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Bird exploitation for traditional medicine in Nigeria

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Summary

A survey covering most Nigerian fetish markets during Aug–Sep 1999 found 199 species and indicated that just a few thousand birds are sold annually on these markets. The traditional medicinal use of the important fetish species is explained. Information on prices and origin of the birds are given. There is an alarming sign that the forest eagles and larger vultures, owls, hornbills and turaco appear to be severely endangered by the demands for traditional medicine, and urgent conservation action is needed to protect them.

Résumé

Une enquête couvrant la plupart des marchés fétichistes en août-septembre 1999 y trouva 199 espèces et montra que juste quelques milliers d'oiseaux sont vendus annuellement sur ces marchés. L'usage médicinal traditionnel des importantes espèces fétiches est expliqué. Sont données également des indications sur les prix et l'origine des oiseaux. Il y a là un signe alarmant que aigles forestiers et grands vautours, chouettes, calaos et touracos apparaissent gravement menacés par la demande de la médecine traditionnelle et que des mesures urgentes de sauvegarde sont nécessaires.

Introduction and methods

Wildlife is heavily exploited almost everywhere in W Africa (Martin 1991). In the forest belt, game meat is a common source of protein. In most parts of W Africa the larger game animals have disappeared. Recent studies have been carried out to calculate the extent and effects of traditional hunting, especially on endangered species. (Ziegler 1996). Traditional medicine, known as *wudu*, *juju* or fetish, is still very popular and can be met everywhere (Taylor & Fox 1992, Cocker 1999). Each market has its corner with all kinds of "medicines". Some of these items are from highly endangered mammal and bird species. Many animals offered for sale are especially hunted for this purpose.

To judge the impact of fetish markets on birds and to find out the main species affected, an inventory of many markets was carried out in Nigeria from 22 August to 10 September 1999. Nigeria was selected because the tradition is still very evident and the country has a high species diversity. The strong economy in Nigeria might create an attractive market for animals killed in neighbouring countries such as Cameroon or Niger.

This study covered 24 markets in Nigeria and included almost all well-known fetish markets in the country. Assisted by Mr Babatunde, working as interpreter and driver, it was possible to check each stall offering birds and list them. Most birds were represented by heads only, some by complete skins. Mr Babatunde, being from the same tribe as the fetish traders on the markets, assisted the survey by asking some of the older women about the use of the birds, the prices and the origin of the birds. In some cases, when the identification was problematic, the heads were purchased and properly identified at a later date by comparing with other skulls.

Results

Who sells the birds?

The sale of local medicines throughout Nigeria is done only by people of the Yoruba tribe from the southwest. The Yoruba believe that witches are generally women, who fly about at night and are associated with birds (especially nightjars: Parrinder 1963). Almost all shops are run by women. The tradition of fetish selling is handed down within a family. Only these people have the power to change a dead bird into a medicinal item, but they are still only the “pharmacy” selling them. Young sellers in particular do not know the use of their goods. The witch doctor sends his clients to these “herb people” and only the which doctor decides which birds, herbs or minerals are needed and how they are to be used.

Which species are involved and what are they used for?

The list below gives all 199 species of birds identified in the markets (plus Ground Hornbill; scientific names may be found in the list below), with the number of individuals recorded. All species linked to fetish tradition are indicated by an asterisk, with their uses. Many of these special medicinal birds are offered as complete skins. Unsurprisingly, there is usually a logical link between some special habit of the bird and its medicinal use. Most bird fetishes are kept by the customers somewhere in the house, shop or office. Examples are birds to attract customers, to have enough money or to make sure that the daughter becomes a beauty. Something against witches is usually hidden near the door. Hooded Vultures are buried in the ground before a new house is built. Parts of others, eagles and large vultures for example, are directly used as medicine in some kind of mixture.

Struthionidae

Struthio camelus Ostrich 6.

Ardeidae

Ixobrychus sturmii Dwarf Bittern 1.

Tigriornis leucolophus White-crested Tiger Heron 4.

Nycticorax leuconotus White-backed Night Heron 2.

N. nycticorax Night Heron 12.

Ardeola ralloides Squacco Heron 1.

**Bubulcus ibis* Cattle Egret 58. Brings money and luck.

Butorides striatus Green-backed Heron 3.

Egretta intermedia Yellow-billed Egret 1.

Ardea cinerea Grey Heron 6.

A. melanocephala Black-headed Heron 21.

Scopidae

Scopus umbretta Hamerkop 8.

Ciconiidae

Anastomus lamelligerus Openbill 3.

