



Gaudenz Domenig, *Religion and Architecture in Premodern Indonesia: Studies in Spatial Anthropology*

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. xviii+ 576 pages. List of maps, glossary of technical terms, list of illustrations and credits, index. Hardback, €149,00/\$194.00. ISBN 13: 9789004274006.

VISITORS TO THE highland regions of Sumatra and Sulawesi in Indonesia have long been impressed with the flamboyance of certain local architectural traditions. Particular attention has been drawn to the dramatic sweeping roof lines of traditional Batak, Minangkabau, and Toraja houses. So emblematic of ethnic identity have

these roofs become that you can see them invoked on everything from Padang restaurants and Christian churches to New Order-era monuments and contemporary tourist carvings. They have prompted all sorts of speculations ranging from the more plausible (memories of ancestral ships) to less so (evidence of extraterrestrial visitors) but also serious research by scholars such as Roxanne Waterson and James Fox. Less well known but also remarkable structures are found in various parts of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), East Timor, Maluku, and Kalimantan. The attention these buildings have drawn is disproportionate to the relative scale of the societies that produce them, most of which are quite small and historically isolated. Although nearly 60 percent of Indonesia's population lives on Java, dwellings there have received little scholarly notice by comparison. One reason for this disproportion is simply the exotic character of the former, against which even traditional Javanese houses can seem quite familiar, their design principles functionally straightforward to Western eyes and therefore requiring no particular investigation. By contrast, the exuberance of Batak and Toraja houses, to mention the best known, seems to reach far beyond anything that can be explained in terms of shelter or comfort. Another reason for the special attention they receive lies in an old scholarly habit of seeking evidence of archaic traditions and origins among the present-day inhabitants of societies scattered around the edges of the densely populated Muslim populations of the irrigated rice-growing lowlands. The notion that some societies preserve the past as if they had been frozen in time has long since been discredited among anthropologists. But, rather like James Scott's "Zomia," inhabitants of some of the highlands and smaller islands do have certain things in common. They managed to elude the more direct forms of state power during much of their history, and have often relied on what SCOTT calls "escape agriculture," (2009) such as swiddening, to remain mobile. Some of them also share certain distinctive features, such as asymmetric marriage systems, social organization along the lines of "house societies," and, in certain places, have resisted the major religious forces that swept the rest of the archipelago. And then there are those houses. Despite the 1,500 miles distance between the Toraja and Batak homelands, for instance, their rooflines are strikingly similar.

Religion and Architecture in Premodern Indonesia is an ambitious effort to explain these houses, the culmination of decades of what was clearly exacting research and imaginative reflection. Although, as noted, important books on the topic precede it, this monograph is remarkable both for its thoroughness and the distinctive perspective its author brings to the topic. An architect by training, Domenig has a sharp eye for detail, and the evidence it offers for construction techniques and the way builders solve engineering problems. This volume weighs in at over 500 pages, generously provided with 385 illustrations. The author seems to have scrutinized every picture, diagram, model, and written account on the subject, and has visited many of the places in person. His technical discussions of everything from the cantilevering of floors to the vulnerabilities of roof plates are painstaking in their precision. As an encyclopedic record and formal analysis, this book will serve as a reference work on these architectural traditions that we are not likely to see surpassed any time soon—it is a testimony to the kind of projects that only institutions like the KITLV can support.

The book's eleven chapters work from the ground up. Beginning with what the author calls "landtaking rites," it proceeds to look by turns at sacred groves, the spatial location of the spirits, and the function of decorations on altars and other structures, before then moving into the house itself, and culminates in an exhaustive discussion of roofs over five chapters. (Perhaps this interest in roofs explains the relative lack of attention paid to the famous longhouses of Borneo, whose roof-lines are mundane by comparison.) This sequence reflects the overarching concern of the book, to reconstruct a hypothetical religious logic and developmental sequence underlying the design principles of these various architectural traditions. Thus what the book's subtitle calls "spatial anthropology" is really about something more specific, namely, spatial relations between humans and spirits. In line with this focus, the volume makes no mention of important work in the anthropology of space, such as that of Nancy Munn, Fred Myers, or even the pioneering writings of Durkheim and Mauss, and has relatively little to say about the overall layout of villages or the spaces between them.

