



Illustration 1. Group portrait of Batak warriors, K. Feilberg, 1870.

## Inquiry of a Chinese Trader about the Batak People in North Sumatra, 1 March 1701

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## 1 Introduction

Daniel Perret, “Inquiry of a Chinese Trader about the Batak People in North Sumatra, 1 March 1701”. In: *Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta*, document 9. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2013.

BY DANIEL PERRET

The report about the present-day province of North Sumatra in Indonesia, submitted to VOC headquarters in Batavia by a Chinese in 1701, is one of the earliest accounts of a person who had actually lived in the interior of the area.

For more than a millennium, since the second century AD, under the influence of the writings of Ptolemy, the northern part of Sumatra had been viewed as a perilous area because it was thought to be inhabited by cannibals. However, it was also known to be rich in camphor which had been exported since the fifth of sixth century through a port called Barus. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Zhao Rugua wrote about a state known as Pa-t’a which was controlled by Sriwijaya. The connection between Pa-t’a and Bata is generally accepted. Moreover, the official history of the Yuan Dynasty (*Yuanshi*) recorded the arrival of envoys from Ma-da at the palace of the Chinese Emperor in 1285. Since the syllable *ma* was actually pronounced as *ba* in the local dialect of the people of Fukien (now Fujian) in South China, it is possible that this area was linked to Bata. However, neither Chinese source refers to Bata lands populated by cannibalistic inhabitants.

Clearer information about the people of the area emerged following Marco Polo’s visit to the northern part of Sumatra in 1291. He was the first per-

son to record the presence of Islam in the area as well as the conflict between the Muslim minority in the coastal area with the still pagan majority in the mountains, the latter still virtually untouched by the outside world and some of whom were cannibals. In the following century, more records penned by westerners and Chinese containing the same information about the inhabitants emerged with a number of sources adding information about a tattooed people among them.

Nicolo de’ Conti, who lived in the town of Sciamuthera (Samudra) for a year in 1439, was the first person to call the area “Batech”, referring to a settlement inhabited by a cannibalistic and warlike people. The name was used again in the sixteenth century by Tomé Pires who wrote about “a king from Bata” in his famous *Suma Oriental* (1512-1515). It is noteworthy that the contemporary Chinese sources do not mention any cannibalistic people but merely remark on the difference between, civilized, communities following the same tradition adhered to by the people living in Java and Malacca with their, uncivilized, counterparts, who did not in fact always live in the mountains. Pires writes about three places in the north-eastern area which were centres of trade involving foreigners: Bata (south of Pasai), where rattan was the primary trade commodity, Aru where camphor and incense were found in abundance, and Arcat.

‘Bata’ as the name of a tribe emerged thanks to Fernão Mendes Pinto (1509-1583), possibly the first European ever to travel into the interior of Sumatra and produce written records. In his work entitled *Peregrinação*, this Portuguese explorer writes about the visit by the envoy of the “Bata king” to the new captain of Malacca, Pedro de



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Faria, in 1539. Among other topics, Mendes Pinto writes that the king was an adherent of paganism and the capital of his realm was called Panaju. However, parts of his records about the northern area of Sumatra are rather unconvincing. Mendes Pinto was also the first to record the presence of the people of “Aaru” on the northeast coast of Sumatra where he also visited the local Muslim king. Approximately two decades earlier, Duarte Barbosa (1480-1521) had already written about the kingdom of Aru which was then ruled by cannibal adherents of paganism. The name of the “Batang” people emerges in Arabic sources fifteen years after Pinto’s records. In 1554 the Turkish poet and man of letters Sidi ‘Ali Celebi, wrote about eaters of human flesh living in the western part of Sumatra.

In 1563, João de Barros again used the ethnic group name “Batas” mentioning that the said “most savage and belligerent people in the world” inhabited the part of the island facing Malacca. His geographical perspective of the inhabitants merely reiterated the almost three-century-old view of which distinguished between the “Moro” people (Muslims), the foreigners who came to trade and eventually settled in the coastal area from the “Gentios”, indigenous (followers of paganism) people sheltering in the hinterlands.

Among the several important events which affected the area, it is known that in 1612 Aceh conquered the trading place of Deli and captured Aru the following year. Deli, which is called Dillij in this document, is none other than the place which was to become the centre of the Deli sultanate in northeast Sumatra. The name is still used today in Medan: Deli Tua (Old Deli) and Labuhan Deli.

Only after the Dutch conquered Malacca in 1641 did any more information emerge about the trade relations between the eastern coastal area of Sumatra with the outside world. These dwelt

especially about its strong ties with a number of ports on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula in particular Malacca.

