
A Little Bird Told Me: Changing Human–Bird Relations on a Formosan Indigenous Territory

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Abstract: The tiny bird known as the *sisil* in some Indigenous communities in Taiwan, and as the grey-cheeked fulvetta (*Alcippe morrisonia*) by international ornithologists, has long captured the imagination of the human habitants of that island. The bird appears in the practices of Indigenous hunters and religious leaders, as well as in the writings of Kano Tadao (one of Japan’s founding anthropologists) and contemporary birdwatchers. Among the many different ways of relating to the *sisil*, hunters and trappers have the most intimate relationship to and detailed knowledge of bird communication and behaviour. Indigenous hunters report that they (or more accurately their fathers) formerly relied on observations of the *sisil* to foretell the outcome of a hunt. They may describe the process of observation as a way of learning from the paths taken by birds and mammals through the forest or as a way of communicating with the ancestors, but always encounter the bird in a forest filled with memory. Four stories about the *sisil* illustrate different historical ways of relating to birds. They also draw attention to how global processes of colonialism, industrialisation and urbanisation have destroyed forests and alienated people from animals.

Keywords: human–bird relations, Indigenous knowledge, ontologies, ecology, Indigenous peoples of Taiwan, Japan

Résumé : Le petit oiseau appelé *sisil* par certaines communautés autochtones de Taïwan et *Alcippe* à joues grises (*Alcippe morrisonia*) par les ornithologues internationaux a longtemps captivé l’imagination des habitants humains de l’île. L’oiseau est présent dans les pratiques des chasseurs et des chefs religieux autochtones, ainsi que chez Kano Tadao (l’un des anthropologues fondateurs du Japon) et les observateurs d’oiseaux contemporains. Parmi les multiples modes d’entrée en relation avec le *sisil*, les chasseurs et les trappeurs entretiennent avec lui les liens les plus intimes et détiennent les connaissances les plus pointues sur son mode de communication et son comportement. Les chasseurs autochtones mentionnent qu’ils (ou plus exactement leurs pères) se basaient autrefois sur l’observation du *sisil* pour prédire le résultat d’une chasse. S’ils décrivent parfois ce processus comme un apprentissage à partir des sentiers empruntés par les oiseaux et les mammifères à travers la forêt ou comme un mode de communication avec les ancêtres, ils retrouvent toujours l’oiseau dans une forêt remplie de souvenirs. Quatre histoires autour du *sisil* illustrent différents modes historiques d’entrée en relation avec les oiseaux. Elles mettent également en lumière la façon dont les processus mondiaux de colonialisme, d’industrialisation

et d’urbanisation ont détruit les forêts et éloigné les gens des animaux.

Mots-clés : relations hommes-oiseaux, savoirs autochtones, ontologies, écologie, peuples autochtones de Taïwan, Japon

What Messages Might Birds Have for Humans?

For anyone thinking from a naturalist perspective, this question sounds absurd. If all animals are instinct-driven mutes, one of the basic assumptions of modern ontology, birds would barely be able to communicate with one another, let alone with humans. In English, the adage “a little bird told me” is a clever way of refusing to reveal one’s source, but is based on the shared assumption that birds cannot possibly speak to humans. Yet around the world, there seems to be a universal cognitive trend in which humans look to predictive signs made by birds to foresee or hypothesise future events (Wyndham and Park 2018). Practices of ornithomancy (divination by observing birds) are an important part of traditional life for Indigenous peoples throughout Southeast Asia and Oceania (Cauquelin 2006; Forth 2017; Laugrand, Laugrand, and Tremblay 2018; Le Roux and Sellato 2006). Even in the West, ornithomancy was common until industrialisation relegated such beliefs and practices to long-forgotten folklore (Hopf 1888). Nowadays, conservation-minded birdwatchers hope that birds can be “sentinels” for risks to biodiversity and biosecurity (Keck 2015), but few people in modern industrialised societies would suggest that birds are anything more than objects of human observation and scrutiny. This cognitive distancing between human and other lives, which seems to characterise the anomie of the Anthropocene, needs to be better understood. Is the relative alienation from intimacy with non-human others a question of radical alterity between peoples, as perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998) or ontological anthropology (Descola 2013) would suggest? Or is a growing disconnection from nature in postindustrial societies (Gosler 2018), which

would include Japan and Taiwan as well as the West, a symptom of “extinction of experience” (Soga and Gaston 2016) that must be addressed to gain public support for policies meant to address species extinction and habitat destruction?

Although anthropologists are adept at finding alternatives to modern ontology by looking to non-Western and Indigenous societies, even looking to them as models of ecologically sane societies untouched by Western “hubris” (Bateson 1987, 498), non-Western and Indigenous peoples are also not immune to cultural change. In Taiwan, where Truku-speaking hunters and trappers tell me that their ancestors used to communicate to them via the small *sisil* bird, there is a rich tradition of ancient legends and hunters’ tales about birds and mammals as persons, and even as transformed humans (Simon 2015b). In the same communities, however, I encountered scepticism when I inquired into such topics. Just one day after one woman had told me about the efficacy of owls to predict the gender of unborn children and communicate that information to humans, for example, her 50-year-old son gave me his frank opinion about my ethno-ornithological project while serving tea and cookies in his home. He said:

You are interested in birds, but I am not interested in birds at all. When we were children, we used to kill birds with slingshots and eat them, but nowadays, everyone just looks on as they fly past. In the past, we needed the birds for food, but now we can buy as much meat as we want. Back then, we knew the names of each bird. Now, nobody cares.

In this article about changing relations with one kind of bird, I explore the contradictions inherent in a society where birds are seen as sentient beings of the forest, even emissaries of the ancestors, by some, but where those ideas are not equally valued by all members of their communities. I am not convinced that there is any unilinear ontological change going on. Indeed, I note that conflicting views or perceptions about non-human lives exist simultaneously in the same communities and may even change in the mind of any given individual depending on context. I think it is important that the sceptic quoted above is a successful farmer-entrepreneur in tea growing and processing, because he does not have the same frequency or intensity of experience in the forest as those individuals who regularly hunt for or gather food. It is also pertinent that he is an active member of the True Jesus Church, a Pentecostal denomination that focuses on individual

relations with God rather than on the politics of indigeneity (see below).

