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DEATH BY DESSERT: SERIKAYA IN 16TH CENTURY MELAKA AND ITS TRANSMISSION TO PORTUGAL

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Abstract

There is an ongoing debate about whether the dessert *serikaya* originated in Portugal or Southeast Asia. This article uses qualitative methods, especially document analysis and qualitative approaches to heritage studies, to support the view that *serikaya* was present in Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Portuguese. The sources that are analyzed include an account from *Oriental Ethiopia* (1608), a travelogue of the Dominican monk João dos Santos and a recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara in Elvas, Portugal. The account in *Oriental Ethiopia*, that is later repeated and adapted in other hagiographic sources used by the Catholic Church, relays the story of a woman who attempts to kill the Bishop of Melaka with a dish of poisoned *serikaya* that is described in a way that indicates that the dessert was popular in Melaka but likely not known in Portugal. The recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara claims that a recipe for the dessert *serikaya* was passed from Melaka to Goa to Portugal and adapted along the way. The article findings assert that *serikaya* was popular in Melaka in the 16th Century and was brought to Portugal through Goa, even though there may be some factual inaccuracies in some of the details of the sources. The significance of this finding is that *Ethiopia Oriental* provides one the oldest extant sources about *serikaya* and lends support to the view that the cosmopolitan culinary culture of Melaka and Southeast Asia influenced the culinary culture of Portugal.

Keywords: Serikaya, Portuguese Sericaia, Melaka, Portugal, Origin

Introduction

Like many foods in Southeast Asia, there has been a considerable amount of debate about the origins of *serikaya*, a custard made of coconut milk, sugar, and eggs. Often the search for the origin of a particular food is the quest for a singular origin story about a specific time and place in which a food was created by an individual, shop, or community. These origin stories, which are often more myth than history, are frequently employed to legitimate claims of authenticity or cultural identity.[1]

The food historian Massimo Montanari argues that when looking for the roots of food cultures, the error is to look for, "a single point of departure," such as a single origin story. He writes,

> "every culture, every tradition, every identity is a dynamic, unstable product of history, one born of complex phenomena of exchange, interaction, and contamination. Food models and practices are meeting

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> points among diverse cultures, the fruit of man's travels, of commercial markets, techniques, and tastes from one part of the world to another."[2]

Montanari, uses the metaphor of the roots of a tree, to suggest that those looking for origins of a food or food culture should anticipate finding a densely tangled web of roots. Instead of looking to discover a single source, one should anticipate exploring a complex history of cultural interactions and incremental developments.

When it comes to the debates about the origin of *serikaya* and of food cultures in Southeast Asia, Montanari's admonition is apt, especially considering the long history of cultural interactions in Southeast Asia that preceded and continued during European colonialism.[3] With these complex interactions and a limited amount of historical accounts from that period, it is not surprising that the history of *serikaya* is far from linear and more like a tangled web of roots. This article focuses on the historiographical complexities of some of the "roots" of *serikaya* and analyzes how it is presented in European travelogues and hagiographies in order to explore interactions between Portugal and Melaka and, more broadly, between Europe and Southeast Asia, especially in relationship to cultural transmission and adaptation. *Serikaya* is well-suited for this kind of study because it is found in Southeast Asia, Portugal, and Central America and has been adapted in a variety of ways as it has spread to new locations.

In his recent book *The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels through the Archipelago*, food researcher Khir Johari spends a significant amount of his chapter on Malay desserts discussing a specific debate about the origin of *serikaya*. Variations of *serikaya* (known under a variety of names and spellings) are found throughout Southeast Asia. There is also a dessert in Portugal which is called *sericaia* and variations of this dessert are found in Central and South America.[4] The debate that Johari discusses is about whether or not Malay *serikaya* is a variation of a Portuguese dessert. Some argue that *serikaya* is a variation of Portuguese jam or Portuguese *sericaia*, while others argue that *serikaya* was present in Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Portuguese.[5]

Khir Johari gives the following arguments for why he thinks Malay *serikaya* did not originate in Portugal, but in Southeast Asia:

1. Malay *serikaya* is an umbrella term for delicacies made with egg and *santan* (coconut milk), whereas Portuguese *sericaia* is a particular kind of dessert that is not made with coconut milk and found in a region of Portugal where there are no coconut trees.
2. The word *serikaya/sericaia* likely has its origin in two Malay words "*seri"* and *"kaya"* and means "resplendent richness," "cream of greatness," or "radiant greatness." The word does not appear to have any possible Portuguese derivatives.
3. Malays have openly recognized other words in the Malay language that have a Portuguese derivative, but have not recognized *serikaya* as a word derived from Portuguese.[6]
4. Egg custards are not unique to Portugal, but were common in other parts of Europe and other parts of Southeast Asia.
5. The Malays called the new world fruit *Annona Reticula, "buah serikaya,"* (*serikaya* fruit) most likely because they noticed its resemblance to their custard *serikaya* and this, "suggests the term predates the Columbian exchange."[7]

6. Perhaps Malay *serikaya* is the inspiration for the Portuguese *sericaia* dessert.
7. *Serikaya* is mentioned in the Malay source *Cerita Kutai* (dated: 1620) and its source material is likely from a period long before 1620.

