

Taro diversity in a village of Vanua Lava island (Vanuatu) : Where, What, Who, How and Why?

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Abstract : Through an agronomic and anthropological approach, this study demonstrates that taro does not only play an alimentary role but also helps to underline the identity of the group that cultivates it. In Vêtuboso, the biggest village of Vanua Lava island (North Vanuatu), taros are planted in swamps, rivers, and irrigated pondfields. In the latter, farmers draw their pride from taro cultivation that need sophisticated ancestral practices, alternating dry and wet phases to allow ecological pest control (*Papuana spp.*), to level off climatic variation, and to adapt corm quality to the nalot, North Vanuatu's traditional meal. On the western coast of Vanua Lava, farmers adopt distinct management strategies to plant ninety-six taro cultivars in various assortments. Through the description of the aerial and underground characteristics, Vêtuboso dwellers are able to differentiate this high diversity of cultivars without synonymies and homonymies. Field surveys illustrate the variability of taro portfolio that twelve households have adopted. Common cultivars that most farmers plant in high quantity have their specific uses in both every-day and ceremonial meals or have major agronomic qualities, whereas rare taros, unevenly distributed among farmers, are still planted because of farmer interest to experiment new cultivars, and to preserve their community and family heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is an essential staple food on the west coast of Vanua Lava, a northern island from the 80 of Vanuatu. As Barrau (1983 : 14) emphasizes – « aliments are not only good to eat, they are also 'good to think' » - the taro's role in Vanua Lava is not a simple food but reveals the identity of the group who cultivates it. Similarly as Haudricourt (1964 : 93) has written about the « yam civilisation » in New Caledonia, the studied society could be qualified of « taro civilisation ». Vanua Lava is the biggest island of the Banks groups (331 km²) where are living about 2000 inhabitants talking two languages : the Vera'a, within an area restricted around the village of Vatrata, and the Vurës, on the rest of the islands. As dominating, the second one will be used for local terms. Surveys were mostly done in Vêtuboso, the biggest village of the island (610 inhabitants in 2001 (Hess, pers. comm., 2001). Within a four hour walk from the airport (19 km), the village is lying among mountains at about 150 meters elevation. West coast of Vanua Lava dwellers mainly plant taro whereas in the other islands from the Banks group, yams (*Dioscorea spp.*) and taros are mixed in gardens or cultivated as mono-crops. Moreover, Vanua Lava is today the only island to practise a cultivation system based on irrigation (Lanouguère-Bruneau, 2000). Its inhabitants are famous for their know-how of pondfields, socially valorised, in which is grown a high taro diversity differently arranged by farmers. In this paper, we will focus on the reasons leading to the maintenance of such diversity.

VANUA LAVA, A MOSAIC OF SOCIALLY VALORISED GARDENS

Taro cultivation in Vanua Lava : study-case of an irrigated system in Vêtuboso

Among cultural methods using water, three systems could be differentiated : irrigated pondfields (**qêl**, pl. **qêlaqêl**), simple inundation in between river stones (**mat** [river]) and cultivation in mud along rivers or swamps without draining (**mat boak** ou **boak** [mud]). These three systems prevent young taros to be damaged by a pest called the papuana beetles (*Papuana inermis* and *P. huebneri*) well spread all over dry lands.

These systems are coexisting among six large areas named **rot** covering 17.3 ha¹. The agricultural potential of these taro pondfields are high compared to other islands (1,7 ha on west coast Santo (Walter and Tzerikiantz, in press).

Pondfields are composed of flat terraces which shapes are espousing the relief curves and which heights depend on the slope. They are partitioned by stone and mud walls (30 cm) in rectangular ponds named **qêl** (87 m²) - mean value done on 57 ponds - that are themselves cut generally in two sub-ponds separated by ground walls (10 cm), **tin** (42 m²) - mean value done on 119 sub-ponds - , cultivated by a family or a person.

Farmers are alternating wet and dry phases to finally harvest on dry soil. The duration and the rhythms of the phases depend on weather, soil quality, taro properties but also farmer needs, as changing the wet and dry alternations could modify maturation. Generally, taros are harvested after one year of cultivation but if needed the harvest could begin after eight months. A pond could be planted dozens of years without yield decreasing as taros are mostly nourished by nutriment contained in water (Claus, 1998). To restart a fallow pond, weeds are simply cleared, even if, according to villagers, slash-and-burn was practised by the previous generations. Thus, compared with rainfed cultivation, irrigated taro can be qualified as *intensive* and sustainable as taros are growing quicker, the number of cultivation cycles on a same area is higher, fallows are reduced and burn-offs are not practised.

