

A note on the history of cocoyams

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Two recent publications provide some useful clues as to the cultivation and spread of cocoyams. These probably wild in a vast stretch from Papua through to the foothills of the Himalayas, so biogeography provides limited clues. However, within the Papuan languages, a large grouping, the Trans-New Guinea phylum (TNG), previously somewhat controversial, is now accepted by linguists (Pawley 2005). The TNG includes a large number of Papuan languages along the central spine of the island of New Guinea and has some outliers on Timor and a few offshore islands. Unaffiliated Papuan languages are found all around its fringes, especially in the lowlands, and this geography leads us to think it expanded from the highlands. Its lexical diversity suggests that it is significantly older than Austronesian, so it may have originated as much as 10,000 years ago.

The stimulus for the expansion of the TNG is unknown but the proposal on the table is that it was some sort of proto-agriculture. Arboriculture is generally accepted to be sufficiently old in this region and typical species are *Canarium spp.*, *Artocarpus spp.*, various *Pandanus* species and others. However, the cocoyam has a common root, *mV-*, usually, *ma*, which appears to be strongly associated with the distribution of the TNG. Taro is naturally a lowland plant but Denham (2004) has argued that it would have spread to the highlands at this period, hence its identification at Kuk swamp, which is of the relevant antiquity. *Musa spp.* has also been identified at Kuk, but no linguistic evidence for this is yet forthcoming. Nonetheless, it seems credible that the earliest cultivated cocoyams spread with speakers of the TNG.

There is no evidence for the *mV-* root for cocoyam west of Timor, but the etymological dictionary of Austroasiatic by Shorto (2006) recently edited for publication, provides another clue. Shorto (2006:475) reconstructs **t₂raw?* for proto-Austroasiatic with evidence as follows;

Language	Attestation	Meaning
Mon	krao	<i>Colocasia</i>
Khmer	traav	taro
Sre	traw	taro
Chrau	traw	taro
East Bahnar	trəu	amaranth
Riang	səroʔ	taro
Khasi	shriew	arum
Sora	‘saro	<i>Caladium esculentum</i>
Mundari	saŋu	edible root
Santal	saru	taro

Despite the occasional shifts to other species, it is fairly clear that taro was the original referent and it is attested in all main branches of Austroasiatic. This suggests that taro played an important role in the early expansion of Austroasiatic, as Diffloth has pointed out that there is strong correlation between subgroups of Austroasiatic and river valleys. Shorto (2006:160) also reconstructs a general term **l[a]k* to proto-Austroasiatic which has clear Munḍā attestations.

Dempwolff (1938:128-9) reconstructed **talət* for proto-Austronesian but his evidence did not include either Taiwan or any languages near its homeland. Proto-Oceanic has **ntalo* for ‘taro’ and apparently cognate forms show up in Malay for tuber in general. All of which suggests that Austroasiatic speakers were the original domesticators of taro and that Austronesian speakers borrowed it during an early phase of contact. When and where would this have been? The southern Philippines/Borneo is the most

likely zone. It is during the expansion of the (originally) rice cultivating Austronesians that they switch to vegetable. This cannot have been through contact with Negrito hunter-gatherers and is thus most likely that it was Austroasiatic speakers, *previously resident in insular SE Asia*. This would explain some of the apparently 'early' sites on Palawan and other southern locations. Taro and other vegetable had spread east for the mainland, and the expanding Austronesian speakers adopted it from the Austroasiatic speakers whom they subsequently assimilated, but not before borrowing their term.

The linguistic evidence, at least points to double domestication of taro, once on the island of New Guinea and associated with the expansion of TNG speakers and once somewhere on mainland SE Asia, providing the engine of Austroasiatic diversification. Further research should concentrate on taro terminology in the island zone between the southern Philippines and Timor to give this hypothesis a more solid base.

References

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