

## Module # 2 - Component # 1



# Birds - African Folklore

## Introduction

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***These stories are written in precisely the same way that Credo tells them, with all their original colloquialisms and styles.***

## **Birds: Beautiful Fertilisers of Earth**

Our people, throughout Africa, believed many strange things regarding birds. First of all, our **general name for a bird in Zulu** is *ingonyi*, while in Sesotho and Tswana it is *ngonyani*. These are beautiful, strange and mystical African words, which mean ‘**fat**’ and ‘**fattening**’.

Now... what has a bird to do with being fat ? Our people believed that, like the **animal herds that used to criss-cross the face of Africa**, birds were bringers of fertility. We believed that the **great bird migrations that used to come into our skies at certain times of the year brought fertility** to or ‘fattened’ the land. For this reason, a bird, any bird, is called the fertiliser or the fattener... *ingonyi*

Another belief regarding birds is that they are the **souls of human beings** who have reached a high state of perfection. When you have been reincarnated seven times on Earth, as either a human being or an animal, you are raised by the Gods to the **state of a bird, the freest creature in the world**; a creature that is a friend to the air, friend to the land and friend to the water. This is the *ingonyi* - the freest of the free, the fattener, the fertiliser.

Our people **protected birds** with very, very strict laws. The *mosu* tree (umbrella thorn, or *Acacia tortilis*) is a large acacia tree, which has bean-like pods as fruits. The Batswana, ba-Pedi and Northern-speaking people **never cut these trees** down. Why? These are the trees upon whose **branches migratory birds rest**, when they come into southern Africa at certain times of the year.

Our people used to punish with a **savage fine** anyone who was caught **hunting** more birds **than was needed for food**. There were exact guidelines laid down to **prevent the exploitation** of birds and other animals, for example you were not allowed to hunt more than two guineafowl a day and you were not allowed to hunt every day. Each guineafowl you brought down had to last a number of days, which is why **guineafowl meat was dried**. The most terrible sin that our people knew regarding birds was for a man, woman or child to **break the eggs** of a bird. It is said that should you commit that sin, you will bring a curse of seven years upon, not only yourself, but also your family.

When we **undergo the deepest initiation into the mysteries of our people**, when we become not only sangomas, but also **sanusis** (who are higher than sangomas), we often are asked questions that are actually **riddles**. The successful answering of these riddles tells you whether one is a true sanusi or simply a fake. If someone **claims to be a sanusi**, I will ask him or her, “Please tell me, fellow sanusi, who is the beautiful woman who is the mother of a tree ?” Now, if the person is not a true sanusi, he will not know the answer. But the answer is, “the bird is the mother of the tree.”

You find a saying all over Africa, in various languages, one that was stressed upon our people again and again: **if you kill a tree, you are killing a bird**. In Setswana they say, “*setklara seswala kinyona*,” and in Zulu, “*ummuthi uzalwanyone*” - both of which mean, “the tree is given birth to by the bird.” Why did our people say so? Our people noticed that when birds from far away rest on the branches of certain great trees, sooner or later you would see **strange trees** growing at the feet of these big trees, since the seeds were excreted in the past by migratory birds.

The Bakgatla people have a proverb that **says if you shave the great Earth Mother’s green hair, she will loose her feathered lice**, in other words, if you destroy trees, birds will no longer come to bring fertility.

## Hamerkop

The hamerkop is a **very strange bird**. It is a small, ugly-looking creature, but this creature is the **second-most feared bird** (after the fish eagle) in South Africa by black people. It is not so much feared as revered. Why? I don't know.

However, it is the one bird that our people all believe is a **bird of very ill omen**. It is also the **symbol of vanity and human futility**. When you see the hamerkop in the water, it always **seems to be admiring itself in its reflection** on the water. So our people believe that it is the **symbol of pride and vanity**. It is said that this bird is proud of its feathers and that it is always well groomed, making sure that there are no lice or fleas amongst its feathers.