Sources in the *Daghregister* mention that in June 1642, Arent Pater travelled to Deli and when he returned brought with him eight slaves and 270 *gantang* of rice. At the time, Deli was considered a highly dangerous and treacherous area because of its narrow rivers and rapacious “Batak people” (*roofgierige Battaers*). We also know that in 1644 a number of praus sailing from Aceh to Perak and carrying textiles (*cleden*) made a call at Deli. Jooris Vermeeren, who put in to Deli in May 1644, reported that the place was fertile and could supply 300 to 400 *lasts* of rice, eight to ten *bahars* (weight measure) of beeswax, slaves, horses and one *bahar* of aloe wood annually. He also confirmed that the bulk of the cloth came from Aceh. At the end of 1645, relations between Deli and Malacca improved when the commander of Deli offered a horse to the governor as a gift. Dutch sources in 1648 report that a number of praus had departed from Batavia, bound for Deli carrying textiles and salt. In 1653, Dutch sources also record the arrival of a prau from Deli carrying 40 *lasts* of rice. In the 1660s Schouten wrote that the role of Deli Aru town in trade activities had become less significant. Nevertheless, textiles continued to arrive from Aceh and Batavia. In the 1670s, Deli exported salted fish (or salted fish roe/*gesoute vischkuyten*), beeswax and nuts while Batavia sent salt and ceramics. In 1682, a prau sailed from Batavia to Deli via Malacca carrying among other wares scrap iron (*oud ijser*), copper, Chinese gold-thread (*chinees goutdraat*) and tobacco (*tubacq*) from mainland China. Deli was therefore a name not unfamiliar in VOC circles when it received the report from the Chinese in 1701.

The report’s author also mentions a place named Pande (or Panda) in the region of Deli. To our ears, Pande sounds like Panai which is still the name



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Illustration 2. Haminjon (Kemenyan), *Styrax benzoin* from Batak.

of the confluence of Barumun and Bilah Rivers today located around 200 kilometres southeast of Medan, on the Straits of Malacca. It is obvious that in this report, Pande was located on the east coast or on the banks of a big river which flowed onto the east coast. At the time, Pande might well have been the main port of Aru since on an 1686 map Aru was drawn as being located in the estuary of the Barumun River and seemed to play a more important role than Deli. This location is also plausible as the Chinese trader reports how he moved between Pande and the mountains of Angkola, which are located in the upstream region of the earlier mentioned Bilah and Barumun Rivers. Furthermore, it is also reported that the Chinese man lived in Angkola which was ten days' journey from Barus on the west coast. The information matches with the location of a certain place in the mountains of Angkola.

Although quite short, what the Chinese trader has to say about the economy and culture,

including cannibalism, in the interior area is most interesting in that it is the earliest such account. It should also be noted that, according to this report, there were no Chinese people living in Barus on the west coast at this time. Whereas there was already a Chinese community living in Padang, also on the west coast.

Only seventy years after the report of the Chinese trader, another travel report of a journey into the interior appeared: a certain Charles Miller travelled into the interior of Tapanuli in 1772. Miller was impressed by the diversity of languages spoken by the inhabitants, each using the same alphabet. He also noted reports of a community of cannibals called "Battas" who differed from all the other people in Sumatra in their language, customs and traditions. A decade later the first synthesis about Sumatra was published: an article by Radermacher (1781) and the famous book of William Marsden, *History of Sumatra* (1783)





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## 2 Transcription of the Dutch text

Daniel Perret, “Inquiry of a Chinese Trader about the Batak People in North Sumatra, 1 March 1701”.

UIT: DAGHREGISTERS VAN BATAVIA, 1 MAART 1791 [BEGINNEND BIJ FOL. 113.]

Den op eergisteren van Sumatra's West Cust aangekomen Chinees, welck sig een geruymen tijd in het Ancools gebergte heeft onthouden, alhier mede ondervraagt zijnde, wierd heden, wegens het nader relaas door hem daerop gedaan, sodanigen geschrift ter Generale Secretary bestelt, als te lesen is bij de volgende insertie, luyden-de aldus.

*Op de gedane afvraghe aan den Chinees 't Singko met de Chialoup van den Chinees Thieko van Baros over Padang alhier aangekomen, weet denselven 't volgende te seggen.*

Dat hij nu thien jaaren geleden met het vaertuyg van den Chinees annachoda Khintayko als passagier van hier na Malacca, en van daer na Pande omtrent Dilly gelegen, is vertrocken; alwaer den annachoda sijne coopmanschappen aan de Maleytse inwoonders verhandelt hebbende, weder herwaerts aan is gestevent, sonder den gevraagde mede te nemen, als die ginder is gebleven, met voornemen om sig met een kleen negotie te erneren.

