

# Taiwanese Indigenous Contemporary Art: Polyphony and Mipaliw

Guest Editor: Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

TAIWANESE INDIGENOUS CONTEMPORARY ART:  
POLYPHONY AND MIPALIW | VOLUME 10, ISSUE 1, 2023

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**INTRODUCTION** Polyphony is a musical term referring to multiple melodies, or voices.

“Eight-part-polyphony” is a unique vocal music sung by the Bunun, one of Taiwan’s indigenous nations. Recognized by the UNESCO as world cultural heritage, the Bununs’ complex harmony celebrates the millet harvest and offers respect to the ancestral spirits. It is sung by several singers facing inwards in a circle, arms interlocked, who separately initiate the different notes with the vowels a, e, i, o and u. The diversity of voices and tones is related to M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony as a metaphor for a literary work with a plurality of narrative voices. In the Bununs’ song as in Bakhtin’s theory, no single voice is subordinated or submerged. Rather, each individual voice remains distinct and necessary.

Nowadays, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has made us more aware than ever before of the importance of mutual collaboration among human beings. Yet Taiwanese indigenous culture has long been based upon cooperation in life. For example, the Amis, the largest Taiwanese indigenous nation, uses the word “mipaliw” to describe women’s mutual collaboration in farm labor, and even to cope with sexual harassment on the farm. That same exchange of labor reflects and nourishes works in Taiwanese indigenous art and culture, so that one regional art festival took the word “mipaliw” for its title. The collaboration of labor, the diversity of voices - these are also seen in the work of Taiwanese indigenous contemporary artists. Polyphony and mipaliw are central to cultural diversity in art and life.

For this edition the authors’ essays address issues such as how do the Taiwanese indigenous artists cope with the sociocultural crisis in contemporary art and life through mutual collaboration? How is the metaphor of polyphony demonstrated by the diversity of voices in art and how art reflects the polyphony.

**Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu**

Guest Editor

# FROM THE “HISTORICAL IDENTITY” TO THE “CONTEMPORARY BODY”, A PROLEGOMENON TO THE CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART HISTORY IN TAIWAN

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## ABSTRACT

This study is based on a thirty-year retrospective of Taiwan contemporary indigenous art to re-examine the problem of historicity. The core issue of discussion pertaining to the Taiwan contemporary indigenous art history encompasses the colonial history of indigenous people on this island and the eventual process of decolonization since 1980s. The concern of Taiwan contemporary indigenous arts is embodied in two aspects: an anticipation to terminate the alienation toward indigenous identity under the colonial experience, and the creative expressions of decolonization. Furthermore, the arguments between the “historical identity issue” and the “subject in contemporary art” can be greatly elaborated to discuss a possible guideline about outlining the history of Taiwan contemporary indigenous art.

## KEYWORDS

Contemporary Indigenous Art History, Taiwan Contemporary Indigenous Art(s), Decolonization (movement) since 1980s, Body, Indigenous Artists

## INTRODUCTION

Following the Taiwan' democratization<sup>1</sup> and the emergence of the indigenous movement in the mid-1980s, the Taiwan indigenous art had undertaken a tremendous development and change. While "tribal art", with an emphasis on the traditional preservations, continues to flourish to an extent of being encouraged and revitalized, the most interesting phenomenon is the introduction of contemporary artists<sup>1</sup> bearing the indigenous identity. These artists gave birth to unconventional works on a wide spectrum of medias, resulting in an unsettling political connotation at the juncture of indigeneity in Taiwanese society. Many articles about the contemporary indigenous art movement have since focused on the historical roots of the movement, the stylistic characteristics of different artists, the numerous "genres" within the movement, and the biographical features of each artist. Furthermore, this article made clear on either "how we should describe this brief art history", or "what the most fundamental work should be while dealing with Taiwan contemporary indigenous art history," i.e., a methodology being applied when writing art history of such pursuit.

## CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART: THE INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT IN 1980s

In order to understand the rise of indigenous contemporary arts in Taiwan, we need to place it in the context of historical processes of decolonization of Taiwan indigenous people that occurred at the end of the 20th century.

