

# Innovated Tradition: Transformation of *Palakaw* Fishing among the Amis of Fataan, Taiwan

---

by Po-Yi Hung, MEd 2005

## Introduction

Fataan, located in a relatively unpolluted area of eastern Taiwan, is a popular ecotourism spot where tourists throng to experience wetland scenery and the indigenous culture of the Amis people. Visitors are mostly attracted by the wetland's blossoming lotus plants, which have become the most flamboyant image of Fataan. The area is also known for having one of the biggest Amis villages in Taiwan, and visitors therefore expect to witness the traditional heritage of the Amis people. As a result, the traditional fishing practice, *palakaw*, has come to represent the unique knowledge and tribal heritage of Fataan's Amis people and is the characteristic indigenous image used to promote tourism development in Fataan.

Palakaw, as practiced by the Amis people, is the practice of constructing "fish homes." In the Amis language, "*pa*" means "throwing away," and "*lakaw*" means "branches of plants." The term, literally "throwing away the plant branches," thus indicates the act of construction. The "fish home" is constructed from three distinct layers of local plants, and different species of fish reside in the different layers of the construction. Usually, the Amis people conduct *palakaw* in the middle of a local stream named Fu-Deng Stream (see photo below).

Palakaw appears in every guidebook, tour

manual, website, TV program, or promotion about Fataan, pre-defining for tourists a certain of notion of what the site's nature and culture should be like. Palakaw, to outsiders, suggests the relatively primitive natural environment in Fataan, which allows local Amis people to maintain their traditional fishing in unpolluted streams. The image of palakaw has created a romanticized notion of Fataan's nature, which contrasts tremendously to the highly urbanized society in Taiwan. Therefore, the symbolic meaning of palakaw, closeness to pristine nature, provides a great attraction to urbanized tourists.

Questions about how the local Amis people will respond in the face of these strong and vividly imposed representations of palakaw, in conjunction with ecotourism and cultural tourism development, remain unresolved. I conducted summer master's project fieldwork in Fataan from May through August 2004 to uncover how palakaw was perceived by outside society, as well as by local Fataan people.

## Outside Images and Official Rhetoric of Palakaw

### *Image construction via popular media*

In late May 2004, the summer vacation season was starting for most people in Taiwan. The biggest chain bookstore in Taipei held a series of tourism book sales and exhibitions called "Escape from Your Mundane City." Not surprisingly, when I perused the local tour guidebooks, images of Fataan appeared in almost every book that mentioned Hualien county or eastern Taiwan. When addressing Fataan, palakaw was described as the Amis peoples' "ecological fishing" and as the major local indigenous tradition or culture.

---

*Po-Yi Hung, from Taiwan, has been doing research on people-environment interconnections. After graduating from Yale, he will continue his doctoral study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison focusing on Political Ecology and Human Geography.*

Two tribal elders demonstrating Palakaw for tourists.  
Photograph by Po-Yi Hung.



An example from the most popular guidebook in Taiwan, *Outdoors Life*, is illustrative: “Fataan, the green land with interlacing creeks, is a productive place where the Fataan’s people plant and fish. Palakaw, constructed by the myrtle branches, nurtures stream fish and shrimp; additionally, palakaw confers a life ethic which is inherited from generation to generation” (Hu and Liu 2003: 170). Here palakaw is depicted as tied closely to the local natural environment and the abundant natural resources. The green land, creeks, myrtle branches, and flourishing fish and shrimp all have placed palakaw in a natural and unpolluted setting, which stands in sharp contrast to the Taipei streets, full of modern skyscrapers and noisy motorcycles and cars, just outside the bookstore. This short description not only creates an image of cultural heritage, but also invokes an urban nostalgia for nature and tradition.

During the traveling season, newspapers in Taiwan also wrote more reports on tourism activities. As a popular tourist spot, Fataan was mentioned in every major newspaper in Taiwan – and palakaw, of course, was written about in the tourism articles. On June 28, 2004, a column about Fataan in *Keng Sheng Daily News* called palakaw the “best representation of Fataan’s Amis culture,” promising that “experiencing palakaw will allow you to learn the ecological

wisdom of indigenous culture, and will also steep you in the natural environment... Fataan is like the Arcadia where you will experience an alternative life during this summer” (Huang 2004). Palakaw was thus connected explicitly to an “alternative” way of life. If Fataan is Arcadia, then palakaw serves as the proof of Arcadian life, which is necessarily away from urbanized and industrialized modern living.

