

# The Tasaday Stone Age people hoax

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The story of the Tasaday hoax is reviewed to help explain why so many people accepted a claim for so long of an event that turned out to be a hoax. Although termed a tribe, the Tasaday in the reports that received much of the media coverage involved only a couple of dozen of people. How the hoax was exposed, and the likely motives behind it, including money, fame, and academic prestige, are also dealt with, as is the lesson the hoax provides for us today, relative to Darwinism, including the problem of ignoring clear evidence that this group are not a Stone Age people as commonly represented. The example also illustrates the tendency to see what one wants to believe. The case also illustrates the complexity of hoaxes and the different reasons that the people involved perpetuate them.

The Tasaday were presented to the world as a ‘Stone Age’ tribe living in caves in a rainforest for over a thousand years until their isolation ended when a hunter from a neighbouring tribe stumbled onto them while setting hunting traps. This hunter mentioned their existence to Harvard-educated Manuel Elizalde Jr, who at the time was an adviser to President Ferdinand Marcos on the subject of Filipino minorities. Intrigued, in June of 1971, Elizalde chopped his way into the jungle on the southern island province of Mindanao in the Philippines, to meet these Stone Age people in an effort to learn how he thought primitive humans once lived back in early human evolutionary history.

Elizalde claimed he learned from the tribe members that they used “only the most rudimentary Stone Age tools, scraping a meager living from the rain forest. They had no agriculture, no cloth, no weapons, not even domestic animals,” nor art, music, pottery, or metal tools and wore sparse clothing made from fresh leaves. They even lacked spears, or weapons of any type, including bows and arrows, to use to hunt.<sup>1</sup> They lacked formal trade networks or regular contacts with the outside world, “living in almost total social and geographic isolation”<sup>2</sup> for probably over a thousand years.<sup>3</sup> Their only tools “were made of edge-ground stone, a type of implement dating back more than six thousand years.”<sup>4</sup>

Their whole world was their small corner of the forest. They had no word for, nor had ever seen, the ocean or even a boat, although the ocean was only a few miles away from their home. Their life involved them being “squatted in caves wearing G-strings of leaves ... [dining] on grubs, roots, and wild fruit, especially wild yams scraped from the jungle soil.”<sup>5</sup> They were described as living in a very early, long-past “evolutionary phase” and were “distant relatives of Java man and Peking man ... the first true man in the evolutionary process, who walked the earth more than half a million years ago.”<sup>6</sup> Or so the story went ... which story eventually was completely debunked.

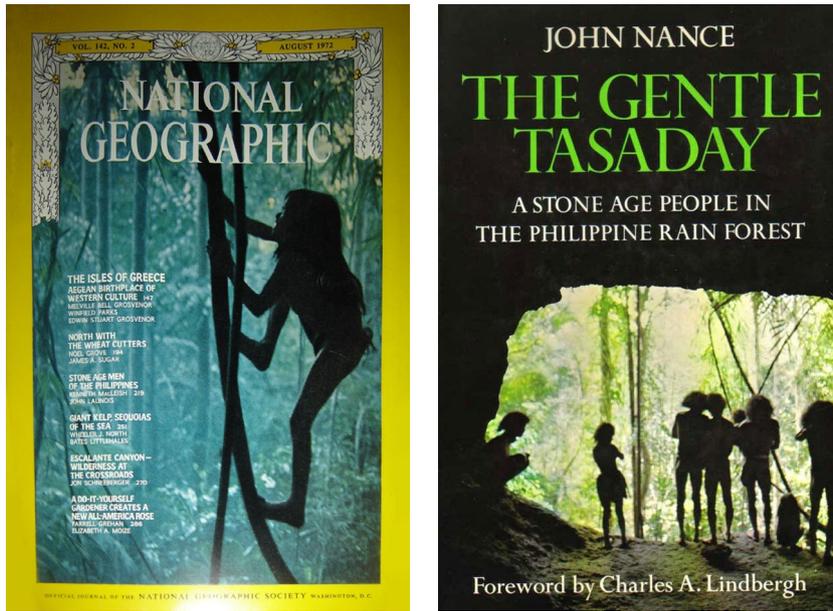
Not long after the find was announced, anthropologists, researchers in human evolution, and reporters were flying

