

From Environmental Injustice to Ethnic Reconciliation: Taroko People and Taroko National Park in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Since the 19th century, capitalist expansion has increasingly penetrated into the world's remote areas; such has also been the case in Taiwan. This paper discusses the indigenous Taroko people of Hualien County in eastern Taiwan and how their land and resource rights have been systematically exploited by the establishment of Taroko National Park. Applying an environmental justice approach, this paper subsequently investigates both human and environmental consequences of the environmental injustices done to the Taroko people. Finally, this paper examines the newly established Taroko National Park Cultural Consulting Committee. The committee was established in early 2002, with the aim of bringing reconciliation between Taroko National Park/the Taiwanese government and the Taroko people. With evidence from my field research, this paper will discuss 1) whether and to what extent the process of ethnic reconciliation has started, and 2) ways to improve this process.

KEY WORDS

environmental justice
National Park
ethnic reconciliation
Magau National Park

indigenous people
Taroko people
land rights



Introduction

On an autumn day in 1994, 1,200 indigenous Taroko people of eastern Taiwan gathered at a playground of a local school; they danced and chatted with each other while awaiting the signal to march to the Taroko National Park (TNP) headquarters a few kilometers away. This was the first time so many Taroko people had gotten together to stage a protest against a government agency, and the main themes of this protest, as their slogans said, were “anti-oppression, fighting for survival rights, and return our land to us.”

Since the establishment of TNP on the Taroko people’s traditional homeland in 1986, the Taroko people have repeatedly voiced their grievances against the park administration and demanded that their rights to conduct hunting, gathering, farming, and building construction be respected. However, their requests have fallen on deaf ears, and both their traditional cultural activities and means of survival continue to be severely restricted by National Park regulations.

The National Park was only one of many outside agencies that have landed on the Taroko people’s traditional territory over the past 30 years; as a matter of fact, recent Taroko history can be characterized as a series of waves of foreign invasions, which have included government projects and private enterprises, all of which are conducted by the dominant Han people of Taiwan. This paper discusses the ways in which the Taroko people’s culture and way of life have been affected by the TNP. It also discusses recent changes in government policy toward indigenous Taiwanese people and how these changes are contributing to the building of a new relationship between the Taroko

people and the TNP.

Theoretical Approaches to Land Appropriation in Indigenous Areas

Since the 19th century, capitalist expansion has increasingly penetrated into the world's remote areas; Schnaiberg and Gould (1994) refer to the modern capitalist economic system as a "treadmill of production" that requires the constant expansion of production and maximal consumption in order to sustain the system. In this regard, Marx and Engels are only partly correct in stating that "[t]he need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe" (Marx and Engels 476). It is not only the need of a "constantly expanding market," but also of raw materials that "chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe." The treadmill of production not only requires an increasing amount of raw materials, energy, and water, but it also generates multiplying amounts of wastes in the form of air and water pollution, solid and toxic waste, and even nuclear waste.

From an ecological point of view, the "treadmill of production" destroys the natural environment mainly in two ways: 1) it treats and consumes the natural environment as "natural resources"; and 2) it destroys and pollutes natural environments with human additions (e.g., roads and buildings) and pollutants. According to Schnaiberg and Gould, the logical conclusion of the modern capitalist economic system is that it would drive those in its thrall to "tear down the Rocky Mountains to remove a few tons of precious minerals" (210).

Similarly, humans continually alter and destroy the natural environment through resource extraction and construction of built environments, the ecological consequences of which are mostly passed onto disadvantaged groups. While environmental problems have attracted international concern since the 1970s, and many countries and international agencies have taken measures to curb the previously unchecked human destruction of the environment, environmental degradation globally has not shown signs of change. Our current societies can only be sustained through continually withdrawing

natural resources from (and, consequentially, adding wastes to) our ecosystems. Thus unless societies can be transformed into what Schumacher calls “Buddhist Economics” (61) with minimum consumption, or into Daly’s “steady state economics,” the maintenance of social systems and ecological integrity are necessarily contradictory. Schnaiberg and Gould call it the “enduring conflict.” To them, environmental issues are inevitably sociological and political economic issues: who decides which restrictions are to be enforced, and which are not to be; and who benefits from such environmental action, and who suffers from it. As such, their environmental/sociological approach is certainly equivalent to an environmental justice approach.

