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INTERSTICES 26

Bure: Spiritual romance



Fig. 1 Chief Josese Nabuta's house at Ba, Fiji (1928) [Photograph: Milton Vickery, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 1467-ALB274-122-3]

The bure

Missionary linguist David Cargill and Reverend David Hazlewood define the *bure*¹ in Fiji's first dictionary, published 1850, "as a god's house [better known as *bure kalou*] heathen temple, a house in which unmarried men, or strangers sleep; a public house,"² (Fig. 1) as opposed to the *vale* which means the general house for women, children, and their men. Today the Fijian English word *bure* means a "traditional Fijian house, made of traditional materials; also, detached tourist hotel unit designed to resemble a traditional Fijian house."³ The *bure* has become a globalised architectural type and the term has come to represent any thatched building, even if not built in Fiji.⁴ In this way, the tourist *bure* has been pivotal in changing *bure* understanding.

It was revealed in a conversation with University of South Pacific Fiji-based linguist, Paul Geraghty, that the *bure* historically did not encompass all Fijian architecture, as commonly understood today. Even some *vale*, or general house, when thatched was misunderstood as a *bure*. This article highlights that the

popular understanding of *bure*, amongst Fijians alike, developed directly with tourism architecture in Fiji. Geraghty explains that development of the blended Fijian English understanding of the word *bure* possibly began with the ‘strangers’ referred to in Hazlewood and Cargill’s earlier definition. Geraghty proposes a likely scenario where the ‘strangers,’ most likely non-Fijian foreigners visiting the village, would always stay in a *bure*⁵ as guests. They perhaps assumed everyone else in the village lived in a *bure* since they looked alike in structure and design. However, they misunderstood that only certain thatched buildings were *bure* and most of the village structures were *vale*. This misunderstanding continues to influence how Fijian vernacular architecture is identified, sometimes described as a ‘*bure* style,’ and distinguishes certain buildings from others in Fiji’s tourist architecture. This misunderstanding is relevant because the tourist *bure*, which has borrowed the earlier form and building materials, will most likely outlive its predecessor due to tourist demand and the appetite for self-orientalising practices. It is only appropriate, then, that design professionals grasp an understanding of what motivated the form of the early *bure*; perhaps it may encourage a reinterpretation from an ideological level and not just a structural level, as is largely the case today. In response, this article is a modest effort, applying archival research, participant research, and architectural site investigations to reveal some of these ideological elements of early *bure*.

Fiji’s *bure* architecture demonstrates how even within Indigenous settings the meanings of architecture can evolve over time and how building styles can transition between contexts. It emphasises an architectural fluidity: how shifting cultural authorities have motivated the construction of Fijian architecture, and the different meanings that have been attached to the Fijian *bure*, which in turn have shaped that architecture. The interplay between material and immaterial is evident. It also affirms the archipelagic theme of persistent but adaptive architectural traditions of Indigenous peoples and challenges the binaries of traditional versus contemporary; however, it does recognise the different authorities⁶ and motivations involved.

These two different contexts of *bure* development provide excellent bases to study the aforesaid dictionary definitions of *bure*. Needless to say, the different contexts highlight the change of functionality and audience—or main occupants—of the two *bure* which governs the underlying architectural decisions. A central consideration at the core of this study is the recognition of how spirituality influenced the design of the early *bure*. Immured bodies were common elements for *bure* architecture which this article conceptualises as ‘spiritual tectonic’; by no means the only spiritual aspect of early *bure*. The article studies the how, why, and the architectural effects of this spiritual tectonic, by piecing together ethnography, anthropology, architectural history, and fieldwork to build an architectural understanding of iTaukei’ Fijian designed and built *bure* in villages.

Tourism is complex; and in a place like Fiji that was once colonised it has orientalising and self-orientalising effects. There are only a handful of Fijian villages that choose to build *bure* in the early vernacular style to continue building traditions, in comparison to the growing number of resorts that build tourist *bure*. From my review of remaining early *bure* on the main island of Fiji, Viti Levu, tourism *bure* certainly exceed those numbers and for this reason it can overetermine what Fijian *bure* means; and design professionals are complicit in this trend. The article reflects on my own experiences of having designed tourist *bure*

in Fiji in the early 2010s, and examines what has been re-interpreted through other contemporary resort projects. As a form of reverse mimicry, the tourist *bure*, designed mainly by non-Indigenous practitioners, continues to influence the understanding of Fijian architectural history for a global audience and Fijians alike.

The article seeks a re-grounding⁸ of Fijian architecture that balances its production through a blended stimuli of spiritual romance and reverses the dominant and inherited narrative of tourist *bure*. The versatility in interpretations of Fijian *bure* that are culturally informed re-Indigenises the contemporary vernacular transformations. The article highlights gaps that practitioners can consider when performing architectural resort projects—in the hope that contemporary architectural practices can build upon early *bure* ideas and extend Fijian vernacular architecture beyond a consumable product. Without the Indigenous understanding of *bure*, external tourism practices risk diminishing and diluting the actual meaning of the *bure* and architects are contributing to this process.

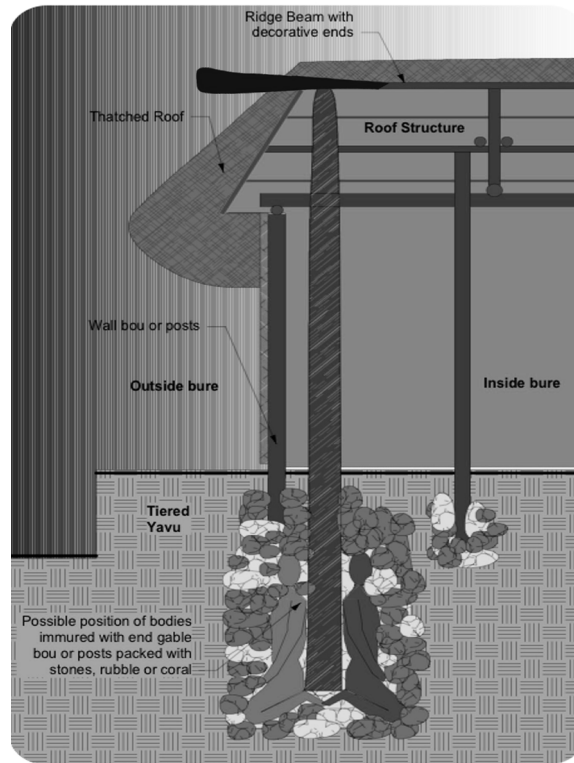
The article contributes to the purposes of cross-cultural theory of architecture; a framework explored by Paul Memmott and James Davidson in their seminal article, “Exploring a Cross-Cultural Theory of Architecture,” which investigates interactions between the architectural values and building traditions of different cultures.⁹ This article adopts one of the theory’s central themes of architect/builder and significance of cultural authority¹⁰ to analyse the intentions of *bure* development in both contexts. In particular, the article discusses the ‘authorities’ of *mataisau*,¹¹ or the Fijian traditional builder and the trained architect, or, as an attempt to equalise the term architect, Memmott and Davidson term them ‘ethno-architects’ and the latter as ‘capital-A architects.’ To be brief, these stimuli are encapsulated as the key terms: ‘spiritual’ and ‘romance’; each immersed in a sociocultural context and depth of meaning arguably beyond its representative term. The early *bure* demonstrates that the ideology of *mana*,¹² as an ‘extra-ego’ authority, prompted the immuring of bodies, consequently influencing the decisions of the *mataisau*. On the other hand, ‘capital-A architects’ of tourist *bure* draw from ‘ego-centric’ concerns within the architectural profession and parameters set by clients who themselves are largely driven by the ‘audience’ of tourists. This complex mesh of economics, cultural politics, and design parameters creates the tourist *bure*.