Formosa: Real People and Real Birds

As in the Americas, indigeneity in Taiwan is a legal category that emerged from the past four centuries of colonialism. On the 35,000 km² main island of Formosa, only the Indigenous people are descended from populations who inhabited that territory before the seventeenth-century spread of the capitalist world system. Linguistically, they are distinct from both the Han and minority groups of China. They are Austronesian peoples related to other peoples of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Stressing the difference between these peoples, who have inhabited Formosa for millennia, and the Taiwanese of Chinese origin who began settlement only during the Dutch period (1624–62), geographer William Hipwell calls the Indigenous groups collectively by the locative “Formosans” (2009, 294). The steep mountains of central Formosa, inhabited by warriors willing to defend their territories from foreign encroachment, were never administered by a state, neither by the Dutch, nor by the subsequent Koxinga and Qing regimes that came from China. It was only after Japan annexed Formosa in 1895 that a modern state forced the mountain-based groups, one by one, to surrender and accept state rule. The Truku-speaking groups in Hualien were the last to submit, after fierce fighting in the 1914 Battle for Taroko. In the 1930 Musha Incident, six Tkedaya bands in the adjacent highlands that revolted against the Japanese were brutally suppressed. The Japanese and, following its defeat in World War II, the Republic of China regime contributed to the cultural survival and political status of Indigenous peoples by putting into place a separate legal status for individuals, a reserve-based property rights system based on American models, and eventually quotas for political representation (Simon 2012). As historian Paul Barclay observes, the Japanese policy of “ethnic bifurcation” set the terms of engagement for Formosan indigeneity (2018, 249). Some 566,129 individuals are currently registered as “Indigenous” (*yuanzhumín*) in Taiwan, which means Indigenous people account for about 2.4 percent of the population in this society of nearly 24 million.

Since 2000, a political process of “name rectification” has led the number of Indigenous “tribes” to increase from 9 (the number established under Japanese administration) to 16.¹ In 2004, when I arrived in Hualien to study the Atayal, the local people previously classified as Atayal had just gained legal recognition as the

independent Truku Tribe. As the years unfolded, some discontented members of their community joined forces with people in Nantou to create the Sejiq/Sediq/Seediq Tribe, gaining legal recognition in 2008. This new political unit is effectively a confederation of speakers of Truku, Teuda and Tkedaya dialects, hence the different spellings for the ethnonym, which means “human.” According to household registration statistics, the nation-wide Truku population in January 2019 was 31,859, and the Sejiq/Sediq/Seediq 10,202. Within the process of name rectification, Truku and Sejiq/Sediq/Seediq leaders alike chose as a national symbol the same small forest bird (of about 11 centimetres in length), which they call *sisil* or *sisin*, depending on local linguistic variation.

Formosan hunters and trappers inspired my interest in animals by telling me stories about their encounters with mammals and birds of the forests. Inspired by the tales I heard in my initial 18-month research project (2004–07), I did six months of ethno-ornithological field research in 2012–13 with Truku speakers on both sides of the tribal and county divide. During this time, local people persuaded me to explore beyond the usual anthropological interest in names, taxonomies and legends to the actual physicality of birds and other animals. A few individuals did this in their idiosyncratic way by catching birds, manipulating their bodies and (in three cases) cooking them and feeding them to me, which they explained is their most traditional way of relating to birds. Others encouraged me to take photos of birds and to seek an understanding of bird behaviour. I then spent the year 2017–18 as a visiting researcher at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka so that I could deepen my knowledge of Japanese ethnography about Formosa while also doing research on human–bird relations in Japan and Taiwan. Understanding Japanese relations with birds has allowed me through contrast to better understand Indigenous Formosa. Birds, especially the *sisil*, which has become a totem-like symbol of two emergent Indigenous nations, are clearly “good to think,” in the terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964, 89). For Formosans, Japanese and others alike, they are good to think, good to eat, good to photograph and good to follow through the forest.

New Currents in Ecological Anthropology

Anthropology has been developing new conceptual and methodological tools relevant to understanding the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene. Instead of studying human impact on the environment or speculating about the influence of the environment on human cultures, there are increased efforts to bridge or efface the conceptual divide between “nature” and “culture.”

In some circles, this means that non-humans are no longer excluded from ethnography. This broader intellectual climate includes not only the much-heralded “multi-species ethnography” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Smart 2014), but also the development of a semi-otic “anthropology beyond the human” (Kohn 2013), and an “ontological turn” that may (or may not) be a reincarnation of cultural relativism (Venkatesan 2010). These new theoretical turns tend to ignore the well-established genre of ethnobiology (Berlin 1992) and its subdiscipline of ethno-ornithology (for example, Forth 2004; Tidemann and Gosler 2010). This reveals deep-seated philosophical differences between anthropology and ethnobiology. Ethnobiologists, as they elicit information from informants to understand how cultural frameworks influence human perceptions of nature, begin with the ontological stance that culture and nature are separate spheres of action.

In spite of the important differences between their approaches, recent anthropological currents all question the separation of culture and nature. Philippe Descola explicitly rebuts post-Boasian interpretations of culture that hold teleological assumptions that each culture inclines toward perpetuation of its own *Volkgeist* (2013, 73). Tim Ingold rejects the philosophical “givenness” of nature and culture. He argues that only “Western ontology” begins with the assumption that minds detached from the world interpret natural phenomena with cultural design or symbols, whereas hunter-gatherers are “like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world” (Ingold 2000, 42). Kohn’s attention to semiosis (the creation and interpretation of signs) goes beyond phenomenological interest in embodiment by showing how multispecies engagement emerges from partially shared semiotic and communicative propensities (2013, 9).

