

Indigenous Reconciliation? *The Case of Taiwan*

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As in Australia, the United States, and Canada, reconciliation in Taiwan between the minority indigenous populations and the overwhelming majority of the later-arriving communities has been difficult to achieve. The “immigrant” communities in Taiwan assumed a cultural and racial superiority over the indigenes, whom they regarded as “savages.” Due to the resulting systematic discrimination, Taiwan’s indigenous peoples—like those in Australia, the United States, and Canada—have below average income and educational levels. Despite some improvements over the years, this discrimination and disadvantage continues, leading to higher rates of alcoholism and despair among Taiwan’s indigenous communities.

When the Dutch—the first foreign power to rule Taiwan—arrived in 1624, they described Taiwan’s indigenous peoples as strong and healthy. Even though Chinese reported the Dutch to be considerably taller than themselves, the Dutch recounted that Taiwan’s aborigines were more than a head taller than the Dutch. In addition, the aborigines could run endlessly—one of their methods for hunting deer was literally to chase the creature down. The Dutch also reported that Taiwan’s indigenous peoples had relatively egalitarian societies in which no one could order anyone else around, a relatively humane system of laws and regulations, fine and substantial housing, and large villages. Archeological evidence demonstrates that Taiwan’s indigenous peoples have inhabited Taiwan for over six thousand years. Some twenty-six hundred years ago, they had substantial trade networks with Southeast Asia. Scholars today also believe that Taiwan is the source of all the Austronesian peoples who inhabit every Pacific Ocean island capable of sustaining life, large parts of Southeast Asia, and Madagascar across the Indian Ocean.²

Taiwan’s history neatly falls into three major periods. The first is the six thousand years

¹ The author wishes to thank many indigenous and non-indigenous friends in Taiwan for contributing to the ideas in this article.

² J. Bruce Jacobs, “A History of Pre-Invasion Taiwan,” *台灣史研究* [*Taiwan Historical Research*] 23, no. 4 (December 2016): 1-38.

prior to the arrival of the Dutch in 1624. During the second period, from 1624 until 1988, Taiwan underwent rule by six colonial regimes, which came in from the outside and ruled in their own interests. These regimes were (1) the Dutch (1624-1662), (2) the Spanish (1626-1642) who ruled northern Taiwan simultaneously with Dutch rule in southern Taiwan, (3) the Zheng family, which continued the rule of its founder, Zheng Chenggong, also known as Koxinga (1662-1683), (4) the Manchus (1683-1895), (5) the Japanese (1895-1945), and (6) the Chinese Nationalist Party (romanized variously as Kuomintang, KMT, or Guomindang) under Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. Only with the death of Chiang Ching-kuo in January 1988, did the colonial period end and the third major period begin, the period of democratization.³

As Taiwan liberalized and then democratized, many social movements arose, including that of Taiwan's indigenous peoples. This development has led to some improvements in the treatment of the indigenous population. Thus, Taiwan's indigenous peoples, who were still called *fān* (savages) under the Manchu and Japanese colonial regimes, became *shān bāo* (mountain compatriots) under the Chinese Nationalists—though the then colonial government tried to force the indigenous peoples to become Chinese through such policies as requiring them to adopt Chinese names, which could not begin to express the sounds of their original indigenous names. Later, in 1994, as part of the constitutional revisions enhancing democracy, the “mountain compatriots” became Taiwan's “indigenous people” or its *yuán zhùmín* (original inhabitants), a term much more in accord with international conventions.⁴

Even back under the authoritarian regime led by the Chinese Nationalist Party, Taiwan's indigenous peoples had their own electoral constituencies for legislative and council seats, which at least ensured that some indigenous legislators and councilors would be elected. These separate electorates continued after democratization. In the close December 1995 legislative election, Taiwan's indigenous legislators formed a critical minority. They used this power to gain concessions from the government, including the establishment of a de facto ministry for indigenous affairs, the Council of Indigenous Peoples.⁵ But, by and large, the Council of Indigenous Peoples has found it difficult to operate in Taiwan's political system; gains for Taiwan's indigenous peoples remain slow and incomplete. Factionalism and incompetence in the ministry and among Taiwan's indigenous leaders have also slowed progress.