**Ciconia abdimii* Abdim's Stork 1. Brings fertility

Leptoptilos crumeniferus Marabou 3.

Threskiornithidae

Bostrychia hagedash Hadada 4.

Lampribus rara Spot-breasted Ibis 2.

Anatidae

Dendrocygna bicolor Fulvous Duck 1.

D. viduata White-faced Tree Duck 12.

Plectropterus gambensis Spur-winged Goose 1.

Pteronetta hartlaubii Hartlaub's Duck 3.

Anas undulata Yellow-billed Duck 1.

A. acuta Pintail 1.

Accipitridae Eagles (all birds of prey) against weakness of body. Large vultures against mental disturbance, epileptic problems, bad eyesight.

**Aviceda cuculoides* Cuckoo Falcon 1.

**Elanus caeruleus* Black-shouldered Kite 5.

**Chelictinia riocourii* Swallow-tailed Kite 2.

**Milvus migrans* Black Kite 23.

**Haliaeetus vocifer* African Fish Eagle 2.

**Gypohierax angolensis* Palm-nut Vulture 23.

**Neophron percnopterus* Egyptian Vulture 1.

**Necrosyrtes monachus* Hooded Vulture 48. To bury in the ground before building a new house to give luck for the future.

**Gyps africanus* White-backed Vulture 5.

**G. rueppellii* Rüppell's Griffon 15.

- **Trigonoceps occipitalis* White-headed Vulture 1.
- **Circaetus gallicus beaudouini* Short-toed Eagle 1.
- **C. cinereus* Brown Harrier Eagle 1.
- **C. cinerascens* Banded Harrier Eagle 2.
- **Dryotriorchis spectabilis* Serpent Eagle 1.
- **Polyboroides typus* Harrier Hawk 10.
- **Melierax gabar* Gabar Goshawk 7.
- **M. metabates* Dark-chanting Goshawk 2.
- **Accipiter tachiro* West African Goshawk 11.
- **A. badius* Shikra 10.
- **A. erythropus* Western Little Sparrow-Hawk 3.
- **Butastur rufipennis* Grasshopper Buzzard 8.
- **Kaupifalco monogrammicus* Lizzard Buzzard 17.
- **Buteo auguralis* Red-necked Buzzard 16.
- **Aquila wahlbergi* Wahlberg's Eagle 4.
- **Lophaelagus occipitalis* Long-crested Hawk-Eagle 7.
- **Stephanoaetus coronatus* Crowned Eagle 4.
- Falconidae** Against weakness of body.
- **Falco tinnunculus rufescens* Kestrel 9.
- **F. ardosiaceus* Grey Kestrel 1.
- **F. chicquera* Red-necked Falcon 2.
- **F. cuvierii* African Hobby 3.
- **F. biarmicus* Lanner Falcon 4.
- Numididae**
- Guttera edouardi* Crested Guinea-Fowl 1.
- Numida meleagris* Helmeted Guinea-Fowl 40.
- Phasianidae** Against fever (Sodeinde & Soewu 1999)
- **Coturnix coturnix* Quail 1.
- **C. delegorguei* Harlequin Quail 1.
- **Ptilopachus petrosus* Stone Partridge 7.
- **Francolinus achantensis* Ahanta Francolin 2.
- **F. bicalcaratus* Double-spurred Francolin 243.
- Rallidae**
- Himantornis haematopus* Nkulengu Rail 3.
- Porzana egregia* African Crane 1.
- Amaurornis flavirostris* Black Crane 3.
- Porphyrio alba* Purple Gallinule 3.
- Gallinula chloropus* Moorhen 1.
- G. angulata* Lesser Moorhen 1.

Gruidae

- **Balearica pavonina* Black Crowned Crane 7. Guarantees a lucky wedding and family future.

Heliornithidae

Podica senegalensis Finfoot 3.

Otididae

Neotis denhami Denham's Bustard 4.

Ardeotis arabs Arabian Bustard 2.

Eupodotis senegalensis White-bellied Bustard 2.

E. melanogaster Black-bellied Bustard 6.

Burhinidae

Burhinus senegalensis Senegal Thicknee 5.

B. capensis Spotted Thicknee 1.

Cursoriidae

Rhinoptilus chalconotus Bronze-winged Courser 2.

Charadriidae

Vanellus senegallus Senegal Wattled Plover 1.

V. tectus Black-headed Plover 12.

V. crassirostris Long-toed Lapwing 1.

Pteroclididae

Pterocles quadricinctus Four-banded Sandgrouse 1.

