

# REBUILDING MAMA'S HOUSE-AN ETHNOHISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND HOMECOMING OF THE BUNUN ON TAIWAN

**Steven Andrew Martin**<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

This study is the ethnography of three members of an indigenous Bunun family on Taiwan. In 1941, during the Japanese occupation era, the family was forced to abandon their home. The research moved to conceptually reconstruct their domicile through in-depth interviews followed by a 19-day mountaineering expedition to the remote village of Takivahlas in the Laipunuk region. The research reveals four stages of indigenous adaptation and reconstruction over time as access to knowledge and new resources became available. Ultimately, the study pinpoints the severity and outcome of foreign cultural incursion and sheds light on the cultural revival and homecoming of the Bunun with the house as a point of contact with the past; it serves to reconcile the past with the present to produce a lasting story and insight to Bunun epistemology and heritage for English readers.

**Keywords:** Taiwan aborigines, Austronesian, Bunun, Laipunuk, ethnohistorical

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# สร้างบ้านใหม่ให้มีม้า การบูรณะและสร้างที่อยู่อาศัย ของคนพื้นเมือง บันนัน

## ผ่านการศึกษาประวัติความเป็นมาของชนเผ่า

สตีเวน แอนดรู มาร์ติน<sup>2</sup>

### บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้ใช้เวลาหกปีในการเก็บข้อมูลทางด้านชาติพันธุ์ของกลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวน 3 คน โดยเริ่มตั้งแต่ปีพุทธศักราช 2547 กลุ่มตัวอย่างเป็นชนเผ่าบันนันตั้งเดิมในได้หัวน การบันทึกภาพและเสียงได้นำมาใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลจากกลุ่มตัวอย่างเพื่อบันทึกเรื่องเล่าจากความทรงจำและความเข้าใจลักษณะต่างๆ ของบ้าน ซึ่งกลุ่มตัวอย่างได้ขยายตัวอยู่ที่บ้านเรือนของพากษา เนื่องจากการเข้าครอบครองของประเทศไทยปุ่นในช่วงปีพุทธศักราช 2484 การวิจัยนี้มีแนวคิดในการบูรณะที่อยู่อาศัยให้กับหมู่บ้านห่างไกลชนเผ่าภูมิลำเนาภูเขาสูงในแคว้นตากวลาสและไอบีคันด โดยรวมรวมข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก สำรวจพื้นที่เนินเขา และบันทึกลักษณะที่ตั้งของบ้าน ข้อมูลจากการสำรวจได้นำไปให้กลุ่มตัวอย่างทั้งสามคนใช้ควบคู่กับความทรงจำของพากษาเพื่อออกแบบและวัดโครงสร้างพื้นบ้าน จากการวิจัยนี้ยังพบว่าการบูรณะของบ้านเรือนนั้นประกอบไปด้วยขั้นตอนต่างๆ 4 ขั้นตอน ที่ให้ความรู้และเป็นแหล่งข้อมูลใหม่ที่สามารถนำไปใช้ได้อย่างมีประโยชน์ ในการบูรณะบ้านเรือนครั้งนี้ได้มีการเดินทางไปสำรวจพื้นที่ ที่เป็นที่ตั้งของบ้านเป็นจำนวน 2 ครั้ง ก่อนที่จะลงมือบูรณะและสร้างบ้านจริงๆ ในปีพุทธศักราช 2550 และ 2551 แต่อย่างไรก็ตามความพยายามในการสร้างบ้านขึ้นมาใหม่ อีกครั้งนั้นไม่ประสบความสำเร็จ เนื่องจากภัยธรรมชาติที่ทำลายบ้าน แต่ในปีพุทธศักราช 2552 การวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาความร่วมมือระหว่างประเทศที่มีบทบาทเข้มข้น และยังศึกษาการพื้นที่ที่บ้านเรือนของชนเผ่าบันนัน โดยนำบ้านมาใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการเก็บข้อมูล โดยเรียบเรียงรายละเอียดและเรื่องราวในอดีต ซึ่งบ้านเปรียบเสมือนตัวแปรสำคัญเชื่อมโยงความเป็นมาของเผ่าพันธุ์จากอดีตสู่ปัจจุบัน ประกอบกับการวิจัยเชิงสำรวจนี้ ยังเผยแพร่เรื่องราวอันยานานเกี่ยวกับประวัติความเป็นมาและประเพณีของชนเผ่าบันนันให้กับกลุ่มผู้อ่านภาษาอังกฤษได้เข้าใจอย่างลึกซึ้ง