Johari's strongest support comes from the early date of the source *Cerita Kutai*, because even though the document is dated over 100 years after the arrival of the Portuguese, it likely does refer to stories that pre-date their arrival. The linguistic evidence about the names *serikaya* and *sericaia* and the discussion about the differences in ingredients are significant, but fraught with difficulties because the origin of the name of a food often does not give accurate information about the origin of the food itself.

The Portuguese writer Tiago Salgueiro has recently contributed to this debate about Portuguese *sericaia* and Malay *serikaya* by presenting information that he found in the *Miscellenaeous Packs of the Convent of Santa Clara de Elvas* collected by Dr. Fernando Duarte and found in the Torre de Tombo, which is part of the national archives of Portugal.[8] Of special note is a recipe for *sericaia* that came with a note about how it came to the Convent of Santa Clara in Elvas, Portugal. The note reads [my translation],

> "It [*sericaia*] was something known in the Eastern parts, having come from Malacca to Goa, under the possession of the Jesuit Fathers, who gave it to the nuns of the Convent of Santa Monica, who had prepared it in an earlier time, being highly appreciated among the good people of the said Square. From the government of Goa by D. Constantino, this one [*sericaia*] went to his table, with good pleasure being taken by him. Coming to the kingdom [of Portugal] and taking his home in Vila Vicosa, in the year of [1]562 he handed it over to the Sisters of Santa Clara of the Convent of Chagas de Christo in the said Vila, who came up with a way to prepare it in their land. It came to this House of Santa Clara de Elvas, in the year 1584, through the work of our admired Sister Maria da Purificacao, who began to prepare it in this House and from there to the others of our Order in the parts of Alentejo."[9]

Salgueiro then gives the recipe for the *sericaia* [written "*sericai*"] which includes milk, eggs, brown sugar, rice flour, lime, and cinnamon. This source provides support for Johari's hypothesis that in a form of "reverse cultural transmission" *serikaya* came from the Malay community to Portugal by giving details about how the dessert came from Melaka to Goa to Portugal.[10]

In this article, it will be shown that there is another set of sources that contribute to the debate about the origins of *serikaya*: *Ethiopia Oriental* and Roman Catholic hagiographies about the first bishop of Melaka, Jorge de Santa Luzia (bishop of Melaka from 1558-1576). These accounts relay the story of how a woman in Melaka attempted to kill the bishop by putting poison into a delicacy called *Syrica* (other spellings: *Sericaya, Siriaca, Syricaya, Ciricaya,* and *Sericaia*), a dish made out of milk and sugar.[11] These sources may be the earliest extant sources about *serikaya*.

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Discussion

Methods of Research

In this article sources that are hagiographic accounts of the life of a saint or the source material for such accounts will be analyzed. Hagiographies in the Middle Ages often followed conventional forms and tropes modeled on the classical models of biography and can be categorized as the *vita* (about the life of a saint or holy one), the *passio* (about the trials and martyrdom of a saint or holy one), and *miracula* (about the miracle of a saint or holy one).[12] The hagriographers had a moral and religious motive, so they applied the lessons of the past to the present in ways that are frequently not consistent with current standards of verification. Many scholars today look at hagiography not mainly as a source for historical data, but as a source for understanding how hagriographical authors influenced their society and culture by constructing a narrative about the past for the present.[13] However, as with many other types of historical sources that mix legend with history, there is still historical data that can be drawn from these hagiographic writings, especially details about the culture and physical environment of the time described. As seen below, many of the hagiographers anticipated that their works would be met with skepticism and so were concerned about finding reliable sources and eyewitnesses. Even if some of the events they describe are dubious or impossible to verify, many of the details that are given about foods and food culture of that time can be valuable to food historians.

The account about *serikaya* in Melaka should be classified as a *miracula* (miracle story) that encourages the virtue of obedience to authorities and discourages the vice of gluttony. As emphasized by later hagiographers, the miracle reported is that the bishop knew that the *serikaya* had been poisoned. In *Ethiopia Oriental*, Dos Santos does not directly state how the bishop obtained this knowledge, but it is inferred that he obtains the knowledge through supernatural means because he is a servant of God. For the purposes of this article, the focus is not on the reported miracle, but on the description of *serikaya*.

The Serikaya History: A Historiographical Account

Modern discussions about the origins of particular foods, such as *serikaya*, are markedly different from travelogue and hagiographical accounts of food mentioned above. Anneke Geyzen argues that the most popular explanation for the post-World War II obsession with heritage, which is often a driving force for studies of food origin and authenticity, is Claude Fischler's view that it shows a desire for distinctiveness and security in response to a post-war homogenization and globalization that effectively erases regional and seasonal distinctions.[14] [I Books like Johari's *The Food of Singapore Malays* do seem to be driven by a desire to preserve the distinctive culinary contributions of the Malay community in Singapore in response to threatening forces like globalization and modernization.[15]

