

Displaying Political Order: Yam Cultivation in Tokaimalo, Ra Province, Viti Levu, Fiji

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Abstract

The yam is one of the most important agricultural products in Melanesia, both in the subsistence economy and in the symbolic world. The symbolic usage of the yam is best seen in the annual competition to produce and display giant yams. The men of Tokaimalo, Saivou District, Ra Province, Viti Levu Island, Fiji are also good cultivators of the yam. Though they do not cultivate giant yams, and there is no annual competition between individuals to produce good yams, the yam cultivation seems to have a symbolic meaning in the political interactions between chiefdoms. Here the yam cultivation of Tokaimalo is described and analysed in comparison with other Melanesian societies.

Key words: Fiji, Yam, politics, Chiefdom, Power

I

Yam cultivation in Melanesia has attracted much interest among anthropologists not only because of its importance in subsistence agriculture but because of its symbolic value in many aspects of social life. The yam is one of the important staples in Melanesia, along with taro, sago, banana, breadfruit, sweet potato and cassava. Which of them assumes primary importance in subsistence depends on ecological circumstances. Apart from its featured significance in the subsistence economy, the yam often plays a central role in the value system. For example, in Bunlap of Southern Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, about 70% of vegetable food consumed is taro, contrasted with yam, which accounts for only 5% (BARRAU, 1958: 63). Despite its position as the primary staple, the status assigned to taro in the ideological system is secondary to that of the yam. The yam is a sacred food, the origin of which is narrated in myth. Furthermore, the yam cultivation cycle underlies the calendar and various ritual activities. Men compete to grow the longest and finest yams to show their ability (JOLLY, 1981: 271-278).

This annual competition to produce and display giant yams seems to be found in many Pacific islands, through Melanesia and as far as Tonga and Samoa in Polynesia, and Pohnpei and Yap in Micronesia. The bigger the yam the man produces, the greater the renown he wins. The yam he produces symbolically expresses his ability and power, which is the reason why men are so enthusiastic about cultivating yams (ISHII 1988).

In Tokaimalo, as in many parts of Fiji, the yam is also highly evaluated (cf. RAVUVU 1983:

42). But the yam as a food makes up only a small part of daily consumption. The inhabitants cultivate taro, cassava, banana, breadfruit, and sweet potato as staples. Of these, the newly introduced cassava is most abundantly produced and consumed, probably because of its ready cultivation. Failure in yam cultivation never causes food shortage, but without cassava, the possibility of starvation will increase dramatically. There is no economic necessity for yam cultivation; nevertheless, yam cultivation is highly regarded (cf. BELSHAW 1964: 159). In past decades excitement spread through the village during the periods of yam planting and harvesting, and this excitement can still be observed though to a lesser degree. Even today the rituals concerning yam cultivation are the most important rituals of the annual ritual cycle.

This preeminence of yam cultivation in the ideological system of Tokaimalo does not immediately mean that the yam has high value as an item itself. The yam occupies only a minor position in the exchange system. It tastes good but it is not the most delicious food. The price of yams in markets is not expensive, at least in comparison with other agricultural products. The yam is also important in ritual exchanges, but it ranks second to taro and is never an indispensable item. Probably consistent with this is that giant yams aren't produced in Tokaimalo. The farmers know that in some places in the Pacific, like Rotuma and Tonga, long yams are produced and, that by using special techniques, it is possible to produce giant yams up to 2.5 meters in length. They argue, however, that it is pointless to produce yams of such length since yams measuring 1 meter or less are sufficient as a foodstuff.

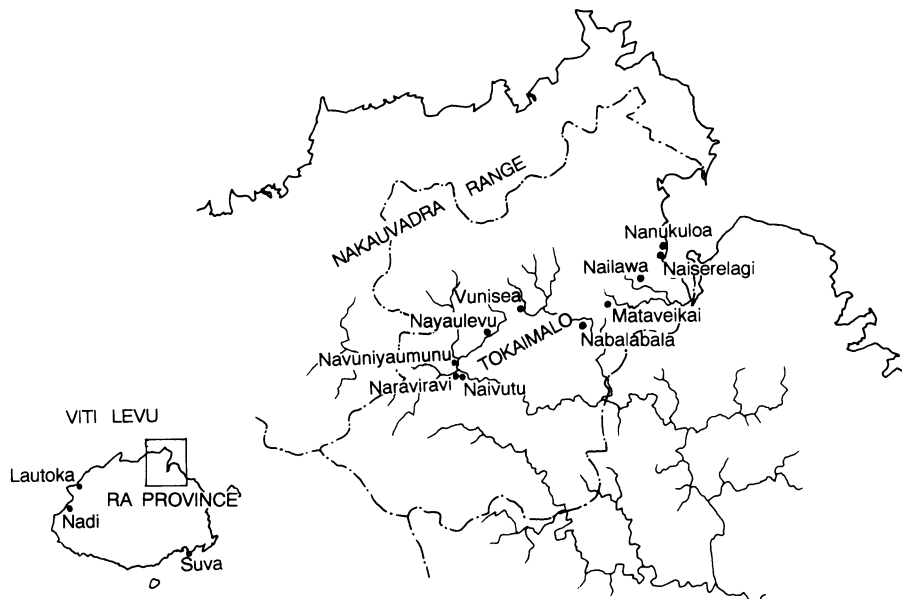
This means that the people of Tokaimalo are not fetishists concerning yam, in contrast with some other peoples in Melanesia. A typical example is reported among the Arapesh people of Sepik, Papua New Guinea, where huge yams are cultivated to show male prestige and yams are thought to be a religious plant with spirits inherent in them (TUZIN 1972). Here the yam is the main staple and at the same time it is the focus of Arapesh religious belief. It is really the most preponderant agricultural item in their ideological system.

