

# A Tale of Two “Rumah”

## State, Market and Two Austronesian Communities

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**Abstract** – In this paper, I will juxtapose the socio-economic histories of two Austronesian communities in order to highlight the working of a key cultural concept, “house” or rumah, in both communities in the face of encroaching contemporary state and market forces. The communities under consideration are an Iban longhouse community of Sarawak and a Paiwan community of Southern Taiwan. Both group honored a kind of precedence in terms of land occupancy and the utilization of natural resources. Both group follow a rather fundamental cognatic principle in kinship recognition, household division and property transmission. While a comprehensive comparison of the two on so complex a subject is apparently way beyond the scope of a conference paper, I choose here to focus on the interplay of state policy (both colonial and independent) and market force on land tenure and land utilization among the two communities, and hope to demonstrate the upholding of the notion *umah* as a value in these peoples modernization strategies. Even though the contents, scopes and representations of the notion of “House” are different in these two societies, its centralities in their respective social and cultural systems are fascinatingly comparable. I do not intent to say that these two local communities of the Austronesian experience no difficulties whatsoever in their ever-increasing involvement in the national, regional and global systems. From what we observe, however, we do see that they are not just surviving the encroaching external impacts, they continue to exist as two “rumah”.

**Keywords:** house, iban, paiwan, taiwan indigenous.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Rumah”, along with its cognate “*umaq*”, is a common Austronesian word for house. Among the Iban of Sarawak, the word designates, in particular, “longhouse”.<sup>1</sup> For the Iban, then, a rumah is equivalent to a village or community. Among the Paiwan, the word *umaq* is used to designate a named, slate-built single-family residence. For the Paiwan, a village, *qinalan*, consists of a cluster of “*umaq*”. Unlike Iban longhouse, which is the communal “theater” for the member families to compete with each other in terms of subsistence as well as prestige economies on an egalitarian footing. While the Paiwan

<sup>1</sup> More precisely, In Iban language, longhouse is called “*rumah panchiai*”, literally a “long house”. In daily usage as well as documentation and mapping of settlement, however, the term *rumah* is used to designate a longhouse community.

houses in a village are divided into hereditary noble and commoner classes, with land right and other economic and ritual privileges unevenly distributed between the classes. However, Paiwan house is also a key representation of Paiwan ideas of person, life, social reproduction and history (Chiang, 1993). Elaborately decorated houses of high nobles are the gathering places of villagers. The founding of a village is usually recounted in terms of the establishment of the founding house or houses. Therefore, like the Iban, the Paiwan upholds the "house" as a focal concern of their social life and a key idiom in their ideology. This paper is thus a story about the socio-economic processes of two "house centered" Austronesian communities. I hope to demonstrate in this paper how the influence of state policy and market force are, so to speak, "filtered" through their respective house ideologies before making an impact on the local communities.

"House" as an analytical concept is first proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1982; 1987). The concept was meant to solve the problems in understanding social organizational principles of those societies that are impossible to be understood in terms of unilineal descent principle. According to Lévi-Strauss, the house in these societies has a number of common features, which are "a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both (Lévi-Strauss, 1982)."

The "house" is soon identified as a fundamental cultural concept and social category in the societies of Insular Southeast Asia by Fox (1980), Macdonald et al. (1987), Errington (1989), Waterson (1990), and McKinnon (1991).

The two Austronesian communities that constitute the subjects of this paper are the Iban longhouse Rumah Chang of the Fourth Division of Sarawak and the Paiwan Village Parilaiyan of Southern Taiwan. "Traditionally" both the Iban and the Paiwan were swidden agriculturalists; both group honored a kind of precedence in terms of land occupancy and the utilization of natural resources; both group follow a rather fundamental cognatic principle in kinship recognition, household division and property transmission.

In terms of colonial experience, there were more contrasts than similarities between the two. The Austronesian peoples in Taiwan have never experienced any influence of Hindic nor Islamic kingdom. The first colonial administration in Taiwan was established by the Dutch East India Company, lasted for thirty-seven years, from 1624 to 1661, and the real influence was restricted to the southeastern plain area. After that the island was under the bureaucratic administration of Imperial China until 1895, when it was ceded to Japan. The Japanese colonization in Taiwan lasted from 1895 to 1945. After the Second World War, the Nationalist Chinese government took over Taiwan; its administration continues to the present. Except for the Dutch and the Japanese periods, when the administrative authorities did try, to certain extent, to integrate Taiwan into their respective global or regional mercantile operations, the major colonial experience of the Austronesian peoples in Taiwan was under the agrarian regimes that equipped with a strong Confucius idea about ruling. Chinese immigrants to Taiwan over the centuries were mostly peasants craving for farmland rather than traders searching for exotic goods. Chinese administrator's main concern was therefore in keeping the Chinese-Indigenes land competition in check (Shepherd, 1993; Kua, 2001)

Sarawak was nominally under the sovereignty of the Sultan of Brunei before the 1840s', when the Englishman James Brooke helped the Sultan in suppressing the rebellion in southwestern Sarawak and was therefore installed as Rajah. From 1841 to 1905, The Brookes regime acquired, step by step, all the territories that constitute the present day Sarawak. James Brooke followed Stamford Raffles's view that the occupation of territories in the Eastern Archipelago was essential to British trade (Ooi, 1997). James Brooke's nephew, Charles J. Brooke succeeded him to become the Second Rajah in 1868. He was in office for forty- nine years. In 1888 Sarawak became a protectorate of Britain. Charles J. Brooke died in 1917 and was succeeded by his son Charles Vyner Broooke. From 1941 to 1945, Japanese military intruded and controlled most of the coastal areas of Sarawak. After the War, Charles Vyner Broooke reckoned that the post-war rebuilding of the country was too formidable a task to be carried out by his regime and transferred Sarawak to the Crown in 1946. British colonial rule in Sarawak ended in 1963 when Malaysia was founded and Sarawak became a state of the federation. The essence of all three Brooke Rajahs' shared ideas in ruling Sarawak was that development should be a gradual process, and most importantly, the protection of native interests and the improvement of their welfare

should be adhered to without compromise (Ooi, 1997).” Under the British colonization, this essentially non-developmental, conservative and paternalistic policy underwent a significant change. “British policy towards economic development was straightforward: to raise the standard of living by fostering exports, with particular reference to cash crops, and thus provide revenue to help funding of development and earning foreign currency to pay for imports (Porritt, 1997).”

