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# An Aslian origin for the word *gibbon*

Teckwyn Lim

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Gibbons are small arboreal apes whose range once stretched from India to China but which are now found mostly in the forests of Southeast Asia. There are some 20 extant gibbon species, in four genera, comprising the family Hylobatidae [Fan *et al.* 2017]. The word *gibbon* was first recorded by the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon [Buffon 1766: 92-95]; it entered English in 1770, and is now found in languages throughout the world. However, the root of the word has eluded linguists for centuries [Buffon 1792: 185 n., Skeat 1910: 778, van Gulik 1967: 1].
- 2 Buffon suggested that *gibbon* may have had its origins in the East Indies, but he was unable to identify which language it came from. The *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED3] states that ‘gibbon’ is “alleged to be an Indian word, but it has not been found in any Indian language”. Skeat [1910: ‘gibbon’] states that “how the name came into existence we cannot tell, but that it was suggested [to the French] by an Englishman [in India] can hardly be doubted”, noting that *Gibbon*, the English proper name, was an extension of *Gilbert*. To help solve this puzzle, this article reviews lexemes for *gibbon* among the native languages of the animal’s natural range and identifies the most likely root of the word.

## 1. Methodology

- 3 I used maps from Turvey *et al.* [2018] and Biotani *et al.* [2006] to identify the distribution of gibbons (Figure 1). I then used the language maps of Eberhard *et al.* [2019] to identify languages native to this region. I then identified local word-forms for ‘gibbon’ from a broad selection of these native languages.
- 4 I carried out an analysis on the words using a feature-weighted linguistic algorithm (ALINE, *aliner*-package in R [R Core Team 2013; Downey *et al.* 2017]). The ALINE distance ( $ALINE_{Dist}$ ) between two words is calculated by an automatic phonetic sequence

alignment algorithm that determines the similarity of the words, giving a result ranging from 0 to 1, with zero indicating that the words are effectively identical, and 1 indicating the words have no phonemic similarities. Specifically, the ALINE algorithm [Kondrak 2000] assigns a distance value to pairs of words by decomposing the phonemes into elementary features (which include place, manner, voice, etc.), assigning numerical values to each feature and then calculating the weighted average distance between the features. The values for the features are based on the position of the vocal organs when making the sound represented (e.g. the value assigned to the feature “manner” varies from 1 for a stop, 0.4 for a high vowel, and 0 for a low vowel). The similarity value is normalized by the length of the longer word, with a penalty being applied for each unaligned phoneme and to reduce the relative importance of vowel matches (as opposed to consonant matches). ALINE was designed to identify and align cognates in related languages and can be used for calculating the similarity of any pair of words [Kondrak & Sherif 2006].

- 5 I used ALINE to calculate the distance between the native words for ‘gibbon’ and Buffon’s *gibbon*. While the modern French pronunciation is [ʒiˈbɔ̃] [CNRTL 2019: gibbon], Buffon [1792: 9:185] made it clear that the word originally had a hard /g/ [giˈbɔ̃]<sup>2</sup> – he noted that an alternate spelling of the word was *guibon*.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is a likelihood that the /n/ in the etymon was not silent, i.e. /gibɔn/ (cf. the original pronunciation of the final /n/ in other loanwords in French, such as in the Môn of Môn-Khmer).<sup>4</sup> The analysis used both /gibɔ/ and /gibɔn/.
- 6 For the analysis, I transcribed the lexemes from the source orthography into phonemes for ALINE analysis using the International Phonetic Alphabet. I sorted the lexemes according to their ALINE distance from *gibbon* and plotted the results together with a cladogram generated using the hierarchic clustering (‘hclust’) function in R (using the unweighted-pair group method with arithmetic mean (UPGMA) agglomeration). I identified candidate root words on the basis of the least phonemic distance from *gibbon* and the cluster results.

## 2. Results

- 7 I identified 69 lexemes for *gibbon* from 54 languages spoken in the gibbon range (see Figures 1 and 2). These included words from six language families: Austroasiatic (several Aslian languages, Khmer, Mon and Vietnamese), Austronesian (several Malay varieties, including Aboriginal Malay), Hmong-Mien (Hmong), Indo-European (Assamese and Bengali), Sino-Tibetan (Burmese, Hakha Chin, Karen and Southern Min) and Tai-Kadai (Thai and Lao). The lexeme that had the closest phonemic distance from *gibbon* was *kəbɔŋ*, a word form from a Northern Aslian language of the Malay Peninsula (ALINE<sub>Dist</sub> *gibɔn/kəbɔŋ* = 0.1556). The word form *kəbɔŋ* clustered together with *gibɔn* and *gibɔ* (Figure 3).

