

## **Aesthetics and Politics in Taiwan's Aboriginal Contemporary Arts**

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Since the democratization of Taiwan politics and the advent of the Aboriginal Rights Movement, both of which happened in the mid-1980s, the arts of Taiwan's indigenous peoples have undergone a great expansion and transformation. Although traditional tribal arts, rooted in the social structures and institutions of village communities, have continued to thrive and in some cases have been revitalized, the most interesting phenomenon is the emergence of contemporary artists from Aboriginal backgrounds. These artists create non-traditional works in a variety of media, which often make trenchant political commentaries on the present state of Aborigines in Taiwan's society. Much of what has been written on the Aboriginal Contemporary Arts movement has been concerned with the historical roots of the movement, the stylistic characteristics of different artists and "schools" within the movement, and the biographies of individual artists (Lin, Jian). In this essay, by contrast, we concentrate on "what the artists have to say,"-- the political, social, and cultural messages in their art. In order to understand these messages, however, we first have to place their works in their social and artistic context, and to give a brief history of the development of the movement. We then proceed to examine representative individual works of art that illustrate a series of themes; individual and society, the breakdown of tribal communities, gender, human-environment relations, and relations with the "mainstream" society of Taiwan.

### **I. The Context of Contemporary Aboriginal Art**

To understand the rise of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, we need to put it into the context of three historical processes occurring in the late 20th century: the general development of culture and identity in Taiwan, the rapid social changes that have

happened to formerly relatively self-sufficient indigenous communities (in Taiwan and elsewhere), and the rise of contemporary indigenous arts all over the world.

### *Cultural Change in Postwar and Post-Postwar Taiwan*

Edwin Winckler (1994) has divided the recent history of Taiwan into the postwar period, from the takeover of the island by Kuomintang forces in 1945 to the democratization of Taiwan's politics in 1987; and the "post-postwar" period, from the democratization to the present day. As a heuristic oversimplification, we might enumerate three directions of movement that characterize the transition from the postwar to the post-postwar period: from feigned cultural unity to celebrated cultural pluralism, from top-down cultural management to critical cultural dialogue, and from China-orientation to world-orientation.

It would be a harsh judgment to characterize Taiwan's official postwar culture as a "cultural desert," given the significant movements in literature and the arts that came to be called the "homeland" movement (see modernism and nativist resistance, Sung on poetry) etc. But it was at least a semi-desert or savanna, or to perhaps use a better analogy, a "monoculture," dominated if not totally monopolized by the KMT's propaganda efforts, directed both internally and externally, to portray itself as the sole remaining repository of Chinese culture and tradition. Such forms as ink painting, Peiping (yes, that's what they called it) Opera, and even "national music" were promoted most heavily, while a secondary emphasis on Western derived art forms served to remind the island's own population, as well as foreigners, that the Republic of China was a modern country at the same time as it was the heir of however many thousands of years of Chinese tradition. The emphasis on heritage was strengthened when the People's Republic of China launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the Nationalist state, seeing the opportunity to contrast its own cultural preservation with the cultural destruction that was happening on the Mainland, launched the Chinese Cultural Renaissance movement. Although spaces for very limited pluralism gradually opened up in the late 70s and early 80s, there was more tolerance than actual encouragement of cultural diversity until the watershed events of 1987-88.

The irony of this unitary cultural face presented to the outside world, and officially to the inside world as well, was that Taiwan had a very plural culture all along. The official versions of Chinese culture, centered on a modernist re-interpretation of Confucian philosophy as well as on those high arts that were officially promoted, shared the island with a wide variety of local cultures, both Chinese-derived and aboriginal. Anthropological accounts of this period, in fact, tend to denigrate the invented traditions of the KMT propaganda state as artificial, shallow excrescences on a deeper, more organic series of local cultures, replete with varicolored festivals, rituals, foods, and architectural styles, not to speak of their social, cultural, and linguistic

foundations in either southwestern Chinese or Austronesian aboriginal traditions. But if the juxtaposition of an official, unitary, glorious Chineseness and a multifarious, diverse series of local cultures is the irony of a comical dictatorship, there was also cultural tragedy in that dictatorship's attempts to suppress all these local cultures, not only in the interests of unity but also in the interests of modernization. Whether it was the attempt in Han areas to "eliminate superstition and promote national construction," or the topographically ridiculous but politically scary efforts in Aboriginal areas to "flatlandize the mountains," the regime not only did not celebrate the island's plural cultures, but actively moved to suppress plurality and homogenize a national culture, while perhaps leaving a few touristized relics of Aboriginal culture such as dance performances at Hualien and Wulai, along with associated gift shops.

