

Entangled Biographies: Rebuilding a Sasak House

But more than comfort is at
issue in the elective affinity
between houses and bodies:
our very identity is at stake.

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ABSTRACT *The concept of 'compatibility' has a particular salience in many Indonesian societies. This article examines 'compatibility' with reference to person–house relationships on the island of Lombok. Examining a case where the house and its inhabitants had become incompatible, the article follows one Sasak woman's efforts to rebuild her house and to achieve compatibility. Stressing the unpredictable and recalcitrant quality of material things, the article shows how the materiality of the house imparts dynamism into the relation between a house and its inhabitants. The article suggests that the house is not only a pivot of reflexivity but a vehicle of action.*

KEYWORDS *Compatibility, subjects–objects, materiality, Indonesia*

Recent interest in the emergent field of material culture studies has highlighted the extent to which objects lead social lives. Kopytoff's (1986) seminal article on the 'cultural biography of things' has inspired work that transgress the usual boundaries between persons and objects. Much work on 'the social life of things' (Appadurai 1986) has similarly been concerned to overcome the conceptual dichotomy between subjects and objects that is axiomatic of western 19th and 20th century thought. Although the assertion that 'objects have social lives' has become, as Carl Knappett notes (2002:97–98), 'something of a mantra in material culture studies', this statement has not received the full and direct examination it deserves. To move forward in our understanding of the complex workings of material culture, Knappett suggests that we need to consider the potentially diverse processes whereby inanimate things come to be socially alive. This entails exploring how objects mediate social agency. It also entails investigating the role of objects in lives.

This article examines how identities and biographies are formed around

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objects in an Indonesian society. The analysis presented here concerns the nature of person–house relations among the Sasak on the island of Lombok in the province of West Nusa Tenggara. Following scholars who have called for ‘an anthropology of the house’ that approaches dwellings and their inhabitants within the same analytical framework (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995), I discuss the intimate relations between persons and their houses. Rather than providing a generalized account of ‘the Sasak house’ as has been the common anthropological framing, this article ties the house to a specific woman’s life history, examining their troubled relationship. One virtue of a biographical approach is that it brings the dense relations between persons and houses into focus. But the main reason I adopt a biographical approach is to push the analysis of the house in the direction of its pragmatic role in mediating social action. Taking my cue from Alfred Gell’s (1998) provocative analysis of art and agency, I explore ‘a domain in which “objects” merge with “people” by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things’ (1998:12). Probing the interdependence of people and their dwellings, I show how Sasak houses enter into the formation of selfhood, being key vehicles in intentional projects involving the constitution of meaningful life trajectories.

Engaging Houses

The dynamic aspect of houses has been emphasized in a number of recent studies from Southeast Asia. Although Lévi-Strauss’ sweeping conception of ‘house societies’ (1987) has been criticized, his ideas have provided the inspiration for work that locates the house at the core of kinship systems in the region (Carsten 1997; Smedal 1994; Sparkes & Howell 2003). By delineating the interrelations between buildings, people and ideas, these studies have revealed what Carsten and Hugh-Jones aptly term ‘the processual nature of the house’ (1995:39). By this they mean that architectural processes often coincide with important events in the lives of their occupants or are thought of in terms of them. Their insistence that houses are not static structures but ‘dynamic entities’ (1995:37) entails a timely critique of the rather structuralist approach which has dominated the study of architecture in Southeast Asia. A processual orientation is also in keeping with the greater emphasis on ‘everyday’ practice in kinship studies and in anthropology in general (Carsten 2000; Janowski & Kerlogue 2006).

While the focus on the house has refigured our understanding of kinship in this region, the question of how people experience and act through

their dwellings has received scant attention. This is surprising given the frequent claims that houses are 'living' and endowed with animate qualities (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Ellen 1986; Howe 1983). As Roxana Waterson (2003:35) notes, 'the idea of the house as a living thing, [...] is more than just a metaphor for many Southeast Asian peoples.' One way to approach the 'living' house is to highlight the centrality of notions of 'life-force', 'vitality' and cognate terms (Waterson 1990, 1993, 2003). The approach taken here, by contrast, explores how the materiality of the house imparts dynamism and unpredictability into the relation between persons and houses. This is not to return to crude materialism but rather to foreground the relational matrix in which houses are embedded. Discussing how a Sasak woman's identity is negotiated in relation to her house, I emphasize its practical role in mediating action. Rather than seeing the house as a supplement to an existing self, I argue that houses are 'means that help selves become what they are' (Keane 1999:183). This is because material things embody distinct possibilities for acting upon the world.

The second aim of this article is therefore to examine the material aspects of Sasak houses in light of changing socio-economic circumstances which generate new tastes and preferences. That houses are implicated in on-going, future-oriented projects is very obvious in the case of Lombok where tremendous effort and a substantial portion of people's income are being poured into the construction of bungalow-style houses made from concrete, brick and glass. Spoken of as 'modern' (*moderen*), such houses are rapidly replacing humbler 'traditional' dwellings made from locally obtained materials. The effort and money invested into building 'modern' homes, with associated changes in design and in the use of space, invite an examination of the house as a symbolic category and how these ideas may be changing. To account for the current inclination for 'conspicuous construction' (Thomas 1998), I stress how the economic aspects of houses connect to the fact that distinctions of hereditary rank have long been objectified in Sasak vernacular architecture. While 'modern' houses are ideally suited for signifying status and wealth, it is the pragmatic role of the house as a vehicle for reflexivity and social action, which lies at the heart of this article.

