

## The Monitor Twins: A Bugis and Makassarese Tradition from SW Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Despite increasing investigations on the herpetofauna of Sulawesi (Iskandar & Tjan, 1996; de Lang and Vogel, 2005; Gillespie et al., 2005; Koch and Böhme, 2005; Koch et al., 2007a), and particularly the monitor lizards of this island and surrounding areas (Koch et al., 2007b; unpubl. data), the senior author only recently came across an astonishing zoo-ethnological phenomenon which involves the black Sulawesi water monitor lizard, *Varanus cf. togianus* (resurrected to specific status by Koch et al., 2007b; Figure 1), and the Bugis and Makassarese, Sulawesian agrarian and seafaring peoples who played a significant role in maritime exploration and the East Indies spice and sandalwood trades prior to European domination in the 1600's (Whitten et al., 2002).

A French television documentary of 1999 entitled, "Les hommes varans" – the monitor men of Sulawesi – directed by Jean Michel Corillion, was broadcasted on 21 and 28 August 2006 on ARTE channel in Germany, reporting an extraordinary relationship between these traditional people of the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi and the local endemic monitor lizards. A trailer of the story, here called "Messengers of Sulawesi", can be seen at the company's homepage (see [www.zed.fr](http://www.zed.fr)). However, when asked for a copy of the whole documentary, the senior author was told that ZED productions are only available for broadcasting stations.

According to Bugis tradition, a long time ago on the Island of Sulawesi, the queen of the kingdom Gowa (sometimes spelled Goa) gave birth to twins, one of which was a monitor lizard. Unfortunately, the infant died at birth, but the reptile survived. A week later, the monitor lizard left and went far away from man. The tradition recounts that the water monitor was to let people know through a dream when he intended to return to the company of humans. Since that time, Bugis tradition holds the view that some monitor lizards have an animal's body but a human spirit.

Corillion's television documentary tells the story of Alhim, who lives with his family on a floating house on Lake Tempe, Wajo regency, Southwest Sulawesi, during the rainy season from November to February (Figure 2). Alhim has a son, Suardi, and a four-year-old daughter, Ali Douyoung, who has the scaly body of a monitor lizard, living somewhere around Lake Tempe. One night, Alhim has a dream and the next morning he goes out with his son to bring home his sister, a gentle monitor lizard. Back home, they all live together in peace and harmony, until one day, the monitor lizard disappears. To regain his daughter and to console his cheerless son, Alhim starts on a long journey to the former Kingdom of Gowa, once located around Makassar (formerly known as Ujung Pandang), the capital of South Sulawesi province. There lives Ali Mohammed, a descendent of the former monarch, and he too, is a monitor lizard. On the day when Alhim arrives at the royal reptile's village Todotora (Figure 2), hundreds of devotees have come to celebrate Ali Mohammed's 34<sup>th</sup> birth day. They all praise and worship him because they believe he is the secular representative of Allah, the God of Islam [Remark by the authors: This information was only



Figure 1. A dark-colored monitor lizard (*Varanus cf. togianus*) from the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi. In Bugis culture, some of these monitor lizards are believed to have a human spirit.

given in the German translation of the documentary.]! Now Alhim hopes that the supernatural power of the royal monitor lizard will help to bring back his daughter.

Facing the remarkable story presented in Corillion's documentary, some aspects will be discussed below.