It is against this backdrop of fundamental similarities in Austronesian cultural concept of the house and subsequent divergent experiences in colonial and national histories that we now try to tell the tales of two Austronesian communities.

## II. RUMAH CHANG AND IBAN MIGRATION INTO NIAH RIVER

Iban society has long been considered by ethnographers as egalitarian, loosely organized and fluid (Freeman, 1992; Sutlive, 1978; Jensen, 1974; Kedit, 1993). A longhouse usually consists of a number of bilaterally related families, which form the core of the longhouse. Moving in of unrelated families and splitting off of originally related families are by no mean infrequent, as long as proper consultation and ritual procedures have been honored. Longhouse as a whole can claim to have a territory in which un-cultivated land is considered communal. A *belik* family establishes the property right over a piece of land by being the first one to cut down the primary forest and grow rice on it; the right is not lost after fallow.

Freeman (1992) describes Iban cultural value as based on “individualism”, while Sutlive (1978) lists four value cores of the Iban: “self-sufficiency”, “cooperation and competition”, “egalitarianism” and “mobility and opportunism”. However, it is important to note that, in spite of the emphases on individualism and competition, the Iban highly honor the value of community solidarity and longhouse harmony. Strong adherent to longhouse style of living is illustrious. Communal affairs are always decided through group discussion until consensus is reached. Kedit (1993) highlights the significance of *bejalai* (sojourning, adventure or expedition) in Iban culture, but he also points out the importance of discipline as not to intrude into the affairs of others. These values combined contribute to the production of successful individual Iban in modern society, but they also, to some extent, prevent the formation of corporate business venture among the Iban.

Rumah Chang<sup>2</sup> locates in Sarawak’s Fourth Division, on the right bank of Tangap River, a tributary of Niah River (see Fig. 1). It is about sixteen kilometers from the coastline, on the northeastern edge of Niah-Subis Massif (Sandin, 1957). The entire village has 103 doors (households or *belik*) and a population of 591 in the early 2000s. The compound has two parallel blocks of longhouse facing each other, with 38 doors each, plus a number of smaller rows and detached houses in the vicinity.



Fig. 1. Rumah Chang Exterior View in the Early 2000s  
Source: Author (2021)

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<sup>2</sup> So named in the late 1990s after the name of the *tuai rumah* (village head), Chang.

A single most significant geographical feature that greatly affects people's livelihoods in Rumah Chang is the Niah-Subis Massif. It is a Miocene limestone massif with a summit, Gunong Subis, of 390 meters high (Sandin, 1967). Because of erosion, a gorge is formed in the northeastern corner of the massif and, along with it, a cave system that contains two of the most famous archaeological sites in Sarawak. In addition to abundant 40,000 BP to 2,000 BP remains of human activities, the caves also house millions of *Aerodramus maximus*, the kind of swift that produces commercially valuable edible birds' nest. Birds' nest and guano collecting thus becomes one of the major sources of cash income for the people of Rumah Chang. The entire Niah-Subis Massif was gazetted in 1975 and became a national park. Tourism has since brought some subsidiary benefit to Rumah Chang people in the forms of chances of vending food and drinks and providing homestays for group visitors and backpackers.

Rumah Chang is generally considered one of the most prosperous Iban longhouses in the region. This is evident not only from the beautifully built longhouse itself but also from the number of doors of the community. For the Iban, to be able to keep together in one longhouse as many doors as possible is a definite sign of good leadership of the headman and the prosperity of the community. Furthermore, according to more than one informants of Rumah Chang, the current 103 doors of the village are all believed to be descendants of the original 13 doors when the group first moved in to this location around 1940.

According to the current tuai Rumah, Chang Ugop, his group originally lived in the areas of Entabai and Julau Rivers, both tributaries of Rejang River. During Chang's grandfather Baliy's time, they moved to Tatau River in Bintulu area. After a number of years, during the time of Chang's father, Ugop Baliy, they were not satisfied with the quality of soil in the area and decided to move again to the Niah River. They built a longhouse on a site a little down the river from the current bazaar of Batu Niah. The longhouse was called Rumah Basang. At that time, the area where Rumah Chang now stands was the territory of local Punan. Ugop came here and befriended with the Punan. During the years 1939 and 1940, before the coming of the Japanese, the people of Rumah Basang decided to split up. Ugop brought a part of the group here and built a 13 doors longhouse.

The current longhouse was rebuilt in 1995. It won the third prize in a 1998 sub-district longhouse contest. People of Rumah Chang often make comment about their longhouse, always with a detectable trace of pride and contentment underneath cultivated modesty, that although it is not the most beautiful and modern longhouse in the sub-district, all the *belik* are finished around the same time. "Unlike most other longhouses, some of the *belik* are finished while others are still skeleton." This indicates both the financial means of most member households and the spirit of community solidarity. The rebuilding was proposed by the tuai rumah in 1990, after he visited some modern longhouses near Bintulu. The old building then was already fifty years old and deteriorating. Tuai rumah Chang brought the ideal to the people and, after a thorough discussion, won the approval of the entire village. Two Iban architects from Bintulu were hired to prepare the blueprint. It was agreed upon that all the units of the two blocks of longhouse would follow basically the same design. Minor variations in the quality and style of wooden planks, door and window were allowed, but there were only a few designated varieties to choose from. According to some villagers, after the decision of rebuilding the longhouse was made, there was a preparation period that lasted about three years. Even though Rumah Chang was already a well-off community, not every family could immediately come up with enough cash for the completion of the project. During the following three years, almost all the households had someone working somewhere for money. Some villagers went to work in the oil industry in Miri or Brunei, some in commercial construction. The most conveniently located source of cash income close to home, however, was the birds' nest in the Niah Caves. When the rebuilding was completed, each household had spent from twenty thousands to sixty thousands Ringgit.