Obviously, popular media has constructed a dichotomy in which to situate palakaw. This dichotomy is *de facto* parallel with a “binary opposition” (Smith 2001: 104) between modern society and indigenous communities in Taiwan. While modern society signifies the problems resulting from urbanization and industrialization, such as environmental degradation and complicated human relations, indigenous communities denote the pre-urbanized and pre-industrialized natural environment and an unsophisticated way of living. Hereafter, the indigenous communities become, as Cronon (1995: 69) states, “the places [people] can turn for escape from [their] own too-muchness.” In other words, the binary opposition is underpinned by modern Taiwanese society’s nostalgia for nature and tradition, which apparently drives urban people to travel to indigenous communities, where they can feel pure nature and traditional culture and escape from the modern “city of mundanity.”

Palakaw is positioned by the media as a way to fulfill people's search for nature and local place. Through guidebooks, newspapers, TV programs, and tour brochures, popular media cultivates the expectations for palakaw and constructs the outside definitions of Fataan's nature and culture. However, the purity and the tradition of such a practice can be overly romanticized under such a socially constructed binary opposition.

### ***Official rhetoric via the state***

June 18, 2004 was the inauguration day of the Indigenous Cultural Industry Promotion Center, located alongside the main road in Fataan. A tall totem, which represents Taiwan's indigenous peoples, stands at the entrance of the Center. Situated behind the building is a spacious square where various cultural performances occur; along the edges of the square, local vendors sold indigenous handicrafts, souvenirs, and foods under bamboo and straw canopies. Opposite the Center's entrance was a temporary pond, purposely dug for palakaw demonstrations during the inaugural ceremony.

The magistrate of Hualien County arrived at ten o'clock in the morning. Opening the speech in front of the Center, he emphasized that both central and local governments expended effort to preserve indigenous culture and improve the tribal economic condition. Furthermore, he argued that indigenous communities owned abundant "natural capital" and "cultural capital" and could develop tourism to reach "tribal sustainability." According to the magistrate, the Indigenous Cultural Industry Promotion Center was an important initiative to simultaneously preserve culture and promote tribal tourism development.

Before leaving the center the magistrate walked around the square and spoke to the local vendors. He stopped at the temporary pond to see the palakaw demonstration, and extolled palakaw as "the paradigm of industrialization of indigenous culture," a practice

important as cultural capital and thus to the promotion of Fataan's tourism. Indigenous people would benefit economically by performing their tradition, and, at the same time, their traditional culture would be passed from generation to generation. He concluded that palakaw had "bridged the dichotomy between cultural preservation and economic development."

This incident illustrates that the state, like the media, constructs a dichotomy between modern society and indigenous culture – but here palakaw is positioned in the middle, as a bridge to reconcile the conflict between indigenous cultural preservation and tribal economic development. According to the simple logic of governmental rhetoric, palakaw will attract tourists to Fataan and thus increase development of many related profitable tourism services, such as hostels, handicrafts, and souvenirs. Palakaw thus becomes a cultural performance through which the local Amis performers gain revenue. At the same time, this tradition, as the magistrate said, will be "preserved forever" due to the boom of tourism development. In other words, the official rhetoric has situated palakaw as the catalyst for reciprocity between economic improvement and cultural preservation through tourism. This construction has given palakaw official recognition as Fataan's cultural heritage, and this label, in turn, has prompted the government to endow resources to Fataan for conducting so-called "cultural revitalization."

### **Inside Reactions to Palakaw**

#### ***Fataan culture and history workshop: palakaw for industrialization of culture***

Most guidebooks depict the Fataan Culture and History Workshop as the best place to learn about Fataan's Amis culture. Chang, the host of the Workshop, is a local Amis in his fifties. "While you Han people are struggling for sustainable development, let me tell you, we Fataan Amis reached sustainability long time ago. No wonder we have the palakaw culture," Chang told me on

one occasion. The term “ecological fishing,” used to promote palakaw, he explained, was mainly his idea. He insisted that this term best fit palakaw, which for him, is a unique indigenous knowledge engendered from an adaptation to the wetland environment. Regardless of what truly inherent ecological wisdom palakaw embodies, Chang also admitted that the term “ecological fishing” might attract the attention of the government. “Everybody talks ecology, conservation, and sustainability everyday, especially those governmental officials. Calling palakaw the ecological fishing can draw their attention.” He informed me that university academics and Environmental Protection Agency officials came to his Workshop to learn and document how the Amis people utilized palakaw to sustain their wetlands.

