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Review Article

The Tasaday Yesterday and Today

ERIC S. CASIÑO

THE GENTLE TASADAY. By John Nance. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1975. 464 pages.

FURTHER STUDIES ON THE TASADAY. By Douglas E. Yen and John Nance. (Panamin Foundation Research Series No. 2). Makati: Panamin Foundation, 1976. 191 pages.

Since the dramatic discovery of the Tasaday in June 1971, there have been few really substantial primary data on the phenomenon whose significance has become worldwide. The first official announcement in July 1971, one month after the discovery, was contained in a thin 23-page report by Manuel Elizalde Jr., PANAMIN Director, and Robert B. Fox, then Chief Anthropologist of the National Museum.¹ This was followed in June 1972 by the 53-page report by Carlos Fernandez and Frank Lynch, with a 15-page linguistic appendix by Teodoro Llamzon and Richard Elkins.² Since the appearance of these two basic documents, two major studies have appeared: the nonspecialist report by John Nance, *The Gentle Tasaday* and the specialist report by Douglas E. Yen and John Nance, *Further Studies on the Tasaday*. The following is an attempt to review both books as well as the basic issues revolving around these modern cave dwellers.

Further Studies is jointly edited by Yen and Nance but contains other articles by Robert Fox, Carol Molony, Dad Tuan, Douglas E. Yen, Hermes G. Gutierrez. The topics covered are stone tools (Fox), linguistics (Molony and Tuan), ethnobotany (Yen and Gutierrez), and ethnobotanical names and

1. Manuel Elizalde, Jr. and Robert B. Fox, *The Tasaday Forest People* (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Institution for Short-lived Phenomena, 1971).

2. Carlos Fernandez II and Frank Lynch, *The Tasaday: Cave-Dwelling Food Gatherers of South Cotabato, Mindanao* (Manila: Panamin Special Publication, 1972).

subsistence patterns (Yen). There is also an announcement by Gutierrez of a new Philippine lily – *Trycrtis Imeldae* – named after the Philippine First Lady.

The note on Tasaday stone tools by Fox is highly significant in that it attempts to relate them to tool types found in Tabon Cave and Cagayan Valley. It has often been said that flakes are the basic lithic tradition in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, and for that matter in Melanesia and Australia. The proof of this hypothesis is largely derived from the amazing persistence through thousands of years of this tool type, both in an archaeological context and now in an ethnographic context provided by the Tasaday. He made his comments more meaningful to other specialists by utilizing the analytic distinction between hafted and non-hafted tools, and between maintenance and extractive tools.

In the 1972 report of Fernandez and Lynch, it was stated that stone tools were unimportant to the Tasaday, and that their tool types could not be compared with other Philippine stone industries. Fox takes issue with them on both assertions. Without flake tools as maintenance implements the Tasaday could not have formed and shaped digging sticks and other extractive tools necessary in their food-gathering activities. Moreover, the fact that the Tasaday continued to use stone tools while other Philippine hunters and gatherers had shifted to metal is in itself a salient occurrence. Stone-tool using is significant and important to the Tasaday pragmatically and to the scientific world theoretically. Fox also disagrees with the assertion that the Tasaday used stone axes which cannot be compared with other types in the Philippines. Axes were normally used by Neolithic peoples for swidden farming; the Tasaday were not such and therefore did not use axes. The hafted ground tools observed among them are edge-ground tools that were used as scrapers. He has been vindicated in his view by an old-ex-Tasaday who remembered his people "sawing at a palm with the stone and then pulling the tree down"³ and by Yen who wrote: "In cutting bamboo and rattan they used the tools rather as blades, against the bent stems purposely with the haftings providing leverage as well as a grasp. They laughed at my impression of their use as axes, pointing out that the blade would come out of the hafting."⁴ Finally Fox cited thousands of flake tools and several edge-ground tools from Palawan with which the Tasaday stone implements could be positively compared.

The next article by Molony and Tuan is a clear advance over the early appendix by Llamzon and Elkins. This was initially discussed by Llamzon in an earlier paper (1971), trenchantly criticized by a historian.⁵ Here Molony and Tuan supply us not only an extensive vocabulary of 800 words (compared

