

PEOPLE AND PLANTS OF TASIK BERA, PAHANG DARUL MAKMUR

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ABSTRACT: *Throughout man's civilization, plants and people have been linked together. Plant has been a pivotal element in his daily needs and lives. Man relies on plants for much more than food and shelter. In fact, the reliance and usage of plants to certain extent goes beyond the simple utilitarian purposes. Studies on indigenous societies show a clearer relationship between plants and people. In these societies, plants are fundamental parts of their medicinal and ritual practices besides the daily dietary and utilitarian purposes. This paper will study the relationship of people and plants of Tasik Bera; known as Orang Semelai. More than 137 species have been identified and categorized accordingly. Discussion on this relationship in context of sustainable development will be deliberated.*

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, plants play a fundamental role in most human activities. It has been said that with plants, man steps out from the cave dwellings and explore the world beyond. It was from plants that man created tools for hunting, either individual or in-group, and then later on develops tools for agrarian purposes. In the making of a simple hut, almost every part of plants is important to man. Man used the trunk, branches, woven leaves and bark to construct a shelter.

In some communities, lore and myth have been borne associated with plants thus giving significant or intrinsic values to the society. Undoubtedly, plants have played important roles in almost every aspect of the human life. In retrospect, the relationship of plants and the indigenous people have long been direct and clearer due to closeness and their dependence to nature for subsistence.

This paper will explore the unique relationship of indigenous people and plants of Tasek Bera. The relationship extends to five main categories of their lives, that is, dietary, rituals, medicinal, cosmetics and utilities purposes.

Tasik Bera: Abode of the Semelai

Tasik Bera, home of Orang Semelai, is the largest fresh water wetland in Peninsular Malaysia, covering approximately 7,000 hectares. It is located in the southern central part of Peninsular Malaysia; in the State of Pahang. The lake is an elongated swamp, which is a tributary of Pahang River. It widens and overflows during the rainy season but appears to be made of swamp sedges during dry season (Hoe, 2001). The main habitats of Tasik Bera comprises of the lakes and ponds, river and streams, swamps (reed-sedge swamp and forest swamp) and lowland forest.

The lake is a sanctuary for 328 species of flora, 200 bird species, 50 mammals and more than 95 species of fishes (Sapura, 2005). The forest meanwhile supports numerous wildlife such as tigers, tapirs, elephants, clouded leopard, wild boars and flying lemurs (Sim, 2002). The lake and its immediate areas have been the home to the Semelai since 600 years ago. The rich bio-diversity around the lake has sustained the Semelai for generations.

Tasik Bera is more than a home to the Semelai but has been part of the myth and traditions being told from one generation to another. The story on the formation of Tasik Bera as has been told by the elders revolved around the challenged made by a spiritual old man to the early settlers who have taken the 'fat' from a *Keruing* (*Dipterocarpus kerrii*) tree for their own feast without his permission. The spiritual old man had stuck his walking stick to the ground and challenged the villagers to remove it. No one could remove it except for the old man. The old man then walked away and water began to ooze out of the hole. No one could stop the water and resulting in the whole area to be as it is today- a lake.

Interestingly, Tasik Bera is also of historical significance. It is believed to be located near the ancient trans-peninsular routes between Straits of Malacca and South China Sea. Remains of Ming ceramics and pots were found within the area (peers comm. En Ruzairy Arbi, Jabatan Muzium &Antiquiti). Today, Tasik Bera is Malaysia's first wetland of international importance, being the first Ramsar Site in the country.

The Semelai of Tasik Bera

According to ethnological study, the Orang Asli Semelai has been classified as Proto-Malay, together with Temuan and Jakun and is known as shifting cultivator. Their language is similar to the Mon Khmer languages. The Semelai and Malay people bear much cultural and physical likeness but their historical relationship has yet to be defined. The resemblance to the Malays has led to a speculation that the Semelai obtained their name from the nickname 'Same Malay' given by the Colonial British.

Generally, they are distributed in the middle part of Pahang such as Tasik Bera, Sungai Bera, Sungai Teriang, Paya Besar and Paya Badak while in Negeri Sembilan, near Sungai Serting, Sungai Lui and Ulu Muar (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli, 2002). The Semelai found at Tasik Bera were believed to live there for over 600 years. Many of them have been resettled in permanent villagers around Pos Iskandar since the 1948-60's 'Emergency' and today, many depend on rubber smallholdings for income.

In another belief, according to the local elders, the Semelai are descendants of the seventh child of Batin Paduka Alam, who is believed to be god-like being. This son of the Batin Paduka Alam was the grandfather of the man responsible in causing the anger of a mysterious old man who resulted in the flooding of the Bera River into the current lake formation.

