other form of food sharng known as *seer* is more formalised and is presupposed by the principle of equity. It is performed on a much larger scale than *'ɔɔk*, involving many households if not all the households within a hamlet or village. Usually the village headman or one of his assistants would distribute the food following a set procedure. The distribution is done in public with on-lookers keeping tab on it to ensure equitable sharing. Large game such as wild pig, deer, and bear, procured in hunting are normally shared in this manner. A hunter having killed a large animal would inform the headman who would delegate a few men to carry the carcass to the settlement where it would be butchered. The different parts of the carcass are separated as it is butchered and heaped separately on a mat of leaves surrounded by several pots or plates, each belonging to a household within the village. Once the meat has been cut into fairly equal pieces, the distributor drops a piece of meat into each pot or plate. He tries to be as fair as possible, making sure that every pot or plate has an equal amount of meat from the various parts of the animal. The hunter receives the same amount of meat as others in the village.

About a decade ago, a commodified version of this form of sharing was introduced and has been catching on ever since. In this type of sharing, the hunter, instead of giving his kill to the village, would sell it or would expect to be reciprocated in cash[15]. Since it is regarded as improper for a hunter to sell his game to his fellow villagers, he would sell it to people in another village. Significantly, the animal, if large, would be shared out as in the *seer* practice but each share would be priced and households, if they wished, could have more than one share. Also

significantly, villagers noted that their payment was for the hunter's "capital" (*modal*) i.e. the shotgun and cartridges he "invested" and not his effort in the hunting. The following case exemplifies this practice:

> A hunter shot a wild pig weighing about 40 kilograms and offered it to residents in a neighbouring village. No price was negotiated. The headman informed others in the village and since people wanted the pig, he delegated a group of men to carry the carcass to his house. While the pig was being butchered, the headman asked each household how many portions they wanted in order to know the total number of cuts he should make. Nine households requested one cut each while one asked for three cuts, another two cuts and one none, adding up to a total of 14 cuts. Meanwhile, the people present in the headman's house where the pig was being butchered and distributed, discussed how much they should "pay" the hunter. The headman pointed out that the hunter should be acknowledged for his generosity and the people must reciprocate this "good gesture." They agreed to $M 35 after little deliberation and each cut was thus priced at $M 2.50.

Hence, there are apparently two different trends in relation to intracommunity sharing. The first is the evident decline in the extent and intensity of sharing according to the observations of my Semai informants. The second is the changing nature of this practice from one that is based on generalised reciprocity to one that is based on balanced reciprocity, a process which I term commodificaton since the distribution, as in the case above, very much resembles the distribution in commodity relations.

GENDER DIFFERENTIATION

There is a a recent and growing body of literature concerning the impact of "development" or capitalist penetration on women's autonomy and status and gender relations in general. One of the suggestions in several studies taking their cue from Engels is that commodity production and capitalist expansion has brought about the loss of women's autonomy and the emergence of sexual inequality in numerous societies. For the Hmong of Mainland Southeast Asia, Cooper [1983: 175] argues that the husband-wife relationship has become increasingly unequal as opium cultivation, a cash production activity, has replaced (and is replacing) rice cultivation as the predominant productive activity. He relates this to the fact that women are less involved in opium cultivation than rice swiddening.

In another case study, among the egalitarian Chewong, an Orang Asli ethnic

15) Gianno reports a similar practice among the Semelai:

> There are rumours of men who have begun selling game meat that they shoot to merchants in town. The choice meat is sold, while only the skin, bones and innards remained to be divided among neighbors. The strategy here is simple: whereas the meat itself, if kept, has to be distributed widely, the money received from the sale can be retained by the hunter and the owner of the gun [1985: 91].

group, Howell found "indications that Chewong society is becoming stratified along sexual lines, and that individual men are beginning to emerge as leaders" [1983: 79]. She attributes this incipient "social imbalance" to the recent emergence of malacca cane trade and the increasing external interactions among the Chewong. She explains that, unlike in the collection of the other rattan species in which both men and women participated, the collection of malacca cane, which is a relatively more strenuous activity, was primarily done by men. Being a relatively lucrative enterprise, Chewong men spent most of their work effort on this activity which enabled them to earn large amounts of cash. With these earnings they bought various consumables and claimed these as their own. The women, on the other hand, became economically dependent on their husbands since they no longer earned their own cash income as in the past. Howell contends that the women's economic dependence alongside the "alien models" of sexual inequality which Chewong are confronted with in their dealings with non-Chewong, underlie the process of gender stratification.

