

The Semai's response to missionary work: From resistance to compliance

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Abstract

Missionary religions show an innate inclination to expand their domain and extend the “truth” they hold to the other people. *Other* people in turn might resist the missionary activities or treat them with compliance. The Semai of Malaysia have been subject to missionary activities by Christian and Islamic missions. Christian missions started their activity among the Semai in 1930s, while the Islamic missions advanced when the government took a more active role in Islamic invitation (*da'wah*) in 1970s. The Semai reaction to missionary religions is complicated by the political and cultural context of the missions, as well as a subconscious non-discursive context of conversion. The Islamic mission is backed by the government and is seen as a part of a plan for assimilation of the Semai into the Malay community. Christian missions, in contrast, are nongovernmental and run by non-Malay people. Both Christianity and Islam have their points of compatibility and incompatibility with the traditional Semai culture; therefore, they make different hybrids with it. As the cultural dislocation and threat of identity extinction can be the causes of resistance to missions; religious emotions and perhaps financial incentives lead to a compliant response to the missions and the changes they have brought about. Emotional ambivalence towards Malays, however, is the phantasmic or non-discursive dimension of the conversion. Where conversion to Islam go with the enamoured with Malays and a tendency to identify with them, resistance to Islam or even conversion to Christianity can be regarded as the equivalent of the dislike of the Malay.

KEYWORDS: conversion, Christianity, identity, Islam, Malaya, mission, Semai

Introduction

The Semai of Malaysia, the biggest group of indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia (Orang Asli) have been affected by missionary activities, because they live in a country with Western colonial background and dominant Muslim people. Due to these activities, a substantial number of the Semai have converted to world religions and these converts constitute an undeniable fact of Semai community. The framework of this study revolves around the interaction between world religions – Islam and Christianity in particular – and the Semai that involves comparisons between conversion to Islam and Christianity both in structural relations and non-discursive aspects.

The first thing that struck us during our fieldwork among the Orang Asli was not only the relative silence of the converts' voice but also a partial ignorance about the missionary activities among them in anthropological works. Dealing with conversion in Malaysia has been fraught with political considerations. Consequently, where the previous studies deal with missionary activities and conversion, power relations have been the main concerns (Dentan et al. 1997: 142–4; Benjamin 2003: 51; Hooker 2003: 245; Nah 2003). Inter-group tensions between the converts and non-converts also has been another concern in some works (Kroes 2002: 242; Nobuta 2008: 257–62). In particular, Islamisation with its obvious political implications occupies the most prominent part of the existing discussions on conversion. Accordingly, academic writings are mainly silent about the conversion to Christianity, with its fewer power relation implications. While looking at the conversion as a political matter teaches us about an important dimension of the issue, it simultaneously deprives us from understanding the other part of the reality, which is the reality of the converts. I think we should not reduce cultural analysis to an obsession with power analysis, and a more inclusive view needs to pay greater heed to both converts' views and the non-discursive or phantasmic dimensions of the issue that is working among Orang Asli. This is a *hidden* domain that needs defetishisation or disclosure. Therefore, in addition to the power relation approach, we need to take a symbolic or cultural approach in tandem with non-discursive analysis to obtain a more holistic view. The response to the religious invitation is not reducible to some calculative rational interest in both sides of the missionaries and the Semai, but is a course complicated with non-discursive motives.

The field of study

The Semai are one of the 18 aboriginal groups of peninsular Malaysia, who are generally called Orang Asli, a Malay term literally means *original people*. According to JHEOA – Department of Orang Asli Affairs (2008) – the Orang Asli population was 141,230 in 2007, comprising about 0.5% of the country's population. Conventionally, the Orang Asli are divided into three major subgroups according to their language, geographical location, and physical appearances: the Senoi, the Negrito or the Semang, and the Proto Malay or aboriginal Malays, each including six Orang Asli tribes (Carey 1976: 11–2; Endicott 1983; JHEOA 2008). The Semai people, as one of the subcategories of Senoi, have a population over 42,000 (JHEOA 2008) and form the biggest Orang Asli group in the Malay Peninsula, mostly residing in the states of Perak and Pahang. Semai language belongs to

Senoic or Central Asian branch of Austro-Asiatic languages (Benjamin 1976; Diffloth 1976; Lewis 2009). Gathering products, hunting, fishing and swiddening have been the main subsistence production (Dentan 1968: 31–4, 40–6). However, their ever increasing dependence on markets for their main food requirements and consumable products led them to developing cash cropping and commercial fishing – even fish farming – commerce and wage labour (Gomes 1990; 1991). Today, particularly in the accessible settlements located close to the towns, many Semai are working in the governmental and private sectors (Juli 1998: 43–56).

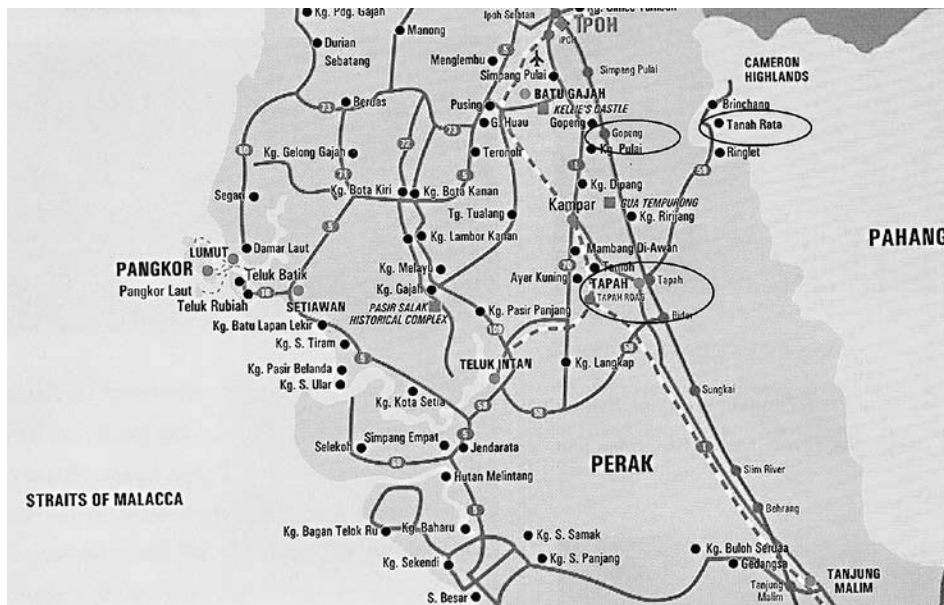


Figure 1: Fieldwork sites in Peninsular Malaysia, Perak and Pahang states

We started the fieldwork among Orang Asli in 2006, studying their religious practice and conversion to world religions. Specific ethnographic data were mainly collected from three Semai villages in Pahang (Sungai Ruil) and Perak (Ulu Geruntomand Lata Kinjang).¹ Sungai Ruil is located near to Tanah Rata in Pahang state, Cameron Highlands, with 1,100 people, including around 200 Muslims and 100 Christians. In Sungai Ruil people mostly work in farms as wage labourers and in hotels, golf clubs and in government sectors. Ulu Geruntom with 350 people, mostly Christians, is in Perak state, Kinta district about eight kilometres from Gopeng. People in Ulu Geruntom are engaged in farming,

¹ For Malay words, the modern Malay alphabet based on basic Latin alphabet is used. Semai terms are recorded according to International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA).

collecting jungle products, and some are working in nearby towns. Two hundred mostly Muslims people are living in Lata Kinjang, along with a few (36) of non-Muslims who follow Semai traditional beliefs. Lata Kinjang is in Tapah nearby in Batang Padang district in Perak. The people have some rubber trees, and are working in close towns, and (because of the Kinjang waterfall that has turned to a tourist site) shop-keeping is especially thriving in weekends as an auxiliary job for some families. The data were collected during several visits to the sites between 2007 and 2010.

