

Birds in Art and Culture Series:

The Soul-Bird – An Orang Asli Legend from the Jah Hut Tribe

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The Orang Asli, meaning 'original people', are the indigenous ethnic groups of Peninsular Malaysia. There are more than 18 ethno-linguistic Orang Asli groups, some with only a few hundred members and others with many thousands. The total Orang Asli population in 2024 was at least 221,098 (JAKOA 2025). The smallest groups are the Orang Kanaq, Mendriq, Kensiu, Kintak, Lanoh, Chewong, Temoq, and Seletar. The groups of medium size are the Batek, Besis, Jahai, Jah Hut, Orang Kuala, Semaq Beri, and Semelai. The largest groups are the Semai, Temiar, Temuan, and Jakun.

The Orang Asli have a rich oral tradition passed down the generations through the ancient art of storytelling. The Orang Asli create stories and narratives to make sense of the world and to impart important social and ethical mores to ensure community living and continuity. Legends and tales are also used to amuse, to teach, to record, to remind and to explain. The Orang Asli oral tradition is based on close observation and understanding of the environment and a belief in the influence of the spirit world. Orang Asli oral tradition therefore represents a repository - and the means of transmission - of generations of wisdom, history and natural observations.

The Center for Orang Asli Concerns attempted to compile and document these Orang Asli stories, legends and myths into a single volume (Nicholas 2018) so that they can serve to educate and inspire us.

Many of the legends and myths refer to birds, often as an agent of the divine being in creation. Others refer to their interaction with the Orang Asli people and nature. Here we reproduce a single Orang Asli legend from the Jah Hut tribe to illustrate the depth of the oral tradition. The Jah Hut are a Senoi group based in Pahang and speak a Central Aslian language. This story was documented by Werner (1975).

The Soul-Bird

The soul of every man is a green bird ... called *Biau*, which has a long beak and feeds on fruit and insects (a Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctiornis amicta*). The *Biau* has two cries, one *Kah-Kah-Kah*, the other *Tutoh Buah* (cut fruit).

When a woman is pregnant and hears one of these birds in the jungle, she knows that the soul of her child has arrived.



Plate 1: An AI generated image to depict the Orang Asli legend.

When a man dies, his soul leaves him in the form of a bird. If anyone catches a *Biau*, a great thunderstorm will occur.

Apparently, a man's soul can leave his body during life in the shape of a *Biau* bird. When someone hears one of these birds, he knows that a friend is coming to see him, and he starts calling out the names of people he knows until the bird is silent. The last name mentioned before the bird ceases crying is that of the visitor who is coming.



Plate 2: Male Red-bearded Bee-eater, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, October 2022.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Amar-Singh HSS for editorial support and images, and Jia-En Ho for reviewing the manuscript.

References

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Citation: Colin Nicholas, Center for Orang Asli Concerns. (2025). The Soul-Bird – An Orang Asli Legend from the Jah Hut Tribe. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2025, Sept 2025: pg. 92-93.