“Spirits Fly Slow” (pahapahad no anito) : Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Cultural Revivalism in Lan-Yu∗

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to widen the relational discourse regime of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) research in Taiwan, and deepen the socio-cultural analysis using local narratives of species and places to illuminate the contemporary environmental practices that result from emic cultural insights of ancestry. The Yami people on the island of Lan-Yu employ various plants and animals, via an association with spiritual symbolism, to manifest their visualizations of an ancestral power. Past Yami TEK referred to ancestral ownership or group privilege through landscape remembrance in a sense of the genealogical institution regime, and expressed the intimate feelings that occurred when they encountered the diverse species and places of the island, especially those which served as remembrances of ancestral acts and/or the manifestations of spiritual beings. After the introduction of many national projects during the last century, the once fertile traditional harvest of the forest and ocean vanished for decades, resulting in cultural schism between generations, as exemplified by the frustration, melancholy, and a sense of loss pervading the Yami elders in their effort to convey a cultural heritage to the younger generation, a heritage that remains based on an environment that is no longer visible. Villagers mourn their sacred groves where vanishing species and barren rock indicate the long-term absence of intimate interactions with ancestry once found in the “golden days of old”. The revival of interests in TEK among the islanders is considered a desirable and venerable tool in their efforts to combat landscape degradation. Moreover, the re-focused TEK discourse in the tribal conservation was persistently used by Yami to “heal” landscape through the reconnection of ancestor-offspring relations. After commercial exploitation of an endemic species, the Golden Butterfly, a recovery project was initiated in the 2000s, and serves to demonstrate how the Yami TEK of a culturally trivialized species has been successfully over-emphasized in a contemporary tribal revitalization of ancestral ecological views as means to preserve an endangered species.

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Although governmental funding stopped since 2004 due to the tight budget, the indigenous self-sustaining landscape management employed by the Yami operates autonomously until now. It has greatly encouraged local Iranmeylek villagers that their landscape care is as good or better than those of the scientifically minded professionals representing the Taiwan’s conservation bureaucracy. Moreover, it exemplifies a spiritually empowered community development strategy that may prove to be widely applicable in the indigenous societies. Although global economic integration has significantly marginalized the locally subsistent Yami communities, recent tribal highlights of ancestry follow the ethos of TEK, articulating the global conservation paradigm with the ancestral embodiments embedded on the landscape. Contemporary TEK unveil a renewing strategy, also as an ultimate goal of cultural struggle, to experience ancestry at large which exemplifies how local Yami interact with the globalization process through their landscape practice.

Keywords: traditional ecological knowledge, ancestry, landscape, cultural revival, place names, environmental experience, butterfly conservation, Yami, Lan-Yú (Orchid Island)