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Indigenous Knowledge among Iban Kua' in Samarahan District, Sarawak: Some Observations

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Abstract

This paper presents some findings of a study and observations on indigenous knowledge (IK) among Iban Kua' and uses of natural resources in Samarahan District, Sarawak. Like the other Iban in Sarawak, Iban Kua' in Samarahan is also rich in indigenous knowledge. As Samarahan has the fastest growing population in Sarawak with an average annual population growth rate of 6.0% in the year of 2000 to 2010, the study tries to examine the state of IK among Iban Kua' in Samarahan. A qualitative research design which involves semi-structured questionnaires to the 165 respondents was used. This paper discusses some of the findings and observations based on the fieldwork at 14 Iban Kua' villages in Samarahan in February 2017. This study also reveals the effect of physical development

projects to the IK practice and to the natural resource management. Modernisation and Christianity are the key factors that affect the state of IK practices that are now diminishing.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Iban Kua', Language, Culture, Sarawak, Samarahan

Introduction

This paper presents some findings and observations based on a study on selected indigenous knowledge (IK) among Iban Kua' and the uses of natural resources in Samarahan District, Sarawak. The main purpose of the study is to examine the state of IK among Iban Kua' in Samarahan. Originally, the Iban lived in a longhouse-dwelling that was made from various types of wood and mostly located on the river bank. The Iban were also acknowledged as a great traveller and settler and has always been of great significance for the social standing of an Iban, especially when involved in headhunting expeditions or being involved in other risky activities while abroad. They are also good in many IK, such as making a house, handicraft, weapon, traditional healing, and much more. In the past, it was very important for the Iban to gain IK for survival. The Iban traditionally relied on the natural resources as their source of life, especially for food and transportation (river).

Literature Review

According to Chikaire et al. (2012), IK is a local knowledge that is unique to a given culture acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture. It is the actual knowledge of a given population that reflects the experiences based on traditions and include more recent experiences with modern technologies.

IK are often associated with indigenous people such as the farmers, labourers, rural artisans, women, and rearers. They are the custodians of IK system and basically use natural resources in the surrounding environment for IK practice (Freeman, 1992). The Indigenous people like the Iban in Engkari River Sri Aman, Sarawak often exclusively depend on the natural resources available within the ecosystem, where they live, and commonly manage their resources. They are depending on the natural resources for their livelihood, besides shifting cultivation of hill rice as a food crop (Sanggin et al., 2016).

IK can be called by various terms such as indigenous knowledge of knowing, traditional knowledge, local knowledge, and rural knowledge. It is therefore generated by a society within a geographical area and transmitted from one generation to another to provide solutions to the existing problems of that time (Risiro et al., 2013 and Pottier et al., 2003).

In the past, IK was typically seen as an obstacle to development and efficient resource management, but today IK is pivotal to sustainable resource use and balances development (Ulluwishewa, 2008). While Silitoe (2002) criticizes that, the development linked to the modernisation has become a threat to the practices of IK such as the knowledge gap between the youngsters and the elders. Knowledge erosion is a threat, as it becomes difficult to conserve what we do not know.

Iban of Samarahan

Traditionally, the Ibans were animist who believed in superstitions and taboos. The majority of the local Iban communities in the study area are now Christian, but some still continue to observe both Christian and traditional ceremonies.

The Ibans in Samarahan are informally known as Iban *Kua'* or formally called Iban Sebuyau. *Kua'* means 'you', that refers to the pronoun of the second person, while Sebuyau is a place where they originally came from. Pringle (2010) and Blehaut (1994) argues that, generally, the Iban are believed to enter Sarawak mainly via the Batang Kapuas in Kalimantan, Indonesia in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. According to Sandin and Sather (1994), they moved into Sarawak through Lubok Antu to settle in the upper Batang Lupar, Batang Undup and Batang Katibas areas. From there, they migrated to the west and northeast, successively settling in the tributaries of Lupar, then into other river basins (Sadong, Sebuyau, Saribas, Rajang, etc.) Some of the Sebuyau Ibans also settled on the banks of the Samarahan, as well as the Lundu and Sadong rivers, probably early in the nineteenth century prior to the arrival of James Brooke (Sutlive and Sutlive, 2001).