In Tokaimalo also, the yam is an important agricultural product in their ideological system. But why is it so highly valued even though it has little importance as a staple food? Why don't they compete to produce huge yams in a way consistent with the yam's role as a socially valued product. What, then, is the social implication of yam cultivation in Tokaimalo?

II

The Northeastern Viti Levu, the Ra Province, is the heart of Fijian culture. The sacred Nakauvadra mountains, which lie on the northern coast of the Province, are the place where, according to the origin myth, all Fijians originated. The Province consists of 4 Districts (*Tikina*). Tokaimalo is in Saivou *Tikina*, which is at the center of the Province, though the most densely populated and economically important *Tikina* is Rakiraki. Saivou lies on the southern foothill of Nakauvadra Range extending from the coast of Viti Levu Bay to the hill plateau of about 300–500 meters above sea level. This plateau also adjoins to eastern

MAP 1 TIKINA SAIVOU



highlands of Mt. Tomini, the highest mountain of Viti Levu, and is the source of Rewa River, the biggest river of Viti Levu Island¹⁾.

Ecologically Saivou borders the northwestern dry zone and the southeastern wet zone of Viti Levu Island. The rainy season begins in November and ends in March, which sharply contrasts with the rest of the year. Subsistence is agriculture and taro, yam, cassava, sweet potato, banana, breadfruit and a wide variety of vegetables and fruits are cultivated. Pigs, goats, fowls, and cattle are kept. Though the quantity of these agricultural products is sufficient for subsistence, sugar cane, which was introduced ten years ago, is also cultivated in large scale as a source of cash income. In the cane cutting season, a "sugar cane cutting corporate group" is organized by young men to complete this hard labor efficiently. Another source of cash income is the cattle-raising scheme of Ului Saivou Corporation. Ului Saivou Corporation is a public company which is aided by the government and of which the villagers of Tokaimalo are stockholders.

The name Tokaimalo is used in two ways. First, it is used to designate the area around the old abandoned village site Koroka and the present central village, Nayaulevu. Second, it is used as the name for a group of people, "*kai tokaimalo*", who are believed to have originated from the old village Koroka. They now live in 4 villages: Nayaulevu, Nabalabala, Nailawa, and Naiserelagi.

In the political sense, Tokaimalo consists of two chiefdoms (*vanua*), each of the two has a paramount chief. Four villages from the coast to inland, i.e., Naiserelangi, Nailawa, Mataveikai, and Nabalabala are under the control of a chief whose title is "*Vunivalu*". Five villages further inland than these four, i.e., Vunisea, Nayaulevu, Navuniyaumunu, Naraviravi, and Naivutu are under the control of a chief "*Tui Vunivau*". Although all of the people of these nine villages are not "*kai tokaimalo*", both chiefs are *kai tokaimalo* and

related in their mythical origin so that the whole area that is under control of these two chiefs is called Tokaimalo. Each vanua consists of two *yavusa* (confederation of *mataqali*), and each *yavusa* consists of several *mataqali* (localized patrilineal clan and land owning group at the same time) which are ranked in political stratification²). But this traditional political stratification of patrilineal clans has almost lost its social significance, at least in everyday life. In this aspect, we can say that the traditional political order has changed considerably. But still, the chiefs are respected and keep their traditional authority. In everyday affairs the chief, together with the village head (*turaga ni koro*), who is elected by the villagers, has decisive power, and in ceremonial occasions the chief is always the focus of the rituals.

The basic and smallest social unit is the household group (*vuvale*) which occupies a single hut and is named after the name of place where their hut stands. It is a group made up of husband, wife, and their children; sometimes other persons, not always relatives, are attached. It is a producing and consuming unit which cooperate in everyday life, and in ceremonial occasions it carries out ritual services as a unit. Several *vuvale* compose a *mataqali*, the land-owning unit³). Within *mataqali* the eldest male member of the most senior *vuvale* serves as the head of *mataqali*. Inheritance and succession are patrilineal, and the most senior male member of the group is responsible for everything that happens within the group.

This formal structure of social organization has been more or less affected by recent social change, especially since independence. The main effect of the change in the outside world seems to have been an increase in population mobility. Most of the younger generation have once or more experienced urban life in big cities like Ba, Lautoka, or Suva, seeking either higher education or wage-earning labor. Some of them never come back to their village, and some often leave their village for a few years or more. This mobility makes it difficult for people to fulfill the many requirements of social interaction within the village.

The situation is similar for those living in their village. Even those remaining in Tokaimalo, most of the young generation, like the wage-earners of urban areas, work either in the sugar cane cutting group or Ului Saivou Corporation. They work away from their home and gardens. Those working in the garden, planting, weeding, and harvesting are old men and women. This seems to have made a great impact on the mode of subsistence. The most impressive is the decline in yam cultivation, which requires intensive labor. Cassava, which is easier to cultivate, displaced the yam, it seems, to save time for other work (cf. THAMAN 1988: 40). The tendency for a cash economy to increasingly influence the mode of village life is a general development which can be observed anywhere in the Pacific. But here in Tokaimalo this social change is affecting the symbolic meaning of the yam cultivation cycle. Now let us describe yam cultivation and the changes it has undergone in Tokaimalo.