Semai religion

Semai religion is an indigenous religion by definition. Belief in supernatural invisible beings is foundational to Semai beliefs. For the Semai, the world is full of spirits that in a way or another affect their life. Disease and misfortune are bound with spirits. This caused Semai religion to be identified as animism, as is put forward by Tylor (1920: 241). The term animism is widely used to refer to Semai religion by the officials and the Semai also adopt the term and usually introduce their religion as animism to the outsiders. Religion is not a distinct institution in Semai society; instead, it is a loosely shaped collection of beliefs, taboos and practices that is an integral part of Semai culture. The people themselves often refer to their religion as *adat*, which is a Malay term for *tradition* and *custom*. *Adat* is woven into all aspects of Semai life and thus does not have a distinct border. Components of *adat* include more than religious matters and encompass Semai kinship system and the ideas of social and natural order. Belief in supernatural invisible beings is always associated with a medium, or shaman, who is specialised in communicating with the supernatural and has the authority to direct supernatural power towards solving various difficulties of the group such as diseases (Stutley 2003: 2). Belief in supernatural beings or spirits (*ɲaniʔ* or *dʒæni* in Semai language) and a shaman (*halaʔ*) are paramount characteristics of Semai religion that demonstrate Semai religion's profile.

Supernatural beings are hidden causes of diseases and by bringing about misfortune; they can punish both individuals and the group. Sometimes they are manifested in natural phenomena like thunder, reducing the unknowable complexity of the natural world by giving meaning to them. The most referred supernatural beings are *ɲaniʔ*, which are bound supernatural beings that are associated with physical or even non-physical phenomena. *ɲaniʔ nku* (spirit of thunder) and *ɲaniʔ kudʒru* (spirit of gibbon) are examples of the *ɲaniʔ* category. However, *ɲaniʔ* behaviour in Semai *adat*, mixing different categories of food (meat, fowl, aquatic animals and mushroom) is a taboo. The spirit of mixing immiscible foods that bring about severe to mild disease based on the quality and quantity of the mixed food's consumption is *ɲaniʔ Krentʃa*.² In another version that we found in the Tapah area, *ɲaniʔ Krentʃa* is a spirit with a fearful voice that sometimes comes in the twilight and can cause death or severe harm to people if they stay out at the time. It seems that *ɲaniʔ Krentʃa* plays the bogeyman role for the children; when you ask them about it,

² Nowadays, the Semai are more willing to explain this taboo in terms of food incompatibility, rather than the supernatural intervention.

they imitate its fearsome voice. In addition to *ɲaniʔ*, there are other categories of supernatural beings in Semai pantheon: the highest supernatural being is *ɲenaŋ* or *dʒenaŋ*, who is almost out of reach and does not interfere in everyday life; *maklikator* are assistants of *dʒenaŋ*; *keramat* are dwellers of the land and are associated with landscape features; and *penyakit*, which includes human ghosts (*kikmoi*) and ghosts of non-human beings (*ɲaniʔ*) (Juli 1998: 67–75). The process of borrowing from the dominant neighbouring culture can be traced in these Semai terms. The *maklikat* or helper seems to have been adopted from the Malay/ Islamic *malaikat*, meaning angel, and *keramat* is a Malay folk belief in unusual things (Skeat 1967: 673–4; Endicott 1970: 90; Yousoff et al. 1974: 14), which comes from Arabic means ‘the miracle worked by a saint.’ *Jin* (genie) is another supernatural being which is adopted by the Semai from Malay/Islamic culture. It is a Quranic term and refers to certain invisible but otherwise humanoid beings.

As in other cases and mostly among the west Semai, after settling in former Malay areas, the Semai accepted local Malay spirits like *penunggu* and *jembalang* in their pantheon of supernatural beings (Juli 1990: 44–5). These show the dynamic nature of Semai beliefs that is open to new concepts and apply them to its formation, which revolves around the invisible beings and their connection to people's life. For the Semai, the environment is full of invisible beings that are potentially harmful and are to be avoided. For example, gazing at a land feature with a strange shape such as a rock with unusual size or shape may evoke its spirit and cause harm to the observer. Graveyards are mysterious and dangerous places and must be approached with care and preferably in company with a *halaʔ*, to avoid any harm by *kikmoi*.

The spirit-medium, or *halaʔ*, is another major characteristic of Semai religion. *halaʔ* works through the intermediary of a spirit guide called *gunik*, presumably from Malay *gundik* (consort, concubine) (Kroes 2002: 243). In fact, the appearance of a *gunik* in one's dream is the starting point of *halaʔ* career. ‘I met a small person, an old man, in my dream and then I became a *halaʔ*,’ reported a *halaʔ* from Sungai Ruil. A *gunik* is often a dead person's ghost (*kikmoi*), who had been a *halaʔ* himself. A *halaʔ* career is not hereditary but in most cases the *kikmoi* who appears in the dream is one of the dead relatives such as father, brother or father-in-law. However, other spirits also can be spirit guide of a *halaʔ*. In some cases, a *halaʔ* is in touch with more than one *gunik*. A *halaʔ* is usually regarded as the medium of the *gunik*. To describe the experience of being “possessed” by *gunik*, a *halaʔ* reported: ‘When a *gunik* comes to my body I feel chilled, then the *gunik* speaks from my mouth.’ A *halaʔ* calls a *gunik* through the song s/he has been taught in dream, then the *gunik* possess the *halaʔ*, and thereafter whatever the *halaʔ* expresses will be the will of the *gunik*. Through possession and communication with the spirit world, a *halaʔ* has the ability to manipulate the supernatural in the client's favour. Healing and dealing with afflictions are the main job of a *halaʔ* and s/he performs this job through three strategies: medical herbs, incantations (*jampi*) and healing trance séances (*sewaŋ* or *kəbut*). A *halaʔ* usually knows some medical herbs and prescribe them to the ill. The more important healing role of a *halaʔ* is the part that deals with the supernatural. Incantations or *jampi* are magical phrases that are used for protection, attraction of the opposite sex and so on. The most authentic *jampi* come from dreams, but there are other

sources for them like oral transmission and even Quranic phrases that the Semai learn from Malays. Except *hala?*, some other people may also know *jampi*, thus this is not restricted to *hala?*. These people who are called *malip*, probably from Malay *malim* (Juli 1998: 65) meaning 'Muslim scholar' and learned, know *jampi* and can use them for themselves or give it to the other people. Those who know *jampiare* not in the same category as *hala?* and they occupy a very lower status than *hala?* in Semai community. A *malip* does not have a dynamic relationship with the supernatural, instead he/she knows the magic words that heal certain disease or cure relationships.

