

Telesphore Gottfried Pillai (1930 – 2013) obituary

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Gottfried was born on the 31st. of December, 1930, in Puttalam, Ceylon. His parents meant to call him Godfrey, but the German priest who baptised him entered the name incorrectly in his register. This caused some problems in later life when people wrote to him in German, as he had never learned the language. Ceylon was still a British colony in 1930, but is now independent and since 1972 has been known as Sri Lanka.

Although he was not a lover of all animals (he remembered being trapped in the lavatory by a snake as a boy) he studied Zoology, and Marine Ecology & Fisheries, at university, gaining BSc degrees from the University of Ceylon (1956) and the University of London (1965). In 1970 he gained a PhD in Zoology from the University of Ceylon, with Sir Maurice Yonge as his External Examiner.

It was when he was at University that Gottfried began to seriously study polychaetes as a hobby in the evenings and weekends, and this continued after he entered the world of paid employment. It was also while he was at University that he met his wife Toni. They had three children: Kristina, Johann and Karen. They still remember trips to rocky beaches and the family trailing behind him with buckets and empty baby food jars to collect specimens.

From 1956 to 1968 Gottfried was Superintendent of the Brackish-water Fisheries Development Division of the Fisheries Department, Ceylon, and then from 1968 until his retirement in 1986 he was employed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. For the FAO he worked on inland fisheries development in West Irian; lagoons, lakes and aquaculture in Tunisia; aquaculture development in Tanzania; an integrated fishery, fishery biology and fish culture development project in Nepal, and short-term consultancies in Afghanistan, North Yemen and Egypt. In 1982 he became Chief Technical Adviser of the African Regional Aquaculture Centre in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. This was a multinational UNDP project executed by the FAO. It was affiliated to the University of Port Harcourt, for post-graduate level teaching and training of aquaculturists from African countries, besides establishing a Centre for Aquaculture Development and Research.



Telesphore Gottfried Pillai at Gottfried and Toni's 50th wedding anniversary celebrations in 2009 (photograph by Mr. John Cunningham).

After retirement he moved to England, and since 1987 he continued his polychaete research as a hobby, at first as a visitor but then as a Scientific Associate of the Natural History Museum, London.

Gottfried's early published works – on the polychaete faunas of Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia – are still in use today, and the specimens they are based on are often studied by polychaete taxonomists. He separated the family Spirorbidae from the Serpulidae, and Phyllis Knight-Jones named a subgenus (later raised to genus) *Pillaiospira* after him in 1973. His later works concentrated on these two groups, and display his observations of small details in writing and in his beautiful line drawings. He left several unfinished manuscripts, which colleagues will want to edit or complete for publication.

Gottfried was a good man and a committed Christian, attending church almost daily in his retirement. He loved his fellow man. It was his custom, if anyone spoke to him in an unkindly way, to listen and then say “God bless you” before walking on.

Pat Hutchings remembers him as a true gentleman always offering good quality tea in the laboratory at the Natural History Museum and she encouraged him to complete the paper on the serpulid fauna of the Kimberley region in Western Australia based on material collected by her. She remembers having to get his lovely drawings digitised; he never really entered the modern IT world. Pat says “It was a pleasure knowing him and working with him on this large paper which had a fairly long gestation period and he was always receptive to comments”.

In 1987 Harry ten Hove decided to spend 10 days in the collections of the NHM, London. He says “Gottfried and his wife Toni kindly offered me hospitality in their home. I remember that as a happy stay, we had a lot of laughs during dinners and the evenings, sharing experiences (not only tots of whiskey) or simply watching one of the utterly British comic TV series. In the Museum and in his home we discussed serpulids widely, often bent over his numerous keenly observed and detailed line drawings. Back in Amsterdam, I sent him the fairly extensive ZMA collections of the genus *Serpula sensu lato*, and he started to study this difficult taxon. His first results on *Spiraserpula* triggered me to search for more material of this overlooked taxon in my as yet unidentified collections from the Canary and Cape Verde Islands and Indonesia, as well as during dives in the Caribbean. Our initial 4 species exploded to 18, almost all new to science (Pillai & ten Hove 1994). When our views occasionally disagreed, he accepted the criticism of his younger colleague graciously. After a carefully phrased but nevertheless particular radical comment on one of his manuscripts from my side he answered by dedicating his next reprint “to Harry with, as usual, my highest personal regards”. I will always remember Gottfried as a nice, patient and gentle man, a real gentleman”.

Gottfried died after a brief illness on the 24th. of September, 2013, leaving his wife, three children and a grandson.

I would like to thank Toni Pillai, David George, Harry ten Hove and Pat Hutchings—their comments benefitted this obituary greatly.

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