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Building Village Life in Kamhua Noknu, Arunachal Pradesh

Construyendo la vida comunitaria en Kamhua Noknu, Arunachal Pradesh

Construindo a vida na aldeia de Kamhua Noknu, Arunachal Pradesh

Keywords | Palabras clave | Palavras chave

Vernacular architecture, Northeast India, Wancho community, Indigenous knowledge, Endangered traditions

Arquitectura vernácula, Nordeste de la India, Comunidad wancho, Conocimientos autóctonos, Tradiciones en peligro de desaparición

Arquitetura vernácula, Nordeste da Índia, comunidade Wancho; Conhecimento indígena, Tradições em risco de extinção

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

Modernizing change at the periphery of Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India is visible in the growing number of modified structures in traditional Wancho settlements. This project researches and documents the community's endangered architectural heritage. Their ephemeral buildings of organic materials require regular reconstruction, and each rebuilding becomes a significant event that brings the village together and revitalizes the transmission of indigenous knowledge. This study synthesizes the expertise of architects with the knowledge of local craftspeople and construction experts, surveying four villages along the border with Myanmar with a focus on four building types: the traditional house, the modified frame house, the *morung* or *paa*, and the chief's house. Our ethnographic recordings form an archive of knowledge on construction methods, materials, history, customs, and a traditional way of life.

El impacto de los cambios en la periferia de Arunachal Pradesh, en el nordeste de la India, es visible en el creciente número de estructuras modificadas en los asentamientos tradicionales de los wancho. En este proyecto se investiga y documenta el patrimonio arquitectónico de la comunidad, actualmente en peligro de desaparición. Las construcciones efímeras, realizadas con materiales orgánicos, necesitan una reconstrucción periódica, y cada reedificación se convierte en todo un acontecimiento que reúne a la comunidad y revitaliza la transmisión de conocimientos autóctonos. El estudio combina la competencia técnica de los arquitectos con los valiosos conocimientos de los artesanos y expertos en construcción locales.

Realizado en cuatro pueblos fronterizos con Myanmar, se centra en cuatro tipos de construcción: la casa tradicional, la casa de entramado de madera modificado, el *morung* o *paa*, y la casa del jefe. Los registros etnográficos constituyen un repositorio de conocimientos sobre los métodos, materiales y procesos; la historia, las costumbres y prácticas de construcción, así como sobre el estilo de vida tradicional.

O impacto da mudança na periferia de Arunachal Pradesh, no nordeste da Índia, é visível no número crescente de estruturas modificadas nas povoações tradicionais Wancho. O projeto pesquisa e documenta o património arquitetónico ameaçado da comunidade. As construções efémeras, feitas de materiais orgânicos, requerem reconstrução regular, e cada reconstrução torna-se um evento significativo que une a aldeia e revitaliza a transmissão do conhecimento indígena. O estudo sintetiza a especialização técnica dos arquitetos com o conhecimento inestimável dos artesãos locais e especialistas em construção. O levantamento em quatro aldeias ao longo da fronteira com Mianmar concentra-se em quatro tipos de edifícios: a casa tradicional, a casa de estrutura modificada, o *morung* ou *paa* e a casa do chefe. As gravações etnográficas formam um arquivo de conhecimento sobre métodos de construção, materiais, processos, história, costumes, práticas e o modo de vida tradicional.

Introduction

The traditional buildings constructed by the people of the Wancho community, at the periphery of northeast India in Arunachal Pradesh, are made of wood, bamboo, and palm-leaf thatch. The use of organic materials and the region's heavy annual rainfall account for the ephemeral character of these buildings, which must be reconstructed every eight to ten years. Each rebuilding represents a significant village event that assembles the community and revitalizes age-old practices of knowledge transmission, reciprocity, and social bonding as villagers contribute cooperatively to a labor of renewal. However, during visits to the area I have witnessed rapid change and its impact on this traditional way of life, as each year more modified buildings are erected. In Jagan, the last village before the border with Myanmar, there remain no traditional *morungs*; these iconic cultural institutions that have long been a space for mobilizing the male population are now replaced by buildings of corrugated iron and concrete. Formerly, traditional *morungs* (*paa* in Wancho) were places that would showcase local talent for woodcraft.

A project by Adivasi Arts Trust supported by the Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme (EWAP) at Oxford Brookes University set out to document the architectural traditions of some Wancho villages and ascertain the extent of endangerment and loss of their building customs. The study was conducted with the villagers and combined the expertise of architects and the knowledge of local craftspeople and expert builders. The architects measured, recorded, and analyzed traditional building designs and the

local experts provided insights into construction methods, materials, processes, history, customs, and the traditional way of life. The project was to promote interest in and attach value to this architecture so as to inspire local people to sustain this heritage, as the architects considered how traditional craftsmanship and materials might be adapted to develop new building designs. The recorded knowledge about construction processes and the uses and significance of this traditional architecture is available in an online archive (EWAP 2025).

The Wancho People

The Wancho are a tribe of 56,866 members (2011 census) living in the remote Patkai range of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, India. They have historically practiced self-sufficiency, dwelling in seclusion in rugged terrain where a lack of roads has limited contact with the outside world. Their isolation left them largely unscathed by the colonizing forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2011, what is now Longding District was carved out from Tirap District. The area is considered remote even within the North East Region, and limited contact with outsiders beyond neighboring tribes has helped preserve the indigenous heritage and traditional design of dwellings and community structures. Heavy rainfall makes the area still difficult to access by road and deters most visitors from venturing beyond the district capital, Longding Town. Visitors also need permits. This inaccessibility accounts for the limited research and literature on Wancho cultural traditions and practices.



Longding district and Tirap district



Boys assembled on the veranda of the *chingjaa paa* for the Dingtam festival (boys' initiation) in 2022

The Wancho consist of two groups that speak distinct dialects: those residing in the foothills bordering Assam, and those of the highlands stretching to the border with Myanmar. Their indigenous religious beliefs acknowledge nature and ancestral spirits and their customs have come down through songs and storytelling, rituals, and festivals.

The *paa* (male dormitory, school, and community center) is traditionally the main site of indigenous knowledge transfer among menfolk. But Christianity arrived in these villages about 30 years ago and the Wancho are now 99 percent Baptist or Catholic, which change has impacted traditional spiritual practices and led to a decline of the institution of the *paa*. Government schools have been established in the villages and modern education along

with new economic imperatives and mobile telephony, which has penetrated even the remoter areas, influence younger people's perceptions of the enduring relevance of their ancestral way of life.

