

# Probing the ignorance of Epistemic Indefinites: A (non)-Familiarity constraint<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Epistemic Indefinites (EI), with an added ‘ignorance’ component not seen with ordinary indefinites, are licensed in broadly two contexts. In one, there is ignorance of the witness of the existential claim among a plurality of referents in the domain. In the other, the witness of the existential claim can be identified, but there is ignorance about certain aspects of this witness. The first context is analysed as domain widening of some sort (Alonso-Ovalle and Menendez-Benito 2003, *et seq*). The second context is analysed as domain shifting (Aloni & Port 2010), with two identification methods at play, one required for knowledge (the ignorance component) and one used for specifying of the EI. Available identification schemes are naming, description, & ostension. We focus on the second context, and show that the Telugu EI *eed-oo/evan-oo* (which-DISJ/who-DISJ) ‘some-thing/body’ can be used even when the speaker has access to all 3 methods of identification, which should not be possible going by the domain shifting account. We propose a solution along the lines that if the speaker has recognized the person, *evan-oo/eed-oo* cannot be used. Similar to the familiarity theory of definiteness with discourse referents (Karttunen 1976) and ‘file cards’ (Heim 1983), we formalise this notion using mental referents and mental files (Recanati 2013, 2016).

## 1 Introduction

An Epistemic Indefinite (EI) has an added ‘ignorance’ component that is not present with an ordinary indefinite, as shown in (1)-(2).

- (1) a. *oka pustakamu kinda paDindi*  
one/a book down fell  
‘A book fell down.’  
Existential component:  $\exists x.book(x).fell\ down(x)$
- b. *eed-oo pustakamu kinda paDindi*  
which-DISJ book down fell  
‘Some book fell down.’  
Existential component:  $\exists x.book(x).fell\ down(x)$   
Modal component: The speaker does not know which book fell down.
- (2) a. *uma naa-ku oka pustakamu iccindi*  
Uma I-DAT one book gave  
‘Uma gave me a book.’  
Existential component:  $\exists x.book(x).give(Uma, x, me)$

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- b. uma naa-ku eed-oo pustakamu iccindi  
 Uma I-DAT which-DISJ book gave  
 ‘Uma gave me some book.’  
 Existential component:  $\exists x.book(x).give(Uma, x, me)$   
 Modal component: The speaker does not know which book Uma gave.

The question that comes up in this context is what counts as ignorance. How much can you know and still use *eed-oo*? What licenses *some* in English? When can you absolutely not use *eed-oo*? What anti-licenses *some*? The other question is how to encode the ignorance. What is the source? Is it pragmatic, an implicature, or is it conventionalized, part of the meaning, or is it domain widening, or is it domain shifting?

EIs are common cross-linguistically. As Haspelmath (1997) notes, they involve a “(lack of) knowledge of the speaker” and he also says that this phenomenon “has received very little attention in the theoretical literature.” In fact, they were first noticed by Strawson (1974) who says “that the choice of *some* rather than *a* embodies what might be called an acknowledgement or recognition of the fact that the identification supplied, though perhaps the best the speaker can do, might be regarded as inadequate to the circumstances of the case; and that the kind of identification which the choice of *some* rather than *a* indicates or suggests inability to provide (though perhaps sometimes accompanied by indifference to or unconcern about) **may be either further kind-identification or individual identification.**” (Strawson 1974: 92). He illustrates with the example given in (3).

- (3) Some V.I.P./cabinet minister/general has been shot.