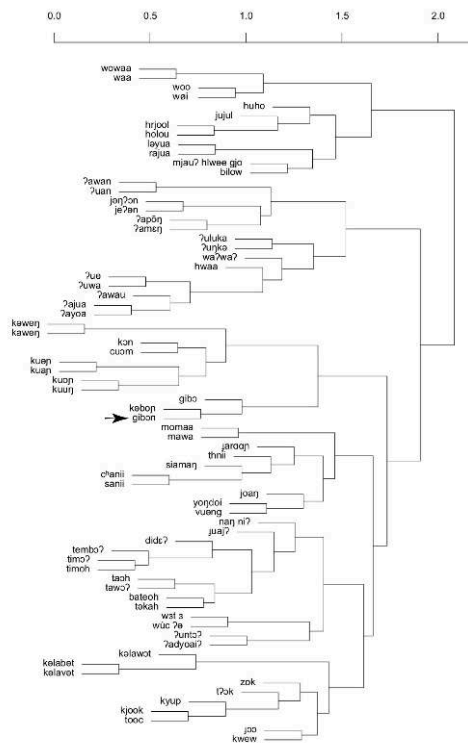
Figure 1: Natural distribution of gibbons<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: Phonemic distance between French and native words for 'gibbon'<sup>6</sup>



Figure 3: Phonemic clustering of words for ‘gibbon’<sup>7</sup>



### 3. Discussion

- 8 The phonemic analysis presents a hypothesis that *gibbon* is related to the Northern Aslian word *kəbɔŋ*. The sections below examine the orthography and morphology of *kəbɔŋ*, and discuss the extent to which the semantic, historical, and linguistic context of both *gibbon* and *kəbɔŋ* support the results of the phonemic analysis.

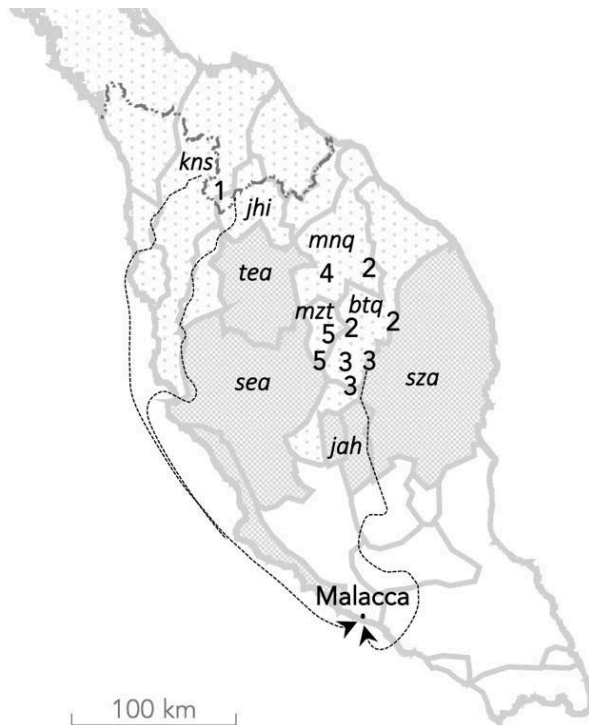
#### 3.1. Orthography and morphology

- 9 The word form *kəbɔŋ* is reported by British anthropologist Walter William Skeat (1866-1953), who gives it as *ka-boñ* ‘monkey’ (*Mal.* *mawah*) from one locality and *kəboñ* ‘monkey’ (*Mal.* *ungka*; *wawah*) from another [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M152].<sup>8</sup> More recent records include *kebòñ* ‘*Hylobates* spp.’ [Endicott 1979a: 65], *kəbɔn* ‘white-handed gibbon’ (*Hylobates lar*) [Lye 2004: 204], and *kbon* ‘long arm monkey’ [Suzila 2015: 199]. In 2013, I recorded *kəbɔn* ‘*Hylobates lar*’ from two localities in Pahang [Lim field notes].
- 10 The most phonemically reliable forms are probably those of the wordlists of the archive of the Volkswagen Foundation’s DOBES (Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen) programme: *kəbɔŋ* ‘gibbon’ [Burenhult 2008] and *kbɔŋ* ‘gibbon’ [Burenhult 2009]. These forms support Endicott’s [1979] rendering of the open back vowel /ɔ/ and the final palatal nasal /ŋ/. The phonetic surface representation of the word is probably along the lines of [kəʔbɔʔŋ] and a purely phonemic representation should probably be /kɔŋ/ since the vowel of the first syllable is likely to be epenthetic and not have phonemic status. The lexeme shall thus be referred to as *kbɔŋ* for the remainder of this article.

