

PASUYA YASIUNGU

# Development and contemporary concepts of Taiwanese Indigenous music and dance

## I. Foreword

In ancient times, the ritual music and dances of Taiwanese Indigenous peoples expressed desire and reverence for the universe and the gods. During seasonal rituals, tribes often performed rituals, ceremonies, songs, and dances with heaven and earth as their stage and the night as their setting. Rituals, ceremonies, music, and dance are a cultural embodiment of tribal ethics and ethnic history characterized by honour and awe of the gods and entertainment for the performers and the spectators. Indigenous rituals, ceremonies, music, and dance embody the memories of ancestors and the ruminations and passing on of the cultural matrix. They also represent a social field for the moral life and care of tribes. Despite the fact that early aborigines had no written language, the cultural embodiment and personal practice of rituals, ceremonies, music, and dance represent a fundamental carrier of tribal ethics and collective memory.

With the passage of time and after a period of generational change and decline of traditional Indigenous rituals and ceremonies, a new trend of ethno-tourism emerged in the wake of social transformations caused by economic development in the 1980s and the rise of the tourism industry. Numerous tourist spots successively offered Indigenous song and dance performances, which turned into one of the main ways for the contemporary public to gain a better understanding of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples; it also allowed for the creation of ethnic stereotypes (Xie 1994). As Indigenous rituals, ceremonies, music, and dances face the danger of 'touristification', experts and scholars who observe and study Indigenous music and dance culture strongly advocate that the cultural context of rituals and ceremonies should be restored. They also contemplate how to incorporate dramatic elements on stage and how to realise Indigenous 'theatrical

dance' forms and thereby enrich existing performance modes in Taiwan (Wu 1993; Wang 2001; Mulu 2003; Hu 2003; Takewatan 2006; Qiu 2007; Sun 2006; Yang 2006; Zhao 2004). In addition, popular music and dance modes that are detached from ritual time sequences and integrated into daily life – for example, market vendors who sell and play Indigenous music tapes, CDs, and DVDs; Karaoke bars in tribal communities, and Indigenous song contest TV programmes – are enjoying a rising popularity. The embodiment of Indigenous music and dance in the fields of rituals, tourism, theatre, and popular culture has evolved in different developmental stages, but despite these transformations and differences, Indigenous music and dance has not lost its key function as a carrier of culture.

The advent of modern forms of government has led to further changes to an Indigenous society that is facing numerous challenges in the fields of cultural transmission and innovation. We must analyse the gradual decline of traditional Indigenous music and dance forms in a changing macroenvironment. We must also find ways to restore the subjectivity of Indigenous tribal communities and maintain unique cultural styles characterized by ethnic diversity. Cultural policies that allow the passing on and development of Indigenous music and dance culture and relevant industries must be formulated by the government in cooperation with dedicated individuals. These are the key tasks that must be faced and tackled in the development of Indigenous music and dance culture. Based on these observations, this study aims to deepen the significance and cultural interpretations of Indigenous music and dance expressions in our age through an in-depth exploration of the development context of Indigenous music and dance as well as concrete research strategies and network analysis.

## **II. Historical evolution of indigenous music and dance in Taiwan**

### Prior to 1895

Taiwan was 'discovered' by the Portuguese and named 'Formosa' (the beautiful island) in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. The Dutch invaded the island in 1642 and opened Taiwan to the world. In 1662, Koxinga drove the Dutch out of Taiwan, which initiated an inextricable relationship with China. In 1683, the

Qing Government ended two decades of rule by Koxinga and his heirs and incorporated Taiwan into the Qing empire. Qing rule lasted until Taiwan was ceded to Japan in 1895. Due to the lack of intervention by the Qing government, Taiwanese Indigenous society had remained self-sufficient and relatively untouched. However, the period of Japanese rule brought dramatic changes to Indigenous society and culture.