Towards Compatibility

One humid afternoon in November 1997, I accompanied Inaq Adi, a Sasak woman in her late 40s, her grown-up son and maternal aunt to the village cemetery. The purpose of the visit was to tell Inaq Adi's long-deceased

mother that her former residence had been rebuilt. Sitting down next to the simple Muslim grave, Inaq Adi called upon the mother's spirit (*roh*) and apologized that several months had lapsed since her last visit. In a soft voice she noted that the construction work had kept her busy. Scrambling to find money to pay for the building materials had been exhausting, and now she worried about the debt. In spite of these worries, Inaq Adi confided that she was pleased with the result. The house was to be inaugurated the following afternoon – the mother was, of course, welcome. Being devout Muslims, Inaq Adi and her son Adi, a 30-year-old bachelor working as a sports-teacher in the local school, then recited a series of prayers for the spirit. Meanwhile, the aunt removed weeds from her eldest sister's burial place. Before leaving she poured 'cooling' water on the grave and all of us rinsed our face in the water, a gesture associated with receiving 'blessings from the dead' (*berkat kubur*).

Rarely have I seen Inaq Adi in such high spirits as that afternoon when she proudly informed her mother and other dead relatives that the old house had been repaired and enlarged. By this time the rebuilding had dragged on for almost one year because the work periodically had been stalled due to lack of funds, and her relief that this difficult period was over was palpable. Since Inaq Adi invited me to her home in the village of Bon Raja in rural Central Lombok in 1993 we have regularly spent time together, and during the course of time I have gained a good sense of how her life has unfolded.¹ This self-reliant woman, who trained to become an elementary school teacher after her second divorce, is not representative of Sasak women of her generation. She exhibits a somewhat unusual assertion of female autonomy in the context of Sasak gender relations and the conservative gender ideology promoted by the Indonesian authorities in which men are identified as breadwinners while women are tied to the domestic sphere (Blackwood 1995; Sears 1996). Yet, even if it is unusual for a single woman to engage in house-building, the desire to have a 'modern' house is widely shared on Lombok. These desires are tied to new patterns of consumption, but I will argue that this construction activity is also animated by cultural assumptions regarding the interdependence of people and houses.

The notion of 'compatibility' is a good starting point for analysing the intimate ties between Sasak houses and their occupants. The main purpose of the house-opening ritual (*roah bale*), in which men from the neighbourhood share a ritual meal accompanied by Islamic prayers, is to generate a state of *selamat* for the household.² For Sasak speakers, the notion of *selamat* carries a fan of positive connotations such as harmony, safety, tranquillity and prosperity.

These values are often summed up in the notion of 'coolness' (*embel bau*), a multi-vocal concept that evokes a sense of being shaded and protected. To notify ancestral spirits that a house is to be inaugurated is not only a gesture of respect but intended to imbue the new house with 'coolness'. I was also told that the inauguration itself is more likely to proceed 'without obstacles' (*edaq halangan*) when these spirits are invited. Such statements make explicit the undercurrent of risk that accompanies house-building in the densely populated communities in the fertile central plain. For this endeavour to progress 'smoothly' (*lancar*), rituals which tie the house and its inhabitants together must be performed at critical spatiotemporal junctures.

An important goal of Sasak house-opening rituals is to lay the foundation for good 'fit' (*rasi*) between the residents and the house that they will inhabit from now on. The concern with *rasi*, which means 'to be right for' or 'suitable to', is by no means restricted to the relation between the house and its inhabitants. A focus on compatibility informs numerous situations when people come into contact with substances, objects and places (cf. Hay 2001:181–82). 'Compatibility' has particular salience in many Indonesian societies. Writing of the Javanese notion of *cocok*, Geertz (1960:31), notes that 'in the broadest and most abstract sense two separate items *cocok* when their coincidence forms an aesthetic pattern.' In the Sasak case, it is more apt to say that when two items are *rasi* their coincidence forms a productive relation. Compatibility carries a sense of growth or enhancement resulting from contact between two or more entities. Not surprisingly, a concern with 'fit' often crops up in connection with courtship and marriage. While frequent quarrels are symptomatic of poor fit, the strongest evidence of 'incompatibility' (*ndeq rasi*) is the inability to produce healthy offspring. As the conjugal tie is a condition for engaging in socially sanctioned sexual relations, the link between marriage and the house is obviously close, as I elaborate shortly.

The importance attached to securing compatibility between the house and its occupants offers a glimpse of an inherently 'relational' conception of the link between persons and things. The Sasak focus on 'fit' and 'matching' testifies to a conception of sociality that includes materiality. It also points to a less dichotomous understanding of subjects and objects than that which became axiomatic in European 19th century thought (cf. Miller 1987; Stallybrass 1998). Rather than operating with a stark dualism between subjects and objects, of people on the one hand and inanimate things on the other, Sasak conceptions are somewhat more fluid. Talk about 'fit' pivots around that which connects persons and things, and there is a strongly interactive cast to such

discourse. The focus on 'fit' offers a glimpse into a relational ontology. In such a world, people are continually affected by their reciprocal engagement with the various beings, more or less person-like or thing-like, with which they come into contact (cf. Ingold 2006). What is of interest here are the specific ways in which persons and various non-human entities impinge upon and affect each other – for better or for worse. With this in mind, we turn to a situation where the house and its owner no longer were compatible. Under such circumstances the house threatens to possess its occupants.

The Oppressive House

When a house and its inhabitants are congenial to each other this results in a harmonious state of 'coolness', but compatibility is not achieved once and for all: it is a relative and fluid state. Several factors informed Inaq Adi's decision to rebuild the brick-house she had inherited twenty years earlier, the most pressing being a nagging sense that the house might be harming her. Topoanalysis is the term Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, coined for 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (1964:8). Bachelard explored how the house furnishes a 'felicitous space' that is inhabited in the imagination, pointing out that 'house images move in two directions: they are in us as much as we are in them' (1964:xxxiii). If houses and persons are so closely intertwined as he suggests, these relations might presumably become troubled. But this theme has largely been left unexplored by Bachelard and later scholars (but see Daniel 1984:140–42). Yet it is precisely when person–house relationships are troubled that we may grasp what is at stake in these relations.

