

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF YAMI FOOD CLASSIFICATIONS

Yu Guang-hong

(ABSTRACT)

The Yami distinguish roughly two categories of food: *kanen* (staples) and *yakan* (supplements). These two terms (and other terms for subcategories of *yakan*) are "key words" (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 80) to understanding Yami culture.

The division of labor in Yami food production is that the women play the major role in "getting *kanen*" and herding pigs, while the men play the major role in "searching for *yakan*" and taking care of goats. While Yami men may from time to time farm their family gardens and feed pigs, Yami women never fish in the sea, nor do they tend goats. The Yami believe that women are physically weaker than men, and hence they cannot handle the physically more demanding tasks performed by men. In social exchange, although *yakan* is more emphasized than *kanen*, both categories of food are indispensable. A husband and wife have to work together to produce enough food to hold new boat or new house inauguration ceremonies, where lots of taro, pork, and/or goat meat will be given away. A single or widowed man will have no way to produce enough food to pay back his social debt. Although he may not cease to be given, his social status will gradually fall because he cannot return what he has taken.

In brief, there are two contradictory views of femaleness: women are thought physically inferior, but socially valued. In terms of these gender representations, we can make sense of the contradictions of female status in different social contexts. For example, Yami women are excluded from inheriting family property (land, house, domestic animals, etc.), while maternal and paternal kin are of similar importance.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AMONG THE YAMI

(ABSTRACT)

Hwa-san Kwan

The aim of the study is to discern the relationship, if any, between Yami religion and the Yami living environment. More specifically, the ways in which Yami's spiritual beliefs, myths, rituals and taboos are embodied in their environment, natural and man-made, in terms of use, form and meaning will be identified. The environment is seen to extend from the large-scale cosmological universe to the physical settlement, including the house.

The principal findings of the study are:

(1) Sea and land are identified as being of equal importance in traditional Yami cosmology. This is in contrast to the commonly accepted proposition that many cultures regard their own living quarters as the center of the world. Two principal directions are identified as being of significance in that they lead to the dwelling of the god. These are to the south, and vertically. Meanings also attached to the rising of the sun in the East and its setting in the West. These are secularity and sacredness respectively. What together form the basis of Yami social and cultural life.

(2) The man-made environment of Yami society on Orchid Island has a spiritual foundation in the formation of villages both for the living and for the spirits of the dead in graveyards. This can be discerned in the practice, according to an understood sequence, of transferring contaminated material, whether abstract or real, to certain places for cleansing and purification. These include "Parurunan" (place for contaminated matters) hoggeries, and the south, on the one hand; and fountain streams on the other. Ultimately,

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these materials, or the dead spirits themselves, may pass back to the village or individual houses. For instance, murder or suicide has happened on certain occasions, or death has occurred in certain houses. As these are seen to be occupied by dead spirits, they need special attention and treatment.

(3) In the traditional private dwelling, there is a spiritual basis in the use of and relationship between the rear room paved in planks, and the adjacent parallel gallery, with its earth floor, as well as in the existence of the flat, curved pier which separates them. Yami mythology plays a part in interpreting the meaning of these spaces and elements. The two spaces are associated with the elderly and the ancestors on the one hand and with land and sea, the latter incorporating flying-fish, on the other hand. More generally, the rear room represents the realm of present-day life, whereas the gallery is the sacred interface between this world and heaven, the ancestors and the gods. Within this realm, the pier symbolizes the transference of the Yami tradition from one generation to the next.

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Bittersweet

The 3,000 or so Yami tribespeople who inhabit Orchid Island belong to the **Western Austronesian group**. Little studied or noticed until quite recently, they have managed, far more than Taiwan's other eight aborigine tribes, to keep their ancient lifestyles and traditions.

During the half-century of Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945, this green spot in the tropical Pacific was preserved as a kind of anthropological museum, mainly for research purposes. Following the restoration of Taiwan to Chinese rule almost two decades ago, however, the Yami had no choice but to accept the various "blessings" of modern times through Chinese schools, new concrete houses, electricity--and, in recent years, a growing number of tourists.

Despite the encroachment of outside influences, however, these dark-skinned fishermen and farmers continue to practice many of their unique ways. Without inside information about the island, though, an outsider would have to depend on pure luck to witness these interesting customs.

In March this year, for example, Yami men donned their feast-day dress--prized helmets, sleeveless vests, long knives--and marched to the seashore for the festival of flying fish. Large crowds gathered before the meticulously constructed canoes, many of them intricately carved and brightly painted. Some brought along firewood, plates and pans, while others provided young pigs and chickens.

