

Black History Month Black People in the Philippines

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Black History Month: BLACK people in the PHILIPPINES: by By Runoko Rashidi - courtesy of playahata.com

Although the great majority of the people of the Philippines are Tagalog, the country is not ethnically homogeneous. In spite of their small numbers the original inhabitants of the Philippines are the Agta (diminutive Africoids), who still live there in some numbers and are commonly and pejoratively called Pygmies, Negritos and Aeta, and a variety of other names based upon their specific locale. In regards to phenotype, broadly speaking, the Agta can be described as physically small and unusually short in stature, dark-skinned, spiral-haired and broad-nosed. They are an extremely ancient people and, I believe, close representatives of the world's earliest modern humans.

Very similar groups of Black people in Asia reside in relative small numbers in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean north of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and in northern Malaysia and southern Thailand in Southeast Asia. In Thailand they are commonly called Sakai. In Malaysia they have been called Orang Asli (Original Man). Pejoratively they are known as Semang, with the connotation of savage. It is very unfortunate that the contributions of these small Black people to monumental high-cultures characterized by urbanization, metallurgy, agricultural science and scripts remain essentially unexamined.

The presence of diminutive Africoids (whom Chinese historians called "Black Dwarfs") in early southern China during the period of the Three Kingdoms (ca. 250 C.E.) is recorded in the book of the Official of the Liang Dynasty (502-556 C.E.). In Taiwan there are recollections of a group of people now said to be extinct called "Little Black Man."

"They were described as short, dark-skinned people with short curly hair.... These people, presumably Negritos, disappeared about 100 years ago. Their existence was mentioned in many Chinese documents of the Ching Dynasty concerning Taiwan."

Similar groups of Black people have been identified in Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, and it seems almost certain that at one time a belt of Black populations of this type covered much of Asia.

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In stark contrast to the Agta (the People), the Tagalog seem to have only entered the Philippines during the last several thousand years, and while almost nothing is known of the early history of the Agta in the Philippines it has been well-documented that they engaged in bitter martial conflicts with the Spanish invaders, whose presence in the islands began in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the country was named by the Spanish navigator Ruy Lopez de Villalobos for Prince Philip of Asturias, who, as Philip II, became the king of Spain in 1542. It was also the Spaniards who named the native people of the Philippines "Negritos" (Little Blacks).

The Spanish observed that "The Negritos, which our first conquerors found were, according to tradition, the first possessors of the islands of this Archipelago." Another account observed that "There are black negroes in this island who pay tribute to no one." Similar documents affirm the widespread presence and distribution of the Agta in the Philippines at the time of the Spanish intrusion. "If we are to believe later historians, the shores of some of the islands fairly swarmed with Negritos when the Spaniards arrived." The Bisayan island of Negroes derives its name from having been an Agta population center. Today, however, the Agta probably comprise less than one per cent of the total population of the Philippines.

The Agta men amassed quite a reputation as warriors, and although the accuracy of the report is somewhat questionable, it is said that the Agta were "such enemies to the Spaniards, that if they happen to kill one, they invite all their kindred, and rejoice for three days, drinking out of the skull, clear'd for that purpose; by which means, they afterwards get wives the easier, as being more courageous."

Dr. Pedro A. Gagelonia, a Filipino scholar, citing the commentaries of the European colonizers of the Philippines regarding the Agta, wrote that:

"They were the aborigines of the Philippines, and for a long time had been master of Luzon. At a time not very far distant, when the Spaniards conquered the country, the Aetas levied a kind of blackmail from the Tagalog villages situated on the banks of the lake of Bay (Laguna de Bay). At a fixed period they quitted their forests, entered the village, and forced the inhabitants to give them a certain quantity of rice and maize....After the conquest of the Philippines by the Spaniards, the latter took upon themselves the defense of the Tagalogs, and the Aetas, terrified by their firearms, remained in the forests, and did not reappear among the Indians."

THE ERUPTIONS OF MT. PINATUBO

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The violent volcanic eruptions of Mt. Pinutabo in June 1991 were particularly devastating for the Agta. Alternately ignored and discriminated against, many Agta lived on the slopes of the long-dormant volcano that is regarded as the center of their cosmology. Forced down the mountain slopes by the eruptions, numbers of Agta, who have historically relied on the herbal medicines now buried under tons of mud and ash, have perished from dreadful epidemics of measles, diarrhea and pneumonia.

SOURCES:

The Filipinos of Yesterdays, by Pedro A. Gagelonia

The African Presence in Early Asia, edited by Runoko Rashidi