One week before the house was inaugurated Inaq Adi recalled the circumstances under which she decided, almost one year earlier, to renovate and expand the house. Sitting on the porch smoking clove cigarettes, Inaq Adi recalled how she increasingly felt uncomfortable in, even afraid of, the house whose foundation had shifted, leaving deep cracks in the cement floor while the plastered walls were scarred by crisscrossing lines. Once she was unable to sleep, fearful that the roof might cave in – the dilapidated building was literally falling apart – and she felt she had no choice but to fix it. That decision entailed, it seems to me, an almost desperate effort to save herself from being crushed by the house, in existential terms as much as in a literal sense. The ever-widening cracks suggested that a comprehensive overhaul was needed, yet her edgy, preoccupied state cannot solely be attributed to practical worries. Rather, it had to do with an uncanny sense of inhabiting an

'occupied place' (Stewart 1996) as various 'spiritual creatures' (*barang ghaib*) turned-up, delivering messages and demanding favours. Day and night, they slipped through the thick walls, making themselves comfortable in the living room. While the spirits encroached on the house, painful memories welled up from within.

The fact that the rapidly escalating decay was accompanied by an invasion of hostile spirits was taken as ominous evidence that the house and its owner had become incompatible. From Inaq Adi's account, it was evident that the diagnosis of 'ill-fit' registered a painful sense of being diminished in her ability to act as a social subject. Being unable to control who entered and left the residence, she felt acutely dispossessed. When I asked her to elaborate on the nature of these occult visitors, Inaq Adi admitted that they were a mixed lot. Some of the spirits (*jinn*) were long-time inhabitants of a nearby water reservoir. Others hailed from distant places. And it was the latter spirits, with their human features and ordinary clothes, she found most terrifying. On several occasions, they had metamorphosed into wriggling snakes right before her eyes. Occurrences of this sort left her in no doubt that she was up against potent malicious forces. While fear kept her from naming these beings, the nature of the encounters strongly suggests that 'witches' (*tau selaq*) preyed upon the house. By far the most feared kind of spirit on Lombok, witches are known to change their form at will, fly, and penetrate all kinds of physical barriers, including bodies. As I have discussed elsewhere (Telle 2003), witches take pleasure in scaring and tormenting people but their ultimate desire is to cause death by draining their victims of blood.

What is most striking in this account is the felt force of the spirit-infested dwelling: As it began to fall apart, the once familiar house unfolded its 'otherness', becoming an oppressive presence. The perception that it had become a menacing, uncontrollable entity provoked much anxiety. While it may be objected that this anxiety was caused more by the spirits than by the house, it is significant that these visitations only began after the house began to fall apart. Once a house and its occupants have ceased to be compatible, the house no longer serves as an effective shield against harmful forces. This leaves the residents vulnerable to spirits, who are prone to seek out persons who are weakened by disease, shock, or undergoing transitions. Liaisons between humans and spirits can be dangerous: unless efforts are made to control such encounters, the victim's zest for life may ultimately be eroded (Hay 2001; Telle 2003, 2006). To protect herself, Inaq Adi initiated a spiritual regime of mediation and night-time prayers. By strengthening the

'life-force' (*semangat*), these practices would also enhance the body's ability to withstand intrusion.

The felt force of this Sasak house that threatened to encompass its human owner reveals some of the shortcomings of currently popular meaning-centred approaches to material objects. The problem with 'the new magic of constructionism,' as Peter Pels puts it (1998:112), is that it tends to treat 'the social as nothing but a human product and to see the materiality of social life as just an empty carrier or representation of human intention and artifice.' In a similar vein, Patricia Spyer (1998:5) notes that the idea of social constructionism 'begs the question of how and why certain things exercise the immense power they do over persons and collectivities.' Following this, I suggest that a basic yet often overlooked aspect of material things is that they cannot be fully mastered. This lack of mastery, I submit, is part of the reason why certain things fascinate and exert power over people. This is consistent with Webb Keane's (2006:200–1) argument that by virtue of *bundling*, the fact that things combine an indefinite number of properties and phenomenological qualities, only some of which have been deemed significant in a given context, they retain a range of latent possibilities. Even the most meaningful things, as Inaq Adi painfully realized, escape human control and lead, as it were, their own life. Confronted with the inherent unpredictability of things, people may discover new lessons about themselves. In this case, the 'ill-fit' forced this Sasak woman to confront her turbulent past. It also nurtured, as we shall see, a desire to change her situation by rebuilding the house.

Although the house 'split apart' (*pecah*) after a severe drought, neither Inaq Adi nor her family or neighbours were content to attribute its untimely demise solely to climatic factors. That a well-built house began to self-destruct while its owner was haunted by spirits made it urgent to identify the deeper cause of the problem. Some neighbours recalled that Inaq Adi's parents had once arranged a shadow-puppet performance (*wayang Sasak*) in the house. They implied that the spiritual trouble and the recurring money problems affecting the household – matters assumed to be closely related – stemmed from neglect of ritual obligations. By failing to stage a *wayang* performance to 'complement' the one that the parents arranged decades earlier, the requirement that these performances must be 'paired' (*bepasang*) had been violated. Sooner or later such neglect, the neighbours reminded Inaq Adi, is bound to bring misfortune. Now the house was cursed (*tepram*) to the point of breaking apart, while the occupants were prey to evil forces. Warning that the repairs would be in vain unless this transgression was rectified, they

urged her to host a *wayang* as part of the house-opening. Only by going to the 'root' (*tunggak'n*) of the problem might the house be saved – superficial repairs would not do.

