

ZUZULE DEMALALADE AND JAYDE LIN ROBERTS

INTERSTICES 26

A place for Indigenous articulation: A *kacalisian* slate house in the Pingtung County Library



Fig. 1 Old Library [Photograph: Cultural Affairs Department of Pingtung County Government, 2017]

In 2020, when the city of Pingtung in southern Taiwan decided to upgrade their county library, a slate house that had been previously installed began to transform from a specimen haphazardly collected to display Indigenous culture to a place for reconsidering Indigeneity. Whereas the municipal officials and Indigenous peoples who originally assembled the slate house inside the old library (Fig. 1) seemed unconcerned about the significance of home in Rukai/Paiwan culture, the re-design (Fig. 2) transformed a hidden relic into a place for Indigenous articulation.

Through the materiality of the slate house, we investigate ‘indigenous’ as: “born or produced from within” but also in relationship with a larger world that it responds to and interacts with, not in complete isolation.¹ Our limited re-telling is one representation of a complex historical emergence that intersects with,

Fig. 2 MAYU Architects (2020).
Pingtung County Library, Renovated
Library [Photograph: MAYU
Architects]



and in some ways is sustained by, the global Indigenous with a capital I, which has been applied to diverse communities that have allied themselves to assert greater recognition and rights since the 1980s. Indigeneity, therefore, is not based on an absolute origin or a retreat to the past but a “generative, sociomythic tradition” that allows for pragmatic retrieval of practices and stories that can produce alternative futures.² In our specific case, the source for understanding *anew* is *kacalisian*³ culture, which depicts a mutually co-constituted lifeworld that integrates the slopes of the Dawu and other mountains with the people and more-than-human lives which inhabit that topography.

This living tradition has encountered multiple challenges in the history of Taiwan, where multiple waves of colonisers—Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, and Han Chinese—have compelled Indigenous peoples to adapt and relocate in order to survive. In this unequal process, wherein direct and indirect violence created space for colonial settlers at great cost to native residents, some elements and practices were actively remembered while others were forgotten. As with Indigenous peoples elsewhere in Oceania and further afield, tradition is not simply repeating the past but “a practical selection and critical reweaving of roots”.⁴ “The ‘cultural’ continuity of indigenous societies has frequently been uneven, not guaranteed by a persistent, transformative structure”.⁵ In this reweaving, the routes for reconnections are often archipelagic, that is, without permanent paths that always lead from origin to destination, but are adaptive responses to changing conditions that travel the sea between islands as zones of possibilities rather than as empty spaces.⁶

We undertook our analysis through a dialogical process that combined etic and emic perspectives. Zuzule Demalalade, a *mamazangiljan* (noble) in Paiwan society and former curator at the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Cultural Park, gathered and retrieved knowledge through an autoethnographic process based on her own life as an Indigenous leader and advocate, and through open-ended interviews with tribal elders and informants related to the slate house in the Pingtung County Library. Jayde Lin Roberts, a Taiwanese-American spatial ethnographer,

analysed the architectural plans and spaces of the library as well as relevant social media, and learned from Demalalade's interpretations while also weaving in relevant theories and scholarship. The resultant article should be read as a conjunctural opening towards more equal knowledge production wherein myths and wisdom—read as history—are no less valid than continental philosophy, at least as an opportunity to think more locally, specifically, and relationally.⁷ As such we consider *kakudankudan*, Paiwan wisdom inherited from ancestors to be passed down to future generations; *umaq*, a house or building constructed by people who live on slopes; and *kaumaqan*, a home, which is a house that has been named and whose name becomes the root identity of those who live in the home. We also weave in relevant discussions from place studies and Indigenous studies.

Employing James Clifford's 'articulation theory' we analyse the slate house in the library as a dynamic place where different understandings and revised practices can emerge through selective and contextualised retrievals of the past. "Articulation offers a nonreductive way to think about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of 'traditional' forms"⁸ without demanding purity, permanence, or authenticity. Social and cultural persistence is negotiated—made, unmade, and remade—to enable survival and chart possible futures. This openness of connections and disconnections is critical because of this essential question:

Will subjugated knowledge and practices be articulated with the dominant, and neutralized? Or will they occupy the space opened from above while resisting its built-in logic, connect with others, toward "transformative" cultural-political alternatives that still cannot even be fully imagined?⁹

But Clifford reminds us that the power of place remains critical when thinking about the differently articulated sites of indigeneity.¹⁰ Place, as defined by Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas, and Robert Mugerauer, is a dynamic and nested gathering that allows multiple temporalities and ways of being to intersect—connecting and confronting old myths with current realities, inside and outside practices—to act in the present.¹¹

The slate house in the Pingtung County Library is such a place of articulation where the wood, stone, and other materials became a site for retrieving *kacalisian* life despite its displacement in an urban and non-Indigenous building that was not designed with Indigenous culture or history in mind. In the following analysis, we begin by explaining the significance of traditional slate houses by defining the terms Paiwan, Rukai, *kacalisian*, *kakudankudan*, *umaq*, and *kaumaqan*. We then discuss the troubling dislocation of a slate house and the almost unthinking display of Indigenous artefacts in the 1984 Pingtung County Library. Next, we analyse the re-design of the County Library, focusing on the location and transformation of the slate house within the library. Finally, we argue that the slate house is a place for Indigenous articulation: like a seed that had lain dormant under unfavourable conditions, it is sprouting to enable new conversations about practices surrounding *kacalisian* identity.

Kacalisian* culture and *kakudankudan

In the island nation of Taiwan, 2.5 per cent of the total national population (approximately 588,660 people) are identified as *yuanzhumin* (原住民, Indigenous) and are categorised into sixteen groups: Amis, Atayal, Paiwan, Bunun, Puyuma, Rukai, Cou, SaiSiyat, Yami (Tao), Thao, Keblan, Truku, Sakizaya, Seediq, Hla'alua, and Kanakanavu.¹² Among these, Paiwan and Rukai peoples (approximately 113,000 total) who reside in Pingtung and Taitung Counties, share a high degree of cultural similarity even though they speak different languages.¹³ Both maintain a strictly stratified aristocratic society and uphold similar traditions in clothing, crafts, and building slate houses. Those who live in Pingtung refer to themselves as *kacalisian*, meaning people who live on slopes. *Kacalisian* believe their settlements and farmlands have always been located on slopes, making the topography an integral part of their lifeworld rather than a passive setting. Traditionally, every aspect of *kacalisian* life is intertwined with the local environment, not only in terms of practical considerations such as construction and livelihood, but also in terms of living philosophy: *kakudankudan*. *Kacalisian* houses are made of the slate and wood sourced from the mountainous landscape and their food is produced via swidden agriculture on hillsides, along with hunting and fishing. When Demalalade asked elders: Why do we identify ourselves as “people who live on the slopes”?, elders explained: “Because the steep slopes allow us to work the land and harvest crops without bending over.”¹⁴ This commonsensical statement is more than a practical assessment. It conveys the underlying principle of Paiwan life, that is, those who live on slopes work intelligently to produce food, rather than exerting unnecessary effort or excessively disturbing the land. The mountainous homeland of the *kacalisian* is geologically unstable and prone to earthquakes and landslides. The core practice is to sensitively adapt the terrain to preserve soil structure rather than massive earthworks which could result in soil erosion. Historically, this life philosophy was passed from elder to youth in the practices of everyday life and education through storytelling but encroachment by various colonisers and settlers has and continues to weaken these traditions.

From *umaq* to *kaumaqan*: The significance of naming

In *kacalisian* culture, houses are not just objects to be owned and occupied but homes that constitute the very people who build and live in them.¹⁵ The material house, known as *umaq*, becomes *kaumaqan*, a home, through an integral process that not only transforms a building into a living entity but also binds its residents to this home in an enduring relationship that is remembered by future generations.

Traditionally, *kacalisian* built slate houses through a strict communal process that included living and ancestral members. In the past, when a family decided to build a new house, they had to consult with the entire tribal community to maintain environmental and social well-being. The placement of each house had to consider access to fresh water and soil stability and avoid accumulation of stagnant water. In addition, the process of building a slate house from acquisition of materials to construction was carefully coordinated, timed to avoid conflicts with the farming, rainy and typhoon seasons, and organised to assure acceptable and reciprocal workload. The requisite slate was meticulously



Fig. 3 Slate house built according to traditional construction techniques, located in the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Cultural Park [Photograph: Zuzule Demalalade, 2026]

selected from locally available black and grey slate and shale to prevent irreversible damage in the surrounding environment and required collective manpower to quarry and transport to each village. In addition, quarrying required specific rituals to honour ancestral spirits and local deities to ensure a smooth and successful stone-cutting process.

Today, however, many of these traditional practices have been disrupted by larger political economic forces such as state-imposed land use and environmental regulations, as well as local adaptations in livelihood and community structure. Geoffrey Gowlland analysed how *kacalisian* adopted cement and concrete as building materials through a market-driven process and a Han civilising project that indelibly altered Paiwan villages but did not produce a permanent erasure of *kakudankudan*. Although cement has been used in Paiwan and Rukai villages since the 1970s and two-storey concrete houses line many village streets, Paiwan people have come to see how slate is a more appropriate building material in their slope-side settlements and continue to build in traditional ways whenever possible.¹⁶ Indeed, Paiwan and Rukai elders have actively rebuilt slate houses in villages such as Sandimen and Majia (see, for example, Fig. 3) and worked with Taiwan's Ministry of Culture, the Pingtung County Cultural Heritage Division, and National Taiwan University's Institute of Building and Planning to hold workshops on slate house construction and then published *Old Haocha Traditional Slate House Construction Manual*.¹⁷

