

# THE TASADAY TWENTY FOUR YEARS AFTER: INSIGHTS ON ETHNICITY AND THE RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

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*The Tasaday case presents a challenge to anthropologists to go beyond merely discussing this group's 'authenticity' as a Stone Age people. The Tasaday people and their current identity as ancestral domain claimants more than twenty years after they were first 'discovered' by Manuel Elizalde provide anthropologists with a more nuanced understanding of ethnicity. Some of the more relevant concepts of ethnicity as seen in the case of the Tasaday (who now refer to themselves as 'Manobo Tasaday'), are the fluidity and negotiability of their ethnic identity towards specific others and in certain situations, the social constructedness of ethnic names, and the Tasaday's appropriation of an 'invented' identity to utilize political possibilities. At the same time, the Tasaday case also shows the weaknesses of the rights framework in the form of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, particularly in the valorization of 'expert' or anthropological knowledge over indigenous knowledge, and the rigidity of the definition of culture. In this light, questions are raised regarding the role of anthropologists towards groups such as the Tasaday who are using the legal framework to exercise their rights as indigenous peoples or to gain redress for injustices committed in the past.*

*Keywords: Tasaday, ethnicity, rights*

Twenty years after the first International Conference on the Tasaday held at the University of the Philippines Diliman (in 1986), a new forum was organized in 2006 in UP to discuss the contemporary developments about this highly controversial group. The forum "*What's New With the Tasaday? Implications for the Theory and Practice in Anthropology*" was a venue for older audiences to update themselves regarding the Tasaday and to familiarize younger audiences with this decades-old controversy. This forum sought to discuss the new identity of the Tasaday as ancestral domain claimants and to thresh out emergent issues in the practice of anthropology vis-à-vis the Tasaday experience. Speakers included Sylvia Miclat from Environmental Science for Social Change which is an NGO assisting the Tasaday, Chairperson Jannette Serano of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), anthropologist Ponciano Bennagen and

archaeologist Israel Cabanilla who talked about their 2003 visit to the Tasaday community.

However, despite attempts by the speakers to initiate a new discourse regarding the Tasaday that veers away from discussions about whether or not they were a 'hoax', the audience was still very much interested about this aspect of the Tasaday's past. So even though now the Tasaday has a new identity as ancestral domain claimants, a significant part of the forum still focused on the controversy and the new evidences that allegedly refute the claim that they are a Stone Age people. At the same time, the new identity of the Tasaday as ancestral domain claimants is being contested because of the controversy. There is thus a need for fresh perspectives on the Tasaday and to make the discussions about them more relevant to their current experiences and to the practice of anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is an exploration of what I see as the issues implicated/emergent in the said forum: the issues of ethnicity, the formation of identity/ies, and assertion of territorial rights. These issues will then be discussed briefly in terms of the critiques of the legal framework of rights and the possible role of anthropologists in these cases.

### **From Stone Age people...**

A critical look at the available literature about the Tasaday reveals a discourse that has mostly revolved around the issue of authenticity of their Stone Age culture<sup>2</sup>. Many of the published materials and documentaries mainly discussed the controversy and debated about the role of the Tasaday people themselves in performing for Manuel Elizalde and the wider public (see Chua and Tatel, this issue). A critical observation by anthropologist Eufrazio Abaya was made during the forum on the continuing focus on the controversy. According to him the Tasaday are real, living and breathing people and yet people talk about them as though they are relics of the past, or worse, as though they do not exist at all. This statement is a challenge for anthropologists to consider new ways of looking at this group of people. I will argue in this paper

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<sup>1</sup> This is by no means the first attempt to provide an alternative discourse about the issue of the Tasaday. See Chua and Tatel in this issue for a comprehensive look at the history of the discourse on the Tasaday.

