

TAIWAN'S INT'L AUSTRONESIAN FESTIVAL BY MARTINE WHITE

TAIWAN HOSTS THE FIRST 'INTERNATIONAL AUSTRONESIAN FESTIVAL.'
(650 words) (2,020 words total)

It was a sweltering summer day in Taipei when my pal, Shelly Anderson, called to invite me to the International Austronesian Festival in Taitung. The brochure promised week-long festivities - dancing, music, lectures, cultural exhibits, arts and crafts. All nine Taiwanese tribes would perform, as well as troupes from Hawaii, Fiji, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Guam, and Palauan. Wow!

Historically, the arts have always transcended ethnic barriers. This international medium speaks equally to everyone, and here was a chance to tap into aboriginal cultural energy - potentially inspiring others and stimulating an artistic renaissance.

It was an extraordinary opportunity to view all of these tribes side by side, to observe and compare everything from faces, dances, art, dress, tools, language...

And just who are these Austronesians? They are the seafaring people of the South Seas. Their name comes from the Greek, "Austro" meaning south (ie: Australia, the southern land) and "-nesia" meaning archipelago (ie: Polynesia, many islands).

Surprisingly, the far-flung Austronesian tribes may have originated in Taiwan. A recent theory holds that, five thousand years ago, the native Taiwanese began migrating to SE Asia, and to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They went as far as Easter Island in western South America, Madagascar in eastern Africa, and south to the tip of New Zealand.

The most obvious link between these diverse cultures is language – which proves that they originated from the same Austronesian roots. Some 900 languages, spoken by 280 million people, share similar words attesting to a seafaring lifestyle in the tropics. These include fishing terms, such as: boat, sails, oars, sharks, lobsters, turtles; and agricultural language: sugar cane, coconuts, bananas and bamboo.

Bananas, taro root and yams are popular staples throughout the Pacific, and are thought to have originated in SE Asia. There are other "daily life" similarities too, such as the building of raised, "pavilion-style" shelters, or meeting rooms on posts. This keeps inhabitants dry and prevents access by wild animals.

Culturally, there is the ritual pulling of upper teeth, practiced here in Taiwan, Mainland China and in SE Asia. Wood carved figures also share attributes, from squatting forms and "frog-shapes," to protruding tongues and "t'ao t'ieh," the eye motif. Are these related characteristics, or do they result from parallel development? These are questions to be addressed by the distinguished Austronesian forum.

So why was Taitung selected to hold this international event? Taitung has the highest aboriginal population of Taiwan, and numerous tribes reside here, such as the Ami and the Pyuma or Beinan. Artifacts dating back 10,000 years have been discovered along Taitung's Peinan River, proof that indigenous people lived here long before the Chinese arrived.

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When I arrived in Taitung, the sleepy town was buzzing with excitement. Colorful banners billowed at each intersection, and downtown was crowded with families headed to the street fair.

The cultural exhibition at the County Cultural Center was a great place to begin. Beautifully crafted exhibits explained Austronesian origins simply and artfully, using bamboo, woven grasses and wood. Each included historical information, photographs, tools, crafts, and even mannequins in traditional costumes and natural settings.

The inaugural festivities began June 27th, hosted by President Lee Teng Hwei. It also opened a week-long series of lectures by noted speakers such as Professor Peter Bellwood of Australia's National University. He addressed "5000 years of Austronesian History, from Taiwan to Easter Island." Other lecturers examined diet, migratory patterns and the challenges of integration, faced by indigenous people worldwide.

The big event was Saturday night's "Hit Songs and Hot Dances: the Austro Carnival". County Governor Mr. Chen Chien Nien welcomed the crowd and the performances began. And what a show!

While the Taiwanese were the most serious, the dances always felt very authentic, and the costumes displayed great complexity and variety. New Zealand's fierce Maori warriors were impressive, with their painted faces and tattoos.

Naturally, Hawaii's warm, gorgeous, sexy hula was a big hit. But the real showstopper was the Solomon Island's primitive, exuberant performance that had the whole auditorium cheering.

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AN EXTRAORDINARY NIGHT OF DANCE (780 words)

The Malaysian troupe opened with a fierce headhunter war dance led by a tanned, lithe muscular dancer. He was bare-chested, clad in a short loin cloth, ankle wrappings, and a headband with a feather, American Indian style. He stomped and shrieked as he and his female retinue circled a rattan cage holding a fake head – yes, this used to hold a real head.

