Crafts of the Semelai

Written by Reita Rahim of Gerai OA

The Semelai are part of the Orang Asli, the indigenous minorities of Peninsular Malaysia. The Orang Asli constitute less than 1% of the Malaysian population.

The Semelai reside mainly around Tasek Bera in southwestern Pahang and in a few areas nearby Negeri Sembilan, including the villages of Batu Peti and Sg. Sampo. The Semelai are grouped under the Aboriginal Malay sub-ethnic group and only number 6,418 (Jheoa 2003).

Once swiddeners, many now own agricultural smallholdings, run small businesses or are wage workers. Despite rapid development of their traditional lands, the Semelai have managed to retain much of their adat (cultures, social mores & traditions) and intangible heritage including their distinct language, myth and stories, songs and dances, and handicrafts.

Semelai Handicrafts Today

The Semelai still produce many agrarian and utilitarian crafts, especially in communities which still practice swiddening (shifting cultivation). Common crafts include cheruu’ winnowers and hrog back baskets.

Basketry is a common craft still practiced by both men and women, using rattan and palm rachis fibre. However only women weave either wild or cultivated screwpine (pandanus spp.) into mats, baskets and pouches.

The Semelai residing around Tasek Bera still make traditional shallow dug-out canoes (perahu jalur), hewn from half a tree trunk. Being lakeside dwellers, they also craft various fish traps and snares.

Traditional musical instruments such as salong flutes and gambang wooden xylophones are rare, but still occasional made and played on request.

RPS Pos Iskandar, Tasek Bera

This resettlement scheme consist of seven separate villages and is located on the southern shore of Tasek Bera, the largest freshwater lake in Peninsular Malaysia. Pos Iskandar is an hour’s drive from Bahau in Negeri Sembilan, and borders a RAMSAR wetlands site.

SABOT, a community based eco-tourism initiative was established here in 2002. Eco-tourism and craft production is treated as supplementary income especially for those who own swiddens or rubber smallholdings. Visitors are welcome to visit the artisan, while boat rides, jungle trekking and home stays are possible with advance notice.
Contemporary Crafts

The following are some Semelai crafts marketed by Gerai OA:

perahu jalur miniature dugouts
Full scale canoes are still used, hewn from *Dipterocarpus* trees. Miniature versions are carved from *Artocarpus* trees, often by actual dugout makers. These miniatures come complete with wood paddles and bamboo flooring.

bubu rattan fishtraps
There are numerous types of fishtraps, depending on type of fish and where the trap will be placed. Most are made from various species of rattan, and are available in full size or miniature versions.

tikar pandanus mats
Course but durable mats are woven from wide strips of unprocessed *buyu’* or ladangan (wild-harvested *pandanus*). Fine sleeping mats are made from cultivated *sake’ pandan* or wild lake *rasau* which is processed and dyed.

hrog pandanus baskets
These are a few types of baskets, each from different purposes. the *hrog adoi* and footed *hrog tok siak* are large burden baskets while fine *hrog benih* house paddy seeds. All are made from wild *pandanus* strips and rattan.

kelumpeng pandanus ‘embroidered’ pouch
These hold all pouches traditionally housed tobacco and betel quid. They are of varying sizes, often decorated with *pandanus* embroidery. The lid is secured via a short strip of cloth sewn onto its underside.