Epistemic indefinites have been examined cross-linguistically in mostly Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages: English singular *some* (Becker 1999; Farkas 2002; Weir 2012), German *irgendein* (Kratzer and Shimoyama 2002; Aloni 2007; Lauer 2010; Port 2010; Aloni and Port 2013, Chierchia 2013), Spanish *algún* (Alonso-Ovalle & Menéndez-Benito 2003, 2008, 2010, 2011), Greek *kapjos* (Giannakidou and Quer 2013), French *quelque* (Jayez and Tovena 2007, 2013), Italian (un) *qualche* (Zamparelli 2007; Aloni and Port 2013; Chierchia 2013), Romanian *vreun* (Farkas 2002, 2006, Fălăuş 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014), Russian *-to* series & *-nibud* series (Geist 2008), Czech *-si* indefinites (Simík 2016), Slovak *vola-* and *si-* series (Richtarcikova 2013), Sinhala *wh-da* & *wh-hari* (Slade 2011), and the Japanese *wh-ka* indeterminates (Sudo 2010; Kaneko 2011; Alonso-Ovalle and Shimoyama 2014). They differ from each other in the environments licensed –they are sensitive to different types of knowledge. Here we will examine the Telugu EI *eed-oo/evan-oo* ‘what-DISJ/who-DISJ’ paired with singular NPs.

EIs vary in their properties. Some EIs don’t mind reinforcement, whereas others do. Some EIs don’t mind cancellation, others do. Telugu *eed-oo* doesn’t like cancellation, as shown in (4).

- (4) a. oka pustakamu kinda paDindi. adi naa diary  
 one/a book down fell that my diary  
 ‘A book fell down. It is my diary.’  
 b. eed-oo pustakamu kinda paDindi. #adi naa diary  
 which-DISJ book down fell that my diary  
 ‘Some book fell down. It is my diary.’

Telugu *eed-oo* also doesn't like being reinforced, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. oka pustakamu kinda paDindi. adi eed-oo naa-ku teliyadu  
 one/a book down fell that which-DISJ I-to know-not  
 'A book fell down. I don't know which one it is.'
- b. eed-oo pustakamu kinda paDindi. #adi eed-oo naa-ku teliyadu  
 which-DISJ book down fell that which-DISJ I-to know-not  
 'Some book fell down. I don't know which one it is.'

This is in line with the generalisation in the literature that the more 'specialized' the morphologically, the more pronounced the ignorance effect.

In this paper we first examine the proposals for explaining the ignorance component in the literature, and show how they fail with the Telugu data in §2, before attempting a formalization of our own proposal for the Telugu indefinites, in §3.

## 2 What is the Speaker ignorant of?

Epistemic indefinites are licensed in broadly two contexts. In one, there is ignorance of the witness of the existential claim among a plurality of referents in the domain. In the other, the witness of the existential claim can be identified, but there is ignorance about certain aspects of this witness.

### 2.1 Case 1: Multiple referents

The speaker doesn't know who or what the witness of the existential claim is:

- (6) a. **Context:** Speaker is sitting with 3 others on a sofa. When he/she bends down to tie shoelaces, one of the others pulls his/her hair. The speaker doesn't see who.
- b. (mii-loo) evar-oo naa juTTu laageeru  
 you-in who-DISJ my hair pulled  
 'Someone (among you) pulled my hair.'

This can be captured using von Stechow's formulation for *some* (that he adapted from Dayal's *whatever*) –variation of the individuals satisfying the existential claim across the speaker's epistemic worlds.

- (7) a. LF: some (P) (Q)  
 b.  $\exists w', w'' \in D_w [\{x : P(w')(x) \& Q(w')(x)\} \neq \{x : P(w'')(x) \& Q(w'')(x)\}]$  ( $D_w$  is the set of worlds compatible with the speaker's evidence in  $w$ )

This is also captured in an implicature approach (Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito (AO-MB) 2003, 2008, 2010, 2011a; Chierchia 2006, 2013; Fălăș 2009, 2011a,b, 2014) by saying that the EI is a domain widener: The domain of existential quantification is maximal. Domain widening is costly. It signals that alternative, more specific, smaller domains are false, lead to false claims. We can illustrate with an example: Let's say the 3 others sitting on the sofa are A, B, C. Then we get the implicatures and their exhaustification as shown in (8).