New Zealand's Maori warriors followed, shouting the "Kiora" welcoming cry. These were sturdy men with black- striped faces, tattooed shoulders, and knee-length straw skirts. They leaped forward, yelling ferociously and stuck out their tongues. The crowd roared.

The Maori ladies were next, dressed in similar skirts and beaded tops of red, black and white geometric designs, rather like the Yami patterns. They swayed their hips and swung traditional "poi" balls, singing a soft melody.

Taitung's Amis opened with a slow war dance of their own. The multicolored costumes reminded me of Guatemalan dress, with a gold brocade trim, and their heads were adorned with white-feathered crowns. Their second number was a "step and kick" chain dance, simple and moving.

The enchanting Fiji troupe was composed of gentle women and tall, muscular, bare-chested men, wearing floor-length grass skirts and green armbands. The women swayed their hips and waved, Polynesian style, as the men thrust their spears and stomped.

Lanyu's (Orchid Island) lovely Yami ladies appeared in white skirts with striking black and white striped tops and bright sashes. They made a circle for the unusual "Long Hair Dance", sweeping their long hair forwards and backwards as they chanted and pounded their feet - symbolizing the eternal movement of the waves and the tides – to and fro along the shore.

The sweet, young ladies of Palauan (near Madagascar) seemed to be a cross between Tahiti and India, with big round eyes, straight black hair and high cheekbones. They swayed gracefully to soft, slow melodies, clad in 90's blue, green and pink grass skirts, and each with a flower tucked behind her ear.

Guam's troupe was boisterous and touristy. The women wore bright red and white flowered skirts, white tops and shell necklaces. The men, clad in white tops and pants, had odd bulges over their thighs, as though balls were stuffed in their pockets. Their dancing was Polynesian, but their faces and music revealed a surprising Spanish influence. The guitarist was accompanied, flamenco-style, by castanets - unexpected and fun!

Taiwan's Paiwan tribe opened with a sublime operatic refrain by a handsome brother and sister duo. Then, chanting softly, the whole troupe performed a graceful, traditional line dance.

The dancers and costumes were stunning: willowy lasses in long, crimson sheaths, and young men in silky, royal blue and white striped ensembles, with red sashes. This was a highly stylized performance, commercially potent, yet not in the least bit disappointing.

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“Aloha.” The audience applauded loudly as the flirtatious Hawaiians’ emerged. This was their second and much awaited visit to Taitung. And though the hula has been danced countless times, these talented performers exuded a genuine warmth and delight that quickly infected the entire hall.

The guys were tanned, tall and lanky, sporting big biceps and lazy smiles. Their girlish partners were tall and slender too, each with a red flower behind one ear, and scantily clad in a long grass skirt, exposing flat waists and sensuous hips.

And what an exhilarating close! As the beat of the drums grew more and more frenzied, and hips whipped faster and faster, the crowd roared with astonished pleasure, hands clapping loudly, inhibitions forgotten...

Amazingly enough, the best was yet to come. A dozen Solomon Islanders leapt onto the stage, shouting “Roara Hyushiyami” and surely winning the award for most primitive (and smallest) costume. Their gleaming black bodies were like canvases, covered with white paint in geometric patterns, and each wearing only a tiny g-string.

These were handsome, fun-loving performers, beaming like happy children, eyes sparkling, their music gay and infectious. What joie de vivre! The crowd cheered wildly.

They began with a very traditional number. The men paired up, face to face, and grasped each other by the leg. As the pairs revolved, each man would chant and slap his partner’s thigh – like a “skin” drum.

But it was the intoxicating jungle rhythms that brought the house down. These were exuberant tunes sung as the dancers circled the drummers, leaping and gyrating. Meanwhile, Mr. Charm, the song-leader with a Louis Armstrong smile, egged the audience on... an aboriginal cheerleader in a g-string...

It was all so wonderfully surreal - and the crowd’s enthusiasm was deafening!

After the last encore, we slumped in our seats, exhausted, palms and throats sore, giddy from all the excitement. What a night!