The two blocks of longhouse in Rumah Chang now look absolutely polished and neat, with sturdy common staircase on both ends, wide and bright *ruai* area, similar looking ceiling fan in front of almost all the *belik* (see Fig. 2). Most *belik* are equipped with TV, VCR or VCD player, stereo set, gas stove and refrigerator. Nowadays, sitting on the *ruai* for late afternoon or evening chatting, people are still occasionally comparing and commenting on the different quality and price of the building materials that each *belik* uses. Out on the *ruai* of Rumah Chang, one witnesses the realization and perpetuation of the core Iban value that emphasize at the same time the spirit of community solidarity and individualistic competition; and these are expressed through the cultural idea of the house, rumah.



**Fig. 2.** Rumah Chang Interior View in the Late 1990s  
Source: Author (2021)

### III. RUMAH CHANG’S ECONOMY

Apparently, the kind of village-wide three-year endeavor of money making for the rebuilding of longhouse was in no small ways inspired by the traditional Iban value of *bejalai* (Kedit, 1993). In this case, however, both men and women were involved. Many young and middle age villagers were working in places away from home during that period of time. Nowadays, the people of Rumah Chang takes pride in the fact that, compared to other longhouse communities in the region, they are able to keep most of their youngsters at home. As the Tuai Rumah puts it: “Our youngsters do not need to go to big cities like Brunei and Singapore, we have the “big city” next door”. He is referring to the birds’ nest enterprise of Niah Caves. In addition to birds’ nest collecting, there are two other major economic bases for Rumah Chang’s prosperity: wet rice farming and oil palm growing.

#### A. Birds’ Nest

Appearing on numerous postcards and tourist pamphlets, the formidable scene of wood shelves and climbing masts hanging down from the 61 meters high West Mouth of the Great Cave is now becoming a trademark of birds’ nest enterprise at Niah. While the Iban of Rumah Chang do benefit from this particular enterprise, and make their diligence visible through a beautifully built longhouse, they are neither the owners of the caves nor the major traders of the nests. They work mainly as collectors and guards. Compared to the Chinese, almost all the native groups are only secondary beneficiaries of this regional birds’ nest market. The involvement of the Iban of Rumah Chang in this enterprise, however, is an example of aggressive and active response by a local group to the encroaching international market force

The caves at Niah produce black and yellow nests.<sup>3</sup> In 1901, the Second Rajah, Charles Brooke, issued an order stressing the importance of forest preservation and that the development of birds’ nest should be supervised by the government (Sarawak Gazette No. 425: 115). In 1905, Baram Resident R. S. Douglas announced that all the birds nest caves in the Baram, Niah and Suai Rivers had been registered with the Resident’s court and a Government Registration Ticket was required for all transaction concerning birds’ nest right. The Resident’s announcement of 1905 legalized the right and its inheritance. In 1940, a nationwide “Edible Birds’ Nest Ordinance” took effect, which specified that

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the kind of nests that are heavily coated with feather and tinted with minerals from the rock. Black and yellow nests are of lower unit price, but the huge quantity produced in Niah makes it one of the three major birds’ nest production area in Sarawak. The other two are Bau and Middle Baram.

"No person other than a native shall be the owner of any cave containing edible birds' nest" and the Curator of the Sarawak Museum was designated as the official responsible for the rules governing the procedures of collection and sale of nest.

The Punan was officially recognized as the earliest inhabitants of Niah. After the arrival of Iban and the establishment of Rumah Chang, however, the original Punan moved away and settled down at Kuala Tangap. There they gradually converted to Islam. Many of them moved out of the area, some to Miri and Bintulu. Becoming "absentee landlord" notwithstanding, currently, every birds' nest producing section of the Niah Caves are registered under individual Punan/Malay families.

The actual operation rights of bird nest collecting at Niah, however, have almost entirely been leased by the Punan/Malay owners to different Chinese traders, towkay, at prices ranged from ten to twenty thousand Ringgit Malaysia (RM) per year, depending on the production of the specific section concerned, for the duration of ten to fifteen years. The Chinese traders, however, do not work the caves themselves either; they hire the local Iban, Malay and Bugis to do the guarding and collecting. Because of spatial proximity, the Iban of Rumah Chang now form the main work force in Niah Caves.

Almost every able-bodied male at Rumah Chang work, at one point or another, in the caves, either as guard or as collector, or both.<sup>4</sup> All of the households in Rumah Chang are divided into several working units; each unit is contracted by a Chinese towkay to work in one or several sections in the cave. Taking the biggest working unit in Rumah Chang as example, it consists of 42 households. All the able-bodied males of these households are grouped into teams of three. Each team works on a half-day shift, guarding as well as collecting the nests. Although government regulations stipulate that there should be two harvest seasons per year at Niah, workers from Rumah Chang say that the Chinese towkay would push for more frequent, even monthly, harvesting, each time from a different part of the sections that he leased.

