METAMORPHOSIS

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TRIBUTE – PROFESSOR JEAN-LOUIS AMIET

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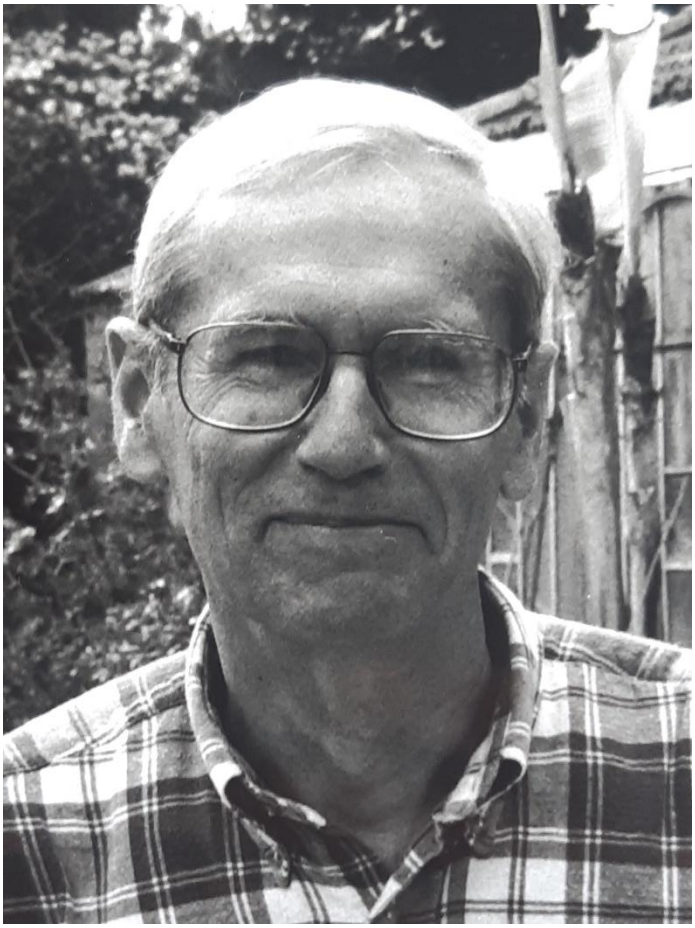

Jean-Louis Amiet

I met Jean-Louis at the University of Yaoundé (Cameroon), where I arrived in 1979 to teach chemistry. He was responsible for the Zoology department, a discipline which my son François, although barely eight years old, was already passionate about. The two large aquariums which stood in Jean-Louis' vast office at the Faculty of Sciences and where *Aphyosemions* were evolving, naturally attracted him. The professor not only knew how to explain, but also how to tell a story, and François was a great listener. These were François' first steps in ichthyology, which he still practises today.

When it became clear that it would be impossible for me to do research in chemistry, I naturally turned to Jean-Louis, and he patiently guided my first steps in entomology. That's how we became friends. Not only did Jean-Louis teach me all about butterflies, he also taught me a lot about Cameroon. He was more discreet about his personal life, but he would occasionally mention this or that episode, and I was able to reconstruct the broad outlines of his career with the help of the biography by Raymond Ramousse (2019) that he had supervised. To compensate for memory lapses, I also often referred to his "Souvenirs d'un naturaliste au Cameroun" (shortened below to "Souvenirs").

I know little about his youth, but he happily recalled that he made his first publication in the *Bulletin de la Société linnéenne de Lyon* at the age of twelve. Later, he was rewarded for his success at the 'baccalauréat' with a holiday in the Vésubie valley (in the French Alps), which was a revelation for him, and he returned there every summer for twelve years. His observations on terricolous beetles of the valley were the subject of three important publications in 1967 and 1968, in which he used the techniques he developed as part of his doctorate thesis. This, which he brilliantly defended in 1963, was based on zoological research carried out on the Mount Nimba massif during a nine-month mission that Professor Lamotte had entrusted to him when he had not yet completed his degree (!). He defined groups of insects, or entomocenosis, whose vertical distribution he linked to that of the vegetation levels, and he introduced the term orobiont for orophilic species.

