Owls

OF THE WORLD

Their Lives, Behavior and Survival

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KEY PORTER BOOKS

c. 2003

Contents

CHAPTER 2

Owls in Mythology and Culture

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Throughout human history, owls have variously symbolized dread, knowledge, wisdom, death and religious beliefs in a spirit world. In most western cultures, views of owls have changed drastically over time. Owls can serve simultaneously as indicators of scarce native habitats and of local cultural and religious beliefs. Understanding historical and current ways in which owls are viewed, and not imposing western views on other cultures, is an important and necessary context for crafting owl conservation approaches palatable to local peoples.

Introduction

I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls.

—Job 30:29

Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth.

—Psalms 104:20

Long before there were ornithologists and graduate students, keen observers in other tribes and bands roamed the forests and plains. In their search for resources they encountered owls—winged denizens of the night—and incorporated such spectral figures into their mythology and culture.

The North American Cherokees call them *uguuk*, the Russians *sovah*, the Mexicans *tecelote*, the Ecuadorians *huhua* or *lechusas*, and aboriginal peoples of the Kaurna area of Australia *winta*. In Chinese, they are *mao tou ying* or, literally, "cat head eagle." For centuries, indeed millennia, owls have played diverse and fascinating roles in a wide array of myths and legends. In this era of rapidly shrinking habitats for many owls of the world, a first step toward garnering concern for their conservation is to better understand the role of owls in cultural stories, religions and lore. In this chapter, we hope to foster an appreciation for the extent to which owls have become part of the mythos of human societies. We offer this as a celebration of the remarkably

OPPOSITE: **Owl mask with articulated mandible. 32 cm × 27 cm × 22 cm. Collected by J.T. White in 1894 at Kasaan Bay, Alaska. It is superbly designed and carved, one of the finest examples of the region's sculpture.**

Owl petroglyph in the Hillaire Chamber of the Chauvet Cave in France. Radiocarbon dating has indicated humans used the cave an estimated 35,000 years ago.

diverse ways that cultures have responded to owls the world over. No other bird family has aroused more universal fascination and interest, and can better serve as a basis for conservation. For conservation must proceed from respect for diverse cultures and creeds, as much as for the organisms that share our sphere.

Symbols Old and New

But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there.

—Isaiah 13:21

And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls.

—Isaiah 34:13

I see a likeness between the old, animist forest, where one could not be sure whether a screech owl's call came from a bird or an Omah[1]*, and the evolutionary forest, with its unclear distinctions between tree and fungus, flower and fir cone. The tree-fungus relationship is as mysterious in its origins and implications as the owl-Omah one. Both belong to a world that goes deeper than appearances, where a buried interconnectedness of phenomena renders behavior ambiguous, where one cannot walk a straight line.*

—Wallace 1983:83

Owls have always been part of the root metaphors of how humans relate to the land. One of the earliest human drawings, dating back to the Upper Paleolithic period at least 30,000 years ago, was of an owl—probably a long-eared owl—painted on the wall of Chauvet Cave in France. Rock paintings or petroglyphs of owls have also been found in other disparate locations including the Victoria River region of northern Australia and the lower Columbia River area of Washington state, U.S.A.

In the Victoria River region of Australia there is a group of prehistoric art sites at a rock outcrop known as Jigaigarn,

Prehistoric rock painting of an owl from the Weliyn rock-shelter, Victoria River region, Northern Territory, north-central Australia.

where human use has been dated to about 10,000 years BCE (before the Common Era). There sits an unusual formation of a large sandstone boulder balancing on a tiny base. This balancing rock was said by the local people to have been placed there by, and is still imbued with the presence of, the creation ancestor Gordol, the Owl. A large rockshelter below this formation contains many engravings and paintings, dominated by a huge one of a striped figure of the Owl. Also, many grooves were pounded into the rock, in the belief that making such marks conjures the power of the rock and the Owl ancestor.

Owls played roles in the ancient Mayan cultures of Mesoamerica. A carved bas-relief of the ancient Mayan Ruler 3 of Dos Pilas, in what is now Guatemala, following the death of Ruler 2 in 726 CE (Common Era), is shown adorned with a screech owl, apparently a symbol of ruling power or the resurrection of government. The ancient Mayans also believed that an owl hooting long and loud was a bad omen. They represented the screech owl as *Mo An*, the bird of death, and the Mayan death god *Yum Cimil* had attendants that included vulture, dog and owl. The Worcester Art Museum of Massachusetts has in its collection an artifact from the Guanacasta-Nicoya region of Costa Rica in Central America, a small 1.5 × 2.5 inches (4 × 6.4 cm) pre-Columbian "mace head" figure of what appears to be an *Otus* screech owl that has

The Owl Nebula, known in astronomy as M97 or NGC3587, is a planetary nebula in the constellation Ursa Major.

been dated to 1 to 500 CE. Made of white stone, this owl head may have been a heraldic finial, an ornamental cap to a ceremonial staff such as is often found with offerings of jade and metates in elite, ancient Mesoamerican burials.

