

citation: Marcot, B. G. 2007. Owls in native cultures of central Africa and North America. Tyto Newsbrief 11(March):5-9.

Owls in Native Cultures of Central Africa and North America

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Throughout the world, owls have been viewed variously as signs of ill fortune and great power or wisdom (Marcot et al. 2003, Holmgren 1988). During recent visits to central Africa and southwest U.S., I interviewed members of local cultures to determine how owls are perceived within their traditions.

Owl Tales from Africa

During October 2006, I traveled to west-central Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), to the remote village of Monkoto and into Salonga National Park (the largest tropical forest park in Africa), where I interviewed several groups of people.

Village Chiefs

Within Salonga National Park, I spoke with four Chiefs of local village groups ("groupements"): Chief Lokuli Bosami of Village Groupement Yangi, Chief Bokele Lomama of Village Groupement Isaka, Chief Bokongo Botuli of Village Groupement Mpongo, and Chief Mbeko Ingala of Village Groupement Entoo. The interview was in (my) English translated into (their) Lingala.



Village groupement chiefs, wearing headdresses of leopard skin and necklaces with leopard teeth.

The chiefs noted that their cultural perception of owls is "not good." They said that when you hear an owl, it means bad news, such as "perhaps a relative has died back in Kinshasa" (the capital city of DRC). So owls are feared, as they "bring prophecy." Owls are "bad species" by custom, but only against men, not women.

Although owls are known to be bad, they are also occasionally eaten (as are most other animals in the region). Both large and small owls are eaten. However, there is no formal hunting of owls. Owls are killed when they are seen, though, opportunistically.

I probed as to which owls they know. I showed them pictures from my bird book (van Perlo 2002) and also played various owl calls from my tape recorder (taken from Chappuis 2000). Most interestingly, it turned out that the "owls" they fear really are only the males of one species: African Wood Owl, *Strix woodfordii*, a species that most commonly is found around and within villages and secondary forests. To this end, the chiefs noted that there are "two kinds of cries" of the (wood) owl: the bad cries from the male which mean bad news, and another cry from the female which does not mean bad news. What they referred to as the male's bad cry is the typical 7-note song of the African Wood Owl (which in actuality is given by both sexes, the male's being lower in pitch), and what they referred to as the female's cry is the single-note wail call (probably most often given by females, but possibly also by males and juveniles).

They use the Lingala term *esukulu* ("es-oo-KOO-loo") to refer to "owl" but this really is a direct reference to the "bad" African Wood Owl. The term refers to both sexes of this species. They also use the Lingala term *lokio* ("low-KEY-oh") to refer to the Vermiculated Fishing Owl (*Scotopelia bouvieri*), which they say (accurately) occurs only along the river (in riparian gallery forests, as I had also discovered there), and that calls early morning, such as 3 to 5 a.m. Vermiculated Fishing Owls are not bad omens, as they never enter villages. They use the Lingala term *enkimeli* ("en-kim-EL-lee") to refer to Pel's Fishing Owl (*Scotopelia peli*), which also is a riparian or flooded-forest species, is not a bad omen, and does not enter villages.

They also spoke of another small owl that "has no cry," which might refer to a number of other possible small owls in the area that do not have calls like the wood owls or fishing owls (although they do have their own distinct, different vocalizations).

Also, they spoke of another owl-like creature called *lyokokoli* ("leeyo-ko-KOH-lee"; this is not Lingala but instead a local dialect, as there is no Lingala word for this) which is "very rare" and "appears once every forty to fifty years." It has a long wail call that increases in pitch, they say. It is not an owl. They were unable to identify or describe it any further, and I don't believe than any of the chiefs I spoke with have personally seen this creature; it may exist in story only.

I asked if there are any positive aspects of owls, such as providing special powers, and they replied no. Also, eating owls does not confer any special powers or traits.

Gatherers in Monkoto Village

In the village of Monkoto, I interviewed four women who gather non-timber forest products in the forest every day. The interview was mostly in French and (their) Lingala.

They said that local beliefs in owls pertain to *ndoki* ("en-DOH-kee"), which is magic or sorcery. When you hear an owl you think of sorcery. Owls are feared because when one cries by your house it means bad news. Then you must throw stones at it to chase it away. They also said that owls are bearers of news about the death of a relative elsewhere. It appeared that they were referring to African Wood Owls, but it was not as clear that it is only this species that is bad. But they too knew the term *esukulu*. I asked if owls are ever eaten in this village, and they said no.

Owl Tales from North America

Owl Tales of Hopi and Isleta

I recently had an opportunity to spend a day hiking the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona with a wonderful Native American lady, and we discussed owl lore. She comes from two pueblo tribes, the Hopi in Northern Arizona and the Isleta which is south of Albuquerque along the Rio Grande River, New Mexico. She relayed to me some owl stories she was told while growing up.

Owls are viewed by these Native American cultures as harbingers of ill health and ill fortune. An owl once came to their house and shortly thereafter her younger brother fell ill. If an owl was heard calling, she and her siblings would go outside and shout at it, trying to compel it to leave.

Owl Tales of Shuswap

I also recently had an interesting discussion on the role of animals, and on owl lore in particular, with Ernie Philip, Elder and Cultural Coordinator of the Shuswap Tribe. We met at the Quaaout Resort and Conference Centre on the shores of the Little Shuswap Lake outside the small town of Chase, British Columbia, Canada (east of Kamloops in south central B.C.). Ernie conveyed to me several owl stories of his people.

Mostly, owls are viewed by the Shuswap as messengers and usually portend a forthcoming death, but the messages are not always bad. You have to know how to read the messages, Ernie said, to understand the owl's calls. Ernie told me that, as a youth, he was taught this by his elders. I asked if it is only the larger owls that convey the messages of death and he said no, it is all the owls, including Screech Owl, Great Horned Owl, and the others as well.

Further Reading

One can learn more about traditional views of owls through the references given above and many other sources. For African cultures, also see Enriquez and Mikkola (1997) and Mikkola (1999). For native North American cultures, also see Fienup-Riordang (1996), Miller (1963), and Wilson (1950).

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