The women in their festive costume watched from a distance. Ritual rules required them to stay far away from the boats.

◀ Yami children ham it up in one of the villages.



Yami People

Blessings of Civilization

By Willi Boehl Photos by Douglas Habecker

The men, squatting in a crowd, suddenly came alive. The masters of the boats entered their craft from the rear, walked to the very front, and made signs of invitation toward the sea. At the same time they swung their pigs and chickens and shouted the word: "Come! Come! Come!" In this way, they asked the flying fish to approach.

Then the men moved back to where a fire had been ignited, slit the throats of the pigs and chickens, and caught the fresh blood in bowls. Taking the blood, the men and their small sons walked to the shore, where the boys smeared the blood on round stones where the waves rolled in. Men without boats had to do the job themselves. The ritual was rich in symbolic meaning: "These stones will lie here forever, without change. In the same way, we Yami will remain unchanged for ever and ever."

The men next took the blood and smeared it on their boats. More was poured into small wooden boxes, to be taken onto the sea and poured in.

Blood Protection

The chickens and pigs, plucked and cleaned, found their way into the pots. Finally, each canoe master marched ahead of his crew back to the village, where they disappeared into the houses with their now-cooked pork and poultry to celebrate the day with a feast. Each was convinced that the pouring of blood would protect his life, his family's safety, and provide an abundant harvest during the flying fish season, which lasts from March to August.

By the time the men navigate their canoes to their fishing grounds each night during this season, darkness has completely fallen. On the boats they kindle fires of dried reeds; this attracts the flying fish, which fly toward the flames and are caught in nets. This goes on until the first rays of the sun strike the boats the next morning, whereupon the fishermen turn their bows toward home.

The fishermen take their catch to the stone platforms in front of their houses, scale the fish, and clean them. Then they salt the fish in home-made troughs, using salt that they have gathered at the seashore. This done, they tie the fish to poles hung over the platforms to dry in the sun.

The men, their work of the day completed, then retire to their stilted rest platforms for breakfast and a well-deserved sleep. Another night of fishing will soon be upon them.

Richly carved and painted canoes, which are skillfully fashioned using more than 20 individual pieces of wood, have become the symbol of Orchid Island. The launching of one of these boats is cause for another of the Yami's major festivals.

The launching of a 10-man boat, which had been built over two years using traditional methods and not a single nail or screw, was celebrated for two days at the end of August when the moon was full. At least 290 guests attended the event, the immediate preparations for which included the painting of the boat, the gathering of taro (a staple in the Yami diet), and the piling of the taro into a ceremonial "mountain."



