

1/4/2011



Last night Professor Lin organized an “eco-cultural” night at St Francis of Assisi Hall, Providence University, Taichung. Earlier, I had given a deep ecology presentation, sang some songs and once again showed the Franklin River blockade footage from Earth First! to an appreciative audience of teachers and students at the university. Various professors and the vice chancellor attended. Yih-ren seems very excited about the environmental activism and philosophy I bring here, I feel like I’m back in some groove that I

abandoned, oh, 5 or 6 years ago. The 200 seat auditorium was full for the eco-cultural night which started with music from 4 of the aboriginal tribes of Taiwan.

First came 5 elderly singers from the Bunun tribe in their full traditional regalia.



The MC for the night was my friend Neqou, also from the Bunun tribe in this picture you see him with the elders from his tribe. I first met him when he accompanied Professor Lin to the “Keeping the Fire – Cultural Integrity, Wild Law and Economic Development” conference at the University of Wollongong last year. Here’s how he and his presentation were described in the conference programme:

NEQOU SOQLUMAN
Mr. Neqou Soqluman,
Indigenous writer and

founder of Tongku Saveq Movement, Kalibuan community, Bunun tribe, Taiwan, is a prize-winning novelist in Taiwan, and currently completed his Master degree in ecology. He is deeply steeped in Bunun ecological knowledge, history, and mythology. He is experienced in walking and living in the region of what is now Yushan National Park, and is the founder of an organization ‘Sons of Yushan’, the ‘Mountain Guide Alliance of Bunun Tribe’s Culture and Ecology’. Yushan (Jade Mountain) is the Han Chinese name for the tallest mountain in Taiwan; the Bunun name is Tongku Saveq. Mr Soqluman is a co-founder of the Tongku Saveq movement, and a lecturer in the Tongku Saveq school, a community-based teaching and learning collaboration between Kalibuan community and Providence University.

The Concept of Home and the Foundation of Law: A Response from a Cultural Perspective of Bunun

‘Asang’, being a concept of home or homeland, could not only imply the boundary of practical life of Bunun people, but also be regarded as a point of view to perceive the world. ‘Samu’ is taken as Bunun’s Law to maintain sophisticated relationships in Asang. In the first two sections of presentation, the conception of homeland/world and the foundation of law will be articulated from a Native’s point of view. The development and vision of ‘Tongku Saveq’ movement will be the conclusion.

I remember him from the conference in his splendid white traditional regalia, the same as he now wears as MC to this concert.

The next performers were a woman and two men from the Seediq tribe from the mountains of Nantou county in central Taiwan. They are the group that will soon be portrayed in the movie Seediq Bale about the 1930 rebellion against the Japanese made by one of the most popular directors in Taiwan which will be released in September. They attacked the Japanese killing several hundred and their leaders eventually committed suicide. She sang and played a kind of xylophone, one of the men played drum, the other a bamboo jews harp.



The next performers were three young men from the Rukai tribe wearing traditional skirts. This is the tribe of great artists that I visited a few days before in the mountains of southern Taiwan and whose sculptures and paintings I speak of in [the first of these essays](#). The 4th group was two woman from the Atayal tribe (which I will visit in a few days). They sang the Atayal version of “Amazing Grace” .

Then Professor Lin hummed the tune of an

old song derived originally from the Pazeh, one of the plains tribe of aboriginals from middle Taiwan around Puli. The words of the song have been lost but the tune was preserved by a Presbyterian minister working among the Pazeh who took the tune, added Christian words and included it in a hymn book thus preserving the one and only tune we have from these people. .

Professor Lin told me the story of the mother of his friend, the liberal Presbyterian theologian Reverend Lai who was Pazeh and, like most aboriginals on the Taiwan plains back in those days, hid her aboriginal identity and

immersed herself in the dominant Han Chinese culture. Reverend Lai became interested in his heritage in the '80's by which time only one fluent Pazeh speaker remained. So, he learnt the language from this old woman, collected vocabulary and grammar and now, as the Pazeh people take more and more pride in their identity, more and more people are learning to speak the language again. I was to meet Reverend Lai a couple of days later, a radical priest, jailed for his pro-democracy activism during the dictatorship, he was later expelled by the Presbyterian's for his too-vehement advocacy for the aboriginals.

For the finale of the concert I performed Drew Dellinger's "Universe Jam" with full modulation though there were only a handful of people who would've understood it. Yih-ren gave a long explanation of it afterwards.