Together, the three taro garden types, in pondfields, in rivers or in swamps, allow a regular harvest along the year of a great quantity of corms. However, even if they are coexisting in the same area, they are not assigned the same social value.

Taro pondfields : a man pride

Taros issued from pondfields are the pride of men in Vêtuboso. On the contrary, taros harvested in rivers are considered as easy taros worthy of the orphan that 'does not know how to work': Wômôdô, who creates them. The swamp cultivation is the least prestigious and no founder myths are associated to it.

A man who cultivates a high number of terraces according to ancestral rules, will be admired for his working capacity and his know-how. Indeed, if no maintenance is needed in rivers or swamp gardens, pondfields require a constant work based on knowledge transmitted by men. This knowledge covers diverse domains in agronomic sciences such as drain maintenance, excavations, walls consolidation, irrigation and pest control but also in social field through custom, bans and magic.

Men could prove their superiority in pondfields by comparing their ability to grow taro, which depends on the knowledge they acquire through years. As an example, a kind of taro called **sestan** is known to be a good river-taro but with poor yields on pondfields. When two men want to compare their knowledge, a competition is organised : only the one who knows the adequate magical leaves will harvest the biggest corm. Knowledge, which can be paid off, are not revealed because they shape the social status of men which will grow in importance when compared with the other ones.

¹ Calculated thanks to a program composed by François Bonnot (CIRAD-CP) from GPS data.

Moreover, the best taros are harvested from the irrigated system, their corms being stronger and tastier. But the quality depends also on how the farmer is dealing with the water and dry alternations in order to avoid deterioration caused by the *Papuana* beetle or a texture alteration : soft inner and hard outer (**mötöltöl**) or too strong inner (**te³urnur**). At the time of gatherings, a man will share the taros he has cultivated with the other members of the community who will judge his know-how.

Thus, pondfields are valued for the importance and the privacy of knowledge needed to grow the best quality taros in them. As irrigation is a speciality of two villages on the island, Vatrata and Vêtuboso, this cultivation system constitutes the pride of their inhabitants, especially men, the knowledge keepers.

A DIVERSITY OF CULTIVARS AND FARMERS

Cultivars from Vanua Lava

On the west coast of Vanua Lava, 96 cultivars of taros² have been characterised (agromorphological description and origin stories) thanks to individual surveys made with questionnaires (68 quick and 12 in depth interviews) and to multiple informal conversations in Vêtuboso and Vatrata and their pondfields. In this paper, the term ‘cultivar’ refers to a group of individuals presenting morphological and agronomical characteristics sufficiently remarkable for the interviewed farmer who assigns it a name recognized by the full community. We are not using the term ‘variety’ or ‘race’ because these cultivars are “a clonal replication of exceptional individuals” (Zohary, 1984).

As in Gaua or Mota (Vienne, pers. comm.), when interviewed, Vanua Lava inhabitants insist on the origin stories dealing with the context of ‘apparition’ on the island of each cultivar. These stories were asked to four chiefs of Vêtuboso well known for their knowledge. When a farmer finds a ‘variant’ in a population, he pinpoints it to evaluate its qualities when mature, then judge its place in his taro portfolio to finally decide if he keeps or rejects it. In Vêtuboso, this event is so rare that the farmer, as a collector, always conserves it. New taros can be discovered in three different ways. The main part of them (47% of those for which the story is known) appears after burning weeds in pondfields fallows old of five to dozens of years,. According to the young shoot description and emergence conditions, these taros might result from seeds and sexual reproduction (Caillon et al., 2003). Secondly, importing taros from another island bring 38% of the cultivars. This important exchange of germplasm illustrates that the number of morphotypes owned by each inhabitant continues to be diversified with travels. The last solution consists in random somatic mutation, a new morphotype can be a chimera produced by changing colours from another known one (15%).

In general, the name attributed to a cultivar, correspond to its origin story. If, by clearing a new terrace, the farmer finds a taro morphologically distinct from the already named ones, he can baptise his discovery with his own name preceded by **qiat min** (taro of) or **wot min** (born under). These prefixes are slowly erased through years. Taro names also identify places where the plant appeared (name of a river or hill) or originated from. If imported from the Banks, the vernacular name will be conserved. In other cases, the taro will be named according to the island of origin. Chimera will take the name of the mother plant they are issued from corrected by an adjective translating changes in colours. **Lamkör** or **mal** is added when the stick is darker, **qagqag** in the other case. When the corm is stripped (fibers) with a colour different from the parenchyma, **gatgat** is added but if it is only spotted, **lörlör** is used.

