

**Can Local and Global Knowledges be mixed?
Shifting Paradigms among the Bidayuh of Sarawak**

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Abstract

Loss of traditional indigenous knowledges of the environment (TEK) has been observed particularly in the newly industrializing countries of South America and Southeast Asia. This knowledge loss includes the traditional knowledges of local food plants and local food plant practices, as well as their traditional cultural meanings. While this “deficit” story is strong, it is not the only story, however. There are indeed, and increasingly, calls for establishing cultural centers to preserve traditional indigenous cultures, but there has also been a growing appreciation of, for example, a broader variety, and easier availability of foods, including imported foods. In the present study, we report from one part of our research, a qualitative interview study with 12 participants from a mid-size Bidayuh community in Sarawak, using a semi-structured, open-ended extensive survey, involving men and women of different ages. This study enabled us to better understand the variety of participants’ concerns when dealing with questions of culture and food. Today’s indigenous cultures find themselves in an uneasy flux as they try to negotiate local traditions and global cultural influences.

Keywords

Indigenous; knowledge change; culture preservation; food plants; knowledge;

Background

Much of the knowledge of food plants and their uses within their local ecosystems is found in the cultural knowledges, social and gendered practices, and sacred rituals of our world’s indigenous peoples. However, in newly industrializing countries in South America and Southeast Asia, this traditionally oral knowledge has been disappearing fast within just the last one or two generations, due to the rapid spread of large-scale plantation cultures and the globalizing of trade, and its associated cultural and food transitions. Our present study among indigenous communities in Malaysia, and among the Bidayuh particularly, reports on efforts to document indigenous peoples’ traditional knowledge, and to identify barriers and facilitators (e.g. the role of knowledge keepers, or local cultural centers) toward preserving and transferring traditional food and dietary habits across generations (e.g., Biluh 2009). However, as we have found in our work, the answers are not simple.

On the one hand, many indigenous Malaysian headmen and medicine men and women, and indigenous people in general, often regret the loss of their local traditional knowledge and culture, contributing to what has come to be known as “deficit” stories, in Malaysia and elsewhere (Andaya 2001). For example, in the 1970s, Malaysian indigenous Temuan adolescents were still able to identify several hundred plant species in their environment (Andaya 2001). Moreover, the harvesting of plants involved a mastery of cultural practices and sacred rituals to facilitate the search and placate the spirits of the plants involved, requiring special forms of communications in the process (12). This plant knowledge and its associated cultural knowledge can be seen to constitute a comprehensive, experiential language of interacting with the environment. Being displaced to another environment would “demand an almost impossible task of relearning a great number of unfamiliar types” (12). It is like learning a new language. How easy do you find it to learn a new language? Unfortunately, in Malaysia, this is a common experience where indigenous peoples, having no title to their lands, are resettled, sometimes repeatedly, to make room for the spreading oil palm plantations or other business interests.

But this is not the only story. As our study indicates, Sarawak’s indigenous people are not all unhappy about the changes and some even appear to welcome some assimilation into the Malaysian mainstream, with its promises of income, mobility, improved health care – and more choices in foods, including imported, non-local foods, according to market availability rather than local environments.