Anthropologists Debate Tasaday Hoax Evidence

The American Anthropological Association, concerned about the credibility of the discipline, has launched a review of the data

"A RAIN FOREST WATERGATE" is the way Gerald Berreman sums up the story of the Tasaday, a "stone age" tribe in the Philippines that is supposed to have survived into the 20th century knowing nothing about agriculture or the world beyond their caves.

Berreman, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, views the widely publicized "discovery" of the Tasaday 18 years ago as an egregious fake. That was the thrust of his message when he led off a 17-member panel of speakers brought together by the American Anthropology Association to discuss the Tasaday during the AAA's annual meeting in Washington, D.C., on 16 November. Two earlier debates sponsored by other groups have examined the subject, and this latest will serve as preamble to yet another review. It will be conducted for the AAA by a panel chaired by Fred Eggan, former anthropology professor at the University of Chicago.

Thomas Headland, an anthropologist at the University of Texas, Arlington, whom the AAA tapped to organize this meeting, said the association has been troubled by press accounts describing the case as the biggest hoax since the Piltdown man and by the public's continuing fascination with what one panelist called a band of "paleo-hippies." AAA leaders snapped "wide awake" last spring, Headland said, when they saw a British film, "Trial in the Jungle," due to be shown on U.S. television soon, which asks the question, "If [the Tasaday] were able to fool every anthropologist who ever saw them, how credible is the science of anthropology?" The AAA was stung badly enough to set aside $3,000 to organize this public review. The National Geographic Society contributed $2,000.

The story begins with Manuel Elizalde, Jr., a Filipino cultural minister and scion of a wealthy family, who was the first to reveal the Tasaday's existence in 1971. He announced that he had located the tribe in the Mindanau rain forest with the help of a hunter named Dafal. Early accounts appeared in the *National Geographic* ("First glimpse of a stone age tribe," December 1971, p. 880) and in a book by journalist John Nance (*The Gentle Tasaday: A Stone Age People in the Philippine Rain Forest*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, N.Y., 1975).

While there have always been doubters, they did not get much attention until a Swiss journalist named Oswald Iten in 1986 hiked to the Tasaday caves, found them empty, and declared the entire story a hoax. His skeptical view now predominates. However, some researchers who published early studies on the Tasaday, including Stanford University linguist Carol Molony, say the hoax theory is no more credible than any other explanation of the Tasaday and should be taken with a grain of salt.

Au naturel? *A Tasaday family as found by Oswald Iten in March 1986. A week later, Stern photographed them half-naked, wearing leaves.*

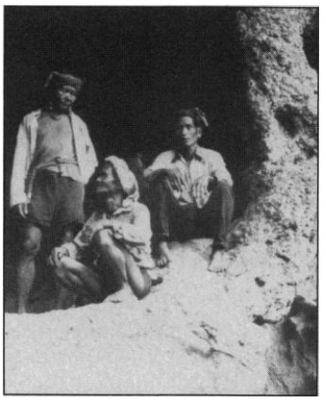
The AAA session this November did not change any of these opinions. But doubters like Berreman rattled off a damning barrage of questions that, through lack of response, made a firm statement. Headland, who tries to hold a a middle ground in the debate, said it has been hard to keep these questions in focus because defenders of Elizalde's view of the Tasaday shift to other topics. Often, he said, they argue that critics are out to destroy the Tasaday as a people. Indeed, several speakers who rose after Headland, including members of the audience with ties to the Philippine government, argued vehemently that the Tasaday exist, attacking a logical straw man. They warned that if anthropologists take away the Tasaday's identity, loggers and miners may also take away the reservation set up for them. Berreman says this is unlikely, and Headland says that even if it were, it is not relevant. The real question, Headland insists, is whether the Tasaday have lived in isolation for centuries—as claimed—"following a stone-tool-using, foraging mode of existence, without iron, eating only wild foods and having no contact with agricultural peoples until the 1960s."

Although not a Phillipines expert, Berreman is regarded as savvy on ethical issues in anthropology, and, for this reason, he says, he was thrust into the controversy in 1986 as a member of a six-person panel reviewing the evidence. The group never visited the Tasaday caves, for the territory is dangerous, and they never issued a joint report, although Berreman said that some wrote papers. After reading the literature, Berreman developed a keen sense of disbelief.

The real "knee slappers" in the story, Berreman said, are the claims that there was no debris on the floor of the cave where the Tasaday lived because the tribe is extremely tidy, sweeping off the floor every day, and that neither they nor their ancestors ever bothered to make the 3-hour walk to a neighboring village to barter for decent food. Like Berreman, Headland has doubts, and he focused his fire on the Tasaday's improbable diet, pointing out that not enough wild yams grow in the area to keep them alive. His research implies either that the tribe did not truly inhabit the rain forest or that they had supplemented their wild diet with harvested food, such as rice, obtained from neighbors. Another doubter on the panel was Zeus Salazar, an anthropologist at the University of the Philippines, who was the first to challenge the Elizalde story based on his analysis of the Tasaday language and tools, which seemed phony to him. Next came Robert Carneiro, curator of the American Museum of Natural History, who found the Tasaday stone axes crude, flimsy, and "unlike any working stone ax heads I have seen anywhere in the world"—in sum, not plausible. William Longacre, an archeologist at the University of Arizona, said that a competent researcher with a spade could do "in a matter of hours" what no one has bothered to do in 17 years—look through the debris to see if the

Tasaday lived at the caves. He did not volunteer to do it himself, but his point was, why hadn't the proponents of the Tasaday done it?