In this context, the events of the late 1980s were earthshaking. As important as the lifting of martial law, the legalization of opposition parties, and the increase in elective offices was the sudden end of censorship and state control of media and the arts. Unofficially, of course, the latitude for various kinds of local opposition, including environmental protest and local publishing, had been increasing gradually since the early 1980s, but the explosion of plurality after 1987 was really stunning. Opposition political magazines, groups supporting Marxism or anarchism, open praise of things Japanese and of Japanese colonial rule, direct criticism of the Chiang family, open advocacy of official independence from China, and most significantly Lee Teng-huei's official call for a re-examination of the history of 2-28 and the period of "white terror," all happened in a hurry. And one important aspect of all this political and cultural turmoil was the aboriginal rights movement, which gained enormous momentum in a hurry. Within a few years, "mountain compatriots" were "aboriginal peoples," the story of Wu Feng was no longer part of school textbooks, the Executive Yuan had a Commission on Aboriginal Affairs with a real budget and a modicum of real power, and aboriginal intellectuals were publishing oppositional newspapers and magazines (Shan Bao, Gao Shan Qing, what else), organizing protests against dams, and going public with the movement to "return our land." Finally and most importantly, "mainstream" intellectuals who favored Taiwan's independence began to look at Taiwan's real cultural plurality not as a vestige of the Redfieldian "little tradition" to be eliminated as part of a modernist project, but as the thing that distinguished Taiwan from China and made the political project of an independent Taiwan at least culturally justifiable. And a big part of that plurality or diversity was the presence of Taiwan's oldest, and least Chinese cultures, those of the formerly despised or ignored aboriginal peoples. In sum, as part of Taiwan's overall democratization, aboriginal culture gained two kinds of prominence on the national scene: aboriginal cultural activists were free to promote their own cultural and political agendas in direct opposition to the assumed cultural hegemony of the mainstream society, and dissident members of that mainstream society began to use aboriginal culture for their own purposes in a dispute

that really had very little to do with the aborigines themselves--the battle between the idea of an independent Taiwan and the idea of Taiwan as part of a cultural, if not political, "greater China." This opening of a space for aboriginal culture within the larger plural culture of post-postwar Taiwan was one condition for the emergence of Aboriginal Contemporary Art.

*The End of Effective Independence for Aboriginal Communities*

As Hsieh (ref) has pointed out, the almost four hundred years since the first permanent Chinese and Dutch settlement on the island of Taiwan have represented a gradual, stage-by-stage erosion of the power and autonomy of the island's Aboriginal Peoples. The original lowland inhabitants were mostly assimilated into the mainstream society and culture by 1900 (Shepherd, Brown), and the communities in the mountains survived primarily because of the impenetrability of the terrain, the lack of perceived resources to be extracted from their territories, and their own military traditions of warfare and headhunting. It is safe to say that even the attempts of Taiwan's first provincial governor Liu Mingchuan to "go into the mountains and subdue the aborigines 入山撫番" had little effect on the internal organization or the culture of most of the mountain peoples.

The Japanese colonial administration had a much larger effect on mountain communities than had its Qing predecessor, establishing effective peace between communities, and between Aborigines and neighboring Han communities, and introducing minimal education (in the Japanese language) as well as public health measures. And, for the first time, the methods of scientific ethnography were trained on the aboriginal communities, producing a detailed record of their subsistence, social organization, and rituals according to the anthropological conventions of the period. In addition, regulation of hunting and other subsistence activities by the colonial state somewhat curtailed the power of chiefs and the abilities of communities to regulate their relationships with their own environments (Taiban 2006). But it was not until the post-war period that the pace of social change represented by the modernist nation-building project, as well as the rapid entry of missionaries and conversion of the great majority to various forms of Christianity, threatened the integrity of the local communities, and the stability of the social order in general. A crude but useful general portrait of Aboriginal Taiwan by about 1965 would show increasing population, severely curtailed spaces for pursuing traditional subsistence, replacement of native religion by Christianity, breakdown of the authority of chiefs, elders, and councils, decline of the arts of carving, weaving, beading, etc with the demise of the ritual contexts of these arts and the replacement of artistically-enhanced daily use goods with cheap commodities purchased on the market, and a considerable degree of demoralization.

The inability to lead the kind of lifestyle to which multiple generations had

become accustomed led in turn to out-migration, which began in earnest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Aborigines who were forced to leave the village, or who were attracted by the possibilities of a different life, or a little of both perhaps, soon found that they were unprepared for life on the outside, and many turned to begging, prostitution, or other desperation moves, though a few managed to earn a marginal living as miners (until the mines were played out in the 1980s), factory workers, or construction workers.

Against this background, the Aboriginal Rights Movement, which sought local autonomy, recognition of cultural tradition, and perhaps more than anything public dignity and respect, seems to have been inevitable. How far it would have gotten under a continued martial law regime is a matter for counterfactual historical dispute, perhaps, but the culmination of the misery of the local communities coincided with the democratization of the whole society, allowing the Movement to have the rapid and spectacular growth that it enjoyed in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

It is important to emphasize here that something like the Aboriginal Rights Movement was not a nativist movement in the pure sense. It was led by Aboriginal activists with college educations, many of them tutored in the Presbyterian or Catholic Churches (though others remained steadfastly anti-church), people who had much more knowledge of and familiarity with “mainstream” society and politics than did the average member of their communities or even the average urban labor migrant. At the same time, as Lin (2005) has pointed out, artists who joined the informal community of Contemporary Aboriginal Arts were usually a product of the conjunction, or perhaps collision, of two worlds--that of the village, which in spite of its transformation and degeneration was still there and held their imagination, and that of the larger society, in which they could operate at least semi-effectively, even though they still felt themselves to be outsiders. It was the opening of aborigine communities to the world, and the opening of Taiwan’s urban society to Aborigines, that constituted the second condition for the emergence of Aboriginal Contemporary Art in the 1990s.

### *The Rise of Indigenous Contemporary Arts*

The Aboriginal Contemporary Artists of Taiwan have probably had less contact with their counterparts in other parts of the world--Maori, Australian Aborigine, Native American and other artists usually grouped under the fuzzy rubric of “indigenous,” than these other artists have had with each other. Nevertheless, the emergence and trajectory of their movement shares much in common with those of these counterparts, particularly in the ways in which their work negotiates the space between “tribal tradition” and “modern art.”

