

# The Dutch Impact on Siraya Ethnobotany in Historical Perspective

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## **Abstract (83 words)**

The Siraya were the first of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples to experience colonization, starting in 1624, when the Dutch East India Company founded a colony on the southwest coast. Over nearly four decades, the Dutch had a radical impact on the Siraya way of life, in particular their ethnobotany, their ethnic plants, but also on the ecology of the southwest plain. Nearly four centuries later, I visited a Siraya village in search of ethnic plants and a novel historical perspective on the Dutch colony.

## A Visit to a Siraya Village (645 words)

Since 1987, when martial law was lifted, Taiwanese people have been exploring their multicultural heritage, particularly Indigenous minorities. Like Taiwan's other Indigenous minorities, the Siraya, who live on the southwestern plain, have explored their heritage, including their ethnobotany – their ethnic plants – by carrying out a cultural revival. To revive their cultures, they ask elders about life in the olden days, but they also check colonial records to learn how even earlier ancestors lived. Unlike Taiwan's other Indigenous peoples, who check records left by the Japanese from 1895 to 1945, the Siraya check records left by the Dutch, who colonized western Taiwan from 1624 to 1661. As a scholar of Indigenous Taiwan with Dutch blood on my father's side, I'd always been curious about the Siraya, but I'd never gotten around to visiting a Siraya village and observing the cultural revival, until 2023.

One hot summer day I paid a visit to a Siraya cultural activist named Duan Hongshen (surname, given name) in Mandarin and Alak Akatuang (given name, surname) in Siraya. Mr. Akatuang runs a Siraya learning center for all ages in 吉貝耍部落, the village of Kabua.



Fig. 1. Sign welcoming visitors to 吉貝耍部落; author's photo.

It's a bit odd that the place name contains two words for "village," 耍 and 部落, but the important thing is that the village is named after the 吉貝, a Taiwanese approximation of the Siraya word *kabua*, meaning kapok, a tree with orange-red flowers (as you can see in the sign).

Mr. Akatuang wasn't around when I arrived, but a neighbor said he would be back, and kindly offered me a bunch of longan fruit to munch on and a stool to sit on while I waited. Instead of

sitting down I walked around. To start with, I took in the corrugated metal mural of plants and animals in the alley leading to the learning center.



Fig. 2: Corrugated metal mural in the alley to the learning center; author's photo.

The leaves in the vase on the left are from an aster (a plant in the sunflower family) called *ihing* in Siraya, and to the right of the leaves you can see betel nut, or *abiki*. Underneath is a wild boar, a *kavalon*, and next to it a sika deer, a *fulang*. To the right is the brilliant bloom of a *kabua* – a kapok tree. I headed down the alley and saw a *kuva* or “shrine” to the left. Inside I found a pig’s skull bound with rattan bark to a bamboo stick, vases containing *ihing*, betel nut on a banana leaf, and bottles of rice wine. Hanging up on the wall was a dried [chaplet](#).



Fig. 3. The offerings in the *kuva*, and the chaplet hanging up on the wall; author's photos.

Leaves of sugar cane formed the loop of the chaplet, which was then adorned with *ihing* leaves and three kinds of flower, of betel nut palm, globe amaranth, and cockscomb (*Celosia cristata*), as a signboard outside explained.



Fig. 4. A signboard explaining the composition of the Siraya chaplet or *halau*; author's photo.

On the left, a girl wears a chaplet, called a *halau* in Siraya, atop a strip of mauve fabric.

Underneath her grows sugar cane and *ihing*. Under the center of the sign, you can also see the “spiky” trunk of a *kabua*, the tree that gave the village its name. It was while I was reading this sign that Mr. Akatuang finally arrived.



Fig. 5. Alak Akatuang and I outside the Siraya learning center; author's photo.

In a wide-ranging conversation, Mr. Akatuang helped me fill in some of the blanks of the story of Sirayan ethnic plants and animals as well as southwestern Taiwan ecology. This story would draw on Mr. Akatuang's own life experience, but it began thousands of years ago.