Zulu people have a powerful **symbol of futility**, a symbol that reminds human beings that they are really nothing, and that their pride is nothing. This symbol is that of the **feather of a hamerkop floating down a stream**, futility, being carried away by time.

So feared is the hamerkop, that when people see it flying over someone's village, they believe that a **death is going to occur** in that village. There are many beautiful songs in which they flatter this bird and ask it to go away peacefully.

One such song we sang as children goes like this:

*Hamba we Thekwane  
Uliqhawe le Nyoni  
Hamba we Thekwane  
Uliphisi lenyoni  
Sithi hamba we Thekwane  
Uliqhawe lenyoni.*

In English the song translates approximately to:

Fly hammerhead  
You warrior of a bird  
Go away o' hammerhead  
You warrior of a bird  
Go away you hammerhead  
You warrior of a bird  
Go away you hammerhead  
O' king amongst the birds

One of the **worst things that can happen to a person in southern Africa** is to **dream about a hamerkop** flying in the sky or wading through water. This means a great disaster will follow that person.

## African Hoopoe: Harbinger of Friends

There is a **most ridiculous looking little fellow**, who looks like as if he is wearing a **Native American headdress** on his head. This is the *ngomfi*, the African hoopoe, the bird that our people believe is a **symbol of a loyal friend** or a good visitor. It is said that if you hear this bird sounding off in the bush, saying, “hoop-hoop, hoop-hoop, hoop-hoop,” it means that you’re going to have an **important visitor** who will bring much prosperity to the family. This bird’s wing and tail feathers are black and white; night and day, darkness and light, pleasure and pain.

So, **if you see this bird**, it is believed that **you will have a visitor** or a friend coming to you, who will stand by you, by night and by day, through suffering and through joy. The bird’s **general colour is like the colour of beer, corn beer**, which is why this bird is **associated with celebration**, and with drinking and eating.

## Lilac-Breasted Roller

In Western culture, the **dove** is considered the **bird of peace**. But in African lore, it is the lilac-breasted roller.

Let me tell you about the *langazana*, the beautiful 'bird of the sun,' the lilac-breasted roller. This is the bird of **peace** and **reconciliation**. This is the bird that was often **sacrificed by kings who were making peace**. One of these little birds was taken and its throat was cut with a battle spear, which was thus purified of evil and sanctified with the blood of the 'bird of the sun.' **The spear was ceremoniously broken by the two kings** and buried in a hole and then the *langazana*, bird was buried on top of this spear and thus peace was made.

## Long-Tailed Bush Shrike

Let me tell you about a beautiful **black bird with white feathers on his wings and a very long tail**: the long-tailed bush shrike. This bird is *isakabutle*, King **Shaka's favourite bird**, known as 'the scatterer of enemies.' Only warriors, who were determined **not to return back from battle without having won a victory, wore the feathers of this bird**. They were worn in the headdress and around the upper arms of these fierce fighters. Whenever an army celebrated victory, the feathers of 'the scatterer of enemies,' the bird of victory, were much in prominence.

Another name for this beautiful bird is *ujomela*. What a beautiful name, *ujomela*, meaning the one who reigns supreme, the **king of kings**, the emperor.

## Yellow-Billed Hornbill

The yellow-billed hornbill, *umkolwana*, is a bird that **really brings laughter to one's heart**. Now, what is this name, *umkolwana*? In Zulu if you say, "I believe," you say "*ngjakolwa*," and 'a believer,' whether a Christian or a believer in any religion is known as *ikolwa*.

Now what has this got to do with this bird? The answer is very simple. A hornbill is a **strange bird, which, when it sits on the branch of a tree always looks up at the sky as if it sees something or someone up there**. Over the centuries, our people began to believe that the *umkolwana* is the symbol of faith, the symbol of human faith in a better tomorrow. The *umkolwana*, the little believer, is **the bird of the optimist** who says, "All shall come right in the end."

Even when there is the biggest drought, you will **never see the *umkolwana's* beak drooping earthwards**; it is always facing upwards, because it believes in a better tomorrow.

