

INTERVIEW: The revival of indigenous culture and language in Taiwan: An indigenous leader's perspective

Akawyan Pakawyan ((林清美 1938) is a senior leader of the Indigenous Pinuyumayan people ((卑南族) in the Puyuma village (南王部落), of Taiwan.

She has personally experienced the significant societal changes that have shaped Taiwan and impacted heavily its many indigenous groups, including the colonial period of the Japanese (1895-1945), to when the Republic of China (China) took control of Taiwan after 1945. Earlier, Taiwan's indigenous groups had experienced the arrival of the Dutch in the 1600s on the west coast as well as Han settlers.

Akawyan's life work focuses on the revitalisation of her traditional language and culture. She still works for the Taiwanese Ministry of Education as lead curriculum designer for the Pinuyumayan language and teaches the language in her home village. Among many other things, she is Founder and current Director of the Taiwan High Mountain Culture and Dance Troupe.

She spoke with Melbourne Asia Review's managing editor, Cathy Harper.

Could you talk a bit about your people and culture, such as the main rituals and ceremonies and a bit about the way of life?

The Pinuyumayan people consist of 10 villages. Our language differs only slightly from village-to-village, so all 10 villages are able to communicate, more or less. Each year, we have many ceremonies, Each year, we have many ceremonies. The first is *basibas*, the 'monkey killing ceremony' held in mid-December which is a ceremony the boys partake in. Then there is the *mangayaw*, which translates roughly to the 'Great Hunting Ritual', which includes a series of male rituals and activities that happen between the beginning of December to the beginning of January. The New Year's festival is held at the end of December, which is one activity of Mangayaw and is held at the end of December. We also have *puwalresakan*, (Shaman annual ritual), which is on the 3rd day of the 3rd month of the Lunar Calendar. In this ceremony, the Shamans renew their *laiutr*, the Shaman shoulder bag, which carries millet seed

(dawa), a rattle (sinsinan) and a knife. After puwalresakan, they begin using their new laiutr. Shaman—our intermediaries with the spiritual world—maintained an incredibly important position within the village. The work they did was highly regarded. Back then, they were responsible for safeguarding peace in the village, and keeping enemies or evil spirits out.

I have been the headwoman of the Puyuma Village Women's Council for many years now, so I take part in all our village's ceremonies—whether they are for girls or boys, I will participate because I believe one's own traditional skills and arts are incredibly important.



Akawyan Pakawyan (far right) performing at the University of Melbourne, November 23, 2023, with other dancers including Shura Taylor (second from right). Used with the permission of Peter Casamento and the University of Melbourne.

What happened to your people during the colonisation by Japan and what impact has that had on language and culture and land

ownership?

When the Japanese came they wanted us to become like Japanese and they encouraged families to speak Japanese. That was at the time of the Second World War so we didn't get very far with our education, but within the villages there were many among the older generations who spoke Japanese. Within our villages, although we came into contact with different languages and had to learn them, we still spoke our own language from a young age.

The thing that had the biggest impression on me, as a Grade 1 and Grade 2 student was that we had nothing to eat; most likely due to the war. It was tough back then—there were no clothes and I didn't even have shoes to wear. In terms of culture, we used to pierce monkeys as part of the ceremony, but the Japanese didn't stop us from doing this. When the Kuomintang government came, they banned it. So, for our ceremonies, I don't feel that I can say the Japanese banned us from doing anything.

Our people spoke of our mountains and forests and how the Japanese went to our Patatallu Hill and built a military base there and the land where sugar used to be cultivated was turned into an airport. There were lots of other places that they claimed, but because we weren't in the mountains, we were living in the plains, we didn't fight with them. There was nothing that happened to us like with the Bunun people or the Tsou people who both had a struggle with the Japanese.

Another impact the Japanese had on our lives was the way in which we planted and grew food. At the time, everybody had to grow rice, not millet. Lots of water was poured into the drainage ditches in between the fields which were installed and irrigated. So, because we weren't able to grow millet, the Misaur—women's millet production working group—disappeared.

What happened to you and your people when the Kuomintang (KMT) took control?

In our village, the KMT banned our own language. The Mandarin language policy was implemented across the whole country. We are allowed to speak our language within the home, but the banning of dialects meant our own regional languages largely disappeared. Elderly people along with small children would go to learn Mandarin and the older people didn't teach the small kids their own language. Learning Mandarin was a major contributing factor to the disappearance of our language.

In terms of land, it was easy for us to be scammed. The (Chinese) Minnan (Hoklo) were business-minded people. When they saw our land was plentiful and they needed something, they would say: 'You have so much land here. Can you not lend us some of it?' We indigenous people were simple and honest folk and we had no real concept of economics or saving money because the land was abundant and we had enough to eat. They would tell us to sign [documents] and we couldn't understand what we were actually signing, so we lost our land and now we have no land to speak of. There used to be a cemetery dedicated to Pinuyumayan people and then the government took that and built a baseball stadium, and now everyone's grave sites are scattered around. Also, my father was sick for quite some time. Because of the cost of my dad's medical treatment, we had to sell our land, bit by bit, to the point where now we have not one bit of land left (to sell).

I'm very sorry to hear that. I wonder, on a more positive note, what you regard as your main achievements in terms of rebuilding language and culture?

