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Tasaday: Their Current Situation

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1. Introduction

In 1971, a group of forest dwellers living isolated in the rain forest of southern Mindanao, the Philippines, was reported.¹ Manuel Elizalde, a wealthy industrialist and head of the government body PANAMIN (Presidential Assistant on National Minorities) reported that Dafal--a Blit Manobo hunter--had befriended a group of isolated hunter-gatherers who lived in the caves and rain forest around Mt. Tasaday in Southern Cotabato. Elizalde arranged to meet them and did so, in a clearing made on the edge of the rain forest. He was joined by the anthropologists, Robert Fox, Jesus Peralta, and Frank Lynch, the linguist Teodoro Llamzon, the journalist, John Nance, a representative of Readers Digest and Jack Reynolds of the American TV company NBC and others. In order to visit their presumed home, a set of caves on Mt. Tasaday, in 1972 he had a helipad built on the top of a high tree in the rain forest and flew in with a group of photographers and journalists. Subsequently, he also brought in other anthropologists (Carlos Fernandez, David Baradas, Amy Rogel-Rara), linguists (Richard Elkins, Carol Molony), and ethnobotanists (Douglas Yen) to study them. He also brought in many celebrities to see and photograph the Tasaday people, including Charles Lindbergh and the Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida.

Elizalde believed that indigenous peoples had the right to retain their traditional attire and way of life and resist the incursion of lowland peoples into their traditional lands and created reservations for them under the control of PANAMIN. Elizalde was close to President Marcos and prevailed upon him to set aside forty-five thousand acres of forest for the exclusive use of the Tasaday people. One could not enter the reservation without receiving explicit permission from Mayor Mai Tuan of Tboli town and no one did. Nothing further was heard of the Tasaday for 13 years. After President Marcos was toppled and fled the Philippines for Hawaii in 1986, in the wake of martial law, a Swiss journalist Oswald Iten entered the reservation and found the Tasaday wearing not their traditional leaf garments, but T-shirts and jeans. He proclaimed the Tasaday a hoax, a drama orchestrated by Elizalde to take Tboli and Manobo farmers from Blit and have them rush to the caves and don leaves whenever he took visitors to see them.

The hoax story was picked up by local political entities, as well as by some of the country's anthropologists at the University of the Philippines (UP) and was the topic of a conference held in 1986 at UP. Some international journalists rode the gravy train, and produced videos and documentaries, with titles such as "The Tribe that Never Was." A subsequent event, a session of the International Conference of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held at Zagreb,

¹ A full discussion of the events described briefly in this paper can be found in Nance (1975) and Hemley (2003).

Yugoslavia in the summer of 1988 attracted me, although I was there to present a paper on the Negritos of northern Luzon. At the Tasaday session, nothing was presented about the language that the Tasaday people spoke at the time of the first announcement of their “discovery”. It was claimed that they were Tboli people, and thus presumably spoke Tboli language. Since my interests were primarily linguistic, I decided that I would try to visit the Tasaday people and determine what language they spoke. A third conference was held in Nov. 1989 in Washington, D.C. as a special session of the American Anthropological Society, on the Tasaday Controversy (Headland 1992).

During the course of several years from my first visit in 1991, through 1996, I lived with Tasaday people for several months in their place in *Magtu Inilingan* ‘New Learning’ close to the cave complex that they considered their original home, and subsequently in Matu’lung near Blit where the Tasaday Belayem had decided to build his house,² and other places, to learn their language and compare it with Blit Manobo. At that time, they had no knowledge of Tboli, but spoke a language similar to Blit Manobo but distinct from it in several respects. This convinced me that there was no hoax involved, and that the Tasaday people were a distinct ethnolinguistic group speaking their own dialect of South Cotabato Manobo. This has been published (Reid 1996). Tasaday texts (Reid 1997) and my papers about them are available on-line, however many Filipinos and others still adhere to the hoax story following what was reported in the past and without ever having done any research on the issues.

