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Traditional Amis Architecture and Its Environment in a Contemporary Context

Abstract

This essay discusses issues the author encountered while constructing a house in 2020 using traditional methods of the Amis, one of the officially recognised Indigenous groups in Taiwan. The author dealt with many obstacles including legal, environmental, and resource issues. These problems point to the historically disadvantaged status of Indigenous Taiwanese people in terms of land rights. With the help of others in his village, the author completed the construction of the house, an achievement that highlights the challenges faced by Indigenous Taiwanese people wishing to implement traditional building practices and lifestyle in the contemporary context.

Keywords: Amis, Amis architecture, Indigenous, Indigenous land rights, Taiwan, First Nations



Figure 1. View of a traditional Amis house in Madawdaw, Taitung County, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Xiao Juan



Figure 2. Akac Orat using rattan for structural binding on a traditional Amis house, Madawdaw, Taitung County, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Hau En Tsai

In 2020, I built a traditional Amis house (Fig. 1). Over the ten years prior, I acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish this feat, and I put this knowledge into practice by building workers' huts, hunting shelters, tree houses, and watchtowers. A variety of plants including rattan, sugar palm, bamboo, silver grass, and fan palm can be used in building traditional Amis structures (Fig. 2). The maintenance of the surrounding environment is important as well, the plants mentioned above will thrive when they are trimmed periodically. The current site of the house sits adjacent to the bamboo forest my grandfather took care of since his time. It is intended for the preparation of the construction of the house.

The question people most often ask me is why I wanted to build a traditional Amis house. Some assume that my purpose was to revive traditional cultural practices, while others think my aim was to create a tourist attraction. Neither is correct. Instead, it is because I realized that every aspect of my life requires the space of a traditional house. I have learnt how to hunt, farm, and forage on both land and sea. Killed game needs to be treated and smoked in a house. The plants I enjoy growing and weaving will be used and stored in the house. The smoke from the fireplace in the traditional house helps maintain the

house and preserve the materials inside. With the knowledge, resources, and skills at hand, I was motivated to build the house and decided to recreate the space of the traditional house that can sustain the activities I enjoy doing.



Figure 3. Abandoned traditional Amis house covered with metal sheet, Madawdaw, Taitung County, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Akac Orat

Pre-building Complications

In preparing to build my Amis house, I walked around my village, Madawdaw, trying to find traditional houses which were still being maintained, but to little avail.¹ Those that I did find intact were abandoned and, thus, were in disrepair (Fig. 3). Moreover, only a few people in my village who have experience building such structures are still alive. In the past, the processes of preparing to build and constructing a house were community efforts, and the labour involved would be divided among people of different age groups. One group would be in charge of cutting timber, another would collect cogon grass, and the elderly would shave rattan. In contrast, I worked primarily on my own for two years, collecting the necessary materials from the forest and preparing them myself with the help of volunteers.



Figure 4. Plants used in building traditional Amis houses: cogon grass (left), silvergrass (centre) and thorny bamboo (right). Photograph courtesy of Akac Orat

I gathered bamboo, rattan, and silver grass during autumn and winter (Fig. 4). Because wild cogon grass is now hard to find, I had to buy it from the farm of an elderly couple in a neighbouring village. Fifty years ago, silver grass thrived in coastal Taitung, but due to the extensive use of pesticides and herbicides by farmers and roadside spraying to control the growth of weeds, it and similar plants have diminished and been replaced by other dominant species. I had to search for silver grass on several mountains in order to collect the bare minimum required. Because of legal restrictions, I had to purchase timber for the main structure of the house from the local forestry bureau through a bidding process.² In the past, people would cut timber from their traditional territories three years prior to building their house. After cutting it into the desired shape, they would slowly move the timber down the mountain. The trees they used were *Formosan michelia* and *Zelkova formosana*, which today are rare and very expensive woods. My choices from the forestry bureau were limited by what I could afford, which was mostly pine, Chinese fir, and *Phoebe zhennan* (the latter being the best of the three for construction).

Access to Land and Material

Taiwanese Indigenous people of the past were foragers: materials for their everyday necessities could be found in the forests of their traditional territory. However, since transitional justice has yet to take place, these traditional

territories are owned by the state, which means the resources there are not accessible to them.³ Collecting rattan and bamboo and cutting trees for building are prohibited on these lands under the Forestry Act of 1932. There are historical reasons for the enactment of this law, as well as the Soil and Water Conservation Act of 1994, but they are a direct violation of Taiwanese Indigenous people's right to forage, and the government has offered no satisfactory compromises or alternative solutions.

