Bulmer, Ralph. 1967. "Why is the cassowary not a bird? A problem of zoological taxonomy among the Karam of the New Guinea highlands. *Man* n.s. 2(1):5–25.

The title of this article poses a problem that RB addresses not from a morphological perspective (that is, that the cassowary is anomalous in that it is a bird that does not fly, has poorly developed wings, no feathers) but rather through a quite extensive discussion of Karam mythology and beliefs. Thus in discussing, at the end of this article, Mary Douglas's discussion of the taboo on pork, RB notes: "It would seem equally fair, on the limited evidence available, to argue that the pig was accorded anomalous taxonomic status because it was unclear as to argue that it was unclear because of its anomalous taxonomic status." (21).

RB begins this article with a discussion of Kalam higher level categorizations of animals. He distinguishes this level with the terminal taxa level:

"One can look at the smallest units which Karam discriminate, the 'terminal taxa', and with them the rather few intermediate taxa present in the system, and she what kinds of discriminations are there being made... their terminal taxa only correspond well in about 60 per cent of cases with the species recognised by the scientific zoologist, they are nevertheless in general well aware of species differences amonog larger and more familiar creatures.

At the upper level of Karam taxonomy, however, objective biological facts no longer dominate the scene. They are still important, but they allow a far greater, almost infinitely varied, set of possibilities to the taxonomist. This is the leve at which culture takes over and determines the selection of taxonomically significant characters. It is not surprising that the result shows little correspondence either to the taxonomy of the professional zoologist, which reflects the theory of evolution, or, for that matter, to our modern western European folk-taxonomies. Thus, as can be seen from table 1, mammals are split up between six different Karam primary taxa, some being thrown in with birds and others with frogs. There are no Karam taxa corresponding to 'reptile', 'lizard', 'snake' and so forth" (6)

RB suggests some factors that might have led to the rather unusual, from a Western scientific perspective, groupings (e.g., "larger marsupials and rodents"; "rats from homesteads and gardens"; "frogs and small marsupials and rodents other than kopyak" (previous set). RB suggests that one could derive these groups by distinguishing animals along the following dimensions:

By gross morphological distinctions

Bones No bones

Wings No wings

Bipedal Quadrupedal Limbless

Not elongated Elongated

Large Medium Small

By habitat

Horizontal Forest at one end, homestead at the other (gardens & open country inbetween)

Vertical Aerial through arboreal, terrestrial and aquatic, to subterranean

"The justification for using these dimensons of habitat is not merely that, like the morphological distinctions I have drawn, they can all readily be expressed linguistically iin Karam and that they seem to make sense of distinctions that are awkward to draw in purely morphological terms, but that Karam use them both, [9] explicitly, in accounting not so much directly for their taxonomy as for the status animals enjoy in their system of dietary regulations" (8-9)

NOTE: that, essentially, then, RB shows how by using these criteria the categories that Karam note through primary linguistic terms have referents that share theses common features. Note, then, that his conception of the category is, after all, essentially Boolean. At the same time, however, he asks whether the above is a "real" taxonomy, or just a "key, useful for deciding where things have to go, once the categories are *given*? (9)

Having set this question up, RB notes that he will devote the rest of the paper to "demolish this pattern, or rather ty to show that it is not so much wrong as inadequate for indicating the significance which certain of these animals have in Karam thought" (9). Note that in other words the key above works to sort out the categories that Karam have, e.g., it works to group together "frogs and small mammals", but it does not capture the cultural significance of the categories that seem to stand out: cassowary and dog.

Even though cassowaries "can be marked off as a distinct class of creatures by morphological characters alone: size, absence of wings or other visible upper limbs; heavy human-like leg-bones; unique pelage; and unique cranial structure ... to point to these features does not explain why the cassowary should enjoy special taxonomic rank" (11)

The remainder of the article goes on to point out the unique cultural status of the cassowary, particularly in its taboo relationship to taro cultivation: "To return to the question of why there is an antithesis, a required separation, between cassowaries and the taro crop, we can see that in the first place the cassowary is the prime game of the forest, and the taro is the key element in horticulture, or, in civilisation. If we we turn to other things which have to be kept away from growing taro, we find that a number of these too can be seen to exemplify the same opposition" (14). These include the pandanus nuts. The summary expresses this (basically structural) opposition as follows:

I hope I have said enough to indicate that there is a real antithesis between uncultivated things and wild game, whose prime elements, cassowary and pandanus palm, are not merely undomesticated but may not be domesticated, on the one hand, and civilisation, centring on the cultivation of the taro, on the other; and to suggest that this must be understood in evaluating the status of the cassowary and also the statuses of the other creatures of the forest which share some of the same attributes: the dog, terrestrial cuscus and striped possum. (17)

RB then continues to note that the cassowary "is in a sense equated with a man" (17) He recounts a cassowary myth that brought him to ask if the cassowary is a "cross-cousin" of men. And, the response was that upon seeing a cassowary, a Karam will state "there are (our) sisters and cross-cousins over there". Other evidence is cited as to the close relation between cassowaries and human.

In summing up the section, RB argues strongly that the anomalous taxonomic status of the cassowary is not due to unusual morphological or behavioral features, but to the special place it occupies in Karam culture:

Lastly, I would argue that to look for an explanation of the cassowary's special taxonomic status in purely taxonomic terms, by reference to objective features of its appearance and behaviour alone, could be to miss the point. Certainly it is a strange beast in many ways, and using only characters of which Karam are well aware one can isolate it as a separate taxon in any one of several different ways: as a terrestrial biped, as a hairy egg-layer, as a thick-skulled brainless monster and so on. But equally well, and still using characters which Karam are well aware of, one could fit it in with the birds (as many other New Guinea Highlanders do) or even perhaps with wild pig and wallaby in a class of 'big game animals'. So, for me at least, 'special taxonomic status' is a function of something broader, a special status in culture, or cosmology, at large. (19)

Note, though, that perhaps this only removes the analysis one step, since one could argue that the special cultural status is a reflection of the unusual morphological/taxonomic characteristics of the cassowary.

RB then goes on to discuss the status of dogs and pigs. In regard to all three he adds: "I hope I have demonstrated that the statuses which these creatures occupy in the totallity of Karam activities and thought are complex, and that to understand both their special taxonomic rank and the particular rules which govern their slaughter, handling, and consumption, one has to take an extensive body of ethnography into account. One cannot, I think, be satisfied with simple explanations of such things as dietary status in terms of taxonomic, or taxonomy in terms of dietary status". (21)

RB then concludes by discussing Douglas's discussion of taboos and the relationship of these taboos (e.g., pork) on the "ambiguous" taxonomic status of the taboo items: "It would seem equally fair, on the limited evidence available, to argue that the pig was accorded anomalous taxonomic status because it was unclean as to argue that it was unclean because of its anomalous taxonomic status" (21)

NOTE: in general then RB makes a strong argument that the taxonomic uniqueness of the cassowary is a reflection of its place in Karam culture, not to its unusual morphological/taxonomic characteristics. It is not anomaly that is the driving force of the taxonomic position but the cultural beliefs of the Karam regarding, in this case, the cassowary.