

The Function of Bamboo in the Life Structure of the Temiar Society: An Ethnographic Analysis

Aisya Azhari, Hafis Simin, Nik Nur Azizah Nik Halman, Ain Salem, Naqeeuddin Roslan

Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000581>

Received: 10 September 2025; Accepted: 17 September 2025; Published: 19 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted role of bamboo in the daily lives of the Temiar, an Indigenous Orang Asli community in Malaysia, who maintain a lifestyle closely intertwined with natural resources and their surrounding environment. Bamboo is extensively utilized across diverse domains, including traditional housing construction, food preparation, everyday tools, hunting implements, and musical instruments. Such utilization reflects the community's adaptive strategies to their ecological context and the intergenerational transmission of local knowledge. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research was conducted at the Kuala Betis Resettlement Scheme (RPS), Gua Musang, Kelantan. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with four key informants possessing extensive experience in bamboo craft and usage, coupled with participant observation and field notes. Thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo 12, was used to identify patterns in bamboo utilization across different aspects of daily life. The findings reveal that bamboo plays a critical role in fulfilling the community's material and subsistence needs sustainably, while simultaneously representing local ecological knowledge and cultural heritage. Despite facing challenges associated with modernization and diminishing forest access, bamboo remains a significant and enduring resource. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the role of natural materials in sustaining Indigenous lifeways and underscores the importance of preserving traditional knowledge in the context of contemporary socio-environmental changes.

Keywords: Bamboo, Temiar, daily practices, ethnography, sustainability, traditional crafts, local knowledge

INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, representing a minority population spread across most states, with the exception of Penang and Perlis. Among these communities, the largest populations are found in Pahang, Perak, Selangor, and Kelantan. According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA, 2022), the total Orang Asli population in Malaysia is estimated at 209,575 individuals, with Pahang hosting the largest community (78,615), followed by Perak (61,225), Selangor (20,961), and Kelantan (17,487). These figures highlight the uneven distribution of indigenous populations, which has implications for resource access, cultural preservation, and policy planning.

This study focuses on the Temiar, a subgroup of the Senoi peoples, who reside predominantly in the Resettlement Plan Area (RPS) of Kuala Betis, Gua Musang, Kelantan. The Temiar represent the largest Orang Asli community in Kelantan, numbering 15,237 individuals, which constitutes the majority of the state's Orang Asli population (JAKOA, 2022). Historically, the Temiar have maintained a semi-nomadic lifestyle closely intertwined with forested landscapes, relying on natural resources for shelter, sustenance, and cultural practices. The community's continued engagement with natural materials, particularly bamboo, provides a unique lens through which to examine indigenous knowledge systems and cultural resilience.

Bamboo (locally known as buluh) is a versatile natural resource that has held profound significance for indigenous communities across Southeast Asia, both as a practical material and as a symbol of cultural identity.

Among the Temiar, bamboo serves multiple purposes in daily life, ranging from the construction of dwellings and household implements to food preparation tools, hunting equipment, and musical instruments used in ritual performances such as the *sewang* ceremony (Abdullah et al., 2022; Farhana et al., 2021; Sahar, 2020). Its availability, renewability, and adaptability have rendered bamboo an indispensable resource, fostering sustainable practices embedded within the community's cultural framework.

The use of bamboo among the Temiar reflects a sophisticated system of indigenous ecological knowledge. Every stage, from selecting the appropriate species and age of bamboo to its functional application in daily life, embodies accumulated knowledge passed down through generations. This knowledge system integrates environmental awareness with cultural norms, ritual significance, and social practices. For instance, bamboo musical instruments such as the *centong* are traditionally reserved for specific ceremonial contexts, highlighting the instrument's symbolic role in social cohesion and spiritual expression (Nicholas, 2020). In this way, bamboo functions not merely as a utilitarian material but as a medium through which cultural values, identity, and collective memory are expressed and preserved.

