

# The Role of Bird Characters in African Story and Myth

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## **Abstract**

The paper explores the role of bird characters in African story and myth. Birds are ecological beacons in the environment. Their sight impresses humankind visually and their music is aesthetically important. Birds signal the coming of mornings and the setting of the sun. The aim is to show that African societies attach different beliefs to different birds. Some birds are viewed as signs of bad omen yet others as the reverse. For instance, the vulture is regarded as a sign of death whereas the dove is seen as a bird of grace or good fortune. In addition, some African societies believe that certain birds possess significance for specific occasions or ceremonies like circumcision. The argument shows that such beliefs are mirrored in African story and myth. Traditional African narratives include many bird characters, demonstrating the widespread idea that birds are closely related to humans. Since birds are generally appreciated as guardians of human life, they play a positive role in African story and myth, often appearing in times of crisis. Birds resolve conflicts and protect protagonists. In some instances they are personified and take on even more important roles than animals. Birds can carry urgent and important messages about a protagonist, hence opening up possibilities of salvation for the latter. Human characters in African story and myth can be counselled by and saved from danger by birds. In addition, birds can also reveal human character by testing for such virtues as patience and faithfulness. Ultimately, there is a certain reciprocity between birds and humankind in African story and myth.

**Key concepts:** Bird characters, Traditional African narratives

## **Introduction**

In many cultures birds are believed to carry a meaning. As far as African philosophy and religion are concerned, birds are important modes of communication from the spirit world and must be interpreted properly. In other words, birds are winged messiahs from divine sources. Ingersoll (1923:4) contends that primitive man 'regarded birds as supernaturally wise'; hence they were treated with great respect by early men. Biblically too, birds of the air were expected to convey important messages; for instance in the book of Luke chapter 32 verse 34, the crowing of a cock ushers in the momentous tragedy that closed the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth. For these reasons, the actions of birds have been watched with great interest the world over in the hopes that they might express a revelation.

This paper aims to examine the role of different bird characters in selected African stories. As already mentioned, in African beliefs birds do not just appear because they are part of nature; rather, they are treated as a guiding light from the ancestors to the living. This paper hence attempts to answer the central question: What is the significance of birds in the African story?

For the purposes of this paper, an African story will be defined as a traditional story which is transmitted from one generation to another or from place to place by oral means. However, it is worthwhile to note that most of these traditional stories have been recorded in print. This paper also concurs with Lusweti (1984:123) that African stories include myths (stories believed to be true and concerned with the origin of things or activities of God), legends (true stories dealing with culture and history of people) and fairy tales (artistic stories meant to entertain listeners).

## **Background**

Like any other story, African stories have characters. A character may be human, animal, bird, object or spirit. Literature studies have shown that narrative characters in African stories are usually symbolic. Since most African stories are allegorical there are certain behaviour patterns that can be repeated by specific characters. With just a line up of characters in a story and no synopsis of the story, one can easily guess the story line basing on character behaviour in other known narratives.

A lot has been written and said concerning human, animal and ogre (a monstrous human) story characters. Particular scholars to mention include Lusweti (1984), Finnegan (1984), Nandwa and Bukenya (1986), Kahari (1990), and Miruka (1994). By contrast there is scanty research on birds as story characters. This absence has encouraged the writer to explore the significance of birds in African stories. However, it is first important to show the relationship between traditional stories and society in order to gauge the influence of bird stories on the human world.

### **Oral Literature and Society**

In literary circles it is widely known that a story reproduces the concerns of the society that creates or composes it. A story recreates in symbolic or allegorical form a society's beliefs, customs and accepted norms. Through narratives or folktales a society develops its own self awareness.

Most African societies have similar values although the details may differ. There is a striking resemblance among stories in Zulu, Shona, Chewa and Kikuyu, to mention but a few ethnic groups whose customs have been examined by scholars. An African story could have different versions in different African languages but the theme, story line, characters and purpose will be almost the same in all of them. This paper therefore agrees with Nandwa and Bukenya (1986:24) who claim that 'African religious, philosophical, legal and political concepts and precepts are expressed' in any African story. In the same vein Ingersoll (1923:1) believes that when we say, 'A little bird told me....,' we are making use of legend, folklore and superstition at the same time.' So narrative characters, birds included, may be mythical products of the pre-literate folktale world and as such are symbolic in African story and myth.