III

Various kinds of yam (*uvi*) are identified by their shape, color, and texture in Tokaimalo. They distinguish at least 18 varieties for cultivating yams and 12 varieties for wild yams:

cultivating yams are *taniyala*, *danaboli beka*, *teboru*, *moala*, *vurai*, *varagi*, *lokaloka*, *kasoni*, *wawailavo*, *viwa leka*, *kasokaso*, *boa*, *kawai*, *balebale*, *uvi ni valagi*, *nene*, *kau ni sela* and wild yams are *buti*, *doledole*, *tivoli*, *ceiva balavo*, *rova*, *sare*, *le*, *vurai navi*, *tuarau*, *kedra voti*, *levui*, *voti*. Several of these types are chosen but all of them are planted in the same garden without any separation. The best place for yam cultivation, it is said, is the bank of a river with dry clay soil. Adequate rainfall is required during the growth but adequate drainage is necessary as well. Fallow is not required but after the cultivation of yams other crops should be planted for two years before yams are cultivated again. Usually cassava, sweet potatoes, or kava (*yaqona*) are planted during this period (cf. HOCART 1929: 102–106).

Yam cultivation is different from cultivation of other staple crops in many aspects. First, it is hard work and requires a lot of effort to make it successful. Second, it is a seasonal crop. In contrast with that of other crops, the yam cultivation cycle is definite. Taro, cassava, sweet potatoes can be planted and harvested at any time of a year, but yams must be planted and harvested once a year at fixed times. The land is cleared and ploughed deeply from June to July. The planting ends in September at the latest. Unlike taro and cassava, yam gardens need weeding very often. For taro and cassava, weeding once or twice is enough and in fact these gardens are often covered with weeds. But yam gardens must be carefully looked after and failure to do so is directly reflected in poor results. Yams grow during the rainy season, and the first harvest begins around March. In the dry season yam vines wither and change color to yellow or brown, which is the sign of the harvest season. April and May are the busiest months for yam harvesting. This annual cycle of yam cultivation lies behind the traditional lunar calendar of Viti Levu. Below are the names of the months in Fijian calendar (*Na vula vakaviti*):

1. *Vula i Balolo lailai*
2. *Vula i Balolo levu*
3. *Vula i Nuqa lailai*
4. *Vula i Nuqa levu*
5. *Vula i Sevu*
6. *Vula i Kelikeli*
7. *Vula i Gasau*
8. *Vula i Doi*
9. *Vula i Werewere*
10. *Vula i Cukicuki*
11. *Vula i Senidrala*
12. *Vula i Kawakawa*
13. *Vula i Vavakada*

Eight of these names are derived from natural phenomenon such as the names of flowers and fish. The others refer to the work to be done during the yam cultivation cycle. When the *balolo* (palolo, a kind of sea annelid) appears in the reef, it is the sign of the beginning of new year⁴). It is said that palolo usually appears in the end of October and in November. Following the lunar system, if its appearance is delayed, the previous year will have thirteen months, though if it is early, the year will have only twelve months. *Nuqa* and *Kawakawa*

are names of fish. *Gasau*, *Doi*, and *Senidrala* are names of flowers which bloom in that season.

All other five names of months indicate tasks done in the annual cycle. The new cultivation cycle begins with weeding and burning of the garden where yams are to be planted. It is the month of *Werewere*. *Werewere* means the cutting of trees and grass. *Cukicuki*, the name of the next month, means to plough. The yam garden is ploughed, holes to plant seed yams are dug, stones are removed, and the soil is carefully broken into pieces so that air will permeate the earth. The future yam gardens are thoroughly cleared so that one can immediately notice them even from far away. No leaf, no stone, no twig should remain in the ground in order to secure a good harvest. Seed yams are buried 20 to 30 cm under ground and a small mound is made above each planting. It really is hard work which requires a large labor force to complete, and all men available are summoned through various social linkages. Notably, to clear and plough the chief's garden, a number of village members are assembled to show the authority. When new shoots of yam grow to about 50 cm, a reed (*Gasau*, sometimes called bamboo grass) support is erected on the mound just beside each shoot. This support is called *Vavakada*, and the month of *Vavakada* is the time when the support is planted to help vines and leaves grow well. When the shoot reaches about one meter high, this support is bent horizontally, and the top of it is tied to another support which is set up for this purpose. So the two supports make a U shape on which the vine of new shoot twines around. Thus when leaves of vines grow thick enough, the earth of the gardens is covered by the arches of leaves and vines which prevent the sunshine from penetrating to the earth and allowing weeds to grow. In this way every yam shoot has its proper support respectively but there is another way to support vines. In this way parallel rods of about 20 meters long, sometimes longer, are set horizontally about 50 cm above the ground, just after planting. Usually bamboo is used for the horizontal rods and their supports. Seed yams are planted in a straight line so that they form a row just below a rod. A row of planted yams has a support rod in common. The vines of yam coil around the rods and the earth is covered with yam leaves. This second method is suitable for gardens with broad dimensions.

