

Religion as Identity:

The Changing Face of Paiwan Spirituality

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When discussing religion, especially the indigenous religion of a colonized group, the researcher is forced into a very specific rhetoric. Discourse revolves around a portrait of indigenous spirituality as permanent and unchanging. It appears to have survived the test of a length of time eons beyond the tumultuous history of more prominent religion, and into the present in a pure form. In truth, just like many other religions, the spirituality of the Paiwan has adapted and survived through changes in government and shifts both inside and around them.

This paper will explore elements of Paiwan spirituality that have been changed through outside influences, or adapted to changing times. Each topic will be presented in its simplest form, revolving around descriptions dating from the mid 1960s and 1980s, by anthropologists belonging to groups outside the Paiwan. Initially, a description of the current climate of Paiwan culture under the Republic of China will set the stage for more specific details. The first motifs and roles discussed setup a history of Paiwan spirituality. The final topics are items that have been significantly changed through history. There is a definite focus on the Maleveq ceremony as an indicator of cultural and religious change. Finally, it will explore the Paiwan's own role in the changes and where they have led today.

Taiwan is home to 490,000 people identified as indigenous in origin, and 14 cultural groups (Collins 2009) (Robbins 2013). The Paiwan are spread around the Southern chain of the central mountain range. They specifically live in the foothills and coastal regions. According to Li-Ju Hong in her essay, "Contesting Memory," a census taken in 2010 found that 86,000 of Taiwan's indigenous population could be identified as part of the Paiwan cultural group (2008). This is just under 18 percent of the total indigenous population. They live in 70 villages across Taiwan. However, this geographic definition of the Paiwan is insufficient.

The varied religion of the Paiwan has survived multiple foreign governments that

misunderstood or mistreated these traditional beliefs. Yet today, there is a new threat to traditional spirituality: Paiwan villagers involved in Taili Hu's documentary film work in the 1980s explained that their young people often leave to pursue jobs and education in the larger Taiwanese cities. It is not a problem that has gone away. This is a major stressor on efforts to keep the Paiwan's deteriorating cultural history alive.

It would be incorrect to imagine the indigenous groups of Taiwan as living cloistered lives, independent from other groups or modern development. Aside from strains on their culture placed on them by colonial groups throughout hundreds of years, their lives have been shaped by interaction with each other. This is especially true in the case of the Paiwan.

Erika Kaneko (2006) claims in a negative review of John Balcolm's Taiwanese literary collection that attempting to date the Paiwan's arrival to the island is irresponsible, due to a lack of reliable dating methods. However, it has been well-established that indigenous groups predated the arrival of the Dutch in 1624 by millennia. Evidence of Paleolithic settlement is extant on the island. This lengthy history of the island is being utilized by the Taiwanese government today as a means of individual identification from mainland China. This is a development new to this century.

The Paiwan and other indigenous groups speak languages within the Austronesian family (Hong, 2008), and have cultural similarities with nearby groups (Chen, 1963). Chen Chi-Lu's essay on the woodcarving of Paiwan demonstrates the similarity of the Paiwan's squatting human figure, and nearby groups. It also shows how each group has reinterpreted this motif to fit within their specific visual language.

While some of the motifs are rendered in a similar manner to nearby island groups, the Paiwan practice a religion unique to Taiwan. On top of this, the Austronesian connection differs

greatly from the dominating Han Chinese of mainland China, rendering it another tool for the current Taiwanese government. By amplifying the nuances of its indigenous population, the Republic of China can further distinguish itself from the People's Republic of China.

The Paiwan look to gods for protection, and have religious officiants to communicate with these gods. As long as societal rules are followed, they are protected from spirits and ghosts that live on a parallel supernatural plane to their own. Witches perform healing treatments and talk to the gods, and priests lead the many annual, and quinquennial rituals necessary in the Paiwan religion. Since the breaking of taboos is considered the root of many troubles, witches perform a sort of social control, as well ("Paiwan," 2008). The Paiwan also practice what many anthropologists have called ancestor worship.

The traditional spirituality of the Paiwan dictates that there is a supernatural world alongside the human one. Within it are spirits that can do harm or good. The ails created by these spirits can be healed by sorcerers and witches.

By 2009, the important position of witch had dwindled to a mere 20 qualified personages as a result of lessening interest by younger generations, and strict rules within the religion (Collins, 2009). In response, Collins writes in "School of witchcraft opens in Taiwan," the daughter of a line of witches worked to convince three women to begin a school to keep the position alive. Western news outlet *BBC News* likened the shaman-like role of witch to popular Western literature character Harry Potter attending his school, Hogwarts (Sui, 2009). While this approach simplifies Paiwan beliefs by comparing it to an idea of magic nothing like their spiritual beliefs, it encourages an audience that would previously be unaware of the group entirely a small connection to what could otherwise be an intimidatingly foreign culture.

In the Kulalau village story "Origin of the Five Year Festival," it is explained that all

witches come from a family of five siblings, and that the role must be passed down through blood (Early and Whitehorn, 2003, p. 219). This was the belief of the older generation of witches around 2009. Yet, they were finally convinced to forgo the bloodline tradition in order to keep the practice alive (Collins 2009). Now, children outside the traditionally honored bloodlines are learning the necessary spiritual knowledge to carry out the role of witch while the practice remains firmly under the direction of traditional Paiwan spiritual leaders..

