

# FARMING, FORAGING AND HUMAN RESILIENCY

## HUNTER-GATHERER SOCIETIES OFFER KEYS TO OUR PAST AND PRESENT

By KATHLEEN TUCK

Photos by ALLISON CORONA

Artifacts can tell us a lot about a culture, but without a deep understanding of the people who used them, they provide an incomplete historical record. Dr. Pei-Lin Yu, assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology, says that without recognizing that connection, artifacts are just objects.

Yu knows what she's talking about. She spent two years living with hunters and gatherers in Venezuela

in the 1990s and hopes to set up a similar experience with an indigenous tribe in Taiwan.

"It's a bridging thing to live with a

culture and reach out across time and place," she said. "You can see how they interact with the material world, and what that implies for ancient people."

Ethnoarchaeology is a good fit for Yu. Growing up in New Mexico with a Taiwanese father and American mother she was fascinated by the culture of her Latino and Native American friends, and describes herself as culturally "all over the map."

This curiosity, combined with an interest in the past, led her to study archaeology at the University of New Mexico, where she worked with Lewis

Binford, one of the 20th century's most influential archaeologists and a firm believer in the idea that culture informs science.

After graduating, Yu worked with the U.S. Forest Service before receiving an unexpected letter from a colleague doing research with the Pumé tribe in Venezuela. He said he needed help connecting with the women of the tribe.

"I had good pay and promotions with the Forest Service," Yu recalled, "but I knew I could only be this crazy one time in my life."

Yu embraced the challenge, despite losing 40 pounds due to constant walking and periods of near starvation. She grew to love the people and became intrigued with their stubborn resistance to the sedentary farming lifestyle.

Yu returned home and earned both master's and doctoral degrees. She spent 20 years as a federal archaeologist working with Native cultures for the Forest Service, National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation before coming to Boise State in 2014.



Two Pumé women hurry home from a gathering trip before a thunderstorm. Left: Yu treasures the digging stick she bargained for with one of the women.



But the hunter-gatherer lifestyle continues to fascinate her, both because it may offer a healthier diet and because it allows us to explore our own foraging origins. Now she is turning that interest toward Taiwan, a tropical island believed to be the grandmother of many South Sea cultures, including the Malay, Filipinos, Hawaiians and Maoris.

"Neolithic Taiwan was an incubator - something was going on there," she said.

Hunters and gatherers lived on Taiwan for thousands of years before Chinese farmers arrived. Yu wonders what prompted that Chinese immigration 6,000 years ago and the later pioneering expansion into the Pacific. She feels Taiwan is the perfect place to study humanity's resiliency and ability to adapt to new conditions.

"Although Taiwan tribes use modern farming

equipment today, some still cultivate ancient crops," she said. "I can compare labor-intensive crops (like millet) with hardy ancient crops (like taro) and see what these modern-day farmers can tell me about labor costs and resiliency.

"Living off wild things is not only healthy but can be productive," she continued. "We need to rediscover the knowledge the ancients had." **B**

