

CHAPTER FIVE

TURTLES

Reptiles are treated here in three separate chapters, reflecting the three broad groupings recognised by the Nuauulu themselves: testudines, saurians and snakes. The still rudimentary state of our herpetological knowledge of Seram, and of the Moluccan islands in general, has been commented upon elsewhere [Ellen et al, 1976a]. However, the information available for reptiles is probably more complete than that for amphibians. Reptiles are also more numerous, and prior to 1969 43 certain species had been reported, plus one uncertain provenance for the Elaphid snake *Aspidomorphus muelleri*.

Of the total corpus of known species, 19 were definitely observed during fieldwork, and most of them obtained as specimens in the Nuauulu area. However, there is evidence that the Nuauulu are familiar with at least 39 reptile species. The difference between this figure and the number known zoologically from the entire island may be accounted for by relative geographical distribution, particularly differences between highlands and the coast.

5.1 The turtles of south central Seram

There are just two families of testudines on Seram: the Cheloniidae, of which there are now four species recorded, and the Emydidae, of which one species is found. The leatherback turtle, *Dermochelys coriacea*, previously unrecorded for Seramese waters, was observed in 1973. A checklist of testudines reported from south central Seram is presented in table 8.

5.2 Nuauulu categories applied to turtles

5.2.1 peku, sahaunue

This is the only testudine category elicited for which specimens were actually collected, all other species being either not observed at all or too large to preserve and transport under normal ethnographic field conditions. **Peku** corresponds to *Cuora amboinensis*, the freshwater turtle, and is consistently identified as such by informants. Its morphological distinctiveness compared with other known turtles and the absence of an extensive testudine fauna makes this understandable. It is much smaller than the marine turtles with a shell length of little over 20 cm. It has a domed carapace, hinged plastron and unlike the marine turtles can completely withdraw into its shell when threatened. It is a herbivorous inhabitant of ponds and marshland.

TABLE 8 Checklist of testudines for the Nuaulu area of south central Seram

Species	Ecological zones					Nuaulu glosses
	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>CHELONIA</i>						
Emydidae - freshwater turtles						
<i>Cuora amboinensis</i>	-	-	-	+	-	peku
Amboinan box terrapin						
Cheloniidae - sea turtles						
<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	-	-	-	-	+	enu ikae
leatherback turtle						
<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	-	-	-	-	+	enu hunane
hawksbill turtle						
<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	-	-	-	-	+	enu hunane
green turtle						
<i>Caretta caretta</i>	-	-	-	-	+	enu hunane

Key. Zone 1 = above 1000 m, principally montane rain forest; zone 2 = tropical lowland rain forest; zone 3 = secondary rain forest, garden and village areas; zone 4 = freshwater and swamp forest; zone 5 = marine and estuarine.

Peku is a primary totem for the clan Nepane-tomoién, who are prohibited from using this name for the animal, although this attitude by no means applies to all totems. Instead it is referred to as **sahaunue**, the term also used for the coconut shell or AM 'tampung'. Literally, it has an affinity with **msaha**, a term used to refer to or address married men before they have become fathers, or **sahane**, a generic term for affines; **unue** = 'head'. The connection between the literal and referential meaning of the term **sahaunue** is obscure. It is not the same as that used for carapace, which is **nonia**. **Peku** is sometimes referred to by individuals from clans for which it is not a totem as **peku sahaunue**. Such synonyms indicate the importance of correlating names with actual specimens, rather than informants' descriptions or ethnographers' observations, since different names have a tendency to suggest separate categories.

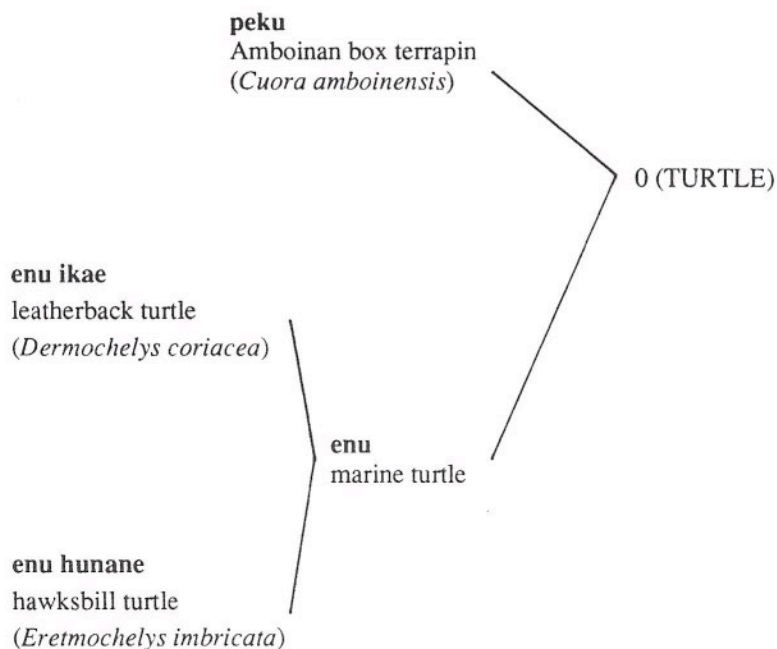
5.2.2 Enu (penu)

