

## Short Notes — Notes Courtes

### **An ethno-ornithological contribution: four traditional bird stories from the Gourmantché**

Names and stories of birds in African languages are disappearing as African society changes (Gispén 2015). Even in the smallest rural villages, recounting of traditional stories is nowadays often replaced by modern entertainments such as watching television, and the passing on of traditional bird names and bird stories is impaired (S. Anderson pers. comm.). At the same time, knowledge of the names and role of birds in local cultures can improve the effectiveness of conservation and advance scientific knowledge (Berkes 1999). People with no prior interest in birds may become interested once they realise that birds are part of their own cultural heritage. For these reasons, namely the conservation of local cultural heritage and of the birds themselves, it is important that information on names and stories of birds in African languages and cultures be collected and recorded. In this article we present four traditional birds stories from the Gourmantché, a people also known as Gurma or Gourma, who live mainly in SE Burkina Faso around Fada N’Gourma, and also in SW Niger, N Benin and N Togo; they number approximately 1,750,000. The first three stories were told by FO and the last by TT, during a bird course for the ecoguides of W International Park. This park is shared and jointly managed by Bénin, Burkina Faso and Niger. FO later wrote down the stories in French and JB edited and translated them.

#### **Pourquoi le Héron garde-bœufs *Bubulcus ibis* est blanc**

Autrefois, le Héron garde-bœufs était de plumage noire. Tellement qu’il aimait beaucoup la migration, il fut appelé par Dieu. “Tiens ce troupeau de bœufs que je te confie en garde.” Il gardait ainsi les bœufs chaque jour, faisant la transhumance, aller et retourner. Très content de son métier, le garde-bœuf enlevait les tiques et puces qui se fixaient à ses animaux.

Pour montrer sa gratitude envers lui, dieu l’appella un jour et lui demanda: “Quelle récompense veux-tu que je te fasse?” Etant donné qu’il a un grand amour pour dieu, il répondit: “Habillez-moi en boubou [robe traditionnelle] blanc!” Et tout de suite, il se transféra en blanc. Ravis de son état, le Héron garde-bœuf se convertit en musulman. C’est pourquoi il ne mange jamais un insecte sans le remuer en disant “tu es mort ou vivant?” pour éviter le risque de commettre un péché par la consommation d’un proie pas tué rituellement.

#### **Why the Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* is white**

In the past, the Cattle Egret had black plumage. As he liked migrating so much, he was called by God. “Here is a herd of cattle, which I entrust to you to watch over.” And so he kept watch over the cattle every day, travelling with them out and back.

Very happy with his job, the Cattle Egret took off the ticks and lice that had attached themselves to the animals.

To show his gratitude towards him, God one day called the Cattle Egret and asked him: “What reward would you like me to give you?” As he had a great love of God, the Cattle Egret responded “Dress me in a white boubou [traditional robe]!” And immediately he became white. Delighted with his new condition, the Cattle Egret became a muslim. That is why he never eats an insect without shaking his head while saying “are you dead or alive?”, to avoid committing a sin by consuming a prey that has not been ritually killed.

### **Comment le Corbeau pie *Corvus albus* est devenu pie**

Il était une fois, la sécheresse s’installa sur la terre. Elle frappa le monde animal et végétal. Toutes les mares et les rivières furent tarées. Ainsi, tous les oiseaux se réunissent pour prendre une décision afin de survivre. A l’issue de leur entretien, le Corbeau pie fût désigné pour transmettre leur message à Dieu d’envoyer de la pluie pour leur secours.

Avant son départ, il remplit un sac de farine blanche qu’il porta au cou. Il s’envola en direction du ciel et chanta “Kaar! Kaar!” se qui signifia “Au secours!” Pendant qu’il survola, la farine sortait et se couvrait sa poitrine et son cou. Voilà pourquoi le Corbeau pie a la poitrine blanche et un collier blanc. Et toute fois qu’il survole, il n’oublie pas de dire “Kaar! Kaar!”, “Au secours ! Au secours!”

### **How the Pied Crow *Corvus albus* became pied**

Once upon a time a drought came over the earth. It hit all the animals and plants. All the lakes and rivers ran dry. Thus all the birds came together to take a decision in order to survive. At the end of the meeting the Pied Crow was appointed to take their message to God to send rain to help them.