However, Geyzen proposes that the French historian Loïc Bienasses provides a more nuanced model of heritagization that presents it as an ongoing process where people with different ideologies and motivations assign various meanings to objects in response to many different situations (not just globalization and homogenization).[16] This broader definition is helpful in

contrasting the travelogue and hagiographic writings of European religious writers with 21st Century writers who discuss food heritage and origins. The European hagiographic writers evaluate experiences with exotic food and assign value based on their religious ideology that is undoubtedly mixed with colonial ambitions. Part of their concern is to protect their religious heritage from the enticements and temptations of the new world. In contrast, contemporary food heritage writers search for origins and authenticity in an attempt to preserve their cultural food heritage from threats posed by supermarkets and international corporations like McDonalds. The two groups of writers have different ideologies and motivations, but both are seeking to protect their heritage from external threats.[17]

Ethiopia Oriental and Other Hagiographic Sources

Extant sources that include the account about *serikaya* in Melaka include:

- *Ethiopia Oriental* (1608; 1891) by João dos Santos.
- *Historia Ecclesiasica* (1611) by Alonso Fernandez.
- *Historia General* (1611) by Ivan Lopez.
- *Historia de S. Domingo* by Luis Sousa and Luis Cacegas (16??; 1767).
- *Sagrio Diario Domenicano* (1668) by Maria Marchese.
- *Anno Historico* (1744) by Francisco Santa Maria.
- *Apologio Dominico* (1753) by Manoel de Lima.

Each of these sources gives the account about *serikaya* and the accounts are similar enough to one another to likely have come from a single source. De Lima and Marchese both identify Sousa as one of their sources.[18] Santa Maria only gives a one sentence summary of the account without mentioning the name "*serikaya*" directly. Sousa, Lopez, Fernandez, and Dos Santos each have a similar account with Sousa's adding some embellishment, but still retaining the basic story found in Dos Santos. Dos Santos may have been the first to publish the account involving *serikaya* or the authors may all be borrowing from another source that is no longer available.

Ethiopia Oriental was written by Friar João dos Santos (1560-1622) and published in 1609 in Evora, Portugal. Dos Santas lived in Mozambique (1586-1597), Portuguese India (1597-1606; 1617-1622), and Portugal and Europe (1606-1617). *Ethiopia Oriental* is divided into two volumes, the first volume dealing with the lands and people of Mozambique (at that time called "Eastern Ethiopia") and the second volume dealing with the history of the church in the Far East.[19] Dos Santos anticipated that some readers would doubt the truth of some of his accounts and wrote [my translation],

> "And because some of the things I say are so prodigious, that they are almost incredible, and told to those who have achieved little of the many wonders that exist throughout the world, their belief towards them is in great danger; therefore, at first I doubted whether this story would come to light, understanding that these things should not be told to similar people, who lightly judge them as fables. But as my intention is not to satisfy these people, nor to tell fables filled with exquisite and well-composed words, using a high speaking style and polite language, but to actually say the

> things that I have seen, noticed and heard from the people of credit, that's why I didn't want to give up on the intention I started, using this simple narration, because the truth doesn't need rhetorical words to declare itself; and only this will be accepted by the curious reader from me, and not the crude way in which I have to report it."[20]

Dos Santos claims that his information comes from his own experiences and from what he heard from "people of credit." The author apologizing for a lack of "a high speaking style" was a convention commonly used in hagiography.[21] Dos Santos likely gathered material for his sections on Melaka while he lived in Goa. Many people travelled back and forth between Goa and Melaka during this time, including the Bishop Jorge de Santa Luzia. Writing about Dos Santos' work on traditions in Southern Africa, Denis comments, "Dos Santos clearly followed his intention never to state anything without sufficient proof. He made use of what we would today call fieldwork methods."[22] However, he also mentions that Dos Santos often portrayed the people he was studying in an unfavorable light, as can be seen in the account about Bishop Luzia and the poisoned *serikaya*.

It is possible that the other sources listed above borrowed Dos Santos' account, but it is also possible that some of them were borrowed from an earlier source. Luis de Sousa (1555-1632) directly states that his work is based on sources collected by Friar Luis Cacegas who died in 1610. De Sousa writes that Cacegas spent twenty years studying the history of the Portuguese convents.[23] It is possible that Cacegas got his information about the poisoned *serikaya* in Melaka from Dos Santos or vice versa. There were likely other sources available at that time that were no longer extant.

Text and Translation of Source: Ethiopia Oriental (1609)

In general, all of the sources about *serikaya* in Melaka include the basics of the narrative about Bishop Jorge de Santa Lucia and the poisoned *serikaya*. Later hagiographic writers embellished the story in various ways mostly to give religious instruction or to enhance the imagery, but still retained the basic elements found in the account of *Ethiopia Oriental*. Using the approach to the heritage of Geyzen and Bienassis mentioned above, one can see that the hagiographical writers assign a specific meaning to the *serikaya* account based on their religious ideology in order to protect their religious heritage from perceived threats. Perhaps the best example of how the account is embellished for religious purposes comes from Maria Marchese's *Sagrio Diario Domenicano*, whose colourful account is included below for comparison and contrast with *Ethiopia Oriental*.

