

Perceptions of Sundanese Men Towards the Consumption of Water Monitor Lizard Meat in West Java, Indonesia

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Abstract - Water monitor lizard (*Varanus salvator*) meat is occasionally consumed in Java, Indonesia, mainly as a novelty food or because of perceived medicinal properties or health benefits. Islam is the main religion on Java and given its carnivorous diet, *V. salvator* meat is generally perceived to be unfit for consumption by Muslims. Discussions with 17 Sundanese men from the southern part of West Java with first or second-hand knowledge of the consumption of *V. salvator* meat showed that the main reasons for consumption are (a) its novelty, (b) perceived medical properties or health benefits, and (c) perceived aphrodisiac properties. Apart from one, the informants did not see any religious, moral or legal reasons not to consume *V. salvator* meat.

Introduction

Uyeda *et al.* (2014) reported on the consumption of Asian water monitor lizard (*Varanus salvator*) meat in two villages in the province of Banten, Java, Indonesia, where 14 informants provided information about its uses. *Varanus salvator* meat was stated to be a remedy for common skin ailments including eczema, and two participants had eaten monitor lizard meat as a source of protein. Uyeda *et al.* (2014) were of the opinion that *V. salvator* meat was seldom used in Indonesia, and singled out three largely Christian ethnic groups (Bataks in Sumatra, Dayaks in Kalimantan and Minahasans in Sulawesi) as ones that did. They were of the opinion that monitor lizards were especially rarely eaten in predominantly Muslim areas due to religious restrictions on its consumption. Nijman (2015), based on a review of the literature and accounts on the Internet, found that the use of water monitor meat was far more widespread in Java than the report from Uyeda *et al.* (2014) indicated, and estimated that at least 50,000 *V. salvator* were consumed annually on Java alone. These contrasting reports suggests that perceptions towards the consumption of *V. salvator* may differ between and within ethnic groups, similarly to what has been found by Bolton (1972) for the Orang Asli in Peninsular

Malaysia.

Varanus salvator is not included on Indonesia's list of protected animals (Noerjito & Maryanto, 2001), and thus its consumption by any given individual is legal. However, trade in unprotected species is subject to a quota system (Siswomartono, 1998) and it is highly unlikely that the proprietors of food stalls or restaurants serving *V. salvator* meat have received part of these quotas (Nijman, 2015). This makes the selling of water monitor meat illegal. However, the trade in *V. salvator* meat is open, and to the best of my knowledge no one has ever been prosecuted for trading in it. The Sundanese (*i.e.*, the people that live in western Java where both Uyeda *et al.* and I work) are largely Muslim (*i.e.*, over 97%: BPS, 2010), and just like all carnivore meat it is generally believed that monitor lizard meat is *haram* (forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law). However, in Indonesia, some imams and Islamic scholars have equated the monitor lizard to the Dhabb mentioned in the Koran, and concluded that its meat is *halal* (permissible for Muslims to eat) (Ahlussunnah, 2013).

Here, a report is given on the perceptions of ethnic Sundanese men living in the southern part of the province of West Java towards the consumption of *V. salvator* meat. The meat is served primarily in specialised 'novelty-food' restaurants or food stalls, which are

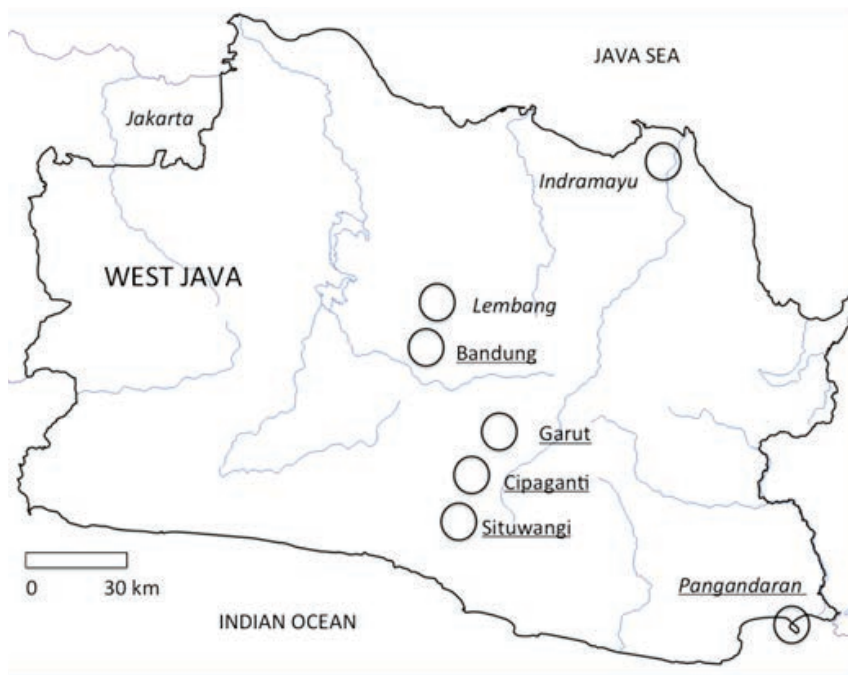


Fig. 1. The province of West Java, Indonesia, with survey locations (underlined) and towns where water monitor lizard meat is sold (Italics) according to local informants.

concentrated in a few geographic localities. Apart from a novelty food, and a remedy for skin ailments, it is widely believed that it can cure asthma and, more commonly, that it acts as an aphrodisiac.

