Laurie Reid’s Importance to the Tasaday Controversy

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The following is excerpted from the book, *INVENTED EDEN: The Elusive, Disputed History of the Tasaday* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2003). The Tasaday were a band of 26 forest dwellers “discovered” living in the rain forest of Southern Mindanao in 1971. Brought to the world’s attention by a Marcos government minister, Manuel Elizalde, a playboy and scion of one of the Philippines’ richest families, the Tasaday were soon heralded in the press worldwide as a “Stone Age” tribe that lived in caves with no knowledge of the outside world, no cloth, no metal. They had lived in total isolation for a thousand years or more. Most remarkably in light of the conflict raging in Vietnam at the time, the Tasaday were said to have no word for war or enemy. Visited by such celebrities as Charles Lindbergh and Italian actress Gina Lollabrigida, the Tasaday were embraced by the world media, but the studies conducted by various social scientists were inconclusive and ambiguous. In the mid-seventies, Marcos and Elizalde closed off the Tasaday’s 45,000 acre Reserve to further visitors and the group faded from public view. Then in 1986, a Swiss reporter acting on a tip hiked into the forest on the heels of the Marcos government’s ouster and was allegedly told by the Tasaday through a translator that they were really farmers whom Elizalde had coerced into dressing in leaves and living in caves. This revelation ignited a world-wide furor among journalists and academics alike. Far from the ethnographic find of the century, the Tasaday were now ridiculed as another Piltdown hoax. But was it that simple? Enter Lawrence Reid at the 1988 International Congress on Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Zagreb. Over the next ten years, Reid became the only scholar willing and able to take on the controversy in a way that combined open-mindedness, fieldwork with the Tasaday, and his unparalleled knowledge of Austronesian languages to get to the bottom of the Tasaday mystery.

The Zagreb conference was not entirely devoted to the Tasaday issue as the U.P. conference had been. The Tasaday controversy was a small part of the conference, where 2000 anthropologists, linguists, and others were in attendance, among them Lawrence Reid and Thomas Headland. Headland is both missionary and anthropologist, a fact that doesn’t sit well with some anthropologists, many of whom are ambivalent at best towards missionaries. His home institution, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, was founded in 1934 by American missionary-linguist, William Cameron Townsend, based on the “realist humanitarian philosophy” that Christianity, introduced through native languages is the best way to help “the needy and oppressed”
tribal peoples of the world (Bodley 1990:186). SIL’s translation of the New Testament into various tribal languages has also produced numerous lexicons in the most obscure tongues, an invaluable resource for future researchers, especially as speakers of the smaller languages die out.

Headland’s main role at the ICAES in Zagreb was as the chair of a symposium he’d put together, titled “Deculturation and Survival Among Southeast Asian Negritos — What Can Be Done.” But he was also presenting three papers at the conference, including one on the Tasaday, “What Did the Tasaday Eat?”

He roomed with his long-time friend, Lawrence Reid, a former member of SIL, and Professor of Linguistics at the University of Hawai’i. Headland considered Reid “the leading expert on Philippine Austronesian linguistics,” and the two were working together on several papers.

Reid, for his part, found himself seated next to ABC reporter Judith Moses (who had produced a documentary titled “The Tribe That Never Was” for ABC’s 20/20) at a dinner the night before the Tasaday session hosted by Mario Zamora. The Tasaday came up in conversation and Moses whispered into his ear, “It’s really terrible the way these people have been exploited. It’s all a hoax, you know.” She proceeded to tell her side of the story in whispered tones. This piqued Reid’s interest and he decided to attend the Tasaday session.

The session began at 8:30 the next morning. The BBC was filming and their presence didn’t help. The participants played to the camera with less ease and certainly less goodwill than the Tasaday. In the BBC production we see hoax proponent and UC-Berkeley anthropologist Gerald Berreman telling the room of anthropologists that the people who went down to see the Tasaday tended to go down there with an “idée fixe as to what they were going to see, and they tended to see it.”

