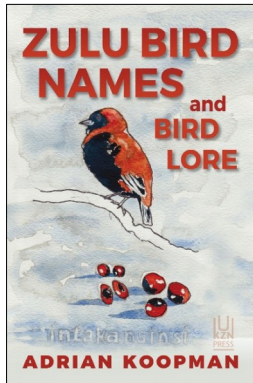




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Zulu bird names and bird lore



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Naming birds accurately is part of being passionate about defending nature

To frame this review of Adrian Koopman's most recent remarkable book, I make two general points. First, it is a philosophical commonplace of our contemporary understanding of how our minds apprehend the world that language precedes perception. What we see and understand depends on the language we inherit through enculturation: if you are not given words to describe the world, you cannot and do not see it in any consequential way. Second, to be intellectually alive in our contemporary world entails knowing some of the fundamental scientific features of climate change, and perhaps more importantly, being aware of the growing clamour about the extinction of species that climate change threatens. This awareness comes burdened with moral imperatives: we are enjoined to do something about the loss of nature, but we pall at the prospect of change on this scale. These two framing threads will be brought together in why I consider Koopman's book to be important.

Zulu Bird Names and Bird Lore is fundamentally autobiographical. Koopman mines his lifelong engagement of collecting folklore, myths, and the multitude of folkloric narratives from eastern southern Africa. As a professional scholar of language, he explores the morphology of linguistic structures, and the multitude of ways inherited observation, through countless generations, has attributed semantic and relational properties to naming birds. There is therefore considerable consonance between Koopman's interest in linguistic morphology – the form, change and inflection of words – and the morphology of birds. Reading about the complexity of Zulu bird names is to be immersed in an extended dialogue between culturally embedded forms of description, as one shuttles constantly between English common names of birds, the universalising and culturally invariable scientific binomial nomenclature, and Zulu words drawn from a multitude of descriptive experiences, both of living people and archival semantic sources. The latter includes the dictionaries of Bishop John Colenso, the Reverend Arthur Bryant, the records of James Stuart, the mid-20th century lexicography of Clement Doke and Benedict Vilakazi, and a host of others. Included among these multiple sources are the rich traditions of praise poetry, proverbs and riddles, mythological beliefs and the verbalisation of birdsong.

There is also reference to the Zulu and other regional vernacular words that various published English bird guides have provided over the decades (often erroneously), most notably in the successive editions of the canonical Roberts field guides. In an implicit yet real sense, this book is a highly developed exploration of cultural mediation, and the author is scrupulous not to give precedence to one classificatory scheme over another. Koopman is not explicit on the matter of cultural relativism, but in a significant way the book immerses the reader in the competing legitimacy of incommensurable rational and descriptive systems as different people with different pasts have looked in wonder and veneration at the fauna of their worlds; as a cardinal principle of cultural mediation, this is virtue indeed.

Koopman gathers his harvest of Zulu bird names to provide a descriptive context of linguistic structural principles of Zulu, including the morphology of bird names and, particularly, the use of prefixes and suffixes. He shows how naming birds has informed, and is referenced to, many other uses in the metaphorical evolution of Zulu, as is the case also in naming the different properties and patterns of cattle, or even historical military regiments.

The book illuminates the personal relationships between the author and a number of his important informants. Fascinatingly, he explains how they offered their insights in a series of bird-naming workshops between 2013 and 2017. Here we catch a glimpse of a vibrant exchange between people that suggests a social and living form of scholarship, including giving names to birds that previously had none.

Koopman has included some of his own watercolour sketches of birds that seem to yearn to illustrate the symbolic, metaphorical and morphological connections to which his academic study points. His paintings join the immense, and highly regarded, genre of South African bird illustration. Look at birds in an informed way by means of a vocabulary of description, the author seems to suggest, and you will begin to understand the miracle of the creation and the myriad functional and descriptive relationships of nature which bird watching, if genuinely informed by observational accuracy, will lead you into. Seeing bird species precisely has language at its core in any account of evaluative cognition.

Zulu Bird Names is not an easy book to read but it will unquestionably become a standard reference for biologists, taxonomists, and ecologists insofar as their work impinges on the social and political world – most assuredly as professionals devise persuasive programmes in defending regional biomes as essential habitats upon which the survival of species depend. This book offers the richest experience for those fluent in Zulu and English. Thus, within southern Africa, the readership is a very large one indeed – part of the extraordinary privilege of living in a multilingual society. The work amply underscores the point that the cognitive and cultural tools of veneration and wonder at nature's richness reach deeply into the archaeology of our own minds, but most of all, are part of a fertile dialogue of cultures. This is the book's real strength.

Koopman's study may well undergo some change in later editions. Although it has a bird-name index, it is not an easy reference tool. For example, when speaking with a friend about the call of the Cinnamon dove, more often called the Lemon dove, or *Aplopelia larvata*, neither of us could think of the Zulu name, *isagqukwe*. The index of *Zulu Bird Names* has 30 page references to 'dove', and 8 to 'Cinnamon dove', but it did not yield instantly to the Zulu name for the bird. Future editions might correct this, and a simple solution would be to include a table that showed English common names, scientific names, regional Zulu variations, and references to birds so named in the body of the text.

For recreational birders and scientific ornithologists alike, all protesting loudly about what we, as a human species, are doing to our environment, an immensely valuable book has arrived.

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