

STORIES OF MIGRATION FROM NATIVE RESOURCES: THE SEMAI ORAL TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss stories from the Semai oral tradition about migration and the first people of Malaysia. The Semai regard their oral tradition (chermor) as true stories of happenings in the past. Since the Semai were preliterate, stories were inherited verbally and were therefore subjected to outside influences, especially from the great traditions. The Semai borrowed elements and terms from these traditions and incorporated them into their own tradition. These borrowings and incorporations do not, however, erode the essence of the original Semai stories. As a Semai man, the late Mara' Semae of Kampung Perah, once said, "Kado kan sesetengah i muh ajih eh, muh Gop, tapi' i chermor ajih chermor hiq!" (meaning: Although some names are borrowed from the Malays, the stories are ours!).

By presenting these stories, my paper attempts to offer some data, in case they are needed, to stimulate theoretical discussion about the migration of the first people to what is now called Peninsular Malaysia.

ORIENTATION

Oral tradition has always been the main source for the Semai in laying their claim for indigenous identity. Such a claim brings up two issues: first, Semai originated on the Peninsula, or, second, they are the first people to migrate to it. Hence, this report describes a number of stories which form the basis of these two views.

THE CREATION OF THE FIRST EARTH¹

I begin this section by describing the story about the creation of the first earth. According to the Semai, before the earth was created, the universe (*swiiq*) was only occupied by creatures such as the sun and its children, the moon and its children (*perloi*), a pair of stones called *Batu' Angkup* with

crabs hiding behind them, and an area of water called *samudera raye* (Edo 1988, 1990). The *swiiq* was dim most of the time, except for one area of *samudera raye*, which was clear, so that it was easy for the creatures to fetch their drinking water there.

The *swiiq* and its creatures were controlled by an ultimate supernatural power called *Nyenang* (or *Jenang*). The *Nyenang* and his helpers resided in one section of the *swiiq*. One day *Nyenang* told his helpers that he was so lonely, he wanted to create a human being, a living creature which was going to look like himself. His helpers agreed with this proposal but questioned *Nyenang* on where to keep the newly created creature. *Nyenang* then asked his helpers to create earth.

Nyenang's helpers used three ingredients, *beras kunyit* (tumeric-rice), *berteh* (popped rice) and *tepong tawar* (flowery-fragrant rice powder). These ingredients were mixed together and the mixture became the foundation of earth (soil).

Meanwhile, *Nyenang* surveyed (*tuwoq*) the area on which he wanted to lay the first earth. He finally decided to put the mixture in the middle of the *samudera raye* because the area was bright (clear) and it would be easier for the human being, which he was about to create, to fetch water there. The first earth was named *Padaq Judah*. The *Nyenang* gave *Padaq Judah* the same soul (*ruwai*) as a human being, so it would grow up like a human being, from a baby to a teenager, to a young adult, to an oldster, and finally die.

After the first earth was created, *Nyenang* asked his helpers to go down to *Padaq Judah*, collect the dust there, and make a manikin. When the manikin was ready, *Nyenang* gave it life (*nyawa*). The first human being was then named *Nyenang Raq*. After a while, *Nyenang Raq* began to feel lonely and asked for a female partner from *Nyenang*. *Nyenang* fulfilled *Nyenang Raq's* wish by sending a girl directly from heaven (*surga*) and named her *Judah*, whose name was in accordance with the first earth.

While human beings began to multiply through the association of Nyenang Raq and Judah, the earth, *Padaq Judah*, was also growing up. When *Padaq Judah* reached its youthful age, its size became larger than the *samudera raye*, and the water from the *samudera raye* flowed into its "chest" and flooded all the low-lying areas.

Next comes the story of the sun and the moon. The children of the sun were said to be very naughty, aggressive, and hot tempered. They always quarreled among themselves. During each clash, their bodies became very hot and began to shine brightly. The human beings were heated badly by this heat and suffered eye sores. *Nyenang* advised the sun to control the behavior of its children but the sun failed to do so. Finally the moon got an idea, asking the sun to kill its children by swallowing them. However, the sun refused to do this, unless the moon killed its children first. The moon then went to see *Batu' Angkup*, seeking help to hide its children in a tunnel (*gepoq*) that belonged to *Batu' Angkup*. *Batu' Angkup* agreed and hid the moon's children in the tunnel, as *Batu' Angkup* itself hated the sun's children. The sun was trapped by this trick and had to swallow all its children. Later the moon released all its children from the *gepoq*, which angered the sun, who in return wanted to kill the moon by swallowing it. In pursuing this revenge, the sun sometimes appears close to swallowing the moon, during which time an eclipse (*rahu*) may occur. However, the sun does sympathize with the moon, especially after being persuaded by human beings from the earth who ask the sun to release the moon; otherwise, all the human beings would suffer from darkness during the night.² The absence of the sun's children helped the descendants of Nyenang Raq to maintain their good health and to persist until today.