Once the construction of a house is complete, Paiwan and Rukai people conduct a naming ceremony to bless the house and its family members, transforming the house, a *umaq*, into a *kaumaqan*, a home. *Kacalisian* believe that houses, like human beings, require a proper name to become a living entity, and residents are intimately tied to their home as seen in the *kacalisian* naming system for human beings. Traditionally, *kacalisian* people are known by their personal name followed by their house's name, as seen in the name of the lead author, Zuzule,

her personal name, followed by Demalalade, the name of her home. Most *kacalisan* house names are inherited, based on ancestral names that clearly denote the status and position of a family and individual within the tribal hierarchy and are strictly regulated.¹⁸ Certain names such as Demalalade can only be used by noble families. It means a spring brimming with life and endless vitality. Decisions about which name to give a new house are made through discussions between the relatives of the root family and the new homeowner. Once a name is chosen, a consultation meeting must be held with the family of the tribal leader and respected elders to ensure the selected name is appropriate and aligns with the identity and social status of the new homeowner. A person's social class and familial affiliation are often identifiable through their home name. In addition, a tribal priest must perform cleansing and blessing rituals that not only bless the family but also connect the family to their village community, nature, and ancestral spirits.

Once established, home names are rarely changed unless a lineage ends or the family relocates outside of the tribal community. The interrelated ritual of naming a house—the transformation of *umaq* to *kaumaqan*—and the naming of a person binds the home and its residents together in an enduring relationship that is recognised for generations. The *kaumaqan* is not only the place of daily life, but also the place of birth and death. In the past, Paiwan and Rukai elders buried a newborn's umbilical cord beneath the floor near the entrance, symbolising the deep connection between the individual, the home, and the land. When introducing themselves, people would often mention the slate house where they were born, where their umbilical cord was buried. At the end of one's life, the deceased's body would be buried beneath the ground near the hearth, completing the cycle from birth to death. This practice reflects the Paiwan and Rukai belief in the home as a spiritual entity, where the destruction of the physical body does not signify the disappearance of the individual. Instead, the body returns to the land that once nurtured it, while the soul remains eternally connected with family members who continue to live in the same house.

Despite multiple challenges such as livelihood and compulsory standard education, which have compelled Indigenous peoples to leave their home villages, the tradition of naming houses and transforming a structure into a place has continued. Even when new houses are built out of concrete and steel, families still conduct the naming ceremony to imbue their homes with cultural and spiritual meaning. In many villages, elders still guide younger generations in selecting and passing down house names to ensure the continuity of naming ceremonies. Moreover, some groups actively reinforce this tradition through tribal festivals, language revitalisation programmes, and cultural workshops to prevent further assimilation into mainstream Taiwanese society.¹⁹

Dislocation of a slate house

When the construction for the Pingtung County Library was completed in 1984, no space was designated for Indigenous artefacts.²⁰ The installation of a slate house on the fourth floor of an urban library occurred by chance, through a series of events that were driven by national policies rather than an explicit effort to recognise the presence and significance of Indigenous communities. In 1989, Taiwan's Small and Medium Enterprise Administration, under the Ministry of

Fig. 4 The woodcarving room displaying carvings and furniture [Photograph: MAYU Architects, 2018]

Fig. 5 The original location and condition of the slate house in the old library [Photograph: MAYU Architects, 2018]



Economic Affairs, adopted Japan's "One Town One Product" initiative to bolster local economies. Translated as 一鄉一特色 (One Village One Specialty) in Chinese, this policy requested each county or region to identify some practices, products, culture, or geography that are unique to their area, then promote these specialties to develop local economies.²¹ In Pingtung, a county where nearly one in twelve people are Indigenous, government officials identified Indigenous tribes as their most unique attribute then collected Paiwan and Rukai woodcarvings to display as their specialty.²² This effort proceeded piecemeal because officials were reacting to national policy rather than pursuing a specific vision for the library or an exhibition space. A "woodcarving room" was established on the fourth floor by placing carvings into an existing space with little alteration, not even a distinct enclosure or door (Fig. 4). Later, in 1995, County officials decided to add a slate house (Fig. 5). The collection of Indigenous carvings included not only vertical panels but also lintels and furniture, all elements belonging to traditional Paiwan and Rukai houses, therefore, the addition of a slate house seemed logical.

The County hired *kacalisian* from the Wutai and Ali villages to install a slate house on the fourth floor of the library, apparently without careful consideration or planning as we have been unable to locate public announcements or archival records. It is unclear if the *kacalisian* who installed the slate house disassembled an existing house then moved it to the library or constructed a new one. As with the woodcarvings and furniture that were already displayed, the slate house was added to exhibit the "exotic customs" of tribal peoples.²³ General knowledge about Indigenous culture and history in Taiwan was still superficial in the 1990s. Government staff, like most Han people, are the dominant ethnicity in Taiwan, who were unaware of the significance of *kaumaqan* as an integrated and living home. Instead, they treated the house as an object for display, a dislocated *umaq*, stripped of its potential spirit as a living expression of *kakudankudan*.

