

VALENIVANUA: A COMMUNAL CULTURAL SPACE, THE PINNACLE OF INDIGENOUS VALUES, PEACE, AND MANA

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The size and value of a vale [house] is determined by social usage and the effort and support received during its construction.¹

—A. Ravuvu

The indigenous architectural heritage of Fiji richly shows the culture and traditions of inhabitants and mirrors their way of living.² A variety of traditionally built houses existed prior to the advent of modern materials, which were better adapted to the islands' climatic conditions. However, the sad issue is that traditional architecture is declining in Fiji, with only Navala Village in Ba Province showing resistance to modern "Western-style" comfort and privacy. The value and importance of historical traditional buildings in the lives of the indigenous people have diminished greatly. An elder from Lau Province once lamented, "House building [is] a poor affair [as] compared with what it used to be [in the olden days]."³ Perhaps, with the introduction of cash economy, it has become quite expensive to construct a *bure* (traditional house) properly. At the same time, galvanized iron houses have been introduced into indigenous Fijian villages (even though they are considerably hotter) because the Ministry of Health felt these modern houses were cleaner and more hygienic.⁴

1. A. Ravuvu, *Vakaitaukei--Fijian Way of Life* (Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies, USP, 1983), 17.

2. U. Herbig, G. Zohrer, and F. Zamolyi, "Recording the Cultural Heritages of Samoa and Fiji Islands," *The International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences XXXIV-5/C15* (2003): 1682-1777.

3. A.M. Hocart, "Lau Islands, Fiji," *Bernice Bertroff Museum Bulletin* (1929), 126.

4. John Wesley Coulter, *Fiji: Little India of the Pacific* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 5.

Nevertheless, this paper seeks to highlight the organization of work along with the related processes and language used regarding the building of traditional architecture, specifically the *valenivanua*—a traditional house used as a meeting or cultural space for village chiefs and clan heads. This will be followed by a discussion of rituals and ceremonies associated with building the *valenivanua* and a look into the role of the structure as a sanctified cultural space symbolizing peace, social cohesion, *mana*, and *sau*.⁵ Other societal significance of the *valenivanua* will be discussed using the Malomalo District in Nadroga Province, Western Viti Levu (Fiji’s main island), as a case study.



Like any other element of traditional wisdom and expression of the indigenous Fijians, traditional architecture differs from one region or province to another. The word “house” differs to a greater extent between regions. Generally it is referred to as *vale* in many parts of Fiji. In the Yasawas Islands, Ba, and Rakiraki (Western Viti Levu), a house is referred to as *sue* while in Vuda, Nadroga/Navosa, Savatu, Waya, Vatulele, and Serua it is called *were*. Also, the word *bure*, which generally refers to a traditional thatched house, is denoted differently in various parts of Fiji—it is known as *bato* in Serua Province and *bito* in Nadroga Province.⁶

5. *Mana* in this context refers to power to effect while *sau* is a powerful and effective influence to cause ill or good.

6. iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture, “Vale Vakaviti” (unpublished, 1999), 3.

7. Literally translated as “pig’s head”; during traditional feasting pig or pork is usually reserved for chiefs, especially the pig’s head, hence the significance and importance of this traditional house in Bau. The *ulunivuaka* was used mainly by important visitors on the chiefly island of Bau.

The form, magnitude, and rituals accorded during the building of the Fijian *bure* or traditional house vary depending on their intended social functions, symbolism, and occupants. Some were built for the *bête*, or priests, as temples (*burekalou*), others to serve as visitors’ houses (*burenivulagi*), like the *ulunivuaka*⁷ in Bau in the 1800s. Most, though, serve as the *valenivanua* in which the elders meet to discuss

1 *Ulunivuaka*—visitors’ long house on Bau Island, Fiji in the nineteenth century. Source: Steven Hooper and Jane Roth (ed.), *The Fiji Journals of Baron Anatol Von Hugel 1875-77* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1990).

important matters regarding the people, land, customs, and traditions; these valenivanua are also used as official residences of the village or vanua chiefs (*valelevu*).⁸ There is also the *burenisa*, a designated house where older and younger men converge and sleep in preparation for war or prepare for the next hunt, fish drive, or other collective pursuit for sustenance (land, food, or water) for the community. The use of the *burenisa* to prepare men for war is synonymous with the infamous indigenous Fijian counting system related to the subject of traditional architecture: *tini na iwau sa dua na bure* (ten war clubs [assuming 10 warriors] are equivalent to one bure).