Despite its cultural centrality, the continuity of bamboo-related practices faces increasing challenges. Rapid socio-economic changes, encroachment of modern development, deforestation, and limited forest access threaten the sustainability of traditional practices. Furthermore, younger generations of the Temiar are often less exposed to the cultural and practical knowledge associated with bamboo, leading to a gradual erosion of skills, traditions, and ecological literacy (Nordin & Rahim, 2021). The pressures of modernization, coupled with policy frameworks that may not fully recognize indigenous resource use, pose significant risks to the transmission of these culturally embedded practices.

Previous studies have highlighted the symbolic, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions of bamboo in indigenous communities; however, there remains a gap in the literature regarding its practical functions in everyday life, particularly as experienced and articulated by the community members themselves. Ethnographic approaches, which foreground the perspectives and lived experiences of the Temiar, are therefore essential for capturing the nuanced relationship between the community and their natural environment. Such approaches provide not only detailed documentation of material culture but also insights into how cultural practices, ecological knowledge, and social values are interwoven.

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic methodology to explore the multifaceted role of bamboo in the daily lives of the Temiar in Kuala Betis, Gua Musang, Kelantan. By engaging with community members through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and active field engagement, the research aims to document the diverse functions of bamboo, including its practical applications, symbolic meanings, and cultural significance. The study emphasizes the voices of the Temiar themselves, thereby validating indigenous perspectives and promoting an understanding of bamboo as both a material and a cultural artifact.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of indigenous material culture and its role in sustaining community identity, knowledge transmission, and ecological stewardship. In an era marked by rapid modernization and environmental change, documenting the uses, meanings, and significance of bamboo becomes critical not only from an academic standpoint but also as a strategy for preserving indigenous heritage. By highlighting the practical, symbolic, and cultural roles of bamboo within Temiar society, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers, cultural preservationists, and scholars interested in the intersections of indigenous knowledge, sustainability, and material culture.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach, as it provides the most suitable framework for understanding the cultural and ecological practices of the Temiar community. Ethnography allowed the researchers to engage directly with daily activities, enabling insights that extend beyond surface observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The study was conducted at the Kuala Betis Resettlement Scheme (RPS), Gua Musang, Kelantan, where the

Temiar continue to maintain traditions that revolve around bamboo. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the aim of selecting individuals who possessed deep knowledge of bamboo-related practices. Three key informants were chosen: a craft practitioner, a community leader, and a ritual specialist. While this approach ensured rich, experience-based data, it is acknowledged that purposive sampling introduces certain limitations, as the perspectives of highly skilled individuals may not fully represent the diversity of practices across the wider community.

Data collection combined several methods: semi-structured interviews conducted in the Kelantan dialect, participant observation, and field notes. These methods allowed for both the documentation of practical uses of bamboo and the capture of symbolic and cultural meanings. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and supplemented with detailed field journals.

For analysis, the study employed thematic coding using NVivo 12. The process began with initial coding of meaningful units of data, followed by the grouping of codes into broader categories, and finally the development of themes that reflected the core findings. Although the NVivo software assisted in managing and organizing data systematically, coding was primarily inductive and guided by the narratives of participants. To enhance credibility, triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with field observations and supporting literature. However, it must be noted that the coding and validation process was not subject to inter-coder reliability testing, which represents a methodological limitation of this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without its limitations. The use of purposive sampling, while useful for identifying highly knowledgeable informants, inevitably narrows the range of perspectives included. The voices of skilled craft practitioners and community leaders may not fully capture the everyday practices and experiences of the wider Temiar population. In addition, although NVivo 12 was employed to assist in thematic analysis, the process of coding and theme validation was not described in great detail, which limits the overall transparency of the findings. Future studies could address these issues by including a broader range of informants particularly younger generations and women while also strengthening the analysis with intercoder checks and member validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Finally, the study's focus on the Kuala Betis Resettlement Scheme means that the findings should not be generalized to all Temiar communities or other Orang Asli groups in Malaysia without caution.

