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Salmah Omar, Malisah Latip

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## The Use of Plants in Traditional Medicine of The Melanau Community in Malaysia

Salmah Omar, PhD (Corresponding Author)

Senior Lecturer School of Language, Civilisation and Philosophy College of Arts and Science

Universiti Utara Malaysia 06100 Sintok Kedah

Email: [salmahomar@uum.edu.my](mailto:salmahomar@uum.edu.my)

Malisah Latip, PhD

Department of Social Science and Management, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia Bintulu Campus, P.O. Box 396, Nyabau Road, 97008 Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia.

Email: [malisah@upm.edu.my](mailto:malisah@upm.edu.my)

### Abstract

Traditional and modern medicine have the same goal of curing diseases and alleviating the suffering experienced by patients in their own concepts and way. Like other traditional communities, the Melanau community also relies on traditional medicine to overcome health-related problems. The entry of elements of modern medicine into the Melanau society does not entirely affect their knowledge and trust in the traditional medical system. This situation occurs because the traditional system is still relevant. It is believed that its ability to heal and cure a disease is incompatible with modern medicine and treatment. The focus of this study was to investigate the use of plants in the traditional medicine of the Melanau community in Sarawak. Primary data was obtained as a result of field studies and library research. Field studies involved the method of interviews with the primary informants, shamans and midwives, and observations of the plants used by them. The information obtained includes how they gain knowledge about the use of plants, the types of plants used, how the plants are used, when they are used, what purpose they are used, and their effects on patients. In general, medicinal plants among the Melanau community have two functions, the first to cure the disease and the second to prevent the disease from developing infections. This study shows that the use of plants in traditional medicine among the Melanau community continues to develop and is practiced until this day. This is because the Melanau community is surrounded by a natural environment that supplies plants in their daily lives. Plants can be found on the banks of rivers, swamps, and forests and planted around the house. The use of natural plants in the environment does not require considerable capital and does not involve a large amount of energy. The continuation of this traditional practice is also influenced by generations' beliefs, knowledge, experience, and skills inherited by the Melanau community. The values, beliefs and heritage of the Melanau community in the use

of plants are seen as still relevant and can survive the challenges of today's development and modernization.

**Keywords:** Culture, Plants, Malaysia, Melanau Community, Traditional Medicine

### Introduction

The Melanau community is one of the indigenous tribes in Sarawak. In terms of history and origins, Clayre (1970) noted that the Melanau people might be the oldest and original inhabitants of Sarawak. This is also supported by Mullen (1967) through his hypothesis about the Melanau people and their relationship with human civilisation 40,000 years ago in the Niah Cave located within their area. The Melanau people are associated with the Kajang people (Morris, 1978). Jackson stated that the Melanau is the intermediary between the Malays and the people in the interior (Jeniri, 1988), while MacDonald noted the Melanau had established the relationship between the primitive upstream and more modern population on the shores of Sarawak (MacDonald, 1968). Morris (1978) reported that Melanau was the name given by the Malays of Brunei in the past, and thereafter, that name was listed on the map of Sarawak in 1959. The Melanau is also known as a *liko*, which refers to 'the settlement population'. 'A *liko*', in a broader context, means 'world' and 'indigenous' (Jeniri, 1988). In terms of geography, the grouping of the Melanau people is clear, namely a group of people who inhabit the coastal areas from the Rajang River Delta to Bintulu in the North. Undoubtedly, the Melanau are closely related to the Malays, mainly through Islamisation (Zaini, 1998).

The belief system is a pillar that determines the outlook on life and actions of the Melanau community. These belief systems influence the way they think and react to nature, events, and the environment. Animism is a belief found among the Melanau community before the arrival of Islam to the archipelago. They believe in the existence of supernatural and magical powers. This belief has become a feature of the Melanau community. They believe that this world has three layers, namely the upper, middle, and lower world. These three layers are interconnected. There are elements of evil and good in each of them. Those who still hold strong to this belief are the Pagan Melanau and a handful of Christian Melanau (Jeniri, 1988).

