

Semaq Beri

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1 Background

Semaq Beri (szc) belongs to the Southern branch of Aslian (Diffloth 1975, Benjamin 1976, Dunn et al. 2011), along with Semelai (Kruspe 2004a, 2004b), Mah Meri (Kruspe 2010, 2011, in progress) and Temoq. There are approximately 2400 Semaq Beri speakers occupying a large area in the Malay Peninsula, north of the Pahang River, and east of the Tembeling River.

The exonym Semaq Beri, a calque on the Malay *Orang Hutan* (person forest) ‘forest person’, was bestowed by colonial authorities when the Semaq Beri came under their attention in the 1950s. Prior to this they had been labeled Sakai (Skeat and Blagden 1906) or Jakun (Evans 1920). Like numerous other Aslian groups, historically they did not have an endonym that named the group as a whole. The Semaq Beri have sometimes been erroneously referred to as Semelai, pace Needham (1974). While this is the name with which some of them associate themselves, the ethnonym Semelai has long been established with a different Southern Aslian group who live predominantly in southwestern Pahang. In the north, ‘Semelai’ is the ethnonym used by the Batek for their Southern Aslian neighbours (Kruspe fieldnotes).

The Semaq Beri are a heterogeneous group, in the south displaying the more typical attributes of the Southern Aslian grouping—combining the collection of forest produce for trade and low-level horticulture—while in the north engaging in mobile foraging like their Northern Aslian neighbours. Despite this heterogeneity, they identify themselves as a unified group with kin in far-flung areas, and provide ethnohistorical motivations for their current distribution.

This paper deals specifically with the speech variety of the northern Semaq Beri of Terengganu. Although they have not been included in the Semang ethnographical sphere, they live like their Batek neighbours combining hunting and foraging with the occasional collection of forest produce for trade, or waged labour (Kuchikura 1987). Their society is egalitarian and the conjugal family is the only persistent social unit. There is a weak patrilineal bias, but no fixed pattern of post-marriage residence. Strict cross-sex avoidance is maintained with affinal kin, and also between parents and children, and between siblings after the onset of puberty.

Exogamous marriage forms an integral component of the foraging mode, and the Semaq Beri maintain close social relations across their extensive territory with other groups of Semaq Beri. The northern group also have close relations with the neighbouring Batek, resulting in inter-Aslian bilingualism absent elsewhere in the Southern branch. Northern Semaq Beri exhibits both lexical and grammatical influence from North Aslian, which is less prevalent in southern varieties (Kruspe fieldnotes).

The Semaq Beri have remained largely unknown both linguistically and ethnographically. Kuchikura's research on subsistence ecology (1987) provides the only ethnographic research of northern Terengganu Semaq Beri. The earliest linguistic record of Semaq Beri is in Blagden's "Comparative vocabulary" (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 503, 507–764). Evans (1915, 1920) provides the first ethnographic materials and wordlist from the people he named the Tekai River Jakun. No further linguistic materials were published until Endicott's 1975 paper. Based on comments from Diffloth, he reports that there were a number of words loaned from Jah-Hut (an isolate to the west) and Ceq Wong (a Northern language to the southwest of the Jah-Hut). The authors of a brief report on Semaq Beri syntax noted dialect variation between the two groups they surveyed (Nik Safiah Karim and Ton bt. Ibrahim 1977).

Semaq Beri shares considerable lexicon with Semelai, but they are mutually unintelligible. The major lexical differences in Semaq Beri are the presence of Northern Aslian loanwords; some cognates shared with Mah Meri, but not Semelai, and some loanwords possibly from the isolate Jah Hut. The borrowings from Northern Aslian are of interest as they exhibit closer resemblance to Ceq Wong (Kruspe, unpublished database), a language with which present day Semaq Beri has no contact, more so than the Batek language spoken in the same settlement. Overall, Semaq Beri has a lower loanword rate from Malay than either Semelai or Mah Meri, particularly in the domains of kinship and ethnobiology, making it particularly valuable for historical reconstruction.

In terms of syntax and derivational morphology, Semaq Beri has both similarities and differences with Semelai and Mah Meri. Semaq Beri exhibits infixing coda reduplication like Semelai but unlike Mah Meri, while Semaq Beri has a causative infix with a nasal segment, attested in fossilised Mah Meri forms (Kruspe 2010), but not present in Semelai.

Semaq Beri exhibits a typical Southern Aslian pronominal system §5.1.1.1, but one unusual feature in the system is a gender distinction, *ja* '2SG.F, female' and *he?* '2SG.M, male', not found elsewhere in Aslian. The male term is clearly cognate with Mah Meri *hi?* '2SG', however the etymology of the feminine form remains unclear.

This chapter is based on the author's ongoing research. Research is conducted at a resettlement community of approximately 300 people, both