Contrary to moving toward minimum consumption, capitalist globalisation since the 1980s, fueled by regional and global trade agreements (such as NAFTA, APEC, EC, and WTO), seeks to expand production and consumption by breaking down existing national and geographical barriers. This global expansion of production puts increasing pressure on energy and natural resource extraction, which necessarily results in ecological destruction. An important feature of the current phase of expansion can be identified: as most easily accessible energy and resources worldwide have been depleted, capitalists have had to penetrate deeper into dense rainforests, mountains, deserts, the Arctic Circle, and other remote areas to search for new minerals, oil, timber, ranch land, and water power, among other resources. These “remote areas,” however, are often home to indigenous peoples.

In her influential article, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” Sherry Ortner presents the following metaphor: “[W]e may envision culture in this case as a small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system” (Ortner 85). While Ortner uses this metaphor to illustrate that women are located in between the realms of nature and culture, it can also be used to help us better approach the present issue in the following way. By combining Schnaiberg and Gould’s metaphor with that of Ortner, we have a simplified picture of the modern world (figure 1). First, the commercial-industrial-urban area is located in the

concrete-and-steel complex at the center of the “cleared” (destroyed) natural environment. This complex, the center of the treadmill of production and modern “civilization,” to be sure, is by no means just the “small clearing” Ortner describes in her article. The past few hundred years of ever-expanding industrial production has cleared massive areas of the natural environment, and it continues to transform the remaining natural environments into “built environments.” At the edge of this complex is the urban slum where the poor must live on whatever scraps are available to them from the city, but who also suffer the most from urban environmental pollution and wastes. Most people in industrialized countries, and an increasing percentage of the developing countries’ populations, live within the limits of this urban complex, which we may call circle 1. With the constant expansion of this circle, it also means that the extraction of resources and the production of wastes are increasing rapidly, as cities are not self-sufficient environmentally, but are “consuming cities,” if not parasitic entities.

Immediately surrounding circle 1 is the countryside where the farmers, ranchers, herders, and the like live. Nowadays, the countryside is also dotted with patches of national parks and natural reserves to protect wildlife and to preserve a limited area of the ecosystem from unrestricted human intervention. We may call this area “circle 2,” which is sandwiched between the natural world and circle 1. Circle 2 is the main agricultural production area that supplies most of the world’s food; it is also the area where most of the urban wastes find their final resting places. In the natural world, which we may call “circle 3,” there exist forests, mountains, deserts, oceans, ice fields, grasslands, and other natural areas which are less disrupted by human activities. There are very few people living in this circle, and many of them are the most traditional indigenous peoples of the world. Most of them live within the parameters of their surrounding natural environment without largely altering it.

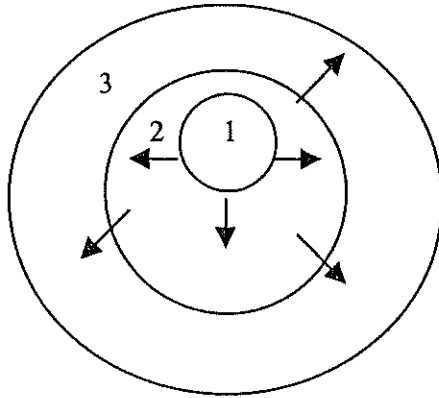


Figure 1: The expansion of human settlement and activities

The most significant feature of the above figure is that circle 1 is constantly expanding at the expense of circles 2 and 3, while circle 2 is also expanding but only at the expense of circle 3. Production expansion is due, on the one hand, to the current capitalist economic structure, and on the other hand, to increases in population and urban consumerism. With this so-called “development,” the destruction of the natural environment, the disturbance of ecological processes, and the discharge of pollutants all take place. All of the above result in both the extinction of wildlife and the oppression of marginal and indigenous peoples. In other words, both humans and nonhumans suffer from the same political-economic and technological process of domination. Further, as many ecofeminists point out, among humans it is women, children, and marginal people who suffer the most. Therefore, as Plumwood maintains, it is necessary for an environmental ethics to address the multiple forms of oppression that lead to the domination and oppression of both humans and the environment.

Threatened both by becoming a global dumping ground and by resource extraction, indigenous peoples worldwide are rapidly losing ground to ecological colonialism from the outside. In the following section, I will examine the ways in which the land rights of indigenous

Taroko people have been threatened by such ecological colonialism and how this process generates one of the most serious problems of human suffering in Taiwan.

