

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JHM-5
CHANGE AT TASEK BERA

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Tasek Bera is Malaysia's largest lake, about 25 km from north to south, in the middle of the Malay Peninsula. You'll find it on a map, shaped like a hyperactive amoeba, in the Pahang River watershed, near where the states of Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor meet. The forests surrounding the lake are home to the Semelai people, one of Malaysia's orang asli (indigenous) groups. Until only 15 years ago, this area was considered deep jungle, and was accessible from the outside only with great difficulty.

I recently spent a week at Kampung Bapak, a Tasek Bera settlement, with Dr. Rosemary Gianno, an American anthropologist and archeologist studying orang asli forest product technology. I'd been hearing too much about this place since meeting Rosemary in Washington, last year, to turn down an invitation to visit. We stayed with the village's head family, the Batin (headman) Hokin Sujin, his wife Eng Tek, and their children, with whom Rosemary lived from 1980 to 1982, when she was doing her dissertation research.

After a 5-hour Land Rover drive from Kuala Lumpur, we unloaded a week's worth of groceries for our stay, and gifts from people in Kuala Lumpur to friends in the village. We'd come at a good time. It was the height of the fruit season at Tasek Bera, conveniently coinciding with a 2-week school vacation.

Kids armed with long fishing tridents pulled down red and yellow clumps of hairy, lychee-like rambutan from the treetops, and shook branches to loosen delicate mangosteens, each fruit six pinky-white sections of sweet juice protected by thick yellow pulp in a purple skin. The thump of a ripe durian hitting the ground was unmistakable, followed by a running crowd vying for shares of the spikey, stinky favorite. (I won't describe the smell or taste of fresh durian. Poetry and cartoon contests have been sponsored throughout Southeast Asia for that. I've even heard rumors of a durian symphony.)

At every household where we dropped in, we feasted on piles of fruit. With the dusty ride, it made for a sticky day. As late afternoon drizzle began to freckle the beached dugout canoes along the lakeshore, driving groups of young swimmers out of the water, we grabbed sarongs and soap for a bath in the sandy part of the lake, where the shore had been cleared of the otherwise ubiquitous reeds.

Judith Mayer is an Institute Fellow studying environmental protection, conservation, and sustainable development issues in Southeast Asia.

That evening, I strained above the tin-roof-amplified rain to hear the mixture of Semelai and Malay (the latter spoken for my benefit) of visitors passing through the Batin's house. Sitting on the vinyl-covered floor beneath a kerosene pressure lamp, smoking, chewing betel nut, eating rambutan, and drinking Milo, they discussed the changes that had taken place in the area since Rosemary left, 5 years ago.

The most noted new development was the oil palm plantation just beyond the designated orang asli area, which everyone called simply the "scheme" (rancangan). The Batin explained that the government needed to clear the forest, sell the timber, and plant oil palms to get enough money to pay off foreign loans. One young man in the room chuckled, saying they'd need to keep clearing more and more land, planting more and more "schemes," since the price of palm oil keeps falling. He shook his head, puzzled by the rationality of such a strategy.

Ten years ago, the area of about 150,000 hectares (375,000 acres) was mainly primary forest, where Semelai men collected a huge variety of forest products for local use and trade, especially liquid oleo-resin (minyak keruing) from Dipterocarpus kerrii trees, and rattan. The filtered resin is used locally for sealing the elegant canoes the Semelai make for transportation around Tasek Bera. Resinous sediment was used for making torches, before people switched to kerosene lamps. Known by the trade name gurjun balsam, the purified resin is sold today mainly as an adulterant or replacement essential oil in Patchouli-based perfumes. Strong and flexible rattan, palms that use sharp hooks on their stems to climb on other vegetation toward light in the rainforest canopy or along waterways and clearings, is used for lashing in all kinds of traditional construction and sold for the manufacture of cane furniture. However, this trade in jungle products is drawing to a close as the forest disappears.



