

New evidence for the genetic and geographical origins of cultivated taro, and names for wild and cultivated taro in Southeast Asia and Oceania

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A recent survey of chloroplast DNA diversity in taro and closely related species provides a partial solution to the problem of how to distinguish natural wild populations from wild populations established by transplantation and other human activities. A new model for the origins of cultivated taro is proposed, and can be related to previous suggestions based on linguistic data. Together, the ethnobotanical and genetic studies raise questions about what kinds of linguistic data are needed to investigate crop origins and dispersal history.

To understand the relationships between crop selection, domestication, dispersal, and language, closer integration of linguistic, cultural, and biological research is needed. How people identify plants, use them, select them, and move them about in landscapes is closely related to behavioural and cultural traditions that are learned through seeing, doing, and language. Plant names are often very descriptive, and the descriptions embodied in plant names are an essential part of the transmission of plant knowledge and the plants themselves.