

# **THE ORIGINAL BLACK INHABITANTS OF TAIWAN**

## Part 1

Article by **Caroline Gluck**  
BBC News, Taiwan. Thursday December 7, 2006.

**Once upon a time, so the legend goes, the Saisiyat people - one of Taiwan's 12 officially-recognised aboriginal groups - lived in mountains next to a tribe of dark-skinned dwarves, or pygmies.**

The short-people were both feared and admired by the Saisiyat as they were thought to have magical powers. But they also had bad tempers, and often flirted and made advances towards the Saisiyat women.



The Saisiyat keep alive the 'ritual of the short black people' alive today.

The story varies in detail but, according to one version, the short people were invited to the Saisiyat's annual harvest festival and angered one man by making advances towards his wife.

He took revenge by cutting down a bridge that killed all but two of the short people, who put a curse on the Saisiyat.

Alarmed, the Saisiyat begged for mercy and were forgiven on one condition - that they sing the songs and dances of the pygmies - called the Ta'ai - to appease the spirits of those they killed.

### **Protective grass**

That ritual ceremony is said to have been carried out for as many as 400 years, and continues today.

Last weekend, the Saisiyat - who number about 5,000 people and live in two main areas in northern Taiwan - observed the rituals of the Pas-ta'ai, the Ritual to the Short People.

It is an elaborate ceremony, held at two complementary and overlapping sites in Miaoli and Hsinchu counties over several nights, during the full moon of the 10th lunar month.

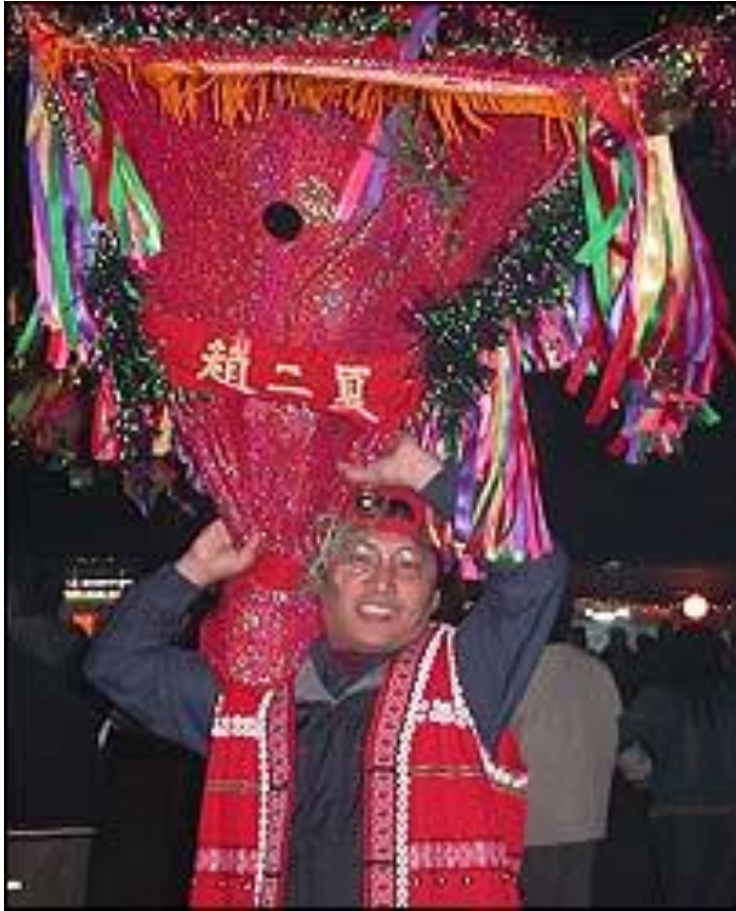
It takes place every two years. And every 10 years - which happens to be this year - it is larger and takes on added significance.

Thousands gathered for the first day of the ceremony in Wufeng, Hsinchu county, many of them drunk thanks to the potent local rice wine.

I was asked to enter a building where tribal members tied pieces of Japanese silver grass, which grows wild in the area, around my arm, camera and tape recorder.

"If you put on this grass, it protects you from evil things," explained Galah A-Talo, as he tied the grass. "It gives us security; it's a blessing."

"If you enter Saisiyat territory, you have to wear this; respect our tradition,"



“ The message is Saisiyat people should reflect on themselves - what they say, what they do. It's the true meaning of peace for [us] ”

Obay A-Awi Tawtawazy

he went on.

The main ceremony was taking place in an open field.

Men and women were dancing and singing, arms crossed, hand-in-hand and moving in and out of a huge circle.

They all wore bright red and white traditional costumes with intricate weaving, and beading.

Some have ornate decorations at the back, from which hang mirrors, beads and bells that ring and clang as the dancers move - representing a communion with the spirit world.

"This is the biggest event for the Saisiyat people, and it helps to unify and solidify the tribe," said elder Tahes A-Obay.

## **Bad luck**

The ceremonial ground is the focus of attention and visitors are welcome.

But some rituals are held in secret by tribal leaders, including those to welcome and send away the spirits of the small people.

Local villagers believe the pygmies lived in nearby caves, which are considered sacred, and warn that terrible things can happen to curious visitors.