Owls also are very much a part of modern culture, in the sky as well as on the land. In the constellation Ursa Major, at a most dim magnitude of 11.20, is a planetary nebula designated by astronomers as the Owl Nebula (more formally called M97 or NGC3587) because of its resemblance to an owl. In a more terrestrial venue, a query of the U.S. Geological Survey database on place names revealed 576 features in the United States in some way named "owl," such as Owlshead Canyon, Owl Mine, Owl Creek and Owl Hollow. Records of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names lists 88 current and 17 additional historic places in some way named "owl." Doubtless, many other countries have similar designations.

Etymologically, the word "owl" goes back to the Middle English word "oule," which may derive from the Old English "ille," which is cognate with the Low German "ule," in turn going back to the German "eule." The ultimate root of the modern word "owl" was presumed by Lockwood to be a proto-Germanic word "uwwalo" or possibly "uwwilo."

Another derivation of "owl" is the Icelandic "ugla," which is cognate with "uggligr," which gave rise to the Scandinavian "ugly," which led to the Middle English "ugly" and the Modern English word "ugly." The Icelandic "uggligr" does not mean "ugly" in modern connotations (that is, unpleasant to behold), but rather it means "fearful or dreadful." This is precisely the connotation of owl symbols and totems in many myths and legends. Thus, the very names that we use often speak of a deep history of traditional viewpoints and cultural perspectives.

In modern Korean, owl is "ol-bae-me." Bae-me is often used as a suffix to denote an animal, so the root Korean word "ol" is similar to the English "owl." Further, in Hindi, owl is "ul" (similar to the German "eule" or Low German "ule") or "ulu" if referring to one of the large owls (the Hindi or Urdu term for smaller owls is "coscoot"). The ancient Roman "bubo," the ancient Greek "buas," the modern Hindi "ulu," the Maori "ruru," and the modern Hebrew "o-ah" are each an obvious onomatopoeia, as is the modern Nepali "huhu." In Korea, the

Oriental scops owl is called "seo-juk-say," resembling the owls' call (and "say" or "sae" is Korean for "bird"). Thus, in many cultures, the sound has become the name.

An awareness and understanding of the deep, complex perceptions of owls in the past may help support efforts to protect those species today. For example, the ancient cultural importance of owls in Europe helps modern conservationists there. The same is true in America. The blend of traditions carried to the United States by white immigrants and black slaves from West Africa means that North American owl species have a strong cultural profile that may aid conservation measures. E. Ingersoll in 1923 traced the bird beliefs amongst African-American slave and ex-slave communities. Such beliefs seeped into the dominant European-American culture the way that African rhythms were given to the world through the blues and jazz music of black North America. Thus, current U.S. folklore about owls is an eclectic blend of European, African, Native American and Asian traditions.

This can be extended to an environmental principle for the West (meaning all areas occupied by those of European descent, and also by mixed-race societies such as South Africa, where a highly developed conservation tradition exists). Any animal or plant with a strong cultural profile, no matter how negative that cultural perception may once have been (such as with bats, wolves, sharks and owls), is at a major advantage, for conservation, over an animal with no cultural profile whatsoever (such as some rodents and sparrows). The advantage is that they are rooted and recognized in the social consciousness. In the case of owls, the deep fears and anxieties they generated and the prophetic status they once held (and still hold) present environmentalists with a handle with which to engage the interest and sympathies of a wider audience. But the critical element in these

Asymmetrical pair of owl masks collected by Sheldon Jackson on the lower Yukon River, western Alaska, in the 1890s. Similar masks were collected by H.M.W. Edmonds, which he identified as reflecting the "*inua* [spirit] of the Short-eared Owl." The Yup'ik carvers greatly valued the representational dimension and manufacture of their work, as masks were used in dances to elicit the goodwill of members of the spirit world.

situations is the fact that most western cultures no longer perceive owls as omens of evil, or retain only the dimmest vestiges of these old beliefs.

