



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Exploring the indigenous Semai's enduring connection with cultivation, proverbs, and worldview*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/227218/>

Version: Published Version

Other:

Kamarudin Azhar, NI orcid.org/0009-0007-5763-7829 (2025) Exploring the indigenous Semai's enduring connection with cultivation, proverbs, and worldview. University of Leeds.

<https://doi.org/10.48785/100/332>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



EXPLORING THE INDIGENOUS SEMAI'S ENDURING CONNECTION WITH CULTIVATION, PROVERBS, AND WORLDVIEW



 <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/332>

Nur Iman Kamarudin Azhar 

The largest group of indigenous people are the Senoi, also known as the Central Aslians (Senoic), comprising approximately 56% of the indigenous population in Peninsular Malaysia (Abd Rahman et al., 2020; Benjamin, 2012). They are primarily found along the Banjaran Titiwangsa in the states of Perak, Pahang, and Kelantan (Semai, Temiar), in central Pahang (Jah Hut, Che Wong), coastal Selangor (Mah Meri), and south-central Pahang (Semoq Beri). While some indigenous subgroups have established permanent farming operations – managing rubber, oil palm, and cocoa plantations – or have joined

the labour force in skilled and professional roles, others continue to depend on the forest for their livelihoods (Nicholas, 2000).

The majority of indigenous Semai communities are spread out along the Banjaran Titiwangsa, which forms the backbone of Peninsular Malaysia, spanning the states of Perak and Pahang

geographical isolation. Meanwhile, the indigenous Semai communities in Pahang also share linguistic features with other indigenous groups in the state, such as the indigenous Temiar communities (Abd Ghani, 2015).

In Perak, anthropologists divide the indigenous Semai communities into two groups: the highland and lowland (Edo,

The majority of indigenous Semai communities are spread out along the Banjaran Titiwangsa, which forms the backbone of Peninsular Malaysia, spanning the states of Perak and Pahang.

(Mohd Aslam & Abdullah, 2004). The differences between the Semai in Perak and Pahang include geographic locations, language and dialect, along with their livelihoods and economic practices. The indigenous Semai communities are scattered around parts of Central Perak such as Kuala Kangsar, Hilir Perak, Bagan Datuk, Kinta, Batang Padang, and Manjung; Southern Perak, such as Teluk Intan, Tanjung Malim, Sungkai, Trolak, Behrang, Bagan Datoh, Hutan Melintang, Slim River, Bidor, Sitiawan and Tapah; and Western Pahang, such as Kuala Lipis, Cameron Highland, and Raub (JAKOA, 2025).

The differences between language and dialect are that the dialect spoken by the indigenous Semai communities in Perak is often considered to have certain variations compared to other dialects, notably Lanoh and Semnam, which are mainly influenced by their limited contact with neighbouring ethnic groups and their

1998). The highland indigenous Semai communities are more adapted to activities that rely on resources from the forest, such as hunting, fishing, gathering, and farming. In contrast, the lowland indigenous Semai communities have traditionally adopted a peasant lifestyle, engaging in labour and small-scale trading of jungle produce. Today, they are more exposed to the modern economy.

In Pahang, the indigenous Semai communities are generally more involved in subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering. Their economic activities are closely tied to the forest and river systems (Dentan, 1971). Some traditional crafts, like weaving and basket-making, are still common in these more rural communities (Dentan, 2012).

The language of the indigenous Semai communities is a Mon-Khmer language belonging to the Aslian family of languages. Aslian languages are spoken in

areas of Peninsular Malaysia and the southernmost part of Thailand. According to the Atlas of the World's list of endangered languages, the indigenous Semai people are categorised as severely endangered, and their language is only spoken by about 15,000 people (Moseley, 2010). A language that is severely endangered implies that it is spoken by the older generation, including

communities in Pos Lenjang and Pos Lanai, in the district of Kuala Lipis, Pahang. The methodology adopted in this study was laboratory procedures, namely collecting 18 types of paddy samples from Pos Lanai and Pos Lenjang, DNA extraction, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification, molecular analysis, and participant interviews. The results included an index unit matrix and a

The indigenous Semai communities maintain the traditional practice of planting rice, which has a maturation period of 130 to 150 days, making it suitable for planting only once a year.

grandparents; while the parent generation may understand the language, they do not speak it with their children or among themselves (Renganathan et al., 2018).

