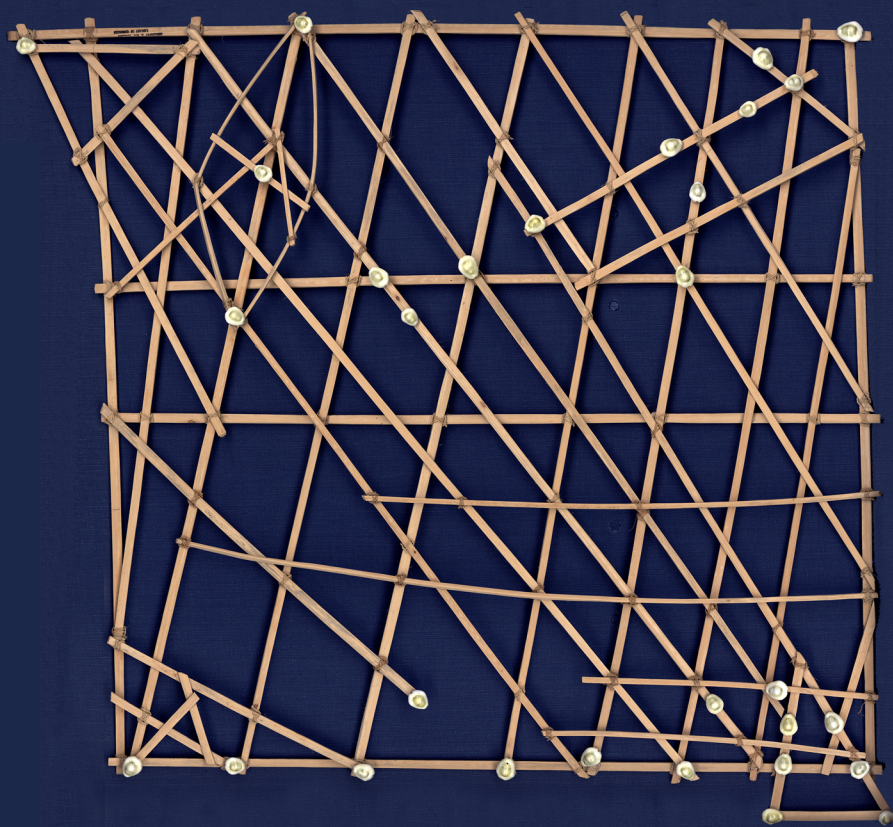


INTERSTICES 26

*Journal of architecture
and related arts*

ARCHIPELOGICS:



*INDO-PACIFIC
INDIGENEITIES*

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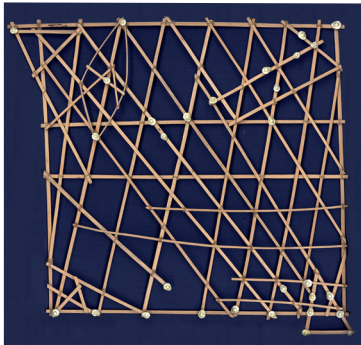
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(western) chains of the Marshall
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island locations. Each straight stick
represents regular currents or waves
around the low-lying atolls while the
curved sticks depict ocean swells.
[Photograph: Library of Congress
Geography and Map Division]

EDITORIAL / ANOMA PIERIS, JAYDE LIN ROBERTS, AND
CHARMAINE 'ILAIŪ TALEI

Archipelogs: Indo-Pacific indigeneities

INTERSTICES 26

This themed issue of *Interstices* invited scholars based in Asia and Oceania (Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the wider Pacific region) to interrogate how we might redress our framing of 'Indigenous' (First Nations) cultural contributions. We sought to see them as internally differentiated from continuing 'indigenous' presence, practices, worldviews, and questions of ethnicity of peoples whose migration to and habitation in places over millennia had blurred the distinctions between autochthonous and migrant groups. We also recognised that our understanding of Indigenous identification differed from those of settler colonial nations in which First Nations groups and settlers were racially and culturally divided along colour lines. Confusion regarding the different usages of these terms by scholars based in Asia, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand surfaced in conversations across these diverse geographies. The strong propensity for Asian scholarship to naturalise evolutionary histories of the nation and modernity has been challenged by scholars like Prasenjit Duara and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.¹ However, Asia still persists in much of these writings as a geopolitical construct within which Indigenous recognition is taken up unevenly due to internalised racial hierarchies. Internal colonisation of First Nations peoples has occurred in many of these geographies. Despite the co-mingling of Indigenous and settler populations—who in some instances may appear racially similar—and the cultural appropriation of Indigenous values and practices, discriminatory and exclusionary government policies and epistemes persist. Perceived civilisational hierarchies, whether dictated by endogenous imperialism or learned from colonialism and universalising religions, cast Indigenous communities as primitives. Although Indigenous built and unbuilt environments form the basis for regional vernacular architectures, these environments have been misinterpreted due to fundamental epistemic prejudices regarding their 'naive authenticity.' Prompted by these realisations, ours is a first attempt at developing an exploratory comparative framework for what is—to date—an under-researched area in built environment studies.

Significantly, this collection took shape in response to efforts at integrating previously neglected Indigenous knowledges in built environments curricula and the introduction of new professional competencies for both Australian and New Zealand architectural schools. These processes have implications for

scholarship on Asia and Pacific (non-Māori) architectures and for the many international students of Pacific and Asian descent whom we educate. Are we complicit in similar forms of cultural suppression? Are we neocolonial in our commitment to modernity? To what extent have the categories of ‘vernacular’ and ‘traditional’ architectures, of ‘regionalism,’ differentiated First Nations from other hegemonic cultural legacies? Modernity, democracy, institutionalisation, urbanisation—all of our professions’ foundational values are implicated in extreme legacies of cultural genocide. Whereas a generation of postcolonial scholars had critiqued dominant forms of colonialism through resource extraction and settlement, their revisionist narratives had naturalised statist models of national cultural sovereignty that in turn perpetuated these wrongs. Decolonial thinking arising from Indigenous social activism and politicisation challenged our revisionist positionality.

Architectural education’s Pacific turn has had a slow gestation in Australia, with notable exceptions, such as the work of Balwant Saini, and with inadequate recognition of the colonial violence that underpinned that encounter.² At New Zealand’s largest university in Auckland, it began much earlier, with non-Indigenous mavericks like Mike Austin, who began teaching in the 1960s, and then Mike Linzey from the 1980s; both conducted research and supervised their students’ learning about Pacific and Māori architecture.³ Prior to Indigenous scholars joining academia from the late twentieth century, studies about Pacific architecture were fixated on colonisation and Westernisation during the nineteenth century.⁴ From the early 2000s, the rise of Indigenous-led spatial concepts using Pacific and Māori languages began to emerge in architectural educational curriculum.⁵ Asian architectural scholars remain at the sidelines of these discourses. They do not identify as settler colonists and, because they share the sensibility of colonial victimisation and value decolonial cultural recovery, they claim a degree of affinity with First Nations perspectives. Some see Asia’s Indigenous peoples as ancestral groups. But few are willing to acknowledge their own culpability in perpetuating and benefitting from the many forms of structural discrimination that differentiate these groups and amplify their erasure. These omissions are most evident in the ways that Asian civilisations are elevated in architectural publications and curricula. This special journal issue responds to these provocations.

Conceptual framings of ocean and archipelago

The core ideas and many of the papers for this issue originated in a virtual symposium organised in early 2024 by built environment scholars moving between Asia and Oceania.

The work we do in sustaining both the diasporic networks from, and rooted connections to, our island origins is imaginatively expressed in the concept of “er-rantry” by the Antillean scholar Édouard Glissant.⁶ It gives our title “Archipelogs,” its rationale, as an architectural and place-based interpretation of archipelagic relationality. The subtitle “Indo-Pacific Indigeneities” engages with experiential understandings of lived realities. The positionality of the collection’s editors and authors is important for this orientation. The symposium was led by Tongan architectural scholar Charmaine ‘Ilaiū Talei, based at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, who works on the built environments of the Pacific region, in collaboration with Melbourne-based Sri Lankan-Australian scholar, Anoma Pieris,

who works on the Indo-Pacific more broadly, and Jayde Lin Roberts, a Taiwanese-American scholar who focuses on place and heritage in Southeast and East Asia. While we have identified the contributors in relation to their place of origin, and current domicile, these are not the sole criteria for identification, since our professional and academic careers have enabled horizontal relationships.

Our workshop participants were tasked with examining the spatial, material, and environmental mediation of settler and First Nations relationships. We invited scholars critical of hegemonic cultural framings and regional vernacular typologies that inhibit consideration of the socially complex, politically dynamic, and sometimes hostile intersections and elisions of Indigenous identities. Our objective was to explore research-led approaches that acknowledge and value Indigenous societies in Asia and to develop an intellectual and pedagogical framework for integrating Asian within global pan-Pacific and pan-Indigenous knowledge systems; encouraging regional Indigenous scholars to assume future leadership in the spatial disciplines. Our contributors include PhD researchers mentored through co-authorship. The contributions collectively enable a dialogue across the islands of the Indo-Pacific, including Fiji, Taiwan, Borneo, Sāmoa, Hawai‘i, Sri Lanka, and the Ryukyu Islands, with book reviews on recent collections that deal with Ādivāsi architecture in India and theorise changes to vernacular design across Asia and Oceania. Our intention, beyond elevating a neglected region, is to identify internal omissions and exciting new directions within these regional built environment studies.⁷

Our thematic focus was on the different approaches to integrating and building awareness of Indigenous (First Nations) knowledge in diverse—mainly island—geographies, inspired by two important concepts now familiar to scholars of Oceania and the Americas. Tongan writer and anthropologist, Epeli Hau‘ofa’s reframing of Oceania as a boundless “Sea of Islands” (1994) gives the myriad archipelagic clusters in the Pacific Ocean a greater territorial footprint.⁸ In this, now famous, seminal essay, he interprets colonial cartography as a structure of territorial confinement that failed to recognise the core reciprocity of oceanic cultures.⁹ Hau‘ofa argues that landmass-based conceptions that revert to nation-states (political bodies) as default categories misrepresent Oceania. Teasing apart nation-state-based representations of Indigenous cultures and building practices from place-specific particularities can help us work against hegemonic narratives. Building on this distinction can also help us knit together Glissant’s call for examining “relations between particularities” and their potential to create creolised practices rather than fixating on established “Histories.”¹⁰ Writing from his interpretation of the Caribbean’s creole cultures, this relationality is based not on the binaries of oppression and resistance, foundational to postcolonial theory, but through recognition of the differences through which subjectivity is constituted and continues to evolve. This approach is important because of the atavistic norms typically applied to Indigenous autochthony by nation-states, but often adopted by ethnic groups in asserting a place for themselves within them. Our aim is to interrogate the underlying logic of these archipelagic relationalities as a means for testing the assumptions and ideologies of our built environment disciplines.

This issue extends the oceanic territory imagined for the Pacific to encompass islands in the Asian region that also have a strong Indigenous footprint, believing this juxtaposition will expose disciplinary lacunas. In conceiving of a strategy

for achieving this aim, this collection assumes a fluid oceanic relation between Oceania and Asia, rooted in historical migrations. It builds on the surge of interest in liquid terrains that challenge nation-centric ideologies and narratives. This idea can be applied to connect the many Indigenous lifeworlds in the broader Indo-Pacific region including the Indian and southern oceans and the South China Sea. The sensibility of contiguity is most apparent in the pan-Indigenous politics inaugurated by the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the decades-long working groups that preceded it, which exposed contestations within nation-state formations that undergird that mandate.¹¹ Pan-Indigeneity presupposes a flat ontology of being and dwelling that can politicise the multivocality of First Nations presence. It empowers the possibility of a regional or global understanding of Indigeneity. The UN Declaration has provided the scaffolding for Indigenous rights activism and even militancy on issues of both social and environmental justice. The associated geocultural values exceed their territorial boundaries and have gained planetary relevance, thus demonstrating the power of Glissant's archipelagic metaphor. Our contributors reinterpret these cogent concepts for diverse and contemporary cultural phenomena that we will introduce as we elaborate on this introduction's themes. We cannot hope to match the ambitious scale of Glissant's 'whole world' treatise; we see these as more modest disciplinary steps.¹²

Some of the contributors engage directly with the core concepts. Hau'ofa's ideas about relational fluidity, Indigenous self-identification and determination are discussed in the contribution by Sāmoan scholar Karamia Müller. Müller's article, "Beyond the Fixed: Sāmoan Digital Spaces, Errantry, and Decolonising Architecture," applies Glissant's idea of errantry to widen an understanding of architecture beyond the tangible, fixed, and permanent to include digital mobilities and spatial production of *siapo*, Sāmoan *tapa* cloth. Moreover, Müller argues for the inclusion of digital *siapo* as a site for architecture that exceeds crafting but also involves making, dialogue, exchange, and iteration, which are all architectural processes. Malaysian-Chinese scholar Catherine Mei Min Woo and Anoma Pieris's "Archipelagic Memories at Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum" focuses on how hospital museums represent Peninsular and East Malaysian cultural complexity without reducing patient populations to the inherited colonial categories that classified all Indigenous groups as Malays.

Glissant's distinction between 'archipelagic' and 'continental' thinking is useful for challenging the totalising 'civilisational' models that have become sedimented in Asian area studies.¹³ The "great" cultures of Asia—China and India—have a long history of believing themselves to be higher cultures capable of civilising others. In some parts of Asia, anticolonial processes of cultural recovery have produced knowledge systems that have systematically obscured the plurality of regional cultures and societies. These processes can be translated into our understanding of built environments where the vocabulary includes norms and forms pertaining to materiality, building elements, tectonics, spatial schema, compositions, and aesthetics, among other ways of expressing cultural specificity. By analysing the artwork housed in Kelaniya Royal Temple, located north of Colombo, Pieris traces how Buddhist *jātaka* stories, founding myths, and historical narratives from the Indian subcontinent entwine in constructing Sinhala political authority while marginalising knowledges of prior Indigenous inhabitants, the *vāddas*. Sovereignty is imagined and claimed through both oceanic and riverine geographies in what could be seen as settler colonial processes.

Pieris's questions on the internal colonisation of Indigenous groups in Asia are corroborated by the pejorative terms used for distancing Indigenous cultures. While Indigenous and First Nations have become preferred terms since the early 2000s, their lexical predecessors such as the English terms *aboriginal*, *race*, and *ethnicity*, and categories in other languages such as *iTaukei* in Fijian, *Kānaka Maoli* in Hawaiian, *minzu* and *yuanzhumin* in Chinese, *bumiputra* in Jawi, *pribumi* in Indonesian, *ādivāsi* in Hindi, and *vāddas* in Sinhala (discussed in this issue's articles) all cast long shadows that continue to affect the lifeworlds of these diverse peoples and influence how we understand them in research and architectural practice. Terms like *minzu* (often translated as ethnic nationalities) were created by a state-led classification project in the 1950s to render diverse non-Han groups in a new China more legible and claim national unity by subsuming difference. In the *minzu* classification project, the work of an amateur ethnologist and turn-of-the-century British military officer became the foundational logic for a taxonomic system that over-simplified and reified *minzu* identities, erasing self-identifications that were not included in the official lists.¹⁴ Writing on languages, Glissant, in his *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, advocates for another form of orality that is vibrant and creative and is appearing on the great stage of the world.¹⁵ He understands this relation as one language dominating another, and the need to resist universalisation. 'Archipelagic' knowledge is about listening to others, understanding them and accepting their truths. In his view, "it is the mission of the poet, the writer and the intellectual to reflect and to come up with proposals with regard to all these coordinates, all these relations, all these intertwinings of the question of languages."¹⁶

These ideas resonate strongly for the Pacific region. In Aotearoa New Zealand, on 6 February 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), was established as a founding document for a bicultural nation. It was not until the twentieth-first century passing of the Treaty of Waitangi Act (1975) that there has been greater awareness and social politicisation of who are tangata whenua, or people of the land, and who are considered tangata Tiriti, or people of the Treaty of Waitangi. Indirectly, it contests the ancestral connections of Māori and Pacific peoples as an 'othering' within the bicultural nation-state. To counter this, several terms have been created, typically by Māori or Pacific peoples, to re-establish their ancestral ties, such as tangata moana, or Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, and mana moana. 'Moana,' a Proto-Polynesian term for 'ocean' or 'deep sea,' shared by many languages (Māori, Hawaiian, Tahitian) centres Indigenous knowledge, deep connections, and collective belonging in ways comparable to Australian Aboriginal relations with 'Country' but with the moana, or Pacific Ocean, as a connective tissue.

In Australia, the multivocality of the kind imagined by Glissant occurs not through the 250 Indigenous languages and 800 dialects as identified by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) but through more nation-state bound identities, and resistance to anglophone hegemony. As settler-state countries, Australia and New Zealand converse, compete, and contest with each other within an oceanic continuum. New Zealand, increasingly known by its Māori name, Aotearoa, has seen a revival in te reo Māori, the Māori language, due to the strategic establishment of kōhanga reo in the early 1980s across the country. Kōhanga reo refers to kindergarten educational providers that deliver all learning and teaching in te reo Māori. The number of Māori who can speak their language has continued to grow since the 1980s,

making the programme an exemplar of language revitalisation. In addition, a noticeable number of non-Māori, in particular Pākehā (a person of European descent or a non-Māori white person), have chosen to learn te reo Māori to recognise Te Tiriti o Waitangi within a bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand. Furthermore, government, public and private organisations, and places have also adopted Māori names alongside English nomenclature.

Our collection sees the Indo-Pacific region as a culturally vibrant geographical continuum that is dialogically linked. We are committed to the multivocality of dynamic building traditions and seek to decentre the professional design solutions that have been privileged in architectural education and practice. We see Indigenous spatial practices, material cultures, and architectures as providing a critical vocabulary for decolonising architecture. This is how we interpret orality for the built environment.

Built environment approaches

To what extent is scholarship on Asian and Pacific built environments sensitised to these inclusive frameworks? Are our discussions and representations of civilisation, colonisation, and vernacular settlements cognisant of First Nations realities? Do we acknowledge Indigenous dispossession when we discuss our affective associations with land and property?

Recent scholarship by Paul Memmott in Australia and Marcel Vellinga, first in Southeast Asia then more globally, has shaped new directions for vernacular architecture studies and helped conceptualise architectural anthropology.¹⁷ Vellinga's work elevates the contemporary vernacular architecture of communities that challenges pre-existing examples that are fixated on past forms. Memmott et al.'s *Design and the Vernacular*, reviewed for this journal issue by Lorenza Lazatti, suggests that a generation of Indigenous professionals are problematising the perceived marginality of vernacular practices by formalising them both in design practice and in scholarship.¹⁸ The voices across the sixteen chapters of the anthology include "architects, designers and theorists" of Indigenous and settler backgrounds from Oceania's settler colonies and post-colonial Asian nations, and from both dominant and minority migrant groups. The book demonstrates how the meanings ascribed to, and production of, vernacular architecture are being transformed through the training of Indigenous professionals and modernisation of Indigenous communities. Whereas the "vernacular" has previously been employed as a catch-all category for all that is not monumental, the rising awareness of Indigeneity opens up an opportunity to scrutinise classifications/categorisations in architecture.

ʻIlaiū Talei's work contributes to this vein of vernacular architecture through research about Tongan peoples' concrete block houses and their reliance on architectural remittance from the diaspora and other topics.¹⁹ Her article, "*Bure: Spiritual Romance*," discusses early and contemporary *bure* forms of Fijian vernacular architecture. ʻIlaiū Talei argues that the tourist *bure*, as an orientalisising architecture, has overdetermined Fiji's contemporary architecture and suggests a deeper understanding about the spiritual values of early Fijian *bure* could present opportunities for culturally appropriate design innovation.

In their article, "A Place for Indigenous Articulation: A *Kacalisian* Slate House in the Pingtung County Library," Paiwan scholar, Zuzule Demalalade and Jayde Lin

Roberts reconsider Indigeneity by examining a slate house located in an institutional building in Southern Taiwan. By tracing the history and transformation of a traditional Paiwan/Rukai house in an urban and largely Han Chinese context, the authors argue that the materiality of the slate house can, and has, served as a site for retrieving and re-articulating Indigeneity. Awareness of, and respect for, Indigenous knowledge systems have challenged the various colonising and civilising narratives through which disciplinary content has been organised so far.

Indigenous Architecture in India, edited by Indian scholar Gauri Bharat, reviewed for this issue by Pieris, explores plural lifeworlds that intersect with, but are not dependent on, the built environment lens.²⁰ Her shift to socio-spatial practices over physical and material analyses demonstrates the relationality we advocate. Notable is her distinction between Ādivāsi, a term legitimised through constitutional recognition in India since 1950 (as Scheduled Tribes), and ‘indigenous,’ applied to other minoritised materialities and world views that fall outside architectural practice. These nascent efforts to recognise Indigenous lifeworlds within architectural thinking are yet to be theorised for Asia alongside a more robust engagement with the ethics of Indigenous acknowledgement and collaboration. Definitions of ‘Indigenous’ as ‘not being colonial’ are inadequate for understanding prior presence, autochthony, and the related legalities surrounding land rights, collective ownership, and generational inheritance, particularly with groups whose values are not necessarily tied to sedentary and individual conceptions of property. Much of the scholarship on Asia circles the tensions resulting from voluntary or forced transition from cultural and communal lifeworlds to those overdetermined by an increasingly globally integrated political economy whose hold on Asian societies was consolidated during colonial rule. But within these broader and more obvious transitions, and the resultant binaries of modernity and tradition that have consumed scholars of Asia in the past, is the troubling adaptation by postcolonial governments of settler colonial modalities. Indigenous peoples are discriminated against in many parts of Asia, and they experience similar forms of dehumanisation and cultural suppression to those historically practised and persisting in settler societies. In many parts of Asia, racial, linguistic, and cultural proximity as well as mutual cultural absorption blur the distinctions between a hegemonic civilisational culture and “cultural minorities,” often categorised by the state. Classification imposed through apparent similarities and differences in ‘culture’, religion, agricultural practices, collective or communal land tenure, and other attributes categorised minority groups despite the absence of clear distinctions. Focusing on architecture, vernacular houses attributed to Ādivāsis in India may approximate those of remote rural villagers, similarly, the Iban longhouses of Sarawak are sometimes reproduced as masonry structures. In short, these categories cannot be fixed.²¹ Recognising Indigenous peoples as living communities requires recognising and respecting their efforts at cultural recovery, and the pathways they choose for achieving this, whether through historical revision, environmental militancy, or minority politics. These in turn may translate into new spatial and material inventions, spatial occupation, monuments, and memorials that employ dominant discourses and languages to strive for recognition.

The politics of dispossession is more likely to surface when interrogating the slow structural violence of settler colonial property regimes. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar, James Miller’s article, “*Hulihia*: Learning from the *Kauhale* in Times of

Transformation,” describes the disruption of *‘aina* in Hawai‘i when pursuit of privatised property disempowered Indigenous land sovereignty and relationality to land. Miller presents a comprehensive description of *kauhale* of Hawai‘i over three time periods, explaining the loss, transition, and hope for the future of contemporary housing of Indigenous Hawaiians. Miller’s article shows the variance of Indigenous land relationships after colonisation and the journey towards cultural revitalisation and resurgence. The desire for self-determination based on continuous or learned endogenous cultural practices is inevitably shaped by the many exogenous forces that impact and transform individuals and communities internally and through the violent and disruptive cultural and political processes that are integral to both imperialism and nation building. Patrick Wolfe famously highlighted the genocidal intent that differentiates settler colonialism from other forms of colonisation;²² more particularly, the impact of colonisation on First Nations and tribal peoples who lack the institutional and military infrastructures with which to counter colonial violence.

The language and politics of dispossession related to Indigenous belonging and denial of rights is an anglophone discourse that has naturalised nation-state sovereignty and its predicate of territorial boundaries without recognising how this language erases other ways of being and inhabiting. First Nations, Aboriginal, Ethnic Minorities, Indigenous, Ādivāsi, First Peoples as well as *minzu* and *yuanzhumin*, *bumiputra*, *pribumi*, and *vāddas* are relational descriptors that conjure the original inhabitation of a territory when compared with subsequent, dominant settlers or migrants as the ground for identification. State-produced classifications are not rigorously scientific and align with the mentality of the colonial period.

More critically, despite the emergence of pan-Indigenous solidarities and the UN Convention of 2007, these identifiers remain circumscribed by their respective nation-states. These ways of recognising Indigenous peoples are inherently flawed because their very existence challenges nation-state formations and their lands are not necessarily coterminous with nation-state boundaries. The earlier definitions of pre-industrial traditional societies are no longer valid for many due to exposure to, and integration with, or absorption into, national populations, dispersal, and migration that is not necessarily coercive, and modernisation of their communities. The difficulty it seems is in differentiating a particular community and practice as economically, culturally, and politically distinctive in a world that has encroached upon and forcibly transformed their lives.

Decolonisation and Indigenous recognition

The common political thread that binds these diverse geographies is decolonisation, a framing long excluded from architectural discourse because it politicises what was regarded as an apolitical pursuit. Only those who are entitled can afford to be apolitical, indeed that is the very nature of their politics. Decolonisation has different interpretations and meanings in Asia that stem from colonial metropolitan processes. However, many Indigenous peoples and territories of the Pacific were left out of these processes, for example (among many others), Indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Hawai‘i, Tahiti, Micronesia, West Papua, and East Timor. They were part of the collateral of the global war between the region’s many colonisers, persistent reminders that Emily Kim analyses in her visual essay, “Beyond the View from Above: Re-reading the Pacific

Airfield.” She questions the colonial aerial logic of the wartime military airfields at Okinawa and Tinian that flattened the ecological and cultural complexity of these Pacific island sites. Extended through nuclear testing, the Cold War in the Pacific, in turn, ignited Indigenous rights activism around decolonising agendas and ecological recovery.

Tracey Banivanua Mar, in her influential book, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, writes that the pivotal Pohnpei Charter of 1978 (conceived at the second Nuclear-Free Pacific Conference) used terms such as “fourth world” (as distinct from the third world used for many Asian states at that time).²³ The term, she notes, was coined in 1974 by George Manuel of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada to describe decolonisation’s “forgotten people.”²⁴ This structural asymmetry in global processes that cast the Pacific peoples at the political periphery was countered through the formation of pan-Pacific and pan-Indigenous solidarities that gained dispersed and marginalised populations a larger political footprint from which to negotiate for collective rights. For small island territories, such solidarities remain critical for sustaining their autonomy against continental neighbours, and the ocean becomes the connector through which alternative alignments are sought. The resistant poetics of Glissant’s geographical metaphor envisions decolonisation as operating through this relational frame.

When extended to Asia, Indigenous rights activism demanded internal decolonisation of racialised hierarchies. Christian Erni, in *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, notes that this proved to be controversial.²⁵ Many Asian countries represented in the UN working groups leading up to the 2007 declaration called for a flexible, contextual, country-specific approach. Eleven countries abstained from voting for the declaration and four voted against it at that time—USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Australia endorsed it two years later in 2009, and New Zealand in 2010.²⁶ Intransigence was noted with regard to “the ‘s’ in ‘peoples,’ and closely connected to this, self-determination, the rights to land, territories and resources, or free and prior informed consent.”²⁷ Among the arguments raised, for example, by Bangladesh and Indonesia, was that their entire population was indigenous prior to British colonisation.²⁸ This would be similar to the invention of “Pacific peoples,” which avoids excluding minority non-Polynesian Pacific groups now living in New Zealand as recent migrants, and inadvertently supports the ancestral claim of kinship between Pacific Islanders and tangata whenua, or Māori. Racial hierarchies continue in Australia for both Māori and Pacific Islanders, where together they are reclassified as ‘Pasifika’.²⁹ Indigenous identification should not be confused with other subnational and minority groups in their respective countries.³⁰ The Chinese delegation declared that all of China’s ethnic groups had fought against foreign invaders, and there were no indigenous people in China. Erni observes that by 2008, only Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines had passed acts for Indigenous rights. Among the fears underlying these controversies was the problem of essentialising Indigenous identity and thereby encouraging fragmentation of fragile postcolonial nation-states in Asia and Africa, through Balkanisation.³¹ The two opposing groups favoured either self-identification (which a government may or may not recognise) or agreeing on a definition (and risking elimination based on that criteria). While “a definition of indigenous peoples is neither desirable nor necessary, the problem remains that the subjects, whom international or national legal instruments are supposed to apply to, need to be identified,” Erni notes.³²

Erni makes a distinction for countries without a large-scale inflow of settlers who ruled over native populations and from which colonisers left following political independence, similar to many Southeast Asian nations and small islands in the Pacific.³³ There were natives, Erni notes, who assimilated with colonial norms, becoming postcolonial political elites, and others who refused to assimilate or were too remote to be touched by these processes. Systemic racism and discrimination introduced by colonisers often persisted post-independence for the least assimilated populations, and, in many cases, they were the groups that identified as indigenous—maintaining precolonial cultures and economic and sociopolitical systems. Postcolonial governments found it hard to accept their unique status and associated rights. In response, “In the past 30 years they have self-identified as indigenous peoples, established their own movements and converged their national and regional movements into a global indigenous peoples’ movement.”³⁴ More importantly, these emerging solidarities broke through the forced insularity of the political dependencies imposed on these native peoples.

Concluding thoughts

In this issue, we employed Glissant’s ‘archipelagic thought’ to bring different Indigenous histories, spatialities, and practices together to ask how they might relate to each other, not to present a comprehensive comparison or propose a totalising explanation. Indeed, as scholars who seek to decolonise knowledge production, the risk of capitulating to existing hierarchies and classifications of peoples, values, and systems is ever-present, demanding particular attention to: 1) How we conduct our research: What are deemed to be proper sources or how we interact with our interlocutors be they human or more-than-human; 2) How we use language: How Indigenous terms and concepts are rendered into English and the limitations of translation; and 3) How we endeavour to present dynamic and subsumed or marginalised lifeworlds in our representations through words and images. Inspired by Glissant, we resist the universalising project of “continental” thinking and instead explore networked and decentred histories through the method and metaphor of archipelagos—configurations of islands that are interlinked through liquid passages and currents with no single centre that governs the whole.