As the idea of "decolonization" is referred in Taiwan, especially after 1980s, it's very often that we placed a double meaning to this term. In addition to talking about the cultural revival history of those Austronesian indigenous people on this island<sup>2</sup> which has been the colonized subject since centuries, we also take the considerations of the countermeasures initiated by the China-oriented assimilation policy which KMT(Kuomintang) laid out all over this island. Since 1945, the mainstream consciousness of Taiwan was essentially a driven "cultural unification" movement, with the KMT government's determination to portray itself as the sole representative of the Chinese culture and tradition in both domestic and international propaganda.

During the era of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution<sup>3</sup> launched by People's Republic of China, the Kuomintang took advantage of such opportunity to play the role as the sole protector of Chinese culture, resulting in instigating the Chinese Cultural Revival Movement<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, such cultural policy oppressed the local culture of Taiwan and the culture of the Austronesian indigenous peoples herein.

In this context, the series of democratization reforms (the "Quiet Revolution") in Taiwan that took place in the late 1980s, including the lifting of martial law, overturning the ban of political parties, the abolition of government censorship over the media and the arts, the re-election of Taiwan's long-standing parliament, the direct elections for the presidency, and the constitutional amendments, greatly reinforced the democratic system of government in Taiwan today.

In the mean time, the discourse of "Taiwanese subjectivity" that accompanied the political liberalization became a prerequisite for the emergence of contemporary indigenous art in Taiwan. Taiwan subjectivity, also known as "Taiwan subjective consciousness", has become the mainstream political and cultural discourse after the democratization of Taiwan in the 1990s. "Taiwan subjectivity" is a cultural identity that focused on Taiwan-centered thinking, multiculturalism, Taiwan nationalism, yet excluding Chinese-centrism, Chinese nationalism or Greater Han nationalism, and establishing Taiwan as a real nation.

As part of the benefits of the overall democratization of Taiwan, indigenous cultural activists were free to promote their own cultural and political agendas in direct opposition to the presumed cultural hegemony of the mainstream. In the meantime, the indigenous artists were proceeded to the gradual construction of the cultural subjectivity in the year after 1980s.

## **THE BIRTH OF CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ARTS**

In 1991, the Lion Gallery in Taipei presented an exhibition by the 49-year-old artist Hagu (CHEN Wensheng), the sixty-ninth generation head of the Chien-He (Kasavakan) tribe of the Puyuma (Peinan) group.

This solo exhibition was entitled “The Dignity of the Chief: Hagu’s Wood Sculpture”. Hagu found acceptance in the mainstream when the scholar Du Ruo Zhou(杜若洲) announced to the public that “This is indigenous art; it did not stop at the age of pure totemism. Even what it depicts is contemporary, it has not lost its indigeneity”<sup>5</sup>. The timing of this particular exhibition marked the beginning of an era for the contemporary indigenous arts in not only successfully introducing an unique style of an outstanding artist of his kind, but also making known first time in the history the name of a particular indigenous artist in any related exhibition. Looking back 30 years with a diverse perspective of contemporary history, the indigenous movement in Taiwan back in 1980s has provided a necessary maturity concerning a historical recognition of indigenous subjectivity through the dialogue inside of Taiwan communities during the last decade. As a result, such phenomenon of indigenous cultural revival movements can be considered and discussed in the context of “contemporary art”. However, in view of the Hagu’s exhibition in 1991, there are still many ambiguities in the terms of “indigenous”, “indigenous art”, and “indigenous contemporary art” which deserved to be clarified in the next 30 years.

## **FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES RELATED TO INDIGENOUS ART HISTORY: FROM THE TERMINATION OF ALIENATION TO DISCOURSE OF DECOLONIZATION**

The first question that must be asked is the epistemological basis of the concept of “indigenous contemporary art”. Undoubtedly, it is the term “indigenous” that defines this conceptual field, not the latterly defined “contemporary art”. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Indigenous people is defined as a group of people who have been invaded, occupied, colonized, or all three by a foreign group and have been deprived of their rights in their place of origin. The concept is originally referred to the situation of indigenous peoples in the United States, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific region under the plundering and colonization of Western countries since the 16th century geographic discovery, but in the late 20th century, a deeper social, cultural, and even legal issue gradually emerged, i.e., the colonial status of indigenous peoples did not end after the “decolonization” of most colonies after the mid-20th century as commonly thought.