The formation and thatched characteristics of the valenivanua also vary in different parts of Fiji. The valenivanua is unique in that it is the biggest of all houses in the village. It is the vanua that postulates the site and builds the valenivanua. Another significant feature of this particular cultural icon is that its foundation (*yavu*) is higher than any other built dwelling in the village, with interior decorations intricately woven to the poles and wall hangings in the form of mats and *masi* (tapa cloth) hung to showcase the craftsmanship of the people.

There are three basic types of vale:⁹

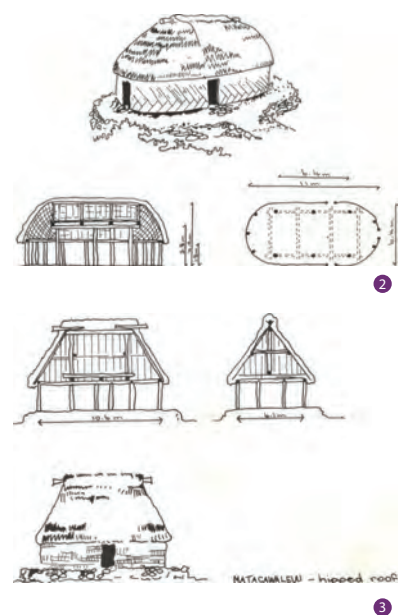
(a) Tongan-type vale (Figure 2) can be found mostly in the Lau Islands in the eastern parts of Fiji. These are houses with straight sides and rounded ends, with arched roofs throughout. This type of traditional house was introduced by Tongan builders who came to Fiji in search of timber to build large double-hulled sailing vessels (canoes) that became known as the *drua*.

(b) The thatched oblong (Figure 3), which is without a center pole, is the most common vale found in almost all parts of Fiji. There are two forms: (1) houses with a main post in the middle of each of the short ends and (2) houses with no main posts.

(c) Thatched vale with center poles are a feature of Western Viti Levu. These houses are rectangular in form and have a single main post in the center of the floor to support the ridge pole and the apex of the roof. This special form of traditional architecture is known as the *rausina*.

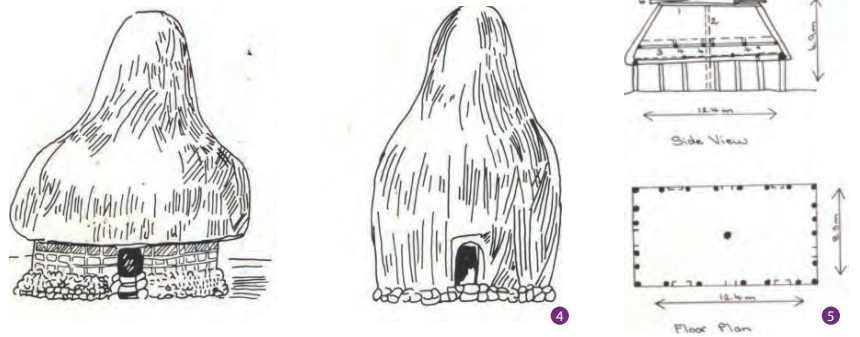
8. Literally translated as “big house,” the magnitude of the house is symbolic of an occupant who is of a high status in society.

9. George Kingsley Roth, “Housebuilding in Fiji,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 84, I & II (1954): 1-2.



2 Tongan-type vale. Source: S. Freeman, “The Centre-poled Houses of Western Vitilevu,” *DOMODOMO* IV:1 (1986): 3.

3 Thatched oblong vale with no center pole. Source: “The Centre-poled Houses of Western Vitilevu,” *DOMODOMO* IV:1 (1986): 5.