Specifically, our exploration of Indigenous spatialities and architecture asks how existing classifications such as Aboriginal, race, and ethnicity function as taxonomies that render ‘minor’ and peripheral groups easier to manage while simultaneously minimising their histories through demands for ‘reproducible’ research that prioritises written records and unchanging materiality that adhere to Cartesian rationality. This epistemology can dismiss the water between islands as empty space rather than the connective tissue that weaves together a “sea of islands” which predates the colonial imposition of nation-state boundaries.³⁵ As argued by Hau’ofa, the myths, oral traditions, and cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania depict a lifeworld not only of land surfaces but also “the surrounding ocean... the underworld with fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with... named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas.”³⁶ This expansive conception is no less valid than the continental representation of the Pacific as small, isolated islands in need of external aid and development, and their source of knowledge based on less tangible evidence such as myths and oral traditions informs our explorations.

The apparent clarity and stability of ethnic or Indigenous categories, along with the seeming permanence of architecture, has clouded our vision, making it more difficult to detect traces that have not been continuously archived, burst forth in creole fragments, or become buried in construction processes.³⁷ As seen in the work of anthropologists such as Roxana Waterson and Erik Mueggler, Indigenous houses are not empty frames but living entities that require specific rituals, orientations, and relationships to support mutual wellbeing.³⁸ For the Lolopo people in Southwest China, dwelling was a continual negotiation wherein the “body, house, and universe all double, enfold, and invade one another,” leaving ghostly traces that must be placated or contended with to live without disease.³⁹ We pay attention to the discontinuous and ethereal to discern how Indigenous ways of living, building, and being might generate a less colonial framework for architectural scholarship.

The decolonising project is fraught with pitfalls. As Glissant stated, “[t]he theory of difference is invaluable [because] it has allowed us to struggle against reductive thought” but “difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.”⁴⁰ It can repeatedly reinstate “the different” in a hierarchy of judgement that makes the periphery legible and assimilable to the centre without demanding the same transparency or pliability of the normative system. Glissant calls for a “right to opacity” wherein the parties endeavouring to understand each other do not insist on origins or universals but focus on “the texture of the weave”—the lines of interactions and mutualities that constitute a dynamic relationship.⁴¹ As such, the articles in this issue attempt to weave threads of connections to existing scholarship without subjugating Indigenous knowledges to dominant discourses or Cartesian rationality. The inexplicability of ancestral spirits, life forces in rocks, trees, and water, and absences in “complete” historical narratives remain opaque to call what we consider to be knowledge into question.

NOTES

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INTERSTICES 26

Stories from the antechamber: Settler perceptions of Indigenous presence at Kelaniya Royal Temple

Indigenous dispossession and cultural erasure are undeniable features of South Asia's dominant 'civilisations,' with the transition of tribal communities to sedentary agricultural practices frequently naturalised as a teleological process. Equally, by sometimes casting First Nations populations as ancestors, settlement and urban expansion is legitimised. Migrants moving across the subcontinent are called settlers rather than colonists. 'Colonisers' is a term reserved for Europeans, while the term 'invaders' is used to describe competing neighbouring claimants to settler sovereignty. This article explores these perceptions from the viewpoint of Lanka (known as Sri Lanka since 1972), where the Sinhala settler culture, a highly dynamic social construction shaped by Buddhism and the linguistic inheritance of the Theravāda canon—Pāli (and an admixture of Prakrit and Sanskrit)—remains dominant. This 'subcontinental' culture has succeeded in absorbing or subordinating diverse and multivocal Indigenous knowledges from the island's deep past through acculturation. It has assimilated successive waves of immigrants who, by adopting Buddhism, have identified with and contributed to its augmentation, minoritising geographically proximate Tamil and other minority cultures from southern India, and the region. Buddhist literature, rituals, and religious traditions play a dual role in asserting the island's autonomy while acknowledging its subcontinental lineage. The architecture of its celebrated UNESCO World Heritage sites provides evidence of a mature past Buddhist civilisation with expansive monastic complexes and giant stupas. Sinhala political sovereignty and cultural hegemony on the island is characterised by the dense entanglement of these competing interests and their storylines.

These framings marginalise the cultural sovereignty of the island's earliest inhabitants, (First Nations) Indigenous groups, some of whose descendants have begun to identify as Wanniyala-aetto (forest-dwelling peoples). They include those who live in villages or (mainly Tamil-speaking groups) in coastal areas known generally as Vāddas, or more recently as Ādivāsis, adopting the Indian term ('Indigenous' or Aboriginal are rarely used).¹ Although active participants in nineteenth-century anticolonial rebellions in the Kandyan kingdom, alongside the Sinhalese, very little is known about Vāddas, such as clan names or languages, or specific practices and beliefs, particularly in the most populous and western coastal areas which experienced the longest periods of European colonisation

(from 1505–1948). While scholars approaching this subject emphasise relational attributes—cultural adjacency and absorption, religious syncretism, and racial mixing—cultural affinities that substantiate Sinhala or Tamil autochthony are used to moralise acculturation into a Buddhist worldview.² The Buddhist practice of *ahimsa* (non-violence/harm) excludes the hunter ontology. It privileges the autarkic Sinhala civilisation with its innovations in irrigated wet-rice cultivation that are lauded as superior to swidden agriculture and have transformed the island's physical landscape. Buddhists believe in *Samsara*—the cycle of karmic rebirth. Vādda belief systems recorded by scholars include worship of deceased ancestors known as Ne Yaku extended to include some Hindu and Buddhist spirits and deities.³ The Sinhalese also have integrated some Vādda deities into their folk beliefs. However, these entwinements do not preclude popular categorisations of the Vādda culture as that of a primitive and uninhibited population that fall outside the Lankan settler ethos. These hierarchic prejudices undermine the multivocality of an island culture where immigrants have interacted with First Nations cultures over millennia, incorporating aspects of their belief systems—their spirits, and deities, and ritual practices. Once reorganised within the settlers' cognitive framework, these Indigenous knowledges lose their significance and become marginalised or are lost.

Are these modalities of cultural assertion settler colonial practices? Do they reflect what Édouard Glissant might interpret as a systematic, ideological form of “[sub]continental thinking” that suppresses the creolisation that is actually taking place?⁴ Poor knowledge of Indigenous cultural practices, clan names or habitats, compounded by their non-representation in contemporary censuses, suggests that acculturation into settler societal systems suppressed their particularity.⁵ Indigenous activism since the late 1980s, provoked by dispossession of the Dambana Wanniyala-aetto by the Maduru Oya National Park-related irrigation schemes and agricultural ‘colonies,’ has generated awareness of generational trauma.⁶ Scholarly interest in this topic has grown alongside Vādda politicisation with notable archaeological findings of rock shelters, prehistoric stone implements, potsherds, and skeletal remains revealing a more complex pre-Buddhist culture on the island.⁷ Leading archaeologists have sought to investigate the biological continuum between Mesolithic inhabitants and the present-day Vāddas, with competing theories on regional influences and urban cosmopolitanism.⁸ However, the unrecorded social history of the island, dating from skeletal remains of Balangoda man (30,000 BCE), has been obscured by the 2000-plus years of Buddhism-centred histories that have shaped civilisational hubris.⁹ Popular histories that link the Lankan with Indian civilisations, and come with assumptions and prejudices, have been politicised in ways that influence public perceptions and the reception of Vāddas. This influence is most evident in predatory internal tourism to Vādda villages.¹⁰ The built environment disciplines are silent on this topic.

Using a Buddhist temple complex as a single case study, this article asks what visual representations of Sinhala pasts in Lanka's revered Buddhist architectures reveal about these settler processes. Kelaniya Royal Temple located north of Colombo and inland along the banks of Sri Lanka's Kelani River (Fig. 1) is associated with an ancient kingdom, although the present temple buildings date from the eighteenth century, a period under the Nayak dynasty (1739–1815), a royal line with South Indian origins.¹¹ The physical reconstruction of the temple between



Fig. 1 Exterior view of the image house and stupa at Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph: Anoma Pieris]

the eighteenth and twentieth centuries transformed it into one of several discursive spaces for fortifying Buddhism against Christian proselytisation when the island's coastal regions were occupied successively by Dutch and British colonisers who succeeded the Portuguese.¹² Senkadagala (Kandy), the last capital, resisted colonisation until 1815.

Buddhist cultural resistance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, institutionalised through the persistence of the religious orders that protected the Sinhala language and literature, ignited the anticolonial struggle as the ideological foundation for the postcolonial state. The temple played an important role in anticolonial politics as the place for the Kelaniya Declaration of Independence in 1947, one year before the actual event.¹³ These political alignments reified Sinhala, Aryan-Indian origins while emphasising Lanka's distinctiveness as a Sinhala Buddhist geography, as expressed and elaborated in the temple's visual archive. These representations were also influenced by Orientalist constructions of a lost glorious Buddhist civilisation recovered through colonial archaeology.¹⁴

This article presents the murals in the image house as analogous to an assimilatory Sinhala Buddhist worldview that is entangled in these many competing claims to autochthony. Exploring Lanka's cultural dependency and differentiation from the subcontinent, I discuss how these various tensions persist within modes of postcolonial cultural recovery beyond independence. The extraordinary

religious syncretism attributed to Lankan Buddhism by eminent anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere is evidenced in the temple's artworks, which illustrate encounters between Indigenous, Buddhist, migrant-settler, and colonial cultures.¹⁵ The interwoven social constructions of the island through myths, legends, and histories form a multilayered assemblage. The Sinhala culture's land claims extend the authority of the subcontinent over this southern island as imposed, not negotiated, by mythical, historical figures, over spirit, and supernatural beings.

Founding myths and storylines

The assemblage of stories circling Buddhism depicted in murals at Kelaniya Royal Temple offer remarkable insights into how settlers from the Indian subcontinent legitimised their cultural and territorial claims. The *jātakas*—the birth stories of Buddha Gautama, familiarising places across what is now north-eastern India—as well as his life story and his teachings dominate the Lankan Pāli Buddhist texts and commentaries. They have, according to many scholars, provided storylines for Lanka's founding myths.¹⁶ These stories are depicted as horizontal strips of continuous narrations that line many image house interiors, including at Kelaniya. They are typically interpreted through the lens of the mural artist's temporal and social context. The island's history and the works of kings are interwoven with these subcontinental lineages in stories that are mythical and iterative. They confer authority, most notably, for the early period of settlement documented in the *Dipawamsa* (island chronicle, third–fourth century CE) and *Mahawamsa* (great chronicle, fifth century CE) compiled by monks of the Anuradhapura, Maha Vihara; one of three competing subdivisions of Theravāda associated with monastic complexes in that original primate city.¹⁷ These texts describe the island's original inhabitants as *Dēvās* (divine beings, or guardian deities), and as supernatural spirit-beings attributed with various powers, *Yakkhas* (sometimes called *Yaksha*) and *Nāgas* (half human-half cobra beings), which some sources link to the *Vāddas*.¹⁸ Chapters in the *Mahawamsa* that precede Buddhism's introduction mention them as royal allies or adversaries.¹⁹ The sixth-century CE Tamil-Buddhist epic *Manimēkalai* and the eighteenth-century *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* discuss powerful *Nāga* dynasties.²⁰

Kelaniya is closely associated with *Nāgas* in the Lankan Pāli texts. During the Buddha's legendary visits to select the island for his *sasana* (dispensation), having expelled the *Yakshas* at Mahiyangana, and pacified the *Nāgas* at Nāgadeepa, he is believed to have visited Kelaniya on the invitation of Māniakkhika, the *Nāga* king.²¹ An invitation to imprint his footprint at Mount Samanala by the *Dēvā*, Saman, is deemed to have sealed this future covenant. In *Ancient Jaffna*, C. Rasanayagam observes that the *Nāgas* were a prominent race living in South India and Ceylon, as mentioned in both the Indian, *Mahabharata* and the *Rāmāyana* epics, and that they intermarried with Dravidians and were admitted into the "Aryan fold."²² Writing on the prevalence of *Nāgas* around 300 CE, K. Indrapala argues that they were absorbed through acculturation both by the Sinhalese and the Tamils, respectively, and that the identifier is evident in royal names at Anuradhapura dating to the sixth century CE.²³

These scholars envision the subcontinent and Lanka as a contiguous geocultural territory with the *Nāgas* operating on both sides of the Palk Strait. Cobra figures are found sculpted at man-made bathing places and *Nāga* guardians at entrances

to Buddhist monastic complexes in the north central parts of Lanka referred to as Nāgadipa (snake-island) in Claudius Ptolemy's second-century CE *Geographia*.²⁴ The Nāga's symbolic association with water resonates culturally to the extent that the contemporary Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, with oversight of major irrigation schemes, has appropriated the symbol of a seven-headed cobra.²⁵

The Yakshas recur in the second founding myth of the exiled Indian Prince Vijaya who arrives on the island the very day of the Buddha's *Parinibbāna* (passing) (in 543 BCE), asserting Indo-Aryan succession as the royal lineage. He forms a union with Kuveni, a Yaksha Queen, and destroys with her aid the Yaksha city, Sirisavattu, brutally killing her people.²⁶ He abandons her and their progeny to marry a Pandyan Princess and so legitimises his rule. In the *Yalpana Vaipava Malai*, conversely, Vijaya is a Saivite prince who arrived on an 'unpopulated' island vacated by the Rakshasas (demons) after the death of Vibhishana—a hero of the dominant Vaishnava Hindu epic, *Rāmāyana*.²⁷ While this story is not depicted in Lanka's Buddhist image houses, Vibhishana is venerated among the island's guardian deities, with a historical shrine to him attributed to the former Kelaniya Royal Temple site.²⁸ In Valmiki's version of the *Rāmāyana*, one of Hinduism's two greatest ancient epics, Vibhishana betrays his brother, Ravana, the Raksha king of Lanka, by aiding Rāma in defeating him, and inherits his throne.²⁹ This epic is unfamiliar to Lankan Buddhists and not part of their literary canon, however, the Tamil *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* begins with Vibhishana's demise.³⁰

These competing founding myths and intercultural tensions reveal processes of dispossession, genocide, acculturation, and assumption of *terra nullius*, as well as contemporary symbolic cultural appropriation and naturalisation of these associations in ways advantageous to the settler culture. Their density pushes aside or subsumes Indigenous belief systems. The introduction of Buddhism to Lanka during the reign of Maurya Emperor Ashoka (ca. 268–235 BCE) by his son, Arahant Mahinda, a historical event, sees a radical epistemic shift. Mahinda's conversion of King Devanampiyatissa, while hunting, frames what Obeyesekere describes as a "charter myth" differentiating hunting from Buddhism.³¹ As noted, the Buddhist practice of *ahimsa* excludes the hunter ontology. His sister Sanghamitta *therī* follows Mahinda to Lanka bearing a cutting from the fig tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment (*Ficus religiosa*). The monastic and royal city of Anuradhapura expands around its planting as the Sri Maha Bodhi.³² The *Mahawamsa* identifies Nāgas as being among the several groups appointed to protect the tree by King Ashoka, having practised magic to win over the tree during its ocean journey, escorted the tree to their realm, worshipped, and returned it.³³ The ritual protection of the tree, the *Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi*, celebrated during the Poson (full moon of the sixth lunar month), is perpetuated through generational transplantings and propagation of trees [the first eight saplings (*ashta pala ruha*) and the thirty-two subsequent saplings (*dethis pala ruha*)], including at Kelaniya. While the symbolism bears deep connections to Vādda animist beliefs,³⁴ its replication as an element integral to every temple complex claims the island for the diffusion of the *sasana*. Over one million pilgrims continue to travel annually at Poson to Mihintalē (Mahinda's plateau, 13 kilometres east of Anuradhapura), the rocky outcrop on which Mahinda and his *bikkhus* (monks) appeared to the king, reinforcing through an embodied cultural practice the links between Lanka and India's Maurya dynasty. On this same pilgrimage, they worship the sacred Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura.

These three foundational narratives are replete with references to Yakshas and Nāgas that serve to elevate Buddhist morality and civility. The Buddhist mission's doctrine of non-violence once scaffolded by political power and urban and economic expansion provokes a chain of challenges from Hindu Chōla and Pāndyan kingdoms. They are identified in the *Mahawamsa* as foreign invaders that threaten Anuradhapura's sovereignty and the doctrine it protects. A significant early conquest is by the Chōla King Elara from 205–161 BCE. The recapture of the kingdom by the southern king, Dutugemunu, and his unification of the island's kingdoms, sees the reinstatement of Buddhism in what the Sinhalese regard as the city's golden age. Dutugemunu is born of a princess from Kelaniya, Vihara Maha Devi.

Writings on this ancient period express contradictory desires both for legitimising kingship through contiguity with the Indian culture and geography, and the need to avoid subsumption into that identity and assert both political and cultural sovereignty. Urbanisation, monastic complexes, the construction of massive irrigation infrastructures, and the scale of rice cultivation for export are regarded as markers of progress. These storylines become fragmented as the Buddhist kingdoms splinter and move southward from the tenth century ACE onwards, until King Parakramabahu VI of Jayewardenepura-Kotte unified the island during the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 destroyed this precarious unity, inaugurating a century of fierce conflict and destruction of many cities and religious sites. Kelaniya is among them. Stories illustrated in the eighteenth century Kelaniya Royal Temple are produced during the period of European oppression and Christian proselytisation when reference and reinforcement of Buddhist genealogies fortify devotees. The recurrence in these murals of the Yakshas, Nāgas, Dēvās, and Vāddas are of interest.

Chamber and antechamber

Stories in the eighteenth-century murals

The medieval Kelaniya Royal Temple was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1510. The complex's reconstruction during the 1780s is attributed to King Keerti Sri Rajasinha (1747–81) during a religious revival against Christian proselytisation. This artistic cultural renaissance filled a gap created by dispersal of the monumental tradition once upheld by the Anuradhapura kingdom followed by its destruction.³⁵ However, only two chambers of the original eighteenth-century image house remain. The antechamber is unfurnished except for wall-to-ceiling, horizontal murals and timber guardian figures (Fig. 2). The inner chamber contains three images (one reclining and two seated) of Lord Buddha and several guardian deities. The murals form part of a Kandyan artistic tradition resistant to proselytisation that set out to familiarise devotees with the island's sixteen Buddhist pilgrimage places (*solosmasthana*), alongside scenes both from the *jātakas* and from Siddhārtha's life story. The style is heavily influenced by South Indian art. Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Anuradhapura dominate. Kelaniya is among them.

These late eighteenth-century frescos testify to the period's cultural syncretism before colonial modernity took hold. The material intimacies of everyday life in Lanka at the time is captured through representations of the people, buildings, landscapes, and objects used to illustrate the *jātakas*. Scenes from the past and



Fig. 2 The antechamber of the eighteenth-century image house at Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph: Thomas Wyness/Alamy]

present, and places in India and Lanka, become fused. These paintings are part of a continuous Lankan Buddhist tradition that remains distinct from that of the island's prehistoric hunter-foragers or early agriculturalists and is linked with, but different from, that of the Indian subcontinent.³⁶

The *jātakas* are particularly evocative of India's prominence in the cultural imagination, through faraway places related to the life-stories of Buddha Gautama, illustrated through scenes situated in the Lankan society and environment of that period. This is particularly evident if we look at the architecture, furnishings, and the clothing of figures representing royalty or ordinary folk. Among them, the Mahakanha Jātakaya (Giant Black Birth Story), number 469, represents a rare instance when Vādda presence is central to a *jātaka*.³⁷

At Kelaniya Royal Temple, the tale is depicted on the left-hand interior wall of the antechamber, alongside many others and painted in natural dyes of reds, ochres, greens, and browns. The story is set in a period when the *sasana* of the Buddha before Gautama, Buddha Kassapa, had declined, and the urban population of Benares (Varanasi), the monks, nuns, and laity had gone astray. Alerted to this crisis, the *bodhisattva* (a person on the path to Buddhahood) of Siddhārtha Gautama, in the form of Lord Sakkra (King of the *Dēvās*), descended to the earth as a Vādda with his charioteer—Mātali disguised as Mahakanha—a black dog (Fig. 3). Accordingly, Lord Sakkra

... put on a pair of yellow garments, and bound his hair behind his head, and donned a red wreath; taking a huge bow, fitted with bowstring of the colour of coral, and twirling in his fingers a javelin tipped with adamant, he

Fig. 3 Scenes from the Mahakanha Jātakaya. Lord Sakkra in the form of a Vādda [Photograph: Anoma Pieris]

Fig. 4 Scenes from the Mahakanha Jātakaya and other *jātakas* [Photograph: Tibor Bognar/Alamy]

assumed the aspect of a forester, and descended at a spot one league away from the city.³⁸

Roaring that the world is doomed, leaping over the city walls, and barking at the palace windows, Mahakanha terrified the dissolute population away from the ten paths of evil doing. King Usinara, fearful that the dog was a Yaksha, likely to consume human flesh, embraced the path of righteousness along with his subjects.

The hunter in the fresco—dark skinned with a bare torso, long hair, a bow, and a quiver of arrows slung across his shoulder—cuts a figure of boldness and physical strength. The people in the town are depicted as smaller figures in different shades of brown and ochre (Fig. 4). Among them a group of light-skinned soldiers wear hats, striped shirts, and pantaloons. They carry bows, arrows, and swords. Ornate timber furniture, white drapes, two-storey buildings, brass spittoons, and the patterned clothes and shawls of inhabitants conjure the Kandyan era, fusing colonial with subcontinental traditions.



Two insights from the Mahakanha Jātakaya are significant. The Sakkra's assumption of the form of a Vādda in disciplining the erring populace demonstrates that forest-dwellers command respect. Although Buddhist civilisation was hegemonic, it was not necessarily intolerant, argues Obeyesekere.³⁹ There was no internal colonisation by violence, or forced proselytisation into Buddhism, best evidenced by the many symbolic cultural performances that reiterate their

“separation cum unity.”⁴⁰ Variations in the skin colours of human figures in the frescos suggest a multi-ethnic polity. These seemingly minor details are important for understanding the island’s social diversity. Scholars conducting fieldwork during the 1960s and 1970s, like Obeyesekere and James Brow, argue for co-dependent and symbiotic relations between the Sinhala and the Vādda despite evident differences between ancestor worship and the Buddhist belief in karma and rebirth.⁴¹

References to the Nāgas are also found within the image house. On the right-hand side wall of the antechamber, guarding the portals to the shrine room, is a floor-to-ceiling-high carved, timber statue of Māniakkhika, the mythical Nāga king of Kelaniya in an alcove guarded by two (atypical and anglicised) long-maned lions and flanked by a Nāga man and maiden (Fig 5).

Fig. 5 King Māniakkhika and Nāga men and maidens [Photograph: Tibor Bogner/Alamy]



Like the Vādda, the Nāgas remain outside the inner chamber as perpetual guardians, incorporated and subordinated within the Buddhist hierarchy. However, the Vādda ancestral deity, Saman, and the Raksha Prince, Vibhishana, brother to Rāvana, are depicted among the island’s guardian deities on the wall of the inner chamber. While Sinhalese Buddhists are seen to form a single moral community, both Vāddas and Sinhalese are united in worship of guardian deities such as Saman and Skandha, Obeyesekere notes.⁴² Rāvana’s brother Vibhishana, identifiable by his tiny tusks, reappears in one of the temple’s many alcoves, as he is being crowned by Prince Rāma (Fig. 6). Once again connections to the subcontinental geographic and cultural imagination are reproduced and translated from the island’s perspective. Kelaniya’s association with the warrior prince makes it popular among many armed forces personnel, who seek his blessings before leaving on active duty.⁴³

The argument that Vāddas were omnipresent during the last Kandyan kingdom draws them into a period contemporaneous with the nineteenth-century

Fig. 6 Relief sculpture of Lord
Vibhishana in the rear alcove at
Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph:
Anoma Pieris]



Kelaniya frescos. Obeyesekere describes a warrior class, employed as the king's guard, where land grants given for services rendered to the king produced a form of Vādda aristocracy.⁴⁴ They fought alongside the Sinhalese in the anti-British Kandyan rebellions of the nineteenth century and protected the royal families during foreign invasions of the capital city. When Buddhist civilisations in the eastern part of the island were abandoned in the fourteenth century CE, both Vādda and Sinhala reverted to forest-dwelling, practising hunting alongside pastoralism and swidden cultivation, he writes.⁴⁵ The anthology, *The Vanishing Aborigines*, argues that by primitivising the Vāddas, colonial racialisation suppressed the many forms of mutual cultural absorption that were taking place.⁴⁶ Bourgeois elites schooled in colonial values internalised these prejudices and their rhetoric of extinction.⁴⁷ The expansion of the British colonial plantation economy into Kandyan areas weakened recognition and reciprocity between these groups.⁴⁸

In societies like Lanka, where industrialisation had not ruptured peasant connections to forest and spirit worlds to the extent of European settler colonies, differentiation was claimed through cultural links to the subcontinental mainland (and its royal lineages) because of the advantages of these connections within the Sinhala social and court hierarchy. These claims suppressed knowledges of, and desire to investigate, pre-Buddhist settlements and the terms of their later acculturation and interethnic mixing with newcomers. There was also reluctance to recognise cultural and genetic interchanges that have occurred over millennia, which Obeyesekere argues are more blurred between Sinhala and Tamil than between Vādda and Sinhala.⁴⁹ These tensions alongside the increased threat of Christian conversions during the Kandyan era provoked reactive affirmations of Sinhala ethnic distinctiveness and ascendancy. Anticolonial sentiment was increasingly directed at constructing, sustaining, defending, and romanticising a Buddhism-centric history. The artworks in the new wing at Kelaniya testify to this process.

Stories in the twentieth-century murals

The twentieth-century renovation of the temple (1927–46) was undertaken by British colonial architect H. H. Reid, a proponent of the Indic style of architecture we associate with the late Gothic, and arts and crafts revival in Britain, which was incorporated into the architecture of the two eighteenth-century chambers. In Lanka, this influence produced an eclectic ‘Buddhist’ aesthetic, borrowing features from ancient and medieval monuments. The temple complex includes the paddy-sheaf shaped *dhanyakara* stupa, the renovated image house with its new (late 1920s) wings, two gateways, the prayer hall, the *sanghas*’ (monks’) residences, and the Bodhi tree (see Fig. 1). The new wing’s interior was decorated by local artist Solias Mendis between 1930 and 1950 after the mural style of the Sigiriya and Indian-Ajanta frescos (see Figs 7 and 8). Mendis’s murals, although rooted in an eclectic, transitional style, influenced equally by European art and the paintings of the Bengali Renaissance, display what is described as a vigorous and unsentimental realism, unlike the Bengali paintings.⁵⁰ Many of the murals depict scenes chronicled in the *Mahawamsa*.

Mendis’s murals were commissioned by Helena Wijewardene, a matriarch from a politically powerful dynasty of future politicians, and contributed to the mid-twentieth-century decolonising agendas of the incipient nation-state.⁵¹ In pursuing this politics, they emphasised the narratives that validated Buddhism’s place on the island, which historian Jonathan Walters argues were equally influenced by British Orientalist constructions of Kelaniya’s past.⁵² Unlike the Portuguese and Dutch who, seeking to defuse its political significance, built churches and schools at the ruined site, writes Walters, British antiquarians saw it as a depoliticised religious site and romanticised their representations of its ruins. Once the Kandyan kingdom was captured, the British colonial administration, as the sole political authority, diverted the cultural narrative towards a lost ancient past disconnected from the several anticolonial uprisings that they violently crushed.⁵³ Their gaze contributed to what Lankan historian Sujit Sivasundaram describes as “islanding,” a process by which Lanka was discursively constructed by its British colonial administrators as distinct from India so as to justify its separate governance as a crown colony.⁵⁴ The historical fortification and defence of Kandy as the last resistant kingdom and a Sinhala-Buddhist domain, its circumscription due to colonial control of the surrounding coastal and lowland territories, and gradual colonial encroachment into the central hill country contributed to this ideation.⁵⁵ Responses that situate prior Indigenous inhabitants in relation to a centralised Sinhala Buddhist culture are exemplified in the new wing.

