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Amis Aborigine Migrants' Territorialization in Metropolitan Taipei

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relatively successful experience of territorialization by a group of aborigine migrants in metropolitan Taipei, northern Taiwan. The aborigine migrants of the Amis established a self-built community in a marginal site along the riverbank of northern Taipei that was constantly under the threat of floods and of eviction and forced relocation by the government. But eventually the settlers and the government came to an agreement regarding on-site relocation, and the municipal authority granted special land use rights to the settlers. Several historical processes help explain their success. First, the rising political discourse of Taiwan Independence in the past decade has provided the aborigine migrants with political legitimacy and support. Second, Taiwan's social activism has been developing rapidly since the 1990s, as its electoral democracy takes shape and matures; the aborigine migrants' rights to the city were an integral part of this social mobilization. Third, the reinforced identity and solidarity within the community in question helped form a coherent front at the moment of confrontation and negotiation with the government. Finally, a group of professional and progressive planners have been actively involved throughout the territorialization process, acting as planners, brokers and coordinators.

Success in Kamaya¹

Kamaya is a small settlement of Amis aborigines in Xindian, Taipei County (Fig. 1), established by tribal members who migrated to Taipei in 1976.² For centuries, Amis tribal settlements have been concentrated in the narrow bands of lowland areas in Hualien and Taitung counties along Taiwan's east coast. A sharp decline in the rural economies of these two counties in the latter half of the 20th century, however, forced some Amis to migrate to urban areas, including Taipei, in search of work. A legacy of discrimination in education and employment against Taiwan's aborigines meant that most of these urban migrants were confined to low-wage construction

work in which labor conditions were especially harsh. Many Amis could not afford the high rents and cost of living in urban areas and were forced to live in temporary sheds on construction sites.



Fig. 1: An aerial view of Kamaya. Photo: Taipei county government.

The Kamaya settlement was originally chosen by a small group of Amis migrants who, after several years in the city, found this relatively isolated waterfront site away from the developed center of the city. It bore some physical similarities to their riverbank home villages along the east coast of Taiwan, where fishing was an important part of Amis economic and cultural life. In Taipei, the Kamaya settlement is located on the bank of Xindian River, a main southern tributary of the Keelung River drainage system in the Taipei Basin, and is surrounded by grass plains suitable for vegetable gardens and small-scale farming. The settlement began as a cluster of small sheds in which Amis migrants stored fishing gear and gardening implements for their frequent visits to the riverbank for social gatherings, planting, and fishing. These sheds gradually expanded into small houses. By building homes at this well-hidden site, the migrants settled in Xindian and forged a new community in Taipei.

Most early Kamaya residents were construction workers of various skill levels. They built their own low-cost housing in Kamaya by scrounging together second-hand building materials and helping each other through a customary aboriginal labor exchange system. To avoid unwanted attention, Kamaya's pioneer settlers built their homes hidden among the tall

reeds of the Xindian riverbank (Fig. 2). This furtive building process on the riverbank was aimed at maintaining a low profile in order to avoid intervention by the city government.



Fig. 2: The settlers started to build their wooden houses surrounded by tall weeds. Photographer unknown.

For many years, the settlement existed in a state of acute uncertainty ramified by its location on the physical and social-political margins of society. Summer floods routinely destroyed or damaged the settlement. Settlers were also aware of the illegal nature of their *ad hoc* community. As a hedge against such uncertainty, they initially built only temporary structures using the cheapest materials available (Fig. 3).

In 1997, Kamaya was ravaged by fire during the mid-autumn festival, and most of the wooden houses of Kamaya were destroyed. In the wake of the fire, the Taipei County Commissioner ordered a crackdown, informed the displaced residents that they were forbidden to rebuild on the site, and closed off the area. The settlers responded with protests against the commissioner and seized the political opportunity of the forthcoming election campaign to quickly rebuild their homes on the site. They did so with the tacit consent of the section chief of



Fig. 3: The view of Kamaya settlement. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

the Aboriginal Affairs office of the Taipei County Government, who was sympathetic to their plight. The settlers also received building material donations from two of the most influential charity organizations in Taiwan: World Vision and the Tzu Chi Foundation. With outside assistance, the settlers were able to build sturdier and more permanent homes using poured concrete with fireproof properties.

From that time on, the Taipei County government did not interfere much with the illegal settlement until 2007, when the community faced renewed threat of demolition and removal due to a flood mitigation plan that placed their settlement within its designated flood zone. The Taipei County water management bureau distributed notices of demolition to the community, triggering a chain reaction of efforts aimed at securing the settlement's long-term prospects. Leading the charge to mobilize people in support of the village was Kamaya's Self-Help Association (*zijiuhui*), a self-initiated organization of the settlers headed by traditional tribal leader Jian Timo, and his brother, Jian Futing, who served as the spokesperson of the Association (Fig. 4).

A breakthrough in the ensuing standoff came in 2008, when the Taipei County Government sparked a firestorm by forcibly relocating another Amis settlement named Fangas (Fig. 5). The uproar surrounding the forced relocation of Fangas prompted a new round of negotiations between Kamaya and the county government over the demolition and relocation planned in the flood mitigation scheme. The results of this round of negotiations were largely



Fig. 4: The protest organized by Kamaya settlers blocking the road during the presidential campaign of Mr Ma Ying-jeou. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.