The most typical work of *hala?* is to conduct healing *séances*, which are held indoors in the dark of night (*kəbut* or *sewan*). The ceremony includes performing monotonous music by playing the tambourine and bamboo tubes, singing, and burning incense to facilitate the *hala?*'s communication with the supernatural, which leads to healing the ill. Singing usually lasts for two to three hours in darkness, but the timing is flexible depending of the participants' zeal. The *hala?* sings and a background singer (usually his assistant) accompanies him/her in a higher octave. Meanwhile, the *hala?* (now possessed by the *gunik*) speaks to the ill and sprinkles water on participants as a blessing and heightening of spirituality. The *séance*'s atmosphere is charged with hysterical intensity aroused by resonant music of tambourine and bamboo tubes. After turning the lights on, the *hala?* continues the healing procedure by blowing in the head and affected organs of the client through certain leaves and herbs such as *selbək* and *buna çæræk* (*çæræk* flower). In that way, the curative power of the leaves strengthens the soul and heals the affected part. The clients usually feel an immediate relief that (besides the supernatural efficacy) can be caused by the cathartic effects of a long arousal ceremony.

Each village usually has one or in some cases more than one *hala?*. The villages with the majority of Muslims or Christians may do not have any *hala?* but this does not prevent the villagers to seek a *hala?* if necessary. A *hala?* is an independent agent, and there is not any kind of solidarity between them. There is no tradition of apprenticeship in the career and it is based on the personal call and often through a hereditary line. There are some *hala?* with a good reputation for their power and some of them are long remembered, with people recounting stories of their miraculous treatments. As a career mostly involved in illness and healing the *hala?* position is declining in Semai community as access to medical services increases. However, the healing ceremony by the *hala?* is still an alternative to expensive medical treatments and the diseases that persist in spite of simple available medical treatments.

Semai religion involves everyday needs of the Semai, such as healing and cultivation, and is restricted to the people and landscape with no tendency to deliberate expansion. In other words, it is a worldview with its beliefs and practices situated in the environmental and socio-cultural sphere of the Semai with no organisational support. It can be said that the best word for this religion is the very Semai term *adat* (custom) that shows the identificational function of the term as a property of the Semai. The Semai use the word *adat* as opposed to Malay *adat* which consists of religion customary laws and unwritten traditional codes regulating different aspect of social life, and in doing so they distinguish themselves from Malays.

The Semai in Malaysia's social arena

The Semai have never been “isolated” and have always been living in contact with their neighbours. Having a subsistence economy based on swiddening, hunting, and gathering jungle products, the Semai have always been exchanging their products with their neighbours. For centuries, the Malay have been the only farmer neighbours of the Semai. Since the Malay came to the Malay Peninsula, most of them have lived in rural areas and even now in most areas Malays (but not the Chinese or Indians) are the immediate neighbours of the Orang Asli (Amran Kasimin 1991: 104–5). The Semai's involvement with the market economy has greatly increased since Malaysian independence; this led to the emergence of petty commodity production (PCP) and cash income besides subsistence economy (Gomes 1991). In fact, the Semai began to turning to small-scale commodity production and a more confident interaction with Malays since the formal abolition of slavery in 1880s (Gomes 2004: 31; Juli et al. 2009). Before that time, between the 16th century and the late 19th century, the Semai were subject to random Malay slave-raiding (Wray 1903: 108, cited in Gomes 2004: 29; Gomes 2004: 29; Juli et al. 2009), mainly for women and children. According to a report from Annandale and Robinson (1902: 180), Orang Asli women were ‘very common in the houses of better class Malays before the emancipation of slaves in 1893’ (cited in Baer 2006: 4).

The people of the main fieldwork sites of this study are mainly involved in wage labouring, growing cash crops such as rubber and fruits; and hunting, fishing, and gathering jungle products as secondary economic activities. As such, trade with neighbouring people is an integral part of their life. Although there is no record of the relation between the Semai and Malays before 19th century, existence of some trading between these people is certain (Gomes 2004: 29). Therefore, trade and symbiosis has been a given among the Semai and their neighbouring people. As has been shown (Headland & Reid 1989), trade and symbiosis with neighbouring societies and desultory food production (hunting, fishing, and part-time cultivation) observed among “hunter-gatherers,” are neither recent nor atypical ‘but representing an economy practiced by most hunter-gatherers for many hundreds, if not thousands, of years.’

This continuous relationship, however, has a definite effect on the way the Semai orient themselves in Malaysia's social arena. A one-way cultural acquisition from Malays to the Semai is the inevitable consequence of the relationship between outnumbered, dominant, and more “sophisticated” Malays and the Semai. All the Semai speak Malay language, but reverse is not the case. The Semai's adoptions of Malay cultural elements are clearly detectable in certain aspect such as clothing and marriage costumes and religious beliefs.³ The Semai, especially the west and central Semai in Perak, practice *berinaibesar* (great henna-ing) and *bersanding* (enthronement) in wedding ceremony. The bridal couple dressed in Malay wedding dresses sits on a bridal dais with Malay style decoration while the maid of honour and the best man standing next to them fanning them with fancy Malay

³ For more detailed discussion on the influence of Malay folk religion on Semai religion, see Benjamin (1979) and Kroes (2002: 242–9).

fans. Further, another Malay adat called *sembahmentua* (bowing to the parents-in-law) is also practiced, and the wedding followed by Malay music performance and dance.⁴ Nowadays, the Semai who live near to Malays incorporate the Malay rural culture to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish Semai villages from those of the Malays at first glance (cf. Hood Salleh 1984).

The linguistic, social and economic transformation of “hunter-gatherers” according to the organisational and behavioural expectation of “farmer” neighbours is shown in studies about the two groups’ relationship (cf. Spielmann & Eder 1994). This cultural transformation leads to the conclusion that the Orang Asli, in general, are “ethnically” closer to the Malays than any other ethnic groups of the country (Amran Kasimin 1991: 104–5).

However, racial considerations are also at work. ‘We Chinese regard the Orang Asli as Malays,’ a young educated Chinese man said, adding, ‘they are definitely not close to the Chinese or the Indians and their physical appearance is more similar to Malays.’

In a country with “race” as its central social concern, such a conclusion is understandable. More than everything else, the concept of race relies on both the genotype and phenotype of a population that eventually appears in their physical appearance. A similarity of physical appearance, in addition to extensive cultural borrowings, has led the Orang Asli to be roughly categorised in the Malay category, according to an educated Chinese man.

