

TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS AND THE USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES AMONG THE IBAN OF BALAI RINGIN, SERIAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the possible gaps in current indigenous knowledge in the use of natural resources, specifically in traditional handicraft making. The Iban women are known for their traditional weaving skills. However, due to various reasons, this knowledge is declining. Through interviews and focus group discussions, the knowledge on the types and availability of resources in the respective areas, as well as the gap of knowledge in resource use and management between the older and younger generations and its cause were identified. Through observation, while traditional baskets and mats are still used by the Iban today, most of the traditional handicrafts made using natural materials seen in the longhouses are relics from the past, made by previous generations. The scarcity of raw materials such as rattan and wood has resulted in the decline of the production of such handicrafts. Though the skills of making these baskets especially among younger generation are eroding, the cultural significance of this basket among Iban community should not be forgotten.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge; natural resources, Iban

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge is defined as the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society, developed from experience gained by generations adapting to the local culture and environment (Sillitoe, 1998). Traditional or indigenous knowledge plays an important role in the daily lives of the indigenous communities of Sarawak (Nicholas & Lasimbang, 2004). These cultural and traditional practices usually involve the utilization of natural resources and play a part in their livelihood strategies and daily activities such as during paddy planting, hunting, fishing, home building, handicraft making as well as in curing simple ailments with traditional medicines.

The traditional livelihood of the indigenous communities in Sarawak relies very much on the availability of natural resources that surround them. Any changes in the environment will affect the people's livelihood strategies, and changes in their livelihood strategies will in turn affect the environment thus their indigenous knowledge revolves around the utilisation and management of those resources (Joe & Insham, 2004).

Sarawak is rich in plant and animal biodiversity and this inevitably leads to land use practices that utilise these natural resources to boost its economy such as logging, agriculture and forest plantations (Hon & Shibata, 2013; Ichikawa, 2007). The rapid exploitation of forest areas for development and agricultural activities have resulted in the diminishing of wild flora and fauna. Despite this, a majority of the indigenous population in the rural areas of Sarawak remain dependent on natural resources for