

Issues and Challenges of Bamboo Handicraft among the Temiar Community in POS Hau, Kelantan

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Abstract

The handicrafts of the Temiar ethnic group, particularly those made from bamboo, hold significant cultural importance and serve as a hereditary legacy that reflects the identity and uniqueness of this community. Temiar handicrafts embody the refinement of hand skills, high creativity, and traditional knowledge, resulting in unique and captivating artistic creations that play a vital role in their daily lives. In addition to serving as household tools, these handicrafts also act as a medium for preserving cultural identity and ensuring the continuity of the Temiar people's ancestral heritage. Despite their rich traditional values, Temiar bamboo handicrafts face various challenges in maintaining their continuity and relevance in the modern era. The scarcity of raw materials, lack of skilled artisans, and competition with modern products are among the main factors threatening their sustainability. Therefore, this study aims to identify the issues and challenges encountered in the production and preservation of Temiar bamboo handicrafts in Kelantan. This study employs a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods, involving in-depth interviews and participant observation in the crafting process to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Three key informants with extensive experience in bamboo handicraft-making will be interviewed to obtain in-depth data on the technical aspects, symbolism, and cultural significance of these crafts. The collected data will be analyzed using **QSR NVIVO 14** software to identify key themes related to the sustainability challenges of Temiar bamboo handicrafts. The findings of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of the

Temiar bamboo handicraft industry and contribute to efforts in preserving and empowering this cultural heritage in a more sustainable context.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Temiar, Bamboo, Sustainability, Heritage

Introduction

The Orang Asli is an indigenous minority group in Malaysia, residing across Peninsular Malaysia except in the states of Penang and Perlis. The largest populations of Orang Asli are found in Pahang, Perak, Selangor, and Kelantan. According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) in 2022, there were approximately 209,575 Orang Asli in Malaysia. Pahang recorded the highest population with 78,615 people, followed by Perak with 61,225, Selangor with 20,961, and Kelantan with 17,487 individuals.

This study focuses on the Temiar ethnic group from the Senoi sub-group, who reside in the Resettlement Scheme (RPS) Pos Hau in Kelantan. The Temiar are the largest Orang Asli group in Kelantan, with a population of 15,237 out of the total 17,487 Orang Asli in the state (JAKOA, 2022). The total number of Orang Asli in Kelantan is presented in the table below:

No.	Ethnic Group	Total
1.	Jakun	37
2.	Temuan	36
3.	Bateq	789
4.	Jahai	715
5.	Kensiu	4
6.	Kintaq	1
7.	Mendriq	523
8.	Jahut	1
9.	Mahmeri	3
10.	Semai	134
11.	Semoq beri	7
12.	Temiar	15,237
Total		17,487

Source: Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) (2022)

Traditional handicrafts play a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity and heritage of the Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. Previous studies have examined various aspects of these handicrafts, including their economic and social significance, as well as the challenges faced by these communities. For instance, a study by Pereira and Subramaniam (2017) explored the socio-economic aspects of the Temuan Orang Asli in Kampung Bukit Lagong, Selangor. The study found that their primary economic activities included agarwood collection, rubber tapping, and weaving, all of which are closely linked to forest resources and traditional skills. Weaving, in particular, not only provides a source of income but also serves as a medium for preserving their cultural heritage.

In the context of Malaysia's Orang Asli communities, handicrafts play an essential role in maintaining their cultural identity and traditions. Each Orang Asli ethnic group has unique craft-making traditions that reflect their close relationship with nature. For example, the Temiar are known for their bamboo and rattan weaving, while the Mah Meri ethnic group excels in wood carving, particularly in creating ritual masks. These handicrafts not only

function as economic resources but also serve as a means of storytelling, conveying beliefs, and expressing cultural values.

This study focuses on the issues and challenges related to bamboo-based handicrafts, which represent an important cultural heritage among the Orang Asli, particularly the Temiar people in Malaysia. Bamboo is not only used as a primary material in craft production but also holds symbolic significance, reflecting the community's deep connection with nature (Omar & Hashim, 2020). Bamboo handicraft products such as baskets, mats, musical instruments, and traditional weapons serve both functional and symbolic purposes, representing cultural identity passed down through generations (Juli Edo, 2017).