Columbidae

Treron australis Green Pigeon 15.

T. waalia Bruce's Green Pigeon 8.

Turtur afer Blue-spotted Wood-Dove 8.

Streptopelia semitorquata Red-eye Dove 2.

S. senegalensis Laughing Dove 9.

Psittacidae

**Psittacus erithacus* Grey Parrot 73. Gives intelligence.

Poicephalus gulielmi Red-fronted Parrot 2.

P. senegallus Senegal Parrot 24.

Psittacula krameri Rose-ringed Parakeet 11.

Musophagidae Attract customers.

**Corythaeola cristata* Great Blue Turaco 43. Protects from poverty.

**Tauraco persa* Green Turaco 18.

**T. erythrophus* Yellow-billed Turaco 3.

**Musophaga violacea* Violet Turaco 70.

**Crinifer piscator* Grey Plantain-eater 44.

Cuculidae

**Clamator jacobinus* Jacobin Cuckoo 17. If it calls in the forest, a close relative or friend will die. Gives protection.

**C. levaillantii* Levaillant's Cuckoo 6. If it calls in the forest, a close relative or friend will die. Gives protection.

C. glandarius Great Spotted Cuckoo 1.

Cuculus clamosus Black Cuckoo 1.

- C. gularis* African Cuckoo 1.
Chrysococcyx caprius Didric Cuckoo 3.
Ceuthmochares aereus Yellow-bill 1.
Centropus leucogaster Black-throated Coucal 7.
C. grilli Black Coucal 2.
 **C. senegalensis* Senegal Coucal 108. For blessing.

Tytonidae

- **Tyto alba* Barn Owl 42. Protection from witchcraft.

Strigidae Protection from witchcraft.

- **Otus senegalensis* African Scops Owl 9.
 **O. leucotis* White-faced Owl 38.
 **Bubo africanus* Spotted Eagle-Owl 15.
 **B. poensis* Fraser's Eagle-Owl 1.
 **Glaucidium perlatum* Pearl-spotted Owlet 15.
 **Strix woodfordii* African Wood-Owl 5.

Caprimulgidae Protection from witchcraft.

- **Caprimulgus climacurus* Long-tailed Nightjar 3.
 **C. nigriscapularis* Black-shouldered Nightjar 1.
 **Macrodopteryx longipennis* Standard-winged Nightjar 4.

Apodidae Used for blessing.

- **Apus caffer* White-rumped Swift 2.
 **A. affinis* Little Swift 13.

Trogonidae

- Apoloderma narina* Narina's Trogon 1.

Alcedinidae

- Halcyon leucocephala* Grey-headed Kingfisher 2.
H. malimbica Blue-breasted Kingfisher 1.
H. senegalensis Woodland Kingfisher 11.
H. helicuti Striped Kingfisher 1.
 **Ceyx pictus* Pygmy Kingfisher 77. Attracts customers to a shop.
Alcedo cristata Malachite Kingfisher 3.
Megaceryle maxima Giant Kingfisher 1.

Meropidae

- Merops pusillus* Little Bee-eater 1.
M. albicollis White-throated Bee-eater 1.
M. malimbicus Rosy Bee-eater 3.
M. nubicus Carmine Bee-eater 1.

Coraciidae Give beauty.

- **Coracias naevia* Rufous-crowned Roller 10.
 **C. cyanogaster* Blue-bellied Roller 2.
 **C. abyssinica* Abyssinian Roller 23.
 **C. garrulus* European Roller 0.

**Eurystomus glaucurus* Broad-billed Roller 35.

Phoeniculidae

Phoeniculus castaneiceps brunneiceps Forest Wood-Hoopoe 2.

P. purpureus Green Wood-Hoopoe 7.

Upupidae

Upupa epops senegalensis African Hoopoe 1.

Bucorvidae Give protection and security, like protecting the house or farm.

**Tropicranus albocristatus* White-crested Hornbill 13.

**Tockus hartlaubi* Black Dwarf Hornbill 3.

**T. camurus* Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill 1.

**T. erythrorhynchus* Red-billed Hornbill 41.

**T. fasciatus* Pied Hornbill 35.

**T. nasutus* Grey Hornbill 25.

**Bycanistes fistulator* Piping Hornbill 16.

**B. subcylindricus* Black & White Casqued Hornbill 5.

**B. cylindricus* Brown-cheeked Hornbill 5.

**Ceratogymna atrata* Black-casqued Hornbill 15.

**C. elata* Yellow-casqued Hornbill 5.

**Bucorvus abyssinicus* Ground Hornbill 0. Important fetish species, but not found on the markets. The game cannot see the hunter, so that the hunter gets very close.