The workers from Rumah Chang are not paid by wages. After each harvest, the working unit is entitled to half of the sale. According to some informants, between 1988 and 1990, when the price of birds' nest was at its highest, one kilogram could fetch 1,000 RM and each harvest could amount to 40 kilograms. During that period of time, each household could earn 400 to 500, and sometimes even 1,000 RM a month. In 1999, however, both the harvest and the unit price are declining. Nowadays each harvest can only amount to 15 kilograms of birds' nest and the price is 600 RM per kilogram. The monthly household income from birds' nest sale is therefore down to 80 to 200 RM. The Iban of Rumah Chang has never given up rice cultivation (Kaur, 1998). When birds' nest operation was at its peak, women were almost entirely in charge of the paddy. When birds' nest price was good, it was the sole source of cash income for the household. Now the major sources of cash income are pepper planting and working in oil palm.

Because of the size, the openness and accessibility of the caves, the birds' nests in Niah Cave are highly susceptible to theft. Some Chinese traders in Batu Niah recalled that, starting around 1975, people of Rumah Chang was granted permit to collect guano in the caves. After becoming familiar with the caves and learning the technique by observing veteran *tukang julok* at work, they started to collect birds' nest illegally and recklessly. The birds' nests thus collected were continuously brought down to the bazaar in small amount and sold to crooked Chinese towkay. By the 1985, the situation was getting out of hand, Chinese leaseholders asked police force to intervene and to track down the perpetrators. This was confronted with armed resistance by the people of Rumah Chang. In late 1980s', the leaseholders were forced to seek reconciliation with Rumah Chang people and start hiring year-round guards to protect their interest. Rumah Chang has since become the main supplier of climbers, collectors and guards to the birds' nest enterprise at Niah.

The people of Rumah Chang have a different point of view regarding this development. One informant says: "Last time when the Malay were the owners of the caves, we Iban were free to collect

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<sup>4</sup> Women do not work in the caves, not even as *tukang pungut*, on the ground collector. The reason they give for this is that the work is too filthy and no woman would want to go. There is not special taboo against women in the caves. In the *semah* ceremony which was held in 1998 at the West Mouth to appease the cave spirits, however, both men and women, elderlies as well as children participated.

whatever useful in the caves. After they leased the caves to the Chinese, we could not do that anymore. Nowadays we have to work as *julok* or *jaga* to earn wages. We are becoming coolies to the Chinese. We Iban were definitely not coolies to the Malay." This might be the case in the eyes of Iban Rumah Chang. But one can also see the people of Rumah Chang as having created an unprecedented job opportunity for themselves through their energetic and aggressive exploitation of the caves. The regional commodity market might be beyond the control of local community, and its encroaching irresistible. At the juncture when the regional or global system needs to be articulated with the local, however, we see that the chaos created by the people of Rumah Chang has successfully forced the birds' nest trade to come to terms with them. They earn their share (though not the biggest one) in the profit that is generated from this regional trade and use it to embellish their community life through the rebuilding their longhouse.

### B. Oil Palm

As mentioned earlier, the good reputation of Rumah Chang is based on both its wealth and its size. One might argue that the downright proximity to the hometown "gold mine" (birds' nest caves) makes people stay, and the earlier custom of longhouse splitting and migration is no longer practiced. In the mind of at least some of Rumah Chang's neighbors, however, the good leadership of the current *tuai rumah* is also a major factor contributing to the solidarity of the community. Chang Ugop is considered a just and honest leader. One proof of his honesty is that, in negotiating land concession with timber companies or other big corporates, he would always bring the company's representatives to the longhouse and let them talk directly with the people. This makes the transaction and the profit to be shared by each party transparent to the entire longhouse. Chang is also credited as the one who spearheaded the switching to oil palm growing in the mid 90s'. Sensing that the prospects of birds' nest and pepper were on the wane, Chang persuaded others to follow him in joining governmental scheme of subsidy for oil palm growing. The benefit to individual household is now materializing.

All the households of Rumah Chang together are entitled to about 4,000 acres of farmland. In the past five years, except for the currently in-use and fallow rice paddies, many of the former pepper or rubber gardens, and in some cases hill paddy field, are now converted into oil palm farms. Approaching Rumah Chang from southeast, one will first see vast acreages of company owned oil palm plantation. The palms are all more than twenty years old and stand at least about five to six meters high. Continue to approach Rumah Chang, the roadside landscape dramatically change into newly planted young palm trees or seedlings, mostly no more than two and a half meters high. There are also increasing number of wet paddies interspersed among the oil palm gardens.

Under the leadership of *tuai* Rumah Chang, the villagers started to accept the government scheme that provides 150 oil palm seedlings to each participating household free of charge. For those households who have more land and are willing to plant more palm, seedlings are available at 5 RM a piece. Government scheme also provides free fertilizer, herbicide and tools. The palms start to produce yields on the third year. Here are a few examples of household oil palm production:

Angau anak Kassin's household started their oil palm garden four years ago. Now he plants only 1 acre of oil palm, which produce 2,000 kg of fruits every fortnight and earn them 400 RM a month.

Unyu anak Blaja's household has 20 acres of oil palm garden and 1,000 palm trees. They hire 5 workers. For each worker they have to pay 300 RM a month. If we follow the same estimation above, they are making around 22,000 RM a year.

The households of Ajoi anak Gunton and Jok anak Law each has 6 acres of oil palm with 200 palm trees. But there are also a few households like that of Angau anak Kujat who has no oil palm garden because of shortage of men power. According to one Rumah Chang informant, most households here nowadays have at least 5 acres of oil palm.

Market price for oil palm is not always stable, but the recent Malaysian government's vision of developing oil palm into a possible energy substitute does make its planting a reasonably profitable project. On the national and international scale of oil palm enterprise, the profit shared by Rumah Chang's people is minimal at best. The management is entirely in the hands of individual households and the pattern of land utilization not very much deviated from the custom. Whether or not palm oil will become a major source of energy in the future depends on technological breakthrough, which is nowhere in sight yet. *Tuai rumah* Chang's decision to promote it as a substitute source of income in



place of pepper and birds' nest is, however, serving the people of Rumah Chang rather well for the time being.

