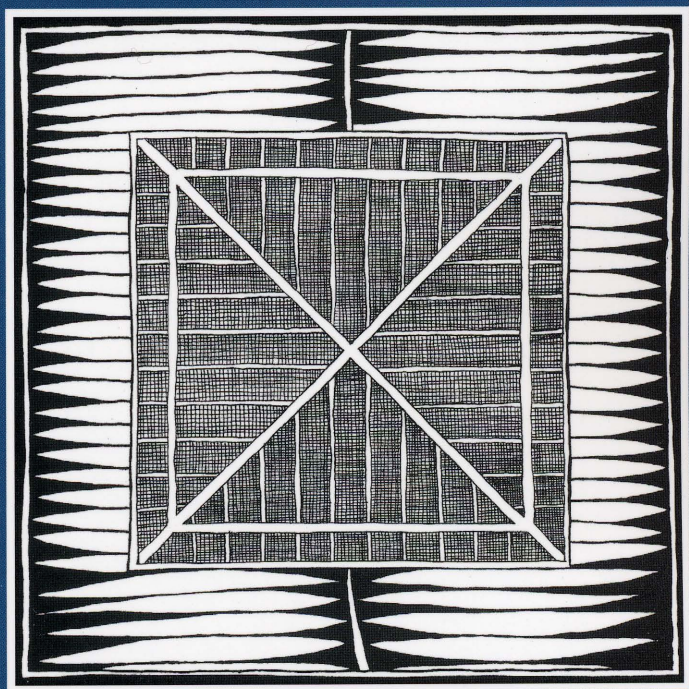


S U M M E R  
*conversations*

---



VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2 SUMMER 2005

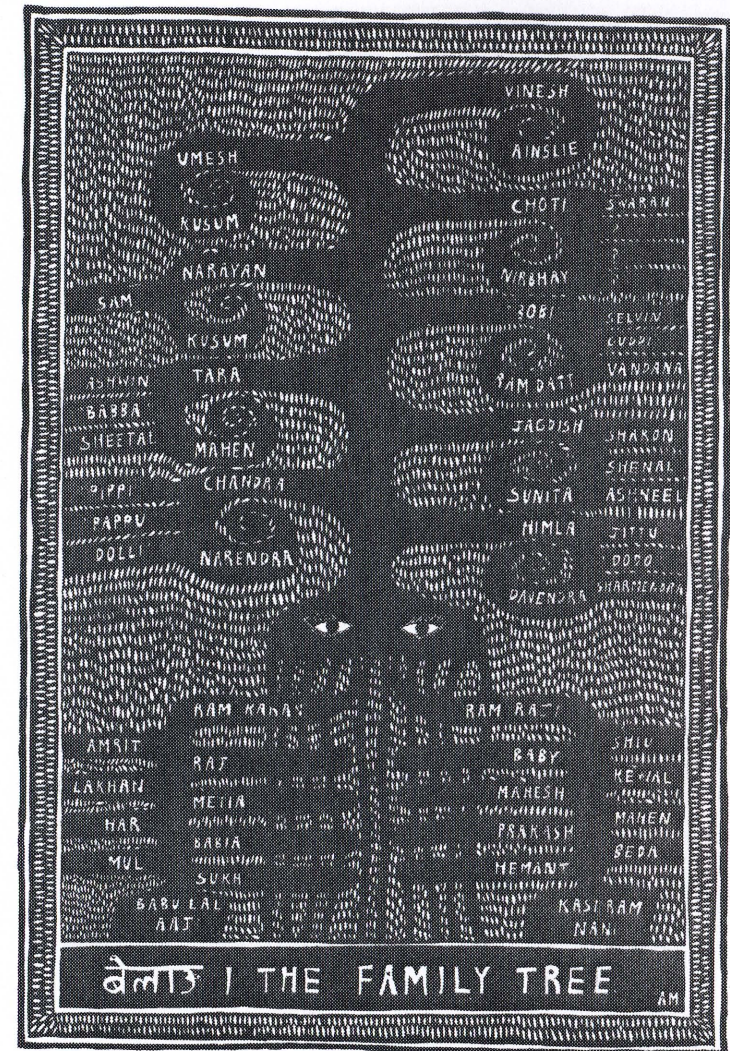


## Belaau: Contemplating Architecture in Rural Fiji

*Spirit is what drives me. Spirit, and memories  
of times past half-real and half-imagined.*

I have a memory of the river ... we were winding through cane fields in a rusty blue van with schizophrenic wheels, wobbling along a little dirt track to a beach at the riverside.