<sup>2</sup> The American Anthropological Association (AAA) came out with a publication in 1992 that directly tackled this "Stone Age" issue. Thomas Headland who edited the book concluded that "no scholars will argue today that the Tasaday are a Stone Age people, or that the Tasaday never existed. All seem to accept that they are a genuine minority tribal people..." (1992:215).

that one way of looking at the Tasaday is through the discourse of ethnicity, particularly the processes of formation of ethnic identities, which becomes more relevant especially now that they are ancestral domain claimants, an identity that is also highly contested.

Given this context, it is not the issue of their authenticity as Stone Age people that is relevant. Rather we should ask if they constitute a different ethnic group among other Manobo groups in the area (herein comes the interrogation of the processes of the formation of their ethnic identity) and if they are legitimate claimants of territorial rights (in the context of the current legal rights framework for indigenous peoples in the country).

Arguing about the 'authenticity' of a particular group can be problematic. The notion of authenticity is itself a cultural production, constructed by anthropologists and social scientists as well as played out in the everyday practice of people, intraethnically and interethnically (Eriksen 1993:131; Jones 1997:103). It is in the writings of scholars where ethnic identities of groups of people are represented, reproduced, and eventually become standard ways of seeing others. It can also be constructed during people's everyday interactions with each other within their group and with other groups of people. Notions of authenticity become more problematic especially since ethnic identity is fluid, negotiable, and situational; a product of social interaction (Barth 1969 and Leach 1954 [cited in Jenkins 1997 and Jones 1997]; Eriksen 1993).

Ethnic categorizations are said to be fluid because their importance varies situationally. Depending on the social context, ethnic identity can be overcommunicated in certain situations and undercommunicated in some (Eriksen 1993:1). It is the agents (the people themselves) who decide when to make their ethnic identity relevant and when to hide it. It however becomes more pronounced under circumstances of extensive contact with others.

It is useful to use this conceptualization of ethnicity to analyze the Tasaday case. They became more self-conscious of their identity when outsiders in increasing numbers started pouring into their community during the 1972 'discovery' of Elizalde followed by visits from foreign journalists, scholars, and celebrities up to the 1980s, and the 2003 visit of Bennagen and Cabanilla.

Hoax proponents argue that some elements of the Tasaday culture as presented to the public in the 1970s were 'invented' by Elizalde, a Marcos crony who had considerable political clout and power over the Tasaday people (see Adler 1986; see also Chua and Tatel in this issue for their listing of materials that discussed the Tasaday in a different light). Assuming that this is correct, I argue that we can look at the Tasadays as similar to actors who performed for specific audiences, i.e. people from Manila and other parts of the world. This was seen in the way they dressed in grass skirts, ate tadpoles and

insects, used tools made only of stone and spoke in a language that lacks any words for war when there were film crews and scholars around. This particular identity was overcommunicated to the outsiders partly because it was what the audience expected, while they undercommunicated their Manobo identity. The elements of the Tasaday culture as performed for the public were starkly different from the culture of the Manobo farmers from which, it was later found out (and which they also now assert), they are a subgroup.

In such situations, there are standardized ways of behaving in relation to others, what Eriksen (1993:21) termed as "ethnic maps". We saw this in the Tasaday's Stone Age 'performance' in 1972 and we once again saw this when they started making grass skirts without being told to do so upon meeting with outsiders in 2003 (as narrated by Bennagen and Cabanilla). It can thus be argued that the 'Stone Age' identity has become an integral part of their distinct Manobo identity, given that this was how people had perceived them to be (and for which they had become famous). Eriksen (1993:22) calls this 'ethnic stereotypes:' the creation and consistent application of standardized notions of cultural distinctiveness of the group, which guides their relationship with other people, and wherein power is inherently implicated. For instance, we saw in the Tasaday how a dominant group, in the person of Elizalde and PANAMIN (Presidential Assistant on National Minorities), was able to impose an identity upon them. Elizalde was able to dominate which particular standardized notions of cultural distinctiveness (e.g. Stone Age cultural elements) were to be applied to the Tasaday, a group of people who in relation to this individual have considerably less power at that time. This imposition of identity can sometimes be internalized and embodied by the people themselves; it may just be that the 1972 performance was so significant for the Tasaday's cultural memory that they now see themselves as others perceived them: as an ethnic group with traces of Stone Age cultural elements, and in their experience of past international recognition as such, distinct from other Manobo groups in the area.