Lybiidae

**Pogoniulus chrysoconus* Yellow-fronted Tinker-bird 46. Helps if a woman cannot get children.

Lybius vielloti Vieillot's Barbet 2.

L. bidentatus Double-toothed Barbet 1.

L. dubius Bearded Barbet 21.

Picidae

Jynx torquilla Wryneck 1.

**Campethera punctuligera* Fine-spotted Woodpecker 25. Improves business.

**Mesopicos goertae* Grey Woodpecker 4. Improves business.

Hirundinidae Used for blessing.

**Hirundo abyssinica* Striped Swallow 1.

**H. ethiopica* Ethiopian Swallow 12.

**H. rustica* Barn Swallow 2.

**Delichon urbica* House Martin 1.

Motacillidae

**Motacilla aguimp* African Pied Wagtail 3. Gives security.

Pycnonotidae

Pycnonotus barbatus White-vented Bulbul 21.

Turdidae

**Cossypha niveicapilla* Snowy-headed Robin-Chat 16. Against students' examination stress.

**C. albicapilla* White-crowned Robin-Chat 3. Against students' examination stress.

Turdus pelios African Thrush 12.

Sylviidae

Melocichla mentalis Moustached Warbler 1.

Hypergerus atriceps Oriole Warbler 1.

Muscicapidae

Melaenornis edolioides Black Flycatcher 1.

Platysteira cyanea Wattle-eye 1.

Timaliidae

Turdoides plebejus Brown Babbler 4.

Nectariniidae

Nectarinia verticalis Green-headed Sunbird 1.

N. senegalensis Scarlet-chested Sunbird 4.

N. chlorophygia Olive-bellied Sunbird 3.

N. cuprea Copper Sunbird 1.

Laniidae

Corvinella corvina Yellow-billed Shrike 7.

**Tchagra senegalla* Black-crowned Tchagra 9. This musician gives his talent.

L. aethiopicus Tropical Boubou 1.

L. barbatus Gonolek 1.

Malaconotus blanchoti Grey-headed Bush-Shrike 2.

Prionopidae

Prionops plumatus Crested Helmet-Shrike 5.

Dicruridae

Dicrurus adsimilis Fork-tailed Drongo 3.

Corvidae

Ptilostomus afer Piapiac 6.

**Corvus albus* Pied Crow 55. Gives protection from witchcraft.

Oriolidae

Oriolus auratus African Golden Oriole 4.

Sturnidae

Lamprotornis chalybaeus Blue-eared Glossy Starling 1.

L. splendidus Splendid Glossy Starling 4.

L. pulcher Chestnut-bellied Starling 1.

Cinnyricinclus leucogaster Violet-backed Starling 1.

Ploceidae

Passer griseus Grey-headed Sparrow 2.

Sporopipes frontalis Speckle-fronted Weaver 1.

**Ploceus cucullatus* Village Weaver 198. Used for blessing.

**P. nigerrimus* Vieillot's Black Weaver 13. Used for blessing.

Malimbus rubricollis Red-headed Malimbe 1.

Anaplectes melanotis Red-headed Weaver 1.

Euplectes orix Red Bishop 4.

Estrildidae

Spermophaga haematina Blue-bill 1.

Lagonosticta senegala Red-billed Fire-Finch 3.

Estrilda troglodytes Black-rumped Waxbill 1.

Viduidae

Vidua macroura Pin-tailed Whydah 5.

V. orientalis Paradise Whydah 1.

Practically any species can turn up on these markets, but Palaearctic migrants are scarce. The results provide interesting data on the abundance of some rare species in Nigeria. Spot-breasted Ibis is new for Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994). White-crested Tiger Heron, White-backed Night Heron, Yellow-billed Duck, Serpent Eagle, Crowned Eagle, Nkulengu Rail, Red-fronted Parrot and Fraser's Eagle-Owl are little recorded in the country. The absence of records of most storks *Ciconia*, spoonbills *Platalea*, Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax*, Martial Eagle *Hieraetus bellicosus*, Red-headed Lovebird *Agapornis pullaria*, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl *Bubo lacteus*, fishing-owls *Scotopelia* and Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus abyssinicus* could be an alarming sign or simply show that the hunting pressure in the savanna is lower.

Where are they sold?

