

*Constituting Unity and Difference: Vernacular Architecture in a Minangkabau Village.* By Marcel Vellinga. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004. 53 figures (line drawings, house plans, black-and-white photographs), 2 maps, xii, 337 pp.

The Minangkabau of West Sumatra are as renowned for their elegant architecture as they are for their matrilineal kinship system. Both these features arguably have been liable to some degree of romanticization, as much by Minangkabau scholars as by outsiders. Yet ironically, as the author of this work points out, surprisingly few detailed studies of the architecture have ever been carried out. Most works fail to get beyond a few superficial architectural clichés, and they have tended to present an idealized version of house styles found in the *darek*, the highland area considered by Minang to be their cultural heartland, at the expense of the *rantau* or peripheral areas. This has produced an over-standardized picture which obscures the actual variety of styles to be found throughout both central and peripheral regions. It was with these considerations in mind that Vellinga chose as the site for his fieldwork the village of Abai Sangir in the district of Solok, in the little-studied southern borderlands of the province. With this book he has given us perhaps the most detailed published study of Minangkabau architecture to date.

In the past, the Minangkabau “great house” (*rumah gadang*) often accommodated a number of matrilineally related nuclear families under one roof, and there were many that achieved impressive sizes. However disasters of war or accidental fires have taken their toll over the years and today’s generation often prefer to enjoy the privacy of smaller dwellings, albeit usually clustering about the “mother” house. Abai village repays close study since its inhabitants can claim the achievement of having constructed the longest houses in the whole of West Sumatra. The village includes eight such houses (known as *rumah barih*), reaching lengths of over 70 metres. The longest comprises twenty-one bays or family compartments, more even than the exceptionally long house at a better-known village, Sulit Air near Lake Singkarak, which only has twenty. No other village has such a

concentration of long houses, in such a well maintained condition. Their construction appears to have started in the early 20th century, developing a competitive element from the 1950s onward which caused them to become even longer. Nothing could convey the dynamism of Abai's vernacular architecture more vividly than Vellinga's comment that at the time when he started his fieldwork in 1993, out of thirty-two houses in the village eight had been built within the past forty-five years, and twenty-two (or two thirds) were still under construction or in process of improvement. The village would thus appear to be in a permanent state of becoming. Besides this, a large number of "small houses" for individual nuclear families had also been constructed. The villagers are not especially wealthy; nineteenth century travellers described the region as being very poor, with little land suitable for wet rice cultivation. Today they still depend largely on subsistence agriculture and small-scale cash cropping, as well as work on a nearby palm oil plantation. What could account for such vigorous investment in these extraordinary houses? That is the puzzle which Vellinga's book sets out to answer.

The explanation lies in a close examination of the kinship structure, one that provides a new and original perspective on the workings of Minangkabau matriliney. The insights Vellinga offers contrast in some significant ways with descriptions from other districts of West Sumatra, thus contributing to a more rounded understanding of cultural variations in the area. He also considers the question of whether this can best be understood as a house-based society in the sense outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a concept that has provided the impetus for an increasing number of recent analyses of Indonesian kinship systems. As frequently turns out to be the case in Indonesian societies (but in contradistinction to most already existing descriptions of Minangkabau matriliney), in Abai, "descent" is not as straightforward as it seems. The *kampueng* or "clan" turns out to be more than a matrilineal descent group; its subgroups (*kaum*) do not necessarily all acknowledge a common female ancestor, but only agree that at some point in the past, their ancestors decided to enter into a relationship with each other. This perhaps reflects the fact

that historically, some of the early settlers appear to have come from areas south of Minangkabau, arriving after the original Minangkabau settlers; relationships of inequality between original and later settlers persist into the present.