After his thesis, he had to carry out his military service, for which he was assigned to the Lycée de Rosso (Mauritania), where he taught natural sciences for one year; he had fond memories of this episode.
He therefore already had some experience of Africa when he was assigned in 1966 to the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Yaoundé as a lecturer in Zoology. He was 30 years old, and had no idea that he would spend the rest of his university career there. As all new 'coopérant', he was housed in a hotel upon his arrival in Yaoundé, but he was undoubtedly the only one to stay there for so long: out of administrative phobia, he occupied a room

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at the Grand Hôtel for 24 years, and also took his meals there… For a purely administrative reason, he then had to resign himself to move to an apartment.

This is not to say that he was antisocial, far from it: he received guests in his office in the Faculty of Science and was happy to accept invitations from friends, but it was in the restaurant that he treated his friends; he was never slow to tell his anecdotes, and it was always a pleasure to listen to him. He, however, devoted most of his time to his scientific activity. He had arrived in Cameroon with the intention of continuing his research on the populations of insects living on the soil surface in a tropical environment, and this is what he did during the first four years of his stay. It was also during this period that he set up a network of collectors whose catches were partly sent to specialists of different groups.

Jean-Louis Amiet in his element – nature

Many of the hundreds of species thus collected turned out to be new to science – several were dedicated to him, and he took legitimate pride in the fact that 33 taxa bore his name in groups as different as the Ciliates, the Monogeneans or the Reptiles, not to mention the Batrachians and above all the Insects (21 names, including 14 for Lepidoptera). Judging by the number of times he mentioned it, the Scorpion *Lychasioides amieti* Vachon, 1974 particularly pleased him. He relates in his memoires the role played by the climbing tadpoles of Mount Kala in the combination of circumstances that led him to redirect his research towards Batrachians. I have no competence to describe his research, but I remember the importance he attached to their songs, to which he devotes chapter 13 of his memories and a book embellished with four audio CDs. He was also able to distinguish 160 species audibly (out of a total he estimated at around 200 for Cameroon).

He was above all a man of the field, and he carried out 1306 nocturnal outings, a total of which he was very proud. He would call "short outings" those which were carried out in the vicinity of Yaoundé, "missions" those that led him to explore the entire Cameroonian territory and to acquire a broad knowledge of the diversity of its biotopes. Endjam Mathieu was mostly behind the wheel; when they arrived, Mathieu took care of the stewardship, in particular recruiting porters when Jean-Louis left the village to establish his camp in a site that he had selected on a map, often several hours' walk away. He would remain there alone for several days, dividing his time between his different subjects of study: butterflies and plants during the day, batrachians at the beginning of the night and freshwater fish from 8 p.m., when the Batrachians stopped singing. This program alone speaks volumes about his talents as a naturalist. Mathieu was waiting for him in the village, and a strong friendship had been formed between the two men. Two species were dedicated to Mathieu, a tree frog, *Hyperolius endjami*, and a limenitine butterfly, *Pseudathyma endjami*; Jean-Louis also dedicated chapter 33 of his memories to Mathieu.

A large proportion of Jean-Louis Amiet's batrachology publications, and in particular all of his earliest ones, were published in the *Annales de la Faculté des Sciences de Yaoundé*. He was aware that they had become practically impossible to find, and he reprinted them in their entirety in 2008, in the form of facsimiles (two volumes, the

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second one including publications in other journals). In 2012, he also published a volume dedicated to the Cameroon tree frogs. If these works are intended for specialists, the book he devoted to the *Aphyosemion* of Cameroon aroused the interest of the vast community of killifish amateurs. This ichthyological parenthesis is the subject of chapter 20 of his memories, which, like the other chapters, is magnificently illustrated. Jean-Louis indeed attached great importance to illustrations, both for their educational interest (he was also a teacher) and for their aesthetics. He embellished his publications with high-quality hand-drawings and photos taken from some ten thousand slides showing animals (especially insects and fish) as well as plants and flowers, biotopes and landscapes, a pygmy camp (or his own camp) or a logging truck overturned on a track.

Another subject on which he has carried out remarkable work is the study of butterflies (from egg to imago), inseparable for him from that of their food plants (which he was often the first to identify). During the last five years of his stay in Cameroon, he spent approximately 2,500 hours searching for eggs and caterpillars and following females (showing a talent for hooking the reader, he entitled chapter 24 of his memories "For five years, I followed females"). In addition to this work in the field, he had to monitor the rearings in his office-laboratory, to supply the caterpillars with fresh food... and to clean up the abundant droppings. A considerable work, very demanding, with sometimes the reward of an intense emotion, such as that caused by the female of *Aterica galene* who laid her eggs on the leaves of a bouquet that he was holding in his hand.

