

Redmond O'Hanlon

INTO THE
HEART OF
BORNEO

*An account of a journey made in 1983
to the mountains of Batu Tiban
with James Fenton*

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The Kenyah chief's two sons walked over to us and one or two men came in from the verandah. I continued to turn the pages. They nodded with recognition and pleasure and talked excitedly to each other; but there were obviously some matters of weighty dispute. James and Dana and Leon and Inghai joined us, and everyone sat down in a circle.

"Bejampong," said Leon firmly, putting his finger on the Crested jay, *Platylophus galariculatus coronatus*, a brown perky bird with a white crescent at the back of its neck and a plume like a second tail growing out of the back of its head. "He very cheeky, like Inghai. And he talk a lots, like me."

"Was that?" said Inghai, sleepily, giving Leon a push.

"Very important bird for we Iban," said Leon. "He sing like hot sticks. We must hear him, after we chop the trees but before we burn the hills, to plant the padi."

Leon mimed the fire with his fingers flickering like flames and made a rapid, crackling cry. The Kenyah nodded.

"See," said Leon, taking the book, "they agrees with me. And you must hear the bejampong before you goes hunting or for fights. He very quicks; you be very quicks. And his jugu"—Leon pointed at the jay's crest—"is like the hair on the head of a man you don't like"—Leon held up a patch of his own hair with his free hand—"and so you will take heads."

There was an awkward silence, and Leon, realising that he had got over-excited and spoken out of turn, sheepishly handed *The Birds of Borneo* to his Tuai Rumah. Headmaster Dana proceeded to turn the pages with an air of authority, lecturing James and me, in official tones, in Iban.

"He the Tuai Burong," said Leon, "he know what the birds tell to us. Very, very difficults for ordinary mens. He dream dreams for chiefs. Not like our very naughtys dreams, absolute no. Singalang Burong invite him to his house in the sky, to meet the birds, his—how do you say?—the husbands of his daughters. They called keptupong, embuas, beragai, papau, bejampong, pangkas and nendak. They look after we Iban. They speak to us and our Tuai Burong he understand."

Dana held the book open for all to see, his thumb on the Diard's trogon, a long-tailed thrush-like bird with a black chest and a scarlet stomach, a fairly common but rarely seen resident of primary jungle up to about 4,000 feet.

"Pau, pau, pau, pau, pau, pau," sang Dana in an ascending scale.

"He make the sound," said Leon. "Very good lucks sound this bird. Beragai laki and Beragai indu, the man and the wife in a bush. You can't see them. They laughs. You have good hunting; and then you laughs, too."

Dana rifled through the plates and found a pair of Banded kingfishers, the male banded blue and black, the female black and brown, primitive tree-living deep-jungle kingfishers who are never seen over water.

"Pi-pit, pi-pit, pi-pit," sang Dana, in falsetto.

"Very bad lucks," said Leon, unknowingly disagreeing with Freeman's anthropological opinion that the Banded kingfisher is baka orang mentas jako, like someone speaking kindly. "Embuas laki and Embuas indu—you hear them, you turn back, or you harms. If they fly mimpin, from your rights to your left, you runs back, all the way."

At that moment there was a distant crack of thunder; rain began to fall on the roof, way up above the great dim rafters, up above the feeble shadows cast by the lamp.

"Badas!" said Dana, with an enormous grin, forgetting himself and flexing both his champion biceps.

Inghai beamed with pride, and then looked with awe at his hero, the Lord of the House, the Bringer of the Rains.

"Our Tuai Rumah, he the best chief in all Kapit," said Leon.

"Clever old Rumah zoomer," whispered James, "but I think he's been systematically pinching my ciggies."

Seeing that the Kenyah were about to leave us and the party break up, I quickly dug Lord Medway's *Mammals of Borneo* out of my Bergen and opened it at a photograph of *Didermocerus sumatrensis harrissoni*, the Borneo (Sumatran or Asiatic) two-horned rhinoceros.

"Leon, ask them if they've ever seen this."

Leon touched his eyes and then pointed at the picture, a captive female from Sumatra wallowing in her private mud pool in the Botanic Gardens (Kebun Raya), Bogor, Indonesia.

There was much shaking of heads.

"Everyone heard tell of it," said Leon, "even at Kapit; but no one ever seen it."

So then I tried them on a rare bird, confined to Borneo, the Bald-headed woodshrike, *Pityriasis gymnocephala*, for which Ernst Mayr, at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, had asked