

# 2 *Where did suli come from?*

## *A study of the words connected to taro plants in Oceanic languages*

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### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 Aim

Proto Oceanic (POc) vocabulary as currently reconstructed contains several forms for taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) as summarised in Ross (1996) and Tryon (1994). However, the Wailevu communalect of Fijian (hereafter WL) has a term *suli* for taro, which is a reflex of none of these forms, but of POc *\*(j,s)uli*, the semantic reconstruction of which is ‘banana or taro sucker, slip, cutting shoot, etc.’<sup>1</sup> According to Geraghty (1983:344), there are other communalects spoken on Kadavu and Vanua Levu which have the form *suli* for taro. In Standard Fijian the term for taro is *dalo* which is a reflex of POc *\*talo(s)* ‘taro, *Colocasia esculenta*’,<sup>2</sup> while *suli(-na)* indicates ‘taro sucker (-POS 3S)’. There are some other languages spoken in the Pacific which also have *suli*-like forms meaning ‘taro’.

In this paper, I will examine the distribution of the reflexes of these two forms, viz., *\*talo(s)* and *\*(j,s)suli*, looking for the source of the term *suli* ‘taro’ in WL. It will be shown that there are several possibilities, but the most likely explanation is that the WL term has undergone independent semantic innovation from the reconstructed POc meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross (1996) reconstructed the Proto Oceanic form as *\*(s,j)uli(q)*, keeping the final consonant of Blust’s (1972) PAN form *\*suliq* ‘tendrill, sucker’. However Ross (pers. comm.) agrees that there is no evidence for the retention of the final *\*-q* in Oceanic languages.

<sup>2</sup> Reconstruction by Ross (1996).

## 1.2 Assumptions and method

There are three possible sources for the WL form *suli* 'taro':

- (i) The form was borrowed along with the introduction of a new kind of taro.
- (ii) The form is the result of an independent semantic development from tendril to taro in different areas in the Pacific.
- (iii) The form is a reflex of a different protoform meaning 'a specific kind of taro'.

To evaluate these possibilities, I will examine the distribution and regularity of the reflexes in §2 and §3, taking into account also the distribution of the taro plant in the Pacific area.

## 2 Distribution of PAn \**suliq*

The POC form \*(*j,s*)*uli* is ascribed to Proto Austronesian (PAn), where it is reconstructed as \**suliq* with the meaning 'tendrill, sucker' (Blust 1972). Its reflexes, or reflex-like forms are found all over the Pacific area.

In §2.1, I will provide a list of reconstructed reflexes of PAn \**suliq* (Table 1) and a list of *suli*-like forms which indicate 'taro' (Table 2). I will discuss formal and semantic aspects of these forms in §2.2 and §2.3.

### 2.1 Lists of the forms

(1) Reconstructed forms.

**Table 1:** \*(*j,s*)*suli* and other reconstructed forms<sup>3</sup>

	Form	Meaning	Source
PAn	* <i>suliq</i>	'runner, sucker, shoot'	Blust (1972)
POc	*( <i>sj</i> ) <i>uli</i> <sup>4</sup>	'banana or taro sucker, slip, cutting shoot (i.e. propagation material)'	Ross (1988)
PPn	* <i>suli</i>	'young shoot'	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PEO	* <i>juli-</i>	'(banana, taro) sucker'	Geraghty (1983)

(2) List of the *suli*-like forms meaning 'taro'.

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used in the tables are:

Adm	Admiralty Is.	PPn	Proto Polynesian
CP	Central Pacific	PPT	Proto Papuan Tip
MM	Meso-Melanesian	PT	Papuan Tip
NCV	North Central Vanuatu	SES	South-East Solomonian
NNG	North New Guinea	SV	South Vanuatu
PEO	Proto Eastern-Oceanic	WMP	Western Malayo-Polynesian
PN	Polynesia		

<sup>4</sup> Blust (1972:27) reconstructed the POC forms as \**suli* 'shoot, sucker (of banana or taro)'.