There was a group of people who first settled at Merdang Gayam, Merdang Lumut, and Merdang Limau where this study was conducted. The unique culture of Ibans in the olden days was typically often named a place associated with the environmental element or living things surround. In addition, animism or "nature worship" to be the first phase of religion. This is one of the reasons that the indigenous people, particularly the Ibans are always associated with the nature and pay full respect to the environmental element around them. Besides, the knowledge and values embedded in taboos, myths, and cultural practice governs the relationship between nature and humanity and also assist in preserving natural resources.

The above migration has therefore created 14 Iban *Kua'* villages in Samarahan District. The total number of local Iban *Kua'* in Samarahan recorded about 7,100 people (survey, 2017). Today, the local Ibans in Samarahan prefers to be known as Iban *Kua'* instead of Iban Sebuyau. While their lifestyle, culture, tradition and other things are similar to other Iban sub-groups, there are some variation in term of language. They have a unique dialect, but some still intelligible to other Iban sub-groups. Table 1 below shows some examples of the differences in the various dialects spoken.

Table 1: Language variation between Sebuyau Iban and other Iban sub-groups

Sebuyau Iban (Iban <i>Kua'</i>)	Standard Iban	English
Kua'	Nuan	You
Mentang	Lapa	Why
Muak / Banyau	Mayuh	Many
Adai	Enda	No
Ila'	Lagi'	After this
Siba	Nemu	Know
Temengat	Begaut	To hurry
Hempah	Lauk	Side dishes
Temenyul	Pansut	Come out
Kekajal	Kekasak	Restless

Methods

This exploratory research was carried out in February until April 2017 at 14 villages surveyed at Samarahan District (Table 2). Information and data, which focus on understanding the level of indigenous knowledge in using the natural resources are gathered through in-depth interviews with 165 respondents among the household using a semi-structured questionnaire; within the focus group discussions (FGDs) and observation during fieldwork in the research area. A seminar was conducted at the end of the data collection period to gain feedback from the heads of the villages in the form of corrections and clarification of information. Intermittent visits to the field are also carried out to verify some information with key informants in the villages.

Table 2: Villages surveyed at Samarahan District, Sarawak

Name of villages	No. of households
Kampung Entingan	39
Kampung Nangka	20
Kampung Sebayor	18
Kampung Mangka	4
Kampung Jegoi	4
Kampung Semawang	13
Kampung Sungai Empit	3
Kampung Sungai Batu	2
Kampung Merdang Lumut	10
Kampung Merdang Gayam	9
Kampung Merdang Limau	5
Kampung Rembus	13
Kampung Melaban	11
Kampung Plaie	14
Total	165

Figure 1 below shows the location of the study area that is situated in western Sarawak. One need to travel from one point, Kampung Sungai Empit along the 14 villages for about 18 kilometers or approximately 25 minutes through tarred road and ferry to across Batang Samarahan until the end which is at Kampung Semawang.

Figure 1: Map of Sarawak with the location of the study inserted (edited from Google Maps)



Findings and Discussions

This section presents some of the main findings of the study, focusing on two main aspects such as the type of indigenous knowledge and natural resource management.

Type of indigenous knowledge

Handicrafts

During the olden days, the Iban in Samarahan heavily relied on natural resource materials such as *bemban* (kind of reed), rattan, bamboo, and *senggang* in the making of handicrafts. The knowledge of making handicraft was practically passed down through a medium of communication, conservation, observation and practice. It is common to witness a woman making those handicrafts. Similarly, men also play a dominant role in collecting the materials, especially when they must go to the forest to collect rattan. In the process of plaiting and basket making, they will be learning a few common weaves, as well as the many *penti pemali* (prohibitions or taboos) surrounding their craft. According to one respondent in Entingan, "A young woman must also first start with a basic step before they attempt to plait complex patterns like *remaung* (leopard). Attempting to skip one of these stages, particularly in pattern weaving is considered dangerous; might get sick or fatal" (Interview with Ketua Kaum David Jiku anak Nader on 20 February 2017).