The account about poisoned *serikaya* in Melaka from *Ethiopia Oriental* is as follows:

> "Hua molher de Malaca pretendeo matar este fervo de Deos, porque lhe tolhia certos tratos illicitos que tinha. E pera isso fez hum manjar de leite & azucar, a que na India chamao Syricaya (que he hum comer muito excellente) & deytoulhe dentro pezonha, & ordenou por terceira pessoa, que esta iguaria sosse presentada na mesa ao Bispo, quando jan tasse: mas

> esse tanto que a vio diante di si, disse que a tomasse & lancassem no rio, ou a enter rassem, & q ninguem comesse della: nao querendo com tudo dizer que tinha pezonha, por nao infamar quem tanto mal tinha ordenado. O que vedo o despenseyro do Bispo mandou tirar a iguaria da mesa, dizendo que lha guardassem, per esse mesmo por em esseito o que o Bispo mandava; & depo is disso comeo della, parecendolhe, que o Bispo deixava de a comer por ser muito deliciosa, & nao teria outro mal. Mas tato que comeo, logo sentio emsi os effeitos da peconha da qual inchou, & morreo em beve tempo."[24]
>
> A woman from Malacca intended to kill this servant of God, because he hindered her from certain illicit dealings she had. And to do so, she made a delicacy of milk and sugar, which in India is called Syricaya (which is very excellent to eat) and poured poison into it, and ordered by a third person that this delicacy be presented on the table to the Bishop, when he had dinner. But as soon as he saw it in front of him, he said that he should take it and throw it into the river, or bury it, and that no one should eat it: not really wanting to say that it had poison, so as not to make someone infamous who had ordered so much harm. When he saw it, the Bishop's steward ordered the delicacy to be removed from the table, saying that it should be kept for him, so that he could take into account what the Bishop ordered; & after that he started eating it, it seemed to him that the Bishop stopped eating it because it was so delicious, & there would be no other harm. But as soon as he started, he soon felt the effects of the poison from which he swelled, & he died in a short time.

This is the version of the account from *Sagrio Diario Domenicano* (1668) by Maria Marchese [my translation from the Italian]:

> "There were in the city of Malacca some people of such bad conscience, and so given to every strong vice, that the flattery and caresses, the admonitions and threats of a Bishop considered by all as a saint, such as our Fra. Giorgio was, were not enough to ensure that they held back at least a little from that enormous current which perceptibly carried them to the abyss. The good Prelate continued with his office without dissenting, because his first plans did not succeed; indeed he sought other means to bring them back to the straight path. And when such diligent duties of a zealous, no less than loving Shepherd, should have moved him to hear that voice, which invited him to life, now more than ever obstinate in evil, they engineered his death. They chose as a procuress [go-between, intermediary] for this a woman who, as she was used to composing poisons, since she poisoned the human race with an apple, seemed to them suitable for preparing with poison the usual medicine of the East, and with a mouthful the death of the good Prelate. She made a dish given to him as a gift and esteemed by the greedy [or gourmands, gourmets] of that land,

> which is called Sericaia, decorating with many flowers, to hide death under the flowery disguise, and in this way she sent it to be given to the zealous Bishop. Having received the steward, who thought he was giving him a pleasant [welcome] morsel, he placed it on the table, which had always been poor, and which was suitable for such a Servant of God, and therefore he could not but consider that food deadly [mortal], which with its preciousness [embellishments] it was so hostile to him. The Bishop placed his eyes, but not his hands, on the dish given to him, and knowing by divine revelation the deception, and wanting to discover the culprit so as not to be the occasion of his harm, he commanded, without saying why, that the dish be taken away from before them, and no one should dare to eat it, rather, just as it was, it was to be thrown into the sea. I think the steward, that is, knew that the good Prelate because as a very continent man considered [esteemed?] that precious food to be the death penalty, which with its delicate flavor threatened ruin to continence, to enliven the gluttony. So, he decided to not obey his master in this, but to have an impressive meal himself. Just as he had decided it, he placed it in the body, and in eating it he swallowed death realizing at his expense that greedy disobedience is always guilty of death. There was no remedy for it, because the poison was so violent, that before it is known as a killer it is known as an enemy. And if the spirit of prophecy on this occasion brought about the life of him alone, the more marvelous is the fact, as we will now relate, because it brought about the life of an entire community."[25]

Analysis

In the account about Bishop Jorge de Santa Luzia and the poisoned *serikaya* in *Ethiopia Oriental* and other sources, the bishop is portrayed as a caring leader who goes to great lengths to care for the people under his care, even to the point that he will try to cover up a murder attempt on his own life. The woman who makes the *serikaya* (and in Marchese's account, the people who hire the woman) is presented in a negative light as one who resists the bishop's care and so attempts to murder him. The steward is the focal point of the moral lesson because he is pictured as the one who disobeys his master, succumbs to the vice of gluttony, and, as a result, receives the wages of his sin, death. The *serikaya* is presented as the object of temptation that is intended by the woman to deceive the bishop, but ultimately deceives the steward. Marchese compares the act of the woman preparing the poisoned dessert for the bishop to Eve offering the apple, the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to the human race. The dessert is alluring but deadly. The moral of the story is clear: one should trust the commands of bishops and the church and not yield to the temptation of gluttony.