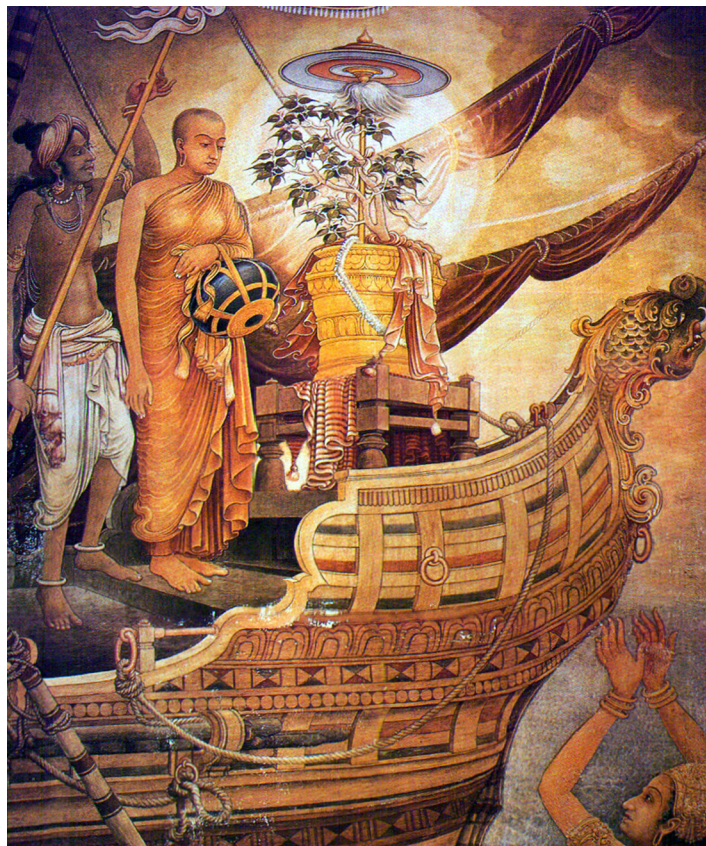
The twentieth-century murals created by Mendis conjure Lanka’s island ontology through arrivals across the ocean. They illustrate both separation from and connection with the subcontinent, exemplifying competing religious-civilisational claims. Many of Mendis’s murals provide an illustrated supplement to the *Mahawamsa* stories alongside depictions of the Buddha’s life story and markers of Sinhala statehood. Using life-size, realistic figures in red and yellow hues, Mendis depicts scenes that amplify the messages of the late nineteenth-century anti-colonial/-Christian, Buddhist religious revival that peaked alongside the independence struggles of the subsequent century. The stylistic shift and human scale of the paintings invite Lankan devotees to identify with these popular histories later integrated into school curricula. Protohistoric scenes include

the Buddha's three legendary visits and pacification of the island's inhabitants depicted as grotesque human figures—the Sinhala idea of the primitive. The Buddha is elevated to the status of peacemaker at Nāgadeepa (Nainativu), settling a dispute over a jewelled throne between the Nāga kings Cūlodara and Mahōdara—relatives of Māniakkhika—an account corroborated in the *Manimēkalai*.⁵⁶ Mendis also depicts Vijaya's encounter with the Yaksha queen Kuveni. Vijaya's ascendance reinforces the subcontinental lineage.

The arrival of Arahant Mahinda is the third example of the unilateral impartation of 'civilisational' knowledge. Mendis depicts the then-King Devanampiyatissa with his bow and quiver, kneeling before the *bikkhu*. Every sixth month of the lunar calendar on the Poson Poya (full moon) day, giant electrified pandals illuminate many towns across Lanka, depicting this same scene alongside familiar *jātakas*. Repetition of these stories imaginatively binds together the Buddhist polity through belief in karmic rebirth and Lanka's recipient role as protector of the *sasana*. One of Mendis's most compelling artworks depicts Mahinda's sister, Sanghamitta *therī* aboard a ship, its sails furled, transporting the sacred cutting of the Bodhi tree. King Devanampiyatissa stands in shallow water ready to greet her (Fig. 7).

As with the paintings in the eighteenth-century image house, Mendis depicts the legitimate custodians as guardians, willingly subordinated to doctrinal patronage. Given that the link between the Vāddas and these proto-historical and mythological figures is unsubstantiated, we could argue that continuous Vādda presence remains unacknowledged or is represented in disrespectful ways. Of greater interest is the way in which the island's geo-spatial autonomy

Fig. 7 Bringing of the Sri Maha Bodhi
to Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta *therī*
[Photograph: CPA Media Pte Ltd/
Alamy]



is reinforced through emphasis on the Buddhist civilisation at Anuradhapura. Political and economic alliances and hostilities between kings across the water that hybridise and dilute this agenda including the stories of Tamil rulers and chieftains are marginalised. A new constellation of internal power relations linked to monastic traditions and riverine settlements unfolds.

Kelaniya is linked to Anuradhapura's genealogy during the time of Chōla conquest. The story recounted in the murals shifts to King Kelani Tissa, King Dutugemunu's maternal grandfather, who puts to death an *arahant* (worthy one), wrongly accusing him of an adulterous affair with his queen. The ocean rises against the king as a symbolic moral force inundating his kingdom in a coastal tidal wave.⁵⁷ As appeasement for his crime, Kelani Tissa sacrifices his daughter Devi, casting her off on the ocean in a boat. A sobering mural by Mendis depicts both the scene of inundation and departure by boat of the sacrificial Devi who is carried south to the kingdom of Ruhuna where she is rescued and weds the southern King Kāvan Tissa (205–161 BC). She bears him two sons, of whom the elder son, Dutugemunu, travels northward along the island's longest Mahaweli River, conquering successive Tamil forts to finally defeat King Elara's army and recover Anuradhapura for the Sinhalese. The victory casts the Tamils as bitter adversaries in the Sinhala historiographical imagination.⁵⁸

This defensive retelling of the island's narrative suppresses oceanic connections, depicting a geography held together by riverine networks facing external existential threats. Mendis also depicts the destruction of Kelaniya Royal Temple by foreign invaders, King Kālinga Māgha (from northeastern India) and the Portuguese (Fig. 8).⁵⁹ Once the ocean brings new conquerors threatening to Buddhism, the river replaces the ocean as a life force. The riverine system supports sedentary agricultural practices that enable the expansion of low-density urban settlements, in turn producing the complex hydraulic civilisations for which the island is renowned.

Fig. 8 Destruction of Kelaniya
Royal Temple by the Portuguese
[Photograph: Anoma Pieris]



In the new wing of the image house, through stories connecting Lanka to India across the encircling ocean, we can visualise settlement as a historical process where 'subcontinental thinking' and authority are replaced by insular ambitions and claims to sovereignty. These claims are predicated on cultural absorption to grow a homogeneous polity that might defend the island against future challengers. The mechanics of settlement displace Ādivāsi historical authority and then subordinate and appropriate their custodianship. Across the artworks we also

witness the religious syncretism of the Kandyan period giving way to racialised cultural distancing that comes with internalisation of colonial values. Whereas the early *jātakas* recognised and elevated prior Indigenous presence, the religious realism of Mendis depicted demons and primitives too confronting to reproduce here. His purpose was to morally unite an ethnically distinctive population of Sinhala devotees marginalised by colonial rule. To this end, Mendis developed a unique tableau of culturally resonant Buddhist myths and beliefs. His human-scale aesthetic realism embodied, preserved, and homogenised an anticolonial and later postcolonial model of cultural citizenship.

The changing relationship with water, from a surrounding element to an internal resource for settler (colonial) expansion, was foundational for the state-led development projects of the postcolonial era, the very projects that Wanniyala-aetto militancy challenged. The island sustained a sophisticated hydraulic civilisation for wet-rice cultivation at great cost to the Vādda way of life. There was no admission of the violence underlying these mythical settlement stories, nor remorse for their legacies. Prior inhabitants were cast as uninhibited, sometimes violent, supernatural or spirit beings whose suppression was seen as a natural outcome of the civilising process. But their representation as violent and needing pacification suggests that these settler actions met with resistance, leading us to question if they were willing subordinates. After political independence, these narrative occlusions hardened into claims of Sinhala cultural sovereignty that many scholars and politicians have upheld. More recently with new awareness of Indigenous self-determination, these marginalised groups are reimagined as ancestral communities.⁶⁰ This belated desire for claiming hybridity is motivated by competition over autochthony.

In his book, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Arjun Appadurai writes of the growing ambivalence of nation-states to the needs of minorities, and how minorities look to transnational organisational forms for building solidarity in a more inductive, context-sensitive manner.⁶¹ He notes that these minorities

... activate new worries about rights (human and otherwise), about citizenship, about belonging and autochthony, and about entitlements from the state... And they invite new ways of examining the obligations of states as well as the boundaries of political humanity...⁶²

Pan-Indigenous identification via the UN has empowered the Vāddas to demand greater internal accountability for their specific grievances in ways that shine a light on the cultural machinations of dominant groups. While other marginalised non-Buddhist groups have had modern institutional representation, these rightful heirs to Lanka's land and resources have faced forced sedentarisation in rehabilitation villages, exploitation by internal colonists, and impoverishment through systemic dependencies.⁶³ Unlike the violence in European settler colonies, my analysis reveals how the "oppression inherent in social relations"—the "structural violence" defined by Étienne Balibar—is directed towards physiognomically similar groups.⁶⁴ The built environment disciplines have contributed asymmetrically to this process by upholding agrarian urban settlements as ontologically rooted and morally virtuous systems of habitation. If instead we elevate the least invasive settlement strategies of swidden agriculture and seasonal rotation, and recognise the value of our historical interdependence, a respectful story of the island's first peoples might be told.

NOTES

1. The name Vādda is believed to be derived from Vedan (hunter), and Vyada, one who pierces with an arrow, as distinct from the dominant farming castes among both Tamils and Sinhalese. John Bailey, "An Account of the Wild Tribes of the Vaddas of Ceylon: Their Habits, Customs and Superstitions," *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, no. 2 (1863): 278–320, 280.
2. K. N. O. Dharmadasa and S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe (eds), *The Vanishing Aborigines* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1990).
3. Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Veddās in Transition* (M. D. Gunasena, 1964), 150.
4. Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, trans. Celia Briton (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 26.
5. *Adi Vasi* was not differentiated as scheduled tribes in Sri Lanka's 1972 republican constitution, unlike in India. The population was believed to have fallen below 1000 persons after 1953 although around 6600 Vāddas were noted by James Brow in his 1978 study of 46 villages of Anuradhapura. *Statistical Pocket Book 2022* (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022), 10, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Publication/PocketBook>. Census of population and housing, 2012 (numbers in millions): Sinhalese 15.2; Tamils 3; Muslims 1.9; Christians 1.4; Buddhists 14.2; James Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura: The Historical Anthropology of a Community in Sri Lanka* (University of Washington Press, 1978), 40.
6. Following a 1996 land rights appeal in the lead-up to the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the self-identifying community has grown numerically to around 500,000 persons (in 2024). Address of Warige Wanniya to the UN, UNWGP 14th session, Geneva, 1996, <https://vedda.org/wanniyalaeto-un.htm>. See also Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (eds), *Our Land, Your Laws: Protecting the Rights of Sri Lanka's Adivasis* (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2023), <https://citizenslanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Issue-03-English-Final-2.pdf>; and Uruwarige Wannila Atto, "We Need Legislation to Validate Our Rights," in Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (eds), *Our Land, Your Laws*, 28–31, 28.
7. H. Nimal Perera, "Prehistoric Sri Lanka," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 59, no. 2 (2014): 23–41; S. U. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Colombo Archaeological Department, 1992); Diane Hawkey, "Out of Asia: Dental Evidence for Affinities and Microevolution of Early Populations from India and Sri Lanka," PhD thesis, Arizona State University, 1998.
8. Raj Somadeva, *Urban Origins in Southern Lanka* (Uppsala Universitet Afrikansk och Jämförande Arkeologi, University of Kelaniya Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, 2006); R. Coningham, M. J. Manuel, C. Davis, and P. Gunawardhana, "Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism in Early Historic and Medieval Sri Lanka," in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads: From Antiquity to Modernity*, edited by Z. Biedermann and A. Strathern (UCL Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.2756072>.
9. The island's original Mesolithic ancestors termed Balangoda Man are traced to 30,000-year-old fossils discovered by archaeologists and further discoveries that predate these are ongoing. Kenneth A. R. Kennedy and Siran U. Deraniyagala, "Fossil Remains of 28,000-year-old Hominids from Sri Lanka," *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (1989): 394–99.
10. C. T. Attanapola and R. Lund, "Contested Identities of Indigenous People: Indigenization or Integration of the Veddās in Sri Lanka," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 34, no. 2 (2013): 172–87.
11. Jonathan Walters, *The History of Kelaniya* (Sri Lanka Social Scientists Association, 1996).
12. European colonisation of the island dates between 1505–1815, successively by the Portuguese, Dutch, and the British.
13. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 101.
14. John Rogers, "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Pre-modern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 10–23.
15. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Principles of Religious Syncretism and the Buddhist Pantheon in Sri Lanka," in *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, edited by Fred W. Clothey (New Era Publishers, 1982), 15–33, 16.
16. Chandana Jayawardana and Wijeratne Bohingamuwa, *Pali Commentaries and Sri Lankan Society: An Introductory Note* (Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 2021).
17. *Dīpawamsa*, trans. Hermann Oldenberg (Williams and Norgate, 1879); *Mahawamsa*, trans. W. Geiger (Oxford University Press, 1912). The Mahavihara was a large Buddhist monastery for *Theravāda* Buddhism in the Anuradhapura kingdom (third century BCE–tenth century CE).
18. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, "Chapter 2: Veddās in the History of Sri Lanka: An Introductory Sketch," in *The Vanishing Aborigines*, edited by Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, 34–47.
19. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 10: The Consecration of Pandukābhaya," 68–76.
20. Bahadur Krishnaswāmi Aiyangar, *Mañimekhalai in its Historical Setting* (Luzac and Co., 1928); *Yālpāna Vaipāva Mālai, or the History of the Kingdom of Jaffna* (anonymous), trans. C. Britto (Asian Educational Services, 1999), xxi–xxii.
21. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 1: The Visit of the Thathāgatha," 1–9.
22. C. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna: Being a Research into the History of Jaffna from Very Early Times to the Portuguese Period* (Asian Educational Services, 1926), 5–6.
23. Karthigesu Indrapala, *The Evolution of an Ethnic Identity: The Tamils in Sri Lanka* (South Asian Studies Centre, 2005), 71, 174.
24. Ptolemy's twelfth map of Asia (second century CE) identifying Sri Lanka as Taprobane was lost and rediscovered in the 1400s, so this information is from subsequent copies.
25. Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, "Historical Background," <https://mahaweli.gov.lk/about%20us.html>.
26. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 6: The Coming of Vijaya," 51–54, and "Chapter 7: The Consecration of Vijaya," 65–67.
27. M. L. Sen, *Rāmāyana* (Archaeological Survey of India, 1927).
28. Totagamuve Sri Rahula, *Sālalihini Sandeśa*, trans. Edmund Jayasuriya (Colombo Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology and Central Cultural Fund, 2002).
29. Anonymous, "A Tamil Hindu Vijaya: Yalpāna Vaipāna Malai," in *The Sri Lanka Reader*, edited by John Clifford Holt (Duke University Press, 2011), 26–29.
30. *Yālpāna Vaipāva Mālai*, 1.
31. Gananath Obeyesekere, "Buddhism, Ethnicity and Identity: A Problem of Buddhist History," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 (2003): 192–242, 212.
32. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 14: The Entry into the Capital," 91–96, and "Chapter 19: The Coming of the Bodhi Tree," 128–35.
33. *Mahawamsa*, "The Coming of the Bodhi Tree," 128–29.
34. C. E. Godakumbura, "Sinhalese Festivals: Their

- Symbolism, Origins and Proceedings," *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, Vol. XIV (1970), 91–130.
35. Senake Bandaranayake and Gamini Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka* (Stamford Lake, 2006), 13–17.
36. Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings*, 11–13.
37. Ja 469, "Mahākāṇḍajātaka [The Birth Story about the Great Black (Hound)] 1859–64," in *The Birth Stories* (Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā), trans. T. W. Rhys Davids et al., 1880–1907. Revised by Ānandajoti-Bhikku, 2003, <https://ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Jataka/The-Jataka.pdf>.
38. Ja 469, "Mahākāṇḍajātaka," 1815.
39. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter* (Sailfish, 2022), 160.
40. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 162.
41. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*. James Brow in his 1970s study of Vādda villages in the Anuradhapura district revealed that many engaged in rice cultivation, living alongside Sinhala people. Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura*.
42. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and Its Extensions," in *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, edited by Manning Nash, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Cultural Report Series, no. 13 (Yale University Press, 1966), 1–26, 20.
43. Observations at the temple during the mid-2000s.
44. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 12–14.
45. Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura*.
46. Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, *The Vanishing Aborigines*; Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 10–11.
47. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 24; C. G. Seligman and B. Seligman, *The Veddas* (Cambridge University Press, 1911), discusses a number of colonial accounts.
48. See Jon Dart, "Chapter 4: The Coast Veddas: Dimensions of Marginality," in Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, *The Vanishing Aborigines*, 67–83.
49. Gananath Obeyesekere, "Colonial Histories and Vadda Primitivism: An Unorthodox Reading of Kandy Period Texts" (G. C. Mendis Memorial Lecture, 2002), 29.
50. Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings*, 21.
51. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 98.
52. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 86–93.
53. Most notably the Uva-Wellsassa rebellion of 1817–1818 and the Matale Rebellion of 1848.
54. Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), xvii.
55. Sivasundaram, *Islanded*, 71–81.
56. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna*, 7.
57. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 22: The Birth of Prince Gāmini," 146–54.
58. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 25: The Victory of Duṭṭhagāmani," 170–78.
59. Kālinga Māgha, believed to be from what is modern day Orissa, is one of the kings who established the Jaffna Tamil kingdom.
60. Dhanuka Rananjaka Kahandagamage, "Those of the Forest: What Should We Do for the Vedda?," in *Our Land Your Laws: Protecting the Rights of Sri Lanka's Adivasis*, edited by Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 3 January 2023), 21–27.
61. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Jane Kramer, Benjamin Lee, and Michael Warner (Duke University Press, 2006), 137.
62. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 42. Brackets in original quotation.
63. See Wivexa Ann-Chatrin Stegeborn, "Nature Conservation, Human Rights, and Indigenous People: The Wanniya-laeto (veddahs) of Sri Lanka," Masters thesis, Washington State University, 1993; Address of Warige Wanniya.
64. Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), 24–30.

KARAMIA MÜLLER

INTERSTICES 26

Beyond the fixed: Sāmoan digital spaces, errantry, and decolonising architecture

Introduction: Online *siapo* as spatial production

Online *siapo* produced and circulated by Sāmoan women in digital environments constitutes a form of spatial production. Digital *siapo* refers to digitised or digitally produced representations of *siapo*, while online *siapo* describes the posting, circulation, and encounter with those images across social media platforms.¹ This article asks how *siapo* operates architecturally when it appears in digital environments rather than in built or ceremonial settings. Unlike a *fale* (house) or *malae* (ceremonial ground), social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook do not offer a stable architectural site. Yet online *siapo* produces what might be understood as a space without fixed territorial ground: a digital interior lined through pattern, memory, cultural reference, relation formed through hashtags, and diasporic self-making. Its architectural significance lies in this act of lining. Online *siapo* composes a relational digital space in which Sāmoan identity can be oriented, recognised, and enacted.

Siapo is painted barkcloth used functionally and ceremonially in Sāmoa and within Sāmoan diasporic communities. In the terminology adopted here, undecorated barkcloth is referred to as *tapa* and decorated barkcloth as *siapo*. The production of *tapa* and the decoration of *siapo* have historically been associated primarily with women's labour and creative practice.² *Siapo* may line domestic and civic interiors, mark ceremonial exchange, and activate relational space. Although Pacific textile scholarship has recognised its role in delineating and activating Sāmoan social space, its architectural implications have received only limited sustained attention.³ This omission matters because *siapo* does not appear in space as a passive material-cultural object. It contributes to the partitioning, organisation, lining, and activation of relational space.

Vā is central to this argument because it frames space not as contained emptiness or neutral distance, but as a relational field through which people, practices, objects, obligations, ancestors, and places are connected.⁴ Sāmoan writer and cultural theorist Mauaiaivao Albert Wendt describes *vā* as the space of betweenness that gives people and things meaning through relation rather than separation.⁵ In this sense, *siapo* is not merely placed within space; it participates in the tending and activation of *vā*. Online *siapo* extends this spatial function

into digital environments, producing relational sites that are not anchored to a single physical location, territorial ground, or fixed boundary. These sites are activated through practice, pattern, memory, identity, digital circulation, and *vā*.

Extending findings from doctoral research on Sāmoan digital space-making, this article places online *siapo* in critical dialogue with the concepts of errantry and relation developed by Martinican poet, novelist, and philosopher Édouard Glissant.⁶ Glissant develops these concepts in relation to a Caribbean history marked by slavery, colonisation, forced displacement, creolisation, and archipelagic connection. His thinking emerges within a wider Caribbean anticolonial intellectual tradition. Glissant is not used here to replace Sāmoan spatial theory or to frame diaspora as equivalent to rootlessness or exile. Rather, errantry is approached as a companion concept for considering how diasporic spatial practices move across media, memory, image, platform, embodied knowledge, and place without becoming detached from relation. Glissant's archipelagic thought is useful here as a non-totalising way of thinking about connections between distinct places, forms, and identities. It does not require those differences to be resolved into a single origin or universal category. Glissant's English translator Betsy Wing explains that errantry is not idle wandering but includes "a sense of sacred motivation": movement remains purposive even when it is not directed towards territorial possession.⁷ This offers a moment of resonance, rather than equivalence, with Pacific barkcloth traditions, whose ceremonial and functional circulation carries kinship, memory, obligation, and cultural value across island and diasporic contexts. Read together, errantry and relation support an understanding of diasporic Sāmoan identity as mobile without being rootless, and relational without being detached from place. Online *siapo* is errant not because it lacks grounding, but because it moves among material and digital forms, homeland and diaspora, memory and platform, while remaining held through *vā*.

Online *siapo* therefore participates in spatial production: it makes diasporic space without relying upon fixed territorial ground, physical enclosure, or built form. This claim also intervenes in decolonial architectural history. As architectural historian Itohan Osayimwese argues, decolonisation requires more than adding previously excluded objects and subjects to an existing canon; it requires questioning the categories, archives, and disciplinary hierarchies through which architecture has been recognised.⁸ When built form, architectural authorship, enclosure, and material permanence are privileged as architecture's primary evidence, practices organised through textile, ceremony, exchange, memory, gendered labour, and digital circulation are rendered peripheral. Online *siapo* tests these disciplinary divisions by moving between textile and spatial practice, material and digital form, and cultural expression and architectural production. The decolonial contribution of this article therefore lies in changing architecture's terms of recognition and redistributing epistemic authority towards Pacific feminist accounts of how space is already made through relation and the tending of *vā*.

The article therefore argues that online *siapo*—particularly as produced and circulated by Sāmoan women—should be understood as a Pacific feminist spatial practice: a gendered and embodied form of diasporic knowledge that lines digital space, activates *vā*, and changes the terms that architectural history recognises as forms of space-making that are relational, temporal, diasporic, and digital.

Siapo, vā, and the architectural problem

Pacific art scholar Anne E. Guernsey Allen has shown how *siapo* and other textiles mark boundaries, status, ceremony, and social relation within Sāmoan spaces. Related work by anthropologists Heather E. Young-Leslie and Ping-Ann Addo, and by anthropologist and historian of Pacific art Nicholas Thomas, places barkcloth within wider Pacific histories of material adaptation, exchange, and cultural value.⁹ Within architectural scholarship, however, *siapo* has received limited sustained attention as a practice of spatial production. Allen's more recent discussion of Sāmoan textiles and architectural space is an important exception, but the broader disciplinary treatment of *siapo* has continued to privilege its status as craft, ornament, textile, or material-cultural object.¹⁰

Within European architectural theory, architect and architectural theorist Gottfried Semper's account of architecture's four elements provides a revealing point of comparison. Semper associates enclosure with textile production and understands woven boundaries as conceptually prior to masonry walls. His account was informed by a Caribbean hut from Trinidad displayed at London's Great Exhibition of 1851, which he encountered as a colonial exhibition object rather than within its lived social, ceremonial, and environmental setting. By abstracting the hut into evidence for a general genealogy of architecture, Semper translated a culturally situated building practice into a universalising European theoretical framework.¹¹ The comparison with *siapo* has limits, however, because Semper's theory does not account for the gendered and relational knowledge through which *siapo* as textile practice operates in Sāmoan contexts. Although his genealogy can help architecture recognise lining, binding, partitioning, and surface-making as architecturally operative rather than merely decorative, Semper should not become the authority through which *siapo* is finally validated, in the construction of this article's argument. For Semper's spatiality remains one of enclosure as opposed to that of connection. *Siapo*'s spatial significance is already articulated through Sāmoan practices of ceremony, exchange, gendered production, and *vā*. The value of the comparison lies instead in exposing a disciplinary inconsistency: architecture can elevate textile principles when they are mediated through canonising European theory while continuing to marginalise Pacific women's textile practices as craft rather than spatial production.¹²

The architectural problem is therefore not simply that *siapo* has been overlooked by architectural historians and theorists. Rather, the categories through which architecture recognises spatial production have often been too narrow to account for Sāmoan practices organised through relation, ceremony, exchange, gendered labour, and embodied knowledge. When architecture is identified primarily with built form, enclosure, fixity, material permanence, and professional authorship, the spatial work performed by *siapo* becomes difficult to recognise. The exchange and display of *siapo* may therefore be spatially active within Sāmoan worlds while remaining partially illegible within dominant architectural frameworks. This illegibility reproduces colonial hierarchies concerning what is considered worthy of architectural study. It is also gendered: the treatment of *siapo* as textile, surface, or ornament has obscured the architectural knowledge embedded in women's creative and relational practices.¹³

Vā provides a different starting point for recognising this spatial work. Wendt describes *vā* not as empty separation but as the relational space that gives people

and things meaning through context. The interdisciplinary Pacific scholars and practitioners contributing to *Vā Moana* extend this account by showing how *vā* connects living people, ancestors, places, obligations, and cosmologies across time, including under diasporic conditions. *Vā* can therefore accommodate spatial realities that are simultaneously located and mobile, rooted and routed, errant and relational. Yet relationality should not be romanticised as inherently harmonious. *Vā* requires tending, negotiation, as well as attention to power; relationships may connect people while also maintaining boundaries, hierarchies, and gendered obligations.¹⁴

Online *siapo* still sharpens this architectural problem because digital platforms do not provide the stable ground, enclosure, or physical boundedness conventionally associated with architectural sites. Yet online *siapo* continues to organise relations through pattern, memory, identity, cultural reference, circulation, and exchange. Drawing on the dataset and conceptual framework developed through earlier doctoral research, this article approaches online *siapo* as an extension of Sāmoan spatial production into digital environments.¹⁵

Errantry, relation, and diaspora: Terms of use

Glissant's concepts of errantry and relation are used here to reconsider how Sāmoan spatialities might contribute to a more relational and decolonial architectural discourse.¹⁶ They are not considered substitutes for Sāmoan space concepts, but as companion terms that help articulate how diasporic digital practices move across places, media, memories, and identities without being reduced to territorial fixity. Errantry is especially useful for describing movement that does not seek territorial possession, while relation provides a way of understanding identity and knowledge as constituted through ongoing encounters.

Diaspora is not treated here as equivalent to exile. Sāmoan communities in Aotearoa New Zealand include migrants and later-generation descendants whose relationships with Sāmoa are mediated differently through family, language, ceremony, memory, travel, digital culture, and place-based knowledge. Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall approaches diasporic cultural identity not as an essence preserved unchanged after migration, but as an ongoing production shaped through history, difference, and representation.¹⁷ Diasporic identity is therefore neither culturally empty nor guaranteed by uninterrupted access to an origin. It is continually produced through social and cultural relations.

Errantry helps describe movement within this condition, but it is not a synonym for Sāmoan diasporic experience or exile. Glissant distinguishes errantry both from territorial conquest and from the losses associated with exile. The errant journey seeks relation rather than possession and does not require identity to close around a single, exclusive root.¹⁸ In this article, errantry names the movement of cultural knowledge across material and digital forms, homelands and diasporic locations, and individual memories and collective vocabularies. Relation describes what prevents this movement from becoming mere dispersal: identities and meanings are constituted through encounters without being reduced to sameness. Online *siapo* is therefore errant not because it lacks cultural grounding, but because that grounding is repeatedly activated through changing relations.

Glissant's archipelagic thought also challenges colonial spatial imaginaries that represent islands as isolated, remote, and peripheral. Literary scholar Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, whose comparative work spans Caribbean and Pacific literatures, similarly demonstrates how islandness has been shaped by cultural and political assumptions, including colonial cartographies that separate islands from the oceanic relations through which they are constituted.¹⁹ Although Martinique and Sāmoa are culturally, geographically, historically, and politically distinct, Glissant's relational archipelagic imaginary can be placed in dialogue with Pacific writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa's account of Oceania as a "sea of islands": a connected world formed through voyaging, exchange, genealogy, and oceanic mobility.²⁰ This comparison does not collapse or flatten the distinct histories of the Caribbean and Pacific. Rather, it brings into view a shared resistance to colonial spatial imaginaries of island isolation. Read together, these concepts support an understanding of diasporic Sāmoan identity as mobile without being rootless and relational without being detached from place.

Online *siapo*: Method and case studies

This article revisits a dataset of fifty social media posts that were publicly accessible at the time of collection and identified through the hashtag *#siapo*. The posts were selected through purposive sampling and coded according to platform, description, title, hashtags, other tags, followers, date, dimensions, and URL. Rather than classifying the visual characteristics of the barkcloth images, the analysis focused on their accompanying language, particularly the ways in which hashtags situated online *siapo* in relation to identity, family, cultural affiliation, and exchange.²¹ Technical communication scholars Alice R. Daer, Rebecca Hoffman, and Seth Goodman describe hashtags as metacommunicative devices whose functions extend beyond classification and searchability. Hashtags, they argue, have evolved as a rhetorical practice that can also frame a post, emphasise aspects of its meaning, and connect it to wider conversations.²² Viewing hashtags as rhetorical indicators, that is, signals contextual information alongside a post, the study found that the hashtags accompanying *siapo* posts were primarily concerned with *emphasis* and *identity*. Three cases are examined here to show how online *siapo* operates through errantry and relation. Together, they demonstrate how digitisation, visual adaptation, captioning, and hashtag practices allow cultural knowledge and diasporic identities to move across media and locations that are not anchored in territory. Errantry helps describe this movement, while relation identifies the ongoing encounters through which these digital spaces acquire meaning.

The analysis was informed by an Indigenous feminist concern with how disciplinary systems make some forms of knowledge visible while rendering others peripheral. Māori scholar of Indigenous education and decolonising methodologies Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that decolonising research requires scrutiny of the categories, institutions, and methods through which Indigenous knowledge is authorised, extracted, or marginalised. Native Hawaiian feminist scholar Lisa Kahaleole Hall similarly argues that colonialism operates through gendered and sexualised forms that reconstitute Indigenous identities in disempowering ways.²³ Feminism is used here not simply to recover women as producers, but to examine how production, objects, practices, and spatial meanings become gendered through relation. Applied here, this approach asks how architectural

discourse has rendered women's textile and digital practices visible as culture while leaving their spatial knowledge largely illegible as architecture. My position as a diasporic Sāmoan woman informed this interpretation, particularly my attention to forms of spatial knowledge that established architectural categories have struggled to recognise.