The ancient class system of the Paiwan is a two-tier system with nobles and commoners occupying different roles in society (“Paiwan,” 2008). The nobles are the artisans, with skills and tools being passed down within families (Chen, 1963). Traditionally, they also own the land, collecting taxes and goods from the commoners working it. Artisanal lines may have developed out of the exclusivity of certain motifs within the Paiwan.

The Hundred Pacer snake is of extreme importance to the Paiwan, and is present on most carvings, though it can only be used by the noble class. This pitviper is native to Taiwan and South East Asia. It has a triangular head and 19 to 22 distinctive dark diamond patterns on its scales (Chang, 2001).

According to Chang Chiu-ju (2001), 60 percent of Paiwan folktales center on the Hundred Pacer. Many of the Paiwan believe that the snake is an ancestor of their noble class, and that during their important Five Year Festival, called Maleveq, it migrates with other gods and ancestors from Dawu mountain where their ancestors’ spirits live, to visit villages along the Central Range (Hu, 1985).

There are differing stories among the Paiwan connecting the snake to the tribe’s history. A prevalent version is that a female human accepted a marriage proposal from a Hundred Pacer, while her family dissented. As a bride price, the snake offered them jars with the snake motif, as

well as the right to use its image (Chen, 1963). These jars are still passed down, and are considered personal holy relics within a family. The carvings are traditionally carried out by minor aristocrats who pass down the art (Chiang, 1986, 53).

The nobles are still principally honored during religious celebrations. Their role is accepted as ceremonial and traditional. The monetary value of being a noble is gone as the Taiwan government now collects taxes on the land.

Since the change in status for Paiwan nobles, from landlords to purely traditional titles, the snake has been redefined as a symbol for the Paiwan themselves. While other groups use the snake motif, it is taught to tourists as an identifying mark of an authentic Paiwan object (Robbins, 2013). In recent years, the class system has broken down, with people outside the noble class carving the iconic snake.

Except for the snake, who was, in a sense, already a deity, there is little evidence of the deification of the ancestors. Instead, there is a feeling of honoring one's roots, and paying ancestors their due. Every five years, a portion of the crops grown and meat gathered is offered to members of the community that in the past provided for the position a village or family occupies now (Hu, 1985). It is a thanks offering.

Maleveq is meant to honor all gods and ancestors at once, and celebrate their quinquennial migration. In the documentary "The Return of the Gods and Ancestors," anthropologist Taili Hu captured the days-long festival in one village and its related ceremonies (1983). In it, several offerings are placed on dishes set on village altars, graves, and inside the ancestral home of the chief. Along with food offerings, there are bottles for drinks, and symbolic offerings from local materials. One such substitution is tree bark for pigs bones: substitutions like this one are made when sacrificial materials are unavailable.

This is the beginning of the festival, where the spirits are entertained and fed. Evil spirits are then seen off. Finally, young men from the village's principal families will compete with bamboo poles to pierce rattan balls which are thrown into the air by the overseeing religious officiant (Hu, 1983).

By some accounts, the rattan ball in the spear game was originally a human head. However, the fact that this substitution shows up chiefly in tourist information suggest it is added to incite an emotional response more than educate. That being said, headhunting was a practice among Taiwanese indigenous. Many foreign governments in Taiwan have claimed to ending headhunting among aboriginal groups, since the Qing Dynasty government in the 1690s. However, by oral accounts (Huang and Chen, 1982), as well as written observations by foreigners (McGovern, 1922), the practice survived into the 20th century. For the Paiwan, severed heads are a common motif in wood carving and an important indicator of the fighting prowess possessed by an ancestor (Chen, 1963).

While not related directly to the ball-piercing game, head hunting was not absent from the celebrations. In a description collected by Robert Early and John Whitehorn during their time within the Patjaval village around 2001, the practice of headhunting is pointed out as a central part of Maleveq (p. 244). Thus headhunting represents more than a tribal warfare practice.

The description from Patjaval explains that well into Maleveq, a group of men go hunting in "enemy territory" (Early and Whitehorn 2001, p. 244). They collect at least one head, then return to the chief's house to continue celebrating around the dead person. The person who makes the kill is expected to provide a pig to feed to the dead "guest" (p. 244).

Maleveq thus deals with many important elements of Paiwan spirituality, combining them with mundane warfare practice. As discussed earlier, the nobles, namely the chief's family,

are especially honored during Maleveq. Historically, this festival was led by the chief himself. However, since the end of Japanese rule, it has been run by town governments instead (“Paiwan,” 2006). However, it is hardly a regulated celebration. Accounts of necessary ceremonies and elements differ between villages, with the unifying factors being the ball-piercing game and offerings to ancestors. Some nuanced versions of the festival have even been lost.

Many of the Paiwan were converted to Christianity sometime in the 1930s (Hu, 1984). Christians still practice many of the traditional ceremonies, though it is common to simplify offerings to fruit placed on graves (“Paiwan,” 2006).