While it is important to not read too much into a single story, one can see from these accounts about *serikaya* that some writers of the church portrayed Melaka as a place of both danger and temptation. The exotic *serikaya* is both an alluring temptation to indulge in gluttony and a deadly trojan horse full of poison. The account justifies the presence of the Bishop (and thus the

presence of the Portuguese) in Melaka and portrays the food culture in an ambiguous way, as something both alluring and a potential source of vice.

The Serikaya. Besides giving moral instruction, the account from *Ethiopia Oriental* gives some information about *sericaya*. It indicates that *syricaya* (*serikaya*) was made by a woman of the land, was made of milk and sugar, was made in Melaka, was called by the name "*syricaya"* by people in that region (at that time Malaysia was part of a region known as "India"), and was a delicacy appreciated by the people of Melaka.

Marchese adds that the *serikaya* was decorated with flowers in order to hide the presence of the poison. This may be a fictional embellishment that was later added to highlight the deceptive nature of the dessert. He also notes that the dish was "esteemed by the greedy [golosi] of that land," which is likely Marchese's interpretation of the phrase "which is very excellent to eat," in *Ethiopia Oriental*. The Italian word *golosi*, could be translated with the English "gourmand" or "gourmet," but it is more likely, in light of the context, that the writer meant to use a word with a more negative connotation such as "greedy." Marchese and the other hagiographic writers do not give more substantive information about *serikaya*, but emphasize its allure.

It is also important to point out that Dos Santos only gives a quick description ("a delicacy made of sugar and milk") and not a recipe. There is much that is unknown about this *serikaya*. Was the "milk" coconut milk or cow's milk? How much did the recipe mentioned in the *Miscellaneous Packs* change as it travelled from Melaka to Goa to Portugal (or possibly Goa to Melaka to Portugal)? The recipe note itself suggests that the nuns in Portugal had to adapt the recipe. The ingredients for the recipe in the *Miscellaneous Packs*, milk, eggs, brown sugar, rice flour, lime, and cinnamon, would all have been readily available in Melaka in the 16th century. From the limited information in *Ethiopia Oriental* one can only speculate what ingredients in addition to milk and sugar were in the Melaka version of *serikaya* and whether it was a custard or a custard cake.

The Identity of the Woman. The identity of the woman who makes the *serikaya* is unknown, but the fact that she makes desserts does fit the description of women in Melaka found in other accounts. In Barretto De Resende's Account of Malacca during the period of Portuguese rule, most likely recorded before 1638,[26] he notes,

> "One thing may be said of the married women of this land which is greatly to their credit; and that is that there is not one who would ask for any help from her husband towards the expenses of the home, which really is their support; for they themselves supply the household money by making eatables which are usually sold in the streets by their slaves, and their houses take the place of inns in the town. Their daughters are brought up from childhood to the same custom, so that there is no girl who has not her own fortune put aside in this way in her father's house; and thus, as in India, girls are not afraid of their husbands not being able to support them; for this reason too persons of much merit are satisfied with a small dowry. This custom has greater effect in this country than in India."[27]

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In praising the independence of the married women of Melaka, de Resende mentions that they all earned money by making "eatables" that were sold in the streets. He does not mention specifically what kinds of food that they made, but he does emphasize that all the married women had this practice. One of the "eatables" that was sold in the street was likely *serikaya*.

It is unlikely that the woman who made the *serikaya* came from Portugal. Food researcher Janet Boileau notes that when the Portuguese sent people to the colonies they sent very few women.[28] Unlike the Dutch and British who would later colonize Melaka, the Portuguese had a strategy of encouraging the men who came to their colonies to intermarry with local women in order to increase the number of people who would work for and be loyal to the Portuguese crown. Boileau writes, "these arrangements, which legitimized a scenario in which indigenous women cooked for Portuguese men, were instrumental in the two-way transmission of culinary culture between the Iberians and their host communities."[29] Of course, the woman was not necessarily the husband of a Portuguese man, but could have been from any number of ethnic groups living in and near Melaka at that time.

The Date. In the sources listed above, this account about *serikaya* is most often sandwiched in between an account of Bishop Jorge de Santa Luzia excommunicating or cursing tigers from Melaka and an account about an attack on Melaka from Aceh. Eredia dates the tiger account around 1560, while Teixeira records the date of excommunication on August 15,1562.[30] The account about the attack from Aceh took place in 1568, so if the accounts were recorded in chronological order it is likely that the *serikaya* incident involving the bishop took place sometime between 1562 and 1568. At the least, *Ethiopia Oriental* shows that a dish with a variation of the name *serikaya* was associated with the city of Melaka by a writer in Portugal in 1609, but if the date above is correct and if the source is reliable, *Ethiopia Oriental* also provides evidence that a dish made of milk and sugar called *serikaya* was made in Melaka in the 1560s.

