Kinship and Food in South East Asia

Edited by

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NIAS PRESS

NIAS Studies in Asian Topics No. 38

First published in 2007 by NIAS Press
NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
Leifsgade 33, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark
Tel: +45 3532 9501 • Fax: +45 3532 9549
E-mail: books@nias.ku.dk • Online: www.niaspress.dk

Typesetting and layout by Donald B. Wagner
Printed and bound in •••••••

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kinship and food in South East Asia. - (NIAS studies in Asian topics ; 38)
1.Food habits - South East Asia 2.Kinship - South East Asia 3.Agriculture - Social aspects - South East Asia
I.Janowski, Monica II.Kerlogue, Fiona
394.1'2'0959

ISBN-10: 8791114934

Cover photograph: Prayer before rice meal at the hearth headed by Balang Pelewan and Sinah Balang Pelewan, Pa' Dalih, Kelabit Highlands, February 2005.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Feeding the right food: the flow of life and the construction of kinship in Southeast Asia

Monica Janowski

The chapters in this volume derive from a panel[1] at the second conference of the European Association of South-East Asian Studies, which was held in Hamburg between 3 and 6 September 1998. The intention of that panel, and of this volume, was firstly to highlight the connections between kinship and food in the region, an area of research which would arguably repay more attention from scholars than it has received so far; and secondly to look at certain aspects of this, in particular the relationship between generations set up through feeding.

There has recently been a resurgence of interest in kinship (Carsten 2000; Carsten 2004; Collier & Yanagisako 1987a; Howell & Melluus 1993; McKinnon & Franklin 2001; Peletz 1995; Strathern 1995), and it seems opportune to look at the relationship between food and the structuring of kinship, particularly in the context of the discussion of the relevance of the transmission of substance as a basis for creating kinship (Busby 1997; Carsten 1995; Carsten 2004; Fajans 1988; Gibson 1985; Thomas 1999; Weiner 1982). It has been recognized for some time that food is often used in Southeast Asia (as elsewhere) to construct boundaries between social groups (Manderson 1986a), but the implications of the feeding relationship which is inherent in many situations in which food is consumed have only recently begun to be explored (Carsten 1995; Carsten 1997).

The term 'kinship' implies some kind of basis in sexual reproduction. However, such a basis is difficult to prove for all ties of relatedness and for all cultures. Largely because of this problem the project of achieving any common understanding of 'kinship' was more or less abandoned during the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, as early as 1977 Marshall argued that we should start from an examination of all the kinds of connections which exist between people in different societies and then examine what unifies or differentiates different kinds of connection (Marshall

1977), and Carsten has recently reiterated much the same point, suggesting using the term 'relatedness' to allow a comparison between different ways of setting up relations between people, on the assumption that the existence of ties between people was, at least, a cross-cultural given (Carsten 2000).

Although it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the problems associated with using the term 'kinship' itself will remain if we try to compare all human cultures, it seems valid to use the term in a more restricted sense, in looking at indigenous ideas of relatedness which have a link of some sort to notions of sexual reproduction, within a given geographical/cultural area. On this basis, I propose to use the term to refer to ties of 'relatedness' between people within Southeast Asian societies which are associated with the production of successive generations of people. However, it is to be noted that although indigenous notions of reproduction and procreation in this area do have important links to sexual reproduction, a) they are not purely biological/sexual and b) reproduction is not perceived as an event but as a process (Carsten 1997; Cedercreutz 1999; Loizos & Heady 1999b; Strathern 1988).

There are ten chapters in this volume. Seven of them deal with Austronesian-language-speaking groups of people in Indonesia and Malaysia, one deals with a group in Northeast Thailand, one with the majority population of Vietnam (the Kinh) and one with the Inanwatan of Papua. The question of deciding on valid bases for comparing societies is a question too large to be tackled here. Broadly, in anthropological writings, comparison is usually either on the basis of common origins (cultural or linguistic or both) – which may be rooted in borrowing – or on the basis of the implied search for commonalties between all human societies. I am relying on the former basis here, although I do not pretend to be trying to go very far in legitimating this; it is certainly possible to raise queries about the different kinds of commonalties between different societies dealt with here. The seven Austronesian-speaking societies can arguably be compared and contrasted on the basis of fundamental cultural similarities between Austronesian societies, expressed in closely related languages, as has been the project of the Comparative Austronesian Project under the direction of James Fox at the Australian National University (although the legitimacy of explaining similarities in social structure on the basis of common linguistic origin can be raised – e.g. see Frake 1996). Inclusion of the three groups which are not Austronesian-speaking, and their comparison with Austronesian-speaking groups, is on the basis of all the societies concerned sharing certain key cosmological attitudes[2]. Mainland Southeast Asian groups in Thailand and Vietnam have many features in common with most Austronesian groups, including the pivotal role of rice and a number of cosmological features,

which are expressed, for example, in house design (Izikowitz & Sorensen 1982). Finally, the Inanwatan of Papua are linguistically Papuan but on a cultural level demonstrate a mixture of Eastern Indonesian and Papuan elements (van Oosterhout, this volume).