Some studies, in contrast, have concluded that women's autonomy remains unaltered in certain societies despite the development of commodity production. Stoler [1977b], for example, argues that women in the Javanese village she studied maintained their autonomy and economic independence despite the intrusion of capitalism: they managed to do this because they engaged in cash earning work, especially petty trade, as much if not more than men and also because they had control over land and capital (see also Dewey [1962]). Nowak [1986] arrived at a similar conclusion in her study of the Hmak Btsisi' of Peninsula Malaysia. She asserts that women's autonomy was unaffected by the penetration of capitalism largely because husbands and wives still frequently worked together.

It appears that the findings of these studies in respect to the impact of commodity production on women's autonomy differ because of the variation in productive relations and the particular circumstances of each case. Stoler, for example, observed that Javanese women unlike their Chewong, Hmong and Btsisi' counterparts engaged in trade and much cash earning work while Nowak found that male-female cooperation was common among the Btsisi'. Unlike the malacca cane collecting of the Chewong where only men participated, both men and women frequently worked together in fishing and marine foraging which were the predominant productive activities of the Btsisi'. Hence, in order to examine gender differentiation among the Semai, it is important to look at the circumstances and productive relations in the village.

As in other Orang Asli communities, division of labour among the Semai is predominantly based on gender[16]. Although there is sex-typing of tasks, there are no restrictions against performing activities assigned to the opposite sex (see Karen Endicott [1979] for the Batek). For example, while hunting is regarded men's work, women are not prohibited from performing it and although women rarely

16) See Karen Endicott [1979], Howell [1983], and Nowak [1986].

join their husbands on hunting trips, they may kill game which they encounter incidentally, if men are absent at the time. Similarly, cooking and childcare which are considered women's work are frequently done by men. Most labour processes are, however, either "alternating" i.e. performed by men at certain stages and women at others as in rice planting where men spike the ground with a dibble stick while women drop seeds into the holes or "mixed" where men and women work together in carrying out the same tasks as in weeding or hook and line fishing. For most "mixed" activities, a married couple is the production unit. It was observed, however, that Semai men mostly worked alone but when they did engage in cooperative labour they worked mostly with their wives (cf. Nowak [n.d.: 5] on the Btsisi').

This fairly flexible sexual division of labour implies gender egalitarianism. However, two observations from my village study in respect to production time allocation and productivity indicate areas where there is incipient inequality. First I observed that women spent considerably less time on commodity production than men, and second that they were less efficient. Women's inefficiency and low productivity stems not only from their inability to compete with most men in strenuous activities but also from the fact that they were more involved in subsistence activities which were relatively inefficient. Furthermore, in some activities, particularly fishing, women usually employed less efficient techniques than men which invariably resulted in relatively low catches. The question that arises here is what are the implications of these observations for women's autonomy and for the prevalent gender relations in Semai villages. It appears that Semai women are fairly autonomous despite their confinement to the domestic sphere and their low productivity because of certain social factors.

As in several other Southeast Asian groups, bilateral inheritance among the Semai serves to mitigate against gender differentiation to some extent. The type of inheritance allows for women to inherit ownership and control of land and trees and gives them equal rights to such property. Furthermore, according to distributional principles, it would mean that women with control of their productive means have rights over products regardless of whether they participated in the production process. A case will illustrate this:

> Wah Buyas inherited several durian and petai trees from her father. When she was single she used to ask her male relatives, particularly her sister's husband to collect petai from her trees. She would give between half and two thirds of the petai income to her helpers. After she married, her husband harvested her petai trees and collected most of her durians which he sold but handed the money to her. She kept some for herself and gave the rest to her husband who was expected to spend most of it on household provisions.

In the case of property amassed after marriage, the couple supposedly possess equal rights over it. In respect to fruit trees, couples commonly cooperate in planting them which, therefore, gives each person equal rights as presupposed in

cooperative labour. In the event of a separation or divorce, the property accumulated jointly during the marriage is divided as equally as possible between the couple.

It appears, then, that bilateral inheritance and its provision for equal access to and control over property alongside the high degree of individual autonomy favoured by Semai allows women to be economically independent and autonomous. They can claim a share of the commodity production income despite the fact that they spend considerably less time on such production than men. Hence, insofar as fruit collecting is the predominant productive activity and bilateral inheritance persists, women's autonomy is in theory protected but greater gender differentiation is likely if male villagers concentrate on rattan collection or wage labour or any other work that excludes women's labour or denies women access to income. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that the increasing emphasis Semai place on commodity production and the decline of subsistence activities, particularly swidden cultivation, in which women contributed substantial labour, often more so than men, may lead to greater gender inequality in the long run among the Tapah Semai.