Reliability of the Account. Dos Santos' depiction of *serikaya* being made in Melaka in *Ethiopia Oriental* is likely reliable for the reasons that follow. Firstly, Dos Santos does give many accurate details about the life of Bishop Jorge de Santa Luzia that can be verified by other sources and his depiction of Melaka is consonant with the description of other sources of the time. Secondly, the mention of *serikaya* is an incidental detail that brings color to the story, not a detail that would be added for moral instruction or purely symbolic value. Thirdly, Dos Santos' description of the dessert suggests that many of his Portuguese readers would not be familiar with it and this suggests that the dish was popular in Melaka, but unknown in Portugal. The author is not creating a legendary origin story for a dish that is popular in his own country, but describing a foreign dish that was not known in Portugal.

Moreover, the account in *Ethiopia Oriental* fits the narrative of the recipe note found in the *Miscellenaeous Packs of the Convent of Santa Clara de Elvas* mentioned in the introduction, specifically, that the recipe for *serikaya* came from Malacca to Goa and later to Portugal. If *serikaya* was a well-liked dish in Melaka in the 1560s, as suggested in *Ethiopia Oriental*, it likely had been present in the city for a significant amount of time. The Jesuits, founded in 1540, were in Malacca as early as 1545 when Francis Xavier arrived. Malacca became the headquarters for the Jesuit mission to the East, so many Jesuits passed through Malacca or served in Malacca at the

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College of St. Paul and the Residence of the Jesuit Fathers located at the Hermitage of Our Lady of the Mount.[31] During this time, there was a significant amount of travel between Goa and Malacca as can be seen in the travels of Francis Xavier and other church leaders. It would not be surprising if Jesuits from Malacca shared recipes with nuns in Goa, especially since monasteries were important centers for baking at that time.[32]

However, the recipe note from the *Miscellaneous Packs* states that the Jesuit Fathers shared the recipe with the nuns of the Convent of Santa Monica. This statement is likely inaccurate because, according to Pyrard, the Convent of Santa Monica was not begun until 1606 and completed in 1627.[33] Even though it is unlikely that Constantino de Bragança obtained the recipe for *serikaya* from the Convent of Santa Monica, it is possible that he received the recipe from nuns in Goa. Convents and nuns during that period played an important role in baking because convents were one of the few places that possessed ovens.

Likely referring to the recipe note from the *Miscellaneous Packs*, Wong and Neo in *The Melaka Chetti Kitchen: Culinary journey of 500 years* write,

> "In Portugal, however, D. Constantino de Bragança, the Portuguese viceroy of India from 1558 to 1561, is credited for bringing the recipe to Portugal from India. The nearest thing to Sericaia that India has is Khoya, a cheese curd made by boiling down milk, which doesn't really fit the bill. As most Indian sweetmeats are made sans eggs for their vegetarian diet, you quickly dismiss any notion that Sericaia originated from this land."[34]

However, the statement that the nearest thing in India to *sericaia* is Khoya is inaccurate. In fact, the Convent of Santa Monica in Goa, mentioned in the recipe note was later known for its baked goods, especially a cake called *bebinca* that has many similarities to *sericaia*. Bebinca is a dessert made with sugar, eggs, and coconut milk that often has multiple layers similar to the Malay dessert *kuih lapis legit*.[35] There is a legend that the dish is named after a Nun named Bebiana who created the dish.[36] Inspiration for *bebinca* could have come from contact with travelers from Melaka who came with recipes of *serikaya* and other similar desserts. Even though the Convent of Santa Monica was not in existence in 1562, it is possible that recipes for *serikaya* were passed from Malacca, to Goa, to Portugal.

As Wong and Neo noted above, the Portuguese Viceroy of India, Constantino de Bragança lived in Goa between 1558 and 1561. When he completed his post in Goa, he returned to Portugal, so the recipe note's comment that he passed the recipe from Goa to the Convent of Chagas de Christo in Vila Vicosa in 1562 is plausible, as is the dissemination of the recipe to the Convent of Santa Clara in Elvas and to other convents in Alentejo. Even though some of the details of the recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara de Elvas are inaccurate, the general proposition that a recipe for *serikaya* travelled from Melaka to Goa to Portugal in the 16th Century is, at least, plausible.

Apart from the recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara de Elvas, the earliest mention of *sericaia* in Portugal comes from the late 17th Century. An article on *sericaia* by Sandra

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Fernandes Morais on the blog *Historias Acucaradas* [Sugary Stories] mentions an entry for *sericaia* in Bluteau's 1720 Portuguese dictionary.[37] The entry reads: "Siricaia, f.f. milk in--, cooked with eggs, and sugar with flour, or without it in half consistency. *Arte de Cozinha*."[38] As Morais points out, the reference in the dictionary is to a menu in the cookbook *Arte de Cozinha* (1680; 1693) that lists "*Leite em sericaia* [milk in *sericaia*], but does not give a recipe."[39] In another section of *Arte de Cozinha*, there is also a mention of, "*um prato de pastelao de sericaia,*" [a plate of sericaia pastry].[40] From the limited information that we can gather from *Arte de Cozinha*, it appears that there were two types of *sericaia* in late 17th Century Portugal: *leite em sericaia*, which may have been more like a custard, and *pastelao de sericaia*, which may have been more like a cake. This fits with Bluteau's dictionary entry that notes that there were kinds of *sericaia* made with flour and those made without flour.