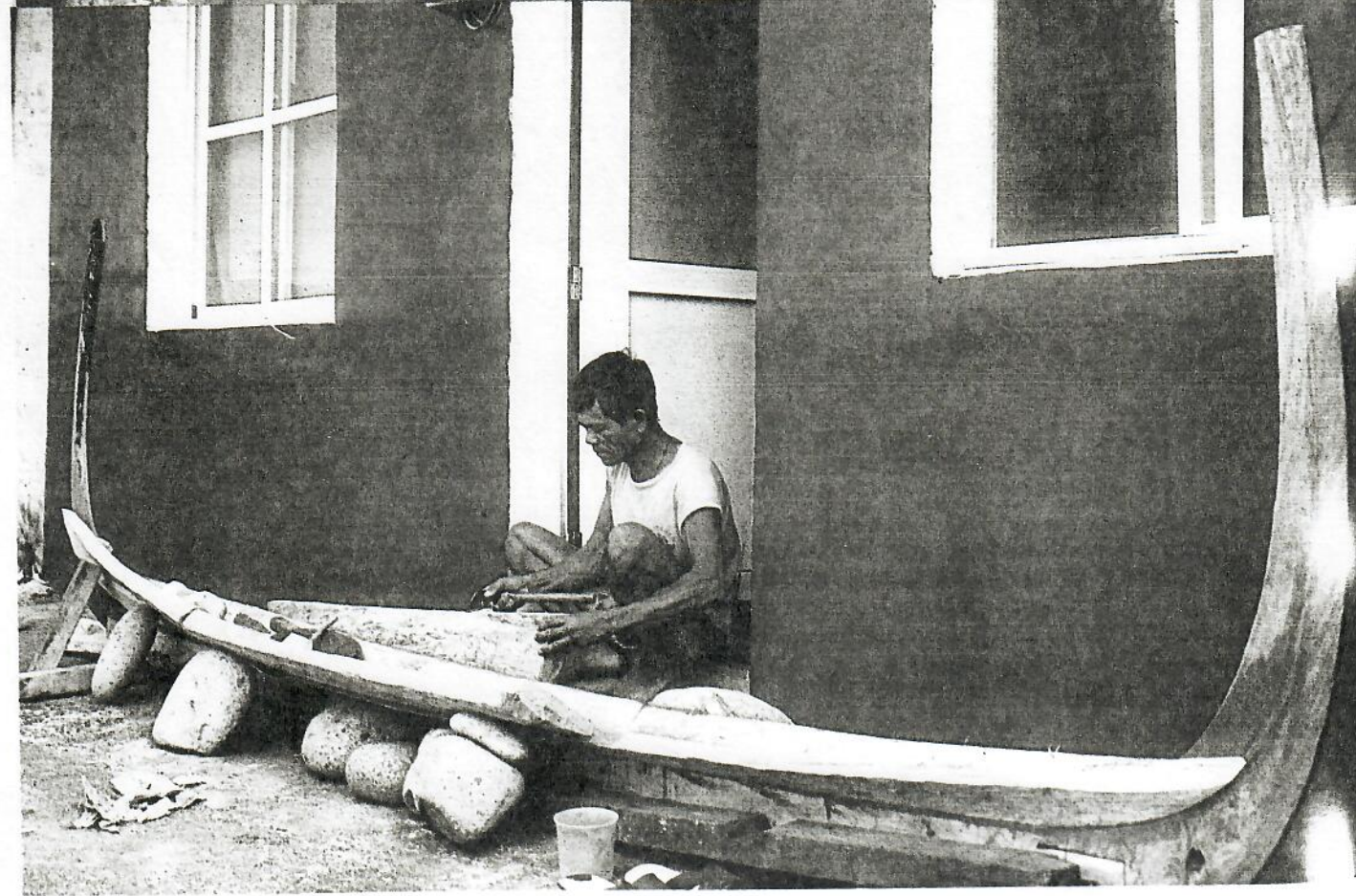
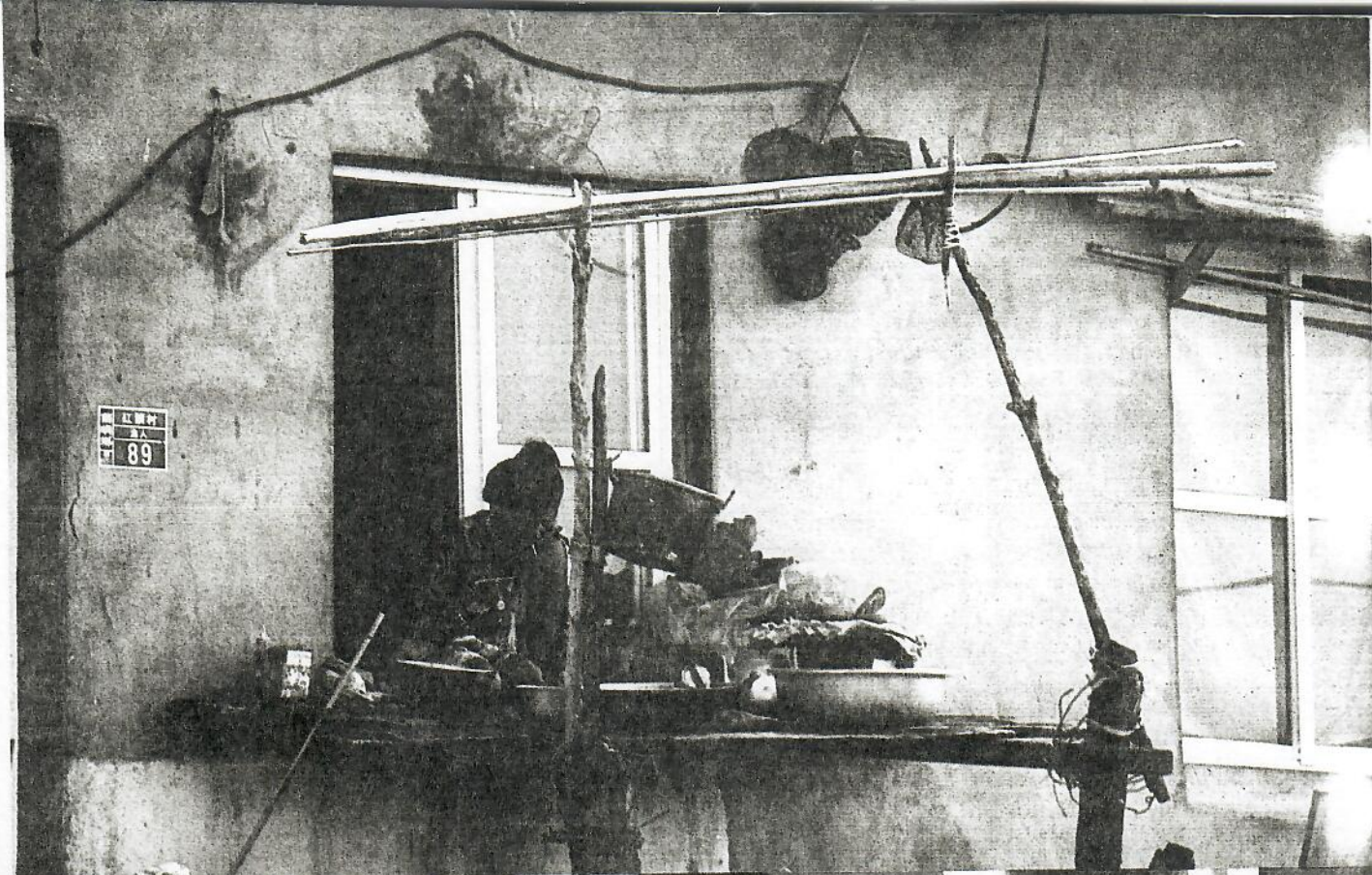
The night's catch is left to dry in the sun.