Kinship in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian societies may be divided into those which are based on membership of lineages and those which are not; the latter have generally been described as cognatic. Probably partly because there seems to be more to grasp hold of, scholars (particularly scholars from Holland, the colonial power in Indonesia) have shown relatively more interest in the lineal societies of the area, which are concentrated in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago. Van Wouden's thesis, developed in the 1930s (van Wouden 1968 [1935]), suggested that kinship in Eastern Indonesia is founded in a conceptual complementarity between groups which are conceived of as male and female and which relate to each other as wife givers and wife takers. This thesis has been broadly supported by research done since then, although it is now recognized that the exogamous groups concerned can be of fundamentally different types – they may be households, lineages, clans or territorial units – and the functions and significance of alliance vary from one society to another. The similarities between different societies are often apparent more at a mythical and cosmological level than at the level of social structure (Lewis 1988).

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that attention began to be devoted to cognatic kinship systems such as those in the parts of Southeast Asia in which there is no clear membership of groups with a corporate existence. Freeman's concept of the 'kindred' (Freeman 1961) stimulated a good deal of discussion, and seemed to present the possibility of an understanding of kinship founded in the existence of corporate groups based on the kindred (although Freeman himself said, in fact, that the kindred among the Iban was a category of people rather than a corporate group). Although kinship is clearly very important as a basis for social organization in many non-lineal societies in Southeast Asia, some scholars have concluded that kinship as an organizing principle of society should be seen as being restricted to non-hierarchical non-lineal societies (King 1991; Rousseau 1978).

In the 1980s and 1990s, following Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Lévi-Strauss 1983a; Lévi-Strauss 1983b; Lévi-Strauss 1987), a more focused interest has developed among scholars of the area in the notion of 'house'-based societies (**rumaq* in Proto-Austronesian [Blust 1980:11]) as a way of understanding kinship in the area – both in areas which have lineage-based kin systems and in those which

do not. This provides the stimulating possibility of understanding all of these clearly related societies within the same frame of reference. A number of edited collections look at the centrality of the house as concrete entity and as symbol in understanding kinship in the area (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995a; Fox 1993; Izikowitz & Sorensen 1982; Sparkes & Howell 2003). It seems clear that the notion of the house is central to societies throughout the area, and provides a means of understanding the way in which groups conceive of ties between people – both ties among the living and ties between the living and their ancestors.

Errington, in the late 1980s, introduced the idea that societies in insular Southeast Asia are divided into two types, with different types of kin organization: 'centrist' and 'exchange' societies, with the epitome of the former being the former Indic States and the latter including most societies in Eastern Indonesia (Errington 1987; Errington 1989). Fox has criticized this division, implying that one cannot make a wholesale differentiation between two radically different types of society and that, at least in Eastern Indonesia, it is not always easy to place a given group in one category or the other (Fox 1991). It does seem valid to suggest, as Errington has, that, through their emphasis on separation between wife givers and wife takers and the need to set up systematic exchange between them, the lineal societies of Eastern Indonesia place greater stress on division between the male and female halves of a cosmological whole. However, this may well be more a matter of degree than of qualitative differences in indigenous cosmology. It seems clear that there are clear cosmological continuities within the whole area, and particularly that there is a widespread emphasis on the potency of the cosmological unity which male + female represents.

Kinship and Food

The link between food and kinship ties, particularly at household level, is more or less an implied or assumed given cross-culturally within all academic disciplines (despite the difficulties of defining kinship); those who are close kin, and especially those who live together, eat from a common pot almost by definition (although they do not always sit and eat together). However, there has been limited exploration of the ways in which food is used to construct kin ties, and of how kinship can be manipulated through the ways in which food is produced and consumed (Fajans 1988; Fajans 1993; de Jong this volume).

There are two major contexts in which food is eaten together by groups of people: on an everyday basis; and at less frequent and often more lavish and festive occasions. Both are important in constructing ties between those who share food.