Putting together Bluteau's dictionary entry and the two names for *sericaia* in the menus of *Arte de Cozinha* with the descriptions of *serikaya/sericaia* in *Ethiopia Oriental* and the recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara de Elvas, one could speculate that *serikaya* was a custard-like dessert from Melaka and other areas of Southeast Asia made with sugar, coconut milk, and eggs (similar to the *serikaya* and *kaya* made currently in Southeast Asia) whose recipe was passed on to people in Goa and then on to people in Portugal in the late 16th Century. Somewhere along the line of transmission, bakers began to add flour to the mixture to make the custard more like a cake and later, when it was adapted in Elvas, cinnamon was added to the top. At least for some time, bakers continued to make both the custard version and the cake version. The custard version of *serikaya* is still well-loved in Southeast Asia as a spread for toast made popular by the Hainanese[41] and as a component of many popular Malay desserts (*kuih-muih*) such as *seri-muka*. The cake version, *sericaia*, is a mainstay in the Alentejo region of Portugal and often eaten with plums. This line of speculation fits the sources that have been presented in this article, but it is important to emphasize that the sources are greatly limited and the history of *serikaya* is likely much more complicated.

Conclusion

An 1874 Portuguese dictionary describes *serikaya* as "a very popular delicacy in Malacca known for its exquisite flavor."[42] Perhaps the author of the entry was familiar with the account about the poisoned *serikaya* in *Ethiopia Oriental* or some other story. Whatever the reason, it is important to point out that the author of the entry does not write "from Malacca" but "in Malacca." The same can be said for Dos Santos' account of *serikaya* in Melaka in *Ethiopia Oriental*. The presence of *serikaya* in Melaka in the 1560s does not mean that *serikaya* originated in Melaka, but shows that Melaka was one of the places in Southeast Asia where the dessert was popular in the 16th Century.

However, the account about *serikaya* in Ethiopia, along with the recipe note from the Convent of Santa Clara in Elvas, does provide support for Khir Johari's hypothesis that *serikaya* was present in Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Portuguese. These sources also show that cultural transmission was not just a one-way-street during the age of European Colonization. As Europeans influenced the culinary culture of their colonies, so the colonies influenced the culinary culture of the Europeans.

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In the 16th Century the Portuguese joined a milieu of cultural exchange that had been flourishing in Melaka and Southeast Asia for decades due to a constant influx of traders from India, China, and the Middle East.[43] Johari, adapting Joel Kahn's insights,[44] notes how Nyona Cuisine is branded as the fusion cuisine of Malaysia, but, in reality, Malay Cuisine is also a fusion cuisine, not just because of colonialism, but because of Southeast Asia's long history of interaction with a variety of culinary cultures.[45] Even though the account of *serikaya* in Melaka shows that *serikaya* likely preceded the European presence in Melaka, this does mean that *serikaya* emerged in a pure Malay culinary culture that was isolated from the rest of the world. It rather means that *serikaya* was highly valued in the cosmopolitan culture of Melaka that, like many entrepots in Southeast Asia, was a culinary melting pot that reflected the broad diversity of its residents and visitors.

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Notes

[1] Anneke Geyzen, "Food Studies and the Heritage Turn: A Conceptual Repertoire," *Food and History* 12, No. 2, July 2014, pp. 67–96, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.FOOD.5.108963.
[2] Massimo Montanari, *Food Is Culture*, Arts and Traditions of the Table (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p.139.
[3] See Khir Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through the Archipelago*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2021, pp. 476–505.
[4] Baba Peter Lee, "The Kinship of Kaya," *The Peranakan*, 2016,p. 26.
[5] Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore,* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014, 46–47; Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, 297–305; Lee, "The Kinship