However, in the modern era, the production and sustainability of bamboo handicrafts among the Temiar people face several challenges. These include the exploitation of forest resources, leading to shortages of raw materials like bamboo, socio-economic changes that reduce the younger generation's interest in continuing this tradition, and difficulties in marketing handicraft products in the commercial market (Roslan et al., 2019). Furthermore, competition from mass-produced industrial products, which are cheaper and more readily available, has contributed to the decline in demand for traditional handicrafts (Mohamed et al., 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods as the primary basis for data collection. The main focus of this research is to gather information through fieldwork in the Temiar community in Gua Musang, aiming to obtain primary data as the main source of the study. Additionally, secondary data are collected from various sources such as journals, books, and academic articles to support and reinforce the findings from primary data. The combination of these data sources enables the researcher to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues and challenges faced in the bamboo handicraft industry of the Temiar community. The ethnographic approach applied in this study involves direct engagement with the local community to gain in-depth insights into the challenges encountered by bamboo handicraft artisans. Data are obtained through interactions with villagers, including handicraft artisans, traditional leaders such as the *tok batin*, and other individuals directly involved in this industry. During the fieldwork, the researcher spent approximately one month with the informants to conduct detailed observations and interviews. This study involves three key informants, labeled as IR1, IR2, and IR3. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Temiar bamboo handicraft artisans, including aspects such as raw material sourcing, marketing, and cultural heritage preservation. Additionally, the researcher analyzed secondary data from various academic sources related to the handicraft industry, heritage conservation, and the sustainability of natural resources in the context of the Orang Asli community. The data collected from interviews and literature reviews were analyzed using NVivo 14 software, facilitating thematic analysis by categorizing data according to predefined themes. The integration of primary and secondary data allows the researcher to present more detailed, in-depth, and holistic findings regarding the issues and challenges affecting the sustainability of Temiar bamboo handicrafts. The interview questions were conducted in the Kelantanese dialect, as the selected informants primarily communicate in this dialect. This approach ensures better understanding between the researcher and respondents. The

collected information and data were thoroughly analyzed to ensure the findings are presented clearly and accurately.

Temiar Handicrafts: An Integral Aspect of Cultural Heritage

The development of human societies in the early stages of civilization was deeply influenced by their adaptation to the natural environment. Through keen observation of available resources, early humans acquired knowledge and developed tools to fulfill daily needs. As noted by Hafis (2015), Sahar (2020), and Asmawi (2018), this interdependent relationship with nature formed the foundation for the creation of tools, materials, and crafts, which were essential for survival and day-to-day living. Furthermore, this close connection to the environment contributed to the development of societal norms that emphasized mutual respect and reverence for nature, which became integral to the cultural belief systems of early human societies. Anthropologists have long recognized that the physical traits and cultural behaviors of human societies are shaped by evolutionary processes and the necessity for survival, which in turn are influenced by the surrounding environment and historical contexts (Phenix, 1964).

For the Orang Asli communities, including the Temiar, traditional handicraft-making remains a vital practice that reflects a deep and longstanding relationship with the natural environment. The Temiar people possess a wealth of knowledge in crafting various objects designed for both practical and symbolic purposes. These include utilitarian items such as shoulder baskets, woven containers, mats, and personal adornments, as well as tools used in hunting, fishing, and daily tasks. Materials for these handicrafts are derived from the natural resources surrounding the community, including bamboo, rattan, and various types of wood. As Mastura and Norini (2018) highlight, these handicrafts are not merely functional objects; they are also imbued with spiritual significance, as many are believed to offer protection from malevolent forces or misfortune.

Historically, the primary purpose of these crafts was to fulfill the everyday needs of the Temiar community. Items such as cooking utensils, storage containers, and food preparation tools played essential roles in the daily sustenance of the community. Additionally, tools for hunting and self-sufficiency, such as blowpipes, dart tubes, animal traps, and digging implements, were crucial for the community's survival. The production of musical instruments, such as the *chentong* and *kereb*, also played an important role in maintaining cultural and spiritual practices. These instruments, while serving practical purposes, were also key to social events, thereby reinforcing the role of music in communal rituals and celebrations. Moreover, personal adornments such as necklaces, bracelets, and rings were crafted not only for aesthetic value but also as markers of identity and social status.

