

1. THE WEAVER FISH

Within the opaquely threaded dialects of the Ferendes, and in all the languages of all the coasts that share their latitude, there must be ten thousand distinct words for weaver fish. More words than reported sightings. More words than actual fish by now, possibly. And more words than the number of fishermen who have use of them.

The latter is logically, if speculatively, explained by Thomas MacAkerman's observation that each person uniquely owns a private, talismanic name, as well as sharing the communal vocabulary, itself vast. Since MacAkerman's time, the accumulated effort of a distinguished rollcall of anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists has generated no more plausible a theory.

More surprisingly, modern oceanography and marine biology, for all their sophistication, seem to have advanced our knowledge of the fish itself not at all. Except, of course, to amplify its mystique and elusiveness. No specimen having been caught and dissected, there is yet no scientific nomenclature, no genus, no species. *Acarcerata textor* might serve, when the need arises.

MacAkerman was a physician and amateur naturalist, of catholic interests and impressive breadth of scholarship, who accompanied Captain Joseph on HMS *King of Kent* for two voyages, in 1816 and 1819. An enthusiast of the new sciences, he was apparently a brilliant popularist and quite famous for his public lectures. These, unfortunately, were never edited for publication, though their quality can be inferred from the comments of contemporary diarists. He did author several papers and monographs on varied subjects, but in respect of the weaver fish only two primary sources survive. One is a short entry, bearing

his initials, in the first (and only) edition of the *New Scottish Encyclopaedia*. The second is a letter in the *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh*, of April 1823. MacAkerman there describes how, shortly after sunrise on Greater Ferende, he was exploring the littoral for crab species when he ‘occasioned’ on a large sea-pool, sequestered from the receding tide by a sandbar, and

about a half-fathom in depth at its most. My attention being focused in pursuit of the crustaceans, their size and colour and actions, I did not at first see something altogether more interesting, which I took then to be some optical phenomenon of the sand and water. I walked the circumference of the pool, to see it vary in place and intensity, and with light in front and behind. It took many minutes to discern, and then only in half belief, that I was seeing fish swimming, many hundreds of them, and of the most transparent substance imaginable, except for small eyes, themselves faint, so that what I had witnessed was the movement of eyes, and a changing refraction of the pool sand of great subtleness. My interest in crabs for the moment set aside, I watched for perhaps a half hour, then something impelled me to throw dry bread into the centre, expecting I don’t know what, but I hoped for some intensification of visible movement. What did follow I could not have expected, for I could not wildly invent the sight, nor would I wish to, for it recurs to me in most distressing images and waking dreams these last seven years. The bread floated for some moments in several pieces, without noticeable disturbance, nor any interest of the fish. Then a solitary gull, to whose aerial squawks I had been only half attuned, plunged at the feast, and rather than plucking one bit in flight, settled on the water, intending, I fancy, to enjoy the multiplicity. Then followed an event I would wish on no man’s conscience, and I am sorely in need to expunge from mine. In an instant the water rose in symmetry around the gull, but it was not water, but a mass of fish stacked high, as well

as I could see from the disposition of their eyes and the faintness of their bodies, in intercrossing alignments of great discipline that was surely not accidental. The wretched bird attempted flight, but to nought avail, as its legs seemed bound in a viscous gel. Then the fish trap (I should call it) rose higher to the full measure of its hapless victim, which soon became lifeless, appearing I thought as encased in ice fully a half foot above the water surface. The orchestration of the trap was now more evident, fish bodies tightly woven crisscross, like warp and weft, but layered, as a solid tapestry might be made, and quite still. And before my eyes, the gull dissolved. I repeat, the beast dissolved in minutes to skeleton alone, but for a strange purple colouration (which I would name Tyrian) surrounding it. Then abruptly, as if on some regimental bugle call, the whole edifice unweaved, the pool returning to its former state but for the gull bone sinking unimpeded at its centre, not five yards from where I stood.