- 11 It is worth noting that final palatals are ubiquitous in Austroasiatic languages, including the Northern Aslian varieties that contain the form *kbɔŋ* [Diffloth 1976b: 76-78, Diffloth 1979: 6-7, Benjamin 1985: 8, 13]. Thus, it is likely that the final nasals of *kabɔnn* [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M152], *kəbon*, *kəbɔn* and *kbon*, involving /n/ rather than /ŋ/, are misrepresentations by non-native speakers. Incidentally, it is thus quite possible that the /n/ in *gibɔn* could similarly be the result of a non-native rendering of an /ŋ/.
- 12 Transcription errors could also be responsible for the closed back vowel /o/ in *ka-boñ*, *kəboñ*, *kabɔnn*, *kəbon* and *kbon*. Aslian languages tend to have much richer systems of vowel phonemes than other languages such as English and Malay (both of which have constrained orthographies). It is thus likely that the authors mentioned gave the closed back vowel /o/ when the open back vowel /ɔ/ was more accurate. Indeed, Skeat & Blagden [1906: 506] admit to particular uncertainty regarding the orthography of the Aslian vowels in the forms they reference. Nevertheless, this vowel shift does not have any influence on the ALINE analysis as these vowels are not distinguished in the analysis (i.e.  $ALINE_{Dist} kbɔŋ/kbɔŋ = 0$ ).

### 3.2. Ethno-Geography of Northern Aslian

- 13 Northern Aslian is one of the four clades of the Aslian branch of the Austroasiatic language family spoken by groups of Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula [Benjamin 2012, Kruspe *et al.* 2015]. There are some 8 to 10 speech varieties in Northern Aslian, with new varieties having been reported as recently as 2017 [Yager & Burenhult 2017]. The lexeme *kbɔŋ* ‘gibbon’ (with the orthographic variations highlighted above) has been recorded from five groups in the north of the Peninsula, all Northern Aslian speakers (Figure 4). The Northern Aslian speakers here are traditionally hunter-gatherers, collectively known as the Menraq [Gomes 2007] (they are also known as *Semang* and *Negrato*).

Figure 4: Records of *kbɔŋ* 'gibbon' with possible routes to Malacca<sup>9</sup>

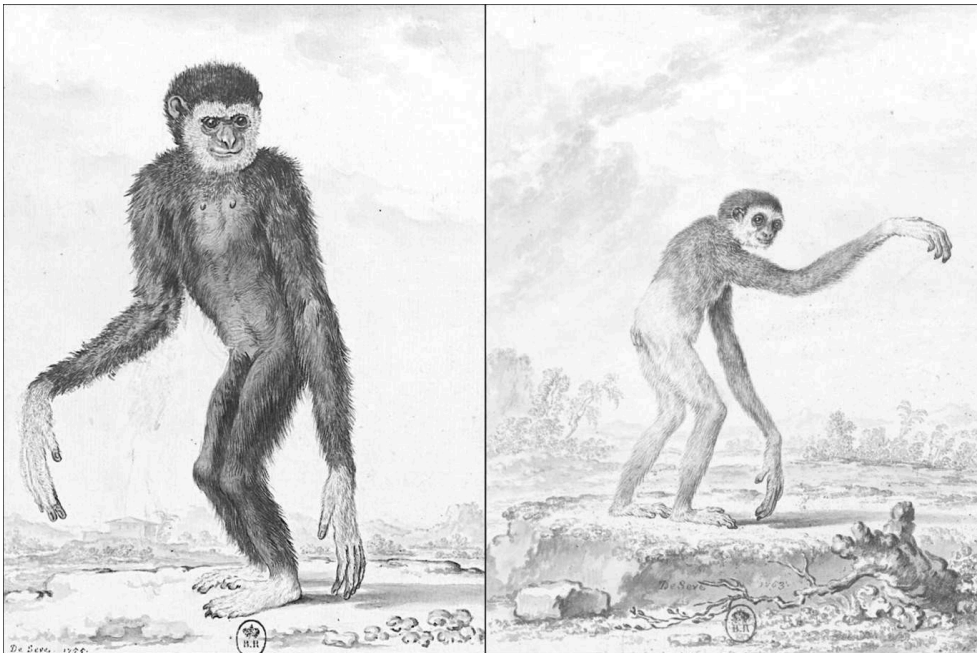
- 14 The word *kbɔŋ* appears confined to speech varieties that are within a sub-branch of Northern Aslian that has been designated Menraq-Batek [Dunn *et al.* 2011]. This sub-branch includes several varieties of Batek, Menriq, Jahai, and Jedek [Yager & Burenhult 2017]. Skeat records *kbɔŋ* from the “Pangan of Ulu Aring [in Kelantan]” [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M152], who, Benjamin [1976: 125-126] suggests, were people now known as the Batek Deq. Endicott [1979a] and Burenhult [2008] record *kbɔŋ* from the Batek Deq of Kuala Koh, Upper Lebir, Kelantan. The records of Lye [2004: 204] and Suzila *et al.* [2015: 199] are from the Batek of Pahang (“Batek Hep”). My records [Lim field notes] were from the Batek of the Tanum Valley (Telok Gunong and Chegar Perah, Pahang), who speak a language known as Mintil [Benjamin 1976]. Burenhult’s [2009] record is from the Menriq of Kuala Lah, Nenggiri, Kelantan.
- 15 One outlier appears to be the record *ka-boñ* from the “Semang (or Pangan) of Jarum” [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M152]. Benjamin [1976: 125-126] suggests that the people of Jarum were speakers of Jahai, and, according to the language map by Benjamin [1983], the village of Jarum (Ban Ya Rom, Yala Province, Thailand) (5°47', 101°8') is at the mouth of the Jarum river on the north-western edge of the Jahai range (point 1 on Figure 4). However, the coordinates for Skeat’s “Jarum” locality (5°51', 101°2') are in the upper reaches of that river and suggest a location about 20 km outside the Jahai range, and in the range of the Kensiu group. Furthermore, the word the Jahai currently use for *gibbon* is [mã 'wẽʔ] [Burenhult 2005: 239]. In the past, the Menraq were highly mobile [Gomes 2007] and it is possible that Skeat’s record from Jarum (presumably recorded during his 1899-1900 expedition) was from a language variety that is presently found further east. There were also several varieties of Northern Aslian found in the coastal lowlands of Kedah and Perak that went extinct with only relatively short wordlists being collected [Benjamin 2012: 165]. Four of these extinct varieties (Low-country