The vast linguistic and cultural acquisition from the Malay culture shows the Semai’s tendency towards Malays as their model. The Orang Asli see the world through the filter of Malay culture (Baharon Azhar 1972: 8; Hood Salleh 1990: 144; Amran Kasimin 1991: 105). Baharon Azhar bin Raffie’i (1972: 8) stated:

For them to be “civilized” or “sophisticated” is to be like a Malay. Hence the Orang Asli would, in general, adopt some of the outward “ethnic symbols” of Malays which again the Malay would take as evidence of the former’s “ethnic affinity” to them (cited in Amran Kasimin 1991: 105)

This tendency, however, by no means shows the Semai’s willingness to abandon their identity and identify themselves with Malays. In practice, the Semai usually identify themselves by highlighting their difference with Malays. For example: ‘Asli hala? “sees” the sickness in the body, Malay *bomoh* just do jampi,’ or: ‘A newlywed couple’s family share the wedding costs, but in Malay *adat* the bridegroom family must pay all the costs,’ or: ‘We don’t mix mushroom with chicken, Malays don’t have this adat.’ These are common expressions that one might hear when a Semai is asked about their adat. As Dentan put it ‘the Semai normally identify themselves as the opposite of Malays along the lines of “We do this, Malays do that”’ (1972; 1975).

Identification is a dynamic system composed of similarities and differences between *I* and *other*. Ethnic identity boundaries do not persist through the absence of social interaction and acceptance, but through the social process of exclusion and incorporation whereby distinct categories are maintained despite the changing content of identity. ‘The

⁴ For more details about the Semai borrowings from Malays especially in wedding ceremony, see Juli (2003: 154–5)

critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic “boundary” that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses’ (Barth 1969: 15). In the same way, in spite of many cultural acceptances from Malays, the Semai keep their distinct identity by emphasising their cultural identity boundaries through the differences with Malays. Malays are the immediate and dominant neighbours of the Semai and they are most significant others of the Semai. As mentioned before, Malay socio-cultural hegemony is accompanied by a one-way cultural flow from Malays to the Semai. Therefore, while the Semai cultural identity contents include many adopted Malay signs and values, the very differences with Malays make the most important dichotomy between the Semai and others.

Despite seeing the Malay as “sophisticated” and “civilised” neighbours eligible to be followed, the Semai, especially those who are not converted to Islam, do not always admire Malays. ‘The Orang Asli hate Malays,’ a young Semai woman told me and a young educated Semai man confirmed this and added, ‘We feel they are arrogant and do not respect the Orang Asli; this is not of course true about all Malays, but this is generally the case.’ The young woman added, ‘When an Orang Asli woman marries a Malay, they really do not accept the woman’s family and this put the woman in a humiliating status.’

Malays usually express a negative judgment about the Orang Asli and their life-style and repeatedly regard them as “lazy” people.⁵ The Semai are conscious of the Malay attitude towards them. Consequently, the Semai admire Malays as more “civilised” people, and simultaneously dislike them. This emotional ambivalence towards Malays is similar to emotional ambivalence towards authorities like rulers, father and father-surrogates and privileged persons (Freud 2004: 48, 57, 157). In *Seminar 20*, Lacan termed this emotional ambivalence to be ‘hate-enamoured’⁶ (1998), which is the characteristic of the emotional attitude in most relationships particularly those involved the inferior-superior relationship.

Missionary work among the Semai

Islamic missionaries, however, mostly came after the independence of Malaysia in 1957 and the establishment of a country with Malay/Muslim hegemony. Before the 20th century, Malays had made prior failed attempts to proselytise the Semai. According to Cerutti (1908: 109), the first superintendent of the Perak Orang Asli:

Some centuries later, in an era of fanaticism, invasions [by Malays] were made upon them [Semai] with the object of converting them to Mohammedism but the only result was fire and bloodshed (cited in Gomes 2004: 30).

Afterwards, before the 1970s, the governmental authorities allowed Islamic organisations and individuals to proselytise the Orang Asli, but then the government took a more direct role in Islamic missionary activities or da’wah (Dentan et al. 1997: 143–4). Where it seems the motivation for Islamic missions was sometimes authentically religious, these governmental Islamic missions have often been criticised by academic writers as a political

⁵ This can be another version of ‘the myth of lazy native’ explained by Alatas (1977).

⁶ hainamoration

plan of Islamisation aimed at the assimilation and eventual absorption of Orang Asli into Malay/Muslim society to reinforce the ruling Malay hegemony, by endowing them with the legitimacy of the original dwellers of the country (Dentan et al. 1997: 142–4; Benjamin 2003: 51; Hooker 2003: 245; Nah 2003; Endicott & Dentan 2004a; Gomes 2004: 30). The Islamic invitation, da'wah, is an integrative work of certain governmental departments and non-governmental organisations. The main agent in the Orang Asli Islamic proselytising is JAKIM – *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia), a governmental department responsible to develop and advance Islam in Malaysia. Besides JAKIM, other involved governmental bodies are the Islamic office (*Pejabat Agama Islam*) of each region and the Council of Islam (*Majlis Agama Islam*) of the state, which is a legislative council under the sultan of the state. YADIM – *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (Malaysian foundation of Islamic invitation) is a non-governmental foundation that is also involved in missionary activities. The department has been renamed to the Department for Orang Asli Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* – JKOA) is a governmental department that deals directly with Orang Asli welfare and development.⁷ This department is not officially in charge of the Orang Asli religion and proselytising, but usually supports the Islamic missionaries who are governmental agents and follows the governments' general interest to Islamise and absorb the Orang Asli into mainstream Malay society.

Christian and Islamic missionaries differ in their attitude towards missionary work. For Muslims, missionary work is an invitation (da'wah) to their own religion, which they are already practice. However, for Christians, missionary work is a way to witness their own faith (Means 2011: 17). They practice their religion through interaction with the Orang Asli, and it is a way of religiosity that let them identify themselves with Jesus and his disciples (Means & Means 2011: 27). In other words, Muslims want to pull the Orang Asli in their own religion and Christians want to live their religion and practice it through the interaction with the Orang Asli. These different approaches mark a difference between the nature of Islamic and Christian missionary work.

Despite the criticisms about the exogenous developmental programs, especially those conducted by the governmental departments, Christian and Muslim missions, more or less, were accompanied with the exogenous development. In other words, the missions are associated with the developmental markers such as schools, health services and opportunities of participation in the national market. The first Methodist missionary, a Batek from Indonesia, started his work in 1931 with teaching Semai children to read and write, and he eventually established a school in 16th mile Pahang road (from Tapah) (Means & Means 1981: 5–11). Providing the Semai with simple medicines and teaching sanitary lessons to the women also were other services of this early Methodist mission (Means & Means 1981: 11, 29) that came before preaching the gospel. Christian NGOs and Christian charity foundations still play this role through medical services, material

⁷ The Department for Orang Asli Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* - JKOA) is the new name of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (*Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli* - JHEOA) since January 14, 2011.

aids and community base empowering programs. Islamic missions are associated with the JKOA which is the government agency entrusted to the Orang Asli development and welfare. Almost all developmental programs for the Orang Asli are done through JKOA. JKOA is not officially responsible for the Orang Asli religion and proselytizing but usually supports the Islamic missionaries who are mostly governmental agents. However, some writers point to JKOA's hidden contribution in a master plan for the "Islamisation" of the Orang Asli (Dentan et al. 1997: 144–6; Endicott & Dentan 2004); something that has never admitted by the JEHOA officials.

