

Symbolic Organization of Space and Social Identity in Alor

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Abstract. – In recent years an increasing interest has been shown in a particular facet of the traditional cultures of South-east Asia: the symbolic organization of space. The emic category of "house" (Lévi-Strauss 1979; 1984; Fox 1980) has emerged as a symbolic structure, a microcosm which reproduces the image of natural and social order. – Through an analysis of the way the people of Alor (Eastern Indonesia) organize and conceive social space inside the village, this paper argues that: (1) the symbolic organization of the space is the main means used by natives to interpret their own social organization and to define social identity; (2) the symbolism of space is not confined to the house but extends to the whole village: neighbourhoods, ritual centers, mounds are different parts of a conceptual network, an integrated system of meanings. [*South-east Asia, symbol, space, house, social identity*]

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1. Methodological Introduction

Alor island is located north of Timor, in that area of the Indonesian Archipelago which provided Van Wouden with the ethnographic material analyzed comparatively according to a theoretical framework elaborated by J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong and known as "ethnologisch studieveld."

Recently, this theory has been critically reconsidered (Fox 1980; P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1984) and this has opened the way to a new assessment of the comparative study of the Insular South-East cultures related to an "emic" perspective, which is based on the indigenous cultural categories rather than on an *a priori* pattern ("ethnologisch studieveld," "structural core"). Crucial, among these cultural categories, is the concept of "house," to be understood as a symbolic structure, a microcosm which reproduces the image of both the natural order and the social relations system.

During the same years Lévi-Strauss (1979; 1984) came to conclusions which, to a certain extent, are similar; he assumed that the constituent components of the Archipelago societies are not to be defined as families, lineages, or clans; in order to grasp their intrinsic nature, it is necessary to resort to the category of "house." Even if Lévi-Strauss' thesis, in particular his notion of "house as a fetish" (1984), does not coincide with P. E. de Josselin de Jong's and Fox's, one can find a meaningful and common awareness, supported by recent research on the field, of the importance of the house symbolism as a key to the understanding of the Indonesian Archipelago societies.

But field research in the South-East area makes it clear that the symbolic organization of space is not limited to the house, but rather concerns the entire village. This leads us to believe that, in order to understand the way the traditional Archipelago societies conceive themselves and the world, it is necessary to take into examination not only the metaphors confined to the house, but also the symbolic relationship between the habitation space and the common spaces, as well as the way the relationship between the village and the surrounding space is imagined. The analysis of the symbolic organization of space within the Alor Kecil community should be read in the light of this approach, already adopted in the Nias society study (Scarduelli 1986, 1989).

The following pages are dedicated to the analysis of the cognitive maps used by the inhabitants of this village, situated on the extreme western tip of Alor Island (Eastern Indonesia), to interpret their own social organization and to establish the frame of reference used for interactions within the community.

The most relevant element of the cognitive maps is the fact that their inner structure is devised according to a symbolic pattern related to the village configuration; therefore, to study how the public areas are conceived by the indigenous people is the best way of reconstructing the main