

# The trepangs of Leschenault

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Théodore Leschenault de la Tour (1773–1826) was a French naturalist and traveller. He was one of the scientists who took part in the discovery voyage to the Southern Lands of Captain Nicolas Baudin onboard the vessel *Le Géographe* (1800–1804). For health reasons Leschenault was landed in Timor in May 1803 with the mission of going, once cured, to Batavia and, from there, to Île de France (today Mauritius) where *Le Géographe* was supposed to stop on the way back to France. In the impossibility of finding a passage neither for Île de France or for Europe, Leschenault accepted the offer of Nicolas Engelhard, the Dutch governor of East Java, to welcome him and provide for his needs by putting his talents to work as a naturalist. Leschenault explored Java for nearly three years in the service of the governor. He returned to France via the United States in July 1807. During these years on Java, Leschenault regularly kept a botanical journal and a zoological journal. Two of the latter's 195 items concern sea cucumbers.

Item N°176. Sea cucumbers. Trepang. There are five species of trepang which are in considerable trade for China. The Chinese eat them like the nests of swiftlet. Trepangs are found abundantly on all the coasts of the archipelago: Buru, Bali, etc., and on the north coast of New Holland [today Australia] where boats from Macassar go fishing. The preparation of this mollusc consists only of drying them. We empty them first and then we boil them for a while in fresh water where there is a little alum, then it is dried over a low heat.

1°. **Tripan pouti** [*Holothuria scabra*; Putih]. This species of sea cucumber is the size of the wrist and about 1 foot<sup>2</sup> long when it is extended. It is not cylindrical but a little compressed looking like a very big slug. (Although the most usual state is the form I indicate, yet the animal can flatten a lot. After it is harvested, its substance sags and deforms. This is what happened to the individual kept in the arack.) The back is greyish, and the belly is dirty white. The whole body, except the back, is covered by small tubercles from which emerge as many small papillae half à line in length somewhat resembling the horns of slugs. The animal can remove them and extend them out at will. These tubercles are much more abundant on the belly. The anterior part of the back is leathery in consistency<sup>3</sup> as if covered with a cartilaginous test. The posterior part and the belly are soft. The mouth is located at the end of the anterior part under the cartilaginous test. It consists of a large number of suckers<sup>4</sup> whose shape I cannot describe because I have not seen them

extended. When the suckers are not extended, they form a bead around the mouth. The anus is located at the end of the posterior part. It is round, surrounded by a bead.

By lightly squeezing one of these animals, its intestine came out of the anus almost effortlessly as by their own weight. It completely emptied himself. In my observation of it, I saw a long gut about 1½ foot in length about the size of a little finger, filled with mud. To the anterior part of this gut was attached a red gelatinous mass which I thought were the animal's gills.<sup>5</sup>

This animal that I observed alive has very slow movements. It lengthens, shortens, folds in various directions. I did not see it change places, but I think that the numerous papillae that are under the belly help it in this operation. Its whole body is covered with a slimy, mucus-like mantle. It lives in shallow waters, near shores where there is sand mixed with mud. This species is the least of all and it only sells for around 6 or 7 piastres<sup>6</sup> for 1 picole<sup>7</sup> (125 pounds) in Batavia. When it is dried out, its size shrinks a lot.

2°. **Tripan koro** [*Holothuria (Microthele) nobilis*; Koro]. This species is the best of all. It is bigger than the tripan pouti. Its colour is greyish black. It lives in sandy and rocky places at considerable depths. Tripan koro sells almost 70 piastres in Batavia.

3°. **Tripan itam** or **Tripan bator** [*Holothuria atra*; Hitam]. We designed under these two names a species of tripan that differs from tripan koro because he is very dark and only lives in rocky places. It is of the same quality as the tripan koro.

4°. **Tripan kouiette** [*? Holothuria (Microthele) fuscopunctata*; Kunyit]. This species is the same size as the tripan koro. It is blackish with a yellow strip on each side of the body. It is of lower quality than the two preceding species. It only sells for 25 to 30 piastres a picole. It lives in the same place as the two preceding species.

5°. **Tripan nanas** [*Thelonota ananas*]. This species is the largest of all. This animal is reddish with large tubercles which made it name ananas<sup>8</sup> by the kind of resemblance it has to this fruit. It is about the same quality and the same price as tripan kouiette, which is a little more expensive. It lives in the same places.

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<sup>2</sup> A foot is 30.5 cm.

<sup>3</sup> Consistency linked to the occurrence of a periesophageal calcareous crown.

<sup>4</sup> These are the peri buccal tentacles.

<sup>5</sup> This is the dense haemal network associated with the middle part of the digestive tract.

<sup>6</sup> General name then given to different currencies, in the present case to the Batavia florin which was worth, in 1820, 2.14 French francs, or a little less than 5 euros.

<sup>7</sup> The picole or quintal of Asia is worth about 50 kg.

There is one more species of black sea cucumber which is very common on the shores covered with molluscs and coral. I have found it abundantly on Bali Island. This sea cucumber species, named 'bouton mati' by Malaysians, has, after his death, a strong smell of rotten fish. There is one more species of black sea cucumber which is very common on the shores covered with molluscs and coral. I have found it abundantly on Bali Island. This sea cucumber species, named 'bouton mati' by Malaysians, has, after his death, a strong smell of rotten fish.

Item N°195. **Tro** [*Phyllophorus* sp.] is a species of almost globular sea cucumber, the size of a large truffle which is fished near Gresik<sup>9</sup> and that the Javanese, after having emptied it, fry in coconut oil to eat it. This sea cucumber lives in sandy places mixed with sand [sic]. When it comes out of the water, all its tentacles being withdrawn inside the body, it is globular and, because of the mud which blackened it and its shape, it looks like a big truffle.

## References

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<sup>8</sup> Ananas means pineapple in French.

<sup>9</sup> A city of Java Island, northwest to Surabaya.