However, for some or even many Africans, Native North Americans, Asians and South Americans, these perceptions of owls are living traditions with deep and powerful roots. For example, in Africa, owls are still genuinely believed to be evil. Surveys of attitudes toward owls in Malawi revealed that owls were regarded as bad birds by a very high percentage (more than 80%) of the people surveyed. In West Africa, most people do not like owls and regard them as evil. In fact, the standard pigeon-English name for owl in West Africa is "witchbird." Rather than garnering support for endangered species such as the rare Congo Bay owl, the ancient African mythic traditions relating to owls may present a barrier to their conservation unless conservationists understand and make use of such myths. A classic parallel case is the aye-aye of Madagascar where this endangered mammal, down to a last few dozen, has been ruthlessly persecuted because of its cultural profile as a witch-creature. The challenge for conservationists is to turn the barrier to an advantage by understanding the cultural society and helping to craft conservation actions while taking these into account.

Modern carving of a stylized owl from a city park in south Victoria, Australia.

Conservationists should understand the role a bird like an owl may play in some societies. Conservation policies for a species of conservation concern, such as the Congo Bay owl, should not be formulated without understanding local attitudes and any uses of that particular species. Conservationists too often inculcate their own positive view of the animal in question, and thus fail to change local cultural attitudes, that is, to replace deep fear or anxiety with admiration and respect.

Markers of Gods, Knowledge, Dread, Wisdom and Fertility

From ancient Athens, the silver four-drachma coin bore the image of the owl on the obverse side as a symbol of the city's patron, Athene Pronoia, the Greek goddess of wisdom who, in an earlier incarnation, was goddess of darkness. The owl—whose modern scientific name *Athene* carries this heritage—came to represent wisdom from its association with the dark. An ancient Greek saying was "to send owls to Athens," the modern equivalent being "to send coals to Newcastle" or to engage in something useless, since owls and Athens were, in a sense, considered synonymous. The role of owls in ancient Greece has been traced in detail.

Many children have grown up with nursery stories of wise old owls. From the ancient Greek legends to the wise owls in *Winnie-the-Pooh* and "The Owl and the Pussycat," we have all seen images in folk tales and fables of owls as the quintessential bearers of knowledge and sagacity.

In many other cultures, owls represent wisdom and knowledge because their

Image of an owl on the cork from a modern bottle of fine Italian wine, from Azienda Agricola (agricultural business) in Valle dell Asso, Galatina.

nocturnal vigilance is associated with that of the studious scholar or wise elder. According to Saunders, in the Christian tradition owls represent the wisdom of Christ, which appeared amid the darkness of the unconverted. To early Christian Gnostics, the owl is associated with Lilith, the first wife of Adam who refused his advances and control. The owl also had a place as a symbol in the King Arthurian legends, as the sorcerer Merlin was always depicted with an owl on his shoulder. In Japan, owl pictures and figurines have been placed in homes to ward off famine or epidemics.

The Blakiston's fish owl was called *Kotan Kor Kamuv* (God of the Village) by the Ainu, the native peoples of Hokkaido, Japan. The traditional Ainu people were hunter-gatherers and believed that all animals were divine; most admired were the bear and the fish owl. The owls were held in particular esteem and, like the people, were associated with fish (salmonids) and lived in many of the same riverside locations. The fish owl ceremony, which returned the spirit of fish owls to the god's world, was conducted until the 1930s.

Many different stories of owls pervade Chinese culture, where owls play both good and bad roles and the stories often are passed down among generations within families. In China, owlets have been believed to pluck out their mothers' eyes. N.J. Saunders in 1995 noted that "The owl's night excursions, staring eyes and strange call have led to a wide-spread association with occult powers. The bird's superb night vision may underlie its connection with prophecy, and the reputation for being all-seeing could arise from its ability to turn its head through almost 180 degrees."

In a similar vein, on Andros Island, Bahamas, an historically extinct species of flightless owl (*Tyto pollens*), scientifically known only from subfossils[2], stood one meter tall and may have been the source of old local legends of "chickcharnies"

or aggressive leprechaun-like imps that wreak havoc, have three toes and red eyes, and can turn their heads all the way around. This owl likely inhabited the dense stands of old-growth Caribbean pine, so much of which had been clearcut on Andros during the latter 20th century by American companies.

Some Native American cultures link owls with supernatural knowledge and divination, possessing special powers not found in other animals. For example, in the Menominee myth of "The Origin of Night and Day," Wapus (rabbit) encounters Totoba (northern saw-whet owl) and the two battle for daylight (*wabon*) and darkness (*unitipaqkot*) by repeating those words. Totoba errs and repeats "*wabon*" and daylight wins, but Wapus permits that night should also have a chance for the benefit of the conquered, and thus day and night were born. In *The Night Chant of the Navaho*, one of the gods is represented by the burrowing owl, who befriends the story's hero and sets him free when he is taken captive by the Utes.[3]

The Pawnees view the owl as a symbol of protection; the Pueblo associate it with Skeleton Man, the god of death and spirit of fertility; and the Ojibwa see it as a symbol of evil and death, as well as a symbol of very high status of spiritual leaders of their religion. On a warm afternoon in August 1985, one of the authors (David H. Johnson), observed Ojibwa peoples at a weekend cultural celebration in Duluth, Minnesota, using the dried wings of the great horned owl to fan themselves after participating in native dances.

