

Semai Lullabies Robert K. Dentan July 11, 2003

Abbreviations

2 digit # = 20th c year observed
M = Mncaak, near Kampar in Perak state
J = Jinteer, K. Jinteh in Pahang state
PJ = Pn>>s Jok, upper Waar [Woh] River,
in eastern Perak hills.

Vocabulary:

-Bwey rock [a child] in one's arms. M63
"n. *hammock*; bebuei, tr.v./intr/v. *to swing, to rock*; benuei, n., *the swinging, the rocking.*"*
cf. "Beui"* , buuy J62 son [address term]

-Da', lie down, recline. *, J62

duy**. Girl baby generic address name J62

leeh** Girl generic adr. name, short for 'Aleeh (cf. *mnaleeh*, nubile girl). J62

nyam** Boy generic address name. (= "unripe, green, young, immature" J62*)

c>>ng** Boy generic address name, short for 'Ac>>ng. J62

-piduy. Sing a lullaby [probably "duy duy duy"] →
pniduy, a lullaby. J62

-'ooic. Chant a lullaby [n. 'ijnoic] PJ92.

Trnad. Instruction (?) or socialization (?) The superordinate category which
subsumes 'ijnoic. PJ92

**My impression is that the first term in these two pairs is for younger
children, but it's certainly not a rule.

Texts:

The melody for the first 4 [J62] songs =

X

-----X-----

X

(The lines are supposed to represent the lines of a clef, the Xs are half-notes).

1. Duy duy duy.
2. Leeh leeh leeh.
3. Nyam nyam nyam,
4. C>>ng c>>ng c>>ng.

The melodies for PJ92 songs =

1. X X
x xxx

2. X X
 x xxxxx

the Xs are quarter-notes, the Xs are half-notes.

[The song repeats the kid's name, e.g.,
Kutii' Kutii'Kutii' or a word like "here/this" *adeh/madeh*.]

Da' da' da' I bwey.

Lie down lie down lie down his/her rock
Singing lullabies at night wd attract *nyanii'*, demons. At night one should sing
only *kbut*,

demon-summoning songs, Malay songs, English songs.

[English and Malay songs are very popular, esp amg kids. Almost any Semai kid
over 8 can sing "Ay lvvb yuw," tho few know what the phrase means. Radios =
main means of dispersal, w. movies next. Tamil & Chinese songs not nearly as
salient. In many western (Perak lowland) settlements, Malay music has
exterminated Semai music, & it's hard to find traditional Semai instruments.]
M63

[Europeans sing like Malays, at Jnteer Semai sing true, at Betau they sing like
Chinese, emphasizing rhythm, w little melodic male solo/choral female response,
says Risaaw] J62

[Traditionally, Semai J62 didn't name kids until they were old enough to seem
viable, one of the ways of protecting them from drawing the attention of demons.
Registration of the names by Malay officials thus put the kids in supernatural
danger, *-siruuu*. Praising the kid's looks also → *-siruuu*. So would playing
with, mocking or laughing at a child. In fact, people frequently rubbed their
lips & nose against their baby's cheek, near the mouth—a Semai kiss; exclaimed
with obvious pleasure every time the baby smiled; and, e.g., gave the baby a
cooked rat leg to hold, pretending that the baby will eat it, to the amusement
of all the adult onlookers. Like many Semai taboos, these are for use when the
kid seems to be ailing, but not normally]

* from Means, Nathalie and Paul B. Means (1986) *Sengoi-English English-Sengoi Dictionary*. Gordon P. Means, ed., Hamilton:
The Joint Center on Modern East Asia, University of Toronto and York University.