This diagnosis was hardly original. It simply affirmed the common experience that ritual performances in and for the house are needed to ensure that it remains good to live in. Sasak houses are not conceived as inert structures over which one may exercise full control: they are closer to person-like beings whose needs change over time. Like people, houses demand attention, and misfortune and disease are often attributed to the neglect of person–house relationships. While Inaq Adi largely accepted this diagnosis, she was upset by the charge of negligence. Being the only child of a marriage that ended in divorce only heightened the obligation she felt to keep the house in good shape through maintenance and ritual performances. When the house eventually was inaugurated, the event was not graced by a *wayang* show. By this time, Inaq Adi was heavily in debt and it seemed hazardous to take out another loan to feed and pay the performers. Bringing me and a neighbour to act as her witnesses during the inauguration, she vowed to host a *wayang* once her 'fortune' (*rezeki*) improved. This indicates that she expected her situation, financial and otherwise, to improve once the project was completed. Having lavished so much attention on the house, she looked forward to a prosperous period of compatibility.

Entangled Biographies

Having known Inaq Adi for almost fifteen years, I have realized that the inherited house was deeply entangled with this Sasak woman's identity: their biographies were virtually inseparable. To speak of houses as having biographies is appropriate in the Sasak context where houses are perceived as going through phases of growth and decline that resemble that of a person's life trajectory. In this article, I am not primarily interested in exploring analogies between person and houses. Instead, I want to point out how houses can be pivots for reflexivity and self-knowledge, and thereby follow up on Bachelard's (1964) observations on the human penchant for using houses or house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups. Once more details of Inaq Adi's family and marital history have been fleshed out, it should be evident that a biography which fails to include the house as an 'agent' will be woefully incomplete.

To contextualize the discussion of this particular house–person relationship, I will sketch out the most salient Sasak ideas and practices pertaining to

the house. On Lombok, the house is a focal institution around which social relations, especially kinship groupings, are organized. Houses tend to be passed down along the 'male path' (*langan mame*), and the youngest son often inherits the house. Daughters, being expected to 'follow the husband' (*nurut semame*) after marriage, typically inherit movable goods, like kitchenware and cloth. When a woman does inherit a house, it is because there are no male heirs or because the brothers have agreed to assist an unmarried or divorced sister. As a symbolic category the house is associated with the conjugal pair. Marriage is a prerequisite for establishing a house, and those who regularly eat food from the same source form a hearth-group (*kuren*), the smallest complete social unit (Telle 2000, 2006). The assumption that a house ought to be comprised of 'male' (*mame*) and 'female' (*nine*) is pervasive. Men and women heading their own household have difficulties fulfilling social and ritual obligations which require input from both partners. Both women and men express a desire to find a lifelong partner, a desire informed by the assumption that a person's productive and reproductive potential is unlocked through a compatible spouse. Yet the frequency of divorce indicates that marriages often fail to live up to the idealized male-female union.

When the house of Inaq Adi began to fall apart, it had long been a locus of memory and inter-generational continuity. Built in the late 1950s, the house was about the only tangible reminder of her parents' short-lived marriage. Both parents had left the village after the divorce but the house was still imbued with their presence. This was especially the case with Inaq Adi's deeply mourned mother. More than two decades had lapsed since this enterprising trader occupied the house, but I was assured that the spirit still returned. Coming from a landless family, Inaq Adi did not expect to inherit much from her old ailing father. Sooner rather than later, the house would in all likelihood be all that remained as a physical memory of her father. Under these circumstances of loss and looming death, keeping this memory-laden inalienable structure intact was important (see Weiner 1992). By holding the house together, she would not only pass on value to her children but also gain a measure of 'immortality' (Waterson 2003) as she would live on in the house.

This woman's identification with the house was also shaped by her own marital history. If there was one object that provided continuity in her turbulent life, it was the childhood home to which she returned after two brief marriages ended in divorce. Both marriages began with mutual attraction and elopement (*merariq*) but they left her utterly disillusioned with matrimony and domestic politics. The story she told herself about the first

break-up was that the marriage was spoiled by conflicts with the mother-in-law who pressured the son to call for a divorce. Polygamy was at issue in the second divorce which came about after a rocky period following the husband's announcement that he wished to take a second wife. Like most Sasak women, Inaq Adi had vigorously resisted the prospect of becoming a co-wife. The marriage deteriorated and eventually the frustrated husband told her to pack up and go, leaving the couple's daughters behind. In this situation Sasak women have limited bargaining power because the principle that children affiliate patrilocally after divorce is upheld in both customary and religious law (Grace 2004; Krulfeld 1986).

Years later, Inaq Adi was adamant that losing the children was the worst part of being divorced. She was allowed to keep her firstborn son, Adi, until he was weaned at the age of two, but the father's family claimed the boy afterwards. Some years later, her mother negotiated a deal with the former in-laws, hence in periods the son was raised by his maternal grandmother to whom he grew deeply attached. The second divorce was 'awfully bitter' (*mulen pait*) because the husband strictly forbade the daughters, aged one and three at the time, any contact whatsoever with their mother. As the girls lived in a nearby village, she sometimes caught a glimpse of them at the weekly market or on their way to school, but no words were exchanged. The eldest daughter had already established her own household by the time she dared to visit. Being reunited with the youngest daughter shortly after the ex-husband's death, Inaq Adi could hardly believe that the toddler she remembered had grown into a pretty maiden (*dare solah*) about to marry.

Also objects become entangled in sexual politics. During the long years when the children were scattered in different places, the house was perhaps Inaq Adi's most constant companion and source of solace. The house did not compensate for the longing she often expressed for the children, yet her emotional investment in the dwelling was arguably nurtured by the pain of being severed from vital parts of herself. In this period the house had, I suggest, become a surrogate companion, a substitute for the relations constituting her identity as a mature subject. For the Sasak, marriage and the ability to produce children are prerequisites for being considered complete social subjects, hence a person's integrity is compromised by the loss of these relations. When I refer to the house as a companion, it is precisely to underscore that the cultural emphasis on 'partnership' and 'pairing' is also reflected in how persons relate to things. In ritual contexts, gendered objects are frequently made to substitute for absent persons. At the level of individual lives, objects

are similarly mobilized to make up for what is missing. A house may thus be endowed with human qualities and make the person 'complete', a process that entails a yearning to bring 'male' and 'female' together.