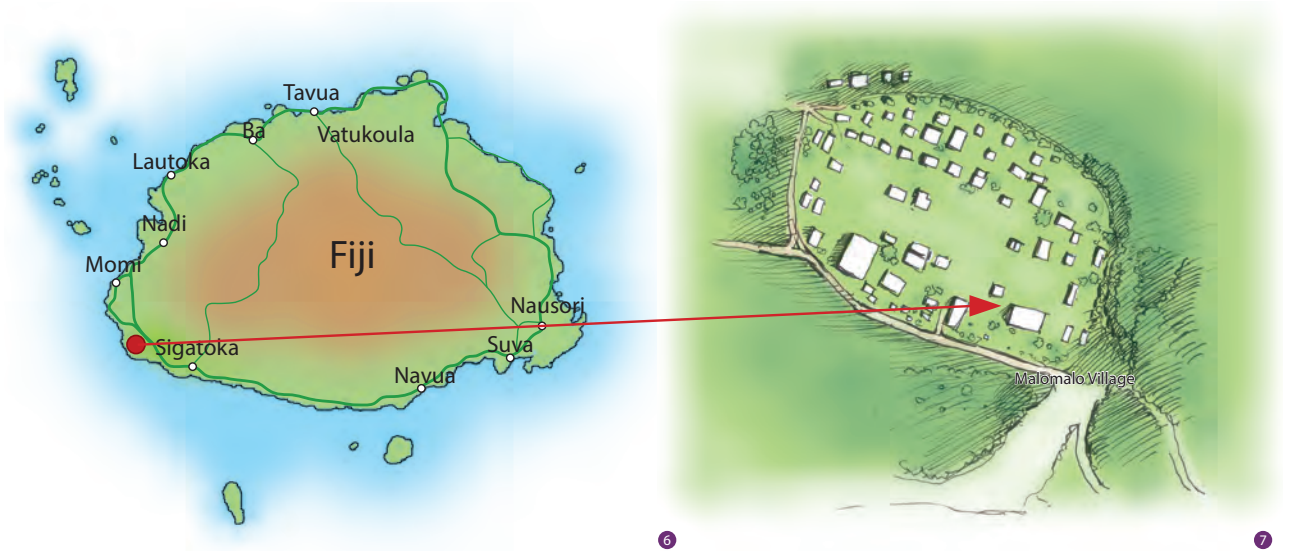
A voyager in the 1800s once observed that “in architecture the [indigenous] Fijians have no mean progress; and they are the only people I have seen...who manifested a taste for the fine arts.”¹⁰ Sadly, this is not the case as there are no traditional architectural structures in place manifesting this observation. The traditional wisdom pertinent to the building of the valenivanua is slowly disappearing.

10. *The Cyclopedia of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, and the Cook Islands* (Sydney: The Cyclopedia Company of Fiji, 1907), 39.

11. Nadroga is one of the fourteen provinces of Fiji and one of the eight based in Viti Levu. Malomalo is one of the twenty-two districts that make up Nadroga. There are a total of eight villages in the district, and Malomalo Village is the principal locale.

REVITALIZING TRADITIONAL WISDOM ASSOCIATED WITH BUILDING OF THE VALENIVANUA IN MALOMALO VILLAGE, NADROGA, FIJI

The valenivanua used in this account was built at Malomalo Village on the southwestern coast of Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest and principal island, by men of the Malomalo District in Nadroga Province.¹¹



4, 5 Thatched vale with center pole. Source: S. Freeman, “The Centre-poled Houses of Western Vitilevu,” *DOMODOMO* IV:1 (1986): 8, 12.

6, 7 Map of Fiji and Malomalo Village.

The building of the valenivanua for Malomalo was in response to a *bosevanua* (meeting of elders in the tribe) called by the grand chief of the vanua¹² or district of Malomalo to discuss the need to revitalize and transmit associated skills and knowledge to youths of the village (mainly males). Through government grants, the reconstruction was undertaken by the people of Malomalo, where the different clans and families assisted through an organized communal activity called *solesolevaki*.

The name of the valenivanua and the site on which it initially stood is called *Nahohowaqa*. Built in 1953 (with a few roofing renovations in 1973), the actual bure had deteriorated. It is customary for the vale to have names to demarcate social standings and legitimacy for one's place in relation to the tribe, clan, or village. Names often trace generations of current and previous occupants of the bure as well as link and rekindle the relationship that exists between two different vanua, tribes, or villages in the same district or province or across borders (in other provinces).

Organization of the Work

The Malomalo valenivanua revitalization and skills transmission was undertaken by three of the eight villages within the district or vanua of Malomalo. The three villages—Nadiri, Nalele, and Malomalo—had different responsibilities during the rebuilding process.