The Melanau people believe that human beings are a combination of four main elements, namely, body, spirit, feelings, and life. These four elements are essential to enable a person to survive and be healthy. Therefore, these four elements must be one without interference. The Melanau people believe that an accident or a disease is caused by the actions of those who violate customs, are disturbed by subtle beings, or are exposed to black magic (Yasir, 1987). However, the beliefs and practices that mixed Islam with animism in the culture of the Melanau community declined in the 19th century.

According to Yasir (1987), traditional medicine among the Melanau community is based on traditional beliefs. Almost all the diseases and ailments found in the community are said to be inflicted by supernatural forces or subtle beings known as *tow*, *amow*, and the likes. This shows that the Melanau community adheres to superstitious beliefs and believes the disease is not caused by a viral or bacterial infection but by the interference of subtle beings. The medical methods practiced by this community require the services of shamans. There are several stages of shamanism based on a person's illness, whether it is serious or not. The most reliable shaman is called *a-bayoh*. The role of shamans in healing these patients is

considered very important because they act as intermediaries with supernatural powers in the effort to heal patients. This paper focuses on the use of plants in the traditional medicine of the Melanau community of Sarawak.

### Literature Review

Every society has its method in the use of plants to cure diseases. Abdul Samad (1982) wrote a Book of Malay Medicine containing a list of diseases and the use of plants to treat diseases such as typhoid, high fever, *belasini*, vomiting blood (haematemesis), sinusitis, eyes, ears and toothaches, cough, gallstone disease, hematuria, hemorrhoids, shingles and many more. For example, the plants used to treat hemorrhoids include seven seeds of white pepper, seven cloves of garlic, and turmeric. All these ingredients are sliced and squeezed, and the juice is drunk for three mornings. Other studies such as Colson (1970), for example, noted *teja* root is used for stomach aches, banana shoots for fever, and *kedot* root for stomach worms. According to Muhamad (1992), the plants used to treat diabetes are *hempedu bumi*, a mixture of several lime buds such as *lelang* lime, *pagar* lime, and Chinese lime, and *kancing baju*; high blood pressure medicine consists of *hempedu bumi*, *misai kucing*, and *sea saga* leaves; for cancer treatment, coconut root, *melor* root, white hibiscus root, and *bemban* tubers are used.

A study of the Malay community in Kampung Wang Kelian, Perlis, showed plants can be used to treat many diseases, such as diarrhea and heartburn use leaves of *ati-ati merah*, sinusitis uses *banang* tree trunks, the shingles uses *setawar* leaves, and wounds are healed using the leaves of *kalam dunia* (A. Aziz, 1998). Meanwhile, for the Malays in Kampung Tekek, Rompin, bitter pepper leaves are used to treat typhoid fever, *kaduk* leaves for menstrual cramps, *kemunting cina* leaves for cough and dizziness, and *gelenggeng* leaves to relieve constipation.

Aloe vera leaves are used to treat skin burns due to fire or hot objects as well as wounds and skin diseases such as leprosy. Drinking aloe vera juice as a tonic is also suitable and effective to eliminate tapeworms, cough, yellow fever, and heartburn (Fasihuddin, 1993). The gel of aloe vera leaves can be used to treat scabies and relieve itchy faces. *Mengkudu* leaves can eliminate wind in the body by drinking its juice, which is boiled with a little ginger. In addition, *pegaga* leaves can be used to reduce body heat. The method is to pound the leaves and drink the water (Nuraeshah, 1991). Another example is to boil thorny spinach leaves with *janggut Ali*, cinnamon bark, and *mempelasari* bark. Then the tonic is drunk to remove phlegm and treat cough for adults and children (Fasihuddin, 1993). For the Balinese community, for example, they often use herbs at night after a tiring day. Ginger (cold element) is applied to the temple to reduce headaches and relieve stress. In addition, they also use turmeric and rice husk (hot elements) to relieve muscle pains (Pembrooke, 1984).

The Eskimo people use leaves, for example, a type of willow tree bark that contains salicylic acid, to relieve joint pain and internal aches such as stomach and intestinal pain. Fungi are boiled to produce laxatives, cranberry juice is used to treat snow blindness, and resin and moss to cover wounds (Lantis, 1959). Ngoni children and adolescents are accustomed to picking and eating forest fruits, especially after rain because it is believed these fruits contain good medicines for health (Read, 1960). The Gwembe community in Tonga, on the

other hand, obtains fruit from baobab and other forest trees that contain high values of ascorbic acid (Scudder, 1962).

