

GROWING UP IN A TREE HOLLOW

我長在打開的樹洞

* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award for Best New Author

* 2021 Openbook Award

After decades away from his roots, award-winning Taiwanese Indigenous writer Apyang Imiq narrates the stories of his people, the Truku, and his return to a tribal community in early adulthood. Here, he writes of the struggles and synergies he encountered as a gay man and late returnee to the people and traditions of his community.

Taiwanese Indigenous writer Apyang Imiq belongs to the Ciyakang tribe of the Truku people from Hualien, Taiwan. His community sits near a creek named Rangah Qhuni, meaning “tree hollow”, a depiction of the creek’s abrupt widening, like an opened tree hollow, inviting the sunlight to shine in. Apyang Imiq grew up with very little knowledge of his own heritage. It was not until he returned to farm and hunt that he started to pen the history and tales of his people.

In “TminumYaku, Weaving, and I”, he describes their tribal craft of weaving, traditionally practiced solely by female tribespeople. It is a taboo for a male to touch the weaving machine, known as an *ubung*. As a man who enjoys weaving, will he find a way to break the boundaries of a gendered tradition? In “Shoot Me with Your Gun Filled with Bhring”, he talks about Bhring, which is Wind, Spirit, and the energy and bonding between people who collaborate at work. He used to hunt with his older brother and uncle with ease. However, after his coming out, the family think ill of his Bhring, and would not go hunting or trekking with him anymore....



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A Taiwanese Indigenous writer, Apyang Imiq, a best new author award at the 2021 Taiwan Literature Award and the winner of Taiwan Indigenous literature awards for seven years, belongs to the Truku people from the Ciyakang tribe in Hualien, Taiwan. After finishing his master degree at Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, National Taiwan University, he returned to his tribe, serving as the associate of Community Development Committee, and tribal council officer. He has been awarded with Taiwanese Indigenous People Literature Award multiple times. He was also granted patronage of National Culture and Arts Foundation in 2020.

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By Apyang Imiq

Translated by Ko Song-Yun

Sungut

In the thin sunlight of five a.m., I park my pickup truck by the 4WD track, and let my brindled Formosan mountain dog jump out. Sunlight scatters through morning mist from just over the top of the coastal mountains to the foothills where the Ciyakang people live. I pick up the compost bucket, put on my hat, and head towards the poultry shed. I walk alongside an irrigation ditch, which meanders for a while, then straightens out. The local Irrigation Research & Development Foundation named it the Pinlin Waterway, but we just call it “The Ditch”. Every morning, when I arrive to feed the chickens and turn off my engine, all I can hear is the crowing of roosters, the honking of geese, and the flowing current of The Ditch.

I notice some movement down by the water – it’s the *payi*¹ who starts work in the early hours of the day. She’s a petite woman with an ever-worsening humpback. As she bent over in the sungut thicket, wearing her white headband, multicolored sleeves, dark cotton trousers, and gumboots, you might mistake her for just another sungut shrub.

Her electric scooter stood parked next to the field. Wherever she rode, she always carried a blue-and-red nylon satchel with all kinds of tools on her back. Sometimes you’ll notice a container attached at the back of the scooter, also packed with tools. An ordinary scene at Ciyakang. *Payi* and *baki* would set out to the fields on their scooters at dawn, fully armed with their tools, each is calm and undauntable. Some *payi* even wear sunglasses as they ride on the Ciyakang Boulevard – adorable.

I finish feeding the chickens and start randomly pulling weeds around the poultry shed. I glance over at the *payi*, who is holding a sickle literally as big as she was. She lifts it with both hands toward sky and swings it forcefully, finishing the movement with a loud clip. She moves as if she were swinging a baseball bat, with speed and precision. One by one, the weeds surrounding the sungut thicket feal. *Payi* the baseball player scoring one home run after another. Neat work.

Sungut is the word for the pidgeon pea in our language. The pronunciation carries a deep nasal sound which is very pleasant to the ears.