“Berreman had gone on for oh, about an hour,” Headland says, “on and on trying to read this whole long thing.” People tried to interrupt him, Nance in particular, but Berreman forged ahead, simply holding up his hand like someone was going to hit him.

Finally, Headland stood and said, “I beg your pardon. Sir, I just have one question Jerry. Are the rest of the people going to be allowed to speak today? Is this a filibuster? Are the people on the other side even going to be allowed to say anything today? I’ve come several thousand miles to hear this. This is an important symposium to me and I would like to hear the other speakers.”

Berreman stopped not long after that and Judith Moses got up to speak. “I’m going to tell you what I really want to tell you, and it’s going to be no holds barred, but you have to understand that I don’t have to go back to the Philippines and live, and that’s the difference between me and my colleagues.”

“John,” she said, addressing Nance, who was taking notes on the proceedings for a book of his own. “If you did know about the hoax, then shame on you. And if you didn’t know, double shame on you. Because nobody had access like you had. Nobody could have had their questions answered.”

Passing around a photo of a corpse on a slab with its head sewn back on, Moses claimed that he had been killed by an associate of Elizalde. But waving around the gruesome photo proved nothing about the Tasaday. Violence was part of the everyday landscape of Southern Mindanao.

Lawrence Reid was intrigued by all the politics in the room in Zagreb:

It seemed to me that there was one line of evidence that had not been explored. If a hoax was involved, surely it would be apparent in the linguistic data that was gathered by the linguists and anthropologists during the initial contacts that had been made with them in the early 70’s. T’boli is not a
Manobo language, in fact it is as different from Manobo languages as perhaps English is from Russian .... It would be interesting, I thought, to critically examine the responses that were recorded to questions posed by the first investigators, for signs of linguistic hanky-panky, or at least for evidence that there was an educated T’boli masquerading as a primitive stone age-cave dweller (Reid 1993:2).

Reid also wondered why, if the Tasaday were a hoax, Elizalde would have recruited a deaf mute couple and a sickly albino child for the original group. It couldn’t have been easy to send them running to the caves in advance of Elizalde’s chopper.

After Moses had finished her admonishments, someone suggested that they gather again that afternoon so that the other side could respond. Headland was tapped to lead the afternoon session since both sides seemed willing to listen to him. Headland was reluctant at first, but finally agreed. A consummate organizer, he gave everyone a set amount of time for their remarks. Everything ran smoothly after that. No one interrupted and no one shouted. And most importantly, TV cameras were banned.

It’s fitting, perhaps, that the BBC filming in Zagreb had turned the proceedings into a circus. Never before have images been so crucial to a supposedly scientific inquiry.

In February of 1990, in the pages of Anthropology Today, Judith Moses ridiculed BBC producer Bettina Lerner’s methods for coming to a conclusion different from her own. Moses writes:

[She] is the only reporter who traveled to the Philippines and never bothered to go to Mindanao .... Of what use is an armchair report? I find such an attitude somewhat arrogant at the very least. (Moses 1990:22)

Lerner responded with her own broadside in the June issue:

Although she sees me as an armchair journalist, I deliberately chose not to go down to Mindanao to interview the Tasaday ... journalists, as opposed to anthropologists, will never find out the truth about the Tasaday from the Tasaday themselves. The Tasaday have changed their story for every journalist who has been down to see them....If there is any ‘arrogance’ in this issue it is shown by journalists like Ms. Moses, who pop down to Mindanao for a couple of days and triumphantly return with the definitive ‘truth....’ Rather than attacking me, it might be more pertinent to question the many ‘armchair’ anthropologists involved in this story (Lerner 1990:21).

Years later, Laurie Reid invited me to his condo to listen to the original surreptitiously-recorded tapes made in 1972 by Elizalde. The tapes had been lost for over twenty years, further fueling the skepticism of the hoax proponents, who doubted the tapes’ very existence. We listened to them over a couple of Steinlager beers (as a New Zealander, he’s loyal to the home product and will keep no other brand in his refrigerator). He also had agreed to show me a stone tool one of the Tasaday, Belayem, gave him — if he could find it. It might be packed away, he said, in preparation for forthcoming scholarly appointments and conferences in France and Japan that would keep him out of the country for the next sixteen months. The tool turned up after a quick search and he brought it over for me to inspect.