Relationship of the Semelai and Plants

The study on the relationship between man and plants is known as ethno botany. It has been recognized that this relationship between man and plants is much clearer especially in the indigenous societies. In these societies, plants are fundamental parts of their medicinal and ritual practices besides the daily dietary and utilitarian purposes.

In the local context, the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia were known as forest gatherer of forest products such as resin, sandalwood and rattan. The products were collected and traded in ancient port of Kedah and later on Melaka (Dunn, 1975). The historical records proved that the traditional systems of botanical knowledge and usage of plants have been passed through generations within the local indigenous

societies i.e. ethno botany. In fact, they utilize the plants not necessarily for basic living, but also for economical reason.

A study on the relationship of the Semelai and plants has shown some interesting linkages with the local myth and traditions of the communities of Tasik Bera. Mohala (2002), has described some of the local myths related to certain plants such *Keruing* (*Dipterocarpus kerrii*) trees, *Mahang* (*Macaranga triloba*) and *Terap* (*Artocarpus elasticus*). Another study by Gianno (1997) highlighted on uses of several plants such as *smburu* (*Dillenia spp*), *midur* (*Goniothalamus macrophylla*), *kijay* (*Triomma malaccensis* and *kmyan* (*Styrax benzoin*). Obviously, these associations with plants show the strong affixation between the Semelai and plants not only to provide sustenance to their survival but also in creating their cultural identity.

In Tasik Bera, the special and direct inter-relationship between man and plants is clearly established in most of the daily activities of the Semelai. For example, the much sought after resin from *Keruing* (*Dipterocarpus kerrii*) are still collected and sold to middle man who regularly come and bought the product. In selecting the suitable trees for harvesting the resin, the people of Tasik Bera believe that tree with branch leans heavily towards sunrise will produce more resin than other (pers comm. Batin Pelah Langkong). This traditional knowledge attained by the local communities perhaps illustrates the unique relationship of the Semelai with the said plant.

Plants of the Semelai

A recent preliminary study in 2005, conducted by a team of researchers led by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, found that there are more than 137 plants within the Semelai communities at Tasik Bera that are closely related to the community. These plants technically referred to as ethno-botany of the Semelai can further be categorized accordingly to the role and purpose of the plants to the community. The followings are brief description about the function and intrinsic values of ethno botany of the Semelai;

- **Plants that Feeds (Dietary)**

A commonly associated relationship between people and plants is that plants provide the source of food to man. Traditionally, the Semelai gathers and obtained their food from the forest. Later, some form shifting agriculture or swiddening becomes part of the Semelai community's traditions to produce plants as part of their dietary. Findings from preliminary study conducted confirm 52 plants being used as part of the dietary of the Semelai.

The main staple foods of the Semelai are either paddy (*Oryza sativa*) or tapioca. In absence of the rice, tapioca or ubi (*Manihot esculenta*) are being prepared as one of the ingredients in their dish or as confectionery. The main staple food are being consumed with other dishes and favourite condiments such as *Kerdas* (*Pithecellobium microcarpum*), *Jering* (*Pithecellobium jiringa*), *Petai* (*Parkia speciosa*) and also *Cemperai* (*Champereia griffithii*)

A dominant plant used in most of the fish dishes of the Semelai is the Serengom/ Pepijat (*Elettariopsis curtisii*). It is a ginger species commonly used as an ingredient to remove the unpleasant fishy smell and taste. The Semelai are also good at 'make-do' with other plants as ingredients in cooking when situation does not allow. For example, the foliage of Bawang Hutan tree or Bawang Beri is used in place of garlic or onion during hunting trips in the forest.

Sugarcanes and Tampoi fruits (*Baccaurea maingayi*) are commonly used to produce the traditional alcohol or Tuak. The Semelai consumes these drinks especially during the fruiting season.

- **Plants that Serves for Material Cultures (Utilities)**

The findings from the recent preliminary study shown that 28 plants have been identified for the purpose to construct shelters, boats, handicrafts, musical instruments and for other utilitarian purposes.

The traditional Semelai's houses were generally made of materials found from the nearby forest and lakes. Structurally, the houses are made of any of the forest species

such as *Tembusu* (*Fragrae fragrans*), *Bitangor/Penaga* (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), *Merawan*(*Hopea spp*), *Meranti Kepong* (*Shorea spp*) and *Cedong*. For floorings, Bamboo is being used while traditionally the walls are made of barks of the Meranti tree. The foliage of *Palas* (*Licuala speciosa*) or Serdang palm (*Livistonia chinensis*) are commonly used for roofing.