Our children need to go outside the village now to attend school and they rarely come back. Young people don't really place a great deal of importance on their own culture or their own customs and language; so our main purpose has always been to preserve, to continue to pass down the traditions. The culture and traditions are just evaporating and young people don't really get what the real shame of it all is. I feel the need to speak up, because our language is largely lost and our traditional festivals and ceremonies have become all about show and no substance. Because I trained (at the Teacher's College) to be a teacher I know that the passing down of one's own culture relies on teaching and passing from generation to generation, teaching the children. We teachers feel that passing down culture is part of our work to respect our traditional festivals and ceremonies and the passing down of culture is our responsibility.

I feel that if our language were to disappear entirely, then our culture would too; and that would then lead to our ethnic group disappearing. When faced with this situation, I have an inner voice deep within me saying: 'On the day our tribe has vanished—I'm thinking to myself oh my god—where will I be on that day? How am I going to face our ancestors? How am I going to face them when they ask 'how did our culture vanish on your watch?'' This is what I feel deeply within me. It is a kind of dread and a fear that my own ethnicity will cease to exist. That's the reason I established the High Mountain Dancing Troupe and we started teaching our own indigenous language. You could say it's my calling, my life's mission. I didn't know

what else to do, so I thought maybe I'd do this!

In the beginning, the main idea was to teach our folk songs and dances to young people, to teach and train them, and through music and dance to get them to cultivate an awareness of their own culture and to study their own language. The Minnan (Han Chinese) would call us savages and they discriminated against us and other Indigenous people. I am grateful for the 'give us back our land' and 'give us back our language' movement for our folk songs and other things. I was often travelling around and taking part in this movement for our language and other things. Later on, gradually the government established the Indigenous Council and eventually we achieved official status as 'indigenous people'. Then, the capacity of our Basic Law on Indigenous People slowly but surely, led to great importance being attached to the revival of our language. The government made a concerted effort, and probably at great expense, to restore our languages. We initially were nine tribes, and then later became 12, and then 14, until now there are 16 tribes.

When everyone took back their indigenous identity, the government slowly began to place greater importance on us Taiwanese indigenous people and attach importance to Taiwan's multiculturalism. For example, there were one-on-one classes where we would study our language—the subject was called 'The Revival of Endangered Languages'. It was a three-year program and you had to teach all young people in the program their own language within the three years. Some of those who are now legislators and work in government, indigenous representatives to the government, did this course so it was an incredibly important process.

We fought for these things for many, many years. From the beginning when the KMT government came in, we started to fight for these rights. Around 1990 we started to have exams in indigenous languages as well as teaching materials. But there has been backlash, for example, the matter of indigenous students getting 'score increases', which is where indigenous students who have tribal language certificates qualify for extra scores in exams. 'Score increases' weren't about stealing placements and giving them to indigenous students, they were the government's attempt to offer more placements to indigenous students in circumstances where the standard of education they were receiving wasn't as good as what Han students were receiving. It encouraged the indigenous kids to seek higher education and help them realise the importance of school and academia. But when they get into university, they are discriminated against, and this has a huge impact on their mental health. Many people think they only got in due to 'score increases', and that

they are not as good as the others. A lot of indigenous students drop out. They stop studying and they go and find a job or to learn a trade.

It seems that you've lived a life of extraordinary cultural fluidity and I wonder if you could reflect on how you've dealt with that and perhaps give others some advice on navigating what can be challenging differences?

We don't teach children traditional things enough anymore. Before, children still used to think that they should learn and practice traditional things. But more and more they have lost interest in their own traditions. I try to keep their interest by adapting. For example, if indigenous children learning music and dance are interested in the Brazilian samba drum I will include that in my lessons. During the break, I get them to practice their own indigenous folk songs. I combine the cultures. We can use the samba to lead the troupe in front. You use the samba to lead the troupe from the front, and we will stand in behind (the samba player). Then it's up to the villagers to make do and come up with a performance.

Some people say 'Why is Teacher Lin [Akaywan's Chinese name]—such a traditional person—why is she doing this new thing? That thing is foreign. Why would she use (this instrument) to create a percussive sound in this way?' I say to them: 'The times are changing. So, why don't we cater to young people's interests?' We use this method to guide young people and at the same time to give them an opportunity to engage with their own folk songs and popular ballads. I think in this way preserving tradition links with modernity. We need to look at how we can entice young people—that's my thinking. Also, what is traditional? On this point, we need to engage in a little bit of reflection. We cannot forever be in one place.

In terms of language, the main international language is English. So, we ask ourselves how do we use English to express a new thing? We take an English word and we mix it a little bit with our own way of speaking and we make hybrid words. We need to persevere to the greatest extent possible to use our own language and preserve our own language. But we don't have our own script. Also, we use the Romanised pinyin system to do translation work and write down our own language. To leave behind the written word is to preserve our language, which in turn is to preserve our culture, which in turn enables (us) to preserve our traditional festivals and ceremonies, as well as many other activities. So, that's why I am scrambling to get all this translation work done now.

This is all about bringing kids up to speed with the world. We can't leave them behind and be made to feel left out. I believe the world is developing at such a rate so as to make it impossible to avoid it (the modern world) and we can't hold back our young people who wish to go and find out about the world. We have to accept the tides of change while preserving our traditional culture. We old folk are still here and we need to do our best to spread the word for the young folk.

Want more on Taiwan? Click [here!](#)

This interview was developed with the valued input of Shura Taylor, Akawyan's aide, and Darcy Moore, who led the translation work.

Akawyan Pakawyan delivered the 2023 Narrm Oration at the University of Melbourne, Tuesday 23 November, 2023.

Main image: Akawyan Pakawyan (centre) performing at the University of Melbourne, November 23, 2023. Used with the permission of Peter Casamento and the University of Melbourne.