The Role of Bamboo in Daily Life Among the Temiar Community

Bamboo plays a crucial role in the daily lives of the Temiar people, particularly in the interior regions of Kelantan, such as the Resettlement Plan Area (RPS) of Kuala Betis. As a readily available natural resource in the tropical forest environment, bamboo is not merely a practical material; it carries profound symbolic and cultural meanings embedded within the community's way of life. Findings from this study indicate that bamboo serves at least four primary functions: as a building material for homes, as domestic tools, as traditional weapons, and as musical instruments for ritual and ceremonial purposes. Its utilization reflects not only the community's adaptation to natural resources but also the transmission of ecological knowledge and ethical principles inherited across generations.

Bamboo in Traditional Housing Construction

One of the primary functions of bamboo among the Temiar is its use in traditional house construction. Temiar houses are typically built using natural materials easily sourced from the surrounding forests, including bamboo, timber, and rumbia leaves (Zakaria et al., 2020). Bamboo is chosen for its lightness, strength, durability, and ease of processing. It is employed in the construction of the house frame, walls, flooring, and roofing. This construction practice is not only practical but also aligns with the principles of environmental sustainability, as it utilizes renewable materials without causing significant damage to the forest ecosystem (Omar & Hashim, 2020).

Figure 1: Traditional Bamboo House of the Temiar



Source: Field Study, 2025

Within the Temiar community, bamboo is extensively used for various domestic structures such as floors, lattice walls, roofs, sleeping platforms, and storage platforms for household goods. Specific bamboo species, such as *pokwak* and *besir*, are selected for their structural strength, smooth surfaces, and resistance to insect infestation. One informant explained:

“Buluh ni banyak kita guna untuk buat rumah, pelantain tempat tidur, dinding rumah, semua boleh, kalau buat rumah pakai buluh ni lagi sejuk daripada pakai simen”

According to the informants, the use of bamboo has been deeply rooted since the time of their ancestors. Bamboo fulfills multiple functions in daily life, from forming the primary structure of the house to creating sleeping platforms and even maternity platforms. The informants emphasized that bamboo houses provide superior thermal comfort compared to concrete structures because of bamboo's natural cooling properties. This insight demonstrates the Temiar's long-standing understanding of bamboo as an integral part of vernacular architecture, which not only addresses physical needs but also considers ecological balance and the well-being of its inhabitants.

Bamboo's selection and usage are guided by intricate cultural knowledge and traditional customs. Certain species are harvested at specific times, following taboos and practices designed to protect the household's welfare. Abdullah and Tan (2020) refer to this as a form of *symbolic ecology*, where natural materials are not merely objects but entities with spiritual and social value. The harvesting, processing, and construction of bamboo are conducted meticulously, in accordance with community norms, to ensure the longevity and integrity of the structures.

Moreover, as Hairulnizam et al. (2025) note in their study in Pos Brooke, Kelantan, bamboo usage in Temiar housing extends beyond physical functionality; it embodies *cultural resilience*. Even amidst modernization and resettlement programs, such as those in RPS Kuala Betis, the Temiar continue to construct semi-permanent bamboo structures for family use, cooking platforms, or resting areas. These structures often integrate bamboo with modern materials such as zinc roofing or brick walls, illustrating a selective adaptation that reflects the community's local genius approach.

This demonstrates that bamboo is not only a practical building material but also a symbol of intergenerational knowledge, household well-being, and human-environment interaction. Its use reflects the Temiar's deep-rooted ecological wisdom and vernacular technology, emphasizing sustainability, climate adaptability, and cultural continuity.

The selection process is carried out with precision, considering factors such as species durability, size, growth direction, and method of cutting, all within the framework of cultural beliefs and practices. Bamboo is carefully harvested, dried, and prepared according to traditional knowledge, ensuring that the material is strong, long-lasting, and resistant to decay. Informants noted that these practices are highly ritualized and informed by experience, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of both the material properties of bamboo and its cultural significance.