Fig. 5: Government bulldozers destroyed Fangas, the other Amis waterfront community, in 2008. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

positive for the community. The county government agreed to allow Kamaya settlers to stay in their current location, asking only that they move some fifty meters away from the riverbank in order to stay above the flood zone. The resolution meant that the settlement avoided the fate of numerous other communities relocated to remote, high-rise housing projects. The county

government also commissioned the Kamaya redevelopment project to a group of progressive community planners based out of National Taiwan University's Graduate Institute of Building and Planning. By 2011, Kamaya's cause had witnessed a substantial evolution: the focus of the community's activism and negotiations with local authorities was now on how to introduce a new zoning category to the existing land and planning regulations tailored for aboriginal migrants in the city. The proposal sought to establish a special zone for aboriginal settlers that would grant collective land-lease rights for government land used exclusively by aborigines for residential purposes. The plan would further grant use rights of homes to individual households. The proposed amendments to existing laws are still under review by the Construction and Planning Agency of the Executive Yuan, but they have already been implemented by the New Taipei City Government and are being considered by other municipal and local governments.

Kamaya's mobilization—its struggle and successful results—is significant for urban researchers and practitioners of community planning for at least two reasons. First, after having lived in the city for more than thirty-five years, the Kamaya settlers continued to self-identify as aboriginal migrants from an original ancestral land in Hualien and Taitung counties of eastern Taiwan. This identification has become particularly significant today, as aboriginal peoples' rights have come to occupy an important place in Taiwan's ethnopolitics and popular culture. Aboriginal rights were among the first issues driving Taiwan's social movements in the late 1980s, alongside labor, gender equity, and the environment. By the 2000s, aborigine rights were further bolstered by the political discourse of Taiwanese independence, according to which aboriginal peoples, together with so-called "native Taiwanese" (*bensheng ren*) whose ancestors migrated to Taiwan from southern China in the 18th century, represent the core of genuine Taiwanese-ness. Standing against the so-called native Taiwanese and aborigines are so-called "Mainlanders" (*waisheng ren*), the minority portion of the population who fled China with the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime at the end of the 1945-1949 civil war against the Communists. For pro-independence Taiwanese, *Waisheng ren* are counterposed to *bensheng ren* as interlopers and colonialists. Indigenous groups, which account for less than five percent of Taiwan's population, therefore occupy a central position in current political discourse of Taiwan independence; yet, they continue to suffer social and economic marginalization in virtually every other sphere of life. Nonetheless, their vaunted position in current discourses lends aborigines a

powerful form of ideological and political legitimacy as authentic Taiwanese that can be leveraged to various ends. The success of Kamaya has been intimately bound up with the community leaders' skills in mobilizing organizational and discursive resources to define and defend their interests and present a compelling case for the relative autonomy of their riverside settlement in metropolitan Taipei.

Secondly, the development of urban activism in Taiwan in the 1990s and 2000s, aimed at the protection of the urban environment, affordable housing, and heritage preservation, paralleled the mobilization of aborigine rights. A group of public intellectuals, professional planners, and community activists, some of them also originating from aborigine villages in eastern Taiwan, became actively involved in the Kamaya cause. They helped the community frame its demands and design its strategies, and communicated with media and government officials on behalf of the settlers. While the role of this group is visible and significant, its involvement in urban social mobilization begs further analysis. I have been directly involved in the Kamaya case as a planner, activist, and researcher since 2008. This paper is an effort to delineate these multiple roles assumed in the process of legitimizing aborigine migrants' rights to the city. I draw upon first-hand information gathered through direct involvement in negotiations with government officials and insights gleaned in the process of developing a construction plan with the settlers to meet the demands of the water management bureau. In my conclusion, I reflect on the conditions of Kamaya's success and on the methodological implications of conducting research while being directly involved in social mobilization.

Kamaya's success in legalizing and legitimizing settlement on government land was not achieved without involving several political dilemmas. To begin with, Taiwan's burgeoning social movements and, within these, the ideological centrality of aborigine rights as mentioned above, provided an important political space for the settlers' mobilization. But the connections between the Kamaya settlers' mobilization and the various movements advocating political liberalization in Taiwan posed a dilemma shared by other groups throughout the 1990s and most of the 2000s; namely, an entanglement with the clientelistic politics of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The DPP was the major political opposition of the 1980s and 1990s, and it rose to power in 2000 with the support of social activist groups and the politically active Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. Political links between the Presbyterian Church and the DPP

were also reflected in Kamaya's power structure. Though party structures stand to provide social movements with institutional and political support, a community risks having its interests hijacked in the normal cycle of election politics. Moreover, party affiliation (or perceived affiliation) became one of the reasons for an internal split between different Amis groups in Taipei. Community politics became embroiled in party politics, as when the Kamaya community accepted the government's plan for collective land-use rights, a move seen by some as compromising the group's ultimate claim to title to the land. Further, by acceding to the government's plan, Kamaya's success lent political capital to the new mayor of the Taipei metropolitan region and the Kuomintang, which has struggled to align itself with social welfare programs and Taiwanese identity.

The 2000s have been a decade of thoroughgoing reflection on a host of issues among social activist groups, particularly environmental groups. Activists have consciously sought to keep politicians at arm's length and to find sources of funding and institutional support outside of party structures. It remains to be seen whether activists for aboriginal rights and urban housing will follow suit. For the remaining of the paper, I will delineate the organization and identity reinforcement of Kamaya, and the interactions among the settlers, community activists, and elected and appointed politicians in the process of negotiating for aboriginal migrants' rights to settlement in the city.