In his book *Mother Earth Spirituality*, McGaa described the four directions of the Sacred Hoop (the four quarters with the power of earth and sky and all related life) of Native Americans. In this description, the snowy owl represents the North and the north wind. The traditional Oglala Sioux Indians (from northern Great Plains of North America) admired the snowy owl, and warriors who had excelled in combat were allowed to wear a cap of owl feathers to signify their bravery. An old-time society of the Sioux was called The Owl Lodge. This society believed that nature forces would favor those who wore owl feathers and, as a result, their vision would become increased.

A. H. Miller in 1935 described how remains of owls worked into various artifacts were found in prehistoric Native American middens of the western United States. The partial ulna of a western screech owl was drilled, leading Miller to speculate it was used as a tiny whistle similar to whistles created from ulnae of long-winged birds such as cranes, as found in other North American Indian middens. Miller reported that one whistle, made from the ulna of a crane and drilled in a similar way, reportedly produced a tone closely resembling that of a northern pygmy owl. Miller also reported finding in the middens remains of an immature long-eared owl. He speculated that a young bird may have been kept by a child or medicine man, and even held in captivity for ceremonial rites, as "some Pacific Coast tribes consider the owls as incarnations of nocturnal spirits of mystic powers."

Some Native American nations have strong taboos against owls. For example,

the Apaches view the owl as the most feared of all creatures. Historically, Apaches shared the widespread Athabascan fears of owls as the embodied spirit of Apache dead. John Bourke, in his *Apache Campaign in the Sierra Madre*, related a famous story of how Apache scouts tracking Geronimo became terrified when one of the U.S. soldiers found and brought along a great horned owl. The scouts told Bourke that it was a bird of ill omen and that they could not hope to capture the Chiricahua renegades if they took the bird with them. The soldier had to leave the owl behind.

In another example, the consortium of Yakama tribes in Washington State use the owl as a powerful totem. Such taboos or totems often guide which forests and natural resources are to be used and managed, even to this day and even with the proliferation of "scientific" forestry on Native American lands.

Owls have played various roles in Russian traditions. For example, in Slavonic cultures, owls were believed to announce deaths and disasters. Russians and Ukrainians sometimes call an unfriendly person a "sych," which is also the Russian common name of the little owl. Traditionally, the little owl has been disliked and feared by people believing that these birds announce deaths. However, Russian common names of other owls, such as the Eurasian scops owl—*Splyushka*, resembling its call, or *Zorka*, meaning dawn—do not carry this negative connotation. In old Armenian tales, owls were associated with the devil.

The Spirit Chasers

He discovereth deep things out of darkness, and bringeth out to light the shadow of death.

—Job 12:22

The screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.

—Puck, in A Midsummer Night's Dream,

Shakespeare wrote of "The owl, night's herald" (*Venus and Adonis*, 1593, line 531) and recognized the role that owls have as the "fatal bellmen, which gives the stern'st good-night" (*Macbeth*, 1605–1606, act II, scene ii, line 4) to that final, deepest sleep. In this way, owls have been seen as harbingers of the end of the world and of the ultimate fate of humans.

The owl was the guardian of the Acropolis, and the Roman statesman Pliny the Elder wrote that owls foretell only evil and are to be dreaded more than all other birds. The archaic word "lich," from the Anglo-Saxon "lic" and the German "leiche," means a dead body, and the archaic term "Lich-owl" refers to the screech owl, which, in superstition, supposedly foretells death.

In many cultures, owls signal an underworld or serve to represent human spirits after death; in other cultures, owls represent supportive spirit helpers and allow humans (often shamans) to connect with or utilize their supernatural powers. Among some native groups in the United States Pacific Northwest, owls served to bring shamans in contact with the dead, provided power for seeing at night, or

gave power that enabled a shaman to find lost objects.

As with the owls of the ancient Roman statesman Pliny the Elder, many forest owls have played key roles as signallers of death. The mountain tribes of Myanmar (Burma) know the plaintive song of the mountain scops owl in such legends. In one Navajo myth, after death the soul assumes the form of an owl.