Because Indigenous peoples had not developed their own writing systems, we are forced to explore pre-Japanese-rule music and dance culture of Indigenous tribes by studying the written descriptions and materials produced by others. What follows below are two eyewitness accounts of Taiwan Indigenous music and dance prior to the period of Japanese rule. Liu Shi-Qi, a Qing official, gave the following account in his 'Aborigine Tribal Panorama Prints Commentary':

Aboriginal custom prescribes that a married couple must organize a feast for all relatives three days after the wedding. All women wear festive attire and makeup for this occasion. They dance arm in arm facing each other and swinging to and fro. They move their feet up and down in an uninterrupted cycle, forming two circles. They sing loudly in perfect harmony, shaking their heads with their eyes closed in a charming manner. (Liu, Shi-Qi, 1987: p. 15)

The dance described by the imperial censor was part of the wedding customs of Indigenous peoples. This custom prescribed that all friends and relatives had to be invited to a grand feast three days after the wedding. The women participated clad in festive attire. They held hands and swung to and fro while keeping the rhythm by stomping their feet in an uninterrupted cycle. They formed circles and sang loudly with stretched necks in a harmonious manner. These written descriptions, while created by cultural outsiders, give us a better understanding of the daily lives of Taiwanese aborigines at that time and allow us to gain an idea of Indigenous music and dances in their original state.

In 'Across Formosa: Travels and Adventures of Foreigners in Taiwan', Ke-Xiang Liu quotes the following report by British photographer John Thomson ('Notes of a Journey in Southern Formosa', 1873) which he wrote after completing his mountain travel notes 'From Tainan to Liugui' in 1871:

After crossing Liugui river, I reached a little village called Paoziliao [. ...] The village was inhabited by members of the Pingpu Tribe who were more savage than their fellow tribesmen along the coastline. They were tall and heavy and

had straight and robust limbs and a light complexion. [...] After darkness fell, they built large fires in front of their houses [. ...] the mounting flames seemed to symbolize a certain totem spirit at the banquet. Later on, young males and females cleared a space and formed a crescent, dancing arms crossed while humming a plaintive song. The song became faster and faster in sync with the dance steps. As the dancers worked themselves into a frenzy, the flame tongues resembled leaping spirits that penetrated the flying dust and sand reminiscent of red clouds that the dancers were engulfed in. As the singing stopped, the savages suddenly started shouting. The loud sound echoed off the mountains and valleys. (Liu, Ke-Xiang 1991: pp. 55-57)

These two accounts of indigenous music and dance prior to the period of Japanese rule only provide us with fragmentary and incomplete information from the perspective of outsiders. However, the vivid descriptions and depictions are reflected in the Indigenous music and dance culture present today. During this stage, Indigenous society was still characterized by a high level of autonomy and remained relatively unaffected by external culture and political upheavals.

#### 1895 –1945 (Japanese rule)

As Taiwan entered the period of Japanese rule in 1895, its Indigenous cultures faced unprecedented transformations. To maximize their profits, the Japanese colonial government adopted hard-handed rule on the island in an effort to eradicate or change local culture through a policy of assimilation. Indigenous tribes tried to resist the measures and coercion adopted by the Japanese. In addition to the controls implemented by police authorities in tribal areas, educational institutions for Indigenous children were established in tribal communities. The government went as far as to strictly forbid numerous tribal customs, rituals, and ceremonies, which resulted in a dramatic upheaval of traditional tribal culture, as the following account demonstrates.

Mayasvi is the name of a festival of the Tsuo tribe. It is a celebration ceremony held after return of victorious warriors, construction of a house, or rites of passage. The purpose of this ceremony is to express deep gratitude for the blessing of the gods and promote the unity of the tribe. The time and date

of this ceremony is not fixed. During the period of Japanese rule, the "Head" ritual was eliminated to improve the custom and the festival was renamed to Avamatsuli. A fixed date was set for the ceremony (August 15). Upon the retrocession of Taiwan, it was renamed to harvest festival which is held annually on February 15. However, strictly speaking, Mayasvi is not related to the bringing in of the harvest. The original harvest festival was held on July 20. (Ming, Li-Guo, 1989: 106)

This account clearly shows that the war ritual lost its original cultural significance due to the prohibition of headhunting during the Japanese colonial period. In a similar vein, tribal communities sprang up everywhere in Taiwan, which led to an irreparable fragmentation of indigenous cultural traditions and mother culture. In this way, the culture of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan gradually lost its subjectivity.

New Indigenous music and dance performance practices also first appeared during the Japanese colonial period. For example, the Chu-yin performances of the Thao tribe became famous in that period. The 'Chu Sounds on the Lake' is one of the eight main attractions of Sun-Moon Lake. Performance activities centered in this area represent the beginnings of commercialization and 'touristification' of Indigenous culture in Taiwan. In addition, images on preserved postcards from this era also depict numerous carefully arranged cultural performances. A notable example is an image of Atayal women playing Jew's harps under a peach blossom tree, which aims to offer a glimpse of the beauty of Indigenous culture and Wushe scenery with cherry blossoms in full bloom. It is very likely that this scene of a family reunion under a tree was carefully staged for the photographer.