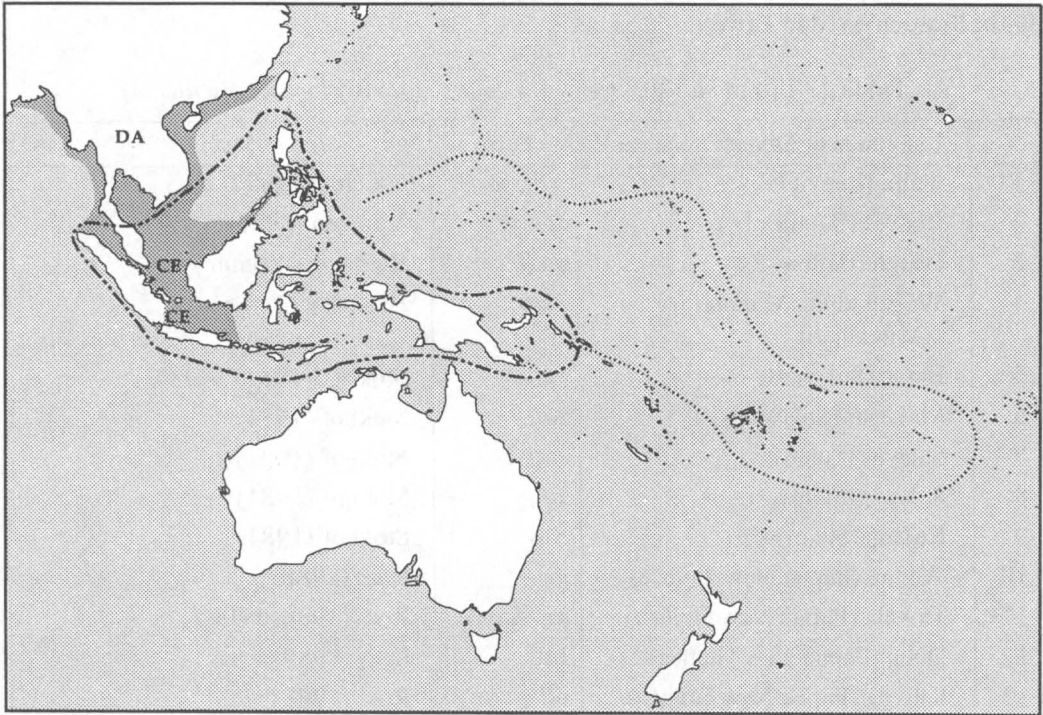
Table 2 is a list of the languages which have *suli*-like forms which mean 'taro' (*Colocasia esculenta*). The number at the beginning of each language indicates the reference to the location on Map 1 over.

**Table 2:** List of *suli*-like terms for generic taro (*Colocasia Esculenta*)

	Language or Dialect (location)	Form	Source
1	Yami (Lanyu Is .)	<i>suli, sōri</i> <sup>5</sup>	Tsuchida (1977)
2	Itbayat (Batanes Is.)	<i>solì</i>	Yamada (1973)
3	Ivatan (Batanes Is.)	<i>sudì</i>	Reid (pers. comm.)
4	W. Bukidnon Manobo (Mindanao)	<i>sulì</i>	Blust (1972)
5	Baree (Sulawesi)	<i>sulì</i>	Stokhof (1981)
6	Makasar (Sulawesi)	<i>sulì</i>	Stokhof (1981)
7	Salayar (Sulawesi)	<i>sulì</i>	Stokhof (1981)
8	Salayar (Sulawesi)	<i>sulì</i>	Stokhof (1981)
9	Kajang (Sulawesi)	<i>sulì</i>	Stokhof (1981)
10	Wedau (Papua New Guinea)	<i>urì</i>	Ross (1988)
11	Tawala (Papua New Guinea)	<i>urì/hurì</i> <sup>6</sup>	Ross (1988, 1996)
12	Dobu (Papua New Guinea)	<i>sulì</i>	Ross (1988)
13	Kilivila (Papua New Guinea)	<i>ulì</i>	Ross (1988)
14	Nehan (Papua New Guinea)	<i>hon</i>	Ross (1996)
15	Chamorro (Guam)	<i>sunì</i>	Topping, Ogo & Dungca (1975)
16	Trukese (Micronesia)	<i>ónì</i>	Goodenough & Sugita (1990)
17	Sa'a (1) (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
18	Sa'a (2) (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
19	Oroha (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
20	Ulawa (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
21	Uki Ni Masi (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
22	Haununu (Solomons)	<i>aarol/hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
23	Rawo (Solomons)	<i>hulì</i>	Tryon & Hackman (1983)
24	Wailevu (Kadavu, Fiji)	<i>sulì</i>	Kikusawa (fieldnotes); Geraghty (1983)

<sup>5</sup> With the meaning 'swamp taro'.