3. Nance, *The Gentle Tasaday*, pp. 214–15.

4. In Yen and Nance, *Further Studies*, p. 177.

5. Zeus Z. Salazar, "Comments: Footnote on the Tasaday," *Philippine Journal of Linguistics*, 2, no. 2 (1971): 34–38.

to Llamzon's 150 basic word list), but they also present an exciting series of three-tiered texts showing original Tasaday, word-order translation, and free translation. The texts cover topics on health and sickness, material goods, food and animals; people and strangers; hunting, gathering, trapping; forest directions and spirits; weather, home, and sex jokes. The early linguistic interest in the Tasaday was motivated primarily by the need to determine their historical and genetic relations with other groups in Mindanao. How long ago did they separate from the Manobo groups whose languages show affinity with Tasaday? Were they closer to Blit Manobo or to Cotabato Manobo? Did the Tasaday split from an agricultural Proto-Manobo and subsequently lose their agriculture-related vocabulary? Or did they split from a pre-agricultural group, which may explain their present non-agricultural way of life? Llamzon's initial lexicostatistical analysis based on a 150 basic word list reveals that the Tasaday may have split from a Proto-Manobo group sometime between 571 and 755 years ago or between 1375 and 1539 A.D.⁶ Molony has not improved on this initial calculation. As she herself claims "My data do not sharply conflict with either the theories of linguistic affiliation or dates of separation."⁷ An outer limit for this historical split from an unknown group is supplied by the words from Sanskrit which suggest that the Tasaday were in contact with an outside group at least a thousand years ago when similar Sanskrit terms were introduced, probably through Indonesia. In comparing Tasaday linguistically with other Mindanao dialects, it was discovered that its closest affinity was with either Blit Manobo or Cotabato Manobo. Molony and Tuan now report that although the Blit Manobo are geographically closer to the Tasaday, linguistically the latter are closer to the Cotabato Manobo. She also adds that there is no longer any doubt that Tasaday is classified as a Manobo language type to be subsumed under the Central Philippine language group.

The Tasaday puzzle was raised early in 1971 during the initial investigation when Lynch had suggested that instead of seeing the Tasaday as splitting from a group with agriculture, which the Tasaday lost, it is conceivable that a group split from the Tasaday in a pre-agriculture era, followed by the acquisition of agriculture by this splinter group but not by the Tasaday who remained at base. The issue therefore boiled down to separation versus survival, or loss versus ignorance. The argument against ignorance is bolstered by linguistics and archaeology. If Tasaday is derived from Proto-Manobo, one can trace a historical sequence from Proto-Austronesian through Proto-Philippine, Central-Philippine, Proto-Manobo, and to Tasaday. Central Philippine language speakers, however, are known to have practiced primitive agriculture even during the Neolithic in Palawan. Rice of both dry-field and wet-field varieties had been propagated in the Philippines probably as early as the second millenium. By accepting the derivation of Tasaday from Central-

6. In Fernandez and Lynch, *op. cit.*, appendix, pp. 7-8.

7. In Yen and Nance, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Philippine language type, one logically must accept that the parent group from which the Tasaday split must have had some agriculture. If this in fact was the case, then the Tasaday had lost recollection of agricultural practices when they reverted to a gathering economy in a tropical rain forest environment. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that the Proto-Manobo who came to Mindanao were pre-agriculturists who learned their agriculture only subsequently from contact with later groups also speaking a type of Central-Philippine language. Molony claims that previous workers had favored the hypothesis that the Tasaday never had agriculture; her own opinion, based on linguistic logic, is that they lost it.⁸

The next three articles are all on ethnobotany. The first paper by Yen and Gutierrez (I. On Useful Plants) would be of great interest to tropical botanists. The extensive list of plants collected included a new type of pandanus and lily. The plants are not only identified by their scientific nomenclature but also classified according to use. Useful plant classification was made under such headings as Food Plants, Food Acquisition, Cordage, Body Care and Adornment, Stimulants, Firewood, and Non-Subsistence Use. The second paper (II. On Plant Names) is a systematic treatment of comparative plant names and may be seen as a special aspect of Molony's linguistic report. The comparison concludes that "despite the differences in the subsistence systems of Tasaday, Blit and T'boli, and given the incompleteness of the lexical data, the overall impression is of plant classification systems with more in common than may have been expected" (p. 158). The last paper (III. Notes on the Subsistence System) is the most significant entry in terms of theoretical interest. Here Yen discusses the whole issue of economics and survival in a tropical environment viewed with the sharp eye of an ethnobotanist. The Fernandez and Lynch report had divided the Tasaday forest environment into three zones covering the (I) streams (II) banks and terraces, and (III) upland forest. Yen has additional support for this zonification from botanical and soil analysis. But he also suggests a (IV) negative zone, covering the area in front of the cave to the stream where the Tasaday do not collect or destroy plants for fear of supernatural sanctions.