In India, the brown wood owl, forest eagle owl and brown fish owl are found in dense riparian forests of *Ficus* near streams and ponds, sites often considered as sacred groves, or in cemeteries that bear the area's last large trees with cavities and hollows. Old-forest owls, particularly the forest eagle owl, play major roles in many Nepali and Hindu legends. As heard calling at night from cemeteries and sacred groves, such owls are thought to have captured the spirit of a person departed from this world. In one sense, then, many of these owl species can serve as indicators of the religious value of a forest; conserving the religious site equally conserves key roost or nest sites.

Members of the animistic Garo Hills Tribe of Meghalaya, northeast India, call owls "dopo" or "petcha." Along with nightjars, they also refer to owls as "doang," which means birds that are believed to call out at night when a person is going to die; an owl's cry denotes the death of a person. Such beliefs are common throughout the world. In Sicily, when a Eurasian scops owl is heard calling near the house of a sick person, it is believed the person will die in three days, and if no sick person is present then someone will become ill with a tonsil ailment. In the pueblo tribes of the United States Southwest, including the Isleta of New Mexico, owls are viewed as messengers or harbingers of ill health and ill fortune. An Isleta tribal member relayed to one of the authors (Bruce G. Marcot) a story of once hearing an owl by her house. Shortly thereafter, her younger brother fell ill, and she and her other siblings went outside and shouted at the owl to drive it away because they were taught that it brought the illness.

The aboriginal peoples of North Queensland, Australia, view owls in a similar way. In January 2000, a female aboriginal elder relayed that owls are special to her people. A little apologetically, she added that owls are also considered an ill omen, signifying a death in the family—but only if the owl stays around the home site for several days.

Throughout India, owls are construed as bad omens, messengers of ill luck, or servants of the dead. In general, owls often have been treated badly both in daily life and even in Indian and Pakistani literature and daily lexicon. For example, in India and Pakistan it is very common to call a foolish person an "ulu" or "an owl," or an "ulu ka patha" or "a pupil of owl."

But in Indian mythology the owl also has been treated at times reverently and given some place of prestige. For instance, Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of money and wealth, is depicted as riding on, or being accompanied by, an owl. Even in present times, some people of India, particularly Bengali, believe that if a white owl enters a home it is a good omen, indicating a

possible flow of wealth or money into that home.

The call of the Ceylon forest eagle owl subspecies consists of "shrieks such as of a woman being strangled" but "the dreadful shrieks and strangulating noises are merely its 'mating love-song,' which would also account for their rare and periodic occurrence." In related accounts, S. Ali and S. D. Ripley in 1987 described its noises as "a variety of weird, eerie shrieks and chuckles" and a scream "like that of a demented person casting himself over a precipice." V. C. Holmgren in 1988 also noted that in history, eagle owls have been variously called bird of evil omen, death owl, ghost owl, mystery owl, knows-all owl and even rat owl.

In India, the devil bird or devil owl can be found in graveyards and is associated with big dead trees—and death. Graveyards often contain the last old-growth trees, and in India, Muslims, especially, revere everything in a cemetery, including the vegetation. Hindus, as well, keep sacred groves of ancient trees, especially banyans. Thus, the eerie cries of the devil owl are heard mostly in cemeteries, portending death. And here converge myth, culture and biology to a consistent whole, as they should for successful conservation of cultures, people and wildlife.

Some Native Americans, for instance, wore owl feathers as magic talismans. For example, along the northwest coast of Alaska, the Yup'ik peoples made masks for a final winter ceremony called the "Agayuyaraq" ("way, or process, of requesting"), also referred to as "Kelek" ("Inviting-in Feast") or the Masquerade. This complex ceremony involved singing songs of supplication to the animals' "yuit" ("their persons"), accompanied by the performance of masked dances, under the direction of the shaman. In preparation for the ceremony, the shaman directed the construction of the masks, through which the spirits revealed themselves as simultaneously dangerous and helpful. The helping spirits often took the form of an owl. The majority of masks contained feathers from snowy owls. Carvers strove to represent the helping spirits or animal "yuit" they had encountered in a vision, dream or experience. In all cases, the wearer was infused with the spirit of the creature represented. Together with other events, the ceremony embodied a cyclical view of the universe whereby right action in the past and present reproduced abundance in the future. Among the Yup'ik, seabirds, loons and owls were commonly seen as embodiments of helping spirits.

Another native North American culture, the Kwakiutl of northern Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, used an owl mask made of wood, and believed that owls were associated with darkness and the souls of the dead. Other owl masks are made by the Haida people of Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia and Prince of Wales Island of Alaska, who use the owl as a crest emblem.

In Central Asia[4], feathers of the Eurasian eagle owl, particularly from its breast and belly, were valued as precious amulets protecting children and livestock

Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of money and wealth, is depicted as riding on, or accompanied by, an owl.