A particularly noteworthy example of Orang Asli craftsmanship is the *tempok*, a traditional object utilized in ritual ceremonies. The *tempok* serves both a functional and symbolic role within the community, underscoring the significance of handcrafted items in the spiritual life of the Orang Asli. As a ritualistic object, the *tempok* is often seen as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms, embodying the cultural values and beliefs of the Temiar people. The crafting and use of such objects reflect the community's enduring connection to their ancestors and their spiritual practices, reinforcing the notion that these items are not merely tools but vessels of cultural continuity.

The process of creating these handicrafts is not solely a practical endeavor but also a manifestation of cultural identity. Each object crafted by the Temiar people represents an intricate blend of knowledge, creativity, and tradition passed down through generations. In this way, the production of bamboo handicrafts, alongside other traditional crafts, functions as both a method of cultural expression and a form of social cohesion, ensuring the transmission of values, skills, and practices from one generation to the next. As such, these handicrafts are not static relics of the past but are dynamic elements of a living cultural heritage that continues to play an important role in the identity and survival of the Temiar community.

In conclusion, the Temiar's craftsmanship, particularly in bamboo, is a vital aspect of their cultural heritage. It represents not only the practical knowledge required for daily survival but also the spiritual and social values that have shaped the community for centuries. The preservation and continuation of these traditions are essential for maintaining the cultural identity of the Temiar people, ensuring that their craftsmanship remains a living, evolving practice within contemporary society.

1) Bubu luu = Lukah



Figure 1: Lukah in small size



Figure 2: Lukah in large size



Figure 3: Lukah Pinggang
Source: Data collection 2024

2) Bubu Ken = Bubu bulat



Figure 4: Bubu ken in small size



Figure 5: Bubu ken large size

Source: Data Collection 2024

Issues and Challenges of Bamboo Handicraft

Shortage of Raw Materials

Findings from the study indicate that the shortage of raw materials, particularly in selecting high-quality bamboo, is a major challenge faced by the Temiar community in bamboo handicraft production. The study's informants stated that natural bamboo resources are increasingly depleting due to logging activities and land-use changes.

"Dulu boleh la dapat sumber buluh dari hutan dekat ni jah, tapi sekarang terpaksa gi jauh ke kawasan hutan. Jadi menambah kos pengangkutan pastu masa jadi koho lamo." (IR1)

"Buluh pun tok banyak doh loni, untuk buat kraftangan tak semua buluh boleh pakai. Dalam 5 jenis buluh tu boleh pakai 2 jenis jah. Itu pun susah nk dapatkan bekalan buluh loni sebab duk teroka hutan" (IR1)

Translation: In the past, raw materials such as bamboo from the forest were easily accessible. However, artisans now have to source bamboo from deeper forest areas, which increases transportation costs and time.

Translation: The shortage of raw materials, particularly bamboo, has become a growing concern in handicraft production. Not all types of bamboo are suitable for crafting; among the five species found in the forest, only two are commonly used for making handicrafts. However, due to forest exploitation, obtaining these bamboo species has become increasingly difficult.

Based on the accounts shared by the informants, they are now facing increasing challenges in obtaining bamboo, which is a crucial material for their traditional handicrafts. This difficulty stems from ongoing deforestation and land clearing activities that have severely impacted the natural habitats where bamboo grows. The informants expressed concern that bamboo is

becoming not only harder to find, but also that certain types they used to rely on are becoming scarce. This is especially troubling because not all bamboo species are suitable for crafting only specific types are chosen for their strength, flexibility, and ease of use, which are essential for producing high-quality and long-lasting craft items. The decline in the availability of these particular bamboo species has not only made it more difficult for artisans to continue their work, but it also threatens the survival of bamboo-based craft traditions that have long been a meaningful part of the Temiar community's cultural heritage.