### **The Austronesian Settlement (677 words)**

Based on evidence from archaeological digs, scientists know which Taiwanese plants and animals are “native,” meaning that they have grown or roamed in Taiwan since before human settlement. When the Austronesian ancestors of the Siraya settled the west coast of Taiwan some six millennia ago, they made use of native plants and animals that were probably familiar with in their original homeland in southeastern China. After all, Taiwan was connected to the mainland by an isthmus during the last ice age, when glaciers covered the northern halves of Europe and North America, lowering sea levels globally. By using plants like rattan and bamboo to make tools to hunt animals such as the sika deer and the wild boar and to make dwellings for themselves to live in, the Austronesian settlers began to shape the local ecology to their needs.

But Austronesian settlers also brought “alien” or “exotic” animals such as the pig and the dog and plants such as ramie (for weaving), rice (for wine), sugar cane (for food and basket material), and betel palms (for nuts to chew). They may have also brought *ihing*, but as *ihing* does not have an obvious practical purpose, its introduction may have been inadvertent. At any rate, by raising such animals and by tending such plants in slash-and-burn gardens called swiddens, they further altered the local ecology. By the mid-fifteenth century, southwestern Taiwan was a patchwork of swiddens and hunting grounds.

In the decades before the Dutch arrived, the Austronesian settlers, who had lived so long in Taiwan that they could be called aborigines, had more and more contact with the outside world. Japanese and Chinese traders brought three New World species – sweet potato, peanut, and corn – from the Philippines. Traders also brought salt, tobacco, sugar, rice flour, fabric, and ironware to trade for sika deer pelts and rattan. Aboriginal men in southwestern Taiwan were now hunting and gathering partly for an “international” market. Men may have been hunting, and women cooking and tending their swiddens, with iron implements. The ready availability of fabric at the

market, whether cotton or linen, meant that women did not need to spend so much of their time tending ramie, a source of fiber that their ancestors had spun and woven into garments. In other words, the aborigines had been adapting to what could be called “early modernity” before the Dutch East India Company arrived to found a fort on the coast of what is now Anping District in Tainan City in 1624.

Three years later, a missionary named Georgius Candidius ventured inland to try to bring religion to the aborigines, who are known to history as the Siraya but who were known to Candidius by the names of their villages. Candidius wrote an ethnography about the Siraya that provides us with the most detailed account of their way of life at the beginning of colonization. The Siraya were living in quite sizable warring villages of hundreds or even thousands of souls. Siraya men made war by headhunting and peace with a curious offering, of trees. Village leaders who kept the peace symbolized their authority with rattan staves. Siraya women tended their swiddens, which were for subsistence, not market production. They used hoes and human effort. They also went at least partly naked at certain times of year for fear that it might not rain if the gods saw them clothed. They made “a beautiful, strong, and delicious beverage” by chewing rice flour into a paste to start fermentation and mixing the paste with a dough of rice they had grown in their swiddens. Rice wine was offered to the gods and the ancestors, as was betel nut, at *kuva*, which were not only shrines but also barracks. Men and women married in the late teens or early twenties, but lived separately, and when wives got pregnant, they had “massage abortions” until their mid-to-late thirties. Only then did they carry children to term, and only then did their husbands move in with them. But this way of life would soon undergo radical change.

### **The Siraya Under Foreign Rule (1,054 words)**

The Dutch East India Company founded the Taiwan colony to facilitate trade and to grow commodities. The Dutch did not discover any spice plants in Taiwan as they had done three thousand kilometers to the south in the Banda islands, which were at the time the world’s only sources of nutmeg and mace. Yet early administrators of the Dutch colony in Taiwan hoped to turn the island into a *spijskamer* or breadbasket. To do that, the colonizers had to first take control of the southwestern plain. They conquered villages that were closer to the fort and

accepted peace offerings of trees from their leaders. Then they offered these leaders rattan staves with silver heads bearing the Company insignia. These leaders became allies in conflicts with more distant villages. In other words, the Dutch were making use of Siraya customs for the purpose of “pacification.” The Siraya were further pacified through education and religion; Candidius visited Siraya villages not because he wanted to write an ethnography, but in order to teach the Siraya and save their souls.

Now that the Siraya were pacified, the Company proceeded to develop Taiwan into a breadbasket, with sugarcane and rice. The only problem was: who would grow the cane and the grain? As Candidius had observed, Siraya men did not plant, and women planted rice and sugarcane only for subsistence, not for the market. The solution was to encourage Chinese farmers to immigrate. These immigrants brought the plough and the water buffalo to Taiwan, and a number of plants: lychee, tobacco, potato, cabbage, chili pepper, basil, tomato, and the kapok tree, which, remember, the Siraya now call *kabua*. These Chinese immigrants also hunted; Siraya men were muscled out of the sika deer trade by Chinese hunters with Company licenses.