The spiritual

The spiritual rite of immuring human bodies alive, as Fijians call it, *buluta-bula-bula*, meaning to bury alive,¹³ particularly with *bure bou*, or structural posts, and in the *yavu*, or house platform, was a common practice in pre-colonial Fiji.¹⁴ (Fig. 2) It is unavoidable that romantic perspectives of the ‘Other’ are alluded to in a discussion regarding human sacrifice. However, by departing from loaded ideas of cannibalism, the article proposes that one adopts the Fijian worldview regarding such architectural rites and understands them as spiritual aspects of early Fijian architecture.

Historical accounts tell us that early *bure*—men’s meeting houses, *bure kalou* or temples, and some chief’s houses—had immured bodies beneath their posts. My investigation cannot ascertain if all *bure* used this spiritual tectonic, and, if so, at what time in Fiji’s history. As to the question of *who* was buried, there are complementary accounts from present-day Fijians, nineteenth-century writings, and ethnography illuminating Fijian reasons for this spiritual tectonic.

Fig. 2 Spiritual tectonics, showing the position of immured bodies in an early *yavu*, as recorded by archaeologist Everett Frost in 1974 [Diagram: Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, 2011]



It is generally understood by contemporary Fijians that the bodies selected were prisoners of war buried alive as their punishment.¹⁵ This interpretation corroborates ethnographer Buell Quain's account of "victims of war" buried beneath each post in the village of Macuata.¹⁶ Anthropologist Alan Tippet emphasizes that they were victims buried 'alive,' standing with their arms around the house posts.¹⁷ Cargill called them "supporters" whose role was to support or "to secure the stability of the edifice."¹⁸

Navatanitawake

These written and oral accounts reinforce my¹⁹ findings from fieldwork in Bau Island.²⁰ There is a peculiar burial of Tongans beneath Bau Island's *bure*, called Navatanitawake, infamously represented in nineteenth-century photographs and engravings as the "heathen temple" (Fig. 3). Its mound was once the sacred site of an early *bure kalou*, from which its name comes.²¹ Afraid to uncover tragic circumstances of fellow Tongans, I was relieved to hear from Bauan elders that, according to their oral histories, Tongan warriors were buried in honour. These warriors assisted Bau Island's final and successful battle of Kaba against neighbouring rivalries Rewa in 1855. Tonga's King George Tāufa'āhau I and Bau's Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau negotiated that in return for Tonga's fighting support, a Fijian war canoe would be given to the Tongan monarch. So, the fallen Tongan warriors of noble birth were provided with a dignified burial under Bau's *bure*. Archaeological digs under the Bau meeting house in the 1980s affirm these accounts.²² They found Tongans wrapped appropriately in *masi*, or barkcloth,²³ which acknowledges the honourable service of these noble Tongan warriors.

In his 1974 archaeological digs in the northern island of Taveuni, archaeologist Everett Frost found "burials flexed in pits, extended full length in pits

Fig. 3 Bau Island's Navatanitawake *bure*, where Tongan warriors from the Battle of Kaba are buried [Photograph: Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, 2010].



(sometimes with wives and slaves alongside, under mounds of stones with tools and trinkets alongside, under house floors, under temple (*bure kalou*) floors, in open *yavu*.”²⁴ According to early accounts,²⁵ it was also common practice when a husband, particularly a chief or a warrior, passes, that his wife voluntarily offers her own life, possibly due to cultural obligations, to honour her marital commitment to her husband. The nineteenth-century accounts have a taint of colonial mythmaking, which scholars from non-Pacific cultures perpetuated during the twentieth century.²⁶ To avoid primitivising, such sacrificial rituals were practised in many cultures, beyond Fijian, in ceremonies for laying of cornerstones.²⁷ A participant from Navai, an interior village of Viti Levu—Fiji’s largest island—balances these earlier accounts, explaining that it was also understood that warriors were commonly buried, even captured prisoners, because their *mana* as warriors was valuable to the building.²⁸ The captured warriors became architectural embodiments of courage and dignity—desirable traits for the victors’ new *bure*. From an Indigenous perspective, the spiritual tectonics involved in immuring bodies as part of the building’s *yavu* can help to broaden understandings of architectural rites beyond accounts of savagery.

Mana

Reverend Wallace Deane explains that *mana* gave Fijians power and “chiefs held their position by the power of the *mana* which was thought to reside within them.” He goes on to explain:

As to the source of the power, the idea of the Melanesian was that it arose as a result of the direct communication with ghosts (Tindalo) and the chiefs especially received from spirits the virtue whereby they were able to bring their evil influences to bear upon others.²⁹

The idea of *mana* as a source of power transferred to *bure* from a body is contentious, however, to explore all reasons, this article begins in this direction. The transfer of spiritual power is grasped in understanding Fijian spirituality: gods, or *kalou vu*, and deified spirits, *kalou yalo*—not always deities; they could be spirits of ancestors—embodying objects like war clubs, *masi* or barkcloth as well as animals, and trees and vegetation.

The anthropologist and minister Lorimer Fison quotes Professor Tylor, who described a “Fijian priest, preparing himself for spirit-possession, was accustomed to look steadily at a whale’s tooth, amid dead silence.”³⁰ Furthermore, “a story of a Fijian woman who rubbed her infant’s lips with the flesh of a slain champion in the full assurance that the child would thereby receive some of the warrior’s bravery.”³¹ Deane retells the story of the chief of Nabukelevuira, from Kandavu, who ate the heart and liver of the chief of Daviqele for the same belief that he would receive the deceased chief’s good qualities.³² By referring to Deane and Fison’s recordings, this article emphasises how the spiritual tectonic of early *bure* transferred a certain supernatural or psychological esteem or *mana* to the physical presence of the *bure*.

In my conversation with Geraghty, he explains that the earlier Fijian concept of *mana* does not carry the same meaning understood in Maoridom, as Deane implies. Geraghty uses Hazlewood’s definition to explain: “a sign, omen, wonder, and, by transmission of meaning, potent, effectual or efficient... so be it, let it be so.”³³ Hazlewood’s definition allows us to understand that immured war captives declared *mana*—in other words a declaration that “the war was a success; the gods were effectual; we have conquered and fulfilled our duty.” *Mana* is therefore not only used as a noun or a “source... [but also as] ... an action, a quality and a state,” as linguist and anthropologist Roger Keesing explains.³⁴ Cargill describes burial rites of a chief, where at the end, “all persons present return thanks by clapping their hands and then the king or a chief of rank replies,—‘Ai [mudu-mudu ni] mate—meaning the end of death—the people simultaneously respond, Mana,—edina: ‘let it be so,—it is true.’”³⁵ With this added understanding, immuring a body under the *bou* or *yavu* of the *bure* after a successful battle was also an acknowledgement of *mana*.