It is easy to define what we mean by tribal tradition or primitive art or indigenous art without the “contemporary” adjective stuck in between. Emerging out of the ethnographic consciousness of 19th-century colonial and crypto-colonial empires from

the British to the Ottoman to the Qing (Hofstadter, Deal and Hofstadter, Emma Teng), there developed in the first part of the 20th-century an aesthetic and collecting interest in the arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native America, both among artists--the most famous of them of course Pablo Picasso--who drew inspiration from the modes of representing space in many of these traditions, and among collectors, for whom this represented an alternative passion to that for the "high arts" of their own tradition. In native America, this was initially primarily an antiquarian tradition, since the unusually repressive policies of the United States and Canadian governments brought artistic production to a near-halt in the early and mid-20th century; in other areas with looser colonial policies, production of "tribal art objects" with either utilitarian or ritual value within the community shaded over gradually into the production of "tribal art objects" made explicitly for sale or trade to collectors from the outside. And even in North America, colonial policies gradually loosened after 1950, to the point where revivals of tribal art led to the same kind of market production as has gone on continuously in Africa and Oceania. In Taiwan, too, this kind of thing is still being produced at higher or lower quality and with greater or less difference from what was produced 100 or more years ago. The *millefiore* or *liuli zhu* 琉璃珠 beads and beaded jewelry produced in Wumass's studio in Shuimen, the intricate elaborations on pottery jars made in Ege's studio just up the hill, or the rebuilding of the traditional meeting house at the Tavalang tribe in Hualien County, supervised by Dafon, are all examples of traditional forms, copied exactly or creatively elaborated, manufactured for either social or commercial purposes or, in Ege's case, for both dowries and sale to tourists and collectors.

It is just about as easy to say what we mean by contemporary art. Works are created by individuals, whose name is attached to them, and are made not so much according to traditional formulas such as the formline principles outlined in Bill Holm's *Northwest Coast Indian Art* but according to some undefined creative powers of the artist, him- or herself. Contemporary art, in this kind of formulation, values innovation over continuity, the creativity of the radical break over the creativity of the improvement on past models, the inspiration of the individual over the elaboration on the conventional motif, the symbolically representational over the literally representational, and often abstraction over representation.

Without steering this paper into the treacherous shoals and eddies of art criticism, it is with the conjunction of these two things that we are concerned here--with art that is "tribal" in that it expresses the concerns of people who live and work in an environment that is at least partly shaped by the culture and community of the tribe, and that is "contemporary" in that it departs significantly from the conventions of the tribe's previous art, and consciously embodies the individual artist's radical creativity and ability to formulate new kinds of symbolic representation. This kind of Indigenous Contemporary Art, of which examples can be found the world over from the Native American Fine Art Movement in North America to many of the artists of the Toi Maori

Aotearoa organization of Indigenous Maori artists in New Zealand, to the works of the Nuosu painter Jjike Age (**check**) in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, is distinguished because it occupies a particular position between two poles. It is not “traditional”--in the sense of hewing consciously to a heritage--tribal art, and it is not art created by someone with a tribal background but whose content has nothing to do with tribal existence or identity, as for example a Native American artist who paints a standard portrait in oils of a business tycoon, or a Maori artist commissioned to do a sculpture of a rugby player. Rather it is art that departs substantially from the media, representational styles, or subject matter handed down in the tribal tradition, but which still tells a story that is connected to the subjectivity of the artist as a member, at least partially, of a tribal world. [fn: As Lin (2005) points out, a single artist can be doing traditional tribal art, Aboriginal Contemporary Art, and non-Aboriginal Art all at the same time. There is also the much more vexed question of the degree to which either traditional tribal art or Aboriginal Contemporary Art can be created by an artist not of Aboriginal heritage, such as Bill Holm, Duane Pasco, or Steve Brown in Northwest Native America, or Aiqin in Taiwan.]

It is surely no coincidence that Aboriginal Contemporary Art in Taiwan has emerged, as has Indigenous Contemporary Art in so many other parts of the world, at the end of the 20th century, when many nations are becoming more pluralistic, when tribal communities have lost most of their capacity for truly autonomous existence. Whether this emergence of Indigenous Contemporary Art is a *condition for* the emergence of the Aboriginal Contemporary Artist of Taiwan or not is a matter of dispute, but there is no doubt that this world wide trend is a *condition under which* Taiwan’s Aboriginal Contemporary Art has emerged.

## II. A Very Brief History of the Aboriginal Contemporary Art Movement

The process of emergence of Taiwan’s Aboriginal Contemporary Arts was a little later in time than that of its parallels in other parts of the world; it really did not appear on Taiwan’s art and culture scene until after the democratization of 1987. Before that time, aboriginal arts had already been commercialized to some extent, due to the interest in them that was displayed by collectors beginning in the 1960s (Lin 2005), in some cases as part of the “homeland” or “nativist” culture movement that flourished in Taiwan at that time, and by tourists around the same time or a little bit later. But insofar as tribal art, modified to a lesser or greater extent, was circulating in Taiwan before the 1990s, it was doing so as “traditional culture,” not as “high art.”

