

THE TASADAY TAPES

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1. Introduction

It is nearly a quarter of a century since the Tasaday people, a band of about twenty-six supposedly isolated, stone-tool using hunter-gatherers, living in caves in the rain forests of Southern Mindanao were first read about in Manila's newspapers (July 8, 1971),¹ and shortly thereafter around the world in hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles. National Geographic and NBC produced TV documentaries which captured the imagination of their viewers and the stage was set for a controversy that has waxed and waned until today. At issue was whether the Tasaday were really a completely isolated group having absolutely no knowledge of the agricultural communities that surrounded their forest home, living a pristine, Paleolithic lifestyle since time immemorial in peace and harmony with themselves and their environment, or whether they were a carefully selected group of Manobo and Tboli farmers, some even well educated, who were persuaded to participate in a well-orchestrated hoax, characterized by some as "the most elaborate hoax perpetrated on the anthropological world since the Piltdown Man" (Mydans 1988), or whether they were something in between these two extreme positions.

In 1986, a conference was held at the University of the Philippines to discuss the Tasaday. Two years later a symposium, organized by promoters of the hoax theory was held at the International Congress on Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Zagreb. I happened to attend these sessions and was intrigued that almost nothing was being said about the language that the Tasaday were speaking in 1971, at the time of the first contact. It seemed to me that there should be clear evidence for or against the hoax theory from the language itself. There had been a number of word lists taken by some of the earliest visitors to the group, anthropologists as well as linguists, most were unpublished. Teodoro Llamzon had collected a 200 word list in two days in July, 1971. Richard Elkins of the Summer Institute of Linguistics collected a small body of data in four days in August 1972, before sickness forced him to leave the area. He was followed shortly thereafter by Carol Molony, who in two

¹ They were first contacted on June 4, 1971, at the edge of the rain forest, by Manuel Elizalde Jr., at that time head of PANAMIN (Private Association for National Minorities), and a member of the cabinet of Ferdinand Marcos.

visits totaling about two weeks recorded some 800 lexical items and some taped texts, 45 pages of which were transcribed, translated and published.

In 1989, I was invited to participate in a symposium on the Tasaday at the 88th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I presented my findings (Reid 1992) that an examination of all of the available data from that period gave no evidence of any hoax, but that it seemed the Tasaday were speaking a dialect of the Manobo language spoken in Cotabato, as other linguists had already claimed.

This however did not settle the question of how isolated the group had been from other Manobos. Little was known of the form of the language spoken in Blit, the nearest agricultural community to the Tasaday caves. Could the Tasaday have been speaking Blit Manobo?² The answer would have to come from doing fieldwork with both Tasaday and Blit speakers. This research was begun in 1993, when I was able to spend approximately three months living with the Tasaday. Although many of the Tasaday have married wives from Blit (they call the place *Tanà Bayi* "Land of the Women") and consequently now speak the Manobo language of Blit, the Tasaday claim that the language they spoke before was different, and not mutually intelligible with Blit Manobo. I worked primarily with the man Belayem, alongside a speaker of Blit Manobo, Mafalu Dudim, the half brother of Belayem's two Blit wives. Belayem gave me hundreds of terms that were supposedly used by the Tasaday before 1971, and which were claimed by Mafalu to be unknown to him as a speaker of Blit. Although, as reported in Reid (to appear), a number of these terms were probably coined by Belayem to accentuate the difference between the two dialects and to authenticate himself as Tasaday, there were also a number of terms that had cognates in languages elsewhere in the Philippines, but which were no longer found in either Manobo or any other language that Belayem could possibly have been in contact with.

1.1. Taping the Tasaday

As part of the endeavor to discover as much as possible about the form of the language spoken in 1971, I decided to try to examine some of the tapes that had been made in the caves within days after outsiders had first visited the Tasaday cave site in March, 1972. John Nance, the reporter who accompanied Elizalde on most of the

² There are two languages spoken in Blit, one is Tboli, the language of the numerically strongest cultural group. The language of the minority is a form of Manobo fairly closely related to the Cotabato Manobo language of the Kulaman Valley. Pascal Lays (personal communication) notes: "The Blit people are culturally closer to Tboli than to Cotabato Manobo; Blit is still a Tboli territory, not Manobo. The influence and the physical presence of Tboli culture and language extend up to the extreme western border of South Cotabato, and one has to go down to the Kulaman Valley in order to find Manobo not linguistically or culturally influence by Tboli. In Blit, some people remain able to communicate in Cotabato Manobo, but use Tboli daily as the dominant local language."

visits to the Tasaday in the early 1970's reports in his book, *The Gentle Tasaday* (Nance 1988:150):