It takes more than four months for yams to grow enough for harvesting. Yams grow during the rainy season, and the yam garden should be weeded from time to time and monitored carefully to help the growth till the month of *Sevu*, when the first yam is dug. *Sevu* means to make an offering, especially to make an offering of first fruits of the year. It is also the name of the ceremony held in the month of *Sevu* to present the first harvest to the chief of *vanua*, the *bete* (the priest of *vanua*), and, nowadays, to the church of the village. Not only yams but all crop varieties from the first harvest should be presented to them before the harvesting begins in full scale. But since most other crops are not seasonal, the season of first fruit means the first harvest of yams. The principal offering of this ritual presentation is the yam and other kinds of crop, taro, cassava, sweet potato, banana, breadfruit, and a variety of fruits are also presented as the first fruits of the year.

The main season of yam harvesting is the month of *Kelikeli*. *Kelikeli* means to dig, here to dig yams. The harvested yams are dried and then stored in the yam houses (*lololo*) built

near the yam garden. Unlike taro, cassava, banana, breadfruit which decay quickly, yams are storable. Yams are stored and consumed during the dry season till the next planting begins. Some varieties, it is said, can be stored more than twelve months.

Following this yam cultivation cycle, a year is divided into two parts. These are the yam growing period and the yam consuming period, each roughly corresponding to the rainy season and to the dry season. These two periods are separated by two major yam rituals. The first one is the *Masi matau* ritual, which marks the end of yam consuming period and the beginning of yam growing period. The second one is *Sevu*, which marks the beginning of the yam consuming period. Both rituals are held in the village communal house to make an offering to the chief. *Masi matau* literally means to wash the digging stick. It is the ritual washing of the digging stick in the river, and it is done after burying something. So it also done after burying corps in the grave. In this case it means that the yam planting has been completed. The ritual is usually held in October or November after the villagers have completely finished their planting. The chief sends his *mata ni vanua* (the herald) to summon all heads of *mataqali*. They mix the kava and pray to the god for an abundant harvest of yams. Wild yams (*uvi vekau*) are collected to present to the chief. From this time on till the ritual of *Sevu*, nobody can plant any more yam and nobody can eat cultivated yams. If necessary, wild taro (*via*) or wild yams are used.

Undoubtedly the ritual of *Sevu* is the most important of the annual rituals. The first yam is presented to the chief, the church and the priest of the village by all villagers, and the chief in turn presents *yaqona* and *tabua* (whale tooth) to the villagers. At this time anybody can dig yams from the garden. In this season vines and leaves of yam wither and their color fades to yellow and brown. It is the sign that the yam of the garden is now ripe enough to harvest, but it is now difficult to find wild yams because withered leaves soon rot away and disappear. Now the season is changing from that of wild yams to cultivated yams.

IV

How is yam cultivation in Tokaimalo similar to yam cultivation in Melanesia in general and in what ways is it different? Let us review these general features briefly before looking into the social significance of yam cultivation in Tokaimalo.

The cultivated yam, in a word, is a highly artificial crop. It is an artificial object in that its cultivation requires skill in both cultivating technique and magical efficacy. Among other staples of Melanesia, taro, sweetpotatos, and cassava are easy to cultivate. They can be planted and harvested at any time of the year without any special techniques or hard labor to assure a good harvest. Weeding is desirable but it is not necessary to be done frequently because this task does not promise a good harvest. Commonly in Melanesia these gardens are covered with weeds, but this does not lead to a poor harvest nor is it a sign of laziness of the cultivators.

Banana, breadfruit, sago are also important staple foods in Melanesia. All these plants do not have an annual cultivating cycle. Banana and breadfruit trees are planted but they

bear fruit at least once every year, in some places more than that, without any special activities. No special techniques are necessary to have them bear abundant fruit, except in some places where magic is practiced. In this sense these plants are half natural, although they are planted by man. Sago is more "natural" than banana and breadfruit. Sago palms grow in swampy lowlands usually far from the place where people prefer to live. Sometimes, when the quantity of natural sago is not sufficient, sago palms are planted but most sago palms are natural products. People just forage them in the swamp land. Even in the case of planted sago, the trees are left in their natural state for ten years or more without human intervention. Just before the trees bear flowers, they are cut down to refine the starch.

Compared with these crops, the yam is an artificial crop and its cultivation needs human efforts both in the secular sense and in the religious sense. It is a man-made product, an achievement of the cultivator, an art. The garden of yam should be cleared and cultivated carefully without leaving a single stone or root behind. To make a long yam a deep hole is dug for each seed yam and the hole is filled with fertile surface earth before planting. The yam garden should be weeded and always kept clean. Moreover the success in yam cultivation not only depends upon these human efforts but it is also related to the manifestation of supernatural power. The cultivators should observe various prohibitions during the yam cultivation cycle, either to acquire supernatural assistance or avoid the anger of spiritual beings. Unlike other crops, there is often a belief that there is a spirit immanent in the yam and the cultivators should take precautions not to invite supernatural anger of these spirits. Thus in Kwoma of the Middle Sepik, the yam and the sago are sharply contrasted in their cosmic order⁵).

