

The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet. Georgius Everhardus Rumphius. Translated, edited, annotated, and with an introduction by E. M. Beekman. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 1999. Pp. cxii + 567. Ills., bibliography, index. \$45.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0-300-07534-0.

This book is a genuine publishing event. Georg Rumph, who Latinized his name as "Rumphius," was one of the greatest naturalists of all time, and a hero in the history of science. His greatest work was his botany of east-central Indonesia, but that enormous work—it runs to 1,661 folio pages, in six volumes—remains untranslated. We are now fortunate to have, for the first time in English, his shorter work on stones and marine animals.

Rumphius (1627-1702) was a German soldier who came into Dutch service. Lured by the remote, he went to Brazil and in 1654 to Amboina, in the Moluccas (now in eastern Indonesia). Here he spent the rest of his life. He became a merchant and colonial official. He married a local woman and had children by her; after she died, he married a Dutch widow. In 1670 he went blind, apparently from cataracts, and had to complete his monumental natural history work from memory and from the help of his family and friends. I had always envisioned him as a dry-as-dust scholar, but he was in fact a veteran warrior, a man of the world, and an enterprising businessman—a man of action, par excellence, until his blindness.

A "curiosity cabinet" was a cabinet of shells and stones; such cabinets evolved into natural history collections. (At Cambridge University, one can see magnificent 18th-century cabinets of this sort and their collections, preserved as a sort of "metamuseum"; they evolved into a full-scale natural history museum there). Rumphius' is, in modern terms, a virtual cabinet; it exists in the form of a book about Moluccan marine life and interesting stones. The original edition appeared in 1705, in 340 folio pages, with 60 plates and 5 vignettes. These illustrations are all reproduced—excellently—in the present edition.

Rumphius described, in exquisite detail, the materials he collected, recording a great deal about the ecology and behavior of even the smallest shellfish. He describes, for example, phosphorescence, including the night-shine still present in slime washed up and onto the sand; he knew its connection with red tides and suspected it was caused by tiny organisms (as, of course, it is). He also recorded local names and beliefs with the same thoroughness. This is what makes his work important to the ethnobiologist. For example, much of the latter part of the book is taken up with descriptions of stones formed in the stomachs or flesh of various animals. Some such stones (bezoars, for example) were real; others were the creations of Indonesian con artists. All were believed by the Moluccans, and by many Europeans, to have magical properties. Rumphius not only records all the beliefs, but provides comparisons with equivalent Classical European beliefs as recorded by Pliny and others.

He has always been a prime source, especially to botanists, but those who cannot read Dutch or Latin have had to do without the benefit of his expertise.

Beekman's translation is, in its way, as amazing an effort as Rumphius' original labor of love. Beekman provides a full introduction that describes Rumphius' life and times as well as his *oeuvre*. Also found herein are 163 pages of notes—

large pages densely covered with fine print. Beekman has tracked down everyone mentioned in the text, located virtually every geographic site, identified animals and plants, supplied references scrappily indicated by Rumphius, and in every way done a job of annotation so monumental that it truly staggers the imagination. One could quibble with, or add to, several of the notes, but the level of accuracy is extremely high. His translation is lively and easy to read. To make it faithful to Rumphius' style, Beekman translated it into a somewhat modernized 17th-century English; no words not found in 17th-century sources are employed, and some 17th-century spellings and capitalization patterns are used. This sounds bizarre, but works perfectly. I have never had more pleasure in reading a work of descriptive natural history. Rumphius and Beekman can make even the description of a mollusk interesting, and, of course, the accounts of local belief are truly absorbing to anyone with a past in ethnoichthyology.

One wonders how anyone in this day and age can find time to carry out such scholarship. This was a work of true devotion.

The work is also beautifully designed, printed, and bound. The flyleaf notes that it was "Designed by Sally Harris / Summer Hill Books," and indeed Ms. Harris deserves recognition. In our degenerate age, when poorly bound paperbacks can cost almost \$200, it is truly amazing to see a book like this offered for \$45.00. Yale University Press deserves our gratitude.

This book is absolutely essential for any ethnobiologist with interests in Indonesia or neighboring areas. It should also be on the shelf of anyone with an interest in marine ethnozoology.

Now if only we can prevail on Dr. Beekman to translate the botany...

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