House built with traditional Semelai construction methods

The Semelai, and other orang asli who formerly lived around Tasek Bera, have along history of collecting forest products for trade in world markets; Semelai counting words for money still reflect the Portuguese currency used in Malacca during the mid-16th century. The trade has had ups and downs, dwindling to a bare minimum during periods of war and extreme political instability, or when world prices are too low to make trading profitable. These "breaks" in the trade have had the side-effect of allowing for the conservation of resources on which the trade depends; keruing trees were given a rest from intensive oleo-resin tapping, and high-quality rattan was allowed to grow relatively unmolested.

The trade in resins and other lucrative jungle products picked up in the 1920s, with reliable middlemen gaining better access to the area. During this period, British rubber plantations were also beginning to replace the jungle within a couple of days walking from Tasek Bera. Some Semelai earned wages felling forest for the plantations, and positively-perceived contact with the outside world increased overall.

Insecurity of the orang asli populations themselves, and wariness of outsiders penetrating to Tasek Bera have also contributed to fluctuations in the jungle product trade. Until the late 19th century, orang asli around Tasek Bera were subject to raiding for slaves by Malays from the coast, a factor that may also be partly responsible for the lack of permanent settlements among the Semelai until recent times. During World War II (which the Semelai refer to as the "Japanese War"), the fighting made it dangerous to go out collecting in the jungle, and the international market for many products disappeared. The Semelai kept a low profile, assisted by their lack of permanent settlements and pattern of moving to new fields every year or two. A household would move when old fields cut from primary forest had too many weeds, lost fertility, when pests and elephants attacked, or when too many people had died in a place.

Certain lands around the lake were never cultivated, especially those around islands and prominent topographic features such as large rocks. According to the Semelai, these places were inhabited by sko', spirits of people who had been lost in the forest. In any case, this belief helped to ensure that substantial areas of primary forest were conserved around the lake.

According to everyone I asked, there has always been enough around Tasek Bera, rice and other crops grown by shifting cultivation. The lake has provided an abundant supply of protein in fish, turtles, and birds. Until recently, fallow periods for fields cultivated in secondary forests were 20 to 30 years, quite sufficient to restore soil fertility before burning off a field for a new crop. However, there was enough primary forest nearby to make farming in secondary forest land a matter of convenience rather than necessity.

Since the late 1940s, the British, and later the Malaysian government offered strong inducements for the Semelai to settle in villages around the lakeside "fort" of Pos Iskandar, a half-hour walk from Kampung Bapak. Used in the late 1940s and 1950s as a base for British

forces to fight Communist guerrillas in the Tasek Bera area, Pos Iskandar now provides basic government services: a primary school and a small clinic.

The government hoped permanent settlement, initially under military supervision, would protect orang asli from Communist influence, and prevent the Semelai from supplying the Communists with food. ("They always paid," I was told by one middle-aged woman.)

This period, known in Malaysia as the Emergency, brought about a radical change in lifestyle for the Semelai. Virtually all 2,600 of them now live in villages. (The total orang asli population is now around 70,000, up from 50,000 in the early 1960s. This is still less than one percent of Malaysia's national population.) People may spend a lot of time at their fields, but come home to the village between planting and harvesting, returning to the fields occasionally to weed. The proliferation of fruit trees around Kampung Bapak is one of the tastier results of permanent settlement, since people can get to their ripe fruit before it's devoured by birds and animals. One of the pleasantest aspects of time at Tasek Bera is paddling to the newly cut swidden fields along the shores of the lake.

In 1971 and 1972, the government offered each household in Kampung Bapak enough rubber tree seedlings to cover 6 acres, although no titles were granted to the land on which the trees were planted. Since the late 1970s, rubber tapping has become a major source of income. Walking around the village, I saw evidence of rubber tapping everywhere, as slender diagonally-slashed trees oozed milky latex into coconut shells, tin cans, or any container that could be placed on the ground under a spout. Oleo-resin tapping, which often requires an over-night trip into the jungle, and rubber tapping around the village complement each other as sources of cash.