My initial feelings about the Tasaday stone tool were merely acquisitive. I simply wished I had one. Only later, after I returned home, did it occur to me that I should have taken a picture of it. Laurie was amenable to the idea of having the tool photographed, but it would have to wait for at least sixteen months and his return to Hawai’i. Typical of Elizalde, he had sent all three of the Tasaday tools that were found and examined by
National Museum staff in those first days (the scraper National Museum anthropologist Jesus Peralta found, a hafted stone hammer, and another hafted tool) to Imelda Marcos as a “political gesture” (Peralta 1992:158). The tools had not been seen since. The Tasaday hastily crafted other tools for their frequent visitors, of which some had been displayed at PANAMIN’s museum. Judith Moses had sent photographs of the existing stone tools to Robert Carriero, Curator of South American Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, who had pronounced them fake. The supporters of authenticity saw such tools as “demonstration tools.” The other tools, the ones the Tasaday said were used by their ancestors, and which were of better quality, were referred to as “heirloom tools.”

Here in Laurie Reid’s apartment were two of the very things whose loss the hoax supporters had bemoaned, even ridiculed—the tapes and a stone tool, apparently one that had actually been used before Elizalde’s arrival. Laurie fetched a small boom box and popped in a copy of one of the Tasaday cave tapes—the rise and fall chirping of thousands of insects blanketed the small living room. He expressed his doubts that such a recording could have been concocted. This felt as close as I could get to time travel, if not to the Stone Age, at least to 1972. Shouts and exclamations, long pauses, and then bursts of language, and over it all, incessantly, the sound of bugs.

Like the stone tools the tapes were lost, or rather, misplaced, and Elizalde’s laissez-faire attitude only deepened suspicions against him. As of 1992, and Berreman’s article in Thomas Headland’s AAA volume on the controversy, the tapes had not been located. “The loss of the tapes,” Berreman crowed, “especially combined with the loss of irreplaceable evidence for other exciting discoveries in various of Elizalde’s enterprises, suggests a pattern amounting to a rain forest ‘Watergate.’”

Elizalde handed over three of the cave tapes to Laurie in 1993, a mere twenty years after anthropologist Frank Lynch asked for them. Reid’s expertise in Austronesian languages qualified him to analyze the tapes in a way that few others could, and Elizalde recognized this. By this time, Reid says, Elizalde was probably convinced that Laurie wouldn’t add to the hoax stories by manipulating the data on the tapes. Perhaps Elizalde had indeed misplaced the tapes all those years as he claimed, or maybe he had simply not wanted to bother with the people asking for them, some of whom doubted the tape’s existence. Regardless, Reid had succeeded where others hadn’t, and he had since transcribed and translated the tapes. He read me several passages:

> The words of Big Uncle Master of the Tasaday [Elizalde], the words of Brother Short-One [Mai Tuan]. Your rattan. Don’t give them away. Your rattan. Don’t deplete it. Your yams, don’t deplete them. Your palm starch, don’t deplete it. Don’t distribute your palm starch to other people.

> “This is Belayem,” Reid told me. “He’s reporting on things that cannot be shared with other people. And he says, Everything is for Big Uncle Master of the Tasaday, the palm starch, the tadpoles, the frogs, the crabs, the monkeys…”

> “Not the gold,” Laurie added and we laughed. “This is their [the hoax proponents’] interpretation.”

All of the fish, all of the little fish of the Tasaday. The little things that are eaten here...yams...especially the palm starch. There is none that can be given away.