Photographers and cameraman will discover their pictures have been erased, and some people are said to have been struck down with terrible illnesses.

Bad luck can also follow those who misbehave at the ceremony.

"One of my relatives just disappeared, with only his shoes left behind," said Obay A-Awi Tawtawazy. "No-one found his body... he disappeared without trace."

"Another cousin said something bad to the elders and did not apologise. All of a sudden, he got hurt when he was doing farm work. He went into a coma for a year and passed away.

"The message is Saisiyat people should reflect on themselves - what they say, what they do. It's the true meaning of peace for the Saisiyat people."

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## **Looking after the little people**

**Amin is a Saisiyat tribe member who lives near caves said to have been inhabited for millennia by a race of black pygmies**

- By Jules Quartly / STAFF REPORTER. Taipei Times. Sun Dec 05, 2004.

After celebrating the Ritual of the Short Black People (矮靈祭) we collected the next morning in the sunlight on a porch overlooking the dappled mountains of Wufeng Township in Hsinchu. Saisiyat tribe elder Amin (Lin Zhen-ming, 林禎明) looked down toward a grove of bamboo trees. Below was a valley through which a stream ran

banked by cliffs where, he said, the Short Black People had lived for millennia. The amiable 55-year-old did not know how long it had been since the last black pygmy lived in one of those caves, but there are records of these original Taiwanese people in Qing dynasty (1644 to 1911) documents. Some gathered on the porch said the ritual commemorating the Short Black People had been going on for 400 years, since the Aboriginal Saisiyat are said to have wiped them out. Another tribal elder suggested the extinction was later, some time in the last century.

Amin was like a big brother to everyone, an electrician/plumber/fix-it man and just the kind of person you could turn to when your battery was bled to death by sleeping in an air-conditioned car without the engine on. He said life in the city was exciting and he would do jobs there, but he was always glad to come home because friends and family meant more to him than money. "Here," he said, surveying the land, a Middle-Earth-like vision of lush mountains and smoke trailing out of nearby settlements. "It's pure." Amin said he was aware of and generally agreed with a study backed by the Saisiyat tribe that established the Short Black People as racially similar to groups now living in Malaysia and the Philippines. He said they were described in stories passed down by his parents as having red hair like these people. He said they were short, but not little, as they were strong. The race is said by various out-of-Africa theorists to have arrived in Asia as long as 20,000 to 50,000 years ago. The first mythical emperor, Fu Hsi (伏羲) was a "black dwarf," they claim. Aborigines are thought to have migrated to Taiwan about 3,000 years ago (other estimates range from 1,000 to 10,000 years). There is another theory that Taiwanese tribes were the first Austronesians. Though the origins of civilization in Taiwan are hotly debated, everyone seems to agree the end of the black pygmies came at the hands of the Saisiyat.

The oral history has been passed on over generations by the Saisiyat, in the 16 songs and in the Ritual of the Short Black People held every two years in Nanchuang Township, Miaoli County and Wufeng. There are similar published versions, Amin acknowledged, but this was his story. Amin said the God of the Short Black People that is prayed to at the rituals represents an advanced race that was kind, gentle and helpful but was also puckish or worse. It was because of this nature that the last of the Short Black People got into trouble with the Saisiyat. The black pygmies liked to flirt with the Saisiyat women but they went too far when they sexually molested an Aboriginal princess and her handmaidens. The Saisiyat men were angry, so they plotted their revenge and invited the pygmies to a harvest festival. On leaving the party the pygmies crossed a bridge. It was here, Amin said, waving in the general direction of the caves below the porch on which we were sitting, where the pygmies died. He pointed to the far side of the river and described a bridge with his hands. Then he made a cutting motion to describe how the bridge was cut. The pygmies fell to their deaths and only one escaped. He taught the Saisiyat knowledge that had been handed down and before disappearing at dawn, into the sunrise, he warned them: if his race's legends died out,

then so would the Saisiyat. Amin further explained there was a small population of black pygmies before this incident and they did not have many women, so perhaps this is why they raped the Saisiyat women.

Currently, there are fewer than 5,000 Saisiyat among a population of under 400,000 Indigenous or Aboriginal people in Taiwan. Many Saisiyat marry into other tribes or Han families, so numbers are decreasing. Amin's mother is Saisiyat but his father is Atayal. The tribe is usually but not necessarily patri-lineal. Amin described himself as part of the Lin (林) family or clan that is part of the Saisiyat tribe. As for the caves below, where the black pygmies were said to live, we were asked to stay away. Amin said the cliffs to get there were too steep. He said those who had photographed the place had their film cleared. There were even curses of the Short Black People that involved memory loss and confusion for those foolhardy enough not to heed the warnings. As it happened, some photos I had taken the previous night had mysteriously disappeared and the car wouldn't start, so the trip was a non-starter. Amin and the Saisiyat guard the caves, hold **the rituals and tell the stories that keep alive the legacy of Taiwan's original settlers, now that they are gone.**





**Saisiyat tribe member Amin lives close to a former settlement of black pygmies in Hsinchu County.**

PHOTOS: JULES QUARTLY, TAIPEI TIMES



**Scenes from the recent Ritual of the Short Black People and the area in which they lived.**