I confess then to great perturbation in my heart. Where previously I had thought lightly of entering the water for the better inspection, I was now repelled, I should say fearful, and stepped back from its edge. For if they could rise so deliberately above its surface, could they not breach its boundary also? After some minutes of composure, and my anxieties abated, I resolved to learn more, and taking from my wares a fine pole net I set about straining the shallows from a discreet distance. To my delight I soon scooped one, a half yard in length as they had all appeared, and held it up for transport to the sand. But to my astonishment and sore disappointment this triumph was quickly reversed. For the fish, which made no movement throughout, took on the purple hue that I had noted earlier, though more intensely, seeming to secrete or gurgitate a slime that I can only guess was some digestive acid of the greatest potency, for almost in a second the fabric of my net was burnt and through its deficiency so effected my captive escaped, falling to the

water where it was instantly invisible. Standing there, with my net made useless for its purpose, I admit to the strangest feeling of defeat and perplexity, which in all my years of collecting God's creatures has no equal before or since.

MacAkerman goes on to describe further unsuccessful attempts to ensnare a specimen, but his efforts were eventually frustrated by the returning tide. It is difficult now to judge how this account was received. It was a time of a growing culture of wonder at the natural world, with a proliferation of gentleman scholarship that was rarely challenged. The last vigorous debate was on infinitesimals, and the next would be evolution. The modern critical discourse of science was in its infancy. Thus there was no subsequent correspondence on the topic in the *Transactions* or any other journal. None of this, of course, should be taken to impugn the accuracy of MacAkerman's report. He was, from all the evidence, a man of unimpeachable integrity and intellectual rigour whose contribution to the sciences has few parallels in his era. Only many years later, and then only in the practice of medicine, was his judgement disordered by the cruel and tormenting decline of his final illness.

There is no doubt that MacAkerman's discovery had a profound influence on him. In a public lecture series of 1824 (abstracted by the canal engineer James Lypton in his *Journal* of that year), he explained his motivation for the second voyage in 1819 as 'to further my researches in the natural history of the weaver fish' (the exact wording may be Lypton's). As it turned out, he never did acquire the specimen for which the Old World museums would have bid dearly; indeed he reported no further observations with any confidence.

But that is not to say the voyage was a failure, and at least two major achievements can be ascribed to 1819. First, he completed the collection that would form the basis of his definitive work on tidal crab speciation (long before Darwin's ideas were published), and secondly, he conducted what we would now call field ethnography among indigenous fishing communities, centred on language and folklore pertaining to

the weaver fish. The latter is a fragmented opus surviving only in notebooks, journals, and many secondary sources, and greatly deserves the attention of modern scholarship. From these studies, we learn that the majority of names for the weaver fish have roots in native words for death, water (that is, a fish made of water), invisibility, the colour purple and, of course, a woven cloth or matting. These meanings were so concordant with MacAkerman's own observation that he was persuaded that similar sightings must not have been infrequent, though obtaining witness testimony proved more problematic. In any event, MacAkerman first employed the term 'weaver' in 1816, apparently quite independently of any native tradition, and never varied from its use. Paradoxically then, whilst no synonyms exist in English, he has left us with a monumental foreign lexicology far exceeding that of any other single referent.

In 1916, exactly one hundred years after MacAkerman's seminal observation, a fisherman named Josef Ta'Salmoud, from the village of Madregalo on Greater Ferende, saw weaver fish. Ta'Salmoud himself gave only a brief description of his experience, and was never persuaded to repeat or enlarge upon it. But there are many eyewitness accounts, from villagers on the shore, which are fully corroborative of what he described. Some of those present were still alive in 1996, and were interviewed by this author during a Language Diversity Initiative field trip. It should be said in this regard that more research is needed using newer validation tools applied to both linguistic and thematic elements. Authentication studies also require a good understanding of cultural specifics in oral tradition, which can be very localized and idiosyncratic. This work is continuing as part of a wider LDI programme.

On days following severe night storms the fishing grounds of the Ferendes could be deceptively treacherous. It was customary for the chieftain of fishermen to enter the water first and, having ascertained conditions in the bay, signal to those on shore that they should remain there or join him. One morning, Ta'Salmoud set forth on this task. As was normal, his progress was observed closely by those on the beach. When he was