

# *The Indigenous People of Taiwan: a Still Too Unknown Part of the Christian World*

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Taiwan's total population of about 24 million people includes a little bit more than five hundred thousand indigenous people<sup>1</sup>, also called aborigines or Yuanzhumin (原住民) in Mandarin Chinese. Those indigenous people are the descendants of various tribes that migrated to the Island through three main migration periods during the Pre-Neolithic, Neolithic and Iron ages, i.e., long before the coming of the first Chinese colonists, also called Han people (漢族)<sup>2</sup>, who began to emigrate to Taiwan only in the 16th century<sup>3</sup>. Today Taiwan laws recognize the existence of 16 different indigenous tribes, each of which has its own culture and language. Those tribes are all related to the big Malay-Polynesian lingual-cultural family and live mainly in the Island's central mountain ranges (Atayal tribe 泰雅族, Sediq tribe 賽德克族, Truku tribe 太魯閣族, Saisiyat tribe 賽夏族, Bunun tribe 布農族, Thao tribe 邵族, Tsou tribe 鄒族, Hla'alua tribe 拉阿魯哇族, Rukai tribe 魯凱族 and Paiwan tribe 排灣族), along the Pacific coast

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<sup>1</sup> According to the statistics from the Ministry of the Interior of Taiwan's government, on January 1, 2015, the aborigines numbered about 545,000 in a total population of more than 24 million, i.e., around 23,430,000 citizens and 620,000 foreigners. It is worth noting that twenty-five years earlier, Taiwan's indigenous population was only about 345,000. The difference does not come from a sudden increase in birth rate, but rather from a legal reform in the year 2001 which allows a much wider range of Taiwan's population to keep or recover its aboriginal identity: in the past only the children from a male aborigine could keep the aboriginal identity; now any Taiwanese, who can prove that only one of his four grandparents is of aboriginal blood, can get the aborigine identity.

<sup>2</sup> "Han people" is a generic term which is commonly used in China to define the great majority of its population which is of Chinese culture in opposition to the ethnic minorities.

<sup>3</sup> See Liu Yi-chang, "Prehistory and Austranesians in Taiwan: an Archeological Perspective" in Blundell, D. (ed), *Austranesian Taiwan: Linguistics, History, Ethnology and Prehistory*, Taipei, 2001, (Shung Ye Museum of Taiwan Aborigines), pp 366-398.

(Amis tribe 阿美族, Kavalan tribe 噶瑪蘭族, Sakizaya tribe 撒奇萊雅族, Puyuma tribe 卑南族 and Kanakanavu tribe 卡那卡那富族) and on the small Orchid Island (Yami tribe 雅美族 or Dawu tribe 達悟族). The Taiwan law however, does not take into account the numerous Taiwan citizens who are the descendants from mixed marriages between Han people and aborigines from the western plain. Those mixed-blood plain aborigines are less visible than the legally identified aborigines, because they have been slowly assimilated into the mainstream Han culture during the last four centuries. The western plain aborigines are called under the generic term of Pingpu (平埔族), which in fact groups together various tribes, each of which, in the past, possessed its own culture and language.

Beyond Taiwan's borders, a significant event of its indigenous people's history is still too often unknown: the fact that nearly 90% of the local aborigines converted to Christianity between 1950 and 1970, mainly to the Presbyterian faith (長老教會) or to Catholicism (天主教會). Early studies explained such a conversion by the deep poverty of the local aboriginal population at that time, which made it especially open to the Christian doctrine that was preached by foreign ministers, who were then distributing, free of charge, a lot of basic goods, such as rice, flour, oil, sugar, milk powder, canned food and secondhand clothes. This explanation is, however, a little bit too simplistic, because the Protestant and Catholic missionaries also provided at the same period much help to numerous poor families of the local Han people, who today account for only 2% of Taiwan's Christians.

In the Chinese-English bilingual book on the indigenous Catholic community of Taiwan that I wrote in collaboration with Prof. Sun Ta-chuan, and Mrs. Chan Chang-hui who is my colleague at the Research Center for Aboriginal Theology of St. Bellarmine Faculty of Theology at Fu Jen University<sup>4</sup>, I pointed out a few complementary reasons for such a massive conversion:

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<sup>4</sup> See 丁立偉、詹嫦慧、孫大川／合著（2004）：活力教會-天主教在台灣原住民地區的過去現在未來，台北，輔大神學院原住民神學研究中心／主編，光啟文化，15-56 頁。Lardinois, O., Chan Chang-hui, Sun Ta-chuan, *Church Alive: The Catholic Church among the Aboriginal People of Taiwan*, Taipei, 2004, pp.75-97.

