Gregory Forth


Why the Porcupine Is Not a Bird is concerned with bridging universal cognitive classification and taxonomy with the semiotics of the particular (culture/religion). It does so through a thought provoking discussion and detailed ethnography of human/animal relations and animal taxonomy among the Nage of Central Flores (Indonesia). The title of the book echoes a classic article on folk taxonomy by Bulmer (1967), ‘Why the Cassowary Is Not a Bird’. Critical of straightforward relativist approaches, Gregory Forth develops some opposing arguments against various authors writing on human/animal relations and taxonomic classification, particularly those who claim that folk knowledge systems are anti-taxonomic or lack natural taxonomies. Forth argues that the Nage natural taxonomy of animals (particularly folk-generics) is generally based on similar universal cognitive principles of classification through which the particulars of symbolic (cultural) classifications are constructed. By folk-generics he means folk categories that separate living biological kind into ‘chunks’ based on perceived similarities, for example cat, mouse, horse, porcupine (p. 314).

By integrating earlier approaches on the subject of folk taxonomy Forth argues we should make a distinction between two general levels of classificatory knowledge systems, that of ‘general purpose’ and ‘special purpose’ classification. The ‘general purpose classification’ forms the natural taxonomy of the environment developed through universal (human) perceptual experience and cognitive understanding. Special purpose classification refers to limited forms of classifications that can be at variance with the ‘general purpose’ classification and counterintuitive to perceptual experience. In this second classificatory type there are two categories, ‘symbolic’ and ‘utilitarian’. Symbolic classification covers both general and religious associations between animals as well as common day metaphors and anomalous associations. Utilitarian classification is the categorization of fauna and flora for economic and other practical purposes.

A large part of the argument in porcupine is concerned with revealing the existence of a main but covert taxon in Nage thought corresponding to what in English is called ‘mammal’. By covert Forth means that although the Nage do not name it, the taxon exists in the way people talk about certain animals, recognizing certain biological similarities between them. Forth gives ethnographic evidence for this and he reminds us that Nage are fully aware of the similarities and differences between different types of animals (those that give
birth to a live offspring or to eggs, having fur or not, having visible genitalia or not, and other features which distinguish mammals from non-mammals). Such features suggest recognition of a covert inclusive ‘mammal’ taxon in Nage understanding of their environment.

Similar to Bulmer’s anomalous classificatory example of the Cassowary, Forth finds an incongruity in Nage classification of porcupines. Although the Nage recognise that the porcupine is an animal similar to ‘dogs and pigs’ they refer to it in gendered differential terms reserved for birds (cock and hen). So why do they refer to it in terms they use for birds? Although Nage themselves find this peculiar and are generally at a loss for an explanation Forth explores a number of possibilities for this such as their lack of a tail and lack of fur which makes them anomalous among the mammals. Forth also suggest that since there is no symbolic or religious value in designating porcupines by terms reserved for birds (cock and hen) then it could also simply be that Nage find this classification of an anomalous mammal poetically or aesthetically attractive or even do so for ‘deliberate nonsense’; a classification that is ‘fun to think with’ (p. 159). Forth’s exploration of porcupine classification argues against the strict relativists approach that only sees difference of classifications being based on deep symbolic meanings and associations. It also challenges the approach, associate with Douglas’s work that suggests that anomalous animals always have special religious or ritual significance (p. 65).

Forth utilizes the term life-form, (the second all-inclusive taxon below ‘unique beginners’), which he says that Nage overtly recognize as including three sub-taxa; flying animals, snakes, and fish. These are contrasted with other animals (mammals) which are seen covertly as a life-form. Interestingly, Nage do not see all insects and invertebrates as composing life-forms. Although Nage recognize biological mammalian similarities between humans and non-human mammals, the Nage taxonomically keep humans apart from animals. Critical authors with a more relativist theoretical persuasion might argue that maybe the Nage do not have a covert taxon of ‘mammal’. Instead they use other forms of taxonomic classifications to the one Forth uses to interpret, organize and analyze his data. This is a point made long ago by Brown (1974) and others. Forth is fully aware of these recurring criticisms of folk taxonomic studies in all their variety, but one might still ask whether his unique approach and presentation has succeeded to fully overcome some of these earlier critiques. The title of chapter three, for example, is ‘Animals, Humans, and Other Mammals’. Although the chapter is stimulating, the combination ‘humans and other mammals’ suggests the extent to which Forth’s ethnographic presentation might still be guided by an international taxonomic perspective (see his discussion on p. 321).
The middle part of the book is divided into two sections, one on mammals and the other on non-mammals. Each chapter in this section is titled after a species with subsections discussing other categorically related animals in Nage thought. The chapters and subsections provide ethnographic (folk) zoological, linguistic, archeological, and historical data in a well-organized and readable narrative. The subsection on the Crab Eating Macaque is particularly memorable. Forth is meticulous in referencing animal names in Nage, Latin, and English, as well as providing information from international zoological knowledge useful to future researchers working in this part of Indonesia. The last chapters focus on miscellanies, such as animal transformations, animal mysteries, and disappearances. The author makes some interesting points about animal metamorphosis, a theme he has explored in an earlier publication (Forth 1998). The book also makes numerous references to Homo Floresiensis and the local belief about ebu gogo (orang pendek), another topic that Forth has published on in the BKI and elsewhere (Forth 2006; 2009; 2013; 2014).

Forth challenges Descola’s view that ontological naturalism is only found in the West and argues that although the Nage believe in spirits they are also ontological naturalists in Descola’s sense (p. 11). However, on reading his study one gains the nagging feeling that Nage general purpose classification and symbolic animals/spirits relationship is far more cognitively and experientially integrated than Forth’s taxonomic and naturalist approach allows (p. 59). We are told that whereas domesticated animals (mammals) are the property of humans, wild animals are the property of spirits and hunters have to carry out a rite asking for specimens to be released. Some animals, particularly those in the taxon of life-forms such as snakes and birds, have specific relations with the spirits. There is a prohibition on laughing at animals or forcing an animal from one species to behave like a human being, or like another species. This prohibition, which is found elsewhere in South East Asia, could be analyzed in terms of Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivalism, although Forth rejects this and uses his own conceptual term ‘reciprocal inversion’. Some form of animism seems to be clearly integrated with Nage naturalism, so separating the two types of knowledge systems like two strands, one based on ‘perceptual experience’ (naturalism) and the other on the ‘authority of the elders’ (religion), seems problematic (p. 5).

One of the laudable suggestions of the book is to pay respect to Nage (indigenous) knowledge of their animal environment. Forth argues that Nage (general purpose) folk zoology could also contribute to international zoology as they meet these animals in their everyday lives (p. 322). His encyclopedic layout of detailed ethnographic folk zoology (and other factual information) under the headings of animal species makes it easy to extract gems of ethnographic
information on Nage’s relationship to specific animals for comparative studies. *Porcupine* is a thought provoking monograph based on the authors’ thirty years of field-research. It is a book good to think with and is an important contribution to the study of folk taxonomy and indigenous knowledge, cognitive anthropology, Eastern Indonesian (Indonesian) studies, zoology, and the study of environmental animism.

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References