Among the anthropologists who defended the original Tasaday research, the most vigorous was Stanford University's Molony. At the AAA session she said that her analysis of tribal words collected in a 2-week visit to the caves under Elizalde's supervision in 1972 indicated that the people spoke a "distinct" language that could not have been faked, certainly not by children. She found that the Tasaday used no common agricultural terms and no Spanish-derived words of the kind used throughout the Philippines. She concluded that the tribe could be a splinter from an older group, having gone its own way in the rain forest before agricultural skills were developed, never developing any of its own. On the other hand, Molony said, the Tasaday might have lost the skills of a more advanced parent group *after* diverging in the forest.



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Meeting point *for anthropologists, photographers, and Tasaday.*

But to the doubters, this hypothesis does not make the Tasaday unique nor does it tell how long they lived in isolation, if at all. Clearly it does not support the idea promoted by journalists in the early 1970s that the Tasaday are 20th-century survivors of the stone age. However, Molony wrote last fall (*The Sciences*, September/October 1988) that some linguistic studies indicate that the Tasaday have lived "on their own" in the forest for "between 571 and 755 years." At the AAA session, Molony said she has learned to be more cautious and now speaks of the Tasaday's linguistic "separation," not their "isolation." She also agreed that the Tasaday may have lived apart from other tribes for as little as 100 to 150 years.

Arguments based on the uniqueness of the Tasaday language seemed to lose their punch when Clay Johnston, a nonanthropologist, told his story. A member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (which translates the Bible), Johnston spent 10 years in the Southern Philippines during the 1960s and 1970s, learning the local languages. But he first learned about the Tasaday at home in suburban Virginia in 1972, when his wife had the television on and suddenly called him from the living room urging him to listen to people in a *National Geographic* television special. The people on TV were identified as Tasaday, and Johnston said, "We could understand everything they said." Last fall, at the request of a reporter, Johnston was given a copy of a tape Molony made while at the Tasaday cave in 1972. He concluded the language on it was "90% equivalent to Manobo," the one he spoke while living in the Philippines. He had people in three villages listen to it, and all could understand it. By one widely accepted standard, Johnston said, languages with a 75% overlap are the same. Thus, he calls the speech on the tape "a dialect of Cotabato Manobo."

At the day's end, Richard Lee of the University of Toronto, billed as "the leading authority on modern hunter-gatherer societies," was asked to sum up. He cast his vote for the hoax thesis, citing five compelling but unanswered questions:

- If the Tasaday lived in their caves for hundreds of years, "where are the middens" or rubbish heaps? The caves are clean, and no one has investigated any heaps outside.
- If the Tasaday did not hunt, grow food, or get food from neighbors, and if the local wild food is too scant to support an active existence, "what did the Tasaday eat?"
- What happened to the tools? The modern-day stone axes of the Tasaday are too crude for most purposes except cracking nuts, which can be done with unfinished stones. More finely wrought "heirloom tools" were photographed but have since been lost.
- "Where are the other groups?" Population experts agree that the number of Tasaday found in 1971 (about 25) could not have survived without replenishment from outside. But two supposed kin groups whose names Elizalde elicited from the Tasaday have never been located.
- Why did the Tasaday for centuries avoid bartering with nearby farming villages (the nearest one is just a 3-hour walk away), preferring to spend much more time searching for inferior food in the forest?

These questions may serve as a starting point for the next round of inquiry under Eggan, which is to deliver a report in 1990. Meanwhile, recent visitors report that the Tasaday, having left behind their jungle costume and diet, are now mixing with the local villagers so effectively that only the most skilled experts can tell the difference between a real Tasaday and the "newcomers."

■ **ELIOT MARSHALL**

Uncertain Future for Chinese Students

Congress has granted a reprieve to Chinese students and visiting scholars in the United States who fear reprisals if they return home. But their future is still far from assured.

Federal law currently requires foreign exchange students holding what are known as J-1 visas to return to their home countries for 2 years after they complete their studies in the United States. The rule is intended to prevent a brain drain from developing countries. But many of the Chinese students openly protested the crackdown in Tiananmen Square last June and an estimated 2000 have stayed on in the United States after their visas expired.

Last week, Congress passed legislation that would indefinitely extend the visas of any Chinese student or visiting scholar who applies, with no questions asked. But the Administration has opposed the legislation on the grounds that it will further strain relations with China, and many of the students fear that President Bush will let the bill die in a "pocket veto" while Congress is in recess. Indeed, the Chinese foreign ministry last week condemned the bill.

The Administration has been pushing an alternative plan. Unlike the legislation passed by Congress, it would require students applying for visa extensions to state their reasons for doing so. Many of the students fear that they would be labeled traitors by the Chinese government if they say they are seeking political asylum.

Xu Guanghan, a doctoral candidate in engineering at Stanford University, who has been lobbying on behalf of Chinese students at northern California campuses, says that students would rather go back than subscribe to the Bush plan. But "no one dares to go back home at this moment" because they fear arrest, says Xu, who was one of many Chinese students who converged on the Capitol Hill last week to lobby for the bill.

Their fears may be justified. Many Chinese researchers, particularly those in the social sciences, are still under arrest, according to U.S. China watchers and human rights groups. These include Yang Wei, 33, a former graduate student in molecular biology at the University of Arizona, and several scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. As recently as last month, Chinese troops were still stationed in the academy's facilities in Beijing.

■ **MARJORIE SUN**