In Kwoma, the hill-tops and the swampy bush are antithetical. The hill-tops, associated with order, civilization, and rule are contrasted with the swampy bush below which is associated with wildness, lawlessness, the untamed, and the dirty. Hilltops and slopes are the places where the villages are. They are also suitable for making gardens where yams and other garden products are planted. They are the places where the wild forest is cultivated and tamed. The man-made order and the morality should prevail there. The village and the gardens must always be kept clean, and rubbish, excrement, etc. are disposed of in appropriate places. On the other hand, lowland bush is the place where sago, the staple of the Kwoma, grows. No efforts are made to maintain order, and things are just left in wilderness. There are no permanent paths, no restrictions concerning the disposal of rubbish. The bush was the fit repository for the headless body of an enemy who had been killed in battle and suitable place for the corpse of one punished for committing incest. Therefore, "impurity or waste such as animal faeces, vegetable peelings, scrapings from the sago pot, and (in a somewhat restricted way) human urine and faeces are all relegated to the lower part of the Kwoma environment" (WILLIAMSON 1979: 213).

Garden making is initiated by felling larger trees and burning off the undergrowth. Only men practice magic and, since magic is required to make yams grow, only men may plant yams. In fact yam cultivation is central to the religious belief of the Kwoma. The religious activities are performed by the yam cult groups. There are three cult groups and the highest

stage is called *Nokwi*, which receives only men of high prestige. By joining these cult groups, men learn the way to solicit the aid of the yam spirit to succeed in yam cultivation. At the final stage of *Nokwi* the men acquire full knowledge of the religious mystery and yam cultivation. Thus the yam cult groups fulfill a number of integrative social functions. It provides the bases for the social stratification of men and the sexual division of labor. It is associated with agriculture and the religious belief (WHITING 1941). There are no such social implications attached to sago production, though the sago is the main staple of the Kwoma. There is no spirit in sago and there is no special magic or rituals connected with its production; in a word it is a natural product not an artificial product.

This aspect of yam cultivation, that it is conceived as a man-made product, presumably is relevant to the seasonal character of yam cultivation. In most Melanesian societies, wild yams are collected and consumed. In the dry season, the vines and the leaves of wild yams usually decay and rot away, which makes them difficult to find. Even so, the edible roots are still alive in the earth. In the beginning of the new rainy season, new shoots come out from the roots. In this sense, yams, as a natural entity, have no season for consumption. They can be collected and cooked in any season of a year. The fact that the cultivated yams are generally planted at the end of dry season is based on the characteristic of the yam that the wet season is the suitable season for growing. This leads us to the assumption that where there is no distinct dry season, the yam can be planted and harvested at any time of a year. The seasonal cycle of yam cultivation, that the yam is planted and harvested once a year, may be, though it is based on the nature of the plant, a man-made order, not a prerequisite to its growing.

The belief that the yam has a spirit and that it should be grown and reared carefully reminds us that the yam is something similar to the human body in having a life of its own; this is another aspect of the yam cultivation. In Mare of the Loyalty Islands, the yam is regarded as a spiritual being and has a power within itself. In the origin myth of yams, various kinds of yams are spoken of as if they were human ancestors, and the most important kind of them (*Wadrava*), which is used in the new yam festival *Rekoko*, is derived from the body of a mythical old woman⁶). Moreover the yam should be handled like a baby, so it must not be carried by holding its head which is the sign of life. A yam without its head is never used in a ceremony such as marriage and a yam should never be cooked before the head is cut off. This practice of cooking the yam as if it were a living thing corresponds with the origin myth of the *Wadrava* yam in which an old ancestress cooks herself in the earth oven and transforms herself into various kinds of cooked foods. In cultivating yams, the cultivators are in communion with the yams they planted, so they must observe various rules in order not to spoil the temper of the spirits (HMAE 1986).

The connection of yam and human body is more apparent in the Ilahita Arapesh example where, similar to the Kwoma example, sago and yam symbolically express gender difference (TUZIN 1992). In Ilahita Arapesh the principal and the most favored staple is the yam. Among other staples, which include taro, sago, and banana, sago is consumed only when other garden products are not available enough, during the period after the harvested old yams are exhausted and the new yams are being harvested. The sago symbolizes feminine

sexuality in that it proliferates uncontrollably by itself in the low wet wilderness. As in other neighboring Sepik tribes, there are men's cult groups consisting of five specified ritual grades. The names of the lowest two grades, associated with pre-adolescent boys, are derived from names of varieties of sago; the highest two represent early and later manhood and are named *Nggwal*. Two *Nggwal* grades are thought to have been introduced from neighboring tribes and, concomitant with the predominance of the yam in Arapesh ideology, the yam is associated with these prestige competing male cults⁷). Thus the yam is associated with maleness on the one hand and sago with femininity on the other hand, but that is not all. Beside the spiritual traits and the treatment of yams, the physical resemblance between man and yam is emphasized in styles of adornment when the yams are displayed. There are two kinds of yams in Arapesh; long straight yams are called "male" yams and short forked or many-appendaged yams are called "female" yams. Long "male" yams are displayed in a line in standing position decorated with the same material used for novices in the male initiation ritual whereas short "female" yams are hung from horizontal poles decorated with motifs and netbags used when girls come out of puberty seclusion. On the basis of its straightness the male yam is symbolically equated with the penis. Men can achieve renown through producing long yams or short yams. In the case of short yams the emphasis is on abundance and the daily care of the gardens is largely in female hands. But the long yams are exclusively in the male domain and the size, shape, and skin texture of the individual tuber are appreciated (TUZIN 1972). Here gender relations of staple crops are two-fold. First, sago and yam are contrasted and then short and long yams are contrasted. Men compete to get renown by producing yams. Sago is not the subject of male competition but, on the contrary, it is the subject of sharing and exchange which enforce the network of kinship and neighborhood. Competition with female yams is a relatively mild affair but contests with male yams are potentially serious, because they are really symbols of male pride and prestige and an attack on them is equivalent to an attack on their cultivator, so that the contests are, in effect, a substitute for overt violence (TUZIN op.cit.).