My study reveals how the spiritual tectonic of early *bure* was conducted in respect: honouring the commissioner, owner, or residents of the *bure* or, as Keesing says, ‘mana-fy’ the *bure*’s function as a temple, as well as a meeting and chief’s house. To mana-fy or make more sacred and to grow esteem appears to be an original intention for the original *bure* design. Thus, I present *mana* as the cultural authority of early *bure*. *Mana* motivated the Fijian *bure*’s spiritual tectonics—the immuring of bodies—as reflected in its elevated *yavu*. Prehistorically, an important owner would easily acquire appropriate architectural bodies, increasing the built-up height of the *yavu*, sometimes even in tiers, and often faced by a stone wall. Ethnologist Laura Thompson studied Fijian culture in the 1930s, and she described how traditionally the height of the mound depended on the status of the owner.³⁶ My own studies illustrate how this design practice of building up *yavu*, now without new immured bodies, has continued for contemporary chiefly *bure* built by Fijian *mataisau*.³⁷

Logically, spiritual tectonics would also influence decisions regarding *bou* or post layouts. The layout of the periphery posts and the central posts of some early *bure*³⁸ were organised around the location of the immured bodies, as they are cantilevered from the *yavu* (Fig. 4). The main roundwood structural posts are usually sunk into the ground so that one third of the *bou* is buried as the house-mound is built up.³⁹ According to Tippet, after the initial request by a chief for a *bure*, the imbedding of the posts was the breaking of the ground for a *bure*, as in other Pacific architecture. It is then that people gather the “materials for the building and food for builders.”⁴⁰ The set-out of the *yavu* and *bou* would then

Fig. 4 Navatanitawake ceremonial mound, Bau. Archaeological findings by Aubrey Parke in 1970 [Diagram: reproduced from *Archaeology in Oceania*, courtesy of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.].

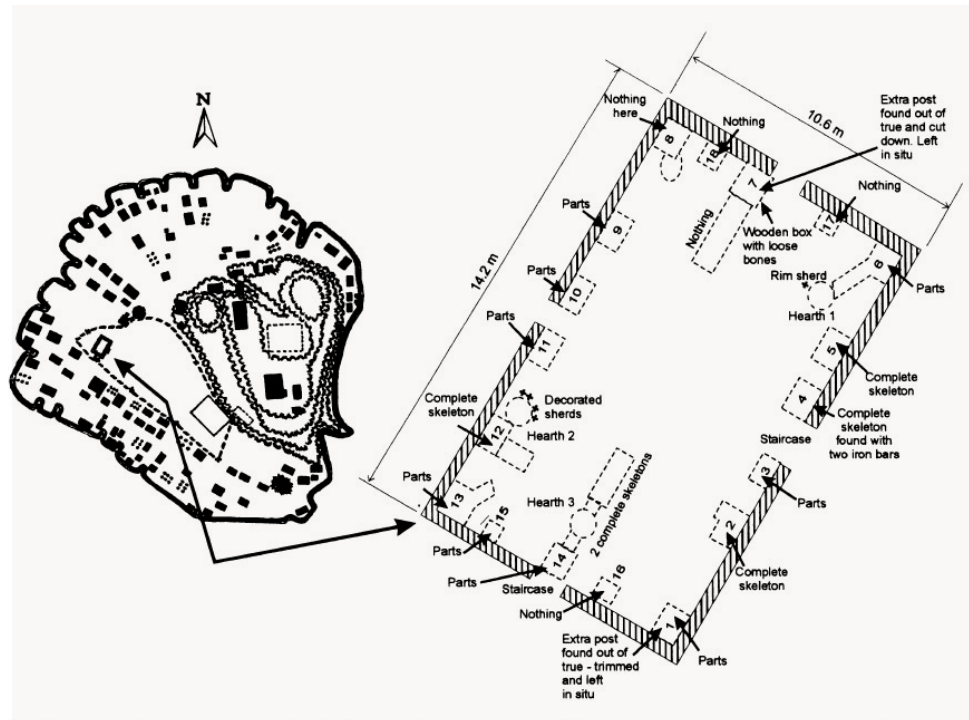


Figure 1. Left: Bau Island, Fiji with location of Navatanitawake (From Tippet 1959). Right: Plan of upper platform of Navatanitawake showing PWD trenches numbered. The hatched outline shows the beachstone border. (Drawn by M. Tracey after Parke)

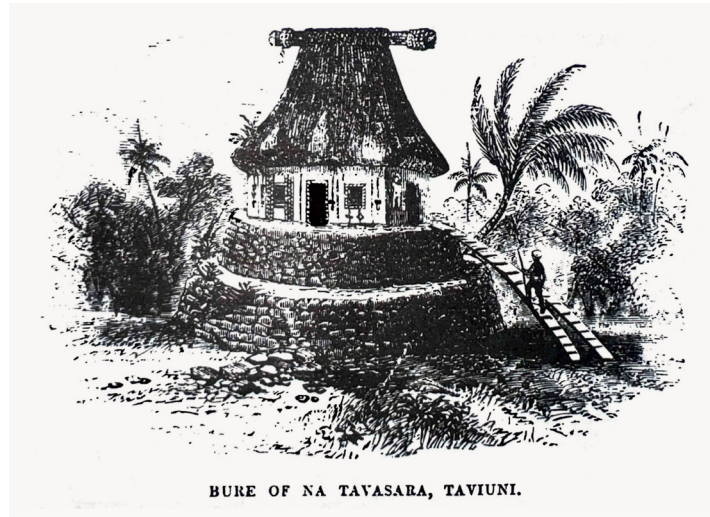
inform the *bure*'s roof form. So, one could deduct that *mana*, as an extra-ego authority, directed the *mataisau*'s configuration of the early Fijian *bure*, which is now appropriated as the romanticised form of the tourist *bure*.

Apart from structural elements, the *buli vula* or cowrie shell furnishings of Fijian *bure* also represent spiritual tectonics. Anthropologist George Roth describes:

Chief's houses were usually distinguishable from other dwellings by their location in the village, higher mounds, and greater ornamentation in the form of the elaborate sennit... white shells (*Amphiperas ovum*) hanging from the tree-ferns placed at each end of the ridge-pole.⁴¹

Tippet explains: "adorning of the ridgepole with white cowries. Once they indicated the number of bodies offered."⁴² Late nineteenth-century missionary Joseph Waterhouse adds, "white shells are adjusted on the black sticks, [adorning] the ends of the ridge-pole, on the outside of the house, as many more meet with a similar fate" (Fig. 5).⁴³ As Tippet and Waterhouse highlight, the furnishing of *bure* interiors using cowrie shells symbolised the number of bodies immured under a *bure*. My recent studies about the chiefly *bure* of both the paramount chief Tui Vuda and Tui Sabeto, demonstrate early *bure* designs built using traditional building practices. The cowrie shells that hang from the *balabala* members, or the fern tree roof extensions, represent the chief's influence and authority over clan groups—the more shells, the greater their territorial rule.⁴⁴ Clearly *mana* motivated the spiritual tectonic process of immuring bodies, and, consequently, influenced the design decisions regarding the placement of the *bou*, the grandeur of the *yavu*, and the aesthetic of the *buli vula*, resulting in the iconic form of the early Fijian *bure*.

