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**OBITUARY**

## Nina L. Etkin (1948–2009)



Nina Etkin her husband and research partner Paul Ross.

Nina L. Etkin, 60, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, died in Honolulu, on January 27, 2009, of cancer. Nina was born in New York City, earned the BA in zoology at Indiana University, and began graduate studies in anthropology in 1970 at Washington University-St. Louis, where she received the MA in 1972 and the PhD in 1975.

Her early research emphasized the biocultural dimensions of health, beginning with her PhD dissertation, which explains the biochemical basis of protection against malaria infection that is afforded by an inherited enzyme (G6PD) deficiency. She also explored the evolution of population variability, epidemiology, and health through studies of sickle hemoglobin and malaria; ABO blood groups and infectious diseases; and the intersection of diet, genetics, and daily activity patterns in the expression of hypertension.

Her postdoctoral research evolved into a multi-decade study of Hausa health, diet, and medicine in northern Nigeria, through which she broadened her theoretical perspective to work at the interface of biology and culture. Her husband, Paul Ross, was an integral element of her Hausa research. She is best known for her pioneering work on the pharmacologic implications of plant use, especially the interrelations between medicine and

food, and the cultural constructions of health and physiologic implications of people's health-seeking actions. In a later trajectory of ethnomedical inquiry, Nina began research on the use of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) in Hawai'i. Her studies revealed that the uses of CAM are not only for preventive and therapeutic actions, but are also statements about what it means to be sick and who has access to the knowledge and substance of cure. In sum, Nina's biocultural medical anthropology research raised questions about explanatory disease models and healing paradigms, "irrational" drug use, agency and authority in identifying drug actions as primary or side effects, the overlap of medicine and food, physiological outcomes of self- and specialist-care, physician-driven and patient-augmented polypharmacy, syncretic models of health care, gauging therapeutic efficacy, and the cultural construction and social negotiation of medical knowledge.

Beginning early in her career, Nina has published extensively across a range of disciplines. Her most recent book is *Edible Medicines: An Ethnopharmacology of Food* (2006). At the time of her death another book was in production, *Foods of Association: Biocultural Perspectives on Food and Beverages that Mediate Sociability*, and another in process, *An Ethnobiology of Darwin's Gardens*. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Social Science Research Council, National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright, American Heart Association, National Geographic Society, and several private foundations and university sources.

Nina Etkin's first academic position was at the University of Memphis (1977–1979). She joined the anthropology faculty at the University of Minnesota in 1979, and the University of Hawai'i in 1990. At UH, she served for many years as graduate chair and briefly as department chair, with strong contributions to college and university governance. She chaired dozens of anthropology PhD and MA committees, mentored extensively outside of anthropology, and served as external reviewer at both the graduate and faculty levels. Her CV lists about 130 publications, including 28 (three of them books) since she became ill about 4 years ago. Her accomplishments were recognized through the prestigious Regents' Award for Excellence

in Research, and college teaching and merit awards. She had only recently learned that she was to be granted the Distinguished Economic Botanist award at the Society for Economic Botany meetings in June, 2009, in Charleston, SC, USA, at which occasion the Society will celebrate her life and career.

Among her many colleagues she will also be remembered because of her great dedication to scholarly work, her enthusiasm for a critical dialogue, and her quiet but determined personality. Her research greatly improved our knowledge of how people understand and use what we commonly call medicine and food: *Food as medicine and medicine as food*. Nina traveled extensively, many of the trips centering on invitations to present plenary addresses and serve on the scientific boards of international conferences. She was a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London and past President of the International Society for Ethnopharmacology. She was editor-in-chief of one academic journal and associate editor of three others, and served on the editorial boards of another ten.

Outside of her professional accomplishments, Nina was passionate about hiking, botanizing, and pet dogs. She is survived by her husband and research partner, Paul Ross; three sisters, a niece, two nephews, and their families; and a golden retriever.

Memorial contributions may be made to the ACLU.

A Nina L. Etkin Memorial Fund has been established to support graduate students: <http://www.anthropology.hawaii.edu/News/Announcements/2009/Etkin/index.html>

(by Nina Etkin, lightly edited by Elaine Elisabethsky, Michael Heinrich, and Dan Moerman)

## Epitaph

Like any creative artist, Nina Etkin recognized no boundaries between what she did and who she was. She was a full-time scholar – always learning, exploring, instructing – punctuating her conversations with “did you know?” or “isn’t that interesting?”, or frequently breaking stride to scribble kernels of ideas in a notebook that was never far away. She marveled at the nuances of language and the intricacies of science, always looking for order, reorder, association, and pattern.

She was never at ease with the boundaries of academic disciplines and got fidgety when faced with routine and comfort. For her, there was little leisure, only the constant joy of doing what she loved. She was

reserved and diffident and yet quietly confident. As a public person, Nina was self-deprecating and modest, but when alone and private, she “knew what she knew.” She was always uncomfortable with the ebb and flow of social gatherings but gained vitality from heartfelt discussion, especially when centered on novel assaults to “the establishment,” academic or otherwise. She disliked the formal and indiscriminate exercise of classroom teaching, but enthusiastically mentored those who demonstrated commitment and focus. Always sparing with her compliments, Nina was never more pleased than when her students succeeded. She was earnest – even reverent – about her calling, but could not talk about what she did without drawing on a dry, deadpan, or even sardonic wit.

A terminal diagnosis 5 years ago was not a signal for her to slow down but a call to accelerate. With the end near, she was a whirlwind: finishing a book, cleaning up and organizing her files, cataloging her library, enthusiastically rekindling a love for the writings of Darwin, administering and advocating as her department’s Graduate Chair, taking her beloved golden retriever for his daily walk, keeping her *Vitae* always current, and, yes, writing her own obituary. She loved her life and died too soon. She was my best friend for nearly 40 years and not nearly long enough.

Finally, a colleague reminded me of these words of Darwin: “It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us... There is grandeur in this view of life....” With all certainty, these words would elicit from Nina a sympathetic smile.

Paul J. Ross

## Editor’s note

Dr. Nina Etkin served as Associate Editor for *Pharmaceutical Biology* during the period of 2001–2008. We were pleased to formally acknowledge her generous and meaningful contributions in a recent issue of the journal (*Pharm Biol* 46: i–ii, 2008). She touched the lives of many. She will be deeply missed and never forgotten.

JMP