



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XXXVII No. 58

December 1987



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Pearce, K. G., Amen, V. L. & Jok, S. (1987). An Ethnobotanical Study of an Iban Community of the Pantu Sub-district, Sri Aman, Division 2, Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XXXVII (58): 193-270

AN ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDY OF AN IBAN COMMUNITY OF THE PANTU SUB-DISTRICT, SRI AMAN, DIVISION 2, SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

A study was made of the plants formerly and/or presently made use of by four Iban communities in the Pantu sub-district, Sri Aman, Division II, Sarawak. 144 different species were enumerated. Most were collected from their natural habitat — a variety of habitats was represented. A few were domesticated. The use or uses of each plant was recorded. Plants were found to have been used for a wide variety of purposes, most of which were related to essential (food, shelter etc.) rather than non-essential activities. For each of three major categories of use (viz. handicrafts and small items; construction of the longhouse and large items, and food) at least forty different species were listed, suggesting that the communities have a good knowledge of local plants and their properties. Many articles formerly obtained from plant materials are now obsolete. Reasons for this, which pertain mainly to improved road communications, are discussed. A good many of the plants recorded are still used possibly due to their availability and convenience, the fact that they are free, and conservatism of the people. The potential of useful plants known to the communities studied is considered.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country in which a number of ethnic groups coexist. Each has its own way of life, culture, traditions, and religion. Many communities live in close contact with the natural environment. They depend on forest plants for food, shelter and many other necessities, and utilize a wide variety of species in various ways in all aspects of life. Abundant wild plants are usually to be found in the surrounding vegetation which is commonly primary or secondary tropical rain forest.

Few specific ethnobotanical studies have been carried out in Malaysia to date. Van Steenis (1958) enumerates some magic plants used by Dayaks. Chai (1975, 1978) gives an account of 41 species known to be used by one of more of the ethnic groups of Sarawak. Chin (1981) has considered ethnobotanical collection from the theoretical and practical viewpoint, with

reference to Malaysia, while Kedit (1982) lists various plants used for medicinal and domestic purposes by members of the Penan tribe in Gunong Mulu National Park. Chin (1984) mentions various plants used for food in a study of agriculture and subsistence in a Kenyah community.

Some valuable ethnobotanical information is available in general reference works such as dictionaries (Richards, 1981; Burkill, 1966) and taxonomic works (Gilliland, 1971; Dransfield, 1979, 1981 & 1984). Reference to the uses of plants are to be found in some general studies on the tribes of Borneo (Roth, 1896; Hose & McDougall, 1912; Hose, 1926; Freeman, 1955; Sutlive, 1972; Sandin, 1976) or on particular aspects of Borneo culture such as handicrafts (Haddon & Start, 1936; Zainie, 1969; Heinz, 1969; Sarawak Museum, 1983), and forest products (Browne, 1955; Cobban, 1968).

The Ibans represent the largest of the indigenous ethnic groups in Sarawak. Spread widely over the state, they share a common origin, a common language and, formerly, a common way of life — subsistence rice farming by shifting agriculture methods. Iban communities were formerly isolated and were not involved in a money economy. Being in close contact with the forests they made great use of the plants around them for all sorts of purposes. Development is now bringing changes to the traditional way of life and many Ibans are now involved in rubber and pepper cultivation, while others are now urbanized and working in towns.

So far no specific study has been made on plants used by the Iban in Sarawak, although information is still easily obtainable from elders of Iban communities. The aim of the present study was to discover and record which plants have been, or still are utilized by members of a particular Iban community, and for what purposes.

SITE

The study was carried out in the Pantu sub-district, Division 2, Sarawak (See Figure 1). This subdistrict is the site of many longhouses four of which were selected for study. Three of the longhouses (Rh. Kubu, Kandis, Rh. Rantai, Lachau & Rh. Munsang, Empeli) were located along a road running north-north-east from Pasar Lachau, 145km along the Kuching-Sri Aman road, while the fourth (Rh. Penghulu Jiran, Sungei Besai) was situated 45 minutes walk from the end of the same road. The longhouses were chosen to represent a range in terms of accessibility, degree of modernization, religion and surrounding forest types (See Appendix II).

METHODOLOGY

Collection of data

Each of the longhouses was visited on a separate occasion. Informal berandau (discussion) sessions, in Iban, were initiated with interested members of the longhouse community, especially the more experienced longhouse elders, and guided by the researchers. The discussion sessions were held during the evening when most people were present. Longhouse members were asked to volunteer information which included descriptions of local useful plants, information on how, when and where they were used, legends or beliefs connected with them and their present and past importance to the community. This information was systematically noted down and photographs taken of any artifacts brought out by the longhouse