It is important to note that not every village that is part of the larger Paiwan population traditionally celebrated Maleveq, and many do not now due to its having been banned during Japanese rule. Yet, it is considered an identifying part of their unique culture by outside sources, and is even presented as such by those from a Paiwan background. Thus Maleveq is another signifier of the Paiwan identity.

In the past, especially just after the turn of the 20th century, foreigners marveled at the barbarity of indigenous groups in Taiwan. Anthropologists arrived with many assumptions about the state of indigenous life they would witness. For them, many indigenous groups were the same; their barbarism a novelty. The superiority of colonial powers is rarely questioned. Such is the case in R.R. Marrett’s introduction to Janet B. McGovern’s *Among the Headhunters of Formosa* (1922). What could easily have been polite hospitality is described as “awe bordering on veneration” and the native’s behavior described as “treating [the anthropologist] like a goddess” (p. 9).

Today, tourism websites created by the Taiwanese government reference indigenous

practices and beliefs as selling points. An example is the page for Beidawu Mountain (2012), the modern name of the Paiwan spiritual home Dawu, which cites the holy element as a reason for hiking. Beyond that, entries like Cheryl Robbins' "Cultural Tourism Along the East Coast" (2013), describe the exotic ancient origins of objects available for sale from aboriginal artisans without complexity.

In the new tourism climate, the largely differing elements of the spirituality of the Paiwan are simplified into a single narrative. An example is a narrative in the textbook *Pali's Red Eyes and Other Stories* (Sakinu and Winkler, 2003). In it, the origin of the noble class is presented in a single narrative, drastically different than the one outlined in Chen's 1963 article. The coiled Paiwan snake, previously reserved for noble families, is used through out the book as a symbol for the Paiwan themselves. It is also recolored as a rainbow motif.

While Paiwan spirituality has in some ways been revived by Taiwan tourism, it has taken several hits over the last century. The Five Year Ceremony was banned in 1934, during Japanese occupation, though it was still practiced in more remote places. It ceased to be practiced in several Paiwan villages in the 50s, due to Christianity's introduction to the population. The ritual made somewhat of a recovery after Taiwan was returned by the Japanese, but the younger population continues to move out of their rural hometowns towards the promise of the cities. They leave many of their rituals behind. (Hu, 1984).

It often seems that modernization within the group has been dictated by foreign pressures and drives to unify Taiwan as a diverse, independent entity through cultural tourism. It is the goal of the Taiwan government to identify itself independently in the international eye. It seeks to do this through tourism. Thus Taiwan has begun a process of assimilation with its indigenous cultures. Indigenous elements are presented to foreign tourists as a uniquely Taiwanese cultural

identity.

After 1988, and election of the first Taiwanese by birth president, efforts were made by the government to develop a unique “homeland identity” in order to separate themselves from mainland China. This included recognizing indigenous populations more fully. (Sung, 2004, pp. 72) While indigenous groups were informally recognized by both the Chinese and Japanese governments that have occupied Taiwan, regulations concerning their preservation and cultural heritage were not enacted until the early 21st century. In 1996, the government formed the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, later renamed the Council of Indigenous Peoples in 2002. The purpose of this council was to “enhance the living standards of the price among indigenous tribes and to restore their confidence and status (“Council of Indigenous Peoples”, 2010). Then in 2001 the *Indigenous Status Act* was passed, followed by the *Regulation for Identifying Indigenous Peoples’ Ethnicity* in 2002 (Sung, 2004).

There are numerous photos available online of Maleveq ceremonies and processions of people in traditional Paiwan costume taking place in Taipei. This transportation of spectacle driven Paiwan ceremony from their native regions to the capital city of the Taiwan government reidentifies the Paiwan as existing within and at one with Taiwan’s national identity. It also simulates an authentic Taiwanese experience for tourists, specifically those who identify what they view as primitive cultures as definitive of a foreign place.

In between public ceremonies, the Paiwan exist as a consumable culture. On Taiwan’s tourism websites, shops where traditional costumes are worn or can be purchased, where to find supposedly traditional ceramic beads, and food related to a prescribed Paiwanese diet are described as part of an authentic Paiwan experience. Cultural motifs are preserved in image only as they are made available for sale on art objects.

However, these experiences are often controlled by the Paiwan themselves, through artists' studios selling ceramic holy objects, local shop owners wearing traditional dress (Robbins, 2013), and participation by traditionally educated religious officiants in public ceremonies and celebrations (Collins, 2009). Cheryl Robbins' article (2013), for instance, presents a more complex portrait than initially read. In it, the author simply recalls the history of Paiwan "treasure" objects before mentioning the artists are Paiwan themselves.

Newer interest in Paiwan participation in Taiwanese culture by the Republic of China is also monetarily profitable to many of the Paiwan. In this way, the modernization of the Paiwan is being controlled by the Paiwan themselves. While the drive towards spectacle and condensed religion may have been foreign in origin, many within the Paiwan seem to have embraced it as a means of preservation and an evolving cultural identity. The future of Paiwan spirituality continues to be driven by the Paiwan themselves, as a part of the Taiwanese identity overall.

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