These theoretical currents make it possible for me to take seriously the affirmations of Formosan hunters and trappers that non-humans, whether they be dogs or boars (Simon 2015a) or forest birds (Simon 2015b, 2018), are also thinking, reflexive beings who possess their own understandings of their relations with other selves, without reducing their ideas to cultural beliefs.² Following Kohn, I study Formosan ideas about birds and other animals as “ontological fact: there exist other kinds of thinking selves beyond the human” (Kohn 2013, 94). Ingold’s concept of the meshwork, or “entangled lines of life, growth and movement” (2011, 63), is useful here. The important thing is that humans first encounter humans and other beings along pathways. Knowledge then emerges from this process of interaction. Ingold’s

phenomenology opens up the possibility that thought emerges from movement in the world. This is compatible with the works of such philosophically oriented neuroscientists as Alain Berthoz, who explores thought as based in the sense of movement, or in kinaesthesia (1997, 11). If thought is movement, it is not located exclusively in the brain as neurons, Platonic images, or symbols. Rather, it emerges from movement through the world, including interactions with other beings who are also thinking in their own ways, and is always immersed in processes of movement. These approaches permit new insights into the ways in which humans interact with other lives, but also reveal how humans can take what they learn from these interactions into relations between humans.

I construct this article around four stories in two parts. Each story is concerned with the little bird called *sisil*, which only through subsequent interpretation can be reduced to a cultural form of divination or one “species” among many. In the first part, two stories come from Truku people (*sejiq truku*) whom I have come to appreciate, not as “informants” representing an exotic culture, but as colleagues collaboratively working to understand the world around us. With their permission, I use their real names in recognition of their contributions. Loking Yudaw provides the perspective of a Truku forest guide who has learned the skills of a hunter from his father. Kumu Tapas has the perspective of a Presbyterian minister who does research on ethnobiology as part of the cultural renaissance of the Sejiq Nation. In the second part, I look at how the *sisil* appeared in and disappeared from the Japanese imagination of Formosa. I look first at a story of the *sisil* as told by Japanese naturalist Kano Tadao, who wrote about Formosan Indigenous peoples and their understandings of the natural world. He wrote about the *sisil* in the first volume of the ornithological journal *Yacho (Wild Birds)* back when Formosa was still part of Japan and when Japanese ornithology was taking form through observation of birds in the tropical forests of that island. I then look at the same bird from the perspective of contemporary Japanese birders. These four stories show how phenomenological encounters with the same kind of bird were transformed into different kinds of human knowledge.

Part One: Indigenous Stories

Thinking Like a Hunter

This first story emerges from a long-standing friendship. I met Loking in 2005 when I was doing my first period of field research in the Truku community Bsngan (in

Hualien County). I was walking through the Tongli district of the village, down the steps behind the gas station and the basketball courts. This district, rather precariously placed in the flood plains of the Liwu River as it flows into the Pacific Ocean, was built to accommodate villagers who were displaced in the 1980s to make way for the re-establishment of the Taroko National Park.³ The Chinese name Tongli, given by the state, reflects Confucian values of “unity” and “courtesy,” but local people also refer to it in Truku by the names of their original hamlets, Skadang and Xoxos. As I walked past an unfamiliar house, someone called to me in English. When I replied in Truku, he invited me to join him for some beer and grilled meat. Our friendship developed over the years as I sought Loking’s companionship and advice during subsequent trips. He is somewhat of a marginal figure in his community. Whereas most people are Truku people from the highland hamlets of Skadang and Xoxos, he is Teuda and from a hamlet even deeper in the mountain forests and now completely abandoned. Loking’s marginal status makes him somewhat of a mediator between different groups. In 2017, for example, he played a key role in securing funding from a Tainan NGO to install solar panels on homes in Skadang and Xoxos in the Taroko National Park and even personally carried some of the panels up the mountain on his back.

Loking and local hunters taught me much about the *sisil* and their perceptions of birds, especially when they expressed confusion about Taiwanese bird guidebooks. Many were unsure of their ability to identify the *sisil* as one distinct “species” either in guidebooks or in the forest. Unlike anthropologists and ornithologists who have consulted them over the past century, these hunters are less concerned about whether the *sisil* of the oral tradition refers to the dusky fulvetta (*Alcippe brunnea*), the grey-hooded fulvetta (*Alcippe cinereiceps*), the Taiwan fulvetta (*Alcippe formosana*), the grey-cheeked fulvetta (*Alcippe morrisonia*), or even one of the yuhinas, babblers or warblers that inhabit the same forests.⁴ In a logic that thwarts the expectations of international ornithology, some of them even refer to the “*sisil* and friends,” saying that several different kinds of birds appear at the same time and may just as well be referred to *collectively* as “*sisil*.” Some of them follow ornithological norms of identifying the *sisil* as the grey-cheeked fulvetta. Others say they are uncertain or propose the hypothesis that the word “*sisil*” refers to different species when used by speakers from different communities. Although they all recognise that taxonomic differences exist between these small birds, they are less concerned than ornithologists about which one is the *sisil balay* (real *sisil*).⁵ From an ethno-ornithological perspective,

the guidebooks draw attention to phenotypic salience, characteristics that allow organisms to be recognised as distinct taxa; whereas hunters draw attention to the birds' ecological salience (Gosler 2017, 638–639). For hunters, who do not carry binoculars and cannot easily see the small details on the birds, these distinctions simply do not matter, as long as the birds show up and chirp beside the hunting path.

What matters to the hunters is that their elders told them that the *sisil* indicates to them whether or not they will be successful on the hunt. When asked, most of them repeat the story familiar to readers of Japanese ethnography (Takoshima 2015; Yamada 2014) that *sisil* birds appearing on the right side of their path as they walk through the forest is a sign of hunting success. If the birds appear on the left side of the path, they will return empty-handed. If the birds fly in an agitated manner in front of the hunter, it is an omen that something bad has happened in the home settlement. Since a family member may have fallen ill or even died, they should return home immediately. In village conversations, hunters were very tolerant of flexible interpretations. One man said that, for him, it is a good sign if the *sisil* birds appear on the left, showing that each hunter has an idiosyncratic relationship with them. Some say that the same birds were consulted in the past at the beginning of any endeavour that involved movement, including warfare, ritual head-hunting, or even the opening of fields for slash-and-burn horticulture. Within a wider cosmology in which game is provided to hunters by the ancestral spirits, the Truku hunters tend to perceive the birds as agents who convey messages to them from the ancestors.⁶ Dadao Mona, a rare traditionalist, explained this to me and Loking in November 2017: “Our ancestors were very intelligent. They could use this tiny bird to communicate with us.”

