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Deep in the dense rainforest, a beautiful riff of bird song echoes in the distance, but the singer's shadow is nowhere to be found. How would you identify the exact bird species singing that melodious song without seeing it? Ask an orang asli. Specifically, a member of the Temiar group.

New research published in the *Malayan Nature Journal Special Edition 2017* reveals that the Temiar people have a unique ability to recognise birds not from what they look like but by what sounds they make.

This indigenous group number around 24,900 and live in the forested landscapes of Perak, Kelantan, and northern Pahang, which includes the bird-concentrated area of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex.

By compiling a total of 172 Temiar bird names and matching them to 143 scientific names, the study found that the Temiar name birds based on the sound the birds make.

It is a classic example of onomatopoeia where the name of the bird mimics the bird call, says lead researcher Lim Teck Wyn.

The Temiars' general word for birds, "cep", is remarkably similar to the English onomatopoeic words of "cheep", "chirp" and "chick". They call the blue-tailed bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*) a "biirig" while the checker-throated woodpecker (*Picus mentalis*) is called a "trahreh".

More remarkably, the study also found that the Temiar can tell different bird species of the same genus apart, as each species has a different name based on its specific call. For example, they do not have a general name for hornbills but have a different name for each of the 10 hornbill species that are found in the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex.

They call the wreathed hornbill a “tahud”, a rhinoceros hornbill “helaan”, and the white-crowned hornbill “kahkuu” (see table for more examples).

“In the wild, it is important for birds to have a differing call from its close relatives so they can find each other and mate when they hear their fellow species’ distinct song in the distance,” Lim explains, adding that this ensures the species’ survival.



Lead researcher Lim Teck Wyn (R) interviewing a Temiar man in Belum-Temenggor, Perak. Photo: Handout

The Temiar share a similar ability with these birds, a trait that helps them survive the dangers of the wild jungle while they are hunting and foraging: They listen to the plethora of animal sounds to figure out what ecological zone is nearby, the time of day or weather approaching, and what plants and animal are close by that they can hunt and gather.

They also believe certain bird calls warn of dangerous animals approaching.

In their fascinating mythology, the call of an owl warns of a tiger while an agitated “mailk”, the bushy-crested hornbill, warns of an approaching person, elephant or tiger.

Meanwhile, the calls of the “cep wedwaad”, birds that sound like the wail of a crying baby, warns the Temiar away, for it is taboo to hunt it – doing so risks retribution from Karey, the Temiar thunder-deity who takes the form of a giant siamang, or gibbon.

As they originate from the forested highlands, the Temiar don't do as well at identifying lowland birds that are not found in Temiar territory.

Lowland birds are generically called “cep baroh” which translates to “birds of the plains”, while the names of some common lowland birds like chicken (ayam) and quail (puyuh) are borrowed from the Malay language.

Lim calls for more documentation when it comes to native language, mythology and traditional knowledge like the Temiar's as they are an underappreciated part of Malaysian heritage. He stresses that orang asli knowledge is at risk of being lost as they adopt a more settled way of life.

“If we fail to document this information, we risk losing an important and integral part of our national indigenous heritage, one that contains insights into our tropical bio-diversity that are treasures that we need to safeguard for the whole world,” he says.

“Understanding orang asli culture and collaborating with them is a key that opens up the door to the forest world,” Lim adds.

He says the orang asli's ecological knowledge can greatly boost ecotourism if they are empowered to be tour guides in their own lands.

However, better communication and understanding of orang asli language and terminology is needed, Lim says.

“There is also a lot that the orang asli can share with biologists and the modern world.

“They have lived intimately with the forest for 50,000 years continuously and know many aspects of the forest – more than modern science does, thus biologists and conservationists have much to gain from collaborating with them in their research,” he adds.

Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) senior conservation officer Yeap Chin Aik agrees with Lim: “Who would know the forest better than the orang asli who live in this landscape?”

Since 2004, MNS has been working with two orang asli groups, the Jahai and Temiar, on its hornbill conservation research in Belum-Temenggor.

Yeap says MNS uses the orang asli's skills to facilitate the research and, at the same time, make the orang asli aware of issues concerning their lands.

Under its latest MY forest initiative, MNS is also endeavouring to strengthen the orang asli's role not only as forest guides but also as guardians of endangered animals and, more importantly, as stakeholders in forest governance.

Yean says the orang asli have a lot of knowledge to share with the outside world but must be given the opportunity and skill development to do so.

Example of Temiar bird names

	Bird species	Temiar name
	Bushy-crested hornbill (<i>Anorrhinus galeritus</i>)	baliyek
	Oriental pied hornbill (<i>Anthracoceros albirostris</i>)	kahaar
	Black hornbill (<i>Anthracoceros malayanus</i>)	taeej
	White-crowned hornbill (<i>Berenicornis comatus</i>)	kahkuu
	Great hornbill (<i>Buceros bicornis</i>)	henwaan
	Rhinoceros hornbill (<i>Buceros rhinoceros</i>)	helaan
	Helmeted hornbill (<i>Rhinoplax vigil</i>)	dekuug

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Wreathed hornbill
(*Rhyticeros
undulatus*)

tahud

Source: *Malayan Nature Journal, Special Edition 2017*

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