### C. Wet Rice

Rice cultivation is the most significant cultural practice in Iban society (Freeman 1992; Sutlive 1978). It is the key idiom of Iban personhood and a focal representation of Iban social and ritual life. Following a value system that stresses egalitarian individualistic principle and encourages competition, Iban man and woman traditionally vie with peers in their respective domains of sojourning, hunting, headhunting and weaving. Rice cultivation, on the other hand, is a task that calls for the collaboration of both genders. Men and women work together in slashing and burning. In the planting phase, men use a digging stick to drill a hole in the ground for women to plant the seeds. The competition in rice cultivation is between households. To successfully perform the highly elaborate rituals surrounding agricultural cycle and to produce abundant rice is the main concern of every decent Iban man and woman.

In most of the classical ethnographic accounts of the Iban (e.g. Freeman 1992), rice cultivation mainly refers to the technical, social and ritual processes surrounding the growing of dry rice (hill paddy, or padi bukit), using a slash-and-burn method and following a paddy-fallow rotation system. However, many of the down-river Iban communities also grow a substantial portion of wet rice (or swamp rice, padi paya).

The Iban of Rumah Chang grow very little hill paddy nowadays. According to *tuai* Rumah Chang, there is no more communal land under the longhouse, every household own land that has been used for the second time (*tamudal*) and its ownership granted. In talking about the traditional Iban spirit of competition in agricultural performance, Chang says: "Now people boast about how many kilogram of rice surplus from the wet paddy one is selling in the market." Again, let us look into the rice cultivation capacity of few households as examples:

Angau anak Kassin is 30 years old, his household has 6 members. They have 3 acres of wet paddy that yield 30 sacks of grains a year; each sack weights 50 kg. The whole family consumes one sack of rice a month. Last year, they had ten sacks of surplus rice to be sold in the market. Each sack was sold at 30 RM and they made a total of 300 RM.

Jok anak Law has a family of six, but only four are capable of working in the rice paddy. They have about 30 acres of land under their title but only grow 4 acres of wet paddy this year because they do not have enough labor to work the field. The annual yield is more than enough for the family.

The affluence of Rumah Chang is evident in the eyes of both the villagers themselves and their neighbors. The three major economic practices – birds' nest collecting, oil palm plantation and wet rice cultivation – correspond to the dynamism of regional commodity market, state developmental scheme and traditional Iban subsistence economy respectively. The people of Rumah Chang may not have total control of the trend of socio-economic development in their part of the world; they are, however, by no mean passive recipients, less "pushovers" or a bystanders when facing the interplay of these forces on their land.

## IV. COLONIAL HISTORY OF TAIWAN

At present, the Austronesian speaking indigenous population of Taiwan are officially classified into 16 culturally distinguishable groups and 9 or 10 almost entirely Sinicized "plain dwelling" groups, which mainly exist in historical context (Map 1).

Traditionally, all the Austronesian groups in Taiwan were slash and burn agriculturalists. Major crops include millet, dry rice, taro and sweet potato. Hunting, chicken and pig raising, fresh water fishing provided supplementary diet. Before converting to Christianity after World War II, all the groups were basically animists. Head hunting was practiced by all the groups on the island of Taiwan as a crucial part of their ritual life before it was suppressed in the 1920s' by the then ruling Japanese authority.

Taiwan was a part of Imperial Chinese territory from 1662 to 1895. Japan became the first "modern nation state" to fully colonize Taiwan since 1895, after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894. The basis of Japanese colonial policy was laid down in a report submitted to the Taiwan governor in 1902. According to that report, "the goal of managing the colony is to develop the economy of the



mother country," therefore, "any resolution regarding aborigine affairs should be proposed and evaluated from economic and financial points of view" (Chiang, 1993). During this period of time, the major attractions of Taiwan for the Japanese were its forest products (timber and camphor) and minerals, both of which were located in the mountains -- the territory of the "untamed" Indigenes.

Basically Japanese administrative office in charge of the Indigenous affairs maintained two objectives in their policy: economic development and law enforcement. The Japanese first launched an island-wide resource investigation. Roads were constructed to cut across many parts of the mountain territory. In some areas, a proposal to confiscate firearms was made. The Indigenes rebelled fiercely. In 1909, the incumbent Taiwan governor launched a "five-year project", which was, in fact, a series of military actions. Many battles were fought between the Japanese and the Indigenes.

By the end of the 1920s, continuous military action had subordinated all the mountain Indigenes directly under the Japanese administration. Police stations and schools were established in most major villages. A vast amount of forest was placed under the control of the government Bureau of Forestation. After decades of military campaign, in the early 1930s, the Japanese authority deemed it necessary to "improve the living conditions" of the pacified Indigenes in order to stabilize its colonization. In addition to the setting up of school and providing of medical facility in most villages, a number of "economic development" projects were launched, which included the introducing of wet rice farming, cattle herding and the silkworm enterprise. Some of the least accessible villages in the mountains were relocated to the foothill in order to facilitate the overall economic reform.

With the end of World War II in 1945, the Chinese regained control over Taiwan, this time by the Nationalist government (Republic of China). No largescale military confrontation between the indigenous peoples and the ruling authority has occurred since. The Chinese authority inherited most of the facilities of the Japanese government-owned industries, including the Bureau of Forestation and Bureau of Minerals that control substantial area of land in the mountains. The geographically circumscribed "mountain territory" is transformed into "mountain reservation". Police stations, renamed as "check points", still remain at strategic locations along the passage connecting plain and the mountain reservation until the early 2000s. Under the new policy, however, the Indigenes are free to pass the check points or to move out of the reservation. Plain settlers, mainly ethnic Chinese, must have official permission to enter the reservation. The system is actually a part of the more comprehensive land tenure legislation that prohibits the selling of land in the reservation to non-indigenes.

