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A Preliminary Study on the Ethnic Plants of the Sediq People

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Abstract

The Sediq people of Ren'ai Township in Nantou County, through the 'Language Development Center' of the Sediq Ethnic Assembly, edited a book, *Tgdaya/Truku/Toda Ethnobotany*, which is worthy of a look by not only the Sediq people, but anyone who has an interest in indigenous peoples or ethnobotany. The book is written in Sediq and Mandarin, and supports the painstaking efforts of the government to literalise and advance Taiwan's indigenous languages. The ethnobotany of the region is closely tied to the Sediq people's indigenous languages and culture. The names of the plants are related to how the plants are used as well as visible characteristics. By understanding the relationship of the Sediq people to their environment, and particularly flora and fauna, one can better understand both the language and culture. The contributors to this study, who collected information on 100 kinds of plants relevant to Sediq life and culture in 14 categories, are from different tribal areas in Renai Township. While not plant specialists, they are specialists of tribal culture and language. The contributors would like to expand this project by having more people work with them to study existing plant resources in the area and systematically reconstruct the related traditional knowledge. In this way, instead of this important cultural and ecological knowledge getting lost, Sediq people, as well as others, can learn more about the plants and continue to use them.

I. Introduction: The Ecological Network of the Sediq People

The three dialects of the Sediq people (recognized in 2008) are Sejiq-Truku, Sediq-Toda and Seediq-Tgdaya, jointly referred to as 3S3T, which have different language tones but are mutually understandable. The history and culture of the different dialect speakers are largely similar. According to oral and documentary sources, the Sediq people originally came from the Shugen (Pusu Qhuni) on Baishi Mountain (Bnuhun) in the Central Mountains, which is 3,108 metres high. They originally lived in Ren'ai Township, Nantou County, but relocated to Hualian and Yilan more than 400 years ago. Since 2004, a large part of the ancestral and recently settled areas has been officially called the Taroko.

Ren'ai Township is located in the northeast of Nantou County, with an area of 1,273



Figure 1 Ren'ai Township and traditional territory (the courtesy of Ren'ai City Council)

square kilometres and a width of 34.4 kilometres from east to west (Figure 1). It adjoins Hualien County in the east; the three towns of Guoxing, Puli, and Yuchi in the west; Xinyi Town in the south; and Taizhong County in the north. At the centre, we can see Jianqing Mountain, which is 1,767 metres high and located in Datong Village. In the surrounding area there are four mountains: East Qilai Mountain in the east is 3,559

metres high and located in Hezuo Village; Meiling Mountain in the west is 886 metres high and located in Huzhu Village; Zhuoshe Mountain in the south is 3,343 metres high and located in Fazhi village; and Bilu Mountain in the north is 3,370 metres high and located in Rongxing Village. In Ren'ai Town, there are high mountains everywhere, and the ridge in the eastern half of the town is one of the main sections of Taiwan's central mountain range. This is also the birthplace of the main tributaries of Taiwan's two major water systems, the Zhuoshui River and the Beigang River.

Ren'ai Township is located at the axis of the Central Mountain range, with its towering mountain peaks and meandering streams, which form an extremely rich geographical landscape, ranging from 500 metres to 3,605 metres above sea level. Due to its superior natural environment, the flora and fauna include species typically found in tropical and temperate rainforests. The abundant rainfall, high humidity, and optimal climate are all suitable conditions for the reproduction of animals and plants, so there are plenty of species. This rich ecological environment provides people of all ethnic groups with abundant resources for hunting and gathering as well as fishing and farming. Since the prehistoric period, human beings have moved here and settled. In addition to the Sediq people, there are also the Atayal and Bunun peoples and later arrivals of the Pingpu, Han and Baiyi peoples. The rich and varied natural environment of Ren'ai constitutes an inclusive natural landscape, while the diverse cultures of different communities form an inclusive cultural landscape. Here the people, flora, and fauna live in a relationship of co-dependence.

II. The Sediq People's Conception of Plants

The Sediq people's image of plants is reflected in the way they name them based on their practical uses or their forms. Cudu and Kri are two examples of this.