Etkin (1982) studied the use of plants as medicine among the Hausa community in Northern Nigeria. It was found that most plants are used as medicine and food. For example, cashew nuts are chewed to treat diseases caused by intestinal worms, diarrhea, and dyspepsia. Cashew nuts are also included in soups and used to cook vegetables.

The Siamese community in Kedah also uses various plants to treat diseases. For example, they use ground betel or *ketumpang air* to treat hemorrhoids, myopia, sore or seeded part of the rectum, and sore and purulent ears. The roots and stems are used for these treatments. There are seven ways to use the ground betel. First, the root is boiled in water for a day, then mixed with brown sugar and then drunk to treat hemorrhoids; second, boil the ground betel with salt to treat myopia or glaucoma; third, pound or crush the ground betel and place it in the rectum to treat a sore or seeded part of the rectum; and fourth, place the ground beetle on the lid of the pot, light the fire and let it wither and the liquid comes out. Then, drip the liquid into the sore ear to treat the sore or purulent ear; fifth, ground betel is used to treat gastritis by boiling and drinking the liquid; sixth, the leaf is crushed and placed on the head to reduce fever and headache; seventh, the leaf is eaten as *kerabu* (salad) or *ulam* (accompaniment) to relieve sore throat (Salmah, 2018).

### Methodology

The data of this study was obtained through fieldwork conducted in Bintulu Sarawak. The fieldwork was performed using two methods of data collection, namely interviews and participant observation. The interview method used by the researcher is the individual in-depth interview. Researchers interviewed several village shamans and midwives who provided information specifically about plants in traditional medicine. The information obtained include how they gain the knowledge in using the plants, the type of plants used, how the plants are used, when the plants are used, the purpose of the plants, and the effect(s) on the informant.

Participant observation is also a basic technique to get more specific and thorough information. Through this participant observation technique, the researcher collected basic information directly from the observed community and checked the validity of the information. The researchers had the opportunity to follow Rokiah, a midwife, to find the roots of some trees in the forest located on the outskirts of the village. The researchers also took the opportunity to buy several types of roots and spices from her.

In general, the Melanau community of Kampung Jepak is familiar with the use of plants in traditional medicine. However, their knowledge is limited. They know little about recognising and identifying one type of plant or another. For them, the use of plants is based more on knowledge inherited from their previous generations. This knowledge is then verbally communicated and passed down from one generation to another. The knowledge and use of medicinal plants usually belong to traditional medical practitioners, such as shamans and village midwives.

According to midwife Zaleha (82 years old), she gained knowledge of midwifery and the use of medicinal plants from her late mother and grandmother, who were also midwives. The

knowledge she acquired was passed down, without her learning or realising it. She inherited the knowledge to use *benyu* (coconut) oil from her late mother. The oil used by her cannot be depleted and must be added from time to time if reduced. She also keeps *meroyan* oil, a type of oil to keep women in confinement healthy, so that they do not get *meroyan* (postpartum distress syndrome).

Some residents know the use of plants to cure some mild illnesses among children and postpartum mothers, such as *senudong* (Baby colic), bloating (wind), stomach aches, night crying, and others. They are not shamans. Instead, they use the knowledge only for family members and villagers who come for help. This medical knowledge is inherited hereditarily. They are Mr. Samsudin Yasin (Head of Kampung Baru Sebulan Besar), Mr. Upit B. Boji (*Bilal* of Kampung Jepak mosque), and Mr. Junid. According to Mr. Samsudin, he would use seven to 17 types of leaves in the forest to treat *senudong* pain.

Those born into families whose members have medical knowledge and practice it are gradually interested in traditional medicine in their families. Childhood interest and observations facilitate the learning process, and over time, this knowledge would finally be inherited. Among the inherited medical knowledge are healthcare prescriptions, medicinal oils, and plant remedies in maintaining health. According to an informant, Mr. Mustafa (66 years old), he inherited his medical knowledge from his father. At the time, he was in his teens. Until today he still treats patients using roots and spells acquired from his father.