## Bateleur

Here I see a bird which was one of the **holiest** in the land of the Zulus. This is the Bateleur **eagle**, known by the Zulu's as *Ingonghulu*. The word, *Ingonghulu*, describes the behaviour of the bateleur when **beating its wings** in the air but the word also means the beginning and the end, alpha and omega.

It is believed that **when creation began**, when the tree of life produced living things, **the first bird to fall off the tree of life**, was the *Ingonghulu*, the Bateleur. To signal the birth of creation, the *Ingonghulu* extended her wings and beat them, GHU-GHU-GHU, and creation was announced.

You were **not allowed to kill this bird**. It enjoyed the direct **protection of the king** of the Zulus. You were not allowed to harm this bird of victory. If it arrived in your area, it was immediately announced to the king that an *Ingonghulu* is nesting in such and such a place, and the king used to come there with his people and **conduct a sacred ceremony** there, to which no ordinary people were invited. It is said that a few hours before the **death of King Shaka in 1828**, an *Ingonghulu* was heard beating its wings and then it was heard making its typical sound, SJWEEE-SJWEE, a **lamentation for a dying king**. It is also said that when the world ends some day, in an Africa that will no longer be like the Africa we know, whose inhabitants will **no longer be black people, but yellow people from far away**, the last *Ingonghulu* will stand up on a rock and there at sunset it will spread its wings and bid farewell to life, farewell to creation.

If you found an *Ingonghulu* **feather**, you had to wrap it up in the hide of a goat or a wild animal and take it straight away to where the village of the king or the *induna* was and there you had to bow three times at the gate of the king. And when the *indunas* came you would place the *Ingonghulu* feather at their feet and then withdraw very quickly.

## **Blackbreasted Snake Eagle**

The Blackbreasted Snake Eagle, like the secretary bird, is a **symbol of victory**. A symbol of **victory over a vicious and pitiless world**. Again and again in caves and in other places of gathering, our people used to portray this bird. It is also a symbol of God's power. Its colour, black and white, like day and night, light and dark, show that this is a sacred creature.

## Crested guineafowl

*Inpangela* is the crested guineafowl. This is a very **sacred bird** amongst all people throughout Africa where I have travelled. It is a **bird of protection**. Our people believe that the guineafowl is **gifted with protective powers** by the gods, that the guineafowl will protect your village's chickens against chicken disease.

The Zulu name for a guineafowl is *inpangele*, which means the **one who is in a hurry**. The word *inpangele* comes from the verb *pangela*, which means to wake up in the morning and go to work. The guineafowl is a bird that is **symbolic of human effort at survival**. In the language of the Botswana or BaSotho, the guineafowl is known as a *kgaka*.

Again the word *kgaka* has to do with effort. If I say in this language I am hurrying *gehgaketsi*, in other words, **I am running like a guineafowl making an effort**. It is said that when a country loses its fertility, the guineafowls are the first birds to disappear. Zulu queens and *sjangane* chief used to try and **breed guineafowls with domestic chickens** in order to create a strong breed of chickens which were as strong as guineafowls and capable of enduring drought.

## Eagles

Another kind of bird that our people **looked upon with great reverence** is the eagle. A bird, which **like both the vulture and the hawk**, was seen as a **protector and a purifier of the wilderness**.

A bird, which was regarded as a **messenger** of the god of light *umvilanganhgi* himself. In the language of the Zulus an eagle of any kind is known as *ukosi*. Now this word comes from the same root as *kosi* or *inkosi*. The word means the **royal dominator**, the dominant bird. And in ancient times **only people of royal blood were allowed to wear the feathers of eagles** on their persons. And as with vultures those feathers had to be **acquired from living birds** and not dead ones because the feather of a dead bird does not have the powers that that particular bird is believed to possess.