Nowadays, a notable number of the Semai, especially in accessible Perak and Pahang settlements, have converted to Christianity and Islam. However, there is no official information available about the number of convert Orang Asli.⁸ Except the main sites of the study (Sungai Ruil, Ulu Geruntom and Lata Kinjang), in many other accessible and even fringe villages some people have converted to Christianity and Islam, and the JKOA mosques and chapels are found in the villages with converts. Mosques are built by the government and are usually a double story building with a multi-purpose hall in the first floor and mosque in the upper floor. Chapels, however, are usually simple buildings made by the respective Christian organisation with the collaboration of the local people. In some villages, there is more than one Christian denomination and each has their own chapel. For example, Dusun Seratus, a fringe village in Cenderiang area, has two chapels: one belongs to Lutheran Christians and the other to Gospel Hall. According to the village headman and JKOA officials who are located in the village, Christians comprise about 10 percent of the population of Sungai Ruil. Christians of Sungai Ruil, which are mostly affiliated with the SIB church, do not have a chapel inside the village and instead they use the Anglican Church building, called All Souls Church, located in the neighbouring Malay village of Taman Sedia.

Semai religion and missionary religions: compatibilities and incompatibilities

World religions the JKOA and primal religions are the most prominent categories of religion in anthropological studies, which (despite the blurriness of their definitions) are still in use (Bowie 2006: 22–4). Influenced by the 19th century missionary attitude and early anthropological literature, primal religion gained further credibility as a viable category alongside other religions, and by using a less theologically derived term as indigenous religion it occupies a distinct place in religious studies (Cox 2007: 30–1).

A series of features have been mentioned by writers as the characteristics of the indigenous religion that distinguish it from the world religions (Bahr 2005: 5–6; Bowie 2006: 23; Cox 2007: 61, 63), including locality, confinement to a single language or ethnic group and oral transmission of the tradition; in contrast, world religions are characterised

⁸ JEHOA (now JKOA) usually do not provide the researchers with the statistical information on the Orang Asli converts. According to Ikram Jamaludin (1997), former JHEOA director, at the time 16% of Orang Asli were Muslim.

by a universal potentiality and scripture-based tradition. Despite the diffusion of beliefs and religious practices due to cultural contact, believing members of an indigenous religion do not deliberately tend to extend their beliefs and rituals beyond their given socio-cultural and environmental boundaries. In one-way or another, believing members of world religions consider this message an ultimate truth and a unique way of salvation. The logical conclusion of this exclusivist view is a commitment to invite other people to the truth. Missionary religions are large-scale, centralised religions that have the tendency to transmit systematised and standardised religious teachings among diffused groups. Therefore, missionary religions show the characteristic features of doctrinal mode of religiosity that transmits religious teachings, along with leaders and authoritative texts, through frequently repeated rituals (Whitehouse 2008; Atkinson & Whitehouse 2011). However, non-missionary religions, such as Semai religion, are small-scale, non-centralised religions that show an imagistic mode of religiosity with low frequency, higher arousal rituals to produce intense social cohesion among a small group of people (Atkinson & Whitehouse 2011).

The animistic world-view and shamanic practices in Semai religion, as a non-missionary imagistic religion, may look dissimilar with the monotheistic world-view of Islam and Christianity, which are based on God's revelation. Nevertheless, the monotheism of these religions relies on spiritualism that in turn might be seen as a derivative of animism.

The highest supernatural being in Semai belief is a supreme power called *dzenaŋor ŋenoŋ*. The term has several meanings and usually is used for grandparents and old, respected people. However, *dzenaŋ* by no means is a god, and people do not have a personal relationship with it, nor it occupies a place in healing ceremonies. Christian missionaries told me that they did use the term *dzenaŋ* to introduce the concept of God in Christianity. In Christian discourse, however, *dzenaŋ* take slightly different meaning. In this regard, Penghulu Hasan of Ulu Geruntom who converted to Christianity in 1960s said:

Different people use different names to talk of God. We Semai call him *dzenaŋ*. Before, we believed that he was far away from us and cannot help us when we need him. Now that we are Christians, we know that *dzenaŋ* is the God (Tuhan Allah) of all people, and that he can help us when we believe in him and pray to him (Shastri 1989: 117).

In the Semai traditional view *dzenaŋ* is a metaphysical and transcendent being that lies beyond the usual ritual practice, but in Christian context, *dzenaŋ* turned into a personal God (equal to *tuhan allah*) that is an essential part of the rituals.

In 1970s during the second encounter of the Semai in Ulu Geruntom with Christianity, the people called the Christian workers *hala?* and their associate deity, Jesus, as a new *gunik*.⁹ Although nowadays they laugh at their naïve perception of the Christian

⁹ The story, according to the elders of the village, began with an epidemic of an unknown disease that killed 70 people. The *hala?* was called to calm down the problem and he imposed strict *pantaŋ* (taboo) on the people in order to propitiate the spirit that had cause the sickness. The *pantaŋ* was comprehensive and included not to make noise, not to play, and even not to eat rice. After a while the people, particularly the young people, got fed up with the situation and talked to the elders to remove the restrictions and they decided to go to these new *hala?* (Christian workers) and their *gunik* (Jesus or God) to free them from this harsh situation.

workers, this perception shows how a person who calls upon an unseen helper to help them is close to the concept of *hala?* and his/her associate spirit helper. In fact, there is not a long way from believing in invisible spirits and spirit helper (*gunik*) to believe in a single invisible being, say the Holy Spirit or Jesus. In the Semai religion, the people must avoid offending the will of supernatural being to maintain their well-being. Breaking a *pantaŋ* (taboo) results in inevitable illness and misfortunes as the punishment from the supernatural beings. This is very similar to the concept of sin in Christianity and Islam, except that in these religions the punishment might not be this-worldly and are deferred to the afterlife.

Semai religion has much in common with Malay folk religion. Malay folk religion, or Malay magic, is a cult mostly practiced in rural Malaysia. A healer, *bomoh*, is the pivotal character in Malay folk religion who healing and divination through his privileged access to supernatural power are his main tasks (Winstedt 1993: 11). Belief in spirits and supernatural beings as the causes of illnesses and as the potential spirit helpers are the underlying belief of the Malay magic. With the spirits that came from Brahmanism and earlier indigenous faith, a host of other supernatural beings, such as *jin* (genie), *nabi* (prophet) and *malaikat* (angels) are adopted from Islamic culture (Skeat 1967: 84, 98–101). These show a striking similarity to Semai religion both in practice and in the underlying worldview, which is based on spiritualism and the necessity of a medium to communicate with and manipulate the spirit world. However, there is a crucial difference as well. Semai adat plays a direct part in upholding the moral codes of the society; in fact, taboos and *hala?* divinations are the means of preserving the normative rules of the society. Malay folk religion, in contrast, is not involved in the moral system of the society and occupies a peripheral position in it, merely dealing with personally afflicted clients. In fact, Islamic orthodoxy looks at Malay folk religion as a suspicious cult engaged in black magic.¹⁰ However, Malay folk religion, as other folk religions, is a syncretic cult with many borrowings from Islamic culture. For the Semai, Islam is almost identical with Malays. To practice Islam, more or less, means to practice Malay culture. Regarding the similarity between Semai religion and Malay folk religion, the Semai see Islam more adaptable with Semai adat practices. This in no sense means that the Semai are more inclined to convert to Islam because of these similarities; rather, it reveals how some Semai Muslims still attend the healing ceremonies conducted by *hala?* and practice *jampi* (incantations and spells).