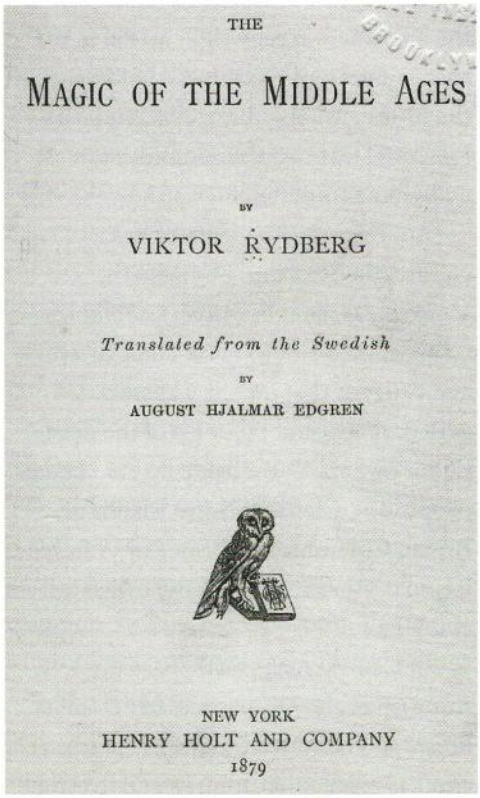
The snowy owl as an emblem on a cigar box, ca. 1960. Minnesota, U.S.A.

from evil spirits. Talons of the Eurasian eagle owl were said to ward off diseases and cure infertility in women.

Among the Maori of New Zealand, to hear the call of an owl near the junction of two trails meant that an enemy force was nearby. The Maori viewed owls as creatures of sagacity, but to hear one calling at night conferred a feeling of uneasiness, as hostile raiding parties were deemed to be approaching. The Maori rendered such warning calls of owls as "Kou! Kou! Whero! Whero! Whero!" Many other Polynesians also hold a similar belief of an owl calling at night, but Native Tongans believe that an owl calling in the afternoon signals that there soon will be a birth in the family.

The Maori also believed that the owl and bat, which they called "ruru" and "pekapeka," originally were denizens of the underworld of "Rarohenga." This is why, in Maori belief, owls and bats do not move around in daytime but only under darkness. "Ruru" was looked upon as a bird of evil omen, and the presence of an owl at one's house signalled dire misfortune. The Maori would capture "ruru" or morepork owls with throwing sticks and slip-nooses. The "ruru" was occasionally eaten by the Maori and was presented preserved in a vessel to an assembly of guests while chanting a song that commenced: "He ruru taku nei" (My gift is one of owls). Maori legend has it that "ruru" was the talisman image used in the posture-dance as the glaring eyes of the owl. In another Maori tribal legend, two owls were used to guard special inland pools and to warn the owner when anyone went near them. The owls' names were "Ruru mahara" or thoughtful owl, and "Ruru wareware" or stupid owl.