in on helicopters in an attempt to visit the Tasaday’s jungle home to see for themselves how humans lived “a hundred centuries ago” before we humans allegedly evolved beyond the Stone Age.<sup>7</sup> The famous pilot Charles A. Lindbergh described his visit to the Tasaday as being like visiting his “ancestors a hundred thousand years ago.”<sup>8</sup> Competition among the “journalists and anthropologists for access to the Tasaday became a source of professional friction.”<sup>9</sup> The reason for the excitement was that the Tasadays “provide an unparalleled opportunity in the twentieth century to understand more fully man’s culture and behavior before the appearance of agriculture and the domestication of animals”, before the evolution of modern man.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this opportunity to better understand primitive people and human evolution, the Tasaday went from being an unknown people to an internationally famous tribe. Pictures of their dirty faces posing nude in their rocky caves soon appeared in magazines throughout the world. One anthropologist dubbed them “paleohippies.”<sup>11</sup>

Documentaries soon aired on TV, a Tasaday child climbing vines graced a *National Geographic* cover (figure 1), and NBC News gave Elizalde 50,000 dollars to do a documentary on the Stone Age tribe, which was actually not a tribe, but closer to a family of two dozen people. The *National Geographic* issue on the tribe was “one of the magazine’s best-selling issues in its history.”<sup>12</sup> Thick books backed up by hundreds of footnotes were written about them, including a bestseller by John Nance titled *The Gentle Tasaday* (figure 1). Soon even linguistic studies of their language were begun. The scientists touted that we now had living proof of human evolution from our early primitive-caveman, Stone Age ancestors.

The shy Tasaday’s ‘peacefulness’ also captivated the world. Some who studied them even claimed the Tasaday lacked words for ‘war’, ‘enemy’, or even ‘conflicts’. They were an uncorrupted version of a rainforest Garden-of-Eden humanity. Their presumed gentleness in 1971 greatly



**Figure 1.** Left, the cover of *National Geographic*, August 1972; right, the cover of *The Gentle Tasaday*, supporting the Stone Age tribe theory

contrasted with the images of violence and horror then daily coming out of the Vietnam war.

The press presented the story as a validation of human evolution. Here was a preliterate tribe living without clothes in a cave, unchanged for thousands of years, that functioned as a time capsule to give scientists a glimpse of life long before civilization appeared on Earth.<sup>13</sup> For evolutionists, it was a picture of the way primitive humans once lived, a compelling snapshot of life at an early stage of human evolution, and a much better picture than any set of fossils could ever depict.

About this time, the close association of the Tasaday with Manuel Elizalde Jr began to cause problems. After Elizalde was appointed their protector, he tightly controlled access to them. Elizalde was a wealthy man with numerous business interests and lofty political ambitions. Although living a jet-setting life, he promoted himself as a champion of tribal minorities. The tight rein he had on access to the Tasaday angered many. Elizalde even persuaded Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos to declare the Tasaday’s rainforest area a protected reserve. “This policy, not coincidentally, also served to isolate them from those whose only agenda was to study them.”<sup>14</sup> Some observers correctly surmised that Elizalde was exploiting the Tasaday to further his political ambitions.

### The Tasaday story unravels

Unfortunately, most visitors from the outside that came to “observe the Tasaday were carefully supervised and [the visits were often] brief, usually less than two or three hours,

ostensibly to ensure minimal” contaminating influence by outsiders. The supporters of the tribe claimed their concern was that outsiders would corrupt the naïve native people.<sup>9</sup> Some anthropologists, such as Daniel Stiles (Ph.D. in anthropology, University of California, Berkeley), found their attempts to do field work with the Tasaday tribe people stymied.<sup>15</sup> Professor Stiles had made all of the arrangements to visit the Tasaday tribe but was “blocked at the last minute”, one suspects due to fear that the hoax proponents would be exposed.<sup>16</sup>

