

## Seeking the Revival of Sustainability for the Island of the *Tao* People

Sutej Hugu, Consortium Coordinator for East Asia and Syaman Vongayan, Lead Director, *Tao* Foundation

We call ourselves *Tao*, a population of about 4,000 people. *Pongso no Tao* (literally the ‘Homeland of *Tao* people’) is a small northern volcanic outlier of the Batanes Islands, southeast of Taiwan (now labeled ‘Lanyu’ or ‘Orchid Island’ on the official atlas). Not far from the starting point of the *Kuroshio* Current and nurtured by the richness of its large marine ecosystem, the *Tao* people have lived ‘the original affluent society’ with their



comprehensive traditional ecological knowledge base on their home island for millennium. There are non-hierarchical and unspecialized egalitarian tribal communities, without chiefs or ruling elders but functional leaders responsible for various production and ceremony activities, and only with a simple complementary sexual division of labor within households.



Following the unique time reckoning system of *Tao* people, which is an original calendar with thirty names of the phasing moon and an intercalation calibrated by the annual revisiting of flying fishes, our ancestors seasonally alternated their migratory fishing and coral reef fishing, maintained their wet taro fields with irrigation channels and supplemented that by shifting cultivation (firing and fallowing) of dry taro, yam, and millet. They also maintained forests through their caring and ecologically-wise timber harvesting for plank boat-building and house building. The accumulated social and ecological knowledge and a related elaborate ‘*makaniaw*’ (taboo) system are continuing today.

### **From cultural affluence to unnatural poverty**

The Tao people culture was kept intact until the end of the 19th century. Even in its first colonial encounter, under Imperial Japan (1896~1945), this island was basically a conserved area for various scientific surveys and ethnographic studies with strict access control. The Japanese brought in a small crew of police, and primary schooling for ‘savage children’ started only after 1923. After World War II, however, came the Chinese Nationalist government, which developed four labor camps, ten veteran farms, and a commanding headquarters in the 1950s. This brought about the dispossession of 90% of the land and all of the marine territories traditionally collectively and commonly owned by the tribal peoples.



In the 1970s, a topocide of traditional villages was also perpetrated. The government tore down most of the traditional ecologically friendly buildings for a very poor social housing program that had to be rebuilt again in the 1990s. In the 1980s came a nuclear waste dump depository along with a contradictory proposal for setting up a Marine National Park. Formidable ecological, environmental, and cultural disasters happened successively on this small island with these peaceful people. As short a time as 50 years appeared to be enough time to terminate a once eco-optimized and rhythmic vigorous indigenous ocean culture, and drop it into the status of unnatural poverty.

### **Resistance of the Tao people**

Actually it is due to such a critical crisis of our home island that the *Tao* people went through a series of resistance events in the last three decades that ultimately created the new identity of the six tribal communities to become one *Tao* people with the vision of an autonomous commonwealth. Beyond the tough challenges we faced from the invaders and intruders, emerged the grand project of *Tao* nation building, and the task of establishing a brave new indigenous society with all the many wonderful opportunities it embodies.

For the new millennium, we have developed strategic plans and foundation programs to persist in our long-term struggle with colonial government. Since 2010 we have

initiated building three important knowledge bases. First is the Tao Culture Digital Archive: we have planned to collect all, and already achieved about half, of the academic studies and scientific surveys on *Pongso no Tao* available from 1896 to the latest, including books, articles, photos, and films in Japanese, English, Chinese, and French. Second, the *Pongso no Tao* Tribal GIS Database: we have remarkably learned and recorded from our elders more than 1,200 place names on the coastline and inland within our 45 square kilometer island, and we are going on to survey and restore our marine territory names and natural resource mapping. We will end by setting up our own land registry and land usage management system according to customary rules and contemporary demands. Third is the *Tao* People Ethnobiology Knowledge base: our ancestors have given about 10 names for wild animals, 30 names for insects, 60 names for birds, about 250 names for plants, and more than 400 names for marine creatures in our *lebensraum*. Along with the names are the abundant experiential knowledge about their habitats, characters, behaviors, applications, and usage norms. These represent our “cosmivision” and our deep relationship with the island natural environment.



Complementary to this process of building these three knowledge bases, we have established simultaneously the Tribal Heritage Keepers Groups for elders from each patri-lineage in the six tribes on the island. We have placed high importance on the restoration and revival of our traditional

bio-cultural knowledge with totally original ontological, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic conceptions. These are the solid and concrete bases for our tribal governance institutions and provide us clear orientation and guidelines for island management for the next generations, as an alternative to modern capitalist development.

For further promotion of the new vision and mission of *Tao* people in the 21st century, besides the integration and strengthening of the six tribal governance councils, we are

very dependent upon the assistance from the women and the youths of the island. Programs of capacity-building and empowerment are underway for the *Tao* Youth Action Alliance and the *Tao* Women's Association. Yet, we are facing arduous and huge tasks. For three decades, we steadfastly appeal for removal of nuclear waste from Orchid island. *Tao* People want to survive without radioactive contamination! There is a 'learning from practice' program of traditional sustainable livelihood knowledge following the course of our calendar '*ahehep no tao*' as the prototype of *Tao* indigenous education. But the public school system has coercively executed a culture-erasing policy of total assimilation since 1959. There is contention over irrigation versus domestic water supply caused by the increase in tourism. We have to transform the traditional joint family collective ownership of water sources into tribal commons to offer clean fresh tap water for everyone. Living conditions are deteriorating due to the heavy burden from food and energy importation. We certainly need solutions of renewable energy and food sovereignty.

### **The way forward**

It must be mentioned that, through international interaction, we are encouraged and inspired very much by reading and discussion about the Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) Consortium and the *Buen Vivir* movement of South America. We also have adopted the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE)



Code of Ethics as our criterion for reviewing all scientific research plans and governmental development programs proposed and imposed upon the island and its people. Based on our traditional knowledge and governance institutions, we are persevering for the restoration of *Tao* peoples' permanent sovereignty over natural resources and human well-being on, around, and under their traditional territory, *Pongso no Tao*. Our struggle is to achieve autonomy and creatively develop an alternative sustainable ecosystem economy for the *Tao* people in the 21st century, before it can be devoured ruthlessly by the modern global market and consumer society.