A master carpenter hailing from Cuvu District,¹³ Kitione Wainiqolo (aged 79), was traditionally approached to lead the work because there were no other locals to spearhead the reconstruction. This particular carpenter is unique in that even though his origin is from another village (Cuvu), he grew up in Nadiri Village and is a *vasu*.¹⁴ Although he is not a traditional carpenter by lineage, he grew up observing and assisting elderly carpenters who have passed on but who had been involved in the building of bures in the village. Similarly, while Wainiqolo is linked maternally to the village of Nadiri, it is the people of Nalele Village, the traditional builders, who are also responsible for the rebuilding of Nahohowaqa.¹⁵ Regardless of his origins, if the vanua elders and chiefs and the traditional carpenter clan are in agreement (and in this case they

12. *Vanua* literally means “land,” but also refers to the social and cultural aspects of the physical environment identified with a social group.

13. Cuvu District is one of the twenty-two districts in Nadroga Province. Cuvu is about ten kilometers from Malomalo Village traveling south toward Sigatoka Town, Viti Levu. It is the principal district of the province as the Paramount Chief of Nadroga Province resides in Cuvu Village, Cuvu District.

14. The *vasu* system traces descent through the mother. The term *vasu* in Fiji refers to an individual's maternal ties to a village, etc.

15. Kitione Wainiqolo, personal interview with the author, 2013.

were), Wainiqilo can deliver the task without any hindrance. This is testimony to the fact that knowledge learned can be *mana* (power to effect) when there is consensus among a group and community.

The age of people is another determining factor in work distribution. Young men in their prime from Nadiri, Nalele, and Malomalo villages were expected to do the heavier tasks that required strength and involved risk, including clearing of bushes, cutting huge logs and transferring them to the building site, and erecting the bure framing. In Malomalo, an assistant carpenter, Isoa Naihoko, was specifically recruited by the vanua to lead the young men in choosing and collecting raw materials necessary for building the bure.



Elders are expected to do little work, and if they work at all, they are assigned tasks that require little effort and can usually be done squatting or sitting, such as preparing cordage and scraping of reeds. In the case of Malomalo, Wainiqilo directed and inspired the workers while sitting around a bowl of *yaqona* (kava); hence, the transmission of knowledge and skills was more practical and hands-on for the young people of the district. The presence of the elders gives a sense of purpose and is appreciated as evidence of their interest. Much of their effort is directed toward discussing and organizing social and economic activities. They are the ritual heads of their households and of the village, participating in rites and performing at ceremonies.

It is also customary that in a huge communal activity such as this, each village that is part of the vanua contributes to undertakings concerning the head village. In 1935, the traditional meeting house of Namosi Province was built, and the Veivatuloa District¹⁶ was responsible for organizing labor for the house building.¹⁷ The distribution of tasks was as follows:

VILLAGE	RESPONSIBILITY
Veivatuloa Village	Collected leaves of the sago palm and prepared them for thatch-roofing.
Mau Village	Provided the two main posts and shorter wall posts as braces for the house.
Qilai Village	Collected reeds and binding string called <i>vau</i> to create walls for the house.
Lobau Village	Collected long timber pieces required as rafters, beams, and purlins for the roof.
Nakavu Village	Provided the sprigs of the <i>makita</i> leaves for thatching walls, supplementary wall posts, and wild creepers for binding purposes.

Table 1: Distribution of tasks and responsibilities in building valenivanua in the Veivatuloa District.¹⁸

The building of the valenivanua begins with the installation of all framings and ends with the thatching of the house. However, the distinctive feature of bure building is that no plans or sketches are needed. It is a skillful form of art, and the ultimate creation is not known to the user until it is finished. Skills and types of bure are similar, yet the knowledge sustained through the language, vocabulary, and techniques that have been passed from one generation to the next are the most creative and varied.

Rituals and Associated Ceremonies

Although there is no taboo observed by the master carpenter and his team of helpers during the building process, certain rituals and ceremonies are performed to ensure that the process of building the bure is undertaken with minimal hiccups. Often these rituals are essential to bring prosperity in terms of knowledge and skills, and similarly, for the gods and ancestors to guide the entire activity.¹⁹ These ceremonies, which have their roots deep in the past and in the memories of men who perform them, serve to solemnize a special occasion and to give it decorum.²⁰

16. There are five villages in the Veivatuloa District in Namosi Province. Namosi is one of Fiji's fourteen provinces and one of eight based in Viti Levu, the largest island. Veivatuloa is located to the west of Suva, the capital city.