2. Meeting the Tasaday

After receiving an invitation to give a paper discussing the current situation of the Tasaday, an attempt was made to determine where they are currently living and how best to interact with them, since I had not had any contact with them for over 20 years. I was told that it is not politically possible to visit their current locations, because of the actions of the New People’s Army (NPA) in their area and the events of November 2017, when the military bombed several sitios. Presently, the military are in force in the area and severely restrict access to where the Tasaday live.

Through the National Museum of the Philippines, a request was made to the head office of the National Commission of Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in Manila to assist the research. Although the authenticity of the Tasaday group had earlier been questioned, NCIP assured me in a visit to their office that the Tasaday group is listed as one of the indigenous groups of the Philippines. Eventually the National Museum received a letter notifying them that Prof. Bion Griffin and I had been endorsed to the Regional Office of NCIP in Koronadal (formerly Marbel), South Cotabato, to conduct a research program with the Tasaday.

Information was sent to the NCIP local office in So. Lamkua, Brgy. Klubi, Lake Sebu,³ giving the dates of our presence there and requesting as many as possible of the present Tasaday group to come to see me, as I was unable to go to see them. On March 13, 2018, Griffin and I arrived at the Tboli “long house” owned and operated by Rosie Sula, the local representative of NCIP and her

² This was the area where the forest was cleared for a helicopter to land and Belayem and other Tasaday were brought by Dafal to first meet representatives of the outside world.

³ “So” is an abbreviation of sitio, the smallest cluster of households in the Philippine political system. “Brgy” is an abbreviation for barangay, the smallest organized political group in the Philippines. Lake Sebu is a municipal center or town, consisting of 30 barangays, each of which has a number of sitios.

husband, Allen.⁴ We were immediately greeted warmly by five Tasaday people who had arrived the previous day,⁵ and several Manobo people from Blit,⁶ who were related by marriage to various Tasaday families. Over the next four days, Griffin and I visited the group in Klubi, Lake Sebu, most of whom stayed for the period while others arrived during our stay.⁷

Interviews were conducted over several hours each day. Questions were asked in English, since I am no longer fluent in the form of speech that the Tasaday use among themselves, a dialect of Cotabato Manobo. Translation was done by Rosie and Allen Sula (when they were available) into Tboli, which many Tasaday now speak (see section 4 below). The two Tasaday who have finished college, Klohonon (Clohonon) Udelen and Yuf (Jumar) Belayem,⁸ also acted as translators since they understand and speak English. They translated into Blit Manobo which most Tasaday now speak. During each day's lunch meal, the Tasaday continued to use their own dialect when speaking to each other, commonly using the distinct Tasaday terms 'eat' and 'drink', *kumundom* and *dumontot* respectively.

The first day's interviews were primarily associated with the distribution of some 50 photographs taken during the 1990's during the periods I stayed with them, first in Magtu Inilingan, then in Matu'lung, and finally in Kematu, Tboli. Information was requested about the identities of the individuals, where they presently live, who they have married, and the number of their children. The purpose of the second day's interviews was to retrieve as much information as possible about the descendants of each of the original seven families, particularly their names, the names of their spouses, and the number of their children. Of the original 27 people, 12 are dead, and 15 are still alive. *Udelen and Dul who had two children when first reported, have 12 living children (and reportedly no miscarriages), and 56 grandchildren. All are married except the youngest son Sok, who is now 20 years old. *Bilengan and Itet had four children with 30 grandchildren now. There are now well over 100 Tasaday or part-Tasaday, a population explosion. Genealogical tables, showing the names of Tasaday people, and the language groups of their spouses are given in section 3.

There were several interesting facts that emerged during the interviews. The first was the fact that all the original female spouses were said to be from Tasafang, a group which Dul claims spoke a language the same as Tasaday. After contact with Tasafang was lost, Belayem married Sindi' from Blit and this place became the source of wives of a number of Tasaday males, to the extent that Blit was called in the Tasaday language *Tana' Bayi* 'Land of Women'. Subsequently wives were found in places further afield, such as Lake Sebu. Another interesting fact is that Dul claims her

⁴ Rosie Sula works in Lake Sebu under the direction of Dominador (Baw) Baay who is the head of the branch of NCIP that covers all the South Cotabato indigenous groups and is owner of the Tboli museum in Lake Sebu.