Fig. 5 *Bure* from Taveuni, ca. 1858
[Drawing: reproduced from Thomas
Williams, *Fiji and the Fijians Vol. I:
The Islands and their Inhabitants*,
edited by George Stringer Rowe
(Alexander Heylin, 1858), 222]



Contemporary Fijian-designed bure

The *bure* spiritual tectonic of immuring bodies has ceased as a building practice with modernisation and a different Fijian society based on Christian ethics and human rights. Some representations of *mana* continue through the symbolic use of *buli vula*, *yavu*, and evidently in the socio-spatial relationships and building practices of respect observed during construction of a chiefly *bure*, which my research captures in the twenty-first century.⁴⁵ By Fijian-designed *bure*, I mean iTaukei Fijian villagers who choose to build early vernacular buildings using locally sourced plant materials. Thatched village buildings dating from around the 1900s can still be seen dispersed amongst villages as guesthouses or family residences,⁴⁶ and are commonly described as *bure*. This practice shows how contemporary Fijian and non-Fijian understandings of *bure* have superseded earlier perspectives of *bure* and the term is now used to distinguish a thatched dwelling from other houses made from industrialised materials.

A couple of *bure* structures are found in non-village contexts such as at Fiji's Cultural Centre. Sitting on a small mound, surrounded by a moat, the *bure* acts as a backdrop for theatrical productions at the centre. Another significant contemporary *bure* sits as an institutional learning space at University of South Pacific, Laucala Campus, to represent Fiji culture. This same campus has several smaller *bure* scattered around the campus as shaded shelters.

Navala Village

Navala is a unique village because people choose to build and live in *bure* architecture to retain, amongst other things, their Indigenous way of construction and living (Fig. 6). The village consists of a chiefly *bure*, school, *rara*—or open communal grassy area—and other *bure* in the Fijian English sense. Ironically, the village is planned in a cross formation with the church at the head of the cross. Christian symbolism and cultural self-orientalising practices have superseded the spirituality of earlier belief systems, and in return this Fijian village transposes the cross in the planning of their 'traditionalist' village. In conversation, a traditional builder and elder at Navala shared with me that apart from requests from the villagers, his skills are often requested at tourist resorts for re-thatching

Fig. 6 Navala Village, showing a linear arrangement of *bure* creating a cross formation and the grassy *rara* [Photograph: Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, 2010].



or to do sennit lashings of internal structural members. In such cases, iTaukei Fijian locals are commonly sub-contracted only to clad the roof of *bure* with local vegetation—*volisi* and *gasau* and to lash the internal roof structure with *magimagi*⁴⁷—after certified builders construct the shell. Therefore, the *mataisau* themselves have been superseded by the capital 'B' or certified builder—expected to be more knowledgeable of building codes.

Contemporary Fijian-designed *bure* and tourist *bure* alike mark an end of an era for particular spiritual tectonics. However, what the Fijian-designed *bure* does do is link back to the *bure*'s spiritual history through its cultural building practices, the architectural representations of *mana* through the *yavu* and *buli vula*, and the ancestral links that are maintained through supply of building materials and labour from clan groups and chiefly alliances. Existing chiefly *yavu* built upon previous sacred foundations continue to have the early remains of immured

Fig. 7 A vacant *yavu* in Navala Village, emphasising the intentional permanence of this *bure* feature, clearly more so than its roof and walls [Photograph: Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, 2010]



bodies and thus still uphold the *mana* they symbolise, and for this reason such *bure* rarely change sites (Fig. 7). Social anthropologist Steven Hooper explains, "House foundations are associated with their occupants' past and present, being the dwelling places of previous members of the clan, and they are usually inherited from father to son."⁴⁸ Fijian scholar Asesela Ravuvu adds:

Although *bure* sites have long since been abandoned, they remain as focal points for the ancient religious beliefs of the descendants of their original occupiers. Reference to these ancestral house platforms during ceremonial presentation is very common. It is on these ancestral

house platforms that the ancestral spirits abide and watch over the affairs of their living descendants. As far as most Fijians are concerned, the *dela ni yavu*, one's ancestral "platform" is potent and powerful in influencing human affairs.⁴⁹

In Navala, I was told that a newly married couple had moved from the city back to the village and constructed their *bure* on top of the family's vacant *yavu*. There were several vacant *yavu* around the village, showing that this was a common situation. The *yavu*, therefore, remains as the permanent link to ancestral ties whilst the *bure*'s more transient elements of wall, roof, and roof structure with internal furnishings are perpetually re-introduced as new occupants arrive. It appears, then, that according to early *bure*, the *yavu* is the most significant architectural feature. However, as seen with tourist *bure*, there is now greater emphasis on the roof, and its elaborate roof structures and lashings, begging the question: Has the current development missed the point? If we apply the framework of archipelagic thinking, these different but overlapping contexts of *bure* challenge hegemonic identifications of 'non-western' and 'non-modern' *bure*, because they in fact entangle these categorisations through orientalising and self-orientalising processes.

The romance

Today's popular tourist *bure* has an important role of representing Fijian architectural identity, particularly within the holiday resort setting that dominates the southwestern coast of Viti Levu and the outer islands of Yasawa and Mamanuca. The appropriated forms of the Fijian *bure* are commercialised as resort *bure* to evoke an authentic cultural experience. In pursuit of romance (ego-centric authority), capital-A architects—mostly Australian or New Zealand trained—are engaged to design contemporary Fijian *bure* that achieve the client's⁵⁰ persuasions. Astute developers also provide architects with a brief that reflects tourists' demands, based on their market research. Since over 80 per cent of Fiji's tourists in 2025 were holidaymakers, it is inevitable that the resort *bure* becomes the most tangible representation of the authentic Fijian experience and epitomises a reimagined local vernacular for them. The capital-A architect requires a working knowledge of Fijian culture and its key architectural forms to inform their interpretation of a Fijian *bure*. Together with the client, they become the authorities of the tourist *bure*. They must negotiate the architectural appropriation of earlier forms and the 'romanticisation of tourist *bure*' for a global audience who are seeking the Fiji paradise. Fiji is a well-known destination for weddings and honeymooners. The process of romanticisation of Fijian architecture and the ideals of a romantic getaway become intertwined in the making of the tourist *bure*.

