

# **SOME PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING THE ORIGIN OF THE PHILIPPINE WORD ‘MUTYA’ OR ‘MUTIA’**

Grace Odal-Devora

University of the Philippines - Manila

[mutisalah@yahoo.com](mailto:mutisalah@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

Certain problems are to be encountered in determining the origin of the word ‘mutya’ or ‘mutia’ (pearl; precious stone). Although the word is believed to belong to the Austronesian super-family of languages<sup>1</sup>, the term has also been discovered to have variants and cognates in languages of other linguistic families such as Sanskrit, Gujarat, Prakrit, Pali, Hindi, Urdu, Singhalese, Nepalese, the Dravidian languages, and Kanauri. Compounded with this is the further discovery of variant terms in Phoenician, Middle Eastern and Egyptian mythology. There are also place-names and people’s names in Dubai, Turkey, Egypt and Russia with the same variant terms. The problem is that the more one follows the word and its variants in their cross-cultural settings, the more its polysemic cognitive elements turn into a family resemblance<sup>2</sup> of primary, widened, and transferred references of ‘mutya.’ More questions are raised than answered. Why is the term and its variants widespread? Why does it exhibit conceptual traits that seemingly exhibit features of a family resemblance? Is it really a proto-Philippine term belonging to the Austronesian family, a loan-word from other families, or a part of an inter-related complex of language families stemming from a mother-tongue? I have no definite answers yet for all these questions. However, I tentatively posit a hypothesis: that the term ‘mutya’ has a disyllabic root-base ‘muti’ / ‘moti’ that demonstrates lexical and conceptual similarities with Sanskrit, Dravidian Indian and Arabic/Phoenician morphemes because it might have been derived from a parent proto-Austronesian monosyllabic root-base (possibly ‘mut’ / ‘mot’ or ‘mu’ / ‘mo’) sharing some affinities with other monosyllabic language families in Asia because they all spring from a common primordial mother-tongue (possibly proto-Asian) that broke up. As a result, its proto-forms either survived through differentiation into variants, cognates, derivatives and synonyms, or became extinct. However, through migration and maritime trade, some surviving proto-forms might have re-linked and been revitalized through collective memories, re-inventions, indigenizations, or some might have readily been borrowed as loan words, for they are conceptually familiar and useful to the local people.

---

<sup>1</sup> There are not only lexical, ethnographic, historical, literary and artistic data that support this from Philippine data, but there are also some variants of the term in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Hervey Islands of Polynesia and even the Southern Ryukyus just off Taiwan)

<sup>2</sup> The concept of family resemblance used here is as defined by Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” of words and concepts.