The purpose of this blog is to explore Semai communities' relationship with land, language, and traditions through the lenses of cultivation, proverbs, and worldview. It draws on scholarly studies to explore the diversity of their traditional rice varieties, the richness of their culturally significant proverbs grounded in nature, and the spiritual cosmologies that shape community life. The aim is to celebrate the richness of their culture but also to highlight some challenges they face with the advent of global modernisation.

The cultivation of paddy hills

Sah et al. (2024) conducted a study that explored the varieties of traditional paddy hill among indigenous Semai

dendrogram.

The irrigation system in the area of Pos Lanai and Pos Lenjang heavily rely on rainfall, springs, and the flow of small rivers. Therefore, paddy cultivation activities are carried out after the dry season ends, with the arrival of the monsoon winds that bring rain change, typically around August to September. The indigenous Semai communities maintain the traditional practice of planting rice, which has a maturation period of 130 to 150 days, making it suitable for planting only once a year, unlike modern varieties that can be planted twice a year.

The extinction or loss of traditional rice varieties poses a threat to future generations. This extinction is driven by external factors and the inherent lack of sustainability of these paddy varieties, which indirectly leads to a decrease in the genetic stock of traditional rice in the

community. The interviews conducted revealed that in the past, there were nearly 50 traditional rice varieties in the community, but now only about 20 varieties remain.

This study concluded by discussing a dendrogram, which showed that all the traditional rice varieties found in Pos Lenjang and Pos Lanai possess high genetic diversity and are thus unique. The range of paddy length for 18 types of paddies is between 44-60mm; the range of paddy width is between 12-15 mm; and the range of paddy weight is between 23-33 grams. The genetic connection index between 18 types of paddies shows several similarities and differences. While some traditional rice varieties are genetically similar, others are more distinct, reflecting the rich diversity preserved through generations of indigenous Semai farming and seed-sharing traditions.

Nature-inspired proverbs

Mahali and Samaah (2013) executed a study that examined indigenous Semai

with five respondents from the indigenous Semai communities.

This study incorporated a comparison between Malay, Indonesian, Japanese and Chinese proverbs that were similar in terms of animals depicted and implicit meanings. This was significant, as the lack of documentation of indigenous Semai communities' language and culture puts them at risk of cultural extinction due to modernisation.

The findings from this study showed that animals like tigers, monkeys, and mice are considered to possess negative traits. Meanwhile, animals like cats are considered to embody positive traits. This distinction reflects how the Semai community associates animals with desirable or undesirable human characteristics based on their observed behaviours and roles in daily life. Next, the colour of an animal works as an indicator for describing the colour of ripe and unripe fruits. Furthermore, the physical appearance of an animal works as an indicator for describing measurements.

This distinction reflects how the Semai community associates animals with desirable or undesirable human characteristics based on their observed behaviours and roles in daily life.

communities' proverbs that refer to animal behaviours and the natural environment to describe situations, human characteristics, colours, measurements, shapes and the five human senses. The methodology applied in this study included in-depth interviews

Finally, the instant reflexes of animals serve as an indicator for describing situations.

On the other hand, Samaah and Abdul (2014) completed a study on the indigenous Semai communities'

mathematical measurements, which are based on proverbs related to animals, local plants, and the environment. The methodology adopted in this study was in-depth interviews with two informants – one from Kuala Koyan and the other from Kuala Lipis, in the district of Lipis, Pahang.

The findings of this study focused on the meanings of the proverbs, as well as the explanations rooted in concepts of measurement and the thought processes of the speakers. Humans speak in different ways because they think in different ways – and they think differently because their language offers distinct ways of expressing the meanings conveyed in their surrounding world. In Semai communities' case, mathematical measurements such as area, size, width, height, temperature, distance, length, water volume, weight, time, depth and quantity are all described and calculated based on proverbs that are related to animals, plants, and environments.

This study concluded that indigenous Semai communities' measurement

human thought.

Beliefs and worldview

Bidin et al. (2013) conducted a study with the aim of documenting the cultures and heritage of the indigenous Semai communities. The methodology applied in this study was oral history technique, where the recording and storage of interviews with selected individuals aided in the reconstruction of the past. Seven interviews were conducted with seven respondents in Pos Dipang, in the district of Kampar, Perak.