Firstly, despite comprehensive studies of Bugis culture and religion (e.g. Harvey, 1974; Pelras, 1993; Pelras, 1996; Acciaioli, 2004), so far as the authors could determine, and except for the TV production reported herein, this is the first zoo-ethnological literature record about the special relationship between monitor lizards and humans in Sulawesi. Secondly, although Islam is omnipresent in Indonesia and Sulawesi (more than 85% of the Indonesian population is Muslim), the retention of earlier traditional elements and syncretism, i.e. the fusion of distinct religions, has prevailed among many traditionally minded Bugis (Pelras, 1996; Whitten et al., 2002). According to Pelras (1996), Bugis' religion in practice is marked by: "...the astonishing survival of elements of pre-Islamic religion, manifested in popular rituals, beliefs in pre-Islamic myths, the worshipping of regalia and sacred places, and the active role still played by a number of the pagan transvestite priests, the bissu – all of which are radically incompatible with Islam." Thirdly, it is known, that other ethnic groups of Sulawesi, particularly the Minahassa of the northern peninsula who are predominantly Christians, eat a variety of unusual meat like dogs, rats or bats. As a consequence, they also hunt and eat monitor lizards. Moreover, monitor lizards of the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi are chased for the international pet and reptile leather trades (pers. observ.). It remains unknown, however, if or how the reptile hunters distinguish between monitor specimens with

and without a human spirit. Fourthly, assuming the age of the monitor lizard in the village Todotora was correctly documented, this would represent the highest age of a monitor lizard hitherto reported. The oldest specimen known thus far was a water monitor (*V. salvator*) kept in a German school terrarium for 26 years (Böhme, 2003). Only a specimen of the Komodo dragon, *V. komodoensis*, maintained in a zoo in Sydney, Australia, might have attained a higher age. This specimen reached the zoo as an adult and was kept for 24.5 years (Auffenberg, 1981).

Other observations among Sulawesi Bugis people revealed that it is common to believe that a child is born with a twin who is a 'buaja' (buaya = crocodile in Bahasa Indonesian language). However, one time when visiting Soppeng, South Sulawesi, such a twin sitting in a tree was pointed out to one of the authors (GA); the animal was actually a juvenile monitor lizard. The term 'buaja' in Bugis must thus denote not only crocodiles, but also 'biawak'- the word for monitor lizard in Bahasa Indonesia.

However, the association described above for Southwest Sulawesi seems not to be unique in Indonesia's manifold ethnic groups. For instance, it is known that people from a restricted part of the Lesser Sunda Islands (Nusa Tenggara) south of Sulawesi have a similar relationship to another monitor lizard, the