On Java and Borneo, scops owls have benefited by having been viewed in


THE

MAGIC OF THE MIDDLE AGES

BY

VIKTOR RYDBERG

Translated from the Swedish

BY

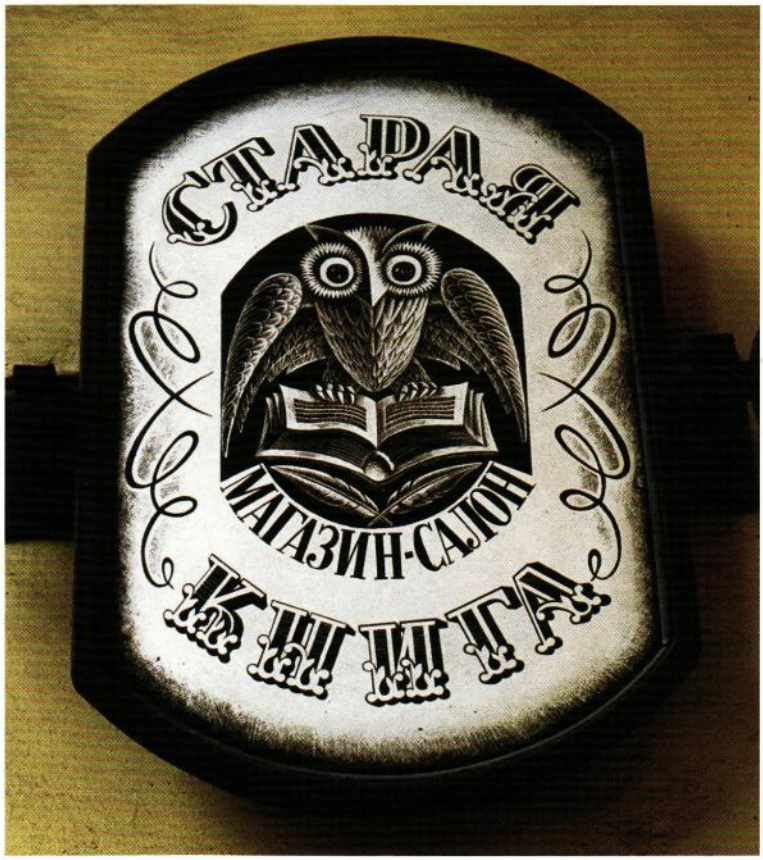
AUGUST HJALMAR EDGREN

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1879

Title page from an 1879 volume on magic by Viktor Rydberg, showing an owl perched on books. In some cultures, owls have been viewed as bearers of knowledge and sagacity.

legends there with reverence or as an ill omen. However, these owls are killed in China and Korea for medicinal use and many have been lost there annually for such purposes.

H. Mikkola in 1997 reported how, for centuries, some cultures have used owls in traditional healing and folk medicine. In Europe, as in Africa, owl eyes were ingested to purportedly improve eyesight, and owl feet were eaten to ward off snakebite. In Malawi, Africa, owls are used by medicine men in ceremonies of magic to bewitch and kill people. In Togo and Ghana, hides and half-rotten owl carcasses are used to protect against evil spirits, and in South Africa owls are used for healing. In China, Korea and Thailand, the eggs and dried bodies of owls are used as medicines for many ailments, including rheumatism and loss of virility. Another old story is that if children eat owl's eggs they will never be addicted to strong drinks.



Informational sign in front of a bookstore in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2000. Text translation: "New Books, Store/Lounge."

Owls in Literature and Paintings

The Dutch of the 16th and 17th centuries often used owls in their paintings and viewed owls negatively because, owls being mostly nocturnal creatures, they avoided light and appeared to stagger about when caught by day. The Dutch of that time were strict Calvinists, and their painting and prints often were moral fables warning against a life enslaved by the pleasures of the senses. Owls were symbols of spiritual darkness, ignorance, drunkenness and debauchery, and thus used as admonitions against such vices. Indeed, for the Dutch, the term "uilskviken," meaning a "nest of owls," was the equivalent of calling someone a "nincompoop," similar to how Pakistanis or Indians call stupid people "an owl" ("ulu"). Another popular Dutch saying was "Wat baet er kaers en bril, alsden uyl niet zien en wil?" or "What need does the owl have for candles or spectacles if he cannot or will not see?"

In Aesop's fables, the owl, hated and mocked by other birds (indeed, many songbirds will "mob" real owls during daylight hours), was used as a decoy to lure songbirds to snares surrounding the owl's perch. Such use is displayed in the

Listed in a 1577 compendium on demons, Andras was named as the Grand Marquis of Hell and appeared with the body of an angel and the head of a wood owl. In medieval history, owls often were viewed as symbols of power and magic.

1665 oil painting *Rest on the Hunt* by Dutch painter Abraham Hondius. In the painting, a sly hunter, having just shot a Eurasian bittern, is plying a young lady with wine. In the background a live owl is shown tethered to a pole, and beneath the owl is a cage of live European bullfinches. The painting illustrates the Dutch phrase "Sweet talk has its poison," in that, just as the small and innocent birds would be lured to their doom by the owl, so too would the young lady by the hunter. In fact, the entire painting is one big smutty joke as the Dutch word for "bird hunting" was "vogelen," slang for sexual intercourse.

Owls also have appeared as demons. The owl demons, Andras and Stolas, were listed among 72 demons in Joannes Wierus's 1577 volume *Pseudo-Monarchia Demonorum*, and in J. Collin de Plancy's 1863 compendium *Dictionnaire Infernal*. Stolas was the Grand Prince of Hell, who appears in the shape of an owl. Stolas can assume the shape of a man and appears before exorcists; teaches astronomy and prophecy based on the study of plants, as well as the value of precious stones; and commands 26 demonic legions as their general.

Rydberg wrote that the magician can conjure the powers of the Creator by combining specific objects in the elemental world, including a piece of fine onyx, a dried cypress branch, the skin of a snake and the feather of an owl.

To the modern Garo Hills Tribe of western Meghalaya, India, the owl plays an essential role in preserving the mantras or divination spells of their largely secret animistic beliefs that constitute their magical religion called "Jadoreng." To record the spells and to protect their potency, mantras are to be written with a smoothened, sharp-pointed piece of red sandalwood as a pen, using ink made from a concoction of common red ink, the juice of the vilva plant, the juice of black basil, fresh blood of "dohka bolong" (a large variety of raven) and fresh blood of "dohpo skotottong," the spotted owlet.

