

A black and white photograph of a dense forest. A large, textured tree trunk is the central focus, running vertically. In the background, several people are visible, some sitting on the ground and others standing. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of depth and texture in the scene.

PHOTO ESSAY

Vivid Spectrum In Black & White

Photographer *Kuan Hsiao-jung* insists that he uses a “recording lens” to reveal the complexities of daily life among Taiwan’s Yami aborigines. But the lens is also a mirror of his compassion and social consciousness.

BY WU JABAO
PHOTOS BY KUAN HSIAO-JUNG

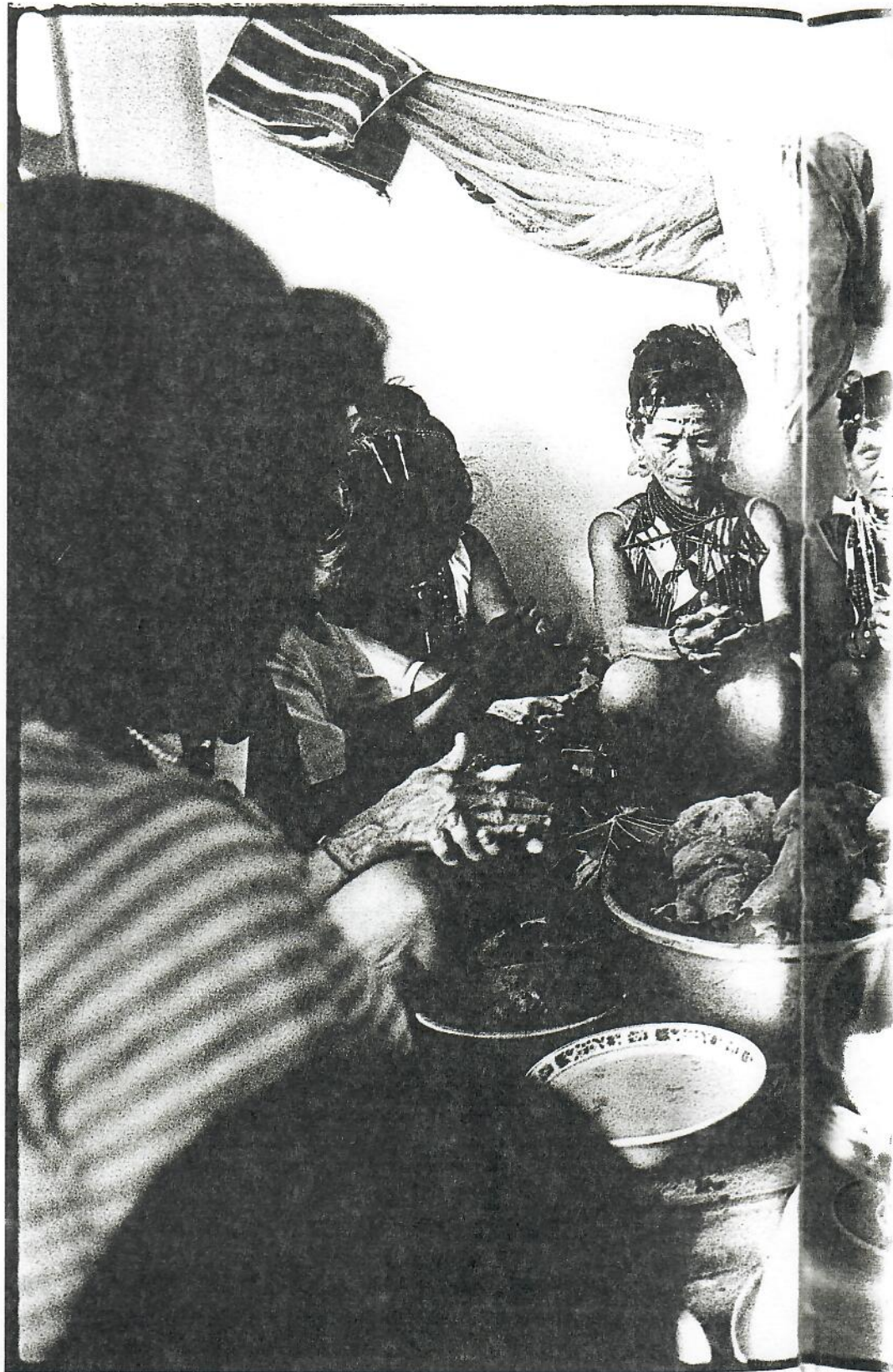


Kuan Hsiao-jung (關曉榮) spent all of 1987 living with the Yami aborigines on the tropical island of Lanyu (Orchid Island), just off the southeastern coast of Taiwan. The accompanying photographs are a result of this experience and are drawn from his three-volume collection of photos and essays, *Dignity and Humiliation, Lanyu: A Nation's Frontier, 1987* (尊嚴與屈辱・國境邊陲・蘭嶼・1987), which will be published later this year. The more than 360 photographs provide vivid images of how the Yami tribe builds traditional boats and houses, how it celebrates the Flying-Fish Festival, and how they pass their daily lives. In addition, the photos record contemporary problems and issues on Lanyu, including the areas of education, labor, tourism, nuclear waste disposal, modern medicine, and public health.

While photographs of aborigines are common in tourist publications, few modern attempts have been made to record their lives in depth. Kuan's work is more than a photographic epic of Lanyu. It represents a clear view of the complex functional role photography can play in society.

The photography of Kuan Hsiao-jung clearly illustrates his respect for life and his commitment to high personal values. He held his first photo exhibition in 1983, at the Jazz Photo Gallery in Taipei. The exhibit was of photographs "taken on the street." Since then, he has done only two other major collections of work, both of them dealing with Taiwan's aborigines.

The first, completed in 1984 after six months of work, was entitled "2% of Hope and Struggle." The photographs are a record of the urban life of Ami tribe aborigines who were working as laborers or fishermen in the Patzemen area of Keelung in northern Taiwan. "Record" is the proper term here. Kuan says his work is best described as "record photography" because the term implies that the photographer is taking an equal and objective stance toward his subject.



Many Yami are Christians. Here, village women pray for the well-being of their men, who are selecting wood for a boat in the nearby rain forest. Every piece of wood for boat construction is from fresh-cut trees.