Semang: ‘Semang of Yen’ and Semang of Juru’; and Kensi: Meni’ Kaie and Kensi Pëmsed) are found north of or adjacent to the Muda River in Kedah (the significance of which will be explained in the following section) [Benjamin 1983].

### 3.3. Semantics

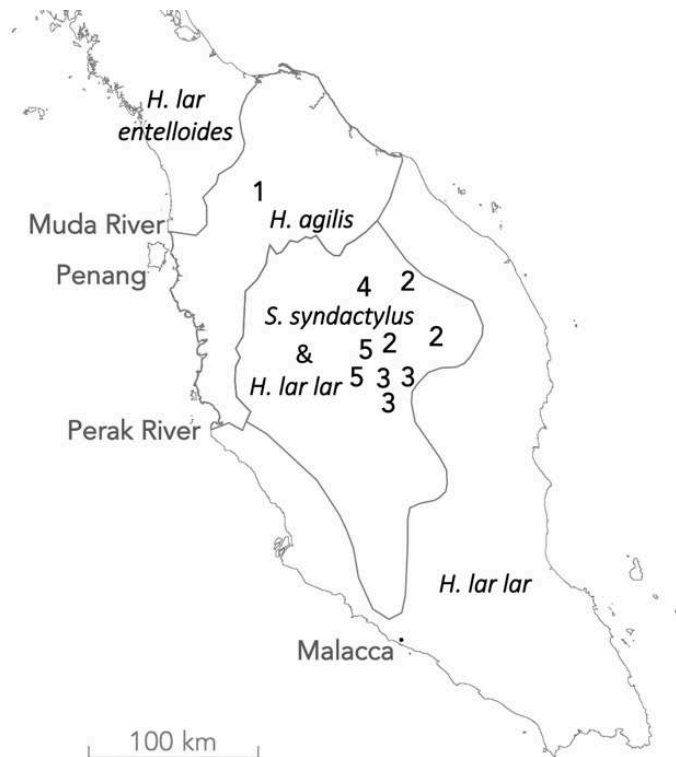
- 16 The original meaning of *gibbon* can be determined by reference to the description given by Buffon [1766]. He presents illustrations of two individual male gibbons (Figure 5). These have both been identified as being White-handed Gibbons *Hylobates lar* (L.) [Groves 1969]. The common name refers to the pale pelage that is usually found on the backs of the hands, feet and facial markings of these animals, while their skin and the palms of their hands and soles of their feet are actually black.

Figure 5: Original illustrations by Jacques de Sève, showing Buffon’s “Grand Gibbon” (1755) and his “Petit Gibbon” (1763)<sup>10</sup>



- 17 There are four subspecies of White-handed Gibbon which once ranged from south-west China to northern Sumatra. Buffon’s two gibbons were from two different subspecies, the first (his “Grand Gibbon”) has been identified as *H. lar entelloides*, found north/west of the Muda River, and the second (his “Petit Gibbon”) as *H. lar lar*, which is only found south/east of the Perak River [Groves 1969]. The ranges of the two *H. lar* subspecies are separated by a stretch of land that crosses the Peninsula between the Muda and Perak rivers (Figure 6). This stretch is inhabited by the Agile Gibbon, *H. agilis*, which is similar in appearance but generally lacks the white hands and feet of *H. lar*.