> “You read this stuff through and this was spontaneous,” said Reid. “It wasn’t set up.”
Elizalde constantly admonished the Tasaday to protect their forest, not to give any of it away. This seems to be the most eloquent argument against the hoax, and it is buttressed by the fact that so long as Elizalde was alive, the Reserve stayed more or less intact and protected. If Elizalde had had designs on it, he could have exploited its resources quite easily during the decade or so that the Tasaday vanished from the public consciousness.1 It was always outsiders, loggers, miners, and settlers, who wanted the Reserve opened up. “Had Elizalde or Marcos not declared it a Reserve ...” I said.

“Oh, it would have gone,” Reid declared. “...I think that Elizalde’s heart was in the right place, but sometimes he made moves which were not in the best interests of the people he was trying to protect. He was trying to establish areas which were tribal areas where people would be able to maintain their traditional ways of life. He really was convinced that it would be good for people to maintain the original ways they had and not to be engulfed with the lowland cultures which were moving in. And this was part of the reason why he told them to continue to wear your old clothes. This comes out, of course, on the tapes where Elizalde supposedly tells them, ‘Don’t let people come in there and take your things.’”

At the D.C. conference, Reid presented his initial findings, based largely on the word lists made by Fox, Peralta, Llamzon, Molony, and Elkins, as well as a tape that Carol Molony had made at the caves in 1972 (but before the reappearance of the tapes mentioned by Nance). A year later, in 1990, he was in the Philippines conducting five months research with several of the Negrito groups of Northern Luzon. Responding to pleas for assistance from the tribes, Reid called then-Under-Secretary for Agriculture in charge of special projects, Carlos Fernandez, to see if any aid could be made available. In discussing Reid’s request, Fernandez surprised him by asking if he’d like to see the Tasaday.

Fernandez had just returned from the Tasaday area — some of the Tasaday had ventured into T’boli to complain of incursions by loggers into the Tasaday Reserve, and he had gone to investigate. Fernandez told him that if he wanted to conduct some research, this would be an excellent opportunity for him to do so in the relative comfort of T’boli township, as opposed to the arduous hike into the Tasaday area. “He said all expenses would be taken care of. A hasty meeting was arranged with Elizalde, whom I had never met before.” (Reid 1993:4)

When he met Elizalde, he said he would be “completely objective” about his findings and warned Elizalde not to expect that he would come up and say the Tasaday were not a hoax if he found them to be so. Elizalde told him he had no trouble with that. Reid found Elizalde to be friendly and non-confrontational. In fact, Elizalde welcomed his research.

Reid had applied for outside funding from the National Geographic Society to support a three-year research project on the Tasaday, and he asked if Elizalde would be interested in funding the project if the National Geographic turned down the proposal.

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1 The Gentle Tasaday was published in 1975. Between 1976 and 1986, virtually nothing was heard about the Tasaday or their Reserve. But if Elizalde and Marcos had wanted the Reserve’s resources, as they’ve been accused, neither would have had to resort to creating a fake tribe to protect. There were much easier ways during the Marcos regime to grab land. Elizalde, who was rich, powerful and influential with the Marcoses, could have found a way to get what he wanted. The Marcoses bought a number of businesses via offers that couldn’t be refused.
Elizalde said he would. Reid talked to a couple of the committee members from the National Geographic, and they were enthusiastic about the project, but then he received a letter of rejection. “Apparently, they decided not to continue getting involved in this on-going controversy, just to disassociate themselves from it,” says Reid.

Reid doubts he could have done any research without Elizalde’s backing, so he went in telling Elizalde that he would brook no interference. Elizalde, in turn, asked Reid to sign a form saying he wouldn’t disclose in print where his funding came from. “He just didn’t want to be involved with anything to do with the Tasaday at that point. He wanted to be disassociated with the Tasaday, from the Tasaday problems.”

After an initial ten-day foray, Reid did three more periods of extensive fieldwork with the Tasaday: two months between February and July 1994, a second trip during the summer of 1995, and a third trip during the summer of 1996.

