

## **Bidayuh Proverbs with Animal and Plant Elements: A Reflection of Culture and Philosophy<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Indigenous communities refer to animals and plants extensively in their folk proverbs. In this study an examination was conducted involving Bidayuh proverbs, with animal and plant elements, of the Bau Jagoi community in Sarawak, Malaysia by (a) categorising them according to the type and frequency of animal and plant elements used, and (b) analysing their implied and implicit meaning using inquisitive semantics approach. Data were collected from interviews with 12 Bidayuh informants aged 23 to 84 who lived in the same village. A total of 33 Bidayuh proverbs were elicited comprising 20 with animal elements and 13 with plant elements. The behaviours of the animals were associated with mostly negative behaviours in human whereas the characteristics of the plants were used to describe desirable human traits and appearance. The proverbs were also used to describe complex situations, teach moral values and good manners, express intense feelings, and give advice about life. Their deep meaning was related to the people's living environment and way of life, their thinking and ethics, their beliefs, and customary practices, which reflect their culture and philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Bidayuh proverbs, elements, inquisitive semantics, culture, philosophy*

### **Introduction**

Proverbs are widely used common expressions by a society to communicate meaning and intention literally or figuratively. Mieder (2004, p. 3) defined proverbs as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and that are handed down from generation to generation." Proverbs are a form of oral tradition of a society, and they serve many purposes such as imparting knowledge and life lessons, giving warning and advice, teaching moral values, expressing feelings and attitudes, and encouraging others. Ideas for folk proverbs are drawn from everyday experiences and common observations in various situations and contexts. Indigenous people who live close to nature such as in remote villages and forests generate creative proverbs by observing their natural environment, including animals and plants they encounter in their daily activities, to communicate their society's way of life, culture, and world view. Animals and plants are usually used symbolically or metaphorically in proverbial utterances. Despite the importance and prevalence of these natural elements in the formation of folk proverbs, there is little research and documentation in this field (Shamsutdinova et al., 2017).

The present study focused on proverbs of Bidayuh, the fourth largest ethnic group in Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. Bidayuh are mostly found in the western end of Sarawak and they originally lived in the hinterland of Borneo as they were mostly swidden farmers and practiced communal living in a long house. As such, the traditional Bidayuh way of life, customs, and practices were impacted by the forest environment (Ridu et al., 2001). However, by 2010, only 25% of the Bidayuh population were still engaged in agriculture, of which 81.4% are Christians, and while most still live in rural areas, they have better access to nearby cities (Kheung & Aduce, 2018). This illustrates that modern Bidayuh are becoming more educated and working in various economic sectors. Furthermore, many younger generation Bidayuh, particularly those who are educated, do not speak Bidayuh at home (Kayad & Ting, 2021). One reason is because the Bidayuh language has

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