Bamboo in Daily Tools and Household Items

Bamboo also serves as a fundamental material in the production of various household tools and implements used by the Temiar community. Common bamboo handicrafts include baskets, fish traps, mats, trays, food containers, and a variety of woven items that facilitate everyday life (Aisya et al., 2025). The weaving techniques require skills passed down through generations, and each weaving pattern carries specific cultural meanings that reflect the identity and aesthetic values of the Temiar people. These tools are not only utilized in daily life but also support economic activities, such as fishing and storing forest produce. By using bamboo as the primary material, the Temiar community can reduce reliance on modern materials that are often expensive and environmentally unfriendly (Tan, 2021).

“Kita banyak memasak guna buluh, masak air, masak ayam, ikan, lauk pauk lain dan nasi pun masak dalam buluh, bau dia dan rasa lagi sedap”

According to the informants, bamboo is frequently used in the preparation of daily meals, including boiling water, cooking rice, chicken, fish, and other side dishes. Cooking inside bamboo tubes not only enhances the aroma and flavor of the food but also reflects a form of culinary ecology rooted in natural resources. This practice demonstrates the Temiar’s sensory knowledge of natural materials, particularly bamboo, and represents an enduring commitment to an environmentally sustainable lifestyle through culinary techniques passed down over generations.

In the daily life of the Temiar, bamboo is widely employed not only for cooking but also for creating containers for water, vessels for drinking, storage for forest produce, and other traditional cooking implements. Informants emphasized that food cooked in bamboo, such as rice, fish, vegetables, and side dishes, produces a richer aroma and maintains its freshness for longer periods. Similarly, water stored in bamboo remains cooler and does not develop the unpleasant odors often associated with plastic or metal containers

Figure 2: Bamboo in Traditional Cooking



Source: Field Study, 2025

This practice reflects a form of traditional technology that is sustainable, cost-effective, and efficient, aligning with the principles of indigenous culinary ecology (Nordin, Ismail, & Jamal, 2021). In this context, bamboo

usage demonstrates not only local creativity in adapting to natural resources but also a refined sensory appreciation for taste, aroma, and texture, highlighting bamboo's role as a culinary medium valued for its functional and perceptual qualities.

Using bamboo as a container for water or for cooking further illustrates the Temiar's understanding of the advantages of natural materials over modern alternatives. Water stored in bamboo is not only kept cool but is also believed to retain a "natural freshness," contributing to better health and well-being. This aligns with the observations of Abdullah and Tan (2020), who noted that in Orang Asli cultures, natural materials such as bamboo are not perceived as neutral; instead, they are imbued with a material soul that impacts human health and holistic well-being.

Beyond the kitchen, bamboo is also used to craft a wide range of household implements, including kitchen racks, storage for tubers, tongs, strainers, large spoons, and firewood containers. All of these items are handcrafted using traditional techniques inherited from elders. Typically, these skills are learned through observation and practice from a young age, without formal education. This illustrates an informal education system within the Temiar community based on intergenerational knowledge transfer and hands-on experience.

Figure 3: Bamboo Constructed Kitchen Area



Source: Field Study, 2025

Nordin et al. (2021) emphasize that indigenous technology among Orang Asli communities prioritizes practicality, effectiveness, and environmental harmony. This is clearly reflected in the Temiar's approach, which uses bamboo not merely to produce functional items but also to reduce dependence on external materials such as plastic and metal, which are inconsistent with local cultural and ecological principles.

From an ecological perspective, the use of bamboo in everyday tools helps minimize modern waste and encourages sustainable living practices. In the context of climate change and resource depletion, the Temiar's approach to bamboo usage represents a model of traditional eco-technology that deserves recognition, further study, and integration into community development policies rooted in cultural values.

Bamboo in Hunting and Agricultural Activities

In the context of hunting, which is an integral part of Temiar daily life, bamboo is used in the making of traditional weapons such as blowpipes, arrows, and bows (Omar & Hashim, 2020). These weapons play a crucial role in providing food resources and ensuring the community's survival in the forest.

The use of bamboo for traditional weaponry requires specialized knowledge to select suitable species and craft them into effective and durable tools. Local beliefs and customs are closely intertwined with this production

process, including specific rituals conducted before the weapons are used to ensure they are blessed and protected. Hunting and fishing remain common practices among the Temiar, especially for supplementing protein intake. Selection of bamboo for these purposes takes into account its strength, straightness, and ability to generate high air pressure for optimal weapon performance.