**คำสำคัญ:** ชาวน้ำที่น้ำ ได้หัวน ภาษาอีสาน ภาษาอีสาน ชนเผ่าบันนัน แคว้นไอบีคันด เกี่ยวกับความเป็นมาของชาติพันธุ์

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## Introduction

Mystery surrounds the exact origin of Taiwan's indigenous peoples. Scholars generally agree that they are Austronesian language speakers (the Formosan languages in particular), yet they belong to different stocks of people. At the time of writing the Taiwan government recognizes fourteen ethno-linguistic groups on the island (including the Yami on Orchid Island). The following research is centered on one of these groups, the high-mountain Bunun of southern Taiwan who once lived in the remote villages of Laipunuk (Ne Ben Lu) (Figure 1). The study is based primarily on the ethnography of two Bunun elders (brother and sister) and seeks to conceptually reconstruct their house site which was burned and abandoned in 1941 at the hands of the Japanese police following the Laipunuk Incident of 1941.<sup>3</sup>

## The Japanese colony on Taiwan

The island of Taiwan was essentially handed over to the Japanese during the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) and a systematic colonization followed. However, the Japanese encountered fierce and unanticipated resistance from indigenous peoples, particularly those in remote mountain areas. Lee (2006 personal communication)<sup>4</sup> explains, "The aborigines were on their home territory, were acclimated to the rugged mountains and jungles, and were prepared to defend their native lands at all costs. The Japanese did not anticipate the will and strength of these peoples. Consequently, the Taiwan aborigines gave the Japanese a bloody nose." On the whole, the Japanese waged a 50-year campaign to take control of the mountain areas which began in the north of the island and pushed southward. The last hours of resistance against the Japanese occurred in the high mountains of southern Taiwan and specifically the region of Laipunuk. Thus, Laipunuk was the final frontier of the Taiwan aborigines and the Bunun in particular.

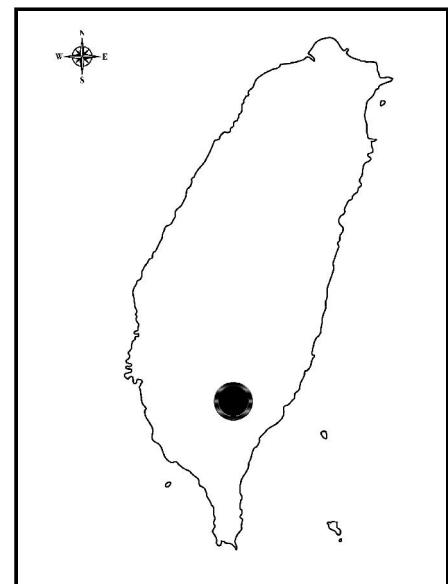


Figure 1: Location of Laipunuk, Taiwan

<sup>3</sup> The 'Laipunuk Incident' refers to a bloody rebellion against the Japanese police led by 'Haisul', a disgruntled Bunun man who had lost his land and then his family to disease, events that he blamed on the forced relocation to the lowlands.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, Chong Lin is a specialist on the Japanese Colony on Taiwan.

## The Bunun of Laipunuk

The Bunun are divided into five ethno-linguistic groups: Takituduh, Takibakha, Takbanuaz, Takivatan, and Isbukun. The Isbukun dialect forms the largest group and is widespread but not restricted to Nantou, Haulien, Kaohsiung, and Taitung Counties. The five Bunun dialects are more than just linguistic groups; they are, "Characterized not only by distinctive dialectal and cultural features, but by a sort of tribal consciousness and tendency toward political cohesion" (Huang, 1988).<sup>5</sup> The Bunun were known to be headhunters, fierce warriors, and a high-mountain people hostile to outsiders, including other aboriginal groups, the Chinese, and the Japanese. According to Bunun oral history, the Bunun people originally lived on the western plains of Taiwan and likely moved to the mountains before or during the 18th century. Since the time of the earliest Japanese ethnographers in Taiwan, the Bunun were documented as the traditional inhabitants of the highest mountain areas. It was common for the Bunun to build their houses at elevations of one or two thousand meters above sea level. A survey done in 1929 by the Japanese scholar Kano indicated that approximately two-thirds (68.2%) of all Bunun settlements were located above one thousand meters (Huang, 1998, 32).

The Laipunuk region it is an alpine watershed, comprised of an arc of mountain peaks and ridges which are the source of numerous small streams and rivers. The region is located primarily within Yen-Ping Township, Taitung County and covers approximately 15,084 hectares of natural forest. Figure 2 identifies the topography and toponyms corresponding to the research.

