

An unidentified word in the account of the zamia poisoning on de Vlamingh's expedition of 1697

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The previously unexplained word 'Drioens' in the journal entry for de Vlamingh's 1697 excursion near present-day Perth, Western Australia, is recognised as slang spelling of the Dutch name for the Sumatran durian fruit, typically *Durio zibethinus*.

Keywords: de Vlamingh, Dutch exploration, zamia, durian, Drioens

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INTRODUCTION

During his explorations of the west coast of Australia, Willem de Vlamingh, commander of the *Geelvinck*, *Wesel* and *Nijptangh*, went ashore near Perth in January 1697. He and his men divided into three parties and investigated the area around the Swan River. Among other things, the men were astounded by the rich vegetation. This almost brought a number of them to grief.

The diarist of this expedition, thought to be the upper-surgeon Mandrop Torst (Schilder 1985, p. 13), recorded the following incident:

Ondertusschen wierd my een pit van een zekere Vrucht aangeboden, van gedaante niet kwalyk gelykende na de *Drioens*, en van smaak na de Vaderlandsche groote Boonen, en, die jonger waren, na een Zinknoot. Ik at'er vyf à ses ... doch na verloop van omtrent drie uren begon ik, en noch vyf anderen die mede van de gezeide Vruchten gegeten hadden, zo geweldig te braaken, dat tusschen de dood en ons naauwelycks onderscheid was.

(In the meantime I was offered the kernel of a certain fruit not unlike the *Drioens* in appearance, and tasting like our Dutch broad beans and those which were less ripe, like a hazelnut. I ate five or six ... but after an interval of about three hours I and five more of the others who had also eaten of the said fruit began to vomit so violently that there was hardly any distinction between death and us.) (Torst 1701, p. 15; Schilder 1985, p. 155).

The men had eaten the poisonous kernels of the zamia (*Macrozamia riedlei*).

The statement that the kernels appeared in shape 'not unlike the *Drioens*' has been an interpretative difficulty for scholars since the nineteenth century. Modern scholars have not identified the word 'Drioens'. In the first edition of 1701 the word is both capitalised and

italicised (as '*Drioens*'). In this edition, place names and nouns such as beans and hazelnut are usually capitalised but not italicised (as 'Boonen', 'Zinknoot'). The only other word that is, like 'Drioens', both capitalised and italicised, is '*Lignum Rhodii*', a type of balm. A nineteenth century English translator (Major 1859, p. 123) suggested in a footnote that *Drioens* might have been a misspelling of some other word as it did 'not occur in Nemnich's polyglot *Lexikon der Naturgeschichte*', which was published in four volumes from 1793–1798 in Leipzig. The editor of the standard modern edition of the voyage commented as follows: '*Drioens*: an inexplicable name; the kernel mentioned is the nut of the *Zamia palm*' (Schilder 1985, p. 241).

DISCUSSION

There is a solution to this problem. The word *Drioens* in the expedition diary is found in other early eighteenth century Dutch work about the East Indies. In a treatise on the natural history of the islands of Ambon, Banda, Timor, Celebes, and Bali, François Valentyn (1726, p. 158) made the following important observation:

Onder de Vrucht-boomen kenne ik'er geen, die zoo hoog, en zoo regt op wascht, als de Doerian-boom, by de onkundige gemeenelyk de Drioens-boom genaamd.

(Among the fruit-trees I know of none that grow as tall and as straight as the Durian tree, commonly called the 'Drioens tree' by the ignorant.)

It appears then that *Drioens* is a slang spelling for *Doerian*, the name of the Durian tree. This slang spelling of *Drioens* for *Doerian* can be found in other Dutch writings associated with the East India Company. In the old songbook *De Oost-Indische Theeboom* (The East Indian Tea tree), published in 1767 in Amsterdam, there is a drinking song entitled 'Een Nieuw Oost-Indies Lied. Stem: a koele Wei! o derre Hei' that lists the *Drioen* alongside other fruits. The song describes travelling the route to 'Jakrata':

'Zag schoone Boomen staan,
Met haar vrugten aangenaam,
Klappers, Pisank.
Ook Arak tot Pinank
Annasse, Soorsak en Drioen'

(I saw beautiful trees standing,
pleasant with their fruits,
coconut, banana.
Also areca nut palm [betel],
pineapples, soursop and durian).

The translation of the song has been made by considering rare words for trees used by the Dutch in the East Indies, some of which are mentioned in Stavorinus (1798), Kalff (1927) and Madhi (2007).