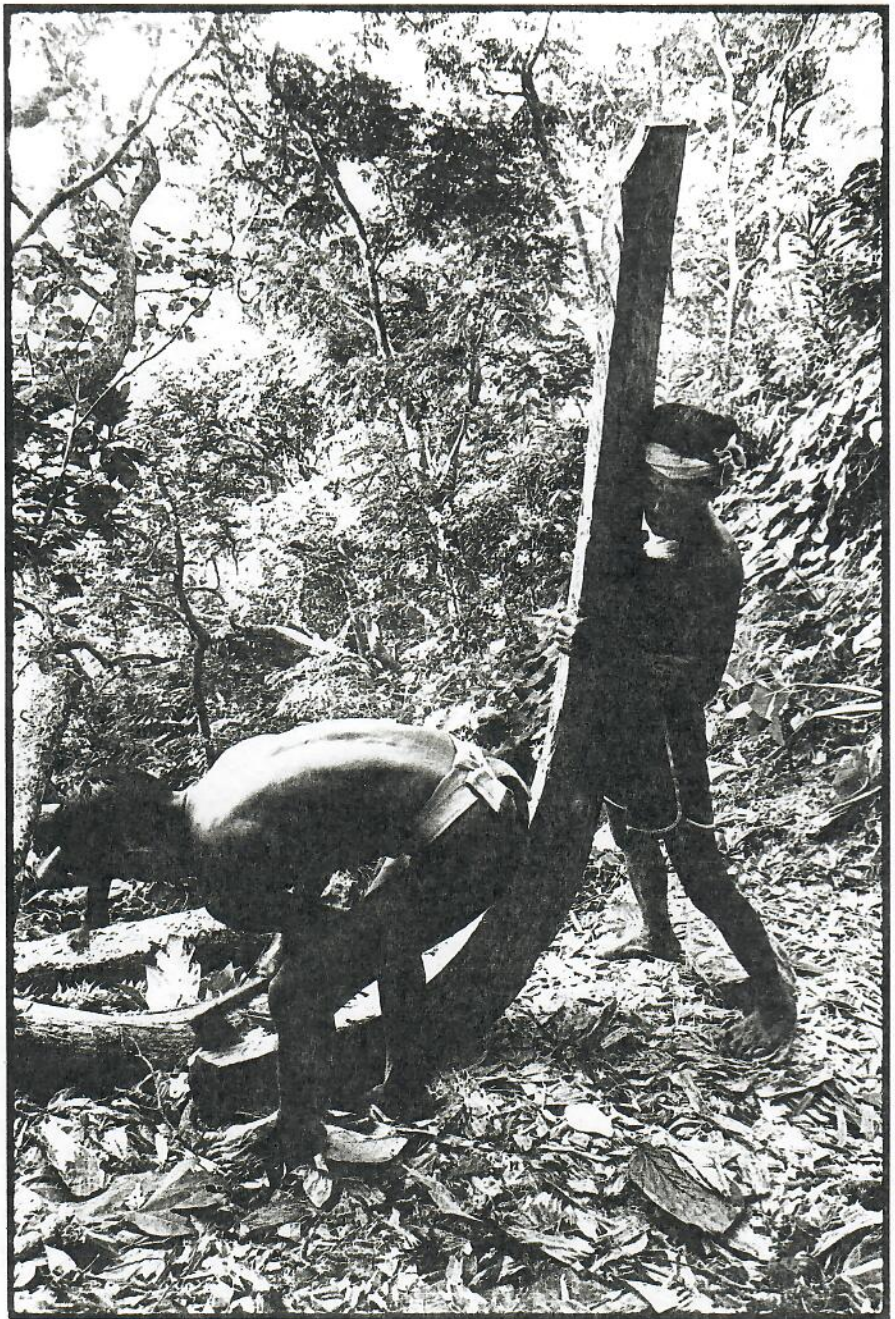


Boat-making is a communal task performed by males, and all the work is done by hand. The most common tools are the axe, flat chisel, and gouge.

Three years after "Hope and Struggle," Kuan finished his photographic record of the Yami tribe on the island of Lanyu. This time, his goal was much more than an exhibition: he wanted to publish a work that would be more than a collection of good pictures. As Kuan has written, he hopes "to do a more profound social structural analysis on the ethnic contradictions between Taiwan aborigines and the Han Chinese people, both past and present." To anyone, Chinese or otherwise, the photographs indeed provide sensitive insights into a way a life that is far different from traditional China. But Kuan wants to convey more than insights into a different culture. His photographs are intended to cut deeply into the heart of anyone harboring feelings of racial superiority.

"The racism of a foreign ruling authority deprives minorities of their political, economic, and cultural sovereignty," Kuan writes. "Then come a series of misfortunes, which demonstrate the cruelty of rulers suppressing weak ethnic groups." He goes on to emphasize the significance of exerting "everlasting efforts for racial equality and harmony." It is this high personal commitment that causes Kuan to insist that he is only recording the lives of the Yami, and is not working from a superior perspective. He stands with the Yami, and is one with them in their continuing struggle to be accorded equal status in society.

Kuan could be described as a social worker. He has a strong sense of mission to help Taiwan's aborigines, and his photography is a tool he can use to realize his goals. This explains why he has not hesitated to give up the high salaries and a promising future in commercial photography with top business magazines and newspapers. Instead, he has preferred to live in substandard physical conditions with the aborigines in Patzemen or Lanyu.



Yami boats, three or seven meters long, are shaped like canoes, but are rowed by oars and guided by a long steering oar. Here, tribesmen shape a section of the extended keel, which will be used for the high projecting prow or stern.



Yami men carry a finished ten-man boat to the seashore during elaborate launching ceremonies.

And now even the photography seems at times to be secondary. Why hasn't he held another major exhibition? Why is he planning to donate half of the royalties he receives from his three volumes on Lanyu to groups representing the rights of the aborigines? And why is he travelling throughout Taiwan to speak for the aborigines? The answer lies with his sense of mission, a sense that has matured.