It transpires that the “house” (*rumah*) is indeed the most salient category for the inhabitants of Abai themselves, more crucial even than the groups linked by matrilineal descent who make up its core, since the *rumah* includes both men of the descent group (mothers’ brothers or *ninik mamak*) and in-marrying husbands (*urang sumando*). Vellinga’s analysis points potentially to a more general underestimation of the usefulness of husbands in previous analyses of Minangkabau matriliney, though unfortunately he does not provide any comparative divorce statistics. By contrast with other regions of West Sumatra (where marriage has typically been described as very unstable, and the position of the husband in his wife’s house tenuous), in Abai men appear to be much more robustly incorporated into the wife’s kin group. This is essential, since without their contributions, no-one could meet the expense of rebuilding or maintaining the houses; and to have a house, as a physical structure, is absolutely vital to the existence of the *rumah* as a group. House and kin group thus are seen to constitute each other.

The reason for this is that, according to *adat* regulations, the group cannot hold any ceremonies, and receive guests from other *rumah* in the proper manner, without a house to provide the setting. This is especially crucial for weddings, by means of which the *rumah* perpetuates itself by entering into a relationship with another *rumah*. Wedding ceremonies are lavish and involve a distinct element of competition between houses. Guests at any ceremony have to be seated in the correct locations within the house, and if no house is available, they cannot be invited in the first place. Furthermore, the interior spaces of the house are needed in order to perform the ceremonial appointment of the house’s own representatives, who perform the role of honoured guests at other houses’ celebrations. Hence, when a long house starts to fall down (after a period of about seventy years), a new house must be built first, before demolishing

the old one. Each *kaum* or subgroup is provided with its own bay or compartment in the house, and cannot inhabit any other room in the house without the express permission of the owners of that bay. Nowadays, most people do not wish to reside in the long house, but make smaller houses for their families alongside. Still, for ritual purposes, they must have their own space within the long house in order to participate. Thus it is felt that at the moment of demolition, if no new house had yet been built, the group would socially cease to exist. Old houses are often simply left to fall down after they have been replaced. The new house also takes a long time to finish. Once the basic structure of the house is completed, under the supervision of a master carpenter, the owners themselves work on the walls. Each *kaum* is responsible for its own bay, whose walls may be renewed in more expensive materials over time, as they can afford it, giving most houses a somewhat uneven and unfinished appearance.

The co-operation needed to achieve these architectural feats is formidable, hence the idea of “constituting unity” which forms the first part of the book’s title. The notion that house construction may also provide a means of expressing differences is also carefully explored. Roof spires, floor levels, ornaments, and other details of construction, as well as the uses of space in daily life and on ritual occasions, can all be telling means of accentuating or acting out hierarchical relationships, and are exploited in different ways depending on context. House construction provides a socially approved project by means of which a wealthy contributor can raise his own status and that of his *kaum* within the *rumah* and come to have a greater say in its ongoing affairs. Even if this involves some manipulation of history, it can be presented as a demonstration of respect for tradition. Conversely, not to contribute would be tantamount to surrendering one’s place in the social organization and finding oneself excluded from future social activities. The main thrust of Vellinga’s argument is that, far from being in a passive sense merely a “microcosm” or reflection of the wider social structure, the house plays a very active role in bringing the social group into being, and enabling it to perpetuate itself. This incidentally confirms that Lévi-Strauss was quite mistaken

in concentrating his attention on the idea of the house as a group, at the expense of the actual architecture. We cannot fully understand the one without taking account of the vital material presence of the other, so closely is the life history of the house intertwined with that of its inhabitants.

Vellinga's book shows the merits of cross-disciplinary approaches to vernacular architecture, one of the aims of the larger joint Dutch-Indonesian research programme to document lesser-known architectures of western Indonesia, of which his study forms a part. Although his original Ph.D. thesis at Leiden was in anthropology, the book is abundantly illustrated with photographs and beautiful line drawings, and the process of construction has been documented in detail both from the technical and the ritual point of view. This book then should satisfy both architects and anthropologists, and stands as a testament to one of Indonesia's most extraordinary living traditions of indigenous architecture.

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