

Press release

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Roses, chocolates, jewellery...and severed heads.

Yes, archivists at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew shed light on a more unusual token of love

Severed heads may, for many, be the theme of nightmares but to nineteenth century Taiwanese aborigines it was a romantic gesture to woo potential partners. This surprising ritual, highlighted as part of the [Archive Awareness Campaign](#) was discovered within the 150 year old letters of botanical explorers.

Collecting exotic plants has always had its hazards and this latest information revealed by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew archivist highlights even further the lengths botanical explorers were willing to go in the name of research, one such letter reveals that as well as Taiwan being a dangerous place to gather exotic plants and objects, botanists often encountered strange romantic rituals of the indigenous people.

The challenges of plant hunting

Botanists travelling in remote parts of the world often wrote back to Kew to inform their colleagues about why they were being prevented from doing their collecting work. Richard Oldham, a Kew Gardener, who later collected plants for Kew in Eastern Asia and India, was constantly frustrated by mundane difficulties such as poor transport, lack of money, and the weather whilst collecting in China, Japan and Taiwan (then called Formosa). However his biggest challenge was coming across the amorous games and headhunting practices of tribes in the north of the region.

In a letter to Kew dated 19 March 1864, Oldham explains why he cannot explore the mountains near Tamsuy (Tamsui or Danshui):

As the spring is the season at which the young savages marry, it is yet unsafe to go as they always fight either with other savages, or other Chinamen in

order to get heads with which to celebrate their marriages, and it is possible they might particular liking for the heads of foreigners. It will perhaps be safer to go in the summer.

Headhunting rituals

The practice of taking someone's head after killing them was a ritualistic part of life for most Taiwanese aborigines until the 1930's. In his 1903 account of the island, James Davidson, author, explorer and consul mentions that the northern tribe, the Atayals, were the most active head hunters. Headhunting practices and their significance varied between peoples, but Davidson records that to the Atayals, headhunting was a prominent, essential and honourable part of society and served many functions - such as gaining favour with unmarried women, obtaining rank and bringing luck and protection. The heads themselves were kept in the open air on a narrow platform and never removed.

Kiri Ross-Jones, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, commented:

“As Valentine’s Day approaches, we can be glad that our romantic rituals are likely to be more idyllic and involve displays of flowers and candles than dismembered heads. It’s great that the Archive Awareness Campaign is bringing these treasures into the light, allowing the public to see another spectrum of Britain’s heritage.”

The letters from Oldham and other botanists were discovered in the Directors Correspondence collection.

Find out more about the Directors’ Correspondence collection and the digitisation project at www.kew.org/news/kew-blogs/library-art-archives/directors-correspondence/. For enquiries regarding the project, contact h.hartley@kew.org. You can also search Kew’s Herbarium Catalogue for plant specimens collected by Oldham.

The Directors’ Correspondence can be viewed in the recently opened reading room at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. To book an appointment or for enquiries regarding the collections contact archives@kew.org

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding living collection of plants and world-class Herbarium as well as its scientific expertise in plant diversity, conservation and sustainable development in the UK and around the world. Kew Gardens is a major international visitor attraction. Its landscaped 132 hectares and Kew's country estate, Wakehurst Place, attract nearly two million visitors every year. Kew was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2009. Wakehurst Place is home to Kew's Millennium Seed Bank, the largest wild plant seed bank in the world.

Kew and its partners have collected and conserved seed from 10% of the world's wild flowering plant species (c.30, 000 species) and aim to conserve 25% by 2020. www.kew.org