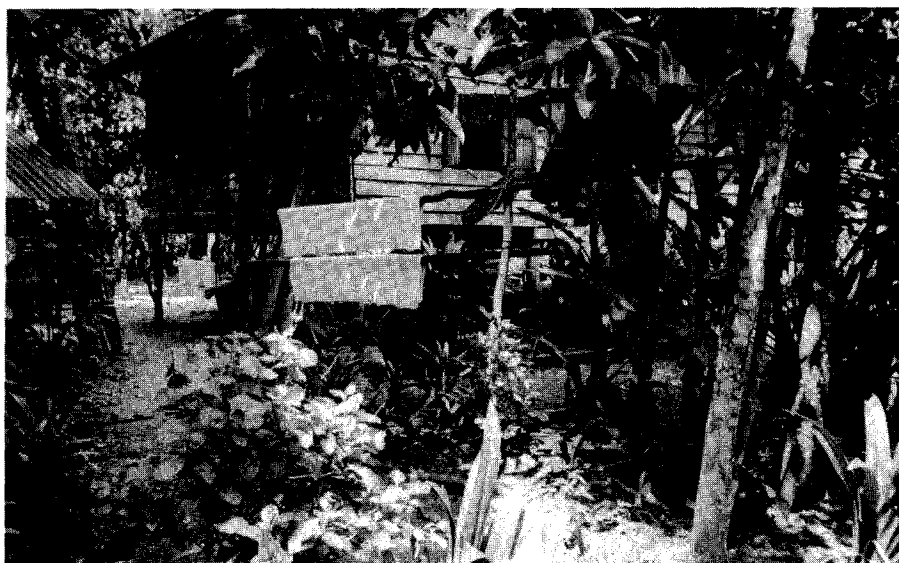


Latex flowing from a rubber tree

Both women and men care for and tap the rubber trees in the gardens located close to the village. The self-regulated pace and requirements of such work are highly compatible with the demands of a traditional life of gathering in the forest, food crop cultivation, and fishing. Although productivity per tree and relative to the land area planted in such a mixed system is not as high as in standard Malaysian rubber plantations, it provides greater flexibility to maximize income. Tapping may be discontinued altogether when latex prices fall too low, and the Semelai spend their time on activities with higher returns. Kampung Bapak families vary the amount of energy family members put into tapping rubber, other latex, and resins, tending fields, fishing, or working outside the village for wages according to the relative worth of these activities and the household's need for food and cash.



Rolling latex sheets in Kampung Bapak



Drying ribbed latex sheets

Destruction of primary forests accessible to the Semelai eliminates the option of gathering. Only a few men are tapping resin and gathering rattan this year, because most of the forest where the resin trees and good rattan were located have been felled.

As the intensity of logging and land clearing has increased in the forests where orang asli gathered trade products in the past, Semelai have hurried to find certain valuable commodities while they last, before the forest is destroyed. One of these is gharu wood, a resin-saturated portion of two species of fungus-infected Aquilaria trees. A potent incense wood, gharu (also known as eaglewood or aloeswood) has been exported from Southeast Asia to China for over 1,500 years. Today, its major consumers are in wealthy Arab nations, and prices there may be over \$ US 50 per ounce.

Gharu does not occur in all trees of the proper species; finding a tree with spike-shaped gharu deposits inside is a matter of skill and luck. In the past, when trees were felled with long hours of strenuous axe-wielding, gharu hunters gained subtle expertise in determining which trees contained the precious resin, and only cut down Aquilaria trees they were fairly sure would have it. These days, on land the Semelai expect will be logged or cleared in the near future, men cut down any tree they think may contain gharu, then chainsaw the tree in slices to search for resin deposits. This process contrasts sharply with the more conservative approach of "mining" only the most likely candidates, letting nonresinous wood rot away over months or years after a tree has been felled, gradually exposing the preserved gharu resin.