Figure 6: Distribution of *kbɔŋ* and gibbon taxa in the Malay Peninsula<sup>11</sup>

- 18 The identification of *Hylobates* gibbons is complicated by the fact that both *H. lar* and *H. agilis* have variable coat colours and differ very little anatomically. Indeed, some hybridisation occurs where the two species meet at the headwaters of the rivers that separate their range [Gittins & Raemakers 1980: 65]. The southern part of the Peninsula is also home to the largest member of the gibbon family, the siamang (*Symphalangus syndactylus*), which is sympatric with *H. lar lar* but is readily distinguished by its entirely black coat and its booming call (the etymology of *siamang* will be discussed below).
- 19 The meaning of the word *kbɔŋ* matches that of *gibbon* in referring to the *Hylobates* gibbons of the Malay Peninsula. Skeat's record from Jarum is within the *H. agilis* range and the further records of *kbɔŋ* are all from Kelantan and Pahang, within the range of *H. lar lar* (Figure 6).
- 20 Supporting this biogeography, Skeat notes that, in Jarum, *kaboynn* or *ka-boñ* referred to the "monkey" that Malays refer to as *mawah*; while in Ulu Aring *kəboñ* is glossed using the Malay words *ungka* and *wahwah* [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M152]. Wilkinson [1932: 22973] translates *mawa* as 'gibbon' (Kedah Malay) and gives *ungka* and *wa'wa* as synonyms. Gittins and Raemakers [1980: 65] note that *wak-wak* is the common name used for both *Hylobates* species in the Peninsula (the form being imitative of the call made by the gibbons). They add that, in districts where both *H. lar* and *H. agilis* are found, locals use *wak-wak* to refer to the former and *ungka* to refer to the latter, since this name "describes more closely the bisyllabic 'whoo-aa' call of this species".
- 21 More recently, Endicott [1979a: 65] explicitly identifies his *kebõn* of Ulu Aring as '*Hylobates* spp.' and Lye [2004: 204] identifies her *kəbon* from Pahang as 'White-handed Gibbon (*Hylobates lar*)'. More ambiguously, Suzila *et al.* [2015: 199] note *kbon* 'long handed monkey' from Kuala Tahan, Pahang.<sup>12</sup> I recorded my *kəbɔŋ* from Pahang as '*Hylobates lar*'.

### 3.4. Historical context

- 22 Given the strong phonemic and semantic similarities between *gibbon* and *kbɔŋ*, it is worth examining whether the historical context could have permitted transmission from Northern Aslian to French. In particular, it is relevant to consider the origin of the individual animals described by Buffon [1766].

#### 3.4.1. Hunting and keeping gibbons

- 23 Human relationship with gibbons in the Peninsula dates back many thousands of years. In Kelantan, the bones of gibbons have been found among prehistoric tools dated to around 5,000 years ago [Baer 2016]. Numerous studies show that Aslian speakers have historically hunted gibbons for food – usually using blowpipes and poison darts [Vaughan-Stevens 1892; Burkill 1935; Endicott 1979b; Raemaekers & Chivers 1980]. Gibbon hunting continues in Menraq communities in Perak [Loke *et al.* 2020] and in communities in Pahang [Lim field notes].
- 24 While adult gibbons are eaten, the young are often kept as pets [van der Sluys 2000: 441]. Tame gibbons can be particularly affectionate, and records of pet gibbons in Asia go back more than 2,200 years [Turvey *et al.* 2018]. In 2015, I observed two young gibbons (a white-handed gibbon and a siamang) being kept as pets in a Batek village in Pahang [Lim field notes].

#### 3.4.2. Trade contact

- 25 The Orang Asli have long had contact with the outside world via trade. As early as the fifth century, Aslian forest collectors had been exchanging items down the main rivers in return for rice, textiles and pottery [Dunn 1975]. Allen [1999: 143] notes that this trade was carried out primarily with the Malays living downstream, as few foreigners ventured upriver prior to the nineteenth century. Historically, there were several trans-peninsular trade and portage routes [Benjamin 2013] (Figure 4), and the points of export were the various coastal ports, primarily Malacca. From here, the produce proceeded eastwards across the South China Sea and westwards across the Indian Ocean [Allen 1999: 143, Hussin 2011]. Archaeological findings [Bellina & Glover 2004] suggest that there has been regular trade contact between the Malay Archipelago and South India for more than 2,000 years.
- 26 The exports of the Archipelago included numerous species of flora and fauna, live as well as dead. There are records of primates such as “monkeys” from the Peninsula being traded across the Indian Ocean by Arab traders at the end of the first millennium (850-1000) [Dunn 1975: 112]. In this context, “monkeys” was a generic term that also included apes such as gibbons. Film-maker Victor Jurgens, in *Nomads of the Jungle* (produced by Louis de Rochemont in 1949), documents a group of Aslian speakers (specifically Temiars) hunting Agile Gibbons using blowpipes and then taking the baby gibbons to a Malay trading post, “where men buy them to send to far-off lands” (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Orang Asli hunters sell a baby Agile Gibbon to a Malay trader in Gerik, Perak<sup>13</sup>

