Adapted revivals
Recent transformations in
Indonesian architectural traditions

Introduction

Since the growth of organized tourism in Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s, the various towering and lavishly decorated pile dwellings in many rural areas of the island of Sumatra have proved an attraction for travellers. Often, however, their admiration was mixed with doubts about the future of the vernacular houses. They were considered unsanitary and impractical. There were isolated attempts to adapt them to modern standards, but the general opinion was that, apart from preserving a few houses for the purposes of historical documentation, the fate of the traditional architecture was sealed.

Developments after the achievement of independence at first seemed to confirm these expectations. Under President Sukarno, emphasis was on the building of national unity and there was little official appreciation for regional manifestations of the ancient, ‘feudal’ cultural traditions. Buildings, just as the national culture in general, had to be modern according to global standards. Things began to change slightly with the New Order of President Suharto, when the ethnic diversity of Indonesia came to be seen in a less negative light, albeit only under the folklorizing condition that ethnic manifestations remained ‘domesticated’ and did not become part of the political discourse (see Schefold 1998). Where this served propagandistic or tourist aims,

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2 For an example of such an attempt concerning the Karo Batak see Anonymous 1919:615, describing a project designed ‘to synchronize Batak artistic flair and Batak architectural style with Western demands for comfort and hygienics’ (‘hoe Batakschen kunstzin en Batakschen bouwstijl in overeenstemming te brengen met westersche eischen van comfort en hygiëne’).
spectacular characteristics of regional building traditions were sometimes encouraged; however, thus far the government has never taken effective steps to conserve the genuine heritage. The upkeep of vernacular pile dwellings is very expensive and it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain the necessary timber. In some regions, such as among the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, there is some private effort to maintain the old multifamily houses; in others, like among their Karo Batak neighbours further to the north, more and more traditional dwellings are falling into decay.

At the same time, however, another phenomenon can be observed. Today, in most rural areas of Sumatra simple and anonymous functional dwellings on low posts are built, of the sort that can be seen all over Indonesia. But alongside these houses, and sometimes even in combination with them, there is increasing evidence of an opposite tendency. Typical features of the local architectural heritage are being revived; they are adapted to new materials and methods and are integrated into modern buildings so as to provide them with an unmistakably local touch.

It is tempting to associate such applications of adapted revivals with the vogue word ‘ethnicity’. In this line, one could interpret them both as an expression towards the external world of common pride in the ancestral cultural traditions, and as a manifestation of the urge to secure familiar backing in interaction with other groups (compare Eriksen 1993, and, in reference to Indonesian houses, Dawson and Gillow 1994:17-18). The special emphasis on architecture could then be attributed to the prominent role houses have always played among the peoples under discussion. This appears in the singular variety of grand designs in the tribal traditions that are rooted in the Neolithic and Bronze Age heritage of Southeast Asia (compare Schefold 2003). Moreover the house is often also focal in a social sense. This phenomenon has even led to the general designation of the pertinent groups as ‘house societies’ (see Waterson 1990:144).

This is not the place to enter into the ongoing discussion on the concept of ‘house societies’. I agree with Signe Howell (1995) that the term should not be used in too broad a sense. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1982) coined it originally to classify ‘undifferentiated’ forms of social organization, such as cognatic societies, in which the ‘opportunistic’ choice to attach oneself to a particular house with its valued material and immaterial property rather than the ambiguous social rules serves as a basis for the constitution of groups. In a

3 Reid’s (1988:62) generalizing statement that ‘the peoples of monsoon Asia devoted very little of their time and resources to their housing’ seems to me to make sense only referring to field dwellings but certainly not to the pan-Southeast Asian longhouses.

4 See the two conference volumes devoted to the concept (Macdonald 1987 and Carsten and High-Jones 1995) and regarding Indonesia especially Waterson 1990 and Fox 1993.