Two springs ago, I planted millet, red quinoa, and sorghum in my field. It was my first time, so I planted sparsely, and I didn’t know what to do with the remaining land I had cleared. One day,

¹ A respectful form of address to an elderly woman in the Ciyakang tribe; *baki* is the male equivalent.

while I was hanging out at my uncle's house, my aunt gave me a sachet of sungut: a mixture of red, white, and black seeds, pleasantly round and firm to the touch, similar to the adlay necklaces that the girls in the community wear.

I asked her how I ought to grow them. She instructed me to plant four to five seeds in a hole, then take five steps before digging the next. She illustrated her guideline with physical movement. When I returned to the field, I planted six seeds in each hole with only four steps between them. I was rather afraid of failure.

In Ciyakang, the sungut thickets are as plentiful as the dogs. If you drive around the community, dogs of every coat and color will come running out to bark at you, and the sungut shrubs will stand at every corner like sentries, watching the borders for the farmers. Sungut takes about a year to grow, and is usually planted in springtime. Come late autumn, they will produce vivid yellow blossoms that hang on until early winter, when the pea pods then start to grow. Harvest needs to happen before the following spring. Sungut shrubs are generally planted at the borders of a field to allow space for other crops in between. As the number of farmers drops, some *payi* and *baki* will plant an entire field with sungut to satisfy the ancient craving of the Ciyakang stomach: a soup made of salt, wild game, sungut, and handful of black nightshade leaves brought to boil in a pot. It's one of the traditional Truku cuisines.

I never really questioned where we get our sungut seeds; it just seems like, every spring, they just naturally appear amid the community. When I asked the *payi* across the street from me, she told me her seeds were given by others a few years ago, and she had saved some of her own after harvest. I also asked the *payi* whom I usually bombarded with farming questions. Her seeds came from relatives of the Ihowang tribe in the south a long time ago. Now she grew her own sungut year after year.

"Growing sungut is a good deal. You'll never want for seeds, people to eat them, or people to buy them." She had a point. With confidence, she talked about how, every time she travelled to the market at Fonglin Township, she would have plenty of flatlanders² asking for sungut. Intrigued, I asked her why would the flatlanders want to eat sungut. "My influence," she replied with a huge laugh.

"My influence." Those words were very empowering for me. When I started farming, I was afraid that growing exclusively traditional plants in Indigenous culture would leave me with limited profit and unable to provide for myself. I had assumed I could only sell it to my own people. Now, looking back, I chuckle at the thought.

Fortunately, sungut has survived, as have many other traditional Truku plants. Although few traditional stories about sungut remain, as they do with millet, the plant continues to thrive in

² Han Taiwanese, the non-Indigenous majority, so called because the tribespeople live in the mountains and the Han on the coastal plain.

Ciyakang as part of the seasonal crop rotation. The cycle of seeding, sprouting, blossoming, forming pods, maturing, harvesting, sun drying, stocking, and sharing seeds communally has continued and expanded.

The sungut that my aunt-in-law gave me sprouted in less than two weeks, and soon grew as thick as my forearm, straight but flexible. I pruned excessive stalks, leaving two to three to grow stronger with more space. After that, all I had to do was weed and wait for the harvest. Sungut enjoys the breeze, but can die of strong wind. It needs space and good ventilation to fruit well, but an overly strong wind can blow the plant over. I have seen farmers use halved plastic bottles to secure sprouts; other more common methods involve anchoring young stalks with bamboo sticks or tying stalks to each other with nylon string.

Before harvest, sungut leaves change gradually from dark green to yellow. Pea pods slowly dry up, becoming brown and hard. We say, "*Mhru ka hiyi na da,*" meaning that the body of the sungut has grown. "Hiyi" in the Truku language can mean both "fruit" as well as "body". Sungut has gone through another cycle, and started a new life. I enjoy watching these traditional plants grow in my fields and sharing these ever-growing, ever-expanding life stories. I enjoy watching the blossoms emerge every winter and estimating, in joy or in despair, how much sungut I will have in the coming year, to eat, to sell, and to contribute to the Ciyakang seed-sharing system.