



Fig. 1 (top left): Taro growing in the water. (Photo by Sinan Lamuran, 2023)

Fig. 2 (top centre): Tending a taro field. (Photo by Sinan Lamuran, 2022)

Fig. 3 (top right): Harvesting taro. (Photo by Syaman Lamuran, 2015)

Fig. 4 (bottom left): Taros and the new boat. (Photo by Syaman Lamuran, 2003)

Fig. 5 (bottom right): Sinan Lamuran takes care of her taro field. (Photo by Huei-Min Tsai, 2023)



Taro

Sinan Lamuran

The importance of taro for the Ta-u cannot be overstated. This goes for everyday life as much as for the peaks of ceremonial life. Women put a great deal of work into tending the fields, and into each and every plant. Generations and kin bond in the taro field, in the taro meal, and in the ceremonial sharing of taro. Discontinuing taro cultivation and abandoning fields leads to a loss in Ta-u language and culture. Reclaiming taro cultivation edifies and secures Ta-u language and culture for coming generations.

Taro is an important part of my life. I plant taro, care for taro plants, and tend taro fields. There are many kinds of taro. I keep six kinds of taro in my taro field. These vary. Some can be harvested after nine months, whereas others can be harvested only after two or three years.

My mother took care of the taro field right up until five days before she died. After that, my sister and I took over her fields. Women do most of the work tending taro fields. But men help to clear and make taro fields, to maintain water flows into the fields, and to carry the taro when many roots are harvested for ceremonies and festivities.

Launching a new boat requires massive volumes of taro, which means two to three years of preparation to grow many taro plants, as well as several work days to harvest. Harvesting for festivities includes ceremonial wearing of traditional Ta-u clothes and singing about the taro. The new boat is then filled with taro, and large piles of taro are presented to guests as gifts to celebrate the new boat. Guests, in turn, pay their respect to both the new boat and the quality of the taro gifts, singing praises and giving thanks for the hard work of growing the taro.

Nowadays, some Ta-u use chemical herbicides and pesticides to make taro cultivation less labour-intensive. The invasive 'apple snail' [*Pomacea canaliculata*] has reached Pongso no Ta-u, causing us to make the difficult choice between use of pesticides or additional manual work to minimise their damage. I do not use chemicals. These pollute the soil, water, and taro roots. When others use chemicals, we talk with them and ask them to discontinue use for the benefit of our common environment.

Food imports of rice, bread, and noodles have largely displaced taro and yams. These new staples do not only provision the large influx of tourists, but are also used for school meals and, increasingly, in Ta-u households.

Taro fields are abandoned as food is purchased from grocery stores and as young Ta-u women move to Taiwan. Forests take over the areas of abandoned fields.

Taro and yams are not attractive for many young people, who have become used to other foods. Some tourists seeking a genuine experience of the island wish to buy taro and dried flying fish. During tourist season, some families sell these to the grocery stores, or from stands adjacent to the grocery stores, the harbour, and the airport. However, most taro is not for sale on markets but is rather reserved for one's own family meals, for ceremonial festivities, and to share with neighbours.

When young mothers do not plant taro, their daughters will not plant, and knowledge about the plant gets lost. Because so little taro is grown, it sometimes has to be imported for a big festival. The guests of the festival are not able to sing their blessings of the taro, as they do not know who planted and cared for it, nor where it grew. In this way, abandoning taro fields leads to loss of culture. Gradually, taro cultivation is becoming as threatened as our language, our boats, and other aspects of our heritage. Nonetheless, taro continues to be important for the Ta-u.

When I was in my 30s, I had a great sense of achievement from planting taro. I was

very happy to see my wet-field taro grow beautifully and robustly. Every time I came back from the taro fields in the evening, I would first go to my mother's house in Imourud (Red Head Village) and tell her what I did for the day. My mother listened to me happily as she brought out a cooked dinner for me to eat and told me how her mother had surrounded herself with the same crops. So, when I harvested the taro and saw the happy expression on my mother's face when I gave it to her, the fatigue of the day completely disappeared without a trace. Words cannot describe my mother's appearance, but it gave me a great sense of accomplishment.

Our mother conveyed her happiness to all of her children. Consequently, we diligently planted taro and sweet potatoes, and in the autumn we planted vegetables. The vegetables my mother planted were so beautiful! She had no formal education, but she learned from nature and did very well with the crops on her land. I really felt happy to be a farmer. In the dry fields, in addition to sweet potatoes and taros, I also planted papayas, bananas, pumpkins, pineapples, and other kinds of food plants.

After my mother passed away, my mood was affected and I seldom went to the field to work. Before, I was very happy with the harvest of whatever I planted, but after my mother left, I only planted but did not harvest. Without having someone to harvest for, I felt empty, but I keep farming and do not give up.

Planting and tending taro makes me happy. This keeps me in touch with my mother's spirit. I take care of taro, as it is central to our culture and way of life. This is why I will continue to plant and care for taro.

Sinan Lamuran lives in Iratay. At age 15, she left home for an education on Taiwan. After high school, she attended a seminary in Hualien, returning to Orchid Island after graduation. She worked for the international charity World Vision, aiding Ta-u communities. As a broadcaster for Orchid Island Radio Station, she promoted the linguistic heritage of her people. She now operates a B&B and takes care of her taro fields. Her passion for traditional farming stays strong alongside her community dedication. Email: sinanlamuran@gmail.com

