CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?
An extension worker's view of village life

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a recent visit to my home village in Buka, North Solomons Province. During the visit I came to realise how the culture of the people in my village is changing. I thought too about the role of extension agents in relation to these changes.

By 'culture' we mean our way of life. It is the way people express themselves both verbally, and in their dress, life-style, beliefs and practices. A culture is a continuously changing process. Some themes remain important for a long time, but others with less meaning, tend to change more quickly. All human cultures are changing at varying speeds. When it comes to change, there are many different opinions about what should be preserved, what should be abandoned, what should be changed, and what should be adopted from other cultures.

Our aim as extension agents is to help people, like those in my village, to learn to manage the real-life changes going on around them. But in order to help others we must first be effective learners ourselves.

So the first thing an extension agent must do is get a detailed picture of the background of the people or situation involved. The following records an opportunity I had to experience all of this first hand.

THE FIELD TRIP TO BUKA

In June 1986 I returned to my home village in Buka for 5 weeks. The purpose of the visit was to collect information for part of a training course at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, N.S.W. Australia.

While staying in my village, I had a great opportunity to learn about many things that I never realised as a child.

I listened to village stories told by village elders, mostly about 'pasin tumbuna', and about the changes that are taking place.

The issue that interested me most was their concern for taro (osono), once upon a time their traditional staple. It was interesting to hear nearly every village elder talk about taro whenever there was a "stori bilong tumbuna" told. This led me to find out more about taro and its traditional importance to my people.

VILLAGE LIFE

Although life was communal in the clans, each man set his own time. Man was the master of his own destiny in every day living.

Everybody's working hours were taken up with food - with producing, collecting, processing and consuming it. People spent more time growing taro than anything else because a taro plant could provide a man with a day's meal without extra hard work. Taro was the basis of their subsistence economy.

In addition to growing plants for food, people collected nuts and many kinds of edible leaves, ferns, mushrooms and fungi from the forest.

Men and boys hunted oppossums and wild pigs which required skill, persistence and courage. A good hunter started off with dogs and roamed the forest until the dogs found and ran down an animal which was then killed by a long throwing spear.

The entire village often took part in fishing activities. Women and girls spent hours

wading in the streams searching for prawns hiding in the roots and under ledges. Men used "mona" canoes, which could take 10-20 people fishing for tuna. Often they brought back a shark or a turtle. When they returned home singing, that meant they had caught more than 10 fish, which were distributed amongst all the house-holds.

The villagers kept domesticated fowls, pigs and dogs which foraged for food around their homes. Pigs were kept especially for feasts and for bride wealth. They were fed twice a day with cooked food. A woman had to wake up early to cook a separate pot of food for her pigs before preparing something for the family.

People made spears, nets, bows and arrows. They made baskets, mats, woven walls of bamboo, pottery and carvings which were mainly representatives or symbols of their ancestors and their clans.

Once or twice a year, the entire village engaged in nut and fruit gathering. This was an opportunity for young men to show their future wives and in-laws how well they could climb.

When the garden food supply became scarce because of crop failure people ate sago, wild yams and galip nuts *(Canarium almond)* as substitute staples.

The wild yams had a bitter taste, so they were first boiled in their skins, peeled, cut into pieces then put into baskets. The baskets were tied up and placed in shallow sea water, tied down with stones, for a few weeks. They were later transferred into new baskets and placed in a stream for another week or so until all the bitter taste was gone.

Galip nuts *(Canarium)* were an important ingredient for most special feast delicacies; thus most feasts were held in the months immediately after nut-ripening.

The kernel of a ripe galip nut is covered with a hard shell encased in a purplish fleshy hull. Pigeons often eat the hull and discard the rest, littering the ground with nuts, which are collected. Kernels are extracted by cracking the hard shell with a river stone. The kernels can either be eaten raw, smoked and kept or mashed to add to puddings. The galip nuts could be stored for more than a year after being dried in the sun.

Special puddings were made by mashing up many kernels and adding them to taro or cassava. Ripe bananas were added for a sweeter taste.

Sago palms had a number of uses. Fronds were used as thatching material. The pithy centre was eaten mumued when food became scarce. The starch obtained from the pith of the trunk was usually mixed with grated coconut and baked. The rotting sago palm stumps provided edible grubs which were eviscerated (stomach cleaned out), cleaned and either smoked over the fire or boiled in coconut cream.

Some of these foods were often the staple diet for those who had given up their usual foods after the death of their loved ones. The period of mourning lasted for about 6 months or more. After this a burial feast was held in which the deceased was recognised and declared as dead, and gone from the clan.

I was able to witness such an event while I was in my village. An old village chief had died a few weeks before I arrived there. The close relatives were still mourning him. They had given up eating foods that were his favourite, and also chewing of betelnuts and smoking. Everybody, including his grandchildren, let their hair grow long and were not allowed to comb it. Relatives still living in the house of the dead man could not leave the house except to go to the toilet and to wash.

