

The Role of Taiwan's Indigenes in Resolving Identity and More

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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The year 2012 approaches, but the elections are only one of many issues that the island nation of Taiwan faces. An important one is Taiwan's identity and its minority issues. Taiwan's indigenous peoples were once majority rulers on this island, but they have been a distinct minority for some time. They are not only a minority, but one that has found itself too often marginalized and plagued with an uncertainty about what their role, function and place in Taiwan's society and government is or should be. Solving such questions will test the indigenous collective wisdom and character but it will also help Taiwan. In this they may well keep in mind the noted statement of Hillel, a statement with many levels and nuances in interpretation. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now then when?" For if indigenes are not for themselves, there is little chance that society in general will be for them.

In working for themselves, one challenge is that the indigenes maintain a sense of common unity. True, the indigenous nations on Taiwan (there are 14 recognized ones at present) have separate identities each with its own issues, values and traditions, but this in itself has been part of what brought about their problem. As separate nations, they have a sense of their own special traditions, ancestral grounds and territory, but they have never felt a sense that all of Taiwan was theirs; each primarily defended its own select territory. Because of this, Taiwan's colonizers were often able to play one indigenous nation against the other; the colonizers allied with and/or employed first this indigenous nation and then that one often to the detriment of all. This is readily seen in the Dutch, Spanish, Qing and Japanese eras; there was never a unified resistance to colonizers and their imposed ideas.

Since each indigenous nation was often only for itself at the expense of other indigenous nations, all eventually lost. During the Qing era, for example, indigenous militias were used against uprisings of various rebellious indigenes as well as rebellious Hoklo and Hakka. The soon to be released film, "Sediq Bale," treats the Wushe uprising of particular Sediq against the Japanese. When the Japanese put down that uprising, ironically some Sediq as well as other indigenous people fought on the side of the Japanese against the rebels. "If I am only for myself, what am I?"

That was the past, but what about today? It stands to reason that when it comes to indigenous rights on Taiwan, all indigenous nations should support each other and not just look out for their own. This attitude especially comes into play as they select who will represent them in the Legislative Yuan where they have six reserved seats to represent 14 nations. Too often their legislators are more easily bought off by accepting immediate short term personal crumbs from whatever the ruling party is instead of looking out for the continued long term benefits of all. But here is where another twist comes in. These legislators should also look out for what is of value

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for all of Taiwan. "If I am only for myself what am I?" It is in this expanded and deeper area that Hillel may help shed some light on Taiwan's problems with identity and why the indigenous people have a vital role.

Taiwan has always suffered identity issues brought on by the imposed identities from each successive colonizer. It can be granted that the needs of the 14 nations appear to be so large and immediate that they may not even be tempted to think about their contribution to the needs of Taiwan. However that issue remains and can only be filled by them. They have an unusual tight rope to walk here where they need to seek the best benefit for themselves, but at the same time the best benefit for Taiwan. They also do not want to face the problem of absorption as suffered by the Pingpu people.

The Japanese were the first nation to not only control the whole island of Taiwan but to also try to put their sense of imagined community on all. They were the first to pacify Taiwan's free eastern side. Sediq Bale demonstrates how late the last vestiges of that final pacification came (1930). The fleeing diaspora Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the latest colonizers of Taiwan, in turn had their troubles in pacifying Taiwan and imposing their sense of imagined community on it. The majority Taiwanese resisted from 2/28 on and finally got their freedom in 1996 when all could choose their president. This was a decade after the KMT was forced to relinquish martial law and allow a two-party state. But what has this to do with the indigenes and Taiwan's identity?

The development of Taiwan's identity has gone hand in hand with resistance to each successive colonizer and who would know more about colonizers than the indigenes. Taiwan is still recovering from the Han centric ideology imposed by the KMT where all Taiwanese after having had to learn how they were part of the Japanese Empire, then had to next learn how they were part of a sham and dying republic brought over from the continent by a deposed and fleeing diaspora.

"The art of free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes that satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision must ultimately decay either from anarchy or from the slow atrophy of a lie stifled by useless shadows." These words of Alfred North Whitehead were written to address the issue of maintaining a symbolic code but they also fit the maintenance of traditions and identity. Reverence for and maintenance of past traditions must be linked to enlightened adaptation to the future. Who have faced this challenge most if not Taiwan's indigenous people?

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Taiwan is more and more being recognized as the root and source of the vast "Austronesian Empire" that spans the Pacific Ocean. Until recently, this reality of more than 5000 years was almost lost sight of as well as the fact that the diaspora that came to Taiwan in the 18th and 19th centuries came for different reasons and are different from the diaspora that came in the 20th century.

Technically the Taiwan of today is a multi-party, multi-ethnic society yet in reality in many ways it is not. In this alleged "multi-ethnic" society, it is primarily Taiwan's indigenous people that are most of all by their history and DNA castigated to a secondary role and suffer the prejudice and treatment of being considered second class citizens. The irony of this prejudice is heightened by the fact that some 85 per cent of Taiwanese share the same DNA. The main causal difference is that too many Taiwanese still only see with the vision, propaganda and eyes imposed on them by their most recently dispossessed colonizer the Han-centric KMT.

This is why Taiwan's indigenes, their past, their traditions and even their intermarriage with continued diaspora and colonizers of Taiwan are crucial to Taiwan's identity. If they can resolve the challenge of Hillel's words, then all of Taiwan can and Taiwan can face the next outsider who wants to claim the island whether from across the Strait or elsewhere. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"

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