

Trepang and Lalipan

A Linguistic Note towards the Reconstruction of Social History of Maritime Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Sama is the self-appointed name of the people who live in the coral reef area of the sea, straddling the Sulu Archipelago in southwestern Philippines, eastern coast of Malaysian Borneo, and eastern Indonesia. Known to others as Bajau or Bajo, the Sama are generally considered as “sea nomads” that generally subsist by fishing while moving around in houseboats. Their unsettled or mobile way of life sometimes causes them to be socio-economically discriminated against. However, a number of Sama live along the seaside, among which there are some groups whose history of this boating way of life is not clear.

The Sama are linguistically divided into nine groups: the Abaknon, Balangingi, Central Sama, Pangutaran, Southern Sama, Yakan, Mapun, West Coast Bajau, and Indonesian Bajau [Akamine 2005]. Like the hunters and gatherers who also do not produce such carbohydrates as rice and tubers, the Sama have a strength in commerce. They only target aquatic products they can take directly to the market rather than assuming a more passive course of selling only the excess of what they catch.

A striking characteristic of their fishing industry is that they specialize in harvesting and producing dried marine products such as shark fins and sea cucumber that can be consumed in the Chinese culinary sphere, what the Asian Studies specialist Tsurumi Yoshiyuki terms *specialty marine products* (SMP) [Tsurumi 1987]. For example, from the second half of the eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, the Sama and other coastal people in the surrounding area were subordinated to the Tausug royalty that ruled over a sultanate or Islamic kingdom on the Sulu Archipelago. The prosperity of

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the kingdom was supported by the SMP harvested by the Sama that could be sold in the Chinese market [Warren 1981]. Most of the Sama were subordinated to the king and the aristocracy as collectors of the SMP, especially sea cucumber in infinite coral reefs around the archipelago, which may have led to the discrimination that the Sama face even today.

This short article aims at advancing a working hypothesis that trepang, a Malay word for sea cucumber, may be derived from the Sama language as a first step towards reconsidering a role the Sama played in the maritime history of Southeast Asia.

I IS TREPANG A MALAY WORD?

Holothuria is the scientific term of the animal commonly known in English as a sea cucumber. In addition, the English dictionary often mentions the term “trepang,” taken from the Malay language, to refer to sea cucumbers.

According to the 2nd edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the term “trepang” entered English as a loanword around 1783. The OED offers the following inaccurate explanations:

1783 [Celebes] furnishes *tripam*, a species of mushroom, which increases in value in proportion to the roundness of it's form, and the blackness of it's color.

1793 The *tripam* is a little spongy plant without root, and like a mushroom... It grows in great profusion in the island of Celebes.

These descriptions are wrong in that they treat trepang as a plant, but they noticed important characteristics of sea cucumber trades: the blackness of its color and an importance of Sulawesi (Celebes) as a entrepôt of sea cucumber trades harvested in presently eastern Indonesian waters.

Relying on actual observation rather than hearsay, the same dictionary reports that in 1802 an English navy in the northern waters in contemporary Australia made the log entry, “sea swallow (called beach de mar by the Portuguese, and *trepang* by the Malays).”