After consulting with Dadao, Loking and I then crossed the mountains by motorcycle, heading toward Alang Boalung in Nantou, from which we climbed the famous Nenggao Trail. This was the same trail along which Loking's ancestors walked from their ancestral homeland to Hualien centuries earlier. It was also one of the paths walked by Japanese explorer and ethnographer Kano Tadao (see below). This popular trail is now covered with Taiwanese hikers and mountain climbers, but few foreign tourists. We stayed at a rustic lodge at the top managed by the Forestry Bureau on the site of a former Japanese police lodge that had been destroyed in the 1930 Musha Incident, when the local Tkedaya rose up in rebellion against their colonial masters. We followed the trail along the power lines to the top, where a large stone monument commemorates the contribution of President Chiang Kai-shek's post-war regime of modernising

Taiwan by linking a Japanese-era hydroelectric dam in Hualien to the industrial centres of the west coast. Pointing to the ridge heading south, Loking said that his ancestors had never dared to go in that direction for fear of conflict with the Bunun tribal peoples, but nowadays he works with them frequently in the pan-Indigenous social movement. To the east, the mountains sloped down toward Hualien and the Pacific Ocean.

Along the way, Loking showed me the natural context in which the *sisil* becomes an emissary from the ancestors. He explained how the *sisil* indicates the presence or absence of prey, drawing my attention to the importance of plants. Good hunters, he said, not only lay traps and pursue animals, but also care for trees. One of the most important is the *Machilus japonica*, known as *lmugas* in Truku, which has purple fruits, but a red stem that also earns it the name *banah papak* (red feet). The fruits attract tree-feeding animals, including macaques, civets and flying squirrels, but also birds. These animals feed on the fruits, but drop some to the ground, which attracts the highly treasured game animals: boars, muntjacs and serows. In the winter, traditionally the peak hunting season, the birds fly through the forest in flocks in search of food. Where the birds are found, he said, the game animals are also likely to be present. Loking also explained that humans and non-humans follow different paths, those constructed by humans being called *elug*, and those used by animals called *dugar*. Loking's description of these relationships between organisms along paths bears a strong affinity with Ingold's concept of the meshwork as “a tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld” (2011, 69–70). What Loking pointed out, but which remains implicit in Ingold's framework, is that these trails are not merely paths for walking. They are funnels of movement and points of encounter between different sentient beings.

Loking was most interested in pointing out the relationships between birds, plants, animals and humans, and he did so by walking in the footsteps of his ancestors in a forest overlaid with memory. This context makes it possible for birds to carry voices across human generations. Although he knew well the story that the *sisil* carries messages from the ancestors, he wanted to show me in person that this was an actual bird making an audible sound and flying in ways that must be interpreted by humans. Kohn would call this an “indexical sign” that, in the context of interpreting the omens of animal cries, gains traction as it is recast as a human symbol (Kohn 2013, 173). What is important is that the hunters are moving through the forest on foot, encountering real birds in situ, and then returning to the village with stories. It is also possible that, by cultivating in young hunters an



Figure 1: For birds, fruit trees are pathways through the forest.

interest in bird movement, the story of the *sisil* as emissaries of the ancestors has contributed to their hunting success over centuries. The story moves on with each person who carries it, linking each hunter simultaneously with the ancestors who formerly walked the same paths and with non-human actors of the forest.

Thinking Like a Presbyterian

The second story emerges from my relationship with Kumu Tapas. In the summer of 2013, while doing ethno-ornithology in the Truku village of Boalung, I wanted to spend time in the historical Truku homeland of Truku Tuluwan. *Tru* means “three,” the root of the ethnonym “Truku” referring to the three original hamlets built on three flat terraces in the mountains. The three hamlets are now referred to as “Alang busi,” “Alang sadu” and “Alang truwan.” At an elevation of 1,800 metres, Truku Tuluwan is one of highest permanently occupied Indigenous communities in Taiwan, so I imagined it to be among the most “traditional” and remote from the capitalist economy. That judgment was erroneous. All but the oldest people were busy with the lucrative high-mountain cabbage crop, and (in stark contrast to what I had seen in the Taroko National Park) had razed forests near the villages to make way for agriculture. I stayed in the home of a cabbage farmer who drove a run-down BMW and decorated his outwardly humble-appearing home with furnishings imported from Europe.

One morning, I got up early and walked down to the Presbyterian church. Armed with binoculars and a camera, I was excited to stand in front of the church, look down toward the trees in the valley and watch the birds. I could easily identify the white-tailed robin

(*Myiomela leucura*), the white-eared sibia (*Heterophasia auricularis*), the loud and ever-present Steere’s liocichla (*Liocichla steeri*), and the grey-chinned minivet (*Pericrocotus solaris*). As the minivets sung on the electric wires and on the adjacent pine tree, I took great pleasure in photographing a bright red male and a yellow female. A mixed flock including at least the Taiwan yuhina (*Yuhina brunneiceps*), the Japanese white-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*), the black-throated tit (*Aegithalos concinnus*), and the grey-cheeked fulvetta (*Alcippa morrisonia*) flew rapidly from tree to tree, eating as they moved across the ravine. Even as I was fascinated by their beauty, I was frustrated by these small birds who moved quickly, hid among the branches and proved immensely difficult to photograph.

I was waiting for Kumu, a Presbyterian minister and grassroots scholar, who like me was interested in ethnobiological research. She interviews elders to gather names of plants and animals, and in 2018 she published a guide to plants in the three dialects of Truku, Teuda and Tkedaya. For her, this work is an integral part of Sediq cultural renaissance and linguistic revitalisation. We had already done interviews with some of the elder members of the community, allowing us to elaborate on the names of birds that were unknown to the relatively younger hunters I knew in Hualien. She laughed at my inability to pronounce the *q* in *qoqul* (yuhina), encouraging me to learn the pronunciation by listening to the crows and imitating their caws. She giggled in delight at the rhythm of the nearly unpronounceable *tnjing* (black-throated tit). I took pleasure in the word *mayas* for the minivets. In Hualien, Truku people had taught me only the plural form, *mmayas*, saying this referred to “all birds that are beautiful and sing well, but are otherwise worthless.” It was an epiphanic moment for me to realize that in Hualien, where people are unlikely to ever see a minivet, the Truku have preserved a memory of this word and thus a memory of their multispecies encounters as their ancestors crossed the mountains hundreds of years ago (Simon 2015b, 193).