The land reform for the indigenous territory starts in 1958 (see Fig. 5). Under this policy, every man and woman who is capable of agricultural work is granted the title of a certain amount of land. Upon its completion, the project effectively changes the highly diversified traditional land tenure systems among different indigenous groups into a unified individual or household ownership system. For those groups who live in the mountain reservation, the title to the land can only be legally transferred to other indigenes.

## **V. THE "UMAQ" OF THE PAIWAN**

In the 2020, the Paiwan has a population of 103,394.<sup>5</sup> Their villages, ranging from 100 to 1,000 souls each, are located in the southern part of the central mountain range of Taiwan. Traditional Paiwan subsistence economy is a combination of swidden agriculture, domestic animals herding and hunting. While agriculture is a task that calls for the collaboration of men and women, hunting is exclusively a male activity.

Most Paiwan villages are located on river terraces or relatively level places on steep mountain slopes. Neither of these locations provides the villagers with large tracts of level land immediately adjacent to their villages. It is not unusual, therefore, to find cultivated patches on slopes of over 45° inclination or at places located one to two hours' walking distance from the village. Some minimal works of terracing are required for most of these agricultural patches.

Some of such patches are used to grow a dominant crop and several secondary crops. In such

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<sup>5</sup> [cip.gov.tw/portal/docList.html?CID=E8F97E390107602E](http://cip.gov.tw/portal/docList.html?CID=E8F97E390107602E), consulted 2021.

cases, crop rotation is followed, which means that the patch will be used to grow different crops during following years, in order to maintain the fertility of the soil. In some other patches, several crops are grown together. The major crops cultivated by the Paiwan are taro (*vasa*) and millet (*va'u* or *vaqu*); the secondary or supplementary crops include rice (*paday*), maize (*puday*), sweet potato (*vuratji*) and peanut (*paketjau*).

The rain-fed upland variety of taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is one of the major staples of the Paiwan. In Paiwan agricultural system, taro has only one growing season per year. The cormels rather than the petioles, along with the top section of the corms are used for propagation.

Foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*) is the major variety of millet cultivated by the Paiwan. Barnyard millet (*Echinochloa crusgalli*), broomcorn millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) and barn millet (*Eleusine coracana*) are also found. These millets are doubtless of ancient Asian continental origin (ibid.:320-21). Their cultural significance to the Paiwan is noteworthy, as will be described shortly.

Rice is believed by some scholars to be one of the ancient crops of the Austronesian people (Bellwood, 1985). However, according to the Japanese reports (RTKC 1922), among the Paiwan, only the northern subgroup grew dry rice; other Paiwan communities observed a kind of taboo against rice cultivation. Wet rice farming was originally introduced to the Paiwan by Chinese immigrants, probably during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the second decade of this century, the authors of the Japanese report witnessed a "gradual increase in wet rice farming among the southernmost Paiwan villages, in response to the encouragement of colonial government." Today, wet rice farming is still very limited among the Paiwan who live on steep mountain slopes -- mainly the northern subgroups; no large scale and well-organized terraced paddy fields, such as those of the Ifugao in northern Luzon, are constructed. Those Paiwan villages that are now located at the foothills --where irrigation and level fields are available -- grow more wet rice than their tribesmen in the mountains. Generally speaking, at present, many Paiwan family have rice as one of their staples. The rice they consume may be home grown or purchased from the shops run by the ethnic Chinese. In any case, the importance of rice in Paiwan culture (especially in the ritual domain) is not as great as millet.

One of the principal features of traditional Paiwan society is a hierarchical system consisting of aristocratic landlords and landless commoners. Theoretically the land resources -- farm land, hunting fields and building plots -- of a village belong to a few chiefly houses. Usually an independent village has one paramount chiefly house and a number of minor chiefly houses, which may or may not be related by kinship to each other and to the paramount chief. Commoners ally themselves as clients and tenants to chiefly houses. As landlords, the chiefs collect rent (agricultural rent, *kazlu*, and hunting rent, *vadis*) from their tenants. As patrons, they host religious ceremonies and settle disputes for their clients. And on the whole, as a class of aristocrats, they enjoy the privilege of employing fine works of art as family emblems.

Along with tattooing and the use of certain beaded and embroidered designs, carving is one of the privileged crafts that Paiwan aristocrats utilize to distinguish their houses, household objects, and personal belongings from those of the commoners. Among all carved objects, house-related carvings are the most spectacular. A Paiwan house, "*umaq*", is more than a dwelling on a plot of land. It represents a perpetual social entity that is conceptually separable from the people who dwell there. In some cases, even after the original chiefly families who resided in the original chiefly house have vacated their dwellings and moved to other villages, people continue to deliver tribute to the vacated houses. Relatives who have the right to enter the houses can consume the tribute, mostly food, in the house. It is deemed transgression, however, to remove the tribute from the houses and consume them elsewhere, because the tribute is considered to belong to these houses. The Paiwan house, then, is an embodiment of the social status, the authority, the privileges, and the very social existence of a fundamental social unit. And this principle applies to the commoner as well as the aristocratic class.

Usually, a head of household is succeeded by the eldest child, either male or female. All the younger siblings will move out of the house when they are married. The head of a house and the eldest sibling are called *vusam*. The word *vusam* also means "seed millet," thus it connotes the possibility that from each existing house and household, others may grow. However, controversy over, and political manipulations of, succession, particularly for the paramount chief's household, are common. It is possible, for example, for an ambitious person who is not in a direct line of succession to usurp the paramount chieftainship by demonstrating that he or she can enhance the dignity of the chiefly line. One

of the means by which this enhancement is achieved is by improving the condition of their house.