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CLOSING NIGHT - AN INTERNATIONAL, ABORIGINAL STREET PARTY (350 words)

Saturday night's performance was undoubtedly a hard act to follow. So the Sunday night closing celebration stayed simple - just a massive dance party. As fireworks exploded atop the Teacher's Hostel, the music began all over again. This time, the performers, dressed in casual sweats or flowered Polynesian prints, opted for 90's style entertainment.

They opened with group sing-alongs, pairing Fiji with the Solomon Islanders and Malaysia with New Zealand – wonderfully off-kilter... Then segued to a massive chain dance, with the audience (both young and old) latching on eagerly. Even the unpretentious Governor and his wife joined the snake-like queue... until there were more dancers than spectators.

An international, “twenty-something” hip hop and reggae shindig followed. It seemed strange, at first, that young people from Africa to Fiji would enjoy “boogie-ing” to the same 90's beat. Yet in today's “instant access” and “high tech” world, it's natural that musical interests span the globe, transcending language, culture and nationality.

It was thoroughly un-Asian, too, to see this uninhibited crowd of all ages, beaming at friends and strangers alike, and dancing up a storm. Perhaps it's that friendly aboriginal outlook on life...

Then, as the night's events began to wind down, I had my own “close encounter” of an international kind. A slender, balding, 85 year-old Puyuma had been standing next to me, watching my enthusiastic bopping with a mix of envy and admiration... Shelly chuckled and elbowed me in the ribs, “Come on. He's dying to dance with you...”

And right she was! When I waved him onto the dance floor, he leapt forward like an excited teenager - hopping madly and arms swinging as KC and the Sunshine Band regaled us with ‘bump and grind’ disco. It was truly exhilarating!

And ten minutes later, he neared exhaustion, the sweat dripping from his brow. As we clasped hands and nodded goodbye, I knew this was a moment we would both long remember... That crazy summer night in '99 when a forty-something “waiguo nuren” (foreigner) and an eighty-something, aboriginal granddad ‘boogied on down’ at the extraordinary Austronesian Festival in Taitung...

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FUTURE AUSTRONESIAN EVENTS (300 words)

Governor Chen has high hopes for future events, "We hope the Festival of Austronesian Culture in Taitung 1999 can serve as a starting point to open up a long-term exchange among Austronesian tribes, enabling traditional cultures to shine and linger..." Chung Wen Pan, Director of Taitung County Cultural Center, agrees, hoping that this will also launch Taiwanese aboriginal cultures into the international arena.

Additionally, the multiple native tribes in Taiwan provide a treasure house of anthropological and sociological history, says Chen. Modern society has impacted and integrated many facets of our native people and cultures. Many traditional skills, rituals and customs have died out as a result. With gatherings such as this, we hope to preserve and maintain our traditions and values for future generations.

Of course, the national government has been instrumental in instigating the aboriginal cultural 'renaissance.' "Since 1981, the Executive Yuan's Council for Cultural Affairs has been the bridge between government, cultural and arts circles," explains Chairwoman Helan. As part of the 'Twelve Construction Projects', the Council's role is to guide counties and municipalities in sponsoring small-scale international cultural and arts activities.

Each county or municipality will hold a top-notch cultural activity every two to three years, using local resources and inviting domestic and international arts groups. These festivals will include performances, exhibitions, forums and lectures. They will also guarantee ongoing sites for local performers to display and share their talents, and to learn from their peers around the globe.

Over the past five decades, our agrarian past has given way to a technologically advanced industrial society. As part of the Global Village, international cultural exchanges promote our image and status, while enhancing our spiritual culture.

This can only enhance the tourism industry, while inspiring artists throughout Taiwan and both educating and entertaining the Taiwanese public."

MARTINE THERESE WHITE

Martine spent twenty years working in the American film and television industry in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.. By 1998, she was ready to embrace a lifelong dream – to explore Asia. She backpacked for eight months throughout the region, finally settling down in friendly Taiwan to study Asian history and learn Mandarin. It was at the International Austronesian Festival that she fell in love with aboriginal culture and began to write about it, as a free-lance writer/photographer, for publications such as The China Post and the Taiwan International Free Press.

(THIS WILL BE PUBLISHED IN APRIL 2000 IN A BOOK ABOUT THE AUSTRONESIAN FESTIVAL – MY STORIES ARE THE ONLY "ENGLISH" ARTICLES THAT WERE WRITTEN ABOUT IT...)