

# PUYUMA NEW YEAR AND MONKEY FESTIVAL 12/99 - 1/2000

The China Post 1998 (words 1368)

Four hundred ago, only a human sacrifice could satisfy the gods as Puyuma warriors welcomed the coming of the New Year, known as “vasivas.” It was the climax of an annual ritual that promised a pure, fresh start for the entire village.

Now, as the west celebrates with New Year’s resolutions, champagne, and fancy balls, Puyuma boys honor their past by spearing a sacrificial straw monkey.

The rituals of “The Monkey Festival” and “The Great Hunt” date back centuries, to an era when ‘men were men’ and headhunting was a way of life. The former is a rite of manhood, while in the latter, elders challenge their youths - ‘testing their mettle.’

The Puyuma clans make their home in the verdant Peinan River Valley, on the outskirts of Taitung. Here, nestled between the mountains and the sea, tribal culture has flourished for more than 5,000 years. These proud and friendly folk are well known for exuberant festivals, brightly-colored leis, and intricate embroidery.

Their traditions nearly disappeared during the twentieth century. It was not until 1989, with the lifting of martial law, that Taiwan’s indigenous people began a cultural revival. For the Puyuma, it has been a difficult task, as they have no written language. Much was lost during the Japanese occupation and subsequent efforts to “assimilate” native people.

Now, tribal culture is enjoying a renaissance, and in the village of Beinan, the special millennial show was quite the event. Clusters of red, yellow and blue banners waved gaily as throngs of people, in an eclectic mix of western dress and traditional costumes, made their way through the village streets.

Thousands more had already gathered on the lush green grounds of the Peinan Culture Park, part of the new Museum of Prehistory. Here, center stage was transformed into a virtual kaleidoscope of color as Ami, Puyuma and Paiwan dancers whirled about the floor, delighting the crowd. Nearby, hundreds more awaited their turn, heads adorned with garlands, and faces flushed with millennial excitement

Finally it was time for the Monkey Festival’s big event - the test of courage. Thirty young Puyuma men, aged 13-18, marched into the arena bearing a straw ‘monkey’ on a bamboo pole. They placed him at the center, forming a circle. They began a ritual dance, accompanied by much hooting and stomping, as they waved long, white-tasseled spears. When at last they stabbed the straw effigy, proud, brightly-costumed parents cheered their bravery loudly, and cameras whirred and flashed.

Later the ‘monkey’ would be cast outside the village perimeters, symbolically cleansing the village of all destructive influences, and exorcising evil spirits.

The killing of a man, or even a monkey, sounds horribly barbaric, and by today’s standards, it certainly would be. ‘Practice,’ however, was an integral part of Puyuma training, and this was a means for young men to ‘practice’ killing in preparation for war.

400 years ago, the Han Chinese put an end to human sacrifice. So, man’s closest relative, the monkey, took his place. But the elders added a new element to broaden the ‘lesson.’ One month prior, the monkey was brought to the “takoban” (military boarding school) to be fed and nurtured by the boys, thus building an “emotional attachment”

## PUYUMA NEW YEAR AND MONKEY FESTIVAL 12/99 - 1/2000

It seems so cruel, and yet so practical. When it came time to kill their animal pal, the boys would experience first-hand the agony of loss – and the demands and horrors of war.

Nowadays, the ritual is far more symbolic with its ‘straw’ monkey, yet respect for death and the rites of mourning continue to play an integral role. Throughout the ceremonies, the bereaved are consoled and acknowledged, and gently readied to resume their place in the clan.

Meanwhile, back in Beinan, the mountains reverberated with the sounds of firecrackers, whooping and hollering, announcing a triumphant Great Hunt.

Now that hunting has been banned in Taiwan, the Great Hunt’s days of glory are over. Their game consists mainly of small rodents and squirrels. So the event focuses more on hunting and survival skills, teamwork, and male bonding.

It’s rather like tribal Boy Scouts, but with a psychological twist. The elders do their best to wreak havoc, using sleep deprivation, confusion and exhausting or dangerous jobs. It’s all just a test. The young guys quickly learn to stay cool and diplomatic – or lose face.

Afterwards, the womenfolk greeted their hunters with dozens of leis, beneath an immense “Hunt Welcoming Gate.” Nearby, inside the “palakuwan,” stately elders donned splendidly embroidered, red and yellow headdresses, vests and leggings. Then they hunkered around the campfire, pow-wow style, comforting the bereaved, singing and telling long, tall tales of the hunt

There was much chanting and smoking of cigarettes within, and many offerings of betel nuts from tiny ceremonial baskets. Time slowed to a crawl... lips turned crimson... the air grew smoky and blue...

After a long hour, the elders finally signaled for the dancing to begin. The young men began a ritual chant as they circled the perimeter, requesting blessings and protection for the tribe. As they finished with vigorous cries of “hey yah huh, hey yah huh,” the Great Hunt ritual was complete, and the ‘mourning’ over. It was time to rejoice!

That night, 5,000 people gathered at the Peinan Culture Park. Vendors lined the perimeters, selling aboriginal bags and garments, local cereal products, and Puyuma delicacies, such as stuffed millet cakes, and sweet and salty dumplings of yam and taro.

The post office stand did bang-up business with year 2000 dragon stamps. And the millennial concert sizzled, with a live, hot mix of Chinese pop, Latin samba, jazz, big band, and even flamenco, concluding with heart-stopping acrobatics and fireworks.

But the real showstopper was the procession of giant lanterns as the clock struck midnight. One by one, a hundred golden orbs in glowing, red cocoons floated aloft to the starry heavens - magically transporting the old millenium, and heralding a new one... It was indeed a fresh beginning for all.

## PUYUMA NEW YEAR AND MONKEY FESTIVAL 12/99 - 1/2000

### SIDEBAR

The Puyuma culture's focus was education and training, and as this was a warrior culture, preparation for manhood was primary. At age 13, a boy would enter the "takoban," a military boarding school. The tribal 'pecking order' was according to age, so each level supervised the lower level, demanding blind obedience. The curriculum ran the gamut, from tribal rules, traditions and taboos to hunting and fighting skills, including tests of bravery.

At 18, the young men moved to the palakuwan, a military academy that served as clubhouse, barracks, and bachelor house where they would live until 'ready' for marriage. They expanded their minds with military strategy, psychology, architecture, and religion. They also attended boot camp, developing strength and quick reactions as they fought hunger and exhaustion. Competition was fierce, and superior achievement was expected. It was a lot like the Marines.

Not surprisingly, the structure was off-limits to women. Some think it was for religious reasons, but it was also thought to heighten the 'mystery' between the sexes while eliminating sexual distractions.

The modern-day takoban and palakuwan traditions bear little resemblance to those of their ancestors. Free time is a major obstacle, for public school is demanding for the boys, and the adult men have busy jobs. Training is accomplished in a matter of days, not years.

Some have questioned the value of rituals and festivals now that the palakuwan's role is more symbolic than active. Sun Ta-Chuan, a director on the Executive Yuan's Council for Aboriginal Affairs, aims to prove them wrong. A Puyuma himself, he instigated the revival of the Monkey Festival in 1990, hoping to renew tribal pride.

Ten years later, Sun believes the results are encouraging. Nearly every household participates in the festivities and a sense of community is growing. Fighting and drunkenness among the younger men has subsided, and they have begun to respect the elders - and each other. Some seniors (who speak only Japanese and Puyuma) even use the festivities as a forum to communicate with their Mandarin and Taiwanese-speaking young.

It is the first step in the reinvention of the Puyuma's ethnic identity. Now, like native people the world over, they hope to update their heritage, giving it validity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.