

A CLOSE OBSERVATION OF A BULBUL FAMILY LIFE

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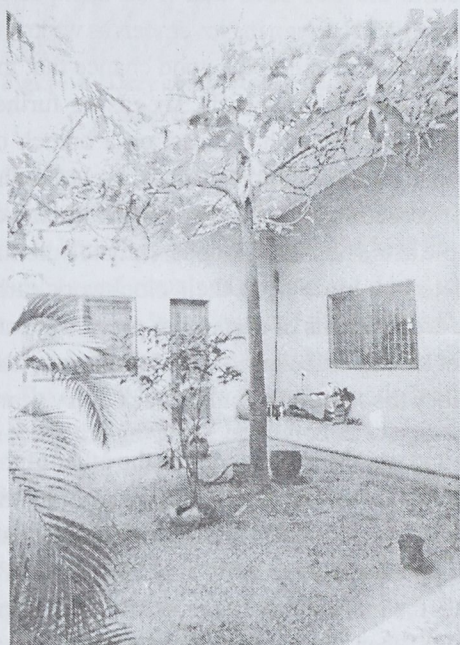


Figure 1. the bombax tree in the courtyard
Bombax glabrum

Each year in November, a pair of singing birds commonly called 'bulbul' (*Pycnonotus barbatus*) nests in the bombax tree that grows in the inside courtyard of our house at Akobo. As youngsters, in Owahwa (a village in the Niger Delta) we used to hunt bulbuls, known as *agbrorhe* in the Ughievwen dialect of Urhobo, with a catapult. I did not know then that bulbuls, if not hunted, don't mind being close to people. The bombax in our courtyard, family *Bombacaceae*, is an interesting tree; the fruit when ripe, explodes scattering seeds that taste like groundnut (in fact Christiana, a friend) who gave me the seedling called it 'Indian groundnut'). The name *Bombax glabrum* derives from the hairlessness of the seed, in contrast with other bombax species in which the seeds are very hairy yielding kapok; the explosion of the fruit is loud enough to make you jump if you are not used to it!

The main trunk of the bombax tree in our courtyard grows straight out of the opening in the roof of our house, so that from a bird's eye view or if one took an aerial photo of the building, the topmost branch of the bombax tree jots out at rooftop. The lower branches of the bombax spread out around the courtyard. Unto the courtyard open the doors to our sitting room, bedrooms, toilet, staircase and library. The bombax tree confronts you no matter where you enter the courtyard. The bulbuls especially the male stands on the topmost point of the bombax and cackle out their familiar loudest at about 6.30 am before they go out for the day; male and female return at about 6.30 pm and sing again, but this time it is a different song before retiring for the night – in the tree.

Kath and I watched them begin to build a new nest from early November, each bird in turn



Fig 2. A bulbul with a birds eye view

bringing dried twigs, bit of straw and even bit of plastic. During the month we saw a new nest emerge; we were impressed that the birds must have selected the location for the nest on the bombax branch - for security. Although the work started after the end of the heavy rains, the pair had chosen a position in the tree such that if an unexpected downpour should happen in November, as we know can happen, there would be a good chance that the nest would not be blown off! To ensure further security the bulbuls built the nest on a branch of bombax half way between ground level and the apex, where the chicks would be out of reach of predators; though of course, at the lower branch, the nest is within easier reach of the people in the house who, apparently to bulbuls, are not predators! Work on the nest did not deter the birds from their clockwork early morning and evening singing repertoires. There are remnants of nests from previous years in our bombax tree which up till now we had not taken particular notice of; it appears that bulbuls must build a new nest each season. Are they the same pair coming back every year?

We are now in the last week of November or so and we observe that one or the other of the pair is spending long periods sitting on the nest. We are so fascinated that we walk by the nest frequently and see that the birds are now more frequently sitting in the nest than before, and even when I move to within a touching distance, the birds don't fly away! We think that the eggs have been laid. We think both the male and the female take their turns over the eggs: the nest is only a few inches wide. When the bigger male sits on the eggs, his head and tail stick out more than when the smaller female is on the eggs, only her head sticks out. Since yesterday 19 December, they are not sitting as much as they did before, but appear to hover with something in their beak, probably food which means that there are chicks in the nest now! Hush, yes, there are chicks, probably two; we have seen a tiny head with mouth agape making a chirping noise and the parent bulbuls flying about friskily.