My interest in how objects are imbricated in Sasak lives both follows and departs from Janet Hoskins' *Biographical Objects* (1998), an intriguing study from eastern Indonesia. Intending to study autobiographical narratives, Hoskins discovered that she could not elicit the life histories of persons separately from the histories of their valued domestic possessions. According to Hoskins, the Kodinese on the island of Sumba tend to organize stories about their lives around so-called 'biographical objects', possessions endowed with the personal characteristics of their owners. By showing how objects are re-imagined in terms of each person's subjective experiences, she offers a compelling analysis of how objects, as metaphors for the self, become pivots for introspection. Whereas Hoskins primarily treats objects as vehicles of reflection and narrative, my inclination is to explore the materiality of the things that enter into the formation of subjects, not least because they resist human desires. Combining a focus on meaning with the pragmatic 'work' of objects, this article is concerned with the kinds of action made possible by material artefacts which motivate inferences and responses.

In *Art and Agency*, Gell (1998:18–19) proposed that 'social agency can be exercised relative to "things" and social agency can be exercised by "things" (and also animals).' As an example, Gell tells us that the soldier's weapons are *parts* of him which make him what he is. In short, the 'soldier' is a totality composed of the person and his weapon. In this perspective agency is distributed, inhering in the relations between the human and non-human entities which constitute a field of action. One implication of this approach is that objects, by expanding possibilities for action, bring subjects into existence (Küchler 2002:10). Gell's ideas can easily be applied to Sasak houses that may act, and be treated, as extensions of their owners. We have seen how the decay of the house spilled over into the owner's sense of self, provoking a crisis. But the strongest evidence for how it was part of the owner's self comes from the effort to rescue the dilapidated house. Resolving to assert greater control over herself and the direction of her future, this Sasak woman turned to the house – her main vehicle for acting upon the world. The argument is simple: Repairing and enlarging the house was a work of healing, a project undertaken to construct a life with direction and coherence.

Sacrifices for the House

Having decided that a complete overhaul was needed, Inaq Adi travelled by horse-cart to a nearby village to consult a colleague reputed to be good at identifying auspicious days for initiating major works. Before leaving, she prepared an 'offering basket' (*andang andang*) with rice, the ingredients for betel chewing, cigarettes, cotton and coins. A prerequisite for requesting assistance from persons with specialized knowledge, the basket serves as payment but its contents may also be used for divination purposes. This expert simply relied on his intuition for identifying auspicious, literally 'beautiful days' (*jelo solah*). His instructions were precise and they were dutifully followed: The old roof was dismantled on Sunday afternoon while the new house posts were 'planted' (*tanjak satang*) seven days later at seven a.m. Water to drive out spirits from the ground was liberally sprinkled where the foundation was to be located. Owing to the virulent spirits, he advised that the foundation be extended southwards. Recalling the consultation, Inaq Adi noted, 'Raden Tuan was confident that the spirits (*jin*) harmed the house. You know, they hang around the pond behind the toilet.'

These measures conformed to standard Sasak methods for ensuring that houses are properly 'planted'. Botanical idioms are pervasive in connection with house-building on Lombok, where houses are 'rooted' by having the posts put down the way the tree grew, with the 'base' (*akah*) in the ground and the 'tip' (*poto'n*) pointing up. Far from simply being a matter of sturdiness, distinctions between 'trunk' and 'tip' are integral to notions of order (Fox 1993; Ellen 1986). Techniques for identifying good days are varied and people draw on different sources, including the Sasak or Balinese calendars, the Qu'ran, and insight acquired through meditation and dreams. Whatever the technique, the goal is to ensure that the construction proceeds smoothly. That one week should lapse after the roof was torn down and before starting the work was clearly intended to distance the new house from the problems with the old one. The advice to move the foundation was informed by the same logic of separation, articulated in a spatial mode. Together these measures would enhance the integrity of the refurbished house.

As the development of the house hinges on it being properly emplaced, I will sketch out how the first phase of the work proceeds and identify the main concerns at this stage. Once an auspicious day has been identified, a carpenter (*tukang bale*) selects a site and puts down the main pillar. Known as the 'teacher' (*guru*) as its location determines the placement of the other pillars, it is located in the south-east corner, 'facing south' (*andang lau*).³

This direction evokes the Pujut area in southern Lombok to which the majority of the population in the district of Jonggat trace their origin. For the descendants of migrants who moved to the central plain in search of fertile land, orienting the house 'southwards' reaffirms a connection to their ancestral place of origin. Once the site has been identified, water (*aiq*) that has been rendered potent by a spell is poured into the corners and along the perimeter of the site. Acting as an invisible fence, the water prevents negative influences from entering. A chicken is sacrificed (*sembele*) and the carpenter makes sure that blood drips into the hole prepared for the main pillar, making it 'strong' (*kuat*). Some carpenters describe this sacrifice as compensation to resident spirits, 'owners of the land' (*épen paer*), who may be angry at having their dwellings disturbed. The pillars are placed on top of flat stones, anchoring the house firmly in place.

