

*Making Natives:  
Japanese Colonial Policy and the Creation of Formosan Indigeneity*

Scott Simon, Associate Professor  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Ottawa

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**Abstract:** Japanese colonialism has often been credited with bringing modernity to Formosa in terms of education, public health, transportation, agriculture and industry. This paper shows how Japanese administration also contributed to the creation of indigeneity through policies modeled on the American experience. These policies included the settlement of tribes into reserves, Japanese language and cultural education, and the expropriation of natural resources. Formosan indigenous peoples, especially the Sediq/Taroko nation (still considered to be part of the Atayal at the time), responded with violent resistance, but were ultimately subdued. In the long run, the combined experiences of Japanese education and resistance against Japanese rule forged a strong ethnic identity as Taroko.

The Japanese experience had a lasting effect on Formosan indigenous nations, especially since the subsequent Chinese Nationalist regime merely continued or modified Japanese colonial policy. The continuation of the reserve land system was important as the material base that kept communities intact amidst rapid economic and political change. The subjective experience of colonization and a land policy based on American models also gave Formosan indigenous nations the position to participate in a global indigenous social movement as First Nations. This paper explores how the Japanese occupation and subsequent social memory of the experience continue to shape the Taroko relationship with the state and their involvement in a global movement for indigenous rights.

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For two years now, I have been conducting anthropological field research with the Taroko nation of Formosa, formerly known as part of the Atayal nation. This summer, I went up into the mountains with my friend Ichiro (a pseudonym), his teenage son, and two other scholars to discuss the establishment of an international Aboriginality Sustainability Network linking scholars and indigenous rights activists around the world. We stayed in the hamlet of Skadang, about 1200 meters above sea level, in the work shed that Ichiro had built just behind a fire-cleared field and not far from the old Japanese police station. Pointing out the cement block in front of the police station, he said, “That is where they used to raise the Japanese flag.” He also showed us the place where his father had died when his vehicle fell off a crevice. Late at night, after a hot meal of wild chicken and way too much whiskey, Ichiro fetched three headlamps and proposed that he, his son, his loyal dog, and I observe nocturnal flying squirrels.

With headlamps tied to our heads and wearing rainboots to prevent us from slipping, we marched upwards through the rainforest. We sometimes followed the streams and sometimes followed the path that Ichiro carved out of the dense vegetation with his so-called *fandao*, or “savage knife” (蕃刀).<sup>1</sup> Ichiro asked us to shine the lights up into the trees, as it would reflect back from the eyes of the squirrels. Twice, we saw the reflection of eyes staring back down on us from the trees. Twice, the eyes merely stared down at us and then slowly faded away without making a sound. On the way back, I tripped over something concealed under the vegetation. I landed on my arm and twisted my wrist. Since I could still move my fingers, we

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<sup>1</sup> The craft of making the blades was learned from the Han during the Qing Dynasty, but they are now sold to tourists as traditional aboriginal crafts.

assumed it was a minor injury. It was only the next day, seeing a doctor just to “make sure,” when we discovered I had suffered a broken wrist. I had to have surgery, installing steel pins to set the bones in place. Just before coming out of the anesthesia, I dreamt that a voice was telling me remember the Taroko people and work with them in their struggle.

I returned my field site in the village of Cyakang, where the people long ago took up farming corn and peanuts in the valley. Seeing my arm in a cast, the villagers delighted in offering explanations for why I would fall on the mountain. My hypothesis, that it might have had been caused by a combination of fatigue, poor eyesight and the whiskey we had drunk a few hours earlier, convinced no-one. Some of them blamed Ichiro for neglecting to carry out the proper rituals to the ancestors before entering the forest. Others said that I had certainly violated *gaya*, the moral order of the universe, through some kind of immoral sexual contact. When I insisted that I had not committed adultery, one man laughed and said, “That is what you say, but the proof is there in your broken arm.” There was strong consensus that we should have turned back the first time a pair of eyes disappeared without making a sound – since that could not possibly be a squirrel. It was the village witch, with her ability to know such things, who finally offered the explanation that satisfied most people.