While ethnicity is an aspect of relationship (Eriksen 1993), it is also cultural in the sense that a large part depends on assumed common descent and shared culture (Jenkins 1997:13). The fluidity of social boundaries is seen in the different cultural elements that become invoked in the course of social interaction to assert difference or similarity in relation to specific others. For instance, the Tasaday uses certain cultural elements that seemed to be derived from the 'Stone Age' when interacting with outsiders like journalists and scholars. However, they do not invoke these same cultural elements when interacting with fellow Manobo groups in the area. Using Bourdieu's practice theory, we can also look at how in social practice and interaction with others,

*doxic* knowledge (of which cultural symbolisms and meanings are an integral part) breaks down, engendering a reflexive mode of perception (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2003). If for the Tasaday that which makes them distinct from others is their performance of a Stone Age culture, then this cultural element may still be performed years after. This could be the cultural element they overcommunicate when there are outsiders but it may not be the same cultural elements they communicate with other Manobo groups. The point here is that in the process of the formation of their identity, the Stone Age cultural element may have already become part of their identity because it was a significant experience serving as an ethnic boundary vis-à-vis specific others.

Another major contentious issue in the forum was what to call this group of people who currently refer to themselves as “Manobo Tasaday.” Some panelists in the forum asserted that they should be called “Manobo Blit” instead, a locally recognized ethnicity with whom their language shares much in common. The name is important because it is part of legitimizing their claim to ancestral domain rights. However, the name itself, like notions of authenticity, is socially constructed. Many of our ethnic labels were given by outsiders, e.g. a colonial administration, and yes, anthropologists. If we look at the etymology of most labels for indigenous groups we will see that they are indeed labels used by outsiders. In the documentary *Tasaday Scandal: The Lost Tribe* (1987), an elder Manobo revealed that those who are being presented as Tasaday by Elizalde et. al. were in fact their relatives. It could have been a strange experience for this Manobo elder to see these people (the Tasaday) as separate from them simply because of the ethnic label accorded by outsiders. When the people being labeled start appropriating the labels, as what has happened with the Tasaday, this has the consequence of reifying the group (i.e. concretizing their distinctness from other Manobo groups in their area).

### **...to ancestral domain claimants**

Today, the “Manobo Tasaday” are ancestral domain claimants. These Tasaday, through contact with other actors such as non-government organizations, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, journalists, and anthropologists, began to organize themselves to assert rights to their land under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 [or more specifically to claim, along with other IP (T’boli and Manobo Blit) in the area, some 19,000 hectares of the ‘Tasaday-Manobo Blit Preserve’ that President Marcos had set aside for them in Proclamation No.955]. In this legal framework they are now asserting their ‘time immemoriality’ (i.e. they have

been living in the land as far back as memory can recall) in the place and the 'authenticity' of their indigenous culture under the name "Manobo Tasaday".

This latest development reveals that the Tasaday are trying to adapt to changes in the larger society by utilizing new avenues and political possibilities. It is interesting to note though that given the new political possibility of claiming land rights, the Tasaday have now overcommunicated their identity as Manobo and undercommunicated their identity as Tasaday. This further underscores the fluidity and situationality of the construction of ethnic identity.

