

Perspective articles are invited opinion pieces discussing a theme in wader/shorebird biology, ecology or conservation. Opinions expressed in these articles are not necessarily those of the Editors or of the International Wader Study Group.

## African spirituality and African nature

Walk through any traditional market or bazaar in many African countries and you will be astounded by the variety of species used for wild meat and traditional medicine. The majority of these animals are birds, with waterbirds and waders making up a large proportion of the meat consumed. While a lot of attention has been drawn to how African traditional cultures have negatively affected waterbirds populations, some of these beliefs can also be part of the solution. Here, I highlight the inadvertent protection/conservation of waterbirds and their habitats, through traditional religious beliefs and ancestral practices of the African people, with particular references to Nigeria.

Our journey starts at the beginning, creation.

*In the beginning, there was nothing...Then Bumba's pain began...He vomited nine living creatures; the tortoise, the leopard, the eagle, the crocodile, the fish, the heron, the beetle, the goat, and Tsetse...the heron created all the birds.*  
– Bushango creation account<sup>1</sup>

In the Bushango culture of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the heron is sacred, a totemic child of Bumba, and anyone who kills a heron will never last more than one year.

Ifé, currently Nigeria, is the Yoruba city where the following verses were recorded:

*Ogan sprouts, it reaches the road,  
Clearly Palm Tree's affair is most important, clearly, "Mine is important, mine is important" is the cry of the Grey Heron*  
– Ifa (of Ilé-Ifé) text<sup>2</sup>

In Yoruba mythology, Ifé is where Earth was created by Oduduwa, a deity from whom the Yoruba kings descended. According to the Ifa creation story, the Grey Heron is Odududwa crier, an important role which gives rise to the Yoruba saying: "no gong is so loud that the [Grey] heron cannot be heard."

African traditional religions/cultures provide either direct protection to specific wader species by providing them sacredness status or due to safeguarding of specific wetlands. In some cultures, certain bird species are protected with strict laws and some species are considered totemic children of the river gods. For example across



Is the heron, creator of all birds, now the inadvertent protector of waders in Africa? (photo: J. van der Winden).

south-west Nigeria, during the *Ìyá Efun* festival, *Lékeléke* (Cattle Egret) are carried by each Osun devotee through city streets before congregating at the local shrine of Yemoja. After chanting prayers and panegyrics in praise of the River Goddess, the egrets are released<sup>3</sup>. In many tribes in the north-central part of Nigeria, the Black Stork, locally known as *ganshamó*, is never killed for eating. It is considered as the appeasement of the river goddess, and only used in the *Èròpẹ̀şẹ̀* practice, in which it is sacrificed in order to gain relief from pain, stress, and discomfort.

Throughout Africa, several beliefs suggest that strange things regarding health, disease and success or misfortune are not chance events, but rather result from the active influence of individuals or ancestral spirits. The guardian/ancestor spirits live in certain sacred rivers, estuaries, lakes and waterfalls, and a visit to such sacred

<sup>1</sup>Sherman, J. 2004. *Mythology for storytellers: Themes and tales from around the world*. Routledge, New York.

<sup>2</sup>Bascom, W.R. 1991. *Ifa Divination: communication between gods*

*and men in West Africa*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

<sup>3</sup>Fadipe, N.A. 1991. *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan University Press, Ibadan.

sites is a common treatment of illnesses and diseases, especially for women suffering from infertility<sup>4</sup>. 'Sacredness' has implicit and explicit meanings in our culture, but it widely means that no human waste is to be deposited in it, and fishing, hunting and harvesting of products are completely forbidden<sup>5</sup>. Anyone caught hunting at such places is punished with a steep fine. Although there are no specific references to waders (shorebirds) in ancestral ceremonies, some of these African belief systems appear to resonate with the concept of natural resource management and have been effective in protecting local biodiversity. Given that many wader species can occupy sacred wetlands, they benefit from the protection granted by local beliefs. This has already been shown for sacred woods, where the indiscriminate harvesting of forest products is prohibited, and so these areas hold higher biodiversity of both plants

and animals compared with non-sacred sites<sup>6,7</sup>. Also, fish composition in sacred lakes, with strict observance of rules based on indigenous belief systems, is higher than in unmanaged lakes<sup>8</sup>.

In sum, and despite most work so far focusing on how African traditional cultures might have negatively affected waterbirds, it is also very important to consider the value African people give to birds and how cultural beliefs help protect their habitats. Perhaps further work taking such protection into account would be a more realistic image of our interactions with these (and other) species in Africa.

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<sup>4</sup>Koster-Oyekan, W. 1999. Infertility among Yoruba women: Perceptions on causes, treatment and consequences. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 3: 13–26.

<sup>5</sup>Appiah-Opoku, S. & B. Hyma. 1999. Indigenous institutions and resource management in Ghana. *Indigenous Knowledge & Development Monitor* 7: 15–17.

<sup>6</sup>Decher, J. 1997. Conservation, small mammals, and the future of sacred groves in West Africa. *Biodiversity & Conservation* 6: 1007–1026.

<sup>7</sup>Khan, M.L., A.D. Khumbongmayum & R.S. Tripathi. 2008. The sacred groves and their significance in conserving biodiversity: An overview. *International Journal of Ecology & Environmental Sciences* 34: 277–291.

<sup>8</sup>Anwana, E.D. 2008. *Forbidden (sacred) lakes and conservation: the role of indigenous beliefs in the management of wetland resources in the Niger Delta, Nigeria*. PhD thesis, University of Greenwich, UK.

## NOTICE OF THE 2017 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL WADER STUDY GROUP

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the International Wader Study Group (IWSG) will be held at 9:00–10:00 on Saturday 16 September 2017 during the Annual Conference at the University of Life Sciences campus, Prague, Czech Republic. The meeting room will be T1. Nominations for the election of Officers and other members of the Executive Committee may be made in writing to the General Secretary not less than 14 days before the AGM. Each nomination must be proposed and seconded by fully paid-up members and accompanied by the nominee's written consent.

### AGENDA

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| 1. Apologies   | 7. Project Coordinator's report (Jannik Hansen)                         |
| 2. Minutes of the 2016 AGM (published at <a href="http://www.waderstudygroup.org">http://www.waderstudygroup.org</a> ) | 8. Conference Coordinator's report (Triin Kaasiku)                      |
| 3. Chairman's report (Yvonne Verkuil)  | 9. Publicity report (Elwyn Sharps)                                      |
| 4. a) Treasurer's report for 2016 (David Turner)   | 10. IWSG-Wetlands International Liaison Officer's report (David Stroud) |
| b) Auditor's report for 2016   | 11. Colour Marking Officer's report (Jim Wilson)                        |
| c) Auditor's report for 2015   | 12. Election of Members of the Executive Committee                      |
| 5. Membership Secretary's report (Rick & Elis Simpson)   | 13. IWSG Conference 2018  |
| 6. Editor's report (Humphrey Sitters)  | 14. Any other business  |

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