In these present days, the customs are no longer strictly followed. The village chiefs themselves have now changed these customs. For example: the mourning period is now only 20 days; the relatives walk around showing their faces which never happened before; and damaging of food gardens belonging to the relatives of the deceased is not taken seriously anymore. The customs are gradually changing because people are so preoccupied with cash cropping and other responsibilities.

STORI BILONG TARO (OSONO)

I was warned that taro was once so important in Buka life that conversations about it can go on endlessly. An old man said to me, "anyone who didn't talk about taro had to be a one-day-old baby." I was also told that what I heard was not everything about taro.

Taro varieties

Certain taro varieties, usually those with larger corms and a sweet taste (masina), were used for special occasions like feasts, bride price payments and other ceremonies.

Children had their own taro variety which had a very sweet taste and was very soft. The taro was either boiled in clay pots or baked over fire, usually with the skin unpeeled. It then could be kept overnight or for a whole day to provide the child with enough food.

An old woman said to me, "nature provided this (soft) taro variety also thinking about old people without teeth, who can not enjoy eating hard taro". Grand parents who cared for weaned babies did not have to go to the trouble of mashing the taro with no teeth.

Field preparation

Village chiefs decided when and where to start a new taro patch. The traditional land owners seldom refused permission to use their land. This helped to prevent social and economic inequalities between households or clans. It also protected the forest environment from being over-exploited in some areas, while others remained under used. Every household was told of the decision.

The first stage in ground preparation was men's work. They began by measuring out the required patch using rope (ulas) made from dried plantain sheaths. The required measurements were tied in knots beforehand.

The plots were marked off, the total number depending on the total number of households. Tracks were made to mark off boundaries between each plot.

The shrubs and smaller trees were cut first then the bigger trees followed. Trees like galip nuts and other useful trees were left standing. While this was going on the younger men hunted for oppossums or birds' nests, - something to bring back home to the family.

The logs cut from the felled trees were either stacked for firewood or laid on the ground to outline the plots.

Tree branches and other large rubbish were piled and left to dry, to be burnt either before or during planting. Other unnecessary dry rubbish was burnt immediately. This was a chance for the men to bake taro or any edible foods they could find for their midday meal.

At this stage the men also started to put up little sheds around the patch, preferably one near each plot. The sheds provided shelter for the women and children either from rain or from the sun. The sheds were also used to store planting materials and the thatch made from leaves was used to collect water. When selecting the garden site it was important that it be close to a stream.

Each day while the men were out working, the women remained in the village preparing food for them. Each morning the girls would collect a variety of greens, always including taro leaves, while the women went fishing on the reef. The boys usually brought back a good number of opposums. The animals were killed, cleaned and smoked soon after capture. The heart and liver were usually cooked and eaten while the men worked.

Planting taro

Taro planting was done by the whole village. The stalks were planted in holes formed by digging sticks.

The stalks were prepared weeks in advance. They were harvested by the women from a matured garden. Stalks of the same taro variety were tied up in bundles, sometimes in fifties or hundreds. The big stalks were usually separated from the smaller ones, often to be planted together with a medium sized stalk.

A typical taro garden with sugarcanes planted among the taros.

To speed up work the men would all stand in line, each holding a digging stick and dig the holes. The women would then plant the stalks into the holes. The children also played their part by handing stalks around to those who did the planting or covering the holes after the stalks were put in.

The villagers also planted banana suckers in the corners of the patches and sugarcane beside tree stumps. An area was specially prepared to grow tobacco. The seeds were broadcast, (thrown about) to be transplanted later.

The major portion of gardening work was then over. Thereafter gardening became a woman's affair.

Maintaining taro plots

The women continued to work in their plots each day. They planted colourful herbs and flowers around the taro plot. Special herbs were always added to a pot of taro, so that the cooked taro or leaves would taste better. Each day as woman returned home she would pick a flower to put in her hair or

After the major portion of garden work is over, tending the garden became a woman's affair.

around her ears. A young woman did that to show that she was attracted to a man.

Weeding was done by hand, with the help of the children. While weeding they also removed destructive caterpillars by hand.

During this time it was important to observe certain customs. For example, women having their menstrual periods must not do gardening; couples must not sleep together before going to the new taro patch or anywhere near the patch; plantains must not be harvested and certain foods were not to be eaten till after harvest time. It was believed that doing any of these things would result in poor yield, invite wild pigs to damage the gardens and encourage pests and diseases.

The women stopped weeding their plots as soon as the plants reached maturity. From then on no one was allowed to go near the taro patch except the witch doctor (kalkalala). He would walk through all the plots, performing certain rituals before the taro was harvested. It was believed this helped to bring an even better yield. The

vitch doctor also prevented any evil activities being performed on the taro before it was harvested.

