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Peter J. Matthews

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On the Trail of Taro

An Exploration of Natural and Cultural History

Peter J. Matthews

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Preface

In this volume, I introduce an integrated, ethnobotanical approach to understanding the history of a crop that is possibly one of the oldest cultivated food plants known to humankind. Botanical, ecological, genetic, and ethnographic approaches have been combined in order to investigate the history of taro, *Colocasia esculenta* (L.) Schott. It is only through such an integrated approach that certain key questions can be addressed.

On the Trail of Taro reproduces a range of previous work that has been inaccessible and scattered, though foundational for exploring the history of this crop. In Part 1, the first chapter (newly written), introduces the subject, approach, and my own first steps on the trail of taro. It is followed by two short notes (Matthews 1982a, b) published as the fieldwork began in New Zealand. Parts 2 and 3 reproduce my MSc thesis (Matthews 1984) and PhD thesis (Matthews 1990) respectively. Each has been edited for errors, annotated with footnotes, and partly reorganised in order to provide a more readable sequence. All appendices have been combined into one section, all references have been combined into a single bibliography, and a comprehensive index has been added at the end. The compilation thus covers the years 1982–1990, includes herbarium data gathered during a year of study in Germany (1985), and records initial explorations in New Zealand, Australia, and Papua New Guinea. Although some of the laboratory methods reported are now obsolete, the need to integrate natural and social science approaches through fieldwork, laboratory work, archival research, and literature study is still very current, perhaps more so than ever. Basic historical understanding of useful plants may help to reduce dependence on the dangerously small number of crop species that now support the global food system. To conclude the volume (Part 4), I review recent research and consider future directions for the study, uses, and development of taro.

The target audience for this volume includes students and researchers in the agricultural, biological, and social sciences, and anyone concerned with human relationships with plants, the origins of food, and crop development. The trail of taro is what first brought me to Japan in 1990, a country with a rich history of taro cultivation, research, and utilisation. Since 1990, and while employed at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka (from 1996), I have conducted further fieldwork in Australia, Cook Islands, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Hawaii, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Every garden and every trail is a small monument to human intentions to survive and prosper, to explore and return home. Even as gardens and the trails that lead to them come and go, taro has persisted in pockets of opportunity provided by nature and by human imagination, memory, and neglect. This volume is an invitation to step into the trail of taro, and explore the remarkable history of a plant carried by countless ancestors, in their travels near and far, over thousands of years.

Peter J. Matthews

25th October 2013

Acknowledgements

Part 1

The New Zealand Archaeological Association (NZAA) kindly gave permission for reproduction of the notes shown in Chapters Two and Three. Regarding the latter (Matthews 1982b), I thank Doug Sutton for arrangements and Jane Connor for field assistance. For their advice and generosity, thanks also to Hera Motu (Department of Maori Affairs, Kaikohe), Sydia Marsh (Waimate North), and the women at the Ohaeawai Cultural and Community Centre (Huatahi Kauwhata).

Part 2 (MSc 1984, University of Auckland)

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Part 3 (PhD 1990, Australian National University)

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FINDING THE TRAIL

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Reader, please note: Since the major topic of this work is *Colocasia esculenta* (taro), entries have been kept to a minimum under this keyword.
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