² To compare with, 5 *Alocasia macrorrhiza* names and 4 *Xanthosoma sagittifolium* types have been identified.

Conscious synonymy is possible for taros recently brought from a common island; even if they have the same eponym of the island, they are morphologically distinguished in fields. On the other hand, by collecting and describing the 96 cultivars (Caillon and Malau, 2002), it can be concluded that there is no synonymy for Vanua Lava and Banks taros. Genetic fingerprints conducted with AFLP³ (Caillon et al., 2003) show that local identification criteria are sufficiently shrewd to avoid homonymy that is under a same name are not regrouped two different cultivars as they are morphologically similar.

Even if 90% of taros are growing in any agro-ecological environment (wet, dry or in alternation), the location of the taro in the agrosystem is all the more the same since corm quality depends not only on the cultivar but also on the cultivation mode. Corms are stronger when taros are cultivated with alternated irrigation or in swamp, and softer when planted in rivers.

Farmers' strategies to manage diversity

To understand the diversity managed at a village scale, 56 ponds of 12 farmers have been visited to count the number of plants by cultivar and to determine areas planted. In this paper, the essential of the analysis is based on pondfields description. We annotated that in three simple inundation rivers in which 20 cultivars have been inventoried, only one, recently introduced, takes up 45% of the total area planted with taros.

In the sampled pondfields, 51 of the 96 cultivars of the village grow, but only six, called 'commons' – in order, **rov**, **marêwasalav**, **lantar**, **wasanto**, **vinmötöl** and **wêvê** – represent 83% of the planted taros and at least 5% of the portfolio of each farmer. At the opposite, 40 cultivars, said 'rares', cover less than 1% of taros owned by each farmer. There are at least 10.7 plants of common taros for 6.7 less cultivars. This disequilibrium between varieties in a space organised by humans can be compared to wild species repartition in nature. It is indeed admitted in ecology that the majority of population communities are composed of a small number of common species and numerous rare species (Krebs, 1994). If all villagers own the same common taros, rare cultivars are more heterogeneous favouring exclusivity and the difference valorisation. This taro mosaic could be compared to a museum where the cultivars composition of each room is designed and supervised by a guardian, the farmer.

The twelve persons for whose pondfields have been described have been chosen for their dissimilarities and/or similarities in terms of age, history, family or character. In their whole, each of them is planting a mean of 20 cultivars for 957 plants (cf. Tab. n°1).

	Area : m ² (%)	Number of foots (%)	Number of cultivars	Effectiveness	H (per farmer)
Quentin	2.3 (4,7%)	465 (4,2%)	22	4.7	2.30
Arthur	3.8 (7,8%)	805 (7,3%)	27	3.4	2.28
Achille	3.4 (7,0%)	312 (2,8%)	22	7.1	2.25
Eric's family ⁴	12.4 (25,5%)	2479 (22,4%)	27	1.1	2.21
Pascal	2.7 (5,5%)	481 (4,3%)	14	2.9	2.21
Henri	22.1 (45,4%)	2652 (23,9%)	46	1.7	2.20
Wendy	0.8 (1,6%)	81 (0,7%)	9	11.1	2.08
Anatole	1.1 (2,0%)	259 (2,3%)	15	5.8	2.04
Eric	7.3 (15,0%)	1448 (13,1%)	20	1.4	1.98
Hervé	1.1 (2,3%)	192 (1,7%)	9	4.7	1.58
Luc	0.5 (1,0%)	163 (1,5%)	13	8.0	1.58
Bertrand	0.2 (0,4%)	34 (0,3%)	6	17.6	1.54
Martin	3.4 (7,1%)	1718 (15,5%)	10	0.6	1.42
Mean	6.0	956.7	19.8	4.8	2.0

³ Amplified Fragment Length Polymorphism.

⁴ Eric's family includes Eric, the father, and its children, Arthur, Pascal, Hervé, and Bertrand.

Table 1 : Portfolio of the 12 farmers in numbers: percentage of the total surface surveyed , percentage of the number of plants, numbers of selected cultivars, conservation effectiveness (number of cultivar/number of plants) and measures of the varietal diversity thanks to the function Shannon-Wiener at each farmer scale.