The Invasion of the Taroko People's Homeland

Not only are indigenous peoples threatened by bulldozers, dams, oil drilling machine, and nuclear wastes, over the past two decades, they are increasingly oppressed by governmental conservation policies in many countries. The establishment of national parks and natural reserves has a long history of displacing local people and abusing local people's land and resource rights. Under the noble name of "nature conservation," governments often ignore local peoples' rights to their historical homelands and forcefully establish national parks or natural reserves on their lands. They fail to see or admit that their policy results in local/indigenous people bearing all the costs of conservation, which Hitchcock calls "coercive conservation" (172).

In Taiwan, the cost of conservation is unfairly forced upon the weakest group of society—the indigenous peoples. Since the 1980s, the government has established six national parks on Taiwan, and of these, three high altitude parks are located on the historic homelands and hunting grounds of the indigenous Taroko, Tayal, and Bunun tribes. In drawing the boundaries of each national park, the government of Taiwan has chosen to include those indigenous communities and homelands inside the parks without considering how such decisions would affect their way of life. Perhaps to the worse, the government never even consulted with those would-be affected indigenous people before setting up national parks on their land. To the Taiwan government, indigenous peoples do not have any land rights; the government can make any decision on indigenous homelands as they see fit.

The establishment of these national parks does appeal to the urban middle class, who enjoy the aesthetic value of a protected natural landscape, and who have the money and leisure to spend a weekend in the national parks. However, indigenous people have been forced to

bear all the costs of establishing these three national parks. These costs are manifested in the following items: the ban on mining, fishing, hunting and gathering wild flora; restrictions on the transformation of the land surface; and restrictions on all construction. To most indigenous people, the establishment of national parks did not bring any benefit; on the contrary, their traditional economic and cultural activities have been seriously restricted and their life has been made much more difficult. For example, one farmer was cited and fined 1,200 New Taiwan dollars for trying to remove a big rock from his field with a heavy machine without prior approval. Another farmer complained that he wanted to remove a tree that stood in the middle of his field, but the park administration did not allow him to do so. Many indigenous people are angered by the fact that they cannot do anything about the monkeys and wild boars that constantly destroy their crops.

Indigenous peoples' resentment of the national parks is amplified by the National Park Administration's discriminatory actions toward them. Take mining as an example. While many indigenous people have been cited and fined for picking up only small quantities of precious stone in the park, many big mining operations continue inside the park. National Park administrators reasoned that those mining companies had been mining before the setting up of national parks, and they do have valid mining permission from the government. To this statement, indigenous people reply: "we have been living here and doing all kinds of (now prohibited) activities for hundreds of years, well before the mining companies and the national parks came here."

Because of the aforementioned problems, indigenous people have petitioned to the government and the legislative house and have organized countless protests and demonstrations against national park administrations. In the Taroko area, frustrated by the National Parks Administration's ignoring their request, more than 1,200 Taroko people participated in a protest against the TNP administration in October 1994; it was one of the biggest indigenous protest movements in recent decades. They shouted "anti-oppression, fighting for survival rights, and return our land to us" slogans, and demanded that the park administration accept their 16 requests, most of which were related to

the issues I have discussed.

The protest ended with two hour-long negotiations between park officials and Taroko leaders, and park officials accepted most of the Taroko people's demands. Park officials seemed to have little choice but to bend to the protesters at that time, as the headquarters was closed due to being overrun by the angry protesters. The officials also knew very well that since their administrative office is only a short walk from the village, the villagers could easily organize other protests if they did not receive satisfactory answers from park officials. In other words, the Taroko people have demonstrated their "strength in unity" to the park officials, who until then had been oppressing individual Taroko people. Since this protest, the TNP administration has been treating Taroko people in a more humane way, although the basic environmental injustice built into National Park Legislation has yet to be amended.

From Conflict to Reconciliation

After the October 1994 protest, the relationship between indigenous Taroko people and TNP became more stable, although the deep-rooted conflict between park management ideas and the Taroko people's way of life has not been changed. It was only since 2000, when the new DPP government was elected into office, and President Chen Shuei-Bian announced his commitment to ethnic reconciliation between the dominant Han people and indigenous Taiwanese, that the park/people relationship started to enter a new phase.