Although we have not been able to uncover archival records regarding the exact decisions made by the Pingtung government or how the slate house was installed, its location in a neglected corner (Figs. 4 and 5) on a seldom-visited floor suggests ignorance about Indigenous culture. Like a haphazard display, the artefacts were imagined as educational but failed to attract visitors. Buried in a dark corner of the library with poor lighting, the slate house was more like a gloomy cave. Some schoolchildren who were taken to the slate house during field trips said that the slate house looked so dark and scary that they were afraid to approach.²⁴

Esteemed Indigenous artist Sakuliu (撒古流) deemed the County Library slate house fake because it neither adhered to traditional construction methods nor brought the people of the tribe together to co-create a new home.²⁵ It was detached from its Indigenous cultural context and environment. Sakuliu, along with other Indigenous elders, consider this structure to be incomplete because it never underwent the full and requisite construction and ritual process. In particular, this slate house was never given a name, therefore, it is unmoored from traditional modes of connecting to a household, a tribe, and its surrounding cultural, spiritual, and ecological environment. This dislocation risked reducing the slate house to an inert object that could never be integrated with *kacalisian* life by embodying the complete cycle of birth to death and all of the important life events in between. Instead, the house stood as an empty frame with no relationships or spirit to awaken and sustain it.

This mode of exhibition effectively diminished and misrepresented Indigenous culture. As Duncan and Wallach argue, displays are never neutral; the way objects are presented shapes how cultures are perceived, often reinforcing existing power inequalities.²⁶ The slate house, along with the other Indigenous artefacts, were objectified and exoticised. The darkness of the exhibit not only reduced the visibility of the artefacts but also caused fear among schoolchildren, underscoring how the haphazard collection failed to consider the psychological and cultural responses of its potential audience, including the Paiwan and Rukai peoples whose culture was on display.

Reinvigorating the slate house through re-design

When Pingtung County decided to redevelop the library in 2017, it had two options: demolish the old structure to build an entirely new facility, or renovate. MAYU Architects, which won the design competition, proposed renovating and enlarging the existing building to reduce costs, avoid waste, and preserve the historical significance of the original structure, thereby extending its cultural legacy.

The concept put forth by MAYU was to open up the old library and change its orientation to make it both more accessible and attractive to the citizens of Pingtung. The English and Chinese statements written by the architects, Ma Lone Chang (張瑪龍) and Yu-lin Chen (陳玉霖), explain:

The existing Pingtung Library is an example of public buildings built during the authoritarian rein [*sic*] of the KMT [Kuomintang] with its symmetrical square plan, fortified facade and strong axial relationship to the plaza. The main entrance was hidden from the main boulevard within a park. Thus, the library could hardly be seen with inconvenient access. A new and transparent lobby is attached to the existing building facing the city. This totally transforms the library. At the urban scale, it [the re-design] reorients the entry to face the city and embrace the citizen's daily life... The new lobby is a parallelogram open plan supported by continuous V-shaped steel structure... Given its form, use of materials, colors, and its social-cultural meanings, *the new lobby is a modern interpretation of a "slate building," a typical aboriginal dwelling type in Pingtung...* (emphasis added).

既有屏東圖書館位於千禧公園內，如同其他興建於威權時代的公共建築，採四面對稱的形式主義設計，外牆具封閉性且內部空間呆板，建築的中軸線與前方偌大的硬鋪面廣場…我們改變了建築的軸向，使原本面向公園內部的圖書館，轉向九十度直接面對城市，重新與市民日常生活相連結…新建築以連續的V型鋼結構形成平行四邊形平面的單一空間，其中再以幾個三角形定義出次要的場域，包括下凹的坐席、懸浮夾層，以及懸吊的燈籠，這幾處是在開放平面中預期人會聚集的區域。再加上顏色及材料的運用，我們在形式及社會文化意義上，藉由增建的新大廳向屏東原住民的石板屋致敬...(emphasis added).²⁷

At the scale of the city, the architects' comments regarding the stilted monumentality of the 1984 library and its failure to engage citizens, as well as the KMT's authoritarian rule, suggest an explanation for the uninformed placement of the slate house in the old library.

In Taiwan, martial law was the rule of the land for 38 years, from 1949 to 1987. This significantly restricted the freedom of all Taiwanese citizens and constrained more informed and rights-based approaches to most aspects of life, including issues relating to Indigenous peoples.²⁸ Once martial law was lifted, political debates became more vibrant, if at times raucous, with competing parties such as the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) gaining favour, especially in southern Taiwan. The political machinations of the two parties and other national debates stray beyond the purview of this article except for two facts: the original Pingtung County Library was designed and built during KMT rule, and Pingtung County has been under DPP leadership since 1997, a time that coincides with increasing awareness of Indigenous culture. From the 1980s onward, Indigenous activists called on Taiwanese society to recognise the significance of Indigenous traditions and histories as integral to Taiwan's cultural identity. Mainstream Taiwanese society, however, is still in the process of overcoming settler colonial perceptions of Indigenous peoples as "mountain people" (山地人) in need of modernisation and state-led "development".²⁹

Under these political and social circumstances, the fact that the slate house was relegated to a remote corner of the library is unsurprising. Implementing the One Village One Specialty policy was the main objective but government staff were also constrained by the form and spaces of the library's authoritarian architecture (as criticised by MAYU Architects). To meet the demands of the national government, they inserted woodcarvings, a slate house, and programming into a generic volume, with no recourse but lighting. This haphazard placement neither recognised the symbolism of these artefacts nor their potential to represent a complex relational lifeworld. All of this inadvertently reinforced the coloniality of Taiwanese institutions before the 1990s.