On the fourth afternoon of the visit [3/26/72] Elizalde thought of leaving a tape recorder running in the cave when we were not there. He borrowed a small portable unit from Fernandez and put it inside a black leather bag with some clothes. Mai and Dafal took it to the cave in the evening and said they were putting Manda's wet clothing beside the fire to dry. Just before departing Mai switched on the recorder; its microphone rested against a small opening in the zipper. Mai fetched the machine later and then he, Igna, and Elizalde huddled for more than two hours over the thirty-minute tape. By midnight they had completed it, Mai and Igna translating and Elizalde writing everything down by flashlight. It was painstaking work and there were many uncertainties, but the results were fascinating. Elizalde immediately sent to Manila for a larger recorder and a supply of tapes that would record for two hours on each side. After they arrived, several hours of each day were spent rigging up the machine and transcribing what it recorded.

The next sixteen pages of Nance's book contain "all that was written down by Elizalde at the time of the original transcription" (*ibid.* p. 151) of five recording sessions between 3/26/72 and 4/1/72. Two weeks later, Elizalde and several others including Nance again visited the caves (referred to as the second expedition) and five more recording sessions (eight hours of tape) took place between 4/18/72 and 4/22/72. Translations of some of these tapes are also given by Nance (*ibid.* p. 199-211). Following these two expeditions, Nance states that this "candid" recording technique was only used twice in visits over the following eighteen months for a total of three hours of tape (*ibid.* p. 152). No translations have appeared of any of the latter recordings. As is very quickly apparent, no transcription was ever made of the language that the Tasaday were using on the recordings. Only translations of the tapes are given. So, although they were invaluable for providing clues as to what the Tasaday were talking about when outsiders weren't around, they give us no information at all about how they were saying it.

1.2. The Missing Tapes

In commenting on the taped conversations that Nance described, Gerald Berreman an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and one of the leading proponents of the hoax theory, characterizes the conversations as "ludicrously improbable", containing "inabilities...enough to exceed one's tolerance for conversational implausibility" (Berreman 1992:34-35). Noting that the tapes had reportedly been lost, he implies that the "transcriptions" may not be real. He says, "If the transcriptions are authentic, the Tasaday must have been hard up for conversational fare" (*ibid.* p. 35). Oswald Iten, a Swiss freelance reporter, and one of the leading skeptics of the Tasaday, similarly faults Elizalde and Nance for failing to provide "inquiring scientists" with tapes (Iten 1992:48). Berreman acknowledges that Nance, in the "Afterward" of the 1988 edition of his book *The Gentle Tasaday*, reports that Eli-

zalde "now claims to have found the tapes..." He further notes, "If so--and as of May 1992 they have not appeared--we will be interested to learn what they contain and in what language (and whether, if produced, the ones "found" in fact date from March-April, 1972.) (Berreman 1988:335.)

I have no idea why the tapes were not made available earlier. I was told when I first inquired that I could have access to them whenever I was ready to use them. However, Berreman does have a valid criticism. I have received copies of only three hours of tapes, on two cassettes, only one of which is labeled, and that inadequately. The remaining tapes, of which there must be at least ten hours worth, have still not seen the light of day. There can be no question, however that the tapes that I have examined are absolutely genuine, implausible as the contents may seem to a Berreman or an Iten. They are clearly not fabrications. The conversations on them are in no way staged, and provide significant insights into the enormous impact that exposure to Elizalde and his retinue of associates had on an extremely unsophisticated band of forest dwellers.

2. Field Notes

The transcription and translation of the tapes that were provided to me was done over a period of several weeks in June and July, 1995, first in Kematu, a village close to the township of Tboli, then in Tafal, a Bisayan "Christian" settlement at the end of a former logging road, high in the mountains and a half day's hike from Blit, and finally in Blit itself.

I had originally planned to do the transcription and translation of the tapes either in Blit or in Magtu Ilingan, the small valley where a number of Tasaday families presently live.³ However, municipal officials in Tboli would not give permission to enter the Tasaday Reservation, claiming that there had been recent reports of Muslim rebel activity in the area. A messenger was therefore sent into Tasaday to request some of the men to come out to work with me. Kematu was not a good location to listen to tapes however. It is located in a narrow valley with a single road leading to a gold mining area at the head of the valley, and there was a constant stream of noisy motorcycles⁴ racing back and forth carrying miners and their families to the market in Tboli. Although there was an excellent water supply and ready access to the market (not a minor consideration when feeding 8-10 people three times a day), the Tasaday were not happy there, often complaining of the noise and of being unable to check on their animal traps in their forest home.

³ The name of the valley is traditionally known to the Tasaday as Libutà "Mud" from the name of a muddy creek that flows through the valley.

⁴ So-called "skylabs", the main means of local transportation. These modified bikes are capable of carrying up to five passengers.