Photo courtesy World Vision Taiwan

The actual celebration began with the singing of melodies from days gone by--melodies praising the tedious work that went into the boat, its superb appearance when finished, and the gathering of the taro mountain. At dawn the celebrants attacked the taro mountain, running backward and forward and grabbing violently to get the biggest load, then shouldering baskets of the vegetable and disappearing. Ten pigs were killed in front of the winter houses (the semi-subterranean abodes in which the Yami pass the cold season) and their meat divided up, with each participant getting at least a small slice.

Men in their traditional G-strings approached the boat from all four sides and, lifting it, carried it to the house of its master. There the 10 helmet-clad members of the crew stepped into the boat, sat down, and began singing a tender melody. The attending crowd became quiet as an atmosphere of reverence settled over the scene. From the winter house stepped the boat-master's wife, adorned with precious symbols, the personification of the woman at home who awaits the safe return of the boat from a fishing expedition.

Following a prayer, the boat was carried back to its original position for a ceremony to expel any spirits that might inhabit it. Men approached the craft, shouting; a group finally seized it and tossed it into the air three times, each time higher. In this manner the boat was carried to the shore, where the 10 crew members released it into the water for a dance on the waves. After this, the canoe was ready for any adventure.



▲ *... woman cooking on the makes...*
... *... Many Yamis still prefer the old*
ways to modern housing.

▼ *A new canoe slowly takes shape. Larger boats*
can take two years to build.

New Year Opportunity

The New Year is another opportunity for the Yami to worship and celebrate. On the most recent New Year's Day, village men marched to the seashore, silver helmets in their left hands and long knives in their right. With them they also carried large baskets filled with taro, millet, sweet potatoes, betel nuts, and the leaves that are chewed with the nuts.

Women and girls had to remain on the top of a rise between the village and the seashore. The village's unmarried men had to stay with them.

The men placed their baskets on the shore and squatted in front of them, from time to time pointing their knives toward the baskets. Then they all prayed to the god Shimataluto: "Come at once, we beseech you, and consume what we offer you. Grant that we may catch plenty of flying fish--big fish--and harvest a lot of taro in the new year."

After a while the men turned back toward the village, leaving the sacrificial gifts on the shore for the time being. On this day, the Yami rested from their labors in the village at sea.

In recent years," observed Hsieh Yung-chuan, "the New Year has become more of a time for social gathering, with many young people coming home from Taiwan."

The 34-year-old Yami father of two, a trained catechist of the Catholic Church in Langtau village, voiced concern about the preservation of his native language, which is the backbone of his culture. "Children go to school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and there they are obliged to use Mandarin Chinese," he lamented. "Even at home in the villages, they use their own tongue very little. Our greatest need is to provide Yami language courses in the primary schools of our six villages."