- The spiritual vacuum left by 50 years of Japanese colonial rule from 1895 to 1945, which forbade, or at least strictly limited, some of the most important aspects of the traditional religion of the aborigines, as for example, the worship of hunted heads, shamanism and most of the rites related to the culture of the millet;
- The instruction of local aborigines in the Christian faith with the help of well trained natives, young Protestant ministers or professional Catholic catechists, who made much easier the acculturation of the faith message into the indigenous mental world, because they knew well their own culture and native language;
- The numerous social, educational and medical institutions which the Protestants and Catholic Churches opened for the service of the aborigines;
- A quite traditional and, most often, still strictly hierarchical society where the conversion of a clan or family leader almost naturally led to the conversion of the whole clan or family;
- On the Presbyterian side, the early foundation, not far away from Hualien City, of a theological college, the Yushanshenxueyuan (玉山神學院), especially set up to train indigenous ministers. From the start, and despite a strong opposition from the government, the College insisted on the preservation and use of the native languages to preach the Gospel and to celebrate the liturgy;
- On the Catholic side, a real openness to integrate into the Christian faith and liturgy the traditional worship of the ancestors, as well as to maintain some old feasts, as for example, the Amis tribe's annual harvest festival, the Atayal tribe's rituals for the dead, the Mayasvi festival of the Tsou tribe, the biannual Ailingqing festival of the Saisiyat, while such rites or feasts were at that time rigorously forbidden by the Protestant churches.

When the massive conversion of most of Taiwan's aboriginal people came to an end, just at the beginning of the early seventies, a big challenge for their still quite fragile faith appeared: the sudden

and fast industrialization of the Island, which led most of the middle-aged indigenous people from the mountains or Pacific coast villages to migrate to the growing populous suburbs of the west coast's big cities, as around Taipei, Taichung, Tainan and Kaohsiung. To confront the new challenge, the Presbyterian and the Catholic Churches promoted in suburban areas a different policy with relative success from place to place. The Presbyterian leaders decided to encourage the creation of urban ethnic churches, i.e., new strictly Amis, Atayal or Bunun people's communities of worship which were led by pastors of their own ethnic group. The Catholic hierarchy tried instead to integrate slowly the indigenous peoples from various ethnic groups into the local communities of the already existing parishes, which were then mainly used by Han parishioners. The main result of such a move is that, still today, Taiwan's Presbyterian and Catholic urban church communities often manifest quite a different appearance: most of the Presbyterian urban communities gather members from the same ethnic group which makes the preservation of each people's own culture, language and tradition much easier; while Catholic urban parishes are often "rainbow colored," multi-ethnic communities of parishioners who sometimes use different languages in the same liturgical service. It is worth noting that, about the same time, a growing number of the aborigines who remained in the Presbyterian and Catholic Churches began to feel much inspired and attracted by the Neo-Pentecostal movement (新五旬運動) or its Catholic version that is called the Charismatic movement (神恩復興運動會). At that time too, a few less mainstream Protestant churches and pseudo-Christian sects began to attract not a few aborigines from the Presbyterian and Catholic Churches who had migrated to the cities' suburbs, as for example, the True Jesus Christ Church (真耶穌教會), the Central Church (中央教會), or even the Mormons (摩門教) and the Jehovah Witnesses (耶和華見證人).

Besides the industrialization and the migration to urban areas, another important characteristic of the recent history of Taiwan's aborigines has been the growing affirmation of their specific identity, the renewal of their cultures and the revival of their

maternal languages.<sup>5</sup> The emancipation movement of the indigenous people, in which the Presbyterian Church played a key role, began about the same time as the movement for the democratization of Taiwan, i.e., in the early eighties. The exact key year was the year 1983, with the creation of a small magazine by a few aboriginal students of Taiwan National University, “The Voice of the High Mountain Youth,” Gaoshanqing (高山青), which published various papers on the abuses that were then committed against the local indigenous communities, such as the shameful exploitation of most of their blue-collar workers or the prostitution of too many of their under-aged girls. One year later followed the founding of the A.T.A., “The Alliance for the defense and the progress and the rights of the Taiwan Aboriginal people” (Yuanzhumin Quanli Zujinhui 原住民族權利促進會), which was first led by the famous indigenous Protestant singer Hu De-fu (胡德夫). The A.T.A initiated the “movement to recover our name” (Zhengming Yundong 正名運動), which succeeded in forcing the government to change the legal appellation of “Mountain Compatriots” (Shandi Tongbao 山地同胞) to “Aboriginal People” (Yuanzhumin 原住民). Later on, i.e., after the abrogation of martial law in 1987, the emancipation movement showed a clear acceleration with much progress at many other levels:

- The “movement to recover our land” (Huan Wo Tudi Yundong 還我土地運動), which led in 1988 to a new land legislation in the mountain areas;
- The introduction, in the early nineties, of two hours a week of maternal native language into the curriculum of government primary and junior high school;
- The creation of a national level “Commission for Aboriginal Affairs” in 1996 (Xinzhengyuan Yuanzhumin Weiyanhui 行政院原住民委員會);
- The setting up of a new legislation in the late nineties to protect the rights of indigenous workers;

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<sup>5</sup> See Lardinois, O., *Civilisation chinoise et minorités ethniques: l’émancipation des aborigènes de Taiwan. Un modèle?* Séminaire d’études taiwanaises, working paper 3, L’Harmattan-Academia, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2012, pp. 49-56.