Soon after this, a group of women went quietly to the taro patch, without anyone knowing. Each picked a taro plant (kopkop), described as "stealing", from each taro plot. The corms were cut off the stalks, separating the large corms from the smaller ones. The best taro corms were put into a special basket (kobro). The edible leaves were also put together and tied in a bundle. The baskets were specially made from a palm frond and used only to carry special foods. The basket of taro was taken to the village sorcerer, the "selfish man", to show him what he could eat if he didn't perform sorcery. This was also a chance to get an idea of what the yield might be.

Harvesting taro

Harvesting a new taro patch was an important occasion for everyone. It was a time for feasting, singing and dancing. Each household liked to show off the result of their work. Young people loved to hear comments about how hard they had worked. Neighbouring villages were always invited to join in the celebration. It was a time to exchange foods with friends and relatives.

The entire village took part in preparing food for the occasion. The men and boys hunted wild pigs and oppossums. The women and girls made sure that there was plenty of firewood stored to cook the food. Hard wood was collected to be used in mumus because it burned slowly, and was good for heating up mumu stones. Ordinary firewood was used for open fires.

The women and girls also collected plantain leaves, for wrapping up food and covering mumus. Leaves of a palm tree were used to wrap up puddings. They also made baskets to hold the food. Special baskets were made for food that was distributed to guests from nearby villagers.

Everyone was involved in fishing activities.

Village chiefs checked whether each household or clan had prepared enough food before the women were told to start harvesting their new taro plots.

Each household had to harvest enough taro to fill 2 baskets with the best corms. One basket was given to the village chiefs and the other was for the household. Each basket also contained a large bundle of edible taro leaves and herbs. An extra bundle of taro corms with the stalk still attached was harvested, for distribution to the invited villages. It was important to give away the best plants because this helped to keep up good relations with the neighbouring villages.

As soon as enough taro had been harvested the village would start preparing food for the feast.

During the feast most of the food was cooked in a mumu pit. Each household prepared their own pit to cook their share of food. Foods like pig meat and oppossum were usually cooked separately from puddings and root crops. Fish was smoked over an open fire until it became hard. That prevented it from becoming bad so quickly.

Everyone brought the foods together on the day of the feasting. Foods for distribution or exchange with neighbouring villages were put up on a long high table specially made for the occasion. Betel nuts and mustard leaves were hung up on poles.

The people celebrated first with singing and dancing, often starting the night before. The invited villages had to be entertained properly by being fed and continuously offered betel nuts and mustard to chew.

Dancing stopped when it was time for everyone to sit down and eat. The men joined the village chiefs in the men's house. The women sat around outside making sure that their visitors were being served. They would talk about nothing but taro.

The celebrations ended after food was distributed first to the guests, the village chiefs, then to each household. It was the village chiefs' responsibility to call out to clans or households to come and collect their share of the food. The last thing for that occasion was to say happy return to the visiting villages.

The villagers went about their normal lives

as soon as the feast was over. After all, this was something that was going to happen again and again. It was their life.

DISCUSSION

The above account describes the culture of my village, in relation to taro. But not all these things happen now; there have been many changes in my village. First, sweet potato has largely replaced taro as a staple food.

Other changes have happened faster than people's ability to adapt to them. This has created uncertainty, and led to demands for help and advice from outside the village. This is an area where extension workers can make an important contribution.

The most significant change has been the introduction of cash crops. To a villager today, this is the main ticket for his entry into the 'modern' world.

The introduced cash crops were unfamiliar, and did not fit well into traditional cycles. They often required inputs such as fertilisers, extra labour and time, and more land.

Men now spend more time with cash crops and other enterprises, compared to food gardening. The women are often involved in both cash crops and food gardening, as well as taking care of the family.

The villagers have been drawn towards a nuclear family unit which has decreased the labour pool by diverting it to their own cash crops. Extra labour is often paid for.

Taro in the village today

Taro is no longer the traditional staple but people still talk about it. Only a small number of people grow taro but not the way their grandfathers used to grow taro. I was told they do it just for the fun of it.

The yield of taro is very poor. There is a high incidence of pests and diseases.

Taro requires fertile land and traditionally involves ceremonies and rituals, etc. However most land close to the village is occupied by cash crops. That means the women and children would have to walk long distances to cultivate taro. They would expect a good yield in order to walk that far.

The people today are so preoccupied with other things that they cannot possibly devote as much time as traditionally required, to grow taro.

Labour would be a problem. After all it is mostly the women who are involved in gardening today. If the men get themselves involved who would manage the cash crops which brings the family cash income?

If new land were cleared for taro, where would people grow their cash crops? After all each is expected to have his or her own area of cash crops. They need the money to pay head tax, children's school fees, build a permanent house, purchase steel tools and many more things to join this world of western civilisation.

So how can we bring back our traditional taro, together with all it's pasin tumbuna, without interfering with what we have to do today; or has it gone forever?