⁵ Dul, the wife of Udelen and their son Klohonon; Aduq and Gintuy, the sons of Kuletow; and Yuf, one of the sons of Belayem.

⁶ Soleh the second wife of Belayem; her half-brother Mafalo, who assisted me on my first visit to Magtu Inilingan as a translator into Tagalog of data I got from Belayem, and who provided me with Blit Manobo equivalents of the lexical items I was checking; his daughter Lef and two of her children; Balong and Et Kudo, children of Igi, a Blit Manobo man who assisted me during my first visit to the Tasaday group.

⁷ These included two of the youngest of the 12 children of Dul: Lahonen and her husband and two children, and Sok (Dul's youngest son); as well as Biking, the son of *Mehayag (Mahayag) and Dula', and Dula' herself.

⁸ The names in parentheses are either school names or different spellings (as used in Rogel-Rara & Nabayra 1992). Apostrophe (') is used to mark glottal stop. Place names are given their traditional spellings, e.g., the name of the municipality is Lake Sebu, but Sebu contains a final glottal stop /sebu?/.

father Ka'ong was a survivor of an airplane crash near the Tasafang area, presumably Japanese. She reports that he married her mother Ulan, a Tasafang woman and had only one living child, Dul. Both her mother and father, and the mother's parents were killed in a landslide following a massive earthquake. Dul was the only member of the group who survived. She was probably a preteen at the time. She claims the Tasaday man Udelen found her, raised her and eventually married her. The fact of an airplane crash in the area is confirmed by several Tasaday men who have visited it, but the claim that Dul was the daughter of a survivor of the plane crash had not been told before, although she had told me years ago about her being the only survivor of the earthquake and landslide. The names of her ancestors in Tasafang and their relationships fit precisely the names given by Rogel-Rara & Nabayra (1992).

The purpose of the third day's interviews was to examine the results of the Friends of the Tasaday Foundation, founded by John Nance. These are explained in detail in section 4 below.

The fourth day was a farewell day, when lunch for all was served and final questions asked. Ten Tasaday lined up (as apparently was their custom when Elizalde visited them) to receive final financial gifts. They received P500, about \$10 each. Their lodging, food, and transportation from their homes had already been paid from funds provided by the remaining funds in the Friends of the Tasaday Foundation.

3. Tasaday families today

The following genealogical tables show the seven original Tasaday families and their present descendants. All of the names of spouses and children that were given during the second day of the interviews, match those given by Rogel-Rara & Nabayra (1992: 91-95) from their research in 1989-1990, although spellings may differ between the 1992 work and the Tables below.

Table 1. Tasaday in 1971⁹

Udelen♂ / Dul♀ (Tsfg)

Si'us♂

Maman♂

Lefonok♂ / Unay♀† (Tsfg)

Ukan♂†

Kelis♀

Odo'♂

Sasa'♂†

Bilengan♂ / Itet (Etut)♀ (Tsfg)

Lolo'♂

Lobo♂

Natek♂

Ilib♂

Kuletaw♂ / Sikuy♀ (Tsfg)

⁹ Slashes separate spouses. Children of couples when their names are known, are indented under their parents' names. The symbol † indicates people who died prior or immediately after the group was first reported.

Mehayag♀ / Dula'♀ (Tsfg)
Biking♂
Siyul♀
Gintuy♂
Adug♂

Tikaf♂ / Ginun ♀ (Tsfg)

Belayem♂

Table 2. Tasaday today

Udelen♂† / Dul♀

Si'us♂ / Sabi♀ (Blit Mbo)
/ Mimit♀ (Blit Mbo), 10 children (7♂, 3♀)
Maman♂ / Ida♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 10 children (2♂, 8♀)
Awod (Mary Jean)♀ / Rex Godwino♂† (Tboli), 2 children (2♀)
Pupet (Aira)♀ (4 years old)
Knugun (Iris)♀ (newly born)
Okon♀ / Somenia♀ (Blit Mbo), 10 children (4♂, 5♀)
Diha'♀ / Tudes♀ (Blit Mbo), 7 children (5♂, 2♀)
Sungo♂ / Anita♀ (Tboli), 7 children (3♂, 4♀)
Talihin♂ / Bing♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 4 children (1♂, 3♀)
Dihut♀ / Barmoli Dakais♂ (Dulangan Mbo), 3 children (1♂, 2♀)
(Klo)honon♂ / Jocelyn♀ (Dulangan Mbo), 3 children (2♂, 1♀)
Fakel♂ / Lydiana♀ (Lamfenek, Lake Sebu Ubu') 1 child (1♂)
Tata'♂ / Le'♀ (Talili, Tubak Mbo) newly married
Lahonen♀ / Junjun Belasan (Tasiman, Lake Sebu Ubu'), 2 children (2♀)
Sok♂ (born 1998) not yet married

