



Review Paper

The Austronesian Origin Myths of Aboriginal Taiwan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 23 June 2025	The new book “The Formosan Primary Anthropogonic Myths, Genesis and the Creation of Man” by Valdis Gauss was published in June by Brill’s Series in Taiwan Studies. This monograph offers never-before-seen insights into the origin traditions of Austronesian Taiwan. With the objective of creating the first ever English language corpus of the Formosan origin myths, over 100 texts were translated from Japanese, German and Mandarin into English and added to the over 250 total Formosan texts found for the work. This incredibly colorful array of creation texts, genesis texts, and drift origin texts sheds light on a previously rarely explored subject. The sacred oral histories of Taiwan’s Aboriginal tribes memorialize various types of vessels, of both the cosmic and non-cosmic sort that ferried the ancestors of Austronesian Taiwan to the island. Many of these cosmic vessels are said to have made loud and distressful sounds as they crashed from the sky. Moreover, embedded within the texts are the motives for the creation of man, interdictions bestowed upon the protoplasts by the creator gods, curious specters of creation en masse, the growing of mankind from seeds and an examination of modern practices that are inspired by the view of life through the lens of myth. Creation en masse themes indicate that multiple people were contemporaneously created which negates the otherwise obligatory incest motif that is required in traditions that describe the creation of a single person or two people. Correlations between the Sumerian creation myth and the Kananavu creation myth are also explored. Throughout the book, all of Taiwan’s Aboriginal primary anthropogonic myths are anthologized and the salient motifs preserved therein are identified.
Accepted: 20 July 2025	
Published: 02 August 2025	
Keywords: Formosan, Origin myth, Aboriginal Taiwan, Taiwanese tribes, Austronesian Taiwan	
Doi: https://doi.org/10.59011/austronesian.4.2.2025.65-74	

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1. Introduction

You would be forgiven for assuming that the Aboriginal population on an island as geographically small as Taiwan has a more or less uniform oral history and mythology. You might likewise assume that the tribes inhabiting an island that's about the same size as Michigan's Upper Peninsula would share a common language and culture. However, in making such assumptions, you would be greatly mistaken. The diversity in language and culture, not to mention salient motifs and themes of Taiwan's Austronesian tribes' respective mythologies is remarkably diverse.

To set the stage, Taiwan is home to 16 Austronesian tribes that are officially recognized by the island's Republic of China (ROC) government. In addition to these 16, there is a handful of unrecognized tribes which are known as pingpu or plains-dwelling tribes. All of these tribes are considered partially "Sinicized", meaning that varying degrees of each group's languages, cultures, and oral histories have been replaced by Han and Minnan practices.

The earliest substantiated records of the linguistically Formosan-speaking Austronesians on Taiwan were made in the early 1620s. It was around this time of first contact when the island, known at that time as Formosa, was simultaneously colonized by the Spanish Empire in the north as well as the Dutch East India Company in the south at modern-day Tainan. The principal aim of these colonial powers was to use the island as a springboard for conducting trade with regional powers such as China and Japan. However, despite the influence and new reality that these forces and their heirs delivered to the island's Austronesian population, it wasn't until 1898, three years after the island had been ceded to the Japanese Empire by the Shimonoseki Treaty that formal and methodical ethnographic studies of the tribal population began to be rigorously conducted. The academic institution known as *Banjokenkyukai* meaning Society for the Investigation of Savages was founded with the goal of investigating the languages, cultures, oral histories, and religions of the Austronesian populations (Ino, 1899). Various monographs were published around the turn of the 20th century, all in Japanese, that strove to accomplish the aforementioned goals. Many of these were published by the Provisional Taiwan Customs Investigation Committee of the Taiwan Governor General's Office in different volumes under the title "Report on the Old Customs of Barbarian Tribes" 《蕃族調査報告書》. These chronicles marked an important turning point in the recording of Aboriginal customs and serve as the basis for all modern academic study on Formosan languages and, to our point, mythology.

The author employs a dragnet methodological approach in collecting source texts. Therein, all genres of text regardless of their media of preservation or purpose of collection are considered. As such, sacred oral texts which were originally recorded as part of linguistic studies, government surveys, academic studies, for tourism purposes, for museum displays, missionary work, documentary films, reports by foreign government officials, ethnographic surveys and others are all included in the anthology of Formosan origin texts.

