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Empowering Indigeneity in 'Etolan (Dulan), Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This comment explores the cultural heritage and challenges of the Amis, Taiwan's largest recognized Indigenous group. Drawing on Povinelli's 'The Cunning of Recognition,' it argues that state recognition perpetuates power imbalances and commodifies Amis culture. It examines the Amis age-set system, its role in preserving traditional knowledge, and its challenges due to modernization. It highlights the importance of community-led initiatives like 'Etolan Style' in fostering cultural expression, economic empowerment, and the revitalization of Amis heritage in a post-colonial world.

In June 2023, my colleague and I brought five University of Central Lancashire students to the village of 'Etolan (Dulan) on the East Coast for their first visit to Taiwan. They stayed in a homestay at 'Etolan Style', a community-based project known as 'the shop on the hill', guided by Shana Chiang, an Amis daughter-in-law who learned about Amis culture from her husband and Indigenous elders (Chiang 2023). This visit gave us pause for reflection on the nature of Indigenous communities in Taiwan.

The Amis, Taiwan's largest recognized Indigenous group with approximately 213,514 in 2020 (CIP 2023), possess a distinct cultural heritage. However, as argued in Povinelli's *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002), their state recognition may inadvertently perpetuate power imbalances and commodify their culture. Povinelli contends that such 'liberal acknowledgements can freeze Indigenous cultures within state-defined norms, leading to containment rather than empowerment. The Amis language, one of the nine Austronesian languages originating from Taiwan, reflects a deep historical lineage (Alsford 2021). However, the recognition of the Amis language by academia and the state, as Povinelli might argue, is a form of symbolic acknowledgement that does not necessarily address the profound issues of marginalization and cultural preservation they face today.

Classified as 'plain Indigenous,' the Amis live closely with non-Indigenous people without reserved land or a designated 'mountain township government', leading to challenges such as cultural erosion and economic disparities. This situation illustrates Povinelli's critique: liberal recognition does not necessarily translate into meaningful changes in these fundamental issues. The story of the Amis, therefore, is not just one of cultural and linguistic heritage but also of navigating the complexities and often cunning nature of recognition in a world still grappling with the legacies of colonialism and the challenges of modernity.

The Amis age-set system, a distinguishing feature of their social organization, integrates paternal and fraternal relationships (Yeh 2012: 188). Men in Amis society are categorized by age, with a new age set established every five years around males undergoing a coming-of-age rite (Tsai 2020). The age-set organization manages community affairs and plays a crucial role in preserving and passing down traditional knowledge and cultural practices. However, the age-set system faces challenges due to modernization, urbanization, and shifting lifestyles.

Amis festival participation is a form of cultural expression and 'sovereign assertion' (Hatfield 2020), reflecting their identity and autonomy. Community-led initiatives provide economic benefits by enabling Amis artists to monetize their crafts and preserve their artistic heritage while helping farmers market their products, promote sustainable farming, and enhance their

economic status. These activities combine cultural sovereignty and economic empowerment, positioning the Amis as guardians of their cultural legacy and active economic participants within their community.

Such initiatives create meaningful dialogue and exchange opportunities between the Amis community and wider audiences, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. They also provide working opportunities for young Indigenous people who choose to return to their communities after completing their education, often due to limited employment prospects in cities, rising living costs, the need to care for an ageing population, and a desire to revitalize their cultural heritage.

Despite the challenges the Amis face, ongoing efforts, such as 'Etolan Style, manage to revitalize and adapt the age-set system to contemporary circumstances while preserving its cultural significance. These initiatives are of interest to anthropologists as they improve mutual understanding while providing opportunities for young Indigenous people to return to their communities and revitalize their cultural heritage.

'Etolan Style, No. 224,'Etolan(Dulan), Donghe Township, Taitung County, Taiwan.

For a video see: <https://vimeo.com/848465658>. Also, <https://www.facebook.com/atolan.malakapahay/about/> <https://www.atolan-style.com/>

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