

Socio-Political Association of Taro as a food crop with Bura Namsang Village Nagaland, India

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Abstract

Agricultural development has been a major breakthrough in human civilization as such the development and inculcation of different cultivars species introduced to mankind, and in the process has immense impact in socio-political and economic life from a hunter-gatherer to a settled life. The introduction of taro farming was game changing for many societies around the globe, and as such the population of Bura Namsang in Longleng district of Nagaland India shares close affinity with taro farming in their socio-political and economic life which needs worth discussion in this paper through the lenses of cultivation, marriage, death, tribute and economic ties garnered around their life.

Keywords: Taro, bura namsang, *Ahom tong*, *Ung*, cultivate

Introduction

The birth of human civilization and its association with food culture has been a continuing practice since the hunter-gatherer times and is a record breaking testimony of agricultural development. Archaeological evidences indicated agricultural development around 10,000 BP or more though it is difficult to pin down the genesis. Yet it did develop at multiple times in multiple places before the invention of writing. Research has revealed crops such as wheat, barley, peas, lentils, chicken pea as one of the earliest crop associated with human society. Besides the mentioned ones, taro (*Colocasia esculenta* sp.)

belonging to a member of the Araceae family, is one of the important tuber crops which has been grown by farmers and is regarded as a widely distributed cultivable root crop and used as vegetable for their corm, petioles and leaves (Mezhii et al., 2017). It appears to be a liable and one of the oldest food crops for man's subsistence pattern due to its nutritional capacity.

The history of this crop as per linguistic research done over the years reveal the mention of name *Arum*, *Kolokasia* in ancient literatures of Greek and Latin belonging to 3rd Century BC or

earlier. This tuberous crop is associated with civilization of Australia, Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea, (Grimaldi et al., 2018). The presence of taro in ancient Chinese text dates to 200 BC and Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* 1st c. AD (Grimaldi et al., 2018), while the earliest evidences of taro in man's subsistence pattern historically documented thus far comes from an archaeological excavation at Solomon Island in Kilu cave site dating to 28,000 BP and 20,000 BP at Kuk swamp Archaeological site in West Highland provinces of Papua New Guinea (PNG); uncovered prehistoric stone tools on which likely taro starch grains and calcium oxalate crystals were observed, suggested taro as the main candidate for early use and cultivation, thus supporting the view that taro played an important part in early stages of agricultural development. It is difficult to trace the genesis of taro but recent research have attempted to discuss on its origin and dispersal around the globe through chloroplast DNA analysis, karyological investigation and linguistic research drawing that distinctive gene pools have been identified in Nepal, Southeast Asia and the Pacific based on the research conducted on vernacular names applied to taro in Indo-pacific (Grimaldi, 2016). On the other, hand, identification of starch

grains from taro and yams in dental calculus and food processing tools from the Dingsishan sites of Huiyaotian and Liyupo in southern East Asia dating to c. 9030–6741 BP concluded that the harvesting and processing of these dietary staples supported an Early Holocene population increase in southern East Asia, before the spread of rice and millet farming (Wang et al., 2024). Taro was not only regarded as a stable crop for cultures associated with it such as the Polynesian Island, South East Asian but played an important role towards its historical and social set up. For instance in Hawaii, taro / *kalo* sp. such as *Lehua* and *Pi'i ali'i* were reserved to be eaten only by the chiefs (*ali'i*) (Cho et al., 2007). In Austral Island of East Polynesia, there are evidence of wars fought between people of Rurutu, Tubuai and Rapa for acquisition of land for taro cultivation as one of the main duty of chiefs was to provide the entire population with surplus food. In India, taro research is scanty and at the same time qualitative evaluation on local consumption of taro species as well as the genetic studies have been conducted that has led to realization of taro as a super-crop consumed by locals of Eastern and Southern India but on the contrary, taro is less favored in contrast to rice, wheat, maize and potato and that there is an

immediate need to develop taro as a commercial cultivar (Sikdar et al., 2015). Northeast India serves as a home to many tribal communities with rich cultural and traditional knowledge system. Here taro attains a superior position among its inhabitants, cultivated in most part of the region as a mixed crop or mono crop. Considered as a staple food after rice, it is a very old crop cultivated generation after generation and hence becoming a part of the people's life (Thirugnanavel et al., 2015).

The state of Nagaland covering an area of 16527 km² is home to many Naga tribal communities and rich in biodiversity. Being rich in non-traditional and underutilized horticultural crops, farmers can meet their household needs like food, nutrition, medicine and general livelihood balancing. Among such crops, colocasia sp or taro is one of the important crops grown by farmers and considered as an important crop after rice (Mezhii et al., 2017).

