

The materiality of the kitchen house: building, food and history on Mere Lava, northern Vanuatu

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Introduction

Houses and food in Vanuatu are prominent artefacts that materialise people's links to the land and social relationships. Nowadays on Mere Lava, a striking emphasis is put on the building or re-building of kitchen houses, *n-eañ kuk*, as architectural elements central to households. The PhD thesis interrogates the prominence of these houses and highlights the material and symbolic specificities of these buildings.

The Kitchen House



The kitchen houses' size range approximately from 3 meters long per 2 meters wide and 2.50 meters high, to 10 meters long, 5 meters wide and 3.50 meters high. Always constructed out of local materials, they possess posts made of tree fern trunks, stone and bamboo or wild cane walling, wooden trusses and a thatched roof of sago palm leaves.

The kitchen house is the central place where cooking occurs in both daily and ceremonial life. It is also a resting, chatting and sometimes sleeping place as well as the appropriate safe place for a number of objects either of daily or more restricted use.

Methods

Drawing upon recent theories of material efficacy that consider objects as potent media through which people think, the PhD thesis examines the underpinnings of the major cultural role these buildings play. Key material features of the kitchen houses as well as the values they embody are explored through the lens of the technical processes of house-building and food processing. These processes are analysed on the basis of operational sequences collected during fieldwork.

Furthermore the different usages and roles of the kitchen houses in daily and ceremonial life are researched from the data obtained through participant observation and interviews with Mere Lava islanders.



Outcomes of research



The kitchen houses appears as major transformative places in the life of the people. From birth to death, an individual is crucially related to these houses.

This research also suggests that their prominence is further grounded in both the specific history of architectural changes on Mere Lava and the ways their material features relate to people's conceptualisation of the world. The mechanisms that bind kitchen houses to Mere Lava key social concepts and values, such as the notion of *histri*, 'history', are highlighted, in order to show how these artefacts are today parts of an efficacious social aesthetic that ensure the continuity and transformation of the social order.

Photographs by Marie Durand on Mere Lava, Banks Islands, northern Vanuatu 2010-13