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A GUIDE TO ETHNOBOTANICAL COLLECTION WITH REFERENCE TO MALAYSIA**S.C. Chin**

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ABSTRACT

Ethnobotany is defined. The development of its concept is traced and discussed. A guide to the collection of plants in the environment of any cultural group for the purpose of an ethnobotanical study is outlined. Some problems in folk taxonomy are discussed with reference to the Kenyahs of Long Selatong, Baram, Sarawak.

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Abstract

Ethnobotany is defined. The development of its concept is traced and discussed. A guide to the collection of plants in the environment of any cultural group for the purpose of an ethnobotanical study is outlined. Some problems in folk taxonomy are discussed with reference to the Kenyahs of Long Selatong, Baram, Sarawak.

Introduction

From the very beginning, when man depended on wild foods, he established a relationship with plants. But it was not until about 340 B.C. when Theophrastus wrote *Historia plantarum* that the history of botany began. Both he and his teacher Aristotle made notes on the useful plants of the world so far as it was then known. Other early writings concerned themselves with medicinal, drugs or the supernatural powers of strange plants. The middle ages saw these interests continued and expressing themselves as *herbals*. During this period, the doctrine of signatures was expounded; and no doubt herbals were then popular; Banckes' *Herbal* went through 20 known editions between 1525 and 1560 (Tabor, 1970).

Since then the study of useful plants became more intensive and extensive, and major landmarks were De Candolle's *Origin of Cultivated Plants* published in 1883 and Sir George Watt's *A Dictionary of the economic products of India*, London, 1889-1896.

However until 1871, studies bearing on the utilization of plant (and animal) products by "primitive" or tribal people were non-existent or exist only as cursory mention in ethnographic monographs. In that year, Palmer published his *Food products of the North American Indians*, and this appears to be the first attempt to present a systematic account of the subject (Cattet, 1944).

The first use of the term "ethnobotany" (originally spelled with a hyphen) appears to be by Harshberger in a lecture he delivered before the University of Pennsylvania Archaeological Society in 1895 and published the following year (Harshberger, 1896a, 1896b).

Towards A Definition Of Ethnobotany

Harshberger (1896a, 1896b) did not specifically define the term that he was introducing for the first time, he implied however that it was concerned with the use of plants by aboriginal people. Perhaps, since he was introducing a new field of study, he deliberately stressed and discussed several avenues by which ethnobotany could be of service (to contemporary man). Four points were outlined, viz:

- (i) the study of ethnobotany can help in elucidating the cultural position of the tribes who used the plants for food, shelter or clothing.
- (ii) it throws light upon the past distribution of plants
- (iii) it helps to establish ancient trade routes
- (iv) it might suggest new lines of manufacture (here he referred to a case where, by unravelling the woven fabrics of American Indian manufacture one was able to discover interesting stitches and facts in connection with the weaver's art).

Since the introduction of this line of inquiry, there have been many studies presenting both botanical & ethnographic data. The subject matter presented may be as diverse as plant products, the origins of cultivated plants, plant remains from archaeological sites and plant names and knowledge of aboriginal peoples. Many of these studies have been called "ethnobotany", though most are often more botanical than ethnological (Conklin, 1954).

Both Jones (1941) and Castetter (1944), who attempted to redefine ethnobotany thought that Harshberger's concept of the term was inadequate. The term — "was used narrowly in reference to the use of plants by aborigines" (Jones, 1941: 219, and — "he made no specific attempt to define the term, evidently visualizing it in this and other pages as merely the use of plants by aboriginal peoples" (Castetter, 1944: 159). Though Harshberger was primarily concerned with aboriginal use of plants it is perhaps not quite right to conclude that his concept of the term was solely restricted to this. When he explained that ethnobotany can serve to elucidate culture, past distribution of plants and help establish ancient trade routes, he must surely mean that a study of ethnobotany would include more than just aboriginal use of plants.

The significance of ethnobotanical studies was also emphasized by Gilmore (1932) who wrote that it is of great importance in the interpretation of cultural traits.

It would also be of interest to point out here, that Harshberger while discussing the facilities needed for the study of ethnobotany introduced for the first time the concept of an *ethnobotanic garden*, "to provide living plants for study in connection with the object of vegetable origin displayed in the museum" (Harshberger 1896a: 80, 1896b: 153). This idea originally appeared in, "*Museum and garden*", *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*, Oct. 26, 1895, p. 5 and was expanded in another article (Harshberger, 1896c).

In 1916, Robbins *et al* elaborated on Harshberger's concept of ethnobotany pointing out that it consisted of more than collecting, identifying and ascertaining the uses of plants by primitive peoples. Ethnobotany, they