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<sup>5</sup> Huang references Mabuchi (1951, 44).

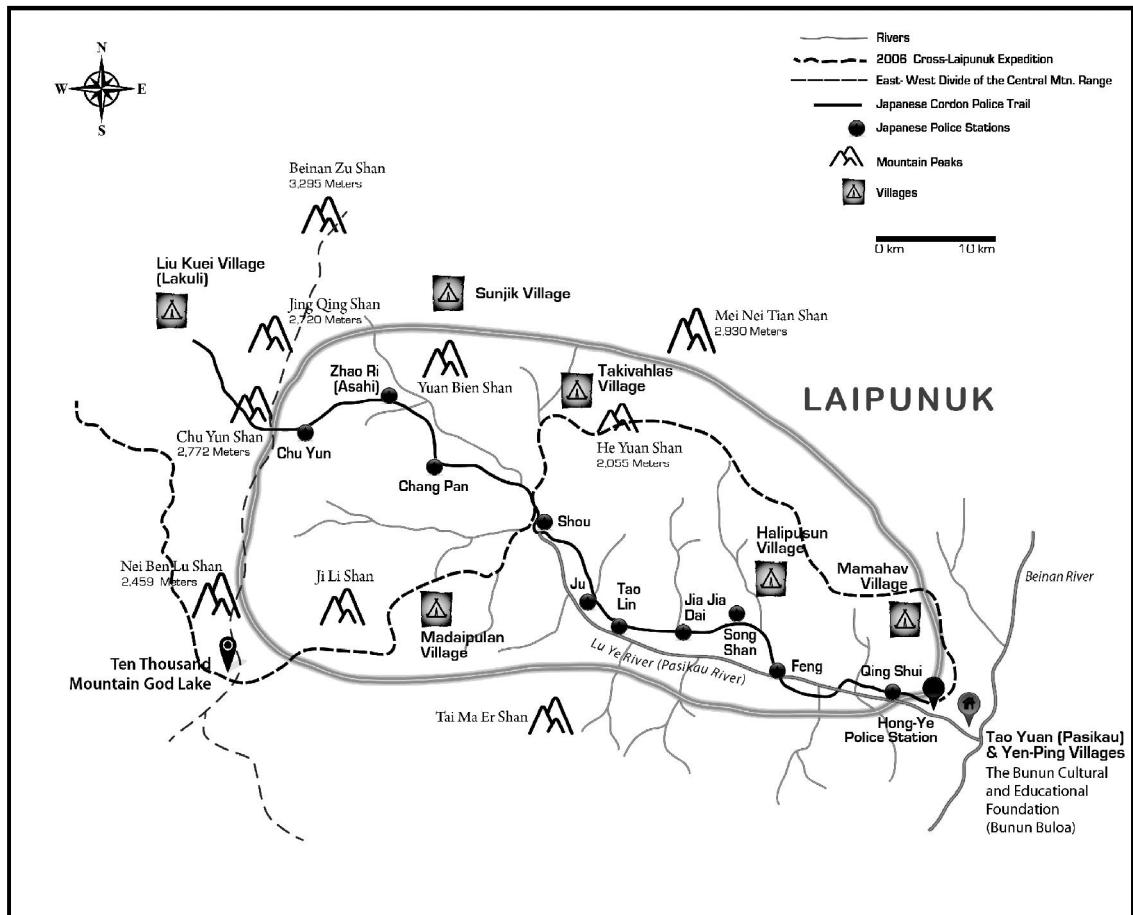


Figure 2: Topography and Toponyms of Laipunuk

Source: S. A. Martin (2011)

## Methods

This qualitative research uses an ethnohistorical case study approach, which is an appropriate methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed to integrate oral history with limited existing literature and exploratory research. Ethnohistory is generally considered as an anthropological study of cultures lacking a written history of their own through the examination of their oral traditions and comparing them against existing external evidence, including the written accounts from other cultures. This study seeks to reconstruct the Bunun cultural tradition through the identification of place, the evolution of a Bunun house construction, and the recognition of the Bunun cultural heritage of Laipunuk.

This research is an ethnohistorical reconstruction whereby three family members participated in sharing their individual and collective knowledge of the place in question.

"Mama" in this research refers to Langus Istanda;<sup>6</sup> Biung Istanda<sup>7</sup> refers to Langus Istandas' older brother; and Nabu Istanda refers to Langus Istandas' youngest son. Langus and Biung Istanda served as the primary informants whereas Nabu Istanda served as the translator as well as a guide in the nineteen day mountaineering expedition to Laipunuk.

