

Birders of Africa: History of a Network

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BOOK REVIEW

Birders of Africa: History of a Network

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Birders of Africa: History of a Network by Nancy J. Jacobs. 2016. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA. xiii + 325 pp., 16 color plates (a subset of the 48 black-and-white text figures). \$85 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-300-20961-7.

This volume chronicles how Africa's birds came to be known. Nancy Jacobs recognizes three distinct types of bird knowledge—vernacular, ornithological, and recreational—and weaves a complex tale of how they have developed and interacted through her “network” of birders. She adopts Ted Eubanks's refreshingly broad view of birders as people who “find their way to nature through birds,” and takes this to include anyone who observes birds, even if it's only to better hunt them or keep them from one's crops. I suspect that many “traditional” birders would bridle at calling such consumptive/combatative relationships “birding,” but Jacobs uses this premise to argue that most rural people are birders.

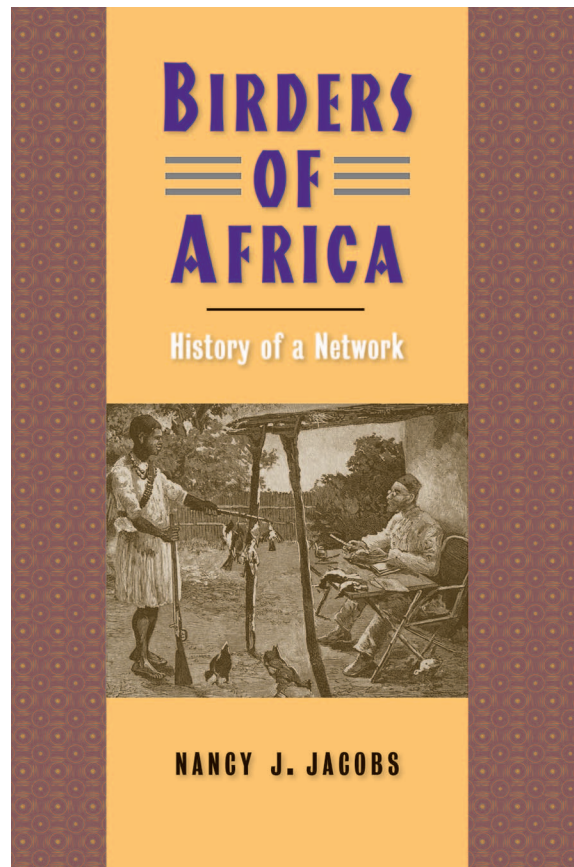
A central question of the book is how colonial “ornithologists” interacted with—and exploited to varying degrees—Africans who possessed vernacular knowledge of the region's birds. This question is addressed mainly through the lens of southern and central Africa. There is little mention of the exploration of birds in Francophone or Portuguese Africa, or in the Abyssinian region. Jacobs explains this bias in terms of the much richer archival tradition in the former British colonies, but, at least in the first half of the

book, the focus on the south strikes me as deliberate, for it was there that the arrival of seafaring Europeans in the 16th century had the greatest impact on local communities.

The wide-ranging Introduction outlines the author's approach to her diverse and challenging subject. It is followed by two sections, each containing four chapters. Chapter 1 deals with vernacular birding knowledge in Africa, starting from precolonial times. It provides a wealth of interesting anecdotes about the roles ascribed to birds in traditional beliefs, although some details are confused (e.g., the “predatory *unomyayi*” [Cape crow] is referred to as “European rook”). Several stories are related to mythological “birds,” but Jacobs is not concerned about objective veracity; to her, an interest in birds (in the broadest sense) qualifies as knowledge.

Chapter 2 considers the earliest contacts between the Dutch and various indigenous peoples found at the Cape. Here, Jacobs has little material with which to work; there is

more on the transfer of knowledge about plants than about birds, and many of the author's inferences are based on the interactions of Dutch physician–botanists with people in Asia rather than in Africa. Chapter 3 describes the development of ornithology in southern Africa from 1700 to 1900. It is here that Jacobs clearly espouses her



views on the strong links between imperialism, racialism, and ornithology: “The leading partisans of European empire would include ornithologists, soldiers, and governors who conquered people and occupied territory” (p. 78). Strong stuff to place ornithologists at the head of this egregious pack! Many British officials in the 19th and early 20th centuries were indeed frustrated naturalists, but this was not the case in the 18th-century Dutch colony. She goes on to dismiss Peter Kolb’s observations on birds because Cape sugarbirds don’t eat insects (which of course they do). Most of the rest of Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of the development and cultural implications of nomenclatural systems. Chapter 4 explores the importance of authority and its alignment along racial lines in African ornithology. I found the contrast between Latour’s “hard” and “soft” facts particularly illuminating. However, the distinction between recreational birders and ornithologists in this regard is somewhat artificial; some of the continent’s best observers and recorders of natural history over the past half century have been, first and foremost, “recreational” birders.

The second part of the book explores the lives of selected birders as exemplars of the various roles played in the scientific discovery and description of Africa’s birds. Chapter 5 explores the boundaries imposed by white ornithologists on their African field assistants, based on the careers and writings of George Bates, Reginald Moreau, and Leslie Brown. Chapter 6 chronicles the life of renowned collector Jali Makawa, based mainly on the diaries of the ornithologists with whom he worked and on the recollections of people at Choma, where he retired. Chapter 7 investigates the role of African museum workers in Apartheid South Africa, exemplified by Saul Sithole and other technicians from the former Transvaal Museum in Pretoria. Collectively, these chapters provide fascinating vignettes of a largely bygone era, highlighting the racial

inequalities that underpinned relations across the continent.

The final chapter, “Birding Revolutions,” brings us up-to-date in the current African birding context. It touches on the end of the colonial era, the rise of professional ornithology, and the growing role of recreational birding in ornithology through citizen science programs. Earlier in the book, Jacobs recognizes three key interactions among birders: talking/writing, collecting, and making specimens. This was perhaps accurate up to the end of the 20th century, but the focus in the past decade or so has shifted from collecting to photography. The advent of high-quality digital photography has created a new set of collectors of bird imagery rather than skins. The final chapter concludes by noting the growing importance of conservation and of conservation NGOs in driving bird-related research across Africa, and the need for strong, flourishing networks among birders for conservation initiatives to succeed.

Jacobs is a historian based firmly in the social sciences. To an ornithologist, the text can be hard going in places, although it is leavened by numerous avian anecdotes and insights into the lives of many African birders—some well known, others less so. Despite some inaccuracies about the birds themselves, the book challenges one’s views of the development of ornithology in Africa, and of the way colonialism mined the continent for knowledge as well as physical resources. As Jacobs notes, this inequality persists today; by far the majority of ornithological study throughout Africa is still conducted by researchers based at northern institutions, with at best limited knowledge transfer to the communities where the research is based. It is unfortunate that the book’s price tag means that no more than a handful of copies is likely to reach Africa.

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