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

The distribution of cash income among the village households was unequal, ranging from about $M2,600 to $M10,400. I also observed that there were considerable differences in consumption patterns where households with higher incomes expectedly incurred greater expenditures than those with lower earnings. Most of the incremental expenditure was on such goods as gold ornaments, cassette players, motorcycles and television sets which have become indicators of relative prosperity. The unequal distribution of such goods among villagers is a tangible sign of considerable wealth differences. Any visitor to a Tapah Semai village could not help but notice the extent of intravillage wealth differences. Most noticeable is the variation in house construction materials ranging from completely traditional materials to wooden houses with corrugated iron roofs and glass windows. On closer examination of the settlement, an observer would notice motorcycles parked under some houses and television aerials on the roofs of others while many are devoid of such signs of prosperity. It must be borne in mind, however, that this is not social differentiation which is, as Bernstein writes, related to "the conditions is which wealth becomes capital, when it is not consumed individually but productively through investment in means of production" [1979: 430].

Most current analyses of social differentiation draw on Lenin's work [1964] on the development of capitalism in Russia. Against the view of the peasantry as a static or undifferentiated group of producers, Lenin observed sharp differences among peasant households stemming from their varying capacities to acquire and concentrate productive means within the communities. He distinguished such differences from disparities in property ownership among households, which he

termed "simple differentiation." This view counters the Chayanovian contention that economic differentiation is internally conditioned from "demographic differentiation" (consumer/worker ratio) among households[17]. Lenin emphasised that social differentiation develops as a consequence of the interaction of households with the wider capitalist economy in which they are encapsulated. In the process two social classes—a 'rich' class of petty producers or '*kulak*' and a class of 'poor,' semi-proletarian 'peasants'—emerges. Lenin contended that members of these two emerging classes relate to commodity production in different ways. The more well-to-do peasants are involved in commodity transactions through the purchase and renting-out of land, devote more time and effort in commodity production and in some cases, even purchase labour power. The poorer farmers, in contrast, often pay rent for their land, allocate most of their time to subsistence production and will work for wages.

As Roseberry emphasises, differentiation "can only be realised in those social situations in which peasants have options for the use of the surplus product other than consumption and ceremonial expenses" [1976:54]. The question is, therefore, does the precondition of options for capitalist investment exist in the Tapah Semai villages and if it does, is there social differentiation. I shall begin with property ownership.

Earlier in the paper I noted the growing privatisation of property ownership particularly tree crops. Furthermore, I have also indicated that tree crops especially fruit trees have apparently become commodities as people nowadays engage in buying and selling them. Despite these factors, it appears that there is as yet no major inequality in tree holdings among villagers. Whatever differences exist are temporary and could easily be reversed. This stems from the fact that people still have equal access to land, which is communally 'owned' and are able to expand their orchards simply by planting more trees. But in some villages, as I observed, land is no longer communally owned but has been divided into family-owned "estates." This will certainly undermine the prevalent equality of access to land and cause disparities in land as well as tree crop ownership.

In respect to intravillage capitalist enterprises, some studies[18] have suggested that these ventures tend to create a class of rich entrepreneurs amongst poor peasants. For the Tapah Semai, it can be argued that insofar as the villagers' entrepreneurial ventures have not been entirely successful and the village entrepreneurs have earned meagre profits from their ventures, such activities have not, as yet, induced any significant intravillage differentiation among the people. Being small-scale because they lack capital and collateral for more credit and with low profit earnings, most village entrepreneurs cannot survive by just trading; they have to perform the various productive activities like their fellow villagers for the viability of their households. Nevertheless, there are a few successful Semai

17) See Deere and De Janvry [1981] and Cook and Binford [1986] for a recent review of the debate between Chayonovians and Leninists on the issue of differentiation.

entrepreneurs in the region who engage solely in retailing. Whether a distinct class of entrepreneurs is imminent in the villages remains to be seen but I would argue that in time to come once a few villagers are able to accumulate larger amounts of capital and expand their businesses, internal differentiation will be more obvious. At the moment, petty trading is just as the people say, a "side business" that they perform to supplement their cash crop and forest product income.