1. Cudu

The following three plants are used for making fishing tools: cudu gamil (*Derris trifoliata*), cudu qhuni (*Schima superba*), and cudu rebu (*Buddleja asiatica*). The first part of their name, cudu, refers to the function of poison for fishing. The second term refers to the part used qhuni (tree trunk) and gamil (root), or the shape created by a word, rebu (urine foam). This is a way of naming different trees with similar functions.

2. Kri (*Boehmeria nivea*)

Boehmeria nivea (ramie) is called kri, and *Boehmeria nivea* var. *Tenacissima* is called kri *rungay* (monkey), which means that it is similar in shape but not exactly the same. In this way the two plants can be distinguished, because people can extract fibre from kri to make thread to weave cloth, but they cannot do that with *kri rungay*. The terms *anay* (brother) and *dangi* (friend) are used in colloquial language and also in reference to plants. For example, the elders would say, 'That's not *raus* (*Cyclobalanopsis glauca*); that's *anay* (brother) or *dangi* (friend), it's called *tupih* (*Pasania konishii*)'. The tribal elders' understanding of plants is very clear. They can not only differentiate between

similar plants but also understand how the plants can be utilised. People are also identified in similar ways. For example, if a Sediq woman is called rungay (monkey) and suffers from epilepsy, she will be called mrungay.

III. Use Categories

The Sediq people remember and classify plants based on form and function. When each part of a tree has its own function, we say it is a very good tree. For example, raus (*Cyclobalanopsis glauca*) fruit is a favourite food for humans and animals. Its branches may be the best kindling for fire divination before hunting, while its trunk may be the best choice for the main beam of a house because of its hard core. It is also good firewood for long-burning fires. Trees and plants like this have multiple uses, so it is difficult to place them in any single category. The ancestors' knowledge of mountain forest plants comes from practical life experience, so their understanding of plants is extensive and sophisticated (Figure 2).

In 2017, with the assistance of the Nantou County Government, through field investigation and classification, people from the three Sediq dialect groups such as the Iwan Pring, Dakis Pawan, Aking Nawi, Temi Puhuk, Pawan Tanah, Uya Pawan, and Kumu Tapas collected 103 kinds of ethnic plants from 14 types representing species related to the life and culture of the Sediq people, and gave them written names in the tribal language and written Chinese. Let me give a brief description of some of their examples.



Figure 2 The number of plants in the research

1. Plants Related to myths and legends

The myths and legends of the Sediq people mention many plants. However, because of changes over time, colonial forces, disintegration of tribes, absence of written records, and many other reasons, not many oral legends remain, let alone written texts. The few myths and legends that are still circulating today are: (1) The Tree Beans and the Dwarfs (*smsunguc*). If we split *smsunguc*, we have *sm-* which means similar or for, and *-sunguc* which means tree bean. The name is used for people who are as short as tree beans. They often appeared in the tree bean bush but were not easily found because they were as small as the tree beans. When people passed through the tree bean garden, the *smsunguc* would hide in the tree bean bush and attack them. When people later found out the truth, they were amazed that a group of people as small as tree beans lived there. Since that time, they have been called Sediq *Smsunguc*. (2) Oranges and Two Suns (*dha hidaw*). It is said there were two suns in ancient times. The weather was so hot that the people could not live, so tribal warriors, with babies on their backs, went to shoot at the suns. The warriors planted oranges along the road. As they grew old, the children they had carried began to shoulder the responsibility of shooting at the suns. Finally, they succeeded in shooting one sun but some of them were burned to death by its heat. In the end, when there was only one sun left, all things on Earth returned to how they are now, it was like spring all year round, and everything began to grow. On the journey back, the oranges planted before were rich with fruit, allowing the warriors to satisfy their thirst and hunger during the return journey. (3) A Grain of Millet Can Supply a Good Meal. Just one grain of millet is needed to boil a pot of millet meal. Later, because someone was lazy, he poured all the millet grains into the pot and boiled them. When the pot was opened, the millet grain had turned into sparrows and from that time on, people had to work hard to grow millet. Even when millet was ripe, sparrows would come and eat it, so in order to have a good harvest the people had to work hard in the millet fields to prevent sparrows from stealing.