The first trip was “hellish.” He didn’t realize how difficult it was going to be. It took him two days of hiking twelve hours a day, starting at Lake Sebu. The trails were muddy and overgrown, and the hiking was over steep hillsides. He only wore tennis shoes and they became so slippery, he couldn’t keep them on his feet, and he wound up walking barefoot even though his feet weren’t accustomed to such hiking. The hike became even more hellish when he stuck his foot against a rotten log and splinters lodged in his nail. By the beginning of the second day he was getting stiff. By nightfall, they were still hiking across the final ridge, in the darkness, down a rock-studded river — a gorge leading into the Tasaday area. Laurie had to be supported by two of his guides as he staggered along. He wasn’t able to walk for four days afterwards.

When he arrived, he stayed in the house of Dul and her husband Udelen — this was on a ridge in the little settlement the Tasaday call Magtu Inilingan, literally “New Learning.” Here, to Reid’s surprise, he found another Westerner living among the Tasaday, a Belgian in his late twenties or early thirties named Pascal Lays, a member of the London-based organization Survival International. Lays, for his part, was not happy to see another foreigner and acted coolly towards Reid, though he agreed to help him with his initial research. Lays had been living with the Tasaday for a couple of years and was fluent in the language, so for a time he acted as an interpreter for Laurie. Lays told Reid that the lingua franca the Tasaday used these days among themselves and to outsiders was Blit Manobo. The Tasaday had been finding wives in Blit since 1972 when Belayem married Sindih. Lays, trained as a pharmacologist, was gathering an extensive number of plants from the rainforest, and Reid describes him as a “self-educated academic” who hoped to use his research to earn a Ph.D..

One day, Reid discovered that Lays was excavating large shards of pottery from one of the hillsides. The presence of pottery implies that people had been in the area for quite a long time, but the fragments could be from people who passed through centuries ago. Lays, who jealously guarded his notes and materials, kept the discovery to himself at first and by the time Reid found out about the fragments, Lays had collected the best examples for himself.

“He’s of course completely convinced about the authenticity [of the Tasaday],” Reid says of Lays. “He thinks they came from the Kulaman Valley area [and] he is strongly pro-Tasaday as a group ...”

Reid agrees. “The last time I was there ... one of the things I did was to spend some time in Blit with Belayem and his family, and then I went up to Cotabato City, took a

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2 The pottery was discovered by one of the Tasaday while farming a field. Dul was convinced the shards were magical and didn’t want them taken away.
boat along the Southern coast to a place called Lebak. I went up into the Kulaman area...

Reid asked his Kulaman Valley informant specifically about some of the forms unique to the Tasaday that are not known at all by the Blit, common words like *kumundom* “to eat,” and *dumontot* “to drink.”

Reid would ask, “Do you know what the word *dumontot* means?”

“Oh yeah, *dumontot,*” the man replied. “I think that means ‘drink.’”

“Do you use this term?” Reid asked.

“I don’t know where I heard that word,” the man said. “I don’t know....There’s a dialect that uses *dumondot* for drink.”

But he knew the word. The same was true for the form “to eat.” The man recognized the word and others like it that only the Tasaday used, not the Blit from whom they had supposedly been recruited, according to the hoax busters. But they weren’t his normal words. There was a lot, however, that he didn’t recognize or didn’t know.

Eventually, Reid asked about numerals. The Tasaday, when they were first “discovered,” had several different ways of counting. Lobo used to count by giving each number the name of a bird. When Reid first went to the Tasaday area and Lobo showed up, Laurie asked him about these bird names. Yes, Lobo told him, he could still count that way. Reid asked him to demonstrate and Lobo recited the ten bird names in the correct order. The other Tasaday said, “Oh, that’s Lobo’s way of counting. It’s his unique system.” There was another method that looked like “funny numerals,” with some similarity to numbers, but like “play numbers.” The Blit didn’t use any of these. Reid’s informant from the Kulaman Valley when asked if he knew of any special ways to count, apart from the normal one, two, three, said no at first. Reid told him the Tasaday have a special way of counting and gave the man the first two numbers.

“Oh!” the man told him, “When I was young I used to use those words.”