I remember the exquisite taste of green freshwater, the smoothness of it, the clarity of it, and the way it flowed over my less-buoyant body. The current exerted a gentle pressure on each muscle, and my red-painted toes skated over hidden moss-rocks. We swam upstream, working hard for every stroke against the current, and when we got to the bend, exhausted, we let ourselves go limp and float downstream towards Amma in the shallow water. Floating is not something easily forgotten: ears submerged and hearing only underwater sounds, nose inhaling sweet sticky sugar-coated air, and eyes watching, through a green lens, a drifting world of sugar cane, mango and hibiscus ...



1) Belaau / The Family Tree

This time we were flying in a Sunflower from Ireland, over a green patchwork quilt of cane sewn together with snaking rivers, and punctuated by the occasional dust cloud of a jalopy flying over Labasa potholes. The heat, as we slid down the rear staircase onto the tarmac, hit like a brick wall, choking and suffocating. Sweat beaded on our upper lips, trickled down our necks from behind our ears, and ran in rivers down our backs. We clambered into the back of Narayan's carrier van, and I watched Labasa unfolding behind us ...

... Green, saturated in green, and cane, and bullocks with bulging eyes, poverty and hardship, tears, unforgiving heat, rust and dust ...

... The first and second days of the wedding floated past in a sequined mist of mysterious ceremony. On the first evening the women dressed in their finest saris. Parrot-fish greens, strawberry-frappé pinks, brooding reds and Bob's, a most wonderfully wide-eyed shade of purple ...



2) Belau / Umesh Weds Kusum



Bobi had a large enamel bowl balanced on top of her head, and it contained all sorts of ceremonial offerings. The women gathered and followed her outside in a sea of colour and gold embroidery, where all the men were sitting on the verandah mat drinking yaqona. Slowly, procession-like, we flowed past them and into the street, a slow-moving painting of brilliant sari against inky night ...

We circled on the oval, and then Kaki stopped and proceeded to dig a small hole in the earth. Amma filled the hole with small shards of timber, dressed it with camphor and other things that I couldn't see in the dark, and lit it. They said, in half-Hindi whispers, that it was an offering to the earth goddess. There were prayers, and gradually, the ceremonial ingredients were removed from Bobi's bowl and offered to the fire ...

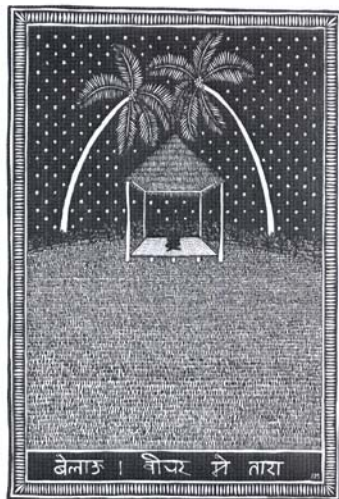


3) Bekani / Tara the the Hedge



Then, equally as mysteriously, and almost without warning, the sisters began to dance, not the demure dance of an Indian lady, but a wild thumping, a hysterical jumping, spinning and screeching and laughing. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped, and we walked again, slowly and ceremoniously back to the house ...

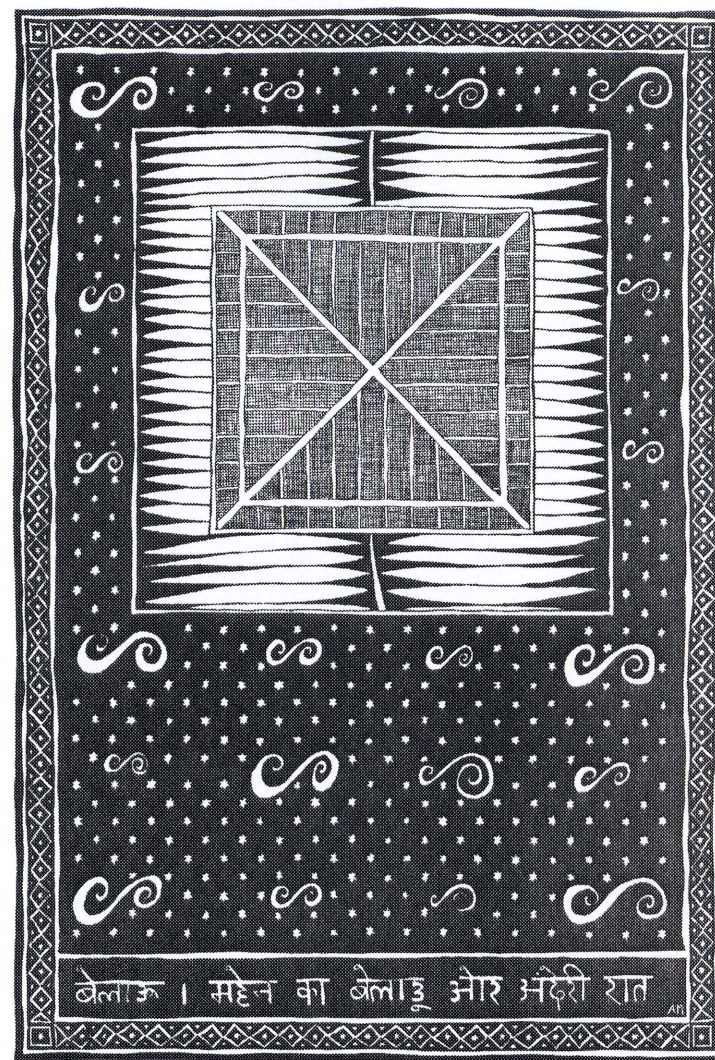
... We rose late, washed our clothes in the concrete wash-tubs of the Labasa Riverview Private Hotel (crack-crack as Amma does), and soon afterwards we were careering away from town in the back of the van towards Tara's house. The fields were dotted with little bamboo houses. The architect in me tried to reach for the camera, but the van was moving so frighteningly fast that the second I loosened my terror-grip I could feel myself about to be bounced right out the back and onto the road like a discarded mango skin. Memory, I decided, would have to suffice ...



4) Belau / Contemplating Tara

... Tara doesn't look like the others. Where they are well-rounded and comfortable, she looks thin and worn. Frail. Farming skin stretched taut over family cheekbones, and big, dark eyes. Later, we learned that the *belaau* holds many secrets. She sleeps out here, huddled under the hedge, when he, drunk and raging, locks her out of the house ...

... Late on Christmas night, after we had set off all the fireworks, counted the stars, and gone for a midnight walk along the corrugated track, I closed myself into my little tin room, ready for sleep. The kerosene lamp sat on the dresser, mosquitoes hummed in the humidity, moths beat themselves against the louvers. I crawled under the mosquito net, and then, there, for a split second, the pure magic of a Labasa Christmas was revealed. The exquisite moment of being inside the net, and watching the way the light on the other side illuminated the bedspace, feeling the soft yellow glow of my skin, the sedative warmth of the air, the drifting night-conversation of the men outside ...