2. Ritual plants

Some of the plants used by the Sediq people are related to ceremonies. Whether they are agricultural ceremonies presided over by priests or the healing ceremonies of shamans, specific plants include panicled millet, millet, beans (*basaw*, *macu*, *sukay*) used during seed sowing rituals, *Miscanthus floridulus* (*bnglux*) for lowering fishnets, *Sambucus formosana* (*dayac*) for treating diseases, *Rubus formosensis* (*rh nuk*) for the gods to eat, *Acorus calamus* (*kdang*) for avoiding and repelling evil spirits, and *Tetrapanax papyriferus* (*bruling*) for the hunting heads ritual. In all these ceremonies, priests or shamans use the seeds, leaves, stems, thorns, and other parts of plants for medicinal purposes or to exorcise evil spirits. They are used to pray to the gods and ask them to end disasters and relieve misfortune, soothe the minds of the people, or provide a big harvest and safety.

3. Edible plants

The traditional food of the Sediq people is mainly chestnuts (*masu*) and broomcorn millet

(basaw). Non-staple foods include *Chenopodium album* (puu), sweet potato (bunga), *Colocasia esculenta* (sari), beans (sukay), corn (sqmu), wild vegetables (sama), wild fruit (hiyi qhuni), *Cucurbitaceae* (cangi), *Allium sinensis* (qucun), natural spice mountain pepper (mqri), and other plants. Meat is mainly obtained by hunting (camac). According to the book *The Plants of the Sediq People*, some plants such as rice (payay), orange (mudu), peach (aring), and banana (blbul) were introduced and planted later. In fact, some of the plants listed above are also the favourite foods of animals and birds. With the disintegration of traditional society and the change of economic patterns, certain activities, especially traditional millet cultivation and hunting, have gradually disappeared.

4. Plants for clothing

The traditional garment-making plants of the Sediq people include not only ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*, kri), but also some dyeing plants: *Dioscorea cirrhosa* (qmawas), *Lagerstroemia subcostata* (suraw), *Celtis formosana* hayata (qbulic), *Trema orientalis* (rmuung); and plants that can be made into thread-making and weaving tools: *Cinnamomum camphora* (cakus), *Fagus longipetiolata* (tubil), *Pinus taiwanensis* (harung), *Bambusa dolichoclada* (oraw), and others. There is always a division of labour between Sediq men and women, with women responsible for making thread and clothes (dresses, work clothes, shawls, quilts, straps, hammocks, sheets, etc.) and men in charge of making tools used for thread-making and weaving (flax strippers, thread coilers, spinners, weaving boxes, knives and sticks, heald sticks, cloth shafts, shuttles, hand stitching sticks, warp sticks).

5. Plants for hunting and fishing

Hunting is the main source of meat for the Sediq people. Before hunters go to a hunting area, they must abide by some superstitions (waya) and undertake a bird divination (psisin), with the flight and calls of grey-cheeked fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia* (sisin) indicating whether the hunters can hunt. If the birds sing happily on both sides of the road, it is a good omen (approval); if they fly across in front of the hunters, it is a bad omen (disapproval). If the bird divination returns a bad omen and hunters still go to the hunting area, they might encounter some unexpected misfortune on the way. The Sediq people have two kinds of hunting. One is chase-hunting (maduk), with traditional hunting tools—a dog (dmurang) and a spear (smbrangan). The other is setting a trap (dangal) and slak¹). There are *truk* made of stones, *dangal* made of branches, *tnbabaw* set on trees, and the recent innovations of *truk* made of iron clamps and *dangal* (pusa wasin or pwaya) made of iron wire. Plants for setting traps need to be strong and resilient, such as *Elaeocarpus sylvestris* (ira), *Eurya pubescens* (btaw) and *Rhododendron oldhamii* (lalay). After a hunter sets the wire, he prays to the gods and says: ‘Whether the prey come from the east or west, let it pass through this place’ (so they may fall into the trap).

For the Sediq people who live along the Zhuoshui River (Yayung Tuda), fishing culture is not as important as hunting, but they occasionally go fishing in their leisure time. The traditional fishing method is to poison the fish (pcahu qcux). Two kinds of plants, *Buddleja asiatica* (cudu rebu) and *Derris trifoliata* (cudu wamil) are used for this

purpose. The poisoning is performed by a group of people who go to the riverside, take *Buddleja asiatica* and *Derris trifoliata* upstream, and beat the two plants on rocks in the river. The juice of the plants then flows into the river, causing the fish to become dizzy and float downstream, where they are caught by those waiting there.

