



PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE RESEARCH OF “ACTIVITY CENTERS” IN TAIDONG, TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT: This report presents current research on aboriginal activity centers in Taidong County, Taiwan, primarily in the townships of Chishang and Yanping with over 30% of the population being of aboriginal ancestry. Taidong County is the region with the most distinctive aboriginal communities in Taiwan. The research attempts to identify the actors behind the operation of such centers and their significance for aboriginal communities. The research investigates the process of selecting suitable location for the facilities, the specific features of such centers, the potential religious significance of the locations including the role of traditional beliefs in predominantly Christian aboriginal communities, the symbolic value of structures built in the traditional style for construction of ethnicity and financing that enables the construction of the facilities and the organization of the festivities held in them. The principle research method used was interviews with local actors including local representatives, organizers of festivities, as well as members of local communities. The research began in 2017.

KEY WORDS: Activity Centers, Austronesian, Taiwan, Aboriginal

Introduction

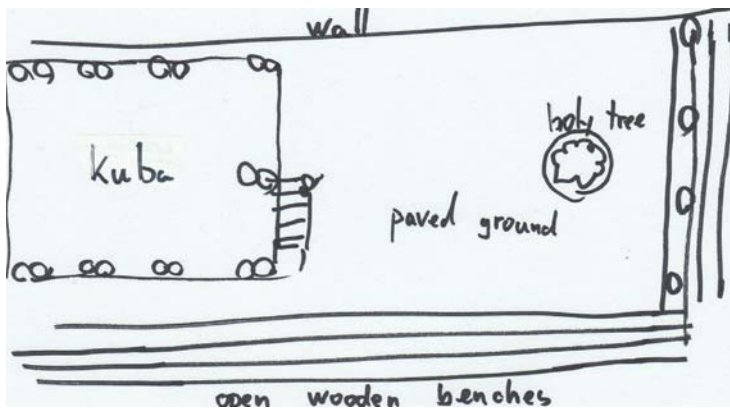
The Austronesian – or aboriginal (*yuanzhuimin*, 原住民) – population in Taiwan makes up about 2.2% of the predominantly Han population of Taiwan, yet the ratio of Hualian and Taidong regions along the eastern coast is about 25% (Hualian) to 31% (Taidong). While regular aboriginal festivals (and irregular events) are viewed as an important feature of aboriginal as well as Taiwanese culture and as an important part of the social life in local communities, the locales where such events are held have thus far received a limited amount of attention from researchers. This paper introduces ongoing research into such facilities in the Taidong region in south-east Taiwan.

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While Han is the dominant group in the area, there are numerous villages in Taidong inhabited predominantly by people of Austronesian ancestry. The people in the aboriginal villages identify themselves as particularly the Amis (*Amei*, 阿美, 29 857), Paiwan (*Paiwan*, 排灣, 10 398), Puyuma (*Beinan*, 卑南, 8 632), Bunun (*Bunong*, 布農, 5 324), and Rukai (*Lukai*, 魯凱, 2 238).² Facilities broadly referred to as “activity centers” (*huodong zhongxin*, 活動中心) are a common feature of numerous settlements (*buluo*, 部落) in the south-east county of Taidong. They typically include open flat ground of a roughly rectangular shape with some seating areas along its edges – in the seating area, there can be fixed benches or a space for placing chairs and it may be roofed. The ground is usually grass-covered. In larger, more affluent communities, the activity centers also include an adjacent structure, such as a concrete building with sanitary facilities, and possibly space for other uses, such as lockable rooms. The centers are accessible from public roads and generally there is also an area for parking either directly by the center or in its immediate vicinity.

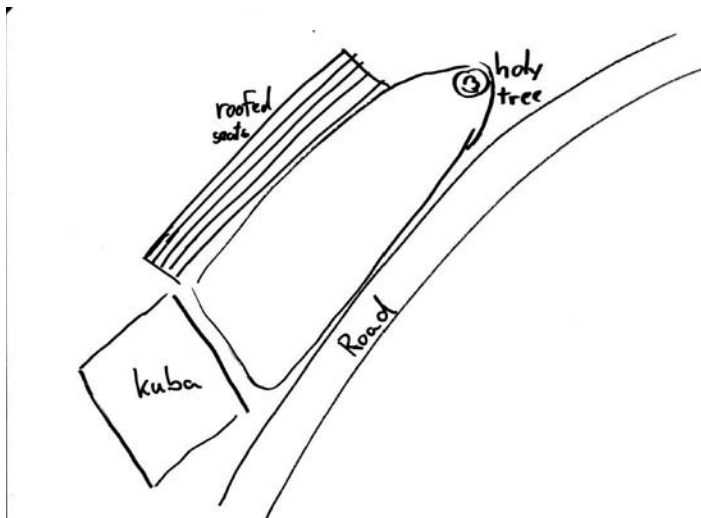
An interesting parallel can be found in the villages of Tefuye and Dabang inhabited by members of the Tsou tribe in Jiayi County in central Taiwan. Traditional festivals of *mayasvi* are held alternatively in the villages each year. Each village has a specific area where the festivities are held (see img. 1 and img. 2). The wooden men’s house – “*kuba*” (庫巴) – is of prominent importance. The houses were erected in the late 1980s by members of the tribe in what is perceived as the traditional aboriginal style. They have a wooden structure without filled walls and a roof of reed. There is a prolonged open ground used for collective dances and other public parts of celebrations in front of the *kuba*. There is a sheltered area with several lines of benches for the audience as well as for dancers to rest along one side of the open ground. Opposite the *kuba* across the open ground is a “holy tree”. Since the *Mayasvi* festival is perceived as a principally religious event, the grounds themselves – in particular the *kuba* and the holy tree - are also perceived as sacred places with certain taboos attached to them.