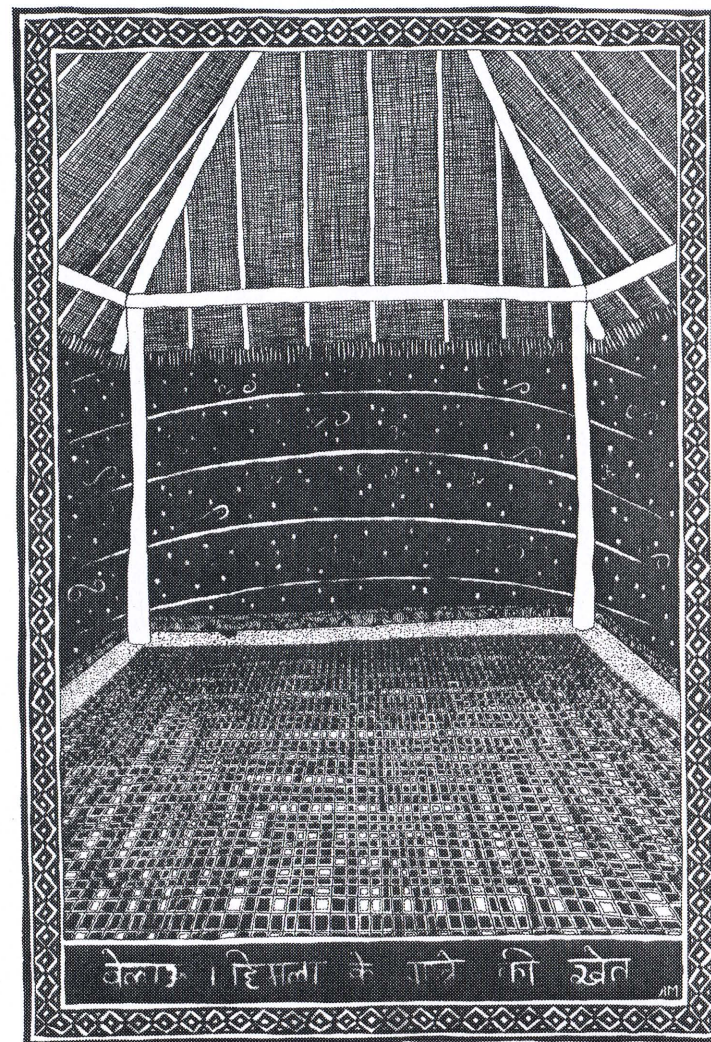


6) Belaau / Night Sky over Mahen



... In a Christmas of foreign ideas and ideals, I clutched at that moment, rejoicing in its solitariness. At times I remember feeling so totally alone in Labasa. I see it now, this aloneness, as springing entirely from being caught between cultures, from being welcomed from the outside to the inside, yet consistently being caught on the outside in a net of language, background and world-view ...

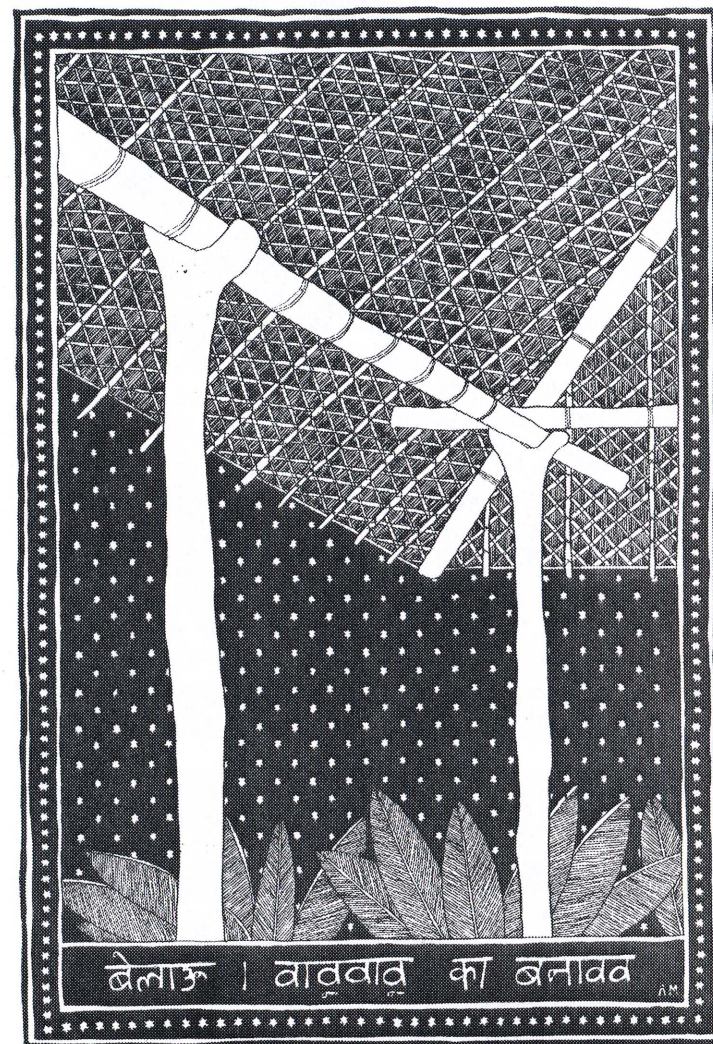
... The earth on the way to the Floating Island, contrary to my memory, was dry and cracked, and I stumbled in my sandals as I trailed after Sunita and the children. It was incredibly hot, and yet she moved so fast through the fields that I could barely keep up. I tied my handkerchief around my neck to absorb the sweat that was pouring from my head, and I felt my cheeks blistering with each step ...



