

Taiwan's Aborigines Suffer More Than Morakot

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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Typhoon Morakot did more than expose the incompetence and lack of leadership in the Ma administration; it highlighted another salient issue in Taiwan, the plight of its aboriginal people. Like many indigenous people suffering the fates of past colonialism, these people are pulled in opposite directions. Tugging on the one side is the wish to maintain their traditional life styles and identities; on the other side are the demands for survival and dignity in the modern, fast-paced, high-tech society surrounding them. As a result, they are being marginalized to the point of extinction. Even if they do fit in, at best, they often face the life of second class citizens teetering on the brink of welfare. If ever the aboriginal community needed vision and leadership, it is now.

Where to find it? The sight of aboriginal villages washed away and wiped out after Morakot has been horrendous; worse, however, is the realization that the causes were more than the typhoon. The devastation came as the result of lack of strong environmental policies and how mountainsides denuded of trees are unable to stop mudflow. Worse still is the fact that the decisions on deforestation and vulnerability were made by profiteers and forces outside the sphere of influence of the villagers.

Living in isolation on ancient ancestral lands, aborigines are often removed from the decision making processes around them. Further without pursuing pertinent related education and degrees that would help legitimize members and businesses in influencing the government's decision making processes, they find their lives controlled by the outside.

The aborigines do live and participate in Taiwan's democracy, but they have not yet learned to use their democratic vote to their advantage. Like any minority, they must fit in. But in fitting in while certain minority advantages are available in education and such, their leadership has no grand plan for their people. Instead, for example, they are satisfied with "vote buying handouts" and small gifts. The aboriginal vote has always favored the wealthy Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) like a dog begging for scraps. This in effect is selling their birthright for a mess of pottage.

As they pick up scraps, the aborigines have been unable to grasp the larger reality that the KMT is a Sino-centric party influenced by its hierarchical Confucian philosophy. In such, no matter how pleasant or inflated the talk, the aborigines will always rank as second class citizens and/or "Uncle Toms." Further, they ignore how they have already been culturally denigrated and stereotyped as lazy, and drunkards with questionably loose morals by the same hand that gives them a dole.

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One way to counter this cultural stereotyping is to elect new leaders, those who are able to relate to and stress a Taiwanese identity for them. For by DNA it has been demonstrated that 85 per cent of Taiwanese have aboriginal blood. This must be repeatedly emphasized. For with its admission and truth, aborigines are then not a minority but part and parcel of the majority. They share a common heritage with the most Taiwanese. Only one group, the waishengren are not one with them; yet it is those same waishengren who buy them off cheaply and look down on them.

In establishing a true vision of fitting in, the aborigines must realize that their best hope is in the building this Taiwanese identity. It is only within the framework of that Taiwanese identity that they will be able to find and maintain a true dignity and a competitive and cultural advantage. Because of this, the current president, Ma Ying-jeou, is actually their worst enemy. Ma repeatedly has tried to emphasize the fabrication of zhonghua minzu with all of its hierarchical implications and past baggage. Ma's patronizing paternalism has already been demonstrated on numerous occasions by treating aborigines like children and second class citizens.

The answer to aboriginal problems will likewise not be found in legislators like Kao Chin (Gao Jin) Su-mei pandering to the money of Beijing for Beijing operates from the same paternalistic, hierarchical paradigm. A simple look at the plight of the Tibetans, and the Uyghurs demonstrates the results of that hierarchy. Both have become aliens and suffer in their own lands. If the aborigines think they will fare better because of temporary handouts from China, they are sadly mistaken. Morakot should be their wake up call. Where have 50 years of handouts from the KMT gotten them?

Instead, an additional alliance that aborigines of all tribes must forge is that with the environmentalists in Taiwan, both in politics and life. This is a natural alliance since all want to preserve and protect the ancestral lands of Taiwan. Included in this must be the commitment of some aborigines to long term education in these matters, just as some must make a commitment to areas like Austronesian studies. Such studies can also give them dignity. The fact that most recent research points to how the vast Austronesian Empire across the Pacific originated in Taiwan should spur them on to recapture their past dignity and rightful place. Pride in the past will never be found in an outmoded zhonghua minzu, but in an empire that they once did build, why it was lost, and what happened to their identity.

Source: [Jerome F. Keating's writings](#)