Area of study

The village of Bura Namsang which falls under the district of Longleng formed in 2004 and a neighbour of Mon District in Nagaland, India where the population exhibits tattoos on their bodies except faces,

where *jhum* cultivation is in vogue like the rest of the other tribes of Nagaland and taro cultivation holds a very important place all over the Phom area. Akin to the Konyaks, the Phoms also practise a village polity where the *Ung* is considered as the head of the village with shared powers between the *Ung* and the council. *Namchung* as it was known earlier, had been derived after the first settlers who sowed first sesame seeds to ward-off evil spirits, as the name *Nam* in their native tongue means sesame, and *Chung* would mean place or site. So the name *Namchung* was used until years later, when it came to be known as Bura Namsang. The village of Bura Namsang which shares a boundary with Upper Assam state region shares very old socio-economic and political ties with *Ahoms* as oral narratives speaks of Gadadhar Singha once stayed in Bura Namsang Village. The village was governed through the *Ung* and his council of advisors for village administration, but the modern system of village administration has taken over the old system and *Ung* no longer exists.

Method of acquiring data

Since Nagas in common do not have a written script so much of data collection for this working paper was done on:

- a) In-depth interviews for sayings, folksongs, oral narratives in association to taro which was conducted personally with different individuals, families and groups.
- b) Observation on the process of harvest and storage for the understanding of taro and its centric values among the population of the said village. However the names of the interviewees are kept in silence due to ethical reasons.
- c) Secondary data collected through literary works in the form of journal articles and paper publications related to taro studies from around the globe.

Cultivation and harvest

Taro among Bura Namsang villagers has been their lifeline since time immemorial, and till now the people cannot recollect when they initially got associated with the crop and there is no trace of its origin except in their lullaby and seed sowing songs where it is mentioned. These days, it is most sought after by all the families in the community. The association of this crop is seen in a bigger prospect as we can find in their relation with Ahoms as well as in ritual practices leading to its cultivation; though, after the arrival of Christianity, the ritual practices associated with taro cultivation have stopped. But till date, the people follow in some manner when it comes to planting, cultivation and

harvesting. It serves as a food security when other crops fails.

Jhum cultivation being the main kind, with mixed cropping pattern, the village is surrounded by cultivable lands where it will be cultivated on a rotational basis as a particular plot of land will be cultivated for two years as far as the farmers knowledge was concern, and took twelve years to complete a rotation. Taro was sowed first after clearing and burning of cultivable track of land in the month of February and March in the entire site followed by ginger, chillies, rice and the likes. Taro planting was done by the first seed sower, who after sacrificing a rooster in the path leading to the *Jhum* field sites, had observed *genna*. No one was allowed to plant taro before the first seed sower.

The sowing / planting of taro was associated with peer group and relatives helping out where melodious chanting of songs in relation to crop was sang which stated, “*let the blessing be like the sands of rivers around the village and harvest be rich so much so that we can feed the people in the plains.*” In the months leading to clearing of weeds, the workers in the field of both able gender would sing a competitive song which runs “*our hands are strong enough to remove*

these naughty weeds today itself” with tools such as scrappers, hoe and a machete by those who can afford but mostly cleared by bare hands with proper work distribution. At harvest, starting from the months of November the same song cited above was sang and chanted to ensure a rich harvest, and then the biggest corm from every household was given to the *Ung*, who in turn would appoint a priest in the village

to perform a ritual to the stone god situated at the apex of *Ayapang* Morung for thanksgiving ritual. After this, the entire village will start consuming its corm.

The table below represents different cultivar species of taro cultivated at Bura Namsang for reference with local names (Table 1, page number 5):

Sl. No.	Local Name	Area of Planting
1	Adi Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
2	Ahom Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
3	Aphak Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
4	Aüshi Tong	Surrounding, as a boundary marker and for protection of the field.
5	Aüshi Shitem Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
6	Mükshang Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
7	Mongmjn Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
8	Mihnyü Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
9	Nyüta Lokjang Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
10	Shok Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops
11	Tongnyak	Entire cultivable land with other crops
12	Zemok Tong	Entire cultivable land with other crops

Table 1

Socio-political context

Socially, Bura Namsang villagers followed a patriarchal society with strict *Morung* system consisting of four in number viz. *Ayah Bang*, *Ahyu Bang*, *Monyiu Bang* and *Lanching Bang*. Each of these *Morungs* were made up of three or four clans and the young adult males starting from 14 years and above mostly spend their time at the *Morung* consisting of age groups in the *Morung* set up with elders from the clans and slept there until he got married. Irrespective of their clan, age group was a significant marker for work distribution and learning of life's ways as *Morungs* were considered to be the only learning institution back then all over Naga Hills. On the contrary, girls would help their mothers in the household chores which formed the basis of learning. The population till date consists of a mixture of two branches of migrants namely those coming from *Yingyishang* (the place of birth / origin of Phom tribe as oral narratives speak) called as the *Ying* and those coming from *Long* also addressed as *Long*.