#### 1945 –1987 Period of martial law

Upon relocation to Taiwan, the Nationalist Government of China took up the planning framework for tribal areas implemented by the Japanese. 'Japanisation' was replaced with a policy titled 'make the mountains like the plains'. It was determined that Indigenous peoples require guidance, care, and control. The assimilation policy of the Chinese Nationalist government was, in essence, identical to the Japanisation policy. Both policies relied on re-education efforts to reform the 'inferior' customs of traditional Indigenous society. This

process of oppression led to a second loss of subjectivity of Indigenous culture.

After the war, Taiwan joined the production system characterized by capitalization of industry and commerce. However, due to the massive political and military threats of the People's Republic of China and the heavy-handed authoritarian policies of the rulers in Taiwan, the residents of the island were unable to freely travel to other countries. This led to the irresistible rise of ethno-tourism in sync with the rising popularity of domestic tourism due to the beauty of the natural scenery and the attraction of a culture alien to the dominant Han race, which had abundant political and economic resources.

Ethno-tourism is a performance of encounter. It involves interactions between subject and object, and contacts between the members of two different cultures or subcultures. The anthropologist Dennison Nash views ethno-tourism as a form of imperialism characterized by the exploitation of undeveloped or developing areas by metropolitan centers (industrialized capitalist society) (quoted in Xie, Shi-Zhong 1994: p. 3).

In the period of martial law, original tribal cultures gradually collapsed under the impact of massive external pressure and the relative powerlessness of Indigenous society. In the eyes of external observers, traditional Indigenous music and dance practices were primitive and not worthy of preservation unless they could be transformed and enhanced at will to meet the requirements of tourism or performances. In addition, the introduction of Western religion and the doctrines and interpretations of the missionaries caused great harm to traditional rituals, ceremonies, music, and dance as illustrated by the following passage on the Amis tribe:

The influx of external religions has led to dramatic transformations of traditional and primitive religions. A majority of tribal community members have been converted to external religions. This has a significant impact on the participation in primitive religions and, the role fulfilled by the age hierarchy in religious ceremonies has been lost. Age hierarchies are in decline due to a loss of functions. The influx of external religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism has undermined the position of shamans in tribal rituals. Many rituals and ceremonies such as blessing and ancestor rituals have been replaced by church ceremonies (Li, Jing-Chong, 1998: p.264).

1987-today Post-martial law period

After the lifting of martial law, the touristification of Indigenous music and dance has turned into an unalterable fact. Even so, performance modes are characterized by an increasing diversity. Indigenous music and dance shows characterized by Indigenous subjectivity have been gradually developed, and Indigenous dance troupes are being established one after another. 'Aboriginal Dancers', which was established in 1991, is one of the top Indigenous music and dance troupes currently active. Indigenous intellectuals who have received a modern education start to utilize diverse techniques and presentation methods in the field of traditional music and dance performances. Brand-new Indigenous music and dance forms exhibit a strong subjectivity and group identification. According to Da-Chuan Sun:

A noteworthy example is "Aboriginal dancers", an indigenous music and dance troupe which has a deep grasp of the spirit of the ceremonies and dances of all indigenous tribes due to rigorous field training. Their stage performances and cross-ethnic music and dance moves manifest a pan-indigenous consciousness. (Sun, Da-Chuan, 2000: p. 148)

Active conduct such as awareness and identification with the own tribal culture due to an awakening ethnic self-awareness, love of performance arts, engagement in new forms of Indigenous song and dance characterized by touristification and labeling, or rescue of records, learning transfer, or innovative research demonstrate the awakening subjective awareness of Taiwan's diverse Indigenous culture and the desire for regeneration.

Looking back on the transformations and development of Indigenous rituals and ceremonies since the 1980s, Mr. Da-Chuan Sun observes that all forms of cultural representation regardless of their purpose (response to political orientation, tourism and entertainment, creation of tribal communities, or theatrical performances) are characterized by a tension between secularity and sacredness. Secularization gives tradition new vitality to conform to new conditions. The sense of sacredness ensures that there is no rupture with Indigenous identity and tradition. In Sun's view, sanctification allows the integration of the secular world encountered in daily life (Sun, Da-Chuan, 2006: p. 164).

