

Taiwan was not 'primitive'

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Cultural sensitivity toward Aborigines has been called into question again after National Chengchi University president Kuo Ming-cheng (郭明政) said on Monday that “400 years ago, Taiwan was a primitive society where people did not have sufficient clothes to cover their bodies,” when welcoming a Czech delegation.

Kuo made the statement with regard to Taiwan’s modern technological advancements, human rights achievements and stellar performance in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, of which the nation should certainly be proud.

However, it was completely unnecessary to make such a juxtaposition. It is a given that almost any country is significantly more advanced than it was 400 years ago, but to call life back then “primitive” is problematic, as the Aborigines already had a rich and vibrant culture that was only primitive through the eyes of the waves of colonizers who exploited them and encroached on their land.

Yes, the Aborigines were non-literate, with different values and ways of life from the Han settlers, but calling them primitive perpetuates the colonial prejudices that led to them being branded “savages” and “barbarians” who needed to be “tamed” or “civilized” for the next few centuries.

It does not matter whether Kuo meant any ill will, but with such a violent and traumatic history and continuing problems today, cultural sensitivity is extremely important regardless of his intentions.

Furthermore, there were already a handful of Han Chinese settlers in Taiwan 400 years ago, and the Dutch established a colony in Taiwan in 1624 and the Spanish in 1626. Would Kuo consider them “primitive” as well?

Many Internet users took umbrage at the “did not have sufficient clothes to cover their bodies” part as well. Kuo used the Mandarin idiom *yi bu bi ti* (衣不蔽體), which could be interpreted in many ways. According to the Ministry of Education’s official online dictionary, besides the literal definition, the idiom implies that the people were “dressed in rags” and “living in extreme

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poverty,” which the Aborigines were certainly not 400 years ago. Some are indeed disadvantaged today due to centuries of marginalization, cultural destruction and blatant discrimination, which makes the comment even more inappropriate.

The appropriate thing to do in this situation is to apologize and help raise awareness of the problem, as discrimination remains an issue in Taiwanese society on so many levels.

However, Kuo's apology appears to have made things worse, as he tried to justify his claims, saying that historical documents indicate that at least some Aborigines were scantily clad. He further compared “a primitive society where people did not have sufficient clothes to cover their bodies” to an uncut jade, where people lived as one with the heavens and Earth.

“It does not mean that they were backward and uncivilized,” he said.

Being correct does not mean anything when it comes to cultural sensitivity, and even if the documents indicate as such, it does not mean that Kuo's statement was not offensive — and he committed the offense again by repeating it in his apology.

He went on to praise the Aborigines, saying Taiwan would not have had its accomplishments today without their “exuberant vitality,” adding that people should thank them for what they have given Taiwan.

That really does not help things and perpetuates a colonizer mentality. What have they given, when everything was actually taken from them?

This came from the head of one of the top higher-education institutions in Taiwan. Kuo should own up to what he said and use his position to educate the public on why it was inappropriate, not desperately try to excuse himself. It is only making him look worse and is setting a bad example.

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