- (8) a. In all accessible worlds, Someone among A, B, C pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 b. Alternatives/Competitors:  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among A, B pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among A, C pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among C, B pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among A pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among B pulled the Speaker's hair.  
 In all accessible worlds, Someone among C pulled the Speaker's hair.

But suppose there is only partial variation, and not all the alternatives are live, as shown in (9b). Here Uma does not know where Ravi is, but not all rooms are epistemic possibilities. This is not *total* variation or ignorance, only *partial* variation or ignorance.

- (9) a. **Context:** Ravi and Uma are playing hide-and-seek. Uma knows that Ravi is hiding in the house and she knows that he is not in the bedrooms, but he could be in any of the others:  
 b. Ravi eed-oo room-loo unnaaDu.  
 Ravi which-DISJ room-in is  
 'Ravi is in some room.'

AO-MB model this partial variation scenario as an anti-singleton constraint, as shown in (10):

- (10) a.  $[[\text{algun}]] = \lambda f. \lambda P_{\langle e,t \rangle} : |f(P)| \succ 1 . \lambda Q_{\langle e,t \rangle} \exists x [f(P)(x) \ \& \ Q(x)]$   
 b. Domain (P) = {bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, study, dining room, living room}  
 c.  $f(P) = \{\text{bathroom, kitchen, study, dining, living}\}$   
 d. In all accessible worlds, Ravi is in a room in Bath, Kitchen, Study, Dining.  
 e. Alternatives/Competitors:  
 In all accessible worlds, Ravi is in a room in Bath.  
 In all accessible worlds, Ravi is in a room in Kitchen. Etc.  
 f. All the alternatives are False.

## 2.2 Case 2: Single referent

In these cases, the speaker can identify the witness of the existential claim, by ostension, for example, as shown in (11a).

- (11) a. **Context:** At the conference dinner, the speaker is pointing out to his/her friend a delegate who has climbed onto the table and is singing:  
 b. A: evar-oo delegate table ekki paaDutunnaaru  
 who-DISJ delegate table climbed singing  
 A: 'Some delegate is singing climbing onto the table.'  
 c. B: evaru? 'who' A (pointing): atanu 'that person'

The use of a demonstrative, a rigid designator, picks out the *same* individual across the speaker's epistemic worlds. There is going to be no variation, the variation condition is not met, as shown in (12). But *evar-oo* is good here. So this analysis won't work.

$$(12) \quad \exists w', w'' \in D_w [\{x : P(w')(x) \& Q(w')(x)\} = \{x : P(w'')(x) \& Q(w'')(x)\}]$$

Should the variation condition be scrapped? A Lewisian ontology could save the variation condition (AO&MB), as shown in (13a).

- (13) a. Individuals exist in only one world (the real one). Cross-world identity is modelled via counterpart relations. Counterpart relations are *similarity* relations. For  $x$  to be a counterpart of  $y$ ,  $x$  and  $y$  have to be substantially similar, along a certain dimension.
- b.  $\exists w', w'' \in D_w [\{x : P(w')(x) \& Q(w')(x)\} \neq \{x : P(w'')(x) \& Q(w'')(x)\}]$   
 $\equiv$  is the counterpart relation that the context demands.

For example, if *ostension* is the counterpart relation that is available, but if the context demands *naming* as the counterpart relation, the EI can be used felicitously.

Aloni & Port (2010, 2013) base their analysis on such a contextually determined ‘identification’ condition, implemented in a dynamic semantics framework: “On the one hand, the indefinite is used specifically. Traditionally, this means that the speaker has someone in mind, that is, she can identify the referent of the indefinite. On the other hand, the use of an EI conveys that the speaker does not know who the referent is, that is, she cannot identify the referent of the indefinite.” (Aloni & Port 2015 p.129). As they say “two identification methods are at play here: the speaker can identify on one method (for example by description) but not on another (for example naming)” and the “referents of EIs are typically identified via a method different from the one contextually required for knowledge.” Finally, “the notion of a Contextual Cover-shift is the technical counterpart of this intuition.” For example, the “typical situation in which EIs are used is one in which the speaker can identify the referent by description, but not by name. Another quite typical situation is one in which she can identify by name, but not by ostension.” This is shown in (14).