During her election campaign for the presidency in 2015-2016, Tsai Ing-wen declared that she would seek to improve the welfare of Taiwan's indigenous population should she be elected president. Thus, Taiwan's indigenous communities looked forward to seeing what she might achieve. During her inauguration ceremony on 20 May 2016,

³ For the issue of colonialism, see inter alia J. Bruce Jacobs, “Whither Taiwanization? The Colonization, Democratization and Taiwanization of Taiwan,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 4 (December 2013): 567-586.

⁴ J. Bruce Jacobs, *Democratizing Taiwan* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 93-94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102-105.

indigenous children participated, though the announcer made comments that some indigenous peoples regarded as insulting, such as suggesting “the arrival of Western religion and influenced [sic] helped rid Aborigines of their ‘boorish and uncultivated’ characteristics.”⁶ A key event came on 1 August 2016, the twenty-second anniversary of the Constitutional revision, which made Taiwan’s indigenous peoples “original inhabitants” and which became the first Indigenous Peoples’ Day in Taiwan. On this day, President Tsai delivered a major speech apologizing to Taiwan’s indigenous peoples.⁷ Prior to the speech, she welcomed leaders of all of Taiwan’s indigenous peoples to the Presidential Office.

The speech was carefully crafted, and her speechwriters consulted similar speeches delivered in other countries, both for content and for rhythm. Thus, for example, Tsai’s speech had echoes of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s powerful apology to the “stolen generation” of Australia’s indigenous peoples, which he gave in Parliament on 13 February 2008.⁸ The rhythm in President Tsai’s speech came as she repeatedly stated: “For this, I apologize to the indigenous peoples on behalf of the government.”

President Tsai began by apologizing directly to the indigenous peoples for “the four centuries of pain and mistreatment you have endured.” She noted that with the arrival of the immigrants, the indigenous peoples “became displaced, foreign, non-mainstream, and marginalized.” She quoted the famous *General History of Taiwan*, written by Lien Heng and published in 1920: “Taiwan had no history. The Dutch pioneered it, the Koxinga Kingdom built it, and the Qing Empire managed it.” President Tsai noted that Taiwan’s indigenous peoples had lived in Taiwan “for thousands of years, with rich culture and wisdom...” She stated, “For 400 years, every regime that has come to Taiwan has brutally violated the rights of indigenous peoples through armed invasion and land seizure.” Thus, “the fabric of traditional societies was torn apart, and the collective rights of people were not recognized.”⁹

President Tsai also raised issues of language loss and how “successive governments have been negligent in the protection of indigenous cultures.” She raised the issue of the government storing nuclear waste on Orchid Island, inhabited by Taiwan’s indigenous Tao people (though unfortunately her speech referred to the “Yami tribe,” an outmoded and politically incorrect Chinese term for the Tao people).

⁶ Loa Lok-sin, “Democracy focus of celebrations,” *Taipei Times*, 21 May 2016. The word “influenced” should be “influence.”

⁷ For the full text of an English translation, see: “Full text of President Tsai Ing-wen’s apology to indigenous people,” *Focus Taiwan—CNA English News*, 1 August 2016, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201608010026.aspx> (date accessed: 6 February 2017).

⁸ For text and video of Prime Minister Rudd’s speech, see: Australian Government, “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples,” <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples> (date accessed: 6 February 2017).

⁹ “Full text of President Tsai Ing-wen’s apology to indigenous people,” *Focus Taiwan—CNA English News*, 1 August 2016, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201608010026.aspx> (date accessed: 6 February 2017).

President Tsai also apologized for the various gaps between Taiwan's indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in health, education, income, and political participation. She apologized for the failure of government agencies to give sufficient weight to the Indigenous Peoples Basic Law. For example, indigenous peoples have been indicted and even sentenced to prison for hunting when "the hunting was done in accordance with traditional customs, on traditional lands, and for non-transactional needs, and where the animals hunted were not protected by conservation laws."