Although the Council of Agriculture and the Council of Indigenous Peoples issued a joint statement in 2019 entitled "The Lifestyle Habits of Indigenous Peoples and Rules on the Gathering of Forest Resources," permission for Indigenous people to forage at their traditional territories is limited to forest by-products.⁴ Prior to this, foraging had been banned for fifty to sixty years and, subsequently, houses that were built using traditional methods could not be constructed during these decades. More regrettably, during this time the knowledge of plants, the forest, and building-related skills that should have been passed down through the generations was either lost or became fragmented.



Figure 5. Amis elder who had experience building traditional house. He holds a model of the bamboo grid roof that was made by artist. Taitung County, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Akac Orat

In Madawdaw, the *kapot*, an age-grade system that once served as a pillar of the community—enabling the collective process of building a traditional house or carrying out emergency repairs after a typhoon—disappeared more than seventy years ago.⁵ It is now rare to see people working together to build or repair a house in this way. With the introduction of Christianity in the early 1930s and modern medicine, members of the Amis community began to abandon their traditional beliefs, leading to the collapse of the social structure and preventing traditional skills—including the construction of traditional Amis houses—from being passed down (Fig. 5).

In addition, the availability of cheaper and relatively more convenient materials such as plastic, metal, and cement has had a significant impact on the village. It has led people to abandon crafting traditional everyday implements on their own (Fig. 6), and as living in traditional houses became perceived as a sign of poverty and backwardness, cement houses began to take their place.



Figure 6. Household items made of packing straps and rattan by an Amis elder, these baskets were mostly made of rattan in the past. Only a few elders are left in the village who still practice weaving, most of their materials were bought elsewhere as they could hardly harvest natural materials from the mountains on their own. Madawdaw, Taitung county, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Akac Orat

***Malacecay Kita* (Hand in Hand)**

Foraging is vital to Taiwanese Indigenous cultures. Without knowledge of foraging, people lose their understanding of the forests and mountains, which could cause this kind of knowledge to die out altogether over time. With this knowledge, basketry and house construction—forms of cultural production that require regular practice in order to accumulate more knowledge and improve one’s skills—could be sustained. Each foraging trip has the potential for danger and uncertainty, so the capacity to improvise based on prior experience is necessary. All of these aspects require substantial knowledge, time, labour, and resources.



Figure 7. Community youths cleaning and sorting building materials, Madawdaw, Taitung county, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Xie Song Zhi

Mindful of the above, I sought to recruit youths from the tribe who were enthusiastic about going to the forested mountains to gather natural resources. This is our cultural value called *malacecay kita* (hand in hand). As more people began to join me, my lonely journey became a group effort in which everyone worked together to carry materials down the mountains. Treating and processing these materials for crafts and construction allowed us to practice our culture and to pass down related wisdom; we spent time every night splitting and cleaning different building materials (Fig. 7). The collection and preparation of materials for building the house took more than two years. In the end, we processed several

kilometers of rattan and an immeasurable amount of bamboo, silver grass, cogon grass, and timber by hand, and formed them into usable building materials.



Figure 8. Volunteers working together in the construction of an Amis traditional house, Madawdaw, Taitung county, Taiwan, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Xie Song Zhi

In terms of building the house, the biggest challenge was not managing the materials but leading the group and overseeing the construction. In the past, people held to a system of *mipaliw*, an act of mutual aid. There was no money involved in this mode of collective work. A family in need would call on relatives and neighbours, who, in turn, would gather their relatives and everyone would come to work together. When the neighbours and relatives who had volunteered needed help in the future, their generosity would be reciprocated. This social custom is uncommon nowadays, and is typically only seen during preparations for weddings and funerals. In order to revive this work spirit, we decided to recruit volunteers online. In return for their participation, we provided volunteers with accommodations, meals, and an opportunity to learn (Fig. 8). Following tradition, we hosted a *pakelang* after the completion of the house to thank everyone for their hard work.⁶

Legal Hurdles to Building a Traditional House

Outside of cities, land in Taiwan that is suitable for land development is limited and those that are deemed unsuitable for development have largely been designated as “conservation zones.” The Spatial Planning Act of 2016 replaced the Regional Plan Act of 1974, turning land-use zoning into land *functional zones* which include conservation, marine resource development, agricultural development, and urban–rural development. From the perspective of Taiwanese Indigenous people, the terms used for functional zones are incomprehensible. Most of them only recognise building land, agriculture land, and land reserved for Taiwanese Indigenous people. Their knowledge of land functions are limited to what they face when they attempt to develop their land.

