

## Abui Ethnobotany: A preliminary report

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This paper presents results from the first survey of Abui (Alor-Pantar) ethnobotanical knowledge, conducted in July 2016 by a team of linguists, botanists, and traditional knowledge experts. The 541 lexical items and 159 botanical voucher specimens collected reveal an extremely rich inventory of food and medicinal plants terminology, few of which are contained in existing dictionaries (Kratochvil and Delpada 2008). A notable feature of the former is the existence of at least 11 different lexical roots referring to 9 different edible tuberous plants, at least 6 of which are still actively cultivated. Among these are terms for several species of *Amorphophallus* (elephant foot yam), denoted *muok* in Abui. This mildly toxic food plant is still actively cultivated in Alor, possibly reflecting an ancient subsistence pattern. Elsewhere in Melanesia, including Papua, cultivation of *Amorphophallus* had ceased at least fifty years ago (Barrau 1958).

The inventory of medicinal plant terminology in Abui reveals a previously undocumented syncretism between terms referring to diseases and the plants which either treat or cause those diseases. For example, the term *takaya* denotes both the ti plant (*Cordyline fruticosa*) and a severe form of malaria (probably *falciparum*). The leaves of the ti plant *takaya* are tied onto valuable trees such as candlenut, areca palm, and jackfruit to create a protective spell which wards off theft of the fruits or nuts of that tree. Transgressing this protection by taking the fruits or nuts without permission will cause the transgressor to suffer the *takaya* disease. We present an initial typology of Abui plant-disease syncretism.

This paper concludes with a discussion of some of the challenges of ethnobotanical field work and the prospects for future ethnobotanical research in Alor and the Papuan region.

## References

- Barrau, Jacques. 1958. Subsistence Agriculture in Melanesia. Honolulu: Bishop Museum.  
Kratochvil, Frantisek and Benny Delpada. 2008. Kamus Pengantar Bahasa Abui. Kupang, Indonesia: UBB-GMIT.