The Tasaday Cave People: Real or Hoax?

In 1971, PANAMIN or the Private Association for National Minorities, a non-profit organization established by the Philippine government to protect the cultural minorities of the Philippines, headed by Filipino millionaire Manuel Elizalde Jr., discovered in the outskirts of South Cotabato in the Mindanao rainforest a tribe of indigenous people living in cave dwellings. What gave this discovery international fame, and later controversy to Elizalde and the Marcos regime, was the press release issued by PANAMIN to the media a month after their initial discovery.

According to the PANAMIN report, the newly discovered tribe people, whom they named the TASADAY, were the last remaining people on earth that lives on the Stone Age culture and lifestyle. These primitive cave dwellers, said to be living on the caverns for thousands of years, primarily eats fruits (wild yams), crabs, tadpoles, frogs, and other vegetation they can gather at the vicinity of the rainforest. Based on the report, they do not know how to cultivate land for farming or hunt for game and wild animals. The Tasadays wore leaves for their clothing and uses stone for their tools. They are also said to be peaceful loving people, they do not have words for war, enemy, or weapons.

The initial press release by Manuel Elizalde and PANAMIN on the Tasaday people made a huge buzz among the international anthropological scene. International press agencies and organizations such as the Associated Press and the National Geographic Society were strictly permitted by PANAMIN to study this primitive tribe. The 1972 National Geographic documentary entitled “The Last Tribes of Mindanao” further trusted the Tasaday discovery into the limelight. The Tasadays were very popular during this period, even famous American aviator Charles Lindbergh and Italian actress and photojournalist Gina Lollobrigida visited the Tasaday caves with the strict supervision of Elizalde and the PANAMIN group.
On April 1972, at the suggestion of Charles Lindbergh and PANAMIN, then President Ferdinand Marcos declared the 19,000 acres surrounding the Tasaday caves as the Tasaday/Manobo Blit Preserve. By 1976, President Marcos issued a Presidential decree banning all outside visitors to the Tasaday nature reserve. This move by Marcos created controversy and suspicion as by this time some media reports from both the Philippines and abroad claimed that the Tasaday discovery was just an elaborate hoax concocted by Manuel Elizalde and President Marcos himself. Subsequent independent press investigations to the Tasaday people revealed that some anthropologists who studied the Tasadays claimed that they saw some PANAMIN guards sneaking cooked rice to the cave dwellings, while another anthropologist said that he saw some Tasadays wearing modern clothings and even smoked cigarettes. The media saw the Marcos ban as a means to stop the press from revealing the real story behind the Tasaday people.

During the initial discovery by PANAMIN up to the Marcos ban, only a few anthropologists have studied the Tasaday cave people. These anthropologists were also handpicked by Mr. Elizalde himself and were only permitted to observe and study the Tasadays for a few days. They were also strictly supervised by PANAMIN staffs and agency guards. An anthropologist was booted out of the Tasaday reserve when he claimed to the press that some guards were providing food to the Tasadays.

In 1986, when the Marcos regime collapsed, Swiss journalist and anthropologist Oswald Iten visited the Tasaday caves to conduct a more thorough study to these primitive cave dwellers. He brought with him South Cotabato journalist Joey Lozano and Datu Galang Tikaw, a member of the T'Boli tribe. When they arrived at the caves, they found them to be deserted, and after further investigation on the nearby vicinity, they encountered the Tasadays, originally featured on the PANAMIN discovery, living not on caves but on huts and wooden houses, wearing jeans and t-shirts, and even smoking cigarettes. When Iten interviewed some of these so-called Tasadays, they claimed that they were never really Stone Age cave people. They only posed as primitive cave dwellers at the behest of Mr. Elizalde who promised to give them financial support and government protection if they lose all of their modern clothings and live inside the caves as a tribe of primitive cave people. They also said that before the discovery, they were farmers living on the other side of the mountain.

With the Oswald Iten discovery and revelations, the Tasadays were once again thrust into the international limelight. Foreign press rushed to the Tasaday caves to set the facts straight once and for all. Documentaries showed during this time such as 20/20’s “The Tribe That Never Was” and “Scandal, the Lost Tribe” further claimed that the Tasaday discovery in the 70’s was a Marcos-Elizalde hoax.

Not all were lost for the Tasadays as Manuel Elizalde, through his wealth and political connections, defended his Tasaday discovery until his death in 1997. He appeared on the 1987 Philippine Congress hearings on the Tasaday controversy. He also brought some members of the Tasaday tribe to Manila to file a libel suit against some Philippine professors for claiming that the Tasadays were just an elaborate hoax. In 1988, then Philippine President Corazon Aquino made a controversial statement on the Tasaday issue when she declared a closure to the Tasaday controversy by saying that the “Tasadays are a legitimate Stone Age tribe”.

Although the power and wealth of Elizalde, as claimed by some, can influence political decisions, his influence on the scientific society, particularly the international
anthropological organizations, was nonexistent. This gave the scientific community ample freedom to further study and reveal the truth to the Tasaday story. An American linguist professor from the University of Hawaii, Dr. Lawrence A. Reid, lived with the Tasaday people during the 1990’s to study their unique dialect. Dr. Reid stated in his report “Linguistic Archaeology: Tracking down the Tasaday Language” that the Tasaday language is similar to the Cotabato Manobo language, a language which is not spoken at the nearby farming community, as claimed by some Tasaday, on the Iten interview, from which they originally came. Based on his studies, Dr. Reid made a final conclusion to the Tasaday controversy. He claimed that the Tasadays were once part of the Cotabato Manobo tribe and were possibly forced to relocate, possibly by tribal wars or diseases, some 150 to 200 years ago to their present cave dwellings. They are also adapted to some modern conveniences like hunting and farming tools which, suggested by the Reid report, were acquired by the Tasadays during the 1950’s from nearby tribes. Dr. Reid also concluded that the Tasaday people during the 1971 discovery were living a primitive way of life, however, they do know how to farm and hunt for food, and they also wear modern clothing as opposed to leaves.

The Stone Age culture façade created by Manuel Elizalde and the PANAMIN group for the Tasadays is now regarded today by experts as a hoax created to claim fame and credibility for Mr. Elizalde and the Marcos government. The funds collected by PANAMIN for the Tasadays and other Philippine minorities, reported to be in millions of dollars, were also looted by Manuel Elizalde, fleeing the Philippines in 1983 and lived for a while in Costa Rica.