

# Fertility and Familial Power Relations Procreation in South India

Review >  
South Asia

In recent years there has been a considerable decline in the average number of children born to women in Andhra Pradesh. The bottom line seems to be that women increasingly perceive children as consumers and not as producers. Challenging the pervasive notion of women as mere providers of nourishment and incubation to the seed that contains the potential of life (Dube 1986, Eliade and Sullivan 1987), Minna Säävälä's *Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India* charts an increase in feminine assertion, as opposed to compliance, in the domain of procreation.

By Nita Mathur

In the present day, women need to negotiate their fertility choices rigorously within family structures. As a result of this changed situation, familial, generational, and gender relations are subjected to significant transformations. In addressing this and related issues, Minna Säävälä brings together anthropological and demographical insights to develop a meaningful interpretation of women's personal narratives.

This study, based on fieldwork in the East Godavari district in coastal Andhra Pradesh, explores the place of child-bearing in the lives of rural women, and how the women aspire to lead a life of dignity with few children rather than struggle to provide for many. It aims to: (1) bring an interpretation of the socio-cultural changes in which fertility decline is embedded to the fore; (2)

establish an understanding of the processes related to declining fertility; (3) analyse, in terms of social, physical, symbolic, and power-related realms, the familial repercussions of the fact that women now give birth to far fewer children than their own mothers did; and (4) examine how the quest for a small family and the adoption of female sterilization as the most accepted contraceptive method have a bearing on gender relations and intergenerational relations. At another level, the work may be located in the larger framework of gender and culture. It examines the implications of low fertility at grass-roots level in terms of women's choices and the interplay of power and social control in families. To pursue this discussion it is imperative to identify the processes and framework within which women make and pursue fertility choices.

Given the fact that, in the traditional Indian situation, a woman's body and

its processes are largely under the control of men, the author cites interesting cases of women who opted for sterilization of their bodies, overthrowing their husbands' authority. This comes out succinctly in the case of a young woman who pressed her right to decide on the number of children she would rear, in spite of the forceful demands of her husband and mother-in-law. A sterilization scar is an assertion of the symbolic status of a mother/woman, challenging the authority of the mother-in-law as a post-procreative woman who wields considerable influence in familial affairs. Such self-assertion appears to have sparked off a wave of conservatism and oppression.

Fertility may be treated as a part of the larger cultural complex, consisting of beliefs, values, myths, rituals, and cultural practices. Against this backdrop, cultural interpretation of conception and birth, as well as indigenous

methods of birth control, assume considerable significance, and had Säävälä examined these she would have added a welcome dimension to the argument developed in the book. Nonetheless this is a fine piece of work with clear objectives, pursued by the author throughout the text, and opening up several interesting possibilities for further research. ◀

Säävälä, Minna, *Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India*, Copenhagen: NIAS (2001), pp. xvi + 239, ISBN 0-7007-1484-7

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# 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.

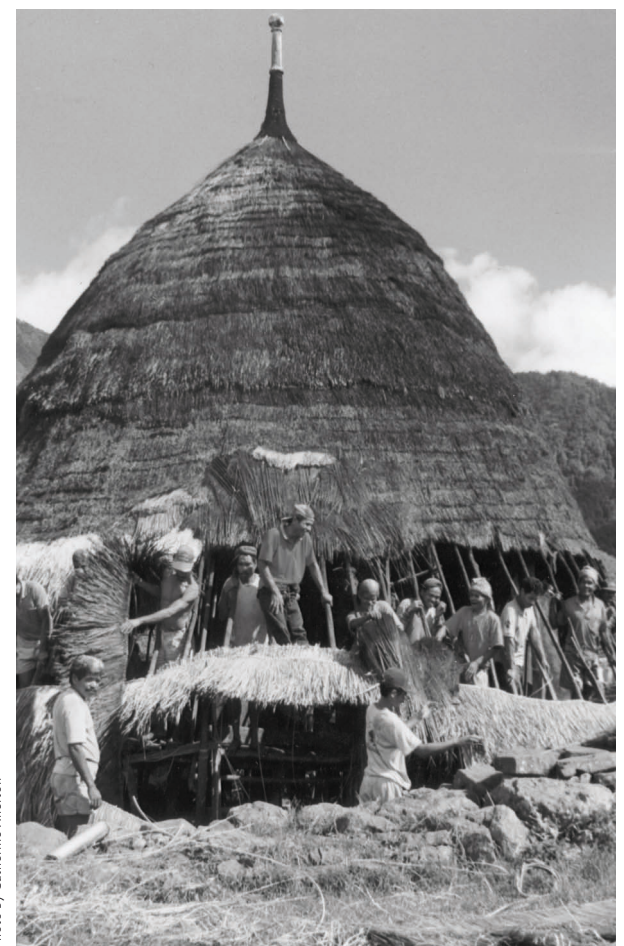


Photo by Catherine Allerton

- 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

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