Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India

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 Sävälä’s Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India charts an increase in feminine assertiveness, as opposed to compliance, in the domain of procreation.

By Nita Mathur

I n the present day, women need to negotiate their fertility choices rigorously within family structures. As a result of this change, there are changes in the family, generational, and gender relations that are subjected to significant transformations. In addressing this and related issues, Minna Sävälä brings together anthropological and demographical insights to develop a meaningful interpretation of women’s personal narratives.

The study, on fieldwork in the East Godavari district in coastal Andhra Pradesh, explores the place of childbirth in the lives of 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 bring an understanding of the nature of these cultural changes in which fertility decline is embedded in the fore; to establish an understanding of the processes related to declining fertility; (j) analyse, in terms of social, political, symbolic, and power-related realms, the familial repercussions of the fact that women now give birth to fewer children of their own mothers did; and (k) examine how the quest for a small family and the adoption of female sterility as the most accepted contraceptive method have a bearing on gender relations and intergenerational frameworks. 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 these 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 mother/woman, challenging the authority of the mother-in-law as a post-progressive woman who wields considerable influence in familial affairs. Such self-assertion appears to have sparked off a wave of conservatism and repression.

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 Sävälä examined this 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 through-out the text, and opening up several interesting possibilities for further research.

\[References\]


Dr Nita Mathur is an anthropologist, and is currently working at the Indian Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, India, where she is preparing a theatrum of Saṅkhā (a kind of indigenous life, the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent) words for body, world, and self. Her research interests range from arts in lifestyles to emotions across cultures and indigenous vision. She has edited the book \textit{Saṅkhā Worldviews}, and is the author of Cultural Rhythms in Emotions, Narratives and Dance.

nmathur3@yahoo.com

The House in 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 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 Sparrke and Signe Howell, is the result of a conference of the Nordic Association for Southeast Asian Studies. The twelve ethno- graphic 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. The chapters are simply presented as a general collection, with no thematic organization or division into parts. The proliferation 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 attempts 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, Rosana Waterson, an anthropologist who has written extensively on the Southeast Asian house and whose beautifully illustrated book (1995) 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 lives. 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 living, house’ (sociétés à maison in southern Indian subcontinent) words for body, womb, landscape in Flores, Indonesia.


References


Dr Catherine Allerton is lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Her research concerns kinship, houses, and landscape in Flores, Indonesia.

C.L.Allerton@lse.ac.uk

The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture and House-Related Relations in Flores, Indonesia.

C.L.Allerton@lse.ac.uk