After the site has been demarcated, an odd number of days lapses before work continues. The minimum period is three days but it is not uncommon to wait for seven or nine days. This interval allows the carpenter to find out whether there are spirits in the ground, if they permit the house to be constructed and, if necessary, to negotiate a deal. The carpenter gains a sense of whether the spirits are amenable to the project or not through dreams and premonitions. Allowing time to lapse also permits the *tukang* to register misgivings from those living nearby and to take appropriate measures. The act of marking the house plot converts a site into a place within a social field, and this might provoke hostile reactions. The waiting period is the first time when the viability of the endeavour is tested. It can be likened to a germination period when the 'budding' house is particularly vulnerable. If no problems are registered at this time the place is deemed 'suitable' to the house and work on it proceeds.

The next critical juncture occurs when the ridgepole (*sun*) is raised, a moment known as 'raising the wood' (*taek ramon*). Again a chicken is sacrificed and care is taken to ensure that the ridgepole, which is oriented along a 'south-north' (*lau'-daya*) axis, is drenched with blood. As this vital fluid seeps into the 'spine' (*tolang bungkak*), the house becomes strong and sturdy. The analogy between the ridge and the spine offers a clue to why sacrifice is performed at this time: the ridge that holds the rafters together is as basic to the house as the spine to the body. Once the roof is in place, the structure begins to resemble a house but it is not yet opened up as a residence. This bears out a frequently made point in ethnographies from Southeast Asia and Madagascar, namely that house-building is a drawn-out

process (Bloch 1995; Carsten 1997). The time it takes to complete a Sasak house varies considerably: While it only takes a week to raise a one-room house (*bale bedek*) from strips of bamboo, it may take years to complete a multi-roomed, plastered brick-house (*bale permanén*). Irrespective of the style, the critical stages to be negotiated are identical. By making sure that the construction unfolds in an ordered manner chances are that the house and its inhabitants 'fit' well together.

To aid the construction Inaq Adi made some additional, unconventional 'sacrifices'. Invoking the Islamic notion of sacrifice (*kurban*), she did not refer to the blood sacrifice discussed above. What she had in mind was the deliberate act of denying herself pleasure and comfort throughout the building period. For example, she made a point of sleeping outdoors. During the first four months, a rickety pavilion in the yard served as a bed. Once the front-porch was completed, she moved to this intermediary zone. Family and neighbours advised against this habit, finding it both unbecoming and dangerous for a respectable woman to sleep outside, exposing herself to all kinds of nocturnal creatures, be they humans or spirits, but to no avail. Having been adept at martial arts (*silat*) in her youth and having spent many nights meditating next to the tombs of Muslim saints, Inaq Adi was confident that, if necessary, she could deal with men as well as spirits. By sleeping outdoors, she assumed the quintessentially male task of guarding (*jaga*) the house against intruders. The habit embarrassed her son Adi, an athletic sports-teacher whose masculinity was compromised by this striking reversal of gender roles. The decision to expose herself to the elements, while her son comfortably slept indoors, was not, however, undertaken lightly.

To grasp the rationale for this practice it must be remembered that Sasak houses are not fit to be inhabited unless they have been inaugurated. Two activities must be avoided before this time: cooking (*mansak*) and sleeping (*tedam*) – acts that are key to Sasak ideas of what forming a house entails. When a newly married couple builds a home, the house-opening terminates a period of co-residence with the groom's parents, marking the formation of a new social unit. Such was not the case here, hence there was no problem with using the kitchen. If anything, it was more frequently used than it had been for years because Adi had moved in just a few months earlier, having found temporary work at the local school. As if making up for the years when others had fed the boy, the mother used every opportunity to 'spoil' him with good food. The injunction against 'sleeping' in the house prior to its inauguration is a euphemistic reference to sex as a dimension of marital

life. For a single woman to reinvest this prohibition with ascetic content was, by all accounts, an original move. In addition, she recited night-time prayers and fasted on Mondays or Thursdays, the preferred days for optional Muslim fasting.

Though unusual, the habit of sleeping outdoors is part of an 'economy of sacrifice' (Brenner 1998) that is deeply ingrained in Sasak discourse and practice. Depriving oneself of food and sleep are the most common ascetic practices in which Sasak women and men engage. The logic of such practices is that by enduring the rigors of self-denial one will reap rewards at some later time. Speaking of the Javanese sacrificial economy, Suzanne Brenner (1998:180–82) points out that it is based on a kind of law of conservation which hinges on the assumption that value, whether spiritual or economic, is produced by controlling desire. A focus on self-denial as a means of gaining self-control and accumulating value also underpins Sasak ascetic practices. These practices are often carried out as an instrumental activity aimed at achieving tangible goals. That the spiritual and material aspects of such practices virtually are inseparable is also evident from Inaq Adi's rebuilding project. The ascetic and religious work performed during cool nights complemented the relentless effort to obtain loans and credit which consumed many hot days. Indeed, this taxing regime was intensified when the lack of money was most acute.

Compatibility and Conspicuous Construction

More than once I wondered why this single Sasak woman went to all the trouble and expense of rebuilding and expanding the house, and it is time to probe the motives informing her venture. Having argued that 'compatibility' is a salient starting point for analysing the nature of Sasak person-house relationships, I will now show how this emotional trope bears on status concerns. As a 'moral affect' (Rosaldo 1983), 'compatibility' positions the subject within local moral worlds. These worlds are far from stable, but negotiated and adapted in the context of rapid social and economic change. In this context, I suggest that 'compatibility' has become a means for engaging and incorporating new, Indonesian ideals linking consumption to modernity. The hectic construction activity on Lombok and the desire to have a 'modern' house of which Inaq Adi's project is a telling example, suggests that these houses increasingly are becoming markers of moral virtue and economic success.