Zulu speaking people associate the eagle with almighty god himself and they refer to god as *ukosi oluma peko peko*, the eagle with many wings. In African symbolic god is depicted as an eagle with **twelve or more wings** on its body. *Ukosi oluma peko peko*, the many winged eagle that can fly in all possible directions. If you are **in trouble** and you **dream of an eagle**, whether it is sitting on a rock or flying through the sky, it is believed to mean that you enjoy the protection of god himself and you need to fear nothing and no one.

If in olden days a man travelling through the bush came across the **shell of an eagle's egg**, it was regarded as a very good omen indeed. It meant that that **man would produce many children** who would serve god throughout their lives as **shamans and diviners**, as **healers, prophets or prophetesses** and other people who worked daily for the good of the community.

## Greenspotted Dove

Now here we have got another bird with a very remarkable and somehow **sad history amongst our people**. It is a plump beautiful creature. This bird, our people say, is the **bird of mourning, a bird of sadness, a bird of sorrow**. It is a **symbol of loneliness without hope, a symbol of somebody who has lost everything**.

**Zulus** say that when this bird sounds off, it is saying “*My family is dead, my children are all dead and now my heart goes DO-DO-DO, slowly fading away.*”

You should **not look at or listen** for the call of this bird. It was said that if you did hear such a bird, your whole family would perish.

## Hawk

All birds of the hawk **family are sacred to the god of Light** throughout southern Africa amongst all tribes. The hawk is also a **symbol of faith**. Some say it is the **symbol of dead** in the way that it stoops out of the sky, snatches a chicken and takes it away before its mother can do anything.

This bird we call **the bird of a thousand dreams**. If a man or a woman **dreams of this bird**, it is seen that this person has been called to **an initiation**.

If while walking in the veld, you come across a **dead hawk**, it is seen as a **symbol of the transience of human life**. The omen tells you that you must do everything you want to do quickly, because time flies and doesn't come back again. The hawk is also a **symbol of courage**, of **truthfulness** and of **fighting for the right cause**.

Sometimes when hawks are particularly vicious towards a village's chickens, the owners of the chickens **will put wings of hawks tied to the thatch of the huts** on the outside to deter these rather hungry birds.

## Grey Lourie

Now here is the bird known by our people as *Kwadira*. It is a bird that makes a very sharp sound to **warn people** that there are demons and **tokoloshes** and other things negative and hostile around.

By shouting at things, this bird is much respected by our people and it is a bird that our people are greatly happy to see in their villages, especially in times of tensions. They say that whenever the **shouter at enemies** is there, there will be no harm to our children.

## Ostrich

Here we have a bird with a very remarkable **name** as well as a remarkable **folklore**. This is the ostrich, *Eenchwe*. In the language of the **Botswana** and the **Basutu**, the ostrich is called *Mpjwe*. Now this is very, very odd, because the word *Eenchwe* has to do with **beauty** and the word *Mpjwe* has to do with **newness and brightness** and **again beauty**.

Why? The ostrich is a very **ugly looking bird**. It looks big, huge and ungainly, and it has a temper to match. So why did our people associate this bird's name with beauty and renewal? The answer lies in the **fat** of the creature. As you may know, our people used to smear themselves from head to foot with **red ochre**. Ochre was used both as a cosmetic to **protect the skin** against the sun, and also as **solidarity**, if one may call it that, because the ancient first people, the **first people** to be created on this planet, are said to have been red.

Also, red ochre had something to do with **preventing age and corruption**. Why? Red ochre was called by the **Xhosa** people *Imbola*, which means that which has to do with *Mbola* or decay, **that which prevents decay**.

The **Zulu** people called red ochre *Isobuta*. Now this is another remarkable name. *Isobuta* means **the bringer of visions or dreams**. Our people believed that red ochre had the power to bring visions and dreams to someone and also to restore life in the **other world** to a dead person. Thus dead people were especially thickly smeared with red ochre to ensure their resurrection in the other world.

But our people did not just take **plain** red ochre and smear it on their bodies. No, because that was asking for trouble. Red ochre could **dry your skin** if you did that. So they used to **boil the fat of an ostrich** until it became like oil. Then they used to mix the oil with red ochre to form a paste. They then smeared this fat on their bodies, which gave their skins a very red hue, which we were told was **loved** by the **ancestral spirits** and the gods.

