

# Hundred-year-old Seediq Stories in the Swedish Collection

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Fig. 1: Collection: Museum of Ethnography, National Museums of World Culture, Sweden; Object number: 1910.05.0029; Name: Slmadac/Hlmadac, headhunting knife; Place & Community Details: Puli, Nantou county, Taiwan. Seediq or Atayal peoples; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: steel, wood, bamboo, human hair, rattan, ramie; Collector: Folke Cronholm Collection; Date collected: accessioned in 1910, likely collected in 1908. Photo: 高政賢 Cheng-Hsien Kao (Pihu Abu).



On the morning of 28 February 2022, after flying a distance of more than 8,000 kilometers, an official research team representing the Seediq people, who have been traditionally centred in Nantou County, Taiwan, travelled to the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. Before starting research on the collections, the team members first performed the *Dmahun* ceremony (the traditional Seediq reconciliation ceremony) to the objects of the ancestors within the museum. On the one hand, the ceremony comforts and prays to the *Utux* (spirit) of the ancestors in the collection so that we, the younger generations, can successfully learn their knowledge of life. On

the other hand, the purpose of the ceremony was also to 'reconcile' with the Swedish National Museums of World Culture, thanking the organization for their willingness to open this kind door to us so that we, who are the people considered to be the **descendants** of the people that made the objects, may have first-hand access to traditional knowledge that has long been lost or is on the verge of disappearing in our contemporary lives.

After the ceremony, we went to the collections study room in the basement of the Museum of Ethnography, where museum staff had gathered various cultural objects for the delegation to research. Two people's eyes knowingly fell in unison on a knife, which had a lock of human hair tied to the end of the sheath, identifying it as a knife used for headhunting. It was the first time in my life that I had touched the most important social symbol for Seediq men.

Headhunting was an exclusively male activity. The owner of a headhunting knife generally did not allow others to touch it, especially women. According to oral descriptions from the elders, headhunting knives were specialized knives. Hair from the head that was taken was attached to the sheath, and their spirit was associated with the hair. A headhunting knife that has been used has not only spiritual significance, it also contains the power to heal illnesses.

Seediq people undertook 'headhunting' as part of male coming of age ceremonies and in order to counteract disasters that occurred in the tribe. Headhunting was also needed to defend and prove personal reputation. Because headhunting in other territories was a dangerous operation, it was usually a group activity, and the rules of Waya/Gaya (Seediq people's laws of life) were strictly followed during the whole process of the ceremony. The head represents the spirit. When it was brought back to the tribe, it was welcomed and fed like a person. The head was placed on a specially designated outdoor rack within the village. The spirit protects the tribe, preventing disasters and keeping evil away. It promotes the health of the tribe.

Looking back on our two-week stay in Stockholm and the survey of the hundred-year-old cultural heritage left by our ancestors, I felt deep admiration for their wisdom and traditional knowledge, as well as connecting with the mind-set of our ancestors. Looking at our people after a century of being colonized by others and subject to the environment of modern life, there are more doubts about how much of our culture we can keep. How much can be passed on to the future?

Note on the Folke Cronholm Collection by Michel D. Lee

The headhunting knife<sup>1</sup> described above was accessioned by the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm in 1910 and came from a Swedish diplomat named

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1 While we do not know precisely when the practice of headhunting started in Taiwan, records of its practice can be found from the time the Dutch were there in the 17th century. We are aware that the practice stopped altogether by the beginning of the 20th century.

Folke Cronholm (1873–1945). He was stationed in Tokyo, Japan, from 1907 to 1911. Evidence in his photography collection shows that he may have attended the inauguration of the opening of the Taiwan Trunk Railway (臺灣縱貫鐵路) in Taichung Park, Taichung, Taiwan on 24 October 1908.<sup>2</sup> Judging by the photographs, the event was also attended by various Taiwan Indigenous groups, including people from the Truku dialect of Seediq people (Seejiq Truku).<sup>3</sup> It is possible the Taiwan objects from the Folke Cronholm collection were collected at this time.

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- 2 Unpublished research by 黃維君 (Wei-chun Huang), National Taiwan University. Correspondence 28 September 2021.
  - 3 Conclusion from a workshop held with Seediq individuals that took place at the office of the Seediq National Assembly Puli, Nantou county, Taiwan on 25 November 2022.