The issue of 'fit' came up as soon as Inaq Adi's bold vision for the house became known. Extensive repair was needed, but the decision to add several

rooms was hardly motivated by lack of space. Made from brick and plaster, it fell into the category 'permanent' or 'modern' house. Besides a porch, a kitchen and a living room at the 'front' (*julu'n bale*), five bedrooms were located at the 'back' (*muri'n bale*). Added a decade earlier to be rented out to junior high-school students, these rooms had been empty for years. Although Adi had recently moved in, nobody expected him to stay because sons are expected to settle on land provided by their father, ideally within the same compound. For long periods, Inaq Adi had been the sole occupant of the musty, dimly-lit house. Most likely, she would remain alone once her handsome son, who was constantly teased for being an 'old spinster' (*kotoq*) since he was unmarried at the age of thirty, got married. Several times neighbours noted that they avoided passing through the yard because the house was 'lonely' and 'quiet' (*sepi*). This eerie, sombre atmosphere arose, one man explained, because 'the house was empty, lacking content' (*bale'n eto kosong, edaq isi'n*). Ideally, houses are filled with sounds and movements, having a lively 'warm' (*angat*) ambience. This house was silent, and the discrepancy between its size and the number of residents created a 'cold' (*dingin*) and forbidding atmosphere. The expansion thus caused bewilderment, making it a topic of gossip.

As the extension was not undertaken to accommodate additional household members, most neighbours initially judged the project to be born out of a desire to impress. A comment by a nephew illustrates that the renovation was deemed to be excessive: 'This project is way too ambitious. Look, they're getting glazed tiles shipped from Surabaya. Ordinary tiles will not do!' Voiced at a time when work had been stalled for weeks due to lack of funds, this was a stinging judgement on the moral integrity of those who launched a project exceeding their means. In this milieu, the Indonesian word *ambisi* has largely pejorative connotations of self-aggrandizement. But as the house slowly took shape the harsh criticism of extravagant spending seemed to soften. Inaq Adi's perseverance in obtaining money to pay for the materials, which meant pawning her gold jewellery, was praised. Hiring a novice carpenter and nephew for the job was lauded as a sensible cost-saving strategy. Seeing her carry heavy loads, I overheard some farmers noting approvingly that this 'civil servant' (*pegawai*), unlike others of similar status, was 'not afraid to get her hands dirty'. Had she engaged in conspicuous consumption of leisure and consumer articles Inaq Adi would have been stigmatized as irresponsible, but this project was one of 'conspicuous construction'.

The notion of 'conspicuous construction' that I take from Philip Thomas (1998) signals my understanding that the decision to expand the house was

motivated by a concern with status. Several factors make 'modern' houses suitable for making claims to status through construction. A key feature of these dwellings is that they are built from non-local materials, like glass and tiles. As the materials for these dwellings are acquired through money and via the market, they can be considered consumer goods (Wilk 1989; Thomas 1998). To a greater extent than other types, 'modern' houses index the owner's accumulated wealth. Whereas one-room houses built from bamboo (*bale bedek*) and brick-houses (*bale bate*) are raised through 'mutual help' (*saling tolong*), 'modern' houses are built by a carpenter with salaried assistants. Building in this style removes a household from the cooperative work exchanges among neighbours and relatives. Opting for this style, people signal adherence to the value of independence associated with modernity. Under the New Order regime (1966–98), with its goals of capitalist development and modernization, Indonesians were bombarded with ideas of 'progress' and 'development' (Blackwood 1999; Lindquist 2004). Images of 'modern' Indonesian nuclear families enjoying a consumer-oriented lifestyle abound in print and electronic media. In this discourse, pleasure and status are associated with economic success and the possession of consumer goods. These developments are prompting Sasak families to invest great resources to raise 'modern' houses.

In the light of these developments it is not surprising that 'compatibility' extends to status. At the beginning of the article, we saw that the house fell apart as a result of 'incompatibility' but what would it take for this teacher to become compatible with the house? I submit that achieving compatibility minimally would require that it 'matched' her status as a civil servant. To put it bluntly, a dilapidated house was not 'befitting' for a state employee like herself. Remarking on the humble uniform houses in the east Lombok village of Sapit in the 1960s, Krulfeld linked this uniformity to a 'negative evaluation on conspicuous consumption except for ceremonials' (1974:103). This was probably accurate at the time, but it should be remembered that Sasak house-designs are varied, reflecting differences in rank and wealth. Such is certainly the case in Central Lombok where the population is divided into two broad categories: nobles (*raden*) and commoners (*jajar karang*). Interestingly, the term *jajar karang* is said to derive from the layout of compounds (*karang*) where houses stand closely together, forming two parallel rows (*jajar*). Similar penchants for making homologies among houses, compounds and categorizations of rank are found in many Indonesian societies (Keane 1995; Waterson 1995).

The fact that distinctions of hereditary status have long been objectified in

domestic architecture is relevant for appreciating the form much of the current construction activity takes. Most Sasak houses are rectangular structures and the ridgepole, or 'spine', divides the roof in two. Discussing construction sacrifice, I noted that this anthropomorphic imagery indicates that the ridge is as integral to a house as the spine is to the human body. This analogy only goes so far: Houses with a pyramid-shaped roof 'facing' in all directions are held to be especially attractive. This roof is associated with power, being reminiscent of sacred buildings, notably old mosques. The right to build a pyramid-shaped roof used to be one of the sumptuary privileges that nobles in Central Lombok claimed to distinguish themselves from commoners. With its four-sided roof covered with shiny tiles, Inaq Adi's refurbished house was 'modern' but it also had the aura of a noble residence. This was not lost on local gentry members who complained that it was 'improper' for a commoner to emulate their style, thus displaying ignorance of 'tradition' (*adat*). Feeling insulted, Inaq Adi had apparently replied that they were hopelessly 'feudal' before delivering a lecture on Islamic egalitarianism and human rights (B.I. *hak asasi manusia*).

