

Oral presentation

A survey of Rapan plant culture and their indigenous taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) varieties

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Introduction. Rapa Island (Rapa iti or Oparo) is a volcanic island containing a bay which is surrounded by an amphitheater of towering peaks connected by razor-shape ridges and smaller deep bays around the periphery of the island. The highest peak reaches 650 m in elevation and several others are well over 400 m. Atop each peak is built a fortress or *pa* that were abandoned at the time of European discovery in 1871. Polynesians have most likely inhabited Rapa since the 14th or 15th century. The geographic location 400 km south of the Tropic of Capricorn and the resulting climate makes Rapa one of the most botanically distinctive islands of central Polynesia. Typical Polynesian crops such as breadfruit and coconut do not thrive in this climate.

Objectives. The objectives of our study were to document Rapan plant use and names.

Methods. During a 2 month period (March-May 2002) we attempted through an interview process to record Rapan plant names and in particular record information about taro cultivars which is the starch staple of the island. We compared these data with records recorded by earlier scientists.

Results. In Rapa, taro is consumed baked and boiled, but is also commonly pounded into a paste (*popoi*) similar to the way taro is preferred in Hawaiian culture (*poi*). There are 25 named varieties of taro in Rapa. Twenty of these varieties are classified as Polynesian introductions; the remaining 5 are recent introductions to the island. Of the 25 known varieties, 10 Polynesian varieties have been lost and 2 of the recent introductions are no longer present on the island. Six varieties of taro are grown for characteristics valued for the production of *popoi*. Similar data were recorded for banana varieties, as well as local names for indigenous species, and notes on present day plant use.

Conclusion. During the interview process it was evident that the Rapans with the most plant knowledge are from the senior age class and knowledge diminished in the younger individuals. This trend occurs in many cultures, but is perhaps more marked in Rapa since students are sent to boarding school on a neighboring island.

Keywords: crops, Polynesia, Pacific, plants, ethnobotany

Selected References

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