The other reward was of course having successfully bred 133 species of limenitines, which enabled him to specify their pre-imaginal characters and to define, from the numerous apomorphies that he highlighted in these characters, the four phyla that constitute the limenitines. Published between 1996 and 2006, these results and their phylogenetic implications were brought together, and of course superbly illustrated, notably with a series of drawings, in his "Histoire naturelle des papillons du Cameroun - Les premiers états des Liménitines", published in 2019. Chapter 30 of his memoires, entitled "The lesson of Evolution of the Limenitines", is based on the same data. This work was awarded the Ivan Bampton Prize by the Lepidopterists' Society of Africa in 2019, and the Passet Prize by the Société entomologique de France.

Before we leave Cameroon, I should mention an event which perfectly illustrates the personality of Jean-Louis Amiet. In 1986 a decree from the President of the Republic named him Dean of the Faculty of Science. He was terrified at the prospect of exercising this function and, after a few days of hesitation and a few nights during which he hardly slept, he decided to decline this honor. He was convinced that he would be expelled for having dared to defy a presidential decision and, deeply distressed at the thought of this unexpected return to France, he prepared his luggage. Nothing special happened, and one of his colleagues was appointed in his place. Relieved, Jean-Louis returned to his research and teaching, as well as to his friends, far from the honors and worries that these responsibilities would inevitably have brought him. His replacement was very happy, and he did an excellent job.

He did not leave Cameroon, the country he had known and loved so well, until the end of his cooperation mission in 1995. He had reached retirement age and settled in Nyons, in the south-east of France, but it would be an understatement to say that this retirement was active. His activity first consisted of completing the publications linked to Cameroon, several of which have already been mentioned, last but not least the Memoirs of a Naturalist in Cameroon, which, as you will have gathered, I would strongly recommend reading. But he didn't neglect his new surroundings, which he set out to discover, and more than once I was amazed at his knowledge of the region's history. It was however not long before the naturalist shows up, a little in relation to butterflies, with a work on the Leptidea (Pieridae), and much more in relation to plants, to which he devoted no fewer than eleven publications (totaling more than 1,100 pages). He often talked to me about it during our Sunday 'conferences', and although I had no botanical skills, he knew how to make me understand the interest of his work.

As in Cameroon, the field occupied a central place, and as in Cameroon for his limenitine breeding, he grew numerous plants at home, and he would not hesitate to brave watering restrictions (and tiger mosquitoes) to save his "plantations". Here also an anecdote illustrates his personality: during a very severe summer drought, he did not hesitate to regularly go and water a few rare plants and even a particularly interesting fern in a difficult-to-access site, some fifty kilometres from his home. No wonder he repeatedly lamented the lack of "field botanists".

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He loved the field, and probably not only because he found there the material essential to his research. He was not an athlete, but this intense physical activity was worth all sports. He ate very little, but showed great endurance; at over 80, when he complained about not being fit, it was because he had only been able to walk for four or five hours! He was nine years older than me, but I wouldn't have followed him.

While his physical qualities were obviously no stranger to the importance of his work, he was above all an intellectual, served by an exceptional memory and driven by his passion for nature. His memory has enabled him to accumulate knowledge whose diversity has never ceased to amaze me. In zoology of course, which is as vast and diverse as chemistry (my initial training): between beetles, amphibians and fish, there is at least as much difference as between organic, inorganic and physical chemistry, but I am not aware of any contemporary chemist capable of carrying out research in these three areas. To this should be added botany, which he has mastered sufficiently to both carry out work that could be described as 'fundamental botany' and use it to gain a better understanding of the relationships between different groups of Lepidoptera. His knowledge of geology was far from superficial, and he knew Letouzey's Etude phytogéographique du Cameroun inside out, two undeniable assets when dealing with biogeography, which was often the case. It was he, of course, who introduced me to this discipline, and I would never have written a line of biogeography without discussing it with him.

No doubt he would blush if he could read these lines, but I don't think that the combination of our friendship and my lack of knowledge of anything other than African Lycaenidae would lead me astray: even if he superbly ignored the two monuments of "modernity" that are the Internet and molecular biology, Jean-Louis Amiet was an immense naturalist.

RAMOUSSE, Raymond, 2019. Amiet Jean-Louis (1936-). Dictionnaire historique des membres de la société linnéenne de Lyon et des sociétés Physiophile de Lyon, d'études scientifiques de Lyon, botanique de Lyon et d'anthropologie de Lyon réunies.

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