Organization and Identity Politics in Kamaya and Beyond

Organization of Kamaya: Key Institutions and People

Kamaya was established by Amis migrants who had longstanding ties to one another; they were neighbors, classmates, or relatives from back home in eastern Taiwan, and oftentimes were work colleagues in Taipei. In establishing their community, the migrants went from being scattered and isolated across the Taipei metropolitan region to being a loosely networked group. The process of building the settlement was crucial in consolidating that social network. Common personal experiences of migration and life in the city further served to enhance mutual understanding and strengthen their identity as Amis.

The retired chief, Jian Iso, was the first to cultivate land and settle in Kamaya, believing it to be unoccupied. Following tribal custom, he distributed land to other Amis, many of them

relatives who followed him to the riverbank. By accepting the authority of Jian to distribute land, new settlers recognized Jian's legitimacy as the settlement's tribal chief. In other words, in the beginning of settlement at Kamaya, the distribution of land did not involve a monetary transaction. Land was assigned based on kinship relations.

Building the settlement was also a process by which the tribe began to organize itself, and power structure of the settlement began to take shape. In many ways the power structure of the settlement is rather concentrated. As in many aborigine communities in Taiwan, the Presbyterian Church has played an influential role in community affairs and resource distribution. The current Presbyterian Church deacon of Kamaya, Jian Timo, is also the eldest son of the retired tribal chief and has been an active participant since the early days of the movement to reclaim aboriginal lands in the 1980s.

In 1997, when Kamaya suffered its devastating fire and faced its first threat of relocation, the deacon initiated the organization of the Self-Help Association and became its head. He negotiated with the local police station to determine the distribution of aid among settlers and contacted charitable groups for donations, which came through his personal bank account. The deacon-headed Self-Help Association of Kamaya was therefore responsible for dealing with local state agencies, politicians, and charitable organizations. Funds and donation from the government, charity groups, and the Presbyterian Church apparatus were distributed to Kamaya's residents through the Association.

After the fire, the Self-Help Association continued to operate and expand. According to the deacon, "...the Self-Help Association was incredibly useful. It handled many different tasks, and had many functions." During typhoon season, the Xindian fire department set up a flood watch command center in Kamaya working with the Self-Help Association. Outside assistance from charitable organizations also continued to flow to Kamaya through the Association. Ultimately, the Association transformed into a permanent presence in Kamaya, where its members acquired an important set of organizational and managerial capabilities. The Association's accumulated know-how and organizational structure also helped in facing the community's next crisis, when it again came under threat of demolition and relocation in 2008.

The consolidation of Kamaya's Self-Help Association in the 2000s also concentrated the power structure of Kamaya in the hands of the retired chief's family. With his multi-based

authority and leadership, the deacon also served as a Democratic Progressive Party's "vote captain" in the election for an aboriginal representative seat in the New Taipei City Government. He now holds the title of Chair of the Kamaya Amis Culture Sustainable and Community Development Association. It is generally believed that he is next in line to become the tribal chief in Kamaya. He says his father frequently tells him that the settlement of Kamaya, which he built from the ground up, must not be dismantled after he passes away.

The Youth League, another distinctive community organization in Kamaya, is organized by the tribe's young people and serves as a training venue for future tribal leaders. The Youth League takes orders from tribal chiefs and other tribal elders and carries out various social service functions (Fig. 6). Internally, the league is run by a leader and is divided into several age-specific levels. Traditionally, the league maintains an activity center, where training and other work take place and where young warriors would have been trained in former times. The Kamaya community does not have a proper activity center, but nonetheless features a complete Youth League organization with about thirty members. Typically, power and authority are entrusted according to the age divisions within the traditional Amis Youth League system. However, in the case of Kamaya, age distinctions are less relevant since most settlers are quite young. Even the tribal chief, now in his early 60s, is relatively young. More relevant than age in Kamaya's context is one's capacity to navigate the complicated political scene involving urban governments, politicians and social activist groups.



Fig. 6: The Youth League members dancing during the 2010 festival. Photo taken by the author.

Socially, Kamaya maintains traditional mutual help practices in housing construction and resource sharing (Fig. 7). The settlers share food, funds, and building materials with clearly spelled out principles of responsibility and obligation. Building paths and roads and installing electrical wires are all tasks undertaken collectively. The tribe also established a system of land allocation centered on the traditional authority of the tribal chief.



Fig. 7: The self-built homes in Kamaya. The white banners read “No Removal” and “No Relocation.” Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

Kamaya’s loosely organized sharing system is coordinated and consolidated by a power structure that integrates a tribal kinship system based on the chief’s lineage, church-based leadership, the Self-Help Association, the Youth League, and the Women’s League. Indeed the rather concentrated power structure of the community is not free of contention, and the retired chief’s family has been challenged, albeit unsuccessfully, by another tribal leader and his wife, an important leader of Women’s League. However, from the perspective of building a united front in Kamaya, it is important to note that the overall legitimacy and coherence of the leadership seems to have helped Kamaya settlers rally together at times of crisis and whenever they need to negotiate with the government and politicians over land and settlement issues. Another key factor that has strengthened solidarity in the Kamaya community is the well-cultivated sense of cultural togetherness and identity shared among the settlers.