Our people believed that the fat of the ostrich had the **ability to renew life**. A chief or a warrior whose muscles were aching was **smeared from head to foot** with **ostrich fat** and rubbed vigorously from head to foot back to front. Thus the ostrich is the **bird of renewal**.

But there was another side to the ostrich. The ostrich egg is the most powerful **aphrodisiac** known in Africa. In fact **Khoi-Khoi** men who ingest half cooked and fresh ostrich eggs are known for the fact that their organs of men are always erect.

Ostrich fat is also a powerful medicine against a disease that appeared in my younger days amongst mission school female teachers, **arthritis**.

Arthritis became a problem amongst our people long ago when the first mission schools appeared. Schoolmistresses suffered from swollen joints. They were women in a **male dominated profession**, and thus they suffered. And I remember my aunt, my grandfather and his many wives, use to massage schoolteachers **with ostrich fat** and they even boiled ostrich fat with bitter herbs and gave these to the suffering teachers as a medicine.

## Pigeons and Dove – Birds of Peace?

Just as there is a **bird of conquest**, there are also **birds of peace**. One of these birds is the beautiful bird known as the **Lilacbreasted roller**. Our people **do not** view the pigeon or the dove as a bird of peace. And the very name, by which they know this bird, proves that it was viewed as anything but a peaceful little creature. There are two words for a dove or a pigeon in the **Zulu** language.

The first one is *Iguba*. This word sounds sweet when pronounced by the human tongue, but its meaning is **horrific** because the word means a **slasher**. It comes from the verb *Tjuba*, which means **to slash something** with a very sharp instrument. Thus you can see that the pigeon or the dove was known as a **bird of murder**.

Why ? Pigeons and doves are unusual birds because of the fact that when two males fight over a female they **fight to the death**. One of the male pigeons **dies** in the fight. Now amongst my people, a pigeon was therefore a bird not of peace but of war. Another name for the pigeon is *Ihobe*. Again this is a **bad name**, **sweet sounding** though it may be when pronounced.

It means **the ambusher**, the one who lies in ambush for an enemy. So, if you want to promote peace in Africa anywhere don't, I repeat don't use the pigeon as your symbol. **You will make things worse**. Please remember that even amongst people beyond the shores of Africa, ancient people such as the **Sumerians** and the **Babylonians**, the dove was not used as a symbol of peace, far from it.

It was the symbol of a strange goddess known as *Ishta*, a goddess who was a weird combination of a **goddess of love** and a **goddess of war**.

## Shrikes and Whydahs

In KwaZulu-Natal and other parts of South Africa, there are **small birds** with very long tail feathers. Some of these birds are **whydah** birds and some are **shrikes**.

All of these birds with long tail feathers were under **direct protection** of the **Zulu** king in olden days. They were all birds whose feathers were looked upon by the Zulu warriors in the same light that British soldiers look upon medals such as the **Victoria Cross** and others. All warriors who had proven their loyalty to the king through **long years of selfless service** were awarded with feathers from the tails of these birds.

In his praise songs, **King Shaka**, is known as *Inyowny ethla esinye*- the bird which eats other birds. This refers to the **shrike**. It also refers to other birds of prey, which eat other birds. Throughout his life, King Shaka, was always seen wearing plumes of birds such as the wader bird and the various kinds of long-tailed shrike.

A shrike to the Zulu people is a **bird of conquest**. It is not a bird of cruelty. It is not a bird of oppression. It is simply a bird of conquest, a bird which dominates other birds.

## Vultures

Our people were always taught that if you want to live in harmony with nature, you must praise it, sing to it, sing for it and then sing in honour of it. In the land of the black people, in days before western civilization held its clouds over the face of my motherland, destroying ancient traditions, turning ancient beliefs into mockery, birds such as the vultures were **respected** and **honoured**.