(Le)fonok♂† / Unay♀ (Tsfg)†

Ukan♂†
Kelis♀† / Salim♂ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 7 children (5♂, 2♀)
Odo'♂ / Bening♀ (Blit Mbo), 7 children (5♂, 2♀)
Bula♂
Sasa'♂† died young (albino).

Bilangan♂† / Itet (Etut)♀

Lolo'♂ / Lufin♀ (Blit Mbo) †, 6 children (2♂, 4♀)
Lobo♂ / Lewin♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 4 children (1♂, 3♀)
/ Funding♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 4 children (2♂, 2♀)
/ Wen♀ (Blit Mbo), 2 children (2♂)
Natek♂ / Kading♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 1 child (1♂)
/ Kulu'♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 7 children
/ Lunti♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu'), 5 children (2♂, 3♀)
Ilib♂† (small child)

Degu♂ / Unknown♀ (Lake Sebu Ubu') 9 children

Kuletow♂† / Sekoy♀†

Gintuy♂ / Sita♀ (Blit Mbo), 2 children (1♂, 1♀)

Sayu♂

Mia♀ / Unknown♂ (Lake Sebu Ubu'--3rd wife), 4 children (1♂, 3♀)
/ Suwal♀ (Blit Mbo), 3 children (2♂ 1♀)

Mases♂ / Unknown♀, 1 child (1♀)

Ariel♂

/ Unknown♀ (left)

Adug♂ / Gili♀ (Mbo Blit)

/ Ye'li♀ (So. Tuboyung, Brgy. Lamfogon Ubu'), 1 child (1♂)

/ 2 Unknown♀ (left)

Mehayag♀† / Dula'♀ (Tsfg) now married to Banas♂ (Lake Sebu Ubu').

Biking♂ / Ning♀† (Blit Mbo), 2 children (1♂, 1♀)

Si'el♀ / Mening♂ (Lake Sebu Ubu')

Belayem♂† / Sindi'♀† (Blit Mbo)

/ Soleh♀ (Blit Mbo), 5 children (4♂, 1♀)

Yuf (Jumar)♂

Med♀ / Joey Baldo (Sarangani Blaan) married 2 years, no children

Malik♂ (works for CAFGU)

Bani (Banie)♂ (Grade 12, Valencia, Bukidnon)

Babi♂ (Grade 7)

4. Legacy of Friends of the Tasaday Foundation

John Nance, a photo journalist who accompanied Elizalde on his first visit to meet Tasaday people, was enthralled by the rain forest and the group of people who lived there. He resigned his position in Manila, wrote a book about them (Nance 1975), and spent the rest of his life till his death in 2012, traveling around the US talking about the Tasaday and defending himself from criticism of his obsession with the people. From funds he collected from various sources, and assistance from a wide range of people who were convinced of the falseness of the hoax claims, Nance established a foundation called 'Friends of the Tasaday Foundation' (FOTF). A Tboli woman, Maria Todi, was enlisted to manage the distribution of the funds to the Tasaday and Nance visited the Tasaday regularly to ensure that funds were being appropriately distributed.

Many thousands of dollars were distributed to the Tasaday under four programs, agriculture, health, education, and the government requirements for obtaining a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). Information about the four programs was elicited during the visit with the Tasaday, primarily from Yuf Belayem.