Although everyday actions are sometimes seen by some scholars as less significant than less regular, more spectacular events, they are in fact of considerable interest to the researcher, particularly where there are clear rules (spoken or unspoken) about how they should be performed, since they express what is conceived of as the proper structure of human life, despite the lack of explicit verbal emphasis (Bloch 1991; Bourdieu 1977). The consumption of everyday food is one of the most important everyday arenas in which rigid rules about how things should be done are often apparent, although they are often unspoken or only partially explicit.

All agricultural societies have a focal eating event focused on certain key cultivated starch foods, which in English we describe as the meal, which is repeated every day and often two or three times a day, and which is a key aspect of ties of relatedness, being shared (although not necessarily contemporaneously) by all those who belong to the minimal unit conceived of as being related, often described as the household[3]. The starch element of the meal, which Mintz has referred to as the 'core' (Mintz 1994) and which is the *sine qua non* of the eating event, may be made of one raw food or a combination of them. Its preparation is often elaborate and may involve a perceived transformation of its substance from one state to another which is not only physical but also to some degree spiritual. The finished product is usually described by a different term than that used for the raw food: bread in Europe (Camporesi 1993), *fufu* in West Africa (made of a variety of roots and plantain), *nasi* (Malay) or other equivalent terms in Austronesian languages. The other categories of foods which make up the meal have been described by Mintz as 'fringe' and 'legume' (Mintz 1994); Audrey Richards described only one category besides the staple starch food, which she termed 'relish' (Richards 1939). Mintz considers his 'fringe' to be the same as Richards' 'relish'. The point of fringe/relish is to enable the eater to consume as much of the 'core' starch as possible.

The meal, with its constituent parts, is not only eaten within the household on a daily basis. It may also be prepared and eaten a) for festive events which are shared by wider groups of people and b) to be shared with the dead. Both contexts generate and underline ties of relatedness.

Food in Southeast Asia: The Importance of Rice

Most societies in Southeast Asia are agricultural, although what are generally termed hunter-gatherer groups[4] rely on wild root crops and on sago as well as on some cultivation of rice, nowadays, under encouragement from governments.

Both among insular Austronesian groups and on the mainland of Southeast Asia, rice is, in most societies, the most important crop and food qualitatively if not quantitatively. This is true of most of the societies studied by the authors in this volume: the Central Sumatran village studied by Fiona Kerlogue, the Minangkabau village studied by Carol Davis, the village in East Java studied by Rens Heringa, the Lio of Flores studied by Willemijn de Jong, the Isan of Northeast Thailand studied by Stephen Sparkes, the Vietnamese studied by Nguyên Xuân Hiên and the Kelabit of Sarawak which I have studied. In many societies in insular and mainland Southeast Asia, Austronesian and non-Austronesian, the focal eating event or meal is described as 'eating rice' (*makan nasi* in Malay/Indonesian). Tai speakers use the word *khao* to mean either rice or meal, so that *kin khao* means both to eat rice and to have a meal. Although in many rice-growing societies only limited amounts of rice are grown and eaten and the 'core' of the meal is not always rice, it is, where it is grown, always regarded as the 'best' starch 'core'. It is eaten more frequently by those of higher status and at feasts and is eaten for preference at special meals held at life-cycle and status-generating events.

The presence of rice as a major crop in the majority of insular Southeast Asian societies is, from a practical perspective, something of a puzzle. Rice is native to the intermediate tropical latitudes, which includes mainland Southeast Asia except the Malay peninsula, but without modification it is not suitable for equatorial latitudes such as those in which the insular part of the region and the Malay peninsula is situated (Bellwood 1985), and varieties which will reach maturity in these latitudes would have needed to be developed over a long period of time. Especially without iron tools, cereals are difficult to grow in the tropical forest, since clearance of vegetation and regular fallowing is necessary for their cultivation, and they cannot easily be interplanted with existing vegetation; this continues to be a relevant consideration for many upland groups which grow rice in dry shifting cultivation in forest areas (Okushima 1999; Padoch 1983). Also, rice is a crop whose natural habitat is swampy areas, and growing it in dry conditions in forested areas would have required the development of varieties which would tolerate a lower level of moisture. It is possible that wet cultivation of rice in naturally swampy areas may be as old as shifting dry cultivation in Southeast Asia (Bellwood 1985) or even that it may have preceded shifting cultivation, using the kinds of shifting, extensive methods of wet cultivation used until recently in the Kelabit Highlands in Central Borneo (Harrisson 1960), which do not require metal tools. There is a suite of non-grain starch crops (roots and tree crops) which linguistic evidence points to being known to the early Austronesian inhabitants of the area (Blust 1976) and which are much easier to grow, being either native to

Southeast Asia or which grow well there. Rice has become the preferred crop and ideal staple starch for most groups despite the difficulty of growing rice in forested areas and in tropical latitudes.

