

Amis

Introduction to the ethnic group

The Amis are the largest ethnic group among Taiwanese aborigines. As of 2004, their population exceeded 160,000. The Amis people call themselves Amis or Pangcah. In their language, Amis means “the North,” and Pangcah means “human being,” “people with the same ethnicity,” or “people of the same descent.” In early documents, the Amis were referred to as Ami or Amis, and other similar names. Various Amis groups use different names to describe the Amis. People from the Hualien region call themselves Pangcah and people from the Taitung area are called Amis. Currently, this group is mainly considered to be “Plain Aborigines” and is most commonly referred to as Amis.

The number of residents in their communities ranges from several hundred to several thousand. The most significant feature of Amis villages is their proximity to water. The entire group is most often categorized into five sub-groups: the Nanshih Ami, the Hsiukuluan Ami, the Coastal Ami, the Peinan Ami, and the Hengchun Ami. However, in reality, the entire Amis group has integrated members of other ethnic groups, as well, for example, the Sakizaya group, some Kavalan, and some Pingpu migrants from western Taiwan. The Amis' culture is very tolerant and very open to other cultures.

Geographical Distribution

Amis communities have been moved many times due to interaction with other ethnic groups and geographical factors. In early times, domestic conflicts or threats from the Bunun, the Atayal or the Puyuma pushed Amis communities to migrate. The migration of the Pingpu people from western Taiwan, and the movement of a large number of Han Chinese to the Hualien and Taitung areas are other factors influencing the Amis' migration.

As early as the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), some Amis people had resettled to urban Taipei and formed the oldest urban aboriginal group. Following the development of the deep sea fishery industry in the 1960's, many Amis crew members left their hometowns for Kilung, Taipei and Kaohsiung. But when deep sea fishery declined, many of these Amis sailors abandoned their fishing nets for concrete molds, moving around different cities to work on construction sites. Nowadays, Amis people are spread throughout large cities. Some of them have built new communities. Migrant issues have affected all of Amis society and culture.

Social Structure and Social Organizations

The age-set system and matrilineal kinship organization are two main characteristics of Amis communities. Amis communities are mainly centralized villages. In the past, their kinship ties were considered to be matrilineal, but recently, research has called into question the idea that kinship is based on matrilineal lineage, and scholars have instead favored an approach that views the “household” as the center of the social system. The study of the age-set system was more focused on functions and group settings, such as the heritage naming system of the Nanshi Tribe or the creative naming system of the Malan Tribe. Scholars also concentrated on the age-set system as an organization with a political, military or educational function or even an organization serving to provide men with some psychological compensation in a matrilineal society. However, the study of the Amis age-set system has shifted its focus to the inner operating scheme of the age-set

organization and on the hierarchical and complementary relations among the age-set organization and other social organizations. Researchers have also emphasized the age-set system as a mechanism between the Amis people and the outside world which stores, operates, and practices the concepts of time and memory.

The age-set organization was indeed an important political organization for the operation of traditional Amis communities. In this organization, the elders are endowed with political powers by the tribe. It can be said that the Amis is an elder respecting society. When boys reach the age of twelve, they are enrolled in the preparation group in the age-set organization. After 3-8 years, once they have passed the rite of passage, they become formal members in the age-set organization. Each age set also receives a name. Nowadays, the annual Harvest Festival is the only occasion for people to observe how rigorous the age-set organization is. Outside this event, members in the same group are good friends who support and help each other at any time, even though the organization is not active in daily life. The age sets have three basic naming systems, including heritage names, creative names and a mixture of these two names. Due to their wide geographical dispersion, the Amis tribes are extremely diverse, but all of them have implemented the age-set system, which is a shared feature of their culture.

<http://www.dmtip.gov.tw/Eng/amis.htm>, also with more information.