To hierarchically classify the qualitative value of the twelve cultivar portfolios, two diversity indexes have to be taken into account : the number of cultivars by farmer and the function Shannon-Wiener⁵ (Krebs, 1994). The second one, based on the number of cultivars and their relative abundance, allows to respond to the question “With which difficulty, could we correctly predict the cultivar name of the next collected individual?”. So, the more the uncertainty is important, the greater is the diversity. This function was calculated within the own portfolio of each farmer (i.e. the calculation is based on the proportion of the $i^{\text{ème}}$ cultivar in the gardens of one farmer and not in those of all the interviewed farmers). Thus, this index gives information on how each farmer is managing his own portfolio disregarding the other members of the community.

According to table n°1, Wendy and Martin are the least incline to conserve cultivars without remarkable attractiveness. The lack of time seems to be the cause of such a drastic selection. Wendy, married in another village, is scarcely visiting her parents in Vêuboso, and Martin is a big producer of copra (whose plantation is at a 6 km walking distance) and of kava that he sales in a bar he has opened in the provincial administrative centre, Sola. The chief Henri is not only the greatest taro planter but also has an incomparable enthusiasm for the conservation with his 46 cultivars. He is a ‘collector’ as he will never throw out a cultivar even if not corresponding to his agronomic or gustative expectations. However, as illustrates the medium rank of his Shannon-Wiener index (H), he is planting few plants per rare cultivar whereas 71,3% of the space is planted with three cultivars, **marêwasalav**, **rov** and **lantar**. His conservation effectiveness, that is the number of cultivars divided by the total number of plants , is weak compared to the others. At the opposite, Quentin, a single young man, is only planting 22 cultivars, rigorously selected, in more homogeneous proportions (highest H) and with a medium efficiency. Having fewer cultivars to manage, he has more time and space to multiply every cultivar. He is a selector. These two extremes lead us to define what is a “good curator ”. As an *ex situ* collection⁶, the ‘collector’ has the advantage to maximise the number of cultivars in a restricted space. On the contrary, the ‘selector’ limits the risk of losing material and so genetic diversity in case of bad weather or social conflict. The collector and selector strategies are thus complementary ; the ‘good curator’ will be the one who conserves a great number of cultivars in numerous copies. The goal is to maximise and equilibrate the two diversity indexes. In our study-case, the adolescent Arthur, with 27 cultivars and an H index of 2,28, is the best diversity curator *in situ*⁷.

⁵ The function Shannon-Wiener (H) is calculated according to the formula : from $i=1$ to N (number of cultivars), $H = - \sum (p_i)(\ln(p_i))$ where p_i is the proportion of the $i^{\text{ème}}$ cultivar in the whole ponds of each farmer.

⁶ The *ex situ* conservation, through national or international institutes, aims to preserve the genes of one particular species in banks (*in vitro*) or collections (*in vivo*).

⁷ The *in situ* conservation of cultivated plants is founded on local management of agrobiodiversity through which we are looking forward not to maintain genotypes but a dynamic process in which the plant is adapting to environmental and sociological pressures.

In spite of the rich portfolio planted by households, only a small proportion of taros considered as commons takes up the majority of space whereas the heterogeneous repartition of rare taros shapes the diversity foundations. This diversity is differently managed according to farmers; between collectors and selectors, good conservators are identified thanks to two diversity indexes, the number of cultivars and the function Shannon-Wiener.

WHY SUCH A DIVERSITY ?

Cultivar portfolios composed by each farmer are heterogeneous. We have to underline the reasons that lead the farmer to select a small group of common taros (**rov**, **marêwasalav**, **lantar**, **wasanto**, **vinmötöl** and **wêvê**) by studying their agronomic performances and by understanding how they respond to precise culinary preparations. The fact that farmers conserve marginal and rare cultivars will lead us to overcome the alimentary value of the taro, also the bearer of a social identity.

Efficient taros

Villagers are much more sensitive to agronomic efficiencies of their cultivars than they generally admit because of the 'custom' make up. **Rov**, the most famous taro on the island, represents 24% of all the sampled taros on pondfields. It is a cultivar that is the best adapted to the irrigation by alternation. **Marêwasalav** (19%) is selected for its long corm growing in six months instead of twelve for the others. **Vinmötöl** (8%), **wêvê** (6%) and **wasanto** (45% of taros counted in rivers) are well-known for their big corm. Thus, among the six common taros, five are selected for their agrosystem adaptation, for their precocity or for their yield.