The Yami have, in recent years, become more sensitive to the impact the outside world is having on them. Two burning issues for them right now are the nuclear waste storage facility that is operated at one corner of the island, and the proposal to establish the island as a national park.

About the park, Hsieh moaned, "We don't want to become a living zoo, but the government doesn't listen to us." He also complained about the airport expansion project and the negative influence of a growing flood of tourists.

Chou Chao-chieh, a 44-year-old Yami primary school teacher, was more positive--though cautiously so--about the national park proposal. "The resulting sale of our products might open up business opportunities for us," he said, "but there is always a danger that the clever Taiwanese will muscle out the local Yami, who have less experience." Also, he urged, "The government should not do anything to hamper our activities by restricting fishing and woodcutting, which national park regulations might do."

Yet Orchid Island and its Yami inhabitants seem destined to have closer and closer contact with the rest of the world, a process that has been going on with increasing rapidity over the past three decades.

Coming of Modernization

A harbor for relatively large vessels transporting tourists and cargo was built around 1960, and scheduled flights by small aircraft began serving the island in 1970. That same year, Orchid Island's first hotel opened its doors. A road around the island was completed in 1973.

The installation of an electric power station in 1985 brought the Yami a more pleasant life, but television (on which all the programs are in Chinese) has virtually re-

placed the custom of singing traditional tunes by which Yami history is passed down to younger generations. The young have learned to drink alcoholic beverages--unknown in the past--and, being educated in schools, do not learn the ancient skills of house- and boatbuilding.

In a study published in Taipei last year as "The Songs of the Ancestors," Dezsoe Benedek painted a discouraging scenario of the once self-reliant Yami: "Strongly discouraged and occasionally barred from taking over the cultural heritage of the older generation, the young Yami graduate from school without any traditional knowledge of how to survive on their own island. With no industry of any kind on Lanyu to provide jobs in the modern sense, young people must go to Taiwan and find work. Once they encounter modernized life they do not want to return to live on their native island, though most of them will visit their parents and relatives during the time of the Lunar New Year holiday. What is happening to them in Taiwan is a sad, but also very interesting, case to be investigated by social anthropologists."

We can only hope that Benedek is too pessimistic. With luck and intelligent guidance the Yami, who now have a growing cultural awareness, will find a way to preserve some of their ancient customs and traditions (and thus their identity as a unique people) as they inevitably accept the ways of the modern world. ①



Yami boys in their G-strings practicing a traditional dance.

Photo courtesy World Vision Taiwan

The Land Time

Text and Photos by Douglas Habecker



The Yami use these roofed platforms to pass the heat of day or to sleep in on warm nights.

The deep blue expanse, viewed from the cramped confines of the small aircraft 2,000 feet above the sea, stretched endlessly in all directions. The Pacific Ocean, once, was living up to its name, kicking up a rare whitecap to break the flat, glistening surface.

Slowly, our plane banked and there it was, looking like any respectable tropical island of volcanic origins should, not unlike the stereotype of a Polynesian getaway—except that this was roughly 5,000 miles from Tahiti.

Fringed by reefs and a few beaches, most of the island's 17.4 square miles (45 square kilometers) is taken up by lush, verdant mountains produced by some undersea eruption thousands of years past. Creased and folded cliffs rise almost vertically for



Almost Forgot

over a thousand feet to ridges that undulate, collide with other peaks and folds, and fall back toward the sea in green waves.

Man's impact on this mass of rock and vegetation is mainly limited to the fringes--a couple of small harbors, a single concrete ribbon of road, small clusters of wood and cement, a solitary vehicle or figure. Even the main airport looks like it is tacked onto the seashore. A solitary lighthouse clings to a high cliff top, a bright white sentinel surrounded by green.

Bang! My spine is compressed as the pilot slams the plane onto the end of the runway and immediately brakes, hard. As the airframe vibrates with the sudden deceleration, I can begin to appreciate the rigors of navigation and carrier landings. We taxi to a terminal not much bigger than a two-car garage and jump off.

As I exit the building on the other side, I hear a roar and look up to see my plane turn, speed down the strip and labor into the sky. It's dead quiet. The random thought that any typhoon could easily strand me here for a week crosses my mind.

