

Why the Porcupine is Not a Bird: Explorations in the Folk Zoology of an Eastern Indonesian People. By Gregory Forth. 2016. University of Toronto Press, Toronto. 375 pp.

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Gregory Forth is a professor of anthropology who has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia for over thirty years. In the 1980s he became interested in the Nage indigenous people living on the eastern Indonesian islands of Flores and Timor because of their unique ritual funerary practices and water buffalo sacrifices (Forth 1988, 1989). Forth was fascinated by how the Nage maintained these traditions although the majority of the populations had converted to Catholicism.

Professor Forth has a diverse body of work. His research is based largely on participant observation ethnography and direct conversations with people in the Nage language and other local Austronesian languages. His writing includes work in ethnozoology, ethnotaxonomy and classification (Fontijne 2004; Forth 1996, 1998a), local economy and ecology, religion, ritual, and mythology (Forth 1988, 1991, 2008). Forth studied local knowledge of *Varanus komodoensis* (the Komodo dragon) to demonstrate how local knowledge of this threatened species can contribute both to zoological investigation and conservation efforts. While conducting fieldwork on Flores in the 1980s, Forth documented Nage taxonomic knowledge of the *ebu gogo*, which many believe may have been *Homo floresiensis* that survived long enough on Flores to influence local cultural memory (Forth 1998b, 2005).

Why the Porcupine is Not a Bird is a comprehensive analysis of folk zoology among the Nage. It illustrates the Nage taxonomic systems for animals, which includes three sub-taxa (excluding invertebrates): 1) flying animals; 2) snakes; and 3) fish and other

animals including humans and nonhuman mammals (although Nage recognize biological mammalian similarities between them). Forth shows that Nage animal taxonomy is based on universal cognitive principles of classification, based on perceived similarities. These systems align surprisingly well with the taxonomies of “western” biologists. There are several sections divided into chapters on categorically related animals; for example, part one of the book covers mammals, and is divided into “mammals of the village”, “never-domesticated mammals”, and “varieties of special-purpose classification”. These chapters provide ethnographic, zoological, linguistic, archeological, and historical data and reference animal names in Nage, Latin, and English, and provide international zoological information. The book is well-organized with a readable narrative.

The Nage also have systems of symbolic and utilitarian classification distinct from their general taxonomy. One such taxonomic record, an incongruity in the classification of porcupines, inspired the title of the book. Although the Nage recognize that the porcupine is a mammal, they refer to it with gender terms that are mostly used for birds (e.g., male porcupines are *lahu*, meaning rooster). Forth uses this example to argue against a strict relativist approach that only sees differences among classifications as being based on deep symbolic meanings and associations. It could be that the porcupine is not a bird because it is poetically or aesthetically attractive for it not to be, or that it is not classed as a bird as deliberate nonsense.



The title has another important meaning. It echoes Ralph Bulmer's work *Why the Cassowary is Not a Bird* (1967). As with Bulmer's work, Forth's *Why the Porcupine is Not a Bird* is a work of great depth by a gifted and dedicated scientist. Nevertheless, critical readers may identify several points where the book comes up short. First, it is regionally and intellectually very specific. It is a comprehensive look at the folk classification of the Nage and central Flores from a taxonomic perspective, a close and meticulous study about organizing information. Secondly, the questions pursued in this work did not originate with the Nage but are Forth's own concerns; it is essentially a work about comprehending indigenous knowledge in juxtaposition with western knowledge systems. Critical readers should keep in mind that much of Forth's work in the region took place during a time when any political activity would have risked being banned from the country, jailed, or worse. Possibly as a consequence of this constraint, Forth fails to bring his experience to bear on issues of threatened traditional lifestyles or local ecology. Since Forth's work began in the 1980s the local ecology of Flores and Timor has dramatically changed and the Nage culture has nearly been lost, having been assimilated by other more dominant regional ethnic groups. An activist reader might be left wondering, had this been a study of their own design, what activities could have been undertaken to further the political aims, goals, and ethical concerns of the Naga people.

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