The problem that the bulbuls have in building their nest at the lower branch of the bombax tree is that the young chicks have difficulty flying out of the nest when the time comes. It takes flying experience to know that from a low branch nest, you

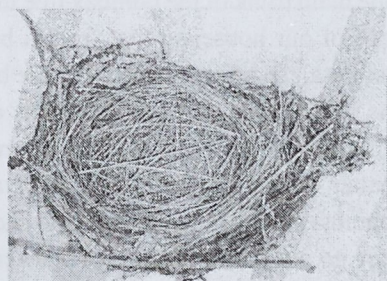


Fig 3. A used bulbul nest

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Figure 4. 'Lazy chick' resting on a palm frond.

cannot fly out of the tree, free into space if you fly at an angle, sideways; you have to fly straight up the tree; if you flop out of the nest at an angle, you are going to end up trapped inside the courtyard! We observed this problem earlier in March 2010 with another pair of bulbuls (or was it the same?) when one of the two young birds that just hatched could not find its way up the bombax and out, free. The adult bulbuls were beside themselves frantically trying to direct the young bird out, without success. They didn't know how to deal with this contingency, but would not abandon their offspring either! The bulbuls would fly out and come straight back chattering friskily all the time. This went on all day while the young chick thrashed about, hanging on at the lower branches. At dusk the young bird now exhausted, fell to the ground at the base of the bombax and remained motionless. I had to cover it with a basket to prevent it falling prey to some other inhabitants of the courtyard forest-ants. At 6.30 the following morning the parent bulbuls were back racketing; when I gently removed the basket, the chick managed to fly up the bombax branches and finally up and away to everyone's relief. We were hoping things would be smoother this time round.

But, this time the experience was even more harrowing. Both chicks fell to the floor of the courtyard and for seven days we watched an epic bird drama during which the parent bulbuls and their chicks put on a display of intense parenting instinct and care on one hand, and infant dependence on the other! This may be an undue anthropomorphic emphasis on bird behavior, but after observing the interaction between parent bulbuls and the two chicks as we did at close range, I now have a new respect for bulbuls; for a short period anyway, the pair intensely experience what it means to be parents, just as we did. I will not catapult *agbrorhe* again!



Figure 6. Lazy chick sleeping in white flower bush?

December 30 —second day of the bulbul chicks being out of the nest

Both chicks are on the ground at the base of the bombax in the courtyard. All the time, the parents are busy shuttling between the chicks and another place where they seem to find some sort of food. On or the other of the parents is away for maybe 30-45 minutes and it is back with food between its beaks. As soon as the bulbul arrives in the bombax tree bearing food, the chicks on the ground start shrieking, and when the parent bird lands on the ground and moves near, the chick opens its mouth agape, shrieking and furiously waving its little tail; it won't stop until the parent has popped in the grub or insect. Within

**Fig 5. bulbul chicks on the ground**

the hour, a parent is back with more food. All the time, the chicks are hopping from one corner of the courtyard to another and occasionally trying to lift off to the bombax branches. When the parent bird is on the ground to feed the chick, it would occasionally open its wings (which are surprisingly large) and flap them, as if to show the chick how to fly! But what used to amaze me is where the birds got food from. Where we live is an extensively built up area; there are very few trees left around and in December Akobo is dry, no earth worms anywhere. But somehow the bulbuls manage to find food for the extremely demanding chicks.

December 31 —third day of the chicks being out of the nest

The chicks usually hop about or attempt flying, each on its own, while on the ground in the courtyard. But early morning this day it was cold harmattan, I found the two chicks huddled together as if to keep warm.

**Fig. 8. Up in the bombax together, the two chicks are together again for warmth and companionship**

One of the chicks is more adventurous (smart). We noticed this from the time they were in the nest—one of them usually poked his head out and shrieked more than the other one; it was also larger; we assumed this to be male. During the day, this chick had succeeded in lifting off and landing on a bottom branch of the bombax. The less adventurous smaller, probably female (lazy) chick is moving about in the courtyard and being occasionally fed by a parent. This chick is now very much at a disadvantage because when the parent bulbuls come with food, they first land on a lower branch of the bombax where the 'smart' chick immediately grabs the attention of the parent; the

chick on the floor of the courtyard is neglected, only getting the attention of the parent after much shrieking and fretting and hopping about, and that is after the 'smart' one has had its fill for the time being. We became concerned that with this state of affairs, the 'lazy' chick may not gain the strength to lift off up the bombax, and indeed it may starve to death, and there is nothing a person can do: if you move near the chick during the day, when the parents are about in the tree above, the parents go berserk, sort of come between you and their chick, and make such a threatening racket, the feathers on the crown



Fig 7. Two chicks huddled together to keep warm, near here

of the head stand up, and they leap about in the branches with such ferocity, you are forced to retreat! I couldn't believe that such a small bird, could exhibit such a powerful protective display! The 'lazy' chick is moving about in the courtyard, finally sleeping perched on a branch of the white flower bush growing at the base of the bombax tree. Is this the smart chick in the Bombax? The 'smart' chick we can see is sleeping perched on a branch of the bombax.