2/4

The next day we said goodbye to Providence University (where I had been housed for a few days in the suite for "visiting professors") and Professor Lin drove David and I on the next leg of our adventure once again turning east from the freeway and heading into the mountains to visit the Bunun tribe in Neqou's village called "Wangxiang" by the Chinese but called Kalibuan by the Bunun themselves. Neqou accompanied us with a busload of 35 students from the university who had elected to do a class called "People and Environment". Our first stop was the Xinyi Museum of Bunun Culture where we looked at Bunun tools, clothing and archeological relics and Neqou told some of their stories and legends.



Like one time when there was a huge flood and the Bunun had taken refuge on the top of their sacred mountain Tongku Saveq (Taiwan's 4000m highest peak known as "Jade Mountain" to the Chinese). Somehow they had lost fire but could see it a long way away on the top of another peak. Frog decided to help them and put fire on his back to bravely swim it across the flood. But it burned his back, he sank, the fire was extinguished and he became a toad. That's why toads have such rough black skin on their backs. Then a raven successfully carried it to them but was also singed en route and that's why this black bird now has red claws and beak.



of the riverbed right up to the school, the authorities decided to take no for an answer and leave the ruins as a grim reminder. Marokot cost the government alone A\$4 billion for reconstruction over 3 years let alone the cost to farmers and the rest of the people. 600 died, 500 in one village alone which was washed away and buried.

On the way we visit the ruins of a school which was built a long way above the river. Neqou says that when he was a boy, there was a deep valley there with the river at the bottom. Then it was destabilized in a typhoon and rebuilt. The same thing happened again and again it was rebuilt. When typhoon Marokot undermined the school for a 3rd time and the debris raised the level



As we enter Kalibuan village we are warned not to fart (it's a strong cultural taboo) and we and all the students close our eyes and hold hands while sharing a Bunun chant of welcome. We share a huge pot of fried rice at Neqou's home and then Yih-ren drives David and I to an open air hot spring bath on the 7th floor roof of this spa hotel talking philosophy naked and looking at the mountains as the day fades. Yih-ren tells interesting stories like how when the Ching dynasty from China occupied Taiwan, they put the aboriginals into 2 classes: the real barbarians (the tribes that lived in the mountains, hostile, aloof) and the mature barbarians, the tribes who inhabited the plains, were willing to learn Chinese and relate to the Chinese. Now the aboriginals put the Taiwanese of Han Chinese descent into 2 classes the barbarian Han (rednecks who have got no time for the aboriginals at all) and the mature Han who are more understanding and friendly.

Taiwan is half the size of Tasmania but has a population the same as the whole of Australia. Length 400km, width average 80km, 2nd highest population density in the world (632 people per square kilometre) after Bangla Desh.

When the Japanese colonized Taiwan in the late 19th century, they did a thorough survey of who was here. Interviewing each tribe, their first question was "Who are you?" When they got to the Bunun the answer they received was "Bunun" and so they became the Bunun Tribe and have been so ever since. However, "Bunun" means "human being" in their language, so their reply was "I am a human being" but was not understood.

The Japanese taught the aboriginals to use the Japanese language so some of the Providence students from Japan told around the fire that night of how their Bunun hosts spoke to them in what they described as elegant, classical Japanese no longer spoken in Japan but accidentally preserved in Taiwan.

Back to the freeway (past betel nut plantations galore on the unbelievably steep hillsides) and north till once again we head west into the mountains, this time to visit the Atayal aboriginals. First stop is the town of Jianshi where our host is the Atayal academic Daya Dakasi Da-Wei Kuan, Assistant Professor in the Department of Ethnology at the National Chengchi University.

3/4

Worked on my computer till late morning when we drove out with sundry crew who are gathering for this afternoon's "no dams" concert, young activists from a medical university, reporters from a radical newspaper etc to visit Daya's cousin Yawi, the artist. David took pix for me of Yawi's landscapes and the woman playing the



bamboo jews-harp and then we went to visit one of the the issues vexing these parts – huge ginger fields on steep slopes bought by Han Chinese gangsters via an aboriginal front-man stooge (no outsiders allowed to buy land by law) and plant it out with soil eroding, shallow rooted, high-value ginger, export the fertility and move on. Before this they did the same thing in Niquo's village, now those




fields are too infertile for ginger – they export fertility, topsoil and profits, leave behind exhausted land, poverty and social unrest. Politicians are in cahoots of course, the gangsters provided the funds needed for their election campaigns, reminds me of the way the Mining Mafia got rid of Kevin Rudd's proposed mining tax, "money doesn't talk, it swears, propaganda all is phony"- Bob Dylan said that. Its also against the law to cultivate slopes as steep as these but the penalties are puny when compared to the profits. And this is only one of 30 such ginger plantations established on aboriginal land in this district so far.