2. Terms

In order to begin a discussion about mythology, it is paramount to state the definition employed by the author:

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief... Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind...and the phenomena of nature. (Bascom, 1965, p.4)

The term “Aboriginal” is preferred over the recently popularized term “indigenous” to refer to the island’s Austronesian population for a number of reasons. First, Taiwan’s tribes have been referred to as Aborigines for over four centuries, this historical fact legitimizes the use of the term. Second, in the Republic of China, weapons and machines designed for warfare are dubbed “indigenous” by the government. Indigenous tanks, indigenous submarines, indigenous fighter jets and indigenous drones are commonly found in media headlines across the island’s news outlets. Referring to people with the same nomenclature that is used for weapons systems is dehumanizing at best. Third, the push to classify large groups of people with single homogenous terms causes a loss of individuality for the groups in question. For example, classifying Italians, Irish, Germans etc. as simply “white” or Mexican, Brazilians, Colombians etc. as “Latinos” is a regrettable attempt to homogenize distinct ethnic groups with unique linguistic and cultural traditions into single homogenized groups. Likewise, the push to classify Austronesians on Taiwan with the same language that is used to denote tribal peoples in the Amazon rain forest, Canadian tundra, or sub-Saharan Africa has the effect of subtracting from their identity rather than adding to it. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, representatives of the groups in question fought for decades for formal recognition as Aborigines. See Taipei Times article *Taiwan’s Aborigines spent a decade trying to shed their government designation as “mountain compatriots,” finally succeeding in 1994 in an important symbolic victory for Aboriginal rights* published July 30, 2017 (Cheung, 2017).

The term Formosan is a linguistic designation that refers to the Austronesian languages of Taiwan.

3. Cultural Documentation

Throughout the Japanese colonial era and the subsequent ROC period which continues to this day, a number of authors and researchers, including Aboriginal people themselves have recorded tens of thousands of historical texts, most commonly published as fragments, across a variety of media. Monographs, books, theses, dissertations, public and private reports, newspapers, magazine and journal articles, websites, publicly posted signs, flyers, bookmarks, tourism brochures, online videos, and many other media types have been utilized to document and disseminate the sacred oral histories of Taiwan’s Aboriginal tribes.

4. Previous Literature

With rare exceptions, serious academic studies generally chronicle Formosan myths in tribe-specific monographs. These works generally focus on a single tribe and offer a variety of oral histories including myths, folktales, and accounts of migrations and conflicts. Academia Sinica monographs on Formosan mythology are chiefly billed as linguistic studies that preserve myths as a corollary to the principal goal of conducting linguistic analysis on Formosan texts. That is, usually mythic texts are afterthoughts or simply mechanisms by which the languages are investigated by linguists. When I recently invited an exceptionally prestigious author who has published numerous monographs containing a wide range of Formosan mythic texts over multiple decades, to write a forward for an upcoming monograph on Formosan mythology, he replied “I’m not in this specialty. I don’t think I’m qualified to write up a forward for it.” What I had failed to recognize was that his life’s work was entirely dedicated to the study of linguistics. The myths which he had so meticulously recorded in field studies and translated into various languages were not the focus of his research. As such, for many researchers who have published Formosan mythic texts, the myths were simply vehicles that preserved the languages. In addition to these linguists, a handful of other researchers have also published tribe-specific corpora of Formosan mythologies and oral histories in Mandarin, German, and Japanese. Books published in English, such as *Pentecost of the Hills in Taiwan* by missionary Ralph Covell and *Literary History of Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples* by academic Pu, Chung-Chen represent a very small number of books for the international readership.

5. The Current Work

My first monograph titled *The Formosan Great Flood Myths, An Analysis of the Oral Traditions of Ancient Taiwan* (2022) was the first English language book to ever offer a comprehensive corpus of Formosan myths (Gauss, 2022). That work anthologizes over 220 Austronesian flood myths from 16 of Taiwan’s tribes and includes over 70 texts that were previously unavailable as English translations. It also includes the first-ever mythologem-specific corpus that takes into consideration all of Taiwan’s tribal literatures.