“Why did you break your wrist?” she asked rhetorically before answering: “Because our Taroko ancestors love you.” She explained that many Japanese soldiers died during skirmishes with the Taroko in the place where I was injured. The first two sets of eyes, she said, were not squirrels at all, but rather visible signs of the Japanese ghosts that were following me with the intent to kill. I merely broke my wrist, rather than falling off a crevice, because a Taroko ancestor had intervened to save me. When I told her about my dream, she realized that I had been saved by Ichiro’s father and

that he had spoken to me. He saved my life from the Japanese in order to keep me in his community and to strengthen my relationship with his son. What intrigues me most of all from this story, only one of many ghost stories I have heard about the Japanese, is the constant reference to Japan more than sixty years after they left the island.

*Pax nipponica: the Military Conquest of Formosa*

It is well known that Formosa was ceded to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 and that Japan stayed there until 1945. The occupation was much more than the simple transfer of title from one state to another, however, for the simple reason that the Chinese state had *never* administered the entire island. In the words of Yosaburo Takekoshi, member of the Japanese Diet, the Chinese policy toward Formosan indigenous peoples had been to “govern them by leaving them strictly alone” (Takekoshi 1907: 212). Only six years after the Japanese took possession of Formosa, he reported:

The entire area of Formosa is estimated at about 14,000 square miles, of which nearly half is still in the hands of the savages, outside the reach of our Government.... (Land) above 1,500 and below 3,500 feet is clothed with dense forests teeming with large and valuable trees, among which camphor trees may be specially mentioned. This timber belt covers about 5,230,000 acres. It is supposed also to be rich in deposits of gold, iron and kerosene oil. But, at present, it is occupied only by the savages, and only the agricultural resources of the coast plans are exploited. In my opinion, the golden key to the exhaustless wealth of the island will only be obtained by opening up the savage districts (Takekoshi 1907: 212).

By the time, Takekoshi wrote his report, the Japanese had established somewhat precarious trade relations with most of the Formosan tribes, whose “mental condition,” he said, “has undergone a remarkable transformation” (Takekoshi 1907: 221).<sup>2</sup> The notable exceptions were the “fierce tattooed savages” (Takekoshi 1907:

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<sup>2</sup> He continues to say: “The human skulls which they were accustomed to use to adorn their abodes have been removed and monkey skulls put up instead. Some, with the permission of the authorities, are endeavoring to make a living by felling the trees, which grow so luxuriantly on the land which they

211) of the Atayal tribe. Describing Ichiro's ancestors who saved my life, he wrote, "They mostly live in mountain recesses, are extremely ferocious and attach great importance to head-hunting. This group is more uncivilized than any of the others" (Takekoshi 1907: 219). The challenge facing Japan was to finish their possession of Formosa by pacifying 104,000 "savages," of whom 20,527 were estimated to be Atayal (Takekoshi 1907: 227). The Japanese reinforced the guard lines that had been established under Qing rule to separate the Chinese settlers of the plains from the savages of the mountains; and further modernized these lines with the use of electric fences to keep both Han Chinese and indigenous Formosans in their place. As the Japanese subsequently pushed their way into indigenous territory, the native peoples fought back. By 1903, Japan had already seen 1,900 Japanese killed in 1,132 incidents with the indigenous peoples of the island (Takekoshi 1907: 229).

Many of these incidents happened in the Atayal territories in eastern Formosa. In 1903, for example, the Japanese encroached upon Nan'ao Atayal land, using electric fences to push back the indigenous peoples and protect workers cutting down camphor trees. The Atayal fought back, leading to the death of several Japanese (藤井 1997: 188). In 1906, they used Bunun tribespeople to suppress the Atayal of Wushe in the central mountains (藤井 1997: 192). After 36 Japanese were beheaded by the Taroko Atayal in 1906, the Japanese focused their attention on that area, even using naval bombardments to stop the tribal people from collecting salt-water from the ocean (藤井 1997: 206). The goal was to make them dependent upon trade with the Japanese for salt.

In 1910, the Japanese Governor-General Sakuma Samata launched the "Five Year Plan to Subdue the Barbarians." The fiercest resistance came from the Atayal people of

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claim as their property. Many of them know the use, and have learned to appreciate, the value of silver coins" (Takekoshi 1907: 211).

the Taroko Gorge. Using the electric fences to restrict the movement of the aborigines, Japanese military forces slowly encircled their villages and encouraged them to surrender to Japanese forces. In what is now remembered as the Taroko Incident of 1914, Japanese troops attacked the people of the Taroko Gorge by coming in simultaneously from Hualien City in the South and Wushe through mountain passes from the West. Japanese forces totaled 11,479 men with advanced weaponry. The Taroko were 1,600 families scattered throughout 97 mountain hamlets. Of slightly more than 9,000 people, only about 3,000 were young men ready for battle (藤井 1997: 266). In spite of the fact that they were outnumbered in forces and disadvantaged in technology, the Taroko resisted fiercely for 74 days before surrendering to the Japanese. Memories of those 74 days of resistance nourished a Taroko national identity that persists to this day (Simon 2007).