VERSIONS ABOUT THE ORANG ASLI'S MIGRATION TO THE PENINSULA

There are a number of versions of stories describing the population status of the first Orang Asli in the Peninsula, either as the people who originated there or as the earliest migrants to the country.

Version 1:³

In this version the people are the original inhabitants of the Peninsula. This claim goes back to the period when the first human was created on the earth. The association between Nyenang Raq and Judah had produced many children. After so many deliveries, Judah became tired and refused to get pregnant anymore. However, Nyenang Raq insisted on having one more child. Since Judah refused to fulfill that request, Nyenang Raq prayed to *Nyenang*, asking him to send the last child directly from heaven. *Nyenang* agreed and gave Nyenang Raq a baby boy as his last son. This baby is believed to be the ancestor of the Orang Asli.

During the second and third generations of Nyenang Raq, the descendants of Judah had multiplied quite rapidly. This situation then led the people to experience starvation. One of the elders, Nabi Daud (the Prophet Daud) prayed to *Nyenang*, asking for seed to plant food crops. *Nyenang* fulfilled this request. But another problem arose when the people began to quarrel over the planting area. In this struggle for land for planting, the descendants of the last child of Nyenang Raq were said to lack bargaining power, since their ancestor was not born through the association of Nyenang Raq and Judah. In addition, they became the target of prejudice. These families then decided to cultivate the hilly area located far away from *Padaq Judah*. Since the cultivated area was far, they decided to settle there. Meantime, the earth had grown up to its youth stage. When it became larger than *samudera raye*, the water had flown into its chest and flooded the low-lying and stagnant areas. That flood separated the area occupied by the descendants of the last child of Nyenang Raq from the rest of *Padaq Judah*.

In this story, the Orang Asli did not migrate but were separated from the main group of *Padaq Judah* people by flood, with the low-lying and stagnant areas then becoming the ocean (*laut*).

Version 2:

This version describes the Orang Asli as migrating from *Padaq Judah* to the Peninsula. According to this version, migration out from *Padaq Judah* to the Peninsula occurred after the earth had flooded. This flood had caused the people settled in *Padaq Judah* to become crowded. Later, life became chaotic when people started to quarrel and fight among themselves over food. The elders tried to restore a peaceful life in *Padaq Judah* but they failed to do so. They worried when the situation worsened and finally decided to move some of the population away from *Padaq Judah*.

Regarding this out-migration, however, there are three *chermor* about it.

*Chermor 1: Migration by "Air"*⁴

According to this *chermor*, the people were thrown away from *Padaq Judah* by the thunderous voice of Baginda Ali. The *chermor* began when all the population held numerous meetings to discuss a moving plan, but this finally failed. No family agreed to move, since *Padaq Judah* was their place of birth. This failure made one of the elders, Baginda Ali, angry and he shouted at the crowd. His angry voice blasted like thunder and threw the majority of the families away from *Padaq Judah*, including the descendants of the last son of Nyenang Raq. Three of their family groups were thrown to the Peninsula. One of the families landed on an island, together with the families of *Gop* (Malays), while the rest disappeared. This family that fell on the island then

established a village called *Pagaruyung*. Later, however, this family group left its village, as they could not get along with the *Gop*. They sailed away from the island and looked forward to joining their long-separated relatives. Finally they met their relatives, who lived in a village on the foothill of Ledang Mountain. The “newcomers” were then referred to as *Temuan*, which means “meet” or “meeting each other.” They lived peacefully together with the already-settled Orang Asli for a very long time. When the *Gop* came and controlled the area, both these groups moved into the interior of the Peninsula.

*Chermor 2: A Migration through the Sea*⁵

According to this *chermor*, when all meetings about the plan to move the people out of *Padaq Judah* failed, an elder, Baginda Ali, became very angry. He refused to have any more meetings, but rather determined to let the people quarrel and kill each other. Seeing such a situation, the families of the last descendent of Nyenang Raq finally agreed to move out. The next day, they felled a dead tree and planned to move in accordance with where the tree fell. The tree fell in the direction of the sunrise, with the tips of its branches touching an island and the mainland of the Peninsula. As such, these families made their journey along the fallen tree trunk. When they reached the first branch, one of the families was unable to continue the journey and decided to stop at an island located at the tip of that branch. Later they established a village on that island and named it *Pagaruyung*. The rest of the families carried on their journey and reached the last three branches at the top of the tree. They then decided to split up, with each family following a separate branch. They ended up at Maluk Mountain, Senya Mountain, and Ledang Mountain, respectively.