of Kaya," 25–29; Julie Wong and David Neo, *The Melaka Chetti Kitchen: Culinary Journey of 500 Years*, Subang Jaya: The Melaka Chetti Heritage Association of Melaka, 2023, p. 277.
[6] Fadly Rahman, *Jejak Rasa Nusantara: Sejarah Makanan Indonesia*, Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2016, p. 53.
[7] Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, p. 303.
[8] Tiago Salgueiro, "A Verdadeira Origem Do Serica: Índia, Brasil, Vila Vicosa Ou Elvas?," accessed December 12, 2023, https://pt.linkedin.com/pulse/verdadeira-origem-do-seric%C3%A1-%C3%ADndia-brasil-vila-vi%C3%A7osa-ou-salgueiro.
[9] "A Verdadeira Origem Do Serica."
[10] Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, p. 303.
[11] João dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental e varia historia de cousas notaueis do Oriente composta pollo padre fr. Ioão dos Santos da Ordem dos pregatores: Varia historia de cousas notaueis do Oriente. E da christandade que os religiosos da Ordem dos pregadores nelle fizerão. Segunda parte*, 1608, p. 46; Alonzo Fernandez, *Historia eclesiastica de nuestros tiempos, etc*, 1611, p. 224; Juan López, *Quarta parte de la Historia general de Santo Domingo y de su Orden de Predicadores*, 1615, p. 1125; Fr. R. Cardon and L. Elkins, "The Old Church on The Malacca Hill," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, no. 1, 141, 1947, p. 225. Cardon and Elkins mention that Sericaya is, "a sort of custard made of the anona squammosa fruit, which even now, is well known and much appreciated by the people of Malacca." However, other than an unlikely inference from the name of the dish, there is no evidence that "Sericaya" was made from the fruit anona squammosa. The serikaya that is made in Melaka does not include this fruit.
[12] Catherine Sanok, "Hagiography," in *Medieval Historical Writing*, ed. Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner, and Elizabeth M. Tyler, 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 422, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316681299.025.
[13] Sanok, p. 435.
[14] Geyzen, "Food Studies and the *Heritage Turn*," pp. 67–68.
[15] Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, p. 18–19.
[16] Geyzen, "Food Studies and the *Heritage Turn*," p. 73.
[17] Furthermore, Pilcher in his framework of "embodied imagination," proposes that it is not just the evaluation of the food that is culturally conditioned, but the sensory experience of eating itself that is culturally conditioned by culture and memory. This is a reminder that the contrast is not just a contrast of ideologies, but of sensory, embodied experiences. Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History," *The American Historical Review* 121, No. 3, 2016, p. 862.
[18] Manuel de Lima, *Agiologio dominico, vidas dos santos, beatos, martyres... da Ordem dos Prégadores*, Soares, 1753, 174; Domenico Maria Marchese, *Sagro diario domenicano. Tomo primo [-secondo] nel quale si contengono le vite de'santi, beati, e venerabili dell'ordine de' predicatori*, 1668, pp. 118–20. De Lima notes that his sources are Sousa and the and Agiologio Lusitania (which does not appear to contain an account about *serikaya*). Marchese also lists his sources as Sousa, Agiologia Lusitania, Senese, Lopez, Fernandez, Historia Ecclesiastica, and other authors.
[19] João dos Santos, *Ethiopia oriental*, Escriptorio da Empreza, 1891, pp. 26–27.
[20] Ibid., p. 27.
[21] Beryl Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages*, Scribner, 1975, p. 48.
[22] Philippe Denis, *The Dominican Friars in Southern Africa: A Social History (1577-1990)*, BRILL, 2016, p. 14.
[23] Luis de Sousa, *Primeira parte [- quarta parte] da historia de S. Domingos particular do reyno, e conquistas de Portugal,* 1767, p. 284.
[24]Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental*, p. 46b.
[25] Marchese, *Sagro diario domenicano*, p. 119.
[26] W. George Maxwell, "Barretto de Resende's Account of Malacca," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 60,1911, p. 2.
[27] Maxwell, p.7.
[28] Joanna Boileau, "'A Culinary History of the Portuguese Eurasians: The Origins of Luso-Asian Cuisine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.'" (University of Adelaide, School of History and Politics, 2010), 138–41.
[29] Boileau,p. 146.
[30] Manuel Godinho de Eredia and J. V. G. Mills, *Eredia's Description of Malaca, Meridional India, and Cathay*, M.B.R.A.S. Reprints, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1997, p. 41; Manuel Teixeira, *The Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore (1511-1958): Malacca*, Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1961, p. 104.
[31] R. Cardon, *Catholicism in the East and the Diocese of Malacca, 1511-1888* (Malaya Catholic Leader, 1938), 4–6.

[32] Boileau, "'A Culinary History of the Portuguese Eurasians: The Origins of Luso-Asian Cuisine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.,'" pp.72–85.
[33] François Pyrard, *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil* (Hakluyt Society, 1888), p. 58.
[34] Julie Wong and David Neo, *The Melaka Chetti Kitchen: Culinary Journey of 500 Years*, 277.
[35] Christopher Tan, "Love Is a Many-Layered Thing," *BiblioAsia*, January 1, 2021, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-16/issue-4/jan-mar-2021/kueh-lapis.
[36] Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Cozinha de Goa: History and Tradition of Goan Food*, Goa, 1556; Tan, "Love Is a Many-Layered Thing."
[37] Sandra Fernandes Morais, "Perseguindo a Sericaia," *histórias açucaradas* (blog), May 14, 2021, https://historiasacucaradas.wordpress.com/2021/05/14/perseguindo-a-sericaia/.
[38] Rafael Bluteau, *Diccionario da lingua portugueza* (na officina de Simão Thaddeo Ferreira), 1789, p. 404.
[39] Domingos Rodrigues, *Arte de Cozinha*, Amass. Cook., 2020, p. 203.
[40] Ibid., p.216.
[41] Duruz and Khoo, *Eating Together*, p.47.
[42] Domingo Vieira, *Grande diccionario portuguez ou Thesouro da lingua portugueza: publ. feita o ms. orig., inteiramente rev. e consideravelmente augm. Q - Z*, Chardron e Moraes, 1874, p. 501.
[43] Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, pp. 478–505.
[44] Kahn, Joel S., "Other Cosmopolitans in the Making of the Modern Malay World," in *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Werbner, Pnina, Routledge, 2008, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003084617-17/cosmopolitans-making-modern-malay-world-1-joel-kahn.
[45] Johari, *The Food of Singapore Malays*, p. 523.

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