Most people date the appearance of “native art as art” on the artistic scene in Taiwan to the show of Hagu’s works “The Dignity of the Chief,” (*tou mu de zun yan*) at the Lion Gallery (*Xiong shi hua lan*) in Taipei in 1991. Hagu [Figure 1], a chief of the Jianhe tribe of the Beinan, born in the early 1940s, did not originally know how to

carve, nor was he part of any indigenous Beinan carving tradition. Rather, as he related to the authors in 2005, in the late 1970s he began dreaming about tribal legends he had known as a boy, and about the village life that he no longer led, and decided he needed to portray these in the form of wood carving. He sought out Eky, an Aboriginal carver whose works later also became quite influential, and asked him to give lessons on how to carve wood, and also took lessons at a local arts cooperative in Taitung. His first work depicted grandmother and grandson, and as he gradually gained skill and confidence, he no longer needed to rely on his dreams for inspiration, but thought up so many topics for carvings that he is limited now not by his creativity, but by his time. His studio, near the seaside in his tribal village, is chock-full of finished and half-finished works in his “neo-primitive realist” style, depicting everything from myths and legends, such as Foreskin, whose penis was so long he had to carry it over his shoulder like a mountain-climber’s rope [Figure 2], to nostalgic memories of tribal life, such as the woman and children loading millet into the granary [Figure 3], to reminders of relations with the Han, such as the treacherous cattle-merchant [Figure 26, below], to one of my own favorites, the boy on his way home from school who is happy because he doesn’t have to recite any more lessons but can get to the important business of baseball, at which of course the Beinan team from Hongye was once the Little League world champion [Figure 4]. Hagu related to Lin Yu-shih that he found acceptance in the mainstream when the scholar Du Ruo Zhou said publicly that “This is Aborigine art; it did not stop at the age of pure totemism. Even what it depicts is contemporary, it has not lost its aboriginal flavor” (這個是原住民的藝術，沒有停頓在圖騰的時代，它雖然表現的是現代的，但是它沒有失去原住民的風貌。)

But if Hagu was recognized in the Art World sooner than many other artists, in the early and middle 1990s there was a lot of other activity as Aboriginal Contemporary art moved in two directions. Artists in and around Taitung developed a style of “life realism”, like Hagu concerned with depicting scenes from traditional or contemporary Aboriginal life in styles that were far-removed from the traditional formulaic symbolic depictions of ancestors, totems and other motifs of tribal art. In addition to Hagu, Amis artists Eky and Asui, used realist techniques to make political statements countering the attitudes of the dominant society about aborigines, and Siki, of the Dulan tribe of Amis, north of Taitung, used a similar realist style to portray myths and legends of his own tribe.

Developing parallel to this realist trend was another, which Lin has characterized as “symbolic expressionism,” using symbolic rather than pictorial representation to depict both the spiritual life of the aboriginal communities and themes related to contemporary life inside and outside aboriginal communities. The first, and in many ways still the most prominent of these artists is Rahic Latif of the Da Gangkou tribe of Amis, located on the coast south of Hualien. Rahic’s highly symbolic, sometimes semi-abstract, work expresses his philosophy that, as he related to Lin Yu-shih, “what we call



art is, in the last summary, something that can stimulate you, both mentally and corporeally, to the emotional feeling that you have touched something that we call the human spirit; in former times for Aborigines this is a kind of religious belief, because it can lead to a tendency to establish relations of mutual help with nature. It is very natural, the most direct form of expression..." Other artists, again mostly from Amis communities along the coast, followed Rahic's lead in using symbolic forms to express aspects of aboriginal thought and life; prominent artists now using this mode of expression include Dafong, Yiming, Rubi Swana (Doudou), Yiming's Han wife Aiqin, as well as Flying Fish (Fei Yu) from the Tawu on Orchid Island.

Despite the flourishing of these two schools of art among Aboriginal Contemporary Artists on the East Coast, it was still difficult, in the mid-1990s, for such artists to be recognized. On the one hand, they were excluded in most cases from the contemporary art scene; while contemporary, they were neither "mainstream" nor "avant garde," but too peripheral and too Aboriginal. On the other hand, they were also excluded from major exhibits of Aboriginal arts put on in the mid-1990s, because those exhibits still thought of "Aboriginal Art" as confined to "traditional crafts 傳統工藝." This changed only in 1998, when the first exhibition of Aboriginal Arts that recognized the importance of "contemporaneity" was put on at the Taipei Municipal Art Gallery. Since that time, through the efforts of curators like Wang Weixu and Lin Yu-shih, there have been a steady stream of exhibits in galleries, department stores, and public spaces; Aboriginal Contemporary Art is no longer regarded as an oxymoron.

At about the same time that these trends were developing on the East Coast of Taiwan, another school of art was growing up among a group of Paiwan and Rukai artists centered at Santi Men on the edge of the Central Mountain Range in northern Pingtung County. While Wumas (Lei Si) was developing methods to manufacture multicolored glass beads [Figure 5], traditionally a trade item with important cultural symbolic value, Sakuliu was experimenting with realistic sculpture, painting, and drawing on motifs of contemporary life, and Ege brought pottery wine jars, traditionally used by a variety of tribes for communal rituals as well as dowries and funeral payment, into workshop production. Later on, two of Wumas's sons became artists--Lei XX a crafter of pottery jars, and Lei En, working as a student of Sakuliu along with Gulele and Daki, Sakuliu's foster son, became an important member of a group doing symbolic expressionist art in metal and scrap metal media.

These two schools of art were not without their interconnections. For a time between 1998 and 2000, some entrepreneurs established a sort of native arts colony-cum-tourist park called the Bunun Village (布農部落) in the upper Beinan Valley north of Taitung, which came to include important works such as Sakuliu's "Generations 時代" [see below, figures 32-34] and Vatsuku's "Home 家," [see below, figures 41-15] as well as works by Eky and some of his students. Currently, artists such as Eren, from the Kochapogan Village of the Rekai on the west side of the mountains, travel back and

forth between the two centers of Contemporary Art production.