“[I]n 1986, this neat little scenario [the Tasaday Stone Age tribe hoax] came crashing to earth.”<sup>11</sup> The Marcos government was overthrown, and the Tasaday Stone Age people were again accessible to outsiders. A Swiss journalist with a doctorate in anthropology,

Oswald Iten, accompanied by a Filipino reporter, seized the opportunity to find out what had become of the earth’s only living Stone Age people during the last 15 years. What they found shocked them, and soon became the basis for the conclusion that the entire Tasaday story was an outrageous hoax “equivalent to the fraudulent discovery of Piltdown fossils earlier in the century in Britain.”<sup>17</sup>

The team found the Tasaday’s caves empty, the same caves that the Tasaday had assured the world that they had lived in “always. Our father’s father and his father were there”.<sup>18</sup> The two dozen Tasaday were now living in clean huts among the Blit Manubo tribe. Gone were their dirty faces. They were neatly dressed in stylish slacks, jeans, and t-shirts, wearing jewellery and colourful scarves, living a simple, but not by any means primitive, lifestyle (figure 2).<sup>19</sup> They grew crops, lived in huts and slept on wooden beds.<sup>20</sup> Either they had amazingly rapidly both learned and adapted to modern culture, clothing, jewellery, and habits including cleanliness, or had taken part in an elaborate hoax that fooled the world

### The cavemen story turned out to be very naïve

Most anthropologists agreed that, in order to sustain themselves as a separate group, it would have required at least 400 individuals, not around 24, which would also serve in helping to avoid incest, a powerful Tasaday taboo. Furthermore, a tropical rainforest offers very little for humans to eat. Even the most primitive jungle diets must be augmented with some cultivated food. They could not have survived for very long on the diet which they claimed they survived on for generations.<sup>21</sup>

A survey of their claimed cave-home areas also revealed no evidence of long-term habitation, such as a significant level of garbage, or even evidence of long-term fire usage. This evidence would be very obvious if they had lived in the caves for centuries as they claimed. In short, acceptance of the cave story was largely because the anthropologists and evolutionists wanted to believe it, but when they began looking into the story in more detail, it very quickly fell apart.

### The hoax unravels

Upon questioning, two Tasaday admitted they were not a Stone Age tribe and never had been. They claimed that Elizalde had pressured them into posing as one, claiming:

“We didn’t live in caves until we met Elizalde. ... Elizalde forced us to live in the caves so that we’d be better cavemen. Before he came, we lived in huts ... and we farmed. We took off our clothes because Elizalde told us to do so and promised if we looked poor that we would get assistance. He gave us money to pose as Tasaday and promised us security from counter-insurgency and tribal fighting.”<sup>11</sup>

Judging by their dress that Iten observed, their acting performances paid off handsomely.<sup>19</sup>

Iten’s discovery sent shockwaves around the world—a fake Stone Age tribe that had managed to fool even the most experienced authors and anthropologists. An example of where anthropologists had been fooled by the hoax is a *Current Anthropology* magazine article that discussed the Tasaday. It uncritically assumed that the Stone-Age-tribe claims were completely legitimate, even though from the first reports problems would have been noted by critical readers.<sup>22</sup>

Reporters were again making the journey into the Filipino rainforest to visit the Tasaday, only this time for other reasons. A group of German journalists arriving within days of Iten’s departure found the Tasaday back at their caves dressed in leaves. But the Germans noticed cloth garments peeking out from beneath the Tasaday’s tactfully placed leaves. It turned out the Tasaday, caught unawares by Iten, had hastily decided to resume the ‘Stone Age tribe’ act, but weren’t sophisticated enough to pull it off without outside help. Consequently, they had pulled on their leaf cover over their clothes.