The traditional Paiwan house is an asymmetrical, gabled building made of slate and wood. Slate slabs are used for walls, roofs, sleeping platform, benches, and all pavements inside and out. Wooden parts include posts, beams, ridgepole, rafters, and doors. The most luxurious residences of chiefly households have carvings on the wooden eaves-beams, doors, screens, main posts (ancestor posts), and even walls (see Fig. 4). The usual aristocratic house, however, is distinguished only by its carved eaves-beams and main post, or *djugez*.

Traditionally, the Paiwan buried their dead inside the house. This custom was banned in the 1930s by the then ruling Japanese authority. The indoor grave (*luvang*) was usually located underneath the central living floor in a house. It was a square pit with an opening of about 1 to 1.5 square meters, and a depth of 1.5 to 2.7 meters. The pit was covered by one layer of earth sandwiched between two pieces of slate, with the top slate levelled with the floor. In the old time, the Paiwan followed the custom of flexed burial. The deceased was put in a sitting/squatting position, dressed in fine clothing and wrapped in a blanket. It was then lowered into the pit in the same upright position. The indoor grave was reusable; it served as the final resting place for all the family members who were born in the house and died a natural death. While the Paiwan sat, talked and lived their daily life on top of the grave and showed no special restraint toward the burial site, they considered the space between the back wall and the posts to be sacred. On the back wall, there was usually a stone shrine for the family to keep their heirloom jars. The stone shrine and the carved main post were the major objects toward which ritual offerings and chanting were dedicated. The grave underneath the floor, the main post with its carved ancestral figure and the shrine for the family heirlooms were, therefore, three sacred objects that symbolized the status and the continuation of the family line (see Fig. 3).

Finally, to encapsulate all the significances they invest in the house, the Paiwan give each house a proper name. Although people do use house name, "*ngadan na umaq*", to designate the group of people who currently reside in the house, house name is essentially the name of the building. When a person moves out of his/her natal house to build a new house with his/her spouse, they invariably give a name to the house that is different from the natal houses of both spouses. If, for any reason, a household group move out of their original dwelling and into another house, they will attach the name of this house to their name and drop the name of the old dwelling.

## VI. THE ARISTOCRATIC HOUSES OF PARILAIYAN VILLAGE

The village of Parilaiyan is one of the oldest villages of northern Paiwan. In the early 1980s', the village has 135 households with a population of 706. According to folklore, the ancestors of the villagers were born from a boulder at the place named Derau, some twenty-four km in the north of the current village site. They moved to the current location some two hundred years ago because of the water spring and abundant game animals in this new village site. Basically, the origin myth relates that the first pair of persons from the boulder were the ancestors of the commoners. Then one day a jar was found on the mountain path by one of the ancestors. The jar was then taken back to the house and put in the deep rear area of the house, underneath the sunshine through the skylight in the roof. After roughly nine months, a baby girl emerged out of the jar, and was regarded as an aristocrat because of her extraordinary birth.

Parilaiyan currently has ten commonly recognized and more or less active aristocratic houses. In local terms, there are one ka-mamazangilan-an (paramount chief), several mamazangilan (aristocrats) and two pualu (dignitaries) houses. The paramount chiefly house is named Dalimalao, which is considered the direct descendants of the first noble baby girl of the jar. Minor aristocratic houses include the Demalalat, Kazangilan, Kalesngan Kauma'an, Ubalat, Dalivadan, Madilin, Madalalap and Tungulingit. In the traditional time, according to villagers, these houses were the land-owners, from whom the landless commoner houses need to rent farm land and pay *kazelu* (agricultural rent) in return.

Taiwan government started to implement the land reform policy in the mountain reservation with a comprehensive land survey in the 1960s. In each village, the land surveyors would gather the household heads of the entire village and they would go to each plot of land that is either under cultivation or fallow. The surveyors would then ask the person who is currently cultivating the land or has used it before to point out the marks of boundary. As long as there is no objection from other villagers who are also present, the plot will be measured and registered under the claimer's name. When contentions occur, they will be solved through open discussion, which sometimes results in share

ownership. The central goal of the project is to establish individual ownership and to level out the acreage holdings among the households. According to Paiwan tradition, however, all the lands within the village territory are nominally the dominion of a few landowning aristocratic houses, such as the ten aristocratic houses in Parilayan mentioned above.

The following table shows the distribution of registered household land holding in Parilayan after the survey:

**Table 1.** The Distribution of Registered Household Land Holding

Landholding (hectare)	Number of households
Over 30	1
25-29.9	0
20-24.9	2
15-19.9	4
10-14.9	8
5-9.9	44
1-4.9	61
0-0.9	15

Source: Author (2021)

Compare this to the landholding of the ten aristocratic houses:

**Table 2.** The Landholding of the Ten Aristocratic Houses

House Name	Landholding (hectare)
<i>Dalimalao</i>	36.8
<i>Kalesngan</i>	22.1
<i>Kauma'an</i>	19.3
<i>Madalalap</i>	17.1
<i>Tungulingit</i>	13.4
<i>Madilin</i>	11
<i>Dalivadan</i>	9
<i>Demalalat</i>	8
<i>Kazangilan</i>	2
<i>Ubalat</i>	2

Source: Author (2021)

It is apparent from the table that, although the aristocratic houses make up less than ten percent of the village in terms of the numbers of household, they make up 37.5% of the households that own over ten hectare of land. And the traditional paramount chief, the house of Dalimalao, is still the biggest landowner of the village.

