

## **THE TASADAY CONTROVERSY:**

### ***A Lesson in the Pitfalls of Evolutionary Expectations***

#### **I. The Tasaday: Fulfilling Humanist Preconceptions**

In 1971, the small Tasaday tribe of about 25 people was discovered on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. They were "living the lives of cave men" and they were "unaware that there were other people on the planet."<sup>1</sup>

Manuel Elizalde, former director of Panamin (the Filipino government's agency for routing aid to minorities), and Ferdinand Marcos' Special Assistant for Oversight of Minorities, claimed: "They didn't realize there was a country; they didn't realize there was a sea" beyond Mindanao; "they did not even know what [rice] was."

**The apparent primitivity of the Tasaday fit in with evolutionary ideas of man's ancient past:** "They have no words for weapons, hostility or war"; for most of history, the secular story goes, "we lived as the Tasaday," in caves, using stone tools, and hunting and gathering. "Could the Tasaday have been alone in their caves for ten thousand years? It was a tantalizing idea."

Further, "they couldn't have come along at a better time." An "interest in primal mankind" came out of the 1960s hippie movement. According to anthropologist Alan Barnard, "People thought the Tasaday were primal," thus satisfying the expectations that such cultures must have existed, if not now, at least in the distant past.<sup>2</sup>

But finding a primal culture *in the present* was much more exciting than theorizing about the past. "*National Geographic* magazine devoted 32 pages" to the Tasaday<sup>3</sup> who were "instant celebrities." One month later, NBC news correspondent Jack Reynolds introduced the Tasaday to a "national television audience."

#### **II. Were the Tasaday Genuine? -- Early Doubts**

"The image of the Tasaday was firmly fixed," but in August, 1972, ethnobotanist Douglas Yen visited the Tasaday to study how they used plants in their culture. Yen's analysis of the Tasaday diet showed "low levels of carbohydrates and proteins." Evidently the Tasaday did not lead the easy life initially depicted in news reports but had to search long and hard for sustenance. In addition, the Tasaday claimed never to have met the nearby Blit or T'boli tribes, "but maybe their ancestors had." Yen checked on this possibility, finding that the Tasaday had no agriculture and used a smaller variety of plants than would normally be expected for a culture situated in the tropics for millennia.

In September, 1972, linguistic anthropologist Carol Molony accompanied Yen in a visit to the Tasaday. Molony and Yen planned to "learn about their past from their language," but 80% of the Tasaday vocabulary was like the Manobo language, so "the idea that the Tasaday had been lost in their caves" for thousands of years "disappeared." The Tasaday language, it was decided, must have split from the Manobo about 1200 AD. **They were "not originally cave men at all, it seemed," but they "had become them."**

Now Elizalde put limits on visits and prevented certain questions from being asked of them. "Meanwhile, there always seemed to be time for the press and their helicopters." **In 1974, Elizalde prohibited all visits.**

Finally in 1986, the Marcos regime collapsed, and visits were possible again. A Swiss journalist went to the old Tasaday site. The Tasaday told him that "they were really from the T'boli and Blit people, and [the ABC news program] *20/20* exposed the hoax [in a program] 'The Tribe That Never Was'."

**20/20 producer Judith Moses said that the Tasaday were warned when visitors were coming so they could pretend to be primitive.** According to rumors in the Philippine press, the Tasaday hoax was part of a plot by Marcos and Elizalde to strip tribal peoples of their lands. On the other hand, Elizalde accused loggers of lying about the Tasaday being fake, so the loggers could resume the harvesting of timber which had been stopped when the Tasaday were discovered. However, the Elizalde family was one of the richest in the Philippines, with investments in land and logging.

In 1988, Elizalde brought the Tasaday to Manila to prove their authenticity in court. Was he saving face, or was he sincere? Fourteen scientists in the early 1970s who saw the Tasaday never suggested that they were a hoax. **Were the scientists victims of evolutionary expectations, believing in the primitivity they expected to see, or were the suspicions of a Tasaday hoax unwarranted sensationalism?**<sup>4</sup>

#### **III. The Doubts Continue**

In 1989, Yen and Molony continued to insist that the Tasaday are genuine. Yet the Tasaday claimed to be ignorant of other tribes only a three hour walk away.