- (14) a. I have to meet some professor. He is the Head-of-Dept. But I don’t know his name.  
 Speaker-can-identify → Description, Contextually-required → Naming
- b. I have to meet some professor. His name is Noam Chomsky. But I don’t know what he looks like.  
 Speaker-can-identify → Naming, Contextually-required → Ostension
- c. Some professor is singing on the table. Over there in the corner.  
 Speaker-can-identify → Ostension, Contextually-required → Naming  
 German: Good; Italian: Bad

The contrast between German and Italian motivates their ranking, as shown in (15):

- (15) a. Ostension  $\succ$  Naming  $\succ$  Description
- b. In Romance, but not in Germanic, the identification method required for knowledge must be higher in order than the identification method required for specific uses of EIs

So if a referent is identified by ostension, then EIs should be infelicitous in Romance, but not in Germanic.

## 2.3 The problem of the Telugu EI

The properties we know about EIs are that the EI is relativized to an epistemic modal base which always obeys variation (and uniformity on one dimension): either the speaker doesn't know who the witness is among many others –a plurality of potential referents; or the speaker knows the witness by one method of identification, but not by some other(s). An analysis to cover both properties would say that variation is caused by indeterminacy of the existential claim: variation of individuals yields non-constant reference; and variation of properties that lead to individuation which are less fine-grained than getting all the way down to the individual yield a single referent but varying on some dimension. The identification schemes that are in play are Naming, Description, and Ostension.

But these Identification Schemes fail for the Telugu EI. Consider the example shown in (16), where the Speaker has access to all three methods of identification, and yet use the EI.

- (16) a. **Context:** Speaker can read the name-tag (with name and affiliation) of the person standing on the table and singing:  
 b. Ravi Sen, HoD, EFLU ani zevar-oo professor table ekki paaDutunnaaDu  
 Ravi Sen, HoD, EFLU said who-DISJ professor table climbed singing  
 'Some Professor called Ravi Sen, HOD, EFLU, is singing on the table.'

How can the EI be used if Naming, Description, Ostension are all available to the Speaker?

On the other hand, there are context where the Speaker cannot use the EI *eed-oo/evar-oo*, even if there is an Identification Scheme that the speaker does not have access to, as shown in (17).

- (17) a. **Context:** Speaker sees his next-door neighbor (of whom he knows nothing, except that he lives next door) slip and fall on the road:  
 b. #evar-oo jaari paDDaaru  
 who-DISJ slipped fell  
 'Somebody slipped and fell.'

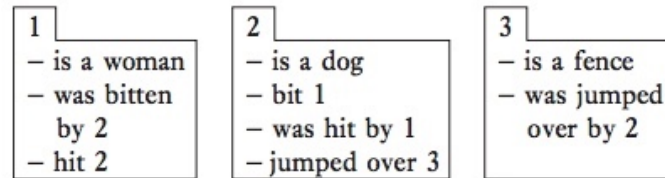
In the above context the Speaker is more ignorant of the witness to the existential claim than in the previous context where the Speaker knew the name and description. So there is more variation, more possible worlds compatible with the speaker's epistemic state in the above example than in the previous example. Yet the example is bad. No variation story can save this situation. If the Speaker has *recognized* the person, he cannot use the EI. But what does 'recognized' mean? How do we formalize it?

## 3 Mental referents

Our proposal is that the Identification Scheme at work here is *familiarity*. We formalize it in the following way. We already know Discourse Referents, going back to Karttunen, and Heim (1983) and the familiarity theory of definiteness: A definite is used to refer to something that is already familiar at the current stage of the conversation. An indefinite is used to introduce a new referent. Karttunen reformulates the familiarity theory using the notion of "discourse reference". A definite NP must pick an already familiar discourse referent, whereas an indefinite NP always introduces a

new discourse referent. An NP may have a discourse referent even when it has no referent. Heim (1983) identifies Karttunen’s discourse referents with “file cards”, as shown in (18).

