

# The Use of Rattan by a Semai Community in West Malaysia

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From March 1982 to March 1983, I stayed in West Malaysia, during which time about 10 months were spent in a small community of aboriginal "Semai" people in the Batang Padang District near Tapah (see Fig. 1). The community I studied live in a forested area at ca. 600 m a.s.l. and consisted of around 70 people. The people lead a semi-nomadic existence and practise a form of "ladang" (shifting cultivation) as well as hunting, fishing, and food-gathering in the forest. In addition, various products of "ladang" and the forest are occasionally sold. The latter include durian (*Durio zibethinus*) and rattan canes. In the daily life of the community, rattan still plays a very important role. Some of the products manufactured will be surveyed; however, a full discussion of all uses made of rattan would make this paper too lengthy.

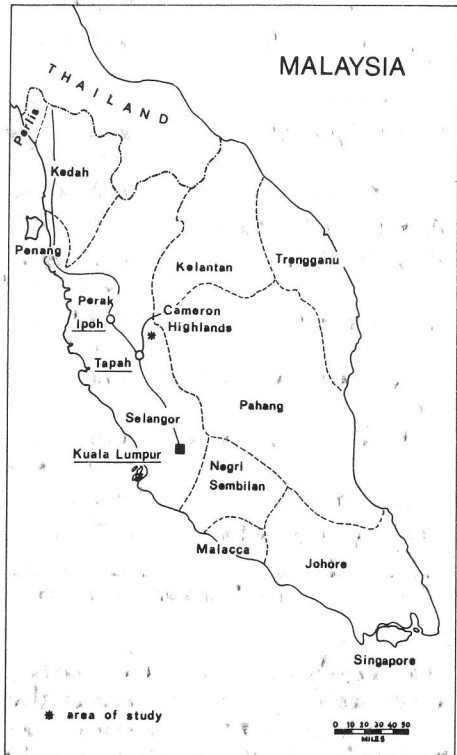
The species of rattan occurring in the study area are enumerated in Table 1 below. In general the scientific classification (Dransfield 1979) agrees closely with the Semai classification, but as one can see in a few cases, the Semai distinguish more than one taxon, where according to Dransfield only one species is involved. \*Indicates those species most often utilized by the Semai.

## Main Artifacts Made of Rattan

The uses of rattan can best be discussed under four headings: a) house-building, b) basketry, c) traps, d) other products.

a) *House-building*. The Semai house is

built off the ground (see Fig. 2). The poles and the framework mainly consist of bamboo. *Calamus diepenhorstii* is the species used to lash together the poles (Fig. 3). This species and also *C. javensis* and *Kortalsia scortechinii* are utilized for binding the walls and floors which are made of split bamboo. The roof is made of leaves of various palms, such as *Arenga wester-*



1. Location of the study area in West Malaysia.

Table 1. List of rattan species in the study area.

Name	Local Name	Use
<i>Calamus blumei</i> Becc.	coonk <sup>1</sup> cemeeh	see <i>C. javensis</i> , but this species is very rare
* <i>C. diepenhorstii</i> Miq.	coonk juk	house construction, manufacture of baskets, adzes, traps; fruits edible
<i>C. exilis</i> Griff.	coonk berber	binding
<i>C. filipendulus</i> Becc.	coonk ? (local name unknown)	binding
<i>C. insignis</i> Griff. var. <i>longispinosus</i> J. Dransf.	coonk gertas	construction of traps, baskets and other household articles
* <i>C. javensis</i> Bl.	coonk stook, coonk seek	manufacture of musical instruments, traps, basket covers
<i>C. manan</i> Miq.	coonk serpeek	rarely used
<i>C. ornatus</i> Bl.	coonk bantak	medicinal and ritual use
<i>C. peregrinus</i> Furt.	coonk beet	rarely used, fruits edible
<i>C. viridispinus</i> Becc.	coonk ceguup	rarely used (in same way as <i>C. javensis</i> )
<i>Daemonorops brachystachys</i> Furt.	coonk kanuul	fruits and cabbage eaten
<i>D. didymophylla</i> Becc.	coonk jernang	manufacture of traps and baskets
<i>D. geniculata</i> (Griff.) Mart.	coonk bala	fruits and cabbage eaten
* <i>D. grandis</i> (Griff.) Mart.	coonk spaal	leaves for construction of roofs, fishing rods and baskets; fruits and cabbage edible
<i>D. kunstleri</i> Becc.	coonk cercer	cabbage edible
<i>D. macrophylla</i> Becc.	coonk moh leek	occasionally used for manufacturing household articles
<i>D. oligophylla</i> Becc.	coonk moh leek	as above
<i>D. verticillaris</i> (Griff.) Mart.	coonk tunggal	as above
<i>Korthalsia rigida</i> Bl.	coonk celdool, coonk tangklah	medicinal use
<i>K. scortechinii</i> Becc.	coonk haak, coonk ncuk	binding material
<i>Myrialepis paradoxa</i> (Kurz.) J. Dransf.	coonk taluut	manufacture of various artifacts, butt cones of darts
<i>Plectocomia elongata</i> Mart. ex. Bl.	coonk peniil, coonk suaak	fruits and flowers sold for decorations
<i>P. dransfieldiana</i> Madulid	coonk ceet	fruits eaten, flowers sold for decorations
* <i>Plectocomiopsis geminiflora</i> (Griff.) Mart.	coonk lak	medicinal use, manufacture of baskets and various traps