- 27 Trade in live gibbons reached Europe by the eighteenth century. One black gibbon, referred to as an “ourangoutang” (< Malay *orang hutan* ‘person of the forest’),<sup>14</sup> entered the menagerie of the second Earl of Shelburne, England, perishing in the winter of 1768 [Grigson 2016: 134]. British statesman Stamford Raffles kept a pet gibbon when he served in Penang between 1805 and 1810, and he also had a pet siamang when he served in Sumatra in the 1820s [Bastin 1990].
- 28 The “Grand Gibbon” was brought to Buffon by the businessman-turned-bureaucrat Joseph François Dupleix. From the 1720s, Dupleix had been based in Pondicherry, the French colony in South India (Figure 1), where he had partnered with English captains and traded extensively with Malacca [Ray 1999: 116, Singh 2006: 458]. In 1742, Dupleix was appointed as governor-general of French India, and, on behalf of the French East India Company, he sent numerous French agents to the Malay Archipelago [Martineau 1929]. In 1753, Dupleix is known to have had a pet gibbon in his possession in his home in Pondicherry [d’Obsonville 1784: 374], and in 1755 he brought the live Grand Gibbon to France, telling Buffon that it was a “gibbon” [Buffon 1766: 185]. Dupleix’s successor, Charles Godeheu, had a White-handed Gibbon from “Malac” (Malacca)<sup>15</sup> (the “Petit Gibbon”) that he too brought back with him at the end of his term in India [Buffon *et al.* 1829: 130].

### 3.5. Linguistic context

#### 3.5.1. Aslian loan words in Malay

- 29 The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch merchant and historian Jan Huyghen van Linschoten [1596: 24] reports that the Malay spoken in the city of Malacca is said to have incorporated the best words (“die beste woorden”) of all neighbouring languages. It is indeed the case that Orang Asli trade with communities downstream resulted in the transmission of several words to the Malay dialects of the Peninsula. Most of these loanwords are the names of animals, including the names of several species that were traded to be eaten, including *dekan* ‘bamboo-rat’ (*Rhizomys sumatrensis*), *merak* ‘peafowl’ (*Pavo muticus*) and *ketam* ‘crab’ [Benjamin 2012: 152-153]. Other Malay words noted to be of probable Aslian origin are *cimcili* ‘flycatcher’ (*Terpsiphone* spp.)<sup>16</sup>, *cucu* ‘grandchild’, *helang* ‘eagle’, *jenut* ‘saltlick’ and *semut* ‘ant’ [Benjamin 2012: 152-53].
- 30 The English word *siamang* (the large black gibbon mentioned above) comes from the Malay *siamang* [‘si:əmɑŋ], which, in turn, probably has an Aslian root. Raffles [1821]

describes the species as *Simia syndactylus*, based on specimens collected in Sumatra, and he notes that *siamang* had a Malay origin. Wilkinson [1901] states that “*siyamang*” was from “*si-amang*, *amang* having apparently the meaning black”. Since *si* is the Malay personal definite article, *siamang* (i.e. Si Amang) would thus take on a fitting gloss of ‘Brother Black’. However, this interpretation is problematic because glossing *amang* as ‘black’ is hard to support, with the closest definition of the word actually being ‘impurities in tin ore’ [Wilkinson 1932: 626].<sup>17</sup> A more likely explanation for *siamang* is that it is an analogical reformation of Central Aslian *?amaŋ* ‘*Symphalangus syndactylus*’ (found in Semnam [Burenhult & Wegener 2009: 306], and in Temiar [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M159, Means 1998: 20]).<sup>18</sup> The combination of *si-* with *amang* thus suggests a folk etymology that employs a somewhat appropriate Malay meaning of the word ‘*amang*’, giving *siamang* a gloss along the lines of ‘Mr Sooty’.

- 31 Malay-Menraq exchange declined during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following an increase in slave raiding against the Orang Asli [Ileto 1971: 25, Warren 1977: 167, Robarchek & Dentan 1987: 360]. During this period, much of the direct Malay-Menraq trade contact was replaced by the “silent barter” [Wells 1925, Rambo 1979]. The silent trade took place without face-to-face contact – Malay merchants would leave goods such as sacks of salt or rice at a spot on the forest edge and, sometime later, the Menraq foragers would take the goods, leaving a fair amount of produce such as rattan or resins in their place. This practice had several implications – it put an end to linguistic exchange and also probably constrained the type of goods sold (live apes were probably not suitable to be left unattended).
- 32 In addition to the slave raiding, the formation of British Malaya during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a degree of homogenisation of the Malay language and there is some evidence of a decline in the Malay use of Aslian loanwords. Some 18<sup>th</sup>-century borrowings that are no longer used include *cuk* (*Hoya* sp.), *hakek* (*Pandanus* sp.), *kemon* ‘son of a brother’ [Benjamin 2012: 152], and *taleb* ‘fungus rhizomorph’ [Bowrey 1701, Wilkinson 1932].