Used taros in daily food

Taro is the staple food of Vêuboso dwellers (1,9 kg/person/day)⁸. Corms are the most frequently boiled in water accompanied by island cabbage (*Abelmoschus manihot*). Taros can also be cooked in coconut milk (**wôrqarqar**) or mixed with grated coconut albumen (**bigtöw**). All the cultivars can be boiled even if the strong ones are preferred in spite of a longer cooking time (the dry matter content being higher). However, elderly without teeth will choose soft corms. If over boiled, taros are doughy and are described by the term **¼êditdat**. While hunting wild pigs in the forest or working in taro paddy fields, taros are roasted (**tun**) or cooked in bamboo (**bônësnës**). Nine dry taros (**mamas**) not too strong, not too soft, have been selected for their roasting qualities as quick to cook and tender to eat (**mako**, **marêwasalav**, **marêwasalav mamê**, **qiatgôl**, **siritimiat**, **titiritowetam**, **tortor**, **vinmötöl** and **wederebiliag**).

More occasionally, to mark particular days such as Saturday morning gatherings, a visitor arrival or departure and any kind of familial feast, taros will be prepared in nalot or grated in laplap. The nalot (**löt**), that the Banks inhabitants are famous for, is a pudding principally prepared with taros. Tubers are firstly baked or boiled (for commodity reasons), than peeled, before being mashed on a flat ovoid wooden dish (**tabê**) with a hard wooden stick (**vötulöt**) especially devoted to this preparation. When tubers are transformed in compact and elastic dough, this one is flatten with a coconut shell portion. The nalot is then cut with special carved knife (**meteges**) previously reserved to socially distinguished men. A good nalot is an elastic pudding made with strong taros said **ta¾a¾al** (high dry matter content) such as **rov** and **lökreg**. To facilitate the dough work, these cultivars are mixed with softer ones like **lantar**. **Rov** is anyway preferred to **lökreg** because of its strong texture; it has a smell and a flavour that please the lovers of nalot. Taros cultivated in pondfields are preferentially chosen to be transformed in nalot because their texture is strongest but also because of the social value of that complex agricultural system.

⁸ Weight measures of all the taros eaten by one household of 7 persons for 16 days.

The laplap, another dish made in Vanuatu, is prepared by grating raw tubers or fruits in laplap leaves (*Heliconia indica*) and by baking them in a stone oven. In Vanua Lava, the taro laplap does not have the same attractiveness as in the rest of Vanuatu. To avoid irritations caused by calcium oxalate particles while grating corms on tree fern (*Cyathea spp.*), soft taros or **mölumlum** (high water content) are used for laplap. Ten cultivars (**lantar malgias, lantar lamkör, relenman, sarê, sesta^{3/4}, suwbê, wakata mamê, wamal, wasanto, wasanto mamê, wêvê** and **wotliev**) fill up these conditions in particular if they are planted in rivers or simple flooding, as they are filled with water.

Thus in Vétuboso, a great diversity of dishes is prepared with only two ingredients: coconut and taro. Nuances in between preparations are due to side dishes (coconut fresh milk, transformed in a white cream or in red grains, or also nangae (*Canarium spp.*) and bush nut (*Barringtonia edulis*) grated dry or green but also depending on the cultivar choice and their agricultural modalities.

Taros for celebrations, ceremonies and magic

The presence of taro, either baked or as nalot is essential for all the ceremonies or great gatherings. When a family wants to celebrate an important event, the friends and relatives who are invited bring raw or cooked corms to contribute. However, guests cannot offer all cultivars. For instance, **marêwasalav** is a taro which corm reaches in six months the size that other cultivars need ten months to reach. Nevertheless, the farmer needs to wait until ten months for the corm to have a “real” taro-taste and not a “yam-taste”. If a guest brings a **marêwasalav** taro to a celebration, the host will suspect the corm to be immature as its size is not relevant. Being very easy to cultivate, **marêwasalav** will certainly be supplied in large quantities by the host, because it becomes soft when baked. Thus, guests have to bring either more rare or better (i.e. harder) taros to diversify gustative pleasures.

During those celebrations, some nalot are more valuable than others. Thus, the one named **lötnerere^{3/4}**, made with taros and dry nangae is a must. Its presence is necessary but other kind of nalot, chosen according to taste and family habits can be added.