(18) A woman was bitten by a dog. (b) She hit it. (c) It jumped over a fence



### 3.1 Recognitional files, Mental Referents, and Mental Files

In our analysis we will make use of Recanati’s Mental Files (2013, 2016): To have a singular thought about an object, a subject must have a mental file that refers to the object. To have a mental file, the subject must be acquainted with its referent. Acquaintance is a relation through which a subject receives information from an object –An Epistemically Rewarding (ER) relation. Mental files are typed by acquaintance relations. Each file-type  $M$  is associated with an acquaintance relation  $R_M$  such that the referent of a file-token  $m$  of type  $M$  is the unique object  $o$  to which the subject stands in the  $R_M$  relation. The referent of a mental file is the dominant source of, rather than the object that best satisfies, the (mis)information contained in the file. Thus mental files have a non-descriptive semantics and so they are the mental analogues of referring terms.

Most mental files exist only as long as the relation they exploit contextually holds —*demonstrative files*: “when a demonstrative mode of presentation comes out of existence because the demonstrative relation on which it is based no longer holds, another relation comes to hold, in virtue of which I remember the object.”: *memory demonstrative file* Through our memories of the object, we can focus our attention on it even after the perceptual encounter has ended. The memory demonstrative itself is converted into a *recognitional demonstrative* file when the object is re-encountered. Multiple exposure to that object then creates and maintains in the subject a disposition to recognize that object, via a stable *recognitional* file. The relation to the object is now ‘familiarity’. Our claim is that recognitional file anti-licenses *eed-oo*.

The recognitional file doesn’t have to contain perceptual information (visual, auditory, etc), it can just be some ‘handle’ on that entity/individual, as shown in (19):

- (19) a. **Context:** You’ve been telling your mother about a new friend you made at work/university, called Ravi. She doesn’t know how this Ravi looks like or sounds like. Ravi calls you at home and your mother answers. If she makes the connection with the recognitional file she has opened for Ravi then,
- nii-koosam (#evar-oo) Ravi phone ceeseDu  
 you-for who-DISJ Ravi phone made  
 ‘Ravi has phoned for you.’
- b. **Context:** If she doesn’t make the connection to the recognitional file:

nii-koosam Ravi ani evar-oo phone ceeseDu  
 you-for Ravi said who-DISJ phone made  
 ‘Somebody called Ravi has phoned for you.’

### 3.2 Recognitional files: Human vs. others

Both *eed-oo* & *some* are sensitive to whether the referent is human or not, as shown in (20).

- (20) a. Some professor is dancing on the table.  
 b. ??Some monkey is dancing on the table.

Weir (2012) takes recourse to the ‘anti-singleton’ constraint of Alonso-Ovalle & Menendez-Benito (2010) to explain the contrast in examples like those in (21) and (22).

- (21) a. ??Some statue is in the middle of the square. [looking at it]  
 b. ??I saw some building on my way through the desert.  
 c. ??There’s some letter in my mailbox [looking at it]
- (22) a. Somebody is in the middle of the square. [looking at the person]  
 b. I saw someone on a camel on my way through the desert.  
 c. There’s somebody in my room. [looking at the person]

Weir (2012) states that “A speaker uses *some NP<sub>thing</sub>* to signal that she could not, if presented with the extension of NP, reliably differentiate the witness of the existential claim from everything else in the extension of NP. A speaker says *some NP<sub>sub-kind</sub>* to signal that she cannot restrict to a singleton the set of subkinds within the extension of NP to which the witness of the existential claim belongs.”