In President Chen's repeated "new partnership" speech, the new major Han-Indigenous Taiwanese relationship would involve the new government's respecting indigenous people's natural rights and the recovery of their traditional homelands. To reinforce his commitment, an official "re-affirming the new partnership" (between the new government and indigenous Taiwanese) ceremony was held on October 19, 2002, two-and-a-half years into his presidency. With this new set of principles, the government started to draft an indigenous self-government act, funded research on indigenous mapping in order to study the traditional territory of the indigenous peoples, and drafted

a revised national park law to allow indigenous participation in national parks. This new government agenda was aimed to empower indigenous peoples and to help them recover their long lost homeland. However, it was a fight between environmental groups and the Veterans Affairs Commission (VAC) that triggered major changes in the people-park relationship.

In the late 1990s, environmental groups in Taipei and Yi-Lan County charged the VAC's forest development department (since renamed the "forest conservation department") with mismanagement of the old growth cypress forests in Chilán mountain area, while the VAC firmly denied the charge. To attract public attention and support, environmental groups organized a series of "spend a night for the forest" activities, which proved very successful. Environmental groups pressed the government to establish a new Chilán National Park to protect the precious forests and to effectively end VAC's right to manage the forests.

While the fight between VAC and environmental groups continued, indigenous Atayal people began to express their concerns. The so-called "Chilán" mountain, they declared, should be called "Magau" according to local Atayal tradition, which denotes a tree species. While they disagreed with the VAC's way of managing the forests, they also opposed the idea of a new national park, as national parks had been associated with the oppression of indigenous livelihood and culture. As such, the Magau forests became a three-way fight.

To make the story short, the government subsequently organized a "Magau National Park Consulting Committee," which was composed of government officials, environmental groups, local Atayal people, and university professors, with an aim to establish the new National Park while making sure indigenous Atayal people's rights and interests were guarded. With President Chen's government coming to office since Spring 2000, ideas about indigenous rights have gained further legitimacy and official support, and a new style of an indigenous-involved--if not indigenous-controlled--National Park was on the consulting committee's agenda. In addition, in order to learn from Canada's national park/indigenous people co-management experiences,

the National Park administrative office invited Canadian indigenous people to come to Taiwan in 2001 and again in 2002; this exchange could also be seen as the Taiwan government's intention to show indigenous people how indigenous Canadians are satisfied with the co-management arrangement.

However, not all Atayal people agreed with the idea of a co-managed national park in their homeland. Opponents of the National Park, led by local government officials, ex-officials and indigenous legislators, argued that the main reason behind Canada's "successful experience" of co-management is that the indigenous groups were able to reclaim the title of their homelands through the treaty process. Therefore they requested that the government deal with the "recovery of indigenous traditional homelands," as promised by President Chen first, before any talk about the Magau National Park and co-management could continue. This opposing group's claim was quickly supported by most indigenous legislators, and the government-environmental groups' plan to set up the new Magau National Park has since been stalled.

While debates over the proposed Magau National Park continue, in Taroko NP the superintendent was eager to reconcile the long-troubled park/people relationship since 2000. First, the park renamed a popular trail using a traditional Taroko place name—Sakadang Trail. In 2001, the park organized a lecture series on Taroko culture, in which Taroko elders and prominent leaders were invited as lecturers. Finally, in early 2002 TNP established a TNP Cultural Consulting Committee (TNPCCC). Among the 23 committee members are eight top national park officials, 12 Taroko people, one Ami person, and two university professors including the present author. The Taroko representatives insisted on having the majority in the committee.

The committee meets four times a year to discuss land, resources, and social, cultural, and economic issues related to Taroko people in and around the national park. In 2002, the committee discussed and decided on issues such as funding for a school improvement project, funding for organizing a dance group, and a training program for Taroko cultural-ecological interpreters. However, issues such as

funding for a committee member's cultural association, and the proposal for a farm road on a steep slope, were rejected on the grounds of avoiding personal favors and ecological concerns.

In the early half of 2003, this researcher conducted interviews to learn whether the committee has had an effect on the park-people relationship. The 23 interviewees included eight Taroko tribe committee members, four TNP officials, five Taroko students of the cultural-ecological interpreters training program, and six other Taroko people.