Within the Taroko Atayal, however, three sub-groups also developed during the Japanese period, and the Japanese know how to manipulate these differences to their advantage. These groups were the Truku, Teuda, and Tkedaya. The nomadic Teuda, for example, often invaded Truku hunting territory and were punished with head-hunting. The Teuda thus surrendered earliest to the Japanese in exchange for protection from the Truku; and sometimes aided the Japanese military. In 1930, under the leadership of Mona Ludaw, the Tkedaya of Wushe rebelled against the Japanese. 136 Japanese were killed in this event, later known as the Wushe Incident. The Japanese then used the Teuda to put down the Tkedaya.<sup>3</sup> Memories of these betrayals established group hostilities that persist to this day and are reflected in political factionalism (Simon 2006).

*The « Indians » of Formosa : Following US Examples*

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<sup>3</sup> In the collective memory of all three groups, there were many such conflicts between them. This is only one example.

Shortly after the Japanese arrived on Formosa, J.W. Davidson, American consul to the island, had observed the problems Japan faced with the indigenous peoples there and provided them with materials on U.S. Indian policy (藤井 1997: 151). From this, they borrowed the ideas of *terra nullius*, that the land was unoccupied if not used productively; and that the “civilized” colonizers had the right to pacify “savages” and develop such land (藤井 1997 : 281). In practice, this meant that the Japanese, like the Americans, had to find ways to expand their own commercial use of the territory, while limiting the natives eventually to what would become reserve land. For the Japanese, that meant expanding their presence in what the Qing Court had identified as savage territory.

In September 1896, Ordinance No. 30 required all persons, with the exception of those doing so for business purposes with district authority get permission from the Chief of the Pacification Office to cross the “Savage Border.” Law No. 7 of 1900 stated that only “savages” could occupy, use, or lay claim to Savage Territory. The Japanese state, however, reserved the right to grant permission for such use (Takekoshi 1907 : 211). In a policy of “using savages to rule savages”, they legalized the Qing Dynasty distinction between “cooked savages” who had given up head-hunting and taken up settled agriculture; vs. “raw savages” who continued head-hunting and led a nomadic life in the mountains. The former were given formal property rights; whereas the latter were not. Their land was legally considered to be imperial land, although the fact that only « savages » actually used it was tolerated at first (藤井 1997: 157).

After 1903, the Japanese took land cadastres, and required the indigenous people to register land ownership; with unregistered land becoming *de jure* state property. Since few indigenous people registered land, this provided the legal justification for Japanese companies, with state permission, to exploit the forests for camphor and

*hinoki* trees. In practice, the Japanese companies usually negotiated with local communities and permitted them to continue their practices of hunting and gathering. The Taroko communities continued their practice of moving through the forest following the availability of game animals. The people of Skadang, for example, had moved into their location in search of a new territory in the late 19th century. The name Skadang, meaning “tooth”, was chosen because they had found an old tooth while digging at that spot.

Although the Japanese encouraged indigenous communities to move to the plains and take up agriculture, they permitted them to stay in the forests if they preferred (顏 and 楊: 2004). Some of the communities moved down into the plains at that time, forming new agricultural communities such as Cyakang and Bsngan. Twenty-eight village refused to relocate, including Skadang (廖 1977 : 109). The land identified for their use became reserve land based on the American model, and has remained the material basis of their communities to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

The relatively tolerant practice of letting indigenous communities stay in the mountains lasted until the Wushe Incident of 1930. After that event, the Japanese forced the remaining Taroko to relocate to combined settlements, often in the plains, that could be better controlled by Japanese authorities. Using the familiar colonial strategy of divide and conquer, they sent groups of people from the same community to different villages; and combined disparate groups together in those new villages. People from the mountain hamlet of Lusaw, for example, were forced to integrate into Cyakang, Bsngan and other communities. Among the three Taroko communities not forced down the mountains at that time was Skadang. Due to the exceptional fertility

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<sup>4</sup> The most important legal change since then was in 1966 when the Republic of China did a land census and required aboriginal people to register land ownership as individuals. Since then, they have been able to buy and sell reserve land, but only to other aborigines. Although this is an important change, it is outside the scope of this paper.



of their mountain land, they were encouraged to practice agriculture there, and the Japanese even provided them with a road (廖 1977 : 79).