Research Background

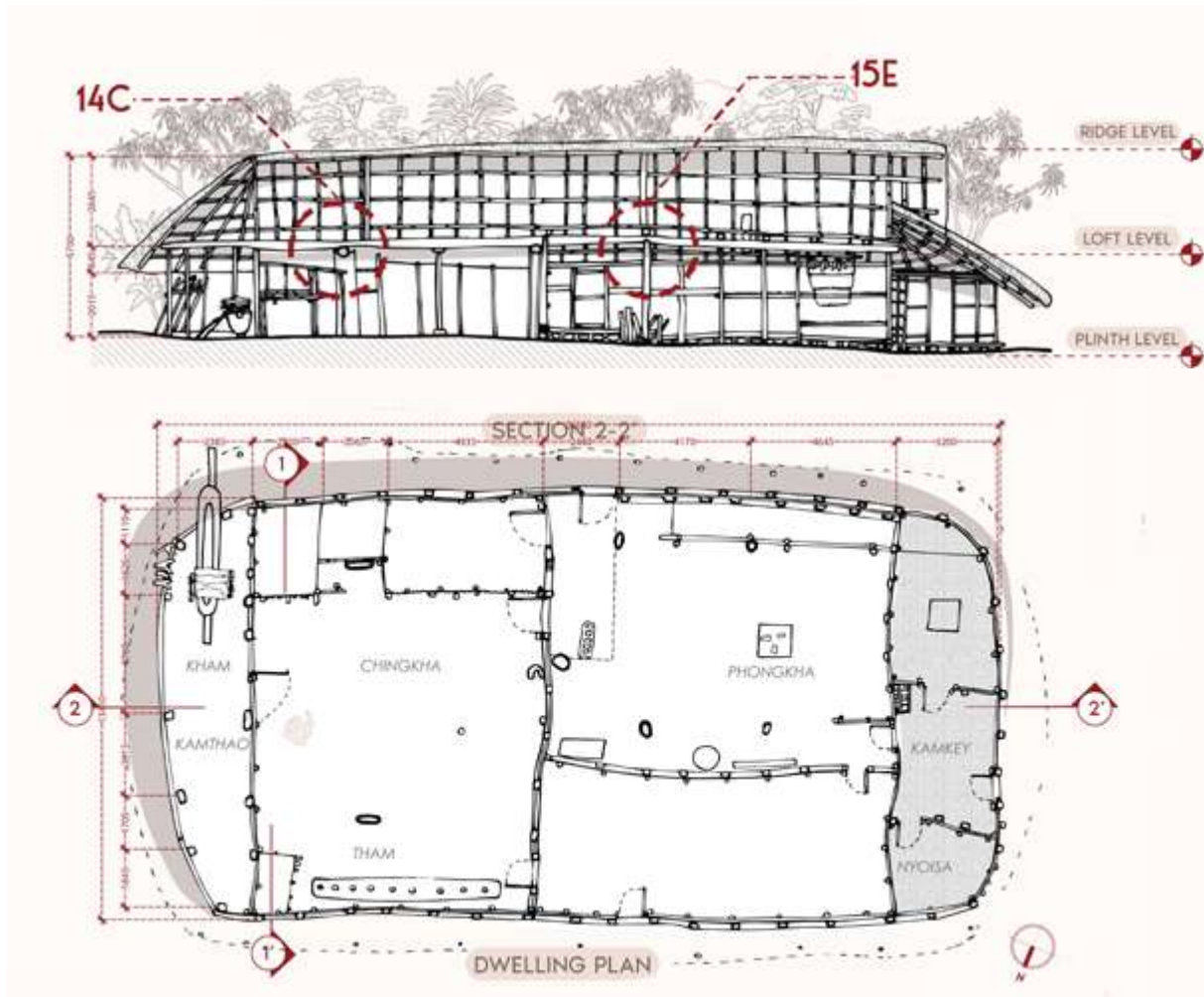
Northeast India is characterized by a diversity of local cultures and practices, with more than 200 tribes and 220 spoken dialects (Das 2023). Each tribe has a distinct traditional dwelling type. To some, the term "vernacular" represents a homogeneous range of architectural traditions deemed in need of preservation from changes that entail cultural decline (Vellinga 2011). But the self-sufficiency,



Front of the *chingjaa paa* in Kamhua Noknu, 2023

self-determination, and self-representation embodied by Wancho architecture are exceptional. The construction and reconstruction of buildings in their villages is a vital, dynamic process that reenacts cultural traditions each year, and the similarity of design in the village houses reflects

social equality. A study of Wancho architecture is thus an opportunity to decolonize perspectives and reexamine the standards of modernity that view the vernacular as romantic, primitive, or irrelevant.



Plan and section of Khasa Wangkam (Arnav & Anupama Architects)



Ngagang Wangham and Athen Wangcha outside the *wangkam*, Khasa, 2023 (Angam Wangpan)



Ngagang Wangham (chief of Khasa) and his wife Athen Wangcha



Weaving the floor of the *hailay*
(bamboo platform), Kamhua
Noknu in 2023

The impact of modernization in rural India threatens the transmission of vulnerable cultural knowledge embedded in traditional storytelling. Younger people are drawn away from villages in search of education and employment and have little time for such stories. My contacts with the Wancho community have shown the urgency of recording the oral histories and memories of elderly tribespeople.

The Project

Participation can be a way to reduce the inherent power relations of research (Stocking 1983). My participation in daily life in Kamhua Noknu fostered a familiarity with the villagers, and a relationship emerged with the community, guiding this study, although the remoteness of my cultural setting meant I had to adjust to a new frame of reference. Filmmaking is an intrusive activity, and questions arose about my presence as an outsider with a camera. But the villagers got used to me and have asked for recordings to be made so that their traditions may be documented and their culture more widely known, believing that this may bring state benefits.