In addition to the Bunun Village, there have developed other public or common venues where artists produce and display their work; these seem to rise and decline at rather quick intervals. For example, the old Sugar Refinery at Dulan on the coast north of Taitung was a center of activity when Eky was alive (he died of cancer in 2003--**check date**); many of his works still sit, semi-abandoned, in the refinery's cavernous spaces. The Aboriginal Theme Park outside the headquarters of the Kaohsiung City Committee on Aboriginal Affairs has become a semi-permanent home for large-scale outdoor works by Rubi, Eren, Chen Zhengrui, and others, as well as the site of a 2006 Austronesian Culture Festival, one of whose events was a visit by three Native artists from Washington and Alaska. Along the National Scenic Route 11, heading north from Taitung, there are now not only cafés, with art for enjoyment and sale, owned by the artists Fei Yu and Vatsuku, but also a series of outdoor works created by various artists at scenic overlook points along the highway.

Finally, a pivotal event in the history of Aboriginal Contemporary Art was the 3-month beach encampment at Jinzun Beach on the East Coast north of Dulan, where 11 artists, organized by curator Lin Yu-shih, built huts of driftwood and other beach materials, and further developed the emerging style of driftwood art, which has figured prominently not only in the seaside pieces mentioned above, but also in the Aboriginal Theme Park in Kaohsiung and in a recent International Driftwood Art Exhibition, held at the Shimen Reservoir in Taoyuan County, where Taiwan was represented by both Han and Aboriginal Artists, the latter including Rahic, A-Hsiung, and Rubi Swana.

The Aboriginal Contemporary Art movement in Taiwan has thus come of age; it is small but vibrant and growing, and attracting increasing international attention, including a small show at the World's Fair in Aichi, Japan in 2005, and a projected large exhibit, including both traditional and contemporary art, at the Burke Museum and the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, in 2008. Against this background, we can now return to the question posed at the beginning of the paper, "what do these artists have to say?"

### **III. Themes in Contemporary Aboriginal Art**

Like any artists anywhere, Taiwan's Contemporary Aboriginal artists create in response to a variety of inspirations, including dreams, other art works, social and political beliefs, the possibilities of media, or the possibilities of the market or wishes of patrons. But the thread that ties together much of Contemporary Aboriginal Art is the concern with social and cultural change, and particularly with the pressures brought upon Aboriginal communities and individuals by the rapid changes and increasing contact with mainstream society described in section I, above. In conceiving and designing the exhibit planned for 2008 in Seattle, we identified five social and cultural

themes that are present in Aboriginal Contemporary Art, and that can be illustrated by contrasting works pertaining to each theme in traditional tribal art with works on the same theme in Contemporary Art. For purposes of this paper, which is already getting long, we will not show the traditional pieces, but will present a discussion of these five themes in the context of how Contemporary Aboriginal Artists have chosen to comment on them in their work.

### *The Individual and Society*

In traditional aboriginal society, as in so many tribal or small-scale cultures, individuals gained their personal identity, self-respect, and the respect of others by occupying accepted and well-defined social roles, whether those be the chief, hunter, shaman, farmer, mother, son, warrior, or whatever. But social and cultural change have brought the idea of the individual, and particularly the individual caught between two worlds, into the consciousness of individual aborigines, and into their art.

And because each individual experiences the space between two cultures differently, and thus develops a different individualism, each portrays himself or other individuals in different ways. When Fei Yu, who comes from the island of Lan Yu off the southeastern coast of Taiwan, had worked in Taipei for several years, he longed for the sea. So he painted his portrait with blue eyes, which at the same time showed the reflection of the sea surrounding his beloved island, the fact that “you could take the boy off the island but could not take the island off the boy,” and at the same time also showed that he was already different from the culturally-defined, socially situated farmer or fisher of the traditional Tawu. [Figure 6]

Daki and Lei En, both male Paiwan artists born in the mid-1970s, and now close neighbors in the village of Shui Men on the edge of the Central Mountains, nevertheless experienced the clash of cultures in very different ways. Daki was born, and raised until the age of 8, in a very traditional village, speaking Paiwan as his first language and having access to only elementary schooling. At age 8, he was orphaned, and was taken under the wing of the older artist Sakuliu, and has spent the last 20 years of his life, as he puts it, on the road back and forth between the village and the city, between tradition and modernity, between being Paiwan and being Taiwanese. He has depicted these oscillations and contradictions dramatically in his self-portrait, “The beginnings of memory 記憶的開始.” He represents himself in a semi-abstract way, as a traditional warrior or hunter with his quiver on his back and feathers in his hair, but the figure rests on the realistic, if unrealistically large feet, whose size he explains by the fact that he is forever using them to travel back and forth between his two worlds. [Figure 7]

Not only Daki himself, but his web of kin relations, is caught between these two worlds, as shown in his work, “Father’s shadow 父親的背影.” [Figure 8] Already father’s head is no longer visible; father is no longer an individual but an idea. Father’s body, which died when Daki was still a boy, is about to rust away, and is done in

ordinary iron. But the strength of spirit, the spirit of the hunter, remains in both the stainless steel frame that supports the hunter's arm and the glow of the candle that lights both the sculpture and the sculptor from the inside. The actual web of kinship in Daki's life has perhaps been replaced by his mentor Sakuliu, his Han wife, and his baby son; they are all part of the lowland world. But the spirit of the patrician is not going away.