Most TNP officials were happy to see the committee in operation; as one put it, "I think the [park-people relationship] has significantly improved; we have formal channels of communication, and [the Taroko people] are able to express their grievances." However, one pointed out that some committee members have their own personal interest, rather than trying to advance the interest of the whole tribe; he worried that these committee members may cause trouble in the future operation of the committee. Contrary to the more positive response of TNP officials, most Taroko people on the one hand gave credit to the committee, but on the other hand were not satisfied with the limited achievement of the committee. They expressed their concern about more pressing issues such as land and jobs, which the committee was not able to tackle. As one put it: "The committee is just like giving us a piece of candy" (B3-1). Another said: "I am very dissatisfied with the committee, TNP avoided the most important issues such as jobs and land, but without dealing with these issues, what good is the committee?" (A1-7) One was disappointed about the lack of discussion on co-management: "We never talked about co-management; TNP lacks sincerity" (A3-4).

Indeed, as most Taroko people's economic condition is not good, they are more interested in land and economic issues rather than cultural ones, which the committee seems to have focused on. Complaints were raised about animals such as monkeys and wild boars destroying their farm products, but they were banned from taking action because of National Park regulations. Job opportunities in the National Park were also the main concern of many interviewees, but

they saw the committee not doing any good to help more Taroko people to get a job in the park: "The committee only receives some funding for cultural activities, but this is the least they (TNP) can do . . . we are like beggars without any dignity" (A4-3).

Even though Taroko committee members have sat at the same table with TNP officials several times, the members' mistrust toward TNP is obvious: "TNP are slowly acquiring land [meaning private land inside the park] . . . It is a well-planned act aimed to drive all indigenous people out of the park, so that it can manage the national park all by itself" (A3-4). Young Taroko people seemed to be less hostile toward TNP; as one argued, "People of our generation are more rational, and we are less resentful to TNP because there is more interaction. Also, TNP has become more respectful of the Taroko people" (C2-5).

Taroko representation on the committee has also been an often-mentioned issue. Most committee members were aware of the fact that some young people openly challenged the legitimacy of the Taroko representatives, and the issue was brought up at one committee meeting, but there was no agreement on how to design a better process to select the committee members. However, in line with the Taroko cultural tradition, a young man indicated that current members are mostly respected Taroko elders and community leaders; there should be no problem with them representing the Taroko people. On the other hand, others feel that the election system tends to be corrupt, and therefore should not be used in selecting Taroko representatives.

In sum, while the committee is generally viewed as a positive move toward reconciliation, most Taroko interviewees thought that the committee had failed to deal with the most important issues such as land and jobs. The younger generation seemed to have more trust in TNP's goodwill, while the older generation, including a few committee members, seemed to lack such trust. To make things more complicated, the superintendent who organized the committee was forced to leave his job in late 2002 because of charges of mismanagement. The new superintendent seems to be less enthusiastic about reconciling the park-people relationship as evident in her not holding regular

committee meetings. While the effect of this new development has yet to be researched, it shows how important it is to have the committee institutionalized throughout the legislative process.

Conclusion

This paper examines the ways in which indigenous Taroko people's land and resource rights have been violated by the establishment of Taroko National Park. It situates the case study in the following context: 1) Taiwan's capitalist expansion into remote areas, and 2) the need to preserve Taiwan's natural areas for increased recreational use. These socio-economic contexts demonstrate that while Taiwan is becoming a "consumption society," its quest for traditional forms of economic development has not lessened. By ignoring the rights and livelihood of the indigenous Taroko people, the government as well as private industries has committed an injustice upon these people, and ethnic conflict and mistrust have been the result.

It was only after the new government took office in 2000, and "new partnership" and "recognizing indigenous people's traditional homelands" became its official indigenous policies, that a better park-people relationship has begun to be built. The Taroko National Park Cultural Consulting Committee was a first step toward indigenous people-Han Chinese/government reconciliation; it brought indigenous people and National Park officials to the negotiating table for the first time in Taiwan's history. This research shows that while the committee has achieved some success in bridging people and park, it fell short of the Taroko people's expectations. Not only is the Taroko composition of the committee members problematic, as there is only one female committee member and no one under the age of 40, the committee has done little to help solve the most pressing land and job problems.

Based on the above findings, this essay argues that in order for the reconciliation process to move forward, the government needs first to amend the National Park Act and formally institute a "community consulting committee." It should also take steps to facilitate indigenous

participation in National Park affairs, which includes having more job opportunities for local indigenous people. In the meantime, indigenous groups need to develop a proper procedure for selecting their representatives (such as a tribal council) to deal with external affairs. Of course, indigenous people-Han reconciliation involves many more aspects and is a complicated process; the National Parks are only a good place to start.

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