

RALPH N.H. BULMER
(1928-1988)

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Ethnobiology has lost one of its most valued practitioners and advocates with the death of Ralph N.H. Bulmer in Auckland (New Zealand) on July 18, 1988.

As a schoolboy in England, Ralph once told me, he detested cricket, so he would escape the playing fields by wandering off into surrounding woods and fields, where a lifelong love of natural history was formed. Much of his life would be spent in the field, observing, collecting, and conducting ethnographic research. His anthropological fieldwork began while he was still an undergraduate at Cambridge University, when he spent six months in 1950-51 as part of a research team among the Reindeer Same (Lapps) of Northern Sweden and Norway. He will be remembered best, however, for his work in Papua New Guinea.

Following his undergraduate degree in 1953, Ralph was trained in Social Anthropology at the Australian National University; his thesis, based on 17 months' fieldwork with the Kyaka Enga of the Baiyer Valley of the Western Highlands, was completed in 1960 and his Ph.D. conferred in 1962. His work with the Kyaka focused on political and social organization, in conformity with his supervisors' preferences, but early publications dealt with Kyaka bird knowledge, lore, and utilization (Bulmer 1957) and involvement in the regional bird of paradise plume trade (1962). Later papers would incorporate Kyaka folk biology data, but Bulmer's true flowering as an ethnobiologist came with his fieldwork with the Kalam (formerly, Karam) of the northern Highlands fringe.

While Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Auckland, Ralph initiated what would be a life-long enterprise, the Kalam Project. Between 1960 and 1985, he spent 28 months in the Kaironk Valley in 14 field trips, long and short, until he had become a regular part of the human and natural environment of the Kalam. Appreciating the importance of team research since his early experiences with the Same, Ralph always stressed collaboration in his work, and the Kalam Project would eventually include two anthropologists, two linguists, and more than 20 zoologists, botanists, and other scientific colleagues. While himself a gifted amateur naturalist, Bulmer always deferred to his professional colleagues, who co-authored with him numerous papers on the fauna and flora of the Kaironk Valley, from both scientific and Kalam perspectives (see Bibliography).

Ralph's most notable collaborator was Ian Saem Majnep, a Kalam who began as a teenaged field assistant and developed over the years into a knowledgeable and articulate full participant in Bulmer's work. Still unparalleled in ethnobiology, the collaboration resulted, in 1977, in the remarkable book, *Birds of My Kalam Country*, with Majnep as senior author. There, Majnep recounts in detail the traits, habits, and Kalam lore concerning 180 bird species, with Bulmer providing commentary from the Western scientific point of view. Including drawings by Chris Healey (one of

Bulmer's first students), the book is a *tour de force* in ethnobiology. (See accompanying book review for a more detailed consideration.) A second collaborative effort, *Animals the Ancestors Hunted*, dealing with Kalam knowledge of animals and hunting techniques, was seen through final revisions just before Bulmer's death, and on his final visit to Auckland to work with Ralph, Majnep brought along a draft of a third book, on Kalam ethnobotany, which will now be completed with the assistance of Andrew Pawley, long-time linguist on the Kalam Project.

Bulmer's gifts as a naturalist and his intimate knowledge of the Kalam gained through fieldwork that has been both intensive and extensive were combined with his collaborators' specialist contributions to result in a series of meticulously-crafted papers that have been enormously influential in ethnobiology. As a careful and thoughtful ethnographer, Ralph was always wary of the "general principles" and "universals" proposed by others. Moreover, he was always concerned with the cosmological dimensions of folk biology, demonstrating again and again that, for the Kalam, the salience of animals and plants derives not only from their economic importance or the compelling perceptual features they might possess, but also from their symbolic significance. These same concerns appeared again in his most recent work, as in his last years he began to publish his long-term investigations into the birds of the Bible—a new direction, with regard to the data examined, but a continuation of his determination to understand folk biological classification systems in their fullest context.

In addition to the intellectual problems related to folk biology, human problems and concerns were always important to Ralph. As Foundation Professor of Social Anthropology at the new University of Papua New Guinea, Bulmer served there from 1968-73, during which time he tried to apply the findings and perspective of "ethnoscience" to science teaching in schools (Bulmer 1971), just as he would later (1982a) argue for the importance of incorporating local knowledge of plants and animals in conservation efforts. Always generous with his time and talents, he worked hard to establish institutional supports for research and teaching, gave unsparingly of his energy to the training of students, and, whether in Papua New Guinea or New Zealand, welcomed visitors and itinerant fieldworkers to his homes with warm hospitality, stimulating talk, and chances to observe his pets of the moment, from birds to sugar gliders.

Ralph Bulmer was a gifted, erudite, versatile, amiable, gentle, generous, yet modest man whose passing represents a great loss, not only to ethnobiology but to all who knew him. Just before his death, in the middle of North American summer holidays, an urgent summons from Andrew Pawley elicited over 100 papers for a volume in Ralph's honor. Once gone, Ralph was taken to the Maori meetinghouse at the University of Auckland, where family, friends, and colleagues spent the day and night amidst speeches of reminiscence. As he had requested, he was buried near Manukau Harbour, near the beach where he had often waded the shorebirds.

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[Ed. note: The following book review originally appeared in the *Folk Classification Bulletin*, precursor of the *Journal of Ethnobiology*, in 1978, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 7-8. It is reprinted here, with minor corrections, to bring the attention of a wider readership to a remarkable work in ethnobiology. TEH.]