Kumu arrived with her dog, the goal of our outing being to visit three large rocks outside the village. We leisurely walked along the road leading out of the village, which hugged the slope of the mountain and led to the cabbage plantations. As she showed me the rocks, she told me the story that I had already heard in various contexts, even in theatre pieces broadcast on YouTube, and that I would later rediscover in Japanese-era ethnographies (Sayama 2011 [1917]). In her version of the story, all of the birds held a contest to see who could move the boulders. The crows, known to Truku speakers as *dyaqun* and to international ornithologists as the jungle crow

(*Corvus macrorhynchos*), attempted to move the rocks. When a rock fell on the leg of one of the crows, he let out a cry – “Qa-qa-qa!” – before flying off in pain. This is why the crow hops around on one leg. Next, the *qopin* (Himalayan black bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*) took their turn. This time, one of them got injured on the beak and feet and bled. This is how the otherwise stark black birds gained their red beaks and red feet. Finally, the *sisil* took their turn. In spite of being among the smallest birds of the forest, they were able to cooperate and move the rocks. The humans were so impressed with the feat that they vowed to respect and cooperate with the *sisil* forever. From that moment on, the humans have consulted the *sisil* every time they enter the forest with a goal in mind, whether that be for hunting or, in ancient times, for warfare and ritual head-hunting. The moral of the story is that it is important to cooperate if one is to accomplish any large task.

Kumu, as part of a much broader Presbyterian project of indigenising the faith, weaves this and other stories into her sermons. At one level, the bird thus becomes important not as a living being in the forest, but as a moral compass. The listeners of her sermons are exhorted to collaborate with one another. In efforts to keep the language alive, she tells the stories in both Truku and Mandarin. Kumu shares her stories not only in her own church, but also as a guest pastor in other parts of the synod and in Puli, the urban centre of Nantou County. She is also involved in projects of Bible translation and of compilation of Sejiq/Sediq/Seediq-language pedagogical materials, and in ethno-biological research. Like the Truku hunters who return to the village with stories of the birds they encountered in the forest, she also moves around as she shares her stories. Driving in her car, she may venture as far as Taipei to share the story of the *sisil* with urban people who may have never seen the bird in the forest. Her linguistic and cultural work has even earned her invitations to speak at academic conferences in California and Japan. It is important that Kumu, unlike the sceptic cited in the introduction, is Presbyterian. In contrast to the relatively more inward-looking True Jesus Church, whose members have told me it is a sin to even talk about the *sisil* (Simon 2018, 158), leaders of the Presbyterian Church are very active in international Christian networks infused with issues of liberation theology, including Indigenous rights and environmental stewardship. Knowledge of the *sisil* moves with Kumu as she takes this symbol, created by her people’s hunters, into the world as a symbol of ethnic identity and as a moral metaphor. Long before Kumu was born, however, the Japanese had followed



Figure 2: Looking at the rock moved by the *sisil*.

the same paths and also carried stories of the *sisil* in different political contexts.

Part Two: Japanese Stories

Thinking Like an Explorer

The lingering Japanese influence on Taiwan is clear. A careful reader might notice that the Formosan elder Dadao Mona (see p. 76) has the same personal name as the Japanese naturalist discussed in this section. This is because many Formosan personal names, even as they describe them as traditional Indigenous names, are based on memories of Japanese people held by their grandparents and great-grandparents. Less obvious is the Formosan influence on modern Japan. In this

section, I look at the emergence of Japanese ornithology at a time when Formosa under Japanese administration had become an immense laboratory for naturalist and ethnological discovery. Japanese ornithology had its beginnings in Formosa with the field trips of Uchida Seinosuke and Kuroda Nagamichi in 1915 and 1916, followed in the 1930s with collection teams organised by Yamashina Yoshimaro, founder of Asia's predominant ornithology centre, the Yamashina Institute. Although local hunters were hired to collect specimens, their classification followed Western taxonomies rather than Indigenous criteria (Keck 2015, 42).

Western naturalism did not replace previous ways of relating to birds in Japan all at once or as one monolithic whole. The uneven process by which naturalism took root can be seen in the history of the Wild Bird Society of Japan, founded on 11 March 1934, by Nakanishi Godō (1895–84). Nakanishi, born in the year when Formosa was transferred to Japan, was a Buddhist monk, poet and essayist. Inspired by his love for birds, he brought together an eclectic group of ornithologists, folklorists and Tokyo elites. Nakanishi is known for having coined the terms *yachō* (野鳥, “wild bird”) and *tanchōkai* (探鳥会, “birding group,” *tanchō* literally meaning “to explore, look for birds,” thus implying movement). He founded the journal *Yachō*, which in the first years focused to some extent on what we would now call the environmental humanities, with poetry, artistic sketches and photography, and reflections on Buddhism and other essays, in addition to more scientific ornithology. Nakanishi led *tanchōkai* so that people would have a direct experience with birds, based on feeling in addition to intellectual thought. He had an unusual method of studying birds by befriending them through feeding. In his journal, he shared photos of himself feeding birds from his mouth, inviting herons and cormorants into his living room, or cradling a ruddy kingfisher (*Halcyon coromanda*) in his hands. He was eventually challenged by professional ornithologists, who accused him of founding a cult and taking an unorthodox approach to ornithology. The journal took a turn toward a more scientific approach, but came to an abrupt end in 1944 due to financial pressures and paper rationing during the war.

