



## BIRDERS OF AFRICA

History of a Network

Nancy Jacobs

Juta

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Ornithology, like any branch of science, is an incremental process whereby new layers of information and understanding are gradually added to an edifice that may have been under construction for centuries. In *Birders of Africa: History of a Network*, social and environmental historian Nancy Jacobs traces the development of ornithology in Africa. Her book reviews the history of knowledge and the network of people involved, with a particular focus on the interactions between three broad categories of bird-related knowledge: vernacular, ornithological and recreational.

The backdrop for the journey on which the reader is taken is the shifting social and political landscapes of the African continent over the past millennium. Jacobs writes about African vernacular birding knowledge and traditions long pre-dating European colonisation; early transfers of bird

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knowledge between, for example, the Dutch and the Nama people of today's Namaqualand; the development of southern African ornithology during the era of Levaillant, Burchell and Andrew Smith; and finally, the changing face of the field during the 20th century as independence swept the continent and brought it into a post-colonial era. Much of the book explores this last period and delves into the contributions made by African assistants to the work of European ornithologists such as George Bates, Reg and Winnie Moreau and Leslie Brown.

The publication of this book is timely and I closed the back cover feeling that I had gained a new perspective. Among the many topics covered is how the incorporation of vernacular terms into scientific names was actively banned by the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, who took the view that only Latin and Greek were appropriate. Although ornithological pioneers like François Levaillant and Andrew Smith disagreed with Linnaeus's viewpoint, the list of scientific names of southern African birds based on vernacular terms is surprisingly short. It consists of just 15 or so species, one example being *mahali* as the species name for White-browed Sparrow-weaver *Plocepasser mahali*.

I also enjoyed the author's objective and insightful discussion of how recognition of the ornithological contributions of African collectors, museum technicians and field assistants was determined almost entirely by the extent to which their European employers were willing to acknowledge the former's skills and expertise.

*Birders of Africa* is meticulously researched, with nearly a quarter of the book comprising

appendices and notes on information sources.

In terms of writing style, the text is readable and engaging, although I must admit I found the flow of the final chapter to be slightly disjointed compared to those that preceded it. The Greater Honeyguide, a species emblematic of vernacular birding knowledge and traditions, features at intervals throughout the book, literally from the first paragraph to the last. So it is disappointing that no mention is made of the remarkable recent work by Claire Spottiswoode and colleagues on two-way communication between the honeyguides and humans in northern Mozambique. A number of typographical errors, such as the misspelling of Hugh Chittenden's surname (as Chittendon) in the photographic credits, detracts from the overall high quality of the text.

Although *Birders of Africa* is primarily about the history of knowledge and secondarily about birds, it will appeal to anyone with more than a passing interest in ornithology on this continent. It will also be of significant interest to historians, as well as those of us employed as academics at a point in history when the decolonisation of education is high on the agendas of South African universities.

ANDREW McKECHNIE