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Indigenous peoples in Taiwan have been exposed to historical evolutions and regime

changes. The development of music and dance has been deeply affected by these changes and upheavals. The overall climate for music and dance development is closely intertwined with politics, economy and society. An analysis of the quality of contemporary Indigenous music and dance reveals traces of different elements and influences. During this process, various ruminations also appeared in the cultural body. Indigenous music and dance in Taiwan are currently in a state of flux in the face of multi-faceted transformations and opportunities ready to be seized. It is the inescapable duty of contemporary Indigenous intellectuals and professionals engaged in the field of music and dance to take the initiative and give full expression to ethnic characteristics.

### **III. Contemporary concepts of indigenous music and dance in Taiwan**

The development of Indigenous music and dance troupes in Taiwan is characterized by great diversity. School and professional Indigenous dance troupes, as well as an even greater number of tribal dance troupes of a local grassroots nature that invoke traditional music and dance or engage in new creations by integrating different elements, all have the same goal despite different developmental directions. They strive to utilize music and dance performances to bring the general public closer to Indigenous culture, generate a deeper understanding, and achieve the goal of cultural transmission.

However, a large number of Indigenous music and dance troupes are not fully prepared to face the challenges posed by theatrical performances. Chaos, a kind of cultural incoherence, is still the dominant feature of many performances under the scrutinizing eye of mainstream society. Such absurd presentations cannot achieve the effect of dissemination, communication, and transmission and are extremely harmful to Indigenous culture since they expose unknowing spectators to erroneous cultural imagery. What follows are several suggestions for staged performances of Indigenous music and culture for individuals dedicated to this field.

#### Tradition versus innovation

When tradition meets innovation, many music and dance troupes face the following dilemma: How should tradition and



innovation be defined and identified? This issue has been widely discussed in academic and industry circles. I have discovered in my recent creative work in the field of music and dance that tradition originates in tribal communities and innovation is dependent on tradition. Tradition must be authentic and derived from tribal communities, while innovation represents an extension of tradition.

Innovation in the context of touristification and commercialization often leads to a loss of appeal and constraints of tradition. Music and dance performances in this situational context are characterized by an overemphasis of bodily expression, joyful atmosphere, and perceptions of exotic cultures. The cultural context of different ethnicities is completely lost, which in turn leads to misconceptions and erroneous perceptions on the part of spectators. This situational context also reinforces the stereotype that aborigines love singing and dancing, since it is impossible to perceive the profound cultural connotations of on-stage performances that exude passion, exuberance, and exoticism.

The tension between tradition and innovation poses a difficult challenge. Numerous professional groups and individuals engaged in cultural work contemplate how to deal with this dichotomy. I think it is of paramount importance to respect the subjectivity of tribal communities before stage requirements are considered. More consideration should be given to this dichotomy between tradition and innovation.

### Misappropriation and erroneous replication

Misappropriation and erroneous replication are prevalent in Indigenous culture performances especially in stage performances in a tourism context. Misuse of tribal costumes is the most notable example. 'Creative costumes' that have lost any trace of authenticity are very common. Common characteristics include scanty fabric, miniskirts, and bright colours. In traditional Indigenous society, clothing often symbolizes social status and cultural representation. A tribal elder once revealed that traditional clothing without leggings is as embarrassing as appearing naked. Costumes created for the sole purpose of attracting tourists are devoid of spirit and provoke outrage on the part of tribal members.

Another common example of misappropriation is the misuse of traditional songs and music. Every tribe and ethnic group has its unique musical styles and singing techniques.

These styles cannot be blended or appropriated at will. Tribal culture performances should present authentic songs and dances characteristic of the particular tribe to convey correct messages. I accidentally came across a performance of traditional Amis music and dance and was taken aback by the blatant misuse of clothing. Songs and dance elements from different areas and ethnic groups are combined and blended, leading to a conveyed cultural imagery that is false and therefore highly detrimental to both tribal members and spectators.

It is deeply worrying that misappropriation and erroneous replication leads to the conveyance of wrong messages and false cultural imagery to spectators who may already have numerous misconceptions and lack understanding and familiarity. These factors should be carefully considered to ensure a rational design of music and dance performances.