Daki's neighbor Lei En, by contrast, grew up in the lowlands, where his father Wumas was busy re-inventing glass bead jewelry and starting what ultimately became a successful business with worldwide connections. Lei En spoke only Chinese as a child, and is far from fluent in his "mother" tongue of Paiwan. He went to school with mostly Han classmates, and graduated from a 3-year technical college, and by comparison with most Aborigines is highly fluent and literate in spoken and written Chinese. Still, his he cannot be rid of his tribal identity, as indicated in his own self portrait. In this work his head is composed of the book learning that comes from his formal education, not much different from that of millions of other Taiwanese in his age group. His heart, however, is still confined in the cage of tribal tradition, and it weights him down like the ball and chain dangling from the bird cage in the sculpture. [Figure 9]

Yet another way of thinking about the emergence of individualism can be drawn from Rahic's semi-monumental driftwood sculpture from the Shimen exhibition. Here what you see in the society, what you see as an individual, depends on the angle you take to look at things. They line up or they do not, their colors are there but relatively random, we are all inside the sculpture (or barely outside it) as we wander around the green lawn, and we are not sure where we are; each of us has a different perspective and a different position. [Figures 10, 11, 12]

It seems to us that the kind of artistic commentary found in these works could have happened only in the context of Aboriginal artists' being pulled out of a world of relative certainty in the tribal community, and into the world of individual achievement and active wondering in the larger society. That this pull, this tension would happen, is was not a given as late as the 1970s. As Taiban Sasala expresses his own experience,

"In the year 1965, I was born in a Rekai tribe in the southern region of Taiwan, and the name of the tribe is Kochapogan. Prior to the age of twelve, I never once left the small tribe in the mountains except for shopping trips for some daily necessities with the grownups down in a small town when on summer or winter vacations. I used to think that my life would be just the same as for most of the other tribesmen, which is to settle down and live a quiet life in the mountains. However, no one was to know that destiny had something very different in store for me. In the year 1979, on the day that I graduated from elementary school, I stood under a beech tree on which many human

skulls hung and said goodbyes to my childhood playmates. We promised that we would meet again a few days later, but as it turned out that time went by faster than we thought, and it was ten long years before we united again with each other. In the years we were apart, I went to study in the city and came in contact with what was known as the modern life, but I never could forget the days that I spent in the mountains.”

Nor could the artists, and their works express their contradictory thoughts and feelings deriving from their experiences in two worlds.

### *The Breakdown of the Local Community*

Of course, artists as individuals are not caught between an intact tribal community and a chaotic larger society. The social changes described above have brought large doses of social breakdown, anomie, and cultural questioning to the tribal communities themselves, and this disintegration has also become a theme for many of the Aboriginal Contemporary Artists.

Perhaps the most poignant general commentary on this trend comes in an installation of driftwood, rock, seaweed, grass, and plastic foam by 45-year old Amis artist Rubi Swana (also known as Doudou and as Shi Yingyuan), entitled “dispersal 分散.” As the wave--the wave of social change that comes from the mainstream society?--breaks on the shore, it produces foam and stirs up the pebbles on the shore, but then its energy as well as the foam, the spray, and even the flotsam is dispersed. What is dispersed in the society? The community? The mind of the artist? Our ability to concentrate our lives? [Figure 13]

Paiwan artist Vatsuku takes a darker, almost frightening view in his stone sculpture, ironically entitled “home 家” at the Bunun Village. Amid the bare ruins of what might once have been a Paiwan stone house, a scared, naked, solitary figure cowers, sucking his thumb and rolling his eyes upward in terror, vainly seeking shelter from the home, the village, the community that is no more. [Figures 14 and 15]

Dafong, Amis carver from the Tavalang tribe in the mountains between the east coast and the rift valley, near Fuxing south of Hualien, has been particularly concerned with the breakdown of community in a series of luminously polished wood carvings. “Twisted” shows the breakdown of community through the metaphor of alcohol containers. On the left is the pottery wine jug, an important part of traditional ceremonies in the tribal meeting-house, where brewed millet beer was a vehicle of solidarity and community spirit. But in the process of social change, things got twisted and tangled (Dafong likes to use carved knots in his work), and on the right-hand end the result is the individual hand of the falling-down drunk individual, clutching the cheap “rice wine 米酒” beloved of Taiwan winos of all ethnicities. [Figure 16]

Dafong also illustrates the breakdown of community in his “broken ladder.” The

rungs of the ladder represent the named age-sets of the traditional Amis egalitarian social structure. But with the disintegration of the community as a unit, and particularly the migration of so many Amis to cities to take on low-level wage work, many of the age-sets, as well as the connections between them, have become fragile or broken, to the point where the bell, traditionally used to summon the men to meetings in the communal house, is barely supported on the broken rung of one of the youngest, and hence most dispersed, age sets. [Figure 17]

As a final example, Lei En has also created many works on this theme, of which “wrongful birth 錯生” is a striking, because unexpected, example. On the surface, it is nothing but a metallic depiction, and a rather tasteful one, of the plant that produces the white lily flowers that adorn the ceremonial headdresses of successful hunters among the Paiwan and Rekai (Taiban 2006). But the title, and Lei En’s description, give it a more ironic meaning. Tourist promoters have begun to use the white lily, along with other Paiwan and Rekai symbols such as the 100-pace snake and the sun, as symbols of the tribes in general, or even of all aboriginal cultures. In the traditional society, they had much more restricted functions, they *meant something in particular*, rather than just being decorations. Now, through “wrongful birth,” the white lily has lost its meaning. One who wears it is no longer a renowned hunter who has killed 6 or more male wild boars, but just another generic Aborigine. [Figure 18]

#### *Gender, Society, and Gendered Art*

Aboriginal Contemporary artists have treated gender in two ways: by making what are traditionally anonymous “women’s crafts,” textile works in particular, into Contemporary Art, and by highlighting the role of women through female imagery. The first is represented in the work of Hana and RsRs, and the second in the work of Rubi Swana.