We can here ask the question, why do humans go down to the level of individuals, and non-humans to the kind/sub-kind level? We suggest that it is because that’s how we cognitively ‘parse’ them and ‘store’ them. Humans go down to the level of individuals. Non-humans stop at the sub-kind/species level, as illustrated in the examples in (refsoup).

- (23) a. naa soup-loo eed-oo purugu undi  
 my soup-in what-DISJ insect is  
 ‘There’s some insect in my soup.’  
 b. ??naa soup-loo eed-oo ciima undi  
 my soup-in what-DISJ ant is  
 Intended: ‘There’s some ant in my soup.’  
 c. naa soup-loo (oka) ciima undi  
 my soup-in (one) ant is  
 ‘There’s an ant in my soup.’  
 d. swimming pool-loo evar-oo unnaaru  
 swimming pool-in who-DISJ is  
 ‘There’s someone in the swimming pool.’

The individual vs. sub-kind difference that *eed-oo* is sensitive to tracks the individual vs. sub-kind



difference in recognitional files for humans vs. non-humans. Some non-humans like books, dogs, pets, can go down to the individual level. On the other hand some humans can stop at the sub-kind level like policemen, watchmen, soldiers, etc (people in uniform).

### 3.2.1 Kind files

We can capture this difference by using the distinction of *natural-kind concepts*: A variety of recognitional files whose content is not an individual object. We can then posit that humans have individual recognitional files, whereas non-humans have natural-kind recognitional files

- (24)
- a. (i) I saw a camel on the way here.  
(ii) #I saw some camel on the way here.
  - b. (i) I saw a man on a unicycle on the way here.  
(ii) I saw some man on a unicycle on the way here.
  - c. (i) There is some plant growing out of the wall of my room (Weir 2012).  
(ii) I saw some appliance/gadget on the kitchen table this morning.

This is similar to the *type* vs. *token* distinction in Japanese (Alonso-Ovalle & Shimoyama 2014), where *dore-ka* is for tokens and *nani-ka* is for types.

### 3.3 Recognitional Files: Celebrities

But in certain contexts, like with heads-of-state and celebrities, *eed-oo* is anti-licensed even where there does not seem to be a recognitional file, as shown in (25a).

- (25)
- a. **Context:** You are watching a news channel. They are telecasting live from the UN. Suddenly there are gun-shots and commotion. The ticker flashes that the President of Peru has been shot. You say to your friend:  
Peru President-ni shoot ceeseeru  
Peru President-ACC shoot did  
'Peru's President is shot.'
  - b. **Context:** You are watching a news channel. The news is about a shooting in a school.  
America school-loo John Smith anee evar-oo student-ni shoot ceeseeru  
America school-in John Smith said who-*disj* student-*acc* shoot did  
'Some student called John Smith in a school in America was shot.'

So does this mean that celebrities or V.I.Ps are more easily familiar than non-celebrities? It could also be that the notion of familiarity with a celebrity is suitably calibrated to the distance that celebrities keep from ordinary folk, or some relative metric like that. Another possibility is that these are actually Kind recognitional files and not Individual recognitional files. It could also be that we expect hearers also to be familiar with them, taking hearers into the computation of the notion of familiarity.

### 3.4 *Some* doesn't care for recognitional files

English *some* can be used for an entity that the speaker has a recognitional file for, as shown in (26).

- (26) a. Ravi is someone that I know from childhood.  
b. This curry is something I've eaten since childhood.

This is of course not possible with *eed-oo/evar-oo*, as shown in (27).

- (27) #Ravi naa-ku evar-oo baagaa telisinavaaDu  
Ravi me-to who-DISJ very-well known-guy  
Intended: 'Ravi is someone that I know very well.'

So *eed-oo/evar-oo* and *some* split ways here. While recognitional files anti-license *eed-oo/evar-oo*, they don't anti-license *some*.

