

Reimar Schefold, Gaudenz Domenig, and Peter Nas, eds. *Indonesian Houses: Tradition and Transformation in Vernacular Architecture*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 207. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003. 527 pp.

Marcel Vellinga. *Constituting Unity and Difference: Vernacular Architecture in a Minangkabau Village*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 220. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004. 337 pp.

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Buildings have been used since earliest recorded times as material devices for expressing values pertinent to social identity and status, political authority, cosmology, and ritual, as well as affording a forum for aesthetic creativity. Ethnographic accounts by administrators, soldiers, and missionaries in the nineteenth century frequently included descriptions of indigenous buildings and settlement patterns in their monographs, and professional anthropologists followed them in confirming their importance. Indonesian ethnographies were no exception, but it was with the publication of Clark Cunningham's structural analysis of the Atoni house in 1964¹ that interest in the Indonesian house as a material agency for symbolism and as conveying cosmological notions can be said to have moved onto the radar screens of scholars studying this part of Southeast Asia. In writing his paper, Cunningham had taken his lead from the writings of his teacher, Professor Rodney Needham, the foremost (and perhaps sole) advocate at that time for taking the house seriously as a repository for symbolism.² He did so by examining the ethnographies on the Purum³ of the Indo-Burmese border and the Lamet⁴ of Cambodia, demonstrating by means of a total structural analysis that the house was a focal component of their respective cosmologies. For several years thereafter, the house as a repository of indigenous values received scant attention from social anthropologists, but starting in the early eighties, following a cornucopia of field studies and the influence of Lévi-Strauss's concept of "*sociétés à maison*" (much referred to in the book under review), this material artifact has yet again moved into the Indonesianist spotlight, a place it has occupied now for a number of years, as witnessed by a spate of studies that have celebrated it.⁵ The anthology under review is among the latest, and one of the best, of such works.

¹ Clark Cunningham, "Order in the Atoni House," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 120 (1964): 34-68.

² Curiously enough, nowhere in this collection of papers is reference made to Needham's anticipatory contribution that he made to the study of the house.

³ Rodney Needham, "A Structural Analysis of Purum Society," *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 75-101.

⁴ Rodney Needham, "Alliance and Classification among the Lamet," *Sociologus* 10 (1960): 97-119.

⁵ Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds., *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); James J. Fox, ed., *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living* (Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian

The genesis of *Indonesian Houses: Tradition and Transformation in Vernacular Architecture* lies in an international conference held in Leiden in 1997 that focused specifically on western Indonesia, a derivation apparent from its geographical slant since nine of its fifteen case studies come from Sumatra. In its published form, however, the scope of the contributions has been considerably widened to include a case study each from Java, Borneo, and Sulawesi, with three from eastern Indonesia. Timor, the largest island in that region, contributes no case study. Two case studies come from Flores.

Despite their ethnic diversity, these papers come together into a more coherent set of studies than is sometimes the case with such collections, and this sense of coherence is brought about by certain themes that inform them. Reimar Schefold introduces one of these themes in the first paper in the volume. In it he argues for the "ideal type" of Southeast Asian house. This type exhibits seven formal features (originally noted, as Schefold remarks, by Roxanna Waterson⁶): (1) a tripartite structure; (2) a multi-leveled floor; (3) an outward-slanting gable; (4) outward-slanting walls; (5) gable finials; (6) a saddle-backed roof; and (7) a differential treatment of root and tip in the use of timber. This model, Schefold proposes, should be thought of as a model of a Southeast Asian-type house in the sense associated with Weber, that is, a type that has rarely existed with all the elements in place, but which demonstrates the connection between local variants and makes them comprehensible in relation to each other. A drawing by Gaudenz Domenig illustrating them is a very useful inclusion. Schefold's essay provides an indispensable foundation for the contributions that follow, but even as a "stand-alone" piece it merits being read by scholars interested in the vernacular architecture of Indonesia.

Among the authors testing Schefold's model against their own ethnography is Gregory Forth, who describes the houses built by the Nage people of central Flores. After determining that there is something of a correspondence between Schefold's model and the Nage house, he suggests some consideration be given to an additional feature that occurs widely throughout Indonesia. This is bifurcation, a principle by means of which masculinity is ascribed to one half of the building and femininity to the other half. Forth offers in support of his proposition not only the Nage house but also houses among the Rindi of Sumba and the Ema (Kemak) of East Timor. As we have by now come to expect from him, Forth delivers his analysis by using a wealth of ethnographic detail that imparts a sense of substantial authenticity to the more abstract aspects of his study. Besides showing the manner in which different styles of building fulfill different purposes and discussing the structural configuration of the principal Nage dwelling, Forth also traces the changes that have taken place over the last century or so and, at the same time, discloses the threads of continuity that link present with past.