The production of these weapons is not merely technical but also deeply spiritual. Local beliefs link successful hunting to the blessing of nature. Blowpipes that are not “blessed” through ritual ceremonies are believed to be ineffective or bring misfortune to the owner (Mahmud & Jamaludin, 2023).

“Sumpit kena buat betul-betul. Kalau tak cukup syarat, tak ‘makan’. Roh binatang tak bagi izin.”

“Sumpit juga. Ada tembak dengan apa. Yang kecil... mengikut kesesuaian napas kita. Tapi susah cari sini... asal dia di gunung Camar. Buluh teming ni panjang dan lurus, tapi susah nak dapat.”

The use of bamboo in weapon-making demonstrates the Temiar community’s reliance on natural resources for survival, while simultaneously valuing traditional knowledge and customs in all aspects of life. Informants emphasized that blowpipes cannot be produced arbitrarily; they must adhere to ritual and spiritual requirements. Blowpipes that do not undergo blessing rituals are believed to fail because the spirits of animals and the forest will not allow the harvest of bamboo. This illustrates how technical knowledge among the Temiar is intimately linked with spiritual beliefs, where hunting success depends not only on physical tools but also on maintaining harmony with the unseen world.

According to the informants, blowpipes used by the Temiar are typically made from teming bamboo, which possesses specific physical qualities such as straightness, length, and lightness. The selection of bamboo must match the user’s lung capacity, as blowpipes require precise breath control to function effectively. However, teming bamboo is increasingly difficult to obtain, as it only grows in highland areas such as Mount Camar and is not available near ordinary villages. This scarcity indicates a decline in access to traditional raw materials, threatening the continuity of weapon-making skills among younger Temiar generations.

For the Temiar, hunting is not merely an act of acquiring food but a long-standing tradition that integrates ecological knowledge, traditional technology, and social identity. Bamboo serves as the primary material for crafting traditional hunting weapons such as blowpipes, arrows, and fishing tools like traps and baskets.

Figure 4: Temiar Bamboo Handicraft



Source: Field Study, 2025

The selection process for hunting bamboo is meticulous. Species such as *teming* bamboo are preferred due to their strength, elasticity, and long, straight segments. Informants noted that this bamboo is increasingly rare, growing only in highland regions such as Mount Camar. The preparation process is labor-intensive: the bamboo must be heated over a fire to straighten it, then carefully massaged to prevent cracking or warping.

Creating a blowpipe requires not only technical skill but also patience and finesse, reflecting the Temiar's mastery of fine indigenous craftsmanship. This demonstrates the community's ability to transform natural materials into highly functional tools through observation, experience, and intergenerational knowledge transfer (Mahmud & Jamaludin, 2023).

Among the Temiar, the ability to craft and use a blowpipe is closely tied to male identity and social status. Young men learn to select bamboo, measure the appropriate length according to their breath capacity, and aim accurately. In this sense, the blowpipe is not only a weapon but also a symbol of maturity and a rite of passage with profound social significance.

Beyond hunting small animals such as squirrels, birds, or monkeys, bamboo-made fishing tools such as traps and baskets are used to catch fish in small rivers and rapids. These tools are tailored to the species of fish and water currents, demonstrating detailed ecological knowledge among the Temiar. Crafting techniques are passed down through observation and direct participation from a young age, making this process part of an informal education system within the community.

Bamboo usage in hunting also reflects the Temiar's ethical ecological principles: hunting is intended solely for family consumption, not for excessive or commercial purposes. This approach demonstrates a balance between subsistence needs and sustainable resource management.

However, the community now faces significant challenges due to loss of access to original forest areas caused by plantation development, road construction, and resettlement. As a result, certain bamboo species are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, threatening the continuity of traditional hunting skills and knowledge.

Bamboo in Ritual and Spiritual Ceremonies

In the Temiar community, bamboo is not merely a physical material used for daily necessities; it also plays a profound role in traditional ceremonies and spiritual beliefs. One significant ritual is the **sewang**, a healing and ancestral spirit-invoking ceremony performed during events such as lifting taboos, curing illnesses, funerals, or the beginning of a season.