The informants were chosen for the following reasons. First, I had access to field data for them stemming from a comprehensive ethnographic research conducted from 2004 to 2006 (Martin, 2006). Secondly, the Istanda family had initiated an indigenous cultural revival movement, the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation, which was founded by Langus Istanda's eldest son, Pastor Bai Guang Sheng (Biung Husungan Istanda). The Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation provided key components to this study: access to essential knowledge on Laipunuk history; location for interviewing; participation in the 2006 expedition to Laipunuk region; and translation assistance.

The recordation of oral history, which formed the heart of the study, employed digital video and audio recording equipment. All questions presented to the informants were generated by the researcher and written in English. All questions were presented by Nabu Istanda (interviewer) to Langus Istanda and Biung Istanda (informants) in the Isbukun dialect of Bunun. Nabu Istanda also served as an informant. Information was recorded and translated, and unclear findings were presented to informants for clarification. Translation from Bunun to English was conducted solely by the interviewer and the researcher by viewing and reviewing videotapes. All transcription was done by the researcher. Bunun language, including toponymns, integrated into the documentation of the research has been placed in italics. Narratives presented herein do not always follow proper English grammar.

Interviews took place in two distinct contexts, those before and those after the expedition to Laipunuk. Pre-expedition interviews were used to gather knowledge and

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<sup>6</sup> Mama is the name most commonly used among family members, the local community, and at the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation for Langus Istanda and was therefore adopted in this research.

<sup>7</sup> Biung Istanda is most often referred to as 'Tama Biung'. Tama is the Bunun term for uncle; it may also be used as a sign of respect. Tama Biung is the name used by his family members, the local community, and at the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation and has been integrated into this research for clarity.

details surrounding the story of the house, including its construction, location, and destruction. Subsequently, an exploratory research was conducted (January, 2006)<sup>8</sup> to locate, study, photograph, video tape, measure, and sketch the house site. The house site had been previously located and identified in earlier expeditions conducted by individuals and family members from the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation.

Post expedition interviews integrated the presentation of photographs, video tapes, and field sketches based on the researcher's measurements of the remains and other findings to the informants. Based on the synthesis of these findings, house sketches were generated by researcher and local artisans at the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation. The sketches served as visual aids to facilitate and validate the informants' memories and to serve as reference figures for this report. Sketches were digitally enhanced and evolved in both design and detail as missing information was added at the discretion of the informants. Figure 3 is a conceptual framework for the ethnohistorical field research.

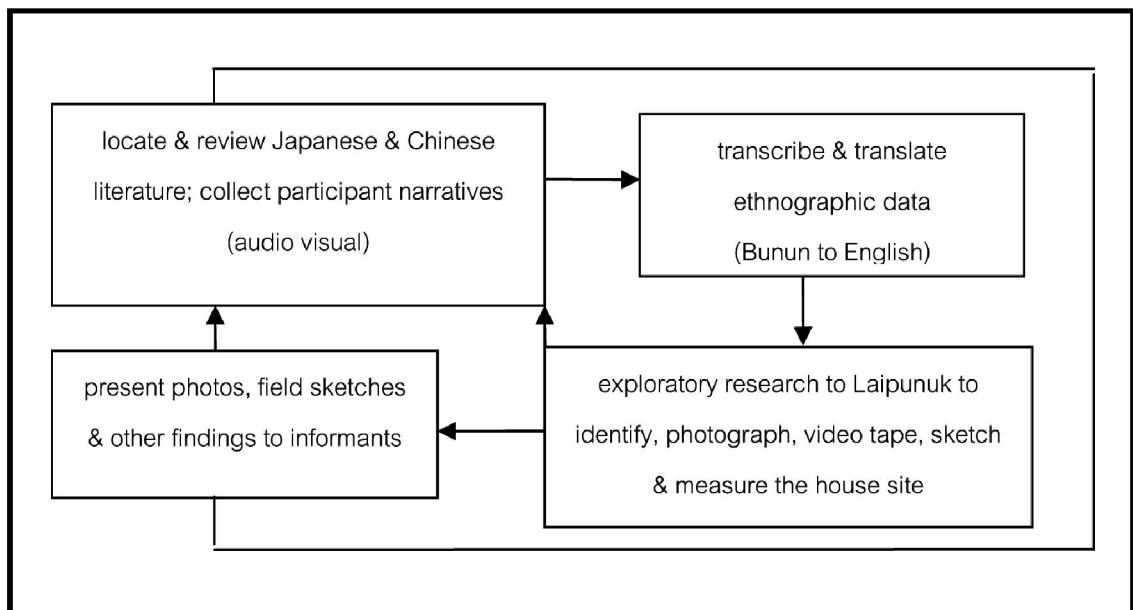


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework for Ethnohistorical Research

<sup>8</sup> January was chosen as an appropriate season for the expedition as snakes are in hibernation for the winter and there is no threat of typhoons.