17. Roth, "Housebuilding in Fiji," 1-2.

18. Ibid.

19. Peni Bulikula, personal interview with the author, 2013.

20. B. Milner, "The Language of House Building," Suva: Fiji Society (1948): 11.

In Malomalo, the grand chief of the district called a meeting of elders and noblemen from the different villages that make up the vanua and presented kava to all, explaining his intentions in that he wished to rebuild Nahohowaqa. Once all were in consensus, the chief, together with the elders, called a meeting with the traditional carpenters from Nalele Village and performed the same ceremony. Peni Bulikula of Nalele Village, head of the carpenters' clan, received and affirmed the request of the grand chief. Even though approval to build rested with Bulikula, his clan again had to traditionally approach Wainiqilo by presenting the whale's tooth (*tabua*) to ask him to lead the revitalization work as most clan members were not previously accustomed to building a bure. This does not mean that the carpenter clans had totally lost the skill and knowledge; sometimes, as is the case around Fiji, mana and sau remain in the veins and blood of the anointed holders until a special place, space, and time in which they will reveal themselves.

When the rebuilding commenced, the *ivakasobu duru* (lowering of the post) was performed. This ritual involves the presentation of the whale's tooth to the chief or owner of the house when the first post is lowered into the dug pit. In the past, men were placed alive in the hole and posts lowered on top of them to satisfy the gods and secure the stability of the building. This, however, is no longer the practice today. During the building process, a feast is held daily so that builders are well nourished and work is efficiently carried out.

At the conclusion of the work, the *talatalavi* ritual (presentation of kava and a *tabua*) was performed by Wainiqilo, Bulikula, and the carpenter clan to the grand chief and elders in order to formally inform them of the work completed and to officially hand over the finished valenivanua to the chief and vanua. The chief also offered kava (in a ceremony known as *vivinidewa*) and a *tabua*, reciprocating the goodwill and commitment shown and thanking the master carpenter and builders for their effort in successfully completing the sacred house.²¹

A large feast known as *ulubewa* was held in honor of the master carpenter and his clan after the handing-over ritual (Figure 9). This ceremony also involved the presentation of a hefty collection

21. Bulikula, personal interview, 2013.

of tabua and other gifts to the carpenter clan. Interestingly, in accordance with the customary practice in the past, no monetary gifting was undertaken as the task remained the traditional role of the Nalele people.²²



A CULTURAL SPACE: PEACE BUILDING AND SOCIAL COHESION OF THE VANUA

For Prestigious Cultural Events

The building of the valenivanua is enriched with various rituals and events to celebrate its construction. Similarly, the building is used only for specific cultural events for the vanua. Since rebuilding Nahohowaqa, it has been used to hold meetings of all village heads in the Malomalo District and to host the funeral of the Grand Chief's late brother, who passed away soon after its completion.²³

Establishing Boundaries of Social Status

The valenivanua is different from an ordinary house in that it is an open space with no rooms. When in use, sitting arrangement is such that the chief would sit at the upper end of the house, with other prominent members of the vanua next to him in rank of seniority. The lower part of the house is for the common people. Sitting arrangement defines both the clan that the bearer represents and his traditional role. The arrangement will also define who can speak, what they say, and how they say it.

22. Isoa Naihoko, personal interview with the author, 2013.

23. Bulikula, personal interview, 2013.



Promoting Reconciliation and Harmony

The respect accorded and silence observed inside the valenivanua and areas surrounding the site reflect the type of behavior and protocols to be observed during proceedings held in the valenivanua. It therefore acts as the most appropriate space to handle disciplinary cases in the village and to solve arising conflicts and crises. In Malomalo, an informant confirmed that the valenivanua was also used as a traditional court to settle disputes and resolve social injustice arising in the vanua. This is because only one voice is heard and people respect the wisdom in the decision handed down by the Grand Chief after consulting the elders.²⁴

Unity in Reconstruction

The rebuilding of the valenivanua in Malomalo was significant as it brought unity among the people of the district. Villages in the entire Malomalo District came together to assist in the rebuilding, brought food for the builders, and participated in regular kava sessions and billeted the young builders. Visitations also came from as far as Malomalo descendants residing in Australia. They specifically came to witness this great event in their history as a vanua.²⁵