"Kalau semasa bersewang tak boleh tebang buluh. Itu pantang... bayang tu masa dia nyanyi lagu tu, dia panggil seluruh alam. Jadi kalau kita tebang suka-suka, berarti kita ganggu roh yang dipanggil."

During sewang, bamboo forms an essential part of ceremonial tools and serves as a sacred symbol that must be respected. Informants highlighted specific taboos related to bamboo, such as prohibitions against cutting, moving, or using it for ordinary purposes during the ritual. Violating these norms is seen as interfering with the spirits summoned by the shaman's chants and music. In Temiar spiritual understanding, every element of nature possesses its own spirit, and sewang acts as a platform to unify human spirit with that of nature (Ismail, 2019).

Bamboo in religious rituals functions as a primary material, with its presence in the environment serving as a conduit connecting the physical and spiritual realms. Restrictions against cutting bamboo during ceremonies are grounded in spiritual ecology principles, where the natural world must remain undisturbed while spirits "descend" into the human world. Human interaction with nature during sewang is regulated by the **Tok Halak**, or shaman, who is believed to possess supernatural knowledge and the authority to maintain harmony between the human and spiritual worlds.

Amir Zal (2019) notes that in sewang, spaces such as the ceremonial hall, or **paro**, are cleansed and "opened" to spirits through sound, smoke, and silence. Any disturbance to the natural elements, including cutting bamboo, is considered a breach of spiritual protocol that can negatively impact healing, safety, and communal well-being.

The taboos surrounding bamboo also reflect the Temiar's cultural ethics toward natural resources, whereby humans are not permitted to act upon plants or land without first seeking permission from the unseen guardians believed to inhabit these areas. In the framework of **ritual ecology** proposed by Rappaport (1968), the human–nature relationship among indigenous communities is not exploitative but negotiated through customs, symbols, and inherited spiritual rules.

Moreover, these beliefs function as social control mechanisms to ensure human activity does not excessively disrupt ecosystems during sacred periods. While modern perspectives might view such taboos as mere superstition, from an anthropological perspective, they represent a form of environmental governance shaped by values rather than written law.

In sewang, bamboo serves both as a healing and symbolic element, reinforcing the Temiar community's connection with the natural world and the spiritual realm. Specifically, bamboo is integral to traditional musical instruments that accompany the singing and dancing, acting as a spiritual communication tool between humans and the supernatural.

One primary instrument is the **centong** or **awen go'h**, made from segments of *besik* and *pokwok* bamboo. These species are selected for their thin skin and ability to produce sharp, rhythmic resonance when struck. According to Amir Zal (2019), centong instruments exist in two main sizes long and short symbolizing masculine (male) and feminine (female) elements.

Both centong types are struck alternately on a wooden base called **genalang**, typically made from forest woods such as *kerog*, *jereg*, or *batang kayu perah*. The rhythmic interplay between the centong and genalang generates the acoustic background for circular singing and dancing around the sewang hall. These sounds are believed to induce trance-like states and facilitate spiritual communication with ancestral spirits.

Bamboo in Traditional Musical Instruments

Beyond its practical uses, bamboo holds significant cultural and spiritual roles among the Temiar community. It is employed in the making of traditional musical instruments such as flutes and drums, which are integral to various ceremonial and religious rituals (Sahar, 2020). Traditional music serves not merely as entertainment but as a medium for transmitting stories, history, and cultural values to younger generations.

“Kalau centong tu, kita ketuk pakai dua... satu panjang, satu pendek. Panjang tu jantan, pendek tu betina. Bunyi dia kuat kalau hentak atas genalang. Dia main masa sewang, bukan suka-suka.”

According to informants, the centong is a bamboo percussion instrument played in pairs during the sewang ceremony. The two sticks of differing lengths “male” (long) and “female” (short) symbolize the balance of sounds produced. The centong is struck on the genalang, a bamboo or wooden platform within the sewang hall, creating rhythmic patterns that accompany singing and ritual performances.