In contrast, spiritual healing is a repeated theme both in Semai religion and Christianity. Sprinkling holy water in healing/religious ceremonies and casting out of demons and singing sessions with trance (Nicholas 1989) might be some likenesses between Christianity and Semai religion. Nevertheless, paradoxically this likeness makes a divergence point of two religions. The Christian missionaries preach the omnipotence of God and deny reliance on the spirits; therefore, all churches prohibit Christians from following their traditional beliefs to cast out interfering spirits. It has happened that some Semai try to challenge the Christian claims on the omnipotence of God:

¹⁰ See I. M. Lewis (2003) for a detailed discussion on two different type of spirit possession cults, he named central and peripheral cults. The relative difference between these two cults is that the central cults are inspired by the spirits which uphold public morality, and peripheral cults are inspired by those peripheral agencies that threaten public order (Lewis 2003: xiii-xiv).

We say that God is powerful, and sometimes the Orang Asli try to find out how powerful is God, so they cast spells over the pastor to magic him to bewitch him and challenge him. In fact it caused some discomforts for the pastor, but he overcame [an Anglican pastor worked in Cameron Highlands].

Christians are taught that the Jesus has the power to heal anyone who prays to him and believing in the name of Jesus frees man from the grip of all unseen powers (Shastri 1989: 129). Therefore, Semai Christians are not allowed to follow Semai religion and seek spirits' help for healing anymore. The Bible points to healing power of Jesus as a sign of his divine authority several times. Therefore, it is understandable how any alternative spiritual healing practice can be regarded as a satanic act and banned by the Christian authorities. Badarudin, a Semai *hala?* in Sungai Ruil said:

Christians don't believe in *hala?* practices, Islam can accept some of them. Christians say *hala?* things are like praying to devil. Some of the *gunik* and ghosts are not bad; some are kind, so why not we follow the kind ones. We don't pray them with any bad intention; it is for good and our benefit. We don't pray them as a god; we just want their power to cure the illness and the sick.

The church is exclusivist in believing in Jesus as the saviour and healer, and does not compromise this with Semai spiritual manipulation practices. However, there is a space to compromise Islamic beliefs with Semai religion. To explain the *hala?* career according to Islamic beliefs, another *hala?* told me 'like God and Satan, there are good and bad spirits. We employ good spirits to fight against bad spirits which cause illness and make trouble for people.'

Despite certain similarities between Semai religion and missionary religions, the missionary religions' idea of personal relationship with God and the concept of salvation were foreign to Semai society. Islam and Christianity both preach a personal relationship with God or Jesus that stands out against Semai religion idea about people's relationship with the supernatural. In the Semai religion, communication with the supernatural is delegated to *hala?* and through his mystical power and his spirit helper (*gunik*) he appeases the supernatural beings or even fights with them in the client's favour. 'Basically,' said Badarudin, '*hala?* asks the ghost politely to release the soul [of the sick], if the ghost refuses, then *hala?* will ask his *gunik* to fight the ghost.' The unseen world affects the Semai directly, but the people's access to the unseen world can only happen through the intermediary of the *hala?*. In contrast, in Christianity and Islam there is a mutual relationship between each person and the unseen. Therefore, it would be said that Islam and Christianity democratise the relationship with the supernatural by making it equally available to people.

Another decisive difference between the missionary religions and Semai religion is the existence of the concept of salvation in Christianity and Islam. Salvation is the state of the ultimate and mysterious fulfilment of all needs. In evaluative terms, salvation describes a quality of identity that is charged with moral meaning and emerges as a super-identity (Davis 2002: 145). Salvation in Christianity and Islam is a reason for living, a spiritual goal that is to be sought by all believers.

This concept of reaching this super-identity is absent in Semai religion. In Semai religion, the relationship with the supernatural is an attempt to manipulate it for immediate needs such as sickness and protection against beasts and natural disasters. The Semai repeatedly liken the *hala?* to physician who treats the sick, of course with an alternative method. Semai religion shows the pragmatic and immediacy attitude that characterises many tribal religions (Morris 2006: 313). It is more a means to overcome worldly difficulties and to make sense of daily experiences than promoting idealism of salvation. However, I heard some accounts about persons who went to jungle wilderness seeking mysterious experiences, perhaps to obtain the spiritual capabilities to become a *hala?* or to find a deeper meaning of life, attaining a super-identity or reaching to a reason for life, i.e. salvation. But these rare and infrequent cases hardly can be regarded as the general attitude of the Semai religiosity.

Furthermore, Islam and Christianity, in contrast to Semai religion, are well-defined and structured religions. Beliefs are outlined and objectively organised so that they are ready to present to other people as a set of Christian or Islamic beliefs. In Islam and Christianity, there are well-defined collective rites with patterned roles and clear stages of the rite and even predefined bodily movements of the participants. The clergies are an organised group that plays the role of the guardians of the religion, and are in charge of maintaining the standard ways of religiosity both in beliefs and practices. Both Islam and Christianity are doctrinal religions, whose adherents plan to spread their standardised beliefs and practices among diffused groups (Whitehouse 2008; Atkinson & Whitehouse 2011). The doctrinal mode of religiosity 'favouring high-frequency, low-arousal rituals, allowing large bodies of religious teachings to be stored in semantic memory, reproduced stably and spread efficiently as oral tradition' (Atkinson & Whitehouse 2011). In contrast, Semai religion is a non-centralised religion with no standardised beliefs and practices. One cannot find the concept of orthodoxy among the adherents of this religion. A healing ritual performance, for instance, has nuanced variations among Semai groups. The kind of *panta?* that the *hala?* puts on the sick for the therapeutic proposes are completely different and depends on inner perception of the *hala?*. However, to maintain and motivate a cultural tradition, ritual elements must be preserved in the participant's memory. Collective frequent rituals, like daily prayer or mass, are absent in Semai religion. However, emotional, yet occasional rituals of healing are the main means of transmission of the religious tradition. Semai religion as an imagistic mode of religiosity (cf: Whitehouse 2008), favours 'low-frequency, high-arousal rituals that must evince strong emotions to etch themselves into episodic memory if they are to have an enduring impact on the religious imagination and to be remembered accurately' (ibid.).

If we regard the *hala?* as the leader, leadership is passive and unorganised. In contrast to Christianity and Islam, the *hala?* is not a member of ecclesiastic hierarchy with the official authority to influence the content of religious knowledge; rather s/he is the focal point of religious network. As mentioned before, Semai religion is an integral part of the culture, and it does not constitute a distinct set of ideas and practices. Hence, it can be said that Semai religion is an informal religion. This puts it on the opposite side of the formal missionary religions of Islam and Christianity that are presented as integrated packages of beliefs and practices.