<sup>6</sup> The forms are *urì* in Ross (1988); *hurì* in Ross (n.d.).



Approximate area of origin of:

CE *Colocasia esculenta*

DA *Dioscorea alata*

■ Approximate extent of Sundaland at sea level - 100m

--- Distribution of wild *Cyrtosperma* related to *C. chamissonis*

..... Main zone of cultivation of *C. chamissonis*

**Map 1:** The distribution of wild *Cyrtosperma* and the main zone of cultivation of *Cyrtosperma*

(Figure 6.1 in Bellwood 1978, modified)

## 2.2 Formal aspects of the *suli*-like terms

- (1) Among these forms, those in the Western Malayo-Polynesian languages show regular sound correspondences while those in Oceanic languages (10 to 23 in Table 2) show irregular correspondences. The Fiji forms show regular correspondences.
- (2) The Papuan Tip data, viz., 10–13 (Table 3), are from Ross (1988:75) where they are given as reflexes of the POc form *\*(s)juli(q)*, but with a footnote which claims that they are “possibly not cognate[s], in view of semantic difference[s]”. Except for the term *uni/huni* in Tawala, each of these forms shows some irregularity in the consonants according to the table of sound correspondences in the same source (Ross 1988:198–200, 204, 219–221).

**Table 3:** Sound correspondences in Papua New Guinean languages

	Language	Forms				
	POc	*(j,s)uli	*j	*s, *c		*l
	PPT	*(s,z)uli	*j	*s (fortis)	*s (lenis)	*l
10	Wedau	uri	t, d	ɣ	∅	n; ∅ / _i
11	Tawala	(h)uni	d	g	h, ∅	n
12	Dobu	suli	d	s	s	n; ∅ / _i; l_ *#
13	Kilivila	uli	d, s	l	s	l; ∅ / _i
14	Nehan	hon	–	s	h	l

(3) All the forms found in the Solomon Islands (17–23) show irregular sound correspondences as shown in Table 4. Since both of the consonants in each form show unexpected reflexes in every language and the forms are identical throughout the languages, I assume that these forms were possibly borrowed recently from (an)other language(s) and have spread over the area, but the source is hard to determine at this point.

**Table 4:** Sound correspondences in Solomon Island languages

	Language	Form for 'taro'		
	POc	*(j,s)uli	*s	*l
17	Sa'a (1)	hui	t, s <sup>7</sup>	l
18	Sa'a (2)	hui	t, s	l
19	Oroha	hui	t, s	r
20	Ulawa	hui	t, s	l
21	Uki ni Masi	hui	t, s	l
22	Haununu	hui	t, s	r
23	Rawo	hui	t, s	r

Another possibility is that these forms have all descended from a single protoform which was different from \*suli but considerably resembled it, and that this second form has been the one that has been reflected as huli in the modern languages. However, if this is true, it is expected that the reflexes would have different forms after having undergone certain historical changes in each language, while what we actually find is that all of these languages share an identical form. Therefore, this is unlikely.

(4) The following information and comments may prompt further study. The numbers after language names refer to Table 2.

(a) Itbayat (2) had some contact with Yami (1) (Yamada 1973)

(b) Ivatan (3) and Yami (1) are considered to be closely related (Reid 1966:1)

<sup>7</sup> Reflexes of POc \*s are /s/ before high vowels, /t/ elsewhere.

- (c) Salayar (7) and Salayar (8) have identical names, but are spoken in different places.
- (d) The forms in languages spoken in Papua New Guinea (10–13) and in North-West Solomon Islands (14) show irregular sound correspondences except for Tawala (11) as discussed in point (2) above.
- (e) For Chamorro (15), whether the sound correspondences are regular or not has not been clarified yet.
- (f) The form in Trukese (16) appears to be cognate on the surface. However, Trukese has a regular reflex, viz., *ini-* ‘shoot, short sucker, runner (as of banana, taro, bamboo)’. Also, the form *óni* itself is irregular with respect to the current phonological system of the language (Sugita pers. comm.).
- (g) All the forms in the Solomon Island languages (17–23) show irregular sound correspondences as discussed in point (3) above.

