

# EDITORIAL

## PUBLISHING ANYTHING — OR PERISH

The discovery of the Tasaday tribe in the southern Philippines in 1971 has been hailed as the “anthropological find of the century.” Characterized as “ultraprimitive,” “lost,” and “Stone Age,” the 26 individuals, living in caves located in a rain forest, pursued a paleolithic lifestyle surviving at the “most elemental levels of human existence.” They wore only leaves for clothing and knew nothing about hunting or agriculture. They survived on berries, roots and wild bananas, as well as crabs, grubs and frogs. They did not know of a large village just a three-hour walk away, or of the ocean 20 miles away, and were even reported to regard themselves as the only people on Earth. Their language was unique, although close enough to a known language used in the vicinity to permit translation.

Discovery of the Tasaday tribe attracted worldwide attention, and government agents closely regulated visits to the last two dozen Stone-Age cavemen of the world. The public media and about a dozen scientists were allowed to view and interview the Tasaday through interpreters, but only for a few hours a day. Coverage to the general public was abundant, scientific reports more limited. The National Geographic Society, whose journal has a circulation of 8 million, published two articles on the group. They and NBC each prepared television programs which were shown worldwide. A book entitled “The Gentle Tasaday”<sup>1</sup> received wide circulation.

Three years later all communication with the Tasaday was stopped and could not be resumed until twelve years later when major political changes in the Philippines altered enforcement of isolation. It was then that a Swiss anthropologist-reporter made his way to the caves and found them empty. He found the Tasaday wearing colored T-shirts, using metal knives, and sleeping on beds. One member of the group reported that they used to live in huts and had done some farming but that government agents had forced them to live in caves so that they would be called cavemen.<sup>2</sup> A few days later some reporters from Germany also contacted the Tasaday and photographed one of the same individuals the Swiss reporter had photographed. This time the “caveman” had reverted to a garment of leaves; however, cloth underwear was showing under the leaves. All this and more precipitated the conclusion that the Tasaday were a hoax. It also generated a major controversy in the anthropological community.

Upon his return to Switzerland, the reporter who discovered the Tasaday living under much more modern conditions immediately called the National Geographic Society, offering them his new information. They sent him a telegram the next day indicating that they were not interested and did not reply to

a follow-up letter. Two years later the *National Geographic Magazine* reported that the idea that the Tasaday were a hoax had been “largely discredited.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, two TV documentaries identified the Tasaday story as a deception. The first was produced by ABC-TV in 1986, entitled “The Tribe That Never Was,” and the other “Scandal: The Lost Tribe,” was shown on NBC-TV in 1987.

Many wonder whether the Tasaday are a genuine “Stone-Age” tribe. Could such a group survive and remain isolated while living in such close proximity to more advanced groups. Most of the early anthropologists who saw the “tribe” support their primitiveness and authenticity. However, after it was suggested that the Tasaday might be a hoax, three international anthropological conferences have been held regarding this challenging question. At stake is the propriety of the governmental agencies supervising the Tasaday, the integrity of the Tasaday, and the credibility of the science of anthropology which occasionally still hears echoes of the Piltdown hoax.

There is little question but that the Tasaday represent a unique group living under somewhat primitive conditions. There also seems to be a fair amount of consensus that they were coerced into orchestrating a caveman show for publicity or economic reasons, which is sometimes referred to as the “rain forest watergate.”<sup>4</sup> It is also agreed that they could have undergone many changes between their first discovery in 1971 and their rediscovery in 1986. Beyond that many questions remain unresolved, a number stemming from positions taken during the early years when they were first discovered versus newer interpretations.

One of the more important questions about the Tasaday is whether their language is sufficiently different to justify claiming isolation of the group for any length of time from neighbors with closely related languages. Opinions between a number of scholars in this area vary widely. The Tasaday had three stone tools in 1971 which mysteriously disappeared before they were ever photographed. They represented the only extant use of stone tools in the Philippines. Some substitute tools made by the Tasaday or their neighbors at the request of government authorities have been categorized as obvious fakes. Another controversy centers on the genealogical data with confusion as to which anthropologist collected the correct information. This has important implications regarding the degree of isolation of the Tasaday. Also much disputed is the question of the adequacy of the purported diet of the Tasaday. Some feel that the forest in which they were supposedly secluded could not have sustained them. Carbohydrates would be in especially short supply; others disagree. Many other points of contention could be listed, but the above should suffice to illustrate the diversity of the conflicting reports.<sup>5</sup>

As one takes a broad view of this whole caper, one has to wonder how so many things could go wrong. Scientists should be careful in communicating

with the public press, radio and television which seldom can correctly represent what they are trying to say. Besides that, a controversial issue such as the Tasaday is prime turf for exploitation by the public media which gain more rating points for excitement, mayhem and carnage than for accuracy.

Another point of great import concerns accuracy of reporting in the professional literature. The great discrepancy in conclusions expressed on a variety of topics about the Tasaday is, to say the least, bewildering. Far too much has been published without adequate supporting data, and once an investigator has adopted and published a position, it is more difficult to back down. Too often initial publication is followed by the traditional interdisciplinary dispute. One wonders whatever happened to the concept of doing thorough research and making sure one has sound conclusions before publishing. Members of the academic community are under great pressure to publish in order to justify their investigations, but this should be fully subordinate to accuracy. The traditional maxim of “publish or perish” is too often becoming “publish anything or perish.” One professional journal quotes the philosopher Lakatos:

*Wastepaper baskets were containers used in the seventeenth century for the disposal of some first versions of manuscripts which self-criticism — or private criticism of learned friends — ruled out on the first reading. In our age of publication explosion, most people have no time to read their manuscripts, and the function of wastepaper baskets has now been taken over by scientific journals.<sup>6</sup>*

Our “scholarly” literature has become so vast it is unwieldy. Unfortunately, the quality of what is presented often leaves much to be desired. There is much room for improvement. We would all be served better by fewer, but higher-quality publications.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Nance J. 1975. The gentle Tasaday, a Stone Age people in the Philippine rain forest. NY and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
2. Iten O. 1992. The “Tasaday” and the press. In: Headland TN, editor. The Tasaday Controversy: Assessing the Evidence. Washington DC: Special Publications of the American Anthropological Association 28:40-58.
3. McCarry C. 1988. Three men who made the magazine. National Geographic 174:287-316.
4. Berreman GW. 1982. The Tasaday: Stone Age survivors or space age fakes? In: Headland, p 21-39 (see Note 2).
5. For general references on the Tasaday, see: (a) Nance (Note 1); (b) MacLeish K. 1972. Stone Age cavemen of Mindanao. National Geographic 142(2):219-249; (c) [no author listed]. 1971. First glimpse of a Stone Age tribe. National Geographic 140(6):880-882b; (d) Bower B. 1989a. A world that never existed. Science News 135:264-266; (e) Bower B. 1989b. The strange case of the Tasaday. Science News 135:280-281, 283; (f) Headland (Note 2).
6. Lakatos I. Quoted in Palaios 2(5):445.