The account of continuity and change in Sāmoan material culture developed by New Zealand ethnologist and museum curator Roger Neich provides a basis for interpreting the movement of *siapo* into digital environments. Neich observes that ancestral principles, forms, and cultural intentions may persist even as producers adopt materials and techniques appropriate to changed circumstances.²⁴ Digital production and social media circulation therefore need not be treated as evidence of diminished authenticity. Online *siapo* can instead be approached as an adaptive textile practice through which embodied cultural knowledge moves among material, visual, and digital forms.

Case study 1: Gender, sport, and errant diasporic affiliation

The first case is a 2018 Instagram post advertising an original hand-painted artwork for sale. The online *siapo* has a rectangular format and reconfigures the Golden State Warriors logo, a professional American basketball team based in Oakland, California, through visual conventions associated with *siapo* and *masi*. The hashtags #kd and #warriors refer to Kevin Durant, then a forward for the Golden State Warriors, and American professional basketball. At the same time, the hashtags #tapacloth and #siapo and #handpainted draw on traditional *siapo* by emphasising the hand-painted quality of the work and the use of brown pigments. Here, *siapo*-associated forms connect Pacific cultural expression to a contemporary urban sporting environment that is neither territorially Sāmoan nor culturally singular. These recognisable formal and material qualities position the work within Sāmoan and wider Pacific relational fields, while its sporting references connect it to contemporary urban and commercial culture.

The post therefore brings together visual and social registers that might otherwise be classified separately: Pacific barkcloth, American professional sport, commercial exchange, urban affiliation, and diasporic cultural identification. Rather than representing a singular or territorially fixed Sāmoan identity, the work places *siapo*-associated forms within a contemporary urban sporting context. Sports-development researcher Andrew Grainger's discussion of sport, race, and representation helps situate such associations within wider relations of cultural power.²⁵ Social anthropologist and printmaker Roderick Ewins's analysis of barkcloth and masculinity shows that *siapo* and *masi* are gender-multivalent forms that can mediate aspects of male identity.²⁶ Although this post does not function primarily as evidence of women's authorship, its inclusion follows from, rather than departs from, the article's feminist method. A visual and material practice historically associated with women's production can also mediate Pacific masculinities through sporting and commercial circulation. Distinguishing the gendered conditions of production from the gendered meanings *siapo* acquires through circulation prevents it from being treated as intrinsically feminine and reveals how gender is relationally constituted through production, use, representation, and exchange.²⁷

Read through errantry, the image moves among Pacific visual traditions, American sporting culture, commercial circulation, and diasporic identification without resolving these elements into one stable territorial identity. Read through relation, its meaning is produced through the conjunction of motifs, hashtags, artisanal labour, sporting affiliation, and circulation for sale. Architecturally, the post activates a digital relational field in which cultural form, urban sport, masculinity, and commerce encounter one another.

Case study 2: UrbanNesian hashtags, errant Pacific affiliation, and relational economy

The second case examines a Tumblr record posted by UrbanNesian on 20 June 2014 and titled *UrbanNesian Siapo Print*.²⁸ The digitally composed image uses repeated stylised frangipani and geometric motifs in turquoise to form a rectangular field, with variations in opacity producing overlapping blocks across the surface. The word *Siapo* appears prominently in stylised typography and is enclosed by a yellow border. The post is accompanied by tags including *siapo*, *tapa*, *kapa*, *ngatu*, *masi*, *samoa*, *tonga*, *hawaii*, *aloha*, *urbannesian*, *urbangraphics*, *urbanart*, *design*, *samoanart*, *polynesian*, and *hawaiinei*. These tags perform what the study identifies as identity emphasis: a rhetorical function through which layered and fluid expressions of cultural identity and embodiment are made visible. The gathering of these terms situates the online *siapo* within overlapping Pacific, diasporic, artistic, and urban fields. In particular, the tags bring several culturally specific barkcloth vocabularies—*siapo*, *tapa*, *kapa*, *ngatu*, and *masi*—into relation within a single digital post. Their co-presence does not necessarily mean that the producer privileges a general Pacific identity over culturally specific affiliations, nor does it indicate a rejection of cultural specificity. Instead, the post shows how digital circulation can place distinct cultural forms and vocabularies in encounter with one another. This clustering may be understood as a relational economy of naming and circulation, in which cultural terms retain their differences while acquiring additional meaning through proximity, exchange, and movement. It also gestures towards historical and contemporary networks of inter-Pacific exchange.

Read through errantry, the post moves across visual traditions, cultural terms, technologies, and urban contexts without resolving them into one fixed identity. Read through relation, the significance of these affiliations emerges through their juxtaposition and circulation. The post therefore does more than represent a digitally adapted *siapo* surface. Through repetition, opacity, typography, naming, and tagging, it organises a relational field in which multiple Pacific identities and barkcloth traditions are encountered together. Architecturally, the post composes a digital interior through pattern, typography, naming, and juxtaposition, allowing several Pacific affiliations to be encountered within one relational field.

Case study 3: Diasporic relational naming and family

Another post in the dataset, uploaded by the Instagram account *rosievai*, shows a close-up of barkcloth accompanied by the caption “Something’s [*sic*] are worth more than gold,” a hibiscus emoji, and the hashtags *#Tapa*, *#Siapo*, and *#FamilyIsForever*. The hashtags do more than identify the object. Together, they situate the image within an affective and relational field connecting barkcloth,

cultural value, and family. When I presented this post at an anthropology conference, an audience member questioned my description of the barkcloth as *siapo*, reading its visual characteristics instead as Tongan *ngatu*. I realised that I had followed the uploader's use of #*Siapo* rather than classifying the object solely according to its presumed visual provenance. This encounter exposed a methodological tension between material attribution and diasporic relational naming. The audience member attended to the textile's visual and cultural specificity, while my analysis had followed the uploader's own use of #*Siapo*. These approaches answer different questions: one asks about the probable cultural provenance of the barkcloth; the other asks how the image was named, connected, and circulated within a diasporic digital setting. The uploader's caption and hashtags perform a related but different operation: they connect the image to overlapping vocabularies of *tapa*, *siapo*, family, memory, and value.²⁹

Here, embodied knowledge refers to cultural knowledge carried through making, memory, recognition, display, exchange, and relational obligation. In diasporic contexts, such knowledge need not be confined to uninterrupted access to customary materials, homeland locations, or ceremonial settings. It may also be encountered and enacted through family interiors, remembered patterns, photographs, digital images, captions, and hashtags. The digital does not replace embodied cultural knowledge; it becomes one of the environments in which that knowledge is recalled, adapted, circulated, and recognised. Analysis of the wider dataset identified recurring themes of diasporic identity, embodied cultural knowledge, family, and relational connection. These findings support the argument that the posting and circulation of online *siapo* can operate simultaneously as self-making and space-making.³⁰

Read through errantry and relation, the Rosie post is not culturally rootless. Rather, it moves among visual form, cultural terminology, digital circulation, family memory, and diasporic recognition. Its hashtags create connections without resolving them into a singular identity: barkcloth and platform, cultural knowledge and family feeling, material form and digital image, individual expression and collective recognition are brought into relation. *Vā* remains the primary Sāmoan spatial framework; Glissant's terms help articulate how these relations move across diasporic and digital conditions.³¹

The architectural significance of the Rosie post lies in this relational work. The image does not merely represent barkcloth within a neutral digital container. Through its caption, hashtags, circulation, and recognition, it helps to line and activate the digital environment. It produces an orientation through which users encounter cultural form in relation to family, identity, memory, and other users. Online *siapo* therefore participates in spatial production: it makes diasporic space without relying upon permanent ground, physical enclosure, or built form.

Across the three cases, online *siapo* undertakes distinct but connected forms of relational work. The first brings Pacific barkcloth into encounter with sport, masculinity, commerce, and urban affiliation. The second gathers multiple Pacific visual and linguistic traditions without resolving their differences into a single identity. The third connects barkcloth to family, memory, cultural value, and diasporic naming. Together, the cases show that online *siapo* is not a stable visual category but a spatial practice enacted through making, adapting, captioning, tagging, circulating, and recognising.

This argument requires a shift from understanding architecture primarily as material enclosure towards recognising architecture as the organisation and activation of spatial relations, whether online or in person. When architectural history privileges the tangible, fixed, measured, and permanent, spatial practices organised through textile, exchange, gendered labour, memory, and digital circulation become difficult to recognise.³² The wider dataset demonstrates that Sāmoan women's cultural production is also spatial production, while the three cases illustrate how multiple gendered meanings emerge through the production and circulation of online *siapo*. It does not ask to be admitted into architecture as an unusual digital object; rather, it reveals the limitations of architectural categories that have obscured relational and gendered forms of space-making. Read through *vā*, errantry, and relation, online *siapo* is mobile without being rootless and adaptive without being culturally empty. It carries embodied knowledge across changing material and technological conditions while producing relational settings for diasporic belonging. Its decolonial significance lies not merely in opposing Eurocentric architectural discourse, but in centring a Pacific feminist account of how space is already made through relation, cultural practice, and women's creative labour.

Implications for decolonising architectural discourse

Recent decolonial architectural scholarship has demonstrated that architecture's disciplinary categories are not historically neutral.³³ Colonialism shaped not only buildings, territories, and institutions, but also the terms through which architectural knowledge was organised: distinctions between modern and traditional, centre and periphery, architecture and craft, and expert and vernacular knowledge. Architectural historians Irene Cheng and Charles L. Davis II, together with architect and scholar Mabel O. Wilson, show that racial thought was constitutive of modern architectural discourse, informing concepts such as progress, character, climate, style, civilisation, and national identity.³⁴ Architectural historian Itohan Osayimwese similarly argues that decolonial architectural history must do more than add previously excluded objects and subjects to an existing canon. It must also reconsider the methods, archives, geographical boundaries, and disciplinary categories through which architectural history itself is produced.³⁵

This distinction is central to the present argument. Recognising online *siapo* as architecture does not simply require adding a new object to an otherwise unchanged discipline. It requires questioning why built form, enclosure, material permanence, and authorship have been treated as primary evidence of architectural production, while textile, ceremony, exchange, memory, gendered labour, and digital circulation have remained peripheral. Glissant's concepts of errantry and relation support this shift by challenging systems of knowledge organised around singular roots, territorial possession, and closure. They do not, however, substitute for an Indigenous decolonial method. Architect, urbanist, and architectural historian Yat Ming Loo describes decolonisation in architecture as a process of questioning and dismantling inherited hierarchies of space, power, and knowledge, including binaries such as centre and periphery, East and West, and modern and traditional.³⁶ Online *siapo* tests these disciplinary divisions by moving between textile and spatial practice, material and digital form, cultural expression and architectural production. Smith further clarifies that decolonisation concerns not only the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, but also

the transformation of the structures through which knowledge is gathered, interpreted, classified, and authorised.³⁷ In this article, that transformation begins by taking *vā* seriously as spatial theory rather than treating it as cultural context added to an architectural analysis. *Vā* identifies space as relational and as requiring activation, care, negotiation, and maintenance.

Recent Pacific architectural scholarship develops this proposition as a matter of practice. Tongan architect, researcher, and architectural historian Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei positions *vā* as a praxis capable of shaping architectural work from conception and design through procurement, construction, and occupation. Further, in collaborative work with Sāmoan architect, researcher, and theorist Pesetā Fa'amatuāinu To'oto'ole'aava Lama Tone, 'Ilaiū Talei considers how Pacific genealogical relations and placemaking practices can inform architecture in Aotearoa.³⁸ This scholarship does not merely illustrate a decolonial theory developed elsewhere. It creates Pacific terms through which architectural research and practice can themselves be reorganised.

Anthropological approaches to materiality further complicate any simple opposition between material object and social relation. Anthropologist Daniel Miller's work approaches materiality not as inert substance, but as participating in the processes through which social worlds and identities are constituted.³⁹ Architectural anthropologist Marcel Vellinga similarly argues that architecture's material, social, and symbolic dimensions cannot be understood in isolation from one another.⁴⁰ Read alongside *vā*, these approaches help clarify that online *siapo* does not become immaterial when it circulates digitally. Rather, its materiality is extended across barkcloth, image, screen, platform, caption, hashtag, and circulation. *Vā* adds a specifically Sāmoan account of how these forms become spatially meaningful through relation, care, obligation, and embodied practice.

From this perspective, *siapo* does not need to be translated into a conventional architectural object in order to become spatially significant, nor does its digitisation make it immaterial. Its making, exchange, display, recognition, and circulation already organise relations among people, memories, identities, obligations, and places. Online *siapo* extends this spatial work into digital environments. Its architectural force lies in its capacity to line and activate a relational field without depending upon permanent enclosure or territorial ground. The decolonial contribution of this article therefore lies in changing architecture's terms of recognition. Online *siapo* makes visible a form of spatial production carried through Sāmoan women's embodied and relational knowledge. It illustrates that architecture's inherited emphasis on the fixed, measurable, professionally authored, and materially permanent has obscured practices through which space is also made: through textile, memory, circulation, naming, exchange, and the tending of *vā*. Decolonising architectural discourse in this context means not simply making the discipline more inclusive but allowing Sāmoan spatial concepts and practices to alter what the discipline understands architecture to be.

Conclusion

This article has argued that online *siapo* constitutes a form of Sāmoan spatial production. Its architectural significance lies not in its resemblance to a building or conformity to inherited categories of object, ornament, or craft, but in its capacity to line, connect, orient, and activate digital space through Sāmoan relational values.

Reading online *siapo* through *vā*, errantry, and relation reveals a spatial practice that is mobile without being rootless, diasporic without being reducible to exile, and digital without being detached from embodied cultural knowledge. *Vā* provides the primary spatial framework: space is produced and sustained through relations among people, practices, obligations, memories, ancestors, and places. Glissant's errantry and relation operate as companion concepts, helping to articulate how those relations move across media, geography, and diasporic experience without requiring identity to become fixed around a single point of origin.

The article makes two related contributions. First, it identifies Sāmoan women's production and circulation of online *siapo* as a gendered form of architectural knowledge. Second, it demonstrates how Indigenous Pacific spatial concepts challenge architectural frameworks organised around territorial ground, material permanence, enclosure, and professional authorship. Online *siapo* does not seek admission into architecture as a marginal digital supplement. Instead, it reveals that architecture's established categories have been too narrow to recognise spatial practices already operating through relation, textile, memory, identity, and exchange.

To describe online *siapo* as a Pacific feminist spatial practice is therefore to make both a spatial and political claim. The practices through which Sāmoan women create, post, tag, circulate, and recognise *siapo* do not merely represent diasporic identity; they participate in making the relational environments through which that identity is lived, negotiated, and renewed. Their significance lies not only in making women's cultural production more visible, but in showing that such production is already spatial and architectural. Online *siapo* therefore demonstrates that an architecture without fixed ground need not be without place, embodiment, or cultural accountability. It may instead be held through *vā*: oriented through cultural memory, sustained through exchange, and continually remade through relation.

NOTES

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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]

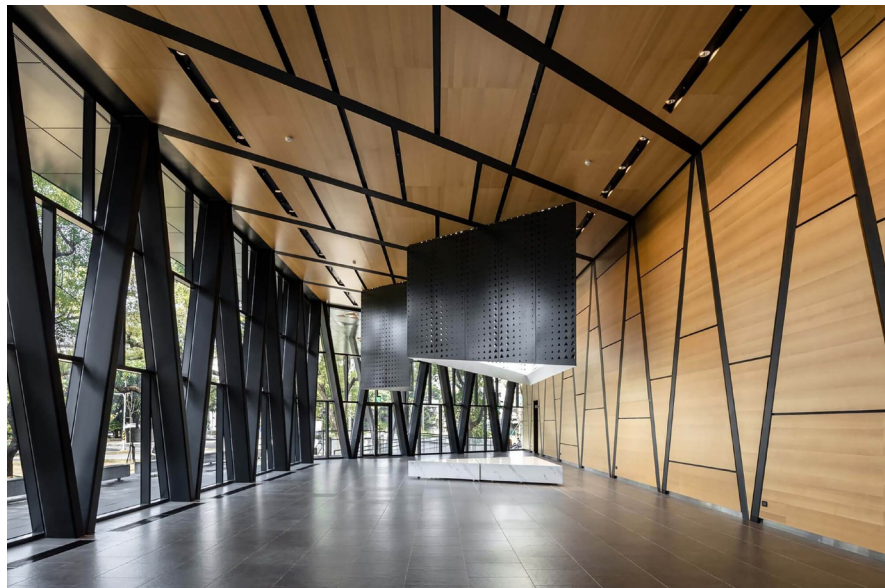




Fig. 8 MAYU Architects (2021).
Floating mezzanine [Photograph:
MAYU Architects]

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.

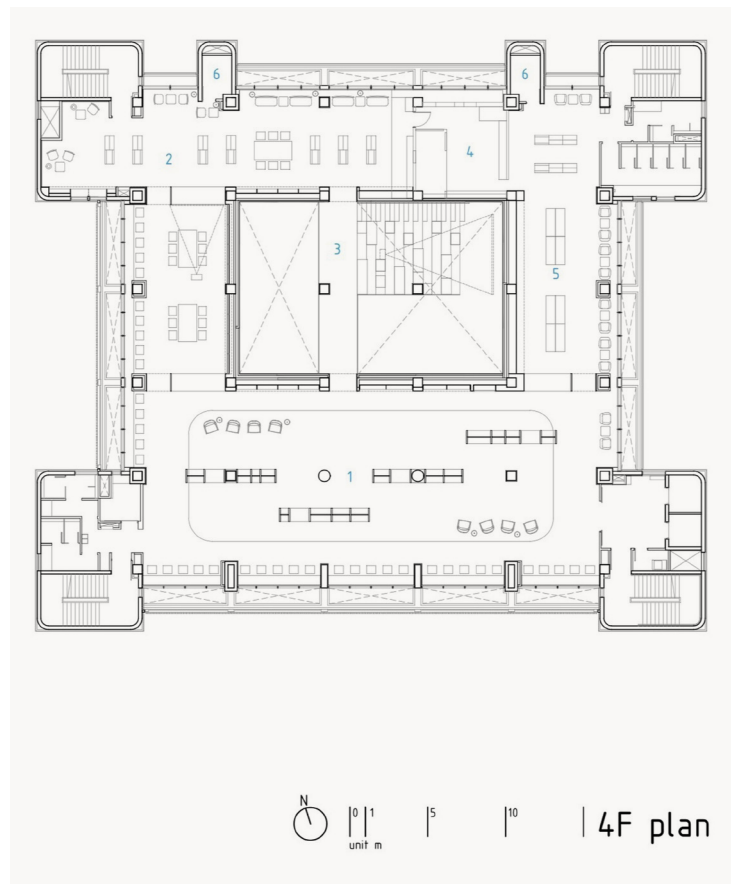


Fig. 9 MAYU Architects (2021). Plan
of the fourth floor in the renovated
library [MAYU Architects]

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.

CHARMAINE 'ILAIŪ TALEI

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.

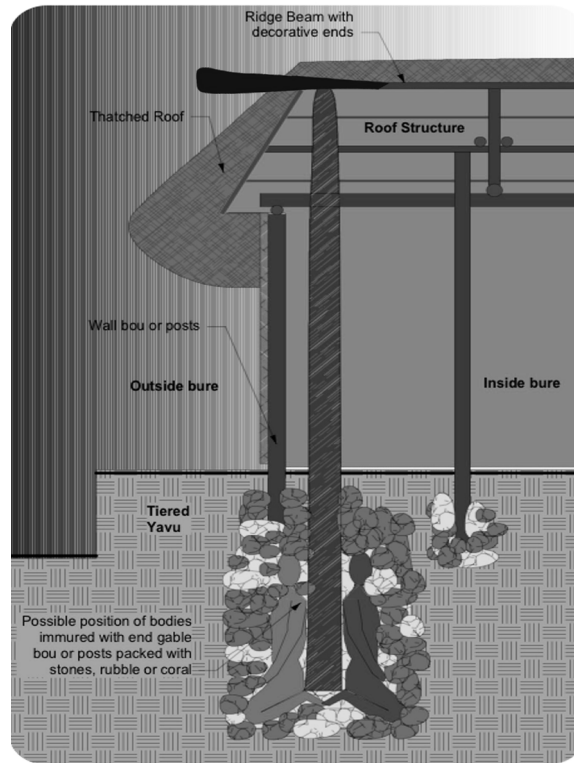
The article contributes to the purposes of cross-cultural theory of architecture; a framework explored by Paul Memmott and James Davidson in their seminal article, “Exploring a Cross-Cultural Theory of Architecture,” which investigates interactions between the architectural values and building traditions 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.].

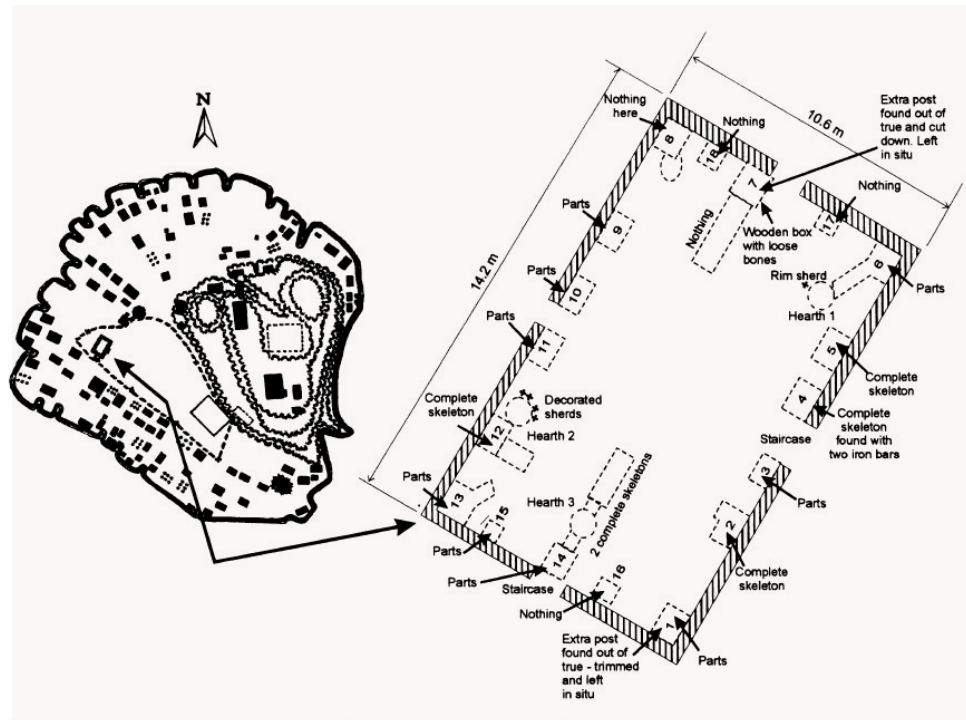


Figure 1. Left: Bau Island, Fiji with location of Navatanitawake (From Tippet 1959). Right: Plan of upper platform of Navatanitawake showing PWD trenches numbered. The hatched outline shows the beachstone border. (Drawn by M. Tracey after Parke)

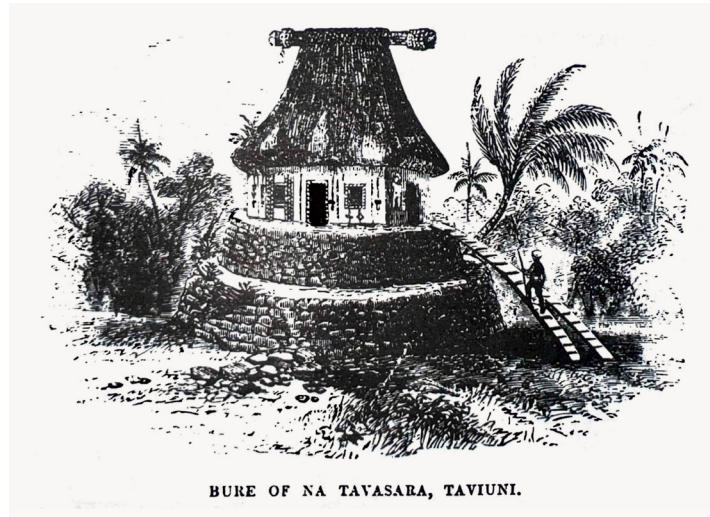
inform the *bure*'s roof form. So, one could deduct that *mana*, as an extra-ego authority, directed the *mataisau*'s configuration of the early Fijian *bure*, which is now appropriated as the romanticised form of the tourist *bure*.

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):

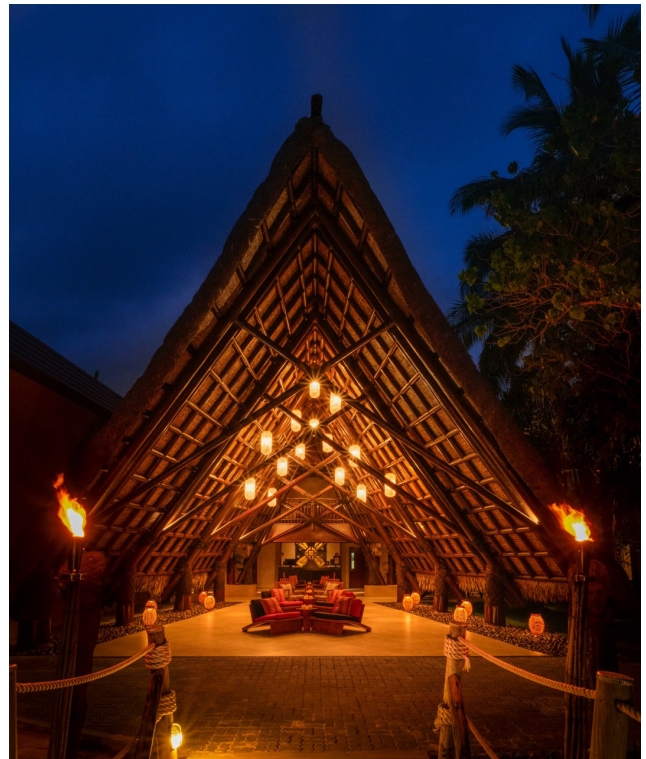
The Fijian name for our rooms is “bure.” There are 45 traditionally designed and styled bures, luxuriously appointed and all with views of the beautiful Likuliku Lagoon and ocean. Each bure has been built with authentic architecture, natural materials and traditional features including local Vesi (hardwood) 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*.

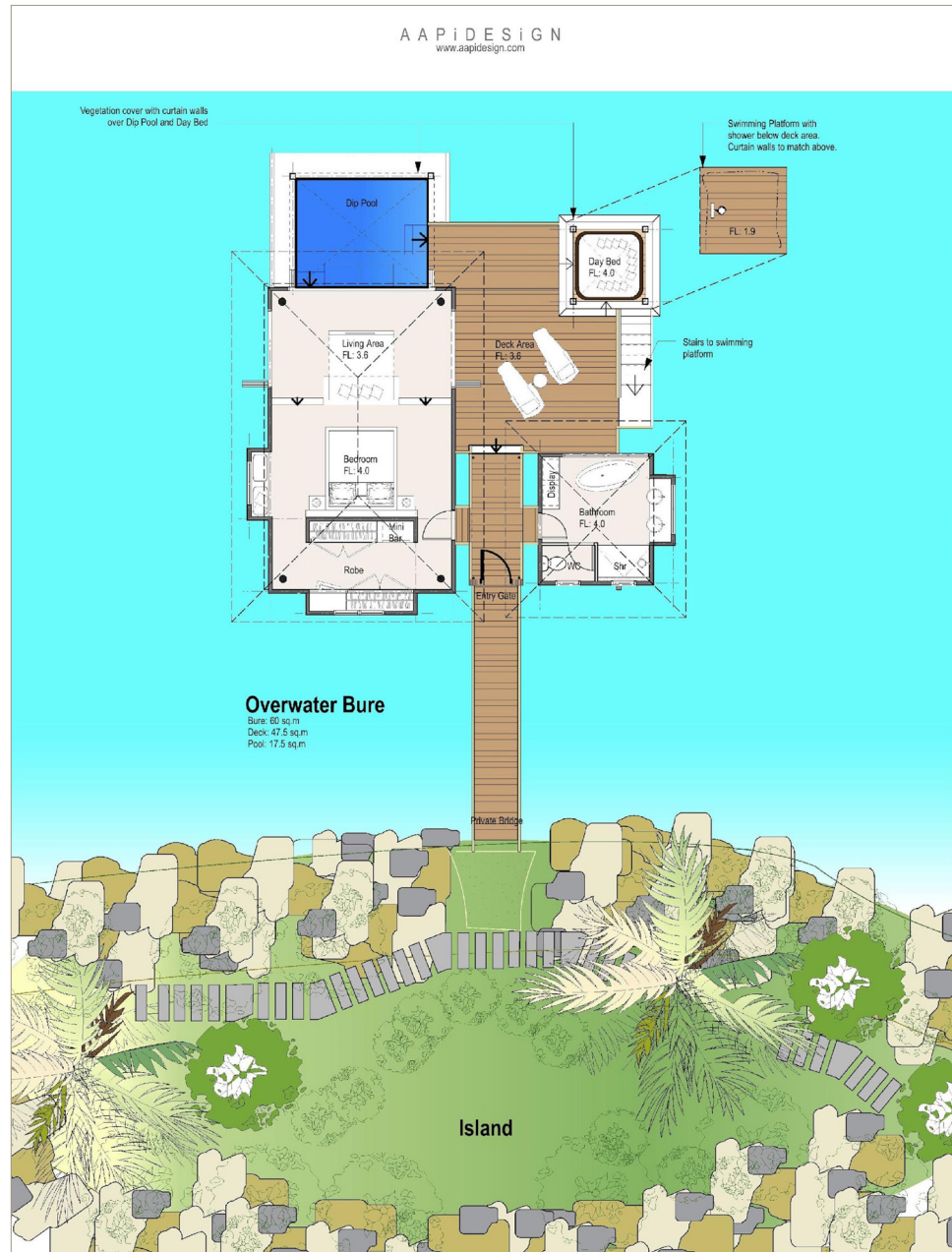
Shangri-La

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 Meziat, "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.
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 Momoeodonu, 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. Aselesia 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.
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CATHERINE MEI MIN WOO AND ANOMA PIERIS

INTERSTICES 26

Archipelagic memories at Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum

Malaysia is split by a body of water into the peninsula (West Malaysia) and the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) on Borneo Island, which in turn is part of the Sunda Islands archipelagic cluster.¹ This collection of territories with diverse political structures is interconnected through shared colonial histories and inherited institutional traditions, in turn, rooted in the ways in which colonisation developed in these culturally distinctive and physically different geographical territories. British control of a number of 'Malayan' territories dates from the late eighteenth century onwards until 1957 and includes the colonial Straits Settlements: Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. Singapore was part of the post-independence Malayan Federation briefly from 1963 to 1965. East Malaysia, this article's focus, initially governed by a British agent, was an independent colony that subsequently joined and remained part of the federation. Architecture historian John Ting's extensive research on Sarawak's urban development helps situate this geopolitical history in settlements developed along riverine networks, as different from Malaya's colonial port cities.²

This article forms part of a larger research project that studies institutional development in Malaysia through hospitals established in parallel in the capital cities of these three different territories. The colonial network of medical institutions, typically concentrated in Singapore, spread throughout Malaya during the early twentieth century, linking both territories through a shared colonial history that saw the first European hospitals and medical schools established in Singapore before expanding to other regions of Malaya.³ The focus on hospital architecture offers insights into Malaya's medical history, explored by medical anthropologist Lenore Manderson through colonial public health policies.⁴ Developments in East Malaysia suggest the parallel evolution of medical institutions during the post-independence nation-building era. As noted by Sandra Khor Manickam, given the region's ethnocultural complexity, including Indigenous (First Nations) communities, it is important to understand how Indigenous experiences are interpreted within these institutional memories.⁵ This article explores how evidence of these particularities in hospital museums offers new insights into institutional histories.