Although rice may, at least in some areas of insular Southeast Asia, have been introduced as early as 2500 BC (Bellwood et al. 1992), it may have been a minor crop until recently in many if not most areas. Root crops (cassava, taro, sweet potatoes and yams) and grain crops other than rice (millet, Job's tears, sorghum, maize) are still widely cultivated by many groups, particularly those living in upland areas. In some areas root crops and other grains form a part, or even the whole, of the 'core' starch (Mintz 1994) eaten at meals, though often mixed with or substituted by rice if this is available. Millet is an important grain crop in some parts of Eastern Indonesia, and there are indications that it may once have been more widespread as a 'core' starch food. In Tanebar-Evav, for example, millet is still the 'core' starch (Barraud 1979), and it is the crop said to have been cultivated by the ancestors among the Lio in Flores (Howell 1991:228). The importance of rice fades as one moves southeast. In Banda Eli in the Kei Islands of Eastern Indonesia, the 'core' starch food eaten within the household is *embal* cakes, made of a type of cassava, although rice is eaten on important public occasions (Kaartinen, this volume). In New Guinea, sago and root crops are grown, rather than grains. Sago is the 'core' starch food in Inanwatan (van Oosterhout, this volume).

At least as regards shifting cultivation, it is difficult to explain the cultivation of cereals, including rice, by using a Boserupian explanation based on necessity (Boserup 1965). It is doubtful that rice uses land more effectively than root or tree crops; but even if it did, it is only recently that there have been stresses (logging, the development of plantations, limitations on the use of land by governments) which would push people to adopt the cultivation of a crop which is so hard to grow in the ecological context. It seems likely that there have been other reasons for the cultivation of rice, rooted in the social, symbolic and cosmological role which it has developed in the area. It can also be hypothesised that the very difficulty of growing rice in the region may have contributed to the decision to grow it; success in the rice-growing enterprise is an achievement, conferring both social and cosmological status[5]. I will return to a discussion of links between status and rice later.

Despite the centrality of rice in most of the societies discussed in this volume, and the importance of the rice meal, which is (where enough rice is grown to make this possible) eaten three times a day, there are other eating events at which other starch foods (tubers and other grains), fruit and meat on their own may be eaten. Large quantities of food may be consumed in various contexts outside

the 'meal'; I would estimate that in a Kelabit longhouse probably roughly a third of the calories consumed are eaten outside rice meals. However, these contexts (which one may describe as 'snacks', to borrow an English concept) receive much less overt emphasis. Among the Kelabit, for example, they are not supposed to satisfy hunger[6]. They have as their purpose hedonistic enjoyment of the food and the social contact they entail; they are eaten by groups of people from *different* households, and provide a context for discussion and interaction. They are casual, do not take place at any particular time, are eaten in comfortable, relaxed positions without apparent rules about how people should sit or how the food should be laid out, and are shared freely with all and sundry without any obligations or relations of dependency being created through this sharing.

By contrast with the consumption of food in other contexts, Southeast Asian rice meals are serious and silent. Everyday rice meals are not normally shared outside the household and they are eaten in a standardised, even explicitly ritualised, fashion, with the food always laid out in a particular fashion and the participants in the meal sitting in a particular formation in relation to the food. An example of the cosmological importance attached to the rice meal among the now-Christian

Photo 1.1 Prayer before rice meal at the hearth headed by Balang Pelewan and Sinah Balang Pelewan, Pa' Dalih, Kelabit Highlands, February 2005.

Kelabit is the fact that grace is said before a rice meal, something that never occurs before other foods are eaten (see Photo 1.1).

Rice is not eaten only at the rice meal. It may be eaten on its own, without side dishes of the usual kind, in specified contexts which are associated either with the rice cycle or with the ancestors. For example, rhe Kelabit eat rice cooked in small packets known as *senape* mainly in one context: in the rice fields, during the harvest. Rice is also consumed in the form of rice beer (sometimes described as 'rice wine'[7]) by some Southeast Asian groups. The Kelabit used to drink rice beer when they were working in the rice fields and when they gathered together in the evenings or had guests from outside the longhouse. In Vietnam, rice beer is paired with steamed glutinous rice at the Tet Festival (Hien, this volume). It seems that the consumption of rice beer is associated with bringing people together – people belonging to different households, and through the offering of rice beer to the dead, as is described in this volume for Vietnam and Lombok (Telle, this volume; Nguyen, this volume; also see Janowski forthcoming for the role of rice beer in the past among the Kelabit).