Identity Building

Despite its *ad hoc* evolution, Kamaya settlers see themselves as building a northern, urban extension of the Amis tribe from the original home of eastern Taiwan. Guanyin Village, the home village of Kamaya's founder and retired chief, Jian Iso, was adopted as the ancestral root of the settlement. As a result, the construction of a shared identity within the Kamaya community needed to find a balance between those who came from Jian's home village and those who came from other Amis villages scattered along the east coast. After all, Amis people in metropolitan Taipei hail from more than ten townships in Hualien and Taitung counties of eastern Taiwan. When "Amis culture" was called upon to mobilize and rally ethnic Amis residing throughout metropolitan Taipei, the project of building a pan-Amis identity turned contentious, as different subgroups of Amis tried to assert their own version of "Amis culture" and their own vision of Amis identity in the struggle for autonomy and resource allocation. In other words, hometown identification did not translate in any simple way into a shared sense of tribal identity across the tribe's various subgroupings. Rather, tribal identities were formed in a far more contingent fashion. As historian Emily Honig has shown in the case of Subei migrants to Shanghai, hometown identity is not fixed, but rather is a social construction that changes with time and place and in connection to other social relations.³ It is a flexible and elastic form of identity. In Kamaya, the leadership tried to reinforce cultural connections between the home village in Hualien and the settlement in Kamaya, mostly by carrying out rituals and festivals integrated with church activities. The most important of these was the harvest festival.

Back in the old days in eastern Taiwan, the Amis harvest festival took place each year in July or August (Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). Village chiefs and elders assembled beforehand to determine the date and sequence of events, and the festival took place over three to five days with celebrations and activities held by settlements along the riverside. As part of the celebrations, Youth League members fished and distributed their catch to the tribe's households. A bonfire, whose flames and smoke were believed to deliver messages from the spirits of ancestors, was maintained throughout the festivities. The harvest festival was an important occasion in the life of the tribe, when families and villages reunited and gave thanks for an abundant harvest through song and dance rituals.



Figs. 8.1 and 8.2: Members of the Youth League and Women's League dancing in the harvest festival in Kamaya. Photos taken by the author.

The first harvest festival in Kamaya took place when about ten households had assembled there in 1984. The tribal chief and the settlers had begun to discuss holding festivities and invited the family tribe back in Hualien to join them in Taipei. In contrast to traditional festivals, the Amis harvest festival in Taipei is not connected to the land or to the harvest it was originally intended to celebrate; rather, it is the search for and strengthening of Amis cultural identity that

is central to celebrations in the city. When the Kamaya community holds its festival, the celebration takes place on a basketball court and parking lot at the settlement, not in the fields.

Interestingly, harvest festivals in Hualien and Taitung back east have also changed over time and are no longer closely associated with marking the agricultural calendar. They have less and less to do with maintaining or recovering traditional practices and increasingly incorporate popular music and dance learned from TV shows in their performances. On the other hand, displaced, city-based tribes seek a more “traditional” approach to the festival. For example, one elder, Jian Futing, has insisted that speeches, blessings, and songs during the ceremonies be recited only in the Amis native language and not be translated into Mandarin. Such linguistic skills are, as it turned out, crucial to the tribe’s political legitimacy. As fluent Amis speakers, tribal chiefs are able to communicate with tribal elders from east coast Hualien and Taitung and to speak at ritual events. As the ability to speak publicly is a critical litmus test of leadership, it seems to be particularly important in this context.

In the spring of 2011, trying to cultivate a greater sense of connection to Amis tradition in Kamaya, the settlement’s leaders decided to hold a traditional “stone burial” ceremony to calm the spirits in the new settlement. The general chief and an elder traveled to the Xiugulan River in Hualien to retrieve a stone from the riverbed that would symbolize ancestral spirits for the community (Fig. 9). They chose a grayish-green stone, which they brought back to Kamaya. Tribe members in Kamaya and chiefs and elders from around the Taipei metropolitan region assembled in Kamaya’s central square for an ancestor worship ceremony. A bamboo table on which were placed ceremonial items, including betel nut, sticky rice, rice wine, and pork, was placed in a gathering hall erected next to the square. The Youth League took charge of forming a patrol to accompany the ritual placement of the chosen stone by the riverbank.

At the riverside location where the stone was to be buried, the general chief lifted the stone and called upon the ancestral spirits to come forth (Fig. 10). Youth League members and elders in attendance began to collectively call out to the spirits. The general chief then placed the stone on a half-buried pedestal. Following further prayers conducted by the pastor, the ceremony came to an end. The placement of the stone as the symbol of the ancestors’ spirits in Kamaya legitimized the settlement and reinforced the connection between the aboriginal homeland and the new settlement.



Fig. 9: The general chief and elder praying for the ancestor to bless the chosen ancestral stone. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.



Fig. 10: The stone burying ceremony in 2011. Photo taken by the author.

In addition to emphasizing their own traditions, Kamaya settlers also participate in other activities in Taipei. For example, stemming from their cultural connections to riverside life, the Amis migrants have become leading contenders in the Dragon Boat Festival, a traditional summertime Han Chinese event (Fig. 11). The Kamaya women's dragon boat team has won several important prizes in Taipei in the past few years. Also, by leveraging the exoticism that Amis evoke in the minds of many Han Chinese and by exploiting aborigines' ideological centrality as supposedly authentic Taiwanese, the Kamaya settlers have deftly attracted media attention and thousands of visitors to their annual harvest festival, making it the Taipei metropolitan region's most significant Amis cultural festival. In Taipei's increasingly homogenous urban space, Kamaya's aboriginal festivities and the Amis' participatory,

welcoming musical and dance performances seem to have added some color to the otherwise plain urban life of Taipei.