Lai Chee Kien's seminal work on Kuala Lumpur has convincingly demonstrated that institutional design in former colonies expresses professional commitment

to self-determination through their form and aesthetics.⁶ Key development indices providing evidence of these changes include the rising standards of healthcare provision through numerical increases in, and the expansion of, extant hospital facilities, which demonstrate the post-independence government's investment in its population's health and welfare, alongside the training of medical professionals and support staff. A broad understanding of these activities enables comparison of how general hospitals were governed in different contexts, including their demographic complexity. In Malaysia, increased regional migration during British colonial rule created a multi-ethnic society with segregation based on race and class, including differentiated practices of care and opportunity. After independence, the medical duty of care required respecting and recognising diverse cultural needs. However, systemic colonial policies of racialisation sometimes persisted and became embedded in healthcare policy and institutional reform during the nation-building decades. The hospital, as it transitioned across the political event of independence, offers valuable insights into the relational histories of institutional decolonisation in each locality.

This article is divided into two sections. Section 1 elaborates on key features that distinguish East from West Malaysia, as viewed through the lens of its plural social composition, spatial networks, and institutional memories. Section 2 discusses the post-independence transformations to the medical institutions in Sarawak as the context for fieldwork at a specific medical museum site. It focuses, first, on Sarawak General Hospital, followed by Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum (LKHHMM), situating each institution within the historical development of their respective cities: Kuching and Sibü. There is a paucity of historical records on hospitals in Malaysia, in general, and in East Malaysia, in particular, making the hospital museum an important archive of the transition from colonial to postcolonial political systems and processes, in particular, its adaptation of the plural political model. These complexities are further revealed through multivocal constructions of historical memory.

While the hospital's community and progress are commemorated through in-house publications such as *100 Years: Sarawak General Hospital Kuching 1910–2010*, the lack of an on-site museum prompted the investigation of a unique museum facility in the neighbouring Sibü district. A visit to the LKHHMM in Sibü, Sarawak, provided the provocation for exploring the historical relationship between East Malaysia's Indigenous communities and the colonial institution first introduced to Malaya in the late nineteenth century. It enabled comparison of the general hospital with the community hospital, which, in this example, is funded by a Chinese migrant minority. In the absence of the original building, the hospital museum has proven to be a significant repository of memories and experiences that reveal Malaysia's multicultural composition. The conclusion discusses the value of interpreting hospital architecture through archipelagic memories. The phrase is evocative of East Malaysia's disconnection, geographically and politically, from the Malayan peninsula, isolating and connecting it in different ways.

Section 1: Peninsula and the archipelago

Plural social composition

Sarawak, as part of Borneo Island, belongs to Southeast Asia's archipelagic island territories, and its spatial organisation, historical development, and sociocultural diversity reflect patterns more typical of island chains than of a contiguous landmass like West Malaysia. Despite occupying part of a larger island, Sarawak's dispersed riverine communities, uneven infrastructure, and distinct cultural regions create a functional geography defined by isolation, nodal connectivity, the jungle-produce trade, and uneven development.⁷ Scholarly work on watershed-based social networks further highlights the need to view connectivity and placemaking as shaped primarily by riverine mobility.⁸ Recognising Sarawak's 'archipelagic' qualities thus offers a valuable lens for understanding governance, Indigenous identity, memory, and development across its interior and coastal regions.

Geographic separation gave rise to different systems of colonial government on the Malayan peninsula and Borneo island.⁹ There was a centralised and hierarchical system of government adopted on the Malayan peninsula with colonial administrators in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Province Wellesley and, briefly, Dinding and Melaka) and local administration by Rajahs or chieftains, including in Selangor, the state in which Kuala Lumpur is located.¹⁰ In contrast, the Brookes, a family of British adventurers, ruled Sarawak as a sovereign state under a hereditary monarchy from as early as 1841.¹¹ Across three generations until 1946, the so-called White Rajahs of Sarawak controlled this territory. British reluctance to incorporate Sarawak as a colony, limited resources to challenge Indigenous jurisdiction, and Brunei's status as a Sultanate, and later a British protectorate in 1888, created conditions for a different approach to sovereignty, resulting in the Brooke administration developing Sarawak's infrastructure independently and more slowly than that of the Western Peninsula, which benefited from stronger institutional support for developing infrastructure and closer integration with the colonial network.¹²

Malaysia's pluralistic state ideology seeks to unify colonial-era racial categories while respecting multi-racial and multi-religious identities. Yet the colonial structure of racialisation was carried into the post-independence administration. This process was most strongly institutionalised in West Malaysia, unlike in Sabah and Sarawak, where colonial rule engaged a wider spectrum of Indigenous groups through categories such as *bumiputera* in Malaysia. *Bumiputera*, translated as "son of the land," is an administrative and political designation of Malays and some Indigenous peoples of Peninsular and East Malaysia. This category is distinct from non-*bumiputera* who are designated as Chinese, Indian, and ethnic 'others.' This collective categorisation of precolonial Indigenous communities is often used in contrast to settler or migrant groups and is mirrored in Indonesia's *pribumi* designation.¹³ Although *bumiputera* and *pribumi* are used in Malaysian academic contexts, and as transnational categories, only *bumiputera* is formalised as a legal definition with constitutional identity and benefits. This was initially mandated in Malaysia's Federal Constitution in 1957, which specifies the "special position" of Malays, Indigenous peoples, and First Nations or *orang asli*, requiring government protection through economic and educational measures.¹⁴ Although the formal policies to institutionalise the term *bumiputera* only

emerged in 1971, after the 13 May racial riots of 1969, the colonial practice of collectivist classifications of Malays and Indigenous groups persisted and evolved throughout the country's postcolonial development journey.¹⁵ The problems related to *bumiputera* demographic absorption surfaced decades later due to economic imbalance caused by government development policies.¹⁶

Because of its autonomy and different administrative system, Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island maintained the diversity and numerical advantage of Indigenous populations, including, but not limited to, the Bataks, Bisayaks, Dayaks, Dusun, Kedayan, Kelabits, Kenyahs, Melanau, Murut, Punan, and Sekapan, who maintain their separate identities and languages. Openness to cultural and religious diversity shaped policies on patient classification and healthcare. Figure 1 is an extract from the Annual Reports by the Medical and Health Department of Kuching General Hospital, which describes the breakdown in patient nationalities admitted to Kuching General Hospital, Sarawak, in 1948.¹⁷ Now named Sarawak General Hospital, it provided medical services to all major towns and deployed remote medical services via travelling medical contingents.¹⁸

The report accounts for thirteen groups alongside regional migrants and some foreigners (American and Australian), including Indigenous communities from both Borneo and Indonesia. This granular approach to racial categorisation was absent in colonial [West] Malaya and Singapore, and persisted past independence in the adoption of broader plural categories that assimilated the many linguistically diverse tribal groups under Malays.¹⁹ Such categorisation produced a different Indigenous-to-migrant dynamic in West Malaysia compared to the East.

Fig. 1 Medical and Health Department of Kuching General Hospital, Sarawak (1950). Nationalities of patients admitted to Kuching General Hospital in 1948 [National Archives, United Kingdom]

(xiv)

Appendix VI.

GENERAL HOSPITAL, KUCHING, 1948.

<i>In-Patients.</i>				
Total number of admissions during the year	..	..	..	5,510
Total number of male patients admitted during the year	..	..	..	2,671
Total number of female patients admitted during the year	..	..	..	2,839
<i>Nationalities.</i>				
Americans	..	..	..	2
Australian	..	..	..	5
Bisayah	..	..	..	2
Bataks	..	..	..	5
Chinese	..	..	..	3,636
Dayaks	..	..	..	1,004
Dusuns	..	..	..	5
Europeans	..	..	..	85
Eurasians	..	..	..	23
Indians	..	..	..	162
Japanese	..	..	..	1
Javanese	..	..	..	43
Kadayan	..	..	..	1
Kayans	..	..	..	3
Kanowit	..	..	..	1
Kelabits	..	..	..	2
Malays	..	..	..	506
Mamaloh	..	..	..	2
Melanaus	..	..	..	14
Murut	..	..	..	5
Philipinos	..	..	..	3
TOTAL				5,510

The scarcity of comparable institutional evidence differentiating Indigenous from Malay-Muslim identity (or Indigenous Christian identities) highlights their structural absorption in West Malaysia by the mid-twentieth century. In contrast, the census figures for Sarawak in 1947, documented by L. W. Jones, identify the Iban (Sea Dayak) at 34.8 per cent as the largest community (exceeding the Chinese at 26.6 per cent).²⁰ Ten Indigenous groups are named, including the Malays. Likewise, in his study of Borneo during World War II, Ooi Keat Gin observes that, unlike in other colonial territories, “Brooke paternalism enacted legislation to shield native peoples from all forms of exploitation by both Chinese and Europeans, especially in matters related to land acquisition and utilization.”²¹ He notes that Brooke’s regular army, the Sarawak Rangers, largely consisted of Iban recruits.²² The excerpt in Figure 1, from the National Archives of Britain, where each patient was categorised by ‘race’ or ‘nationality,’ corroborates the persistence of Indigenous identification in postwar Sarawak (1948–49).²³

Spatial networks

The diverse geographical conditions of each colonial territory’s capital cities influenced where general hospitals were built. Colonial general hospitals expanded by merging European and pauper hospitals to serve broader non-European (Chinese, Indian, Malay) urban communities that supplied labour for the colonial economy. By the twentieth century, these institutions had become self-contained campuses linked with other hospitals in capital cities through expert exchange and specialisation development. They were typically built by the colonial public works department and included experiments in tropical hospital design.

While these campus configurations might be considered the nodal points in each geography, a range of smaller institutions existed alongside them. Notably, community hospitals established by immigrant philanthropists initially emerged to counter the colonial government’s neglect of its population and were found in both urban and rural areas. They were seen initially as pauper hospitals or charitable institutions because they catered to the local population and non-European migrant workers. Rural hospitals were outliers in this spatial configuration and can be recognised as simple spaces within the homes of healers (*bomohs*, *sinseh*,

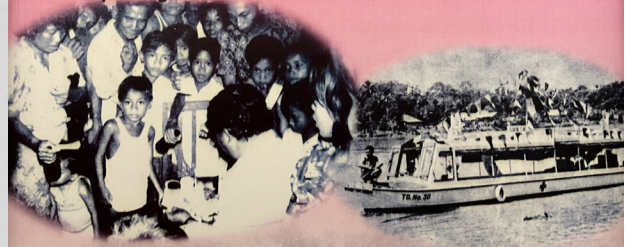
Fig. 2 Two boat styles used as travelling dispensaries along the Pahang (left) and Igan (right) rivers [Photographs: National Archives United Kingdom, 1937 (left), and Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum, 2023 (right)]



TRAVELLING DISPENSARY BOAT ON PAHANG RIVER

Travelling Dispensaries

While the Sibu town folk could get treatment at Lau King Howe Hospital, those living in the remote interior had little access to medical care. Travelling Dispensaries, using native-style boats, were set up to meet this need. The first such boat was completed in Sibu in March 1948, and travelled along the Igan River providing simple treatment to rural folk. Travelling Dispensary No. 1 as it was known, was manned by a hospital assistant, an attendant and a boat driver. It did not only function as a mobile outpatient clinic, but also as a river ambulance to bring the very sick back to the dispensary or hospital. The staff attended to 3,792 patients in the first nine months of the mobile dispensary's operation and by 1949, the total attendances had increased to 13,893. More travelling dispensaries were set up and ten years later, there were four teams operating in the Third Division.



pawang), shophouses for traditional Chinese herbalists, floating boat dispensaries, mobile roadworthy dispensaries, and religious spaces, suggesting dispersion of the many variations of these facilities.²⁴ In Figure 2, two examples of water-based travelling boat dispensaries, extensions of the fishing-boat designs typical of the regions, illustrate how existing transport routes were utilised in West (left) and East Malaysia (right) to ensure remote communities received rudimentary care.

Although some of these medical outreach programmes in Malaysia and Singapore were eventually integrated into the colonial healthcare model, Ooi Giok Ling argues that colonial neglect encouraged greater reliance on Indigenous and ethnic medicines among migrants, a practice that persisted well into the twentieth century.²⁵ Each Indigenous and migrant community maintained its own herbalists, midwives, spiritual healers, and folk medicines, thereby sustaining Indigenous knowledge and ethnic practices. Colonial hospitals and European medical practices were feared as foreign environments that perpetuate alien practices. The diverse practices introduced complexities that challenged colonial healthcare ideals.

Reciprocal exchanges of medical practices are not discussed in scholarship on Sarawak; however, Richard Fidler argues for Chinese-Iban economic symbiosis in the Rejang Valley, whereby material goods were exchanged for jungle products.²⁶ The symbolic use of these imported goods such as iron, cloth, and jars in Iban rituals and ceremonies, and evidence of trade in “*rottan* [rattan], animal hides, *gutta percha*, camphor, rhinoceros horns, and monkey gall stones” for Chinese medicine, suggest forms of co-dependence which, the authors contend, prevented conflict.²⁷ A 1908 essay by A. E. Lawrence on spirit worship among Sarawak’s Milanau describes how images of the spirit believed to have caused the sickness are placed in model boats or houses and either floated down the river or consigned to the jungle as part of the Berayun ceremony.²⁸ In the case of an epidemic, a whole village might join together and build an elaborate sickness boat. Chinese medical practices accompanied migration. Kean Ghee Lim, in *The History of Medicine and Health in Malaysia*, mentions that a Fook Chow medical officer arrived in Sibü as early as 1913, accompanying a wave of Chinese migrants and occupying a shack, which Lau King Howe Hospital (LKHH) eventually replaced.²⁹ Information on how inter-racial relations impacted Sarawak’s medical landscape is scarce.

Another important feature of East Malaysia was the close-knit internal riverine network, by which Indigenous settlements were identified in comparison to towns and *kampungs* in West Malaysia. Geography, rather than populous settlement patterns, assumed prominence in their histories. Sarawak is situated in the Samarahan and Sarawak river basins—the state capital, Kuching, is on the Sarawak River. Historically, including during the colonial period, the Iban were largely concentrated in the Batang Lupar, Saribas, and Rejang river systems, while the Land Dayaks were in the upper reaches of the Lundu, Sarawak, Kayang, and Sadong, notes Ooi.³⁰ The Melanau settlements were located in the lower reaches of the Igan, Oyah, Mukah, Balingan, Tatau, and Kemena rivers. Smaller groups were similarly distributed along the rivers’ various tributaries. These many groups practised either swidden wet-rice cultivation, with several inhabiting longhouses, while a few subsisted through hunting and foraging. As detailed by John Ting, the riverine system was the main transportation network fortified

at strategic points, used for colonial punitive expeditions, and for the circulation of commodities.³¹ The riverine and oceanic networks, which long preceded the construction of roads and highways, signal earlier geomorphic connections across Southeast Asia, between Borneo and Indonesia, and across the South China Sea.

Conversely, road-based connections between remote townships, cities, and capital cities can be understood as an urban phenomenon that replicates the networks between Sarawak, Peninsular Malaysia, and Singapore. During Singapore's independence, its pioneering medical schools were linked directly with Peninsular Malaysia via the University of Malaya's Kuala Lumpur division and by supplying trained staff to Sarawak General Hospital. Within the state, the network can be mapped through its roads and waterways, connecting smaller general hospitals throughout Sarawak to Sarawak General Hospital for specialist cases or referrals. Healthcare to remote areas is connected and delivered by travelling doctors and dispensaries by air and along rivers. These routes serve as conduits for mobility and economic growth, positioning the region as both centre and periphery within a medical network linking Singapore and Malaysia.

Institutional memories

Given these important differences between Peninsular and archipelagic Malaysia, and the scarcity of information on the medical histories of the latter, a possible entry point has been through institutional memories. Self-conscious reflection on colonial institutional legacies has been a postcolonial phenomenon occurring somewhat belatedly for hospitals, once their instrumental functions have been fulfilled. They are typically oriented towards research and training medical students through education into past practices, highlighting medical advances, whereby national imperatives absorbed or transformed colonial systems. Singapore's medical museums, established during and after the British colonial period, include the King Edward VII College of Medicine's Singapore Medical Museum (1905) and the Institute for Medical Research's Biomedical Museum (1983). Such collections, which featured anatomical specimens purely for educational purposes, can be seen as sites of affirmation for colonial authority and of scientific knowledge over Indigenous ways of healing.³² These institutions' initial focus on Indigenous bodies as hosts for tropical diseases established a racist foundation for colonial medical training. The display of biological specimens abstracted from non-European patients and used to represent their pathology objectified natives, dehumanising them as inferiors in the colonial medical system.³³ After independence, national governments in former colonies inherited and adapted colonial-built environments, administrative systems, and institutional cultures to serve local needs, though the degree of decolonising medical legacies varied. While demolition and expansion often erased evidence of spatial evolution, hospital museums preserved and reframed postcolonial developments in relation to colonial histories. In West Malaysia, hospital museums or medical museums commemorating hospital milestones and medical progress in the state emerged belatedly in 1996.³⁴ And although archival pamphlets describe the opening ceremony of Sarawak General Hospital Main Tower in 1970, featuring architectural plans and descriptions that highlight new, high-tech infrastructure, there is no equivalent museum in Kuching, the colonial nodal point in the hospital network.³⁵ East Malaysia's most prominent hospital museum is in

the neighbouring city of Sibu, a district in central Sarawak, at the former LKHH site. It is the first and only publicly accessible hospital museum in East Malaysia. The analysis of archival records, combined with the historical accounts gathered from the LKHHMM and notes from a guided one-on-one tour with a museum guide, suggests the complex dynamics between the Indigenous communities and the migrant Chinese community, and the new tensions that emerged from the creation of Malaysian identity in the state.

Section 2: Hospitals in Sarawak

Sarawak General Hospital

Sir James Brooke established Kuching, the capital and urban centre of Sarawak and a major port, in 1841.³⁶ Sarawak General Hospital was built just three decades later, in 1870, under the Brooke administration, to provide rudimentary health-care for this growing population.³⁷ It was the state's primary general hospital, and a key institutional node in this region's archipelagic network of colonial medical institutions, spanning Malaysia and Singapore. While Singapore was an administrative centre for British colonial rule of Malaya, Singapore, and North Borneo, the post-independence era saw a collective elevation and redistribution of administrative powers and resources throughout West Malaysia, Singapore, and East Malaysia. The establishment of several new hospitals within their network of medical institutions increased access to care for the broader population and reduced reliance on outstation healthcare support. In gaining independence from the British, regions such as Sarawak extended the reciprocal infrastructure connections between West Malaysia and Singapore.

Fig. 3 Top: The European Hospital and Dispensary was built in 1909 and was the first public building in Sarawak to be over two storeys high. It had a concrete frame supported by *bakau* (mangrove timber) piling. Bottom: The main entrance to Sarawak General Hospital in 1930 [Photographs: National Archives United Kingdom]



Once colonial general hospitals were repurposed as national institutions, the intended roles of existing migrant hospitals and medical practices changed. Before the British administration's duty of care extended to native and non-European communities, migrant hospitals were the preferred means of providing familiar and accessible healthcare to poorer populations. More evident in Sarawak, which had and continues to have wider Indigenous diversity and presence than in Peninsular Malaya, the persistence of 'ethnic' medical practices of non-European communities, including herbal and other remedies and midwifery extended to the many shamanic spiritual and ritualistic healing practices and ethnobotanical treatments of the Indigenous tribal communities spread throughout Sarawak. Colonial administrators and missionaries typically regarded these Indigenous practices as superstitious or unhygienic.³⁸ However, despite recognition of Indigenous diversity, the larger Dayak population remained the focus of research from 1946 to 1963.³⁹

Sarawak General Hospital, then known as Kuching General Hospital, first consisted of the European Hospital and the Pauper Hospital, with a mix of colonial and wooden, single-storey wards (Fig. 3). The European Hospital was

Fig. 4 Medical Headquarters, Sarawak, Kuching (1970). North-facing façade of the new hospital main tower [Photograph: National Archives United Kingdom]



situated near Chinatown and along Sarawak River before being consolidated and reconstructed to meet the growing region's training and capacity requirements.⁴⁰ While the European Hospital was an ornate colonial British Renaissance Revival building, the move inland along Jalan Tun Abang Haji Openg in 1925 allowed the hospital's architectural and medical presence to be reimagined and evolve alongside its contemporaries in Malaya and Singapore.⁴¹

When Malaysia was formed in 1964 through the alliance of these former colonies, Sarawak was included in the infrastructural upgrades proposed in the First, Second, and Third Malaysia Plans. This included the development of Sarawak General Hospital.⁴² The main tower of the new Sarawak General Hospital was proposed in 1969 and completed in 1970. Unlike the existing healthcare buildings of the time, this was the first medical facility in the state designed as a fully contained, air-conditioned, multistorey, multipurpose hospital building—exemplified by the hospital's Main Tower Block (Fig. 4).⁴³

Designed and planned in collaboration between the Public Works Department and Australian architects and engineers, Leighton, Irwin and Company, the key architectural elements included a fully equipped and contained nine-storey hospital block with full diagnostic facilities and wards.⁴⁴ Moreover, as the largest hospital in the state, Sarawak General Hospital provided medical services to all major towns and deployed remote medical services via travelling medical contingents.⁴⁵ However, as stated previously, while the hospital's technological innovation, training, and physical developments that are considered normative in the West are commemorated through in-house publications such as *100 Years: Sarawak General Hospital Kuching 1910–2010*, a hospital museum was not introduced at the time when similar facilities were being added to hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia. The only hospital museum comparable to those in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur was 400 kilometres distant in Sibu, a city in the central region of Sarawak, and the capital of Sibu District. Positioned at the confluence of the Rajang and Igan rivers, it is approximately 191 kilometres northeast of Kuching.

Lau King Howe Hospital, Sibü

Travelling from Kuching to Sibü in Malaysia takes a 40-minute flight or approximately five to six hours by bus or car via the Pan Borneo Highway, the main route connecting key Sarawak towns. Before the highway's construction, the longer, more winding journey used a combination of old trunk roads, ferries, and less-developed highways through farms and villages. While landlocked, Sibü was considered an important city outpost connecting townships in the hinterlands of Sarawak, many of which are connected to Sibü via the Rajang River.

Originally known as Maling, a small Melanau village in the 1850s, Sibü was part of the Sultanate of Brunei ceded to James Brooke in 1862. The Brooke Government built Fort Brooke that year, marking the official opening of Sibü town. The fort and many others in the riverine system were built to safeguard against attacks by the initially hostile Indigenous Dayak people. The town expanded with the arrival of migrant Hokkien Chinese workers from Fujian Province as early as the 1860s, who engaged in various economic activities, such as riverine shipping, trade, and brickmaking. While initially a fishing and farming village, the township eventually emerged as a commercial hub and, in 1873, became the base for the 3rd Division of Sarawak. In 1901, Fook Chow, Hin Hua, and Cantonese settlers arrived to pursue agricultural development, including the establishment of rubber plantations and rice farming.⁴⁶ The extensive tropical rainforest provided raw materials for processed timber, and the connectivity of rivers from the hinterland to the coast positioned Sibü as an ideal township for managing timber exports and shipbuilding.

The first hospital in Sibü, built in 1912 by the Rajah Brooke Government, was situated in front of the site of the old LKHH. It was "a wooden single-story raised-floor building about 50–60 feet long," reminiscent of the tiled pitched roof building type typically found in the tropics (Fig. 5). The hospital had an outpatient department and designated female and male inpatient wards. It was designed in a colonial architectural style typical of government buildings under

Fig. 5 Historical photograph of Lau King Howe Hospital [Photograph: Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum]



the Brooke administration, featuring stilted, single-storey structures. When, in the early twentieth century, Sibu changed from a small village into a busy business town, and the original hospital proved too small for its growing population, Lau King Howe, a Chinese migrant based in Sibu between 1916 and 1930, donated his assets to the government to build a hospital. Influenced by his father's charitable work, he sought to benefit Sibu society and other similarly remote communities in the Sarawak hinterlands. The LKHH was established with his financial support in 1931 as Sibu's first general hospital and was connected to Sarawak General Hospital through staff training and patient referrals.

The LKHH exemplifies the efforts of private individuals in establishing community-oriented, migrant-built hospitals, which supported the influx of rural labour. Similar efforts are found throughout the region, most notably at Tan Tock Seng Hospital in Singapore and Tung Shin Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. The concluding section of this paper focuses on how the region's particularity is captured in its institutional memory.

Archipelagic memories

Sibu General Hospital replaced the LKHH in 1994, after which the latter was converted into a polyclinic and gradually closed as its services shifted to the new facility. From that time, members from the United Chinese Association Sibu Division, Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association, Sibu Chinese General Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Malaysian Medical Association Sibu Sub-branch, and Sibu Hotel & Tourism Association collaborated to establish the Memorial Museum, which opened in 1996 at the vacated campus as a tribute to the hospital and the memories shared by the Sibu community.⁴⁷ These memories took many forms related to the locality, including the building's spatial experience and its aesthetic character. Key architectural features of the main entrance, including the iconic hospital signage, the foyer entrance, and parts of the old building with tiled roofs, were preserved to house the museum. Although all the buildings on the old campus area were demolished and replaced by a commercial district, half of the original entrance building was retained.⁴⁸ While this space is now sealed and air conditioned, the vented blocks along the top of the walls remain. The former mortuary has also been preserved and converted into a lavatory.

Fig. 6 Examples of artefacts donated by former doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and administrators of Lau King Howe Hospital [Photographs: Catherine Mei Min Woo, 2023]



The former outpatient clinic, waiting area, pharmacy, and emergency department have been converted into a gallery displaying the hospital's significant medical artefacts and past achievements. Artefacts donated by doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and medical administrators who were previously stationed at the LKHH, have been conserved as nostalgic evocations of community memories and served as the narrative foundation for the exhibits that recount the hospital's history (Fig. 6).

Panels with textual descriptions and photographs represent the hospital's medical milestones, often accompanied by personal stories and anecdotes shared by the community. Exhibitions divided by medical speciality include the evolution of the Nursing Curriculum, tracing the development of Maternal and Child Health Services, a display of Old Nurses' Uniforms, Surgical Services, Old Dental Equipment, Intensive Care Services, and Obstetric Services. Additionally, a small section of the museum is dedicated to Lau King Howe and his legacy as a notable Fook Chow figure in the Sibu community.⁴⁹ A scaled model of the LKHH complements this section, offering insight into the scale of the hospital campus (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Scaled model of the old Lau King Howe Hospital campus, with the now-preserved main entrance in the foreground [Photograph: Catherine Mei Min Woo, 2023]



Fig. 8 The official Sibu guide distributed at local hotels, featuring the Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum (in red) as a significant heritage museum and landmark [Pamphlet: P212 Pusat Khidmat Sibu, Sibu Service Centre]

While this museum honours the hospital and its milestones, it also serves as an educational hub, hosting students from kindergarten through to university and international visitors.⁵⁰ Other notable guests include former employees, visiting clan associations, interstate doctors, international travel groups, and members from medical societies. Unlike its Peninsular counterparts, the hospital museum is advertised in tourism pamphlets as a key institution within Sibu's tourism network (Fig. 8).