### 2.3 Semantic aspects of the *suli*-like terms

- (1) The regular reflexes of *\*(s)juli* have a wide variety of meanings including: a kind of banana; domestic banana plant; sprout, sprout of banana or pineapple; sucker from roots of a plant, taro shoot with leaves. Ross reconstructed this protoform with the meaning ‘banana or taro sucker, slip, cutting, shoot (i.e. propagation material)’. Forms which are possible reflexes of *\*suliq* and have meanings other than ‘taro’ are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: List of reflexes of PAN *\*suli*

Area	Language/dialect	Form	Meaning	Source
WMP	Tagalog	suwi <sup>8</sup>	shoot (of bananas, etc.)	Blust (1972)
WMP	Javanese	<i>sulih</i>	successor	Blust (1972)
Adm	Nauna	<i>culi-</i>	taro shoot	Ross (1988)
Adm	Lou	<i>sili-n</i>	sprout: sprout of banana or pineapple	Ross (1996)
Adm	Loniu	<i>cili</i>	sprout, esp. banana shoot	Ross (1996)
NNG	Manam	<i>suli</i>	banana slip, cutting	Ross (1996)
NNG	Gedaged	<i>dul</i>	yam fibre	Ross (1988)
NNG	Bilbil	<i>duli-</i>	yam fibre	Ross (1988)
NNG	Lukep-Pono	<i>suli-</i>	banana shoot	Ross (1996)
NNG	Numbami	<i>duli</i>	taro sucker	Ross 1996)
NNG	Yabem	<i>s̄ili</i>	tendrill, sucker	Ross (1988)
NNG	Tami	<i>jili</i> <sup>9</sup>	taro sucker	Ross (1996)
PT	Motu	<i>dui</i>	banana plant	Ross (1996)
PT	Lala	<i>dungi</i>	banana plant	Ross (1996)
PT	Roro	<i>tsui(ara)</i>	kind of banana	Ross (1996)
PT	Mekeo	<i>ui</i>	domestic banana plant	Ross (1996)

<sup>8</sup> “PAN [=PAN] *\*l* sometimes disappeared in Tagalog. . . Conditions cannot be stated” (Blust 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Ross (1988) gives *juli* ‘tendrill, sucker’.

MM	Roviana	<i>zuli</i>	transplant (seedling)	Ross (1988)
SES	Gela	<i>duli</i>	banana sucker	Ross (1988)
SES	West Guadalcanal	<i>duli</i>	line, kin	Ross (1988)
NCV	Mota	<i>suli(u)</i>	sucker from roots of a plant	Ross (1996)
SV	Anejom	<i>ni-sje-n</i>	taro shoot with leaves	Ross (1996)
CP	Fijian	<i>suli</i>	banana or taro sucker	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Samoa	<i>suli</i>	young shoot (of banana)	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	East Uvean	<i>huli</i>	young shoot	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Tongan	<i>huli</i>	young shoot	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Rarotongan	<i>?uri</i>	young shoot, seed	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Marquesan	<i>hu?i</i>	young shoot, seed	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Easter Island	<i>huri</i>	banana shoot	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Maori	<i>huri</i>	young shoot, seed	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Hawaiian	<i>huli</i>	taro top (used for planting)	Walsh & Biggs (1966)
PN	Nukuoro	<i>uli</i>	a sprout of a plant suitable for planting	Carrol & Soulik (1973)

(2) The meanings of most of these forms are related to either ‘banana’ or ‘taro’ or both, while a few forms relate to ‘yam’, another important root crop in Melanesia. It may be worth examining also terms related to ‘yam’, since the existence of a few forms implies the potential existence of others in languages which have not been described yet.