After completing my first monograph on the Formosan deluge myths, I decided to broaden the scope of my studies and consider other epic themes that are prevalent across multiple tribal traditions. One of the insights that I gained regards the sequence of landmark events within the Formosan primeval myth-time. Realizing that the deluge represented the end of the first world and the birth of the current world sparked a curiosity in me about the events that preceded and ultimately culminated in the deluge. What I discovered is that, within the antediluvian myth-time, oral histories pertaining to the origins of man are the most common topic. As such, the object of my next study became the origin mythologem. Wondering what the oral histories say about the origins of man on the island of Taiwan, I quickly realized that answering this question is heavily dependent on the tribal tradition in question. Each tribe is composed of various phratries

or kinship groups and as with the deluge texts, each group has its own myths. This is why it is common to see multiple divergent narrative themes within a single tribe's oral history.

For Truku people, for example, depending on the phratry in question, stone origins, tree root origins, pig feces origins, and drift origins are all ascribed to. As a result, there is no single unified Truku origin myth. Instead, there are Truku origin myths (plural). This variety illustrates why answering the seemingly simple question "What is the Truku origin myth?" requires a more complex and thoughtful answer.

For readers who are curious about mankind's most sacred ancient histories, my latest monograph, *The Formosan Primary Anthropogonic Myths, Genesis, and the Creation of Man* offers insights that are poised to incite deeper and more serious examination of the origin mythologem as a whole.