### **Why Birds are Symbolic in Stories**

Birds have various qualities which make them peculiar in an African story. Some birds are gentle in nature. For this reason humans feel relatively safe when interacting with them. Birds are usually benevolent, so if they are to perform tasks they carry them out to perfection. Unlike human and animal characters, birds have the ability to fly and so can transcend the spatial limits

by which other creatures are bound. This means that birds are associated with freedom; they seem to have no limits. Most birds do not speak, but psycholinguistic studies have shown that they can communicate, through mating and alarm sounds, for example. And some birds like the parrot are even believed to be able to 'talk'. In addition, birds seem to be unconquerable. Farmers who specialize in the growing of small grain can testify that birds can 'harvest' for them. Closely linked to this is the importunity of birds; naturally they confront and nag, especially antagonists, until justice is done.

It is these unique characteristics of birds that make them symbolic in their own way, particularly in the African story. Stories of human life and relationships are enhanced by the magical element which is introduced by the bird character. Most importantly because birds can fly they seem to be able to occupy several realms and therefore closely resemble our construction of spirits.

## **Significance of Birds in the African Story**

The bird is symbolic in many ways and this paper will draw up some of these as they are reflected in selected African stories.

### ❖ *Birds as Messengers*

African stories often portray birds as emissaries of urgent and important news. They may convey information about the suffering or death of the protagonist. This is evident in a number of African tales as illustrated in the following examples.

In a 'Gikuyu Ogre Folktale' (Lusweti, 1984:115) a man and his wife build their hut in the middle of the forest. When the wife gets pregnant, the husband goes away blacksmithing. An ogre comes, eats all their food and torments the woman. The woman's time to deliver comes and the ogre helps her but goes on to starve her and the baby. Incidentally, a dove often comes by to eat castor seeds which the woman uses for preparing the baby's oil. One day the woman decides to send the dove to the blacksmith. At the blacksmith the dove sings a song until the husband gets the message. He then returns home and kills the ogre. If it was not for the dove, the woman and her child could have starved to death.

In another story, 'Nyange and His Father' (Nandwa & Bukenya, 1986:75), a father used to trap wild animals. One day his son, Nyange, and his friends release the animal that has been trapped. The father gets so angry on hearing that it was Nyange and friends who had done this that that he decides to punish Nyange severely. He invites Nyange on a honey-collecting spree. The father helps his son to climb up to a bee-hive using a ladder. When Nyange is up the tree, the father removes the ladder and leaves Nyange stuck up the tree for days. Luckily, a buffalo passes by and helps Nyange down. Nyange goes away with the buffalo to lands afar. He later becomes wealthy and marries two wives, but is never happy. He is homesick; so one day he sends a bird to his home to report that he is still alive. In response his relatives also send the bird to tell him to come back home. Nyange is thus able to become happy again with the help of a bird.

The two stories show that the bird is a medium of communication. The woman in the 'Gikuyu Ogre Story' is able to get in touch with her husband who is very far away because of a bird. The bird also relieves her of suffering from torture by the ogre and hunger. The same kind of meaning can be drawn from the second folktale, in which Nyange is re-united with his family by a bird. In both instances the bird utilizes its abilities to fly and 'talk' in carrying the protagonists' messages.

### ❖ *Birds as Bridges between Two Spheres of Action*

Because of their ability to fly, birds can make the impossible become possible. They can reach places which are inaccessible to other story characters, both protagonists and antagonists. Therefore they bridge the gap between characters and desired destinations.

In the 'Gikuyu Ogre' folktale, whose synopsis has already been given, the bird bridges the distance between the wife and her husband. So, besides carrying an important message, the bird also closes the gap between the two. It is virtually impossible for the wife to get to the blacksmith in the thick of the forest because she is emaciated by hunger and pain. Where there is pain and suffering, the bird is able to bring peace and safety.

Again in the other folktale, 'Nyange and His Father', a bird manages to bridge both the physical and sociological spaces between Nyange and his family. The relationship between Nyange and his father had turned sour and

a bird helped in healing the son's loneliness and the father's anger. The distance between Nyange and family was also shortened by the bird.

From these two stories and many others, it can be argued that birds symbolize bridges physical, sociological and psychological distances between different camps. The impossible is made possible.

### ❖ *Birds as Sentinels*

Sentinels are soldiers on guard and birds in some African stories stand up as such to prevent fatalities. African people believe that the appearance of certain types of birds symbolizes or warns of danger or even death. A Kipsigis legend, 'The Battle of Migori' (Nandwa & Bukenya 1984:48) illustrates this.

This is a story about war, based on a historical event which occurred in the 1830s. The Kipsigis and the Gusii are great enemies who habitually raid each other's territories. At times battles are fought to prove which tribe is stronger than the other. One day the Kipsigis organize a raid on the Gusii, but on their way they see vultures following them. However, they choose to ignore the presence of this symbolic bird, the vulture, and proceed on their way. Since the Gusii are well prepared for the battle, they manage to trap the Kipsigis who are slain in large numbers.