The Temiar community utilizes several species of bamboo in their traditional handicrafts, each chosen with care based on its unique characteristics and suitability for specific types of products. The selection process is not arbitrary; rather, it reflects generations of accumulated knowledge passed down through experience and observation. Each species of bamboo offers different properties that significantly influence the strength, flexibility, and overall quality of the final craftwork.

Among the most widely used is *Buluh Betung* (*Dendrocalamus asper*), a large and sturdy species highly valued for its durability. Its robust nature makes it ideal for crafting furniture and larger items such as storage baskets, which require both strength and long-lasting performance. Another important species is *Buluh Minyak* (*Bambusa vulgaris* var. *striata*), easily recognized by its smooth, greenish-yellow stem. This bamboo is particularly favored for making blowpipes and traditional musical instruments due to its natural resistance to insect damage, ensuring the longevity of these culturally significant items.

For finer, more delicate crafts, the Temiar often turn to *Buluh Semeliang* (*Schizostachyum brachycladum*), which has a medium-sized stem and soft, fine fibers. These qualities make it well-suited for weaving mats, small baskets, and other intricately designed items. The choice of bamboo is therefore closely tied not only to functional needs but also to aesthetic and symbolic values rooted in Temiar tradition.

By carefully selecting the right type of bamboo for each item, Temiar artisans are not only ensuring the practicality and durability of their crafts, but they are also maintaining a deep cultural connection to their environment. This thoughtful approach reflects a broader philosophy of living in harmony with nature and preserving a heritage that is intimately tied to the land, materials, and traditional knowledge of the community.

According to Mohd Nor et al. (2020), the expansion of agricultural activities and urban development has significantly contributed to the reduction of bamboo forest areas in Malaysia. These land-use changes have not only led to the loss of natural habitats but have also disrupted the traditional ecological balance upon which many indigenous communities, including the Temiar, depend. In an effort to meet increasing demand, some parties have turned to commercially cultivated bamboo. However, artisans often find that these cultivated varieties lack the strength, flexibility, and overall quality required for traditional handicraft production.

As a result, many traditional craftspeople are left with no choice but to continue sourcing bamboo from the already limited natural environment. This scarcity of suitable raw materials not only increases the cost of production due to the time and effort required to locate and

harvest appropriate bamboo but also places additional pressure on these remaining forest resources. The combined effect of these challenges weakens the market competitiveness of traditional bamboo-based crafts, making it harder for artisans to sustain their livelihoods while preserving their cultural practices.

Lack of Skilled Artisans

One of the biggest struggles the bamboo handicraft industry faces today is the lack of interest from the younger generation in learning and continuing these traditional crafts. Many young people in the Temiar community are looking toward urban life for better job opportunities and financial stability, as they feel these careers offer a more secure future. The thought of spending long hours mastering the delicate art of bamboo craft seems less appealing when compared to the convenience and perceived benefits of working in a city or factory.

A Temiar artisan expressed this concern with a sense of worry for the future, saying:

“Anok muda loni lebih suko kijo di bandar daripada kijo buat kraftangan ni. Dio raso buat kraftangan takdok maso depe. Jadi anak-anak muda loni pun kure doh nok belajar buat seni kraftangan buluh ni dan takdolah hok mahir dale pembuatan kraftangan ini kalu tak se buat doh belako.”

Translation: “Young people today prefer working in the city rather than doing handicrafts. They feel that making handicrafts takes too much of their time. So, the young people no longer want to learn how to make bamboo crafts, and there won’t be any skilled craftsmen in the future if the elders don’t continue teaching.”

This is a sentiment shared by many artisans, and it highlights a real fear for the future of the craft. When young people no longer see value in learning traditional skills, it’s more than just a loss of work it’s a loss of culture, identity, and a way of life that has been passed down for generations. The tradition of bamboo craftsmanship is not just a livelihood for the Temiar; it’s a piece of who they are. But now, with fewer young people interested, that piece is at risk of fading away.

The issue goes beyond simply a lack of workers. It’s about the knowledge, techniques, and stories that are at risk of being lost forever if the older generation can’t find a way to pass them on. This is a critical moment for the Temiar community. Without the right kind of support whether through mentorship, workshops, or educational programs the bamboo crafts that have defined their cultural identity for centuries could become just a memory.