Our people **protected vultures** with some of the **strictest** laws they were capable of enacting. Vultures were known as *lzingwony zenkosi*, which means the birds of the Lord, or the birds of the king. And they were exactly that. Vultures **of all kinds** were protected by the king of the land. And our kings made sure that vultures were **fed** and never left the land over which the king ruled. In **Zululand** (*KwaZulu-Natal*) there were special places, places in which large flocks of vultures used to gather which were under the personal protection of the Zulu monarch himself.

To African people the vulture was the **symbol of fertility**. It was the grandmother who laid many eggs according to one story. Eggs out of which emerge not little vultures, but **any kind of animal** that there is on earth. Some tribes believe that the vulture was the original **great earth mother**. And our people believed that where there are vultures, there, there is **safety**, there, there is **purity**, there, there is **life**. In the language of the Zulu people a vulture was called *Inqe*, which means the purifier, the one who cleans off the land. In the language of the **Tswana** speaking people a vulture was known as *Lenong*. Again we see the word, *Nong*, which has to do with **fertility**, with the fatness of the land. Thus the vulture is the fertilizer of the earth, the one who makes the earth fat.

One tribe calls vultures by a strange name, *Edlanga*, in singular, and *Amadlanga*, in plural. This word *Edlanga*, or *Amadlanga*, literally means a **warrior, an army man**. For warriors to assemble and form ranks before attacking is known in Zulu as *Ukudlanga*, to assemble to be marshalled to prepare for war. Stories say that the vultures were the **reincarnated souls of warriors** who had died bravely in battle. They were also reincarnated souls of brave hunters who had died while out on a **hunt**. One of the greatest things that could happen to either a **warrior or a hunter** was to be permitted by the tribal king to wear the feathers of a vulture as part of one's **headdress**.

Now here is an interesting thing. You were **not allowed** to kill the vulture whose feathers you were to wear. You had to dig a **big round hole** with the help of friends, a hole into which you could go and stand comfortably. Then you had to cover this hole with a **lattice work** of wood and with branches of trees.

Then a **dead ox** would be placed very close to the lip of that hole. And then you had to wait, hour after extra arduous hour. The vultures would come and swarm around the dead animal next to the hole in which you were hiding. And as the vultures got busy eating, you had to **seize** one of the birds by the legs and hold it fast, and then pull off three feathers from its tail or its wings. When you have done this, you must stay in the hole until nightfall with your feathers. Then the vultures would go away and you would emerge triumphant, carrying the three feathers to the king. Then the king **himself** would place the three feathers in your headdress.

Why did there have to be three feathers ? According to African symbolism, three feathers represents what we call the three lights of a human being: **truth, faith and honesty**. These were the three lights of the soul of the human being.

The bones of a vulture which has died of natural causes, are regarded by African healers and shamans as to be of **great value**. Ground into a **powder**, the bones of a vulture are used to **protect people** from mortal enemies but the vulture must have died of **natural causes** in order for the medicine to be effective.

The beak of a dead vulture is a powerful **instrument of divination** and it is part of the equipment of priest diviners. If someone dreams of vultures when one is about to build a family, this is taken to mean that one will be a parent of **strong children**, children who will be **great warriors, great defenders** of the home and the family. But if one dreams that one is being **devoured by vultures**, this is a dream which has taken to mean that one must mend ones ways because the gods are getting angry and might inflict death upon the person as punishment for a long list of transgressions.

## Swallow

Now, one last bird. *Inkonjany* - the one who **points** the way to summer. The swallow, and other birds like it, is regarded by our people as a symbol of **effort** and **hard work** as well as of **unity**, because you will see these birds gather together in large groups as they come and go. The name *Inkonjany* means the **little pointer**, and it comes from the verb *komba*, which means to **point out something**.

It was said that if you saw a lot of swallows in the sky, it meant that the **summer and the harvest** would be very good. The same applies to the swallow's sister, *Themsoslana*, the one who has got a white breast with black spots. It is also something that points to the coming summer.