



FOLK STORIES FROM SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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FOLK STORIES FROM SOUTHERN NIGERIA

BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ANDREW LANG

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weird noises went home. The game birds had no chance and hid in the bush, so that very soon the only birds left were the hawks and the big black-and-white fishing eagle, who was perched on a tree calmly watching everything. The scavenger hawks were too gorged and lazy to take much interest in the proceedings, and were quietly ignored by the fighting tribe, who were very busy circling and swooping on one another, with much whistling going on. Higher and higher they went, until they disappeared out of sight. Then a few would return to earth, some of them badly torn and with many feathers missing. At last the fishing eagle said-

"When you have quite finished with this foolishness please tell me, and if any of you fancy yourselves at all, come to me, and I will settle your chances of being elected head chief once and for all;" but when they saw his terrible beak and cruel claws, knowing his great strength and ferocity, they stopped fighting between themselves, and acknowledged the fishing eagle to be their master.

Essiya then declared that Ituen, which was the name of the fishing eagle, was the head chief of all the birds, and should thenceforward be known as the king bird.¹

From that time to the present day, whenever the young men of the country go to fight they always wear three of the long black-and-white feathers of the king bird in their hair, one on each side and one in the middle, as they are believed to impart much courage and skill to the wearer; and if a young man is not possessed of any of these feathers when he goes out to fight, he is looked upon as a very small boy indeed.

¹ As the king bird is always very difficult to shoot with a bow and arrow, owing to his sharp and keen sight, the young men, when they want his feathers, set traps for him baited with rats, which catch him by the foot in a noose when he seizes them. Except when they are nesting the king birds roost on very high trees, sometimes as many as twenty or thirty on neighbouring trees. They fly many miles from where they get their food, and arrive at their roosting-place just before the sun sets, leaving the next morning at dawn for their favourite haunts. They are very regular in their habits, and you can see them every night at the same time coming from the same direction and flying over the same trees, generally fairly high up in the air. There is a strong belief amongst many natives on the Cross River that the king bird has the power of influencing the luck or the reverse of a canoe. For example, when a trader, having bought a new canoe, is going to market and a king bird crosses the river from right to left, then if he is unlucky at the market that day, whenever the king bird again crosses that particular canoe from right to left he will be unlucky, and the bad luck will stick to the canoe. If, on the other hand, the bird for the first time crosses from left to right, and he is fortunate in his dealings that day at the market, then he will always be lucky in that canoe the day he sees a king bird flying across the river from the left to the right-hand side