Toward a Tolerant Conservation

Do you think I was born in a wood to be afraid of an owl?

—*Jonathan Swift*, Polite Conversation, *Dialogue i.*

Owl mythologies have come virtually full circle in Europe and America. From the worst bird in the world the owl has become almost the most popular. And old mythologies actually make owl conservation easier. The old bad news has become a way of making owls appealing for a contemporary audience. Whereas owls used to be persecuted, with governments imposing bounties on them along with other predators, the same governments are now protecting them with legislation.

This transformation of the owl's image is yet to be fully researched, but we can offer some initial thoughts. First, understanding European and American owl myths may help us better understand or interpret contemporary African and

Asian attitudes. It also may help us understand owl taboos among today's Native Americans and Canadians, tribal South Americans and other First Nations of both New and Old World cultures.

Second, if owl mythologies have evolved so dramatically in the West, then perhaps they offer an insight into the way owl mythologies could eventually metamorphose in other parts of the world, such as Africa and Asia.

Third, by understanding the patterns of owl mythology in modern-day Africa and possibly South America and Asia, we might be able to better understand our own cultural past.

Overall, the contemporary conservation community has not grasped the deeply negative image of owls in less developed parts of the world. In fact, western conservationists in general tend to think of birds or other wildlife mostly or only in terms of their own ecological-science-based and conservation-oriented system. By failing to appreciate other patterns of belief about birds, they are putting themselves at a disadvantage.

In the case of the owl, this is especially significant because the overwhelming nature of owl beliefs is that the beast is powerful even in western cultures. Until the 1950s owls were routinely nailed to barn doors in France and the United Kingdom to ward off lightning and the evil eye. There is even evidence to suggest that these practices continue today in parts of rural Britain. In Africa, deep taboos about owls are still powerful and living traditions. The beliefs in other old and modern cultures that owl body-parts transfer health and that owls attend gods, and imply knowledge and wisdom, also attest to the power of the owl.

A club recovered from the Lake Ozette site in northwestern Washington state, U.S.A. This site reflects a Makah village that was buried in a mudslide 500 years ago. An owl's head was carved at both ends of the club. It is likely that the unworn club was used for ceremonial purposes.

H. Mikkola in 1997 suggested that in some cultures and locations such as southern Africa, owls could be bred for their cultural use as well as conservation. By ensuring a supply of owls for traditional healers and for local cultural beliefs and use, conservation of owls could be attained.

It is important to understand not just historical views of owls in myth and culture but also how such views have changed over time to the present and traveled geographically as human cultures have moved.

A major problem with bird folklore is that some texts repeat the same ideas without any critical analysis of the truth of what they say, or whether the idea still applies in contemporary times. Most of these ideas about owls probably refer to the early modern period and were almost certainly gathered in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. But now many of them have completely died out, depending on the cultural changes of the people in question. For example, Batchelor's book, *The Ainu and Their Folklore*, analyzes this northern Japanese community's beliefs about animals, especially owls, at the end of the 19th century. These old cultural ideas sometimes are still retold as if they were living traditions, when, in fact, modern Ainu may consider their ancestors' owl beliefs as no more than old wives' tales, a part of their own colorful but quaint past. We should, therefore, attempt to understand how cultures and views have changed.

Conclusion

For in the end, we will save only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and will understand only what we are taught.

—Lao-Tzu

In this brief review, we have highlighted only a few of the many roles of owls in myth and culture. We encourage readers to pursue additional sources, particularly those listed in the bibliography.

Owls have served as marvelous and fantastic symbols of recreation, esthetics, art, science, lore, political power, ethics, magic, religion and even death. In the case of owls, the deep fears and anxieties they have generated and the prophetic status they once held, and still hold in some cultures, present environmentalists with a handle with which to engage the interest and sympathies of a wider audience. By inviting owls into a full cultural circle, we can build a more tolerant understanding of all societies and ages, and incorporate wildlife conservation into the broader tapestry of human endeavors.

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Endnotes

[1] In their stories, the Klamath Mountain Indians of northwestern California, U.S.A., referred to "Bigfoot," an elusive bipedal hominid supposedly inhabiting the deep forests, as *Omah*.

[2] One such record comes from Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7006, Collection Division 11, Alexander Wetmore Papers circa 1848–1979, fossil birds, Box 162 of 237, Folder 60, *Tyto pollens*, Figures 10–16, "Bird Remains from Cave Deposits on Great Exuma Island in the Bahamas," 1937.

[3] The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907–21).

[4] In Russian literature, Central Asia is the region to the east of the Caspian Sea including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.