The colonization under colonial expansionism before World War II is generally referred to as “external colonization,” while the continuing conflict between the indigenous peoples and the newly colonized countries after decolonization is referred to as “internal colonization,” and the indigenous peoples of Taiwan have experienced successive rule by the Japanese and R.O.C. governments and the latter’s decades-long assimilation policy. This is also the historical ground for the outbreak of the indigenous rights movement (or “indigenous movement”) in Taiwan in the 1980s. In attempting to construct a contemporary history of Taiwanese aboriginal art, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the indigenous peoples of Taiwan have experienced both “external colonization” in the pre-modern era and “internal colonization” that has not yet been decolonized in contemporary times, likely till now.

The priority to work on the relationship between indigenous contemporary art and colonial historical facts must first be discussed in the context of the modern art historical perspective within the Western knowledge system, where the problem of subjectivity of indigenous art is out of sight. In this field, it is impossible to avoid the classic controversy between the concepts of “primitive art” and “indigenous art” in the history of art. Quite similar to the way how those colonized subjects seen by Western colonizers, Taiwan indigenous peoples had the attention of Japanese anthropologists at the end of the 19th century, when indigenous arts were considered as an object of alienation in numerous studies such as Jiro Miyagawa’s “Primitive Art in Taiwan” in 1930 and Fumichi Sato’s “Primitive Art in Taiwan” in 1942. In his article “Primitive Art and Modern Art” (originally published in *Cubs Publication*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1975), the Taiwanese anthropologist Chen Chi-Lu still focused on the object of aesthetic activity through anthropological fieldwork, for example, in Chen’s “Catalogue of Woodcarving Specimens of the Paiwan Group in Taiwan” (first edition, 1961), “Material Cultures of the Formosan Aborigines” (1941). *Material Cultures of the Formosan Aborigines* (1968) and “Primitive Art in Taiwan” (*Taiwan Literature*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1962), for example.

The first issue of cultural alienation and the absence of cultural subjectivity was basically the object of the 1980s aboriginal movement and cultural revival in Taiwan through the re-construction of indigenous subjective identity, while the issue of contemporary art of Taiwan's indigenous people has since shifted to the dialectic of contemporaneity and indigeneity. This is a multi-directional and complex process of meaning construction, from the broad sense of indigenous communities to the narrow sense of artistic communities. The discourse produced may be from various perspectives such as power relations, economic distribution, and cultural suppression, but the essence is in the discourse of decolonization struggle, and the contemporary and indigenous characteristics continue to become the primary and secondary outputs of artistic creation.

## **COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUAL BODY**

The concept of "body" is considered to be the core of indigenous contemporary arts in Taiwan, and is an important approach to the study of the issue of "identity/body" in this field. The "collective/individual" consciousness in indigenous contemporary art expression(which I sometimes call as "writing") , those indigenous artistic creation (including visual arts, literature, and theater) based on cultural identity, and the connotation of "writing" in works with explicit cultural consciousness, such as " protest demands," "return to the tribe," and "cultural revitalization", almost all adopt a collective writing consciousness. The subjects of the statements are often collective units themselves such as ethnic groups and tribes, and the objects depicted and written about are almost always related to the collective affairs of ethnic groups and tribes or universal phenomena related to the life in tribes. Or should we say, more specifically, the discourses refer mainly to the "identity", so that "collectivity" becomes the main feature of these writings. Therefore, the understanding and recognition of "collectivity" also become indispensable while reading indigenous subjective writing.

However, the identity written with the title of collective ego may in fact conflict with the internal tendency of decolonization, and the reflection on decolonization and cultural hegemony will inevitably continue.

The awareness and manifestation of issues such as differences in hierarchy of power or gender differences can also become a dialectical relationship between authoritarianism and decolonization. For example, Hagu, the artist from East Taiwan mentioned at the beginning of the article, adopted a “tribal realism” without graphic symbolic syntax, which was very different from the “collective” style of the indigenous art represented by the tribal graphic wood sculptures of the Pan-Paiwan communities in the Tjimur (三地門) region, in the south-west Taiwan, at that time. The most important contemporary Amis’ artist, Lahitz Dalif, who emerged from the Hualien Makotaay tribe in about the same era as Hagu, went further and abandoned the vocabulary of communal patterns and figurative or totemic expressions, and was even criticized for being “too unlike the indigenous”. And practicing other than a figurative collective discourse on tribal cultural symbols such as the Amis’ pot and the feather, Eleng Luluan, a female artist from Rukai tribe, focuses more on conveying the individual experience of life in loneliness and travel.