In Bunlap, southern part of Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, the gender difference is expressed in the opposition of yam and taro. The two crops differ in many respects. Whereas yams are cultivated on the dry slopes facing the sea, taro is cultivated in the wet inland basin or valley beside the river and is sometimes irrigated. Yams are seasonal, planted and harvested once a year, and the yam cultivation cycle is the basis of the calendar, but taro is aseasonal, and can be planted and harvested at any time of a year. Whereas taro is cultivated individually or by households, yams are cultivated communally, often the whole village working together to clear, plant, weed and harvest. There is no rigid sexual division of labor in taro cultivation, but there is a rigid division in yam cultivation. That the taro is the most important staple and consumed every day means that it is profane food. The wet, the inside, the informal, the profane and the household based individuality are all thought to be attributes of femaleness. The character of the taro cultivation is associated with femaleness.

Though the yam has only secondary importance as a staple food, it is sacred food and highly esteemed in the ideological system. The growing of long yams is an important part of the exclusive male cult, and men compete to grow the longest and finest yams by which men can achieve renown and prestige. These long yams are displayed in the ritual which ends the seclusion of the circumcision (JOLLY 1981). Here yams are obviously associated with maleness, especially with the penis. After the first yam of the season is ritually dug by the priest of the yam, anyone can eat yams. But until the circumcision ritual is completed, yams must be peeled—as if peeling the foreskin of the penis—before cooking. When planting, only men are allowed to dig a hole with a digging stick and planting a seed yam in the hole, which is imaginary male sexual behavior. During the communal work of yam planting and harvesting, hilarious obscene jokes and songs are heard⁸⁾.

All these suggest that yam cultivation in Bunlap is closely associated with male pride and prestige both in private and communal senses. And this is generally true in Melanesian societies where yam cultivation has social importance. Any agricultural product may have social implications, whether in sociologically or in symbolically. In Ilahita Arapesh, sago flour is processed and shared by a group of neighbors and kin, declaring and reinforcing the solidarity of the social network. Another custom that expresses a social relationship is the ceremonial gift of a special sago by a man to his sister's sons for their future burial service at his funeral (TUZIN 1992). In the same sense, the yam is also an exchange item expressing certain social relationships. In Bunlap, long yams are presented to married sisters of the cultivator which signifies the affective relationship of a man and his sisters. What is singular to the yam is that it is expressive not only as an exchange object but it is expressive in its own capacity, expressing male pride, the human body, or something else.

All the features of yam cultivation may derive from the botanical attributes of the plant, but the relation between these two is not univocal. The seasonality of the cultivation cycle is based on the character of the plant. But yams are not annual plants; they are perennial and the tubers remain alive in the earth all through the year. Seed yams may be planted in any season, although it is better to plant in a certain season. Weeding is desirable for good harvests, but just as wild yams grow in the bush, yams can grow even if weeding is not practiced. To assure the best result, however, hard work is desirable. That the yam is highly susceptible to the efforts of the cultivator seems to be the main and most important factor influencing the yam cultivating culture.

V

All agricultural products are ultimately the gifts of nature, and though men try their best to domesticate them completely, they never fully comply with human demands. The magnitude of this compliance with the intention of the cultivators varies according to the kinds of plants cultivated. Yams, in this sense, admit of human intentions more than other cultivated plants, but never fully. If the man's effort to domesticate nature is to change natural objects into cultural subjects, and if the culture is the domain of human artificial constructs, yams are

more cultured than other agricultural products. But even so, yams are not completely the result of human art. They are still the products of nature and, to the best of the cultivators' ability, there remains the possibility of total failure. The lack of the cultivators' efforts or spiritual power immediately leads to the failure of their domestication. The nature of yams as a natural product reveals itself and overwhelms human ability. The almost universal manifestation in various cultures of the man as the domesticator of the nature in the gender system coincides with the fact that the yam is a male product in Tokaimalo and in most Melanesian societies.

Gender in Tokaimalo is clear. All that exists outside human control belongs to the male domain. The man is the domesticator of the outer world who tries to rule the uncontrollable. Access to the world of ancestors and spirits, hunting (mostly wild pigs), politics, and gardening—which is the domestication of wild bush—are all male activities. Women are expected to be subject to order, and they usually remain in the domesticated world where the human order prevails. Taking care of the family, cooking, collecting fire woods, and net fishing⁹⁾ are thought to be the female activities. Though both sexes cooperate and contribute equally to gardening, it is the man who is responsible for the results. Men are proud of their yam gardens, where they can show their ability: knowledge, cleverness, and diligence. People often say that one is not a Fijian man if he doesn't know to cultivate yam. In cultivating yams, the spiritual and physical power of the cultivator as a domesticator of the wild, a creator of the culture, and as an agent who orders the world, is demonstrated.