Although rice is the most emphasised element of the rice meal, the rice meal cannot take place without vegetable and meat side dishes (cf. Trankell 1995:136 for the Yong of Thailand). While rice for the rice meal is cooked in Southeast Asia without salt and is therefore bland, a pure food presenting itself as a unitary substance, side dishes are complex foods cooked with salt, onions, garlic, ginger and spices, which are made as tasty as possible. There is therefore an important oppositional, and complementary, difference between rice on the one hand and side dishes on the other.

The Gender Associations of Rice and Other Core Staples

There is, in all of the societies discussed in this volume, a complementary opposition between the core starch and foods eaten with it, which is mapped on to a complementary opposition between male and female.

Rice is associated with women and the female principle throughout insular Austronesian and mainland Southeast Asian groups. The association of rice with female goddesses and deities is widely reported in the region. It is often seen, explicitly or implicitly, as having been a gift from a divine, and often ancestral, female entity or as having grown from the body of such a divine female entity, as is the case among the Isan (Trankell 1995; Wessing 1997). Although both women and men are involved in cultivating rice, women are almost always the main decision

makers in rice-growing and they tend to be responsible for the religious and ritual aspects of rice-growing (although among the Lio only men are allowed to sow rice on dry rice fields – de Jong this volume). The Kelabit say that women are able to grow rice without men, while men cannot easily grow rice without a woman. In all of the chapters in the book which deal with rice-growing societies, the association of women and rice is clear.

In Banda Eli in Eastern Indonesia, where the staple everyday food is *embal* cakes, made of cassava, the growing of cassava, like that of rice in rice-growing societies in the area, is the responsibility of women. Rice, in this society, is traded in, and is associated with men. Other foods which are brought in from outside – including fish, the most important protein food eaten with *embal* cakes at everyday meals – are also associated with men. The meal including *embal* cakes and fish brings together female and male foods.

In Inanwatan, by contrast, the staple starch food, sago, is associated with men. This is a Melanesian society whose members define themselves as hunter and gatherers; it is in some significant ways very different in its cosmology from the other societies dealt with in this volume, but there are also some important parallels. In Inanwatan, men grow and provide sago for their wives and children; women are responsible for feeding children blood and then milk from their own bodies, which makes possible life itself. The complementarity between male and female comes out at funeral meals, when sago starch (male), associated with opening up and making grow, is served together with sago larvae, which are classed as a female substance and are associated with rotting, containment and transformation.

The most valued side dish to the rice meal, among the rice-growing societies discussed here, is meat. Although meat is not eaten at every meal, particularly in lowland areas where hunting is not possible or not easy, it is almost always eaten at important meals. Many of the chapters in this book attest to the fact that at the more ritualized rice meals, shared by groups which are wider than the household (`feasts'), the key foods are meat and rice (Heringa, de Jong, Nguyên Xuân Hiên, Telle, Janowski). Meat is in many societies clearly associated with the male principle, and this is demonstrated in some of the present chapters (Janowski, Telle, Sparkes)[8]. With an association between women and rice and between men and the other key element of the meal at ritualized meals, the rice meal represents both a bringing together of the male and female principles, and what they achieve together in terms of reproduction. This may be explicit, as is shown by some of the chapters in this volume (Kerlogue, Davis, Heringa, Telle, Janowski).

Feeding and the Malleability of the Reproductive Process

Food is relevant to the construction of kinship in Southeast Asia in two ways: through sharing food and through feeding. In the sense that sharing food means, in effect, sharing the same feeding source, sharing and feeding are two sides of the same coin. The centrality of the feeding relationship is discussed in all of the chapters in this volume. For all of the societies dealt with, the feeding relationship exists between generations: ascending generations feeding descending ones among the living, and vice versa between the living and the dead. I will return to the relationship between the dead and the living later; first of all I want to look at the feeding relationship between the living.

The relationship between ascending and descending generations is a reproductive one: ascending generations produce descending ones through the coming together of male and female to produce children. It is believed to be susceptible to manipulation, not only through who reproduces with whom but in relation to non-sexual aspects of the reproductive process.