Although nobles in this part of Lombok prefer pyramid-shaped roofs, their ability to defend their 'sumptuary exclusivity' (Appadurai 1986) has been eroded. Structural changes in the political economy of the island, including the 1935 Dutch law turning land into commodity, has weakened the economic ties binding commoners to noble patrons (McVey 1995). With the loss of sumptuary exclusivity based on rank, the ability to manifest status through construction has opened up to anyone possessing money. By the mid-1990s, the hefty construction activity was gaining positive connotations of concentrating wealth, being seen as a morally responsible long-term investment (Bloch & Parry 1989). The fact that these houses are called 'permanent' underscores that durability is one of their attractive features. Even in impoverished communities, it is rapidly taken for granted that anyone possessing the necessary funds will build a 'modern' house rather than opting for cheaper alternatives which are now judged to be 'less practical'. The greater presence of houses made from processed, non-local materials alter the texture of rural Sasak communities. But as I have shown, globally uniform products tend to be 're-contextualized' (Thomas 1991) in culturally resonant ways.

Resting on a foundation of cement, 'permanent' houses are prestige objects manifesting their owners' 'modern' outlook and economic success. But to explain Inaq Adi's or similar projects simply in terms of the sociology of status competition is, in my view, overly reductive. For one thing, it ignores

the personal relationships between persons and possessions, and the fact that houses, over the course of their 'biographies', become saturated with conventional and subjective meanings (Hoskins 1998; Kopytoff 1986). It also overlooks the fact that houses, like other material entities, not only facilitate reflexivity but embody distinct possibilities for action. Yet I will argue that this construction project was fuelled by an element of competition. From a series of conversations, I gathered that a major impetus for expanding the house was to entice her son to remain with her when he eventually married. For a son to stay with the mother would, however, go against the pervasive expectation that sons should settle virilocally. The odds were not good because Adi's grandfather and his deceased father had built a house for the young man. Consequently, the house had to be all the more impressive – it was a matter of outdoing the ex-affines through construction.

In the effort to entice her son to abandon his father's kin, the house was the most powerful vehicle Inaq Adi possessed. In this self-interested struggle pivoting around the son's loyalty and his post-marital place of residence, the house served as a potent 'weapon', it was also the prize that might attract the son to stay. This construction project was less about making general claims to status than about keeping a vital part of herself around. Besides company, having a man around would allow Inaq Adi to participate more fully in social and ritual affairs which require input from the 'male' and 'female' of the house. During a stint of fieldwork in July 2001, I was awakened by neighbours going door-to-door announcing that Adi had eloped and brought the bride to his mother's place. By the time I arrived, the party to welcome the couple (*mangan merangkat*) was in full swing, the cooking fires casting a warm glow over the large crowd gathered to celebrate the good news.

Conclusion

Recent studies from Southeast Asia have revealed that 'the process of kinship and the process of the house are so firmly intertwined as to be one process' (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995:40). Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the 'biographical' significance of houses, and to the affective ties established between specific persons and houses. This is striking given the frequent claims that houses are endowed with animate qualities. As mentioned earlier, 'the idea of the house as a living thing', Waterson notes, is 'more than just a metaphor for many Southeast Asian peoples' (2003:35). Her claim is based on a comparative study of architecture combined with an inquiry into notions of 'life force' or 'vitality' in contemporary ethnographies

and early 20th century sources grappling with the issue of animism. Mindful of the problem of reducing varied and historically complex notions to a few principles, Waterson nevertheless maintains that the idea of an impersonal life force, present throughout the cosmos and concentrated to different degrees in persons and things, is 'the key to an understanding of the powerful interdependence of the respective vitalities of people and their houses' (2003:37-38).

This article has shown that Sasak houses are dynamically part of people's lives, yet I hesitate to attribute this to an idea of 'life force', a notion Sasak speakers rarely, if ever, use in this context. The concern with person-house 'compatibility' is not the result of the imputation of life to inert objects, or the infusion of spirit into matter, but evidence of an inherently relational ontology. In such a world, people are continually affected by their reciprocal engagement with the various beings, more or less person-like or thing-like, with which they come into contact. Stressing the materiality of the house, I have argued that the interdependence of people and houses in large part derives from their role in mediating action and facilitating self-knowledge. Such insight comes about not least because material objects stand apart, resisting human desires. The broader implication of this analysis is that the house should be placed in a 'relational' position with regard to human subjects, a finding that resonates with the thrust of the new wave of material culture studies that promotes an understanding of sociality that includes materiality (Gell 1998; Miller 1987; Myers 2001; Küchler 2002, Thomas 1991).

What emerges from this extended case is that Inaq Adi's life history and that of the house were so intertwined as to be virtually inseparable. This rebuilding project illustrates how objects mediate social relations, entering directly into people's ability to act upon the world. This woman's agency was inextricably wedded to the house, which served as a node in a network linking people and things. The project is also an example of one woman's attempt to alter the expected course of events by acting through the house. Although it is assumed that the house should be passed on to a son, this project did in several respects challenge entrenched cultural expectations. By rehabilitating the house, Inaq Adi asserted control over the direction of her life-course and that of her son, thereby attempting to construct a life with a sense of unity. The 'conspicuous construction' project on which Inaq Adi had embarked was informed by assumptions about the house as a salient cultural category. It was also born out of subjective experiences in her past which made the prospect of being left alone in a 'quiet' house almost unbearable. For a while the house was lively, but during my last visit in September 2006 Inaq Adi again seemed

depressed. Her son and new daughter-in-law had moved out, denying her any contact whatsoever with their 3-year-old grandson. Once again, I was told, strange spiritual figures had begun to haunt the old house.

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Notes

1. This article is based on 17 months of fieldwork conducted between 1993 and 2006 in Jonggat, Central Lombok. Terms in brackets are Sasak terms except where I indicate that Indonesian (B.I.) is used.
2. For a discussion of ritual meals (*roah*), see Telle 2000.
3. *Lau* is often translated into the Indonesian word for 'south' but it is originally a relative orientation term connoting 'seaward', see Fox 1997.

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