Researchers now realized there were many unanswered questions about the Tasaday. At the least, the claim that the tribe’s “discovery had been staged and scripted by the government of President Ferdinand Marcos cast serious doubt on its authenticity.”<sup>23</sup> Was it believable that the Tasaday were isolated for a thousand years, given they lived only a few miles away from a nearby village? Why did the Tasaday appear to be resistant to modern diseases, a problem because their isolation would have left them with little resistance to diseases, a condition which the South American Indians were

in when the Spanish arrived many years earlier? Why had Elizalde so tightly controlled outside access to the tribe? And why, if they lacked knowledge of the use of steel, did many of their instruments and utensils appear to have been cut with steel knives? One study by anthropologist Gerald Berreman of the stone tools the Tasaday claimed to use in order to survive concluded they were nonfunctional and amateurish like “seventh graders might be expected to invent in response to a classroom assignment”.<sup>24</sup>

Faced with these questions, and armed with confessions from the Tasaday themselves, “The accumulated evidence ... left little doubt among many in the academic community that the entire Tasaday episode was a deception perpetrated by political actors, led by Elizalde.”<sup>25</sup> They also concluded the Tasaday story was a hoax dreamed up by Elizalde to make money, now estimated to be more than 35 million dollars.<sup>26</sup> This judgement was expressed in documentaries about the Tribe, such as *Scandal, the Lost Tribe* and *The Tribe That Never Was*.

### The revenge of the Tasaday

However, the Tasaday still had friends (Elizalde, in particular) who attempted to repair the tribe’s now battered reputation. Despite Marcos’s overthrow, Elizalde wielded enough influence in the Philippines to mount a vigorous pro-Tasaday campaign. He led the defence of the Tasaday when the Philippine Congress investigated the hoax claims in 1987. The Congress eventually decided that the issue of fraud should be left to the scientists, not politicians.

In 1988, Elizalde flew some Tasaday tribe members to Manila to file a lawsuit against the Philippine professors who were calling the ‘Stone Age’ claim a hoax. The Tasaday then became the first Stone Age tribe to sue for libel! These efforts paid off when, also in 1988, the new Philippine president, Corazon Aquino, declared that the Tasaday were a “legitimate Stone Age tribe”.

These political tactics had little effect on scientific opinion. Some things about the tribe were proven to be true. For example, evidence exists that the tribe did live as isolated nomadic hunter-gatherers until 1971. While it is true that a detailed examination of their language by linguist Clay Johnson, who had lived with a neighbouring tribe for 10 years, concluded that the Tasaday language was “virtually identical to that of their neighbours”,<sup>21</sup> it nonetheless appears to have been in some ways distinct. Linguists came to believe it likely split from the language of the nearby Manobo people around 200 years ago.<sup>27</sup> Fieldwork, such as by Lawrence Reid of the University of Hawaii, who lived with the Tasaday for extended periods throughout the 1990s, identified their language as a dialect of Cotabato Manobo.

Reid also concluded that the Tasaday had not been isolated for a thousand years but likely had splintered off from the



Image: Susanne Haerpfer/CC BY-SA 3.0

**Figure 2.** The Tasaday tribe taken in front of their home territory. Photo by Susanne Haerpfer taken in 2012. Not many females are pictured, and six children are included.

Cotabato Manobo community a few years ago, perhaps fleeing into the jungle to escape an outbreak of disease.

In addition, the tribe had frequently made contact with neighbouring tribes, and through this contact acquired steel tools and learned agricultural skills. Consequently, when the outside world discovered them in 1971, they were definitely not an isolated Stone Age tribe as first claimed. However, they were living in what we would term primitive conditions, as were many tribes in this and other countries, such as some tribes in the Amazon in the late 1960s.

Supporters of the Tasaday still had to account for the Tasaday's confession that they were a hoax. Then two Tasaday claimed that they had made up this confession because they had been bribed. Friends of the Tasaday credited this confession to the anti-Marcos sentiment that ran high in the Philippines in 1986. Since the Tasaday had been considered a showpiece of his regime, a means by which he projected an idyllic view of the Philippines to the outside world, they became a target of choice for Marcos's detractors. Furthermore, if the Tasaday Stone Age claims were deemed a hoax, the tribe's rights to the reserve that protected their land would vanish, and the loggers could move in.

### Making sense of the Tasaday

At the least, Elizalde was guilty of having encouraged the Tasaday to try to look *more* primitive for the benefit of the cameras. He asked them to wear leaves and hide their steel tools. Thus, he distorted the truth, as did the Marcos government, which shamelessly promoted the Tasaday as a quaint symbol to showcase an idyllic and exotic view of the Philippines.