Kuan criticizes his own collection of Patzemen photographs as being too softhearted, too obviously ethical, and not rigorous enough. But he says that he learned from the experience, and it helped him to be more thorough about his work on Lanyu. Moreover, his choice of the Yami made his work somewhat easier, because the tribe is largely concentrated—and isolated—on an offshore island.

When Kuan went to Lanyu, he decided to remain as mobile as possible, so he did not use a tape recorder, video equipment, or even large cameras. But equipment was the least of his worries. Kuan is Chinese (he was born on Hainan Island in 1949), not an aborigine.



Before the new canoe is launched, the tribesmen perform a dance on the riverbank to dispel evil spirits.



And the history of Chinese-aborigine relations over the past two centuries has not been devoid of the problems faced by native minorities in other parts of the world. As a result, Kuan worried about how he would be perceived by the Yami. Beyond being trusted, he wanted to develop with them a relationship as between equals, human to human, not Chinese to aborigine.

He collected a large amount of data before going to Lanyu, and while there, he filled his spare time by taking copious notes and reading more about the

An old tribesman collects small crabs between waves. The Yami also depend heavily upon their annual catch of flying fish.



history of the island. All these efforts were to avoid presenting what he terms "fake reality." His overall plan was to record with camera, pen, and heart the everyday life of the Yami. Through careful observation, including through the view finder, he tried to figure out the core of the Yami civilization and the logic of their traditional wisdom.

His feelings for the tribe went far beyond pure sympathy for the disrespect and disgrace the Yami have met when facing outside economic invasion. He respects and praises their traditional wisdom, their sense of the balance between human needs and natural ecology.



A sample of his notes provides a sketchy background to a powerful photograph (p. 69): "Feb. 25: I worked with an old lady in a sweet potato field. I was too moved to write down every



A woman digs sweet potatoes, which along with taro, is the staple starch of the Yami.



Women in festival attire gather taro for a village meal in celebration of a newly completed house.

detail. Everything went well. Finally, I had some leisure in the afternoon to compile some notes and develop the negatives." One photograph is a direct shot of the old woman at work, not an illustrative report of an "exotic custom"—a term, Kuan writes, that he finds particularly condescending. The old woman and nature are in harmony, no less than taro leaves in a damp field, crowded together yet sharing the sun.

Twelve months of life with the Yami provided the opportunity to avoid another dimension of being but a reporter of exotic customs. He wrote that even the thought of "taking only pictures of the ceremony for launching a boat aroused indignation in my heart," because it would seem as though he, an observer, would be manifesting a form of "racism and inequality." Instead, "[I] felt that if I can record the process of boat-building...the honor and dignity shown by the laborers may as well serve as a way of eliminating racial discrimination." Kuan believes that greater respect for the Yami would come once people understand them better. "Traditional wisdom accumulated through





"We don't want nuclear wastes!" Taiwan's dump site for the low-grade wastes from its three nuclear power plants is on Lanyu. In February 1991, members of the Yami tribe held their fourth major protest against the practice.



Courtesy of Kuan Hsiao-jung

Kuan Hsiao-jung—"His is a professionalism based upon a respect for life in all its complexities."

generations of the Yami people has worked wonders," he writes. "There is stable balance between planting different trees in turns and rebuilding rain forests in accordance with their needs. This has fully demonstrated the ecological wisdom of complying with nature."

The Yami photographs by Kuan Hsiao-jung convey truths not only about Taiwan's aborigines and their integration with their environment, but also about the nature of mankind itself. The photographs also reflect his strong personal values and commitments. His is a professionalism based upon a respect for life in all its complexities, a respect expressed with a compassionate—and passionate—view of equality among all humans.—*Wu Jabao (吳嘉寶) is director of the Fotosoft Institute of Photography, a commercial enterprise. He is also an instructor in commercial photography in the Department of Design at the National Taiwan Academy of Arts, and in the Department of Graphic Arts at the Chinese Culture University.* ■



The daily life and traditional wisdom of the Yami recorded on film with a "view of equality toward all humans."

