

Bais and Vahey

Transforming a Traditional House

Sinan Hana

Ta-u men are in charge of building houses. A woman doing so implies a curse of having no men in the household. But cultures change, and nowadays islanders mostly live in cement houses instead of the traditional, semi-underground houses made of stone and wood (*vahey*). Rather than being considered a display of lack of men in a cursed family, women building and transforming houses may be seen as the power of Ta-u women to form their own prospects, as beacons for navigating new ways to keep Ta-u culture alive.



Bais in her vahey.
(Photo courtesy of Sinan Hana, 2022)

My birth name was Bais
it means corner
I was born in my parents' house
at a corner in Iraraley
later I asked my dad for the true meaning
of my name

he said: grandpa wanted you to go to
all corners of the world and bring the
knowledge you learn back home
at that time father said this with a smile
but I still liked this name very much

when I came back to Lanyu, to my parents'
place, to give birth
I had saved a little money to give to my
brother and cousin
to build a temporary house for my return
where I could get shelter from the wind
and rain
I didn't know what the house would look like
when I arrived and opened the door
I knew that this was the style I liked

drawing simple design plans
I renovated the house together with
my husband
occasionally I went with my father to
set up a booth at the beach
dad displayed his own handicrafts
I displayed postcards I drew

because my belly was getting bigger
and heavier
and the heat made my father feel ill
I asked my father whether we shouldn't
display our arts and crafts at home

this is how we started to operate
The Corner Café
slowly some people started to know
about The Corner Café
now in business over eight years

since I came back to Pongso no Ta-u,
more and more young people have
returned to their home villages
there are more and more B&Bs and shops
every year
originally what I saw planted were taro
and sweet potato fields
now many plant houses

several times I have gone back to the
school where I studied in childhood
to share the story of *The Corner Cafe
and Art Hub* established with the help
of family and friends by renovating
an old traditional house
I asked the children what do you want to
do in your hometown in the future?
some students replied – I want to build
a B&B like my parents
other students wanted to sell beverages
and so on

at the same time I have watched the
demolition of one traditional house
after the other and the construction
of concrete houses
it seems a pity
yet doesn't everyone need a place to
stay when they return?
and they keep coming back

of course they have to deal with reality first
children's school tuition and other fees,
car loans and housing loans
facts of life one must face
even if you, like me, feel it's a pity
and so I opened a shop
and noticed more and more students
and professors visiting the island
but I never knew what they were studying

because my father's health waned
I bought a piece of land for my 32nd
birthday
and started building a new house at the
age of 33
in order to prove to my father that girls
can live by their own efforts
he passed away before the house
was completed

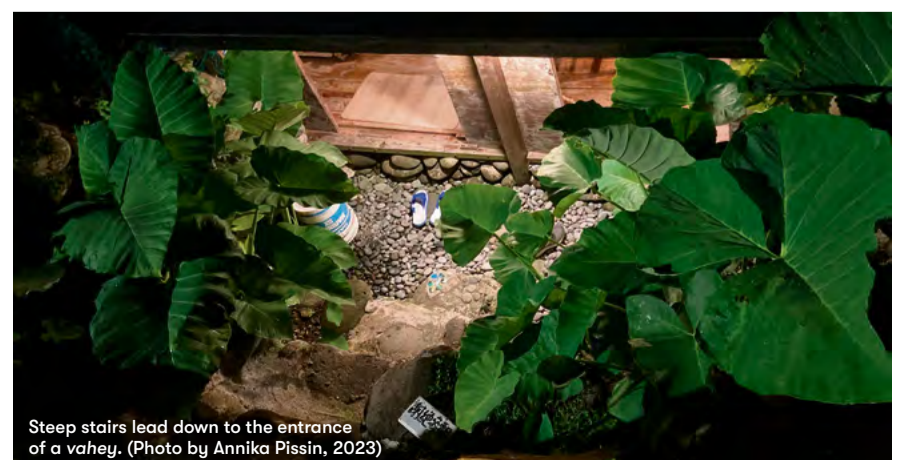
in my youth I joined the return migration
service team
like many indigenous youth I participated
in the projects of college students and
their teachers
we took courses together on the island
for two months
I also made a documentary film
our group discussed *vahey*
the underground house everyone talks about
discussions suggested that within ten years
all houses will have been replaced by
cement
you won't see the sea
year after year just like *vahey*
the sea view will gradually disappear

I also travelled abroad in those years
to Europe, Japan, Korea, Indonesia,
Thailand, Hong Kong, Philippines
to study plans and designs of old houses
in my mind's eye a house plays an
essential role
allowing people to feel at ease
when I see things that this eye tells me
edifies this role
I add them to the house
I believe this enhances the sustainability
and longevity of my house
so I named it *mey vazay do vahey*
(Work Space at Home)

these years have been difficult
because of being a woman
for it is considered a man's work to build
houses and boats
women cannot interfere because there
are different jobs for men and women
in Ta-u culture
if women do men's work it signals that there
are no men in the family
that there are no boys or men in a family
signifies a curse
since I have brothers, uncles, and husband
my working on building a house conveys
disrespect toward them
in addition to signals from family members
there have been many public opinions
whispered in my ears concerning my
work renovating the traditional
semi-underground house

nevertheless I stubbornly insisted on
telling my uncle and mother that I planned
to renovate my grandma's house
"if the child is not afraid of hard work,
let her do it
she has been arguing about this for many
years"
so it happened
after many long conversations with my
parents and my uncle
I renovated my family's lovely old house

the external structure was still very good
and strong
what was needed was a complete overhaul
of the inside
with a mere 20,000 TWD for the project
I had to do it in an inexpensive way
the only skilled work we needed done was
drawing in electricity for the air conditioner
if I needed a table I built a table
if I didn't have a lamp or some part or
component
or if there was something I lacked
I went to the beach
the beach is like an IKEA store
so 80 percent of the interior is recycled stuff
mostly from the beach
the interior is in a constant state of
ongoing decoration