Usually these items are sold in the old markets. Only at Lagos and Kano were there two different markets offering local medicinal products. The really important markets in Nigeria are at Lagos, Oshogbo, Ilorin, Kano, Jos, Onitsha, Ijebu-Ode and Abeokuta. From these, traders also visit smaller markets which are not active every day.

During this survey, the following markets were visited (numbers in brackets stand for birds counted): Lagos I (22), Lagos II (145), Ibadan (68), Ife (51), Ilesa (30), Oshogbo (151), Ilorin (151), Jebba (26), Kaduna (11), Kano I (151), Kano II (130), Jos (297), Akwanga (15), Lafia (0), Makurdi (29), Ikom (0), Calabar (32), Ikot-Ekpene (5), Port Harcourt (39), Onitsha (479), Ore (54), Ijebu-Ode (145), Epe (21) and Abeokuta (194).

What are the numbers involved?

The total number of birds counted on the markets was 2251. Since almost all important fetish markets in Nigeria were checked during this study, a maximum figure of 5000 birds for sale at one time in the whole of the county is realistic. This is the first time a comprehensive study has been carried out to assess the numbers and species involved. The idea that huge numbers of birds, hundreds of thousands or even millions, are possibly involved in W Africa (Cocker 1999), is speculative.

Many of the birds offered have been in the shops a long time, especially the species unimportant in fetish. Even if the number of birds revealed by this study were to be sold and replaced in Nigeria once or twice each year (a turnover rate also suggested by Cocker 1999), the annual toll taken by the markets would not amount to

more than a few thousand, and the toll would be significant only for large raptors, hornbills and other threatened species.

How much money is involved?

Vultures, especially the large species, are the most valuable products sold. Large vultures fetch US\$10–20, a lot of money in Nigeria for many people. The problem is that traders cannot find these birds in Nigeria any more and have to obtain them from neighbouring countries like Chad and Niger. Hooded Vultures, eagles, Palm-nut Vultures and the large hornbills cost \$5–10, the other real fetish birds \$2–5, and normal bird heads \$0.2–1, depending on size and quality. The prices are similar in other W African countries like Ivory Coast and Guinea.

Where do the birds come from?

The real fetish birds are hunted for this purpose and are usually kept complete. Game birds, like herons, ducks, francolins, bustards, plovers and doves were always represented by heads only. Hunters sell game birds to customers, but take the unwanted heads to the Yoruba people to get some extra money. Most are not important in the fetish culture. Many road casualties and dead birds from the live-bird markets in Lagos and Kano end up here.

Large vultures were the only birds mentioned to be imported to Nigeria but real fetish birds are sometimes taken far by traders to the important markets to get the best price. From here the Yoruba also take them to the small markets, which are not served daily. A Yoruba woman at Kaduna mentioned that she goes once or twice a month to Ilorin to get items ordered by customers. Kaduna has very little demand, even though it is a very large town. All non-fetish birds are said to be of local origin.

Discussion: are species endangered through fetish?

Many of the species involved are common in Nigeria but the fact that large vultures are very expensive on the markets and “cannot be found in the country any longer” is an alarming sign. Actually not a single live, large vulture was seen on this trip. Phil Hall (pers. comm.) last saw a large vulture about 10 years ago. Some national parks are probably the last remaining sites for them left in Nigeria. Vultures are actually protected in the Nigerian culture and nobody likes to kill one because it brings bad luck for ever. On the other hand, any part of the vulture, especially the eggs, has the greatest of magic powers and is really worth money.

The other species suffering from fetish exploitation are forest eagles, especially Crowned Eagle. Hunting affects resident forest species most, due to the high hunting pressure there. The fact that no Tawny Eagle was found in the markets could mean that they were not available during the rainy season, that hunting has not reached the non-forest areas to great extent, or that they are getting scarce in the country.

The large vultures and eagles are likely to be highly endangered by fetish anywhere in W Africa. If not seriously protected immediately, the last of them will soon end up on these markets. Crowned Eagle and harrier-eagles are also the commonest eagles seen on markets in Ivory Coast and Guinea (pers. obs.), perhaps because of their owl-like heads. Owls, especially the large species, are very important in the fetish culture. Any night bird is linked to witches. To keep an owl or part of it as a fetish in the house makes it impossible for a witch to enter.

Great Blue Turaco and the large hornbills have declined throughout their W African range. Here, habitat destruction and their persecution for fetish markets go hand in hand.

The demand for large vultures, eagles, large hornbills and owls calls for immediate action to save the small populations remaining in the country. Legislation is necessary, but education programs are even more urgently needed. Most of the species concerned probably have a chance to survive only in protected sites.

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