6. Plants for building

The traditional slate houses of the Sediq people are made of stone, or a mixture of wood and stone. The traditional houses are built by first digging downward (smbalay kmali). The underground excavations are surrounded by stacked stones (mhawac) and then built upwards. The walls are built with transverse woods (kmabil), with the exterior covered by wood or bamboo. The roof is made of spear grass or stone to form a half-cave dwelling structure. The pillars, beams, and walls require solid wood, such as *Fagus sylvatica* (tubil), *Cunninghamia konoshii* (qulic pakaw), *Taxus mairei* (tuqul), *Pinus taiwanensis* (harung), *Michelia compressa* (ckacus), *Cinnamomum camphora* (cakus), or *Chamaecyparis formosensis* (quric baly), all of which are very strong building materials. *Cirrus chrysanthemum* is used as a binding material.

7. Plants for animals

In the ecological environment where the Sediq people live, daily life necessities are taken from nature and shared with birds and animals. In fact, in the food web of the ecosystem, creatures do not necessarily depend on just one animal to survive and are even food for each other. Among the food that animals like to eat, there are flowers, grasses, and trees as well as their fruit. Fruit that falls to the ground can also be food for other species that cannot reach it on the tree. Examples include *Passiflora edulis* (dkeyso), *Ficus heteromorphia* (nunuh dapa), *Lithocarpus lepidocarpus* (rai), *Juglans cathayensis* (brqni), *Boehmeria penduliflora* (camay), *Elaeocarpus sylvestris* (curung), *Machilus thunbergii* (lmukas), *Morus australis* (tluyuq), *Eriobotrya deflexa* (witu), and *Zanthoxylum ailanthoides* (sangas).

IV. Conclusion: Diversity of Uses and Categories

Most of the plants within the ecological region inhabited by the Sediq people have diverse applications and are closely related to their culture, as reflected in the language used to describe them. From the differences in plant uses, we can gain a basic understanding of ecological context and the utilisation of plants by the Sediq, and their coexistence with nature. While there are other studies on the plants of the Sediq, most have only a single use for each plant recorded. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to classify the plants and document details concerning their multiple uses and characteristics.

There are limitations to the scope of this study. Many plants are an integral part of the life and culture of the Sediq people, but this article lists only a few examples. Further research and documentation are needed. As mentioned previously, the contributors of this research are culture and language specialists, but not plant specialists. They also had an

insufficient budget to properly edit the volume. In the future, we hope to ask experts in various fields and elders of the community for further advice. We hope to find resources so that more people can work with us to study existing plant resources in the area and systematically reconstruct the related traditional knowledge, so that this knowledge does not get lost. Sediq people, as well as others around the globe, can learn more about the plants and continue to use them. Finally, a tribal admonition offers a glimpse into the former life and ultimate outcome of living for the Sediq people:

I came out of a bright stone,
 Two persons emerged from it,
 A man and a woman.
 Feeding on the mountain,
 And then they gradually multiplied.
 They plant an acre of millet field,
 Cook a grain of millet into a pot of millet,
 Boil a piece of fur into a pot of meat,
 Until one day, people became greedy,
 A pot of millet boiled into a group of sparrows,
 A cut of a piece of meat drove away prey.
 In Sediq people's life,
 Men must be able to hunt heads,
 Women must know how to weave,
 Until the day of their death.
 When they cross the Goddess Bridge,
 Entering the paradise of their ancestors of all generations,
 People sing before they die,
 The weaving spirit is calling me,
 The weaving spirit will take me away,
 When the sun changes and the night will come,
 When I see the clouds,
 Hold your torches,
 Pull the corner of my garment.

When the white-eye birds come,
 Crows call at the front,
 Leaving a song behind,
 Do not forget me,
 The knitting spirit will take me away,
 Farewell,
 Farewell,
 The knitting spirit will take me away.
 Where will they go?
 They're going to be real people,

Crossing the high mountains,
 Back to the land where the ancestors scattered,
 Never give up
 The footsteps of ancestors,
 Always remind us that
 We will return.

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Note

- 1) A slak is a type of carpentry tool that uses gunpowder to drive nails into a hard surface. Indigenous people use slak gunpowder to convert it into a hunting gun.

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