Yen organized his final discussion helpfully in terms of the earlier tentative conclusions reached by Fernandez and Lynch. On foraging range, Yen finds the 25 square kilometers range suggested by them untenable. The density of wild yam (*biking*) observed by Fernandez, i.e., eight yam holes in an area of 50 square meters, is probably exceptional. Yen himself had counted 34 wild yams pointed out to him by the Tasaday within an area of 20 kilometers. Fernandez and Lynch, observing the abundance of biotic resources, had concluded that the Tasaday seldom get too far away from the caves. Yen's additional observations have modified this now; he had data showing frequent

8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

absences and sleeping out during food-collecting trips lasting sometimes for ten days. This observation is consonant with Yen's postulation of a wider foraging range. The earlier view on foraging time of about three hours a day may also have to be qualified. This may correctly apply to foraging sorties when the cave is used as the base; but when longer expeditions require sleeping outside, the work-leisure pattern may be entirely different. Thus the highly positive picture of Tasaday leisure and lack of food anxiety may have to be readjusted more realistically. Finally, Yen suspects that the balance between the Tasaday and their environment may have been set on a course towards imbalance with the introduction of metal tools and increased utilization of wild palms. The growth pattern of the natek producing palm, which matures in 15 years, and its limited density in the resource base would probably lead to forest modification, forcing the Tasaday to move farther and farther out to search for them. This is a hypothesis worth a study and perhaps remedy by a counter-hypothesis of propagating both palms and yams within close range to the Tasaday traditional home base. But this is a move that would have to be carefully weighed, as it means an evolutionary leap from collecting to food production, a leap made through several thousand years in other parts of the prehistoric world.

The data presented in *Further Studies* were collected by Yen and others between 20 July and December 1972 in a series of intermittent fieldwork periods not exceeding a month in each visit. The Fox paper, though, is based on observations collected from earlier visits. The present report claims that in the 30 months since the end of the fieldwork in December 1972 only seven other visits were made to the Tasaday; this claim may be true up to the time of publication in 1975. Limited fieldwork was in line with the policy of protecting Tasaday privacy as much as possible. The Tasaday population since their discovery has had its share of births and deaths. A young boy had died since contact was made. A child was born in August 1972, a second in April 1973, and a third in December 1974. The marriage of a Blit widow to a Tasaday has brought the total Tasaday population to 29 — 7 male adults, 6 female adults, 13 male children/adolescents, and 3 female children.

The question of population, technology, food resource, and environmental conservation, etc. is fortunately not the only aspect of interest in the Tasaday. There is a strong humanist concern with the Tasaday revealed in the second major work under review. John Nance's *The Gentle Tasaday* puts the preceding scientific probings in a larger context of an ongoing national and international drama. It shows the backstage scenes where crises are faced and decisions made regarding the fate of the Tasaday.

John Nance has spent a total of about 72 days spread over three years with the Tasaday — longer than any field time spent by any anthropologist, linguist, ethnobotanist, or any other journalist. Thus he has the distinct advantage of speaking like an official chronicler and historian of the Tasaday

story. His account is straightforward in overall design. It starts with a reconstruction of the hunter Dafal's first encounter with the Tasaday in the early 1960s. The book's four major parts are arranged from the viewpoint of an observer moving into the forest and back. The headings reveal the movement of entry and return — At the Edge of the Forest; Inside the Forest; Deepening Contact, and Full Circle. In treating details, Nance is a professional craftsman able to balance romanticism and realism and to achieve sharp contrast between the extremes of civilization, from concrete cities to forest, caves, and back. The reportorial posture is warm and down to earth, enabling the reader to participate in a series of encounters, delays, doubts, frustrations, comic relief, wonder, reflection, and enlightenment. The basic questions in most people's minds are honestly confronted, including those of the author himself. Why was Elizalde doing his thing in Mindanao? What was the role of Charles Lindbergh in the early phase? What were the reasons for those for and against PANAMIN's programs? What were the issues between the scientists and the developmentalists and conservationists? What is the scientific, moral, and philosophical implication of the Tasaday phenomenon?

The most palpable theme in the whole story is the human concern for the Tasaday. This theme is highlighted by the extreme tension between those interested in the Tasaday as a curiosity and scientific objects and those interested in them as humans. And Nance has used a highly-calibrated sensibility in capturing and projecting the dilemmas and nuances of the issue. After a while, one begins to empathize with the drama's main protagonists, to such an extent that one is caught up in an intellectual and emotional assent to the central Tasaday universalism: to "call all men one man, and all women one woman" (p. 451).

The Gentle Tasaday is a significant book not only for its message but for its informational content. It is so far the single available connected account of everything on the Tasaday drama. In it the social scientists will better appreciate the ethical, theoretical, and legal aspects of Tasaday research by seeing the reality context of Philippines politics and history. The outstanding questions on the Tasaday, however, remain. When, where, and how did they originate? Who were the Tasafeng and Sanduka with whom they had marriage exchanges in the past? Will PANAMIN search for the other two groups? What will happen to the Tasaday in the future? Although all this has not been fully answered, the data presented by *Further Studies* and *The Gentle Tasaday* have broadened our information base from which future explorations can be made into Tasaday forest world.