Quite fittingly, one of the first articles of *Yachō* was about none other than the *sisil* and by a very special author. The author was Kano Tadao (1906–?), an intrepid explorer and naturalist whose precocious interest in insects led him to publish his first article in entomology at the age of 13. Attracted by Formosa's rich insect fauna, Kano attended the Governor-General High School in Taipei, during which time he explored mountainous regions and befriended Indigenous people. These trips took him

to what is now Nantou, where he became acquainted with the people known then as the Musha-ban and who are now classified as Seediq. Most notably for me, he climbed Nenggao and Qilai, peaks important to the history of the groups I study, and Nenggao being the one I climbed with Loking. Kano also crossed the mountains to the Truku area in Hualien. After graduating in 1929, he made a 150-day investigative trek through the mountains, carefully recording his observations of all living things, and then returned to Tokyo to continue his studies in geography at the Tokyo Imperial University. During his first years of studies in Tokyo, he was worried to read about the October 1930 Musha Incident, in which six Musha-ban (Tkedaya) communities under the leadership of Mona Ludaw rose up against the Japanese and were brutally crushed. He was disturbed not least because the Atayal people there had been his friends, but also because the Japanese police officers had extended great hospitality to him (Yamazaki 1998, 148). He continued his exploration, increasingly ethnographic research, throughout Formosa and on what is now Orchid Island. In 1941, he completed his PhD with his *Zoogeographical Studies of the Tsugitaka Mountains* (Kano 1940). In 1941, he was drafted by the army and sent to the Philippines to maintain the academic materials of University of the Philippines and the National Museum of Manila. In 1944, he was sent to Borneo by the military, given the task of ethnological exploration, and disappeared. He never returned, leaving people to wonder if he had perished or if he had joined some mysterious tribe and chosen not to return. He is still remembered as a founding figure in the Japanese anthropology of Taiwan.

Kano's (1934) *Yachō* article reveals his penchant for ethnology. Entitled “Ornithomancy of Taiwan's Savages (台湾蕃人の鳥占),” the article provides a sympathetic and nuanced understanding of Formosan lifeworlds. Like the Humboldtian cosmos (Morita 2017), from which Japanese naturalism was inspired, Kano strived for continuity between romantic narrative and quantitative description. Kano begins by saying that life “in nature” (*shizen ni*, 自然に) leads to certain customs and beliefs. Noting also the pronunciation *sisil*, he renders the name of the bird as the Atayalic *siliq*. He describes how people entering the forest might have to face unexpected dangers of falling rocks, poisonous snakes, or perhaps even head-hunting by hostile groups. They thus observe the behaviour and cries of birds to understand if they will obtain game, but also if they will emerge unscathed from the expedition. This practice is thus a way in which individuals in movement read the signs of nature to deal with the unpredictability of life. Kano's approach is very sympathetic to local understandings, as he even recounts

the legends, including the one of the birds moving the giant rocks. He is thus the first ethnologist to point out the bird's cultural salience, its particular importance that is unique to a specific culture (Gosler 2017, 638). His contribution to ornithology is that he identifies the bird very precisely as one species identifiable to international scholars. He specifies it as the *mejirochimedori*, or *Alcippe nipalensis morrisonia Swinhoe* in the taxonomy of his time, saying that this bird, found in elevations of 5,000 to 6,000 feet is related to birds in the Himalayas. Concluding with a discussion of ornithomancy in forgotten Japanese traditions, the article looks at the diffusion of bird species and related human customs in what he calls the "Oriental region" (Kano 1934).

There are important theoretical lessons to be learned from Kano's idea that "customs and beliefs" emerge from the phenomenological experience of perceiving birds and other creatures in situ. Considering the duration of his mountain excursions with Indigenous guides, it is safe to assume that he knew what it was like to hunt with a hungry stomach, understanding that whether or not he ate that day depended on the outcome of the hunt. Unlike the hunters who moved between the forests and the villages, however, Kano always had another type of moment on the horizon. Although he always said that his heart was in the mountains of Formosa, his own career took him annually by ship between Formosa and mainland Japan. He always had to

take his experiences back to the classrooms and salons of Tokyo and make his experiences comprehensible to people who had never walked in a forest. In doing so, he carried the symbol of the *sisil* into an entirely new semiotic context — the emerging world of modern ornithology and ethnology. The same bird remains of interest to Japanese bird enthusiasts today, especially now that inexpensive air travel makes the journey to Taiwan more accessible than ever.

Thinking Like a Photographer

In January 2018, as part of my fieldwork on human-bird relations in Japan, I joined a five-day Japanese ornithological tour in Taiwan. Since I wanted to see how Japanese people perceive the same birds in approximately the same area, I intentionally chose the tour that would take me to the Atayal traditional territory, what was called in Kano's time the Tsugitaka Mountains. On this tour, in addition to myself and the two guides (one Japanese, one local), there were six women and four men. I noticed quickly that there were two distinct kinds of members on the tour. Three of the men and one woman were there for bird photography, whereas five women and one accompanying husband just came to see birds. These two kinds of people were easily distinguishable not only from their equipment (whether they had brought along a professional camera with a monster lens or not), but also from their behaviour. The photographers silently



Figure 3: Kano, with Indigenous informants.

focused on finding birds, often isolating themselves from the others, whereas the birders were a bit more talkative and seemed content as long as they saw birds. At the end of each day, the guide went through a list telling us which species we had seen throughout the day.

Birding has already become a well-organised service industry in Taiwan. On three of those days, we spent a couple of hours along the side of the road leading toward Daxueshan. As this is a well-established birding site, or “point” (*pointo*, ポイント, Japanese) in the vocabulary of our professional guides, the road is widened to provide parking for the cars, vans and small tour buses that bring up domestic Taiwanese birders as well as tourists from Japan, China and America. The main attraction was a single *Idesia polycarpa* tree, a berry-producing tree in the willow family that grows in East Asia. This tree alone attracts several of the endemic birds loved by photographers, most notably the white-eared sibia and the colourful Taiwan barbet (*Megalaima nuchalis*). Just behind the Mandarin-language signs saying “Do not feed the wild birds” were waiting two Swinhoe’s pheasants (*Lophura swinhoii*) and some Taiwan hill partridges (*Arborophila crudigularis*). During lulls in the action at the *Idesia* tree, people contented themselves by taking photos of these ground birds. At times, the pheasants even meandered around the feet of the photographers as if they are accustomed to being fed, leaving me wondering about whether or not these were really wild birds.

It was an international meeting place. Accustomed as I am to walking or driving through these forests with Formosan friends who point out historical places, simple stones that mark the tombs of ancestors, or places of personal memory, I was struck by the entire lack of context provided by anyone or to anyone. There was not even a mention that we were on Atayal traditional territory. Instead, there was a steady stream of visitors with cameras, binoculars, and scopes mounted on tripods, speaking Japanese, Chinese or English; and all focused on the birds. This lack of attention to history, so central to the walks that I took with Loking and Kumu, reveals a difference in perception, not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but between the long-term resident and the visitor.