The Siraya must have suffered a lot under Dutch rule, but as students of history and society we cannot regard them as completely passive. Like any people anywhere in times of change, they adapted. They had to move to make space for Chinese immigrants, by founding new villages like Kabua, where the kapok trees bloom from March to May, marking the season of spring. In villages like this, they learned to read and write in Dutch and Chinese, abilities that they would soon be using to write up multilingual contracts in Dutch, Chinese, and Siraya to defend their land rights. They observed Chinese farmers and hunters tossing moon blocks, and at some point started doing the same, except that they used betel nuts. They cut a nut in half and threw [the halves](#), and if one half pointed “up” and the other “down,” it meant that the ancestors were happy. Without abandoning their earlier beliefs in gods and ancestors, they became Christians, and refrained from seasonal public nudity and massage abortion. Siraya wives now decided to have children, and their husbands to reside with them, at much younger ages. Starting in the late 1640s, Siraya men and women began to work the land with water buffalo and plough, even to employ Chinese farmhands. Partly due to decisions made by the Siraya, southwestern Taiwan, which had been a patchwork of hunting grounds and swiddens, was much more arable by the end

of the Dutch era in 1661. Siraya men probably still hunted to supplement the family diet, but the giant herds of sika deer had largely vanished.

Since 1661, when Koxinga forced the Dutch out of Taiwan, the Siraya have experienced serial colonization, by the Chinese, the Manchus, the Japanese, and again by the Chinese since 1945. Each colonial regime introduced new plants and animals, not to mention technologies, contributing to the continued evolution of the ecology of southwestern Taiwan. The cockscomb and globe amaranth in the Siraya chaplet, for example, were introduced in the late seventeenth century. The juicy longans that I munched on waiting for Alak Akatuang were introduced in the eighteenth century.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the state gave the Siraya a tax break, in the hope that the Siraya would serve as a buffer between Chinese settlements and settlements of aborigines who now lived up in the hills and still practiced headhunting. The Japanese removed the tax break, but the Siraya held on. In 1930, the linguist Asai Erin took pictures of Siraya ritual specialists wearing chaplets like the one I saw in 2023, except that there are no cockscomb and globe amaranth blooms to be seen. According to Mr. Akatuang, cockscomb and globe amaranth, along with *ihing* and betel flower, only became essential parts of the chaplet in the 1960s.

When they added these plants to their chaplet, Siraya people did what they must have always done: they made up stories. For instance, the ancestors apparently like the scent of the *ihing*, which is indeed fragrant when dry, which is also why it is carried as a talisman in daily life, why it adorns the chaplet, and why it is placed in the vases containing water that is offered to the ancestors. Stories such as this are evidence of the kind of creativity that has allowed the Siraya to adapt to changing circumstances over the centuries; no wonder Alak Akatuang wants to preserve such stories and related cultural practices, no matter how “young” they may be. Mr. Akatuang is well aware that many of the traditions that he is trying to revive are “invented.” He read Eric Hobsbawm, famous for the theory of “invented tradition,” in graduate school.

Not all Sirayan traditions were invented so recently. After I left, Alak Akatuang sent me a picture of his uncle presiding over a seasonal ritual at a *kuva*, with a chaplet on his head, rice wine in his

mouth, and a rattan staff in his hand – the same kind of rattan staff, perhaps, that the Dutch missionary Candidius had observed nearly four centuries ago.

For the time being, it is his uncle who is upholding Siraya traditions alive at such festivals, but Alak Akatuang’s time will come. At the learning center, he is already passing down the traditions, whenever they were invented, to anyone who is interested. In so doing, he is teaching us not just about what it means to be Siraya in 2023 but about the ways in which we make use of plants and animals, thereby transforming ecology in order to make ourselves at home.



Fig. 6. Alak Akatuang’s uncle; photo provided by the Kabua Tribal Village Learning Center.

#### **Further Reading (four readings; 98 words)**

Andrade, Tonio. 2008. *How Taiwan Became Dutch: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century*. Columbia University Press. E-book: <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/andrade/>

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Kang, Peite [Peter]. 1996. "Culture and Cultural Change of the Siraya Under the Dutch East India Company." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan.