

Tatala – Small Boat

Si Rapongan



Fig. 1 (above): Carving out a plank. (Photo courtesy of Si Rapongan, 2020)

The wish to build a traditional plank boat, with all the knowledge, skill, and hard work this entails, is challenged by what money can buy in the age of fast motorboats. But these are not equivalents. Building a Ta-u boat, one's own or a shared boat, is a source of joy and esteem for a Ta-u man. The boathouses protect these assemblages of wealth, allowing them to live longer, to catch more fish, and to save more trees.

When I was a child, I used to go to the beach to participate in the annual Summoning of the Flying Fish festival. At that time, each family had their own lashed-lug plank boat or *tatala*, a small vessel for one or two scullers, used primarily in nearshore waters. Families would sit next to their boat at the ceremony. I still have vivid memories of standing in the boat that my grandfather built a long time ago, listening to the elders conversing about the ocean's appearance.

Since then, purchase of imported modern boats came to replace the more laborious choice of making traditional plank boats, whose numbers on the beaches declined. Motor boats are fast and convenient. During the flying fish season, you start the engine, turn the steering wheel, and very quickly you are at the fishing grounds, with capacity for a sizeable catch. Traditional plank boats require paddling to reach the fishing ground, which is much more effort. Moreover, the volume of catch is more limited. From an economic point of view, the traditional lashed-lug plank boat does not give much benefit or make much 'rational' sense.

And yet, there are some good reasons to embark on the long and complicated process of building a traditional Ta-u fishing boat. For one, you get to know your family's land in the mountain forest. Only then can you cut down the trees needed for the boat. Each plank needs to be carved out from specific parts of certain trees and carried down the mountain, a part of the process that makes you feel utterly exhausted. Then the planks and wooden pieces are assembled into a boat, and the boat is decorated with engraved totems. Each of the numerous steps in the process requires knowledge and skill, which one acquires along the way, as in an apprenticeship. Unengraved boats do not call for a special boat launch ceremony.

But if you engrave totems on your boat, you need to prepare for a large festive ceremony, including gifting plenty of taro and pork to family and friends.

This long and tedious project makes some Ta-u men hesitate. If you want to make a boat, you need an abundance of determination and endurance to complete it. But the entire process is inherently, deeply rewarding.

Nowadays, Indigenous people are more willing to invest time and money in tourism to make money. To raise a family, buy daily necessities, and pay for all kinds of expenses, you need money. The number of people willing to go up the mountain to chop down trees, carve out planks, and make a boat is getting smaller and smaller.

When I returned from Taiwan, where I worked and studied, to Pongso no Ta-u in 2016, my grandfather's and father's boats had become worn out. So when I participated in the Summoning of the Flying Fish ceremony, I joined a team of ten rowers in a large boat – *cinedkheran*, which is similar in design to the *tatala*, but much larger, for use farther out at sea – for the common ritual of the kin group. Before long, I began to wish for my own boat so that our family would have a place to gather on the *vanuwa* (beach).

When I talked with my parents, they told me that we needed to spend much time and effort to prepare for it. In 2019 I went into the

mountains together with my father to search for suitable trees for the various planks, and in 2020 we started to chop down trees and carve out planks for the boat. Most of the wooden boards were carried down the hill

on my shoulders and the shoulders of my father and another friend. It was very heavy and exhausting, but down we went!

Once we carried a wooden plank down the mountain, we would continue to carve it out. After we finished roughly 80 percent, careful not to carve away too much, we went back up the mountain to chop and carve another plank. A *tatala* requires 15 boards and a number of other wooden parts. After assembling the boat, we brought it home to engrave, which entails preparing for a boat launch ritual. My father would surely give blessings to me and the boat, for this was my first boat. It was my father who introduced me to the forest on the mountain and helped me build the boat. This was the mission my grandfather had entrusted to my father, a mission he had hereby completed.

Thirty years ago, this patch of ocean was filled with plank boats catching flying fish. Sadly, we are now only a few who fish from plank boats. But I rejoice in the happiness this brings! I want to keep going until I cannot push the boat anymore.

Si Rapongan lives in Imourud. He currently serves as Yami representative in the Council of Indigenous Peoples. At age 12, he left his island to study in Taiwan. At age 26, while working at the Taiwan Indigenous Library and Information Center in Taipei, he came to realise the depth of his cultural heritage. Several years later, he returned to his home island to immerse himself in Ta-u knowledge and practice. In 2020, he built a two-man boat together with his father. Email: klin19867597@gmail.com



Fig. 2 (above): Preparing to go out fishing. (Photo courtesy of Si Rapongan, 2021)

Matarek So Vahey – New Family

Sinan Yongala

Traditional Ta-u society is patrilocal and egalitarian. Men and women have a strict division of labour: women's place is the land, the taro fields, and men's place is the ocean. This changes as money, capitalism, and tourism infiltrate the everyday life of Ta-u families. Caring for fields and plants is strenuous and fills much of a Ta-u woman's day. So does juggling the two identities of being Ta-u and Taiwanese, manifested in two names.

In traditional Ta-u social concepts, the family is the most important social unit. When a new family is formed, the woman joins her husband's family and they establish a new home – *matarek so vahey*. Couples have a close relationship and, within a clear division of labor, are supportive of each other. In daily life and in ceremonial rituals Ta-u culture emphasizes a sense of oneness between husband and wife.

Seven years ago, I interviewed my mother while filming a documentary about the making of a *matarek so vahey*. She told me: "After a man and a woman formally become husband and wife, they begin to organize a family by finding land to cultivate and plant crops. After planting sweet potato, they plant yams, and after planting yams, they plant taro. According to traditional Ta-u custom, they form a *matarek so vahey*, a new family, a new home. Men learn to build boats and go fishing, while women practice taro planting and learn the traditional art of weaving."

It is commonly said of the gender division of labor between Ta-u men and women that the sea is the field of men, while the field is the sea of women. In reality it is not entirely that simple. Women do not touch boats during flying fish season, but during the rest of the year they may approach the boats of the family in connection with activities

at the beach. Likewise, while women are responsible for planting, harvesting, and maintaining the fields, men are often included in other sorts of field-related work, such as clearing new fields and building irrigation ditches and channels.

Women are not allowed to attend funerals or approach burial grounds, which are often in rugged terrain with cliffs and dense vegetation. Such taboos are not established through any decision, but rather reflect a set of life attitudes – and perhaps risk management, as, for instance, when women stay away from the ocean and cliffs – passed down through the generations in deep cultural layers.

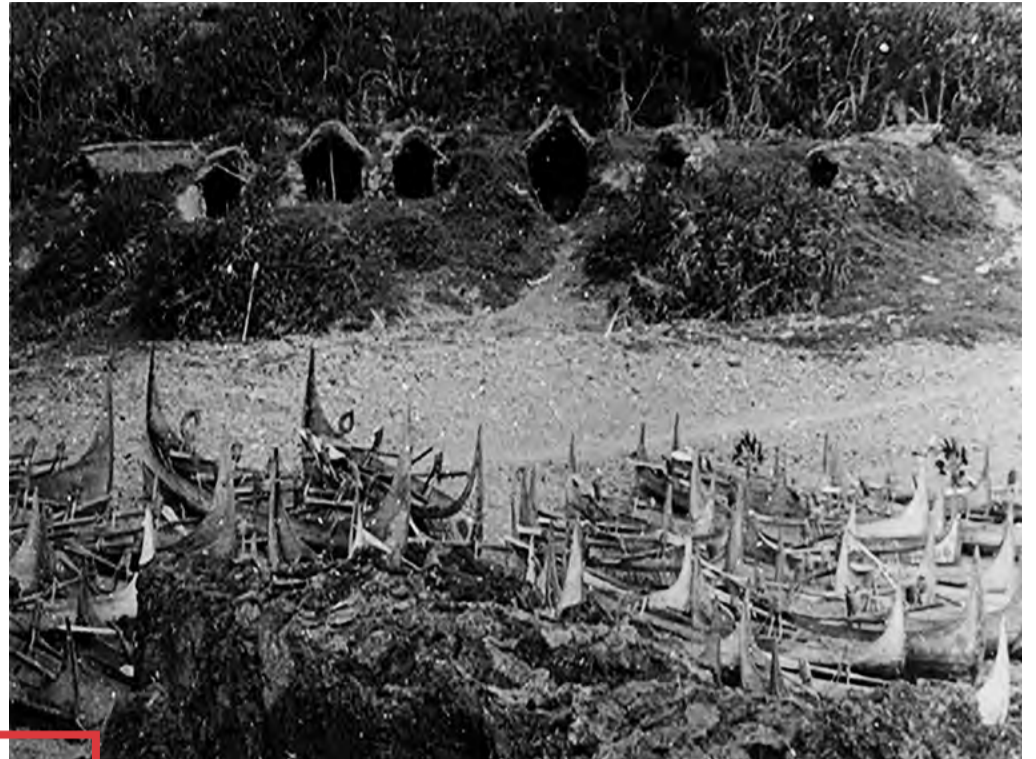
While establishing our family, my husband and I made serious efforts to live as Ta-u, to learn and practice Ta-u culture. My mother said, "Now that you have established a family, you can't ask your mother and father to bring you taro every time there is a

traditional celebration. Don't you have hands and feet?" This made a deep impression on me. I realized that this is a crucial matter. I am no longer a little girl. I have a family, a husband, and two children. Animated by my mother's words, my husband and I picked up hoes, cameras, and tripods, and we went to the mountains to cultivate the land and document the process.

Cultivation is a long and arduous process. In order to turn natural land into a taro field, we first cleared away all the vegetation with our bare hands, mounded up the soil, and drew in water from the mountain to irrigate the field. As an inexperienced couple, it took two months until the first taro seedling was planted.

Our work caring for the taro had only just begun. We had to regularly inspect the fields, weed, and check the water level. One year later, the taro that we had worked so hard to cultivate was eaten up by wild boar. Not a single root was left for us. But we did not give up on growing taro. We remained hopeful to eat the fruits of our hard work during the next flying fish season.

Although I have worked very hard to document and preserve the island's living culture and to remember the traditional wisdom of Ta-u women, it is clear that in



Kamalig – Boathouse

Syamen Womzas

The Yami people on Pongso no Ta-u are the only maritime ethnic group among the 16 officially recognised Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan. The Yami use local materials to make plank boats to fish for migratory fish that visit the island regularly, and for subtidal fish that inhabit the coral reefs along the coast. The rich marine resources have enabled the Yami to be self-sufficient on the island and to develop a unique marine culture.

In the daily life of the Yami tribe, the beach in front of the settlement is not only the usual place for children to play, but also the place where the village holds the Flying Fish Ceremony. It is also the home of the beautiful plank boats. Most of the Yami families on Pongso no Ta-u have built boathouses to shelter their boats, both big and small.

The boathouse is the coastal home of the plank boat. When flying fish season starts, the Yami push the ornate boats from the boathouses to the beach. Here they play a central role in the various festivals held during the flying fish season, and they are used for catching flying fish at both daytime and

nighttime. During the flying fish season, the boathouse is a place where the fishing group congregates, and the members of the fishing group warm themselves with a fire in the boathouse, waiting for the opportunity to row out and catch flying fish.

In late autumn and early winter, when the northeastern monsoon winds begin to pound the island and conditions are not favorable for the plank boats to operate at sea, it is time for the boats to be placed in the boathouses. There are two types of boathouses: one is shared by fishing groups and is used to store large boats, while the other belongs to an individual household and is used to store the smaller one-, two-, or three-person boats (*tatala*).

The main practical purpose of building a boathouse is to extend the life of the boat, which represents a major repository of practical and symbolic value. A properly stored plank boat can be used for more than ten years. If left out in the weather, the sun, winds, and rains reduce the life of the boat to three to five years. Therefore, almost all who build a boat also build a boathouse to shelter the boat.

the face of the rapid changes of the times, our traditions are no longer all there is to life. The people of Pongso no Ta-u can no longer afford to ignore the value of money. In order to support their families, younger generations are caught between traditional culture and the 'realities' of life, with money consistently in conflict with traditional Ta-u

life, especially the traditional rituals of the Ta-u seasonal calendar. During the long flying fish season each year (February to September), ever fewer young people return from the Big Island (Taiwan) to participate in traditional ceremonies.