However, there is another *chermor* about the migration through the sea. According to this *chermor*, the families of the descendents of the last child of Nyenang Raq sailed away on bamboo rafts, and the wind pushed them far from *Padaq Judah*. The wind finally pushed them in the direction of the sunrise. In the event, many of them were drowned, as their rafts capsized while sailing against the waves. Finally only four rafts survived. At the end of their journey, the wind pushed them in different directions. One family landed on an island called *Pagaruyung*, while the other three landed at different sites on the Peninsula. The three family groups then moved into the interior and occupied Maluk Mountain, Senya Mountain, and Ledang Mountain.

Long after that happened, *Padaq Judah* became overcrowded once again. This time many groups were willing to move out voluntarily. A big group of *Gop* landed at *Pagaruyung*. When the *Gop* controlled the area, the earlier inhabitants decided to move. They sailed to the Peninsula to join their long-separated relatives, the Orang Asli (*Seng-oi*).

They then met each other in a *Seng-oi* village on the slope of Ledang Mountain. (The people from *Pagaruyung* were then named *Temuan* — “temu” meaning “meet” in Malay)

After staying some time in the village near Ledang Mountain, the *Gop* started to expand and began to occupy nearby areas. Later they controlled the entire coastal area. This situation forced the *Seng-oi* and the *Temuan* to move into the interior, with some of them occupying the top part of Ledang Mountain. Meantime, a power struggle occurred among the princes in *Pagaruyung*. In that struggle, the elder, who was gentle and generous, lost to his younger brother. The *Gop*, who occupied the coastal part of Ledang Mountain, then invited the losing prince to join them and become their *raja*. This is said to be the beginning of the era of *Raja Gop* on the Peninsula.

*Chermor 3: A Migration by Land and Sea via China*⁶

This *chermor* indicates that *Seng-oi* moved from *Padaq Judah* to the Peninsula via China. According to this story, the group (the descendents of the last child of Nyenang Raq) was persuaded by Baginda Ali to move out. They then took a journey by land, heading in the direction of the sunrise. After a long journey they reached the edge of the land (earth) and decided to stop and establish a village there. They lived there for a long time until the Chinese came (also from *Padaq Judah*) and occupied the village. The Chinese then tried to control the agricultural area and forced the local people to surrender their land. Those people who refused to do so were killed brutally. When the situation worsened, the rest of the local people decided to flee. They moved at night to avoid detection by the Chinese. Each family built its raft and started sailing. Out of them, only six *Seng-oi* families managed to land at some spot along the coast of the Peninsula, while the rest landed elsewhere or were drowned. Since the six landed at different places, they were separated from one another and lost their family contacts. In each area they established a village and lived there for a long time. Later, the *Gop* from Sumatera came and occupied the coastal areas, causing the *Seng-oi* to move inland.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The above stories show that the Orang Asli oral tradition has been influenced by the Malay-Islamic tradition. Contacts between these two groups, either direct or indirect, have taken place for a long time. Indirect contacts might have occurred when Orang Asli were involved in selling forest products to early Malay traders. During the ancient Malay kingdom period, trade routes across the Peninsula connected centers on the east and west coasts. Traders on these coasts used these routes to transport goods. At the same time, Orang Asli were major suppliers of forest products in the region (Dunn 1975; Gianno, 1990). I assume that during these

trading contacts the Orang Asli borrowed some Malay culture and knowledge, or even exchanged world views with Malays.

More direct contact between Orang Asli and Malays has been reported in various historical texts, with such contacts noted to have occurred even early in the Malay kingdom. As indicated in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the Sakai (later known as Senoi) used to serve the palace of Malacca. The men served as fighters, sailors, rowers, and so on, while the women served as servants (Kassim 1964; Muhammad Yusoff 1992). Such contacts were also reported in other Malay states, such as Pahang (Abdullah 1961), Perak (Sullivan 1982), Negeri Sembilan (Gullick 1949), and Johor (Andaya 1975). This situation drove the Orang Asli, as minority subjects of Malacca and other Malay states, to adopt Malay-Islamic elements, for the reason that Malay-Islamic thought had become the basis of state ideology and had been adopted by the majority of the Malaccan community at that time.

