

Tsai honest in apology to nation's Aborigines

Written by Zhang Ming-yo 張明燾
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Youths from the 16 recognized Aboriginal communities recently took to Ketagalan Boulevard in front of the Presidential Office Building in Taipei, calling on the government to “return justice to Aborigines” with real actions.

The first apology to Taiwan's Aborigines occurred on Oct. 16, 1991, when then-Yilan County commissioner Yu Shyi-kun (游錫堃) apologized to the Kavalan community. This time, an apology was given by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

Aboriginal singer Panai Kusui, who performed at Tsai's inauguration on May 20, also participated in the protest. It seems that Panai was not pleased with Tsai's apology, as Aborigines had hoped that the president would come out from her office to make an official apology, instead of offering an apology in a building that represents colonialism.

However, compared with former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) — who said: “If you come into the city, [I will see you as] a human being,” when he visited the Sijhou Aboriginal Community in New Taipei City's Sindian District (新店區) — Tsai has displayed tremendous sincerity.

How Han Chinese — or Pai-lang as Aborigines would call them — have long abused Aborigines can be seen from three perspectives.

The first is historic. Four hundred years ago, the Dutch and the Spanish began colonizing Taiwan. In the beginning, only western Taiwan was colonized, with foreign powers gradually expanding their territories, clashing with Pingpu Aborigines. They were followed by Koxinga (鄭經), who slaughtered Aborigines. Later, Taiwan was colonized by the Japanese, who were replaced by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government when it retreated from China in 1949 at the end of the Chinese Civil War.

All of these foreign powers appropriated Aboriginal lands by force, turning them into “experimental forests,” “conservation zones” or “national parks,” which hampered Aboriginal hunting traditions. Not once did they take the trouble to negotiate with Aborigines before doing those things.

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Second, there is the social perspective. The urban-rural mission of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan destroyed the myth of Wu Feng (吳鳳) — who is said to have sacrificed his life to “correct” the head-hunting custom of the Tsou people — and pulled down Wu’s statue. Many other social issues persist, such as Aboriginal prostitution; nuclear waste deposited on Orchid Island (Lanyu, 蘭嶼), which is home to the Tao people, and its ensuing health problems, such as cancer; and discrimination, of which the incident resulting in the death of Tang Ying-shen (唐英生), a Tsou teenager, is one obvious example. There was also the KMT, which on one hand stole Aboriginal property, while on the other it offered minor perks, such as free coffins for Aboriginal families and subsidies on their traditional rituals or ceremonies. However, land that was expropriated from Aborigines by the KMT should be returned.

The third perspective is economic. It is well-known that differences in resource distribution are an important means of controlling people. Dealers often purchase produce at low prices in Aboriginal villages in Nantou County’s Renai Township (仁愛) and sell them at high prices in cities. Aboriginal villages are powerless to fight back and are forced to accept the exploitation.

Tsai’s official apology to Aborigines on Monday last week was the beginning of the end of 400 years of discrimination. On Wednesday last week, she even stepped out of the Presidential Office Building to speak with and apologize to Aboriginal demonstrators. This shows great sincerity on her part, which is worthy of recognition.

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Translated by Ethan Zhan

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