In ancient times, when men were still distinguished in grade-hierarchies, two cultivars named **tortor** and **mako** were reserved for men. Men isolated in the Men’s House, who wanted to take the first grade in the Soq-hierarchy, roasted these cultivars. When isolation-time ended, the initiated man would prepare a nalot on a small size nalot dish, with a stick smaller than the normal size. Ingesting the nalot would then marks the grade-taking in the **Soq** hierarchy, thus testifying a social construction of the initiated man. The ingested nalot for this circumstance is controversial. Present custom chiefs say it is a **lötnerere^{3/4}** nalot, made with boiled taros and dry nangae. On the other hand, an older man who has lived during the period when this institution still existed, says that a **wagaretow** nalot made with roasted taros and dry bush nuts was used for such an occasion. In the first case, the nalot is elastic as prepared with strong taros like **rov** and in the second case, the choice of soft taros holding a small amount of water gives a soft consistency looked for by elderly people with no teeth. It can be underlined that cultivars used in the **wagaretow** nalot are all ancient taros quoted in custom stories either because they were brought by a mythical hero (**Wômôdô** or **Biliag**), or because they are considered by everyone in the village as the first taros of the island.

Some cultivars, now forgotten by a large part of the village’s population, as they are not used anymore, could have a magical power. In ancient times, a black magic bewitched man would have to eat a raw tuber of a taro named **dogon**, for his family to know his survival chances if he ate it without throwing it up, he would survive to its aggression but in the opposite he would die.

Thus, the social life constantly needs the supply of taros and nalot adapted to every circumstance. Some cultivars are preferred for celebrations, ceremonials and magic for their quality but also for the value they are granted for.

A heritage of taros

78,4% of the 96 cultivars, even if comparatively less represented, are the mainstay of the village diversity and of the island. It is thus essential to understand why farmers conserve these cultivars that, according to their speech, are not particularly efficient or pleasant to eat. Rare taros selected by the twelve farmers are either introduced from another island (25%), or are found in a fallow pond (25%), or are linked to a founder myth (22.5%), or are marked by a morphological or agronomic characteristic (12.5%). Farmers conserve introduced taros to distinguish them with taros bearing unusual appearance.

In fact if a man, or more rarely a woman, gives his name to a new taro that he or she has discovered in a fallow pond, his descendants will conserve it as an heritage. In Vanuatu, we are not talking about property rights but about land use. An individual appropriates what he plants and not the soil that nourishes the crops. The new taro holds the seal of its discoverer. The farmer will plant it, multiply it and distribute it with attention like his 'invention' as the amplitude of the dispersion will condition his renown while alive or after his death.

Finally, farmers like to preserve cultivars which names appear in founder myths (**ta³evsos**, **bulalef**, **burmatan**, **qiatgôl** and **qiatqet**) or other 'custom' stories (**l¹ôvôl**, **rêgêt**, **wasê**, **wemenriver** and **wederebiliag**). The taro becomes an illustration, for lack of writings, of a story that a father will tell with pride to his children.

The taro, through its imagery, is thus a travel souvenir, a parent inheritance or a story illustration.

CONCLUSION

This "civilisation of taro" has created an incredible diversity of agrarian landscapes (pondfields, organized rivers and swamps) and cultivars. Between collectors and selectors, the curators are identified by analysing their strategy of choice and of genetic material risk management thanks to two indicators of diversity : the number of cultivars and the function Shannon-Wiener. The 96 cultivars quoted on the west coast of Vanua Lava have been selected for their efficiency, their adaptation to culinary requirements but also for the social value given by the story of their origin. As in Ambae, Maewo (Bonnemaison, 1974a, 1974b), Pentecost (Walter, pers. comm., 2003) and Tanna (Bonnemaison, 1987), taros are described in function of their magical, customary or culinary uses, and social heritage. This distinction does not imply a hierarchical classification as it seems that the election of the two best taros, **rov** and **lantar**, are more a reflection of the valorisation of a dish, the nalot.

The taro paddy fields, the plant and its transformation are indissociable for west coast Vanua Lava inhabitants. The strongest taros, needed for the nalot, are cultivars cultivated in alternate irrigated pondfields. At the opposite, soft cultivars grated in laplap are preferably grown in continual inundation. We thus need to have a global vision of taro in the social and ecologic environment, the "terroir", to understand what villagers search for at an individual and collective level which combination draws the richness of their cultivar heritage.

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