

# Encoding traditional botanical knowledge in names of locations: The case of Bunun, Taiwan

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Food & Society Symposium and Workshop 2022  
27-29 October 2022, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia



# This talk

- Toponyms encoding plant knowledge
- Other place names encoding plant knowledge
- A quick comparison with Paiwan



# Indigenous minorities in Taiwan

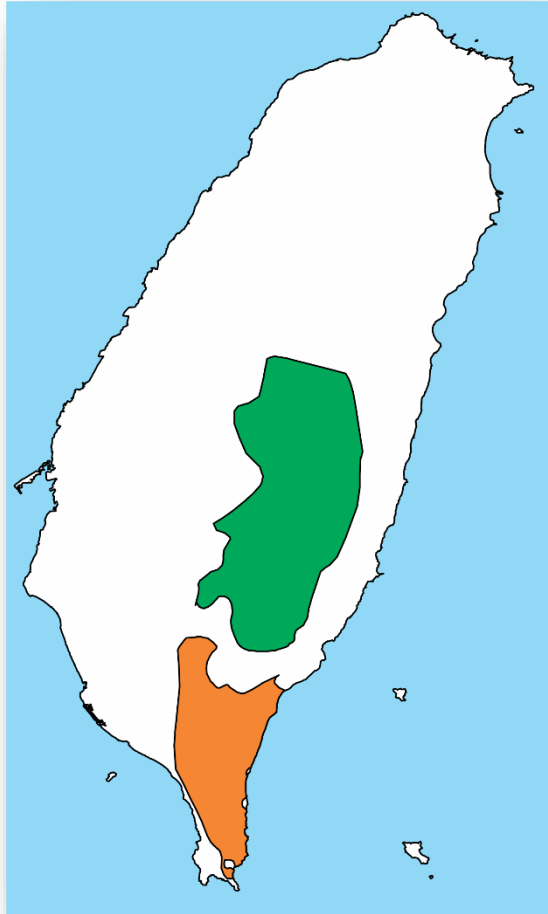
- 16 officially recognized indigenous groups and languages
  - With over 45 dialects
  - 'Formosan' languages are only loosely related
- **Large cultural diversity**
  - Different societal structures (e.g. egalitarian vs. stratified)
  - Different geographical environments
  - Different importance of agriculture, agricultural techniques and wild plant use



# An example

## Bunun

- Egalitarian society
- High mountains of central Taiwan
- Small family groups
- Hunting culturally central
- ...



## Paiwan

- Stratified society
- Plains and lower mountains of southeastern Taiwan
- Villages
- Hunting and agriculture
- ...





# Places and place names

- Place refers to “inhabited space” (Tort-Donada 2010)
- Place names refer to places (not just any space)
  - People name places that are relevant to their lives, that part of their conceptual universe
  - Names of places are meaningful
- Place names
  - Toponyms: names referring to a unique places
    - E.g. Kuching
  - Generic place names: common nouns referring to a type of place
    - E.g. kitchen, the meeting hall



# Places and place names

- Expected consequences:
  - Place names say something about the culture they exist in
    - So we should be able to learn something about a culture when studying its place names
  - Aspects that are important to a culture have a higher chance to show up in place names



# The hypothesis

- Some place names in Bunun will encode information about the relevance of certain plants (or other botanical knowledge) to that location
- Have you ever submitted an abstract before doing the actual research, only to discover that your initial assumptions were completely wrong?



# Bunun terms referring to 'agricultural' spaces

- *quma* 'cultivated or arable land, land suitable for agriculture'
  - *munquma* 'go to the field to work'
  - *aunquma'an* 'month in which the field is prepared for cultivation'
  - *qaquma* 'all the arable land in an area'
- *tilas* 'millet'
  - *patilasan* 'a heightened platform in the house to store millet'
- *lukis* 'tree; wood'
  - *patlukisan* 'wood storage'





# Bunun plant-related toponyms

## **Type 1: Name = plant**

- *Banuaz* < *bunuaz* 'plum (tree)'
- *Salitung* < *salitung* 'papaya'
- *Liliq* / *Lili'iq* < *liliq* 'fern'
- *Qalmut* < *qalmut* 'oak'



# Bunun plant-related toponyms

## **Type 2: Name = x-plant-an**

- *Kabanhilan* < *ka-banhil-an* 'location where cypress trees are harvested' < *banhil* 'cypress'
- *Kaputungan* < *ka-putung-an* 'location where cotton is being grown' < *putung* 'cotton'
- *Sulapatan* < *su-lapat-an* '?' < *lapat* 'guava'
- *Tilusan* < *tilas* 'millet'



# Bunun plant-related toponyms

There'll be millions  
of those!

- Locations that contain plant names
- 9 out of 90 recorded toponyms (in a corpus of 5292 words)



# Possible explanation

- Data gathering
  - No systematic collection of toponyms
  - No systematic collection of plant names
  - Collector's bias
- Complex toponyms are not all transparent
  - E.g. Hava'an < hava '???' + -an 'location'
- Plants are not important markers to turn space into nameable places
- Some cultural factors cause the relative unimportance of detailed botanical knowledge (in the local geography)



# A comparison with Paiwan

## In and around Majia (Pingtung County):

- *Tjanavakung* 'old Kunshan village' < *livakung* 'Crinum asiaticum'
- *Itazaqu* 'Kunshan community in Majia village' < *zaqu* 'Sapindus Saponaria'
- *Tjaraveljevelj* 'a community in Beiye village' : *veljevelj* 'Musa x paradisiaca'
- *Tjuviljuaq* 'a community in Beiye village' < *viljuaq* 'Hibiscus taiwanensis'
- *Tjucekes* 'a community in Majia village' < *cekes* 'Yushania niitakayamensis'







*Crinum asiaticum*▲

▼*Hibiscus taiwanensis*



*Sapindus Saponaria*



*Musa x paradisiaca*



*Yushania niitakayamensis*





# A comparison with Paiwan

- Multiple names in two (small) neighbouring villages
- Use of botanical terms in creating Paiwan toponyms is extremely common
- The variation of plants referred to is large
- → Intercultural variation in the importance of plant names for assigning meaning to space



# Conclusion

- Making assumptions is dangerous
- Importance of not generalizing across cultures
  - In a small geographical area
  - That are perceived as similar
- Place names are culturally important and encode knowledge
- The importance of plant names in creating toponyms varies widely
  - Cultural and ethnobotanical importance



# Bibliography

- Tort-Donada, Joan. 2010. Some reflections on the relation between toponymy and geography. *Onoma* 45. 253–276.