Steep stairs lead down to the entrance
of a vahey. (Photo by Annika Pissin, 2023)



Bais and her friend constructing a vahey.
(Photo courtesy of Sinan Hana, 2022)

most of the conflicts with my uncle were about whether to prioritise renovating inside or outside
I spent most of my time renovating the interior
but uncle insisted that the exterior of the house must be taken care of first
an untidy house or taro field means the owner is lazy
outer appearance is important for the Ta-u but I personally feel that inner meaning and tone are more important than outer appearances
consequently I often had disputes with my uncle

being able to organise vahey myself
I am more fortunate than many people and filled with gratitude
to my uncle for helping to extend the water pipes from his home to mine
to my brother for helping install the faucet
to my mother for helping me weed around the house
to my husband's grandmother for making pillowcases out of old cotton quilts
to my brother for helping with the cement to make a sink
to my husband for helping to make the nine-square grid in the wall
and for helping fetch stones at the beach to renovate the stone houses
just as our ancestors had carried stones one by one from the seashore
the wood of the house walls is from trees planted by our ancestors
every stone wooden floor beam and pillar is the love left by our ancestors
for our children and grandchildren to share

to be replaced by concrete houses
I did not really want that
so I kept on fixing the old house
and the whole family helped
it was not just me who gave it new life
the love of the whole family was infused into vahey

my father said that one can see that this house is not popular
you can tell if a house is full of people by the shining floor
and there must continuously be someone's spiritual aura
this is the right way to treat vahey – it is not only a house but a home

although guided tours can be a source of income
they serve a one-time function
a person who goes on a tour once will not come back four or five times
so I planned my vahey as a multi-functional space
at different times it displays different exhibitions
I think many people will wish to visit vahey again and again

The mey vazay (Work Space) has held about 20 exhibitions featuring local artists
several young people participated
a next door neighbour said "Sister I want to exhibit photography here is it okay?"
"Of course! I can't wait!"
one after another people contact me whether for sharing or exhibition

sharing as an amateur motivates me
I wish to create a platform and give the spotlight to people who share their work for the first time
I prefer to work behind the scenes

since I haven't applied for government programs or grants
and I rent the house from my uncle who is old and does not work
I occasionally charge a small fee for some activities
partly for paying rent and partly to cover house maintenance
eventually I may be able to afford a dehumidifier in order to extend the life of the house

this is the same house I grew up in like a close relative I care very much for it if I treat it well I think the house will over time radiate a powerful energy so powerful that the sharing inside begins to affect people
some people say: "I am a woman like you, and women seem to need more efforts to communicate and coordinate with others in our Ta-u society; but you and your houses encourage me"

I encourage others
it took me 17 years – not 17 days – to gather information, communicate, and coordinate with family
so it was not easy
then some people actually went back to communicate with their families
some tell me they are moved by my sharing so we must be steadfast to persevere
we gradually encourage each other and grow stronger one by one.

inside vahey many good presentations and exhibitions have been shared
photographic exhibitions, picture book sharing, organizer workshops, barista stories, travelogues
think of yourself as a student
listen to the ideas of others

I wrote a picture book illustrated by my friend Yuping
the book is about the interior of vahey
it reflects the precious wisdom of my ancestors

there was also a handicraft course on how to be creative with waste from the sea and another in cooperation with a non-governmental organisation on how to recycle waste oil into handmade environmentally friendly soap
we invite everyone to go to the beach to find materials to make soap containers

I have picked up a lot of flotsam and jetsam along the shore
especially during the pandemic
let everyone turn the waste into whatever they like
bring it back to the main island of Taiwan too

I have also organised several sharing sessions on the the art of making the traditional Ta-u underground houses
my vahey has now been open for public visits and art workshops for two years
many times I have shared it
it is like a joyful spiritual banquet

a place of mutual support
because of this the house has a new life

so, waiting for my house to be built years ago
I turned around and created vahey after vahey was completed
I continued the paperwork for the house to be built
and now we live there

Bais/Corner is my pillar
I use the café to support my ideals without applying for funds
because ideals cannot make money
it's about balancing at the spiritual level what you want to do

if the paperwork for the new house I live in now had gone smoothly
I probably would not have created vahey because of the setback I moved on to the important thing

my current name is not Corner (Bais) but Sinan Hana
Hana is the Japanese word for flower but actually it is the name that my mother found in the Bible
to give to my daughter
it means gratitude or gracefulness
I am Sinan (mother of) Hana

appreciate everything you encounter
good or bad
these are nutrients for life

I went to all corners of the world and blossomed when I returned home

Sinan Hana lives in Iraraley. She worked at a café in Taipei before the call of her roots drew her back to Orchid Island. Today, she manages a cozy café in her village while embarking on the dreams of transforming a traditional underground house into a dynamic art and exhibition forum, infusing new life into age-old traditions.
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Vahey, traditional underground houses.
(Photos by Huei-Min Tsai, left 2019, above 2013)