Before his departure, he filled a bag with white flour which he carried around his neck. He flew away in the direction of the heavens calling “Kaar! Kaar!”, which meant “Help! Help!”. As he flew upwards the flour fell out of the bag and covered his breast and collar. And when he flies he never forgets to call “Kaar! Kaar!”, “Help! Help!”



**Left to Right: Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* (© Peter Karels); Pied Crow *Corvus albus* (© Linda Sharp); Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus* (© Jean-Christophe Nyssens). All photos from the West African Bird DataBase <[www.wabdab.org](http://www.wabdab.org)>.**

### **Comment le Vautour charognard *Necrosyrtes monachus* a perdu les plumes sur sa tête**

Jadis, le Vautour charognard était le plus beau des oiseaux. Il vivait avec le chef du village. Quand le chef n'était pas là, celui qui gardait le palais royal. Il gardait ainsi le palais. Voilà un jour qu'il tomba amoureux de la bien aimée du roi. Pendant qu'ils étaient en mouvement le chef vint les surprendre.

Pour le sanctionner, le chef le fit arracher jusqu'au cou. Il le déshabilla et l'habilla le boubou du boucher. C'est depuis ce jour qu'il est devenu noir-sal avec une tête chauve jusqu'au cou.

Cela signifie: toute tâche qu'on te confie, fais la avec prudence, et avec patience.

### **How the Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus* lost the feathers on its head**

A long time ago, the Hooded Vulture was the most beautiful of birds. He lived with the village chief. When the chief was not there, it was the vulture who guarded the royal palace. And so he guarded the palace. Then one day he fell in love with the king's favourite. As they were together the chief came back and surprised them.

To punish him, the chief had all his feathers to his neck taken off. He undressed him and dressed him in a butcher's boubou. It is since then that the vulture is dirty black with a bald head down to his neck.

The moral is: every task that you are entrusted with, fulfil it prudently, and patiently.

### **La poule et l'aigle**

Autre fois, l'aigle et la poule étaient des amies. Ce fût un jour que l'aigle allait effectuer un long voyage. Son amie alla lui prêter une aiguille pour coudre son vieux pagne. L'aigle l'eut remis et effectua son voyage.

La belle mère poule, ayant cousu son pagne perda l'aiguille de son ami. Quelques semaines après, revint l'aigle. "Bonjour, mon amie poule", "Bonjour cher amie aigle!", "Pourrais-je avoir mon aiguille?", "Désolée!" répondit la poule, "l'aiguille est perdue." "Perdue!" reprit l'aigle. L'aigle dit: "Comme tu as perdu mon aiguille, je prendrais tes enfants en attendant que tu trouve mon aiguille." C'est pourquoi la poule gratte la terre chaque jour à la recherche de l'aiguille perdue.

### **The chicken and the eagle**

In the past, the eagle and the chicken were friends. One day the eagle was going to leave on a long trip. His friend wanted to borrow a needle from him to repair his old clothes. The eagle passed it to the chicken and went on his trip.

The beautiful mother hen, after having sewn her clothes, lost her friend's needle. Several weeks later the eagle returned. "Hello, my friend chicken.", "Hello, dear friend eagle!", "May I have my needle?", "So sorry!" said the chicken, "the needle is lost." "Lost!" responded the eagle. The eagle said: "As you have lost my needle, I will take your children while you find my needle." Which is why the chicken scratches the earth each day looking for the lost needle.

Steve Anderson, anthropologist formerly based in southern Niger, is thanked for discussing the need for the preservation of traditional bird names and stories. The bird course at which these stories were recounted was led by JB and AGS and funded by the World Tourism Organisation and the Ramsar Bureau.

### References

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- GISPEN, W.H. (2015) *Het Afrika van de IJsvogel*. Pharos, Beilen.

Received 22 January 2016; revised 19 February 2016

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## Errata

### **Congo Moor Chat *Myrmecocichla tholloni* in Boma, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

In the list of species observed during my visit to the province of Bas-Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, in June and July of 2009 (Ayer 2011), I included Congo Moor Chat *Myrmecocichla tholloni* as having been seen in Boma. This was a misidentification and so should be removed from the list.

- AYER, H.D.S. (2011) Some observations of birds and bird behaviour in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Malimbus* 33: 65–77.

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