Confronted by rapid change, the elder generation urges younger people to maintain their traditions. “Just as we don’t forget nature, like the sun and moon, we should never forget our culture and traditional way of life. We should not neglect our traditional houses and the way we cultivate the land because these are assets inherited from our forefathers,” says Ngagang Wangham, chief of Khasa village. Few villagers speak English and most elderly people are speakers only of Wancho, so recordings were made without our understanding what had been spoken. The raconteurs were nominated for their authoritative knowledge of particular topics, and so it was usually skilled craftspeople or village elders who spoke to the camera.

The videos were recorded as activities took place, with no staged reconstructions. They were interpreted with Jatwang Wangsa, the interlocutor, a bridge with the community and translator of all our interviews. Through patient sessions of translation with Jatwang and engagement with the material for logging, organization and subtitling, new insights emerged.

The Wancho Centre for Art Culture and Knowledge in Kamhua Noknu was our base. This is a bamboo house built prior to our second visit to Kamhua Noknu in 2020 at the initiative of Jatwang and his family, designed to accommodate a non-Wancho. A gas cooker dispenses with the need to gather firewood and a “sitting room” with a bamboo floor and wooden settee serves for receiving visitors. The space is organic and cozy, enlivened by natural sounds and sensations: wind, insects, rodents, and rain on the palm-leaf thatch.

Our survey by a team of six architects during the house-building season in late November involved photography and the measuring of 19 sample buildings, with observations being recorded about materials, dimensions, and bioclimatic features. The volunteer architects were mostly from the state of Assam, and this proximity made it easy for them to adjust to village life. They selected case studies to illustrate the range of Wancho buildings, identifying four types of structure: the traditional house; the frame house; the *morung* (*paa*); and the chief’s house (*wangkam*). Their field sketches were refined using CAD and finished by hand-detailing for plans, scales, and elevations. A drone operator from Longding Town took aerial photos of the structures and their settings.

I shared research ideas and recorded material at meetings with community members, holding interactive sessions and seeking to prompt reflections by younger people.



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1. Drone view of Kamhua Noknu village, 2023 (Angam Wangpan)
2. Location of the study villages in Longding District, Arunachal Pradesh, India
3. Hondan Losu's traditional house in Kamhua Noknu, 2024

Two teenage YouTubers were enrolled as camerapersons and recorded accounts by family members in an informal, unselfconscious manner. These videos were edited into a short film (Douglas 2024d). By now the telling had become part of the story, and the project required me to reflect on how my presence would be part of the collective memory.

The Villages

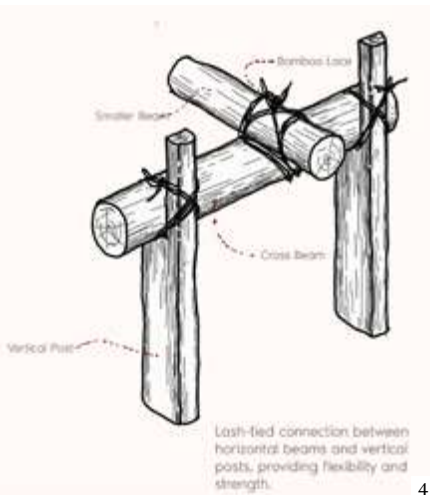
The Wancho villages (*nok*) are dense settlements typically isolated from one another. Four were selected for this architectural study: Kamhua Noknu, Kamhua Noksa, Khasa, and Jagan.

The villages are situated high on mountainsides, generally facing south, so as to facilitate defense in the days when feuds would lead neighboring villages to raid one another. These conflicts would sometimes escalate into war, accounting for the popular imagery of Wancho warriors and headhunters. When the population grew, some villagers would leave and settle elsewhere. The need for protection resulted in alliances between “senior” and “junior” villages, and thus

Kamhua Noksa is junior to Kamhua Noknu. Almost all of the houses here are of traditional design, but each year traditional dwellings are replaced by modified structures, such as the permanent buildings in Kamhua Noknu and neighboring villages built of concrete or galvanized iron panels. Each village is ruled by a chief referred to as *Wangham* (or *Raja*). The village council consists of the *Wangham*, his assistant and announcer (*Ngopa*), the council of elders (*Wangchu-wangcha*), and the *Gaonbura* (government nominee). The council is responsible for village administration and implementing customary laws for the sustainable use of forest resources (Singh and Popli 2020).

Wancho Architecture

Wancho architecture is similar to that of the neighboring Naga tribes, and especially the Konyak, who have many cultural affinities with the Wancho. Their buildings, classifiable in the *kutcha* type, are made of renewable unprocessed organic materials, and as wood, bamboo, palm leaves, etc. are readily available, construction costs



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4. Detail of lashed joint (Arnav & Anupama Architects)

5. Front of Gangpoh Gansa's traditional house, Jagan, 2023

are minimal. A traditional home has a wooden frame structure, and if it is built on a slope, at least part of it—usually the rear—is elevated on bamboo stilts. Their typical dimensions are 10-15 meters long by 4-5 meters wide. Though rectangular, they often have an apsidal curve at the front, covered by the rounded thatched rain shield of the veranda (*jaotha* in Wanchao). A house typically has 2-4 openings in its front, back, and side walls.

Traditional houses have a post-and-beam structure on earth, with supports of timber or bamboo. The central columns are highest, extending above the roof; this extra length is left uncut so that the base, which decays quickly in contact with the soil, can be cut off periodically. The wood used for house construction is obtained from the forests of the hills adjoining the villages, and more recently is grown in private gardens. Wood is reused as far as possible when a house is rebuilt. The roof is thatched, sufficiently to keep the dwelling dry, and the walls are built of split bamboo framing and woven bamboo matting. At least six varieties of bamboo are used in Wanchao housebuilding, harvested, like palm leaves, at specific stages of the lunar cycle, in the last few days (*Lenmah*) or in the middle (*Nyek-cha-tak*), as this is believed to reduce insect attack.

The Traditional Wanchao House

A traditional Wanchao dwelling is a large, hand-built structure with a character and features that reflect the dwellers' lifestyle, customs, and socioeconomic status. The shelter and security provided by such houses is expressed in a saying recorded by Jatang Pansa in Khasa village: *Oloh phang ma kam, oloh phang ma shah* (We come together under a thatched roof, and we eat our fill under a thatched roof).

On approaching the front of a house, a visitor immediately notices the tradition of artistic decoration with buffalo and mithun (*bos frontalis*) skulls.

The larger wall, usually about two-thirds of the width of the house, is the *waknu*, and it is here that the skulls of domestic animals slaughtered by the household are displayed as mementos of past feasts. The *waksa* is the smaller wall, usually to the left, decorated with the skulls of wild animals as hunting trophies.

The spacious interior is partitioned by walls of woven bamboo into sections according to function. The front room (*chingkha*) contains the rice-pounding table (*tham*), used by women, and serves as a public space. The house is separated into male and female areas, and its main section is the kitchen (*phongkha*).

Regarded as the women's domain, where food is cooked over a wood fire, this is a place for gathering and conversation. Life in the village is lived either outdoors or by the fireside. Although the high ceilings in the living area let in natural light and fresh air, little electricity is available and the houses tend to be dark. Light and heat are provided in the living space by the prominent hearth. Wanchao houses are heated by wood and typically have two fireplaces: *phongnu* and *phongsa*. The *phongnu* is the main fireplace for cooking rice and vegetables; fish and meat are usually cooked on the *phongsa*. A bamboo/wooden rack (*hading*) is suspended over the hearth for drying and storing meat, grain, firewood, and tools. As Wangjay Losu explains: "Men should sit at this place (*phongsa*); this is our Wanchao tradition, which we still practice and follow closely." The houses are animated by residents' activities and stories told by the fireside.