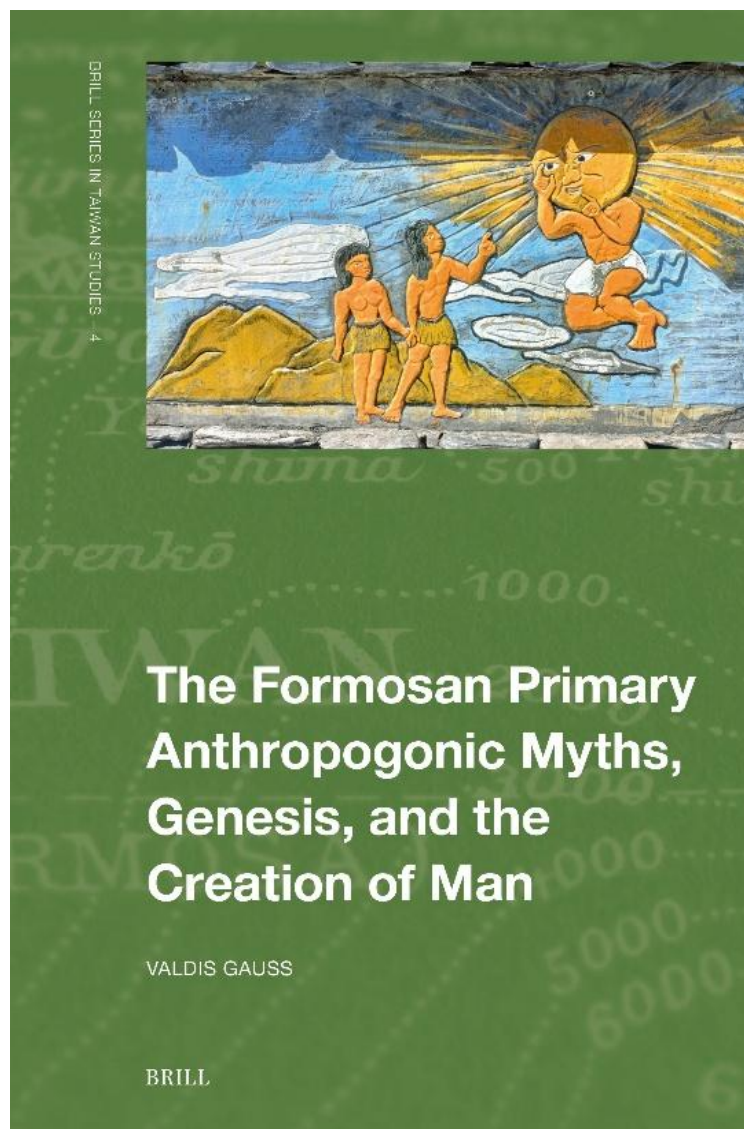


Figure 1. Monograph cover
Source: <https://brill.com/display/title/72496>

6. Discoveries

Essentially three types of origin myths prevail among Taiwan's tribes. These include creation, genesis and drift origin themes. The Formosan creation myths chronicle man's origins as they relate to being created by gods and animals. A simple example of such a text is as follows: "The male and female ancestral gods Muakai and Sakinu, appeared in the clan in ancient times. They created humans by singing and became the ancestors of Rukai people" (Pu, 2012, p. 20). A subset of these creation myths describes man's creation in the sky and arrival on Earth in cosmic vessels such as lightning, bamboo, gourds, eggs, leaves, and even via cosmic ladders that the first ancestors used to descend to the Earth. Some of these non-terrestrial origin myths also categorize the earliest ancestors as children of the gods. On rare occasions, the protoplasts were created en masse such as in the following Yami text:

Two females were born from bamboo at Dzi-paon near the present village site. As a result of placing or inserting stones in their armpits, and pouring spring-water over the stones, sons and daughters were born. They married each other by exchanging sisters and the descendants built the village of Iraralai (Kano & Segawa, 1956, p. 4-5).

According to the Formosan genesis myths, the protoplasts or first people emerged from non-cosmic stones, feces, trees, and from within the Earth itself among other motifs. The genesis motifs describe "spontaneous or self-acting emergence from vessels" or objects (Gauss, 2025) which are dissimilar from those ascribing the origins of mankind to objects that originated in the sky and descended to the Earth. For example, according to one Rukai myth, the protoplasts emerged from a boulder.

There was a spring emerging from underground. In the past, there was a huge stone here. It split open and a boy named Ca'I was born from the stone. After he grew up, he married Sara'c, the daughter of Capungan clan's chieftain, Kazangiljan. The couple created human beings by singing. They were ancestors of the chieftain Kalavayan. (Pu, 2012, p. 21)

Other tribes preserve the genesis motif but follow a decidedly more chthonic theme. For example, one Sakizaya text states that "In the ancient times a man named Botoc and a woman Sabak came out of the land at Nararacanan and got married" (Chen, 2010, p. 26-27).

Some Atayal, Truku, and Bunun oral histories chronicle how the protoplasts emerged from feces. For example, one Truku text combines the feces origin motif with an animal ancestor motif:

One woman was born from pig feces. There were no men, so she had sex with a dog and gave birth to a boy. When the boy grew up, he married his mother and they had many children. They are the Taroko ancestors. (Hsu, 1956, p.156)

Formosan feces genesis texts describe the emergence of the protoplasts from spider, dog, worm, pig and other types of excreta.

The third consequential origin motif is the drift origin theme. The central tenet of the drift origin theme is that the first ancestors of any given tribe originated overseas and then

drifted to the island of Taiwan, sometimes as the result of a cataclysm not unlike the theme preserved in Plato's myth of Atlantis. Drift origin themes are incredibly widespread throughout Formosan mythologies and are found in Amis, Bunun, Hoanya, Kavalan, Ketagalan, Liulang (Kulon), Makatao, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Siraya, Trobiawan (Basay), Tao/Yami and Truku oral histories.

A classic example of the drift theme is preserved in Siraya oral history. According to that text, "the Sirayan forebears braved a deadly storm and suffered a shipwreck while they sailed a boat across the rough sea, but managed to survive and reach the southwest shore of Taiwan" (Tenn, 2017, p. 61). Storms are cited by numerous tribal drift origin texts as the impetus for their ancestors' decisions to take up residence on the island of Taiwan.

Perhaps the most colorful drift origin myth is preserved as a mere fragment. This Amis text was chronicled by James W. Davidson, USA Consul for Japanese Formosa in his 1903 book *The Island of Formosa Past and Present*. That record shows that "Their ancestors came from over the sea on the back of a large tortoise" (Davidson, 1903, p. 580). Other oral histories of the Hoanya and the Ketagalan tribes speak of a diaspora caused by monsters. For example, the Hoanya drift origin myth states that the ancestors fled their homeland because they were under attack by a man-eating giant with black wings. Facing total annihilation, the only survivors of the giant ghost monster with black wings floated to Taiwan on a bamboo raft.