## FINDINGS

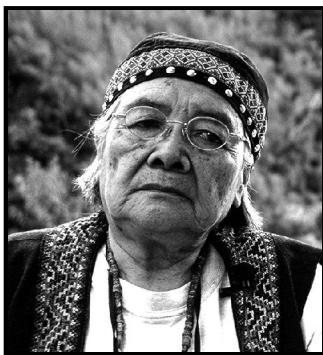
### Nabu Istanda—the identification with place



Nabu Istanda (1964- )

The Bunun custom is to bury the umbilical cord, the busuh, directly in front of the door of the house. The busuh site then becomes a sacred place for the individual and the family; it is symbolic of connecting life with the land. This tradition was broken when the Japanese removed the Bunun from Laipunuk in 1941. The Laipunuk elders were unwillingly separated from their busuh site and many still feel a sense of disconnection and longing to reconnect. Traditional houses were made by digging into a hillside and constructing an earth and stone terrace in front to provide a level or split-level foundation. Although stone is considered the customary material for building, the Bunun quickly adapted to new areas by making use of whatever raw materials were available, including wood, bark, reeds, etc. The Bunun often abandon their houses and fields to move to new areas in search of better hunting grounds and fertile soil to grow millet (*sateria italic*). As they practice in-house burial, when a family member dies in a way considered unnatural, they abandon the house and resettle in a new area. Tama Biung often told me that the Bunun are a 'moving people' and our elders believe that the survival of Bunun culture depends on this 'movement'. Today, I believe the 'movement' needed to conserve and revive the Bunun cultural heritage is to go back to Laipunuk. Rebuilding 'Mama's' house is the action and the symbol of this century.

### Langus Istanda-our Takivahlas house



Langus Istanda (1920- )

We used to be divided by the mountains, but the hunters would meet when they went hunting and they would communicate. They had information exchange; everyone was sharing information. We knew about Japanese and everyone decided to leave and come to the Takivahlas area of Laipunuk. We all came together. Although I was very young, I remember my father Anu moved us to Takivahlas. He carried the roofing materials on his back from Sunjik village area. This was *kalabatune*<sup>9</sup> bark for both

<sup>9</sup> Biung Istanda believes that it was *banil* (Taiwan yellow cypress) bark.

roofing and siding. Our family house went through several stages of construction and reconstruction, and then later he rebuilt it using tagnas<sup>10</sup> leaves for roofing and tagnas reeds for siding. I remember we used these same tagnas reeds for bedding. Then later, after living in Takivahlas, my father learned both the skill to cut slate and the technology to construct with slate. This work utilized special iron tools likely gained through trade with outside cultures. I think that maybe the entire house was made of slate when I last saw it; the sides were likely stone all the way to the roof at that time. I remember my mother and father where crying when they learned the Japanese would set fire to the houses in Takivahlas village; we saw the smoke in the distance as the Japanese marched us down the trail to the lowlands.

### Biung Istanda-our Takivahlas house



Tama Biung Istanda  
(1917-2007)

Our tainidalan<sup>11</sup> at Takivahlas was a man called 'Tahai Binad' from Mundavan<sup>12</sup> of Istanda family. We carried the banil bark to Takivahlas from Sunjik, so our first house was made of banil but later we used tagnas reeds for the walls and roof, then later we built a rock house. We have seen this type of rock house before, so we learned from other people, maybe from Rukai or Paiwan people. I think when the men went hunting or headhunting we saw the Rukai or Paiwan rock house. In Laipunuk everyone was making the stone house. If Bunun have rock, we use it. I was too young

to help build our house in Takivahlas, maybe just five or six years old. Our house had windows, but not a shooting window like our house in Sunjik. Our house was rock on three sides but had wooden boards in the front. The beds were around the sides and against the walls. Our beds in Takivahlas were made of tagnas reeds and with leather, fiber, and cloth to put on top, and it was warm because we also had the stoves. And we had blankets made of goat skin called gulung. The front wall of the house was wood, and when you opened the door, the bachilasan (granary) was straight ahead.

<sup>10</sup> Tagnas: A type of high-mountain indigenous reed (*mischanthus floridulus*).

<sup>11</sup> Tainidalan: The title given in Bunun culture to the first person to locate and 'to open' (bless) the land.

