

Taiwan might have been isolated, but it is not alienated from the rest of the world. Semantics? No, not at all.

Despite the global constraints and pressures weighing upon it, Taiwan has been able to assert itself fairly well, as many US strategic experts, academics and others familiar with Taiwan's unique status agree.

The world can be the proverbial oyster, if one works hard to open it.

One bright spot visible for Taiwan in New York recently was the lively interest generated in the island's indigenous people. A seminar on Taiwan's indigenous people was held at the premises of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in New York, jointly organized by TECO, the permanent mission of Kiribati to the UN, the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, and the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy at Harvard University.

The large turnout at the seminar included not only Taiwanese and Americans, but also other nationalities, suggesting that culture does not have narrow geographic confines. After all, Beethoven may have been born in the German city of Bonn, but his music transcends all geographic boundaries.

An area of key interest is the commonality of cultural and linguistic characteristics of Taiwan's indigenous people with the culture and language of the indigenous people in other parts of Asia, particularly the small islands in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

In an interview with this author on the sidelines of the TECO seminar, Council of Indigenous Peoples Deputy Minister Calivat Gadu highlighted the "striking similarities" in the cultural and linguistic characteristics of Taiwan's indigenous people, for example, with Malaysia's Sarawak state in the Borneo region.

Aborigines could help build bridges

Written by Manik Mehta
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Gadu attributed the similarities with the indigenous people of Sarawak, as well as with the small island states in the Pacific Ocean, to the common heritage they shared in ancient times before tribes from Taiwan reportedly migrated to other parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

Gadu has already been quietly, but effectively pursuing what experts describe as “indigenous people’s diplomacy” by establishing contacts with the indigenous people of Southeast Asia, garnering sympathies in these countries of the region; visits have been exchanged between the indigenous people of Taiwan and those of other regions.

Gadu led a large delegation comprising mayors, township heads and other public officials in February last year to Kuala Lumpur and Sarawak. During that visit, he also met Malaysian Deputy Minister of Agriculture Nogeh Gumbek.

“We were very touched by the hospitality of our Malaysian hosts. Ranu Ank Mina, the Sarawak state legislator received us. We visited the traditional long houses in Sarawak and held talks with the state’s indigenous people. We saw so many similarities with them, one such similarity being that like Taiwanese, Malaysia’s indigenous people also sit around the fire and talk to each other,” Gadu said.

Besides Malaysia, Gadu toured Indonesia, whose indigenous people also share common cultural and linguistic features with their counterparts in Taiwan.

“There is literature, based on research, suggesting the similarities, for example, in words in the Malaysian or Indonesian language. In many cases, the pronunciation of numbers is almost similar,” he said.

Gadu referred to research written by Peter Blust, a noted linguistic academic at the Hawaiian Institute, who suggests that Taiwan’s indigenous people might have migrated to Southeast Asian region centuries ago.

In a 1988 article titled “Austranesian Homeland: a Linguistic Perspective,” Blust had highlighted the linguistic similarities.

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The deputy minister is keen to maintain and intensify ties with the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries. An Indigenous People's Day, organized in Taiwan in August last year, attracted representatives of Sarawak non-governmental organizations (NGO). A delegation of Taiwanese indigenous people also visited Sarawak where they showcased their indigenous products.

Gadu said that a so-called Austranesian Forum has been created to promote interaction and common interests among the indigenous people of Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, New Zealand, Palau and other Pacific island nations. The Austranesian Forum could become an important diplomatic vehicle for promoting Taiwan's image in a number of countries, playing an unofficial, but effective role parallel to that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Taiwan was "trying very hard" to protect and promote the ethnic culture, languages and traditions of the nation's indigenous people, he said.

Indeed, Taiwan passed legislation in 2017 aimed at protecting the indigenous peoples' rights and cultural traditions. This law has not gone unnoticed among other groups in the Asia-Pacific region, with some even calling it "exemplary."

Gadu said that in January, a plan was mooted to forge a closer relationship between Taiwan's indigenous people and Southeast Asian indigenous communities.

"This plan envisages a number of activities, such as discussing topical issues affecting us, our culture, language, etc, and promoting exchanges among ourselves. We are also keen to work together in industries offering opportunities to collaborate with the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia," he said.

Taiwan's indigenous people could build on these contacts with Southeast Asia's indigenous people to create a unique form of diplomacy to forge closer relations. This quiet yet effective form of diplomacy might lack the glamour and media hype associated with conventional diplomacy, but it can produce good results.

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Such people-to-people contacts, by virtue of its spontaneity and devoid of any political agenda, can produce something very important — goodwill and understanding for each other. The idea is to build up a strong bilateral edifice with the individual countries of the region. The common people's language and their way of conducting their interaction are, clearly, different and unencumbered by the dictates of protocol.

“We connect with each other through our hearts,” a Taiwanese indigenous person told me.

How true!

Such diplomacy should be encouraged. It will open up doors and avenues of opportunities for Taiwan's politicians, officials, businesspeople, artists and others, even if Taiwan does not enjoy diplomatic recognition from much of the world.

Manik Mehta is a New York-based journalist with extensive writing experience on foreign affairs, diplomacy, global economics and international trade.

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