A Timeless People

Lanyu, as the Chinese call Orchid Island, actually seems bereft of the flower that is its namesake. At least I didn't notice any. Rather, this isolated tropical corner, 39 miles (62 kilometers) east of the southern tip of Taiwan, has gained an amount of attention as home of the Yami people, who despite the frantic advances of their Taiwanese neighbors, seem content to carry on much as they have for hundreds of years.

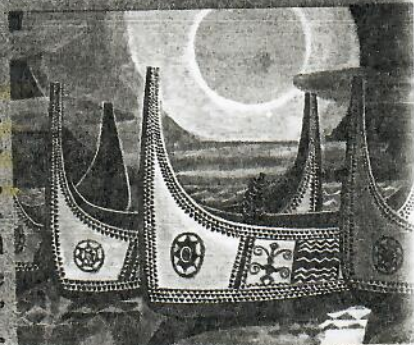
Most of Lanyu's approximately 3,000 inhabitants are Yami, divided among six small villages. Burned dark by the sun, these friendly people speak a unique dialect similar to that of the northern Philippines, hinting at their origin.

They subsist rather simply on sweet potatoes, taro roots, and fish, notably flying fish. These are the subjects of many rituals and stories and are mainly caught in the late spring--a time of activity and festival. Then, the Yami use their distinctive and colorful wooden boats, which resemble canoes with prows and sterns that curve vertically into high points.

Traditionally, the Yami have lived in dwellings cleverly adapted to Lanyu's climate. Their "winter house" is built underground, in stone-lined pits so that only the

roof is visible, protecting inhabitants from powerful typhoons that punish the island every year, the heat of summer, and the cool of winter. The "summer house," partially above ground, is used as a workplace. Finally, the "cool house"--an elevated, roofed platform--is used to pass the heat of day or to sleep in on warm nights.

Perhaps the biggest sign of the changes tugging at Yami culture is the fact that only in two villages on the northeastern coast, Langtao and Yehyin, are these old dwellings still used. Most islanders have adopted the cement houses provided by the government.

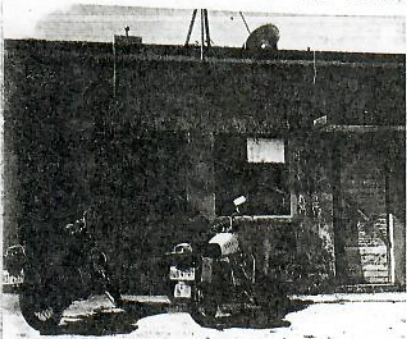


Coping with Outsiders

"Please, don't take pictures of the inside of people's houses and of this," said a muscular Yami construction worker, gesturing toward the loincloth an old Yami man was wearing.

I was walking around the village of Langtao and discovering that Yami people are extremely gracious and friendly, unless you point a camera at them. This usually evokes one of two responses: a demand for money, usually 100 New Taiwan dollars (US\$4), or angry yelling and gesturing.

Dealing with the outside world and the tourists who visit their island is a very sensitive issue for the Yami, who, understandably, tend to resent this intrusion into their privacy. The government is hoping to turn Lanyu into a national park; some local residents hope this will help preserve their culture, while others



have doubts.

"Taiwanese come here and take pictures of the old-style houses and of the people wearing loincloths. They take them back to Taiwan, show their friends and say, 'Look at the savages. Look how primitive,'" said

▲ Like an afterthought, the size of this small police station reflects the peaceful nature of the island's inhabitants.

▼ The road makes exploring this beautiful island relatively easy.

David Lin, a Taiwanese who has worked with the Yami for 16 years and heads up the Cultural and Education Fund, an organization he founded. "This makes the Yami people angry. They feel like animals, like a zoo."

"I was born here and grew up here. I love it here," said Si Yaman Rapongan, a Yami teacher at Lanyu's only middle school. He apologizes that his English is inadequate, as he studied French in university.

"We are like the American Indians," he continued. "The government is too strong. Nuclear waste is being dumped here without asking us. This must stop."

I found that respect, interest, and tact are the best policy in personal dealings. I watched an older man carefully construct a traditional boat, asking him some questions about his craft and family. I eventually asked for a picture and, after some thought, he suggested a trade: I could take a picture in exchange for a copy being sent to him.

Relaxing Atmosphere

"I like Lanyu. The swimming is really fun. There's not much else to do," commented a 10-year-old Yami girl selling seashells, for one NT dollar each, by the side of the road.