The status of housing for Taiwanese Indigenous people before the Building Act went into effect is worth considering.⁷ For example, in my village of Madawdaw, the Amis are the descendants of a mix of migrant groups—ones coming from north of the East Rift Valley in Hualien and the Xiuguluan River area, and from south of Chenggong—who arrived about 150 years ago. These people built a men’s assembly house and formed the *kapot*. The land in *Madawdaw* is owned by different people and under different titles, and these regions/territories—even areas by the reef and the coast—have their own names, such as Sanosingalan and Cifuisay. The land of each clan or group was delineated by immovable markers, usually large rocks or trees. Though most of them lived in a centralised area (just as people live in residential areas today), some people lived in the forest or on mountainsides

In the past, Taiwanese Indigenous people built with gathered materials, but as Taiwan’s economy developed, their desire for consumer goods demanded greater income, so they left their villages to work for money to meet these new needs. Building in this context meant replacing traditional, gathered building materials with more modern ones, such as bricks, cement, and corrugated metal sheets (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Modern cement house in Chenggong Town, Taitung County, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Akac Orat

Over the last century, Taiwanese Indigenous people have experienced periods of drastic political change—going from self-governing communities to living under Japanese rule to a nationalist government. As a result, our living conditions have been completely altered. When it comes to land use and building regulations, Taiwanese Indigenous and non-Taiwanese Indigenous people need to follow the same procedures and standards in order to prevent any code violations or safety negligence. This is a result of the larger issue of how the economy has developed and the current norms of land use.

One necessary consideration when planning to build a home in Taiwan is whether the land it is to be built on is designated as agricultural land or building land. Currently, Taiwanese law divides the latter type into three categories— industrial, residential, and commercial land—and building on any of them requires a building permit that is only given once the safety and coverage-ratio standards in the building plan have been approved. It is basically impossible for a permit to be obtained for a traditional house because Taiwan does not have legal standards for non-mainstream building materials. More specifically, it is extremely difficult to obtain proof of safety and structural integrity for natural materials such as rattan, bamboo, wood, and slate unless an architect gives approval. It is difficult for Indigenous people to build their traditional homes on building land, as the variety of Indigenous architectural style, construction materials, and building methods will not be accepted by today’s safety standards.

The situation isn’t any better on agricultural land. Beginning in the 1950s, many people erected concrete buildings on agricultural land. This phenomenon of “growing houses on farms” prompted a tightening of regulations over the past two decades. Today, for those who want to build a traditional Amis structure on agricultural land can build a “storage shed,” which does not require a building permit. However, storage sheds, which are supposed to be used only to store farming tools, may not be used as residences. Regulations intentionally make them very difficult to live in—specifically, the area of a shed may only be a single structure that does not exceed forty-five square meters and it may not have a toilet—but people live in them anyway.

Traditionally, people of the Amis community would build a complex of structures each with their own function, rather than only one building. The living quarters are the core of the community. Other peripheral structures include the granary, kitchen, pigpen, rest hut, and vegetable garden, which is usually located behind the house. The flatlands and mountain slopes alike are used to grow rice, fruit trees, and other crops. Rest huts for farmers are built on farmland away from the house; some family members may even live in these huts if they have decided to live apart from the rest of the family. The kitchen would be adjacent to the house, not inside it; thus, if we follow the legal stipulations of a storage shed, we are not permitted to sleep in the house we have built and our kitchen has to be demolished as it will be deemed an illegal additional structure.

Furthermore, we must produce crops on our land that meet designated annual output and value standards of the defined agricultural land. The trees and reintroduced plants we are cultivating are marketable but not considered cash crops, which means our application for the shed will be viewed with suspicion and

possibly rejected. The government clerks will ask, “Who is going to buy silver grass and plants used as fermentation starters? And is there that much demand for plants used in traditional basketry and fibre crafts?” But my response is, should we really have to grow cash crops in order for our land to be considered agricultural?



Figure 10. *Loma* (interior of the completed traditional Amis house), Madawdaw, Taitung county, Taiwan, 2021. Photograph courtesy of Hau En Tsai

Historically, we Taiwanese Indigenous people were the owners of the land we lived on and farmed, and so were not limited by modern designations of “building land” and “agricultural land.” Our building methods evolved over the centuries to the point that our structures were stable; we didn’t need to rely on architects and civil or structural engineers to affirm their safety. Our culture, which revolves around the home, is inseparable from the land. Currently, there is no legal provision to protect architecture that is built or restored using traditional Amis methods unless it is at least 100 years old, in which case the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act of 1982 might allow for its preservation.