7) Belaau / Overlooking Himla's Sugarcane



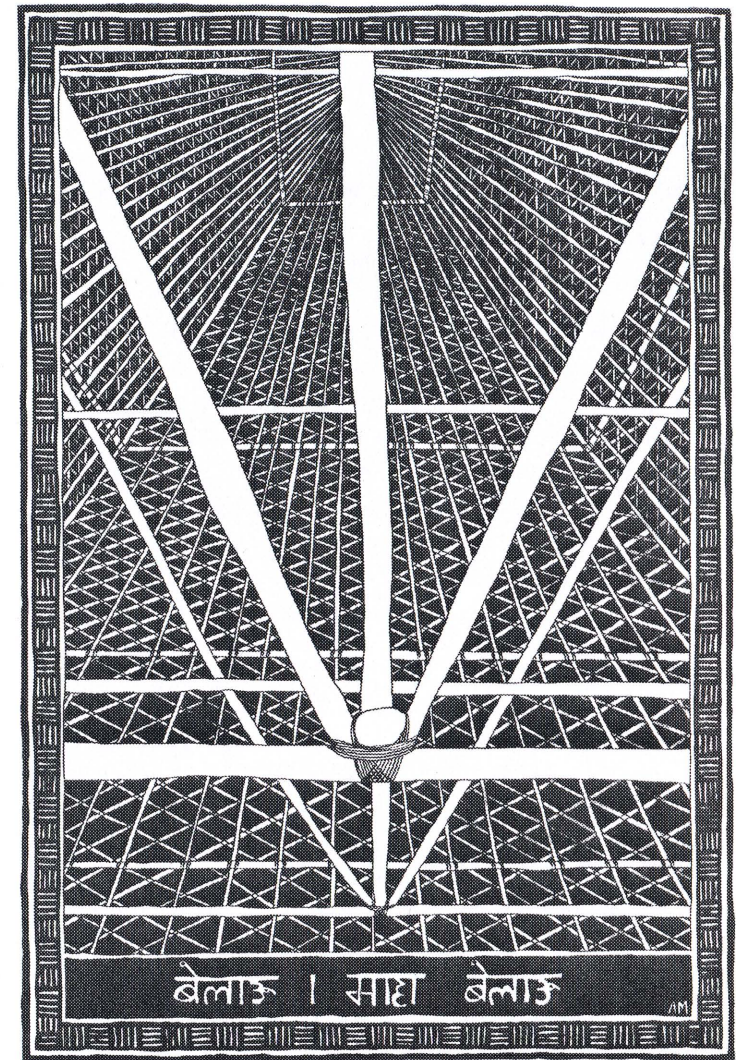
Soon we sighted the Floating Island, which, it is said, floats from one side of the lake to the other according to the sincerity of prayers muttered in the surrounding marsh. Having removed our flip-flops at the appropriate spot, we waded barefoot through the mud to the edge of the lake ...



