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Letters

Tasaday tales

"The Strange Case of the Tasaday" (SN: 5/6/89, p.280) is a brave attempt to sort fact from fiction in this most lurid story. Yet the author did miss a few salient points. First, he did not point out that original research was carried out with cameras rolling; field work and film work were often simultaneous. This is a rather unscientific way of obtaining reliable anthropological data on a reportedly isolated group of people.

Second, not one of the original scientists or reporters ever walked into the area in the early 1970s. They never questioned the use of the chopper for transportation. All were told that the area was too far, too dangerous, too difficult to reach on foot. The investigative and science reporters such as Dr. Oswald Iten of Switzerland and I used our legs and eyes when we went to meet the Tasaday in 1986, after Marcos had fled.

Had the original investigators taken the

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Cover: Many gizmos of the next Machine Age may be visible only under a microscope. Shown here is a photo of an actual micro-motor that would fit inside the shaft of a human hair. The pastel colors are photographic artifacts. By setting up a voltage difference across the rotor's teeth and the shorter stator poles surrounding them, researchers can use static electricity to set the rotor spinning. Graduate student Yu-Chong Tai of the University of California's Sensor and Actuator Center made this device. (Photo: Courtesy University of California, Berkeley)



Departments

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day's hike into the area, they would have found Tboli and Manobo living side by side, intermingling and intermarrying, speaking each other's dialects, as tribal people throughout Southeast Asia do. They would have learned that the Manobo and Tboli, popularly called Tasaday, are well known in the surrounding area and always have been. They would have learned that there are linguistic idiosyncrasies in the Manobo dialect that vary from valley to valley, range to range — linguistic idiosyncrasies that have no relationship to physical isolation.

I must make one correction in your account of my work. I never wrote THE SCIENCES that Tasaday informants told me they spoke Tboli and Blit Manobo. The tribesmen told our ABC audience, and I told THE SCIENCES, that they spoke both Tboli and Manobo. The tribesmen in question do not distinguish between the Manobo spoken where they live — near Blit — and that spoken by other Manobo communities in this tiny province. They were quite clear that Manobo tribesmen in some areas of

South Cotabato display some word differences from Manobo in other areas, much as words and pronunciations vary between Manhattan and the Bronx. This is the way dialects work. Isolation is not an issue.

Regarding the alleged earlier plague called "fugu," which Carol Molony translated in 1972 as "smallpox": Fugu, in fact, means "leprosy." It is not the sort of infectious disease endemic to the Philippines — like measles or chicken pox — that would have rapidly decimated a reportedly isolated population of 26 souls on sudden contact with an airborne bevy of note takers and picture snappers. Had the tribesmen been truly isolated, the mere presence of outsiders bearing those latent viruses and other diseases of "civilization" would have surely killed them off. From a medical point of view, the Tasaday could not have been isolated.

Judith Moses
New York, N.Y.

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How to Think about Statistics

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Letters continued from p.3

Has anyone ever simply asked the elder members of the tribe who were supposedly recruited in 1970 if that was indeed the case?

Judith W. Schrafft
Palm Beach, Fla.

Yes. Journalist John Nance recently went to the Philippines and showed tribe members a videotape of the 1986 ABC documentary claiming the Tasaday are a hoax. Nance says they were astounded at the program's claims. Critics charge, however, that perpetrators of a long-running hoax are not about to fess up when questioned about their authenticity. — B. Bower

Replacing 'imprinting'

As a chemist trying to keep up with the fascinating new developments in biology, I was annoyed by the use of the word "imprinting" in "A Genetic Gender Gap" (SN: 5/20/89, p.312). Biologists already use this term logically to describe the "imprinting" of a parental image on a newborn. Why adapt this informative word to an unrelated phenomenon rather than use a more descriptive word such as "concealing," "cloaking" or "sequestering"?

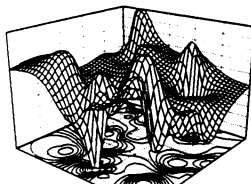
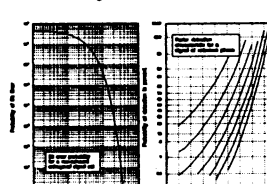
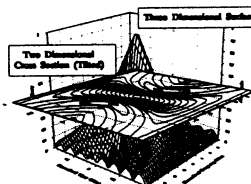
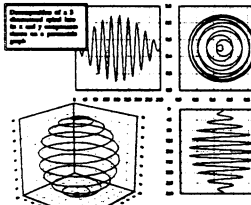
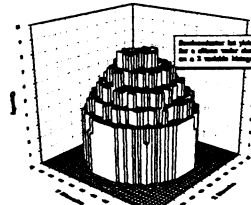
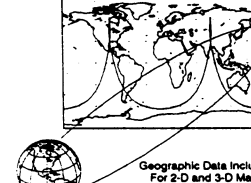
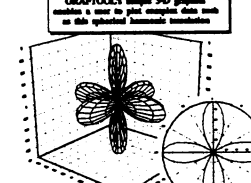
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