“Do you know the rest of them?” Reid asked.

The man started counting, and he gave Reid the same ten numbers, not exactly the way the Tasaday used them, but so close that it was obviously the same sequence, with one or two numbers reversed.

Before long, Reid concluded that the period of the Tasaday’s separation was not in the order of hundreds of years, but no more than five or six generations, maybe 100–150 years (Reid 1992:189–190). The original estimations of the Tasaday’s “separation” had been wrong, but did this constitute a hoax? Reid writes:

The result of this examination of the data was that I became pretty much convinced that the hoax proponents were themselves the hoax makers. There seemed to be no evidence whatsoever that there had been any linguistic shenanigans going on. In fact, the types of responses given and the differences apparent in the lists of different investigators, seemed to me to be clear evidence of the linguistically unsophisticated nature of the Tasaday.... (Reid 1993:2)
Of course, linguistic evidence, while at times as convincing as archaeological artifacts, is not foolproof, hence the downward revision of the Tasaday’s relative “isolation.” Sometimes the evidence is inconclusive and sometimes even contradictory. Of Carol Molony’s assertion that Tasaday had no Spanish borrowings, Reid found at first several possible borrowings, though at least one he believed to have been picked up by Belayem relatively recently. He also thought he found some T’boli influences (Reid 1997:192). And, perhaps most damning of all, he caught Belayem coining new Tasaday words. Of all this he writes:

The data ... appear to be of two different kinds and lead to two different conclusions. A person who is skeptical of the authenticity of the Tasaday would focus on one set and surely jump to the conclusion that here is the evidence that is needed to settle the case...Such a conclusion would have to disregard the other set...

What then is the explanation for the first set? There is no doubt that much of the data that Belayem gave me were indeed made up for the occasion....

At the root of the apparent obfuscation is the obviously deep-rooted sense of identity that the Tasaday (not only Belayem) have of themselves. In the twenty-three years since their first publicized meeting with outsiders, not a single member of the original Tasaday group has ‘recanted,’ even though the supposed motivation for their formation as a group, the all-powerful influence of Elizalde, has long since faded. The group lives in poverty, and has no reason to continue the charade, if indeed there was one. Time and again, Belayem and other members of the group expressed frustration and anger over the questions that have been raised about their authenticity. (Reid 1997:192)

Actually, several of them had recanted, at various times: Lobo, Bilangan, and most famously Dula. But it’s also true that the ones who had said they weren’t Tasaday later claimed they had been coerced and bribed into saying so by Joey Lozano and George Tanedo.

But Reid was essentially correct. The Tasaday had not benefited at all from the “charade” if there was one. Why would they continue if they had nothing to gain?

Seated at his kitchen counter, Laurie started to translate a transcript from his interviews with Belayem. I have always been a sucker for origin stories — they carry a kind of cultural force more imaginatively potent than any other kind. And this was a good one — I was quickly mesmerized as Laurie did his spot translation:

This has always been the origin of the caves. I have already told this story to Momo’ Dakel in the tape recorder before. Exactly the same. There were no other people here except Bibang. He came from there carrying his place...on his back...that place....he was holding under his arm. There was an ax, a stone ax he was holding under his arm...He went walking along the trail...suddenly

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3 Reid now believes there was only one possible borrowing of a Spanish term, the widespread term from Spanish jepe, but that may be a coincidental similarity.
he arrived here, the place of the Tasaday. He said, ‘This is my cave. I will leave it here. I will follow the barking of my dog....

From a far place, this dog could be heard far away. Following the trail of Bibang. Suddenly, he saw Bibang crossing the stream on the other side. He had a huge head, a wide chest. The size of his chest was the length of his arm. So Bibang wanted to pass over this river. The spirit won’t let him pass.

It was a nice tale, but like everything else, it was full of contradictions. In the story, the Tasaday’s ancestor, Bibang, was out hunting with his dog, and the dog was baying after his quarry, a wild pig. The only problem is that the Tasaday supposedly didn’t have dogs before they were “discovered;” they wouldn’t be able to survive in the rain forest. So how could a dog be following Bibang around?