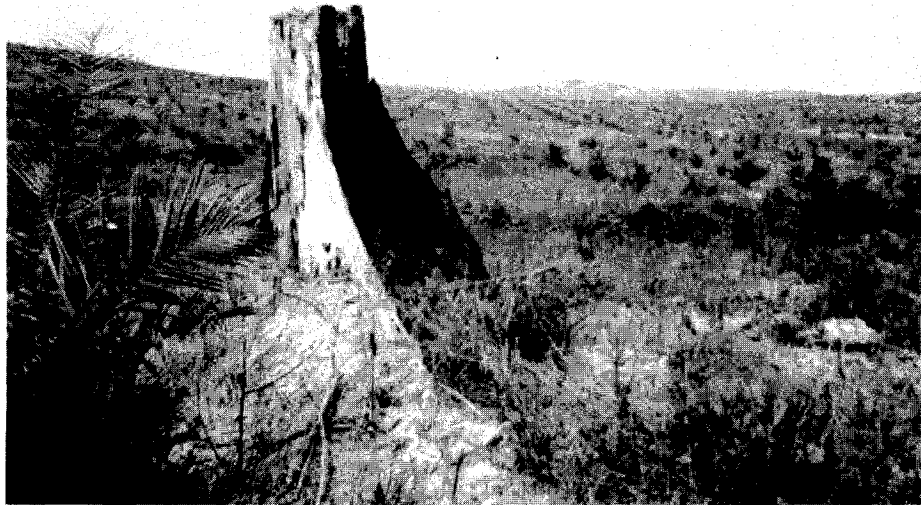
In her research, Rosemary is reconstructing a profile of how people lived in and used the forest before those who remember the days of the "deep jungle" disappear and their techniques are forgotten. As I'm also interested in what people are doing these days, I tagged along as she began a survey of Kampung Bapak's 35 households, and learned that lots of Semelai in the area have been working at the oil palm scheme as contract laborers. A truck rumbles through Kampung Bapak at 5:00 each morning, before dawn, to pick up workers and take them down the new road to the plantation, then brings them home around 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon.

The scheme is a project of Malaysia's Federal Land Development Authority, FELDA, internationally known as the agency that "does it right" with integrated rural development. FELDA specializes in transforming sparsely-settled jungles into large export commodity plantations, mainly rubber, oil palms, and cocoa. Housing, roads, water supply, electricity, and primary schools go in after land has been cleared and crops planted by non-settler workers hired by government contractors. In most FELDA schemes, the settlers arrive sometime between the time crops are planted and the time they begin to yield. Plantation land titles or shares are given to settlers as smallholders, once they pay off debts to FELDA. Payments are supposed to begin when crops start producing, and are calculated for a 15-year payback period.

Land clearing for the FELDA scheme near Tasek Bera began about 10 years ago. FELDA projects are windfalls for the logging companies of Peninsular Malaysia, since they call for clearcutting the jungle

(removing all trees) when other logging has been sharply curtailed on the Peninsula as a conservation measure. (The current logging boom in East Malaysia, particularly in Sarawak, is partly a reflection of relatively new logging restrictions on logging for export on the Peninsula.)

At the new FELDA site near Tasek Bera, bulldozers leveled virtually everything except a few very large tree buttresses and stumps, which remain standing on the stripped, rolling hills like skeletons of the old forest. Contract workers, including many from the orang asli communities around Tasek Bera, planted the oil palm seedlings one to three years ago, and are now hoeing and spraying pesticides around the young plants. (One man from Kampung Bapak works tending an electrified wire fence designed to keep elephants from coming out of the remaining jungle and eating or trampling the young trees. I wondered how much of a jolt it would take to get an elephant to return to the forest, but didn't test the fence myself.)



The new FELDA scheme with tree stump in the foreground and rows of young oil palms in the distance

The long hours under the sun are exhausting for the crews of 12 to 15 people working together through the mid-day heat. The day Rosemary and I rode around the scheme on motorcycles from Kampung Bapak, we joined a group spraying plants with a pesticide carried in large metal backpack tanks. For protection from the sun, most people were covered head to toe despite the blistering heat. The air was saturated with chemical spray, which the foreman said was Paraquat. Each worker, sprays about 30 gallons per day, during which time the crew covers about 25 hectares. Workers refill their tanks from plastic drums carried around the vast scheme site on open trucks. I saw no protective measures at all as the pesticide was poured from drum to bucket to tank, sloshing over the sides onto workers and their clothes. Kampung Bapak residents who work "poisoning" (meracun) at the scheme

don't last very long. The women prefer to hoe rather than spray, despite the lower wage (less than \$M 10 per day as opposed to \$M 14 for spraying). One woman wondered if spraying would "make her baby sick," patting her still-flat belly. We heard several accounts of young men who had to stop working at the scheme after a couple of months when they started bleeding from the nose and mouth. (One of the Batin's and Eng's sons was refused a mask or cloth to cover his nose and mouth when he asked for it, but quit rather than risk getting sick. Many workers improvise face coverings, and wear plastic bags around their waists to avoid getting soaked with chemical.)