Fig. 11: Women's Dragon Boat rowing team. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

Contested Pan-Amis Identity and Mobilizations

The attempt to expand Kamaya Amis identity to a pan-Amis identity shared by other Amis groups in Taipei has proven to be contentious, particularly when it comes to mobilization and collective action. In 2010, young Amis who had grown up in Taipei, along with artists and other supporters of the Amis, formed the Amis Protection Union as a way to link up campaigns

focused on the recovery of ancestral lands in Hualien and other parallel efforts focused on issues faced by Aborigine migrants to the city. The union was intended as a vehicle for collective mobilization. Its main actions were a satirical theatrical performance about Han Chinese land grabs in the aborigine regions held at the symbolic Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and an overnight protest in front of the Presidential Palace against illicit land development of aboriginal lands. President Ma Ying-jeou was openly booed during the demonstration. Although the Amis Protection Union claimed to speak for the interests of all Amis and is the main Amis organization in the area, the majority of Amis migrants in Taipei did not participate in its campaigns. An important group of urban Amis, the Fangas Amis settlers, also located at a riverbank site in northern Taiwan, did not join the union. Fangas was against the pan-Amis movement in general and against Kamaya in particular. While Kamaya has been working with the government to legitimize and legalize its settlement along the Xindian River, Fangas settlers saw Kamaya as being too “docile” and its approach as a sellout. Fangas insisted on taking a more radical route aimed at finding a more fundamental solution that recognizes the full set of land rights of aborigines in both their homeland in eastern Taiwan and in the new settlements in Taipei. Other Amis groups, including the Amis Protection Union mentioned above, also saw Kamaya’s efforts as divergent from the genuine aborigine social movement.

The self-isolation of Fangas from other Amis groups and its refusal to negotiate with the government eventually led to the forced relocation of the entire settlement. As mentioned earlier, in February 2008, the Taipei County Government forcibly relocated the Fangas community to a government-built housing compound an hour away from the original site. Seeing the arrival of the bulldozer, the Fangas settlers put up fierce resistance, calling for media attention and requesting help from labor unions and local politicians, and tried to hold out in their homes. But the settlers eventually did not gain the much-needed political legitimacy in the public’s eyes and lacked the political alliance with other aboriginal groups that could have supported their cause. As they sought to distinguish themselves as non-compromising and authentic Amis, rejecting other Amis groups that were willing to negotiate with the government, they also lost their political and physical turf in the city.

The success of Kamaya’s struggle is due, in part, to groups of professional community planners and activists, who represent an important link between the settlers and the local

government. Kamaya settlers came from the rural villages of eastern Taiwan, where most people traditionally started to work at the age of 12 years old when they graduated from the elementary school. A few of the settlers are illiterate or can barely read. To negotiate effectively with government officials, the intervention of intellectuals and professionals has been very useful.

Since 2008, every step of Kamaya's negotiation with the local government has been mediated by a group of planning faculty and graduate students based at the reputable and socially progressive planning institute in National Taiwan University. The planning institute has been heavily involved in social movements in Taiwan since the 1990s and was officially commissioned by the Taipei county government to take on the project of on-site relocation and redevelopment of Kamaya. This planning project has become the basis of collaboration between Kamaya and the local government. I have been directly involved in this project from the beginning. In the following section, I will briefly outline the relationship between community planning and social movements in Taiwan, and the connection between the planning institute at National Taiwan University and the Kamaya settlers in their struggles for their rights in the city.

Progressive Planners and Community Activists

Since the early 1990s, aboriginal people's rights to agricultural and forest land and aboriginal migrant workers' rights in the city have been a focus of attention for a small group of public intellectuals, among them sociologists of rural-urban migration and ethnographers of aboriginal societies and cultures. In tandem with political liberalization in the 1990s and recurrent social movements during that decade, various activist groups formed in defense of Taiwan's half million aboriginal people.⁴ At roughly the same time, since the early 1980s, a new wave of grassroots-oriented community planning arose with a particular emphasis on community participation in planning and design. This trend was especially notable in the studios of architecture and planning schools, in particular at National Taiwan University. Within this group, advocates of so-called "progressive community planning" in Taiwan were much influenced by the social and cultural movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the wake of the social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the basic principles of modernist city planning and architecture came into question. Increasingly, plans drafted by the architectural and planning elite were criticized for no longer being able to satisfy the actual needs

of people they intended to serve. Moreover, the privatization and marketization of land and housing placed housing increasingly out of reach for society's lower classes in urban areas. New ideas in planning gradually took shape in response to these emergent concerns. Part of this new movement within the field of spatial planning involved reflection on capitalist development and a search for noncapitalist modes of planning. A new skepticism toward the power of experts and recognition of the building practices and aesthetic priorities of local peoples arose in conjunction with this effort. Academic departments and publishing trends helped propagate the ideas generated by the new thinking in planning and joined the discipline to the larger reconsiderations that took place in the wake of the European student movements of 1968 and the American anti-Vietnam War movement.

Amid the intellectual and social foment of that era, Paul Davidoff (1965) proposed the notion of "advocacy planning,"⁵ which emphasizes the need for a bottom-up, democratic decision-making process. Integral to this idea was the role of nongovernmental organizations intervening in defense of the interests of disadvantaged groups and the rejection of utilitarian, expert-led modes of planning. In addition to this novel approach, John Turner (1972) raised the idea of Third World self-help housing as a popular mode of housing provision.⁶ It offered an alternative approach to housing while stressing local initiatives, mutual help processes, and the value of fostering autonomy in the realm of housing.