Romance, then, epitomises an authority quite unique to the tourist *bure* that infiltrates its design process. It is an influential factor when selecting elements to be appropriated from the early *bure*, since romance selects the characteristics that best attract and satisfy vacationing tourists in their desire for authenticity alongside a more superficial cultural understanding of a place. The outstanding romantic features then of a tourist *bure* include the appropriated roof form, use of thatching—natural but now mostly synthetic—appropriated *magimagi* applied to the internal roof structure, and sometimes structural posts and covered resort walkways. The *yavu* is appropriated when it suits the site conditions

of the building. These traditionalised items are applied as cultural skins and accessories to modern structural walls and roofing materials that use industrialised building materials like masonry block, reinforced concrete, and metal roofing sheets. As the next case studies illustrate, the paradisiac romance embodied by the tourist *bure* advertises Fijian culture and provides tourists with an opportunity to ‘flirt’ with this exotic difference.

Korolevu

The first use of the Fijian English definition of *bure* has been traced to one of Fiji’s earliest resorts in the Korolevu or the Coral Coast—the southern coasts of Viti Levu.⁵¹ Named Korolevu Beach Hotel, it was established by Fijian⁵² businessman and politician Sir Hugh Ragg⁵³ and it was operated in the 1950s by hoteliers Bill and Kathy Clarke on 76 acres of prime real estate. It quickly became the place to be for the colonial expatriates of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, located halfway between the capital Suva and Nadi International Airport.⁵⁴ Today, there are only abandoned dilapidated buildings in overgrown bush and the rock pillars of the old entry gate. Their use of the word *bure* to describe tourist buildings could be considered appropriate since the *bure* was perceived as a place that ‘strangers’ also slept in. But perhaps the other key reason is that the hotelier understood the consumptive and linguistic cultural value of *bure*. The widespread textual use and imagery of *bure* in Fiji’s tourism marketing reinforces the firm belief that tourists visit Fiji for a Fijian tropical experience. Unbeknownst to tourists, the amiable imagery of Fijians and their Fijian *bure* feeds into a complex narrative surrounding Fiji’s tourism which entangles changing social relations, commercial and transnational tourism motivations, and postcolonial dependency on foreign trade.⁵⁵ The architect, when making design decisions, must inevitably negotiate the issue of authenticity and cultural appropriation to meet such demands.

Likuliku

The marketing of Likuliku Lagoon Resort unabashedly promotes the ‘real’ Fijian experience, producing architectural measures of authenticity that are legible and appealing to tourists. These in turn influence perceptions of what Fijian ‘traditional’ *bure* architecture is. The imagery of Fijian *bure* in resort marketing becomes what social scientist Yoko Kanemasu describes as “complicit in, colonial (and patriarchal) ‘othering’ of peoples and communities.”⁵⁶ A project, designed by Australian Fiji-based architect Peter Rankin⁵⁷ as Fiji’s first over-water *bure* experience, has marketing from its resort website that explains (Fig. 8):

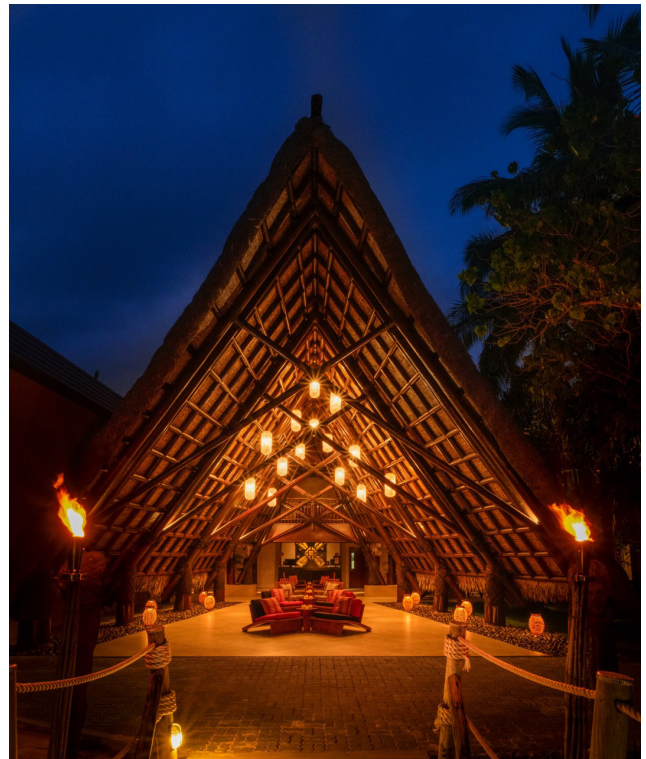
The Fijian name for our rooms is “bure.” There are 45 traditionally designed and styled bures, luxuriously appointed and all with views of the beautiful Likuliku Lagoon and ocean. Each bure has been built with authentic architecture, natural materials and traditional features including local Vesi (hardwood) floors, individual, hand-carved wooden window pelmets and hand-woven “magi magi” (woven coconut husk) art and, Soga (palm) internal thatching woven by authentic artisans from the remote Lau Group of Islands.⁵⁸

Use of local materials are carefully described to support the resort’s claim of cultural authenticity as part of the narrative to romance the tourist. The authority



Fig.8 Likuliku Lagoon Resort
overwater *bure* [Photograph:
Courtesy of Likuliku Lagoon Resort,
Fiji]

Fig.9 Main Reception by night
[Photograph: Courtesy of Likuliku
Lagoon Resort, Fiji]



of romance, though unavoidable, can limit the conceptual scope architects have to appropriate and invent Fijian architecture. Rankin, however, has been able to balance these commercial concerns with creative flair in his designs of the over-water and beachfront *bure* and the facility's main buildings, attempting to push the tourist *bure* design beyond conventional forms (Fig. 9).

The tourist *bure* easily becomes a continual reproduction of borrowed elements—roof form, thatching, and lashing—which architects use to reinterpret historical design intentions. Ideologically, practitioners can ask how we translate

the significance of *mana* in today's tourist *bure*. Perhaps, one starts from reinterpreting the *yavu*, since it is the most significant element of early *bure*, far more than the roof form as currently applied. It may offer tourist *bure* greater historical associations that are authentically aligned with the conceptual design of early Fijian *bure*.