There are plenty of ways knowledge can be passed down from one generation to another, notably through illustrations, writing, and demonstrations. Oral tradition is knowledge passed through singing and storytelling. Indigenous Semai communities today have also gained advantages through the introduction of technology such as computers, mobile phones, satellite TV, and DVDs, which are quickly becoming part of their traditional ways of life. However, not enough efforts have been made to document the culture,

There are plenty of ways knowledge can be passed down from one generation to another, notably through illustrations, writing, and demonstrations.

methods are recorded and expressed using language based on the natural resources they possess and their daily activities. This confirms the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a theory of linguistic relativity, which states that there is a relationship between language, culture, and

heritage, ways of life, and folk traditions of indigenous Semai communities.

The research findings showed that indigenous Semai communities' deep belief in spirits and supernatural beings greatly influences their everyday lives.

Appeasing these spirits is considered essential to their daily routines. They revere both mythical creatures, like dragons, and real animals, such as snakes and dogs, hoping these beings will safeguard their land and community. Their understanding of the environment and nature is closely tied to their beliefs about life and the identity of their society. Indigenous Semai communities' oral

their oral traditions.

On the other hand, Mohammad Aslam and Abdullah (2004) conducted a study that discussed the unique customs and culture of the indigenous people of Semai, which are closely related to non-human creatures and the natural world. Indigenous Semai communities are known as peaceful people. Cruel acts are not

These stories serve as evidence of the importance Semai elders place on teaching traditional beliefs and fostering a stronger sense of identity.

traditions are deeply embedded with moral lessons that symbolise their cultural and spiritual way of life. Their folktales and stories are rich with teachings that have been handed down through generations. Each story represents a dynamic, context-driven narrative that intertwines with their beliefs. Indigenous Semai communities have maintained key aspects of their culture, especially their belief systems, in contrast to surrounding cultures (Chua et al., 2021). These stories serve as evidence of the importance Semai elders place on teaching traditional beliefs and fostering a stronger sense of identity.

This study concluded that rich folklore, folk dance, and tangible expressions are important and necessary in preserving identity for current and future generations. Semai folkloric practices are considered important sources for researchers to reflexively transcribe, interpret, describe and further appreciate

applicable in their culture or daily lives due to their deep respect for the natural environment and spiritual beings that live among the community.

The findings of this study focused on the noble values, beliefs and practices harnessed within the native community, including spiritual beings such as Nyenang, Maklikat and Nyaniik, and concepts such as Tenghak, Terlajj, Srenglook, Puhnan, Tarok and Ngoi. For instance, Nyenaang is regarded as a god-like force, Maklikat serves as its messenger, while Nyaniik directly influences daily life, rewarding respectful behaviour but punishing transgressions with misfortunes. Similarly, Tenghaak represents the concept of sin and retribution, Terlajj relates to divine punishment for mocking sacred beings, and Srenglook warns against breaking promises.

This study concluded that indigenous

Semai communities' worldview helps them to gain social, economic, and political stability. Their traditional customs, taboos, arts and crafts, and beliefs help them develop and sustain their background and identities as native people of Malaysia. This serves as a helpful point in preserving their culture for the current and future generation as the community navigates modernisation.

While they are demonstrating resilience and adaptation, there is also an urgent need for documentation, preservation, and support from wider society to ensure these indigenous perspectives are not lost.

References

Abd Ghani, A. (2015). The teaching of indigenous Orang Asli language in

Their traditional customs, taboos, arts and crafts, and beliefs help them develop and sustain their background and identities as native people of Malaysia.

Conclusion

This blog offered insights into the Semai people's connection with their land, language, and traditions through the lenses of cultivation, proverbs, and worldview. The aim was to provide a broad understanding of the Semai in the new millennium, celebrating their cultural authenticity while remaining transparent about the challenges they face with the advent of global modernisation. Drawing from scholarly studies, it explored the diversity of their traditional rice varieties, the richness of their culturally significant proverbs grounded in nature, and the spiritual cosmologies that shape community life. These cultural practices are not merely remnants of the past but living knowledge systems that continue to inform the Semai's identity and values today. Yet, as global modernisation progresses, the Semai face increasing challenges: linguistic endangerment, the erosion of oral traditions, and pressure to conform to external economic systems.