At the Indigenous Cultural Industry Promotion Center’s inauguration ceremony, Chang narrated the palakaw demonstration for the Hualien County magistrate. Chang once mentioned the occasion in his talks to me. He said that his Workshop has emphasized the concept of “Industrialization of Culture” since its establishment. In order to put this concept into practice, he exerted his efforts to promote palakaw as a tourism attraction. His recognition as an Amis cultural restorer by the Council of Cultural Affairs led to media exposure, causing him to realize the importance of cooperating with media to promote palakaw. “Popular media are networking,” he said; “once you have a positive relation with one media, everybody would come to talk to you. I provide what they want, and they help me to propagate Fataan’s tourism.” Chang felt that indigenous culture could not just be revitalized. Restoration or revitalization was not the ultimate purpose; rather, the ultimate purpose was to improve the lives of Fataan’s people. He hoped that, one day, young Amis people would not have leave home to earn a living. Thus, he saw the current progress towards the “Industrialization of Culture” as optimal for indigenous people and hoped to make palakaw one of the best examples of this progression.

***Greater Fataan community development association:  
A local voice of resistance***

One local Amis who expressed dissent towards the Workshop said he regards the organization as more of a “cultural seller” than a “cultural restorer.” He thought that the Workshop host, Chang, was running “his own palakaw business,” unconcerned with providing benefits for the whole of Fataan. “He sold aluminum before,” this person told me, “and came back to Fataan to sell palakaw.” The Workshop is actually very controversial at the local level, and most of the Fataan’s Amis people I have talked with hold a negative perception of the work the Workshop has done. In fact, a group of Amis people have gathered together to form a competing voice against the Workshop, named the Greater Fataan Community Development Association.

According to members of the Development Association, before Chang began working with the Fataan community, everyone used to work together and discuss ways to preserve and revive Fataan’s Amis culture. Siou, the spokesperson of the Development Association, informed me that the idea of reviving palakaw activities actually originated from everybody’s thoughts, but it was Chang who suggested writing the proposal about palakaw to the Council of Cultural Affairs. When the proposal was approved by the Council, therefore, Chang received abundant governmental resources, which he used to establish the Workshop in the wetland area. Siou told me that, at the very beginning, everybody thought it was good that Chang could help Fataan to obtain outside resources and could contribute to revitalizing palakaw. Gradually, however, people discovered that all outside resources went straight to the Workshop, without any contribution to the whole community.

Since outside society sees the Workshop as the place to learn about Fataan’s Amis culture, the Development Association is trying to reverse this perception. In fact, the Development

Association has promoted another destination to represent Amis culture: Kakidaan, an ancient house located in the Fataan community. Kakidaan, in Amis language, means “abundance with rice,” with the additional meaning of “the affluent family.” Within the house, traditional rice planting tools, daily clothes, household instruments, and other artifacts are exhibited (see photo below). Rather than being in the “wetland area,” Kakidaan is located on a main street in the “residential area” of Fataan’s Amis people. The Development Association sees the location of Kakidaan as ideal for attracting people to walk into the “real Fataan community” and to experience the “authentic Fataan Amis culture.”

However, the Development Association has found it difficult, compared to the Workshop, to receive attention from outside society. They indicated to me that the Workshop has much more political and social power. Many Fataan’s Amis people believe that Chang cultivated his political power and networks by promoting the palakaw concept. As a local Amis said, “[Chang] used palakaw to lure officials, and all the officials from the central to local governments liked palakaw and listened to him.” In addition to the support from the state, the Workshop also capitalized upon positive relations with popular media.

Feng, one member of the Development Association, supposed that palakaw received government attention not only because it represented the uniqueness of Amis culture, but also because of its “ecological” characteristic: “The fancy name ‘ecological fishing’ is just fit for what the government wants,” Feng said. Compared to palakaw, however, Feng felt that Kakidaan was neither ecological nor related to indigenous knowledge. Although she did think Kakidaan represented an authentic element of Fataan culture, she argued that the Development Association needed to increase its creativity in promoting Kakidaan to outside society in order to attain more political power for the association.



Tourists listening to a narration within the Fataan Ancient House, known as Kakidaan. Photograph by Po-Yi Hung.

## Beyond “Ecological Fishing”: Palakaw for What and for Whom?

### *Packaging palakaw for outside rhetoric*

Given the increased treatment of ‘indigenous’ subjects in contemporary intellectual and cultural atmospheres, Li (2000: 153) stresses the importance of “locating the tribal slot in shifting fields of power.” Different factions of society, including the state, NGOs, and other activists, have criteria, formal or conceptual, to specify which group fits into the tribal or indigenous slot. Chang packaged the workshop and palakaw to gain recognition and resources from broader society. The Workshop members use palakaw to situate themselves in accordance with the images, discourses, and agendas that outside society produces for or about them. Palakaw helps the Workshop articulate their identity when negotiating with outsiders. The Workshop furthers this process by fitting palakaw to the governmental rhetoric about “industrialization of culture.” Additionally, the Workshop uses palakaw to suit the media’s

need for exotic imagery about tribal culture. Moreover, Chang labeled palakaw as “ecological fishing” to fit the current rhetoric about “indigenous knowledge,” in which this knowledge is regarded as a local wisdom that sustains communities’ natural resources. Outside society creates the dichotomy between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” discourses, and the Workshop has strategically situated palakaw within the former.