In contrast with the past, most of these materials have now been replaced with a synthetic plastic rope that are widely available. The natural materials have become scarce in the nearby forest. As a result, some family have not practiced or continued the tradition of making handicraft. Therefore, it indirectly influenced the young generation not to practice as well where today, they are unable to

see the process of getting and processing these materials for handicrafts making. This sentiment was also shared by respondents in six other villages. Ultimately, the knowledge of making handicrafts in the 14 villages in Samarahan District has faded slowly due to the process of modernisation.

Fishing and Hunting

Traditionally, the Iban believed in superstitions or taboos such as restrictions, especially during fishing and hunting. For instance, the Iban pay careful attention to the behaviour of birds and animals for their actions are thought to convey warnings, guidance, or foretell future occurrences. Augury (bird omens) is always associated by the Iban with the most powerful of all their gods, *Singalang Burong* (Sandin, 1980). *Pangkas, Beragai, Ketupong, Embuas, Bejampong, Kelabu Papau* and *Nendak* are the type of birds considered to be a sign of how a future event will take place. But these beliefs have disappeared largely because of Christianity and the majority of the Iban in Samarahan, especially the middle age and younger are unable to recognize or to see any of those birds around.

In the past, the villagers went fishing and hunting constantly in providing the community with sufficient foods. About two decades ago, the need of cash money has led people to sell their products to the public at the market. Based on the survey, due to the unavailability or lack of fishes and animals in the river and forest respectively, local people often simply buy their food from the market. Some of the *pulau galau* (reserved jungle) is also being developed for residential areas and government projects. These reveal that the knowledge of hunting and fishing has slowly faded away due to rapid development and modernization in Samarahan District.

Farming

The lands in Samarahan are mostly non-hilly, flat, swamp or low-lying that is suitable for wet paddy farming or *uma*, which means paddy field. The field is often located quite far away from their house and may take several hours to reach. Some farmers stayed for several days in the *langkau uma* (hut) that are made from woods obtained from the nearby forest. According to one respondent in Jegoi, "There were people from Sungai Tanju who came to Samarahan for paddy planting. To get there by car one must take the ferry from Muara Tuang or drive inland to the Malay village of Tambirat. In the past, the only way to get there was by boat from Pending Point. This has led to the formation of Jegoi in 1993 with a migration people from Sungai Tanju" (Interview with Ketua Kaum Masa anak Pinki on 1 March 2017).

In addition, even if the paddy fields are located not too far from their house, traditionally the farmers start walking to the farms very early in the morning to avoid hearing omen-birds on their way which could interfere with their farming activities. This practice seems to have slowly diminished due to lack of suitable land for paddy planting, and the majority of the Iban in Samarahan are no longer planting paddy but instead buying rice at the shop for their daily needs.

In terms of cultural tradition, the farmers in Jegoi, Plaie, Semawang and Rembus are still using *ketap padi* to harvest the paddy. *Ketap padi* is a traditional tool made from a combination of wood, bamboo, and tiny blade. After harvesting, a *pelangka* (sieve) made of a rounded wooden frame and on the bottom of which is a screen. Rice that has been threshed is shaken back and forth on the sieve, so

that the seed fall through and the larger straw and chaff remain. But today, machines are used to perform this job. Besides, previously the Iban in Samarahan have also practiced ritual event like *ngebau uma* as a way of blessing and protecting their crop. *Ngebau uma* is a set of *piring*, an offering for the spirit. Shamans heavily rely on spirits from the natural world for ritual ceremonies.

Traditional Healing Practices

The rapid development and improvement in the health facilities (clinics and hospitals) in Samarahan - which have improved the standard of living of the people, coupled with Christianity has replaced traditional rites, tools, and materials for healing. People prefer to go to the clinic or hospital for medical treatment. For the Iban community in Rembus, only few of them are still preserving the oral tradition. Oral tradition, such as *pelian* has slowly faded away. *Pelian* is the healing ritual in which a *manang* (shaman) attempt to discover the location of a patient's soul. In a shamanic healing rite, both the sick person and the family concerned are put under *pemali manang* (taboo) so as to ensure the efficacy of rite. Nobody else, other than the immediate members of the family, may enter the family room; symbolically a non-family member represents an evil.