The description so far presents a predictable narrative of a community medical facility, albeit located in a remote area away from Sarawak's metropolitan centre. How, then, does this facility evoke its archipelagic context? This article argued that both Indigenous presence and the riverine geography differentiate East and West Malaysia. These particularities were conspicuously absent in Sarawak General Hospital, which was rationalised by Australian architects into a predictably modernist formalism, signifying medical science and sanitary, hygienic facilities. Its architecture, we might argue, could have been introduced to any Asian or even Western city. In fact, certain tropical architectural features, such as louvred windows, typically found in colonial hospital structures, were gradually phased out in favour of air conditioning.⁵¹

The LKHH offers a contrasting narrative. A 1986 account by two UK doctors of their elective period in Sarawak suggests the linkages between the LKHH and riverine dispensaries.⁵² “A single large hospital in Sarawak would have given a very restricted view of the country,” they note.⁵³ From their base at the 400-bed LKHH hospital, they travelled upriver to a smaller mission hospital at Kapit. Here, they joined a district health team visiting Iban villages in Song. Each longhouse, the largest of which could host 30 families, was visited every six weeks by dispensaries along the river, which travelled by boat. Two clinics were conducted at each longhouse, and their sanitary arrangements were inspected. Subsequently, the doctors were honoured with a feast and entertained.

Just as the river carried medical services to the remote districts and villages, it also brought patients to the city. A photograph among the LKHH exhibits of everyday life in Sibu during the flood season, with the elevated hospital entrance as its backdrop, upholds this relationship (Fig. 9). The narrative ignores the physical dysfunction of the city’s infrastructure in celebration of its symbiotic transformation by the river and the resultant range of social activities, including fishing from the hospital verandah. Remote Indigenous communities that used to walk to the hospital, or relied on travelling dispensaries, could instead opt for boat rides directly to the hospital entrance, making inundation advantageous rather than a hindrance to their mobility.

Fig. 9 Everyday life in Sibu during seasonal flooding at the front gates of the old Lau King Howe Hospital, ca. 1960–1970s [Photograph: Lau King Howe Memorial Museum]



Not only have these community experiences been included in the museum’s collective narrative and shared through the memories of on-site Indigenous curators and exhibits, they are also integral to its institutional memory. Its location at the original Melanau village site, with some 200,000 babies born in the hospital between 1936 and 1994, ties it firmly to the Sibu community—in fact, a fundraiser for “Babies of Lau King Howe,” to maintain the museum facility, was mooted in 2022.⁵⁴ But more importantly, the site’s adjacency to the river and memory of the annual flooding is incorporated into the museum’s design through the introduction of a pond as a permanent entrance feature (Fig. 10).

In navigating this feature, visitors are drawn into the archipelagic sensibilities of institutional memory outside the colonial nodal urban centres privileged in medical histories. Through research and observations, this article has recognised

Fig. 10 Present-day Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum, with a man-made pond, installed in 2009 [Photograph: Catherine Mei Min Woo, 2023]



a notable shift in how Indigenous and migrant realities were willingly integrated by institutions unconstrained by colonial and developmental norms that emphasise biomedical progress. The multivocality of this museum's exhibits and celebration of unstable environmental conditions that would have been suppressed or managed elsewhere point to different experiential lenses and measures of success applied to archipelagic Malaysia's regional hospital designs.

NOTES

1. The article is based on Catherine Woo's archival research and fieldwork in London, United Kingdom, and Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia, as well as in Kuching and Sibul, Sarawak. The research findings inform the article's comparison of hospital museums in these different cities. Anoma Pieris has aligned their interpretation with this journal's theme.
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JAMES MILLER

INTERSTICES 26

Hulihia: Learning from the *kauhale* in times of transformation

Indigenous architecture across the Pacific is increasingly theorised as relational spatial systems grounded in cosmology, environmental knowledge, and community governance. Within *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiian) knowledge systems, architecture operates through the interconnectedness of people, land, and more-than-human ecologies. Here, dwelling is a practice of caring for *‘āina*—land understood as that which feeds. In this context, the *hale* (house) reflects a design process centred on *aloha* as relational practice; it is a manifestation of cosmogony and mana rather than a mere structure. The *kauhale* (housing compound or village) extends this logic into territorial planning. Rather than treating buildings as isolated objects, the *kauhale* represents “buildings in the landscape”—an architectural system that embeds communities within ecological systems of reciprocity. This orientation aligns with grounded normativity, where ethical frameworks for generational abundance emerge from everyday land-based practices.¹

While traditional forms of the *hale pili* (pili grass thatch house) come to mind in relation to the Indigenous architecture of Hawai‘i, this article examines how patterns of Indigenous spatial knowledge persist through periods of disruption, supporting the cultural evolution of communities. The focus of the article is the relation of the *hale*, the *kauhale*, and the *ahupua‘a* (land division). Before the nineteenth century *hulihia* (turning), *‘āina* was kin, not property.² The 1848 *Māhele* disrupted the kin relation, reclassifying land as a commodity that could be taxed and sold;³ of roughly 13,500 claims filed by commoner Hawaiians, only a fraction resulted in *kuleana* awards. The 1893 overthrow and 1898 annexation transferred a further 1.8 million acres of land to the United States without compensation to *Kānaka Maoli*. Hawai‘i’s housing crisis has never recovered from this rupture; median home prices on O‘ahu now exceed USD \$1,000,000 and dispossession continues to push *Kānaka Maoli* into diaspora.⁴ This history, developed more fully below in the Great *Hulihia*, and the separation of kinship relations (human-environment-more than human) led to cascading socio-environmental issues across *Pae ‘Āina o Hawai‘i* (Hawaiian archipelago) that continue to reverberate today.

This article argues that *Kānaka Maoli* spatial intelligence—embodied in the *hale*, *kauhale*, and *ahupua‘a* relations—is a living, adaptive system that has

persisted across *hulihia*. The architectural manifestations of these knowledge systems evolve, reflecting outside influence across time as well as contributing to Indigenous architectural futurities. The colonial gaze has fixated us with Indigenous architecture as a form of traditional architecture—an artefact of the forgotten past, which is reinforced within Appendix X: Hawaiian Provisions for Indigenous Hawaiian Architecture Structures in the Hawaii State Building Code. The article activates *mo'okū'auhau*⁵ methodology to examine the history of transformation in Kalihi-Palama, drawing on the *takarangi* spiral to conceptualise connections across time and space.⁶ Building on the growing body of work on Indigenous built environments, this article illustrates how these systems continue to inform the production of the built environment as well as support Indigenous resurgence, demonstrating that this persistence offers a necessary foundation for reframing housing as a relationship rather than a commodity.

Indigenous intelligence

This article argues that the *hale* persists as an Indigenous architectural intelligence that remains operative across historical and political transformations. Despite the disruptions of settler colonialism, Indigenous “pattern languages” continue to function through adaptive and hybridised forms.⁷ Recognising this continuity offers critical insight for contemporary housing governance and building regulation in Hawai‘i. The lens for understanding Indigenous architectural intelligence is informed by the developing literature on Indigenous architecture and planning.

In *Reclaiming Indigenous Planning*, Indigenous planning is established as a field grounded in Indigenous governance, relational onto-epistemologies, and community-led spatial production.⁸ Hirini Matunga and Ted Jojola provide models for Indigenous planning guidelines based on Indigenous systems of knowledge and values. Matunga builds upon his Indigenous planning framework to discuss Indigenous architecture as a narrative-based process that derives meaning through the genealogy and significance of place; it is where Indigenous socio-cultural values and principles manifest in spatial and structural form.⁹ Scholars such as Chris Cornelius,¹⁰ Wanda Dalla Costa,¹¹ and Patrick Stewart¹² further demonstrate how Indigenous design principles function as methodological, pedagogical, and material practices. Cornelius’s decolonising site-planning, Dalla Costa’s design frameworks for Indigenous futurity, and Stewart’s village-based pedagogy are not interchangeable gestures, but distinct methodologies. Across the Pacific, Albert Refiti,¹³ Jade Kake,¹⁴ Charmaine ‘Ilaiū Talei,¹⁵ and Sean Connelly¹⁶ have highlighted how Pacific architectures utilise relational ontologies, such as *vā* (relational space), siting, and environmental integration. While general models and frameworks for Indigenous architecture, planning, and design are presented by scholars, they are translational pieces. In all cases, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous communities are not a monolithic, and Indigenous architecture requires specificity.

Collectively these bodies of work position Indigenous architecture as living knowledge systems—that refuse the confines of coloniality. *The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture*,¹⁷ *Our Voices* series,¹⁸ *Decolonising the Built Environment*,¹⁹ and *Land Back*,²⁰ along with the literature already introduced, represent a growing body of Indigenous and decolonial scholarship that reflects

the trans-Indigenous intellectual development of a unique body of knowledge, reading across distinct Indigenous architectural traditions. Rather than framing the literature as an Indigenous-settler binary that structures most comparative or transnational frameworks, as seen in architectural history studies, we need to frame Indigenous architecture studies through “purposeful Indigenous juxtaposition”²¹—a methodology Allen Chadwick extends to Indigenous technologies and built environments.²²

Indigenous architecture is not a restricted subset of architectural studies, but, following the concept of refusal,²³ a deliberate rejection of the disciplinary terms through which architecture has historically recognised, and thereby contained, Indigenous building practice. This refusal has a precedent outside architecture. American Indian literary studies broke from literary history to claim its own field,²⁴ offering a model for what Indigenous architecture might yet become. Indigenous cosmologies are frameworks of interpretation in their own right rather than content interpreted through Western theory.²⁵ For Indigenous architecture and spatial practices, the recent publication, *Vā Moana*, begins to do this work within the context of the Pacific.²⁶ Rather than situating this article within architecture histories or the study of traditional built environments, I situate it within the field of Indigenous architecture, utilising *mo’okū’auhau* as method.

This article extends the discourse through an analysis of *Kānaka Maoli* housing across three periods: 1) pre-contact and early historic settlement patterns, 2) settler colonial transformations of land and governance, and 3) contemporary expressions of Indigenous housing, including *kauhale* initiatives and emerging regulatory adaptations like ‘*ohana*’ dwelling provisions.²⁷ Building on Dalla Costa’s framing of Indigenous futurity,²⁸ I argue that this architectural intelligence persists and provides guidance in the development of urban futures supportive of Hawaiian values. In neighbourhoods like Kalihi, Honolulu, Indigenous spatial logic persists through layered adaptations shaped by labour histories and shared survival strategies, challenging extractive, technocratic paradigms by repositioning spatial production as an ecological practice grounded in intergenerational responsibility.

To synthesise: an Indigenous design process is a land-based practice of spatial production emerging from lived relationships. Matunga identifies seven key conditions of this process, four of which are particularly salient:

- Genealogy and Archetype: connection to ancestral forms;
- Axiology and Cosmology: structural articulations of values and origins;
- Responsiveness: addressing specific Indigenous needs and place-based narratives;
- Inherent meaning: purpose beyond utility.²⁹

These processes are iterative and intergenerational, integrating oral histories, *huaka’i* (journeying), and ceremonial practice. In contemporary Hawai’i, this intelligence informs housing futures by intersecting with immigrant and diasporic dwelling practices to produce inclusive urban spaces. Ultimately, the *hale* and *kauhale* are reframed here as active intelligences shaping equitable relational futures.

Methodology: Relational positionality and *mo'okū'auhau*

As a *Kanaka Ōiwi* (of Native Hawaiian descent) researcher, my methodology is shaped by relational responsibilities to land, community, and ancestral knowledge systems. My relationship to Kalihi is familial; my father and his siblings were raised in the Kapālama 'camps' between the 1930s and 1950s. Following the 1950s urban renewal and the demolition of camp housing for the H-1 freeway, my family navigated a transition to multi-family apartments before eventually relocating further upland in Kalihi Valley. These intergenerational experiences frame Kalihi as a layered socio-spatial landscape shaped by plantation labour, migration, and community adaptation. The research utilises *mo'okū'auhau* methodology,³⁰ guided by the *'Olelo No'eau: I ka wā ma mua, ka wā ma hope*, or walking through the past into the future.³¹ This framework allows for the analysis of *Kānaka* housing not as a series of static events, but as a continuous evolution of spatial intelligence.

To examine the continuity of Indigenous architectural intelligence, this study employs a tripartite research design that reads historical record, oral accounts, and contemporary practices as a single, continuous socio-spatial field. The archival component draws from Māhele 'Āina testimony, land records, and archival documentation of traditional settlements. These documents often reflect a colonial framing of history and require decoding through Indigenous spatial epistemologies. Concepts such as *he ali'i ka 'Āina, he kauwā ke Kānaka*, which positions the land as chief and the people as servants, provide the analytical lens to interpret meaning within these administrative documents. Further interpretations are informed by the *Kumulipo* (well-known genealogical chant) to ground analysis in a cosmogenic understanding of space³² and the work of Mary Pukui.³³

Contemporary spatial analysis focuses on living examples of land-based revitalisation, specifically focusing on organisations such as Ho'oulu 'Āina in Kalihi. By engaging with contemporary land restoration and food sovereignty initiatives, this study identifies the relational design principles that inform modern Indigenous building codes and alternative housing models. These contemporary examples are understood not as isolated case studies, but as part of a longer continuum of Indigenous spatial practice. Through this combined approach, Kalihi is analysed as a transitional spatial field where Indigenous, immigrant, and diasporic practices co-produce forms of relational urban dwelling, reframing the *hale* and *kauhale* as enduring socio-spatial intelligences.

Early historical context: Land, settlement, and spatial transformation in Hawai'i

Kānaka Maoli spatial systems developed through deeply relational understandings of *'āina*, *wai* (water), and social organisation. Prior to Western contact, settlement was organised through the *ahupua'a* system—a watershed-based model extending from mountain to sea that structured land management and food production according to ecology. The *ahupua'a* was first introduced on O'ahu in the fifteenth century by the *ali'i nui* (high chief), Mā'ilikūhahi. The *ahupua'a* represents the self-sustaining land units running from mountain to sea in which resources are distributed equitably and stewarded through reciprocal responsibility. Within this framework, the *kauhale* functioned as multigenerational socio-spatial compounds that integrated dwelling, ceremony, and

environmental stewardship. Spatial organisation was informed by environmental knowledge, seasonal cycles, and social relationships, reinforcing reciprocal obligations between people and *‘āina*.

The moku and ahupua‘a system

The *moku* (district) and *ahupua‘a* functioned as an integrated socio-ecological framework, recognising the interconnections between climate zones.³⁴ The *ahupua‘a* is the system of land governance developed for the unique ecological system of Hawai‘i. Under this system of land governance: *maka‘āinana* (stewards of the land) cultivated the land and offered *ho‘okupu* (offering, tribute) to the *akua* (gods) and *ali‘i* (chief); and *ali‘i* maintained *pono* (righteous balance) in society or were removed by the *kama‘ainana* (people of the land). *Konohiki* (land managers, planners) drew on generational ecological knowledge to regulate water, harvest, and resources use through *kapu* (natural law, sacred) and *kanawai* (law, code).³⁵ Their knowledge combined empirical observation with cultural values and spiritual understanding—what we might today call a systems-based approach to resource management.³⁶

Each *ahupua‘a* contained resources vital for community substance across four primary realms:

- *Wao Akua* (realm of the gods): Upper mountain forests reserved for limited human activity. Realm connected to water collection from the sky into the natural aquifers;
- *Wao Nahele* (forested region): Managed forests providing timber, medicinal plants, and bird feathers;
- *Wao Kānaka* (human realm): Mid-elevation zones for agricultural terraces and settlements;
- *Kai* (sea): Marine ecosystems including fishponds and reefs.

A significant feature was sophisticated water management, where *‘auwai* (irrigation channels) directed water through *lo‘i kalo* (taro terraces) to maximise nutrient distribution. This water eventually reached *loko i‘a* (fishponds), supporting an aquaculture food chain. This integrated system recognised *wai* as the foundation for wealth (*waiwai*), and utilised nutrient cycling as an early example of circular economy principles.³⁷

Kauhale: The architecture of relation

The *kauhale* represents the architectural manifestation of Hawaiian social organisation. Rather than a single building, it consisted of multiple specialised structures, including the *hale mua* (men’s meeting house), *hale noa* (sleeping house), *hale ‘āina* (women’s eating house), *hale pe‘a* (menstruation house), *hale kuku* (kapa house), and *hālau wa‘a* (canoe house or workspace). These were arranged with careful attention to prevailing winds, solar orientation, and functional relationships (see Fig. 1 for illustration of *kauhale*). Siting was conducted by the *kuhikuhipu‘uone* (master builder, geomancer, architect).

O ke kahua mamua, mahope ke kūkulu.

Site first, then the building. Learn all you can, then practice.

‘Ōlelo No‘eau #24538

Daily life in the *kauhale* followed a diurnal rhythm of collective labour and ritual, governed by *kapu*. Gendered labour and communal life interwove throughout the day. Men tended upland *lo‘i* or fishing, women produced *kapa* (cloth) or gathered near-shore resources, and children and elders occupied the in-between spaces, playing and teaching. Spatial permeability meant the home was not a single building but the relationships between structures and the land. In regions like Ka‘u and Puna on Hawai‘i Island, dwellings were built on old lava beds to preserve tillable soil, a clear indicator of an Indigenous conservation ethic that prioritised long-term food security over convenience (see Fig. 2 for the location of Ka‘u and Puna). The *kauhale* reflected village life on the islands.

Traditional *hale* construction utilised a post-and-beam framework lashed with cordage made from *olonā* (a native shrub) or coconut fibre, its posts seated within or atop rock walls depending on the builders’ genealogy—a design able to withstand hurricane-force winds by dissipating energy. *Hale* lashing, adapted from *wa‘a* (seafaring canoe) construction, developed over time for land-based use.³⁹

The main structural elements included the *pou hana* (main posts), *kauhuhu* (ridge pole), *lohelau* (cross beams), *o‘a* (rafters), and *aho* (purlins). Thatching materials varied by location and available resources, including *pili* grass, *ti* leaf, sugar cane leaves, or *pandanus*. Material choices adapted to local microclimates, and the construction process itself was communal, reinforcing social

Fig. 1 Illustration of a *kauhale*: 1) *hale noa* (dwelling house); 2) *hale ‘āina* (women’s eating house); 3) *hale mua* (men’s eating house); 4) *hale papa‘a* (food storage house); 5) *hale pe‘a* (menstrual house); 6) *hale kuku* (storage house for *kapa* making); 7) *hālau wa‘a* (canoe house); 8) *‘imu* (earth oven—food for women and food for men are cooked on separate fires); 9) *lo‘i kalo* (taro patches fed by *‘auwai*); 10) *wa‘a* (outrigger canoe); 11) *mai‘a* (banana grove); 12) *kahua kapa* (women’s workyard); 13) *kō* (sugarcane); 14) *pā pōhaku* (low stone wall); 15) *loko i‘a* (fishpond); 16) *kahawai* (stream) [Drawing: James Miller]

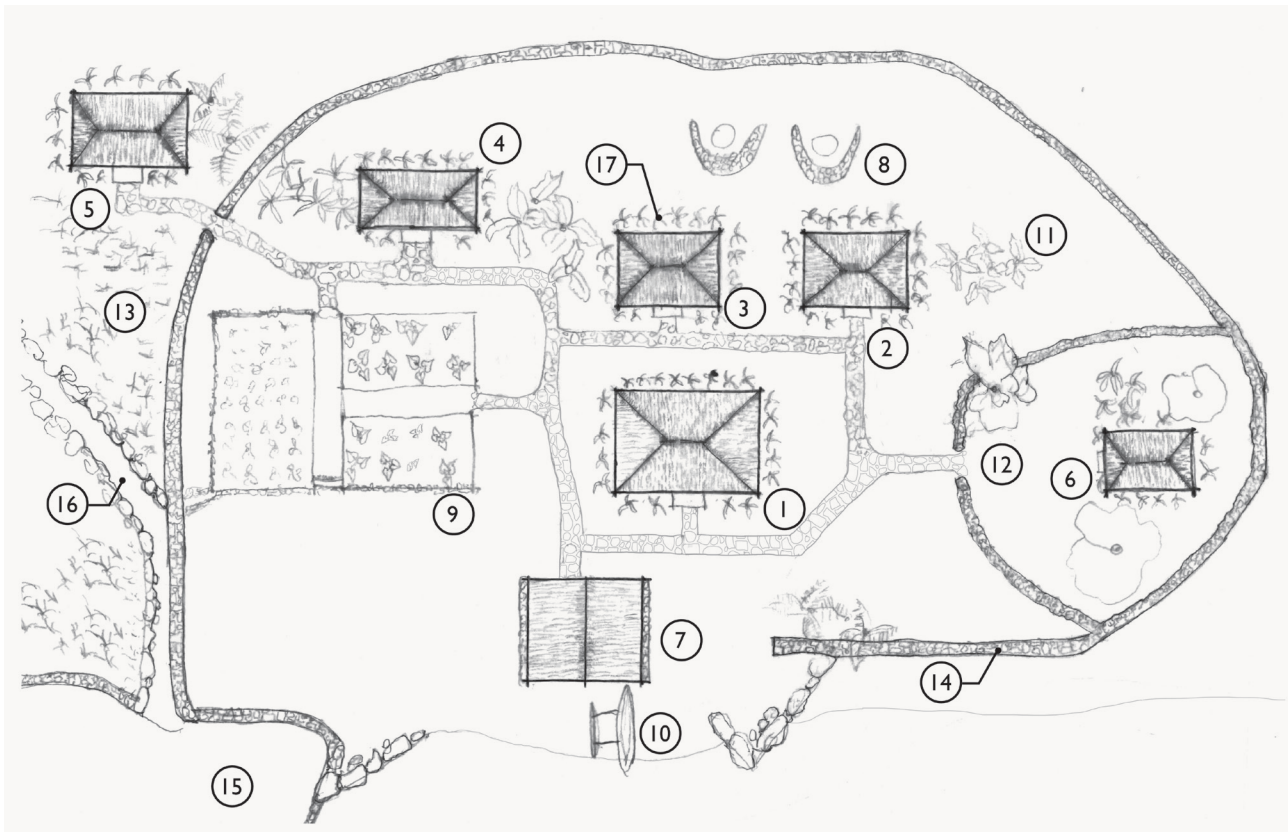
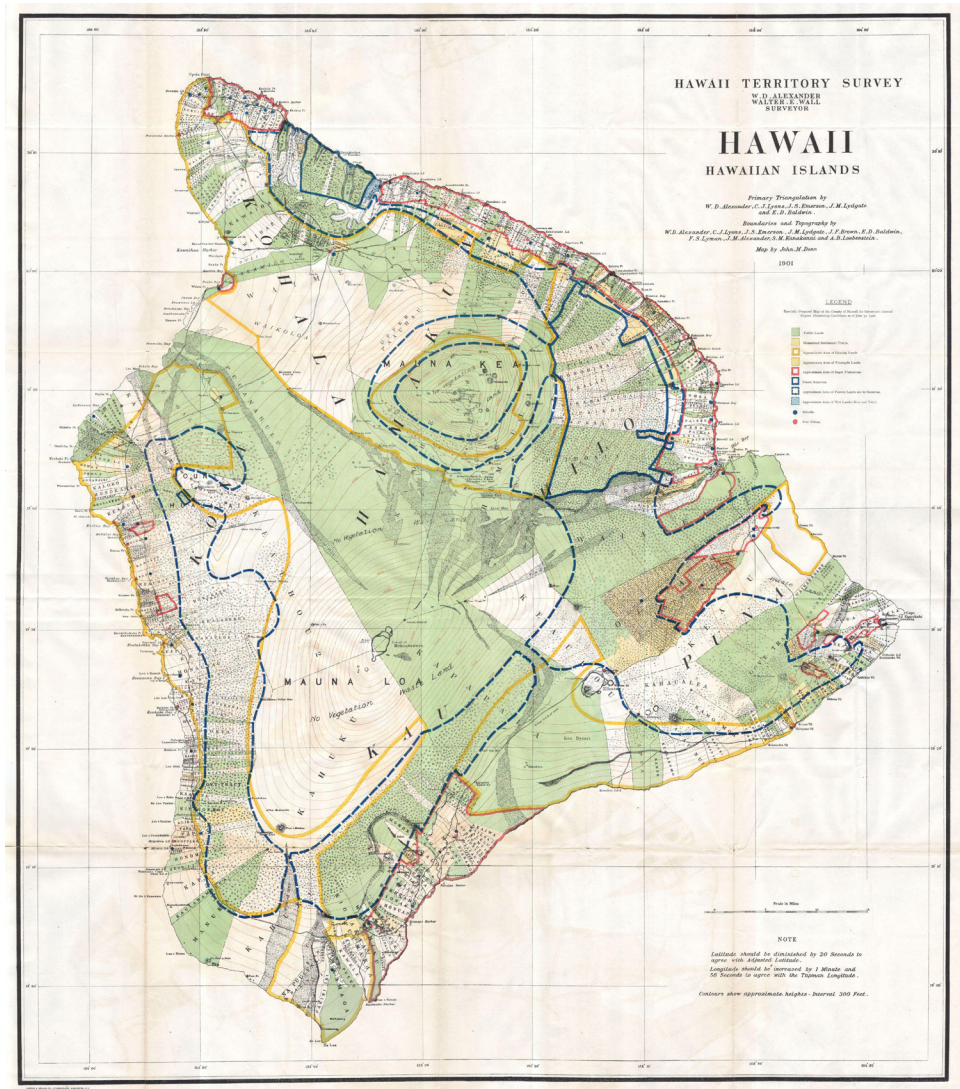


Fig. 2 John M. Donn. Map of Hawai'i Island, 190 [Map: Hawaii Land Survey Registered Maps #2124; public domain]



bonds while transferring knowledge between generations. The *hale* in Fig. 3 reflects the contemporary building practice of *hale*, which was revived by Francis Sinenci and codified within Appendix X402.1 Indigenous Hawaiian Architecture Structures of the Hawaii State Building Code.

Boundaries in Hawaiian architecture marked sites of transformation; the threshold, guarded by the *akua Kane hohoio*, was sacred and could not be sat or stood upon.⁴⁰ The *hale* itself was considered a living entity: upon completion, a consecration ceremony (*pule ho'ola'a hale*) invoked *'aumakua* (family ancestors) and prepared offerings, marking the house's birth as a living presence and establishing its spiritual protection.

E 'oki I ka piko o ka hale⁴¹
Cut is the navel cord of the house

Hawaiian dwellings were not simply shelters but manifestations of Hawaiian cosmogony.⁴² The *kauhale* reflected *'ohana's* filial relationships to place and land. Read trans-Indigenously, rather than as one instance of a universal vernacular pattern, the *kauhale's* treatment of dwelling as cosmological kin finds a

Fig. 3 The interior of a *hale pili* at Ho'oulu 'Āina [Photograph: James Miller, 2019]



counterpart in the Palu'e house of Indonesia, where dwellings are likewise treated as living, cosmological entities.⁴³

The Great Hulihia: Land dispossession and the Māhele Act

Before the Great *Hulihia* of the nineteenth century, the concept of private property did not exist. In the Hawaiian worldview, the land was kin. The first child of Papahānomoku (earth mother) and Wākea (sky father) was a stillborn babe, Hāloa, who was planted into the ground and became the *kalo* (taro) plant, elder sibling to the first *Kanaka*. *Āina* means that which feeds and *'ohana* (family), the branching of the *'oha* (corm of the taro plant). Land and people are kin who live in relation. *'Ohana* expands beyond blood kin, shaped by values of *aloha*; it is reflected in multigenerational housing and the permeability between households.⁴⁴ *'Ohana* reflects a housing practice reflective of *ahupua'a* and *kauhale* systems.

Facing pressure from foreign resource interests, Kamehameha III and his missionary-turned-advisor, William Richards,⁴⁵ initiated the Māhele Act in 1848.⁴⁶ Under the 1839 Hawaiian Declaration of Rights, natural and property rights for commoners and chiefs alike were established, paving the way for land privatisation; the Māhele Act reclassified *āina* as a commodity that could be taxed and sold.⁴⁷

The intent behind the Māhele remains highly contested. For some, including Kamana Beamer, it was Kamehameha III's effort to secure the Kingdom's perpetuation for *ali'i* and *maka'āinana* alike against the incursion of foreign interests and

power.⁴⁸ For others, Kauikeaouli put a price tag on a relative and succumbed to the influence of Western thought. Many other Hawaiian scholars continue to debate the complex nature of the Māhele.⁴⁹ This debate matters because of what unfolded in its wake. While several colonised Pacific nations underwent comparable land reforms in this period, and still hold a majority of their land under customary tenure systems, Hawai'i's trajectory diverged after the Māhele.

The Māhele divided lands among the monarchy (Crown Lands), the government (Government Lands), the *ali'i* (Konohiki Lands), and the *maka'āinana* through the Kuleana Act of 1850. While intended to secure native land rights, it had devastating consequences for most *Kānaka Maoli*, resulting in a fraction of awards secured by commoners.⁵⁰ Even so, these lands remained, at least nominally, within Hawaiian governance. It was the 1893 overthrow⁵¹ and the 1898 annexation's uncompensated transfer of Crown and Government lands to the United States, not the Māhele's reclassification of land, that foreclosed any future Hawaiian government's capacity to legislate a return to collective or customary tenure. In comparison, Sāmoa recovered Indigenous land majorities upon their own independence.⁵² This disparity has compounded the housing crisis ever since.⁵³

Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalaniana'ole championed the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) of 1921, setting aside roughly 200,000 acres for homesteading by Hawaiians of 50 per cent or more blood quantum, an act modelled after the Dawes Act. Divisive blood-quantum requirements, poor quality land, and chronic underfunding left over 28,000 *Kānaka* on the waitlist today. When Hawai'i became a state in 1959, the Admission Act placed ceded lands in trust for the betterment of Native Hawaiians under the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, a responsibility the state has repeatedly failed to uphold. For *Kānaka* and residents of Hawai'i, this is the history from which today's housing crisis descends.

Weaving the past into the future

While historical understanding of *ahupua'a* and *kauhale* systems provides valuable insights, the critical question remains: How can these Indigenous approaches be meaningfully applied in contemporary housing developments in Hawai'i? The testimonies from the Māhele Act are abundant with descriptions of horticulture and landscape practices. In Waikapu Maui, on Lahuapueo, where my *'ohana* stems, canoe plants such as *'ulu* (breadfruit), *kalo*, and *hala* (pandanus) were common, and Land Claims Registry records show *lo'i kalo* and multi-dwelling parcels throughout Lahaina and Waikapū. A story of *kauhale* dwelling is evident.