Contract workers refilling sprayer tanks
at the new FELDA scheme

The permanent settlers at the new scheme are not expected for another few years. Until they arrive, workers hired by FELDA's contractors will carry on. In the Tasek Bera area, according to the Kampung Bapak people who have worked at the scheme, ethnic Malays rarely take these jobs. The "coolies" are mainly orang asli and Indonesians (many of whom are thought to be in Malaysia illegally) with Chinese supervisors.

According to staff at FELDA headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, orang asli whose community may be adversely affected by forest clearing for FELDA schemes, such as those at Tasek Bera, are given priority for resettlement as workers on the new scheme. I did not hear of anyone at Kampung Bapak who was talking about joining, although they have received information about the scheme from FELDA promoters and the Orang Asli Office. Semelai have joined other schemes, with government encouragement, but those at Tasek Bera believe that moving onto the scheme would mean the breakdown of their community, and are apprehensive about the dominance of a Malay way of life.

The Tasek Bera Semelai know that as the jungle around them is cut down, their subsistence and jungle product trade economies will be increasingly threatened. The crunch is beginning -- more people are planting fields and growing rice using swidden (shifting cultivation) techniques

on land that has been deliberately kept as primary forest until now. Land that the Semelai believe is occupied by sko' is being cleared and farmed. Semelai are trying to grow more rice than before, to save scarce cash on things they can't grow and to feed a rapidly expanding population.

Kampung Bapak residents report that many of the sko' displaced by land clearing for new fields are now invading the village and causing sickness. Refugee elephants have also moved into areas around the lake where they were rarely found before, trampling fields, eating crops, and at least once, even coming into the village itself. No one owns the land in the designated orang asli area, based on 1954 and 1974 provisions in Peninsular Malaysia's Aboriginal Peoples Act. Unlike many Southeast Asian peoples who practice shifting cultivation, the Semelai have few customary laws enforcing conservative land use to protect a common resource. Since much of the forest formerly used by the Semelai has been cleared for the oil palm plantation, there is little other remaining forest suitable for traditional shifting cultivation and not occupied by resinous trees that are "owned" by customary rights (unlike the land they stand on) and repeatedly tapped by the Semelai. The Semelai will not destroy trees for which they recognize someone else's ownership or use rights, including fruit trees and trees that have been tapped for resin, latex, or gum.

Unlike land rights, water rights on the lake are protected by tradition. However, the system, in which use of the lake, including fishing, is controlled by "masters" of each section (tuhan lubuk) has largely broken down now that the intensity of use in the areas of the lake closest to permanent settlements has dramatically increased for bathing, beaching boats, fishing, gathering pandanus, and other purposes.

The "tragedy of the commons" may soon be played out in Tasek Bera. With the destruction of the vast forest that has been the Semelai's "safety valve" for centuries, increasing pressure may be put on the land and waters still open for their use. With a sense that their way of life may be doomed in any case, due largely to circumstances beyond their control, what incentives do people have to use their resources cautiously?

The orang asli used to inhabit most of the Malayan Peninsula, albeit with very low population densities. In the last few hundred years, Malay populations began to spread inland from the coasts, later followed by other ethnic groups determined to share in the benefits of developing the vast jungle "wilderness." Government policy now proclaims that a greater portion of the Malaysian people should be given the chance to share in the wealth of the land and enjoy the benefits of development. The traditional economy and way of life of the orang asli are being sacrificed for the national good; these people, too, will hopefully gain from the benefits of development. It is not yet clear how much the jungle and its way of life will be missed. It is certain, however, that the jungle will be much diminished, increasing the stakes in Malaysia's gamble that the new plantations will bring the promised prosperity.

Sincerely yours,

Judith Mayer



Fruit season: a jackfruit tree
(A bit like durian, but less
dramatic. Jackfruits usually
grow from tree trunks, while
durians usually hang from branches.)



Dugout canoes at Kampung Bapak
on Tasek Bera