According to another informant, Mrs. Hadiyah (60 years old), since childhood, she often followed her mother, who was a *bebayuh* shaman. Although she did not learn and practice *bebayuh* medicine, she had inherited several types of oils for health from her mother. Each type of oil has its name and nutrients according to types of diseases. Among the oils she still has in storage are *ratik oil* for body aches as a result of being exposed to rain and for mothers in postpartum confinement as well as her child; *senudong oil* for children with *senudong* pain; *maus oil* for asthma; sinus oil for sinusitis; *tempias oil* to prevent evil spirits or spiritual disturbance; *raboi oil* for wind in the body; *meroyan oil* for mothers who have just given birth; *dugal oil* for gastric pain; *vak or rak oil* for bruises and swelling of the limbs; *selusuh oil* for easy birth-giving; *belasuk oil* for children vomiting and *pong oil* to treat limbs affected by thorns or stuck fish bones in the throat. All these types of oil are made from coconut milk *benyu* (coconut) and are enchanted according to the type of disease. Some oil, such as *tempias oil*, has a guardian. According to her, this oil has been thrown into the sea.

According to Mrs. Hadiyah, anyone who wants to get oil from her should give a hardener, such as a folding knife, a glass plate, a piece of gold, and money as sincerely as possible. It can be said that every family in Kampung Jepak stores several types of oil, such as *vak oil*, *selusuh oil*, *dugal oil*, *maus oil*, and *raboi oil*, for the use of their family members. Some of these oils are inherited from their ancestors while some are obtained from shamans or midwives who still keep them.

Apart from inherited knowledge, knowledge of plant remedies and ethnomedicine can also be gained through dreams. Indeed, in the Melanau community, some residents gain medical knowledge through dreams. A shaman, Mr. Johari Jali (50 years old), said that he acquired his traditional medical knowledge through supernatural beings, even though originally, he had

no intention at all of being a shaman. After a particular event, he fell ill for several years. Then suddenly, he was approached by a mysterious voice (consciously or in a dream), which provided him with a method to cure the disease. He used only two types of wood and some *duyung* oil as medical tools and got help from supernatural power. He said he could know a person's illness through the patient's scent.

A shaman, Mrs. Ariyah (65 years old), gained her ethnomedical knowledge through dreams and strange things that occurred around her. She recalled the first time she gained her knowledge and became a shaman. According to her, about thirteen years ago, while she and her mother went gardening in the forest, an unexpected event occurred. Strong winds came like a hurricane. Although the wind was strong, there was no rain, and the trees did not sway. That was when they saw something fall into the river close to where they were standing. The object that fell was seven *teket* fruits, which is a kind of white forest plant. The *teket* fruits that fell swirled in the water. Because of the peculiar nature of the incident, they brought the fruits back home. After seven days in storage, the *teket* fruits released a kind of oil. After this incident, according to her, the fruits were never found again. It is the oil of this fruit that is used as the medicinal oil of her family's descendants. After her mother died, the oil was passed on to other family members. However, the oil was later returned to Mrs. Ariyah. The oil from this fruit cannot be depleted, and when little remains, it will be mixed with *benyu* oil. The *benyu* oil is obtained from coconut milk that is cooked to produce oil. Mrs. Ariyah keeps the oil with her. One night, she had a dream of curing disease and began her life as a shaman in Kampung Jepak. There are two types of *benyu* oil that she uses for medicine. One oil is used for various types of mild illnesses, such as headaches, fevers, and flatulence. Meanwhile, another oil is reserved to treat patients affected by *sa-ang*. *Sa-ang* is a disease that is believed to be caused by a crocodile ghost.

Knowledge on how to use medicinal plants can also be gained from religious teachers, Islamic medical practitioners, clerics, or from books specialising in certain diseases and treatments. According to Mr. Haji Jabri (100 years old), he studied medicine using the holy verses of the Quran from two religious' teachers of Arab descent, namely Tunku Husin and Tunku Mohamad, who lived in Kuching. He also gained knowledge from the Book of Mujarabat. Mr. Khidir Ismail gained medical knowledge through Dr. Harun Din (Darul Syifaq) and other religious teachers in the Peninsula. He is the only ethnomedicine practitioner in Bintulu who uses prayer and healing water by reciting the holy verses of the Quran and plants. Another ethnomedicine practitioner who knows the use of medicinal plants is Mr. Arbi. He gained medicinal plant knowledge from a *Kiyai* in Indonesia for several years and is an Islamic medical practitioner in Peninsular Malaysia.