<sup>12</sup> Mudavan is located north of Laipunuk in the Central Range.

Next to the granary was a small place to keep the things that we used for our ceremonies. Our ceremony items could be placed on either side of the granary, it didn't matter.<sup>13</sup> The granary was supported by four banil posts so it was about a meter off the floor. As soon as we built the house, there were two stoves inside. My father Anu was always kind and good, and wanted to share his wisdom. Everyone always wanted to come to his banin (stove). There were two stoves; I don't know why we had two stoves, maybe because of separate responsibilities, but not because of samu (taboo), maybe because there were two brothers so we had two stoves. I remember the luluman (pig pen) didn't have a door and that it was to the left side of the house. We kept and fed the pigs inside and didn't let them walk around freely. We also had a tuluk (chicken house). Many years later I went back and saw the house foundation and area. That was during the Kuomintang forestry time in the 1970s.

### **The field research**

The Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates of the house were recorded as 240814 + 2540986 at an elevation of 1,365 meters. The ground slope was approximately fifteen to twenty degrees and the house foundation faced downhill and toward a stream. There were approximately thirty house foundations in the area. The nearest foundation to the house site was approximately ten meters away.

All measurements were taken from the inside of the walls, and the researcher added two feet six inches (the approximate width for each wall) in order to get the correct external dimensions.<sup>14</sup> Sample photographs of the house site show the pig pen as viewed from the corner of the house (Figure 4), and the house foundation as viewed from the rear corner of the house (Figure 5). Trees growing in the house site were planted by the Taiwan Forestry Bureau (TFB) in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Many aspects of Bunun culture are characterized the polarity of hanitu, whereby spirits are either good or evil, and this type of thinking may correspond to the positioning of things in the house. Hanitu corresponds to the Bunun concepts of masial (good) and makuang (bad).

<sup>14</sup> In order to present a concise research, the details and measurements recorded, including the researcher's original field sketch of the house floor plan, have not been provided here, rather these findings were presented to the informants at the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation for clarification and new digital map was produced displaying the combined results (Figure 9).

<sup>15</sup> For nearly thirty years after the Japanese left Laipunuk the region remained untouched. However, to gain access to valuable yellow cypress, Taiwan Forest Bureau (TFB) launched a logging campaign into the upper elevations of Laipunuk in the early 1970s. Exploratory research (Martin, 2006) found that the forestry road has eroded to narrow foot trails broken by landslide areas.



Figure 4: Takivahlas House Pig Pen



Figure 5: The Takivahlas House Foundation

### Conceptual reconstructions

Upon returning to the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation, the interview process re-commenced with the support of the visual aids produced by the researcher. Sketches of the house were generated to represent each stage of development. Drafts were presented to the informants and alterations were made until they met the approval of the informants for each of the three phases as depicted in Figures 6, 7 and 8: bark and river rock sides with bark roof; tagnas reed and river rock sides with tagnas reed roof; and river rock sides with slate roof..<sup>16</sup>

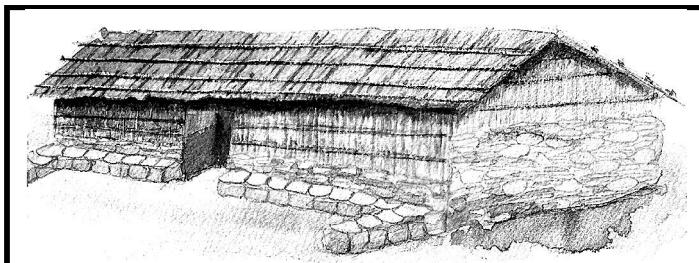


Figure 6: Bark Roof

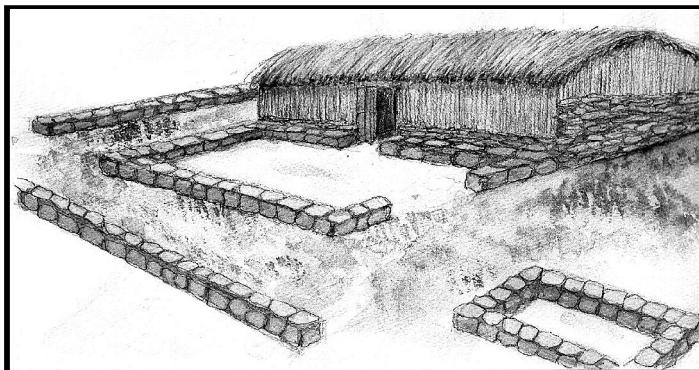


Figure 7: Tagnas Reed Roof  
(Pig Pen in Bottom Right Corner)

<sup>16</sup> According to Biung Istanda, part of the front wall of the house was made of wood. This corresponds to the field observations which were unable to identify the ruins of a rock wall at the front of the house site.

