

Poultry in the backyard

Backyard poultry-keeping is the most widespread form of animal husbandry, but is little documented. Blanche Zoungrana and Gerard Slenders describe poultry-keeping in Blanche's home village, and ask how this compares with your experiences.

**Blanche Zoungrana
and Gerard Slenders**

Doulougou village lies 57 km south of the capital Ouagadougou, but can hardly be reached by motor vehicle in the wet season. Average annual rainfall is 700 mm during 5-6 months, peaking in June to August.

The Mossi farmers grow sorghum, millet and cowpeas mainly for food but also for sale, as well as some cash crops such as groundnut and sweet potato. Traditionally the Mossi keep small ruminants and some are now investing in cattle and donkeys, but all villagers - including children - own chickens, and many keep guinea fowls. Each owner marks his or her birds, eg by trimming different toes. Bird numbers fluctuate greatly because of epidemics, such as Newcastle disease.

During the growing season, various measures are taken to avoid crop damage, eg seedbeds for vegetables and spices such as tomatoes, okra, kenaf and chili are covered with low grass roofs to keep out chickens, and are fenced with thorn branches to keep out goats.

Red sorghum is grown next to the homestead, using the fertility from household waste and human excrements. When there is still soil moisture at harvest, only the heads of grain are cut off. The stover continues to grow and is used as dry-season feed for ruminants. Sometimes the plants are cut at ground level and animals graze the stover. But often the stalks are left standing and bent over about 40 cm above the ground to form a shelter under which chicks can move freely, well protected against birds of prey. Later, the stems are used as fuel.

Breeding chickens

At night the birds are confined in old huts or small shelters built specially for them. These are rarely cleaned but sometimes the floors and inside walls are treated with red-hot cinders and ash to get rid of fleas and ticks.

Hens lay their eggs anywhere, II, for some reason, brooding is interrupted at a late stage, the farmer keeps the eggs embedded in woolly cottonseeds in a clay pot which is turned regularly till the chicks

hatch. They are then reared a few days under a basket, until they foster themselves out to hens with other chicks.

Being grouped in villages rather than dispersed, homesteads are close enough that neighbours' flocks can mix easily. Also the frequent giving and taking of chickens helps prevent inbreeding.

Feeding and scavenging

In the dry season, the birds are fed with small grains and husks left over from daily threshing of cereals. When the whole crop is threshed communally right after harvest, as happens in a good season, the small grains are stored in clay pots. Each morning the men give some grains to the birds of all family members.

The chickens also eat the grains and particles that fly out of the mortar when the women pound sorghum or millet into flour. Men stop hand-feeding and women pound more carefully as the season progresses and grain becomes more scarce.

Most hens lay eggs in the late wet season, when they are not fed, as grain shortage for humans is most severe then. The birds scavenge for seeds from grasses and weeds as well as for insects, and thus may control pests. Elderly people and children collect termites from the savanna, or the birds are taken along to feed on termites while the family works in the fields.

Birds are binding

Poultry are essential for celebrations and sacrifices. Chickens are given to maintain good relations in the village, or as thanks for a favour (eg from an official). If someone dies, neighbours are expected to bring chickens or goats to the house of mourning, where they are ritually killed.

For most sacrificial feasts, birds of a certain sex and colour must be offered, eg, a white cock when a marriage is agreed. If a suitable bird is not available, people buy or borrow a bird to meet their commitments.

Tasty and chewable poultry meat is well liked but, despite the promotion of egg consumption by health workers, few eggs are eaten. Many villagers believe that a child who eats eggs will become a thief.

Ready source of cash

Birds are sold when cash is needed. Income from poultry sales supplements

income from cash crops. The man's crops and animals are sold to pay for medical costs, school fees, staple foods, improved seeds, house repairs and special foods for guests, eg beer and rice instead of sorghum. The wives are expected to buy spices and vegetables, clothing for their children and themselves, and household utensils. Occasionally, they invest in income-generating activities such as brewing sorghum beer or weaving.

Poultry are also sold to meet unforeseen expenses, such as to buy the beer and kolanuts customarily given to gravediggers when a family member dies.

Traders from the capital have begun to buy eggs in the village to sell in the city. Some eggs are bought to be boiled and resold as a snack, particularly popular in connection with the game "Pamb Gella". This is played by two people, each of whom holds an egg in the hand and tries to break the opponent's egg. The winner gains (and eats) the loser's broken egg.

In contrast to chickens, guinea fowls are regarded as a commercial commodity. Farmers collect the eggs, which traders from the capital like to buy because the strong shell makes them easily transportable. Some young farmers buy guinea fowl eggs which they hatch under chickens. Young adult birds are sold, especially in December, which is fortunately just before the high risk period for Newcastle disease.

Commonly overlooked

It is against this background that any improvement in poultry keeping must be considered. Also changes in other parts of the farming system - eg conserving stover to feed cattle - will affect poultry, in this case, by leaving them less protection. Poultry-keeping is so common that it is easily overlooked by "developers", but if it were to become less common as a result, important economic and social functions of backyard animal husbandry would be lost.

Blanche Zoungrana and Gerard Slenders
Barier 22, 5571 TV Bergeijk, Netherlands

Seeking knowledge about backyard animals

How are poultry and other small livestock being kept in your village? Blanche and Gerard Slenders have drawn up some guide questions for preparing case descriptions of traditional poultry keeping. The cases are being collected as readings for students and agricultural advisers, to draw attention to the importance and potential of backyard animal husbandry. If you want to describe similar systems and/or would like the complete version of the Mossi case, please contact the Slenders.