According to President Tsai, remedies for all of these injustices are to be sought through an Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Commission as part of her Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Presidential Office. To describe these processes, she even used the Atayal indigenous words, *Balay* and *Sbalay*, to assist in her description of Truth and Reconciliation. Despite these excellent sentiments, widespread skepticism remains among both Taiwan's indigenous and non-indigenous communities about the possibility of achieving genuine Truth and Reconciliation. Let us look at some examples.

Truth and Reconciliation requires an investigation of past crimes, prosecution of offenders (with consideration of whether any apologies are genuine), and the possibility of compensation. This has not been done for the crimes of the Chinese Nationalist authoritarian government during the period of White Terror (1945-1988). It will be even more difficult in indigenous affairs where the timeframe goes back four hundred years. Even if the necessary documentation is at hand, will the government have the drive to conduct Truth and Reconciliation?

The storage of nuclear waste on Orchid Island has caused health issues for the Tao people. Yet, despite promises, nothing has been done to remove the waste, which was secretly deposited on Orchid Island without the knowledge of its people. President Tsai promised only to "direct relevant agencies to present an investigative report on the decision-making process of nuclear waste storage on Orchid Island." This statement strikes this writer as falling far short of a pledge to remove the waste. President Tsai's assurance of "appropriate compensation" is not helpful to those who have already died or will have their lives substantially shortened by radiation illnesses.

The sixteen recognized indigenous peoples in Taiwan are divided into two groups: the Highland and the Lowland. Excluded are a third group, the Plains indigenous or Pingpu peoples. These are the peoples who met the Dutch and later Chinese invasions, yet they do not have government recognition as indigenous peoples of Taiwan. President Tsai specifically apologized to the Plains indigenous peoples, but she made no promise to give them official recognition. Their history is different, though anthropological work indicates they maintained at least some of their indigenous ways despite intermarriage and language loss.¹⁰ The issue of formal government recognition of the Plains

¹⁰ See, for example: Melissa Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

indigenous peoples remains a difficult one, and many of the Lowland and Highland indigenous peoples say that the Plains indigenous peoples were racist against other indigenous peoples in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and also did not participate in the indigenous social movements of the late 1980s. So President Tsai's promise is vague, and on this issue there is great division among Taiwan's indigenous groups.

Another issue about which Taiwan's indigenous peoples have doubts is hunting. The rules state that any gun used in "traditional" hunting must have a barrel shorter than ninety-three centimeters in length, that it must be homemade, and that it must be loaded from the end of the barrel. Unfortunately, several of these homemade guns have exploded, blinding their users. Furthermore, as President Tsai stated, people have been sentenced and imprisoned for such hunting—and even for gathering fallen trees—because various authorities in Taiwan charge the indigenous peoples under their general laws. Legal coordination among jurisdictions has yet to take place, and many indigenous peoples remain skeptical that such coordination will in fact occur.

Finally, anti-indigenous racism is still widespread, even in contemporary Taiwanese society. A notable example occurred on 16 November 2016 when a prominent legislator of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Ms. Chiu Yi-ying, used a very racist Taiwanese term to refer to opposition legislators, including indigenous legislators. Her use of the Taiwanese word "*huan-a*," meaning "savage," is similar to such English-language racist terms as "n***er," "coon," or "slope." Such words should never be used and most certainly should not be used in a twenty-first century legislature. Chiu apologized two days later in the legislature, but her apology did not seem genuine to the indigenous people. The question is: will she be punished by the legislature or by her party? So far, neither the legislature nor the DPP has acted. Yet, such language by a leading DPP legislator raises questions about whether Taiwan society as a whole has sincerely matched the good will of President Tsai.

Such racism and lack of respect for President Tsai's apology among Taiwan's population appears widespread. The apology was broadcast on Taiwan's Indigenous TV station, but no other station sent TV teams to broadcast her speech. The next day, even though there was no major domestic or international news, the *Liberty Times*, Taiwan's largest circulating newspaper and a close supporter of the DPP government, did not carry news of the speech on its first page.

Thus, despite President Tsai's attempt to improve relations between Taiwan's indigenous communities and its populations descended from immigrants who make up the vast majority of Taiwan's population, there is much work to be done before Taiwan's indigenous peoples can live on their own island with both a good standard of living and without facing daily racism.

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