In addition, ideological contact was also occurring widely between Malay healers (*bomoh*) and Orang Asli medicine men (*hala'*). The *bomoh* established contact with *hala'* mainly because they were interested in enriching their healing knowledge and skills. However, on occasion Malay rajas or sultans insisted their *bomoh* (or *pawang*) establish contact with *hala'* in order to protect their people and states from supernatural (and probably natural) threats. Such contacts allowed the two parties to exchange ideas and knowledge. For the Orang Asli, their *hala'*, who were always leaders in their groups, then were responsible for passing down this new knowledge and skills among their own people. One of the Malay-Islamic traditions borrowed by Orang Asli was *jampi*, including its Arabic (or Quaranic) verses. This tradition contributed to the enrichment of the Orang Asli healing system. Later, when the Malays fully shifted to Islam as a way of life, they abandoned the shamanistic tradition, as its elements are against Islamic thought and values. This abandonment by the Malays had resulted in the Orang Asli being the only ones who maintained the shamanistic tradition (now syncretized with Islamic elements) and carry it on today.

Regarding claims of indigeneity for Peninsular Malaysia, it appears that only the Orang Asli living in lowland areas close to Malays claim to be the earliest migrants into the country, while those of higher land and interior sites claim to be original inhabitants. The elders in my field site (Kampung Perah), for instance, claimed to be the earliest migrants into the Peninsula, as was described in version 2 of the story; they even claimed to have originated in Malacca and to have come into the lowlands of Perak in the late 15th century, along with Hang Tuah. In contrast, people in the highlands (mostly in the center of the Peninsula) claim that they were the original inhabitants. Although these latter Orang Asli agree that they originate from the same human

root, Nabi Adam, their origin story is like the one in version 1. While version 1 is slightly different from the other *chermor*, it still shows the influence of world traditions, especially Islam and Christianity, indicating their great impact on Orang Asli ideas about the origin of humankind. This demonstrates that although the Orang Asli are physically or residentially isolated from the rest of Malaysian society, in terms of ideas and knowledge, they are indeed exposed to other traditions, which, in the long run, have influenced their way of life.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These *chermor* reflect the *Seng-oi's* ideas about their indigenous status in Peninsular Malaysia. The claim is that either they were the original people of the Peninsula or that they were the earliest migrants to it. These *chermor* also consistently claim that they were pushed into the interior by the *Gop*.

The claim about the *Gop* seems to fit in with the older theory of the peopling of the Peninsula, which has often been repeated in Malaysian history and geography during the last half century (Benjamin 1987). This theory is expressed by an archeological analogy that the natives of the Peninsula are like a layer cake (*kuih lapis*). Each segment of population is a constituent layer of a gigantic cake, with the "Negritos" at the bottom, then the Senoi, followed by the so-called "Proto-Malays," with the final and topmost layer supposedly made up of the "Deutero-Malays," the people referred to in ordinary speech simply as Malays. This theory suggests that the Negritos were the first inhabitants of the Peninsula, occupying both high and lowland areas. The Negritos were then pushed into the interior by Senoi, who came and took over the lowlands. The Senoi were pushed into the interior by the Proto-Malays. Then the Proto-Malays were pushed into the interior by the Deutero-Malays, who occupied most of the coastal and lowland areas of the Peninsula.

The above theory, however, does not correlate with *Seng-oi chermor* and their claims in other oral histories. The *chermor* do not claim that the Proto-Malays, who were represented by the Temuan, pushed the *Seng-oi* (Senoi). In the *chermor* about their lives on the Peninsula, these two groups lived together. The *Seng-oi* regarded the Temuan as their long-lost relatives. Moreover, the Temuan came to the Peninsula in small numbers and were therefore unable to push the *Seng-oi* away from their area. Both these groups were then pushed into the interior by the *Gop*, who came in large numbers. Later, colonial powers such as the Dutch and British, together with Chinese miners, were also involved in displacing the *Seng-oi* from their permanent villages. Such events probably are linked to the layer-cake theory, which led professional prehistorians to reject it. Unfortunately, its rejection by specialists has done little to reduce the

entrenched position of this theory in the popular imagination of Malaysians at large, or indeed in the intellectual baggage of scholars in related fields of research (Benjamin 1987).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Mr. Wong Khek Seng of Akademi Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya, for his generous comments and contributions in preparing this paper.

NOTES

- ¹ This story was narrated by Mat Arip Kulop of Kampung Sahom, Kampar, Perak.
- ² During an eclipse the Semai traditionally carried out a singing ritual, appealing to the sun to free the moon.
- ³ This story was narrated by Mara' Semae of Kampung Perah, Parit, Perak.
- ⁴ This story was narrated by Mat Arip Kulop of Kampung Sahom, Kampar, Perak.
- ⁵ These stories were narrated by Ata' Bek Makar and Bek Tambun of Kampung Perah, Parit, Perak.
- ⁶ This story was narrated by Ata' Bek Jarah of Kampung Denak, Tronoh, Perak.

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