In the political sphere, yam cultivation is an appropriate means to indicate the amount of political power. Here the uncertainty in yam cultivation is an important factor. Political power in a sense is the power to control the uncontrollable or the uncertainty in a society, and this parallels the power to control and to domesticate the wild. Success in yam cultivation shows the ability to control the uncertain. In societies with the big-man system, the prevailing political system of Melanesia, the cultivation and display of giant yams to show man's ability corresponds to the political system.

In the big-man system, all men have equal expectancy to be a political leader: a big-man. To become a big-man all men compete to attract followers by impressing them with his abilities in various social interactions, and thereby to gain social power. But the power itself is invisible, and to be accepted in a socially valid way, it should be shown to the public. All societies have approved means to express this social power, ways to visualize the invisible power. In some cases, it is visualized through accumulating shell money or, in other cases, raising a number of pigs. The political aspect of the Kula trading system of Trobriand Islands, besides the economic purpose, is that it is the principal way to acquire renown as a big-man in these island societies. Ambitious men, even at the risk of their life, launch their canoe into the sea to obtain famous items (necklaces and bracelets made of shells). These necklaces and bracelets have no economic value at all but, all bearing a name and colored with heroic tales, they are admired as an indicator of prestige. Each man concentrates his social power, i.e., his economic resources, the human networks he has forged through various social interactions, and his ability in using magical charms, to make his trade successful. The necklace and the bracelet he obtained are his achievement, the result of his

efforts, and the visualized form of his social power. This situation is similar to giant yam cultivation. It is socially significant that giant yams are the symbol of the social power the cultivators have. The yams as an achievement of the cultivator show the power of the cultivator in a visual way.

The political system of Tokaimalo is quite different from the big-man system referred above. It is a chiefdom ruled by a paramount chief. The power relations between descent groups and between individuals are fixed. Social power, as far as it is legal, is allocated heterogeneously from the beginning, and there is no room for an individual to acquire legal power or social status through his effort within the chiefdoms. This seems to be the main reason why the people of Tokaimalo are indifferent to the cultivation of giant yams, stating that it is nonsensical to make such big yams only for food. Giant yams may exhibit the cleverness of the cultivator but it is also senseless in sociological terms because good success of the cultivation does not affect the power relations of the individuals inside the chiefdom. Why then are they so absorbed in yam cultivation, and why does the yam alone have a special position in the ritual cycle?

There are many chiefdom societies like Tokaimalo in the Pacific where yam cultivation is ritually important. In Mare of the Loyalty Islands, yams are planted as if the yam garden is designed according to the structure of the chiefdom. Each yam is a symbol of the human body and a yam garden as a whole is the symbol of the chiefdom (HMAE *op.cit.*). Tikopia, an outlier island of Polynesia, is another example of a chiefdom in which the yam has ritual preeminence. In Tikopia, among many kinds of vegetable foodstuffs, only the yam is sacred and incorporated in the seasonal ritual cycle. It is the yam which can symbolize all vegetable foodstuffs. The yam is conceived as the property of the highest god Kafika and represents his body. Yam rites which play the major part in annual ritual cycle are held to be a perpetuation of the deeds of the principal god (FIRTH 1967: 141). But in the food provision of Tikopia, the yam occupies only secondary position, though it is a useful and highly appreciated foodstuff. Taro and breadfruit far exceed yams in quantity of production and consumption. Firth suggests from a utilitarian viewpoint of ritual performances that extend more than a fortnight, that vegetables with durability are useful. Taro and breadfruit decay in a few days so that only the yam is suitable for the purpose. In fact some varieties of yam are storable more than a few months, and he questions whether it is the relative difficulty of cultivation and variability of yield that made the yam desirable for ritualizing, because in Tikopia, which lacks giant yams, no great technical attention is needed for its cultivation (*ibid.*: 16). It is dubious if this utilitarian view can explain fully the sacredness and ritual supremacy of the yam. The question is why rituals are focused on yam cultivation and not why the yam is adopted in a certain ritual. Apart from this, Firth concludes that the yam ritual of Tikopia has two obvious social functions. The first is that it acts as a symbol for all vegetable foodstuffs, and "the second lies in its aggregative role, linking the chiefs together by their respective participation, and emphasizing the prime place occupied by the Ariki Kafika (the premier chief). In this way it assists in the maintenance of the political and religious hierarchy" (*ibid.*: 194). Thus, the yam itself symbolizes the political and religious power of the chiefdom, and the annual rituals reassure the political and religious

order of the island society.

The yam can also be used as a symbol designating certain values. Here representing the political-religious order and the political-religious power, the durability of the yam seems to be significant. Anything, including consumption goods, can be a medium for designating some value. In Tokaimalo, taro, breadfruit, banana, and cassava have value both as food and as an exchange item. But their value declines as they decay. They cannot designate lasting value, and they are exchangeable only as long as they are fresh. In this sense, the yam is similar to currency in that it can denote lasting value, though, unlike genuine currency, it does not last permanently. The fact that the yam dies is not a negative characteristic in denoting the social power, political or religious. The yam is planted and harvested once a year and is stored until it is planted again. A failure at any point in the process may damage the total cultivation cycle. It is this whole cycle that denotes the power of the cultivator, not only the product itself, the result of harvesting. The yam decays in the long term but before it dies, it renews itself by proliferating. The power of the cultivator, either a chiefdom or an individual, is tested and reassured every year. Therefore the ultimate uncontrollability of the yam as a natural product is also significant. The yam is more like currency than any other agricultural products in the sense that it is durable and artificial, but it is also far from handicrafts because it is finally out of man's control. The yam, in the cognitive world, is at the middle of the uncontrolled and the controlled, between the wild and the tamed, between nature and culture.