Although this community lacks facilities and knowledge of science, earlier generations can distinguish between plants that can be used as medicine or eaten. They focus on the taste and smell of a particular type of plant. The 'trial and error' technique is used to distinguish these plants. In addition, there are also earlier generations who acquired medicinal knowledge by observing the effects of plants on animals. This gives them guidance on whether the plant is poisonous or can be used as medicine (Salmah, 2018).

Next, the data obtained were analysed. The researcher used emic and etic approaches to data analysis. Emic and etic approaches refer to the analysis of the perceptions and behaviours of actors in a cultural phenomenon (Harris, 1984). An emic approach allows

observations to be analysed based on something from the point of view of the society being studied. On the other hand, an etic perspective refers to the ability of the researcher to see the form, relationship, and meaning of something according to the researcher's perspective (Nanda, 2007).

### Findings

In general, there are three elements of traditional medicines which are practiced by shamans, namely the materials used, actions taken, and words uttered. The first element refers to the plant or tool, the second element is the ritual, and the third element is the spell/mantra. In the medical science of this society, the plant itself does not mean or have the power to cure a disease, but what matters is the spell or prayer that is uttered. The plants are only the intermediary. The healing power comes from Allah the Almighty (Salmah, 2018).

Melanau traditional healers, such as shamans and midwives, have the skills to make medicines from plants. Some plants are used on their own, while some are mixed with other ingredients, either plant or non-plant types. The mixture needs to be recited with certain spells or prayers to be effective, and the patient can quickly recover. However, there are also medicinal ingredients that do not require a spell. Here are two examples of diseases that are cured using plants and spells. For example, for stomach aches, a prayer is recited to a type of betel (*sirih bertemu urat*) and betel nut three times. Next, the recitation is made three times on the lime and then pressed on a sore stomach. The spells are as follows:

*Hai jamir, aku tahu asal mulamu  
Angin puteri amir  
Nama ibumu penawar Allah  
Nama anakmu kononkah sakit  
Tajammu tiada tawar  
Sedangkan air lautan sedang  
Tawar berkat doa Lailahaillallah Muhammadurrasullullah.<sup>1</sup>*

For stomach diseases, lemons and lime are used. A thin lime is cut in half and rubbed with lime in the middle and enchanted. Three lemon seeds are applied to the affected area for three to four days. The spell reads as follows:

*Hei rumah baca di hujung tanjung  
beratap daun keladi,  
aku tahu asal mulamu barah, nanah mengandung,  
aku tawar tidak menjadi sah tawarku sah,  
Lailahaillallah Muhammadurrasulullah.<sup>2</sup>*

With the help and guidance of a shaman, the ingredients can be prepared by the patient, or his family or the shaman himself prepares them and the patient uses them. Medicinal plants need to be identified correctly because plants have different nutrients. Medicinal plants must also be taken in the right dosage as excessive dosage will most likely produce adverse side effects.

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<sup>1</sup> Source from Mr. Mustafa

<sup>2</sup> Source from Mr. Mustafa



Usually, during treatment, shamans impose food taboos on patients. According to Mr. Haji Jabri, he would impose food taboos, such as sugarcane, yam, and pineapple, on people who are short of breath or faint until the pain is completely gone. If the taboo is violated, the patient will itch all over the body. Meanwhile, the food taboo for people who are exposed to poison, *santau*, or black magic are stingrays, catfish, pineapple, sugarcane, and bamboo shoots. According to every shaman, abstinence is a major aspect of treatment because the purpose of abstinence is to prevent the recurrence of the disease. If the patient fails to follow the abstinence, the disease would be difficult to cure and slow to heal (Salmah, 2018).

The Melanau people have long used various types of plants to cure diseases, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, eye diseases, black magic, accident wounds, fever, and stomach ache. Typically, medicinal knowledge using plants is common knowledge and widespread among members of society. It is safe to say that in every house there is at least one family member who knows the uses and nutrients of plants, in particular, as medicine (Salmah, 2018).