### 3 Distribution of POC \**talo(s)*

*Talo*-like forms are consistently reconstructed with the meaning ‘taro, *Colocasia esculenta*’. They are found in the Western Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken in the Malay peninsula and in areas towards the East and all over Oceania. The terms seem to be less problematic both formally and semantically than *suli*-like forms. Most of the reflexes show regular sound correspondences and indicate ‘(generic) taro, *Colocasia esculenta*’. The reconstructed forms are as follows.

**Table 6:** \**Talo(s)* and other reconstructed forms

	Form	Meaning	Source
PAn	* <i>tales</i> <sup>10</sup>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Wolff (1994:536)
PMP	* <i>tales</i>	taro, <i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Dempwolf (1938)
POc	* <i>talo(s)</i> <sup>11</sup>	taro, <i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (syn. <i>Colocasia antiquorum</i> )	Ross (1996)
PPn	* <i>talo</i>	taro	Walsh & Biggs (1966)

<sup>10</sup> Although Wolff ascribes this to PAn, it seems to be controversial. For example, Pawley and Ross (1993:443) claim “a group of terms for root crops are attributable to PMP but not to PAn”, including \**tales* ‘taro, *Colocasia* sp.’.

<sup>11</sup> Grace (1969) \**nalo(s)*.

The reflexes are found from Malay in the west to Minahasa and Javanese, and in most Melanesian and Polynesian languages. Although most of them show regular sound correspondences, it should be noted that this somewhat corresponds to the area where English based pidgin languages were, or still are spoken, where the term for 'taro' must have been either *talo* or *taro*.

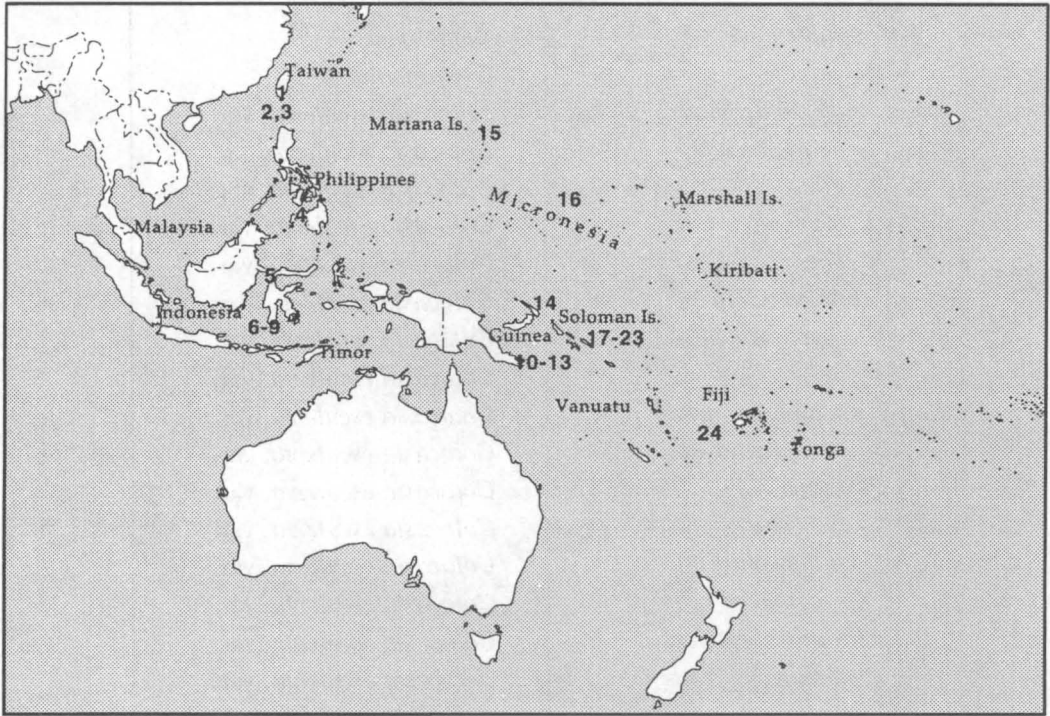
There is not much of a problem semantically, as all of them indicate 'taro, *Colocasia esculenta*' except for Lewo in North Central Vanuatu, where *tale* means 'kind of greater yam' and Kwaio in the South East Solomons, where the reflex means 'a unit of a hundred taro for a feast' (Ross n.d.:10).