With a coterie of progressive faculty and students, the University of California, Berkeley's College of Environmental Design became a seedbed for new thinking in urban and regional planning in the 1960s and 1970s. Significant numbers of Taiwanese students at the college became part of a steady traffic of people and ideas with important historical ramifications for Taiwan's later social movements. In this sense, academia served a pivotal role in the process of cultural transfer for new ideas and practices in planning. In 1976, National Taiwan University's Institute of Civil Engineering established an urban planning studio, which in 1988 was expanded into the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning (GIBP). In 1990, the institute founded a nonprofit organization, the Building and Planning Research Foundation, which was established as a vehicle for focusing work on community planning projects.

The GIBP is not the only institution in Taiwan involved in urban social mobilization, but its faculty and students have played a leading role in shaping the urban policy agenda in Taiwan

on such matters as affordable housing, the distribution of urban social services, gender equity in urban planning, and heritage preservation. It must be noted here that involvement by university students in social mobilization since the 1980s stems not only from the influence of the major American and European social movements in the 1960s. More immediate inspiration was derived from Taiwan's rapid social and political transformation since the 1980s following the lifting of martial law imposed by the Nationalist regime since 1949. Social activism in Taiwan began with mobilization around labor issues, aborigine rights, reform of the political system, affordable housing, gender equity, and the environment. The GIBP's involvement in Kamaya settlement is part of this legacy.

The GIBP's tripartite role in Kamaya has been, first, as an activist organization working for the cause of the community; second, as a broker between the community and the local government; and, third, as a planner facilitating a participatory community planning process.

GIBP as Activists

In a number of ways, members of the GIBP became activists for Kamaya's cause. They were important initiators of the community's activities, served as spokespeople, assisted in negotiations, helped to bring the settlement's cause to the attention of a variety of media, and urged central government officials to support the budget for the Kamaya plan (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: Establishing the community association. Photo taken by the author.

GIBP as Broker

The Taipei County Government's move on February 28, 2008 to forcibly demolish and relocate the Fangas community generated significant media attention. In the wake of that event and with the presidential election about to take place, the county commissioner of Taipei, a rising star of the Nationalist Party, agreed to meet with the director of the GIBP, an aborigine member of the Legislative Yuan and aborigine social movement leader who was also a former TV and movie star, and a spokesperson from Kamaya (Fig. 13). The GIBP director involved in the planning of Kamaya was also consultant for Taipei County, so he enjoyed direct access to the mayor or other high-ranking officers in the local government. This special connection helped GIBP and tribal members proceed with negotiations, project presentations, and planning meetings with government officials in a more effective way. At the meeting, the GIBP director



Fig. 13: The meeting between Kamaya leaders with Taipei county governor. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

proposed that the county government offer land and building materials for the relocation of the Kamaya community. The commissioner agreed to provide land for the relocation, and the GIBP was commissioned by the county water management bureau to handle planning for the Kamaya community. The commissioner also requested the cooperation of county-level bureaus and held a

meeting specifically directed at ensuring the implementation of the plan. Not all officials were enthusiastic about supporting the Kamaya plan, however, and multiple objections were raised. Some said that not all members of the community were low-income residents and therefore did not need assistance; others noted that a plan for the dike needed to be completed before a plan for the community. These objections were addressed with the persistent support and intervention of the county commissioner who had his upcoming election campaign in mind. A change in leadership after the election stalled the progress already made toward finding a more permanent solution for Kamaya.⁷

A breakthrough came for the community in 2010, when Mr. Chu, the Nationalists' candidate for the governor of Taipei County (now called New Taipei City), announced his support for the Kamaya community. The day after his inauguration, Chu visited both Fangas and Kamaya and dispatched the heads of the Aboriginal Affairs Bureau and the City Planning Bureau to Fangas. Faculty from the GIBP took the opportunity to present the Kamaya plan to the mayor, explaining its feasibility and its detailed planning process. Their presentation and fervent support of the cause lent the proposal an aura of professional neutrality. Following the presentation, the mayor announced to media his intention to continue to support the Kamaya plan initiated by former Governor Chou.

At the first meeting of the city planning commission under the new mayor, the Kamaya plan was placed on the official docket. Committee members debated and amended the proposal before forwarding it to the Construction and Planning Agency in the Ministry of the Interior for further review and approval. The revised plan proposed to legitimize the Kamaya settlement's land usage by rezoning the site as an "aboriginal restricted-use zone" (*yuanzhumin zhuanyong qu*), which brought legitimacy and regularized land-use administrative oversight to bear on the settlement's space. The exclusive zoning regulations provided the necessary assurance for the community's development plan to proceed. The central elements to the proposal are its provisions allowing Kamaya to rent state-owned land to construct housing and formalizing collective ownership of property rights in the settlement's homes. Even before the legislation was passed, this approach was already regarded as a model for handling aboriginal settlement issues and has been reviewed by other local urban administrations. Under the current regulatory system, the plan can be legally implemented.