When people, especially the local guides, who see the same birds daily, struck up conversation with me and found out I was an anthropologist, they asked me if I saw any cultural differences between the ways in which Japanese, Taiwanese and Western people watch birds. I said that it was difficult to find any cultural differences in the actual behaviour. In the various countries where I have gone birding, the pattern is the same. A group of people walk along a path. Someone spots a bird, or more

likely hears a bird, and then they start to talk about it and try to identify it as they train their binoculars on it. They always talk about the sound, the location and the physical characteristics of the bird, and someone calls out the name in their language. They carry bird lists and tick off the names as they go, sharing the results at the end of the day. One of the American women said to me that she loved birding because it transcended cultural differences. Even with language differences, she said, she could always communicate with the birders she met because they used similar guidebooks and could refer to the Latin names. In fact, the travel goes both ways. Just as Americans and Europeans fly to Asia to see birds, Japanese and Taiwanese travel to North America and Europe. If anything, I was observing an international community of practice, as people used the same gear (for example, Nikon and Canon cameras, Swarovski and Kowa binoculars) and learned from one another.

The local guides said that the cultural differences were not between people from different countries, but rather between photographers and birders. “The photographers are more like hunters,” said a Taiwanese guide. “They know what species they want to find, and they stalk them. The birders just accept what they see as destiny (*yuanfen*, 緣分).” The following day, another Taiwanese guide again told me that photographers were like hunters, because both photography and hunting required a technique of shooting from the right angle at the right time. There were conflicts between photographers and birders, she said, because photographers occupied more space in their desire to get the right angle and lighting conditions.

Just as we were discussing this, our Japanese guide shouted out “*mejirochimedori!*” He suddenly sprinted downhill along the mountain side of the road, his clients swooping up their cameras and tripods to follow. He stopped short of the ditch and pointed into the forest. There was just enough time to see a flock of tiny birds, some of them with white around their eyes, before they disappeared uphill and beyond our sight. The birders were enchanted, crying out “*kawaii!*” (cute), but with the exception of one lucky man, the photographers could just let out a frustrated “*muzukashii*” (difficult). Admittedly, I was in the latter group. To me, this was the *sisil balae*, the real *sisil*, and I wanted a photo of my own for my publications. I would have liked to stay around and wait for another one, but we had to board the bus and head off in search of other birds. After all, photographers and birders alike were hoping to add photos and names to their collections of birds known only as distinct species with exotic Latin names. As they did so, they took different symbols of the same birds with them to new semiotic contexts.



Figure 4: The *mejirochimedori*.
Photo: Nakano Yasunori

Conclusion

These four vignettes capture four different ways of looking at and representing the same bird, a small bird endemic to the forested mountains of northern Formosa. The Indigenous stories contrast with Japanese stories in two important ways. First of all, the Indigenous stories are solidly embedded in a wider meshwork of lives that includes a full Sejiq/Truku cosmology, frequent walks in the forest, knowledge of ancestors and their teachings, and physical reminders of the past. Kumu took me to look at the actual rocks that the *sisil* moved in ancient times. In Nantou, Loking and I looked at the physical traces left by the Japanese and Republic of China state actors on the terrain, but he also remembered the paths his ancestors took from Nantou to Hualien. They, and the hunters and trappers who also discussed the *sisil* with me, know the bird as a part of the forest and as a personage that links their people to the forests since ancestral days. The bird, as an organism and personage, is a fundamental part of their lifeworlds. They would understand very well the Kaluli informant who directly told ethnographer Stephen Feld, “To you they are birds, to me they are voices in the forest” (Feld 2012, 45). This awareness of how birds and other creatures are intricately linked with the lives of ancestors and spirits is not a part of the way outsiders perceive the same birds, even as Kano surely understood this because of the years he spent with Indigenous Formosans. Nonetheless, he still had to represent the bird

as a *species* when he returned to Tokyo to make his encounter comprehensible to the ornithological community of practice in the metropole. For outsiders, the bird does not remain present in its feathered, flying self beyond the fleeting moment of encounter. As they board their planes to return home, the bird is transformed into a secondary representation as a memory, a photo, or the name of an ornithological species.

Secondly, contrary to what tour guides told me when I accompanied Japanese birdwatchers to forest, there is an important difference between the way in which hunters and birders perceive the animals in space. The hunters imagine animals and humans along converging paths (or lines) within the same verdant world, whereas the bird guides and their clients look for points of encounter, and preferably close to the highway. The hunters perceive their relationships with birds, mammals and plants as emerging from within the movement of all these organisms. The lines are important, and they are aware of the interconnectedness of the lives that follow them. The outsiders use points in Cartesian space as a way of directing movement and, with the exception of some fruits they see being eaten, rarely take note of anything but the birds. The hunters are part of the forest meshwork, whereas the outsiders only pass through.

The hunting and gathering lifeworld is the one that has the most historical depth.⁷ The prototypical movement is the hunter stealthily walking along the forest

path, but there are also birds flying from tree to tree along the canopy and occasionally a mammal making its way under the dense vegetation. If a hunter looks down at the vegetation in a valley, they are likely to see birds at different times of day feeding on the fruits. Each of these beings is endowed with a brain that ensures the survival of the organism by predicting if a form in movement is possible prey (source of food) or predator (Berthoz 1997, 180). In a sequence of synergies, hunters pick up information from birds who make alert cries and dive into the canopy if they perceive a raptor in the air, but who may instead fly up from the canopy if a mammal or potential predator passes below. These waves of movement, which have long been used by Indigenous peoples (Young 2013, xxii), place birds at the centre of communications revealing information about prey and predator alike. In order to be successful, hunters must be able to react quickly to this information around them, in ways that may appear almost supernatural but that are based on years of experience (Descola 2013, 100). What is unique about human movement, however, is that humans transform this relationship between species into something that can be carried out of the forests and into new contexts. When they are in the forest, birds appear as persons; and stories about birds as messengers of the ancestors have surely encouraged young hunters for ages to observe carefully what they might reveal. Human movement also includes the possibility of leaving other lives behind, as did the tea entrepreneur described at the beginning of this article who told me he is not interested in birds at all.