Hana Geliu is an Amis from Dulan, who stressed her connection with the matrilineal Amis tradition in the promotional copy for her first solo exhibit that “Weaving and needlework are not just a craft that old mothers spend their time doing, just as life is not just an endless repetition of eating and dressing. Hana Geliu’s mother, her mother’s mother, her mother’s....have decorated their daughters’ dance skirts one stitch at a time for how long? For generations, the daughters of the Amis have had their mothers as their first teachers...”

Hana’s works, however, do not just continue the Amis tradition. She has incorporated motifs and techniques that blur the distinction between traditional and contemporary, between Amis and cosmopolitan. Two of her works displayed at an Aboriginal Contemporary Art show at Dulan mountain illustrate her eclecticism--the first suggests a traditional piece of Amis cloth, a skirt perhaps, in its patterning, but is woven in an open style using light silk that would make it totally impractical to wear as a skirt or anything else other than a light shawl. [Figure 19] The second uses cross-

stitch embroidery, a technique unknown to any Aboriginal culture of Taiwan other than the acculturated lowland peoples, and designs that are consciously inspired by textiles from the Miao or other peoples of Southwest China. [Figure 20]

RsRs's works are similarly eclectic. A Paiwan living in Taipei, and an accomplished singer, dancer, and performance artist as well as a weaver and needleworker, she creates works that incorporate such Paiwan themes as the sun and the famous "hundred-pace snake," the latter a chiefly symbol now adopted apparently with no irony or regret over its "wrongful birth," into such modern formats as wall-hangings or pillow-covers. [Figures 21, 22]

Rubi Swana, as perhaps the most versatile in both media and design of all the Aboriginal Contemporary artists, has typically taken a different approach to gender and feminism in her art. As with her works on other themes, her gender-oriented work displays little overt connection to her Amis heritage, but follows the symbolic expressionist aesthetic, using sinuous variations on the female form suggested in the first instance by the shape and grain of the wood she is working with, enhanced by a little carving, a few bits of inlaid glass, a backlit interior, to create what she called, in the title of a recent solo exhibit "Woman--A Dream 女人- 夢." [Figures 23-25]

Thus the theme of gender, like the others we have examined here, illustrates the position of Aboriginal Contemporary Artists in two worlds--placed between the village world of matriline, women's crafts, and fixed social roles, and the mainstream society of individual women making careers--as artists or in any other profession, of art without fixed forms or rules.

### *Aborigines and the Mainstream Society*

Quite naturally, Aboriginal Contemporary artists have had a lot to say about this topic, most of it in the nature of political broadsides rather than ironic or nuanced commentary. Artists have used both realist and symbolic forms to illustrate various aspects of the Aborigine-Han relationship.

One recurrent theme has been the perfidy of the Han. When we visited him in 2005, Hagu was working on a sculpture called "the cattle merchant 牛販," and as usual, he had a story to tell. In the old days, Aborigines were not wise to the workings of markets and prices. A Han cattle merchant would show up wanting to purchase one of the healthy cattle that had been bred locally by the valley-dwelling Beinan. All smiles, he would offer something in return that the Beinan would, reasonably enough, consider less in terms of equivalent commodity value than in terms of a Maussian (OK, Hagu didn't use the word "Maussian") gift exchange--maybe even other cattle of his own, or something that superficially looked like an appropriate gift. He would select the best cow or ox, give what turned out to be something relatively worthless in exchange, and depart never to be seen again. [Figure 26]

Vatsuku's "Nouveau Riche" 暴發戶 is less gentle. According to the artist, it

memorializes an actual incident. Vatsuku's work was being shown in a group show in Taipei, and the installation was in charge of a wealthy and not too educated "patron of the arts." In a hilarious imitation of a fast-talking Hoklo businessman, Vatsuku described overhearing the guy saying things like "Jit'e sua:-ti e mng-gia: na u sime yisu." The gentleman bears the hallmarks of Taiwan's *nouveau riches* of the mid-1990s: a big mouth, a western-style pipe, the keys to a Mercedes, an old-style *dageda* mobile phone, and a heavy gold pendant with the English inscription "lucky." Vatsuku said that the misspelling was not deliberate--Vatsuku doesn't know much English--but that he was delighted when he found out his own inadvertent mistake, because it re-emphasized just how crass and uneducated--how thoughtless--the newly rich of Taiwan's mainstream society had become. [Figure 27]

Another theme is the way that Aborigines, perhaps to a degree with their own acquiescence, have become entangled in, constrained by, the variety of institutions that the dominant powers--Japanese colonial, KMT colonial, and Christian--have imposed upon them. Vatsuku, as usual, is not subtle, but his "oppression" sends the message loud and clear--the Hinomaru, the Bairi Lantian, and the Cross all weight down the warrior to the point where his spear becomes less a weapon than a crutch. [Figure 28]

Dafong treats the same theme in a more symbolist way in his series of woodcarvings entitled "*men* 悶," a word difficult to render into English in any case, but in this instance--partly drawing on the art works themselves--perhaps best translated as "constricted." Again using his favorite symbolic figure of the knot, he shows how the the possibilities for Aborigines in today's society are all knotted up--in politics, represented by the meeting-house bell, in religion, represented by the drum and the cross together; in society, as represented by the **womb?** [Figures 29-31]

