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The Hornbill

A Bird That Carried a Culture



The Hornbill: A Bird That Carried a Culture

A bird can disappear from a forest, and with it, stories that have survived for generations. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the Great Hornbill holds a special place in the cultural memory of High land observer Indigenous communities, particularly the Bawm, Lushai, and Pangkhua. Known as *Vapual* among these communities and *Rhongrang* among the Chakma and Marma, the bird's striking appearance has inspired ideas of love, loyalty, commitment, and courage through its distinctive appearance, nesting behaviour, and movements. These values find expression in traditional beliefs, artistic expressions, and the *Vapual Lam* (Hornbill Dance), reflecting a close relationship between Indigenous cultural heritage and the forests that have shaped their lives.

Belonging to the family **Bucerotidae**, hornbills are iconic birds of tropical forests, found across Africa and Asia, where they inhabit dense forests, woodlands and, in some regions, savannas. More than **60 species** are known worldwide. Despite their diversity, hornbills share one unmistakable characteristic: an enormous, curved bill, often topped with a distinctive structure known as a **casque**. This striking combination makes them among the most **recognisable** birds of the tropical world.

In Bangladesh, hornbills are represented by **four species**: the Great Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill, Oriental Pied Hornbill, and Indian Grey Hornbill. The forests of the **Chittagong Hill Tracts** provide important habitat for some of the country's most notable hornbill species, particularly the Great Hornbill and Wreathed Hornbill.

Among the most remarkable aspects of the Great Hornbill's life is its breeding behaviour. As a bird that lives high in the forest canopy, the hornbill spends much of its life among the tallest trees. During the nesting season, a pair selects a natural cavity in a large tree, where the female enters and seals herself inside using mud, droppings, and other materials, leaving only a narrow opening. From outside the nest, the male takes on the responsibility of bringing food to his mate. Even after the eggs hatch, he continues to feed both the female and their chicks. For weeks, the survival of the family depends on his repeated journeys through the forest canopy, making the hornbill's nesting cycle an extraordinary example of parental care and partnership.

This remarkable dependence between the pair has given the hornbill a deeper meaning among some highland observer indigenous communities. Living closely with the forests, the Bawm, Lushai, and Pangkhua communities have developed an intimate understanding of the birds that share their landscapes. Over generations, they observed the Great Hornbill's behaviour, particularly the male's role in caring for its mate and young. These observations found meaning in their own cultural understanding of love, loyalty, and responsibility. The hornbill's behaviour became a reference through which values of commitment and care could be recognised, expressed, and passed down across generations. In this way, a relationship with the natural world became part of the **cultural knowledge** of these communities.

The hornbill's breeding life offers a powerful metaphor for loyalty. The female remains inside the nest, entrusting her own survival and that of her young to her mate, while the male repeatedly returns to fulfil his responsibility. In cultural traditions where the hornbill is associated with faithful partnership, this relationship is reflected in human ideals of marriage—remaining beside one's partner, fulfilling responsibility and maintaining fidelity through hardship.



Great Hornbill (Buceros bicornis)

Thus, the hornbill becomes more than a symbol of love. It represents a form of loyalty in which commitment is expressed through action: staying, providing, protecting and returning. Yet today, this traditional understanding is becoming less familiar among some younger generations. As people grow more distant from the forest-based lives of their elders, cultural meanings once connected to the hornbill may not always be passed down. For those who still remember them, however, the bird remains a reminder of an older ideal of **love, responsibility and faithfulness**.

This connection between the hornbill and human values is also reflected in traditional cultural expressions. Among some Zo communities, traditional headgear inspired by the hornbill features feathers worn as a symbol of bravery, courage. The feathers represent the wearer's strength, hunting skills and connection to traditional forest life.



*Where love, loyalty, and cultural identity meet in traditional adornment.
Photo : Mong Sai Shwe Marma*

The Pangkhua, Bawm and Lushai communities, part of the wider Zo cultural group, have also traditionally connected the hornbill with their forested hills. The **Vapual Lam**, or hornbill dance, is performed as a traditional dance inspired by the Great Indian Hornbill and its movements.

The choreography of the Vapual Lam is highly stylized. Dancers align themselves in pairs, maintaining a slightly crouched, low-center-of-gravity stance with their arms extended horizontally. The arms move in a slow, undulating, rhythmic motion upward and downward, mimicking the heavy, laboring flight of the Great Indian Hornbill. Dancers also perform synchronized sideways lateral hops, recreating the way hornbills move along thick canopy branches while searching for forest fruits.

Together, these traditions show how the **Vapual (Great Indian Hornbill)** has become an important connection between nature and culture among highland communities across Northeast India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Its distinctive nesting behaviour and movements have inspired cultural ideas about **marriage, responsibility, courage and the relationship between people and the forest**.



A dance of gestures, where movement becomes a language of love, connection, and tradition.

But the bird that has inspired generations of cultural traditions is becoming increasingly rare in Bangladesh. The Great Hornbill depends on large, mature trees for nesting and extensive forest for feeding, making it especially vulnerable to forest loss and the cutting of old trees. Hunting and the poaching of chicks have also contributed to its decline.

In recent years, another threat has become more visible: **wildlife trafficking**. Great Hornbills have been among the wild animals recovered in trafficking operations in Bangladesh, with authorities reporting networks that collect rare animals from the hill forests and move them through domestic and international routes.

As the hornbill becomes harder to find in the forests, its disappearance represents more than the loss of a rare bird. hornbills play an important role in forest ecosystems, particularly through seed dispersal, linking their survival to the health and regeneration of the forests they inhabit. making the loss of these birds a concern for both biodiversity and the communities whose cultural traditions have grown alongside them.



*Young artists of Vapual Lam (Hornbill dance), carrying the Hornbill Dance through generations.
Photo Credit: Mong Sai Shwe Marma*