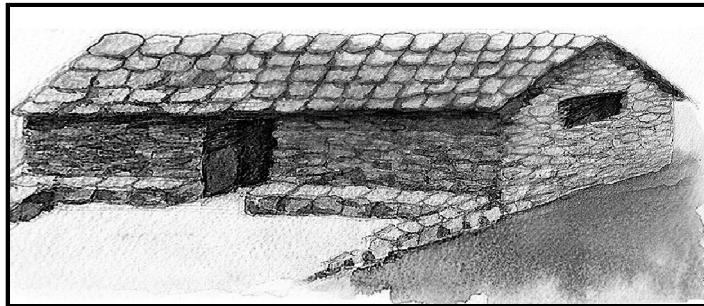


Figure 8: River Rock Sides  
and Slate Roof

With the support of Figures 4 through 8, and through viewing the researcher's original drawing and the corresponding measurements taken in the field, as well as photos and video tapes, the informants directed the final house site spatial plan. Langus and Biung Istanda worked together on June 13, 2006 to complete the project by identifying the location of the beds, stoves, and granary (Figure 9). They were unable to identify the rock pile east of the house.<sup>17</sup>

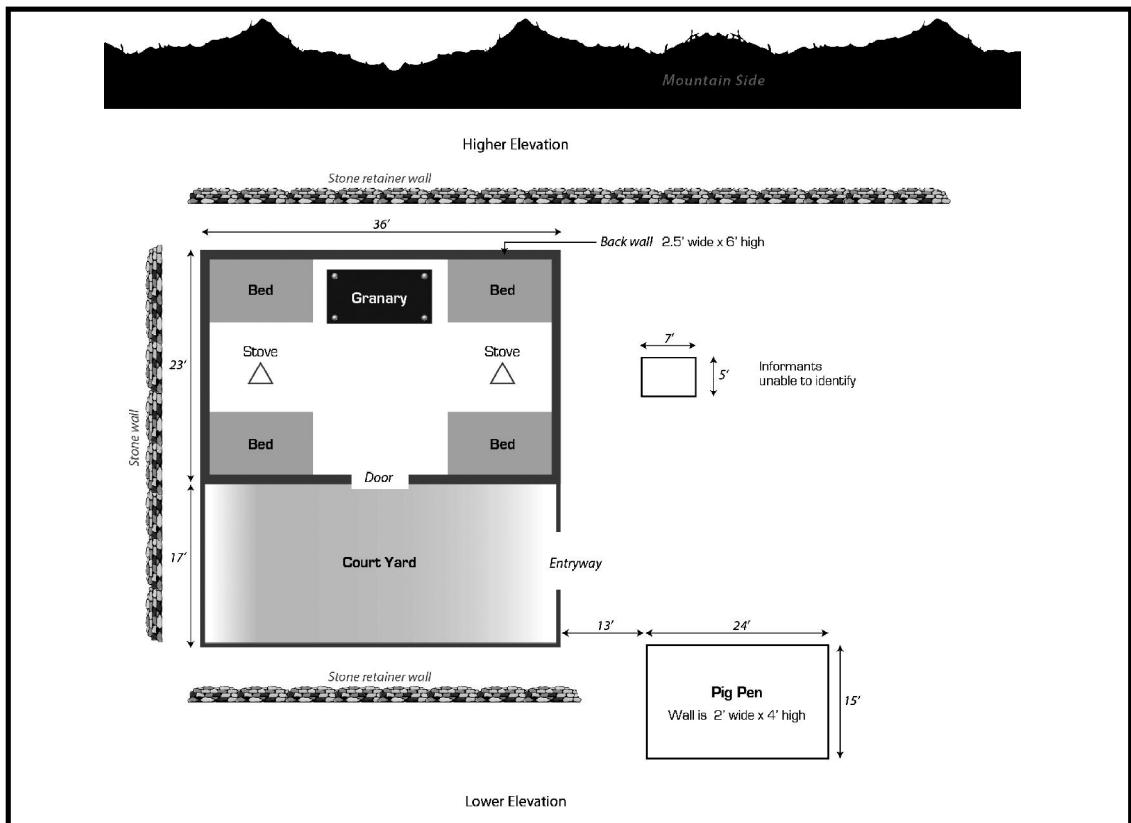


Figure 9: Digital Version of House Spatial Plan  
(based on researcher's field sketch and detailed with the informant's memories)