Peninsular Malaysia. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 208, 253–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.201>

Abd Rahman, S., Mohd Said, H., & Rashid Ali, S. (2020). Exploring development of Indigenous entrepreneurship among the Semai community at Batang Padang District Perak, Malaysia. In Ma'ruf, Sri Oktavia, & Sari Lenggogeni (Eds.), *Proceedings of Tourism Development Centre International Conference: Sustainable Tourism Development in Disaster Prone Destination* (pp. 269–280). Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
<https://repo.bunghatta.ac.id/8636/1/TD-CIC%202019.pdf>

Benjamin, G. (2012). The Aslian languages of Malaysia and Thailand: An assessment. In P. K. Austin & S. McGill (Eds.), *Language Documentation and Description* (Vol. 11, pp. 136–230). SOAS University of London.

<https://doi.org/10.25894/ldd181>

Bidin, S., Saad, S., Aziz, N. A., & Rahman, A. A. (2013). Oral tradition as the principal means for the cross-generational transfer of knowledge to illuminate Semai people's beliefs. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 90, 730–736.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.07.146>

Chua, R. Y., Kadirvelu, A., Yasin, S., & Park, M. S.-A. (2021). An Exploratory Model of Family Resilience Processes and Functioning: A Cultural Perspective of the Semai Indigenous Communities in Perak, Malaysia. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 52(6), 567–582.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002202212111028297>

Dentan, R. K. (1971). Some Senoi Semai planting techniques. *Economic Botany*, 25(2), 136–159.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02860075>

Dentan, R. K. (2012). Culture summary: Semai. *Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF World Cultures)*.
<https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=an06-000>

Edo, J. (1998). *Claiming our ancestors' land: An ethnohistorical study of the Seng-Oi land rights in Perak* [Doctoral Thesis, The Australian National University].
<https://doi.org/10.25911/5D67B624F32D4>

Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli [JAKOA] (2025). *Suku kaum Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia* [Indigenous ethnic

groups of Peninsular Malaysia]. Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli.

<https://www.jakoa.gov.my/orang-asli/suku-kaum/>

Mahali, S. N. H., & Saamah, M. R. (2013). Haiwan sebagai perlambangan dalam peribahasa Orang Semai [Animal symbolisms in Semai proverbs]. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 13(1).
<http://journalarticle.ukm.my/6045/1/2224-4401-1-SM.pdf>

Mohammad Aslam, M. M., & Abdullah, S. (2004). Pembentukan nilai-nilai murni masyarakat Semai melalui konsep pandang dunia (world view): Satu analisis awal [The formation of the decent behaviour of the Semai community through the concept of worldview: An initial analysis]. In *Seminar Antarabangsa Nilai dalam Komuniti Pasca Modernisme (SIVIC 2004)* (pp. 1–10).
<https://repo.uum.edu.my/id/eprint/1874/>

Moseley, C. (Ed.). (2010). *Atlas of the world's languages in danger* (3rd ed.). UNESCO Publishing.
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/angeredlanguages/atlas>

Nicholas, C. (2000). The Orang Asli and the contest for resources: Indigenous politics, development and identity in Peninsular Malaysia (IWGIA Document No. 95). *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*.
<https://iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/305-books/2663-the-orang-asli-and-the-contest-for-resources-indigenous-politics-development-and-identity-in-peninsular-malaysia.html>

Renganathan, S., & Kral, I. (2018). Digital preservation of language, cultural knowledge and traditions of the Indigenous Semai. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 53, p. 02001). EDP Sciences.
<https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20185302001>

<http://ebuletin.mardi.gov.my/index.php/penerbitan/159-2024/bil-41/1053-kepelbagaian-varieti-padi-tradisional-di-komuniti-orang-asli-semai-di-pos-lenjang-dan-pos-lanai-lipis-pahang>

Saamah, M. R., & Abdul, A. H. (2014). Konsep dan bentuk metrologi dalam peribahasa suku kaum Semai di Lembah Jelai, Pahang [Concept and forms of metrology in the proverbs of the Semai ethnic group in the Jelai Valley, Pahang]. *Pendeta: Jurnal Bahasa, Pendidikan dan Sastra Melayu*, 5, 39–58.
<https://myjurnal.mohe.gov.my/public/article-view.php?id=85831>

Sah, M. S. M., Ab Razak, M. S. F., Othman, M. R., Muhammad, N. I. A. R., & Hisham, B. B. (2024). Kepelbagaian varieti padi tradisional di komuniti Orang Asli Semai di Pos Lenjang dan Pos Lanai, Lipis, Pahang [Diversity of traditional rice varieties of the Orang Asli Semai tribe in Pos Lenjang and Pos Lanai, Lipis, Pahang]. *Buletin Teknologi MARDI*, 41, 139–148.