24. Samuela Naulago, personal interview with the author, 2013.

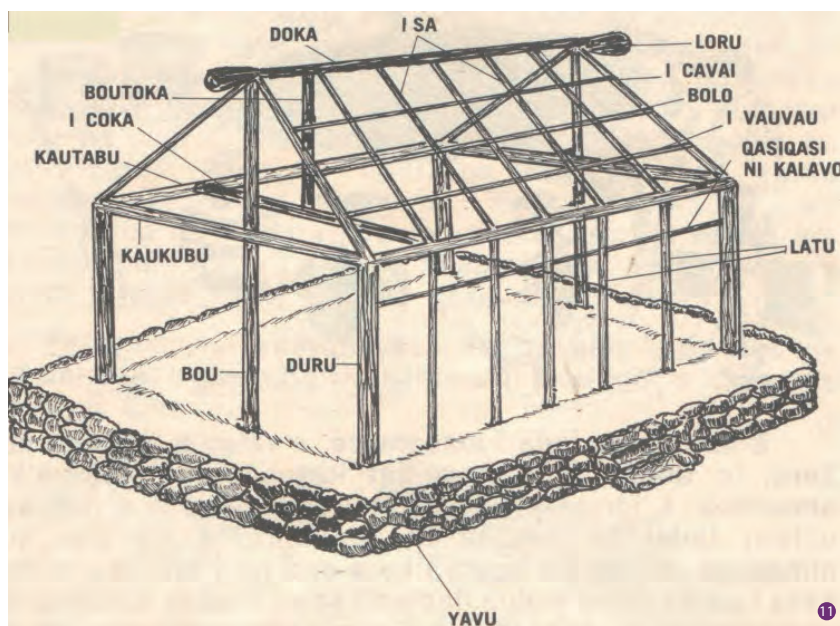
25. Wainiqolo, personal interview, 2013.

Appreciating and Rekindling Traditional Roles and Functions

With the presence of the *valenivanua*, the young and old alike were able to understand and appreciate their traditional roles and specific obligations to the *vanua* and to their chief. The traditional carpenters of Malomalo based in Nalele Village were able to regenerate their skills, which had all this while been dormant yet were a gift rooted in their blood.²⁶ This is *mana* unfolding.

Vanua-strengthened Links to Parts of the Valenivanua

The elders also emphasized the importance of the relationship that existed in terms of certain parts of the *bure* to their traditional roles, the values of the *vanua*, and spirituality (Figure 11).



The *yavu* (earth foundation) links the people of the *vanua* to their ancestors; it is their origin. The foundation solidifies the *vanua* and reminds members that each has a role to play in as far as maintaining the sanctity of an esteemed house and the *vanua* in general. The *bou* or *turuga* is a specially chosen log or post that is a part of the main support structure of the house located in the middle upper end of

26. Bulikula, personal interview, 2013.

11 Different parts of the *bure* and their general indigenous names. Source: Ministry of Education, *Na Viti Va* (Suva: Government Printer, 1983), 19.

the structure; it is meant to be the leaning post for the chief, and its location is a reminder to the people that there will always be a chief, a leader to whom they should uphold and accord reverence. The bou is the chief and the yavu is the vanua. They are intertwined. The *kautabua* or *kaitabu* is a special part of the bure that identifies the different ranks and clans in the vanua and their sitting places in the house. The clans provide the necessary support needed to lift and sustain the vanua. The *duru* refers to the house pillar and is synonymous with “knee.” It signifies strength, and its huge size implies its dependability. This is similar to the vanua and the chief; both are symbolic of institutions upon which people depend. The *loru* are trunks of fern trees decorating both ends of the *doka* running across the upper part of the bure. The loru, often referred to as the “two faces of the bure,” signifies the presence of the spirit and the ancestors and their protection of the vanua (people).

Opportunities Unfold

The rebuilding of the valenivanua brought back *sautu*²⁷ to the people, their land, and the sea, and it even opened doors of opportunity through development projects coming through to assist the district after years of seeking assistance from both the government and private sector.

The valenivanua is a magnificent structure, an iconic heritage symbolizing the identity of the people that is always revered and sanctified. An in-depth reflection of the processes involved, including the rituals, the language used, and the skills and knowledge required, shows the significance of the structure as a cultural space that promotes harmonious living, legitimacy of the vanua, solidarity, and well-being. It is believed that the valenivanua is not only symbolic but also functional. It transforms an ordinary space into a sacred one, exerts a power that transforms moments in life into experiences, and transcends ceremonies and rituals held inside the bure to a new dimension, bringing ordinary people closer to their ancestors.

27. *Sautu* refers to a period of peace or calmness. It is also a time when there is an abundance of opportunities, goodness, and resources.

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