Reproduction derives, in these societies, from what the male and female members of a male couple achieve together, but this is not only through sexual union and birth. In Austronesian societies, the couple build a household together – what I have described for the Kelabit as a hearth-group (Janowski 1995), and what Helliwell describes as a rice group (Helliwell 2001). A major focus of the household and the physical house is the cooking hearth, where the meal is cooked. A building is defined as being a true house (Malay/Indonesian *rumah*), and the group inhabiting it is defined as a separate unit, by having such a hearth. The hearth is central to kinship in the area, and the meal cooked at it is emblematic of kinship. For these societies, understanding (kin) ties between people – the production of successive generations of people – requires an understanding of how people are related through food-based ties between people, mediated through the house and its central hearth (for an analysis of this in Langkawi, see Carsten 1997).

Together the couple produce food and children, something which is expressed in the material form of the house. As Bloch says for the Zafimaniry, who smear soot from the hearth on a child shortly after it is born: 'It is almost as if what is being celebrated by this action is the production of the child from the marital hearth in analogy with the food that is cooked there' (Bloch 1993:128–9). The house which the couple build, and at whose hearth the meal is cooked, is widely believed in the region to be imbued with life force (Waterson 1993).

As is demonstrated by the chapters in this volume, being fed key foods produced and cooked by that household makes you kin to the members of that household: to those who have provided the food and who share the food with you. This is founded in the notion, common in societies in other parts of the world too, that humans are, to a very considerable extent, made up through what they eat and who feeds them, particularly when they are foetuses and small children (Loizos & Heady 1999a). For societies in Southeast Asia, and in Inanwatan at the borders of Melanesia and Austronesian societies too, sex merely initiates a person; subsequent feeding, both within the womb, after birth and indeed throughout life, is vital in the production of a human being (e.g. see Carsten 1995, Carsten 1997; Janowski, this volume; Kerlogue, this volume; Oosterhout, this volume). The relationship between ascending and descending generations, then, is as much about providing the right kinds of food as about sex and giving birth; indeed in Southeast Asia as in some Papua New Guinea societies (Fajans 1993) there is a sense in which kinship constructed through feeding is seen as replacing biological kinship. Those who are siblings are not only so because they have the same parents, grandparents or more distant ancestors, but also because they have been fed the same food.

Within the womb and immediately after birth (through breastmilk), babies are fed by their mothers. What the mother eats is important, since this is transmitted to the baby. In Jambi (Kerlogue, this volume) as well as in Inanwatan (van Oosterhout, this volume), the mother gives life itself, and blood, through feeding her own blood (in Inanwatan) and milk; but in Inanwatan the father, through his input of sago for the mother to eat (and later for the growing child itself directly), socializes that life force, builds flesh, and sets up relatedness with the ancestors, because sago carries with it their flesh, buried in the sago gardens; while in Jambi it is women who provide the rice which continues to build kinship throughout life, following a pattern typical of rice-growing societies. Among rice growers, it is very important to eat the right rice: Davis reports that Minangkabau living in town try to eat rice which is from their own ancestral land – or at the very least from the Minangkabau area (Davis, this volume), and among Kelabit who have migrated to town it is important to eat rice from the Kelabit Highlands, and preferably grown by the hearth-group from which they spring (Janowski 2005a).

The fact that rice constructs kinship in so many Southeast Asian Societies is associated with the special relationship which it is believed to have with humans. The Kelabit say that rice is incapable of growing on its own; it needs human help to allow it to grow. Throughout insular and mainland Southeast Asia, rice is believed to have a spirit (in Malay, *semangat*) like that of a human, as Frazer recognized many years ago (Frazer 1922: 413–419). Tai-speaking societies use the term *khwan*

to describe the spirit of rice, the same term used to describe the spirit of humans (Trankell 1995:133). Many societies consider rice to be kin to humans. A number of myths in the area relate how crop plants, and most importantly rice, grew out of a dead semi-divine being, almost always female (Evans 1953:15–16; Fox 1992:78; Giambelli 2002:50; Schulte Nordholt 1971:271). The Inanwatan, for whom sago is the key, sacred food, say that humans have an ancestress who was half sago and half human (Oosterhout, this volume)

Because feeding and sharing rice meals (mainland and insular Austronesian Southeast Asia), sago (Inanwatan) or *embal* cakes (Banda Eli) plays an important role in constructing kinship, that relatedness is not fully determined by birth and is susceptible of alteration and manipulation. It has to be built up through appropriate feeding throughout life. If an individual eats rice meals or sago from a source other than that of the household into which he or she is born this will mean that it develops kinship with those other households whose rice or sago it has eaten. Because of this, adoption causes kinship to develop with the adopting household, so that gradually the child becomes more and more kin with its adoptive parents and less kin to its birth parents (Carsten 1991a and Kerlogue, this volume).