At the heart of the argument is the claim that the puzzling design features of these houses can be understood as working to bring spirits down from the sky and into proximity to the living. As Domenig summarizes his thesis, Indonesian architecture was traditionally "a means of safeguarding the friendship and benevolence of gods and spirits by inviting them to the house and guiding them to offerings presented there" (16). Favoring as it does religious over purely utilitarian reasoning, this argument has a long tradition behind it, going back at least to Fustel de Coulanges's 1864 masterpiece, *The Ancient City*. One contribution of this book is the effort to shed light on puzzling or hitherto overlooked structural details. For instance, Domenig notices that certain kinds of decoration are likely to move in a breeze, animating an altar or house in ways that are not obvious in still photography. I was especially taken with his injunction that "we must try to imagine how a structure may have looked under different weather conditions" (166). But Domenig is especially interested in those unusual roofs, which more than any other features of the house seem to cry out for an explanation beyond mere functionality. Of certain sorts of projecting gable finials, for instance, he writes "by literally transcending the roof they rather contradict or qualify the rigid finiteness of the apex and provide an aspect of play, of freedom and of life" (428). An entire chapter is devoted to the instability of the roofs. It might seem that flexible roofs better withstand earthquakes and storms than rigid ones (I vividly recall being hustled out of a house in Sumba during a windstorm that my hosts feared would carry our roof away). Domenig, however, pushes beyond such utilitarian explanations to propose that movements of a roof were seen as spiritually auspicious. Suggestions like these will make anyone familiar with these structures view them with fresh eyes.

As a contribution to the anthropology of architecture, the book is truly remarkable. As a work in the anthropology of religion, however, it is rather less persuasive. As a scholarly approach, Domenig's unapologetically speculative reconstructions hearken back to the era of the nineteenth century travelers and missionaries whose texts he favors, on the grounds that their records take us closer to the lost pre-modern world. To be sure, anthropology has a healthy tolerance for some degree

of speculation. But the approach taken here more or less tacitly assumes several things that most anthropologists today would hesitate to take on board: first, that across the archipelago there was once a more or less shared religious logic; second, that this logic was once a coherent and systematic totality; third, that over time the system changed following a clear developmental sequence, but, fourth, all that remains of this system today are fragments whose meanings have been forgotten by living people; and fifth, that the forgotten system can be reconstructed by fitting together bits and pieces of evidence that have been selected from various localities across the region (and even at times, rather inexplicably, from places as far flung as Thailand, Iceland, Japan, and ancient Greece). And of course this approach means ignoring most of the archipelago in favor of certain societies thought to be closest to the past. The idea that all that remains of that past are remnants of a thought-world that was once shared across the region and internally coherent leads the author at times to override the ethnographic testimony of living people—if the locals' interpretations differ from the author's own, that is because the locals no longer remember their original meanings. Given that living people often still build these houses, and in some cases still practice the rituals that go with them, this dismissal is, at the very least, methodologically problematic. For instance, since the theory requires that the projections atop Sumbanese houses are “actually” spirit ladders (263), it leads the author to override the fact that their present-day builders call them “house horns”—even though Sumbanese also stack up real buffalo horns on the veranda, carve them on tombs and altars, and give their shape to dancers' head ornaments. Since the theory literally directs our attention upwards, we rarely get inside the houses enough to see what it's like to actually live in them, to explore the religious implications of huddling in the nurturing comfort of dark spaces and glowing hearths, or of the spatial divisions between eating and sleeping, guests and hosts, men and women, young and old. The focus is on the house as an architectural unit, affording only selective discussion of settlement patterns, plazas, and tombs, and the surrounding gardens and pastures. Although there's a nice detail about rats being identified with ancestors—summoning back some chilling fieldwork memories of my own—we hear little of the domestic animals that often live under the house, whose presence there is sometimes invoked in local cosmologies. And there is relatively little description of actual rituals, compared to those the author postulates must once have occurred. Given the lack of direct evidence, the reconstructions of forgotten religion often follow what E. E. Evans-Pritchard decided long ago as the “if I were a horse” method.

And then there's the question of the “premodern.” If the people who construct and inhabit these houses today cannot be trusted to understand their original meanings, when exactly was that time when they *did* get them right, when the parts *did* fit together? An approach that assumes we are reconstructing a lost whole from its scattered fragments gives the author permission to accept or reject the ethnographic evidence. And, yes, sometimes one does have to make calls about the evidence—no anthropologist can be completely literal-minded. But on what grounds should one be making those calls? The logic underwriting what the author calls the “typological” method of reconstruction seems to require that there was once an original to-

tality, a religious logic that was shared across the archipelago: otherwise, why should evidence from Borneo shed light on Maluku? But what is it that is being reconstructed when we put the different fragments being put back together again? Now Domenig is certainly aware that none of these societies existed outside of time—he does aim to reconstruct a developmental sequence both of house design and of religious belief. This can lead to some interesting suggestions about how people respond to their own material culture. For example, he speculates that the *tavu* of Tanimbar, in southern Maluku, an elaborately carved structure that often resembles a person with outstretched arms, was not originally anthropomorphic. Rather, he proposes that poles that had once been used for holding ceremonial cloths (an idea he obtains from distant Borneo) came to be seen as resembling arms. This resemblance led Tanimbarese to take the structure for a human figure, so when new ones were carved, faces were added (300–22). Whether this is correct may be subject to debate—but even that possibility reveals that people are always responding to the affordances their material surroundings offer them, and on that basis they are elaborating spandrels, producing skeuomorphs, and otherwise engaged in continuous invention and reinvention. If people are now constructing new worlds from the fragments of prior ones, why should we assume this was any different in the past?

REFERENCE

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