### **Cultural rights and the legal framework**

The new identity of the Manobo Tasaday as ancestral domain claimants, itself contested because of the Tasaday as 'hoax' controversy, can also provide us an understanding of the weaknesses of the rights framework, specifically the assertion of rights to territory and culture. Rights are both enabling and constraining, and also productive of identities and cultures (Cowan 2006:10). These are clearly seen in the case of the Tasaday today who have managed to establish networks, support groups, and talk about their identity in ways not seen in past decades. They are enabling because the rights framework gives people avenues to demand redress for injustice. At the same time it can be constraining because it can normalize and legitimize structures of oppression and inequality. In a critique of the legal framework, legalism is seen to "translate wide-ranging political questions into more narrowly framed legal questions" (Brown and Halley in Speed 2006:67). Structures that promote oppression and inequality are rarely addressed in such instances. For example, how should the legal framework approach the rampant logging operations that have decimated the forests of the land of Tasadays?

Short term legal goals also fail to reflect on how scholarly production may actually reinforce structures and discourses of inequality by fixing cultural identities in law despite the fluidity of such identities (Speed 2006). Speed points out that the "unequal valorization of anthropological or 'scientific' knowledge over knowledge produced by indigenous peoples" (2006:72) in legalism reproduces hierarchical power relations wherein people are again left voiceless and subject to the powers of cultural brokers. While it cannot be denied that many NGOs and scholars have good intentions whose initiatives (for instance, when they are asked to speak as "experts" for claimants) can serve and has often served as protective mechanisms, this can

also lead to the reproduction of structures of inequality in society when done in a non-participatory and non-collaborative process.

The reproduction of these structures and discourses of inequality can be seen in the presentation of the NCIP Chairperson Janette Serrano during the Tasaday forum. It is evident in her talk that in order for the Tasaday to legitimize their claim, they need the expertise of anthropologists and other “experts” to attest to their indigenesness. There is nothing inherently wrong with this if the voice of the Tasaday is also heard. It is telling, however, that while everybody was debating about who the Tasaday are, what their name should be, and if they’re indigenous or not, not one member of the Tasaday community was there to speak for themselves.

Legitimizing their claim is especially problematic for the Tasaday because of their highly controversial identity. Should their rights not be recognized because they may have assumed a ‘false’ or ‘fake’ identity in the past? Is it wrong for them to appropriate a ‘Stone Age past’ in the present when it has become a part of their history, experience and identity? Isn’t culture fluid and able to accommodate such transformations? Does the hoax controversy make them less indigenous? The Tasaday’s latest identity as ancestral domain claimants entailed the production of new ways of doing things. They appropriated a new name and in the act of organizing themselves to negotiate with the government and other actors, a changing self-image and probably worldview are being engendered as well.

### **Is anthropology still relevant?**

What should our role be in these latest developments about the Tasaday? Should we aid them or persecute them for their own complicity in past controversy?

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Stone Age or not, ‘Manobo Tasaday’ or ‘Manobo Blit’, we cannot deny that they are real people even as they performed the Stone Age identity for a world audience. No matter if the Tasaday were willing participants as they appropriated the Stone Age identity, in the context of the power equation between them and Elizalde, Elizalde was still the coercive party in that situation for having exploited the vulnerability of the Tasaday. These people have experienced their identity questioned, their motivations suspect, and their forest denuded. In their story we see how structures of the larger society are produced and reproduced where the powerful are able to exploit the vulnerabilities of the less powerful

for their own gains. This was clearly seen in the way different politicians and scholars jostled for position at the expense of the Tasaday.

Anthropologists can position themselves within this situation by using anthropological knowledge and ethnographic inquiry to finally get to know who the Tasaday are, and to study how they are using, making sense of and experiencing the rights framework (what Wilson [2006] calls the "social life of human rights"), through both collaborative and participatory research or an approach that enables vulnerable people to have their own voice.

The Tasaday case can provide us a nuanced understanding of ethnicity, and in terms of practice, a reflexive and critically engaged anthropology. This may be the first opportunity for the Tasaday to speak for themselves and to have an identity and voice beyond what we read in books, see in films or hear in conferences. They may have 'acted' in the past, but isn't such performances what culture is also about?

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