For anyone familiar with the hectic pace of life in Taiwan, Lanyu is a distinct antithesis. If the local folk are any guide, swimming, fishing, and relaxing are the best ways to pass time on the island. Entertainment at Yehyu, the largest village, consists of about three KTVs (karaoke parlors). At a quiet village police station, I asked three officers if they were busy. They laughed.

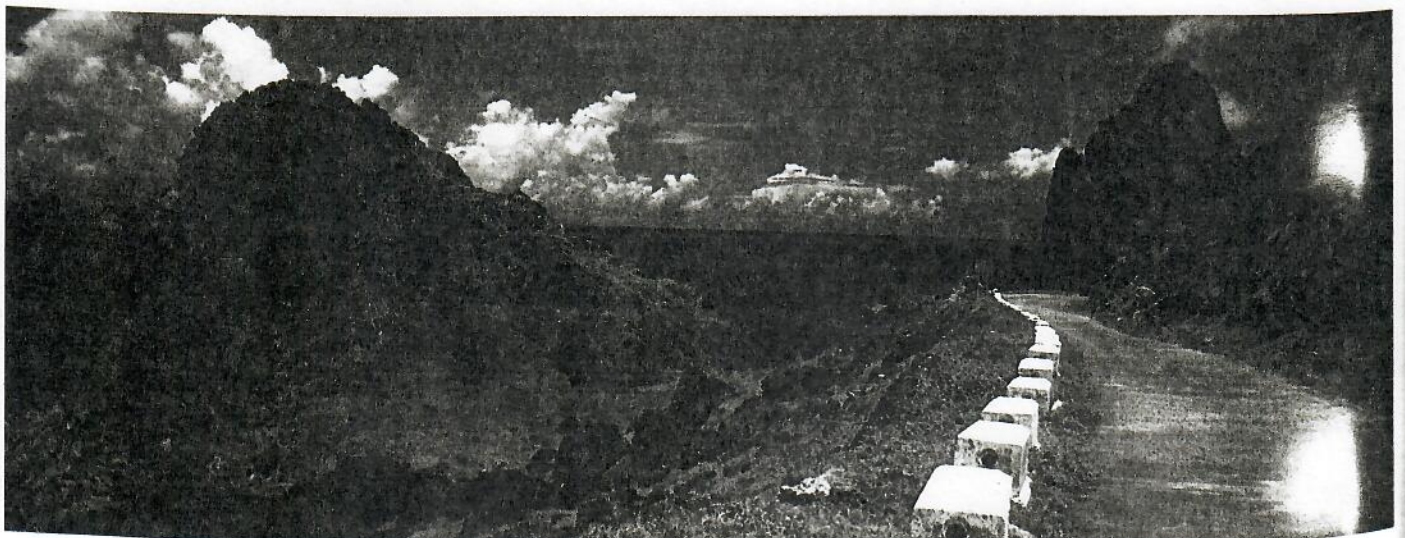
The consensus seems to be that the swimming is good, and indeed it is. Although Lanyu doesn't boast white sand beaches, its teal-colored waters are crystal clear. Com-

bined with extensive reefs, this makes for excellent swimming, fishing, and especially snorkeling. There are a couple of decent swimming beaches south of the airport, in and around Hungtuo village. The beach fronting the Lanyu Hotel in Hungtuo is particularly popular. A couple of small beaches can be found on the east and north coasts as well.

The possibilities for snorkeling and fishing are greater. Gear and tackle can be purchased in shops around the Lanyu Hotel and the Orchid Hotel, which is in Yehyu village near the main harbor. Both hotels also organize snorkeling trips to the reefs, providing masks and snorkels, for a fee of around NTS300 (US\$12) per person. An excellent place to snorkel and swim is in a small, man-made harbor near the southern end of the island.

The other main form of enjoyment is exploring this beautiful island, which is relatively easy. One concrete road completes a circuit around the island. Motor scooters can be rented near both hotels for NTS100 an hour, or NTS700 (US\$28) for 24 hours. This is easily the most flexible way to explore Lanyu, which can be circled in about 45 minutes by scooter. Hotels will also give one-hour bus tours for NTS350 (US\$14) per person. Public buses also run around the island three or four times a day.

Walking is also an option. A good hiker can circle the island in a day. For such expeditions, carrying water is advised, as it can get very hot and stores are few and far between. Along the road there are numerous small trails snaking up toward the hills. Some are merely access trails for farmers, while others continue up into the mountains. Most seem safe to explore, although some residents suggested taking a Yami guide along



longer excursions. There are only two snakes on Lanyu, one poisonous, the other harmless.