Although the architects do not directly address this historical wrong in their Chinese or English statements, they saw the slate house located on the fourth floor as significant: a source of design inspiration in English, and "a way to pay respect to Pingtung Indigenous people's slate houses" (向屏東原住民的石板屋致敬) in Chinese. Translation is never word-for-word but this difference in motivation based on linguistic expression is notable. The English version suggests a more extractive approach, wherein the slate house serves as an architectural type and springboard, inspiring the black triangular structural system as a creative re-presentation of the hundred-pace snake pattern used in slate house architecture.³⁰ In comparison, the Chinese version suggests the design of the

entire transparent lobby is to pay respect to Pingtung's slate houses. The Chinese word *zhijing* (致敬) connotes a high degree of respect, placing significant value on the slate house as architecture capable of inspiration. This respect, however, did not compel the architects to name the Paiwan or Rukai peoples who are intimately connected with slate houses. Instead, the statement identified the house with Pingtung, a statist and non-Indigenous name for its geographic location, the county.

Fig. 6 Main entrance with V-shaped steel structure [Photograph: Pan Mengan, 2020]



As promised, the finished glass lobby is striking, offering an eye-catching transition space between the adjacent park and the building, capitalising on the surrounding trees to create a forest-like environment as the main entrance. Indigenous culture and meanings, however, are barely detectable, even with explicit knowledge of the architects' design intentions as presented in their statement. The black V-shaped structure coupled with the blond wood neither evokes the grounded solidity of slate houses nor their village environment where much darker wood is used (Fig. 6). Two aspects, the large suspended black triangular lanterns (Fig. 7) and floating mezzanine that reads as a thick, almost rock-like

Fig. 7 MAYU Architects (2021). Main lobby with black triangular hanging lanterns [Photograph: MAYU Architects]

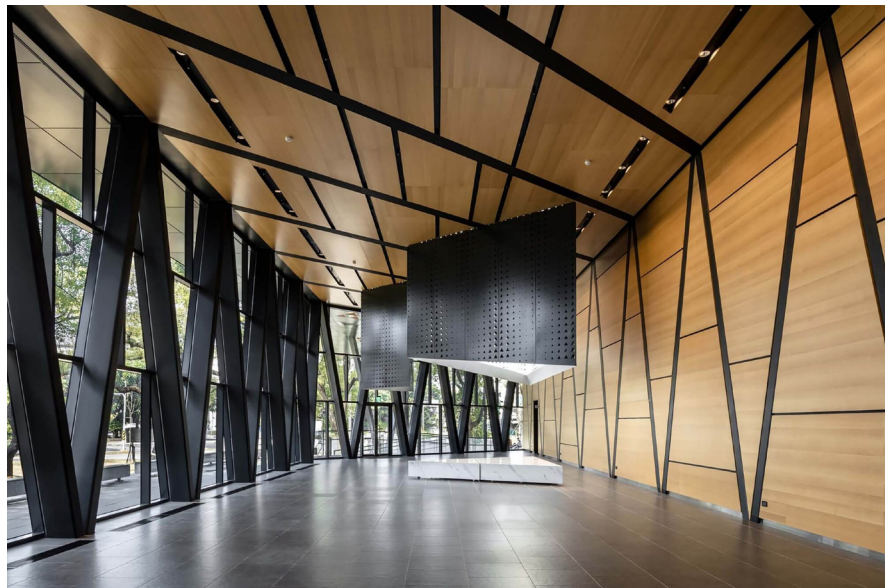




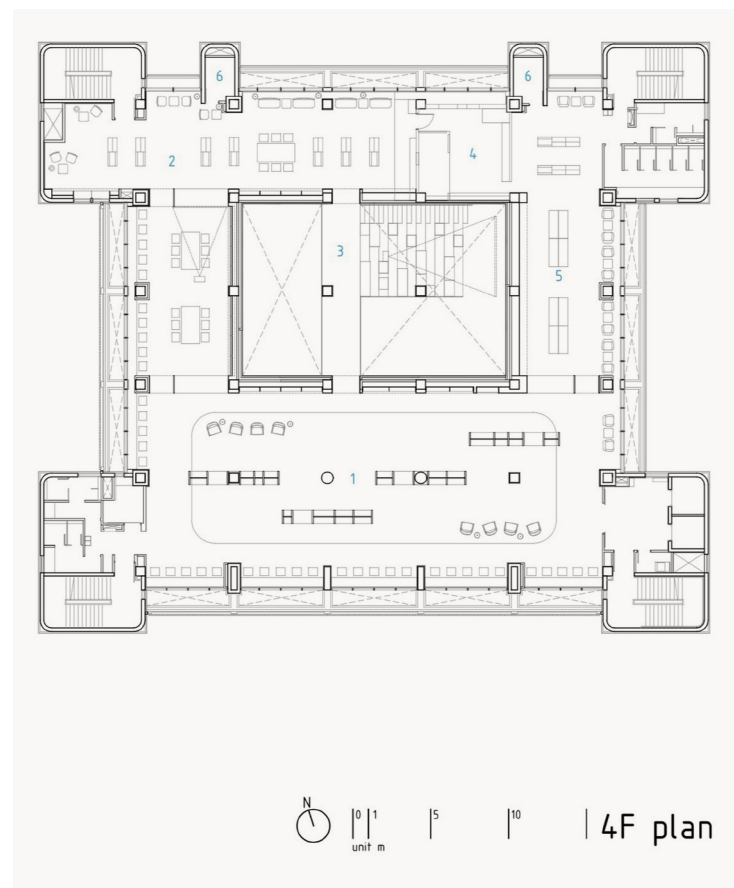
Fig. 8 MAYU Architects (2021).
Floating mezzanine [Photograph:
MAYU Architects]

