

WILD ECHOES

Fun with Feathered Tales & Songs

By SHREEYAA SUBRA

Certain animals are associated with good or bad fortune. Some are linked to fantastical stories. There are many ethnobiological examples that reveal an intrinsic connection between humans and the natural world. Education Committee Chair Tan Beng Chiak recognised the importance but underappreciation of such perspectives when she revisited songs, stories, and myths from her childhood. This inspired her to create an afternoon of sharing, also roping in Norlinda Ishnin as co-presenter. NSS intern **Shreeyaa Subra** sums up their presentations.

Although often dismissed as unscientific or illogical, the intersection where nature meets culture provides a different way to look at the world. This perspective has the potential to instil knowledge and values, encouraging us to find awe in nature. On 29 June 2024, we embarked on a programme that brought participants on a journey to explore melodies and stories inspired by our avian friends and the intangible values we place on them. The event took place at the Singapore Sustainability Academy.

Beng Chiak kicked off the session with personal childhood memories, etymology, and popular stories connected to three familiar birds: sparrows, magpies, and swallows. The sparrow (麻雀) is widespread across the world, representing values like diligence, humility, adaptability, cleverness, and freedom. But there is a duality in its symbolism.

During China's Great Leap Forward, in an effort to stop the sparrows from eating grain, they were attacked under the Four Pests campaign against flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows. People zealously shot sparrows, destroyed their nests, and banged pots and pans so that they could not land and died of



Sing along session led by Mr Zero Nalpon. Photo: Huang Ningxin.

exhaustion. Up to a billion sparrows were killed. Instead of solving the problem, it led to severe ecological imbalance, one of the causes of the Great Chinese Famine.

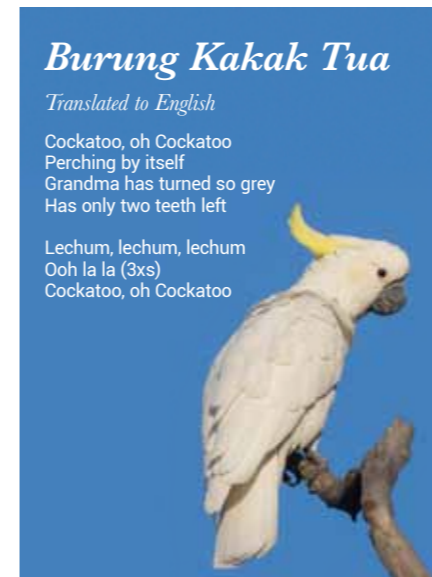
In Western culture, the magpie is viewed negatively as a thief ('thieving magpie') and a sign of bad luck, although there is no evidence that magpies are attracted to shiny objects. But in Chinese, the magpie (喜鹊) represents joy and the bearer of good news. It is hence a popular bird in Chinese paintings.

The Chinese mythology 'The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl' tells of a forbidden romance, where the cowherd (represented by the star Altair) and the weaver girl (represented by the star Vega) were ban-



Tan Beng Chiak getting the response of some enthusiastic participants. Photo: Huang Ningxin.

ished to opposite sides of the heavenly river (symbolised by the Milky Way). Annually, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, a flock of magpies would form a



Burung Kakak Tua

Translated to English

Cockatoo, oh Cockatoo
Perching by itself
Grandma has turned so grey
Has only two teeth left

Lechum, lechum, lechum
Ooh la la (3xs)
Cockatoo, oh Cockatoo

Above: Yellow-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea*). Photo: Francis Yap.
Right: Grey Heron. Photo: Khoh Zhi Wei.

bridge to reunite the lovers for a single day. Examining the lyrics of the Chinese children's song '小燕子' (Little Swallow) reveals that it refers to the migratory Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) that returns every spring and autumn to Singapore. In contrast, we also have the resident Pacific Swallow (*Hirundo tahitica*) that is here throughout the year.

Indeed, songs and stories told across the world have given us different takes on all three birds. The context of the stories and songs also affect our actions. Viewing sparrows as pests, led to their eradication and subsequent ecological disaster. If stories can cause imbalance, they can surely help in restoration. We should also reflect on our personal encounters with these birds that have shaped our thoughts on them.

Norlinda then moved on to examine the birds depicted in Malay songs. She sang them in her youth as popular children and folk songs. They inadvertently teach us about the birds found in this region.

The first song 'Bangau Oh Bangau' could refer to either the heron or the stork, both called *bangau* in Malay. The song highlights the diet, behaviour, predators, physical features, and habitat of the *bangau*. Using the examples of the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and Milky Stork (*Mycteria cinerea*),



Left to right: Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*), Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*) and Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*). Photos: Daniel Neo, Damien Wong, Francis Yap.



Bangau Oh Bangau

Translated to English

Stork o stork
Why are you skinny?
How am I not skinny?
The fish won't go up
The fish won't go up

Fish o fish
Why won't you go up?
How can I go up?
The weeds were too long
The weeds were too long

Weeds o weeds
Why are you so long?
How am I not long
The buffalo won't eat me
The buffalo won't eat me

Buffalo o buffalo
Why won't you eat the weeds?
How can I eat the weeds
My stomach ached
My stomach ached

Stomach o stomach
Why were you aching?
How am I not aching
I ate some raw rice
I ate some raw rice

Rice o rice
Why were you raw?
How am I not raw
The woods were wet
The woods were wet

Woods o woods
Why were you wet?
How am I not wet
The rain fell on me
The rain fell on me

Rain o rain
Why did you fall on the woods?
How can I not fall
The frog called me
The frog called me

Frog o frog
Why did you call the rain?
How can I not call it
The snake wanted to eat me
The snake wanted to eat me

Snake o snake
Why did you want to eat the frog?
How can I not eat it
It is my food
It is my food

Norlinda looked at the differences and similarities between the two species, giving participants a taste of bird identification.

The next familiar folk song from Indonesia Norlinda looked at was 'Burung Kakak Tua' which is about a cockatoo that grows as old as a grandmother. This adorable song is based on the cockatoo's long lifespan, being able to live between 40 and 70 years.

There are feral cockatoos in Singapore that came over because of the pet trade. Non-native parrot species found here include the Yellow-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea*), Red-breasted Parakeet (*Psittacula alexandri*) and Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*). As released or escaped birds, they have established wild populations

in Singapore. Norlinda guided participants to dive deeper and critically question these two songs to learn lessons including responsible pet ownership and not releasing animals into the wild.

After the enlightening presentations, participants had a sing along session led by Zero Nalpon and Leong Kwok Peng. Not only did everybody learn the folk songs featured, they also sang other oldies such as *Blackbird* by The Beatles.

In conclusion, under the dominant anthropocentric Western viewpoint, we risk losing our cultural perspectives and values. We can look forward to future runs of Wild Echoes that will include other mediums such as poems and art to further explore the knowledge and values of birds. 🌿