<sup>17</sup> Nabu and Biung Istanda suggest that the rock pile is from the Taiwan Forestry Bureau era

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The definitive hour of the research came with the rebuilding of the house with local materials during the 2007 and 2008 expeditions. However, on 8 August 2009, Typhoon Morakot caused severe landslides in the region and subsequent attempts to reach the site in 2010 failed. Nonetheless, the 2008 expedition marked the fourth construction of the house, rebuilt with a change in materials and various modifications. The house was structured in a 'log cabin' style using poles fashioned from the nearby pine forest (which had been planted and then abandoned during the Taiwan Forestry Bureau in the 1970s). Figure 10 was taken in January 2008 as shows the house fully rebuilt and occupied. Although the January 2011 expedition reached the house site one and a half years after the events of Typhoon Morakot, the roof had partially collapsed, and at the time of writing, planning was underway for repairs and the results have not been included in this research.



**Figure 10: Mama's House Post-Construction**

Photo provided by Nabu Istanda (2008)

Spatially, the Takivahlas village was larger than traditional Bunun villages and houses were constructed closer together. Biung Istanda recalls that there were larger window openings on the houses in Takivahlas than traditional Bunun houses in other areas, representing a shift in normal construction style, which would only have had a small window or gun slot for defensive purposes against other headhunting groups. These changes may indicate that there was a lessening for the need in fortification, and indicates a shift in the Bunun social environment. This may indicate that the Bunun were living communally and in a larger village atmosphere compared to previous centuries, and that various groups and families had come together in Laipunuk because the Japanese had taken control of the contiguous regions.

Given time and circumstance, the Istanda house foundation showed no evidence of the construction and reconstruction which Langus and Biung Istanda recounted, other than that the side and rear walls were made of stone and that there was no stone used for the front wall. Based on researcher's observation, and following informant's testimony that the Japanese burned the house; the fire likely caused the wood used to support the roof to collapse and the slate roofing material to shatter (indeed slate and shale were scattered on the ground). Additionally, the Taiwan Forestry Bureau had been active in the area and the pine trees planted in and around the structure were as large as two feet in diameter and this activity disturbed the site considerably.

Based on this ethnohistorical research, the Istanda family witnessed material, technological, and spatial changes in the development of their domicile while in Laipunuk. Originally the house was built with the materials that they were familiar with and already had in the original village of Sunjik. Subsequently, the house was rebuilt with tagnas reeds, a local and readily available natural material. Technologically speaking, they learned about using slate for construction from other people already in Takivahlas or from the Paiwan or Rukai ethnic groups. The fourth construction of the house, 70 years after the third, utilized new resources and building insights, namely pine wood, metal saws, and tarpaulins. As in the previous century, the Bunun adapted and utilized the materials at hand; they incorporated the design and will of the times.

The research confirms that the Bunun have a strong sense of place regarding their 'home' and the fortitude to return 'home' has been transmitted and carried by subsequent generations in the face of severe cultural degradation. The ethnohistorical reconstruction proposed in this research came full circle at the will and power of the Laipunuk descendants who braved several mountaineering expeditions to Takivahlas to plan and execute the reconstruction of Mama's house. Although the Bunun were once

again cutoff from Laipunuk by the events of Typhoon Morakot,<sup>18</sup> the ethnohistorical reconstruction provided a methodology for the reconciliation to the loss of traditional lands, culture, and language; it serves as a path for the homecoming of the Bunun, both conceptually and in practice and exemplifies the resilience of the Bunun heritage.

### **LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

Distinguishing meaning and clarity of life experience through the course of translation and transcription of Bunun and Japanese to English posed limitations to the study; and informants were not always accessible due to their ages and health. Informants were not always clear regarding the conceptual drawings and images produced during the research for four reasons: (1) the gap of over 60 years since informants last experienced the site; (2) informants were children at the time in query; (3) a sense of unfamiliarity with the media employed in the research (video and audio equipment, and the use of photographs, drawings, diagrams); and (4) less than perfect vision. The remoteness of the Laipunuk area, coupled with the dangers faced to reach the Takivahlas house site, make expeditions costly and come at considerable risk to human life. For safety reasons, such as unstable mountain areas, typhoons, and poisonous snakes, expeditions were only allowed during the months of January and February when heavy rains and typhoons were unlikely and snakes were in hibernation. Therefore, there were enormous gaps in time during the research.

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<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested that the deforestation and loss of the Taiwan yellow cypress trees in the 1970s and 1980s logging industry are partially to blame for the massive landslides caused during the typhoon.

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