In opposition to those who maintain the inevitability of differentiation, several researchers have documented the absence of social differentiation despite the penetration of capitalism in a number of communities. Some have explained this as a consequence of sharing and other institutional levelling mechanisms which tend to mitigate against accumulation. It is argued that in the process wealthier individuals find it difficult, if not impossible, to accumulate their surplus income while the differentiation stemming from productivity is retarded to produce a fairly homogeneous community. Perhaps the best known example of such an argument is Geertz' "shared poverty" model. In his study of the Javanese economy, Geertz [1963] found, against expectations, that population growth and the introduction of cash crops had not resulted in class polarisation. He explained the absence of a class divided Java as a result of the Javanese practice of sharing labour and products which he labelled "shared poverty":

> With the steady growth of population came also the elaboration and extension of mechanisms through which agricultural product was spread, if not altogether evenly, at least relatively so, throughout the huge human horde which was obliged to subsist on it. Under the pressure of increasing numbers and limited resources Javanese village society did not bifurcate, as did that of so many other "underdeveloped" nations, into a group of large landlords and a group of oppressed near-serfs. Rather it maintained a comparatively high degree of social and economic homogeneity by dividing the economic pie into a steadily increasing number of minute pieces, a process to which I have referred elsewhere as "shared poverty" [1963: 97].

Geertz' contention is developed in Scott's "moral economy" model [SCOTT

18) For example, in a recent study of Buhid "swiddeners" in the Philippines, who are in many respects similar to the Semai, Lopez-Gonzaga [1983] explained the incipient economic differentiation she found among the people as a consequence of the entrepreneurial enterprises by some villagers:
With the differential Buhid responses to the new opportunities for the investment of their surplus, an incipient form of economic differentiation is emerging. Within the past two decades of direct participation in the lowland market economy, small-scale entrepreneurship among these people had led to the creation of a segment of producers with larger landholding, surplus to hire seasonal wage labor, and capital for investment in new tools of production such as the plough and carabao. The institution of private landholding and the concomitant demarcation of land among the emergent local elites may be seen in such instances as Buhid entrepreneurs buying out land from fellow Buhid debtors unable to pay their debts [1983: 182].

1976]. Scott argues that peasants are primarily concerned to minimise risks to avoid economic disasters such as crop failure and starvation. He points out that they forego opportunities to earn higher incomes or accumulate wealth for less lucrative but secure ventures. This "safety-first" attitude of peasants is just one of the various ways farmers insure against risks. He contends that peasants also create social institutions that "normally insures the weakest against ruin by making certain demands on better-off villagers." He comments:

> Well to do villagers avoid malicious gossip only at the price of an exaggerated generosity. They are expected to sponsor more conspicuously lavish celebrations at weddings, to show greater charity to kin and neighbours, to sponsor local religious activity, and to take on more dependents and employees than the average household [1976: 41].

He argues that these social controls tended to prevent intravillage social differentiation [1976: 42]. However, he also observes that:

> Village redistribution worked unevenly and, even at its best, produced no egalitarian utopia...there as always some tension in the village between the better-off who hoped to minimize their obligations and the poor who had most to gain from communal social guarantees [1976: 43].

Some neo-Marxist inclined anthropologists have advanced somewhat similar arguments in explaining the absence or retardation of class formation in the communities they researched. Gavin Smith [1979], for example, contends that certain village obligations and reciprocal labour arrangements among the villagers tended to hinder class polarisation among Peruvian peasants. Similarly, Voss [1983] argues that the extensive labour cooperation among the Igorot of Philippines underlies the absence of sharp social differentiation.

The question is whether the Semai practice of sharing result in reducing differences among households. Do better-off households give their surplus food to poorer ones? There are several observations which tend to suggest that Semai sharing practice has minimal effects in levelling off disparities among households. It is clear that what it does do is allow households to maintain their subsistence without having to buy food on credit when they have little money. Since there was much variation in weekly income among households, there was also much household variation in food supplies, (which were mainly purchased) at different times of the year. At a particular time, a household may have relatively more income, and consequently surplus food, to share with other households but due to low cash earnings at another time it would have to depend partially on food gifts from these households, some of which would have earned higher incomes to enable them to purchase more food. In a sense, people were accumulating debts with their fellow villagers rather than with shopkeepers when they received such food gifts at times of relative food storage.

