

*Kinship and Food in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue. Studies in Asian Topics. Volume 38. Copenhagen: Nias Press, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007. 336 pp.

This edited volume, *Kinship and Food in Southeast Asia*, brings together ten ethnographic contributions on Southeast Asia that analyse how kinship is created and manipulated through the ways food is produced, consumed and shared. A unifying supposition of the contributions is that kinship cannot be analytically reduced to biological relationships but includes other forms of “relatedness” of which biological connections are one facet. This is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia where kinship ties are not fixed at birth, but continually created in an ongoing process, mediated through food consumption. Each of the contributors emphasises the malleability of kinship and the particular role of food in defining and consolidating kinship relations.

In the Introduction, Monica Janowski addresses an intriguing puzzle about the importance of rice in insular Southeast Asia. Although rice is native to mainland Southeast Asia, it is far more difficult to grow rice in the equatorial latitudes of the insular areas and the Malay Peninsula. Nevertheless, rice is an important alimentary and cultural resource in these regions. Janowski argues that this paradox makes sense when the symbolic value and significance of rice are analysed alongside nutritional necessity. By emphasising the symbolic and cosmological meaning of foodstuffs, the book draws on the theoretical tradition of the Comparative Austronesian Project initiated by James Fox at the Australian National University (ANU), which developed a comparative framework and interdisciplinary approach to exploring common themes among Austronesian-speaking populations. In this edited volume, this comparative approach is particularly constructive as it brings together seven examples from Austronesian-speaking groups in Indonesia and Malaysia, a case study from Northeast Thailand, and one from Papua.

A vast number of Southeast Asian societies attach unique symbolic significance to rice because it is associated with generative and

transformative qualities — with fertility, nurturance or life force. Several of the authors explicitly refer to the Comparative Austronesian Project to expand this point by drawing on the concept of the “flow of life”. Carol Davis demonstrates in chapter four how rice, a symbol of fertility among the matrilineal Minangkabau of West Sumatra, becomes a medium for passing on life force. In chapter five, Janowski describes how sharing a rice meal is central to the construction of kinship among the Kelabit of Borneo because it leads to the transmission of life force from older couples to descending generations. Similarly in chapter two, Rens Heringa describes the role of food in the seven months pregnancy ritual in Kerek, East Java, in which the exchange of male and female foods transmits the “flow of life”. A comparable emphasis on the generative potential of food is found in chapter seven; here, Timo Kaartinen focuses on Banda Eli, a Muslim village in the Kei Islands of eastern Indonesia. The staple food in Banda Eli is not rice but local cassava cakes (*embal*) that are considered to be a symbolic concentration of life force.

The authors emphasise how food not only mediates relationships between the living, but is also a way the living communicate with the dead. According to Kari Telle in chapter six, the rice meal among the Sasak of Lombok plays a central role in transforming the dead into ancestors who bestow “blessings” on the living. Kaartinen describes the parallels between mortuary rituals and the way in which people remember absent relatives in the Kei Islands. Chapter ten by Stephen Sparkes investigates the role of ancestral food offerings, especially rice, in the kinship system and cosmology of the Isan in Northeast Thailand and emphasises the importance of reciprocity between the living and the ancestral spirits in these ceremonies. The particularity of ancestral food offerings is also explored in the introduction. Janowski argues that through ancestral food offerings, descending generations feed preceding ones, thus reversing the usual direction of feeding among the living, in which foodstuffs, and, in turn, life force are transmitted from ascending to descending generations.

Several contributors discuss the production and preparation of food and its creative and generative qualities. Janowski, for example, argues that the productive capacities of an older Kelabit couple turn them into “good people”. Similarly, Willemijn de Jong insists that food preparation and consumption among the Lio in central Flores involves a transformative and creative act of identification. In this edited volume there is a strong emphasis on the transformative and symbolic qualities of food, but less theoretical attention is devoted to the political economy of food production.

Another common theme is that food consumption creates a sense of community and integration. Carol Davis describes how the sharing of food in Minangkabau creates relations of trust and relatedness. In chapter three, Fiona Kerlogue draws attention to the convivial qualities of food by showing how daily eating and community feasts in Sebarang, Central Sumatra, strengthen allegiances and incorporate outsiders into the community. She argues that the incorporation of foreigners today reflects the way outsiders were incorporated into the Sultanate in the past. The fluidity of the family replicates the fluidity of the Sultanate, just as the ambiguity of ethnic belonging is reflected in a similar ambiguity in the definition of kin.

While in Sebarang, community feasts enable kinship divisions to be transcended, as argued by Kerlogue, the exchange of food can also act to create distinctions such as those between giving and taking groups. Several other contributors made similar observations. According to Nguyễn Xuân Hiên in chapter eleven, the order in which food is served during the Vietnamese Têt festival expresses gender hierarchy and seniority. Heringa and Kerlogue similarly emphasise how the exchange of food creates distinctions along lines of seniority and gender, and reinforces divisions between different social strata.

De Jong’s study of the Lio in chapter nine outlines how foodstuffs create and reinforce local hierarchies in Central Flores. In this region, rice is a scarce and prestigious alimentary resource that creates social differentiation in everyday life as only the elite can afford

to eat it regularly. These distinctions are also reinforced in rituals. The agricultural rice ceremonies stress the hierarchical relations between nobles, commoners and slaves, whereas the life-cycle ceremonies create less hierarchical distinctions between wife-givers and wife-takers. Drawing on theories of ethnicity, de Jong maintains that food exchanges are vital for the construction of both ethnic and kinship identities. A similar approach is taken by Dianne van Oosterhout in chapter eight which focuses on the Inawatan in Papua. She suggests that the production, preparation and consumption of food are closely linked to people's understanding of how their identity and their bodies are constructed and regenerated from different substances. Food consumption is, thus, a medium through which people create collective and individual identities, and express both unity and distinction.

Due to its juxtaposition of kinship terminology with everyday practices of kinship and relatedness, this volume is an ethnographically rich and timely addition to "new kinship studies". The emphasis on everyday life is particularly evident in Janowski's contribution in chapter five, which shows the importance of sharing a daily rice meal among the Kelabit of Sarawak, Borneo. Here, "rice-based kinship" is produced and stands in contrast to the more implicit understanding of biological connections of sexual reproduction. Similarly in chapter six, Kari Telle examines the role of food in mortuary rituals as well as in daily activities after a person's death among the Sasak of Lombok. For example, the widow Papuq Sip continues to cook the rice meal for her dead husband to lure his spirit back into her house. Accordingly, Telle argues that for the Sasak, food is not only both a medium for remembering the dead and for expressing care and love for them, but also illustrates the indebtedness associated with feeding.

The book offers an excellent overview of different Southeast Asian societies and the way they use food to construct and manipulate social relations. The volume provides detailed juxtaposition of the role of food in everyday life and its significance in rituals. Together the contributions in this volume effectively blend the theoretical

concepts of the Comparative Austronesian Project with the work from the “new kinship studies”, furthering understanding on the link between food and kinship in Southeast Asia.

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