In the old days they used to practice sustainable swidden agriculture round here, millet based, allow the land to fallow and restore fertility. Then the Japanese colonizers came and demanded terraces for rice. Now its 21st century revved-up swidden, slash and burn dude!

“The people are ignorant or powerless” says Yih-ren, its hoped that the anti-dam campaign will conscientise, mobilise and empower them to address other burning issues also, like this one.

Several years ago Yawi was kidnapped and threatened by armed gangsters, a very brave man.

Utterly magic afternoon, lunch in the village, Daya’s mother’s restaurant, then round the corner to a community hall where the 4-hour anti-dam concert was scheduled to begin at 2.



音響轉
100年歌舞飛揚—尖石山谷音樂饗宴活動

尖石這塊土地是神所給予我們的，
服侍神不僅僅是在教會，更是要走出去關心部落，
我們更應該為這土地付出一點力量，
凝聚鄉民的力量，好讓我們保護美好家園。

活動時間 | 民國 100 年 4 月 3 日 下午 13:00
活動地點 | 尖石鄉文化館 (新竹縣尖石鄉嘉樂村 2 鄰 36 號)
活動大綱 | 音樂饗宴—古調傳唱
原民舞蹈
國際環保人士〔約翰·席德(John Seed)〕意見分享

聯絡方式 | 林小姐 0963-064-006 terutayal@yahoo.com.tw
賴小姐 0937-829-973 sabibatu.lai@gmail.com

承辦單位: 尖石鄉反興建水庫聯盟 | 尖石鄉尖石山生態觀光產業發展協會 | 獅屏基督長老教會



Half an hour before the gigs starting time of 2pm maybe 180 seats, packed and overflowing and there’s people packed in the aisles and up the back. I did several TV interviews. They asked me some stupid questions I couldn’t answer and I replied that in Australia we stopped a dam from destroying nature thru peaceful direct action involving thousands of people and I hope that people of Taiwan do the same. For the 2nd stupid question I answered that I understand that the purpose of the dam is to provide water for industry. I think that the taxpayer and aboriginal people and ecology shouldn’t have to pay for this but that industry should recycle and pay for their own water in an ecologically sustainable way.



Kicked off at 2 with the mayor saying the government should listen to the people about the dam, then the 36 women choir we had heard rehearsing at the church last night, various other speakers and performers, then it was my turn and I spoke about what an honour and how we had done non violent direct action when the government wouldn't listen in Australia. Sang the Franklin song and played the Franklin River bit of Earth First. People liked it a lot, called me back on the stage and presented me with the beautiful cotton cloak tied over one shoulder with the brown pattern, the traditional garb that the Atayal men wear and a woven colourful head band and tied it all on me, so beautiful, wore it till I got to Smangus.



The

Then the 2 elders from Smangus spoke against the dam and some young boys did some break dance stuff and young girls did a dance with the linked hands (like on the the wall paintings back in Wutai) and then they had a rock band, guitar, base, drumkit, keyboard, vocalist, all the community strutting their stuff and before you knew it the 4 hour event was nearly over and the last piece was another choir, ¾ women and I was feeling more and more moved as the afternoon progressed and realised that I really did love these people and the last group of young people singing took it up another level still, tears in my eyes, I really want the world to remain a beautiful place for them and I will continue struggling to make it so.



David translates the last song for me which one of them wrote herself:
We are living on the Earth

On the Earth there is a small island called Taiwan
And every time I think about her I feel safe
Because this is our home. There is green field and blue sky
They are blessings of God
This is our deepest love island.



Afterwards trying to express this to Yih-ren and he had been feeling the same way, I said that it felt like a blessing, like a healing and he said, yes, he too felt healed and then suddenly there were little 3 year olds wanting me to pick them up and hug them and then a dozen teenage girls all over me to have our photos taken and old men with tears in their eyes gripping my hand and Chris the journalist said she LOVED the Franklin segment with tears in her eyes and I said I'd send her one and it was time to split, our Smangus drivers were waiting and a tiny boy and a tiny girl danced around me thru the parking lot. Its been a long time since my last experience which deserved the word "ecstasy".

Photos by David Reid

MORE [PHOTOS](#)

[Continued Taiwan 3](#)