The life on the Tasek Bera requires the construction the usage of traditional boats called *perahu jalur*. The *perahu jalur* is a unique feature of the indigenous people of the lake. Again forest trees such as *Resak* (*Vatica spp*), *Tembusu Darat* (*Fragrae gigantica*) and *Medang* (*Cinnamomum spp*) from the surrounding nearby are being used for this purpose.

Like most other native communities in Peninsular Malaysia, the Semelai are also active in the making handicrafts such the pandan mat and other fishing and hunting tools. The screw pines (*Pandanus spp*), *rattan* (*Calamus spp*) and bamboos are commonly used for this purpose. Other significance handicrafts of the Semelai includes miniature '*perahu jalur*' as ornaments for decoration and the traditional musical instruments. The timber from Nangka tree (*Artocarpus heterophylla*) is commonly used for the miniature *perahu jalur* while Medang wood and bamboos are used for the musical instruments.

- **Plants that Heals (Medicinal)**

This category of ethno botany plants associated with the Semelai are the most sought after by the 'outside world' especially with the rise in awareness on their economic value. The findings of the preliminary study showed that these plants made up the second largest group in numbers. A total of 34 plant species has been recorded as plants that heal according to the Semelai community.

The most common medicinal plants are the *Tongkat Ali* (*Eurycoma longifolia*), *Payung Ali* (*Diospyrosbuxifolia spp*), *Pokok Midor* (*Goniothalamus cf. G. tapi*), *Seloul* (*Thottea cf. T. tormentosa*), *Rotan batu* (*Calamus insignis*), *Janggut Tok Adam* (*Themeda arguens*) and *Kacip Fatimah* (*Labisia pumila*).

Other plants commonly used in traditional treatments include the common *Suasa* or *Palong* (*Crinum asiaticum*) and the *Pinang* (*Areca catechu*). The *Suasa* is used to heal broken bones while the drinks from Pinang nuts are used to reduce labour pains.

- **Plants that Provides Spiritual Power (Rituals)**

The Semelai is rich with traditions and rituals. The rituals ceremonies within the Semelai are associated the 'life cycle 'of man, from birth, childhood, adulthood, marriage and till death. In most of these rituals, plants are being used as part of the ceremonies.

The most common plants used in the cleansing or purification rituals of Tepung Tawar by the Semelai is the Neris (*Gandarusia* spp).The Neris is also used traditionally with chicken blood for the purpose cleansing and 'buka tanah' rituals.

Other plant products used in rituals conducted by the Tok Batin (Village Head), Poyang/Bomoh (Medicine man/Shaman) and Tok Mudin (Circumciser) includes Kijai (*Santiria griffithii*) and Kemenyan (*Styrax benzion*).

- **Plants that Beautifies (Dyes & Cosmetics)**

The used plants as part of the traditional dyes and cosmetics are very limited. The Semelai women folks of today are more influenced by the use of modern cosmetics and dyes. The *Keembong* or *Inai ayer* (*Impatiens balsamina*) leaves are still being used by some women folks for colouring their fingernails. Similarly, *Akar Sesintok* is still used for the purpose to shampoo their hairs by some of the women folks.

However, some of the most precious raw cosmetics are collected by the Semelai from the nearby jungle, namely the Minyak Keruing (*Dipterocarpus kerii*) and Kayu Gaharu (*Aquilaria hirta*).Both these plant products are still being exploited by the Semelai for economic returns.

Traditionally, the bark of the Pokok Terap (*Artocarpus elasticus*) are made into bark clothes especially in the form of trousers.

Conclusion

The preliminary study on ethno botany of the Semelai carried out at Tasek Bera has shown that relationship between people and plants are much clearer in indigenous

people. This is probably because of the direct link between production and consumption compared to other industrialized society. It was also realized the Semelai culture retains much knowledge concerning plants compared to the industrialized people. In this case, these knowledge forms part of the necessity in life for the purpose of survival and development of cultural values of the Semelai society. The recognition that the indigenous people are steward of some the most sensitive ecosystems on the planet is also a reason for the interest of ethno-botany within Semelai people is still in tact. Obviously this traditional knowledge should be recognized and conserved to assist in making wise decision pertaining to conservation of natural resources.

Traditional ways of using plants by indigenous people are slowly losing its place in the rapid modern global economy and local culture. Locally, the interest has been quite limited to those within the academic circles. However, recent trends have shown a growing interest into ethnobotany, as alternative to better, healthy living seems to attract several local and international health/pharmaceutical companies to venture into this area. With the recent emphasis on biotechnology by the government, the study of ethnobotany should be very much relevant indeed.

In view of the invaluable traditional ecological/indigenous knowledge that is irreplaceable, certain development programs should be reviewed. By understanding these traditions on plant usage before it is too late, may help to ameliorate negative consequences of that change.

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