

The House in Southeast Asia

Review >
Southeast Asia

Since Lévi-Strauss introduced his notion of *sociétés à maison*, much anthropological research on Southeast Asian social organization has focused on the house and its role in constituting relatedness. In addition, symbolic studies of architecture and the use of house space have revealed the changing significance of houses as gendered domains, expressions of cosmological order, and markers of ethnic identity. This collection of papers aspires to expand on such previous work, applying the concept of house to new areas in Southeast Asia, and considering transformations in the meaning of houses during times of social, economic, and political change. In doing so, what new analytical doors are opened to the Southeast Asian house?

By Catherine Allerton

The collection, edited by Stephen Sparkes and Signe Howell, is the result of a conference organized by the Nordic Association for Southeast Asian Studies. The twelve ethnographic papers cover a wide variety of topics and, in addition to considering more familiar examples from Sulawesi, Sumatra, and Malaysia, introduce material on the house in Thailand, the South Ryukyus, and among the Baba of Melaka. Previous collections on the house, most notably that edited by Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), have focused on the applicability of Lévi-Strauss's idea of 'house societies' as a social type in a range of societies from native North America to medieval Europe and present-day Southeast Asia. With the exception of Howell's interesting comparison of Chewong and Lio houses, which points to some of the paradoxes of Lévi-Strauss's theory, the present collection adopts a broader and more eclectic approach to houses, their architecture, and inhabitants. However, whilst this broad focus allows for the inclusion of a range of examples, it is also the book's main failing. The chapters are simply presented as a general collection, with no thematic organization or division into parts. Moreover, this lack of theoretical and comparative focus is compounded by Stephen Sparkes' rather weak introduction, which fails to put forward any new theories regarding the ongoing significance of houses in Southeast Asian societies.

The best chapters of the book are undoubtedly those that succeed in describing the impact of social change on the house, or in expanding our understanding of houses beyond the ethnographic specificities of a particular situation. A key example of this is Ing-Britt Trankell's chapter on house and moral community among the Tai Yong of northern Thailand. Trankell analyses the provision of rice-meals as the central activity in the creation of house-based kinship showing how, contrary to European assumptions, the Yong house cannot be taken for granted as a fixed, material object. Rather, and as Carsten has shown for the Malays of Langkawi, houses (and kinship) are constituted by the everyday processes of social life. Contrasting with some of the other, strangely time-

less chapters in the collection, Trankell connects this house dynamic with the wider political and ethnic situation in Thailand. She argues that processes for adopting kin through the provision of rice-meals are increasingly applied to members of the Karen hill tribes, with Yong becoming patrons to Karen seeking a recognized (if low-ranking) position within mainstream Thai society.

The provision of rice-meals as a central activity in the creation of (house-based) kinship is also described in Monica Janowski's chapter on hierarchy within different levels of the Kelabit house. Her idea of 'rice-based kinship' shifts the analytical emphasis away from architecture to the daily practices constituting Kelabit social organization. In describing how urban Kelabit attempt to become 'big people' in contexts far removed from village long-houses, she argues that the competition between urban couples to feed and accommodate visitors in their town houses is the urban equivalent to competitive hospitality amongst rural hearth-groups.

In this collection, Roxana Waterson, an anthropologist who has written extensively on the Southeast Asian house and whose beautifully illustrated book (1990) remains a key introduction to house architecture and symbolism in the region, adds to her work on 'the living house' by considering its significance as a thing possessing 'vitality'. This rather nicely captures how Southeast Asian houses can be more than just material objects and implies that, like people, houses have their own life histories. If a house can be seen as vital and alive, it has a kind of subjectivity that is available for communication with others. Waterson's biographical approach to houses offers many interesting insights (such as revealing the connections between houses) and could very profitably be applied to both urban and rural houses in the region.

The elaborate and simple, fixed and moving, ancestral and temporary house structures of Southeast Asia remain a topic of almost infinite interest to ethnographers. However, its size, this collection opens only a few new analytical doors to the meaning and significance of houses. Thus, despite some intriguing ethnography, the comparative insights offered are of a rather patchy quality. ◀

Rethatching a 'round house' (*mbaru niang*) in southern Manggarai, Flores, Indonesia.



Photo by Catherine Allerton

– Sparkes, Stephen and Signe Howell (eds), *The House in Southeast Asia: A Changing Social, Economic and Political Domain*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (2003), pp. 271, ISBN 0-7007-1157-0

References

- Carsten, Janet and Stephen Hugh-Jones (eds), *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1995).
- Waterson, Roxana, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in Southeast Asia*, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Oxford University Press (1990).

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