



Robert Knox Dentan, *Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among the Semai of Malaysia*

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. xiii + 277 pages, b/w photos, sketches, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$80.00; paper, US\$35.95; ISBN 0-7425-5329-9/978-0-7425-5329-3 (cloth); ISBN 0-7425-5330-2/978-0-7425-5330-9 (paper).

ROBERT KNOX DENTAN has written a very interesting yet unconventional ethnographic account. The book is about the Semai, culture change, and creating and nurturing a fragile peace. Dentan, an anthropologist, conducted fieldwork among the Semai in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s. His knowledge of Semai culture and their perceptions of the world is extensive. I find many more positive than negative elements in this book, which is filled with thought-provoking ideas and material.

One strength is that Dentan fully appreciates the complexity of Semai peacefulness and the magnitude of the challenges to their continued survival as a people. He skillfully avoids presenting a saccharine view of the Semai and their nonviolence. We learn that the Semai, like people everywhere, have their foibles. Dentan describes, for example, that the Semai dispute resolution assembly, the *bicaraa*, does not always work. It is refreshing in this book to be presented with some of the messy complexities that some ethnographers sweep under the rug.

Dentan also deserves praise for bringing his ethnographic descriptions richly alive. Several times in *Overwhelming Terror*, Dentan treats his readers to what he calls ethnographic fiction. Based on documented facts, the author creates narrative tales with fictional characters, based on real people and happenings. For example, instead of simply recounting historical accounts of slave raiding, Dentan brings the horrendous practice alive by creating a fictional character, an old man who raided the Orang Asli in his youth and who also had been abused as a slave himself, and lets the old man speak about what he endured, what atrocities he took part in, and how he makes sense out of it all at the end of his life. There are twists to this tale, which I won't reveal here, but the result of Dentan's ethnographic friction is to convey vivid and eloquent insights into Malay and Semai culture.

In a different chapter, Dentan's ethnographic fiction presents Semai trancing rituals and cosmology not only from the perspective of the Semai, but also from the view of the demons that are summoned and transformed by the Semai. Dentan also displays his talents as a writer and anthropologist as he uses the ethnographic fiction to present, in a very human way, the thoughts and feelings of a young disillusioned Semai wife who leaves her unfaithful husband juxtaposed with the agony that the husband feels as he longs in desperation to have his wife and children back again. The story simultaneously illustrates the Semai predilection for avoidance as a response to conflict, that the involvement of third-party mediator-arbitrators doesn't always work, and that traditional Semai culture is undergoing change.

The Semai and other Orang Asli such as the Jahai, Chewong, and Batek are known for their peaceful dispositions. For example, HOWELL (1988, 150) points

out that peaceful coexistence is a trademark of the aboriginal cultures of Peninsular Malaysia: “None of these has any history of warfare, and overt acts of aggression are very rare.” SLUYS (2000, 446), who studied the Jahai, concurs: “Nonviolence features in all hunter-gatherer-swiddener and swiddener-hunter-gatherer cultures of Peninsular Malaysia.” An exploration of Semai peacefulness is the central goal of Dentan’s book. He explains the tripartite plan of the book as encompassing (1) the origin of Semai nonviolence; (2) how the Semai keep the peace; and (3) the destruction of their peace.

Over the course of the book, Dentan argues the thesis that Semai nonviolence stems from slave raiding. The Orang Asli response to slave raiding was to flee rather than to fight back. Thus one meaning of the double entendre in the book’s title is that the Semai faced an overwhelming terror, which was slave raiding. The other meaning involves the ways that the Semai have coped with the terror, generally by flight or surrender, so as to overwhelm the terror and thus survive the waves of brutality that slave raiding brought them.

DENTAN (2004 and the publication under review) develops the thesis that the Semai did not fight violence with violence when slave raiders kidnapped women and children because they realized they were outgunned. Resistance would have been suicidal. Dentan proposes that Semai nonviolence developed as “a reasonable response to a political economy based on slave raiding and coerced trade” (14). He writes: “Raided by merciless human child abusers, menaced from above and below by brutal monsters, surrounded by shape-shifting demons, traditional Semai felt powerless” (110). Dentan proposes that the Semai responded to powerlessness through spiritual surrender: They both identified with the oppressor and engaged in learned helplessness, which included the development of adaptive nonviolence when faced with brutal, more powerful enemies.

This is an interesting argument and it may be true or partly true. However, I must raise the question whether we can really attribute the nonviolent values and corresponding peaceful behavior of the Semai and their neighbors to the fact that they were plagued over centuries by slave raiders. Whereas such an explanation is possible, of course, I wonder if it places too much emphasis on an external reason for Semai peacefulness.

An alternative scenario is that the Semai and other nonviolent Orang Asli of the Malaysian Peninsula were already peaceful, nonwarring peoples before the slave raiders began to wreak sadistic havoc on their lives. There are, after all, nonviolent and nonwarring societies elsewhere in the world that were not subjected to the cruelty of slave raiding so, clearly, nonviolence can develop for other reasons besides the existence of an outside threat (BONTA 1993, 1997; FRY 2006, 2009).

One slight frustration that this reader experienced with the book is that in various places extraneous material such as quotations and poems are not clearly integrated with the ethnographic material being presented. Perhaps I’m being daft, but the relevance of some such material to the Semai was not always clear, and in some cases I think it even broke the flow of the discussion.

Overwhelming Terror will be of interest to Asian specialists, anthropologists, and scholars of peace and violence. The book presents an intriguing and thought-pro-

voking treatment of Semai culture and nonviolence set against a backdrop of rapid social change. Dentan is to be applauded for giving complex topics the careful consideration that they require.

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