Hebbende dan tot Pande, buyten eenige weynige door hem mede gebragte kopere beckens en blauwe baftas, oock eenig zout opgekogt, daarmede hij met eenige draegkoelys te lande naer Bata, omtrent 10 à 11 etmalen gaans van Baros, gereyst is, en aan de inwoonders aldaer omgeset of getrocqueert tegen benjuin en wax, waarmede hij wederom na Pande is gegaan, en 'tselve aldaer tegens zout vernegotieert heeft.

Hoedanig hij dan gedurende al die tijd van thien jaren op die plaetsen met over en weer te negotiëren sig g'erneert heeft, terwijl dat hij onder de inwoonders deser plaetsen door die tijd, meer en meer bekend geraekt wesende, na verloop van vijf jaeren sijns aanwesens aldaer met den Batase vrouw, die door haer ouders voor een somma van 50 rds aan hem overgedaan wierd, na dies lands wijze getrouwt, en er een dogtertje, thans vier jaren oud, bij geprocureert heeft.

d'Inwoonders van Panda en Bata, daer den Chinees veele beleeftheden van genoten heeft, sijn, segt [fol. 114] hij, bijna verwilderde menschen die sig in bergen en bossen onthouden, dogh ontrent 't cultiveren haarer landen seer regulier en menschelijck. En zijn ook civiel en gerieflijck omtrent vremden die se echter in hare landen wijnig ontmoeten, insonderheyt Europeanen, die daer in veele jaren her niet gesien zijn, hebbende met de Malyers in de benedelanden geen gemeenschap, als zijnde geen Mahometanen.

Want varkensvlees houden se voor haer delicaatste eten, en hebben rijs in overvloed,



## TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

die se jaarlijx op sijn tijd planten, waeraan alle de inwoonders van die lantstreek, die veele zijn, haer behoeften overvloede vinden, buyten een menigte van aard-akers en verscheyde groente meer, die se daernevens tot haer voetsel gebruyken.

Ook eten se menschen vlees, dog niet als van quaat-doenders of misdadigers, want sodanigen een, aan handen en voeten gebonden wesende, wert soo levendig van wel 2 à 300 deser bosch-menschen met mesjens aan kleene stuckjens gekorven, en soo bloedig en raauw met wat lange peper of risjens, en een weynigje zout gegeten; blijvende de handen en voeten, mitsgaders 't hart en de harsens, als het delitieuste voor de radjas, en 't hooft met de ooren, de neus, de tong en al 'tgeen 'er verder aan hoort, voor haare grooten, die deselve, mede soo raauw, met zout en risjens komen te nuttigen.

In hare cleedinge sijn se als de Maleyers, dragende de mans soo wel als de vrouwen een cleetje met een lang baaytje; dog met dit onderscheyt, dat de vrouwen, maagd of ongetrouwt sijnde, een baaytje mogen dragen. Maer getrouwt wesende, moesten se hetselve ten eersten verlaten en met heel bovenlijf blood loopen.

Leverende deze lantstreken buyten de gemelte levensmiddelen, ook uyt wax en benjuin, die se aan hare nabuuren tegen zout omsetten, 'twelck tot Bata gants niet te become is, en derhalven 'tselve onder haer voor gelt passeert, als gaande de inwoonders van Bata daarmede ter markt.

Gout of andere mineralen werden, segt den Chinees, in of omtrent dese lantstreken niet vernomen. Mogelijk dat se 'er wel vallen, maer de onkundigheyt oftewel de domigheyt der inwoonders hout haer daerin tot nog blind.

Den gevraagde eyndelick geresolveert sijnde van daer te scheyden en herwaerts keeren, soo heeft hij zulx aan de radjas bekend gemaekt, die denselven van rijs en diverse fruytagiën en groente tot consumptie op sijne reyse rijkelijck hebben laten voorsien, waarmede hij met vrouw en kind dan de reyse te lande na Baros ondernomen en, na verloop van thien etmalen, aldaer verschenen wesende, heeft hij sig aan 't vaertuyg van den Chinees Thieko, dat doenmaels ter rhee de van Baros was, vervoegt, waarmede hij voorts met gemelte sijn vrouw en kind op den 27e der jongst verstreeke maand, over Padangh alhier aangekomen is, om sijn nevens andere van sijn natie, met den landbouw of yetwes anders te ernerren.



### 3 English translation

Daniel Perret, “Inquiry of a Chinese Trader about the Batak People in North Sumatra, 1 March 1701”.