The spelling of the durian in the 1767 songbook is Drioen. However, an older version of the same songbook has yet another variant in the line reading 'Anaffe Soofach, en Drioeen' (Graaf 1716), showing fluidity in spelling of these common fruits, as noted already by Madhi (2007). In discussing the song, Kalff (1927) observed that tropical fruits of the region were known under various mixes of Malay, Javanese, and Dutch spelling. There are also other examples of such variations including 'Drioeen'. De Bucquoy (1744, p. 89), writing of his travels in the East Indies, mentioned the 'Drioeen', with the footnote:

Drioeen, is een Boomvrugt, welke van binnen pitten heest, die vry heet en versterkend van smaak zyn, doch niet zeer aangenaam.

(Drioeen is a treefruit, which has kernels on the inside, which are hot and invigorating in taste, but not very pleasant).

Traditionally, durian seeds in the region have long been roasted, boiled, or fried in oil (Ho & Bhat, 2015).

The Dutch physician Wouter Schouten, in his popular travel book of his journeys to the East Indies but in the latter half of the seventeenth century (Schouten 1676), wrote that the durian was called by the bastardized name Dryuns or they spoke of 'stinkers'. The edible durian, famous for its strong odour and thorny rind, would have been known to de Vlamingh, who was on his third voyage to the East Indies, and to those of his men who had sailed in this region before.

William Dampier also described the durian in 1697, noting that 'within the fruit there is a stone as big as a small bean' (Dampier 1699, p. 319–320). Yule and Burnell (1886, p. 255), in a glossary of Indian and Indies words, describe the 'dorian in Sumatra' and say that 'the offensive odour of the fruit ... procured for it the inelegant Dutch nickname of *stancker*.' Stavorinus (1798, p. 198), in his book on his travels to Batavia, described how the 'Durioens, of Drioeens-boom' ('Durian-tree, or Drioeens-tree'), was offensive to the smell but had 'a strong invigorating force', and noted that it was considered a strong stimulant and 'therefore much prized by the Chinese'; the English translation includes in a footnote (p. 236) that 'Dr Thunberg says, it is considered as diuretic, and sudorific, and serviceable in expelling wind.' Ho and Bhat (2015) noted that durian was traditionally used in Indonesia and Malaysia as an antipyretic, and to treat jaundice and skin problems. These beliefs might explain why Torst, the surgeon, had *Drioeens* in italics as for another medicinal plant, *Lignum*.

The word *Drioeens* was also in maritime use in de Vlamingh's time, with the Straat of Drioeens named by the Dutch East India Company in the 1600s (Ormeling 2010). It lies to the east off Sumatra and is strewn with islands. Elisa Netscher, who spent most of his life in Sumatra, and was a linguist, historian, and botanist of the region, wrote of the 'straat Doerie of Drioen' (Doerie or Drioen strait) between the Boelang Archipel (now Pulau Bulan) and the Kerimata group (now Karimata Islands; Netscher 1854, p. 115), and described 'Straat Drioen' (Netscher 1870, p. 100). A 1799 map in the National Archives of Singapore, by the English navigators Capt. John Hall of the *Worcester*, Capt. J. Lindsey, Capt. Elmore and others, shows the Strait of Drioes, now anglicised from the Dutch Drioeens. The Drioes are a suite of islands then known to the British as the Drioes, with Great Drioen, Little Drioen, and False Drioen. A Dutch map of 1820 shows the name as Straat Doerian (Nationaal Archief Holland 1820). The islands are now known as the Durians and the strait called Selat Durian in Bahasa Indonesian.

Whereas the word *Drioeens* has baffled modern scholarship, the name would have been known to Dutch seamen who sailed the spice routes to the East Indies in the 1600s and 1700s. Fresh fruit was of great importance to men arriving in port after the long voyage—scurvy was rife and deadly. That de Vlamingh's crew had shown little caution and readily consumed a new fresh fruit in a strange land is explained by the similar appearance of the zamia's kernels to the nuts of the durian. Torst's 1697 description of the similarity between durian and zamia is keenly accurate: the seeds of the durian look very much like the kernels of the zamia in shape. The likeness must have suggested to them that this unfamiliar plant was related to the durian and likely edible. That they tasted like hazelnuts, when the durian flesh tastes like almonds to many people, encouraged them to eat more than one.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic evidence presented here shows that the word '*Drioeens*' in the journal entry for de Vlamingh's 1697 expedition is a slang spelling of the Dutch name of the Sumatran fruit known as the durian, commonly *Durio zibethinus*, and other *Durio* species.

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