The Kipsigis should have taken heed of the presence of vultures as they are a sign of misfortune. This tribe ought to have returned home and forgotten about the battle. Vultures are birds that eat the dead; hence they symbolize death. In this legend or story, these birds paradoxically represent guardian spirits which potentially protect humans from monsters or death.

### ❖ *Birds as Counsellors/ Advisors or Teachers*

In the African story the bird character also comes out as a moral voice. Birds can reveal deceptions among humans and can even test virtues like patience and tolerance. Many folktales conform to this since the main purpose of oral literature among Africans was and is to mould a person who fits perfectly into the society.

Fortune (1982:5) records a story 'Shungu Dzinokunda Ronda' ('Mental Anguish is Worse than Pain') in which boy triplets are orphaned at birth. Later their caregivers send them away to wander in the forests. On the

way one of the boys kills a buck. He then orders the other two to continue hunting. The second boy kills another buck and so the third boy has to continue on his own. As he wanders about, he finds a dead hare but a bird appears singing to discourage him from eating the hare. He again comes across a dead buck and the bird repeats its song promising him that better things were to come. After walking for a long distance he stumbles into a homestead whose dwellers take good care of him. He stays there, eventually marries and lives happily ever after.

In this story, the bird symbolizes a counsellor. The third boy is taught by the bird not to rely on other people's belongings, not to feed on carcasses and to persevere in times of trouble. In this way the boy's character is shaped for the better.

In a similar story, '*Rungano Rwenherera Mbiri*' ('The Story of Two Orphans') recorded by Fortune (1982:72), orphaned twins Matirasa and Matinga set out to search food during a year of drought. They find themselves in a cave that belongs to a certain old woman and her ogre son; fortunately the son is away at that time. The old woman warns the twins of her ogre son, advising them to go away immediately and keep watching out for him. The orphans walk for a long distance before the ogre appears behind them. They have to walk faster to increase the distance between them and him. At times they feel too tired to walk, experiencing a strong desire to take a rest, but each time they try to do so, two birds appear and urge them to keep going. This situation continues until the ogre is too tired to follow and the orphans are thus saved from danger.

The two birds in this story serve the same purpose as that of the one in '*Shungu Dzinokunda Ronda*'. The birds counsel the orphans by encouraging them to persevere, since 'hard times never kill', as the old adage goes. Such virtues are expected in any human being.

Another folktale, '*Shiri Yaimutsa Miti*' ('The Bird that Regenerated Stumps') in Fortune (1982:55), has a similar impact. In this story a man wantonly clears the forest in a bid to turn it into a field. During the night a bird sings a song until all the stumps regenerate into trees. The man is amazed the following morning, but goes on to cut down the trees again. One night the man decides to guard the field and discovers what takes place. He kills the bird, takes it home and feeds on it together with his family. All the members of the family transform into birds.

This particular bird teaches the importance of conserving the environment. Humans need to realize that trees and birds as part of the environment are very important and must be conserved. Deforestation causes soil erosion and formation of deserts, whilst killing birds may lead to their extinction. As such the bird has a purpose in the story.

‘The Vulture and the Hen’, recorded by Finnegan (1984:338), also portrays the bird as a teacher. Hen borrows a razor from Vulture to shave her little ones. Hen does not return the razor and she forgets where she has placed it. After some time Vulture comes demanding his razor, but Hen cannot locate it. Vulture decides to be compensated for the loss each time he ‘visits’ Hen. Vulture is still getting his compensation even today.

The two different types of birds in this folktale symbolize different qualities. As already mentioned, a vulture is a sign of danger and death. On the other hand Hen as an example to society teaches people to be responsible, wise and self-sufficient. Hen represents thoughtless carelessness with other people’s property which could destroy faith among neighbours. So the two birds have lessons to teach in this story.

### ❖ *Birds as Part of Conflict Resolution*

In African story and myth, birds sometimes appear on the scene and open up possibilities of salvation when protagonists are in dire trouble. They appear at times of crisis to rescue people. Zondi (2005:25) records James Stuart’s folktale, ‘*Udumudumu*’ in which King Dumudumu has four wives who produce crow children. Consequently he decides to marry a fifth one but unfortunately she cannot produce any child. This earns her the name ‘the barren one’ and the other four wives laugh at and despise her. Eventually the King wants nothing to do with her, so she stops making herself presentable and she cries every day. One day, two doves appear as she works in her field. The doves promise to help her and she feeds them. Thereafter the doves take a blade, make an incision on her left leg and with a reed draw out a blood clot. They do the same with her right leg and place the clots in a pot. After some days the doves fly back, take out two babies from the pot, give them to the woman and fly away. On hearing that his fifth wife now has two children the king becomes very happy. He kills all the crow children and the fifth wife is pronounced the senior wife from that time onwards.