8) Belaau / Wavuwavu Logic



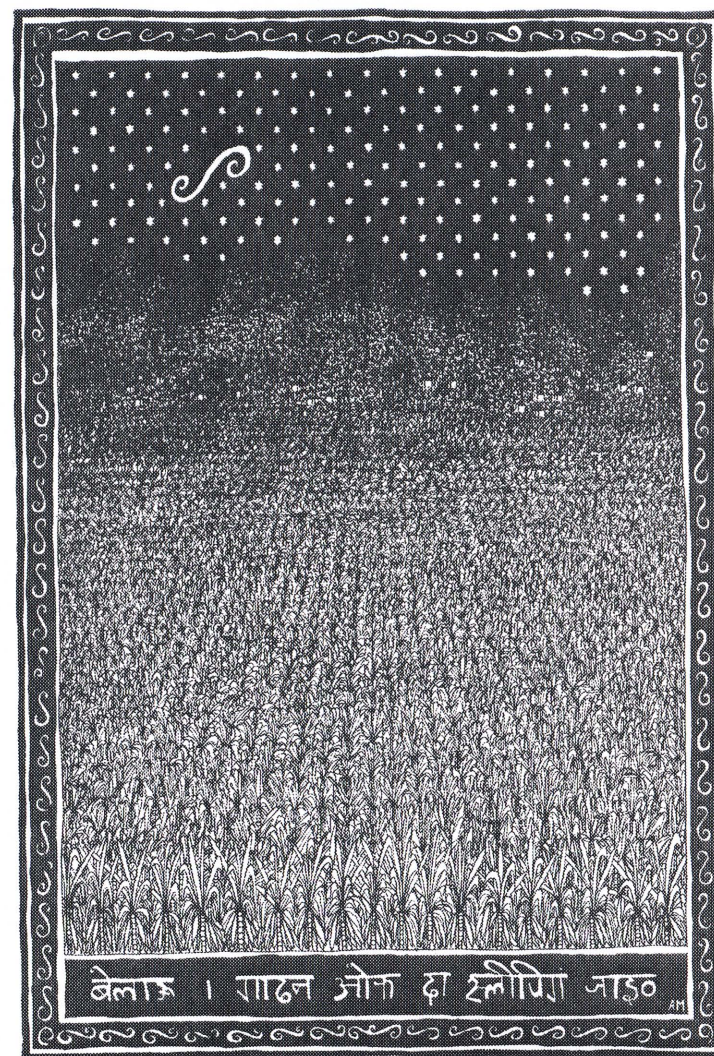
Despite my declarations of scepticism, they still splashed water over my head, a kind of bog-baptism into local Hindu religion. 'But it must be due to tidal movement,' I'd say, or, 'It's probably related to the water table,' and other straws of logic that I needed to clutch at. They'd reply with stories of Mahen, who had seen the island move with his own eyes, and of the bullock that had inadvertently wandered onto the island and had then been stranded for a week as the island drifted into the middle of the bottomless lake. Still, we prayed, and the island did not move ...



9) Belaau / The Grand Belaau



... My memory, remembering, recalling, reciting out of habit all that has happened, all I have seen. It washed over me in great waves, torrents of Hindi and non-comprehension, foreign rituals, strange rules and formalities, and me, so lacking in the necessary social graces, despairing sometimes, for wanting to break through but not ... and then clarity, possibly born out of the wisdom of retrospect, or the depths of non- and mis-understanding, a clearing of thought that allowed me to step back from it all ... consider, converse, confide, connect, concentrate and contemplate ...



10) Belaau / Garden of the Sleeping Giant



S U M M E R  
*conversations*

---

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2 SUMMER 2005

**poetry**

*John Stokes      Carolyn Leach-Paholski*  
*Joy Hooton      Robin Wallace-Crabbe*  
*Peter Rose*

**essay**

*Inga Clendinnen*

**memoir**

*Bruce Bennett      Robert Brunton*

**picture essay**

*Ainslie Murray*

**fiction**

*Maxine McArthur      Jaireth Subhash*



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

**PANDANUS BOOKS**

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

[www.pandanusbooks.com.au](http://www.pandanusbooks.com.au)

ISBN 1-74076-116-9



9 781740 761185