Informants emphasized that the centong is not played arbitrarily, but only within specific ceremonial contexts such as sewang. This demonstrates that its function extends beyond music; it is a key component in the Temiar's social and cultural structure. The selection of bamboo species, playing technique, and timing of use reflect the community's deep understanding of natural materials in reinforcing identity and sustaining tradition.

The Temiar not only utilize bamboo for physical and spiritual needs but also as a medium for traditional musical expression, which is vital to community life. Among bamboo musical instruments, the centong (awen go'h) stands out as a rhythmic percussion instrument used in sewang rituals.

The centong is made from segments of *besik* or *pokwok* bamboo, chosen for their balanced thickness and resonant properties. It is played in pairs, with one long centong and one short, representing masculine and feminine elements. Both are struck alternately on the genalang, typically crafted from local forest woods such as *kerog*, *jereg*, or *perah*. This combination produces the foundational rhythm for sewang performances, usually accompanied by circular dancing and ritual singing.

Figure 5: Centong Musical Instrument



Source: Field Study, 2025

The centong's role transcends music; it functions as a spiritual communication medium, conveying messages to ancestral spirits and facilitating a trance-like state for ritual participants. Amir Zal (2019) notes that instruments like the centong carry high symbolic value in Temiar culture, not only in terms of gender representation but also in bridging the physical and spiritual worlds. The sounds of the centong are believed to summon, calm, or guide the spirits present in the sewang hall.

From an anthropological perspective, the centong exemplifies the concept of a "ritual soundscape", where sound is not mere entertainment but a tool for creating sacred space and reinforcing communal bonds (Schneider, 2021). Each strike carries meaning, and knowledge of rhythms and sequences is acquired through participation and repeated immersion rather than formal instruction.

Furthermore, the use of bamboo in instrument-making highlights an essential aspect of Temiar cultural heritage: music is living culture, born from nature rather than industrial production. Bamboo must be carefully selected according to season, shape, and inherent 'energy', aligning with the Temiar's animistic aesthetic principles (Ismail et al., 2023).

However, knowledge of centong-making and performance is increasingly scarce among younger generations, especially those living outside active ritual areas or in settlements influenced by modernity. Amir Zal (2019) notes that the risk of losing such traditional instruments is high without documentation, intergenerational training, or institutional support for Orang Asli performing arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of bamboo observed among the Temiar resonates strongly with practices found in other Orang Asli groups and indigenous societies across Southeast Asia. For instance, the Semai in Perak and the Jakun in Johor continue to use bamboo in house-building, cooking, and the crafting of household tools, while the Mah Meri in Selangor integrate bamboo into ritual and ceremonial contexts (Abdullah & Tan, 2020; Farhana, Jamal, & Yusuf, 2021). Beyond Malaysia, the Dayak of Borneo and the Karen of Northern Thailand also depend heavily on bamboo for daily subsistence and ritual life, underscoring its shared cultural and ecological importance (Nicholas, 2020; Sahar, 2020). Placing the Temiar case alongside these examples helps to situate it within a broader ethnographic landscape and emphasizes bamboo's enduring significance as a material of cultural continuity across the region.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of bamboo in shaping the daily lives of the Temiar community at RPS Kuala Betis, Gua Musang, Kelantan. Bamboo is utilized across diverse domains, including housing construction, food preparation, domestic tools, traditional weapons, musical instruments, and ritual practices. This demonstrates that bamboo is not merely a practical resource but is deeply embedded within the community's symbolic, cultural, and value systems, passed down orally and collectively practiced over generations.

The ethnographic approach employed in this study allowed the researcher to engage deeply with community life, offering insights into the social, spiritual, and ecological meanings attached to bamboo use. Interviews and field observations revealed that bamboo selection is guided by practical knowledge and experience, taking into account factors such as strength, flexibility, node length, and suitability for specific purposes. These findings reflect an indigenous scientific reasoning that aligns with sustainable ecological principles.

