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Finding our national treasure in Orang Asli communities

The Orang Asli are guardians of a treasure trove of traditional cures. An initiative to document their knowledge is beginning to bear fruit

THE GLOBAL market for herbal products is expected to exceed RM2 trillion by 2020, and Malaysia is taking steps to harness its rich diversity of medicinal and aromatic herbs to tap its economic potential.

One initiative that has been realised is a government project to document the Orang Asli's traditional herbal knowledge.

In 2007, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry launched the "Database of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia" project under the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), and through the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015).

The Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) was commissioned to implement the project, with the objective of systematically documenting all traditional medicinal and aromatic herbs used by 15 of the 18 sub-ethnic Orang Asli groups in Peninsular Malaysia.

"The remaining three sub-ethnic groups – Orang Kuala, Orang Seletar and Orang Mah Meri – do not depend on the forest for their livelihood as they live by the river or the sea. They do not have knowledge of traditional herbs," says Norshakila Yusof, a socio-anthropologist involved in the project.

Norshakila represents a new generation of Orang Asli – those who left their villages to pursue higher education. The 29-year-old Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) graduate, who comes from the Semelai group, has been with FRIM since the project was launched in 2007.

Grassroots ownership and consent

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry has already spent about RM2 million on the project since it was launched. Additional funds have also come from the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry.

The documentation focuses on

herbs that are not listed as "high-value herbal products" under the government's Economic Transformation Programme's Agriculture National Key Economic Areas. The current list includes *tongkat ali*, *misai kucing*, *hempedu bumi*, *dukung anak*, *kacip fatimah*, *mengkudu*, *roselle*, *ginger*, *Mas Cotek*, *belalai gajah* and *pegaga*.

In keeping with the United Nations Environment Programme's Convention on Biological Diversity – of which Malaysia has been a signatory since 1994 – the researchers decided on a holistic approach for the project, which involves obtaining 80% of prior informed consent of the individual households before holding capacity-building workshops or obtaining knowledge or herbarium specimen from the Orang Asli.

The specimens prepared by the Orang Asli during workshops and a database of their traditional knowledge can be used as reference publication and for intellectual property rights application purposes, says Norshakila.

In the past seven years, FRIM has trained more than 325 Orang Asli on how to document traditional herbal knowledge in a scientific manner.

"For the project to succeed, it had to start from the grassroots and we wanted to do it right. First, we had to get

the consent of the community before embarking on the project," says Norshakila.

In 2008, the project commenced at Pos Iskandar, the largest Semelai settlement in Tasik Bera, Pahang, but not without hitches. Initially, the research team had to work hard at dispelling the doubts and scepticism among the local community. "We had to convince the villagers to see the bigger picture, that instead of viewing the project as just research, it was also about protecting their tradition,"

Norshakila says.

The research team first met with the Tok Batin or village heads and village committees before organising workshops to educate the villagers on the importance of preserving traditional knowledge and their community's right to protect that knowledge.

Historically, many companies and parties had exploited the Orang Asli. External parties would offer the villagers money, food and cigarettes to give them the incentive to share their traditional knowledge or bring researchers around the forest to collect plant samples.

"The traditional knowledge is mostly retained among the older generation. We need to impress upon the younger generation the need to preserve their traditional knowledge so that they are aware and realise how important it is," says Norshakila.

Involving the villagers in the documentation process also serves as an informal way of knowledge transfer, as they also learn more about traditional herbs.

Bearing fruit

Until last year, 1,310 herbarium specimens have been collected and prepared by the Orang Asli community, out of which 60 have been analysed by FRIM for active ingredients and 18 have been identified with commercialisation potential, she says. So far, 13 out of 15 sub-ethnic groups have been surveyed. The specimens collect-

ed will be stored in the National Herbarium in Kepong.

Last year, the Ministry of Agriculture provided RM3.6mil funding to FRIM's research team. As the winner of Islamic Development Bank's Science and Technology Prize in 2012, FRIM has been requested by the bank to provide training to researchers in Brunei for a similar project on "Capacity Building on Documentation of Traditional Knowledge on Medicinal Plants in Brunei".

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In January, under its “Developing and Implementing a National Access and Benefit Sharing Framework in Malaysia” initiative, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided funding of RM1.72mil (US\$533,000) to support the 2014-2017 documentation phase of FRIM’s project for the three remaining Orang Asli communities in the country.

Following the launch of the first prototype product developed by FRIM based on the traditional knowledge of the Orang Asli Semelai in Tasik Bera, FRIM is now looking for private sector partners who are keen to collaborate in the commercialisation of new herbal products.

The government invested RM350,000 on the research and development of the prototype product, which is derived from the bark of a tree used by the Semelai to treat stomach ache, diabetes

and high blood pressure as well as for post-natal recovery. The tree species has been given the code name “TSBR087” to protect its identity.

Norshakila says the proposed Bill on Access to Biological Resources and Benefit Sharing will help protect the traditional knowledge of the Orang Asli in the country.

Systematic documentation of the country’s traditional herbs is a vital step in realising the full potential of Malaysia’s growing herbal industry, which is estimated to contribute around RM2.2 billion to the gross national product by 2020.

Beyond financial gains, the government also has the responsibility to safeguard the country’s rich biodiversity. Malaysia is one of the 17 mega-diverse countries in the world and is ranked 12th on the National Biodiversity Index internationally. In Penin-

sular Malaysia alone, there are about 12,500 species of flowering plants, and 6,000 species of trees.

One can hope that this project sends the message that financial gains should not be made at the expense of the Orang Asli, who are the rightful owners and beneficiaries of this national treasure of traditional knowledge.



BY KATHLEEN TAN



PHOTOS BY DD HOE



Working with FRIM as a socio-anthropology researcher, Norshakila Yusof represents the younger generation of educated Orang Asli

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(Left) The TSBR087 prototype product's extract and capsules. A salesman showing a visitor a log of gaharu or agarwood at the recent Herba Malaysia exhibition