Laurie asked Belayem about this. “I thought you didn’t have any dogs.”

“It wasn’t a dog,” Belayem said. “We call it a dog today; it was a wild cat.” It seemed to Laurie a convenient explanation, but not a very good one since cats don’t bay after wild pigs.

Laurie mentioned this to Elizalde one day, and he said, “Do you really believe that these stories remain unchanged, that they aren’t adapted to modern things that they know, that they introduce to their stories, aspects of modern life, assuming that they were part of old life?”

And of course, that was true. It was something Laurie hadn’t thought of — he had similar tales from the Mountain Province of ancient times, in which the customs and objects from the Spanish times had been incorporated. Still, it was a puzzle.

“Well, this is the way the story goes,” Laurie tells me. “But the point is, he dropped the caves from under his arm, this guy Bibang.”

One of Reid’s colleagues at the University of Hawai’i is Rebecca Cann, a renowned pioneer in DNA research. Cann was working on an NSF project for research on Pacific peoples and their relationship to Asian mainland populations when Reid approached her and asked if she could include some Tasaday samples in the study. “You go get the hair,” she told him. “I’ll get the DNA analysis done.” The reason he wanted to do this was because of the claims that some of the Tasaday are actually genealogically related to people in the Blit area. With Elizalde’s blessing Reid traveled to the Tasaday area in November of ‘96. He spent five days getting forty or so hair samples. People would come to meet him and he would try to persuade them to let him pull out three or four hairs from their head, sealing them in envelopes with data about who he got it from, and the person’s genealogical data. Some, like Lobo, refused.

In his office, Laurie shows me Cann’s preliminary report with the names of the subjects and the initial analysis. “These are the names of the people from whom I got hair,” he says. “A lot of them are Tasadays, a lot of them are Blits.”

He points to his own name. “Lawrence Reid, New Zealander. I put my name—they suggested I do that so they would be able to make sure there was no contamination. ‘Place of birth. Paternal kin group. Approximate date of birth.’ They were able to extract DNA from some of this stuff, but not from all of it. Here’s Lef, the daughter of Mafalu who gave me hair. They got DNA from her. But not apparently from Mafalu himself ...”

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4 Belayem told this story to Reid in the 1990’s. By this time, they’d presumably seen many dogs. Nance had even reported in *The Gentle Tasaday* that Dafal had given them a dog, but it had died. The word that they used for dog was most certainly the word the Monobo Blit use.

5 Pascal Lays, in his hometown newspaper in Belgium, recounts the same story, more or less, that Laurie Reid elicited from Belayem about the origins of the caves.
According to Zeus Salazar’s data, Mafalu, the son of Datu’ Dudim, the chief of Blit, is the half-brother of Dul, another of Datu’ Dudim’s progeny. If this were so, then that makes Dul the aunt of Mafalu’s daughter, Lef.

If Elizalde had set up the Tasaday as a charade with the knowledge that the Tasaday and the Blit were relatives, he would have been crazy to authorize a study that would once-and-for-all uncover this bald hoax. The DNA analysis would be at least as elucidating as examining the midden outside the caves to see if the Tasaday had indeed lived in them. On the other hand, it’s hard not to be uncomfortable with all of this—the Tasaday have suffered so much already, maybe it’s best to simply leave them alone and let everyone think whatever they so choose.