→ "If it's green, it's poisonous," said David Lin. "The other one is blue-grey and is okay."

Along the road itself, there are many vistas to please an explorer. Starting from Hungtou village and driving counterclockwise around Lanyu, you will first notice Hsiao (small) Lanyu island, which is uninhabited, lying off the southern tip.

Continuing up the eastern coast and around the north you will see the strangest progression of rock formations, with even stranger names, lining the road. Dragon's Head, Elephant's Nose, Steel Helmet, Two Lions, Virgin Rock, and Tank Rock are among the colorful titles given to these formations. Of note are the Battleship Rocks, lying off a point on the east coast. One story has it that during World War II, American planes mistook these rocks for an enemy ship and bombed them.

There are also caves to explore, including Lover's Cavern, a small passageway past Tungching village, and the massive Five Caverns, further down the road.

A few slightly out-of-the-way sights should not be missed. Just outside of Tungching, a few meters before the sign for Lover's Cavern, is a partially surfaced trail leading off to the right, toward the sea. A five-minute walk will bring you to a cliff wall, where the sea rushes through a 50-foot-high natural arch and into a deep, narrow inlet eroded into the cliff.

For great views of the island, there are two excellent options. Barely outside Hungtou, just south, is a steep, winding road leading to a mountaintop weather station with a view of the southern half of the island. The road continues across to Yehyin,

but is dirt from the station on. Around the northern tip, before the harbor, there is also a road which switchbacks up to the lighthouse. This offers a fine view of the northern half and, on a good day, the coast of Taiwan. A motor scooter would save considerable time and perspiration on both of these roads.

One could say that compared to other destinations, Lanyu has relatively little to offer in the way of "things to do." I pondered this one evening while enjoying a blanket of stars overhead and the muted rush of nearby waves. Such an observation ignores Lanyu's excellent natural setting and scenery but, I finally concluded, it is actually a strength. A true getaway should give one no option but to relax and enjoy some peace and solitude. It is in that role that Lanyu truly excels.

How to Get There

Getting to Lanyu is fairly easy, albeit a bit expensive. Formosa and Taiwan Airlines both have about six flights a day between Taitung and the island--a 20 minute trip. Between Kaohsiung and Lanyu, Formosa has two daily flights and Taiwan Airlines has one. Formosa also has a daily flight connecting Taipei with Lanyu.

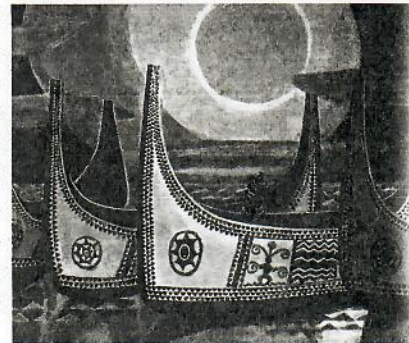
There is a boat (four to six hours) between Taitung and Lanyu, but this has been rather inconsistent. Out of Lanyu, the hotel can inform you whether there will be a boat or not. Note that in the event of a typhoon or stormy weather, air and sea connections are suspended.

Choices for accommodations are very simple. There are only two hotels, the Lanyu Hotel, in Hungtou near the airport, and the Orchid Hotel, in Yehyu near the main

harbor. The Orchid starts from double rooms for NT\$1,200 (US\$48) a night. The Lanyu starts from NT\$1,800 (US\$72) for a double but offers the additional option of dormitory-style lodging for NT\$400 (US\$16) per person. Both hotels provide transportation to and from the airport and suggest prior reservations during peak season--July through September.

For the budget traveler, there are now other options. In Yujen village, beside the airport, there are clean dormitory-style bunks in a two-story building across from the scooter rental shop for NT\$250 (US\$10) a night. There may be similar accommodations in Yehyu. Camping out is also possible. According to the police, tenting in the grass around any of the four schools in Hungtou, Tungching, Langtao, and Yehyu is permitted. Near the southern tip there are some good meadows overlooking the ocean, but you'll have to take your own water.

As for food, there are a handful of tiny restaurants in Yehyu and Hungtou serving noodles and rice dishes. A scattering of "mom-and-pop" stores around the island offer a few edibles. Both hotels also serve meals in their restaurants. T



▲ An oil painting of Yami canoes by Yen Shui-lung.

Painting courtesy Taiwan Museum of Art

▼ Strange coastal rock formations, such as Two Lions, line part of the road.