Dualism also informs Michael Vischer's analysis of the "two-faced" house, and he dwells at some length on its gendered ascriptions as well as on the associations made in local architecture with the boat, another recurrent motif throughout the archipelago.

National University, 1993); Roxanna Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶ Waterson, *The Living House*.

Unlike most of the other ethnic groups discussed in this volume, the people of Palu'é are hardly a presence in the ethnographic literature, and Vischer's account of the house as "the basic social unit of Palu'é" (334) is therefore especially welcome. In discussing the gendered character of the house, he notes how the terms by which its parts are denoted have recourse to the human body, more particularly that of the female body. He informs us that "in female exegesis" the house has "a distinct womb-like quality" (339), a characterization that is by no means exclusive to Palu'é thought. To give just one example, among the Tetum of Caraubalo *suku* in East Timor,⁷ the house is said to possess "legs," "bones," and "a face," while the attribution of a "womb" and "vagina" give clear indication of which sex is being evoked in this imagery.⁸ It might also be remarked that the Tetum also combine the triadic form isolated by Schefold with the dualism remarked by Fischer and Forth. The Palu'é house as conceptualized as a living entity is an important motif in this society, and by examining the conventions applied in house-building, Vischer discovers several elements that depend upon it, including regulations governing the consecration of the house to make it "fit for human habitation" (351), not so much in a practical sense but cosmologically.

The house forms but one element in a cultural landscape, however, and a further dimension to this volume is the emphasis placed on the house's location within spatial coordinates. One very effective instance of this emphasis comes from Robert Wessing in his paper on the Sundanese "home." The duality apparent in the Palu'é and Nage houses reappears, but in Wessing's paper it applies more to the conceptual opposition between *kampung* (hamlet) and village rather than to the structure of the house itself. Elaborating upon the seminal work of Robert von Heine-Geldern,⁹ he describes how the "spiritual field" is interfused with Sundanese notions of the sacred center, the orientation of houses, the way in which directions are used to contrast the complementary notions of hamlet founder and hamlet spirit, sacred hills, the water of life, and the post-harvest ritual (*seren taun*). In addition to studying the dwelling place itself and its location in space, scholars can also investigate vernacular architecture by considering other categories of buildings. In his paper, Gaudenz Domenig selects as his artifact of analysis the converted granary of the Toba Batak. His principal thesis is that this building may have evolved into the standard house in its simpler form. As with many of the other contributions in this volume, the author's case is based on an impressive array of exact ethnographic particulars that add significantly to our knowledge of comparative local architecture. The most personal account is that rendered by James J. Fox, who begins with a nostalgic glance at his first encounter with the people of Roti and then evocatively traces the sad course of change to which their traditions have been subject since the onset of the New Order. The depressing conformity the Indonesian government sought to impose on the marvelous array of variegated houses throughout the republic, though, was happily not as successful among all ethnic groups. Despite external forces that threatened their destruction and did in fact result in their ceasing to be built after the 1920s, vernacular houses (*rumah uluan*) in South Sumatra's highland region are widespread presences on the landscape

⁷ *Suku* are indigenous, geographical/administrative units made up of a varying number of descent groups.

⁸ David Hicks, *A Maternal Religion: The Role of Women in Tetum Myth and Ritual* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), pp. 33-38.

⁹ Robert von Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 2 (1942): 15-30.

even today, and ritual prescriptions that governed them continue to influence the construction of modern houses. As with other contributors, Bart Barendregt traces in some depth the history of the South Sumatran architectural tradition, specifically in this instance demonstrating how the processes of mobility, expansion, and migration caused the *rumah uluan* to spread through the region.

A further theme helping to impart an unusual coherence to this volume is the juxtapositioning—repeatedly made in the various papers—of the diachronic approach with that of the synchronic approach. Thus, while the foregoing papers deal with the house from a structured perspective, they also give full measure to change and transformation. The other case studies also display this combined approach, some however laying greater weight on change, as is evident in their titles: “Ethnic Identity in Urban Architecture: Generations of Architects in Banda Aceh” (Peter J. M. Nas), “Cultural Changes and the Jambi Seberang House” (Fiona Kerlogue), “Change and Diversification in Form and Function of the Limas House of Palembang” (Sandra Taal), “Bugis and Makassar Houses: Variation and Evolution” (Christian Pelras), “The Bornean Longhouse in Historical Perspective, 1850-1990: Social Processes and Adaptation to Changes” (Antonio J. Guerreiro), and “The Settlements and Settlement Pattern of the Rejang” (Jan J. J. M. Wuisman). Ethnicity, social organization, and symbolism, topics also occupying the attentions of these contributors, play a central role in Marcel Vellinga’s paper, “The Use of Houses in a Competition for Status: The Case of Abai Sangir (Minangkabau)” and “Small Town Symbolism: The Meaning of the Built Environment in Bukittinggi and Payakumbuh” by Peter J. M. Nas and Martin A. van Bakel.