In some other Iban villages in Samarahan, the healing method of *besunting* by a *lemambang* (bard) is also still being practiced. It is a tradition where a *lemambang* will read -spells with a small portion of *kapu' sireh* (lime betel) and rub it on the body of the patient. Besides, *daun sireh* (betel leaf) are also used to stop bleeding from the nose and are still being used by some of the villagers. In addition, the healing practices such as using medicinal plant like *buah engkudu* (noni fruit) for high blood pressure treatment.

Festive Season and Traditional Performance

In Samarahan, the traditional performance of *ngajat* is still being practiced by the community and performed to celebrate the most important harvest festival, Gawai Dayak and to welcome important guests to the village. The villagers in Entingan attended *ngajat* class organized by trainers from the Dayak Association such as Serakup Indu Dayak Sarawak (SIDS) and the Sarawak Dayak National Union (SDNU). Dance (*ngajat*) classes are conducted at least 2 – 3 times a month to learn the basic *ngajat* steps. Traditionally, *ngajat* is accompanied by *taboh*, a musics played using traditional musical instruments such as *bendai*, *tawak*, *engkerumung*, and *ketebung* by a group of people. Nowadays, most people in Samarahan played the recorded *ngajat* music via compact disc or other audio player rather than using live traditional musical instruments. This is because there is a lack of people who are expert and interested in playing the traditional musical instruments.

In addition, *tuak* and *langkau* is a special alcoholic drink locally brewed and can be easily easily in Samarahan or in any other Iban areas. The Iban Kua in Samarahan served it during Gawai Dayak festival or any festive occasions such as a wedding or consumed during the weekend as a way of socializing with the communities. There are also some people who sell *tuak* and *langkau* to their own surrounding communities as their source of supplementary income. Besides, *pansuh*, a traditional food cooked in a bamboo is also being commercialized in many local Dayak restaurants in Samarahan District. To sum up, although the continuous development and modernisation in Samarahan have led to the erosion of IK, however, there is a trade-off between these two.

Natural Resource Management

The production of handicrafts, fishing and hunting activities, traditional healing practices and performing arts by the Iban Kua' in Samarahan are depending on natural resources as their basic materials. Besides, it was mentioned that the knowledge and values embedded in taboos, myths, and cultural practice governs the relationship between nature and humanity and also assist in preserving natural resources.

Samarahan District has an average annual population growth rate at 6.0%, which is the fastest growing population in the state of Sarawak between the year 2000 to 2010 (State Planning Unit, 2015). In fact, land use change, and rapid development for the construction of residential areas and the government reserved land for the past 10 years in Samarahan District have strongly affected how natural resources are appropriated and used. These have led to some of the *pulau galau* (reserved land) for the community in some villages in Samarahan no longer accessible to the availability of natural resources. Cooke (2006) stated that *pulau galau* are forest reserves, especially set aside by native communities for essential items such as timber for house construction and building boats, jungle vegetables, rattan, and other produce and hunting ground for the community.

Likewise, the Iban Kua' in Samarahan in the past were highly relying on the natural resources for the livelihood. Today, the majority of them are no longer going to the forest since the introduction of the cash economy, which means that the people use their income to buy some of their basic necessities from the nearby commercial centre. However, it was noted earlier that IK assist in preserving natural resources, but for some reasons, the rapid development has led to the depletion of natural resources available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can clearly be seen that there is a knowledge gap between the younger generation and the older generation; it is not really expressed and adapted. Formal education is one of the major factors which contributes to this knowledge gap when the younger generation spend most of their time at the school rather than trying to adapt and learn such IK from the elders. This study also revealed that the challenges of modernisation in term of development have affected the livelihood strategies of the Iban Kua in Samarahan District. New methods, practices, tools, and ideas such as the clinic and hospital equipment have replaced traditional healing by *manang* (shaman). In addition, the Anglican Church of Saint Francis Cathedral in Samarahan also plays an important role in how the IK practices are now diminishing. Omens and taboos have disappeared largely because of new religion (Christianity), but there are some villages where the old belief persists. It is a result of inherited prejudices developed by Christian theology over against traditional religion of animism. From the perspective of the government and some community groups who are their supporters, the trade-off is worthwhile; the result is economic growth and the rising of living standards for many, especially for the locals. Despite the development that has turned Samarahan into one of the fastest growing population in Sarawak, the negative and positive trade-off can clearly be seen.

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