The feeding relationship between generations among the living is between ascending generations (feeders) and descending generations (the fed). That which is fed, sago in Inanwatan (van Oosterhout, this volume), *embal* cakes in Banda Eli (Kaartinen, this volume) or rice among the other groups discussed in this volume, is produced and provided by those who head the household, who are the parents and grandparents (real or classificatory) of other members. At large-scale rice meals, a wider group of people is fed and this underlines and constructs kinship between all who participate (Kaartinen, de Jong, Nguyên Xuân Hiên, Kerlogue, Telle, Janowski). Among the Kelabit, the providers of a feast present themselves as the 'parents' or 'grandparents' of all present (Janowski, this volume); among the Sasak mortuary feasts are directed and led by a husband-wife couple, who take charge respectively of meat + side dishes on the one hand and rice on the other (Telle, this volume).

However, feeding does not only take place between the living, as is demonstrated by a number of chapters in this book. Dead kin are also fed by the living (Telle, Sparkes, van Oosterhout, Nguyên Xuân Hiên, this volume). This needs to be understood in the context of the fact that in Southeast Asia, death is closely linked to reproduction – reproduction being a necessary corollary of the transience of individual lives, and hence the beginning and ending of life (Bloch & Parry 1982; Hoskins 1996). The kin relationship with the dead, like that with the living, can be manipulated through feeding. However, it is to be noted that the feeding is

going in the opposite direction to that between the living – rather than descending generations being fed by ascending ones, they are feeding them. I shall return to this shortly. First I want to take a look at notions of life force, since I think that this may help to elucidate this apparent paradox.

Kinship and the Flow of Life

In understanding kinship in Southeast Asia, I would suggest that we may find it useful to bring together the analysis made by Fox and others of the 'flow of life' (Fox 1980b) in constructing kinship in the area, with an understanding of food and feeding. There is a widespread belief in Austronesian societies in a quantifiable 'something', of finite quantity in the universe, which may be described as life force, potency or power. It is expressed in the Javanese concept of *kasektèn*, which Anderson describes as 'power' or 'primordial essence' (Anderson 1990), the Balinese concept of *sekti*, which Geertz describes as 'charisma' (Geertz 1980), the Tai/Lao/Isan term *saksit*, the Luwu (Sulawesi) concept of sumangé, which Errington describes as 'potency' (Errington 1989) and the Kelabit notion of *lalud* (Janowski, this volume). Geertz (Geertz 1980:106) has argued that the Balinese *sekti* may be equated with the Polynesian concept of mana. The Ao Naga concept of *aren* (Janowski 1984; Mills 1926) seems to be a similar concept; the Naga are not Austronesian speakers, but they display many similarities to Austronesian groups in the islands of Southeast Asia, including rice-growing, feasts of merit and the erection of megaliths. The Inanwatan of Papua also have a notion of life force, *iware*, which is closely linked to fertility and the ability to reproduce (van Oosterhout, this volume).

The 'flow of life' in Austronesian societies in Southeast Asia is, in Eastern Indonesia, associated with the relationship between wife givers and wife takers (Fox 1980a), with the gift of life being associated with the female and flowing from wife givers to wife takers. Fertility is, in effect, a manifestation of the ability to channel the flow of life. For other Austronesian societies in Southeast Asia, potency or life force tends to be associated with rulers and to radiate out from the ruling centre, which is often conceived of as male+female. A comparability can perhaps be established between the (male+female) married couple as source of life force at the most basic, household level for their dependants and descendants and the male+female ruler as source of life for his dependants within the kingdom, often conceptualized as his 'children' (Janowski 1992). The relationship between the source and the recipient of life force, and that between those who share the same link to the source of life force, are the basis of the most important kin ties

between people. In the indigenous conception, it is that source which makes the production of successive generations of people possible, and the key to successful reproduction is successful channelling of life force to descendants.

Among both lineal and non-lineal (in Errington's idiom, 'centrist'[Errington 1990]) societies, those who pass on life force possess it to a higher degree than others and are closer to its original source (the Creator Deity, identified with the Christian God by Christianized groups); they are, in effect, lower level sources of life themselves. This makes them 'elder' in the indigenous idiom (even if they are physically younger). Ancestors, too, are closer to the source of life; life force is transmitted by both senior kin and by ancestors to their descendants, through 'blessings' which give strong life, health and worldly good fortune (Bloch 1986; Bloch 1993; Geirnaert-Martin 2002; Schiller 2002; Sellato 2002).