Bura Namsang people do share a close association with taro as it brought closeness in terms of seedling sharing, exchange of corms between the families in the village and beyond, as this process of exchange today, has led to the

of a particular cultivar species popularly known in Phom area as *B Namsang* species although the population of Bura Namsang villagers calls it *Ahom tong*. Being closer to Assam, Namsang population since Gadadhar Singha and even before have been going down to places like Geleki and Nazira in Sivasagar District of Assam today, for trade where informants from Geleki speaks about how people of Bura Namsang village would come down to the plains with Ginger, Chilli, Pumpkin and *Piperaceae* (*Tamol Pata* as the locals uses for the term) for trade and would go back buying dry fish and salt along with other essentials. It was through this interaction that the oral narratives speak about *Ahom Tong* (Figure 1, page number 7) natively called by the Bura Namsang population, and was given as a gift for cultivation by the Assamese saying that the particular species would be appropriate for their cultivation after which the species *Ahom Tong* came to be cultivated among the people on a wider perspective. The crop, taro has become closely associated with the village that it finds place in a lullaby entitled *Naii* where a father would carry his son on his back and sing, “*My son is strong and tough like the pumpkin but other's children are like the steamed taro petiole so soft and and slim.*”

It was also the duty of a father to at least send off his daughter with few taro seedlings after marriage to be planted at the new family along with other gifts such as carry basket, machete, hoe, scrapper and ornaments which were a must.



Figure 1: Ahom tong

Taro and Death

Taro cuisine prepared would be served to a deceased man's skull brought home from the grave yard before its final burial where it was placed at the base of the main post, big in size, inside the house after thorough cleaning and decoration circled by small pebbles and a bamboo makeshift pitcher-like item with two narrow ended openings; which was a belief among the people that the spirit of the deceased man would carry it to the land of death and while passing the gates, would offer water to the guards in the said bamboo

makeshift pitcher-like item and when the guardians are confused of how to drink the water, and figuring out the technique, the deceased spirit would slip through the gates and enter the land of death without any difficulties. As for the families they would keep feeding the skull in the living world with taro corm curry known as *tong hao* for about a month after which the eldest lady of the clan would carry the skull on a carry basket with procession in the village from one end to the other and will dispose the skull in a rock curved cemetery to be covered by a stone slab or lid made of stone material. Today the cemetery no longer exists due to arrival of Christianity and the people have done away with such burial practices.

Politics

On the other Bura Namsang population never exchanged or shared taro for seedlings or consumption with any warring villages around their periphery or in the distance, and never did they go to such villages to buy or borrow taro or anything essential to life, and never did they maintain any marriage alliance. To the people, taro corms served as a source of paying tribute to the *Ung* accompanied by administrative boards. Politically, it had played a role for peace and safeguarding the

village as oral narratives speak about a distant village (*Name of the opposing village will not be mentioned due to ethical reasons*) giving up their plans to attack Bura Namsang village when a leader of the opposing village told the gatherings to swallow *Ahom Tong* at one go which became impossible leading to abandoning the plan of invading Bura Namsang.

Discussion

Taro was an essential item of social bond as it led to working gangs in the form of families and relatives along with peers to come together, especially in times of planting, weed clearing and harvest which was a social obligation among the people. It was also a crop of getting to know the strength and valour of a young man who could be vying and looking for a marriageable partner for life while working together in peer groups in the field. The display of strength and valour by a man in singing and clearing of weeds and harvest would be enough to convince the owners who sought to find a suitable man for their daughters of marriageable age. This would then bring together two distant families as one through marriage alliance. As for economical aspects, the villagers went down to the plains of its neighbours like Assam and Naganimora area for trade. This is how *Ahom Tong* and

other species of taro have dispersed to nearby Konyak areas and also made a livelihood for the Namsang population. Rich harvest of taro would mean wealth as its exchange bought rice, tools and other basic needs. It had religious importance as rooster would be sacrificed before planting, and after harvest, the biggest corm would be offered to their god, after which the entire population would start consuming in their homes making taro corm as a potent item for offering in post harvest period and a source of feeding the death before its secondary burial. It was a potent source of protection for the villagers to prevent invasion as just the name of the particular species, *Ahom tong* prevented invasion of the village. Planting *Aüshi Tong* surrounding cultivable land holds certain belief among the society as it was generally believed that this species would protect the crops from wild boar as the morphology of leaves was rough and would cause itching to the animals upon contact.

It is difficult to pinpoint the origin and time of where and when the population came into contact with the crop, as there were no written evidences or markers to indicate its association of time and this population like the rest of the Nagas have in common, no written records

except the reliance on oral tradition. It can be assumed that tracing the roots of taro association with the population can only be related without a specific time frame through oral narration in fragments, their agricultural practices, disposal of death, folklores, phrases and songs associated with their daily lives, marriages. There is also the added factor of scientific analysis of pollen and phytoliths, through which a clear time frame can be ascertained like those of the studies conducted in Polynesian and Southeast Asian areas. However, through oral

narrative, we can assume that the crop has been in association with the population since or even before their migration and settlement in the present site as they speak of food security provided by taro which was easier to carry, and could sustain hunger in long travels like the Hawaiians and their association with Poi prepared for food security in times of voyages. So, hypothetically it can be asserted that taro can be a cultural identity of the population, and a source of connection with the neighbours in terms of economic, social and political relations.

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