In this continuous fracturing from the assertion of collective identity to the exploration of individual life’s inner emotions, and even to the individual experience of “diaspora” and escape from the tribe as the content of artistic discourse, indigenous contemporary art finds its own journey of liberate their bodies from structure of collective identity.

## **CONTEMPORANEITY IN A CHANGING CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION**

Although the life experience of contemporary indigenous people has long since moved away from the colonial history, the first root of the “indigenous experience” faced by contemporary indigenous is the “alienation experience” of the continuation of the colonial state; in this experience, indigenous people are forced to build new subjective experiences throughout their lives through fluid relationships with the lands they rove and those new social networks they encounter in the journey. This cultural situation is similar to that of those diaspora people in history, such as the black Africans who were sold into slavery by the colonizers since the era of geographic discovery, the Jews since the Middle Ages, or the Chinese who have migrated overseas in recent times.

Other than those collective writing discourse of contemporary indigenous people, from the imaginary constructs of “native tribe” and “mother culture”, the individual life experiences of dispersion and migration, however, can be used as a connotation and commentary to indigenous contemporaneity.

Such a flowing experience is not only self-enriching and growth-constructive in response to the challenges of external environmental changes, as we have seen in the process of self-construction of Taiwanese indigenous contemporary art since 1990, but also represents a process of continuous internalization and self-reconstruction of the content of aboriginal subjectivity. Such a shift in body self-consciousness can be found not only in the development of contemporary visual arts with a longer time span, but also in the contemporary indigenous theater arts with a shorter, where such a shift from the statement of tribal collectivity to the depiction of the sense of diaspora and travel can be found.

From the original dance performance of the tribal rituals and dances that have been performed on stage since their founding in 1991, to the 2013 Tjimur Dance Theater’s “Kavaluan’s Gaze,” which confronts the issue of individual differences in tribal collective life, to more recent works such as Tai Body Theatre’s “That Dance Under the Bridge” (2016), which depicts the dislocation of urban indigenous people, and “Dao Yin” (2019), which reflects on the destruction of living space in the aftermath of the August 8 disaster through a visit to the Taivoan tribe. (2009), the experience of the destruction of a living space in the midst of the 8 August disaster, long after the language of the Taivoan tribe had been almost lost in the more than 100 years of colonial alienation that preceded it. While the official criterion for the survival of aboriginal communities or aboriginal identity remains the survival of a stereotypical language, a group like the Pingpu is destined to receive the absurd result of disenfranchisement from its originality, and the only way to reach this subtle corner of indigeneity, which seems so thin, but which can still be extracted from this discrete experience, is through contemporary artistic reproduction.

## CONCLUSION: ART HISTORY AND ART CURATORSHIP AS THE BASIS OF THE SAME PROBLEMATIC

Contemporary art curatorial consciousness and the cognition and construction of contemporary art history are almost a pair of business. While we try to understand the possible basis for the reconstruction and writing of contemporary indigenous art history through the background of the emergence of indigenous contemporary art and the iteration of meaning, from the historical basis of resistance to colonial alienation, from the From the historical basis of resistance to colonial alienation, from the transfer of the collective identity to the subjective experience of the individual body, to the return of the path of discrete experience, the reading and examination may serve as an outline of the three decades of contemporary art of Taiwan's indigenous people.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Included here are such as Lahitz Dalif, Elen Luluan, Eky, Siki Sofin, Hagu and others.

<sup>2</sup> Taiwanese indigenous peoples (formerly Taiwanese aborigines), also known as Native Taiwanese, Formosan peoples, Yuanzhumin (原住民) or Gaoshan (高山) people are Austronesians with linguistic and cultural ties to other Austronesian peoples in the region. Taiwan is also considered as the origin and linguistic homeland of the oceanic Austronesian expansion whose descendant groups today include the majority of the ethnic groups throughout many parts of East and Southeast Asia as well as Oceania.

<sup>3</sup> The Cultural Revolution, formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a sociopolitical movement in the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched by Mao Zedong in 1966, and lasting until his death in 1976. Its stated goal was to preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese Cultural Renaissance or the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement (中華文化復興運動) was a movement promoted in Taiwan in opposition to the cultural destructions caused by the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>5</sup> Hagu's art works were selected for Taitung County's Art Exhibition of which Du Ruo Zhou was the member of the jury.