



# Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among Semai of Malaysia (War and Peace Library)

*Robert Knox Dentan*

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This powerful ethnography of a people believed to be the least violent in the world explores how they maintain peaceful relations even under the most dire circumstances. Robert Knox Dentan, the world's foremost scholar of Semai, brings its members vividly to life. His book includes translations of their poetry, dramatized accounts of particular events, and extensive quotations from a wide range of individuals. In a clear, gripping, sometimes novelistic style, Dentan introduces the reader to tortured Nakhoda; beautiful, stubborn Kliy; witty, ironic Grcaangsmother; doomed Rmpent; brutal, alienated Juni; and other memorable Semai.

The book opens with the horrific circumstances that the author argues gave rise to Semai peaceability, continues by illuminating their adaptation to those circumstances, and closes by sketching the eventual decline of that adaptation under the pressures of globalization. Unlike many behavioral scientists, Dentan argues that the Semai approach to conflict is a successful Darwinian adaptation. A recurring theme is the importance of psychological "surrender" to maintaining this adaptation. Throughout, the author highlights the mechanisms and costs of peace, underscoring their relevance to everyday life in all societies. Students and scholars of peace studies, conflict resolution, ethnography, and Southeast Asia will find this unique work an invaluable and compelling study.

[Coda to Chapter 6: "'Surrender,' Peacekeeping, and Internal Colonialism: A Neglected Episode in Malaysian History," by Juli Edo, Anthony Williams-Hunt, and Robert Knox Dentan \(PDF\)](#)

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