The Agriculture program consisted of providing them with the tools and equipment to transition to a farming economy. Four water buffalo were purchased and distributed as follows: one each to the families of Gintuy Kuletow, Lobo Bilengan, Odo' Lefonok, and Dul, the wife of Udelen. Of these, only two buffalo are now living, the buffaloes of Lobo and Dul, the latter of which is now

used not by any of her family but by Nellis, a Blit Manobo, who considers Dul his adoptive mother (Hemley 2003: 259). Allen Sula, the Tboli husband of Rosie Sula who is presently an NCIP representative in Lake Sebu, reported that he taught farming and distributed seed to the Tasaday. Whether he was paid from funds from FOTF is not known.

An offshoot of the Agriculture program is the formal establishment in October 2016, of the Blit Farmers Association. As of 2016, there were 55 members, most of whom are Blit Manobos, but there are six Tasaday members as well, two of whom are on the Board of the organization. They are Yuf (Jumar) Belayem (Vice-President) and Klohonon (Clohonon) Udelen (Treasurer). The other members are Maman Udelen, Fakel Udelen, Lobo Bilengan, and Dihut Udelen through her Blit husband, Barmoli Dakais.

There are 23 sitios of Brgy. Ned in the Reservation, three of which have Tasaday families. Lamdel, which is registered as Tasaday, has many of Udelen and Dul's children, their spouses and families. Lamuyun is the sitio where the family of Bilengan and Itet have their farms. Belayem and Soleh's family live in the area around Matu'lung.

The Health program consisted of the construction of a clinic in Blit, a central area close to where many Tasaday families were living because of the school there and because many Tasaday men were married to Blit women. This program also provided medicines and paid the salary of an elderly health care worker. After funds from FOTF dried up and the health care worker passed away, the local barangay officials received the left-over medications and provided a health care worker, but Tasaday claim that medicines when they are available are expensive, and immunizations which supposedly should be free, are charged at P150 a shot. It is clear that not only Tasaday received benefits from the funds distributed for the health program from FOTF, but any person living in Blit, whether Manobo or Tboli were also recipients.

The Education program was set up to provide support for Tasaday students from elementary school to college. Since some Tasaday students came from remote areas and were separated from their families during their education, a stipend was given to support them. The level of support given depended on the level of education. An elementary school student received P500 a month; a high school student received P700 a month; a college student received P1000 a month. Names were given of Tasaday students who attended high school, however only a few graduated. Of these, four finished one year and one two years before leaving. Only two finished college, Yuf Belayem (Agriculture) and Klohonon Udelen (Social Studies). As with the health program, some Blit Manobo received FOTF education funds, including relatives of the Blit wives of Tasaday people. These included at least two who completed two years of agricultural training and now have prominent positions in Blit, and one female who almost finished college, but left to get married. Yuf Belayem and Klohonon Udelen are now pastors with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Klohonon can now speak Tboli, because current teachers in the Elementary School in Blit are T'boli, and students are required to learn it.

In the Philippines, under Republic Act No. 8371, also known as "The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997," the State recognizes and promotes certain rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples (ICCs/IPs) within the framework of the Constitution. As part of this, there is an Ancestral Domains Office within the National Commission of Indigenous Peoples

which is responsible for issuing Certificates of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). The Certificate was applied for by the Tasaday, covering the area set aside by the Reservation. The FOTF paid for one of the first requirements, a detailed map surveyed by professional cartographers with technical descriptions and a description of the natural features and landmarks embraced therein. Complications included the fact that the periphery of the ancestral domain was expanded to cover areas resided in by both Blit Manobo and Tboli peoples. The Certificate was approved many years ago, but to date has not been awarded.

5. Conclusion

This paper is about the current situation of the Tasaday, as revealed in a very limited survey. It is clear that they still maintain their independence as a distinct group of Manobo, with one sitio of Brgy Ned registered as Tasaday. However, many of the original group have intermarried with outsiders, including Manobos from Blit, as well as members of other groups, such as Ubu', from Lake Sebu, its closely related language Tboli and even Blaan, each language part of the Southern Mindanao group of languages and very different from Manobo. For those living in the vicinity of Blit, their children go to the elementary school in Blit, and the Tasaday now maintain close ties to Blit. The relationship has been formalized with the Blit Farmers Association. The group with whom we met, even though they interact with and speak Blit Manobo, seemed completely assured of their own identity as Tasaday.

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