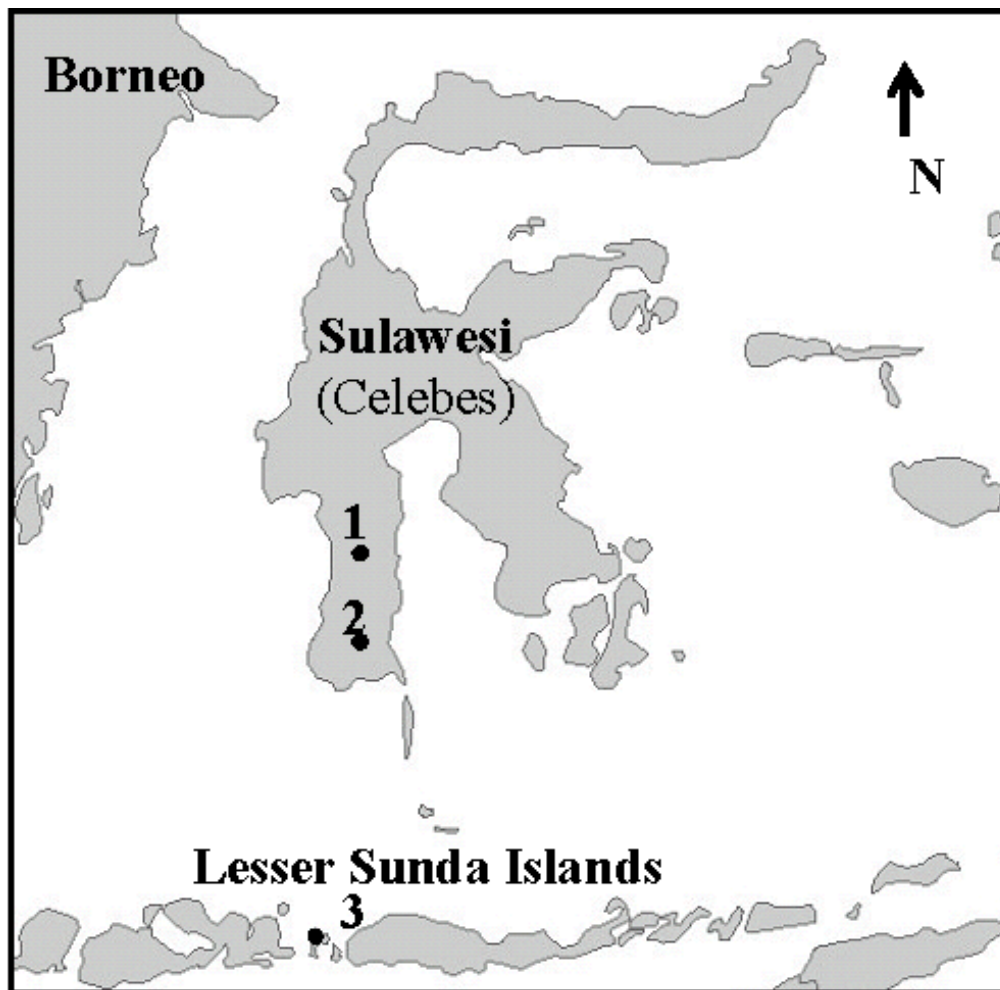


Figure 2. Map of Sulawesi and the Lesser Sunda Islands showing (1) Lake Tempe, the home of Alhim and his family on the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi; (2) the approximate position of the village Todotora (which could not be traced on any map), where the royal monitor lizard Ali Mohammed lives; and (3) Komodo Island, the type locality of *V. komodoensis*.

Komodo dragon or Ora, *V. komodoensis* (P. Hien, pers. comm.). This monitor species is the largest lizard in the world, reaching a total length of up to 3 m and a weight over 70 kg (Ciofi, 2004). Their natural prey are deer, goats and buffalos (Auffenberg, 1981). Therefore, unlike the Sulawesi water monitor, the Komodo dragon is potentially dangerous to humans and attacks, sometimes lethal, occur from time to time.

The traditional view of the original Ata Modo people from the area around Komodo Island holds that some of the monitor lizards are their relatives (Anonymous, 1981: 47-53; Ellis, 1998), viz. specimens with different numbers of toes are considered to have a human spirit (M. Erb, pers. comm.). As in Bugis tradition, it is also believed that a woman on Komodo Island gave birth to twins of whom one was a monitor lizard. Since that time, Komodo people and dragons are siblings (C. Ciofi, pers. comm.). Auffenberg (1981), however, who studied the ecology of Komodo dragons for many months in the wild, did not mention such an intimate relationship between local inhabitants and monitor lizards.

In general, it is supposed that claiming kinship with crocodiles and monitor lizards is a way of attempting to lessen the danger from these animals. These extraordinary associations may represent a variant of other beliefs regarding guardian spirits, as practiced by many indigenous peoples (e.g. Swanson, 1973; Geertz, 1976; Marshall, 1999).

Altogether, it seems to be not by chance that such remarkable tradition as that of the monitor twins is held in the area around Southwest Sulawesi, Flores, and Komodo Island where large monitor lizards are found. However, it is unknown whether the phenetic resemblance of the two species involved – both unrelated monitor lizards are dark brown to blackish lacking any distinct pattern as adults – had any crucial influence on the origin of the tradition. It seems more reasonable to suggest that people of Southwest Sulawesi and Komodo Island have the same ancestors and/or origin, respectively, and therefore similar traditions. Early contacts by traders with natives of the Lesser Sunda Islands, as elaborated by MacKnight (1983), might be another explanation for the common spirituality.

As this report is merely based upon observations from a TV documentary, zoo-ethnological field studies are urgently required to investigate and understand the close relationship between Sulawesi monitor lizards and local Bugis people. Due to the scarcity of information about the Monitor Twins of Sulawesi and adjacent islands, the authors would appreciate additional information about the above described phenomenon.

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