GIBP as Planner

After joining the community's protest actions in the fall of 2008, the GIBP, in consultation with the Kamaya community, commenced its participatory planning process. The multi-step process was designed to transform Amis cultural preferences in housing into a formal design and plan. Under a system of planning studios, the GIBP began a series of interviews, surveys, and studies. At the same time, GIBP invited a Japanese architectural scholar and planner well known for his user-participatory approaches to community design to serve as a consultant in the planning of Kamaya. He introduced several successful housing projects in Japan via slideshows, which worked as an effective communication tool to evoke public interest and discussions about the participatory design process.

The planning of Kamaya was also incorporated into the curriculum of the GIBP. Participating graduate students observed and interviewed local residents in order to better understand the lifestyle, work histories, and relocation histories of settlers. Through this local knowledge, the students learned that Kamaya settlers were not able to comply with the formal building codes of the authorities due to a lack of resources. In other words, the self-help construction process at Kamaya did not only use all possible building materials, but also evaded building codes and the legal property system. Students asked community members to articulate their expectations for the settlement and to draw layouts of the interiors of their homes. In this way, they gained insight into the settlers' lives, societal structure, and domestic spatial arrangements.

In the next stage, the GIBP team facilitated consensus building in Kamaya by organizing a series of group activities, including slideshows, a flag design workshop, a building site tour, among other activities, and formally registering the Kamaya Amis Culture Sustainable and Community Development Association. The flag design workshop encouraged adults and children to share their future visions of home by drawing them on canvas flags that were then displayed for their neighbors (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: Flag design workshop at Kamaya. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

When planning the actual spatial layout of the new settlement, the exterior public space was discussed first. Students and tribe members divided into groups to discuss the design of communal spaces and utilized surveys and open discussion to determine community sentiments about their neighbors. For example, Kamaya settlers enthusiastically discussed the location of the gathering hall, which some settlers felt should be at the center of settlement and others wanted to locate at the entrance (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: The public space workshop for site planning. Photo taken by the author.

In order to determine the spatial relationships between surrounding neighbors, which represent the social and cultural relationships within the tribe, every household completed questionnaires and outlined a draft map. The completed neighborhood layout was determined after town hall meetings and public discussions. The floor plan of each individual household followed the same discussion process, with the size of individual household buildings depending on the number of family members.

Through long and lively discussions, Kamaya settlers created a series of planning principles that represent their autonomy, self-governing abilities, and communal consensus. The major principles such as the layout of public spaces (including a common entrance), the parking lot, and the street pattern, were decided by public discussion. The common gathering hall will be placed at the center of the tribe. These planning principles will serve to maintain the scale and population of the existing households and preserve the integrity of Kamaya (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16: The site plan of Kamaya. Source: GIBP.

During the workshops and studios, students have included many unique Amis housing qualities. For example, the Amis outdoor daily party called *Badaosi* in Amis language is one of the most important spatial patterns in neighborhood living (Fig. 17). *Badaosi*, the informal outdoor gathering activity usually happens around the corner of the inner alley or in common spaces. The Kamaya settlers sit down and share food, drinks, and their life together. This casual and cozy get-together reaffirms the valuable experience of living together as a community.

Badaosi expresses the unique quality of Amis traditional lifestyle and space that could be threatened by living in the modern city.



Fig. 17: *Badaosi*. Photo: Yasuhiro Endoh.

Through housing design studios, interviews, observations, investigations, sketches, and blueprint production, the students assisted in converting the expressed desires for particular housing forms into executable plans by considering physical and architectural requirements (Fig. 18). In this fashion, Kamaya settlers were able to determine the formal outcomes of their own homes and to apply many of the skills acquired in their workplaces to this task, including sketching their ideal homes.



Fig. 16: Participatory design for each household in Kamaya. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

By enabling community members to express their values and culture with others, the design process has built up the settlers' self-confidence. For example, traditional Amis houses were built out of wood and bamboos to create a simple pitched roof building with a front porch on entrance side. This overhanging and front porch area was the intersection between indoor and outdoor spaces and the center of daily activities. In Kamaya, settlers chose to create a similar building form by using modern materials such as concrete and sheet metal. In the future, as a result of the participatory design process, this feature of traditional architecture will be preserved as the major feature of houses in the settlement.

Under the commissioned planning project, GIBP students worked as planners with Kamaya settlers and participated in the construction of building site, the revision of land-use and zoning, and the rental of state-owned land (Fig. 19). At the very beginning, many settlers did not believe that the participatory planning and negotiations would really help to alter their threatened situation. However, the actual changes of governmental behaviors and the construction at the building site did help settlers to gradually trust the tribal leaders and students and boost their confidence in future plans. The participatory design process is very different from the bureaucratic and professional design that failed to respond to the real needs of people and did not include collaboration with community members. Established to encourage communal autonomy, Kamaya residents benefited from a participatory design process that was not a professional black box; they experienced instead an open and extensive discussion with all affected parties. In this process of participatory planning, settlers did not passively accept the plan of the government nor the professional planners' blue prints. The combination of tribal solidarity and participatory planning had turned Kamaya settlers' ideas and ideal into implementable plans.

The political platform built by progressive planning professionals, the government under the increasing pressure of electoral politics, and the coherence of the settlement politics of Kamaya, has formed what You-tien Hsing (2010) has termed, civic territoriality.⁸ The building of the political platform and the defense of the physicality and legality of the settlement are two decisive forces in Kamaya's successful territorialization in the city.



Fig. 19: The participatory design and development process was open to the public. Photo: Yu Xin-ke.