The Formosans and the Japanese alike transform the bird into a symbol. In contemporary Taiwan, the *sisil* is most commonly invoked as a nationalist symbol. Indigenous activists in both Nantou and Hualien have declared the *sisil* to be their symbol, ironically using the same bird to denote difference as they affirm two different political identities. Other groups on Formosa, and not just the closely related Atayal, also have stories about using the same bird as a form of divination. Nationalist stories of the *sisil* are thus closely linked to the political process of name rectification. For the Truku in Hualien, talking about the *sisil* is a way of claiming tribal sovereignty over what is now the Taroko National Park. In Nantou, ethnobiology is woven into projects of language revitalisation and cultural pride, even as the bird habitat near the villages is destroyed to make way for cabbage and tea plantations. The *sisil* as a symbol has become salient to Indigenous Formosans, even if they have never seen the bird because they live in urban areas or in villages that are increasingly like urban suburbs.

The Japanese, beginning with Kano's text in *Yachō*, were the first to identify the *sisil* with an ornithological

species in Linnaean taxonomy. Kano, in addition to his efforts to understand Formosan lifeworlds from within their movements through the mountain forests, took his knowledge of the bird back to Japan as a species. The *sisil*, or more precisely the *mejirochimedori* (*Alcippe nipalensis morrisonia Swinhoe*), thus contributed to the formation of modern ornithology and modern anthropology in Japan. Bird names are notoriously contested among professional taxonomists, making the bird now the grey-cheeked fulvetta (*Alcippe morrisonia*) in the most authoritative English-language guidebook (Brazil 2009, 378). Nowadays, even Truku hunters are so accustomed to being shown guidebooks and asked about species that they express confusion about the conceptual gap between what their fathers told them and what they are asked from outsiders. There is a big perceptual difference between watching waves of motion while hunting versus tracking down individual species of birds to tick off names on a list. There is also an important difference between listening for the voice of the ancestors and looking for differences in feather colours or relative crest size. Only the birders, with their binoculars and cameras, can see closely the details that differentiate fulvettas and other small birds. Nowadays, Japanese birders fly home after visiting Taiwan with photos, memories and completed checklists. This modern means of travel, flying between points rather than walking through thick forest vegetation, detaches them from the meshwork that once characterised the human–bird relationship in Japan, as well as on Formosa.

It would be a gross oversimplification to posit a linear development of ontological change, or even to contrast as cultural differences the animism of the Indigenous to the naturalism of the modern Japanese and Westerners. Rather, as the theories of Berthoz and Ingold suggest, the way in which individuals interact with other animals is shaped mostly by their ways of living and moving in the world. Experience creates different lifeworlds, and these are unevenly distributed through all communities. Thinking back to the man quoted in the introduction to this article, as he declared his lack of interest in birds, it is important that he drives through the forest more than he walks among the trees. Selling tea in a competitive marketplace, he is more attuned to price signals than to bird calls. And as a member of the True Jesus Church, in which the leadership labels many Indigenous traditions as superstition, he has little contact with Presbyterian indigeneity and the identity politics that have elevated the *sisil* to a vibrant nationalist symbol. Even among Presbyterians, being Indigenous has not stopped entrepreneurs from cutting down bird habitat to make way for tea or cabbage. Unlike the Han Taiwanese entrepreneurs who dominate



Figure 5: Cabbage fields replace forests.

the tourist markets, they have yet to find ways to earn a living from birders.

On a personal level, I am a bit envious of Kano because his Formosa was not a world of cabbage plantations, churches, backpackers and national parks. If I had gone to Formosa in his time, it would have been possible for me to do an eco-semiotic study like Eduardo Kohn did in the Amazon, and look among the world of the *lmugas* fruit tree, sisil and muntjacs for webs of icons, indexes and signs. Now, I glean only a glimpse of that world, sometimes by walking in the forest, but mostly through the nostalgia-tinted memories of friends and research partners. I am deeply concerned about this loss, making it the central part of my research agenda, because I agree with Kohn that actively cultivating ways of thinking with and like forests and their beings is the only way that “we” will survive the Anthropocene (Kohn 2013, 227). Drawing attention to birds is a way of becoming aware of the fragility of a shared world that makes both human and avian lives possible. The sisil can teach us about the value of sharing and cooperation, even as competition and other modern hubris deceive us into seeing the world otherwise. If birds even inhabit our future world is a serious question in the current age of extinction (van Dooren 2014). Humans definitely need to relearn how to perceive birds and the interconnectedness of our shared meshwork if we are to make the difficult political decisions needed to address climate change and species extinction. Our shared extinction of experience is part of the problem. Maybe the Formosan elders and other Indigenous peoples on the planet can point human perception in the right way. But for that to happen, many

more humans must listen to the messages carried by birds.

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Notes

- 1 “Tribe” has been a contested word because it has connotations of primitive political organisation. My use of the term reflects its usage in English translations of Republic of China law and is limited to describing this form of biopolitics.
- 2 Biologists are also making new inroads into understanding of non-human thought. Most notably for this article, ornithologists are discovering that birds have rich thinking lives (Ackerman 2016; Emery 2016; Heinrich 2006). The fact that ornithologists study birds as sentient beings challenges ontological contrasts between “animists” who perceive humans and animals as sharing an “interiority” of “intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity, feelings, and the ability to express oneself and to dream” (Descola 2013, 116) versus modern, Western “naturalists” who assume that only humans possess those traits (Descola 2013, 173).

- 3 The park was originally founded by the Japanese in 1937 as the Tsugitaka-Taroko National Park.
- 4 Although I used Chinese-language field guides while in Taiwan, these English and Latin names come from Brazil (2009), the preferred reference for international ornithologists working in the region.
- 5 This is consistent with ethnobiological research showing that most taxa in folk taxonomies are at the generic level, and that a prototypical species is often selected as a subcategory due to factors such as taxonomic distinctness or cultural salience (Berlin 1992, 23–24). The prototypical species is often called the “real” one. As one of the reviewers of this article pointed out, international ornithologists do the same when they apply “common” to one species within a genus.
- 6 See Kim 1980 for a summary of the Taruko (Truku) legends about animals that form the basis of Truku cosmology.
- 7 Examples of other hunter and gatherer lifeworlds: the Koyukon interpreted omens from the direction taken by owls flying over a hunter’s trail (Nelson 1983, 233), and the Inuit long followed ravens to prey, leading at least one biologist to conclude that belief in bird omens led to greater hunting success (Heinrich 2006, 254).

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