The people of Skadang were ultimately forced to move down to Bsngan, but long after the Japanese left. They were relocated in the late 1970s by the Republic of China state to make room for the establishment of the Taroko National Park. Although most of it is overgrown with plants and no longer usable, the remnants of the Japanese-built road remain; this is, in fact, where Ichiro's father fell to his death. Nonetheless, the National Park authorities refuse to let the people of Skadang settle permanently in their own village or reconstruct a permanent road – which they perceive as a violation of their human rights. In fact, some of them even use the word *colonial* to describe their current situation.

#### *Conclusion : Assessing the Impact of Colonialism*

The Japanese left Formosa after defeat in the war in 1945, to be replaced by the Republic of China regime. It is not the responsibility of the anthropologist to make a moral judgement of colonialism – especially in such a case where arguably one colonial regime has merely been replaced by another. Our job is rather to analyze the effects of colonialism on local society. In addition to the obvious impacts of railroads and irrigation systems, there are also political institutions such as reserve land that exist (albeit with certain modifications) to the present day. This agricultural land, on which communities subsist by growing corn, peanuts, betul nuts, and other crops, has given the communities a material base and kept them together. Even for individuals who migrate to the cities in search of better paid work, it gives them a community to return to and a sense of collective identity. Without these reserves, the indigenous communities of the east and central parts of Formosa might have met the fate of the plains aborigines in the west during the Qing Dynasty – death by violence and assimilation for the survivors. Policies based on U.S. models thus created

communities with an indigenous identity similar to that of North America. This historical legacy, what scholars of institutional history call “path dependency” (North 1990: 93), makes it possible and natural for the indigenous peoples of Formosa to participate in a global indigenous peoples’ movement.

Other effects are also strong. During their battles against the Japanese, the Atayal Taroko forged an identity based on resistance. After years of lobbying, this identity was finally legally recognized in 2004 by the ROC Executive Yuan, making them the 12th official indigenous nation recognized by the state. Tribalism still exists, however, and there remain hostilities between the Teuda, Tkedaya and Truku. The Truku, in the numerical majority, have embraced their new identity as members of a Taroko indigenous nation. Many Teuda and Tkedaya, however, perceive the legal change as Truku hegemony. Some still call themselves Atayal and others prefer the ethnonym Sediq. Memories of their struggles during the Japanese period are still mobilized by politicians who manipulate these differences for their own benefit. The old practice of divide and conquer has not ceased.

Within the villages themselves, people still identify with their community of origin before the Japanese forced them to relocate. This has created factions in the communities that are mobilized at election time, as I observed by doing field research in both Bsngan and Cyakang. These divisions make it difficult for the villagers in these settlements to cooperate with people from other factions. Bsngan, for example, has five main factions, who are divided into five Christian congregations and tend to be spatially segregated. The newcomers to that group are the people from Skadang, who received land on the flood plains when they were relocated. Many conflicts have arisen in that village, mostly based on competition for resources provided by the Taroko National Park since they have to apply for them under the name of separate “development associations.” These problems, which many Taroko humbly refer to as

a cultural inability to cooperate, are actually after-effects of colonial rule and remain obstacles to the effective organization of both development projects and resistance in the communities. An example is the struggle against Asia Cement (Simon 2002), in which one group of Taroko protested to reclaim land that had been occupied by that company. They received little support from other factions in the village. Asia Cement, on the other hand, is aware of the importance of these subgroups and hires employees from all factions.

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Just outside the village of Cyakang lies a barren plot of land surrounded by verdant fields of corn, peanuts, and other plants. The village witch explains that land was formerly the site of the village Shinto Shrine. During the Japanese period, the villagers prayed there, then clapped their hands and pulled a rope attached to a bell. Sometimes the bell would then ring a second time by itself, indicating that the prayer had been heard and would be answered. Sometimes the bell was silent, meaning that the prayer would not be answered. When the Japanese left, the Chinese came and tore down the Shinto Shrine. The villagers have since tried to grow crops on that land, but no matter what they plant, the land remains barren and empty. Just like the Japanese ghosts who roam the mountains, the Shinto deities, no longer objects of veneration, still maintain some power over the land. The Japanese have left Formosa, but their presence is still felt.

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