



REVIVING LOST STORIES THROUGH BOTANICAL WISDOM: A COMPARATIVE ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDY OF THE ORANG LAUT AND SINGAPORE'S CENTRE FOR ENTHNOBOTANY

By Yrina Vera Rodriguez
01852343

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NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY (SINGAPORE)
Imperial College London (UK)



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Singapore is a bustling metropolis with one of the most advanced economies in Asia. It is world renowned for being a vibrant multicultural society that peacefully coexists despite the different languages and religions spoken and practiced by its population. However, there's a small community whose tales have been buried by the high flux of people that have settled in the country over time.¹

The Orang Laut, the indigenous people of Singapore, have an evident underrepresentation in many aspects of Singapore's society. Particularly in historical narratives,² as seen in Singapore's school History curriculum, which mainly focuses on Singapore's colonial past.³ To address this gap and help preserve traditional knowledge, an ethnobotanical study was done, where the uses of plants reported by Singapore's Orang Laut and the ones reported by Singapore's Centre for Ethnobotany were compared.

Historical Background

Back in 1819, Singapore's strategic location, had the British particularly interested in transforming the island into a commercial hub. After successfully persuading the Sultan of Johor, Britain formally acquired Singapore, and over the next few decades, the island rapidly developed into a major port, becoming an integral part of the British colonial network.^{4,5} This transformation attracted a great number Chinese, along with some Arab, Malay and Indian traders and workers, from around South-east Asia, due to Singapore's free port status, geographical position and emergence of the tin industry.¹ These factors further integrated Singapore within the region's economic fabric and establishing it as a major stopover along the route to China.

Before the British acquisition of Singapore, the Keppel Channel that separates Singapore's mainland and its southern islands, was often avoided by merchants, due to the hazardous terrain and recurrent piracy. The island was then inhabited by around 1000 people, consisting of multiple Orang Laut tribes and some Chinese settlers.⁶ The Orang Laut, meaning "sea people" in Malay, were nomads that had lived mainly around the coastal areas and near rivers of Singapore and the southern Malay peninsula. Since the 7th century, the Orang Laut had played a major political role in Malay history,⁷ particularly supporting the Sultan during the Melaka-Johor-Riau Sultanate. However, their influence began to decline with the arrival of the Dutch during the 18th century and the subsequent weakening of the Sultanate. During British rule in the 1830s, the Orang Laut had moved to the Keppel Harbour area.⁸ By mid-19th century, they had disappeared as a distinct community, gradually assimilating into Malay culture.^{9,10}

The few members of the Orang Laut tribes who managed to preserve their traditional way of living into the 20th century, eventually settled in nearby islands, where they continued their culturally significant fishing and navigating activities. However, following the Singaporean government development plans, between the 1960s to the 90s, their villages and settlements were demolished, and they were relocated to public housing around Singapore. As it is the case, of the Orang Semakau whose home was turned into a landfill, and they were asked to evacuate Semakau island.¹⁰⁻¹² This relocation disrupted their traditional lifestyle and ties to the

sea, it marked a significant change for the community, as they adapted to life in a new urban environment while striving to maintain their cultural heritage.

Recently, significant efforts have been made to revive and preserve the stories of the Orang Laut that were once nearly lost. Orang Laut SG, an organization founded by Firdaus Sani, a fourth-generation Orang Laut descendant, has played an important role in this revival in Singapore.^{11,13} Through initiatives in education, art, and food, the organization has successfully amplified the voices of these indigenous communities and brought greater awareness to their cultural heritage.¹⁴

Ethnobotanical Study

Ethnobotany studies the interaction between humans and plants, highlighting the ways in which plants contribute to cultural identity and survival.¹⁵ Traditionally, this field focuses on the knowledge and practices of indigenous communities, who often maintain stronger, and more integrated relationships with plants as a vital part of their environment.¹⁵ Plants with practical or medicinal properties, ornamental value or those that are simply abundant in the local landscape, can become an intrinsic part of the culture of a community, shaping rituals, traditions, and daily life. Conversely, ethnobotany can provide perspectives on how anthropological activities, such as agriculture, urbanization, and trade, have impacted and transformed environments.

Content Analysis of the Centre for Ethnobotany

The Orang Laut perspective

Conclusion

Research methods

Content analysis

A visit to the Centre for Ethnobotany, which is found within the Singapore Botanic Gardens, was done on the 13th of February of 2024. Pictures of all information boards, displays, videos and leaflets were taken, later the text on the pictures was transcribed.

An inductive approach was employed to develop codes for content analysis. After inspection of the collected data, specific code words were developed to represent plant uses. During the coding process, each plant was given a unique code, accompanied by the code that specified its use. To address the issue of plants with multiple names (i.e. Nutmeg, *Myristica* species, penarahan, are all the same plant), a single code word was selected based on its frequency of occurrence within the recorded text. It should be noted that plant codes, aren't always a single species, sometimes they include a whole genus or family of plants. Additionally, indigenous tribe names were also coded for. After the coding process, the data was analysed and plotted.

Much of the content displayed in the Ethnobotany centre was based on the work done by I.H. Burkil, the second director of the gardens. Ethnobotanical and ethnomedicinal information of the Malay peninsula are recorded in his works *A Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula*,¹⁷ *The Medical Book of*

Malayan Medicine,²² *Malay Village Medicine*²³ and *On Chinese Medicine: Drugs of Chinese Pharmacies in Malaya*.²⁴ Through a content analysis of the exhibitions in the Centre for Ethnobotany, it is expected to find the culturally significant and influential plants of South-east Asia, from the perspective set by The National Parks Board (NParks) greatly based on I.H. Burkil's works.²⁵

Orang Laut Interview

To compare the information gathered from the Centre for Ethnobotany exhibits, it was thought it would be most beneficial to interview Firdaus Sani, as the representative and voice for the Orang Laut descendants of Singapore. Firdaus Sani is the founder of Orang Laut Singapore,¹¹ which is an organization that focuses on retelling the narratives of the indigenous people of Singapore, through food, art, digital content, and education. He has closely worked with many members of the community and gathered numerous stories and valuable knowledge that he kindly shared during our interview. Although time constrains limited further interviews, it should be noted that the insights shared by Firdaus Sani are reflective of a collective perspective within the community.

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