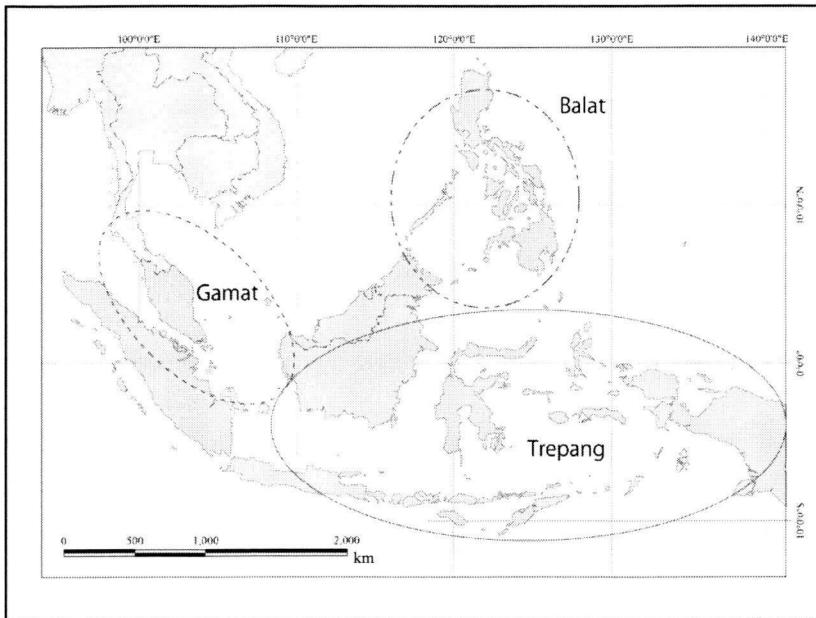


Figure 1 General terms for sea cucumber in maritime Southeast Asia

Source: Akamine [2010]

The common names for sea cucumbers in Maritime Southeast Asia are displayed in Figure 1: classified into three groups such as the gamat zone, the balat zone and the trepang zone¹⁾. It appears that while sea cucumbers are generally called “gamat” on the Malay Peninsula [Burkill 1966: 1200], they are commonly called “trepang” in Indonesia.

We should note in particular that the English navy recorded the term in the adjoining waters with the current eastern Indonesian Islands. “Malay” in the explanation of the OED, thus, should be interpreted as Malay peoples from the eastern part of the Indonesian Islands. The OED crystallizes the diligent work of collecting the first examples of words and phrases from an enormous body of literature, but inquiry into the origins of loanwords from non Indo-European languages is insufficient. I contend that the origin of “trepang” is not Malay, as the OED holds, but rather comes from the vernacular languages in eastern Indonesia.

1) To mention only briefly, sea cucumbers in the Philippines are commonly known as “balat,” “balatan,” or “bat.” Taking “balat” as the base form, plurals are constructed by adding the suffix “-an,” yielding “balat-an.” The consonant “l” sandwiched between the two vowels “a” is then omitted, yielding “bat.” Apparently the original meaning was “skin,” “hide,” or “peel” [Zorc 1979: 35].

II CENTIPEDE OR PINEAPPLE

My assumption is that the origin of “trepang” comes from the Sama term “lalipan”, referring to centipede. In the Philippines, a species of sea cucumber, *Thelenota ananas*, is commonly known by the similar sounding terms “talipan,” “taripan,” and “dalipan.” However, if one asks native speakers about the original meanings of the term itself, they reply only that “it means ‘sea cucumber’” and can offer no explanation about its origin.

Although the beautiful yellow-brown color unfortunately cannot be reproduced, Photos 1 and 2 below show the *Thelenota ananas*. This centipede-like sea cucumber is described in the Southern Sama language as a “centipede sea cucumber” (*bat lalipan*), and one can infer that only the “centipede” part was transmitted as a particular name across the Philippine Archipelago. Even though the languages of the Philippines have their own individual terms for “centipede” such as *ulahipan* (Tagalog), *alahipan* (Hiligaynon), *uhipan* (Cebuano), *ulalahipan* (Waray), and *lahipan* (Tausug), there is a strong probability that these were borrowed from the Sama language term “talipan/daripan” to refer to *Thelenota ananas*.

Was the term transmitted southwards from the Sulu Archipelago? To answer this question, I cannot assume that the term centipede sea cucumber was established only in the Philippines prior to the formation of the modern states of Malaysia and Indonesia. Rather, I should hypothesize that it was a household word in the area in which the Sama lived, even including on the islands of what is now Indonesia.

In Bahasa Indonesia, the national language in Indonesia, the general term for sea cucumbers is “trepang” – the term also found in the OED. The *Thelenota ananas* in question is called “trepang nanas” in Indonesia. “Nanas” means pineapple in the language.

From what time did the term pineapple sea cucumber spread across the Indonesian



Photo 1 *Thelenota ananas*.