If we want to preserve this part of Temiar heritage, it’s essential to act now. Creating spaces for young people to reconnect with these crafts, showing them the pride and value that comes from creating something with their own hands, could be the key to ensuring that this tradition survives for years to come.

This loss of interest in bamboo handicraft-making is not just a matter of changing job preferences but also reflects the deeper economic pressures faced by the younger generation. Many young Temiar individuals are increasingly migrating to urban areas, lured by the promise of stable jobs with more predictable incomes. This global trend, as noted by Tan (2021), is also affecting Malaysia's Orang Asli communities, where traditional practices

like bamboo craftsmanship are being abandoned in favor of modern employment opportunities.

Nicholas (2019) further explains that the declining interest among young Temiar individuals in pursuing bamboo handicraft traditions is directly linked to the perception that these crafts are not financially rewarding and that the skills involved are difficult to master. As a result, fewer young people are taking up the trade, and the number of skilled artisans within the Temiar community is steadily shrinking.

This shift in priorities has led to a gap in the passing down of knowledge and skills to the next generation, which is critical for the survival of this unique cultural tradition. Bamboo handicraft-making is not just a form of livelihood; it's a craft that requires immense passion, patience, and creativity qualities that are not easily found in just anyone. Without younger artisans willing to learn and develop these skills, the future of the craft is uncertain.

As the number of skilled artisans continues to dwindle, it's clear that this issue is more than just about preserving a craft it's about safeguarding a cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations. For the Temiar, bamboo handicrafts are not only an art form but also a connection to their identity, their history, and their relationship with nature. If nothing is done to reignite the interest of younger generations, the legacy of bamboo craftsmanship risks being lost forever.

Competition with Modern Products

Temiar bamboo handicrafts are facing significant competition from modern products, especially plastic and metal items, which are often seen as more affordable and durable. During interviews with several informants, it became clear that many consumers now prefer plastic-based products because they are cheaper and last longer than bamboo items. As one artisan shared:

"Ore loni lebih suko beli raga plastik nga bare-bare plastik sebab lebih murah pastu tahan lamo. Kalau rago buat nga buluh ni akan kalahla dari segi harga dan jangka hayat sebab biasanya kalu guno buluh ni akan tahan dalam setahun atau dua tahun jah kalu dok keno air dan cahaya matahari."

Translation: "People nowadays prefer to buy plastic baskets and other plastic-based items because they are cheaper and last longer. Bamboo baskets, on the other hand, cannot compete in terms of price and durability. Bamboo products typically last only one to two years if they are not exposed to excessive water or sunlight."

This shift in consumer preferences is a major challenge for the traditional bamboo handicraft industry. Modern alternatives such as plastic baskets and metal products are not only less expensive but also require little maintenance, making them highly attractive to today's consumers. Bamboo products, while beautiful and culturally significant, often cannot compete on the same terms, particularly when it comes to longevity and cost-effectiveness. Interviews with other artisans also revealed a growing concern about this trend. Bamboo handicrafts, which once had a strong presence in local markets, are being gradually replaced by mass-produced, factory-made goods. The appeal of plastic products is clear: they are

lightweight, affordable, and can be produced in large quantities, unlike bamboo products, which require more time and skill to craft.

The market for traditional bamboo handicrafts is increasingly under pressure as consumers choose the practicality of modern products over the cultural value of handmade items. As Rahman et al. (2020) point out, mass-produced plastic and metal goods are often more popular because they offer lower prices and greater durability. Ismail (2019) also notes that the forces of globalization and industrialization have shifted consumer preferences toward more practical, cost-effective solutions, sidelining products that are seen as outdated or less functional.

Moreover, the lack of innovation in bamboo handicraft designs is another contributing factor to the decline. Bamboo products, which once served as a reflection of cultural identity and craftsmanship, are now viewed by some consumers as old-fashioned compared to sleek, modern alternatives. Without new designs or updates to traditional products, it becomes harder to attract younger buyers who are drawn to contemporary styles and materials.