Enu refers to marine turtles of which two types are recognised: **enu ikae** (**ikae** = 'fish') and **enu hunane** (**hunane** = 'moon'), also known as **enu tipope**, the meaning of which is unknown. The first refers precisely to the leatherback turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*, although Stresemann, 1927: 61 reports that in the closely related language of Hatue the same species is referred to as **tipope**. There are no testudines in museum collections from Seram apart from *Cuora amboinensis*, although *Chelonia mydas*, *Eretmochelys imbricata* and *Caretta caretta* are known for Ambon, and these species must certainly be present in Seramese waters. Sachse, 1907: 57 reports *Chelonia* (i.e. *Eretmochelys*) *imbricata* from Seram. Descriptions of **enu hunane** appear to be referring to *E. imbricata*, but the label is probably applied by extension to all other marine turtles that are obviously not **enu ikae**. *Chelonia mydas* has a maximum shell length of just under 1.5 m and varies from light to dark brown, sometimes with a tinge of olive. The scutes are marked with radiating or mottled darker markings. *Caretta caretta* has about the same maximum length and is usually reddish-brown in immature specimens. It can be distinguished from *Chelonia mydas* and *E. imbricata* by the five (instead of four) costal scutes on each side of the carapace. It also has a relatively larger, broader, head. *E. imbricata* is the smallest of the **enu** species, with a maximum shell length of one meter. The overlapping scutes on its shell (in all but the very largest) distinguish it from all other marine turtles. The carapace is amber with streaks of various shades of brown and yellow.

5.3 General remarks on Nuaulu turtle classification

On the basis of observation, tests and interviews, testudines are clearly treated by the Nuaulu as a separate natural group, although there is no generic term for them, such as AM 'tuturuga'. The possession of a distinctive morphology is backed-up by the assertion that **peku** may develop from **enu** eggs. This belief in inter-species ontogeny is a widespread characteristic of Nuaulu ethnozoology and is discussed in detail in chapter 6.4 of *The Cultural Relations of Classification*. If an **enu** (type unspecified) lays 150 eggs in the forest - I was told by Saniau - 50 of these would become **peku** on reaching the shore. There is no evidence that either **enu** (which is more likely) or **peku** is used as a generic for testudines in the way **notu** is used for frogs (see 8.4). The distinction made within this covert group is probably simply habitational, between marine (**enu**) and freshwater (**peku**), although size (large:small) was also offered by informants as a distinguishing characteristic. This provides us with the taxonomic structure in figure 7.

FIGURE 7 Nuauulu classification of turtles arranged as a taxonomic hierarchy



by extension:

green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*)

Specimens of *Cuora amboinensis* were consistently identified as **peku**. **Enu** of any kind are rarely encountered and there is probably some difficulty among younger Nuauulu in differentiating between **enu hunane** and **enu ikae**. This is partly to be accounted for by the fact that Nuauulu do not generally engage in marine fishing, and it is even forbidden for some clans e.g. Sonawe-ainakahata. No doubt this is connected with the fact that prior to resettlement the Nuauulu were located in the upper valleys of the Nua and Ruatan rivers, with little opportunity to see - let alone eat - sea turtles. There

is no evidence though that the term **enu** is a recent loan word, which might seem a reasonable inference in the circumstances.

As far as can be judged, there is little or no variation between informants in terms of assigning terminal categories for turtles to more inclusive groups. Although this domain is not named, there is no difficulty in representing its inner relations as a taxonomy. This is partly due to the limited content and distinctive morphology of the group. In the card-sorting test, 22 informants out of a sample of 25 grouped **enu ikae** and **peku** together. These were grouped with other reptile categories as follows (numerals indicate number of informants):

	puha crocodiles	puo₁ monitors	isa sail-tails	imasasae geckos	poso₄ skinks	kasa'un <i>Calotes</i>
peku	11	2	2	1	1	1
enu ikae	9	4	4	3	2	2

The preference for grouping with **puha**, and then **puo₁** and **isa**, appears to be due to the fact that like turtles, these are to a certain extent, aquatic beasts. There seems to be no consistent reason for associating turtles with the remaining categories. The **enu/peku** distinction itself is probably made largely on the basis of habitat (sea:land).

5.4 Social uses of turtles

Except for Nepane-tomoién, turtles and their eggs may be eaten by anyone, and it is not even entirely clear whether the taboo with respect to **enu** is rigidly enforced for this clan. However, they are not preferred foods and occurred nowhere among the items consumed during a dietary survey undertaken in 1970-71. They are not sought after or hunted, but readily eaten when available. Although *E. imbricata* is occasionally eaten, the flesh can be poisonous and its consumption has been known to cause human deaths. The shell of hard-backed marine turtles (**en(u) unte** = 'enu skin'), usually that of *Eretmochelys imbricata*, is fashioned into finger rings (**sopao**) and small anklets (**niti anae**), generally for children. ¹

Peku is undoubtedly the most commonly consumed turtle, and occurs in large numbers around the mouths of the larger creeks flowing into the Banda sea, such as the Upu and Pia. The larger marine turtles are only eaten when caught on the beaches, usually when laying eggs. A large (80 kg) **enu ikae** was caught in this way in August 1973. When the shell, calipee, dung, blood and waste had been discarded just over half of the original weight was

available for eating. However, the odour of the leatherback is disliked, and compared to the smell of decomposition - **haue kopue** (**haue** = 'smell', **kopue** = 'rotten, decaying, foul').

Note to Chapter 5

- 1 For example, see Museum of Mankind (London) Reg. Nos. 1972 AS1, 224-7; Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Ellen field catalogue No. 551; British Museum (Natural History) Reg. No. 1976.933.