

FOOD PLANT KNOWLEDGE AMONG THE BIDAYUHS OF SARAWAK



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Much of the knowledge of food plants and their uses within local ecosystems is found in socio-cultural practices and sacred rituals of Indigenous people. Our study among the Bidayuh in Serembu area, Bau District, Sarawak reports on efforts to document Indigenous knowledge, with food plants as proxy, and to identify barriers as well as facilitators toward preserving and transferring traditional food and dietary habits across generations. Our results show that identification of traditional food plants was weakest, and that most of identified food plants had been seen in markets rather than in forests. While most participants were aware of traditional local plant knowledge linking plants and food plants to spirits, they could no longer remember such knowledge, except for the elderly headman. Most noted also was the Bidayuh's relationship with food plants had changed due to lack of time, and most are buying food plants at the market. In some cases, knowledge of traditional food plants did not derive solely from within the community. Others noted their availability at shops made food plants or plant-derived products. Much change has occurred and was acknowledged but not necessarily in negative terms. Some participants even welcomed assimilations into the Malaysian mainstream, with its promises of income, mobility, improved health care and more choices in foods according to market availability rather than local environments. Some suggested that traditional practices could be documented in writing or preserved in cultural centres. However, while material artefacts can be preserved in cultural centres, an important part of traditional practices was spiritual in nature. While it seems clear how to preserve the artefacts of the past; it seems much less clear how to preserve the once lived spirituality that breathed through, and gave life to our artefacts.

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Documenting food plant knowledge among the elderly and the youths at Peninjau Village, Bau District, Sarawak