There is no legal protection for those who wish to build or restore a traditional house using traditional methods with natural materials. Furthermore, there have been cases in which experts have questioned the authenticity of the traditional houses we have built. For instance, even though slate has been identified by anthropologists and other scholars as the traditional house-building material of the Paiwan, the Paiwan community in eastern Taiwan generally have never built homes with slate; they used bamboo, silver grass, and cogon grass.⁸ Should the Paiwan have to build homes made of slate just to comply with the definition of a “traditional Paiwan house” given by experts?

All we want is to build our own homes on our own land. Changing current laws so that we may achieve this goal will require the combined efforts of politicians, academics, and lay people. We are not the only Taiwanese Indigenous people in this position. Our example has initiated a dialogue on the survival in contemporary society of the traditional structures of the Bunun, Atayal, and Puyuma, who all face the same problems. Indeed, there is still a long way to go before Taiwanese law will support Taiwanese Indigenous people’s right to be themselves, from building traditional structures to foraging and hunting.

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Akac Orat currently lives on Taiwan’s east coast and is engaged in curatorial, craft, and art education. His work focuses on the overlapping aspects of art and real life, and he creates events, activities, and exhibitions that perform and expose them. In recent years, he has transformed his curation process into an educational vocation. He has built a traditional Amis house, produced woven baskets from different Indigenous groups, and cultivated a piece of land in the forest. Since then, he has

been seeking different perspectives of the world while dedicating his educational efforts locally.

Notes

¹ Madawdaw is a village located in the town of Chenggong, Taitung County. The village has a population of 3,046, 59% of whom are Taiwanese Indigenous. 國家文化記憶庫 (Taiwan Cultural Memory Bank) https://memory.culture.tw/Home/Detail?Id=272484&IndexCode=Culture_Object (accessed September 12, 2022). The village has a view of both the mountains and the sea, and a diverse ecology. “Dawdaw” means “light” in the Nansi Amis dialect. The Taiwanese Indigenous community in the village consists of different groups of Amis whose ancestors migrated from different communities, so they speak a variety of Amis dialects. In 1911, it was the site of a massive revolt against the Japanese known as the “Madawdaw Incident.”

² The Forestry Bureau manages the state-owned forest areas to control illegal logging. In the past, these areas often overlapped with the traditional territories. An invitation for an auction is announced by the Forestry Bureau, so that the forest’s main products, such as logged trees, can be purchased.

³ In 2016, the government introduced its plan for implementing transitional justice and approved the establishment of the Indigenous Justice Committee and Transitional Justice Committee. Transitional justice is a set of judicial and non-judicial measures implemented in order to redress violations of human rights. In the context of Indigenous ethnic groups, this includes but is not limited to the recognition and proper naming of different ethnic groups, language rights, and the return of traditional territories (e.g., sacred sites, hunting grounds, ceremonial sites, and so on). 總統府原住民族歷史正義與轉型正義委員會 (Presidential Office Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee), <https://indigenous-justice.president.gov.tw/EN> (accessed September 24, 2022).

⁴ There is no English translation of the statement. The Chinese name for the statement is 原住民族依生活慣習採取森林產物規則 <https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=M0040049> (accessed September 24, 2022).

⁵ The *kapot* was a system in Amis society by which men would be grouped by age. They would enter this system at a certain age and progress into older grades together instead of as individuals. Through this system, they would carry out different tasks and be assigned different responsibilities. Younger groups would have to obey orders and carry out tasks assigned by the older groups; their responsibilities changed as they advanced into older grades. Each grade had its own title; for example, Pakalongay, the first grade, was composed of youths who

had just entered the system. Members of this grade had to do basic training and errands as ordered by the older grades.

⁶ A *pakelang* was held after a laborious endeavor, so food and drink were a way to compensate people for their hard work. People would also go to the rivers and ocean to catch shrimp and fish at this time because water was viewed as a way to wash away filth and exhaustion and to purify one's body and mind. Rain on the day of a *pakelang* is considered auspicious.

⁷ The Building Act was enacted and promulgated by the Taiwanese Government in 1938 to implement building management to maintain public security, traffic, and health, and to improve the appearance of cities. 建築法 (The Building Act), <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=D0070109> (accessed September 24, 2022).

⁸ See Chih-hong Huang and Si-hong Yang, eds., 千千岩助太郎台灣高砂族測繪手稿全集（下） (*Chijiwa Suketarou's Research on Taiwanese Indigenous People's Houses II*) (Taipei: Hua-syun, 2012), 5–248.