### 3.5.2. Malayisms in European languages

- 33 As Aslian words entered Malay, so too did Malay loans enter the languages of the West. Trade contact with the Malay world is evident in Indian languages, such as Tamil, and later in European languages, including French and English [Scott 1897, Tan 1998, Fraser Gupta 2008, Tan 2009, van der Sijts 2011, Hoogervorst 2018]. Loanwords are particularly common among the names of the plants and animals that were exported from the Archipelago. One ancient example is the tree *kapur* ‘*Dryobalanops aromatica*’, which is the source of the aromatic chemical, camphor, which has a wide range of uses, including perfumery, food and medicine (Mal. *kapur* > Tam. *karppūram* [University of Madras 1936] > Ar. *kafur* > 13c. Fr. *camphre* [CNRTL] > 14c. Eng. ‘caumfre’ [OED3 ‘camphor’]).
- 34 Similarly, the Malay *kakatua* ‘cockatoo’ (parrots of the family *Cacatuidae*) is thought to have accompanied the export of live birds to India since ancient times and gave rise to the Tamil word *kākkattuvāṇ* [University of Madras 1936, Hoogervorst 2014, Hoogervorst 2015]. The arrival of European traders in the Archipelago saw cockatoos being exported to Europe and *cockatoo* entering both French and English languages in the seventeenth century (English *cacatoes* (1634) [OED3], French *cacatoua* (1652)

[CNRTL]). In addition, *Kakadu/Cacadu* became a common item of German vocabulary [Mahdi 2007: 185-191].

- 35 Another animal name, *gecko*, entered the European lexicon shortly before *gibbon*. This word (which is said to be imitative of the mating call of the male) was recorded in French in 1734 and then in English in 1774 [OED3: 'gecko']. However, the putative Malay etymon *gekok* is not found in Malaysian or Indonesian, although Wilkinson [1931: 10280] notes it from "Java Malay". The species *Gekko gekko* is instead known as *tokek* in Malay and as *tekek* in Javanese [Robson & Wibisono 2002: 26971]. Mahdi [2007: 197] suggests that *gekok* is actually a borrowing or projection from a Dutch word, in turn from Creole Portuguese *\*jecco*.
- 36 Some of the hundreds of European words with a "Malay" etymon ultimately have an Aslian root.<sup>19</sup> Two English words are already accepted in this category: the Orang Asli ethnonyms *Semang* (mentioned above) and *Senoi* (another subgroup of Orang Asli). The *OED3* notes that *Semang* (recorded in English in 1808 as "Samang") probably comes via Kedah Malay from an Aslian language meaning 'human being' (cf. Semnam *smaaʔ* 'human' [Burenhult & Wegener 2009]). Similarly, *Senoi*, recorded in English in 1891, comes from Central Aslian *sɛnʔoi* 'man' [OED3].

## Conclusion

- 37 The phonemic, semantic, historical and linguistic evidence offered above is consistent with the hypothesis that *gibbon* has a root in Northern Aslian *kbɔŋ*. It is perhaps most likely that the loan followed trade contact and was facilitated by Malay acting as an intermediary:

Fr. *gibbon* < 18c. Mal. *\*kəbɔŋ* < N. Aslian *kbɔŋ*<sup>20</sup>

- 38 In the case of the Grand Gibbon, biogeography suggests that the point of transfer was probably from a location on or north of the Muda river. The fact that *kbɔŋ* has not been recorded from any of the Northern Aslian varieties presently found here does not exclude the possibility that *kbɔŋ* was from one of the varieties that are now extinct. Similarly, while the intermediary *\*kəbɔŋ* has not been found in the Malay corpus, it is possible that it was present in peninsular dialects of eighteenth-century Malay (e.g. in Kedah and Malacca) and went out of use (being replaced by *ungka* and *wakwak*) before being recorded. The transfer from Malay to the language of export probably took place in Kedah or in the city of Malacca, ca. 1750.
- 39 Dupleix received the gibbon and its name when he was in Pondicherry but there remains a question as to the actual language of export. It is quite possible that one of Dupleix's English trading partners could have been the source of both. An analogical reformation of *kbɔŋ* (or of *\*kəbɔŋ*) using English "Gibbon" (as suggested by Skeat [1910]) would also explain the phonemic shifts, such as that of /k/ to /g/. Perhaps further historical research will shed light on this possibility.