Conversion: from resistance to compliance

Conversion is an ambivalent term used positively by those in the religion to which one converts and negatively by that religion which one abandons (Taylor 1999); therefore, it is an evaluative term with diverse meanings among different social actors. The prevailing anthropological view, that is formulated by Geertz (1966), sees religion as a worldview, a way of constructing the reality that believers find uniquely meaningful and real. By conversion, the passage from one worldview to another happens involving both syncretism and breach, even though this is not a mere syncretism neither an absolute break with the previous social life. The conversion involves a process of 'continual embedding in forms of social practice and belief, in ritual dispositions and somatic experience' (Austin-Broos 2003: 2). While in East Asia it is not so unfamiliar to be part of more than one tradition, Islam and Christianity as the main missionary religions among the Orang Asli are totally exclusivist and do not tolerate multiple affiliations. Conversion is not just a personal decision and a spiritual shift, but it is an entry into a particular religious community that inevitably makes changes in traditional ways of life and social orientation. Nonetheless, the expressed reason for conversion is always a religious and emotional reason.

Religious laws are an integral part of Islam. Food restrictions, one month abstaining from eating and drinking from dawn to sunset during Ramadan, and five times daily prayers are fundamental in Islam. Following these obligatory Islamic laws are not so easy for the Semai. As Carey has pointed out (1976: 326), this was one of the factors that inhibited the Orang Asli from converting to Islam and led to the comparative failure of Islamic missionaries in the 1970s. Recognising this problem, nowadays Muslim missionaries are more lenient towards the religious shortcoming of Muslim neophytes. Even circumcision is not required of adult male converts. A Muslim religious teacher (*ustaz*) told me how they ignore dismissive behaviour of the Semai about Islamic laws and did not push them to follow all Islamic laws. In fact, only a few Semai Muslims observe religious laws like daily prayer and Ramadan fasting. In daily prayer times, the village mosques are almost empty. But, identificational practices such as wearing a scarf in public by Muslim women and participating in Islamic festivals with Malay/Muslim clothes are common practices among them. These are the ways that Semai Muslims identify themselves with Muslim/Malay society. Islamic dietary rules have such an identificational role as well. By following Islamic dietary rules (*halal* foods), the Semai symbolically separate themselves from the Semai non-Muslims. Following Islamic dietary rules is a symbolic device that Malays also use to separate themselves from significant Chinese and Indian ethnic groups in the country. Marking halal food and restaurants and distinguishing them from non-halal ones symbolically emphasises the ethnic separation in the country.

In the same way, Islamic dietary rules among the Semai Muslims play this role and are much in use when the Muslim identity is concerned. The Semai Muslim families, however, still do not avoid eating together with their non-Muslim relatives. 'My brother is not a Muslim, but we go to their home and eat with them and they come to our home and eat ... he just knows we are Muslim and does not prepare non-halal food for us,' said a Muslim woman in Lata Kinjang. Malays usually do not eat in non-Muslim restaurants or

food that is not prepared by non-Muslims. However, it is noteworthy that Malays usually do not have non-Muslim relatives.

For the Semai converting to Islam means entering the Muslim community of the country that is almost identical to Malay community. The Semai non-Muslims sometime refer to conversion to Islam as *moodz gɔb*, which literally means to enter to Malay and shows disapproval. In fact, a sense of hostility against Malays, but not Chinese and Indians, is observed among the Semai non-Muslims. Regarding the likeness of Semai religious beliefs and Malay folk religion and likeness of their physical appearance, Malays are more similar to the Semai than other major ethnic groups of the country. However, this resemblance can be the source of what Freud termed the narcissism of minor differences (Freud 1961: 199; 1961: 114), that is the feeling of strangeness and hostility caused by minor differences between two people who are otherwise alike. The narcissism of minor differences makes the inter-group cohesion easier and strengthens the sense of identity. In the case of the Semai, the very attempt of Malays to Islamise the Semai and fade the differences, have caused more hostility toward Malays among those Semai who resist accepting Islam. Some scholars criticise the assimilation function of the Orang Asli Islamisation and the government's financial incentives and "positive discrimination" for Muslim Orang Asli (Dentan et al. 1997: 142–4; Nicholas 2000: 98–104). The Orang Asli receive some money as a reward when they convert to Islam; and the amount varies in one state to another.¹¹ In Cameron Highlands (Pahang State), for example, they receive 400 Malaysian Ringgit (roughly 130 USD).

According to Islamic law a Muslim, whether male or female, is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim. Consequently, marriage is one of the main reasons for converting to Islam among the Semai; as it always has been one of the reasons for converting to Islam (Dutton 1999). Many of the Semai, Muslims and non-Muslims as well, point to marriage as the main reason for becoming Muslim. Acknowledging this fact, state government of Kelantan state offers 10,000 Malaysian Ringgit (about 2,900 USD) to each Muslim preacher who marries an Orang Asli woman and naturally converts her to Islam (The Star newspaper 2006). Even though, mass conversions to Islam have been more or less a result of missions' activities among the Orang Asli. The people of Lata Kinjang, the oldest Semai Muslim village, converted to Islam some decades ago through the Muslim preachers' activities, yet marrying remains another means of adding the number of Muslims. The people of Sungai Ruil, with about 200 Muslims, also started converting to Islam through the activities of Islamic missions, and now they have a resident ustaz who lives in the village with his family.

Considering the religious obligation to observe the Islamic laws and the fact that according to Islamic law once somebody converts to Islam, s/he is not allowed to change his/her religion, make the conversion to Islam a matter of hesitation. A Semai woman told me how she had been hesitating to accept the marriage propose of a Semai Muslim for

¹¹ Christian missionaries also time by time provide the Orang Asli community with some material goods and free services such as health services. Nonetheless, Islamic missions that are endorsed and supported by the government are more apt to be criticised as the agents of government policies rather than pure religious missions.

three years, thinking about all commitments that being Muslim and living among a Muslim family would have brought about.

In contrast to Islamic missions, Christian missions are affiliated to separate church organisations that are run by the Chinese, the Indian and indigenous people of Malaysia. The Methodist community in Ulu Geruntom is a well-developed religious community. They have their own Semai clergy who regularly conduct the Christian services in the village. These Semai clergy work as missionaries among other Orang Asli villages. Bah Rahu, a Christian clergyman from Ulu Geruntom, has evangelised other Semai settlements; for example the people of Sungai Liririk in the Cenderiang area are entirely Methodist Christians as a result of his effort. In Cameron Highlands, the SIB church (a local Malaysian Church) with a group of Iban missionaries works among the Semai. Therefore, being Christian keeps the Semai separate from Malays.

The Semai do not seem very zealous in religious affairs and rather look at religious conversion as a personal matter. However, they express their discontent with the conversion to other religions by saying that if people, especially the young ones, forget Semai adat they will not be Semai anymore. This sense of identity loss is the source of resistance against new religions. Then why do they convert to Islam and Christianity? Undoubtedly, there are more factors than identity involved in the Semai conversion.