As the competition with modern products intensifies, artisans face a critical crossroads. While bamboo handicrafts are deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of the Temiar people, they must evolve to meet the changing demands of the marketplace. This evolution doesn't necessarily mean abandoning tradition but rather finding ways to innovate and make these crafts relevant to today's consumer. Whether through creative design, better marketing, or even sustainable practices, the bamboo craft industry has the potential to adapt and thrive despite the challenges posed by modern alternatives

Conclusion

This study highlights that the bamboo handicraft industry of the Temiar community faces major challenges that threaten its continuity, namely the shortage of raw materials, the lack of skilled labor, and intense competition with modern products. The shortage of raw materials stems from the exploitation of forest resources, land clearing for development, and ecological changes that make it difficult to obtain high-quality bamboo. At the same time, skilled artisans in bamboo craft-making are decreasing due to the diminishing interest of the younger generation in preserving this cultural heritage. Additionally, competition from modern products, which are cheaper and easier to produce, has further marginalized the industry in the current market.

Despite these challenges, the Temiar bamboo handicraft industry still has great potential for development. To ensure its sustainability, several strategic measures need to be implemented. These include conservation efforts such as bamboo replanting and stricter control over resource exploitation. Furthermore, training programs, skill workshops, and incentives for young people should be introduced to encourage them to inherit and continue this traditional craftsmanship. Moreover, innovative marketing strategies, such as leveraging digital platforms, participating in art festivals, and integrating with the ecotourism sector, can help increase demand for Temiar bamboo handicrafts.

With the implementation of appropriate measures, the Temiar bamboo handicraft industry can not only be preserved as a cultural heritage but also develop into a sustainable economic

source for the community. Therefore, continuous collaboration among the government, NGOs, the private sector, and the Temiar community itself is crucial to ensuring this heritage withstands modernization and is passed down to future generations.

This research makes significant theoretical contributions to the discourse on cultural ecology and material culture studies by integrating ethnographic methodologies with sustainability frameworks. It elucidates the dynamics of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in contemporary contexts, demonstrating how indigenous systems of knowledge are inherently adaptive and dynamic (Omar & Hashim, 2020). Through an in-depth analysis of the Temiar community's bamboo handicraft practices, this research reinforces the premise that indigenous knowledge functions as a sustainability mechanism, harmonizing traditional practices with natural ecosystems. The findings validate the theory that interactions between indigenous communities and natural resources such as the selective use of bamboo species based on their physical and symbolic properties are not merely utilitarian activities but complex manifestations of cultural identity and cosmological relationships with the environment. Furthermore, this research enriches academic discussions on materiality by revealing how craft objects serve as mediums for transmitting socio-spiritual values and collective histories, a dimension often marginalized in studies narrowly focused on economic dimensions.

Contextually, this study addresses a critical gap in literature concerning Malaysia's Orang Asli communities by providing empirical insights into the socio-ecological challenges faced by Temiar artisans (Nicholas, 2019). By synthesizing qualitative data from key informants and field observations, the research offers actionable insights for stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and policymakers, to design rights-based interventions that prioritize indigenous autonomy. For instance, findings on raw material scarcity and youth migration to urban centers not only underscore the urgency of sustainable bamboo reforestation programs but also advocate for innovative economic models that integrate traditional crafts with ecocultural tourism or digital marketplaces. On a broader scale, this study serves as a critical reference for global initiatives aimed at safeguarding intangible heritage, particularly in Southeast Asia, where modernization pressures exacerbate tensions between tradition and progress. By emphasizing intergenerational knowledge transfer and ethical resource management, the findings call for holistic strategies that align environmental sustainability, social equity, and cultural autonomy key pillars of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Collectively, these contributions not only map contemporary challenges but also propose solutions rooted in the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, positioning traditional crafts as both cultural assets and economically viable practices in the modern era (Ismail, 2019).

This research thus advances interdisciplinary scholarship by bridging cultural anthropology, sustainability studies, and heritage conservation, while providing a replicable framework for protecting marginalized indigenous traditions worldwide (Hafis, 2015). Its dual focus on theoretical rigor and practical relevance ensures its significance as a catalyst for policy reform, community empowerment, and global advocacy for cultural resilience.

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