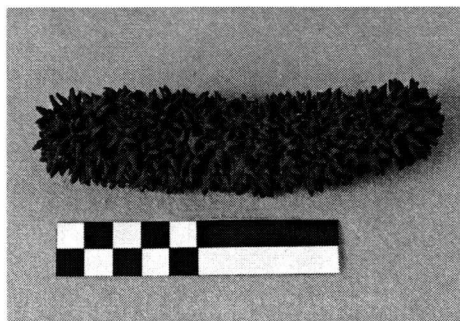


Photo 2 Dried *Thelenota ananas*.

Archipelago? Or, to rephrase the question, from which regional language does the figure of speech “pineapple sea cucumber” originate? While I do not have the materials to offer a complete explanation, I would like to highlight that the term “pineapple sea cucumber” is commonly understood in the Indonesian Islands, but that other terms are employed in vernacular languages, especially in the eastern part of Indonesia. For example, the Sama people of central Sulawesi call this species “*balaq talipang*.” “Balaq” means sea cucumber, and “talipang” means centipede in Indonesian Bajau. Thus, the slightly changed sounds of “sea cucumber” and “centipede” appear in an identical expression in the Sama languages of the Philippines.

I suspect that this does not necessarily indicate the direct influence of the Sama languages of the Sulu Archipelago onto Bahasa Indonesia, but that the term “talipang,” /talipan/, which means “centipede” in Indonesian Bajau, was probably borrowed for use as the general term for sea cucumber through a change from talipan > *taripan > *tarepan > *tərepan > trepan.

III CI-SHEN AND GUANG-SHEN IN CHINESE SEA CUCUMBER MARKET

Why was *Thelenota ananas* among others originally adopted as a pronoun for general term representing sea cucumber? While only a tautological explanation is possible, it is likely that the spiky “pineapple sea cucumbers” were considered very “sea cucumber-like sea cucumbers.”

“Sea cucumber-ness” is not something that the Sama decided upon, but is derived from the sense of the Chinese people who were their consumers. The Chinese classify sea cucumbers into two types depending on their shape. Just as described in the section on sea cucumbers in *Bencao Gangmu Shiyi*, compiled in 1765, the Chinese call sea cucumbers with spikes “ci-shen” (spiky sea cucumber) and those without “guang-shen” (shiny sea cucumber) [Zhao 1971: 494]. “Spikes” actually refer to the parapodia lining a sea cucumber’s back and sides that harden when dried.

There are some morphological and ecological differences between ci-shen and guang-shen. Generally speaking, ci-shen are slim and small, but guang-shen are meaty and large. Ci-shen are most common among temperate sea cucumbers, while guang-shen are more typical among tropical ones. *Thelenota ananas* is of a tropical spiked variety, and spiky species are quite rare in tropical waters. It is not hard to imagine that such a sea cucumber,

seeming to hold the essence of sea cucumber-ness, was highly valued in the eastern seas of Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century²⁾.

CONCLUSION

The fragmentary historical materials I have gathered and discussed above can be used as data for the following hypothesis: the OED hypothesis that “trepang” originated in Malay but the source of the Sama term centipede sea cucumber can be persuasive.

In contrast to the image typically given to the boat dwellings and unique ways of life of insignificant fishing people, the Sama people must have occupied a central position in the sea cucumber industry in the eastern seas of Southeast Asia.

Needless to say, the suggested conjectures concerning the fragmentarily employed relations of terms for sea cucumbers in the scenario discussed above are restrictive. We should pay attention to not only sea cucumbers, but also tortoise shells and pearls and other marine goods that have circulated in maritime societies since times past. Furthermore, the route taken by “trepang” as it became an English loanword has not been satisfactorily examined from a theoretical historical linguistics point of view. Paralinguistic fieldwork is necessary to examine the voyage records of the navy and merchants written in Spanish or Dutch and investigate in which contexts trepang was used. It is perhaps an endless project, but going beyond simply the research of sea cucumbers to firmly establish “holothuriology” is a vision I hold, and I hope I have been able to take a step in that direction.

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2) Chinese do not think that centipedes have particular appeal, but they call *Thelenota ananas* “plum blossoms sea cucumber” (meihuashen).

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