What is important to note is that, unlike Hsing's depiction of the corporatist village in southern China, Kamaya settlers in Taiwan, an institutionalized electoral democracy, enjoyed far more social and political resources in their struggle to consolidate their territorial autonomy. Unlike the inward-looking and enclosed southern Chinese corporatist villagers, Kamayans' territorial strategies have extended further into other sectors of society. One important result of this extension of their mobilization is that election-minded local government leaders have been forced to incorporate the Kamaya model into the official regime of urban redevelopment. As an optimistic note to Kamaya's success, the Taichung city government of central Taiwan and other city governments that also face the issue of illegal Amis migrant settlements in their jurisdictions, visited Kamaya in Taipei to see if they could learn from its experience.

Conclusion

After three years of direct involvement as a community planner, activist, and researcher in the Kamaya settlers' struggle to establish a relatively autonomous community on the margins of Taipei, I offer the following reflections on the success of the case and on my role in the ongoing campaign.

Kamaya's success in founding a legal settlement on government land was conditioned by several historical and structural factors. First, the centrality of aborigine movements in Taiwanese politics helped Kamaya settlers obtain a priority position in governmental negotiations. Kamaya's success can also be attributed to the community-based empowerment of the tribe itself by means of active engagement with outside connections. One clear outcome of the Kamaya settler community's sustained action has been a greater sophistication in its outreach to other communities, the media, and the government. The deacon of Kamaya, for example, was featured in a lengthy 2011 article about Kamaya in the *United Daily*, in which he outlined the community's plans and hopes for the future. Further, the community has a chief who is able to use the Amis native tongue to communicate with other Amis chiefs about the future plans of Kamaya. One Kamaya leader, Jian Futing, was invited to give a talk on the Kamaya case at a journalism university in Taipei. Success in these areas seems to have strengthened the community's sense of identity. In August 2011, Youth League participation Kamaya's harvest festival grew to thirty people after the settlement's young people were impressed by the success of its campaign and the affirmation it received by the government and Taipei's cultural elite. Since then there has been a noticeable increase in efforts to organize migrant Amis groups in different parts of Taipei and central Taiwan, where there are also new settlements established by migrant Amis.

Finally, a few words about my own role in this process. The traditional methodology always advised researchers to keep a distance from the subjects of their fieldwork and to minimize interfering in their daily lives. However, in the Kamaya case, professionals of various backgrounds were a key factor in the community's success. The professionals took on multiple roles by choosing their social positions in the community and actively, consciously, and strategically choosing the opportunities and occasions to act and practice. In other words, the professionals did not just act differently in different positions, but also carried out multiple tasks and overlapping roles by crossing the limits of individual roles in different occasions. Therefore, the professionals and Kamaya settlers could actively create multiple possibilities for innovative actions.

As to the methodological question of my role as activist, researcher, broker, and planner in this project, my first and foremost concluding reflection is that it is not possible to keep a

perfect balance among the four roles, although prioritization is inevitable and often necessary. I became an activist the moment I entered the settlement in 2008, when Kamaya was under threat of being demolished and relocated. Organizing protests and articulating with other groups were our first actions, in order to react against the bureaucratic procedures. As part of the mobilization and negotiation team with the local government, I had a clear agenda of finding the best possible solution for Kamaya settlers and minimizing the negative impact of government policies and market influence on them. I could not, and did not intend to, claim a neutral position from the very beginning. This “pro-community” position consequently led to a dilemma: this clearly politicized position brought me as many allies as rivalries, and as much trust as suspicion. From the perspective of conducting research, this dilemma inevitably set limits on the type and credibility of the information I was able to obtain from different actors in this process. Most Kamaya residents treated me as an ally and a trusted friend and granted me access to as much information as I needed. And, I was part of the process of strategizing with the community leaders and residents. But the other Amis settlement that was competing with Kamaya and in disagreement with Kamaya’s approach to resolving the relocation problem saw me as a potential threat to their cause, making it difficult to have open conversations with its leaders and residents. This situation serves as an example of the difficulty of playing a quadruple role in a community project and the complexity of building a pan-Amis identity, as mentioned before. Furthermore, as I am writing this piece that will be published with my name as the author, I cannot help but wonder about the possible impact of the article in Kamaya’s ongoing struggle. I have tried to omit details that would lead to easy identification of individuals involved in the mobilization, and I have done my best to provide an “objective” analysis of the victory of Kamaya settlers’ struggle to assert their rights to the city. But I wonder how successful I am in this effort. Since writing is an important part of practice, it seems impossible to act subjectively and write objectively. Perhaps being aware of such dilemma is the first step toward that elusive goal.

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Notes

¹ I have used fictionalized names for the tribes, villages, settlers, and other actors.

² Information about most of the history and events that happened before 2008 is based on in-depth interviews. After 2008, the author personally participated in most of the events described.

³ Honig, 1992.

⁴ Website of The Council of Indigenous Peoples.

<http://www.apc.gov.tw/portal/docDetail.html?CID=940F9579765AC6A0&DID=0C3331F0EBD318C21EEE349EF7E8D71B>. Accessed July 21, 2011.

⁵ Davidoff 1965.

⁶ Turner and Fichter, 1972.

⁷ Because the KMT decided to select another candidate for the following election, the sitting commissioner, Chou Hsi-wei was forced to withdrawal from the election and left the county government. Since Chou was leaving the county government, other officials stalled the procedures, waiting to see who the new governor would be and what he/she would do with Kamaya.

⁸ Hsing 2010.

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