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Preserving the natural way of life

SALIBAH BOLA (pic) is a 45-year-old Orang Asli shaman or *dukun* from a village in Ulu Jelai, the largest sub-district of Lipis, Pahang. When the villagers face health problems, they turn to Salibah, who prays to the spirits and uses his medicinal knowledge to prescribe traditional herbal remedies.



When met at the Herba Malaysia exhibition, he relates the incident of a man who had sought his help over marital problems. "After having two children with his wife over seven years of marriage, he had erectile dysfunction problems. They

were on the brink of divorce when he sought my help," Salibah explains.

Praying to the spirits, Salibah saw a vision of an old man leading him to a *tongkat ali* plant in the jungle. "This was no ordinary *tongkat ali* plant but a rare *tongkat ali sengsara* plant. Its roots had been struck by lightning but the plant was neither dead nor alive. I gave him some of the boiled *tongkat ali sengsara* to drink and that cured him of his problem," he claims.

That particular *tongkat ali sengsara* plant would not be sold as it was a divine cure, he says.

Herbal medicinal plants are extremely versatile in application, as they are used not just to treat diseases and ailments among the Orang Asli community but also for hunting and fishing.

The *akar tuba* or tuba root, which is poisonous, is used to temporarily stun fish. This is a sustainable way of fishing compared to using explosives, as it does not deplete the fish supply in the river.

Another poisonous plant known colloquially among the Orang Asli as "dog" is used for poisonous darts in the blowpipes or sumpit. The sap from its leaves is so lethal, it can kill a bear. "It takes four days to boil the leaves of the plant to produce 3kg of sap, which then produces 200g of poison. There is no antidote if one has been poisoned by it."

Salibah says not many villagers are privy to traditional medicinal knowledge in the village; as such information can be misused.

For injuries, there is the *talung* plant. With its antiseptic properties, it is used to drain pus from wounds and help heal cuts.

Newborns are bathed with water infused with the *tunjang bumi* plant, which is said to prevent them from catching colds, while the mothers are given the boiled herbal water to drink to build up their immunity.

Salibah is thankful to the Forest Research Institute Malaysia for its initiative to engage with Orang Asli villagers to collect, document and help develop traditional herbal plants for commercialisation purposes. "They are helping the Orang Asli to progress while protecting and preserving our national heritage of herbal knowledge."

However, the younger generation of Orang Asli are not interested in acquiring this knowledge. They are more educated and are no longer familiar with traditional herbs. "Nowadays, not many Orang Asli know how to cook the herbs anymore. They're increasingly modernised – they even eat farmed chicken instead of free-range ones," he laments.