Another interesting finding is the correlation between prominent themes in Formosan origin texts with those recorded in the Biblical book of *Genesis*, the Zoroastrian *Zend Avesta*, and certain Sumerian origin texts. One example of this is the seeds of man origin:

According to the Zoroastrian genesis text, The *Zend Avesta* (1880), the creator god Ahura Mazda commanded the progenitor, Yima, to "bring the seeds of men and women, of the greatest, best, and finest kinds on this earth" (Ch. 2, 35:106) into an underground city called Vara to survive a destructive and dire winter which claimed the life of every creature on the surface of the Earth...

The chthonic origin motif of man being grown from seeds planted in the Earth is shared by the Tsou myth of Hamo. "Once long ago the great god Hamo came down to Earth and planted men. What he planted grew from the Earth into the ancestors of the people of today" (Ferrell, 1966, p. 172–173). (Gauss, 2025, p. 134-135).

This discovery is in line with previous research findings by the author which discovered corollaries regarding the global deluge mythologem as well as the shooting the sun mythologem.

7. Relevant Exhibit

The enchanting topic of Austronesian Taiwan's origins is the subject of the National Museum of Prehistory's Austronesian Hall. *Austronesian Worlds, Worldly Austronesias* is a permanent exhibition on the continual movements and entangled stories

of different ethnic groups across diverse Austronesian worlds” (National Museum of Prehistory, 2025). Moreover, according to the museum’s official website:

We start out this exhibition from an Austronesian perspective, showing who “*kita* we” who live here are through stories from Taiwan, Island Southeast Asia, and Oceania: our legends of how the world was created, our stories of cultivation, trade, migration, and colonial encounters. Through these legends and stories, we have woven memories of our movements across the great expanses of the ocean, where the convergence of different peoples has created diverse histories. As we tell you our stories, we maintain that *myth is no less substantial than history* and that *science is no more authoritative than storytelling*. The unique island experiences and oceanic philosophy of Austronesian worlds are not merely local knowledges. They contain wisdom that shall inspire the entire world (National Museum of Prehistory, 2025).

I couldn’t agree more with this sentiment. For Austronesian cultures that have relied on oral literature to pass down sacred origin myths since time immemorial, myth is history. While voluminous books have been published over the centuries regarding the mythologies of the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Norse, the Romans, the Mesoamericans, the Chinese, and others, the Formosan origin myths have never before been compiled into a single source text allowing easy access to these incredible oral histories.

8. Conclusion

The June 2025 publication of *The Formosan Primary Anthropogonic Myths, Genesis, and the Creation of Man* addresses significant gaps in published literature and brings these fascinating histories to the English-speaking world. No longer are hours of tireless research required for investigating the question of Formosan origin oral histories. Creation, genesis and drift origin myths from all of Taiwan’s 16 officially recognized Austronesian tribes: Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Hla’alua, Kanakanavu, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Thao, Truku, Tsou and Tao/Yami as well as compendia from the Favorlang, Hoanya, Ketagalan, Makatao, Pazeh, Siraya and Basay Trobiawan pingpu tribes are all compiled in this monograph. Cataloged in the corpus are 129 creation-origin texts, 74 genesis-origin texts, and 50 drift-origin texts.

You are invited to take this opportunity to learn more about Austronesian mythology and consider how the Formosan mythic texts complement themes that are exhibited around the world. Consider the implications of the finding that:

In both the Kanakanavu and the Sumerian texts, a god created mankind as a result of complaints from his mother. Also, in both oral traditions, the chronology commences with the complaints of the mother goddesses regarding the toughness and difficulties of life. Even the names of the gods bear phonological similarities; Niun and Ninmah as well as Parumaci and Enki. Both myths describe the creation of mankind en masse and the post creation dominion of the gods over man. The only material difference between the Kanakanavu and the Sumerian myths is that

Parumaci created mankind from leaves that grew on trees rooted in clay while Enki created mankind directly from clay (Gauss, 2025, p. 131-132).

You are invited to enjoy reading the fascinating sacred oral literatures of Taiwan's Aboriginal tribes for yourself. Perhaps you will discover meaningful pieces that help to finish the puzzle that we are all working on in our parallel quests to understand more deeply our places in this fascinating world.

Conflict of interest

None.

Authors' contribution

The author made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the study. The author took responsibility for data analysis, interpretation and discussion of results. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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