

Forager-forest relationships in the Malay Peninsula

Two DOBES projects – *Tongues of the Semang and Hunter-gatherer languages in contact* – target the endangered Aslian languages. These languages form a branch of the Austroasiatic language family and are spoken by culturally diverse minorities in the Malay Peninsula. Our documentation focuses on those Aslian languages which are spoken by hunter-gatherers, ranging between 26 and 1,000 people. We also carry out surveys in order to identify the current endangerment status of Aslian varieties. The results serve to inform future directions in efforts to document Aslian languages.



Aslian languages documented by our projects.

The green megastore

The Malayan equatorial rainforest boasts an astonishing biodiversity, and the Aslian-speaking foragers rely on forest life forms as the primary sources for building materials, tools, food, medicine, and adornment. Consequently, the Aslian languages harbour a wealth of indigenous knowledge about the rainforest. Our projects study and document lexicon and grammar with a specific focus on fauna and flora, foraging and preparation techniques, as well as beliefs, myths and stories associated with plants and animals. Our research reveals complex lexical systems which structure the natural world and how it is perceived and exploited by humans.



The rich Aslian knowledge systems are threatened as the Malayan rainforests they exist in disappear.

Smelling is believing



Human relations with the supernatural are mediated largely through smell.

Mainstream theory supposes that the human ability to identify and categorise smells is weak. The Aslian-speaking communities challenge this view, since smell plays a central role in both their lan-



Jahai language consultant Rempoy fashioning poisoned darts for his blowpipe.

guages and religious beliefs. For example, the Jahai language contains at least a dozen abstract descriptive smell categories that are basic, everyday terms. The Jahai discuss smells in just about the same way as English or German speakers talk about colours. A stinging smell from smoke, plant sap, petrol or paint is *cjes*; the smell of raw fish, meat, blood or egg is *plʔej*; the smell of fragrant flowers, perfume, and soap is *lʔpit*, and so on.

Wildlife and the senses among the Maniq

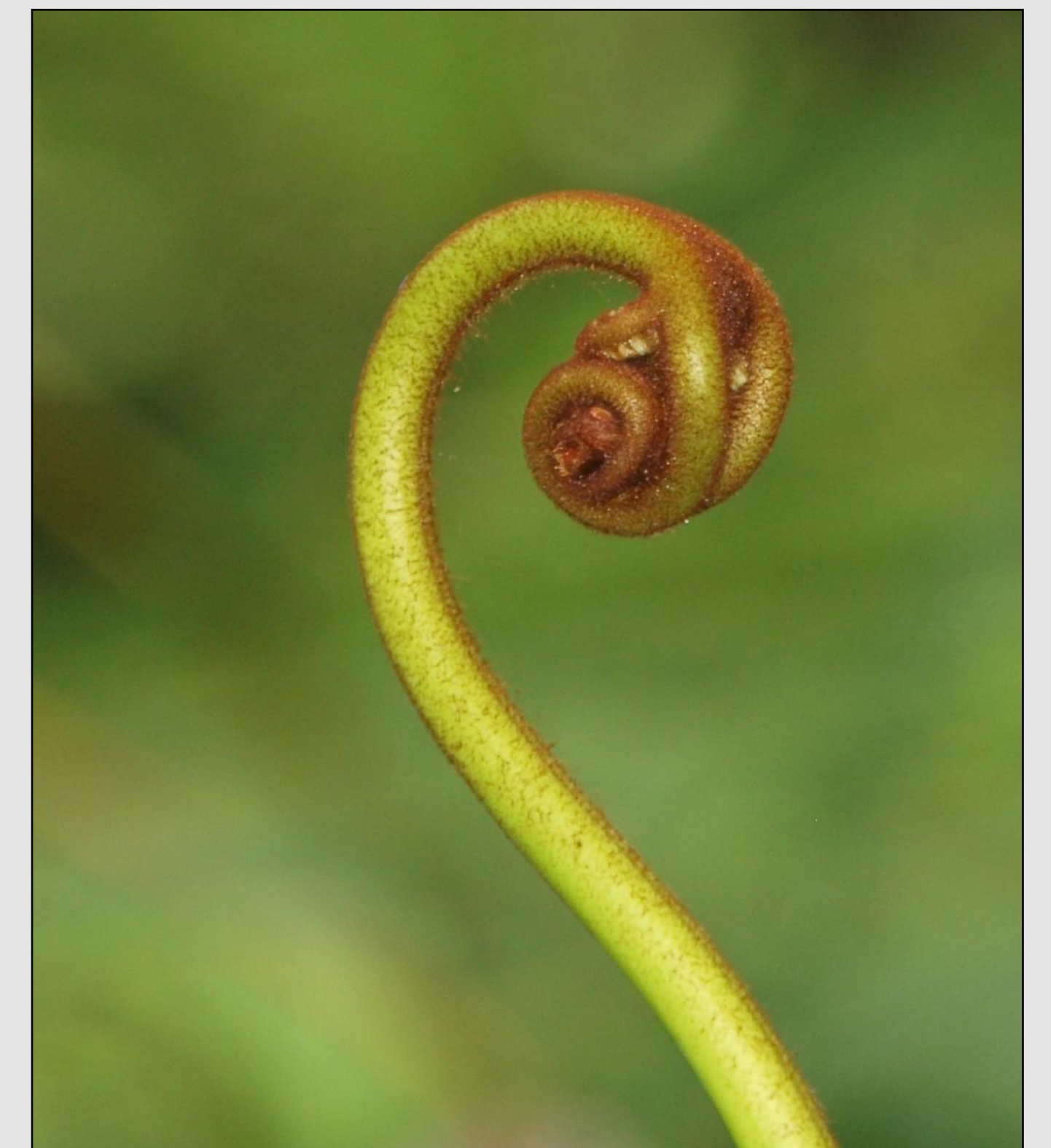
Project researcher Ewelina Wnuk investigates indigenous ethnobiological knowledge of the Maniq, foragers of southernmost Thailand, with a focus on the sensory language used in descriptions of plants and animals. The intimate familiarity with wildlife is reflected not only in the number of recognized species, but also in a remarkably rich linguistic repertoire employed when talking about their smells, colours and patterns, e.g. *kameh* 'to stink (of a millipede)', *taləŋ* 'to be red (of ripe fruit)', *cawāc* 'to be striped lengthwise'.



A wild ginger flower (*Etlingera littoralis*).

Expressing nature in Semai

Aslian languages have peculiar words known as *expressives*, which function to depict sensory events such as sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Project researcher Sylvia Tufvesson explores this topic among the Semai. Semai expressives exquisitely capture sensory aspects of nature and provide a system for categorizing the environment according to its perceived qualities. For example, the forms *crahees-crahuus* and *crahuus-crahvws* both express the roaring sound of a waterfall, but waterfalls of different size. The pair *slwv? sriwvɔŋ* and *slwv? britvɔŋ* expresses a visual distinction in plants between those with a striped pattern and those with a dotted multi-coloured pattern.



The Semai expressive *wēlwēl* conveys a notion of swirling shape or movement.

Know what you eat!

Does every language have a word like English 'eat' or German 'essen'? Our analyses of Aslian languages suggest no. In Aslian languages spoken by foragers, speakers have to select between a handful of specific verbs according to what is eaten. For example, in Semaq Beri, there are four basic eating verbs: *cɾet* 'to eat meat', *glət* 'to eat ripe fruit', *mamah* 'to eat raw vegetables', and *ɲca* 'to eat a staple'. These eating categories map neatly on to the primary foraging targets of the Semaq Beri subsistence.

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