Methods

Between 13 and 22 December 2015 the southern part of West Java, Indonesia, was visited and information was gathered on the use of and perceptions towards the consumption of *V. salvator* (locally known as *biawak* in Bahasa Indonesia or *bayawak/biayawak* in Bahasa Sunda). Seventeen men (2 in Bandung, 1 in Garut, 9 in Cipaganti, 2 in Situwangi, and 3 in Pangandaran; Fig. 1), with first- or second-hand knowledge of the consumption of water monitors were located opportunistically. All but two were born in the region, and considered themselves ethnic Sundanese (the exceptions being one man from Palembang in Sumatra, who had lived in Bandung for 12 years and one man from Jakarta who for work travelled through this part of West Java on a regular basis), and all were Muslim. Five men were farmers or farm workers, four were drivers, two were secondary school teachers, two were entrepreneurs, and one was a rickshaw driver; for the other three men their profession is not known. *Varanus salvator* is common in Pangandaran, and, according to informants, is present in Garut, Situwangi and parts of Bandung. None are present in Cipaganti, possibly because it is located at

too high an altitude (1,300 m asl), but they are present at lower elevations. Discussions typically started with the topic of *sate kambing* (goat satay, a common dish, comprising of grilled meat on skewers, served with peanut sauce, sweet soya sauce, chillies and shallots) and *sate kelinci* (rabbit satay, a less common dish), after which the informant often brought up the topic of *sate biawak / bayawak* when asked about other satay dishes. Discussions were held with informants one at a time, as to ensure independence of the data (Lammertink *et al.*, 2003), and lasted anywhere between 5 and 30 minutes (frequently the discussion moved to another topic such as the weather, economics or governance, only for the topic of *sate biawak* to be brought up again later on). All discussions were held in Bahasa Indonesia, with the key words being repeated in Bahasa Sunda. While I had a list of questions, given the informal nature of the discussions, not all were brought up with every informant.

Results

Two of the men had consumed *V. salvator* sate themselves – one in Lembang north of Bandung and one in Pangandaran; the other 15 had second-hand knowledge of the topic. Lembang was mentioned ten times as a place where water monitor meat dishes were offered for sale, Pangandaran three times and Indramayu, a coastal town known for its consumption of wild meat

Table 1. Use of water monitor lizard *Varanus salvator* meat by Sundanese in two provinces in western Java (West Java: this study, Banten: Uyeda *et al.* 2014). Informants often gave multiple reasons for consuming monitor lizard meat.

Reason for consumption	West Java (n=17)	Banten (n=14)
Novelty food	16	0
Skin ailments / eczema	6	12
Aphrodisiac	4	0
General health benefits	3	0
Asthma	1	2
Burns or sores	1	1

(McCarthy & Noor, 1996), and Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, once.

The most common reason for consuming *V. salvator* meat was because of it being different from other meats; *i.e.*, it was perceived as a novelty food (Table 1). In addition, it was widely perceived as a cure for different skin ailments, including eczema. One informant was of the opinion that it would help with the healing of burns, and one mentioned it to provide relief from asthma. Four informants stated that the main reason for consuming water monitor meat was because of its perceived aphrodisiac properties.

All but one of the informants (an Islamic teacher in Situwangi) were of the opinion that there was no religious or moral reason not to eat water monitor meat. It was perceived as a suitable meat fit for consumption, but many pointed out that given its perceived medical properties it was fine to use it, even if it was considered *haram* for normal consumption. The teacher was adamant that *V. salvator* meat was not fit for consumption for Muslims but it would be fine for non-Muslims to eat it. With four informants the legality of the trade in *V. salvator* was discussed. Two explicitly mentioned that given that the species was not protected under Indonesian law, its trade and consumption was legal. The two others likewise did not see any restrictions on the consumption and trade in *V. salvator*, with one adding that it was generally a common species and not in need of any protective measures.

Discussion

This reports adds to two previous reports on the trade of water monitors in Java (Uyeda *et al.*, 2014; Nijman, 2015), most likely all referring to *V. s. bivittatus* which is endemic to Java and the Lesser Sunda Islands (Koch

et al., 2013). The views expressed by Sundanese men in West Java are in part similar to those recorded by Uyeda *et al.* (2014) in Banten, with the difference that theirs was more focused on the meat's medicinal properties. The most common reason for consuming it in this study was that *V. salvator* meat was perceived as a novelty food, worthy of exploring by some. Just as Uyeda *et al.* (2014) reported, the number of informants that had actually consumed water monitor meat was small, *i.e.*, between 12-14%, but its availability and its perceived benefits were widely known.

Lembang is well-known for its exotic dishes and the sale of *V. salvator* meat in this montane resort has been covered widely by the Indonesian media (Ahmad, 2013; Mutayasaroh, 2015). Given this, and its close proximity to the interview sites, it is therefore not surprising that Lembang was frequently mentioned as the place to eat *V. salvator* meat. According to Suganda (2011) in 2010 there was just one kiosk offering water monitor meat in the Lembang area, but according to the informants it is more widely available at present. As such, it is part of the trend of eating a wider range of exotic dishes, something that is known in Java as '*kuliner ekstrem*' (Nijman, 2015). A somewhat surprising finding of the present study was the wide acceptance of water monitor meat amongst the Muslim Sundanese. Partially because of its perceived health benefits or medical properties, *sate biawak* was widely seen as an acceptable source of protein for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, at least amongst those familiar with the dish. As indicated elsewhere (Nijman, 2015), trade in monitor lizards in Indonesia is subject to a quota system, and the sale of *V. salvator* meat should be regulated by the Regional Offices for the Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) (Siswomartono, 1998), but this apparently is not the case. *Varanus salvator* is heavily exploited

in Indonesia, largely for skins, and the intense and continuous annual off-take levels has led to local population declines (Koch *et al.*, 2013). While *V. salvator* is still common in Java (with, however, no information available about declining population trends: Koch *et al.*, 2013), it is perhaps prudent for the Indonesian authorities to act upon their own wildlife trade regulations and start monitoring, and if necessary, curbing the unregulated trade in the species.

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