

Chapter 15

The Plight of the Orang Asli Women in Malaysia: Promoting Wild Edible Plants Through Street Food

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ABSTRACT

In the past, Orang Asli women and men were considered equal, even though their roles were very different. As modernization slowly crept into their lifestyles, the gender divide has gotten a lot bigger and the paternalistic culture has taken a hold of many. Some researchers have said the skewed depictions was influenced by both Christianity and Islam, whereby women were considered to be created by supernatural powers alongside the male species. However, there have been accounts of women being the village chief, but as more anthropologists targeted their research on the Orang Asli, the role of a women in the decision making process slowly got relegated. Hence, this review aims to provide the role of Orang Asli women in educating the general public on the usage of wild edibles found in Malaysia and how it could be incorporated into street food to preserve traditional dietary culture. Some of the key challenges, plans, and practical applications are discussed to improve rural development and prepare a holistic mediation guideline to buffer the health and safety of the population.

INTRODUCTION

Based on current estimates, the amount of indigenous people that can be found worldwide roughly accounts for 370 million people and is spread across 90 countries. Each indigenous groups have their own specific customs and what differentiates them from the mass population is the way they live, their economic and social relationships and also the stratification of their society (UN, 2018). The term Orang Asli, which literally translates to ‘original people’ was first introduced by both the government and sociology researchers on how to identify these indigenous people. Based on the Federal Constitution of

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Malaysia, the term can also be applied and referred to as the Aboriginal people of Malaysia. However, the term indigenous people of Malaysia is more broadly used when identifying this particular group of people. During the time of the British Occupation, they were categorized into three main groups namely Negrito, Senoi/Semai and Proto-Malay to ease administration purposes and govern them (Edo, 2006).

Currently, among Orang Asli families, women are thought to be the primary care giver for their households; and nothing more than that, which has contradicted many reports on them being midwives, paving way for them to be shamans and spiritual leaders in their own rights. However, in the 1940's a paradigm shift happened and shamans that exist today are all man. As a consequence of this, the social standing of a women from the Orang Asli people has been deteriorating, more so in the last few decades. When it comes to making decisions that would affect the nuclear family unit and the village, the man acts as both the representation of the women and their children.

To make matters worse, similarly to their identity, the role of women has been enforced upon the dominant society rather than it being defined on their own. A quick survey among the urban population, when asked about the Orang Asli yielded many negative perceptions both in terms of identity and the servitude role a woman plays in their family. When being compared to other indigenous groups in West Malaysia, the Orang Asli do not have enjoy any special rights or privileges. This has led to their lack of representation, marginalization, being poverty stricken and also their poor living conditions especially among the Orang Asli women. As their land rights have been abused by various government and private agencies, many do not own any land, though forest reserves has been gazetted in the Aboriginal People's Act.

Past literature has reiterated that in comparison to many other hunter-gathering societies, there were no gender divisions between the Orang Asli. All activities to ensure continuous survival were deemed to be equal. No one gender, were superior to the other, though there were some tasks that were more gender oriented such as hunting. Marriage was seen as a tie that allowed both sexes to form a self-sufficient economic unit. However, the shift from hunter gathering lifestyles to a cash economy came about through various governmental policies forcing the Orang Asli to assimilate with the dominant culture which allowed them to understand the value of money that seemed to slowly seep into their non-violent and materialistic culture. Wood from trees and exotic animals from the jungle have become prized goods and raw materials for various industries. The prices of some of these goods started increasing in value and many men succumbed in trade participation, gathering large amount of forest material for sale (Howell, 2006). When the Orang Asli men started have started receiving kickback from the sales of these resources, it caused a further divide between gender roles. The amount obtained has allowed them to exert an authoritarian like position in their own families. The women were further relegated and had to take up more male-dominated role which were often carried out by their husbands as they were away for longer periods of time due to depletion of forest resources causing them to venture in further into the forest. Since women were not the ones earning money, they had to rely on their husbands to purchase groceries and materialistic goods to feed the mouths of their children and them.

That is not to say that the women took a backseat in providing for their families. Orang Asli women were engaged in foraging and were well educated when it came to the usage of medicinal plants (Gianno, 2006). They also fished in the nearby rivers for additional protein. When it came to durian and mango season, the women took an active role in plucking them. Many different varieties of mangoes and durians are gathered using lengthy bamboo poles. Their skill and agility in handling these plants are based on experience. These poles are then attached to a hand woven basket with jagged ends to agitate the fruits

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