However, the Tasaday themselves appear to have willingly played the role asked of them. They liked the attention and hoped that Elizalde would provide them with significant financial aid, which he did. The fact that they were wearing nice clothes including jeans and t-shirts when Iten found them is hard to explain just by the 15 years of acculturation they had experienced since 1971. There was also a surreal moment in 1988 when members of the Tasaday agreed to participate in a cultural festival at nearby Lake Sebu, during which they posed in imitation caves, like exhibits in a zoo, for the benefit of onlookers.

The media also repeatedly misrepresented the Tasaday. In 1971 it hyped them as a peacenik, utopian, Stone Age tribe. It could only see the Tasaday in

sensationalistic black-and-white terms, as either throwbacks to the Stone Age, or a fraud, never in shades of grey. Almost everyone involved in the Tasaday story distorted the truth for their own purposes. The supposed evolutionary discovery was so "transparent and compelling it ... was not strictly speaking, dependent on the *truth* [emphasis in original]."<sup>28</sup> In the end, most of the claims about the tribe's primitiveness were documented to be, at best, gross exaggerations, or errors.<sup>29</sup>

Understandably, "Appalled by the apparent humbug that had taken in so many, including most anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association asked linguist Thomas Headland to organize a symposium on the Tasaday for their 1989 annual meeting."<sup>21</sup> The contributions, which were published in 1992, found that of the participants, "most concluded from the evidence that the Tasaday had been manipulated to play the role of a primeval cave people as part of a cynical hoax."<sup>21</sup>

### The media completely sold on the Stone Age tribe myth

A major question that arises is: "Why were Westerners, and Americans in particular, so willing—and even eager—to embrace the Tasaday [hoax]?" "Why were we so fascinated with the notion of noble primitives? They never hold up under scientific scrutiny."<sup>30</sup> The answer can be found from reading the many publications about the Tasaday, mostly articles supporting evolution, in this case evolution from primitive cavemen to modern men. The best illustration of the fact that the media was completely sold on the 'Stone Age tribe' myth was the example of *National Geographic*,

which published two gullible articles on them, but subsequently gave no hint that their story had been irresponsible.

One of these two accounts described their Stone Age hardware as so primitive that, “For the Tasadays, the height of technological sophistication has been a knife with a bamboo blade or a hammer of chipped stone bound with rattan to a wooden handle.”<sup>31</sup> The story also claimed they used crude digging sticks, stone scrapers, bamboo knives and had no word in their vocabulary for ‘war’ as we would expect from self-respecting cavemen. The magazine even added that the Tasaday described some of their visitors as “strangely clad men from the sky, bearing miraculous gifts—beads, mirrors, metal knives, even a flashlight.”<sup>32</sup>

The anthropologists, the *National Geographic* added, had long been looking “forward to the rare opportunity of studying firsthand a people who ... have lived in isolation for hundreds of years” or longer. The three-page article had three illustrations of nude ‘primitive’ men, women, and children doing caveman things with primitive tools.

The *National Geographic* follow-up, a 30-page article that contained 19 pictures of nude men, women, and children, likewise had the Tasaday doing what you would expect Neanderthal cavemen would do. The Tasaday were very dirty, unkempt with long straggly hair, many sitting naked on rocks in barren rocky caves in a picture that looked staged; and, from what we know now, most of the posed photos and activities likely were staged for the camera. The rugged mountainous area shown in the pictures was described as “a primeval Eden” inhabited by “24 people who lived much as our ancestors did thousands of years ago.”<sup>33</sup>

The children looked like they had mud smeared on their faces just for the picture, which is likely what occurred. One young boy was shown “climbing vines ... with the ease of a monkey ... . His major worry was lack of a mate. Only five of the Tasadays are women, and all have husbands.”<sup>34</sup> We later learned one Tasaday man had two wives.<sup>35</sup> I counted nine children in one picture alone. The rest of the tribal people shown were young adults, and I saw no elderly adults in any of the pictures. This fact was explained by claiming their life span was very short, even though the researchers saw little evidence of disease.<sup>36</sup> In the distant past, a smallpox epidemic evidently occurred, but other than this they were very healthy. As noted, 24 people sheltered for thousands of years would have required almost all of them to be involved in incest, a practice apparently forbidden among these people.<sup>37</sup>