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## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Paul Sidwell and to the anonymous *Lexis* reviewers who gave helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2.  $ALINE_{Dist} \text{gib}^{\text{õ}}/\text{ʒib}^{\text{õ}} = 0.29$ .
3. Phonetic representations of *gibbon* vary, with the standard anglicized pronunciation being [ˈɡɪbən].
4.  $ALINE_{Dist} \text{gib}^{\text{ɔ}}/\text{gib}^{\text{ɔn}} = 0.15$ .
5. The modern range (dark gray) is from Biotani *et al.* [2006] and the historical range (light gray) is adapted from Turvey *et al.* [2018]; the box shows the location of the Malay Peninsula (Figures 4 & 6).
6. Language codes following ISO 639-5 and ISO 639-3 are provided in brackets.
7. Agglomeration based on average ALINE distances (UPGMA).
8. They cite a comparison with another Northern Aslian form, *tabö<sup>ng</sup>* ‘monkey’ (*Mal. lotong*), used for another species of primate (*Presbytis* sp.) [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M146].
9. The language boundaries are adapted from Benjamin [1983], with the language names following the ISO 639-3 codes: Northern Aslian: btq-Batek, jhi-Jahai, kns-Kensiu, mnq-Menriq; and Central Aslian: jah-Jahut, tea-Temiar, sea-Semai, and Semaq Beri-sza. Light stippled shading represents the Menraq group, the medium shading represents the Senoi group. The dashed arrows follow the trans-peninsular portage routes from Benjamin [2013]. The numbers represent localities where the communities using the word *kbɔŋ* ‘gibbon’ were recorded: (1) the Semang of

Jarum [Skeat & Blagden 1906], (2) the Batek De' [Endicott 1979a], (3) the Batek [Lye 2004], (4) the Menriq of Kuala Lah [Burenhult 2009], and (5) the Batek of the Tanum Valley [Lim field notes].

10. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie.

11. The species ranges are adapted from Biotani *et al.* [2006]; the numbers represent the locations mentioned in Figure 4.

12. Suzila *et al.* [2015: 199] give a list of Batek names for some 34 mammal species. The gloss given for *kbon*, 'long handed monkey', could be reasonably interpreted to refer to a gibbon. For example, in Chinese, the gibbon is known as 长臂猿 'long-armed ape' – *cháng bì yuán* in Standard Chinese and /təŋ<sup>5</sup> pɛi<sup>3</sup> ʔuan<sup>5</sup>/ in Southern Min (Lim Tze Tshen, pers. comm., 19 Aug. 2019). However, other entries in the list by Suzila *et al.* [2015: 199] are questionable, such as 'hippopotamus' for *tladas* (which should probably be 'sun bear' *Helarctos malayanus* [Lim field notes]). Furthermore, one of the entries in the list is "/lar/ 'tail-less gibbon'". Here, "/lar/" is almost certainly a transcription error, confusing the Latin name "*H. lar*" for a Batek name.

13. Stills from the documentary, *Nomads of the Jungle*, directed by Victor Jurgens [1949].

14. The English word *orangutan* most commonly refers to apes of the genus *Pongo* – and, as such, was recorded in English in 1654 as *orangh-outangh* (< Dutch *orang-oetan*), and in French *orang-outan* in 1680 [OED3].

15. At the time, "Malac" (Malacca) referred both to the entrepôt (then under the control of the Dutch East India Company) and also to the Malay Peninsula more generally.

16. In addition, the Malay *cepu-cepu* 'a small white bird' [Clifford & Swettenham 1894] is suggestive of Temiar *cep* 'bird' (which is probably imitative, like the English 'chirp').

17. This word appears to have an Austroasiatic root and compares with *mɛ:ŋ* 'black spots' used by the Bru people of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand; and proto-Katuic and proto-Khmuic *\*-maŋ* 'soot' [Sidwell 2005], perhaps ultimately from proto Mon-Khmer *\*maŋ* 'night, evening' [Shorto 2006: sec. R.638.A].

18. Northern Aslian names for *siamang* include Batek Deq *bătēyū* [Skeat & Blagden 1906: M157], Jahai *ʔamɛŋ* [Burenhult 2005: 257], and Mintil *batew* [Lim field notes]. Suzila *et al.* [2015: 200] note the Batek Hep /btew/ 'black-furred gibbon'.

19. In English there are 253 words with a "Malay" etymon, including 69 items related to flora and 34 related to fauna [Tan 1998: 46]; additional Malay loanwords are present in Malaysian English, such *ayam* 'chicken' and *ikan bilis* 'anchovies' [Tan 2009: 11-20].

20.  $ALINE_{Dist} kbɔŋ/*kəbɔn = 0.1059, *kəbɔn/gibɔn = 0.1111.$

## ABSTRACTS

This article examines the etymology of the word *gibbon*, which is not yet clear. The article presents a phonemic analysis using the ALINE algorithm which suggests that the root word is Northern Aslian *kbɔŋ*, used by Menraq communities in the heart of Peninsular Malaysia. This article reviews morphological, ethno-geographical, semantic, historical and linguistic evidence that supports this hypothesis. The article proposes Malay as an intermediary, noting that several other Aslian words entered European languages via Malay.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** noms d'animaux, emprunts, analyse morphologique, austroasiatique, malais

**Keywords:** animal names, loanwords, morphological analysis, Austroasiatic, Malay

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