FROM: DAILY JOURNALS OF BATAVIA CASTLE, 1 MARCH 1701 [BEGINNING WITH FOL. 113.]

Today the Chinese man, who arrived here the day before yesterday from the West Coast of Sumatra and had spent a long time there in the Angkola Mountains, was questioned about the verbal report he had already made about this. And it was written down at the Secretariat of the Governor-General, as can be read in the following enclosures.

*In the completed interrogation of the Chinese 't Singko, who arrived here [in Batavia] from Baros via Padang with the challop of the Chinese Thieko, he ['t Singko] has the following to say.*

Ten years ago he sailed as a passenger on the ship of the Chinese *nachoda* Khintsijko from here to Malacca and left from there to [voyage] to Pande, which is situated in the vicinity of Dilly. Whence, after the *nachoda* had negotiated his business with the Malay inhabitants and departed [to Batavia] without taking the interrogatee with him. The latter was resolved to remain there and earn his livelihood in some small business.

After he had purchased some salt in Pande, to supplement the few copper basins and some fine blue cotton cloth (*baftas*) which he had brought with him, taking a few coolie porters he travelled to Bata, about ten or eleven days journey from Baros. There he sold or exchanged these [wares] with the local inhabitants for benzoin and wax, with which he returned to Pande, where he traded these for salt.

For a period of ten years he earned his living by trading back and forth in the villages in this fashion. As he did so he gradually became better acquainted with the inhabitants of these villages and after five years he chose a local Bata woman whom he married after her parents accepted the sum of 50 rix-dollars for her as is the custom of the country. He has also begot a small daughter now four years old.

Even though the inhabitants of Panda and Batak have shown this Chinese great consideration, he views them as virtually savage people who dwell in the mountains and forests, however they are very consistent and [act like] human-beings in the cultivation of their fields. And they are also civil and courteous towards strangers whom they do not meet very often in their country, especially not Europeans, who have not been seen there for many years. They do not associate with the Malays in the lowlands as they are not Muslims.

Because they think that pork is the greatest delicacy, they have plenty of rice which they plant every year at the right season. This is plentifully sufficient to satisfy all those - and they are many - who dwell in this country.





## ENGLISH TRANSLATION

They also have plenty of fields of grain crops and various other vegetables, which they also cultivate to produce their food. They also eat human flesh but only that of wrongdoers or criminals and once such a one has been bound hand and foot, he is carved up into small pieces while still alive by two to three hundred of these forest people using small knives, and is eaten raw and still bleeding with some long pepper or small [risjens] and a pinch of salt. The hands and the feet as well as the heart and the brains are kept as delicacies for the rulers, and the head with the ears, nose and tongue and all the rest pertaining to it, is for the notables, who likewise consume it raw with salt and small [risjens].

They dress in the same fashion as the Malays, both men and women wearing a sarung with a long jacket, but with the distinction that the maidens and unmarried women are allowed to don a jacket. When they marry, they are expected to doff it and walk around with a bare torso.

Apart from the usual foodstuffs, these regions also produce wax and benzoin, which they exchange with their neighbours for salt, which cannot be procured among the Bata and therefore is regarded by them as money, likewise among the inhabitants of Bata themselves in the market.

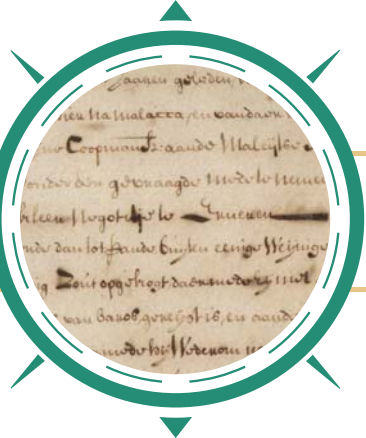
The Chinese says that nothing has been heard about gold or other minerals in or around these regions. Possibly such are present but the ignorance or stupidity of the inhabitants blind them to this.

Eventually the interrogatee decided to leave there and journey in this direction and he announced this [decision] to the rajas, who provided him generously with rice and various fruits and vegetables to consume as supplies during his journey. Thus supplied, he and his wife and child undertook the journey overland to Baros and, having reached there after a period of ten days, he boarded the ship of the Chinese Thieko which was lying in the roads of Baros, on which he with said wife and child arrived here via Padang on the 27<sup>th</sup> of last month planning like others of his nation to earn his living from agriculture or in some other manner.



## 4 Colophon

Title	Daniel Perret, “Inquiry of a Chinese Trader about the Batak People in North Sumatra, 1 March 1701”. In: <i>Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta</i> , document 9. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2013.
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## 5 Folio image

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