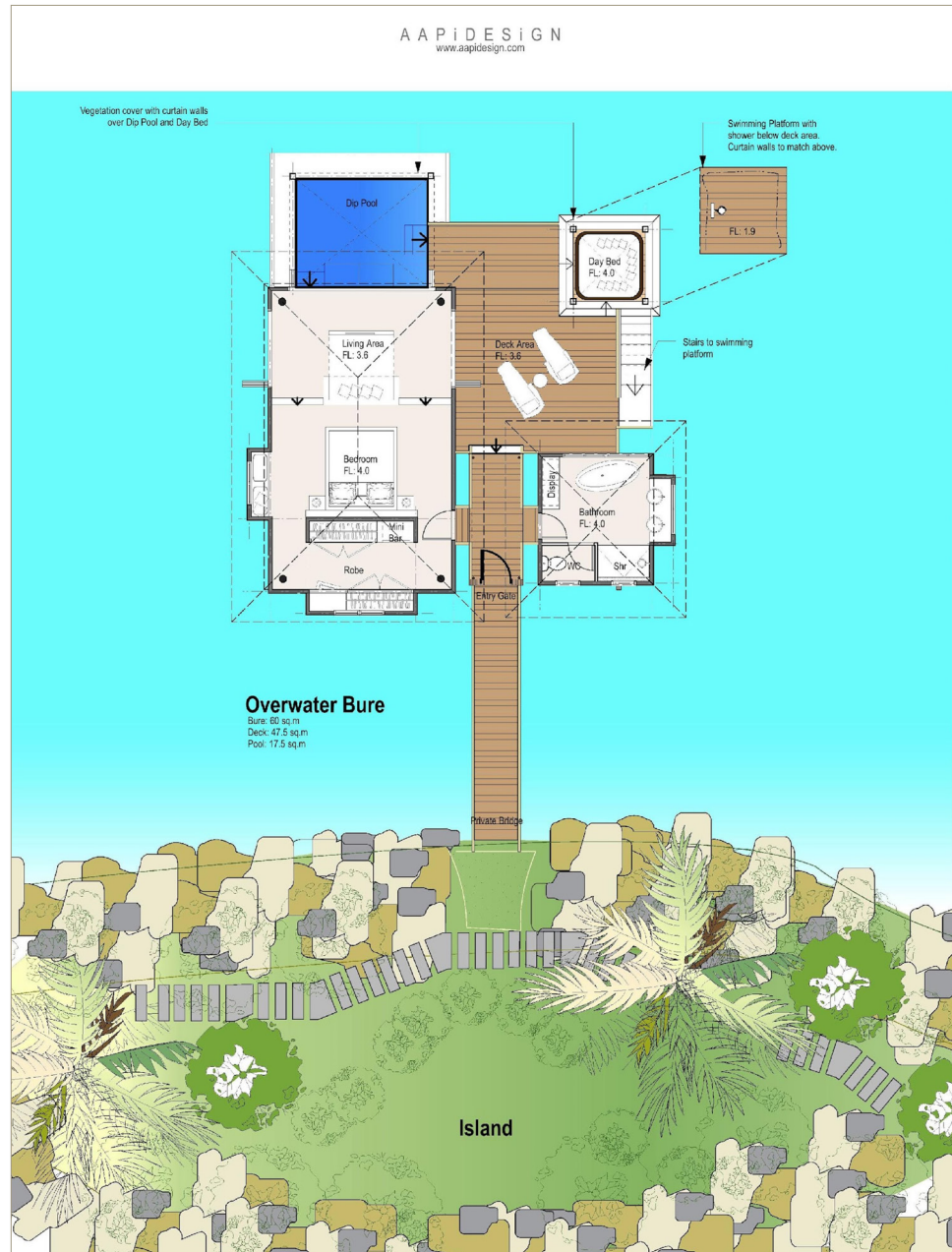
Shangri-La

A contemporary development of tourist *bure* is its larger openings to capture the scenery—certainly a feature needed to frame the amazing landscapes. For the tourist *bure*, the expansive view enhances the experience of being away on holiday. The enlargement and favourable position of *bure* window openings frame the panoramic setting (Fig. 10). The captured landscape supports the psychological and phenomenological experience of re-creating or reinventing oneself while on holiday, separating oneself from the usual mundane reality back home. Where earlier the body was immured, the tourist body is now contained in the *bure*, gazing outward in a moment of self-reflection. The spiritual reconnection with nature becomes reified in the tourist *bure* experience. Resort marketing certainly supports this vision, as exemplified by luxury island resort Shangri-La Fijian Resort and Spa's website, which persuades tourists with adjectives including "idyllic," "expansive," "truly unique," and with abundant phrases like "memorable views of the Pacific Ocean," "an enchanting tropical gem," "South Pacific escape," and "our tranquil South Pacific beaches and inviting deepwater lagoon."⁵⁹ The culturally loaded *bure* surrounded by the wild Fijian tropical bush woos the tourist. Travel anthropologist Patricia Jasen would liken the heightened feeling of difference—being beyond one's norm or usual surroundings—to a "religious experience" that travellers willingly seek,⁶⁰ and it is at this moment where the spirituality of tourist *bure* exists.

Fig.10 View from overwater *bure*
[Photograph: Courtesy of Likuliku
Lagoon Resort, Fiji]



Fig. 11 AAPi Designs Ltd (2010). Overwater *bure*, a preliminary design by Peter Rankin showing the outward focus of tourist *bure* and enhanced connection to the ocean [Plan drawing: Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, to a design by Peter Rankin, AAPi Designs Ltd, 2010]



Taunovo Bay

Romance also, literally, regards the matrimonial reasons for travelling to Fiji where tropical beachside weddings are common at resorts and honeymooners frolic on the beach hand in hand—a large proportion of the tourists who visit Fiji (Fig. 11). Resort developers find this a lucrative market. In 2010–11, I worked at AAPi Designs Ltd, a Suva-based architectural firm, who were engaged to complete the master planning and design of over-water *bure* for a high-end resort in Taunovo Bay, Pacific Harbour.

The client, above all, wanted to maximise each *bure*'s view. It was often requested that the *bure*'s floor incorporated a glass panel to allow occupants to see the reef below. In response, several planning and orientation adjustments were made



Fig. 12 AAPi Designs Ltd (2010). Planning of Taunovo Bay over-water *bure* with maximised ocean views whilst also ensuring privacy [Site plan: AAPi Designs Ltd, documented by Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, February 2010]

to achieve the 'right number' of *bure*—another marketing strategy the developer uses to achieve exclusivity—and to maximise uninterrupted views of the ocean whilst still maintaining privacy (Fig. 12).

Clearly the focus of the design process was to capture the panoramic connection outwards to the ocean, since the ocean's horizon and openness can certainly heighten the mood of romance. The overwater *bure*'s functional separation from the beach and immersion in lagoon waters further supports a feeling of detachment from the norm.

The contemporary *bure*'s function, therefore, is to "frame" the landscape—especially the ocean and beach that are seen as healthy and redemptive.⁶¹ Similarly, the *bure*'s framing continues to detach tourists from whichever reality they arrive from and supports the process of spiritual re-creation. The tourist *bure* delinks from past spiritual functions and now attempts to recreate spirituality and tranquillity through a soft primitive space. Again, the Taunovo Bay project used the term *bure* to exclusively market its over-water architecture, distinguishing them from 'villa' accommodation, designed ashore. Once again, this reminds a tourist

that this unique Fijian *bure* experience is exclusive. Hence, the tourist *bure* continues to sit in an interesting intersection between fixed and invented traditions, prolonged by the authority of romance.