A map locating the ethnic groups described in these papers is essential for comparative studies of this nature, and one is duly provided, as is a glossary of technical terms, which Gaudenz Domenig has assembled. So if anyone should wish to know the difference between a box frame and an H-frame construction or between a bargeboard and a batten, this glossary is the place to come for enlightenment.

As noted above, one of the contributors is Marcel Vellinga, who describes how houses serve as a means of acquiring status and enhance claims to perform certain activities specified in the *adat* of a Minangkabau community. In his monograph, *Constituting Unity and Difference: Vernacular Architecture in a Minangkabau Village*, he describes in considerably greater detail the Minangkabau community he has singled out for study, Abai Sangir, which is located in the southeastern part of the province of West Sumatra. In expanding upon his briefer depiction of Abai Sangir, he takes up several of the themes identifiable in the anthology, for example, the manner in which vernacular houses are constructed, designed, and put to spatial use. Diachronic considerations also play a part in his treatment of the Abai Sangir “dwelling,” and he stresses the arguably factitious distinction—taken for granted by most scholars—between the “traditional” house of some golden age and houses of contemporary times that, subjected to foreign and modern influences, deviate from it. This dichotomy Vellinga finds untenable at the wider level of culture, and he states peremptorily that “the existence of a distinction between traditions that are ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ and those that are derived and therefore ‘less authentic’ can of course not be accepted” (10). His portrayal of Abai Sangir society and its cultural traditions demands that instead of being conceptualized as unchanging they be regarded as being in the process of

continuous redefinition. Nor does Vellinga hold any sympathy for another stock convention of anthropology, namely, the standardized image of local architecture, which brings about such expressions as “*the Minangkabau house*” or “*the Atoni house*.” His skepticism reflects his interest in variation in house architecture, which is a compelling theme in his book. Even if this proposition were the sole analytic contribution he had made to our better understanding of the house in Indonesia, it would have been enough to consolidate the favorable impression conveyed by his cogent discrediting of the contrived distinction between authentic and modern. Vellinga, however, adds further insight into the meaning of local houses in Abai Sangir when he draws upon an assumption prevalent in the field of material culture studies that treats houses not as passive artifacts, recipients of values invested in them by their creators, but as objects engaged in a continuous dialectic relationship with the human beings they serve. In this interpretation, material objects and abstract culture mutually influence and react to one another. He adds that

from this point of view, societies do not form entities that exist apart from and prior to the expression or reflection in material culture, but are created in a process in which people give meaning to and are in turn affected by their material surroundings. Therefore material culture is not so much a passive reflection of society, but is instead actively, and indeed fundamentally, involved in its constitution. (6)

Developing this bracing notion, he examines the way the house functions as an active agency in the constitution of social groups, thus influencing the way people self-identify and identify others.

A well-remarked characteristic of societies in the archipelago is that the term by which their language denotes the dwelling place also denotes the social group associated with it. Vellinga is witness to the same recourse in the Abai Sangir community, but his understanding of the relationship between society and material artifacts inclines him to lay greater emphasis on the material artifact itself than upon the social unit owning it, and so we find him an advocate for the term “social House.” His argument that the house needs to be viewed, not as a passive recipient of sociocultural values but an interactive agent with the social group involved with it deserves to be tested against the ethnography of other societies in Indonesia and at the very least would lend novel perspective to the comparative study of this artifact. One place to begin would be East Timor, whose people use the house of one district (Lautem) as a national icon of self-identity.

The editors of *Indonesian Houses* promise that further volumes on the house are in preparation and that these are planned to be part of a special *Verhandelingen* series. If they attain the analytical acuity, provide the ethnographic detail, and aspire to the theoretical significance demonstrated in the two books under discussion, one would anticipate that our understanding of the vernacular house in Southeast Asia will be even more impressively increased. Both volumes make substantial additions to the literature on the social anthropology of material culture. Yet again, the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde is to be applauded for a contribution to anthropological scholarship unmatched by any other institution in the world.