With capitalism comes tourism, and our young people now prefer to engage in the

The forests of Pongso no Ta-u are limited, so if you care for your boat and extend its lifespan, you can save trees needed to build your next boat. By cutting down fewer trees, there remain more trees for future generations. In Yami culture you do not ask, "How can we use our environment sustainably?" These concepts are already embedded in the actual practices of daily life and do not need to be deliberately designed or purposively programmed.

Syamen Womzas lives in Yayo. At age 15, he left to study at Taitung Normal College. He returned at age 20 to serve as a teacher and principal of a school on Lanyu. He is dedicated to developing Yami Indigenous education. He is currently Yami representative in the Indigenous People Transitional Justice Commission under the R.O.C. Presidential Office. He advocates the rights and interests of the Yami, especially the removal of nuclear waste from Pongso no Ta-u, practicing social justice, and leaving a clean and beautiful island to future generations. Email: syamen.womzas@gmail.com

tourism business. The younger generations have lost much of the knowledge underlying the rituals, and many of the rituals have become simplified as they approach the brink of extinction. This breach in cultural continuity deeply concerns me.

How well do I know my home? My culture? I have been pondering these questions over and over since I was a young girl, and my ponderings have only intensified with bearing and rearing children. With the growing impacts of Taiwanese culture on island life and the cycle of traditional Ta-u rituals, I believe that without our cultural roots as source of nourishment, as bedrock foundation, we face immense challenges.

In order to not become an outsider in my native place, I struggle with my two identities as Xie Fumei and Sinan Yongala. Xie Fumei is my official name, forced on me by the Taiwanese government, for use in formal documents and Taiwanese contexts. It has no other connection or meaning to my life. Sinan Yongala, on the other hand, means mother of Yongala, which means 'blessing' and is the name of my eldest child. His name is Si Yongala, like my name was Si Namot – namot means diligent – until I became a mother. When Si Yongala someday becomes a father, his name will change

Boat and Boathouse Vocabulary

Boat house: *kamalig*

Types of boats

Small boat: *tatala*
 One person boat: *pikatangyan*
 Two person boat: *pikavangan*
 Three person boat: *pinonongnongan*
 Eight person boat: *apat so avat*
 Ten person boat: *cinedkheran*

Places to build a houseboat:
kamamaligan (above the highest tides)

Structural parts of a boathouse

Foundation: *sako no kamalig*
 Stone wall: *atoy no kamalig*
 Longitudinal beams: *sapawan*
 Horizontal beam: *pakaow*
 Roof: *atep no kamalig*
 Pillar: *ai na*
 Y-shaped bracket: *pakow*
 Joints between beams and columns: *panyakedan*

Boathouse materials, trees and plants

Philippine fire tree: *aninibzawen* ('hard as iron'); or stinky lady: *aryoh* (for Y-shaped brackets)
 Tarzan bamboo: *kawalan* (for beams)
 Red-leafed rattan: *ozis*; Indian whip rattan: *wakey*; or Orchid rattan: *vazit* (for fixing beams to supports)
 White fescue: *vocid* (for roofing)

Boathouse materials, stone

Andesite: *veysen*
 Coral reef rock: *haan*

Fig. 3 (right): Sinan Yongala and her mother at work in the field. (Photo by Si Panadan, 2017)



to Syaman Name-of-child, and my name again changes, this time to Syapen Name-of-grandchild, and I will share that name with my husband. Such a beautiful naming culture!

With my two identities and two names, I balance on the edge between two societies, two cultures, two lives: Ta-u traditional life and Taiwanese-influenced modern life. As a mother, householder, and writer, I continuously struggle to affirm and nurture my Indigenous culture, while coping with contemporary conditions of life on our island.

Sinan Yongala is a resident of Iranmeylek and has been a passionate writer and photographer since attending Lanyu Junior High School. After higher education in Taiwan from age 15, she returned in her 20s when the Lan-An Cultural and Educational Foundation offered her a position to develop her interests. For over two decades, she served as a dedicated journalist for the *Lanyu Bi-Weekly Journal*. Through her eloquent reporting and captivating documentary films, she meticulously documented the significant transformations unfolding on Orchid Island. Email: sinamot@gmail.com