

The ethnobotanical-linguistic documentation of Sago: a preliminary report from Merauke

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the ethnobotanical-linguistic documentation of sago (sago *Metroxylon Rottb.*) in Marori. Sago is a plant of high socio-cultural and economic values for the Papuan people in general and for the Marori ethnic group in particular. Socio-culturally, sago plays a central role in everyday life: it is used in a variety of important rituals, from birth to funeral ceremonies, which involve certain social obligation and responsibility. It is the identity of the Mahuze clan. Traditionally sago has a high economic value too, as staple food.

However, there has been a widespread process of acculturation and change resulting in a shift, among other things, in the consumption patterns of staple food, from sago to rice. In addition, the Marori language is highly endangered; the local indigenous knowledge related to sago (and also other plants) is also increasingly endangered. This is mainly due to external socio-historical-cultural factors that have affected and shaped the current ecology in Merauke and in modern Indonesia. The role of language is central in the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. Collaborative efforts of all stakeholders are therefore urgently needed to do language and cultural documentation, as part of the conservation and preservation of language and culture of this ethnic group.

The discussion on the entholinguistics of sago in this paper will address two related aspects: (i) documentation aspects and (ii) ethnobotanical-linguistic aspects. On the documentation issues, we will report the problems we are facing, from collecting and processing data to the development of the bilingual dictionary of Marori ethnobotany. Examples with illustrations using audio-video recording are given in relation to our case of sago documentation.

The paper will also report the progress on our linguistic-ethnobotanical research. We will discuss our investigation and documentation of folk taxonomy and lexical items in relation to sago plants and sago processing, including lexical items describing traditional tools and rituals, part of lexical database development to produce the dictionary of Marori ethnobiology. In folk taxonomy in Marori, there are four kinds of sago: *elitel*, *mbuov*, *uliba* and *yuk*. While more investigation is needed on the basis of morphological identification, it appears that the four identifiable types correspond to those identified by Rauwerdink (1986) in Flach (1997). Our research uncover rich vocabulary related to socio-cultural knowledge of sago, e.g. related to the parts/tools used such as *kosanggod*, *apuan*, *dapaa*, *roon*, *pondu*, *pendu*, *bing* and *pendol*.

Finally we will also discuss our findings on the sociocultural significance of sago in the context of physical and ecological changes in today's Merauke. Three functions/domains are highlighted: sago as staple food, sago in rituals and sago in totemism. We have found that deep cultural knowledge across these domains is seriously in danger. Our ELDP-funded documentation is hopefully an important starting point in the long process of language and cultural conservation/preservation for the Marori people.

Reference

Flach, Michiel. 1997. Sago palm *Metroxylon sagu* Rottb. Promoting the conservation and use of underutilized and neglected crops 13. Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research, Gatersleben/International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, Rome, Italy.