"Kapaoakua is the name of the land, Apeke is the claim, with two houses, two kukui trees, two coconut trees, one breadfruit tree, three *lo'i*, two *mo'o*. Those are my claims which are stated to you, the Land Commissioners, which I occupy in Lahaina."⁵⁴

As late as 1934, Craighill Handy and Mary Kawena Pukui documented at least five *kauhale* surrounded by *lo'i* in Lahaina.⁵⁵ Today, the same canoe plants continue to be planted around parcels, particularly among Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Peoples, and multigenerational habitation persists, supported by the *'ohana* dwelling code.⁵⁶

Fig. 4 A house in Kalihi with gardens. A banana grove, *olena* (turmeric), papaya, ti trees, and more can be seen [Photograph: James Miller]



As Hawaiian family members moved from *kauhale* and their homeland, descendants experience diminished feelings of belonging and bonding to the old *kauhale*. George Kanahele refers to this as the trauma of rootlessness—a diminished sense of connection to *‘āina* and to the family’s *kuleana* lands.⁵⁷ Yet these connections are rarely lost outright, only hidden: the knowledge of place travels with people, negotiating placemaking within new spaces like the multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of Kalihi. That *kuleana* carries through socio-spatial practices like having an *‘imu* and sharing food together. As Shawn Malia Kana’iaupuni and Nolan Malone remind us, the land calls us: “The voices call to the spirit, to the body, to the memory of cells and DNA—for the undeniable link is genealogical: ‘Our mother is our land, Papahānaumoku, she who births the islands’.”⁵⁸

Kalihi: A place of transition in a settler colonial city

Kalihi is where the persistence of Indigenous spatial intelligence can be traced through transformations across the twentieth century; spatial intelligence adapts rather than disappears. Known for the Kilikilihune (fine light) rain and the guardian *mo’o*, Wahinehi‘u‘ia (fishtailed fern woman), Kalihi historically held a deep connection to the flow of water and to marine and terrestrial ecological systems. Over the twentieth century, however, Kalihi became a place of transition. What was once a neighbourhood of middle- and upper-class *Kānaka Maoli* in the early 1900s became a multicultural, working-class home for Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, and Puerto Rican families leaving the rural plantations, followed by Sāmoans, Koreans, and Filipinos.⁵⁹ By the 1920s, Japanese residents alone comprised over 40 per cent of the territory’s population, many settling in urban peripheries like Kalihi; *kalo* patches persisted into the 1930s, reflecting a continuity of land-relations. But as the political economy of Hawai‘i shifted under American colonial pressure, so did the spatial and human relations of the district.

Epistemological rupture

As discussed above, the colonial property regime ushered in by the *Māhele* introduced a spatial logic fundamentally incongruous with Hawaiian society: land as filial relation was violently supplanted by land as transposable commodity.⁶⁰ Indigenous settlement patterns like the *kauhale* and the *ahupua'a* were fractured by the gridlines of private property. This incongruity was not incidental, as Jodi Byrd argues, Indigenous critiques of colonialism must reckon with how settler juridical and economic categories were built to make Indigenous land relations illegible on their own terms, not merely different from them.⁶¹ Read alongside Audra Simpson's concept of refusal,⁶² what follows in the Kapālama camp is a refusal of the terms of legibility that settler property law imposed, holding fast to relations. This colonial framework sought to obliterate what Māori call *whanaungatanga*—the deep, almost mycelial connections at the essence of Pacific identity, splitting apart what had existed in sacred accord: *honua* (place), *‘ohana*, and *mo‘okū‘auhau*.

Our family grew up in the shock waves of this exploded worldview... the race was on for the taking apart of all facets of Hawaiian identity to make room for capitalism—the land, the language, and then the culture. We lost sight of our ways of being human together...⁶³

Fig. 5 Sanborn maps depicting the camps (labelled tenements) along Robello Lane adjacent to Ka‘iulani Elementary School in Kalihi-Palama. Left: 1914 Sanborn map. Right: A 1955 reprint of the 1927 Sanborn Map [Sheet 015 (1914) and Sheet 145 (1927), Insurance Maps of Honolulu, Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, Sanborn Map Company, <http://hdl.handle.net/10524/55041>; <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4384hm.g01537195501>].



Life in Sumiyoshi Camp

My father and his siblings grew up in the camps of Kapālama along Robello Lane, on land owned by Mr Sumiyoshi and adjacent Ka‘iulani Elementary School. The Sanborn Maps in Fig. 5 depict the densely populated parcels of the area. While the homes were simple, shared infrastructure provided communal anchors that naturally wove diverse families together.

We all used a couple of common bath houses heated by wood. One... had a real wooden *furo* you could go into. The other... had a metal and concrete tub... we would just take some of the water out with a pot to take a bath since the tub was too hot... Actually some of the older Japanese women used to cook on *hibachis* outside one of the *furos* and I can still remember how good the grilled fish smelled... The *Lonoaeas* used to also dry squid hung on lines outside their house.⁶⁴

Resource use was circular and intimate. Japanese and *Kānaka* fisherman alike brought back the day's catch, prepared it over the *furo* fire or dried it, and shared it. Life in the camp was punctuated by seasonal, culturally distinct events witnessed by the entire neighbourhood, temporarily transforming shared spaces into stages for cultural continuity.

The Japanese men, Mr Murakami and Sumiyoshi... would pound mochi with a large stone mortar, while women flipped the rice between poundings, sometimes singing Japanese songs... The *Lonoaeas* dug a big '*imu* to roast the pig the traditional *Kānaka* way... Across from Robello Lane there was a Japanese temple... every late summer or early fall a lot of the neighbourhood gathered for traditional Japanese and Okinawan dancing... I loved the music—the drumming, *shamisen*, and Japanese flutes.⁶⁵

Within the ruptured landscape of Kalihi-Palama, known for the Kilikilihune and Wahinehi'u'ia, new forms of collective community emerged.

The socio-spatial dialectic of transition

The camps' socio-spatial relations echoed the traditional *kauhale* and the life lived in-between buildings. In both, spaces were functionally dispersed yet highly interdependent. This transformation of Hawai'i's neighbourhoods into shared, multicultural spaces by immigrant families stood in stark contrast to the coercive, standardising impulses of the American colonial machine. Where working-class immigrants adapted and shared resources, the colonial government sought to concentrate power and property—a dialectic that became highly visible after World War II reshaped Kalihi.

While surrounding landowners capitalised on commercial re-zoning and urban renewal projects, displacing residents, Mr Sumiyoshi made a different choice. The photograph in Fig. 6 captures a few remaining dwellings along Robello Lane prior to their demolition to make way for urban renewal. By choosing to build apartments, it is conjectured that Mr Sumiyoshi demonstrated an enduring commitment to the neighbourhoods' working-class roots, prioritising affordable housing over pure profit. Some original families, like my father's, moved into these apartments, holding onto a fragment of the community.⁶⁶

Ultimately, the universalising forces of capitalism prevailed. *Kalo* patches and the communal spaces of the camps gave way to commercialisation. Today, the Lo'i Kalo Mini Park remains a small, vital symbol of a forgotten, deeply relational past.

An enduring spatial practice

Even within Kalihi-Palama's complex, changing landscape, families continued to look to relationality to respond to contemporary realities. The introduction of the single-family dwelling on an individual parcel was a settler-colonial invention. Like the decentralised system of the *kauhale*'s collective habitat within the

ahupua'a, the camp's architecture possessed permeable boundaries, embodying families' interdependent relationship with environment and each other. Colonial property regimes rendered the traditional *kauhale* structurally impossible, yet the Indigenous intelligence and collective imagination of this settlement pattern persist. Today, this embodied practice survives through multigenerational households, the fluid use of semi-outdoor spaces (like *lānais* and carports) as primary communal gathering areas, and stewardship of earth and water in places like the Lo'i Kalo Mini Park. For Native Hawaiians, dwelling represents an embodied practice of relationship with *'āina* that has persisted despite over 200 years of colonial influence and occupation—a lens through which to examine contemporary housing challenges. Kalihi reflects ongoing resurgence among Native Hawaiians, its spatial practices carrying forward Hawaiian ways of being and knowing.

Fig. 6 The 'camp' on Robelo Lane in Kapalama, Honolulu, before being torn down [Photograph: Hampton Miller, ca. 1960]



Contemporary architecture of aloha *'āina*

The story of Kalihi-Palama and the life along Robello Lane is itself a *mo'olelo* (history, story) of the *kauhale* as a living system; a *mo'okū'auhau* of place that survives fracture rather than being erased by it. *Mo'okū'auhau*, as method, is not only a genealogical claim on the past; it is generational and forward-facing: a set of relations carried into the present and toward the future. The persistence of the *kauhale* within Kalihi's camps represents genealogical continuity. In practice, it informs contemporary architecture, planning, and land stewardship, making *aloha 'āina* both spatial and material. The following provides contemporary examples of *mo'okū'auhau* guiding *ahupua'a*-based planning, and *kipuka aloha 'āina*, where the genealogy of place-based intelligence is being consciously rekindled to enact and design Indigenous futures.

A recent article co-authored with Kelema Lee Moses, "Living in Relation," calls for policy and planning approaches to future housing in Hawai'i that restore

Fig. 7 Lo'i Kalo Mini Park along
Kapalama Drainage Canal,
Kalihi, Honolulu, Oahu, Hawai'i
[Photograph: James Miller]



this reciprocal relation between people and *‘āina*.⁶⁷ Contemporary examples of architecture and community planning demonstrate the cultural resurgence beginning to transform the built environment, reflecting Indigenous intelligence and refusing colonisation. Led by practitioners like artist and architect Sean Connelly, contemporary creators are blending ancestral knowledge with modern engineering to build flexible, climate-responsive *hale*, as seen in Hale Pi‘o. Simultaneously, grassroots initiatives, exemplified by the community-led village design of Pu‘uhonua o Wai‘anae, are revitalising traditional *ahupua‘a* systems to house *Kānaka Maoli* facing homelessness.

Each of these projects can be read as an experiment in the quality of relationships housing makes possible. Hale Pi‘o restores a direct relationship with *‘āina* through its siting and materials, and with ancestors through the traditional knowledge it borrows from *kuhikuhipu‘uone* and master *hale* builders. Ho‘oulu ‘Āina restores relationships across the same immigrant and diasporic networks that have been traced through Kalihi-Palama. Pu‘uhonua o Wai‘anae represents the collective power of unhoused *Kānaka* and builds toward future generations, modelling the kind of *Kānaka Maoli* self-determination its own residents hope to pass forward.

Conceptualised by scholar Mary Tuti Baker as *kīpuka aloha ‘āina*,⁶⁸ organising efforts like Ho‘oulu ‘Āina and Pu‘uhonua o Wai‘anae operate as cultural and ecological oases that heal the land and foster community care. Ho‘oulu ‘Āina, which has become an active *kīpuka* within Kalihi itself, returning stewards to the *ahupua‘a* this article has shared.⁶⁹ Together, these spatial practices tackle urgent housing and environmental challenges by reconnecting Native Hawaiians to their ancestral lifeways.

These Indigenous approaches to housing provide place-based solutions to meet our current converging crises. They remind us of the *‘Ōlelo No‘eau*:

He po‘i nā kai uli, kai ko‘o, ‘a‘ohe hina pūko‘a
Though the sea is deep and rough, the coral rock remains standing

Like the coral that withstands the rough seas, Indigenous spatial intelligence has persisted despite centuries of colonial disruption, adapting through the plantation camps of Kalihi and re-emerging in modern architectural innovation. These *mo'olelo* reflect the *mo'okū'auhau* of Kalihi-Palama, grounding the present and guiding the future. By reframing the *hale* and *kauhale* as active, highly adaptable design intelligences rather than static historical artefacts, this article provides a necessary theoretical bridge for urban planners, architects, and policymakers. It moves the discourse beyond the binary of 'traditional versus modern,' demonstrating that to solve the contemporary housing crisis, we do not need to invent entirely new systems. Rather, we must actively design for the relational, land-based epistemologies that have always sustained life in the Pacific. By rekindling these practices and adapting them to contemporary urban contexts, we can create housing futures that are *pono*—in right relationships with the land, with each other, and with generations to come.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most fundamental shift required in Hawai'i's built environment is moving from understanding housing as a speculative commodity to seeing it as a living relationship. Traditional *Kānaka Maoli* housing practices were grounded in an understanding of *'ohana* that extended beyond the nuclear family, encompassing broader networks of interdependence, ecological care, and cross-cultural sharing—as evidenced by the lived realities of the Kalihi camps.

As various scholars demonstrate, there is a profound misfit between the standardised, single-family Western house and the land-based, ethical frameworks of Indigenous communities.⁷⁰ The Western model atomises the family, severs the domestic sphere from food production, and treats the outdoors merely as aesthetic property rather than a vital, working extension of the home. It is evident that new models of housing are needed that recognise the deep continuity of culturally specific socio-spatial patterns. A common challenge for communities and architects is imagining how these patterns translate into dense urban areas, especially as large numbers of Indigenous peoples live in urban areas like Honolulu, Auckland, or Seattle. While the expansive space of rural village life cannot easily be transposed into urban centres, architectural design can still draw on the generative logic of these deep cultural patterns, not their literal scale, to model more compact forms of housing within dense urban areas.

Drawing on Mishuana Goeman's investigation of Land within Indigenous frameworks as a living, evolving entity that is unbounded: "Land is a meaning making process rather than a claimed object... Placemaking is moving toward cultural and intellectual sovereignty."⁷¹ Crucially, land as private property is not a prerequisite to maintaining and passing on the continued evolution of meaning making. This relational understanding of housing directly challenges the market-driven approach that has made Hawai'i's housing among the least affordable in the United States. It suggests that solutions must go beyond simply increasing housing supply; they must address the quality of relationships that housing either enables or disrupts—relationships with *'āina*, with ancestors, with multi-ethnic community networks, and with future generations. Through this lens, we see the inherent flaws within contemporary housing production: it is strictly confined within the extractive economic production of capitalist society. Modern housing is fundamentally flawed if it does not restore relationality.

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Glossary

‘Āina	Land
‘Aumakua	Family ancestors
‘Auwai	Irrigation channels, canals
‘ili	Subdivision of an <i>ahupua‘a</i>
‘imu	Earth oven
‘Oha	Corm of the <i>kalo</i> (taro) plant
‘Ohana	Family
‘Olelo No‘eau	Proverb, wise saying
‘ulu	Breadfruit
Aho	Purlins
Ahupua‘a	Land division; a water shed-based model extending from mountain to sea
Akua	God
Ali‘i	Chief
Ali‘i nui	High chief
Aloha	Love, compassion
Aloha ‘āina	Love of the land
Apeke	Small land claim or reserved interest situated in larger tract of land
Furo	Wooden tub, refers to Japanese bath house (Japanese)
Hala	Pandanus plant
Hālau wa‘a	Canoe house or workspace
Hale	House
Hale ‘āina	Women’s eating house
Hale kuku	Kapa house/storage house for kapa making
Hale mua	Men’s meeting house
Hale noa	Sleeping house
Hale papa‘a	Food storage house
Hale pe‘a	Menstruation house
Hale Pi‘o	Name of <i>hale</i> created by Connelly and Leong Leong
Hale pili	Pili grass thatch house
Hāloa	Stillborn babe of Papahānomoku (earth mother) and Wākea (sky father)
He ali‘i ka ‘Āina, he kauwā ke kanaka	Proverb which positions the land as chief and the people as servants

*He po‘i nā kai uli,
kai ko‘o, ‘a‘ohe hina
pūko‘a*

Proverb translated as, though the sea is deep and rough, the coral rock remains standing

Hibachi

Traditional fire bowl, grill (Japanese)

Ho‘okupu

Offering, tribute

Ho‘oulu ‘Āina

Organisation; HĀ

Honua

Place, earth

Huaka‘i

Journeying

Hui Aloha

Oneness, in reference to Hui Aloha ‘Āina – a prominent nineteenth-century Hawaiian civic organisation formed after the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom to oppose annexation to the United States

Hulihia

Turning

*I ka wā ma mua, ka
wā ma hope*

Proverb translated as, walking through the past into the future

Kahawai

stream

Kahua kapa

Women’s workyard

Kai

Sea

Kalo

Taro

Kama‘ainana

Child of the land

Kanaka

Person (singular), in context of article referring to Native Hawaiian (singular)

Kānaka

People (plural), in context of article referring to Native Hawaiians (plural)

Kanaka ‘Ōiwi

Person of Native Hawaiian descent

Kanaka Maoli

Native Hawaiian

Kanawai

Law, code

Kane hohoio

Hawaiian deity, god of the door way or threshold

Kapa

Bark cloth, typically of mulberry bark

Kapaoakua

Name of the land

Kapu

Natural law, sacred

Kauhale

Housing compound or village; traditional compound

Kauhuhu

Ridge pole

Kilikilihune

Fine light rain

Kīpuka

Clear place or oasis within a lava bed where there may be vegetation; a calm place in a high sea

<i>Kīpuka aloha ʻāina</i>	People, places, and organisations acting as ecological and cultural oases for the revival of Native Hawaiian lifeways; Indigenous refusal	<i>Pā pōhaku</i>	Low stone wall
<i>Kō</i>	Sugarcane	<i>Pae ʻĀina o Hawaiʻi</i>	Hawaiian archipelago
<i>Kokua Kalihi Valley</i>	A nonprofit dedicated to the wellbeing of low income residents	<i>Paluʻe</i>	Type of house in Indonesia
<i>Konohiki</i>	Land manager, headman of an ahupuaʻa	<i>Papahānomoku</i>	Land; earth mother
<i>Kuhikuhi puʻuone / Kuhikuhipuʻuone</i>	Master builder, geomancer, architect	<i>Pili</i>	Type of grass
<i>Kuleana</i>	Responsibility	<i>Pono</i>	Righteous balance; in right relationships with the land, with each other, and with generations to come
<i>Kumulipo</i>	Origin, genesis, source of life; name of the Hawaiian creation chant	<i>Pou hana</i>	Main posts
<i>Lānai(s)</i>	Porch, open air covered space near a house	<i>Puʻuhonua o Waiʻanae</i>	Name of organisation and place; literally, Place of Refuge in Waiʻanae
<i>Loʻi</i>	Irrigated terrace	<i>Pule hoʻolaʻa hale</i>	Consecration ceremony
<i>Loʻi kalo</i>	Taro patch/terraces	<i>Shamisen</i>	Traditional three-stringed, long necked musical instrument (Japanese)
<i>Lohelau</i>	Cross beams	<i>Takarangi</i>	Traditional intersecting double spiral (Māori)
<i>Loko iʻa</i>	Fishponds	<i>Ti</i>	Ti tree
<i>Lonoaea</i>	Placename	<i>Vā</i>	Relational space
<i>Māʻilikūkahi</i>	High chief of Oʻahu during the fifteenth century	<i>Waʻa</i>	Seafaring/outrigger canoe
<i>Mahalo</i>	Thank you, gratitude	<i>Wahinehiʻuʻia</i>	Fishtailed fern woman
<i>Māhele</i>	Division	<i>Wai</i>	Water
<i>Māhele ʻĀina</i>	Hawaiian title for the Māhele Act	<i>Waiwai</i>	Wealth, abundance
<i>Maiʻa</i>	Banana grove	<i>Wākea</i>	Sky father
<i>Makaʻāinana</i>	Stewards of the land	<i>Wao Akua</i>	Realm of the gods
<i>Moʻo</i>	A guardian, a lizard, continuity. Also a narrow strip of land, a land division smaller than an ʻili.	<i>Wao Kānaka</i>	Human realm
<i>Moʻokūʻauhau</i>	Genealogy	<i>Wao Nahele</i>	Forested region
<i>Moʻolelo</i>	History, story	<i>Whanaungatanga</i>	The deep sense of family connection that brings a sense of belonging, relationship, kinship (Māori)
<i>Moʻokūʻauhau</i>	Genealogical		
<i>Mochi</i>	Soft rice cake (Japanese)		
<i>Moku</i>	District		
<i>O ke kahua mamua, mahope Ke kūkulu</i>	Proverb translated as, the foundation first, then the building		
<i>Oʻa</i>	Rafters		
<i>Okinawan</i>	Referring to style of dance from Okinawa		
<i>Olena</i>	Turmeric		
<i>Olonā</i>	<i>Touchardia latifolia</i> , a native shrub		

NOTES

- Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson define grounded normativity as the ethical frameworks derived from Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge—the deeply rooted, reciprocal relationship to the land that informs Indigenous modes of thought, behaviour, and political systems. Refer to Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 249–55.
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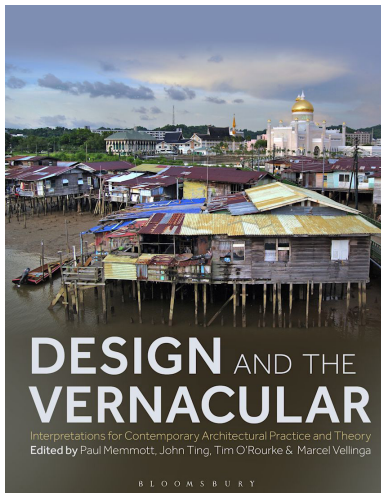
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book review / LORENZA LAZZATI

INTERSTICES 26

Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory Edited by Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke, and Marcel Vellinga Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023, 320 pp.



Design and the Vernacular is a collection of well-chosen essays edited by Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke, and Marcel Vellinga. The sixteen contributions are a relatively well-balanced representation of the Australasia and Pacific regions. The scholars carefully crafted an understanding of Indigenous and vernacular practices based on their geography, materiality, and climate. They situated them in relation to historical events, colonisation and inter-atoll migration shifts, and sociopolitical and cultural changes.

The book invites us to consider vernacular architecture from a contemporary perspective—a living form of architecture that organically evolves alongside its context. By doing so, the connection between architecture, vernacular, and politics becomes apparent and the book's key argument, which is its interpretation of vernacular as a process rather than a final product or artefact, emerges. The scholars' contributions to this collection describe how vernacular architecture is a non-linear, dynamic, and evolving process influenced by multiple factors, such as different migration patterns, demographic shifts, sociocultural and political circumstances, and climate and environmental conditions.

While the book doesn't refute the widely accepted views on vernacular sustainability, mostly stemming from the general conception of the vernacular as a form of architecture that manifests Indigenous connection to the earth (or country)—a symbiotic way of living that understands the climate and the environment rooted in many of the region's Indigenous cultures—it questions how the tangible and intangible characteristics of the Australasia and Pacific vernacular can respond to contemporary challenges. To answer, the collection presents a diverse selection of case studies that embrace not only the production of architecture, its materiality, and physicality, but also the process itself.

The book's first section exposes the gaps between the Indigenous and colonial values systems, inviting us to reflect on and consider what we could do to design and deliver culturally appropriate projects and research. We often hear about

co-design, participation, and inclusiveness in architecture, planning, and other disciplines. However, what does meaningful engagement look like? Particularly when Indigenous people are a key actor. The Eurocentric cultural hegemony still influences many aspects of our societies, including how we conduct research and design and implement projects, and how funding streams are set up or construction projects are budgeted and delivered. The cases presented on humanitarian architecture (Charmaine 'Ilaü Talei) and research practices (Savannah Brown (Ngāti Whātua o Kaipara, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Wai), Amber Ruckes (Tūhoe), Faye Mendes-Underwood (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa), Aisea Fanamanu, Deidre Brown (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu)) highlight the challenges generated by the gaps between different value systems, illustrating how integrating and working with Indigenous practices can yield positive outcomes.

Likewise, the case studies of Indigenous architectural practices of Arnhem's country (Kabulwarnamyo homeland and Maningrida homelands) demonstrate how flexible funding arrangements and mutually beneficial partnerships between traditional owners and land management bodies can deliver sustainable outcomes (Hannah Robertson). These last examples also enforce the connection between vernacular and modernity by illustrating how vernacular architecture and features can be integrated into modern building methods. Contributions by Gabriele Weichart, Tim O'Rourke, Hannah Robertson, James Miller, and R. H. Rusch, J. H. N. Amar, and L. A. Armitage bring attention to the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and practices. By breaking the conventional juxtaposition of modern and vernacular, innovative and traditional, the scholars in this section achieve two objectives. First, they demonstrate the Indigenous population's agency in adapting and producing vernacular landscapes. Second, they elaborate on the hybridisation of vernacular architecture, which can occur over time and can be influenced by multiple factors, from political interests and social changes to migration patterns and cultural shifts or the necessity to adapt to changing climate conditions.

The book's section on how migration patterns intertwine with vernacular processes unpacks a core theme. Colonial settlers' impacts on Indigenous vernacular are more commonly discussed in terms of disruption or marginalisation of the vernacular, as foreign materials, knowledge, and sociocultural practices are introduced. Colonial migration tends to create a hierarchy where the vernacular is subject to the new imported forms of architecture (Edson G. Cabalfin).

However, the book's content widens to include other forms of migration, like labour and diasporic movements, and climate-induced migration, offering an alternative and compelling reading of vernacularisation processes. Diasporic and labour movements create a more balanced power dynamic between the vernacular and migrants' knowledge and practices. Their influence on the built environment is more subtle and indirect, generating vernacular forms that mark their identity and express their need to create a space for themselves in the settlement country (David Beynon and Ian Woodcock). For climate-induced migrants, on the other hand, the big questions are whether vernacularisation processes can be reproduced in settlement countries and who owns them (Lizzie Yarina, Penny Allan, and Martin Bryant).

The intriguing element of this collection is the connection between vernacular and politics, nation-building, and collective identities. For colonised nations,

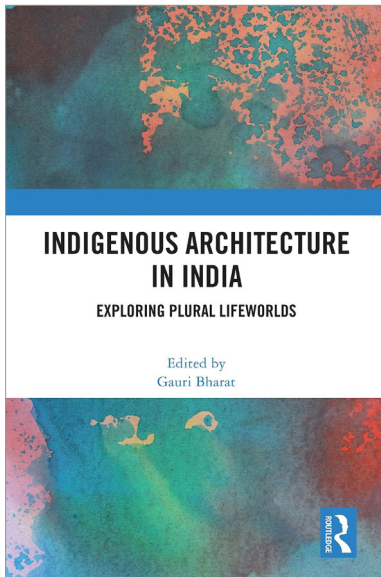
referencing pre-colonial architectural forms serves the dual purpose of uniting people under a shared banner while rejecting imposed colonial identities. The conical houses on the Loyalty Islands rekindled Kanak identity (Louis Lagarde and Yves-Béalo Gony). Flowers, plants, and dancing women were some of the vernacular features intended to mark a distinctive Filipino architecture (Edson G. Cabalfin). However, for culturally diverse countries, this exercise is driven by political decisions that ultimately pick elements that belong to a dominant group or can serve specific interests at the expense of others. Ultimately, political decisions can either harness or inhibit vernacular potential.

The strength of *Design and the Vernacular* lies in how it successfully challenges the conventional modern–vernacular binary thinking, which sees modern architecture as innovative and flexible in contrast to vernacular architecture, which is considered traditional and unchanging. Its contemporary approach to vernacular, strong emphasis on the process, and separation of the vernacular from a specific location or group afford us the opportunity to examine past, present, and future vernacular.

By sifting through the pages, readers can encounter some thought-provoking ideas and take away a few clear messages. Vernacular processes are not a one-way series of actions but a diversified network of interactions. Can vernacular and the vernacularisation of our processes help respond to sociocultural challenges and climate crises? Most likely. However, the hegemonic cultural monopoly we inherited from colonial times must end. We ought to recognise diverse sociocultural values in their own right. This includes rethinking how we conduct research: What does co-design genuinely mean? What does a culturally aware ethics clearance look like? How do we develop an equal and meaningful partnership? We must reconsider how funding streams are structured and their accessibility and eligibility criteria. *Design and the Vernacular* provides insights into how we can reframe our thinking and internalise Indigenous practices in our processes, but much more needs to be done. While I would certainly recommend this book to academics, it is a must-read for policy-makers, built environment practitioners, and humanitarian professionals.

Indigenous Architecture in India: Exploring Plural Lifeworlds

Edited by Gauri Bharat
Routledge, 2024, 214 pp.



Gauri Bharat's recent book, *Indigenous Architecture in India*, addresses a question I have been mulling over this past decade—how the seamless integration of vernacular, traditional, tribal and Ādivāsi, and local built environments in our conception of Asia's 'indigenous' architecture has disadvantaged First Nations groups. Bharat offers an in-depth analysis of these various terms and their genealogies in relation to India—where constitutional recognition of scheduled tribes has produced a distinct category of tribal architecture. She notes that “the word indigenous is not common to administrative parlance here and the term *adivasi* is used instead” (2), a distinction important to recognise as different from its usage in Oceania. This terminology introduces another more nuanced layer of identification between colonial and First Nations cultural identification based on millennia of interactions, varied degrees of acculturation and combined anticolonial resistance whereby Ādivāsis are deeply embedded within a colonial-indigenous binary that diminishes their particularity.

From the viewpoint of our disciplines, both vernacular and traditional architecture have been elevated through their championship of cultural recovery but remain inextricably linked to their discursive genesis in the British arts and crafts movement and feudal religious and political structures from the past. When culturally neutralised through scientific approaches, they are reduced to exemplifying grass roots technologies and approaches to sustainability. They are increasingly fetishised and decontextualised. Bharat points out that all these efforts at interpreting and fixing indigenous architecture reduce its dynamism as a practice that remains open to diverse influences and is shaped by individual intentions. She argues that these are not mutually exclusive categories. Her interpretation of the terms suggests their grounding in the local to provide a situated analysis of each case within its sociopolitical context, prioritising place epistemologies rather than phenomenological readings of place. Central to this approach is the recognition of the plural lifeworlds that Indigenous people inhabit and the intersections of these in their everyday lives. As Bharat argues, the architect's gaze frames the Ādivāsi landscape as located outside modernity but, in fact, these are dynamic and changing environments where community aspirations and expectations are equally important for any analysis.