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1. Buffalo skulls on the *waknu* of the *nyalem paa* in Kamhua Noksa in 2023

2. *Phongkha* (kitchen) of the *wangkam*, Kamhua Noksa, 2023

3. *Hading* (drying rack) in the *phongkha* (kitchen) of the *wangkam*, Kamhua Noksa, 2023

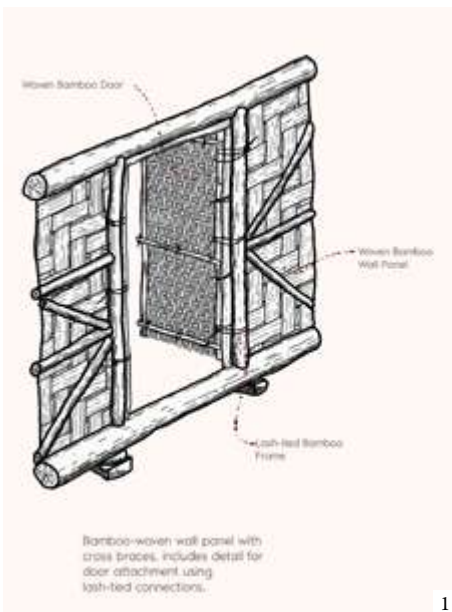
4. Ponwang Losu seated in the *nyoi* (room for elderly people) in the Wancho family house in Kamhua Noknu, 2023

A common practice is for elderly men to have a separate room (*nyoi*). As Ponwang Losu explains: “It is not that one who sits like this is alone. Every elderly man has a separate room, designed for older people. They want a warm place to sit in and don’t always want to mix with the rest of the family in the *phongkha* (kitchen).” (Douglas 2024h).

In the open-plan interiors of traditional homes, families prefer to sleep close together in the *kamkey* (back room). Washrooms and pig sheds are built away from the main house to keep out damp and maintain hygiene indoors. Water is supplied at outdoor taps and in communal areas. The village chief’s house stands out as larger than the rest.



Wapan base beam dividing the *phongkha* from the *kamkey* (back room) in Hondan Losu’s house, Kamhua Noknu, 2023



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1. Detail of door and woven bamboo walls (Arnav & Anupama Architects)

2. Completing the reconstruction of the *wangkam* (chief's house) in Kamhua Noknu in 2021

3. *Ogeeko* process of wrapping the central ridge pole (*ochung*), Kamhua Noknu, 2023

Construction Processes

The first phase of building is performed by the homeowner's close relatives. Once a decision is made to build or rebuild a house, the materials are stockpiled over more than a year: large amounts of wood, bamboo, palm leaves, and bamboo string. The site is prepared by digging and leveling to make the base floor, and on the first day of construction the *wapan* is fitted—a horizontal base beam installed in the front third of the house.

Exterior and interior structural columns to support heavy roof beams are erected, followed by layers of bamboo roof framework. On the second day, the roof is finished with a thick layer of palm-leaf thatch and the walls, exterior and interior, are fashioned usually from woven bamboo. On the

third day, the room partitions are erected and the bamboo floor is woven and put in place in the *kamkey* (back room).

In any culture, dwellings are linked to economic needs, cultural values, and social relationships. So it is with traditional Wancho architecture, which is moreover eco-friendly building with its use of local resources, low energy consumption in material preparation and transportation, and reuse and recycling of materials. Until recently there was no cash economy in Wancho villages, so transactions took place by barter and exchange. Thus housebuilding, certainly one of the most expensive undertakings for a family, involves the gathering of local materials and the skills and cooperative building practices through which people help each other and in turn expect and receive help. Community participation in all major village tasks

and activities including building reflects a collective spirit and a cultural embodiment of this architecture. Yet the availability of imported products has now led a few rudimentary general shops to be set up in the villages, and purchased materials are brought in by vehicles that ply daily to Longding.

The building of a house involves a series of choreographed actions and roles, each with a synchronized routine. Building skills are acquired through a learning system in which the process is guided by experienced craftsmen. Every component of a traditional house has a local name describing its location and function which is recalled as the piece is erected, so that its position is understood and the knowledge transferred to the next generation. The strongest boys and young men perform the physical tasks of gathering materials from the forest or farm as well as the heavy work of erecting the frame, weaving the walls and floors, and building the roof. Older men prepare the leaves for thatching and cut the sticks used to pin the palm leaves when wrapping the central ridge pole (*ochung*), a process called *ogeeko*. The housebuilding event is a noisy, amicable affair that brings the community together, and the hard work is rewarded by a feast laid on by the owner on the second day.