<sup>1</sup> The 'c' in Semai to be pronounced as ch in church.

*houtii* and *Daemonorops grandis*. Ladang houses are temporary constructions that are sometimes built on very steep slopes receiving much wind, in which case the construction is supported by means of guy

lines made of whole canes of *Calamus diepenhorstii*.

b) *Basketry*. Under this heading a few rattan products will be mentioned that can be broadly classified as baskets but which



2. Semai settlement showing typical dwellings against a forested background.

also include such artifacts as winnowing trays. The most frequently made baskets are the "raga sempaa" to carry durian (sempaa = durian) and "raga kayu" (kayu = cassava) to carry cassava or firewood (Fig. 4). These large baskets are usually made from split canes of *Calamus diepenhorstii*. Occasionally *C. manan* or *C. ornatus* are used to make "raga sempaa." Smaller baskets such as "raga tengroi" (Fig. 5) are made of *C. javensis*; they are used to carry food or fish (tengroi = to fish). Other small baskets are likewise made of the split canes of *C. javensis* or other small-stemmed species (*C. viridispinus*).

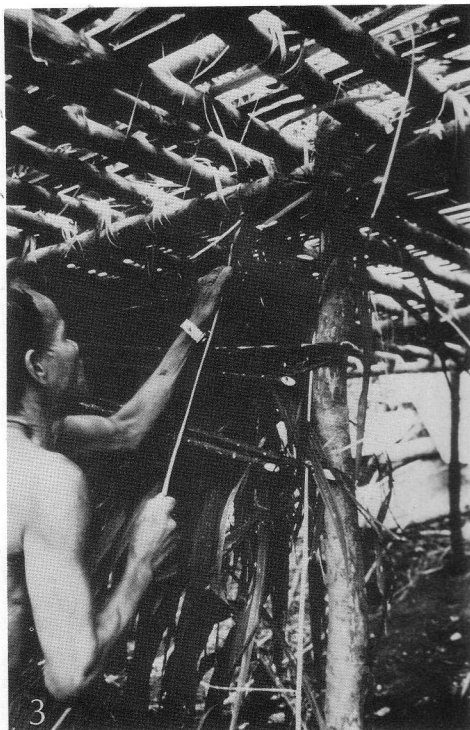
A special type of basket is the "tangguk" (Fig. 6) which is made from the skin

of the petiole and rachis of *Daemonorops grandis*. They are used to store food and are suspended from the kitchen roof.

The same material is used to make winnowing trays, "jempiir" (Fig. 8) which are used to separate chaff and padi (rice grains still in husks) from rice grains.

c) Traps. The trapping devices consist of two major groups: the fish traps and the snares.

There are four types of fish traps, "bubu." "Bubu uaak" is a large fish trap ca. 90 cm long and 30 cm across (Fig. 9) made of strips of *Plectocomiopsis geminiflora* supported by rings of *Daemonorops geniculata* canes fastened with split canes of *Calamus javensis*. The funnels inside the trap, "hinyaap," are made of