In addition to the financial incentives, it seems that other mechanisms are involved in the Semai conversion to Islam and Christianity. In the case of Islam, the Semai's emotional 'hate-enamoured' ambivalence (cf. Lacan 1998) towards Malays is the most important non-discursive cause. The Semai have developed an emotional ambivalence of admiration-dislike towards privileged and dominant Malays (cf. Freud 2004: 48, 57, 157). Therefore, conversion to Islam coincides with enamoured/admiration pole of the emotional ambivalence and resistance to Islam with the hate/dislike pole. As some writers have mentioned (Endicott & Dentan 2004a), some Semai and Temiar have become Christian to escape Islamic proselytising. In this case, conversion to Christianity is a kind of resistance to Islam. Being Christian lets the Semai maintain their distinct identity.

However, when the Semai Muslims are asked about their difference with Malays, they usually say that there is 'no difference, we marry with Malays and follow the same religion.' Accepting Islam comes with intermarriage with Malays and practice of the Muslim/Malay kinship system, and more practice of Malays language both in religious ceremonies and inside families. Being Muslim not only changes the content of the Semai identity, but also loosens the ethnic boundaries with Malays. Consequently, the most distinctive signs of ethnic identity pales into insignificance in comparison to the Semai non-Muslims. The Semai Muslims move toward identification with the Muslim/Malay sector of the larger society.

The Semai Christians accordingly have a diverse attitude towards the conversion and traditional beliefs. A Semai pastor told me that the traditional beliefs are killing the people and hurt their health, 'Sometimes *hala?* orders some food restrictions that are not good ... the Bible says that there is nothing wrong with food, God created all these and created you to live.' He added:

The first thing is the beliefs that make the people backward. They say that malaria is because of the spirits, we teach them that this is because of these mosquitoes. Diarrhoea is another problem, and they say it is because of the spirits ... they really believe this.

In the same way, the Semai Muslims also acknowledge what they have gained through conversion to Islam, i.e. the things like the knowledge that they gained through Islamic instructions that make them more open-minded. Through participating in Islamic ceremonies and festivals, such as *fitr* celebration (*hari raya aildifitr*), the Semai Muslims definitely have more opportunities to mix with Malay people and a bigger society.

Furthermore, many of the Semai converts have a spiritual or religious story for his/her conversion. Pure spiritual and religious reasons for conversion are almost neglected and trivialised by most scholars (Rambo 1999), but a religious insight or experience of an altered spiritual conscience are not absent among the Semai converts.

'It was Christmas time' a Christian Semai said, 'and I absorbed by a Christmas song in the chapel ... on the way back home I was in an altered condition of mind and then I decided to become a Christian.' Likewise Muslims say about such religious experiences as opening the heart and having a call, as their motive to conversion.

Conclusion

Semai religion is integrated in the entire Semai custom, which is referred as *adat* by the people. This religion is an indigenous religion with close ties with the landscape and lifestyle of the people. Therefore, this religion is a property of Semai society and lacks the deliberate tendency for expansion of its jurisdiction beyond Semai territory.

The missionary religions of Islam and Christianity that had already entered to Malaysia extended their global interests to the Orang Asli people and invited them to their universal truth. This caused an inevitable local-global interaction between an expanding and a non-expanding entity that became complicated by the ethnic power-relation in Malaysia as well as non-discursive factors. Islam is the official religion of the Malaysian state, and Islamic missions are backed by the government. In fact, there is a political will to assimilate the Orang Asli to Malays as ruling people of the country, as opposed to major migrant groups of Chinese and Indians. As Islam is almost identical with Malays, becoming a Muslim, more or less, means to follow Malay customs. Regarding the common beliefs and practices between Malay folk religion and Semai religion, it paradoxically allows continuation of some Semai religious elements and at the same time leads to more proximity to Malays. Christian missions consider the Semai religious belief and practices as perverted beliefs and practices and prohibit the Semai Christians from following their traditional religion. However, except the cultural elements that they regard as religious, Christian missionaries leave them free to practice their customs and language to keep their distinct ethnic identity.

Being subordinate to Malays, the Semai have developed a subconscious emotional ambivalence towards Malays, which is admiration of the privileged and hatred for the dominant authority. As the Semai Muslims nourish the admiration pole, to the extent that

they identify themselves with Malays, the Semai non-Muslims nourish the dislike feeling and resist the Islamisation. Acceptance of Christianity can also be a result of the reluctance to convert to Islam and enter Malay. However, the patient residing of Christian missionaries among the Semai and letting them practice their own language and kinship system are other significant factors in the Semai conversion to Christianity instead of Islam.

Most of the previous works pointed to the unfavourable aspects of missionary activities among the Semai and the Orang Asli in general, such as the political plans behind the Islamisation/Malayisation and tensions between convert and non-convert factions of the villages (Dentan et al. 1997: 142-4; Kroes 2002: 242; Benjamin 2003: 51; Hooker 2003: 245; Nah 2003). The Semai's resistance to missionary activities because of the cultural dislocation they cause is a reality; however, another equally important aspect of reality is the converts' reality and their approving attitude towards their allied religion and the changes it has brought about.

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POVZETEK

Misijonarske religije kažejo nagnjenost k širjenju svojega področja in širjenja svojih resnic do ljudi. Ti se lahko misijonarski dejavnosti uprejo ali pa se jim podredijo. Semaiji iz Malezije so podvrženi misijonarskim dejavnostim krščanskih in islamskih misijonov. Krščanske misije so začele tam delovati že v 30. letih 20. stoletja, medtem ko so se islamske misije začele razvijati, ko je vlada začela igrati bolj aktivno vlogo v islamskih vabilih (da'wah) v 70. letih 20. stoletja. Odziv Semaijev je zapleten zaradi političnih in kulturnih kontekstov misijonov kot tudi zaradi podzavestnega nediskurzivnega konteksta spreobrnjenja. Islamsko misijonarsko dejavnost podpira tudi vlada, saj jo vidi kot del načrta za asimilacijo Semaijev v malajsko skupnost. V nasprotju s tem pa so krščanski misijoni nevladni in jih ne vodijo Malajci. Tako krščanstvo kot islam imata točke kompatibilnosti in nekompatibilnosti s semaisko kulturo in jo zaradi tega hibridizirata. Tako kot na eni strani kulturne motnje in nevarnost izumrtja identitete povzročajo odpor do misijonov pa verska čustva in morebitne finančne spodbude vodijo k pozitivnemu odzivu na misijone in na spremembe, ki jih ti prinašajo s seboj. Čustvena ambivalentnost do Malajcev je fantazmična oziroma nediskurzivna dimenzija spreobrnjenja, pri čemer spreobrnjenje v islam nakazuje na simpatiziranje z Malajci in identifikacije z njimi, na drugi strani pa lahko odpor do islamizacije ali celo spreobrnjenje v krščanstvo razumemo kot odpor do Malajcev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: spreobrnjenje, krščanstvo, identiteta, islam, Malaja, misijoni, Semai

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