wedge, evoke the substantial weight of slate (Fig. 8), but library patrons without prior knowledge of, or experience with, slate houses would not associate the lobby with Indigenous houses.

Once on the fourth floor, however, the architects' intention of respecting the slate house is clearly visible. Instead of being buried in a dark corner, the house (No. 4 in the plan) now connects the Taiwan Literature (No. 2) and Local Literature (No. 5) rooms, articulating a new space at the conjunction of two key genres that are foundational for Taiwan's cultural and intellectual history (Fig. 9). Distinct from Chinese literature, these genres prioritise the multiple languages and cultures in Taiwan including Hokkien, Hakka, Mandarin, Japanese, and Indigenous languages, reflecting the island nation's multi-ethnic, postcolonial, and politically charged histories. The renovated, one might say rehabilitated, slate house is now named Traditional Paiwan [*sic*] Cabin and serves as a reading space surrounded by Paiwan handicrafts, literature, and culturally significant plants such as millet, quinoa, and ginger leaves (Fig. 10). In our usage analysis, the Paiwan Cabin is frequently occupied by students sitting on the chairs and floor, doing their homework, reading books, or simply relaxing. The once dark and scary cave has become a welcoming space for reading and learning.

Fig. 9 MAYU Architects (2021). Plan
of the fourth floor in the renovated
library [MAYU Architects]

Fig. 10 Interior of the rehabilitated
slate house [Photograph: Zuzule
Demalalade, 2026]



The dislocated slate house as a place of Indigenous articulation

Although dislocation can tear a people or a house from its roots, Glissant and Clifford remind us that cultures and identities are relational: produced in contact and transit, and reproduced through translation, appropriation, and negotiation.³¹ While power disparities inevitably constrain agency in moments and places of contact, these encounters are articulations where different understandings and adaptive practices can emerge without severing connections to the past—the past as an active source which informs the present. Similar to “talking theory without losing one’s soul,” it is possible for Indigenous peoples and practices to confront homogenising and civilising forces without being subsumed.³²

The slate house dislocated from its hillside environment and inserted into an urban library was robbed of its potential spirit between 1995 and 2017. Like a dormant source of *kacalisian* culture, however, it could be awakened under more favourable circumstances to reconnect Paiwan and Rukai people with tradition. An Indigenous mother who volunteers at the library said that she cherishes the slate house because it provides a new opportunity for her to show her children how their ancestors once lived.³³ Urban Indigenous populations in Taiwan have long been displaced via economic, political, and cultural forces with many holding no direct experiences or memories of slate houses or other traditional environments. The slate house in a now celebrated and popular library serves as a rare place of articulation where Paiwan and Rukai culture can be retrieved without physically returning to the mountains.

Even for Paiwan people who still live in villages, the library slate house can articulate new connections. Lavakau, a young Paiwan leader who still lives in his village in a reinforced concrete house with a slate panel façade, said:

When I saw the slate house inside the library, I suddenly felt that a slate house doesn’t have to exist only in the village. It can also be stylish and contemporary. I felt a sense of pride and finally understood what our elders meant when they said, “our house is alive”. Sitting inside [the library slate house], I didn’t feel like I was in a public building. I felt like the house was breathing, just like a slate house in our village. They are both alive.³⁴

For Lavakau, authenticity is secondary, not only for the slate house in the library but also for his own home made of “modern” materials. Both can be alive and serve as bridges between urban life and *kaumaqan*, connecting an urban and at times alienating environment with *kacalisian*, the sense of kinship and belonging in Paiwan and Rukai villages.

Surrounded by the Han majority at only 2.8 per cent of the national population, the Indigenous peoples of Taiwan have few realistic options for survival without obtaining recognition from non-Indigenous people. As analysed by Gifford and Hau’ofa, essentialist claims and arguments about indigeneity constrict reconceptions that could reframe islands as more than tiny peripheries and history as more than the glory of empire.³⁵ Alternative histories are required to connect and confront the coloniser with the colonised, the settler with the settled upon. In Clifford’s words, outsiders, even eminent scholars, can be “simultaneously displaced and recruited” to support Indigenous agendas.³⁶

The slate house in the renovated library became such a site of recruitment, capable of articulating new relationships between Indigenous peoples and the

Han majority. After 2017, the library and slate house received widespread positive attention in mainstream news and social media. Among similar posts, travel blogger Bobowin wrote:

There is a special attraction in the Pingtung Country Library. On the fourth floor, there is an Indigenous slate house. The interior of the slate house is a reading room, and relevant books are on display. You must not miss this. It is an opportunity to get closer to an Indigenous slate house without going on a long trip.³⁷

News outlets such as *FHK News* featured the library and slate house with an on-line video titled, “Pingtung’s Forest Library that Integrates Indigenous Culture.”³⁸ The video takes the viewer into the library through the forest-like lobby up through the various levels, ending at the slate house. In the accompanying voice-over the reporter states:

This slate house has been protected for over 30 years... its new interior is modelled after Indigenous houses... It preserves Pingtung’s diverse Indigenous culture and memory, making it possible for contemporary children to understand Pingtung’s history and culture.³⁹

Whereas the travel blogger still approached the slate house as somewhat other, a chance to “get closer to” an exotic space, the news video claims the slate house and thereby Indigenous culture as a part of Pingtung. This public claim could be interpreted as yet another encroachment on Indigenous life, but the call for children in general to learn about Indigenous culture suggests a bridging between two peoples—colonisers and colonised—and a potential to work through many lingering injustices and misconceptions.

Conclusion

How the library slate house transforms perceptions both etic (Han) and emic (Indigenous) will require time and further study. Our observations of library patrons on the fourth floor suggest the rehabilitated Paiwan Cabin is attracting many users. But the building as a whole is a library, not an Indigenous cultural centre or museum. Whether all users have, or will develop, a greater understanding of, and connection with, Paiwan culture and the significance of slate houses is, as yet, unclear.

Questions of authenticity with respect to Indigenous houses on the island of Taiwan have already been raised by scholars such as Shu-Mei Huang and Jeff Hou, who noted that Rukai houses in Rinari were not absolute copies of traditional slate houses but adaptations appropriate for their circumstances and relocation after the Morakot typhoon and landslide.⁴⁰ Similarly, Gowlland convincingly argued that the adoption of cement and concrete in the construction of *kacalisian* houses not only demonstrates the hegemony of market and civilising forces but also Paiwan cultural resilience in maintaining aspects of *kakukandukan*.⁴¹

In our dialogical exploration undertaken by an Indigenous and non-Indigenous researcher, we wonder if the library slate house could accrue additional life and meaning. The once inert object arbitrarily installed in the library has already become of an *umaq* of sorts. As seen in the utterances, texts, and videos of the

users, bloggers, and reporters above, it is seen as an Indigenous house, even if the house functions as a reading room. Could this place of Indigenous articulation engender deeper connections by becoming an urban *kaumaqan*? Could Paiwan and Rukai leaders conduct a naming ceremony to bring the house more fully to life, to create an integrated urban “home” for urban Indigenous people who feel disconnected from their tribal roots? Could it be transformed from a representation of Paiwan/Rukai culture to a living house that enables adaptive Indigenous practices which reconfigure tradition without severing cultural connections?

Metaphorically, the slate house has already taken root in the library. It has remained in the same location, orientation, and design while the spaces of the library were reoriented around it. Like a seed that has burst forth from its dark shell, the Paiwan Cabin now anchors two significant literary collections and inspired MAYU Architects to allude to the hundred-pace snake pattern in their transformation of the library. If named and reconnected with *kacalisian*’s sociomythic tradition, the library slate house could become a point of contact to generate inter-tribal and inter-ethnic understanding within and between Indigenous groups and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As declared by Hau’ofa and affirmed by Clifford, the future(s) for Pacific Islanders and Indigenous peoples is/are not rooted in some unchanging past but “grounded in history’s multiple threads [and] continuities in transformation” that have engaged with outside influences and new technologies and continue to do so.⁴² These interactions—points of articulation—do not have to align with “dominant trajectories of core and periphery, tradition and modernity, local and global”⁴³—they can pursue “cultural-political alternatives that still cannot even be fully imagined.”⁴⁴