Discussion and Conclusion

The traditional architecture of the Wancho community is linked to a sense of identity deeply connected with the regional geography—connections to the land that are explicit in the community's oral history, myths, and folklore. Underlying this are ancestral animist traditions defining webs of human relationships extending from the family, clan, and village to embrace natural and supernatural entities (Hallowell 1960; Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2006:10). In the Wancho imagination, the entire landscape is animated by stories, and the place for telling them is by the fireside in a traditional house.

A subsistence farmer depends on the soil, climate, and knowledge accumulated through observation of the environment, as well as on solidarity established through relationships of cooperation. The integrity and identity of shelters in Wancho settlements are bound up with this way of living and a culture which emphasizes family values and community belonging and cohesion. Entering a local house gives us an insight into a timeless, enduring resilience; a way of life involving know-how in practices such as farming, hunting, rituals, crafts, and feasting. The custodians of knowledge in the villages are versed in the



Drone view of front of the *wangkam* in Kamhua Noknu, 2023 (Angam Wangpan)



Drone view of the *wangkam* roof, Kamhua Noknu, 2023 (Angam Wangpan)

properties and uses of plants for nutrition, medicine, rituals, and housebuilding. This collective memory is essential for adherence to sacred traditions that sustain lifecycles and conserve natural resources through rituals and prescribed times for harvesting.

A study of architecture isolated from indigenous philosophy and cultural practices would be incomplete, for in the Wanchó psyche, mountains, rivers, and forests are perceived as animate; even certain stones, trees, plants, insects, and animals are seen as dynamic forces to be embraced and transformed. This inclusive mindset is linked to the nurturing of reciprocal relationships between humans and with diverse entities encountered in the non-human ecosystem. For instance, in one traditional story, a sacred bamboo grove near Nyinu village is associated with ethereal ancestral beings, and when the bamboo is cut these guardian spirits die, impacting the wellbeing of humans. These relationships are sustained through place-specific rituals of “reinspiring” that maintain balance and good relations, honoring and integrating human connections with the world (Studley 2019). In this environment, hand-built dwellings in the Wanchó tradition are more than assemblages of materials. In the village, the *Gampa* (traditional priest), called upon to cure ailments attributed to the influence of harmful spirits, was also engaged to perform *kamdong* rituals to drive away evil spirits attracted to a newly built house (Douglas 2024c). Many traditional customs remain ingrained and continue to be practiced, showing how Wanchó society maintains multiple, often contradictory ontologies simultaneously (Fowles 2010:8).

These buildings do not require preservation in the conventional sense; like Wanchó stories, they exist as both a process and an artifact, an ongoing cycle of construction

and reconstruction. Fabio Bacchini (2018) proposes that architectural works are performances or processes rather than mere material objects. Buildings made of ephemeral materials are outcomes of architectural events encompassing erection, endurance, and eventual decay. Decay sets the stage for reconstruction, an occasion to assemble the community for a coordinated series of activities that repeat the performance. Hence, as part of an animate landscape including the annual cycle of seasonal change, Wanchó architecture is in constant transformation. A traditional Wanchó house requires periodic reconstruction, but each new structure is built on the site of a previous one, reflecting a deep-seated continuity, as families remain at the same location for generations, with little inclination to move away.

These houses are living examples of resilient thinking (Walker and Salt 2006), incorporating subtle indigenous innovation. The beauty of the Wanchó house lies in its quick construction using local, organic materials that are not only biodegradable and environmentally friendly but also reusable, ensuring sustainability. Housebuilding reinforces community values and supports local knowledge in a performance of customary practice, reciprocity, participation, and transmission via songs and rituals. Through such communal activities, Wanchó customs are revitalized, sustaining a way of life and a moral and cultural code that is understood collectively. The potential impact of its loss was expressed by Jatwang Wangsa: “People gather during the reconstruction of the chief’s house and this leads us to discuss traditions and culture. Traditional songs and dance are also part of it, and all this gets lost when a building becomes a permanent structure; but people now prefer to build modern tin-roof houses.”

Plan of the *wangkam* in Kamhwa Noknu (Arnav & Anupama Architects)