Given these conceptual anchors, the collection's emergent themes advance a value system very different from those found in conventional architectural writing or pedagogy, including those of the established vernacular canon (Rapoport, Rudofsky, Oliver) which are indelibly tied to contrasting modes of property ownership.¹ The book outlines what can be achieved if the concept of property can be suspended in favour of the affective relations sustained through the creative labour of everyday life. Unlike *Design and the Vernacular*, also reviewed in this issue of *Interstices*, and the inclusion of architecture in its title, it is not concerned with responding to any conventional disciplinary norms. The overlap instead is in a new sensitivity to the differentiation between the identification of 'indigenous' as not being colonial and 'Indigenous' as First Nations or Ādivāsi identities with very particular cultural traits. These distinctions have been delineated by scholars interested in the anthropology of architecture, for example, Roxana Waterson, Paul Memmott, and Marcel Vellinga, with fresh impetus for such efforts fired by Indigenous rights discourses globally.²

The book organises its nine chapters under five themes. Ādivāsi lifeworlds are portrayed in the first two chapters through the hidden interior art practices of Bachchom Bayer Ba, created annually for the *mage parab* festival (Sanjay Nath and Rinu Kumari) and the sacred grove *jaher* that is central to the organisation of Santal Ādivāsi community life (Sumit Hembram and Amit Kumar Kisku). The theme "Understanding the Socio-Spatial in Indigenous Lifeworlds" includes a chapter by Sprya Sharma which explores the cycle of dismantling and rebuilding homes along the flood plains of the River Kosi in North Bihar. These unlikely entry points into an architectural study set the pattern for exploration of material and spatial practices, relationships to and with the environment, ephemeral and nomadic occupations of places and buildings, and modes of self-representation, many of them shaped by and shaping contemporary economic and material practices that are, in the book's argument, equally instrumental in shaping Ādivāsi lives. Bharat has no qualms in redefining the meaning of architecture as an approach and a discipline based on the plural lifeworlds of these historically and currently marginalised groups. Neither are their worlds essentialised as rural and remote. Halfway through the volume the discussion shifts to urban contexts with an interlude by veteran educator Neelkanth Chhaya.

An important aspect of the collection is in recognising the intersection of Ādivāsi lifeworlds with labour and craftsman/woman-ship, as important aspects of their modernity and integration into urban life. Jigna Desai's study of Kachchhi crafts at Nirona reveals that they are a sum of many migrant material cultures that become situated as Indigenous knowledge. Anjali Mittal writes of how glass bangle making in Firozabad has shifted to a semi-industrial process, without disrupting community agency. Chintal Sharma travels with the Rabari, nomadic pastoralists whose minimal transient modes of living produce a different model of domesticity networked across a number of places and services. Priya Joseph describes how terracotta technology was transformed by entanglements of Indigenous with colonisers. As the study moves towards craft and materiality, the distinction between Ādivāsi and indigenous becomes blurry. Sankalpa's dialogue between masons from Telangana and Goa focuses on mud and timber technologies, while Smit Vyas's chapter on Chota Oda residents' adaptation to urban influences, and the changed place of livestock, are as much about the sudden onset of contemporary norms in places that were unchanged for generations. The final chapter

on the museumisation of a semi-nomadic Ladakhi village by Manvi Seth, speaks to how these changes inspire self-conscious efforts at recognising and protecting built and material heritage.

Gauri Bharat was an associate professor at the CEPT University Ahmedabad when she published this anthology, following on from her own seminal work on the Santal communities, *In Forest, Field, and Factory: Adivasi Habitations Through Twentieth Century India* (SAGE/Yoda Press, 2019) and *The Social Life of Streets in India: Histories, Contestations, Subjectivities* (Bloomsbury, 2022) with Sadan Jha. She is currently professor and dean of the School of Architecture at Anant National University. Her focus on architecture as a critical creative practice illuminates the selections for this book. The collection also highlights important considerations when focusing on First Nations communities in Asia: that they cannot be differentiated based on race, social disadvantage, cultural marginalisation, customary laws and sustainable practices, ontological connections to land, claims of autochthony, or many of the highly essentialist binary tropes applied to and by First Nations communities in settler colonial societies. These categorisations are applicable to many minority groups who may or may not be Ādivāsis, and the levels of cultural absorption may make such identitarian claims difficult to ascertain. But this is exactly the complexity of Asia that constitutes its cultural richness and demands interpretation of the built environment as a socio-spatial practice.

NOTES

1. Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Prentice-Hall, 1969); Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* (Museum of Modern Art, 1964); Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The Vernacular House World Wide* (Phaidon, 2007).

2. Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Tuttle Publishing, 2014); Paul Memmott, *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia* (University of Queensland Press, 2022); Marcel Vellinga, *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Routledge, 2007).

visual essay / EMILY KIM

INTERSTICES 26

Beyond the view from above: Re-reading the Pacific airfield

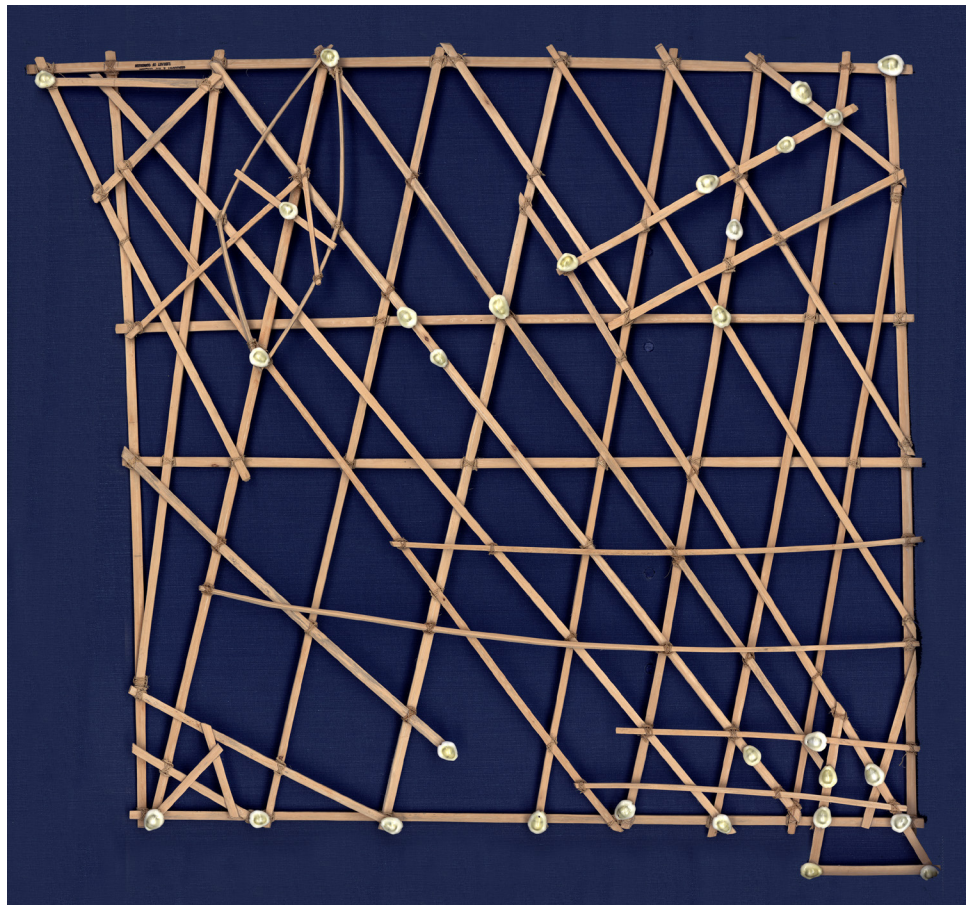


Fig. 1 Majuro (192-?). Marshall Islands stick chart, Rebbelib type
[Photograph: Library of Congress Geography and Map Division]

Pacific Islanders have navigated the ocean for thousands of years. The Marshallese stick chart, like the one found in the US Library of Congress, encodes this knowledge as a tactile mnemonic, studied on land as a personal tool of routes previously traversed, rather than held as a navigational map during travel.¹ Its most detailed register is the ocean itself: currents, winds, and swells, focusing on the connective tissue between islands.

This form of spatial navigation stands in contrast with much of Western cartography, whose oceanic representation enforces a water–land dichotomy. Abraham Ortelius’s *Maris Pacifici*, one of the first printed maps of the Pacific, rendered the



Fig. 2 Abraham Ortelius (1589). *Maris Pacifici* [Map: public domain via Wikimedia Commons]

ocean as a void: a blue expanse punctuated by routes and landmasses marking shifting imperial claims. Early twentieth-century aerial photography became the colonial map's successor.

During World War II, the Allied military tactic of 'island hopping' through the Pacific Theatre treated islands as strategic stepping-stones rather than places. Airfields demand specific, replicable dimensions, graded and cleared to accommodate flight. This militarised gaze flattened the ecological and cultural complexity of both individual islands and larger archipelagos, effectively erasing Indigenous understandings of a connective ocean and transforming distinct landscapes into placeless infrastructure. James Corner describes this synoptic vision as a scopic regime of authority and instrumental distance,² a gaze from everywhere and nowhere.³

This project questions this aerial logic through a multi-method investigation of two World War II airfields: Iejima Auxiliary Airfield (Okinawa Prefecture, Japan), and North Field (Tinian, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, US), militarised and infrastructural landscapes that are often dismissed. Findings are based on fieldwork and archival research conducted between 2023 and 2025. Here, the runway is treated as more than inert ruin, instead as material archive: an active participant in a living landscape.

The following drawings articulate tensions between imperial time and local ecological and cultural cycles. Chamorro/CHamoru (the Indigenous peoples of the Mariana Islands) temporalities are "fluid cycles in which the past, present, and

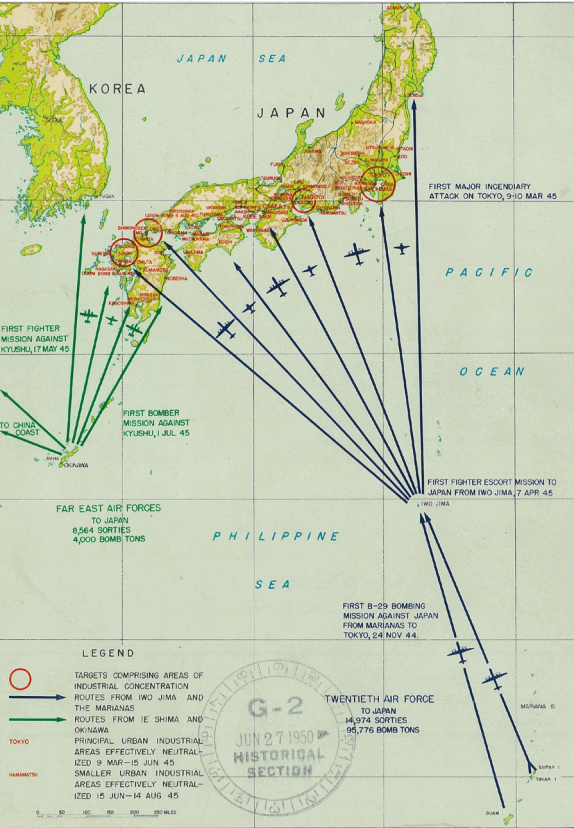
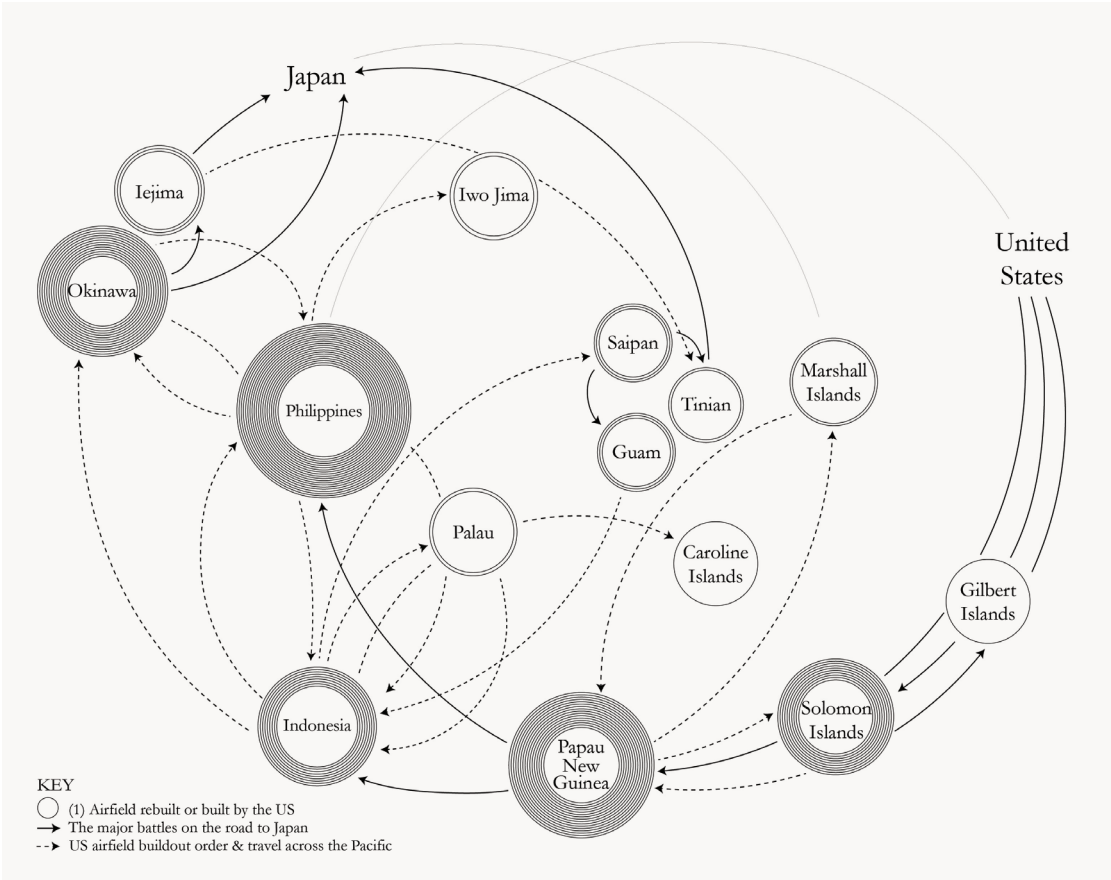


Fig. 3 Allied Force Headquarters (1944). Japan Bombing Operations Rough Draft (NAID: 50925956) [Map: US National Archives]

Fig. 4 Emily Kim (2024). World War II Airfields of the Pacific Theatre [Diagram drawn in Illustrator, using data on airfield locations, counts, and directional flows (based on battle dates) compiled from Pacific Wrecks, the US Army Center of Military History, the Australian War Memorial, Okinawa City government records, Batangas History, and Wikipedia].



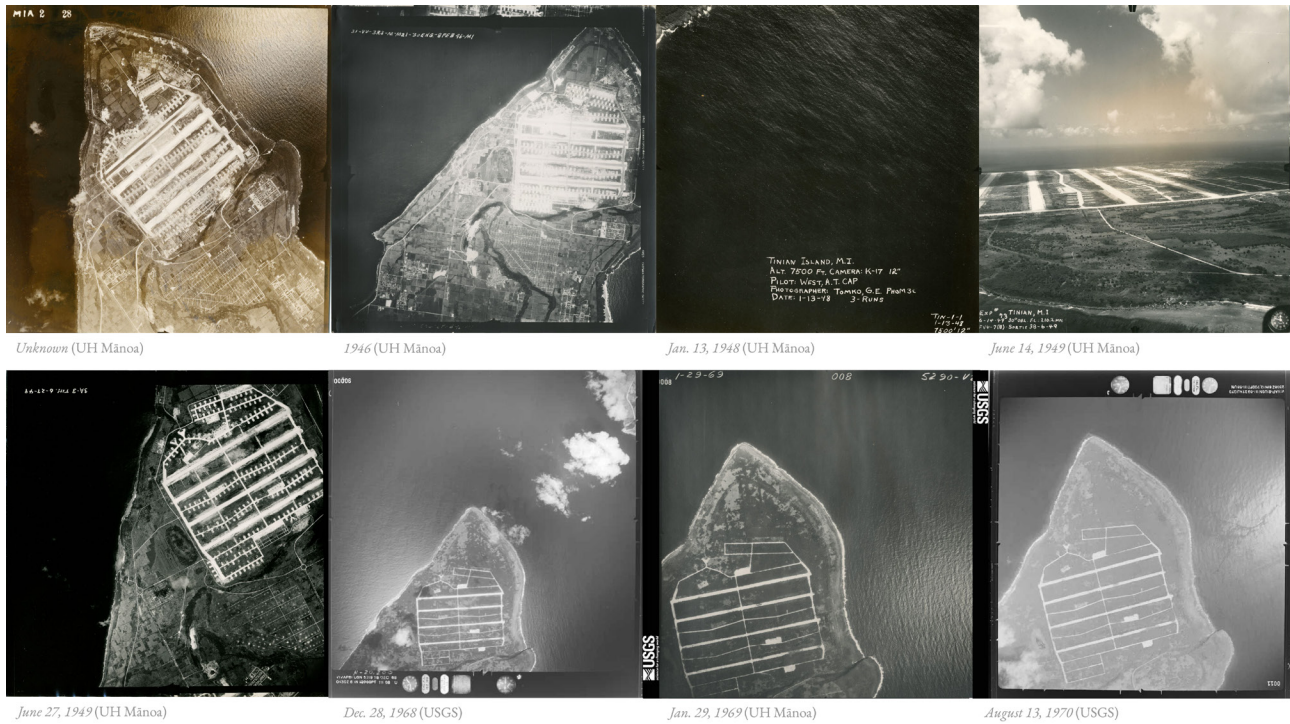


Fig. 5 Emily Kim (2025). Aerial photographs of North Field, Tinian, 1946–1970 [Composite aerial photographs: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Digital Collection and USGS]

Fig. 6 Emily Kim (2024). Runway Baker, North Field, Tinian [Drone photograph]



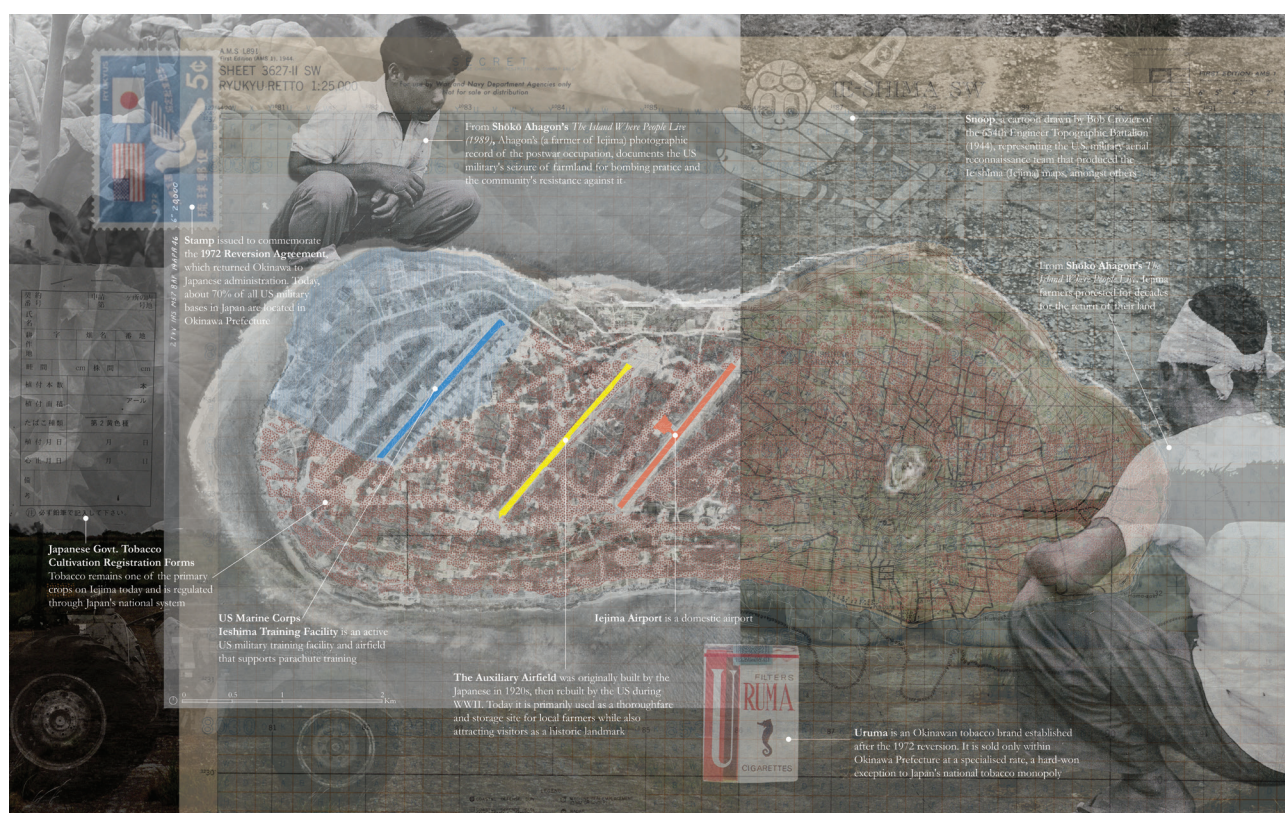
future are interdependent,²⁴ interwoven with Islander worldviews. The Cyclical Timeline renders this frame cartographically: events are anchored in islands and to each other, with the ocean drawn as the field of relation. Each collage, assembled from fragments, offers a situated, partial view.⁵

Standing on the Iejima Auxiliary Airfield runway is disorienting, flanked by low tobacco fields with the runway's geometry extending in both directions. There is a sensation of being anywhere and nowhere, neither a physical place nor a derelict ruin. Okinawan farmers, who have and continue to fight US military presence to reclaim their agricultural lands, actively maintain the surface for tractor movement and tobacco storage. The geometry of occupation on this sliver of Iejima is neither erased nor intact.

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The stick chart is not a tool for locating position but for orienting oneself within relational fields. This is reflected in the collages: not singular views from above or below, but a new field of vision assembled from many. Their density invites close reading: zooming, tracing layers, following annotation, their partiality acting as an opening for further investigation. Through this ground-level re-reading, not from above, the Pacific runway is returned to the complex living and relational genealogy of the archipelago.



in Illustrator: Iejima Auxiliary Airfield (yellow, currently used by Okinawan farmers for tractor movement and tobacco curing), US Marine Corps Ieshima Training Facility (blue), Iejima Airport (orange). Additional elements: photographs of farmers surveying land cratered by US military ordnance, from Shōkō Ahagon's *The Island Where People Live*, a farmer's photographic account of the post-war occupation of Iejima:

an aerial reconnaissance cartoon by Bob Crozier, 654th Engineer Topographic Battalion, 1944; a 1972 postage stamp commemorating the Okinawan Reversion Agreement, which returned Okinawa to Japanese administration while the US military presence remained; and a package of Uruma cigarettes, an Okinawan brand established by local farmers after reversion, and a hard-fought exception to Japan's national tobacco monopoly]

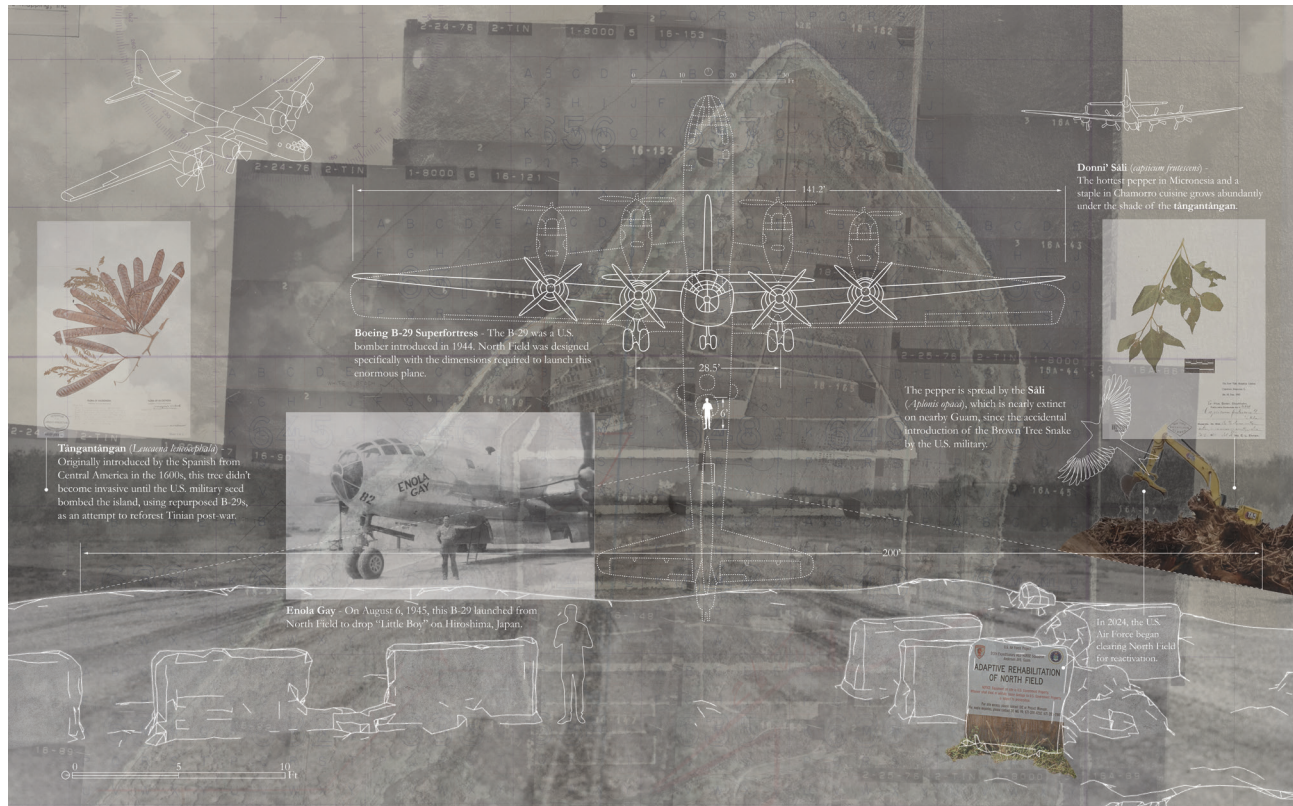


Fig. 9 Emily Kim (2024). Unfolding North Field [Digital collage assembled in Photoshop, Illustrator, and Rhino. Base: Special Air and Gunnery Target Map of Tinian, 64th Engineer Topographic Battalion, USAFICPA, April 1944, 1:20,000 (US National Archives), layered with a fieldwork photograph of Runway Baker (2024) showing skid marks from recent use, and a 1976 aerial photo index prepared by the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Division of Lands and Surveys (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa MAGIS). Centre: Boeing B-29 Superfortress front elevation and plan, drawn in Rhino from technical drawings and scaled to the runway photograph; flanking B-29 drawings traced from photographs. The runway's dimensions were specified to accommodate this aircraft, which launched the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from this site in August 1945. Foreground: 3D LIDAR scan of the runway's cross-section, captured in 2024 and processed into linework in Rhino. Right: US Air Force excavator (still from USAF Civil Engineers, "Tinian Island: WWII's Busiest Airfield Comes Back Into Focus," 2024) and fieldwork photograph of "Adaptive Rehabilitation of North Field" signage, marking current military reactivation. Ecological actors: *tangantangan*

(*Leucaena leucocephala*) herbarium specimen, Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, originally University of Guam Herbarium; *donni' sali* (*Capsicum frutescens*) herbarium specimen, New York Botanical Garden; *sali* (bird) traced from photographs. Aerially seed-bombed onto Tinian post-war, the *tangantangan* has been classified as invasive, while the *sali* and *donni' sali*, in the years between heavy military use, have made of its canopy a site of mutual flourishing, re-authoring an occupied landscape and unsettling the category of 'invasive' itself]

NOTES

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2. James Corner, "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes," in *Composite Landscapes: Photomontage and Landscape Architecture*, ed. Charles Waldheim and Andrea Hansen (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 135.

3. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

4. "Section 4: Timeline," Guampedia, <https://www.guampedia.com/fanohge-chamoru-exhibit-section-4-timeline/>.

5. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 586.

6. Cynthia Ross, "Ecological Imperialism in the Occupied Landscape," *World History Connected* 18, no. 2 (2021): 26, <https://doi.org/10.13021/whc.v18i2.3609>. Though the focus of Ross's paper is on Guam, the analysis on the use of *tāngantāngan* by the US across the Pacific Islands is of particular note.

7. Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15.

bios

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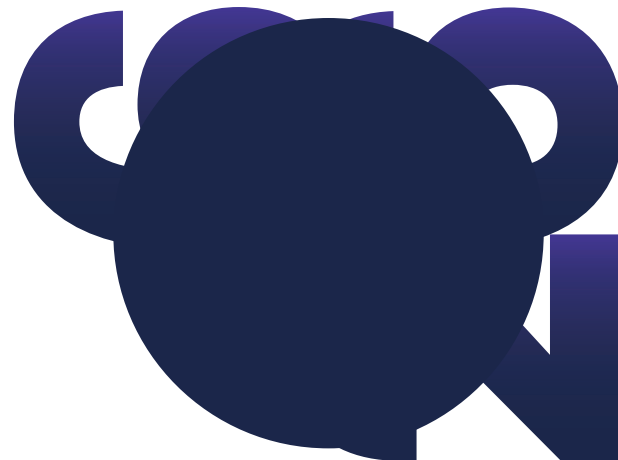
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colophon

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