NOTES

1. James Clifford, "Among Histories," in *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 13–14.
2. Clifford, "Among Histories," 25.
3. According to *Report on the Review of Indigenous Language Writing Systems* 105年檢視原住民族語言書寫符號系統報告 (Chang, Yu-lung (ilong moto). 2016. 105年「檢視原住民族語言書寫符號系統」研究報告 [2016 Research Report on the Review of Indigenous Language Writing Systems]. Indigenous Language Research and Development Center.), capitalisation of Romanised Paiwan words follows the general orthographic conventions shared across Indigenous languages. The initial letter should be capitalised at the beginning of a sentence and in proper nouns, place names, ethnonyms, personal names, and status titles. Otherwise, they remain in lower case. This article follows the above convention.
4. Clifford, "Among Histories," 25.
5. Clifford, *Returns*.
6. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 147–61.
7. Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (SAGE, 2005); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 2024); Clifford, *Returns*.
8. James Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," in *Returns*, 60.
9. Charles Hale (2002) quoted in Clifford, "Among Histories," 45.
10. Clifford, *Returns*.
11. Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (University of California Press, 1997); Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2018); Robert Mugerauer, *Interpretations on Behalf of Place: Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses* (State University of New York Press, 1994).
12. Ministry of the Interior (Taiwan), *Population Statistics by Ethnic Group* (Ministry of the Interior, 2024).
13. Studies on Paiwan–Rukai relations have often noted that, despite substantial similarities in cultural content, the two are differentiated most clearly at the linguistic level. This distinction was also significant in the gradual emergence of the Rukai as a separately identified group in academic classification.
14. Elen, interview by Zuzule Demalalade, 6 March 2024.
15. This culture and practice have been studied extensively by Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Tuttle Publishing, 2012).
16. Geoffrey Gowlland, "The Materials of Indigeneity: Slate and Cement in a Taiwanese Indigenous (Paiwan) Mountain Settlement," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 1 (2020): 126–45.
17. Auvinni Kadreseng, Kuale Taugadhu, and Ming-Yu Hong, 好茶舊社傳統石板屋營造技術手冊 [*Old Haocha Traditional Slate House Construction Manual*] (Pingtung County Cultural Heritage Division, 2020).
18. Y.-Q. Zeng, 「Laima」排灣族家名制 ["Laima": The Naming System of the Paiwan People]. In *Personal Names and Status Registration of Taiwan Indigenous Peoples* 台灣原住民の姓名と身分登録, ed. A. Yano and I. Matsuoka (Survey Report No. 147, National Museum of Ethnology, 2019), 73–89, <https://doi.org/10.15021/00009356>.
19. The naming system faces many challenges in contemporary Taiwanese society. For example, land management and registration emphasises individual property ownership rather than collective ownership which poses legal challenges to house names as markers of family identity. In addition, under Japanese and Kuomintang rule, Indigenous peoples were forced to adopt Japanese or Han Chinese names. In 1995, the Taiwanese government amended the Name Act to allow Indigenous people to officially register their traditional names. Currently, only 5 per cent of Indigenous individuals have reverted to their traditional names. Most identification documents still record only a person's Han Chinese name without their traditional house name, continuing the neglect of this traditional naming practice.
20. 屏東縣公共圖書館館藏發展政策 (*Pingtung County Public Library Collection Development Policy*) (Pingtung County Government, Department of Cultural Affairs, 2024).
21. Small and Medium Enterprise Administration, Ministry of Economic Affairs, "One Village One Specialty Policy Overview" (1989/2024), <https://www.moeasmea.gov.tw>.
22. C. Y. Chen, interview by Zuzule Demalalade, 4 July 2024.
23. Chen, interview.
24. Chen, interview.
25. Sakuliu was a recognised leader in Paiwan cultural practices including art and architecture, although his status has been called into question in the #MeToo movement. We include his judgement on the slate house because he is a holder of Indigenous knowledge, not as an endorsement.
26. C. Duncan and A. Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, no. 4 (1980): 448–69.
27. Design statement by the architects as presented on <https://archi-tec.com.tw/2020/03/屏東圖書館/>. However, on MAYU's company website, their commentary on authoritarian architecture has been removed. See <https://mayuarchitects.com/copy-of-pingtung-public-library>.
28. H.-M. Chou, *The Development of Indigenous Education in Taiwan* (National Academy for Educational Research, Educational Resources and Publishing Center, 2019).
29. Council of Indigenous Peoples, "Historical Source Guide: The History of Taiwan's Indigenous Resistance Movements [史料導讀：臺灣原住民族抗爭運動史], 9 January 2023.
30. Ma Lone Chang, interview by Zuzule Demalalade, 23 March 2026. The hundred-pace snake pattern is an overlapping triangular motif that is seen in the way that slate is installed on the roofs of slate houses and in traditional woodcarving.
31. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
32. James Clifford, "Hau'ofa's Hope," in *Returns*, 199.
33. C. Y. Jiang, interview by Zuzule Demalalade, 10 June 2024.
34. Lavakau, interview by Zuzule Demalalade, 4 November 2025.
35. Clifford, *Returns*; Clifford, *Routes*; Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands."
36. Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," 484.
37. Bobowin (n.d.). 屏東縣立圖書館：結合原民文化的創新建築。Bobowin 旅遊攝影生活, <https://bobowin.blog/pingtung-library/>
38. FHK News, 復興崗新聞 (29 March 2023). 屏東森林圖書館 結合原住民文化 [Pingtung Forest Library that Integrates Indigenous Culture] [Video]. *PeoPo Citizen Journalism*, <https://www.peopo.org/news/624653>
39. FHK News, 復興崗新聞. (29 March 2023). 屏東森林圖書館 結合原住民文化 [Pingtung Forest Library that Integrates Indigenous Culture].
40. Shu-Mei Huang and Jeffrey Hou, "Relocated Authenticity: Placemaking in Displacement in Southern Taiwan," in *Planning for Authenticities*, ed. Laura Tate and Brettan Shannon (Routledge, 2019).
41. Gowlland, "The Materials of Indigeneity."
42. Clifford, "Hau'ofa's Hope," 201.
43. Clifford, "Hau'ofa's Hope," 212.
44. Clifford, "Among Histories," 45.