In 2000, Laurie Reid put portions of the long-lost 1972 cave tapes on the Internet, allowing others to analyze the linguistic evidence. Tom Headland asked several linguists, all speakers of Cotabato Manobo, independently of one another, to do just that. None of the four scholars (Clay Johnston, Ross Errington, Douglas Fraiser, and Meg Fraiser) collaborated with one another. All four agreed that what they heard was a close dialect of Cotabato Manobo. Errington felt that “our Cotabato Manobo neighbors would... understand most of the oral text, although they would probably say that it has variations and is not ‘pure’ or ‘good’ Manobo.” Douglas Fraiser, a “community development specialist” with SIL, seemed to agree that while some word usage and definitions differed slightly from Cotabato dialects he knew, the majority of Tasaday words were either “identical or closely related” to Cotabato Manobo words. He added that in 1990, “some of the Manobo [people] we know visited the Tasaday people and got to talk with them for a short while. Some felt they had a hard time communicating. My impression from the Manobo men’s reactions to meeting the Tasaday, and from what I have seen of the Tasaday language, is that they were having no more trouble understanding Tasaday than I once had understanding certain British dialects.”

When Elkins reviewed the transcripts posted on the Internet, he wrote, “Virtually none of the inflections of the verbs look anything at all like Tboli,” and he, too felt that the language reflected in the transcripts was “virtually identical to Cotabato Manobo.”

“Case closed,” Headland wrote in an e-mail to me after Elkins’ comments.

Not quite, I thought. While this testimony demolished the notion that these were people whose first language was T’boli, but who pretended to be Manobos (one should note Reid’s contention that such speakers, even if fluent in Manobo, would invariably borrow from T’boli, their first language — not to mention the fact that their inflections would be different), there was still the notion of tigtu kagi, or the Tasaday’s true language, to be considered. By 1972, the time of the tape recordings, the Tasaday had been in frequent contact with their Blit neighbors. For instance, the widely reported word for “good” or “beautiful,” mafion, was metelol in tigtu kagi, as I had been told on my second visit and then corroborated with Laurie Reid. Likewise, plant names like dalikan and seyal had matched up with the names unique to the Tasaday recorded by Yen thirty years earlier. This suggests that the Tasaday rapidly learned many words from their neighbors in Blit, much as Carlos Fernandez and David Baradas quickly learned Tasaday words within only a week of contact. As Reid (1992:183) suggested in Headland’s book, the dialect of their neighbors would have had a higher status to the Tasaday than their own, but regardless of why or how long they had been speaking the dialect of their neighbors, one couldn’t assume that the speech of the Tasaday recorded in 1972 was what they would have spoken prior to 1971.

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6 Thomas Headland, e-mail to the author, 23 February, 2001.
I needed to make one more trip — to Hawai‘i. I e-mailed Laurie Reid to ask him if he’d seen results from Rebecca Cann’s DNA research. He hadn’t heard anything in quite a while, so he called and made an appointment for us to meet her. I was experiencing a new feeling about my research; let’s call it dread. I had come pretty certainly to the conclusion by now that the Tasaday were no hoax, as such, and that the real hoax had been perpetrated by some of the very same people who decried the Tasaday as fake. But DNA — that was incontrovertible, wasn’t it? I felt confident the DNA would show that Mafalo and Dul were not related, but what if they were? Why should I care one way or the other? But I did. What could I do about my biases at this point besides admit them?

Laurie and I met with Rebecca Cann in her office. The news was disappointing — not because the DNA proved Salazar correct, but because, as Dr. Cann patiently explained to us, to prove the relationship of two people, one would need a much larger sampling of DNA from the population of Blit. Laurie had collected upwards of fifty samples from the Tasaday and the people of Blit, but the sample wasn’t large enough to be conclusive.

When we returned to Laurie’s office, I told him about my map, the one from the early fifties showing human structures of some kind relatively nearby the Tasaday caves. We spread the map on his desk and he studied it. I expressed some regret that I had even found the map.

“You can’t hold anything back,” Laurie said, looking up at me.

“No, of course not,” I said.

Like Tom Headland, with whom I’d previously shared the discovery, Laurie thought the map indeed had significance. He wondered if it would be possible to match the arrival of Dafal’s father, Mindal, to the approximate date of the maps.

Laurie popped one of the cave tapes from 1972 in his tape deck and turned it on. The small office filled with the echoing sound of the caves and the ever-present cacophony of bugs. For ten minutes at least we listened to that tape, neither of us saying a word.
References