#### 4 Discussion

- (1) *Suli*-like forms are found all over the Pacific area. Those meaning 'taro' have been found in the Western Pacific area. In the six areas where Oceanic languages have *suli*-like forms for 'taro', all of the forms show irregular sound correspondences, except for the one in Fijian. At this point, it is impossible to find any relation between the distribution of the *suli*-like forms and that of the *talo*-like forms, and I will just point out that in Haununu, spoken in San Cristobal, both a *talo*-like form and a *suli*-like form occur, viz., *aaro* and *hui*, both meaning 'generic taro'. In this language, the form *aaro* shows regular sound correspondences, while *hui* is irregular.
- (2) From the fact that WL and some other Fiji communalects are the only languages in Oceania where the *suli*-like term shows regular sound correspondences, it is most likely that the meaning 'taro' was an independent semantic innovation. This assumption raises the following questions:
  - (i) How likely is it that the reconstructed meaning could change to '(generic) taro' independently in different areas?
  - (ii) What are the source(s) of the terms which are probably borrowings?
- (3) Regarding question (i) in (2) above, the meanings of the reflexes seem to be divergent at first glance. However, they can be summarised as follows, 'a side part of a plant which newly comes out of the ground; descendant'. From this point of departure, it may be possible to find even more reflexes which have undergone semantic change to meanings other than those already identified.
- (4) Still with regard to question (i) in (2) above, in addition to the term *talo*, Samoan has another term *fua-a-uli* which means 'taro (as a whole)', *fua* meaning 'fruit' and *uli* meaning 'small corm which grows under the sucker (*lauvai*) of a taro plant' (Milner 1966). According to Milner (1966), the form *fua-a-uli* is also a polite word for 'chief'. Samoan also has a reflex of *\*(j,s)uli(q)* showing regular sound correspondences: *suli* 'young shoot (of banana)' (Walsh & Biggs 1966). These facts probably merit further study.
- (5) The distribution of *suli*-like forms meaning 'generic taro' corresponds to the distribution of the wild *Cyrtosperma*, which is related to *Cyrtosperma chamissonis*, as well as to the main zone of cultivation of *Cyrtosperma chamissonis*, according to a summary of the distributions of some major Pacific food plants in Bellwood (1979).



There are no such forms found outside of these zones (Map 1 and 2). The currently reconstructed POc form for 'swamp taro', which may be the closest to what is technically called *Cyrtosperma*, is *\*bulaka* (Blust 1972).



**Map 2:** The distribution of *suli*-like terms indicating '(generic) taro'

- (6) Even though it is likely that the form in Wailevu developed the meaning 'taro' independently, there is a possibility that the protolanguage distinguished different kinds of taro, one of which could have been something like *suli*. More data are needed, and further semantic examination is also required.
- (7) With reference to the borrowings of terms related to taro, I would like to mention the following two points. First, it is only Fijian and Polynesian languages which have a generic term which covers *Colocasia* and (an)other taro-like plant(s). In Western languages a generic term as such does not exist.<sup>12</sup> The other point is that there is a possibility that *talo*-like terms in Western Melanesian languages, and possibly in other languages too, may have been borrowed from Pidgin English, as pointed out by Ross (1988).

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<sup>12</sup> The fact that 'taro' is a more important part of the local diet in Polynesia compared to that in Western areas may have something to do with this (Rehg 1995 pers. comm.).

(8) WL terms for kinds of taro are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7:** Wailevu terms for specific kinds of taro

Form	Notes
<i>via</i>	<i>Alocasia</i>
<i>suli(i)tana</i>	<i>Xantosoma</i>
<i>viaxau</i>	<i>Cyrtosperma</i>
<i>bāvia, dromodromo</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>beranabuxeje</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>iloilo</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>māxutu</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>nayova</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>nereō damu</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>nereō vulavula</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>oriori</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sāmoa damu</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sāmoa vulavula</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sadri</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sexasexa</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sulinivāmau</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>sulizina</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>taulasanisāmoa</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>tōxula</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>vavai</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>volo</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>vorēnavara</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>vujixoto</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>vulalima damudamu</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>vulalima vulavula</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>xuroxece baci</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.
<i>xuroxece vinaxa</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> , var.

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