Saturday 1st January—fourth day of the chicks being out of the nest.

We continued to worry about the 'lazy' chick, but it continues to struggle skipping across the courtyard floor, receiving the occasional morsel from parent bulbul and trying desperately to take off and join the rest of the family up in the bombax. There is a difference between bulbul, and our common chicken, chicks, even though at this stage the former look a lot like small day old chicken chicks. The difference is in the way they move on the ground: bulbul chicks hop - both legs come off the ground at the same time, while chicken chicks walk one leg then the other.

The 'smart' chick continued to dominate the attention of the parents, but they did not abandon the 'lazy' chick; one parent, I think it was the female who was most persistent, would swoop down to feed it. In the evening I thought let me help nature by assisting the 'lazy' chick to the lowest branch of the bombax tree, so that it may find its way up. I found 'lazy' fast asleep on the frond of an indoor palm growing at the bottom of the bombax. When fast asleep, bulbul chicks are completely vulnerable, and at the mercy of predators. This must be why bulbuls seek secure positions to nest. I grabbed hold of 'lazy' in my right palm; it immediately began to squirm and shriek. Fortunately, the parents who were asleep up in the tree above were also dead to the world. I raised 'lazy' up in my hand hoping that when I let go it would fly and land on a bombax branch. Instead, when I opened my palm,

'lazy' flew in a daze, straight to the floor of the courtyard! I had failed the poor chick. Be careful not to interfere with nature-o! At this time of evening, about 8.00 pm, bulbul chicks can't move, so now it must spend the night on the cold terrazzo floor where it landed. To protect it from the cold, I interfered again to try and correct my first mistake by placing some rags around 'Lazy' and covering it with a basket.

Sunday, 2nd January —fifth day of chicks out of the nest.

I wake up early and remove the basket at about 6.30 am; I am relieved that 'Lazy' is alive. I leave it where it is sitting and go back to bed. When I get up again at 7.30 pm 'lazy' had disappeared; it was up in the tree with the rest of the family! All four bulbuls are now up in the tree. The parents are busy as usual shuttling back and forth with food for the chicks. Again the 'smart' chick has the advantage; because it is now able to move from branch to branch more easily than the 'lazy' chick; it means that it gets the attention of a food-bearing parent before 'lazy'. Sometime during the day, the two chicks came together.

Later in the day, we are somewhat surprised to see 'lazy' back on the ground again! There had been an accident. 'Lazy' spent the night down in the courtyard, perched on a clothes rack. By 7.00 a. m. it was down in the yard hopping about and trying to fly up the bombax. All day the parents flew down to feed 'lazy'.

Monday, 3rd January —6th day since the chicks have left the nest.

By 6.00 am the smart chick is up in the tree. On one occasion the smart chick perched side by side with the male bulbul like father and son preening, with the parent spreading his wings and flapping about as if to show the youngster how to do it. So now there are three birds up racketing in the tree trying to get 'lazy' to fly up and join them. By 7.30 am, 'lazy' had succeeded and once again joined the rest of the family, but by 3.00 pm the smart chick had flown out of the bombax. 'Lazy' is by itself up there. The parents carry on as before; they go and look for food and come to feed 'lazy'. By evening time, the chick could still be seen in the tree.

Tuesday, 4th January —7th day since the chicks left the nest.

Early this morning there was none of the usual 6.300 am loud song in the tree. No sign of the parent bulbuls or of 'Lazy' on careful inspection. The parents must have gone with it early this morning! Now all is quiet in the internal courtyard. It has taken 7 days since the chicks came out of the nest to learn to fly out of the bombax. Where did they go from here?

Saturday, 8th January ---twelve days since our bulbul chicks left the nest and 5 days since the last of them was seen in the bombax.

What day is this?

There are bulbuls in the bombax branches today! It could have been my imagination, but I thought I saw FOUR birds. Could it be the family returning to their breeding site? Since then, to our great relief, they have returned to the bombax with an evening serenade, and woken us up at the crack of dawn. We think a nest may soon be built. Next time you see a bulbul just think that bird has a family to which it will return at night!



Fig 9. a new pair of bulbuls atop
the bombax branch