

Tasaday

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An image released by the media, circa 1970. *Photograph by John Nance.*

The **Tasaday** (IPA [təˈsɑːdɑɪ]) were purportedly a group of **uncontacted** people living deep in the **rainforest** on the **Philippine** island of **Mindanao**. When the media reported they had been living in isolation since the **Stone Age**, the group gained international fame in the 1970s. The Tasaday received worldwide press and the attention of **anthropologists** and **scholars** throughout the 1970s, and then again in the 1980s, when **Oswald Iten** claimed that they were a **hoax** masterminded by **Manuel Elizalde, Jr.** [1]

Michael Crichton used the Tasaday as an example in one of his speeches on bad science, relating "More recently still the gentle Tasaday of the Philippines turned out to be a publicity stunt, a nonexistent tribe." [2]

Manuel Elizalde

Manuel Elizalde was the head of **PANAMIN**, the Philippine government agency created in 1968 to protect the interests of cultural minorities. He was the son of a wealthy father of Spanish lineage and an American mother. Some found it unusual that a notorious playboy would have interest in a group of primitive people. He took credit for discovering the Tasaday, which he did on June 7, shortly after a local barefoot Blit hunter told him of a sporadic contact over the years with a handful of primitive forest dwellers. He released this to the media a month later, and many excited people began the long task of clearing the thickest forest in the world. Weeks later, visitors were only three hours away when their way was blocked by the PANAMIN guards, who only answered to Elizalde. Elizalde

allowed only a handful of the "most important visitors" to meet them.

Introduction of the Tasaday

Manuel Elizalde, Jr. brought the Tasaday to the attention of PANAMIN. With a small group including Elizalde's **bodyguard**, **helicopter pilot**, a **doctor**, a 19-year-old Yale student named **Edith Terry**, and local tribespeople for **interpreting** attempts, Elizalde met the Tasaday in an arranged clearing at the edge of the forest in June 1971.

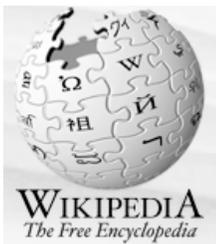
In March 1972, another meeting occurred between the Tasaday, Elizalde, and members of the press and media including the **Associated Press** and the **National Geographic Society**, this time at the Tasaday's secluded cave home site. This meeting was popularly reported in the August 1972 issue of *National Geographic* by Kenneth MacLeish, which featured on its cover a photograph of a Tasaday boy climbing **vines**.

Since these first meetings and reports, the group was subject to a great deal of further publicity, including a *National Geographic* documentary, "The Last Tribes of Mindanao" (shown **December 1, 1972**). The Tasaday became so popular as to attract such famed visitors as **Charles A. Lindbergh** and **Gina Lollobrigida**.

Ban on visitation

In April 1972, Philippine **President Ferdinand Marcos** (at the behest of PANAMIN and Lindbergh) declared 45,000 **acres** (182 km²) of land surrounding the Tasaday's ancestral caves as the **Tasaday/Manobo Blit Preserve**. By this time, eleven anthropologists had studied the Tasaday in the field, but none for more than six weeks, and in 1976, Marcos closed the **preserve** to all visitors.

One of the reasons for the closing was a number of suspicions that arose. Apparently, their dead were left in the forest under a layer of leaves, yet no bones, compost, or the like were found. Secondly, although the Tasaday had claimed to be living in the jungle at their cave shelter full time, there was no garbage or sign of human waste. Elizalde claimed that among the 24 remaining Tasaday, there was no wife-sharing, adultery, or divorce. Their diet was claimed to be all forage, i.e., wild fruit, palm pith, forest yams, tadpoles, grubs, and roots. The calories in such a diet are less than the amount needed for survival, so they should have been paper thin. The



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apparent yams that they survive on were experiencing a shortage around the area where they lived. When dietitians and health advisors suggested further research, they were promptly banned from the Tasaday's home. An anthropologist reported seeing soldiers slipping cooked rice to the Tasaday, and he was banned as well.

Prior to the closing of the preserve to visitors, PANAMIN funded essentially all efforts to find, visit, and study, the Tasaday, with most of the money used to "protect" them coming from Elizalde and his family, with a lesser portion provided by the Philippine government. As contact between the Tasaday and the world outside their forest virtually ceased with the banning of visitors to the preserve in 1976, so did expenditures on the Tasaday by PANAMIN.

Elizalde's flight and return

In 1983, some time after the [assassination](#) of Philippine opposition political leader [Benigno Aquino, Jr.](#), Elizalde fled the Philippines. It had been rumored that he fled with and eventually squandered millions of [dollars](#) from a foundation set up to protect the Tasaday.

Elizalde returned to the Philippines in 1987 and stayed until his death on [May 3, 1997](#), of leukemia. During this time, from 1987 to 1990, Elizalde claimed he'd spent more than one million [U.S. dollars](#) defending the Tasaday against hoax claims. During this time, Elizalde also founded the [Tasaday Community Care Foundation](#), or TCCF.

Oswald Iten

After President Marcos was deposed in 1986, [Swiss](#) anthropologist and [journalist](#) [Oswald Iten](#), accompanied by [Joey Lozano](#) (a journalist from [South Cotabato](#)) and [Datu Galang Tikaw](#) (a member of the T'boli tribe to serve as chief translator, though he did not speak Tasaday), made an unauthorized investigation to the Tasaday caves where they spent about two hours with six Tasaday.

Upon returning from the forest, Iten and Lozano reported the caves deserted and further claimed the Tasaday were simply members of known local tribes who put on the appearance of living a Stone Age lifestyle under pressure from Elizalde.^[3]

"In retrospect, the fraud seemed obvious. Why, some wondered, were the caves so clean? Even a

Stone Age tribe would have had garbage, such as crab shells or scraps of food. And how did such a small tribe avoid inbreeding? Also, the Tasaday were a mere three hours walk from a modern village. It seemed odd that they would not have encountered this village while searching for food."^[4]

Four months later, for [ABC television's 20/20](#) program "The Tribe that Never Was", two young Tasaday men (Lobo and Adug) told the [20/20](#) interviewer (through Galang, hired by [20/20](#)) they indeed were not Tasaday. These claims of a hoax thrust the Tasaday into worldwide headlines again.

Controversy

Two years after "The Tribe That Never Was", during the making of a [BBC documentary](#), the same two Tasaday (Lobo and Adug) watched the [20/20](#) program with a group of other Tasaday and confessed to the gathering that they had lied to the interviewers because, "Galang said if we would say what he told us we could have [cigarettes](#), clothing, anything we wanted." ^[5] On future [video](#) and radio programs, Galang confirmed the Tasadays' statement. Nonetheless, the controversy had already incited studies among scholars, [politicians](#) and businessmen alike.

References

- [↑] ["Stone Age Tasaday"](#), *Museum of Hoaxes*, accessed [2 April 2008](#).
- [↑] <http://www.michaelcrichton.net/speech-environmentalismaseligion.html>
- [↑] [BBC - h2g2 - The Tasaday Hoax - A726653](#)
- [↑] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A726653>
- [↑] <http://www.tasaday.com/>