The overpowering architectural representation of the tourist *bure* risks a reduction of Fijian architecture as a commodity that is experienced only by the wealthy few who can afford it. The other risk of the architectural fixation on tourism is that it becomes an inherited *bure* form that loses all Indigenous value but represents Fiji's vernacular architecture in the long term. As Indonesian scholar Amanda Achmadi warns in reflection of Balinese architecture, "architecture is no longer seen as a field of invention and problem solving, but as a series of obligatory architectural forms."⁶² Beyond a renewed 'authentic' Fijian architecture, this article seeks diversification of contemporary forms of *bure* that go beyond the dominant designs of tourist *bure* and calls for renewed understandings of early *bure* as a way forward. I suggest that the tourist *bure* and the iTaukei Fijian-design *bure* both have an opportunity to be reimagined, since both contexts of *bure* production need each other: one has the economic means for design innovation, and the other offers culturally grounded expertise and knowledge. To avoid binary thinking, the collaboration between early and new understandings of *bure* has potential to extend Fijian architecture beyond a fixed reified type and equally to sustain early iTaukei Fijian building traditions and meaningful architectural logic. A spiritual romance is needed.

Conclusion

This article has presented two developments of Fijian *bure*. Once produced by select Fijian *mataisau*, the early *bure* was designated for Fijian uncircumcised men, the village priest, and 'strangers' visiting the village.⁶³ The authority of *mana* inspired the spiritual tectonic of immured bodies and we can extrapolate consequently the *bure*'s early form, as understood today. On the other hand, the tourist *bure* is designed from romance—a process that incorporates the appropriation of physical elements from the early *bure*. The tourist *bure* becomes complicit in the social construction of touristic images and romanticisation of an authentic experience of the 'Other,' and ironically for non-Fijians and Fijians alike. Tourism has over-determined how Fiji's *bure* architecture is interpreted by architects and therefore as design professionals they become complicit in this narrative of 'othering.'

This article highlights that there is great advantage in understanding early forms of cultural authority, because it can widen the conceptual scope for design. Through a study of spiritual tectonics—immured bodies with *bou*—the cultural ideology of *mana* surfaces as an intangible cultural authority that determined the design of *yavu*, the positioning of *bou*, and the *buli vula* furnishings. The tourist *bure*, however, appears stunted in comparison due to a fixation on a past form and aesthetic without the underlying spiritual and linguistic knowledge. This paper does not renounce such tourist *bure*, since *bure* development is unavoidable with cultural change. Nonetheless, an understanding of early cultural authority may spur innovation: where practitioners—equipped with an understanding of its early motivations—can better negotiate how forms and aesthetics are borrowed, and/or ideas are re-interpreted for today's audiences.

This article explains how contemporary iTaukei Fijians continue to emphasise the *yavu*, as opposed to the roof, in their genealogies and cultural practices. Perhaps architects could balance their design innovation and representation and give attention to the meaning and presence of the *yavu*. The building practices of retaining the *mana* of *bure*, such as the respect to the *vanua*, or land and its custodians, that *bure* are by and built on, could be continued through the cultural protocols of prayers and traditional chants over *kava* (*Piper methysticum*) that are interwoven into modern construction processes, from start to finish. In addition, innovative designs can recognise *mataisau* as an ancient and knowledgeable building trade that goes beyond their thatching skills. Elevating such iTaukei Indigenous knowledge creates meaningful architectural and building collaborations that are appropriate for local context and climate, and makes sustainable use of local plant building materials. These are just some opportunities to extend Fijian architecture beyond romanticised and fixed forms. Whilst this article contributes largely to cross-cultural architectural theory of Fijian *bure* architecture, it also challenges the design strategies presently practised, inviting a review of early authoritative concepts to widen current sources of inspiration and, similarly, appropriation. This proposition could indeed be the *bure*'s next development.

Glossary

<i>Bou</i>	Posts
<i>Buli vula</i>	Cowrie shell used as symbolic rooftop furnishings on Fijian
<i>Buluta-bula-bula</i>	Spiritual rite of immuring human bodies alive; lit. bury alive
<i>Bure kalou</i>	God houses, temples
<i>Dela ni yavu</i>	Refers to one's ancestral home, lit. the ancestral foundation/ platform
<i>Gasau</i>	<i>Miscanthus floridulus</i> , used as roof and wall thatching on <i>bure</i>
<i>iTaukei</i>	The Indigenous people of the Fiji Islands
<i>Kalou vu</i>	Gods
<i>Kalou yalo</i>	Deified spirits; can be the spirits of ancestors
<i>Kava</i>	<i>Piper methysticum</i> , a tropical evergreen shrub. Its roots are used to make a traditional Fijian drink.
<i>Magimagi</i>	Braided coconut husk used for lashings on <i>bure</i>
<i>Masi</i>	Barkcloth
<i>Mataisau</i>	Fijian traditional builder
<i>Rara</i>	Open communal grassy area of a village
<i>Vale</i>	The general house for villagers
<i>Volisi</i>	<i>Pennisetum polystachyon</i> , a local grass used as roof thatching and flooring material for a <i>bure</i>
<i>Yavu</i>	Elevated house platform made from earthen mound and faced with rocks