However, the study also identified challenges faced by the Temiar community in maintaining bamboo-based traditional practices. These include pressures from development, forest degradation, and diminishing interest among younger generations. If left unaddressed, these challenges threaten the continuity of traditional knowledge, which forms the foundation of the community's cultural identity.

Therefore, the preservation and empowerment of bamboo-based traditional knowledge are crucial. This can be achieved through systematic documentation, supportive community development policies, and intergenerational educational initiatives. The study contributes to scholarly discourse on local wisdom, cultural ecology, and community resilience, providing a solid basis for integrating indigenous knowledge into sustainable national development agendas.

Looking ahead, it is important that bamboo-based practices are not only documented but also actively supported. Policymakers should recognize bamboo as both a cultural heritage resource and an ecological asset. Practical steps may include creating conservation programs for bamboo groves, providing incentives for sustainable harvesting, and supporting community-driven bamboo industries (Nordin & Rahim, 2021; Azhari et al., 2025). On the community side, initiatives such as youth training programs in bamboo craft, incorporating indigenous ecological knowledge into school activities, and partnerships with NGOs can strengthen intergenerational transmission while creating sustainable livelihood opportunities. In this way, the findings of this study go beyond academic interest and point to practical pathways for safeguarding indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural resilience in an era of rapid modernization.

REFERENCES

1. Abdullah, A., & Tan, S. (2020). Symbolic ecology and material culture among Orang Asli communities. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 51(3), 421–439.
2. Abdullah, N., Rahim, R., & Hassan, F. (2022). Cultural significance of bamboo among Indigenous peoples in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Anthropology*, 18(2), 55–70.
3. Amir Zal, M. (2019). *Sewang: Ritual soundscape and symbolism in Temiar performance*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
4. Azhari, A., Simin, H., Nik Halman, N. N. A., Salem, A., Khairil, N., Tuah, N., & Amirawa, A. (2025). Issues and challenges of bamboo handicraft among the Temiar community in POS Hau, Kelantan. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 15(5), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i5/25423>
5. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
6. Farhana, S., Jamal, A., & Yusuf, H. (2021). Traditional crafts and sustainability in Orang Asli communities. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(2), 112–130.
7. Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
8. Ismail, N., Nor, M., & Zakaria, Z. (2023). Animism and environmental ethics in Orang Asli rituals.

- Asian Journal of Social Science, 51(1), 77–94.
9. Ismail, S., Abdullah, M. Y., & Zakaria, Z. (2019). Cultural adaptation and ecological knowledge among the Orang Asli in Malaysia. *Geografia – Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 15(4), 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2019-1504-05>
 10. Mahmud, R., & Jamaludin, S. (2023). Bamboo blowpipes and hunting rituals among the Temiar. *Journal of Ethnographic Studies*, 12(1), 89–104.
 11. Nicholas, C. (2020). The Orang Asli and the contest for resources: Indigenous politics, development and identity in Peninsular Malaysia. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
 12. Nordin, N., & Rahim, H. (2021). Transmission of indigenous ecological knowledge in the age of modernization. *Journal of Environmental Anthropology*, 15(2), 144–160.
 13. Nordin, N., Ismail, F., & Jamal, A. (2021). Indigenous technology and eco-sustainability: Insights from Orang Asli communities. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 17(4), 56–72.
 14. Omar, A., & Hashim, M. (2020). Traditional bamboo houses and ecological adaptation in Malaysia. *Journal of Architecture and Environment*, 8(2), 97–110.
 15. Rappaport, R. A. (1968). Pigs for the ancestors: Ritual in the ecology of a New Guinea people. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 16. Sahar, S. (2020). Bamboo in Orang Asli cultural practices: Spirituality and everyday life. *Indigenous Knowledge Journal*, 5(1), 21–38.
 17. Schneider, A. (2021). Ritual soundscapes: Music, trance, and spirituality in indigenous traditions. New York: Routledge.
 18. Zakaria, Z., Hassan, R., & Lim, K. (2020). Sustainable vernacular architecture in Orang Asli communities. *Journal of Built Environment*, 26(2), 65–82.