Although denounced by the local Amis, Chang did not think he had done anything detrimental to the community; on the contrary, he thought he had improved the community by promoting Fataan to outside society and by fighting for outside resources. Moreover, Chang thought cultural revitalization would be “nothing but idealism” if Fataan’s Amis people could not actively communicate with outside society. He argued that the first step was to receive recognition from the outside world, and that this recognition and supply of resources would give Fataan’s people the autonomy to manage their affairs, including the tasks of cultural revitalization.

From my perspective, the Workshop and Chang are struggling for access to power from the outside Taiwanese society. Palakaw has become the tool through which the Workshop keeps positive relations with the government, popular media, academia, and other outside sources. The practice has been intentionally packaged by the Workshop in order to establish a network with outside societies, and the Workshop expects that this networking will provide more powers to Fataan. Although Chang’s original expectation may have been for an increase in power and resources for the Fataan community at large, the local Amis people claim that the power and resources garnered seemed to provide only for the Workshop and Chang. As a local Amis told me, “All Chang cares about are politics and power, and he is not a cultural restorer, because he just wants to use palakaw to become a real politician, who can

have much more power to earn more money and do whatever he wants to do.” This person also informed me that Chang would like to campaign to become a local legislator. While these intentions and actions may be overstated, what is obvious in this conflict is that palakaw is an instrument used to address power struggles, articulated in terms of cultural empowerment and revitalization.

#### ***Extra- and intra-local expectations***

While the Development Association denounced the Workshop’s use of palakaw to “sell Amis culture,” they also realized that, in order to promote their alternative attraction, Kakidaan, they should be more “creative” in the search for increased political powers. Furthermore, while they condemned officials who had been fooled by the workshop, they also admitted that the term “ecological fishing” did fit governmental needs. It seems that the Development Association is trapped between inside and outside expectations of Amis culture.

The Development Association wants to label Kakidaan as the authentic Amis culture; moreover, they argue that promoting Kakidaan should be beneficial to the whole community. They hope to promote Kakidaan’s emergence as another popular cultural symbol for tourists, government, and popular media. In order to draw this attention, it is inescapable that the Development Association must understand the expectations of these outside actors. Currently, the Association proclaims to outside society that palakaw is only one part of Fataan’s Amis culture, and that Kakidaan should be visited in order to experience the “comprehensive and authentic” Amis culture. This declaration of “comprehensive and authentic” culture itself is actually a form of cultural packaging, fitting with outside society’s expectations.

In addition, while the Development Association staff reprehend the Workshop’s use of palakaw to “lure officials” to gain more power, they also acknowledge that the Development

Association needs more political power to promote Kakidaan and to benefit the Fataan community. Apparently, the Development Association is also eager to gain approval and recognition from the state.

The Development Association is evolving in resistance to the Workshop, and its future evolution remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Association is now trapped in the predicament of balancing the extra- and intra-local expectations on representing Amis traditional culture. In trying to avoid the route of the Workshop and palakaw, they may actually follow the same track.

### Acknowledgements

I thank the Tropical Resources Institute, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, and Yale Program in Agrarian Studies for supporting the summer fieldwork in Fataan. I thank Professor Michael Dove and Dr. Carol Carpenter for giving me the insightful comments on the initial paper proposal. I'm also very grateful to Andrea and Laura for your wonderful editing job. I thank all the people, especially the informants in Fataan, who ever participated in

the fieldwork for your generous help and valuable contributions to this research. And I thank Huai-Hsuan Chen, my wife, for always being the greatest supporter for me.

### References

- Cronon, W. 1995. The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Going Back to the Wrong Nature. Pp 69-90 in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, W. Cronon, ed. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Hu, Jhen-Ni and Shu-Bin Liu. 2003. Fataan Tribe. Pp 170-173 in *Richness of Travel in Taiwan – Hualien County*, Yu-Jhen Li, ed. Outdoor Life Books, Taipei.
- Huang, C. M. 2004. Visiting Fataan: An Intellectual Travel of Wetland Ecology. *Keng Sheng Daily News*, June 28: 5.
- Li, T. 2000. Articulating indigenous identity in Indonesia: Resource politics and the tribal slot. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42(1): 149-179.
- Smith, P. 2001. *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers Inc., Massachusetts.