In Tokaimalo, the division of a year into two seasons, dry and wet, is marked by two major seasonal rituals: "*masi matau*" which marks the end of yam planting and "*sevu*" which is the offering of the first harvest of the year. As in Tikopia, the rituals function to reaffirm the order and the power relation within the chiefdom. Symbolically, the ritual cycle of yam renovation signifies the renovation of the chiefdom. The harvest is stored in the yam house "*lololo*" near the garden to show the achievement of the chiefdom¹⁰). It is not only the harvest but also the whole process of yam cultivation that designates the power of the chiefdom. Clearing and ploughing of the yam garden, and planting and harvesting of yams all require a great labor force, which denotes how influential the chief is (cf. NAYAKALOU 1978: 109). It is said that the planting and the harvesting of yams are the times when an exciting atmosphere pervades the village. From the chief's point of view, just as the yam is not fully controllable and its yield uncertain for a cultivator, how great the man power he can assemble and how large the yam garden he can cultivate within his chiefdom, in a word, how completely he can achieve the yam cultivation cycle within his chiefdom, are finally uncontrollable and uncertain. Through this process of cultivation his power is assessed and displayed.

Now we can understand why the members of the chief class are more interested in yam cultivation than others and why commoners are relatively indifferent to it though they admit its cultural value. There should be no political competition between individuals, at least in a legal way, within a stable chiefdom in which power relation is fixed. But between chiefdoms there remain rivalry. In precolonial days of warfare, there was a possibility to defeat other chiefdoms through physical combat. But in most societies, physical combat is the last means

of influencing others. There should be many other legal ways to prevail upon others. In Karavar of Northern New Britain, a man can be a political leader (i.e. a big-man) by accumulating *divara* (shell money). Karavarans think that human nature remains what it was, greedy, formless, wild. It is controllable only through *divara*. Brideprice, fines for offenses are paid with it, the ritual grades of men's society are bought with it, and it is distributed at mortuary ceremonies. As a medium of exchange, *divara* is an analogue of money but it is more pervasive than money. It is the universal medium of social interaction. In Karavar moral, religious, political, economic order are governed by *divara* (ERRINGTON 1977). For Karavarans the only legal way to influence others and to get followers is through *divara*. "Humans can have effects on other humans through fights, threats, physical abuse, love magic, sorcery—or through *divara*. Of those, only *divara* can control people and at the same time result in order. All the others are intrinsically antisocial characteristic of the *momboto*¹¹⁾" (ibid.: 37).

Yam cultivation is multivocal in Tokaimalo. Economically, it is an agricultural process to supply one staple food and a product for exchange. Ritually, the annual cycle of the people of Tokaimalo is settled by the predetermined seasonal cycle of yam cultivation. And through the whole process of this cultivation, which is the only approved means of combat, chiefdoms can compete to prevail over others by confirming and displaying their power: their strength, mobilization, fertility, richness, and solidarity¹²⁾.

Notes

- 1) Field research in Tokaimalo was conducted for about three months from July to October 1991, supported by the Scientific Research Funds of the Ministry of Education of Japan.
- 2) Formally, each *yavusa* consists of at least seven *mataqali*. These are *mataqali* of *Turaga* (chiefs), *Sau turaga* (sub-chiefs), *Mata ni vanua* (spokesmen, or heralds), *Bete* (priests), *Mata i sau* (carpenters), *Bati* (warriors), and *Gonedau* (fishermen). But most of *yavusa* lack one or more of them.
- 3) The word "*i tokatoka*" to signify a subdivision of *mataqali* is not often used in Tokaimalo.
- 4) Palolo very often marks the beginning of the new year in Pacific islands (cf. LEACH 1950).
- 5) WILLIAMSON 1979.
- 6) Similar myths stating that various kinds of yams originated from the body of a mythical ancestor are often found in Melanesia.
- 7) Tuzin asserts that these facts provide circumstantial evidence that sago holds an ancient place in Arapesh culture and subsistence (TUZIN 1992).
- 8) JOLLY op.cit. with my information.
- 9) Angling and spearing of fish are done only by men. These activities are similar to hunting though net fishing is a collective activity.
- 10) The quantity of agricultural product used as an indicator of the political power is not unique to yams. The quantity of rice product within a chiefdom was used to indicate the power of lords in feudal Japan. It denotes not only the economic power of the lords but also the relative status among feudal lords. Like *lololo*, the rice granary may indicate the power of the cultivator.
- 11) "*momboto*" is a Karavaran word which designates the anarchical state of the imaginary past when people were afflicted with cannibals, incest, fights, and murderers.
- 12) A Tuzin's remark that the competition by display of giant yams was a substitute for the physical fight after Australian administration in Ilahita Arapesh parallels Tokaimalo example. The recent decline of yam cultivation in Tokaimalo is worth noting, because it may reflect some change in the

political situation between chiefdoms after independence.

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