In 1988, at the World Congress of Anthropology, Gerald Berreman noted that **observers meeting the Tasaday "went" with "an idee fixe" in love with the concept of the noble savage.** Their caves had no remains of food, "an impossibility" for a tribe living in the caves for

thousands of years. They had no fishing technology, they had to catch fish by hand, and they had no "carrying" technology -- no nets or baskets, and no rituals or folklore. These deficiencies are not "anthropologically believable" and are "not authentic." The Tasaday seem to have been invented by Elizalde "perhaps just for glory."<sup>5</sup>

In Berreman's view, "The evidence leaves no doubt in my mind that the entire Tasaday episode has been a deliberate deception, a hoax ... Vulnerable villagers ... were induced to cavort, clad in leaves, as cave-dwellers before outsiders during brief, preannounced visits."<sup>6</sup>

Duke University professor Martin Lewis summarized the Tasaday episode by writing: "Most glaring is the case of the Tasaday ... famed for both their gentle ways and their total freedom from corrupting exterior contact. **The discovery of this stone-age remnant now appears to have been an outright fraud.**"<sup>7</sup>

The Tasaday site had no traces of old stone tools either. "[W]here did the stone tools go? If they had been using them for hundreds of years, wouldn't there be at least a few left lying around? None were reported found."

The Tasaday had no agricultural foods at all, a condition very much unexpected for a people living in the wild for centuries or millennia. "Were [the Tasaday] simply lying" about their primitivity? Yet Molony saw the lack of agricultural foods as evidence that the Tasaday are genuine.

According to Molony, "they would have to carefully exclude from their speech" all the "rich complex" of agricultural metaphors present in all languages, if in fact they really were modern farmers. And children would need to have been accomplices in this hoax, watching their vocabulary, too -- "even more impossible," Molony asserted.

Yen claimed that the Tasaday children could not even identify a rice plant he showed them; their "surprise could not have been faked." **Were Molony and Yen victims of evolutionary expectations of primitivity that caused them to overlook tell-tale clues they should have noticed?** Or are their assertions valid?

On the other hand, "[I]f the T'bolis lived so close to their Tasaday neighbors," how could they not have known of them? ... [T]he Tasaday story remains a perplexing one. ... They told NBC they were real ... they told ABC they were fake ... They've told Philippine television they were real ... and British television they were fake."<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. "The Tasaday Controversy: Assessing the Evidence"

This is the title of a book by anthropologist Thomas Headland.<sup>9</sup> According to Headland, the Tasaday were not paid performers, but there were gross exaggerations because scientists were "excited" about what they were finding. Headland pointed out that ideas about hunter/gatherers have changed since the late 1960s. In 1968, anthropologists decided that hunter/gatherers, though primitive, "lived a very affluent lifestyle," and it was then that the Tasaday were discovered.

According to Headland, **"for some reason they broke off" from the Manobo people in the nineteenth century**, possibly because they were hiding from slave traders or fleeing a plague of disease. Headland also proposed that the Tasaday in fact occasionally traded with their farming neighbors down the river.

Despite sporadic contact, "Perhaps by 1971, the Tasaday really did believe they were the only human beings on the planet." By 1989, intermarriage with the Manobo had increased the number of Tasaday to 62 people.<sup>10</sup>

Were the Tasaday a deliberate hoax engineered by Elizalde, or is Headland's milder judgment correct? Regardless of the answer, one sobering fact remains. **The false premise that there must be primitive evolving races conditioned scientists to "see" what they believed.** The Tasaday were seen as an ancient stone age people, when they were no such thing.<sup>11</sup>

#### Sources

**1** Bettina Lerner, "The Lost Tribe: Was This Story Just Too Good to Be True?," *Nova*, BBC-TV, 1989. Televised on WTCI-TV45, Chattanooga, Tennessee, September 21, 1993. Quotations are the words of Bettina Lerner, the writer of the program, unless otherwise attributed. **2** *ibid.*

**3** *National Geographic* published several articles on the Tasaday as if they were real stone age people: (1) Kenneth MacLeish, "Help for Philippine Tribes in Trouble," *National Geographic*, Vol. 140 no. 2, August 1971, pp. 220-255; (2) Jerry Jones, "First Glimpse of a Stone Age Tribe," *National Geographic*, Vol. 140 no. 6, December 1971, pp. 881-882; and (3) Kenneth MacLeish, "The Tasadays, Stone Age Cavemen of Mindanao," *National Geographic*, Vol. 142 no. 2, August 1972, pp. 219-249. A full-length book describing the Tasaday as a genuine stone age culture was also published: John Nance, *The Gentle Tasaday*, HBJ, 1975. **4** Lerner, *op. cit.* **5** *ibid.*

**6** Martin Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism*, Duke University, 1992, p. 67.

**7** Gerald Berreman, "The Incredible 'Tasaday': Deconstructing the Myth of a Stone Age People," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Vol. 15 no. 1, January 31, 1991, p. 34. **8** Lerner, *op. cit.*

**9** American Anthropological Association, 1992. **10** Lerner, *op. cit.*

**11** Antonio Montalvan II, "Final Word on the Tasaday?," [www.inq7net/globalnation/col\\_krm/2004/aug09.htm](http://www.inq7net/globalnation/col_krm/2004/aug09.htm), August 9, 2004, paragraph 12. A review of Robin Hemley's *Invented Eden*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.