Now we know they found wives among nearby tribes. The person who discovered the Tasadays was, the *National Geographic* claimed, greeted as the “fulfillment of their ancestors’ promise”<sup>38</sup> of a saviour that would come down from the sky (in this case a helicopter they called the “Big Sacred Bird”).<sup>39</sup> This outsider would come to love and protect them,

and lead them out of darkness. Their saviour was recognized as Manuel (‘Manda’) Elizalde.

A *Time* magazine article indicated that the Tasaday were “the most primitive human beings so far discovered on this guilty planet”, adding that, to study these “prehistoric people”, several dozen “scientists and journalists and film people” visited the Tasaday.<sup>40</sup> One example of the work of the “film people” is the *National Geographic* video special titled ‘The Last Tribes of Mindanao’. The *National Geographic* also “published a cover story with dramatic pictures” about the Tasaday.<sup>41</sup> The hoax was also represented as fact in major encyclopedias and references books. Feder concluded that the “motivation for the hoax, [was] likely ... to control and to profit from ... a gullible world.”<sup>21</sup>

### Summary

As concluded by University of Chicago anthropologist Fred Eggan, the claim “That the Tasaday were an isolated Stone Age people is nonsense”.<sup>42</sup> Instead, they were very poor people living close to nature in a Philippine jungle who became swept up in, and manipulated by, global events beyond their control. This version of events isn’t as compelling as the versions that made headlines in 1971 and 1986, but is a good illustration of how the truth is often more complicated than it at first appears.

Although proving evolution was not the main motivation of the hoax, evolution was nevertheless a major reason why the hoax was uncritically accepted for so long in spite of the irredeemable problems with the original story. It is also a reason why it was so widely repeated as fact in so many sources, including mass media publications, references books, and encyclopedias. It also may explain why almost every USA publication that covered the Tasaday hoax, including the *National Geographic* and the *New York Times*, not only did not print a retraction after it had been exposed, but “actively upheld the old story” that claimed the Tasaday were a Stone Age Tribe isolated for generations.<sup>43</sup> The fact is, the claim of “The discovery of an isolated primitive tribe living in forest caves on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao in 1971 has become a disputed milestone in the history of cultural anthropology.”<sup>17</sup>

It is true that the myth was finally exposed, but, in the end, not by Darwinists attempting to critically research the story, but more by those interested in harvesting the lush valuable wood where the Tasaday people resided. The Tasaday hoax even earned a place in *The Encyclopedia of Hoaxes*. The editor, after listing five convincing reasons to classify the Tasaday event as a hoax, wrote in his conclusion that the Tasaday affair was an outright hoax similar to the Piltdown hoax.<sup>44</sup> In the end, the Tasaday people

“... admitted to being members of a nearby tribe

with normal human vices, who had been recruited for the greatest ever anthropological fraud (more than comparable with Sir Cyril Burt's doctoring of data on inheritance of intelligence within psychology). In recent years the continuing controversy between Tasaday's defenders and detractors has wreaked havoc inside anthropology, with scientific reputations at stake—if not a whole world-view, or even the credibility of science itself.<sup>745</sup>

Part of the problem is that “anthropology fieldwork produces ‘fictions’ that are vulnerable to criticism like any other work of literature.”<sup>746</sup> As concluded by the British Broadcasting Corporation documentary *Tasaday, Trial in the Jungle*, if a group of 24 people were able to have “pulled off the most elaborate hoax in scientific history ... [and] fool every anthropologist who ever saw them, how credible is the science of anthropology?”<sup>728</sup> Actually, most, but not every anthropologist was fooled. Although many wanted to believe the Stone Age story, after the 1986 Iten report was published, anthropologists for the first time began to study the Tasaday claims in earnest with a skeptical eye, and when they did this, even they were surprised by how inept the hoax was, and how gullible they had been to accept it as valid.

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