Along with land reform, Taiwan government also launches a series of promotions of forestation and the cultivation of cash crops. As a result, the houses that have more land under their disposal are also the bigger beneficiaries of economic development. Among the three biggest landowners of Parilayan, the Dalimalao have moved to another village at the foothill to be closer to medical facilities and entrust the house to a cousin, the head of Kalesngan house. The head of Kalesngan house is a retire policeman, he is both wealthy and, in a sense, well connected. The head of Kauma'an house, also a cousin of the Dalimalao house, speak very good Japanese because of earlier education and which facilitates his communication with local Chinese businessmen, who share a similar background in Japanese education with him. And most significantly, they also choose to invest their wealth in the rebuilding and remodeling of their house, either to revitalize the traditional style slate building, or to build a new concrete house with modern material but carrying the traditional artistic decoration.



**Fig. 3.** The Family Photo of the Ruvaniaio Chief in Front of Their Old House  
Source: Author (2021)



**Fig. 4.** The Chiefly Kaoma'an House Is Decorated With Traditional Pattern Using Mosaic  
Source: Author (2021)

## VII. CONCLUSION

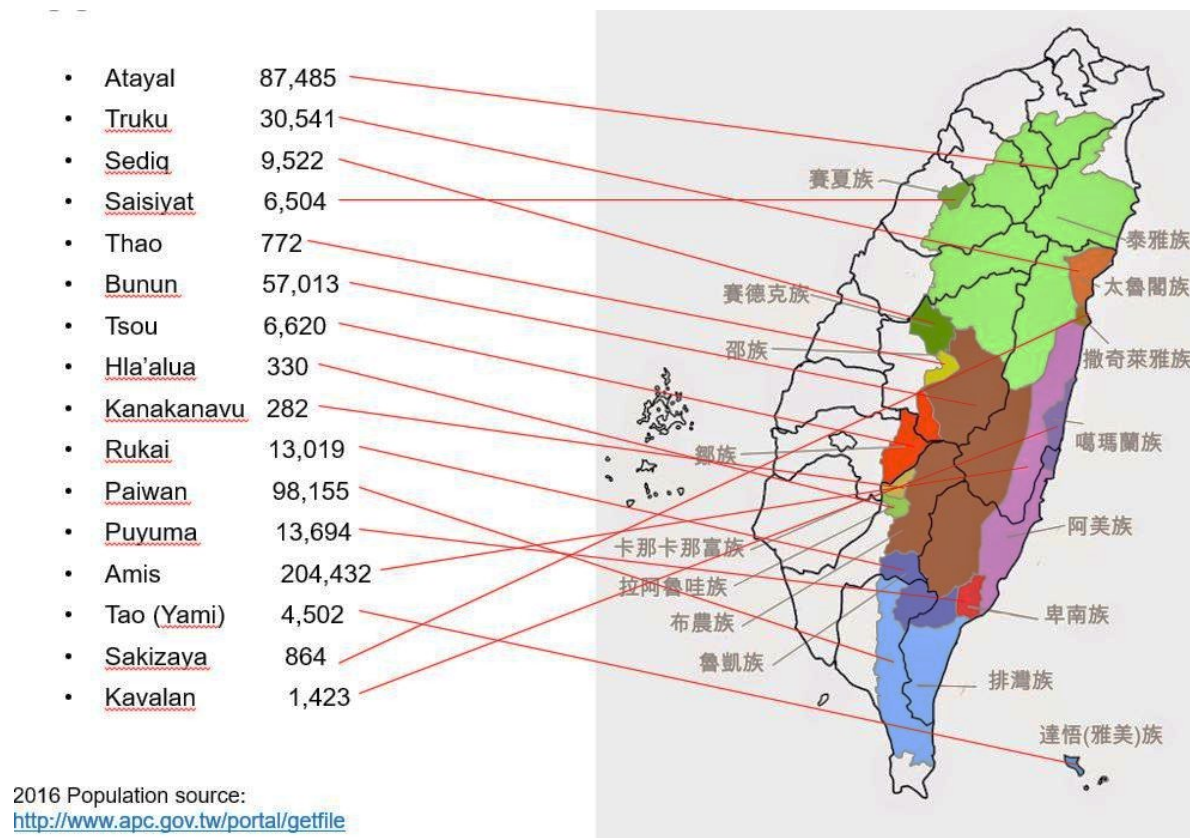
In both communities, we see the enduring strength of “house” ideology in a changing socio-economic environment. Even though the contents, scopes and representations of the notion of “house” are different between the Iban and the Paiwan, its centralities in their respective social and cultural systems are fascinatingly comparable. Among the Iban, the longhouse is physically and symbolically equal to the community. It is the social setting for the self-fulfillment of Iban men and women.

For the people of Rumah Chang, the three major economic activities, whether market inspired, state initiated or customarily sustained, are all carried out in the longhouse setting, both socially and physically. And the people are certainly not hesitant to translate their economic prosperity back into the key representation of their community, the longhouse itself. Among the Paiwan, on the other hand, community consists of a group of individually named and hierarchically positioned houses. Houses are related to each other based on hierarchical principles, either as senior sibling vs. junior sibling or as noble vs. commoner. Traditionally this hierarchy is concomitant with the consolidation and



monopolization of land resources and ritual privileges. We have seen that Paiwan aristocrats’ privilege in land tenure is challenged, but not entirely eradicated, by state’s land reform project; the ritual disparity between the aristocrat and commoner houses continues to find its expression in local and national politics; and the emblematic features of the physical structure of Paiwan house is all the more espoused by the people to symbolized their cultural heritage.

I do not intent to say that these two local communities of the Austronesian experience no difficulties whatsoever in their ever-increasing involvement in the national, regional and global systems. From what we observe, however, we do see that they are not just surviving the encroaching external impacts, they continue to exist as two “*rumah*”.



**Fig. 5.** Indigenous Communities of Taiwan

Source: [www.apc.gov.tw](http://www.apc.gov.tw) (2016)

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