- The proclamation in 2005 of a presidential order to protect the fundamental rights of the aboriginal population.

Such progress not only developed into the democratization of the Taiwan political landscape, but was also fostered by the emergence of an indigenous intellectual elite, which had been mainly educated, thanks to the long-term educational promotion programs led by the Presbyterian and Catholic Churches. The two Churches not only trained quite a few outstanding ministers, Protestant pastors or Catholic priests, they also helped many lay aborigines, male and female, partly from underprivileged families, to have access to higher education. Among the Christian indigenous leaders who can be associated with the aboriginal emancipation movement, here are a few examples:

- Rev. Yohani (尤哈尼), a Presbyterian minister from the Bunun tribe and an ardent promoter of aboriginal self-rule, who became the President of the Commission for Aboriginal Affairs during the first mandate of president Chen Shui-bian;
- Walis-Pilin (瓦歷斯-貝林) from the Sediq tribe, a former Catholic priest who, when he was a legislator, initiated laws that allow aborigines to continue to hunt in the mountain areas on certain conditions, and who served as President of the Commission for Aboriginal Affairs from 2004 to 2008;
- The famous Protestant novelist Walis-Nogan (瓦歷斯-諾幹) from the Atayal tribe, who wrote moving novels about the aboriginal soul confronted by modernised society;
- The Catholic writer Sun Ta-chuan (孫大川) from the Puyuma tribe, who is, and has been for a long time already, a devoted promoter of aboriginal literature in Mandarin Chinese, as well as one of the initiators of the teaching of traditional aboriginal values in mountain primary and junior high-schools;
- Rev. Puxin-Tali (布興-大立) from the Atayal tribe, who is the present Rector of Yushan Theological College, as well as an ardent promoter of native theology;

- Msgr. John-Baptist Tseng (曾建次主教) from the Puyuma tribe, who is the first and only Catholic aboriginal bishop from Taiwan, as well as a devoted promoter of the indigenous acculturation by Christian arts and liturgy.

There are still many other aspects of life of the Christian aboriginal community of Taiwan, which can be a source of inspiration for other Catholic or Protestant members of ethnic minorities on mainland China or in other countries. Here below are a few more examples to show how this quite young and lively part of the Christian World is very worthy to be better known:

- Taiwan accounts for a few beautiful Christian sanctuaries which are partly or fully decorated with local indigenous works of art, as wood or stone sculptures, paintings, liturgical clothes, potteries, etc. One of the most worthy places to visit in that regard is the Catholic church of the Paiwan village of Jinlun (金崙天主堂) in Taitung County.
- Both the Presbyterians and the Catholic Church have already produced Bibles and liturgical books in various tribal languages, which contribute to the preservation of the native languages that would otherwise fast disappear.
- Taiwan Churches run not a few non-government organisations (NGOs) that are doing wonderful work in terms of prevention against alcoholism and violence, which are still quite serious problems, and symptoms of a lack of self-esteem and adaptation to modern life among many low-income indigenous families living in rural areas.
- Two Catholic religious congregations working in the counties of Hualien and Taitung on the Pacific Coast are mainly made up of indigenous sisters from various tribes, who are doing outstanding work at the service of underprivileged children, women and elders: the St. Martha Institute (聖瑪爾大修女會) and the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (聖十字架慈愛修女會).
- For a few years now already, the Presbyterian Church has run Yushan Theological College and the Catholic Church has run the Research Center for Aboriginal Theology at Fu

Jen's St. Robert Bellarmine Faculty of Theology. Each publishes a yearly magazine which focus on local aborigines' theological and pastoral issues: the "Yushan Theological College Journal" 《玉山神學院報》 and the "Bulletin of Aboriginal Theology and Pastoral Work" 《輔神原住民神學牧靈年刊》 which is often more simply called 《原牧》.

- A few well-known Taiwan anthropologists, such as Huang Ying-kuei (黃應貴), Hsie Hsi-chun (謝世忠) and Wang Mei-Hsia (王梅霞), have recently published interesting papers which mention the transforming and empowering role of Christian religion among the local indigenous communities.