#### The tribal community as the main entity

The subjectivity of tribal communities must be constantly emphasised, since all cultural traditions are derived from these communities. If this subjectivity is lost, the traditions that we value the most will also disappear. Many performance troupes engage in music and dance performances that are not related to their own ethnic group. They sometimes perform ceremonial music and dances of a taboo nature in a rash manner without consulting tribal communities or acquiring their consent. This is highly disrespectful and potentially harmful to the members of these communities.

The contents and methods of music and dance performances should therefore be discussed beforehand with involved tribal communities to achieve a consensus through communication and coordination. Ethnic music and dance performances without consent are disrespectful, harmful, and destroy the subjectivity of tribal communities.

#### In sum

The reflections on the contemporary development of indigenous music and culture presented above indicate that there is a strong dichotomy between tribal communities and stage performances. How to achieve a balance between these two poles will be a key task requiring continued efforts by

workers engaged in the field of Indigenous culture and performance.

## References

Hu, Tai-Li. *Cultural Performances and Taiwan Indigenous Peoples*. Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2003.

Li, Jing-Chong (ed.). *History of the Amis People*. Taipei: Shita Books, 1998.

Liu, Ke-Xiang. *Across Formosa: Travels and Adventures of Foreigners in Taiwan*. Taipei: Independent Evening Post, 1991.

Liu, Shi-Qi. 'Aborigine Tribal Panorama Prints Commentary'. *Collection of Documents and Historical Materials, Taipei, Taiwan*, Vol.2. Taipei: Datong, 1987.

Ming, Li-Guo. *Rituals of Taiwan Indigenous Peoples*. Taipei: Taiyuan, 1989.

Mulu, Panay. 'Symbolic Meaning of Music and Dance in Rituals and Ceremonies – Illustrated by the Example of the Mirecuk Ritual'. *Teaching Workshop on Indigenous Music and Dance Culture: Manual for Instructors and Training Camp Participants*. Taipei: Formosa Indigenous Dance Foundation of Culture and Arts, 2003.

Qiu, Kun-Liang. 'Mobile Theater'. *Formosa Culture*, Issue 6 (Jan. 2007): 40-45.

Sun, Da-Chuan. *Constructing Ethnicity under Strain – Language, Culture, and Politics of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan*. Taipei: Unitas Publishing, 2000.

-----. 'Return of the Sacred – Current Status and Regeneration of Rituals and Ceremonies of Taiwan Indigenous Peoples'. *Music and Dance Education: Aboriginal Teaching Genie – Collected Articles on Taiwan Indigenous Education*, edited by Da-Chuan Sun. Vol. 4 (2006): 156-165.

Takewatan, Alice. 'The Future of Taiwan Indigenous Music, Dance, and Art'. *Music and Dance Education: Aboriginal Teaching Genie – Collected Articles on Taiwan Indigenous Education*, edited by Da-Chuan Sun, Vol. 4 (2006): 166-181.

Wang, Song-Shan. 'Ceremony, Cultural Performances, and Social Validity – Case Study of the Zou Tribe'. *Collection of Papers Presented at the International Conference on Society, Ethnicity, and Cultural Performance*, edited by Qiu-Gui Wang et al. Taipei: Center for Chinese Studies, 2001. 265-329.

Wu, Jin-Fa (ed.). *Aboriginal Dancers*. Taichung: Morningstar, 1993.

Xie, Shi-Zhong. *Ethno-tourism in Taiwan—Anthropological Interpretation of Contemporary 'Mountain Culture'*. Taipei: Independent Evening Post Cultural Press, 1994.

Yang, Zheng-Xian. 'Time in Space: Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines, Curation Concepts for 2006 Special Exhibition in Cooperation with Tribes.' *The Mobile Tribe: Indigenous Dances in the Urban Jungle – Special Exhibition Publication of the Museum in Cooperation with Tribes*, Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines (2006): 54-58.

Zhao, Qi-Fang. 'Physical Memory and Metaphors of the Sea: Interpretation of the Dance Culture of the Makudai Tribe'. *Ocean Memories: The Sea, Ethnicity, and Culture Conference Manual*. Taipei: Formosa Indigenous Dance Foundation of Culture and Arts, 2004.

**Pasuya Yasiungu** (Cou Nation) is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Ethnic Relations and Cultures, National Dong Hwa University (Taiwan), and Assistant to the Dean, College of Indigenous Studies, NDHU.