In general, medicinal plants in the Melanau community have two main functions, the first is to cure diseases, and the second is to prevent illness. Table 1 demonstrates the summary of name of plant/herb, part used, preparation and usage, and purpose.

Table 1

*Summary of name of plant/herb, part used, preparation and usage, and purpose*

Name of plant/herb	Part used (twig, leaf, root and others)	Preparation and usage method	Purpose
<i>Seruntun</i>	Root	The roots of the tree are finely chopped, mixed with <i>ambuyat</i> and then eaten together with shrimp paste, lime juice and salt.	Cold fever or malaria
Hibiscus	Leaf	The leaves of the hibiscus are wrung in water, then rubbed on the head.	Headache and dizziness
<i>Setawar</i>	Leaf	The <i>setawar</i> leaves are pounded, then rubbed on the forehead.	Headache and dizziness
<i>Keladi ular</i>	Flesh	The flesh of <i>keladi ular</i> are finely pounded and applied to the wound.	Light wound
Betel nut	Nut	Betel nuts, betel leaves and lime are pounded or chewed, then made into a paste to be placed on the stomach.	Hernia
Betel leaves	Leaf		
Pitcher plant	Water content	The water is put into the affected eye(s).	Eye disease

<i>Akar bumi</i>	Root	<i>Akar bumi, akar hujan panas</i> and betel leaves are boiled, then dried and boiled a second time before drinking.	Knee pain
<i>Akar hujan panas</i>			
<i>Mengkudu</i>	Leaf	The end of betel nut is sharpened and wrapped with <i>mengkudu</i> leaves. Then, heated and pressed into the place of the hemorrhoids.	Piles/Hemorrhoids
Hot pepper ( <i>Cili padi</i> )	Root	The roots are washed, soaked and boiled, then the water is drunk.	Dysentery/ Rectal bleeding
<i>Sambo bangkak</i>	Stem/trunk	The stem/trunk of the tree is dried and finely pounded, then chewed with betel nut. This ingredient is then sprayed on swollen feet.	Swollen feet
<i>Sambo bangkak</i>	Root	The roots of the plant are dried and boiled, and then drunk.	Postpartum distress
Bitter gourd	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and mixed with shallots, then pasted on the stomach.	Diarrhea
<i>Dukung anak</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded together with cumin and pasted on the stomach.	Diarrhea
<i>Semunting</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and rubbed all over the body.	Jaundice (baby)
Ginger and Turmeric	Rhizome	Ginger and turmeric are boiled and the water is drunk.	Period cramps
<i>Induk bengelai</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and rubbed on the sprained area.	Sprained foot or hand
<i>Pegaga</i>	Leaf	The leaves are eaten like an accompaniment.	High blood and diabetes
<i>Hempedu tanah</i>	Leaf	Three pieces of leaves are soaked in water and the solution is drunk.	High blood and diabetes
<i>Tarum</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and rubbed on the spot of scabies or ringworm	Scabies/Ringworm

<i>Kebas</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and rubbed on the spot of tinea.	Tinea
<i>Mengkudu</i> ( <i>Morinda</i> )	Leaf	The leaves are boiled and the water is drunk	Gastric
<i>Setawar</i>	Leaf	The leaves are pounded and pasted on the stomach.	Constipation
Betel-nut	Nutshell	Ripe and dried betel-nut skins, <i>duyung</i> oil and chicken feathers are burned and smoked with incense, and rubbed all over the body.	Insect/small animal bites
<i>Tenggalik</i>	Root	The roots of the <i>tenggalik</i> plant are boiled. After cooling, the water is orally taken and kept in the mouth for a few minutes before being spit out.	Toothache
<i>Sambo bangkak</i>	Leaf	The dried leaves of <i>sambo bangkak</i> are chewed together with betel leaves and sprayed on the stomach.	Bloating (baby)

Source: Field study

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that the Melanau community traditionally relies heavily on plant-derived medicines to treat illnesses or diseases. The Melanau people believe that every plant has its nutrients and benefits for medicine and health. Plants are not only used to treat and cure diseases but are also used as a method to prevent diseases. In addition, plants are also better and safer to use because they are free from chemicals and poisons. With the rising cost of modern medicine in the market, traditional medicine will become more popular and favoured in the Melanau community.

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