Although no longer-term quantitative data are available, it does appear that

over time households would have received from their beneficiaries amounts more or less similar to what they have given out. This implies that the type of reciprocity associated with this kind of sharing tends to be more balanced than generalised. It is clear that people were not purely altruistic when they made such gifts; they expected a similar gift in return particularly at a time when their food supply was low. That is why sometimes households refused to accept a food gift offered to them when they too had enough or surplus food. Furthermore, several villagers told me that they would stop giving food to a household that did not reciprocate their initial gift. Hence, insofar as such food sharing tends to be governed by the principle of balanced reciprocity, its potentiality in redistributing food surplus among households is undermined.

As for labour cooperation, it might be argued as in Geertz' "shared poverty" model or Scott's "moral economy" approach that such practices would serve to spread the available work opportunities among villagers and would consequently retard if not prevent intravillage social differentiation. This assumes of course that wealthier individuals (or people with more harvestable trees) or households would invite poorer individuals or households to harvest their crop. In the Semai context, this "function" of cooperative labour is minimised by the fact that such cooperation is performed on an exchange basis. Normally an invitation to harvest is reciprocated. Some villagers have stated openly that they invited others to harvest their fruit with the expectation of a return invitation. The following is a case in point:

> On 19th of July (1983), Bah Openg invited Bah Cekap to pick petai from his wife's tress. Together with three of Bah Openg's household members, they collected 18 bundles which Bah Openg sold for $M216 at $M12 per bundle. Bah Openg and Bah Cekap each carried 4 bundles while the other three carried the remaining 10 bundles. Bah Cekap was given $M48. The following day, what seems like a reciprocal gesture, Bah Cekap invited Bah Openg to pick his petai in another village. With help from a third person, they collected 10.5 bundles which Bah Cekap sold for $M90. He divided the money equally among the collectors since each carried 3.5 bundles.

Bah Openg's household had the highest cash earnings among the six households in the village while Bah Cekap's was the lowest earning household. Therefore, if Bah Cekap's return invitation were not recorded, it would appear that Bah Openg's invitation to cooperate in harvesting his wife's petai trees is an act of redistribution of his household's surplus. However, it is apparent that Bah Openg in collecting Bah Cekap's petai on the following day recovered a large part of the money he indirectly "gave" Bah Cekap. Nonetheless, there may be some transfer of income from the wealthy to the poor in this kind of cooperative labour. In the case discussed, Bah Cekap had $M18 in the course of the two collecting events but it is likely that, in the long run, Bah Openg would have regained this amount through other similar cooperative labour arrangements with Bah Cekap.

It must be borne in mind that the productivity of fruit is erratic, variable and

seasonal. A household may have plenty of fruit to harvest at a certain time and none at all at another. Since the timing of harvests, particularly in petai production, varies among trees it is likely that some households may have plenty of petai to collect at certain times when other households may have none. Hence, the practice of cooperative or rather exchange labour actually serves to spread petai income throughout the year for each household rather than among households.

CONCLUSION

This paper documents several socio-economic changes among Tapah Semai which are associated with their growing involvement in the market economy through petty commodity production and market consumption. There is now more emphasis paid to property ownership which is turning out to be increasingly privatised. This in turn seems to translate into an increase in exploitative practices whereby people on the basis of their ownership of property (or capital) are casually appropriating part of the product of other people's labour. When such appropriation occurred in the past, before the intensification of market links, people saw it in terms of their social and moral obligations toward their co-villagers. These days they justify and legitimise it on the basis of their private ownership. Another obvious change is the growing availability of options for capitalist investments in the village. There are many Semai-run village shops these days and there is a growing number of Semai entrepreneurs driven by a desire to make profits from economic transactions with their fellow villagers.

A number of studies formulated within a marxist framework have linked such developments to class differentiation. In this study, however, it appears that there is as yet no sharp intravillage social differentiation among the Tapah Semai despite the existence of the bases (or preconditions) for social differentiation namely the development of private property, the increase in labour exploitative practices and the availability of options for capitalist investments. It is noteworthy that this absence of social differentiation is not a result of intravillage sharing of products and work; it was observed that the levelling capacity of sharing is undermined by the fact that Semai sharing is based on balanced reciprocity. Apparently, certain constraining factors and contradictions in the preconditions for class formation, as they occur in the village, tend to undermine the potentialities of these bases to create social differentiation. Among these factors and contradictions are the villager's equal access to land, which is communally owned, and the difficulties entrepreneurs encounter in running a business among their fellow villagers. However, in the light of some of the developments resulting from commoditisation which provide the necessary preconditions for class division, it would be reasonable to assume that social differentiation is incipient among the Tapah Semai. What remains to be seen is whether petty commodity production, which some argue will collapse if producers are socially differentiated, can survive in a class-based Semai social formation.

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