Perhaps the most monumental, and certainly one of the most technically impressive, pieces of political art, Sakuliu's "Generations," at the Bunun Village, treats the relations with the mainstream society as a construction beam, showing the strength of, but still heavily weighing down, a father and son. The father leads the way, barefoot and barechested, dressed only in a traditional loincloth, with his half-sheathed hunting knife at his belt and surrounded by Paiwan totemic signs such as suns and snakes, as well as by wild and domestic plants and animals. The son follows, in his construction-worker outfit with leather boots and a cap with a Nike swoosh, surrounded by a new set of symbols--Confucius, the successive rulers and dynasties of Chinese history, the surnames--Luo, Li, Fan, Chen--imposed upon by state-supported Chinese education, the *bopomofo* and *katakana* phonetic alphabets, and at the very end of the beam, the KMT flag, three crosses, a swastika for the Buddhists, a yin-yang symbol for the Daoists, and a big dollar sign. The symbolism needs no explanation, but it is worth commenting that, however bent over they may be under their dual burdens, the father and son are attached to each other by the beam, and they are marching forward together. [Figures 32-34]



The most poignant commentary on the relationships with the mainstream society, Daki's "Rainy Day 下雨天," says nothing about the mainstream society directly at all. Only its materials--used auto parts and spray paint--have any direct connection to modern life. But Daki's explanation ties it all together. In a dream (Daki literally dreams up most of his art works, as Hagu used to do), Daki was on his big-footed way back to the village, when he met an old man by the path. Stopping to chat, Daki heard the old man say he was afraid to return to the village--too much had changed. It started to rain, and the old man lit his pipe, taking cover under a taro leaf, and began to tell stories... [Figure 35]

### *People and the Environment*

Most of what Aboriginal Contemporary Artists have to say about the environment is surprisingly simple and romantic, perhaps even nostalgic. Sakuliu's limited edition print of the happy hunter with his dog, merrily striding along amidst a forest of huge broadleaf evergreens, is a clear example. [Figure 36]

But more direct criticism is possible, especially where Aborigines see their environment ruined by their contact with the mainstream society. A paramount example are the works of Fei Yu who, coming from the island of Lan Yu, which has been embroiled for two decades now in a dispute over nuclear waste dumping (**refs**), including his strikingly political "Where to? Where From?" 何去何從, imagining a future for the Tawu people that is about as far from traditional tribal existence as can be imagined. [Figure 37]

Other works simply celebrate the natural environment, often in very exuberant and sometimes splashy ways. Eren's driftwood and beach rock sculpture at the Aboriginal Theme Park in Kaohsiung [Figure 38], Rubi Swana's even more monumental work at the Shih-men International Driftwood Art Festival [Figure 39], and the series of works decorating the viewpoints along the East Coast Scenic Highway, particularly Fei Yu's **name** [Figure 40] and Jianwei's "Two Friends Chatting Beneath the Moonlight 兩個朋友在月光下聊天," [Figure 41] are celebratory rather than critical, commenting perhaps by not commenting too much, letting the felicitous coincidence of art and nature speak for itself, with any critical commentary to be found only in the distant echo of the implicit contrast between the free spaces that inspire and house most of this art, and the crowded, noisy conditions of Taiwan's densely populated cities and towns on the West Coast.

### **Conclusion**

Despite its close connection in themes, materials, and content with the particular history and current situation of Taiwan's Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal Contemporary Art in Taiwan is not a particularly or peculiarly Taiwanese phenomenon. All the themes

addressed in this essay exist in common with indigenous peoples and communities in every country with a history of colonialism, external or internal. And in fact because it shares so much with the indigenous arts of other countries, Taiwan's Aboriginal Contemporary Art can tell us several more general things about the place of native peoples in Taiwan's contemporary society.

First, despite their partial transition from a subsistence to a cash economy, despite the cessation of warfare and raiding, despite the fact that everyone under 60 can speak, read, and write Chinese (and some people over 60 can speak Japanese), despite the paved roads and modern houses, the cars and motor scooters of today's *buluo* villages, Aborigines still live very much in two worlds. The tribe, the clan, paradoxically even the church, are part of the little world, which retains both social and emotional salience despite its partial breakdown. But nobody lives entirely within this little world anymore.

Second, living in two worlds brings both opportunities and pressures. Prejudice, discrimination, misconception, and ignorance--probably more of this than anything else-- still characterize the attitude of most Taiwanese to the island's native population. It takes strong, adaptable people to adjust to being tugged in two directions like this. So many of the artists whose works are described here are that kind of adaptable people, but not everyone has the gift of artistic talent. At the same time, the knowledge of tribal life, customs, history, and art itself bring opportunities for these people to interact not only with the elites of the island but with networks of artists and art-lovers all over the world.

Finally, for all its political melodrama, environmental pollution, crowding, and inferiority complexes of various sorts (Hsu 2005), Taiwan remains an extraordinarily vibrant, pluralistic, and open society, a place where the cultural preoccupations of any one group, such as Aborigines, do not just serve the political interests or cultural complaints of that group itself, but are discussed, enjoyed, debated, displayed, and sometimes even co-opted for the benefit of other groups or other interests in the society as a whole. Only a small portion of the audience for Aboriginal Contemporary Art is composed of aborigines. These artists succeed--in some cases even make a living--because their art is not only pertinent to the general social and cultural questions that pervade Taiwan's contemporary media and culture, but is also art that speaks, through its aesthetic power, through the sharpness of its commentary, through the universality of so many of its themes, to the interests of anyone who creates, enjoys, or argues about art.

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