NOTES

1. *Bure* can be singular or plural. There are various styles of *bure* reflecting Fiji's diverse terrain, available vegetation, microclimates, and common skill of the *yasuva*, regional tribes of Fiji. There are distinctly four structural types of *bure* as documented in the work of architecture student Sanjay Patel, "The Fijian Bure," BARch research report, University of Auckland, 1993; anthropologist Susan Freeman, "The Centre-Poled Houses of Western Viti Levu," *Domodomo* 4, no. 1 (1986): 2–19; and anthropologist George K. Roth, *Fijian Way of Life*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1973 [1953]). See Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, "Navala and Lau Bure of Fiji," in *Habitat: Vernacular Architecture for a Changing Planet*, edited by S. Piesik (Thames & Hudson, 2017), 164–67.
2. David Hazlewood, *A Feejeean and English Dictionary: With examples of common and peculiar modes of expression and uses of words, also containing brief hints on native customs, proverbs, the native names of the natural productions of the islands, notices of the islands of Feejee and a list of the foreign words introduced* (Wesleyan Mission Press, 1850), 20.
3. Paul Geraghty, France Mugler, and Jan Tent, *Macquarie Dictionary of English for the Fiji Islands* (Macquarie Library, 2006), 74.
4. Associate Professor Paul Geraghty, University of South Pacific, Laucala Campus, Fiji, pers. comm. with the author, February 2010.
5. It is interesting to note that the common usage of the Fijian word *bure* today refers to more than one entity within something, like a beehive, *bure ni oni*, or a wasp's nest, *bure ni vi*. S. T., pers. comm. with the author, July 2026.
6. In other publications, I have referred to authorities simply as 'agents' of transformation. See Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, "Tongan–German (Siamane) Relations and their Architecture in the Kingdom of Tonga," in *Architecture in Oceania (1840–1970): Para-Colonial Influences – Colonial Transactions – Postcolonial Legacies*, edited by Michael Falser, (Leuven University Press, 2025), 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.26248846.5>.
7. iTaukei are the Indigenous people of the Fiji Islands.
8. Kahina Meziant, "Glitches, Geopoetics, and the Matter of Migration: Regrounding beyond Citizenship," *Geographical Journal* (London) 192, no. 1 (March 2026): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.70024>.
9. Paul Memmott and James Davidson, "Indigenous Culture and Architecture in the South Pacific Region: 25 Years of SAHANZ Research," *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 18, no. 1 (2008): 74–117, [10.1080/10331867.2008.10539623](https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2008.10539623).
10. Authority as described by Memmott and Davidson means on what "people base their decision-making processes for the built environment." See Paul Memmott and James Davidson, "Exploring a Cross-Cultural Theory of Architecture," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 19, no. 2 (2008): 55.
11. In Fijian mythology, the *mataisau* clan is descended from the deity Daunisai, one of the sons of Lutunasobasoba, who brought the Fijian people across the seas to Fiji.
12. *Mana* is defined later in the article but is a controversial subject on its own which exceeds the scope of this paper. Refer to Roger M. Keesing, *Rethinking Mana* (ANU 12, 1987), 5.
13. Hazlewood, *A Feejeean and English Dictionary*, 20; Lorimer Fison, *Tales from Old Fiji* (A. Moring, the De la More Press, 1904), xxv.
14. To name a few: Thomas Williams, *Fiji and the Fijians Vol. I: The Islands and their Inhabitants*, edited by George Stringer Rowe (Alexander Heylin, 1858); Fison, *Tales from Old Fiji*; Alan Richard Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture: A Study of Cultural Context, Function, and Change*, Bishop Museum Bulletin 232 (Bishop Museum Press, 1968); and Everett Lloyd Frost, *Archaeological Excavations of Fortified Sites on Taveuni, Fiji* (Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawaii, 1974).
15. J. T., pers. comm. with the author; L. F., pers. comm. with the author; and S. T., pers. comm. with the author, 2010.
16. Buell Quain (1948), in Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 162.
17. Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 162.
18. David Cargill, entry dated 15 August 1849, in Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 162.
19. I carried out fieldwork in Bau Island in March 2010, measuring the infamous Navatanitawake and collecting historical narrations.
20. Bau Island is located to the east of Suva, Fiji's modern capital. Bau is historically significant as the residence of the dominant chief Cakobau, who was the stronghold for missionaries and colonialists before they could progress into Viti Levu, Fiji's main island.
21. Aubrey Parke, "Navatanitawake Ceremonial Mound, Bau, Fiji: Some Results of 1970 Investigations," *Archaeology in Oceania* 33, no. 1 (1998): 20–27.
22. Parke, "Navatanitawake Ceremonial Mound," 20–27.
23. Bau Island resident female elder, pers. comm. with the author, 2010.
24. Frost, *Archaeological Excavations of Fortified Sites on Taveuni*, 10. Brackets as per the original text.
25. Williams, *Fiji and the Fijians Vol. I*, 194–95; Mary Wallis, *Life in Feejee: Five Years Among the Cannibals* (Fiji Museum, 1983 [1851]), 71, 91; Joseph Waterhouse, *The King and People of Fiji* (Hayman Brothers Printers, 1866), 371.
26. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific: With a New Afterword by the Author* (Princeton University Press, 1997).
27. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Macmillan, 1922).
28. J. T., pers. comm. with the author, 2010.
29. Rev. W. Deane, *Fijian Society: or the Sociology and Psychology of the Fijians* (Macmillan and Co., 1921), 87, 88.
30. Fison, *Tales from Old Fiji*, xxxvii.
31. Fison, *Tales from Old Fiji*, xxxvi.
32. Deane, *Fijian Society*, 225.
33. Hazlewood, *A Feejeean and English Dictionary*, 85.
34. Keesing, *Rethinking Mana*, 5.
35. David Cargill, in Deane, *Fijian Society*, 87.
36. Laura Thompson, *Southern Lau, Fiji: An Ethnography*, Bishop Museum Bulletin 162 (Bishop Museum, 1940), 160.
37. Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, Inoke Momoedonu, Luke Schwalger, Waisake Nakalougaga, Jona Masi, Necani Lesa, Serupepeli Nagaga, Josua Stewart, Keberieli Daunitutu, Mosese Tavutu III, Makitalena Lelei, Samuela Talei, "Vunisei," A report prepared through Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, July 2026; on open access through *Epexio*, Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme, Oxford Brookes University.
38. The Fijian *bure* have various layouts for posts, which differ stylistically from region to region. See Note 1.
39. Patel, "The Fijian Bure," sec. 4.2.
40. Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 161.
41. Roth, *Fijian Way of Life*, 100.
42. Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 164.

43. Waterhouse, *The King and People of Fiji*, 370.
44. 'Ilaiū Talei et al., "Vunisei."
45. 'Ilaiū Talei et al., "Vunisei."
46. S. T., pers. comm. with the author, 2011.
47. The client, pers. comm. with the author, February 2010. The client requested skilled locals to re-thatch the resort's roofs.
48. Steven James Phelps Hooper, "A Study of Valuables in the Chiefdom of Lau, Fiji," PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1982, 31.
49. Asesela Ravuvu, "Fijian Ethos as expressed in Ceremonies," PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 1985, 4; Geraghty, pers. comm. with the author.
50. The term client is used here as an umbrella term to include the marketing team and financial strategists, since all are working towards resort objectives set by the 'client.'
51. "It all Happened at Korolevu," *The Fiji Times*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/it-all-happened-at-korolevu/>.
52. Fijians of Western descent.
53. "In the Beginning...", *Pacific Islands Monthly: PIM* 57, no. 6 (1 June 1986), <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-335585885/view?partId=nla.obj-335594243>.
54. "This End of the Coral Coast," *The Fiji Times*, 9 October 2016.
55. Yoko Kanemasu, "Social Construction of Touristic Imagery: Case Of Fiji," *Annals of Tourism Research* 43 (October 2013): 476–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2013.06.004>.
56. Kanemasu, "Social Construction of Touristic Imagery," 457.
57. Peter Rankin designed this project whilst at Architects Pacific, as Design Director. Rankin has intellectual rights over Likuliku, not AAPi Design, his current company.
58. Likuliku Lagoon Resort, <https://likulikulagoon.com/>.
59. Fiji Luxury Resorts, Yanuca Fiji Islands, <http://www.shangri-la.com/en/property/yanucaisland/fijianresort> and <https://www.shangri-la.com/en/yanucaisland/fijianresort/rooms-suites/>.
60. Patrica Jasen, in Inger Birkeland, *Making Place, Making Self: Travel, Subjectivity and Sexual Difference* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 40.
61. Jeremy Treadwell, in Greg Fleming, "Designers Step in to Reduce Price Tags on Nofrills Bach," *New Zealand Herald*, 8 January 2009.
62. Amanda Achmadi, "The Architecture of Balinization: Architectural Representations and Contestations of 'Balinese' Identity in Rural Bali at the End of the 20th Century," *Trialog: Zeitschrift Fuer Das Planen Und Bauen in Der Dritten Welt* 85 (2005).
63. Cargill, entry 15 August 1849, in Tippet, *Fijian Material Culture*, 162.