## 4 Conclusion

In this paper we saw clear evidence for an Identification Scheme beyond Naming, Description, Ostension to capture the distribution of the Telugu EI *eed-oo* —Familiarity. We made an initial attempt at grounding this identification scheme in the notion of mental recognitional files of various kinds, with humans being sensitive to Individual recognitional files and non-humans being sensitive to Kind recognitional files.

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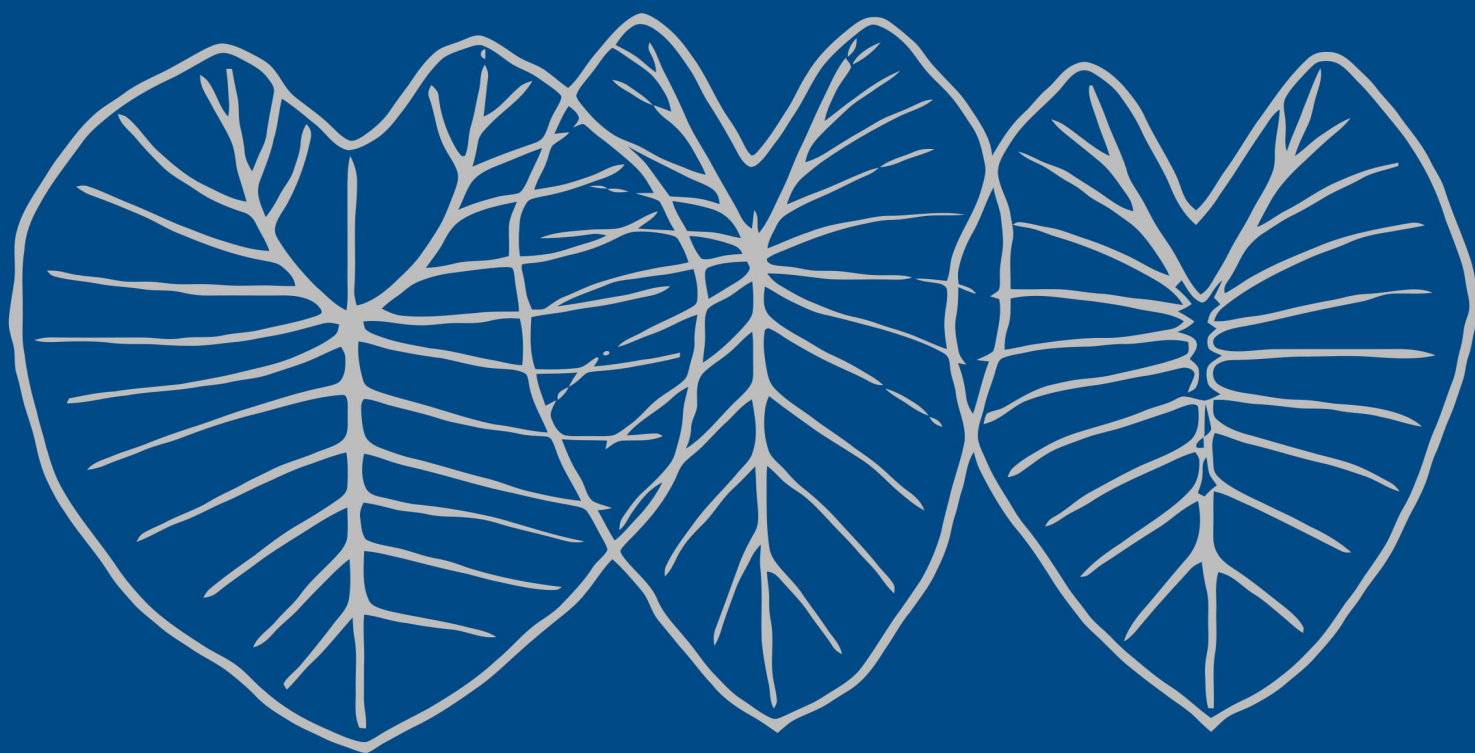
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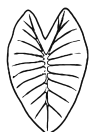
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