The two doves change the fortunes of 'the barren one.' In African culture, fertility is expected of a wife and at the same time regarded as a blessing. On the other hand sterility is a curse; childlessness is great affliction for a married woman. The woman in the story has problems with her husband because she cannot conceive. This being the case, the dove restores honor and dignity to the woman who is in a crisis. In African tradition, as reflected in this story, the dove generally symbolizes good luck, family concord, productiveness and peace.

❖ *Birds in Reciprocation or Bargaining*

All the incidents cited above show that birds provide a service of some sort to human characters in African stories. However, it is important to also note that at times birds do not just serve others for nothing. Though in most cases they benefit only from the gratitude of their beneficiaries, birds do sometimes try to strike a bargain. In doing good, they are also portrayed as bargaining. Three stories will be used to illustrate this point.

In '*Rungano Rwemukoma nemunin'ina*' ('The Story of Two Brothers') recorded by Fortune (1980:64), the younger brother offers food to a bird when it asks for it, whereas the elder brother refuses. After some time, the two brothers happen to marry women from the same family. The father-in-law declares that the brothers may take his daughters away only after passing some tests. The tests are quite challenging and the younger brother is helped to accomplish his tasks by the bird he fed earlier on. The elder brother fails and so has to leave his bride while the younger brother takes his. The bird acts in reciprocation, for one good turn deserves another. The elder brother gives the bird nothing and receives nothing in return.

Finnegan (1984: 347) records a story entitled 'Hyena, Hare and Crow' which also portrays birds in a bargaining situation. Mr Hare and Mrs Hyena eat a lot of honey. Mr Hare 'advises' Mrs Hyena not to lose such sweet food and so he stitches her anus together with her tail using sharp thorns. After that they go separate ways. When Mrs. Hyena wants to evacuate, all the other animals except Crow refuse to help her. Crow has to undo the stitching and Mrs. Hyena is able to defecate. In the process, pieces of meat also came out and Crow eats them. Crow gets the prize for helping Mrs. Hyena, thus benefitting from the bargain.

Reciprocation involving birds in the African folktale is also found in the 'Gikuyu Ogre' story whose synopsis has been given already. The dove habitually feeds on castor oil seeds provided by the woman. In return the dove carries the woman's message to her husband who has gone blacksmithing.

The African story thus emphasizes social interaction between birds and people. However, at times a negative image may be given in the bargaining process.

### ❖ *Negative Portrayal of Birds*

Generally birds have been positively portrayed, but occasionally they appear in a negative light. When this happens, it is usually meant to emphasize a human vice.

Fortune (1982: 29) records '*Chishiri Chainzi Chinyamungune*' ('A Bird Called Chinyamungune'), in which a man abducts and hides a girl. A weird bird is responsible for keeping a key for the door to the room where the abducted beautiful girl is kept. The bird is the man's accomplice and so is viewed in bad light.

The crow children in '*Udumudumu*', referred to earlier on, are killed when the 'once barren' wife 'gives birth' to twins. According to African tradition, crows are birds of bad luck. When one sees a crow flying past, one must spit to dispel bad luck and prevent it from coming one's way. In '*Udumudumu*', the crow is thus negatively imaged to heighten the fact that man, represented by King Dumudumu, is very unreliable. Humankind changes with changing situations.

Again in '*Shiri Yaimutsa Miti*' (Fortune, 1982:55) the same bird that magically regenerates the forest also magically transforms family members into birds. In regenerating trees, the bird is positively portrayed, but in transforming the family it is some what negative, however justified the punishment that it enacts.

## **Conclusion**

Bird characters in African culture and tradition deserve special scrutiny because literary scholars need to appreciate and understand their symbolic

meaning. The symbolic function of different birds may vary according to the contours of specific stories. However, the portrayal of each class of birds is fairly stable in most stories. For instance the eagle is identified with vigilance, the dove with good luck, the crow with bad luck, the cock with new beginnings and so on. This paper, therefore, advocates that literature scholars read or hear African stories not at the level of nursery school children, who look at bird characters as part of mere entertaining tales; rather they should interpret the role of birds in as complex a way as they do human and animal characters.

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