

*Accidental Cosmopolitans and Other Ironies of Indigenous Place-Making in A'tolan, Taiwan (proposal for research 2011-2012)*

### **project overview and scope**

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, indigenous men from Taiwan's East Coast enlisted in the island country's far ocean fishing fleet. The work, although dangerous, was lucrative; and the three to five year stints brought the men, mostly of the Amis ethnic group, to ports of call in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. Accidental cosmopolitans whose ventures financed competitive house building in their home villages, these men form a cultural cohort whose experiences contrast with and at times unsettle dominant narratives of indigeneity.

In this project, I focus on ironies of indigenous place making in A'tolan (Dulan), a town in southeast Taitung (Taidong) County. Paying particular attention to practices in which A'tolan Amis mediate desires for cosmopolitan presence and demands of emplaced belonging, I will examine their particular formation of indigenous place in relationship to other constructions of what indigenous people should be: To what extent are experiences of far ocean fishing commemorated, and in what materials? How do Amis interpret these materials, and how do these interpretations contrast or connect with a majority imagination of indigenous people? To those of indigenous elites?

A majority Taiwanese imagination defines indigenous people as most local and situates them as marking Taiwan's difference from China. Part of this imagination is the construction of places like A'tolan as pristine landscapes belonging to rustic "mountain people" (*shandiren*). Far ocean fishing belies such constructions. Sugarcane covered much of the plains and hillsides surrounding A'tolan from the 1930s until the 1980s, when the sugar economy in Taitung ground to a halt. With the end of industrial sugar, its particular landscape was replaced by the orchards and secondary growth forest seen around A'tolan today. Where outsiders see purity and authenticity, this landscape also indexes economic marginality and displacement for A'tolan Amis. It is the landscape in which Amis men built houses from their years' work on floating factories. And far from rustic, the far ocean fishing cohort cultivated a cosmopolitan orientation realized in both housing styles and musical taste.

Yet this irony is entangled with another: that of indigenous activism. While A'tolan Amis men were working the fishing fleet, an indigenous rights movement erupted among a cohort of indigenous Taiwanese people associated with academic institutions in Taipei. The movement called for recognition of indigenous Taiwanese as indigenous and not mountain people, the ability to employ indigenous names in official documents, and return of indigenous lands. Cultural as well as political activists, this cohort fostered music and dance troupes. They also advocated a "return to the village" to reinvigorate themselves, if not the villagers, through traditional culture. Men in the fishing cohort seem to have conceived a very different type of being indigenous. Do their contrasting subject positions have points of conjuncture? Or do these subject positions represent competing cultural formations of indigeneity? I hope that I will discover the answer to these questions through close attention to practices in which each position makes indigenous places the center of ethical problems.

### **methodology and project schedule**

My focus on music and houses follows from the importance of each as materials with which Amis engage in place making. Moreover, the contrasting possibilities of these two

media will allow me to illustrate tensions within Amis ethics of locality that can illuminate discussions of contemporary place making more generally.

Although Amis society is matrilineal, with women owning and cultivating land, the basic economic unit tends to be a reproductive couple and their unmarried children. A'tolan Amis also practice an age grade organization in which all men belong to an age set (*kapot*). Kapot members contribute to the kapot as a corporate unit, particularly during the annual harvest festival (*kiluma'an*), in which they maintain a meeting place in one kapot member's house. Because the *malikoda*, a circle dance with accompanying singing, forms an icon of the community during *kiluma'an* and of the family during family gatherings, those in the community felt the absence of these men as a lack of pull and vigor during participatory musical practices, even as the houses served as meeting places for kapot.