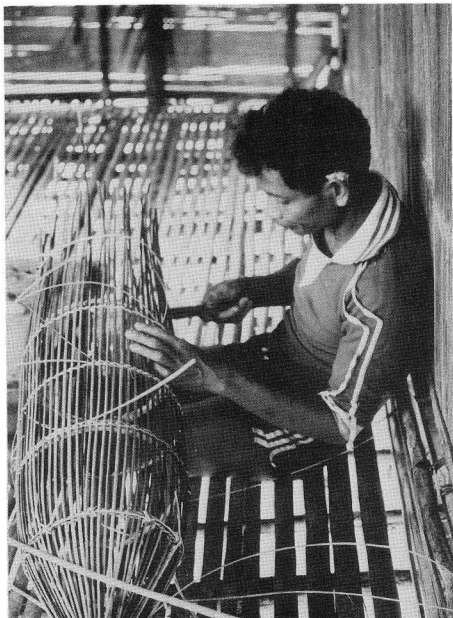




7. The "bubu sreek," with opening in the middle. 8. A winnow, "jempir."

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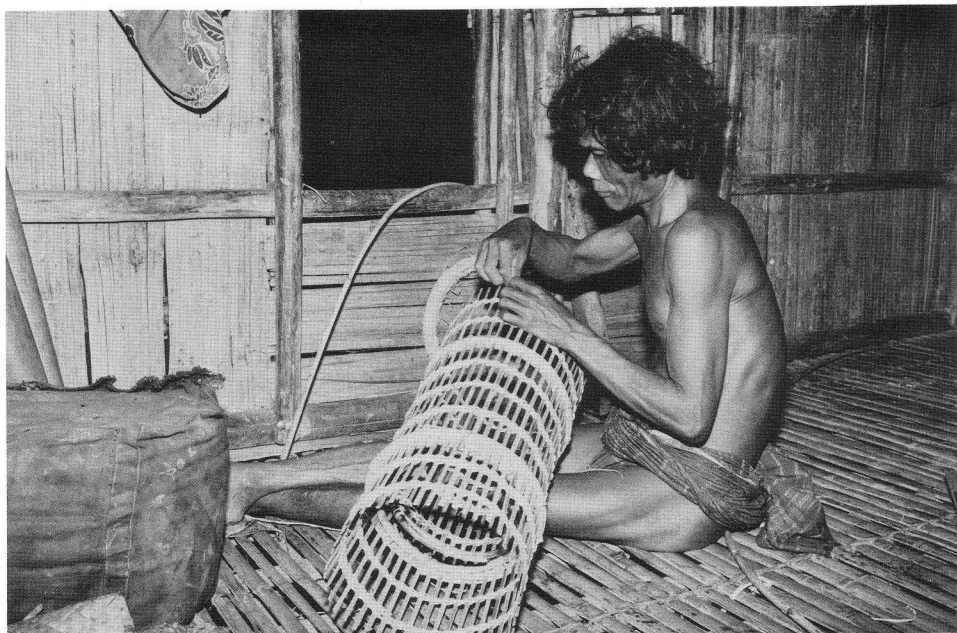
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 3. A man engaged in house-building. Note extensive use of rattan as binding material. 4. Woman carrying cassava and other products in a "raga kayu." 5. Various types of baskets, top: "raga sempaa," bottom left: "raga tengroi," bottom right: two "raga kayu." 6. A woman manufacturing a "tanguk."



9. A man making a "bubu uaak." Note the inner ring ("gedik") and binding ("berniir").

*Plectocomiopsis geminiflora*. This trap is used to catch fish of various sizes. "Bubu sereek" is an ovate trap with its opening on the side (Fig. 7). The same material is used as for the previous bubu. "Bubu kadaap" (kadaap = tadpoles) is a smaller version of "bubu uaak" and is used to catch tadpoles. "Bubu kampeet" or "bubu gelpil" (gelpil = turtle) is a large cylindrical trap (Fig. 10). This is a very strong contraption made from the canes of *Plectocomiopsis geminiflora*, but is sometimes also made from bamboo or *Donax*. It is used to catch the Malayan mud turtle (*Trionyx cartilagineus*).

A variety of snares or noose traps, a second group of the trapping instruments, are used by the Semai. Strong snares such as the "bako" (Fig. 11) and "jawer" are made of *Calamus diepenhorstii* and also of *C. insignis* or *Korthalsia rigida*. These are used to catch larger mammals such as civets and monkeys. Various other small traps are made of *Calamus javensis* and



10. The "bubu kampeet" or "bubu gelpil" used to catch mud turtles.



11. Example of a noose trap "bako" to catch civets and monkeys.

are used to catch smaller game such as rats, shrews, and birds.

d) *Other Uses of Rattan.* Rattan plays a role in various other activities of the Semai. The most common use of rattan, of course, is as binding material (Fig. 3). *Calamus javensis* or *C. blumei* are used to make "jerengkob," a cover for dart quivers (Fig. 12). Some species of *Daemonorops* have edible growing tips (cabbage) which are eaten raw or cooked. The fruits of some species have seeds covered by a thin fleshy edible layer, for instance *Daemonorops geniculata*. Other species are used for medicinal purposes, mostly against coughing and stomach ailments; examples are *Calamus ornatus*, *Korthalsia rigida*, and *Plectocomiopsis geminiflora*. *Calamus ornatus* is used in rituals.

### Conclusion

I hope to have shown that rattan plays an important role in the daily life of the Semai. Its role in the economy of the group will be discussed in another paper.



12. Decorated bamboo quivers covered with a "jerengkob."

### Acknowledgments

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### LITERATURE CITED

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