Current research attempts to establish whether there are similar perceptions regarding activity centers in Taidong County to perceptions regarding *kuba* and adjacent grounds.



Img. 1 Men’s house *kuba* and adjacent grounds in Dabang (Drawing: Petr Janda).

² 2010, National Statistical Tables



Img. 2 Men's house kuba and adjacent grounds in Tefuye (Drawing: Petr Janda).

Methodology

The research is fundamentally qualitative, and the empirical data are primarily obtained by unstructured interviews with members of aboriginal communities in Chishang area in Taidong County, unstructured interviews with representatives at municipal and county levels and observation and comparison of activity centers in Chishang area. The questions focus on several themes, including but not limited to where communal activities are held, why was the location chosen, what are the particular features of the facilities and their symbolic meaning, what activities are held at the center, why are the particular events held at the center, where funding for the establishment and maintenance of the facilities came from, who organizes and funds events held on the grounds and who and why participates in the events. Raw data will be analyzed later on the basis of procedures of grounded theory as stipulated by K. Charmaz (2006).

Interviewees are selected via chain-referral sampling from among members of local communities; members of regional administration are interviewed according to the area of their responsibilities.

In addition, there is a documentation process of activity centers by photographs for further analysis of architectural and decorative features (particularly in respect to their "aboriginesness"), and the dimensions of the grounds and individual facilities within them are taken and sketches are drawn.

Research questions and preliminary results

1) Secularization

While festivals of a religious origin are typically held at the activity centers, such as *mala-ta-ngia* of the Bunun or the harvest festival of the Ami, as well as preparation for such festivals, the grounds and buildings on them do not seem to have any particular religious significance. This seems to correspond to the secularized nature of current

celebrations due to the prevalent conversion of the aboriginal population to Christianity, both of the Roman-Catholic and Protestant denomination. The research attempts to establish whether aboriginal activity centers were built in locations with any consideration to the religious importance of the particular locality and whether or not the entire grounds, their parts, or structures erected on them, plants growing on them have or have not acquired any religious meaning after erection.

2) Investment

For a better understanding of the dynamics of society, important actors have been interviewed who participate in initiating, organizing and funding the construction of the activity centers as well as their management after completion and organizing and funding of events held at the facilities. A key question is whether such initiatives are grassroots movements, i.e. coming from inside aboriginal communities, or whether such initiatives originated outside the communities, e.g. following the general guidelines set by central or regional governments.

3) Aboriginesness

Buildings do not tend to be erected from traditional materials or according to a traditional architectural style (unlike in the case of *Tsou kugas*, which were intentionally build of wood and reef in the 1980s, when other buildings in villages had been replaced with modern structures made of modern building materials such as concrete, glass and metal sheets). Open grounds are often a grassy flat area, while examples of permanent buildings are typically concrete buildings with glassed windows. Decorations with what is perceived as traditional aboriginal art can be found at the community centers – geometric patterns over the entrance gate, a wooden statue at either side of the entrance, etc. Current research investigates which particular features are perceived as the markers of the aboriginesness (or tribalness) of the facilities in the complex ethnic landscape of south-east Taiwan.

4) Activities

Activity centers host annual tribal festivals such as the harvest festival referred to above. They are not, however, the only public grounds, where communal events are held in aboriginal communities. Churches of Roman-Catholic as well as Protestant denominations are present in numerous communities across the county and organize community events for members of the church. Such events include religious events related to Christian holidays, such as Christmas, which are also open to people outside the particular church. Churches are not directly involved, however, in organizing what is perceived as tribal events. Such a separation is partly grounded in competition between the Roman-Catholic and Protestant churches, which divide aboriginal communities into distinct groups along the Catholic/Protestant line.

Another institutional actor in the communities, that also serves as a location for community events, is local elementary schools. The schools are part of the national system of compulsory education but their sports grounds are open to the public after instruction and during the weekend (in compliance with national policy). Schools also organize events for the communities – principally events related to their educational program and extracurricular organized clubs and courses – with a focus on students of the school and their family members; such events include singing contests and sport events such as baseball tournaments, etc. The schools do not organize annual tribal

festivals, but their employees and students of aboriginal ancestry participate actively in the festivals and in preparations for them.

Conclusion

Festivals held in activity centers have lost their original religious importance, but remain an important sign of tribalness of local communities. As a visible symbol of such tribalness, most activity centers display aboriginal features. These may include structures such as “traditional” grass-roof huts or decorative features such as reliefs or sculptures. The locations seem to be chosen on a random basis, i.e. a flat grassy ground of a suitable size is chosen without regard to any traditional religious beliefs. The locations can be moved in case a better place is found such as in Bunun village of Wuling (武陵), where the festivities used to be held “in a grassy place behind the elementary school” before they moved to a larger open area just outside the village. Only aboriginal festivals are held, in contrast, on such grounds. Most of the communities, where the research was carried out, only seem to hold one annual festival a year; such a festival is held at the specific activity center. Should the community organize other aboriginal events, they would be held at the center. Other events that are regarded as non-traditional would find, however, other locations such as school playgrounds, churches, etc. Events held at the facilities are usually co-founded by local aboriginal communities and regional governments. They are even open to the non-aboriginal public and actors other than local aboriginal communities play a role in the festivals as well as in establishing and operation of the activity centers.

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