For far ocean fishermen, houses were an ethical substance, the material with which they maintained a relationship with A'tolan and formed themselves as good husbands, fathers, and kapot members. In interviews with these men and their families, I will (1) document their memories of house building: the initial construction date, what influenced their decisions concerning layout and finishes, when construction had to be delayed for lack of ready cash, and subsequent additions. I will (2) also ask about who has lived in the house and who lives there currently. These questions will form the basis of an understanding of what the house means in the context of A'tolan, of particular importance in cases when the family now primarily resides in Taipei or other cities. I have already conducted a few of the above interviews and will complete several more during a concentrated period of time surrounding the annual harvest festival in 2011 and the new year holiday in 2012, when most A'tolan Amis return to the town from cities elsewhere on the island. Additionally, I will (3) perform archival research on house construction in Taitung County during the 1980s, particularly in relationship to state-sponsored projects of community development, which during this period advanced "urbanization of the countryside" and other assimilation policies, such as the "lowlandization of mountain villages" (*shandicun de pingdihua*). Archival research and analysis of interviews will examine the extent to which competitive house building was interpellated within these state discourses of social improvement aimed at marginal populations.

In addition to house building, I will also examine musical practices. If house building represents an investment in a hometown in the context of displacement, Amis musical practices, through their extensive dialogue with popular musics, often index a cosmopolitan subject position. Curiously, a Latin sound has become a feature of several Amis musicians from A'tolan and elsewhere along the East Coast. In interviews with some of these musicians, they have claimed that they never studied or listened to these musics formally but imbibed this sound in their hometowns long before they had a label for them. In work on musical practices, I will ask how the experience of far ocean fishing contributed to the cosmopolitanism of Amis. Do the complexities of a cosmopolitan subject position sounded musically parallel, reinforce, or contradict objectification of emplaced belonging through house building?

As in my work on house building, my investigation of Amis musical practices in relationship to far ocean fishing will be double edged. On the one hand, I will examine how musical practices commemorate, interpret, or incorporate materials from far ocean fishing (such as melodic motifs from foreign ports of call); on the other, I will investigate how these musical practices have become part of a Taiwanese imagination of indigeneity. To make these observations, I will (1) document everyday contexts of

musical participation in A'tolan and Taipei, but also (2) observe places where indigenous music making is produced or disseminated to a majority audience, and (3) work with local folklorists and ethnomusicologists investigating the development of Amis popular music.

### **contribution and outcomes**

A'tolan Amis cultivate a cosmopolitan orientation in which A'tolan is peculiarly Amis but not so different from other marginal places that they know from travel or the media. They realize this stance most notably in the ways that they make indigenous places through musical practices and house building. In this regard, far ocean fishing resembles socioeconomic and political contexts in which indigeneity appears elsewhere. Much recent work in cultural anthropology has investigated indigeneity as an “emergent” phenomenon that cannot be extricated from these contexts. Several scholars have shown that its forms bear traces of contradictions in modern notions of citizenship as members of indigenous groups make claims on the state based on the recognition of corporate rather than individual rights. Yet others argue that the burdens indigeneity prescribes as a condition for recognition are often more than would-be indigenous people can bear. In general, anthropologists have shown that indigeneity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century derives from globally circulating discourses as much as it might from a privileged relationship to place. Nonetheless, much of this work focuses primarily on institutional actors and defines indigeneity as an instrumental category. As a result, the particular forms of ethics and affect associated with indigeneity have remained relatively unstudied. Because indigeneity can condense a wide variety of demands (for recognition, restitution, or redress) on the basis of a relationship to place, its associated ethics of locality deserve more careful attention. Through an examination of how one form of indigeneity, created by a cohort of accidental cosmopolitans, may participate in a broader cultural formation of indigeneity on Taiwan, this project will develop a model for better understanding discourses of indigeneity and, more broadly, the value of place within ethical formations generally.

This project will result in academic publications, including a book length monograph. In addition to sound documentation on CD or website that will accompany the monograph to be completed after the fellowship period, my collaborators on Taiwan will work on a documentary film. I also hope to work with musicians to create a production of songs of / about far ocean fishermen. Through this work with indigenous musicians and other cultural workers on this project, I hope to create work that crosses beyond rather than remaining immured within the academe.