If life force is transmitted by ascending generations to descending ones, it seems clear that it is associated with the process of reproduction – the production of descending generations on the part of ascending ones, through the bringing together of male and female in the married couple. The original source of life is a potent unity which was fractured with the beginning of life as we know it on earth – when reproduction began – necessitating the separation of the male and female principles which together make up the whole and generating differentiation, necessary for life (e.g. see Errington 1990; McKinnon 1991). Through reproduction, that which has been separated is brought together, although only to be separated again, in a perpetual cycle.

It may be that we should see what is achieved by the married couple, through reproduction, as being the transmission of life force, both through sexual activity and through the provision of appropriate food (rice meals, meals based on root crops or meals based on sago). The couple is arguably to be seen as a living, potent centre, generating life, a centre which exists to some degree within the most humble household as well as at the level of semi-divine rulers and high status aristocrats in hierarchical societies, although within the households of leaders and rulers a much more potent centre exists, conceived of as closer to the original source of life.

The focal starch food has a central role in the 'flow of life'. Among the Inanwatan, sago achieves the transmission of domesticated life force, ensuring that humans are proper human beings and not demons (van Oosterhout, this volume). In rice-growing societies in the region, rice has a special role in reproduction; its role in bringing the two genders together is sometimes explicit, always implicit (de Jong, Davis, Heringa, Janowski, Nguyên Xuân Hiên, all in this volume). Within many rice-growing societies, the association of women with rice and men with meat has already been mentioned. Thus, reproduction through sexual intercourse and

reproduction through the building of proper human beings through appropriate feeding of rice meals are analogous: both involve the coming together of male and female. Both the male and the female parts of the unity which is the married couple are essential to reproduction. This implies that, despite the fact that, in many Austronesian societies, men and women do not lead very different lives on an everyday level, and can do each other's jobs at a pinch, male and female need, at certain moments, to be symbolically or physically distinct (Hoskins 1987). Their main 'products', food and children, can only be produced if they are distinct in their reproductive roles, at least at certain key, symbolic points. Thus, the production of food may be considered part of sexual reproduction; commensality is among a number of groups associated with sexual intercourse (Manderson 1986b:12–14; Ng 1993:134; Heringa, this volume; Osterhout, this volume), emphasizing the reproductive aspects of the co-production and co-consumption of key foods. For some groups such as the Lio studied by de Jong (this volume), women's role as distributors of rice to others is key to their gendered role, constructing networks of kin relations with other households.

The issue of whether the notion of shared substance and transfer of substance is a relevant way of understanding kinship in the region, which has recently been a topic of discussion (Busby 1997, Carsten 1995, Fajans 1988, Gibson 1985, Thomas 1999, Weiner 1982), can perhaps be approached in the context of looking not just at the transfer of physical substance but at the 'flow of life'. It does seem that the construction of physical substance conceived of as being the same (made up of flesh and blood on the one hand, which are wet, female and transient; and bones on the other, which are dry, male and permanent) is generally believed in the region to be made up through feeding. This process of construction, which we may term reproduction, is a process which is consciously undertaken and which is believed to be susceptible to alteration and manipulation, depending on the type and source of food. It could perhaps be argued that what is central here is not the transmission of physical substance itself but the ability to build the right kind of substance through being able to channel life force through food. The successful cultivation and preparation of the right food, and the control of nature which is involved in achieving this, makes people fully social beings (Dentan 1968; Fajans 1988; Manderson 1986a; Young 1971). Achieving this involves harnessing and channelling life force from the ancestors, who are the source of 'blessings'.

In general, the data we have on notions of life force seem to indicate that for many groups in the region it is a unitary notion. However, for some groups such as the Kelabit of Sarawak, and the Inanwatan of Papua, there is a distinction between socialized, humanized life force and wild life force (Janowski, this volume and

van Oosterhout, this volume). For the Kelabit, wild life force is associated with the male and humanized life force is associated both with the female and with the couple as a unity; for the Inanwatan, by contrast, wild life force is associated with the female and socialized life force with the male. In both of these societies, however, both types of life force are important, emphasizing the complementarity of male and female within the couple.

Feeding and Competition for Status

Feeding others generates status for the feeding couple in the region. This is particularly true in relation to meals consisting of the staple starch plus side dishes, as opposed to snacks. In all of the groups discussed here except two, rice is the staple starch which is most highly valued, and in all of these rice is closely associated with social status. While all groups in the region which grow rice also grow other starchy crops, it is rice which is ideally eaten at daily meals consisting of starch plus side dishes. Because rice is not easy to grow in many of the ecological contexts in Southeast Asia, including both the more arid areas of Eastern Indonesia and sloping land in forested areas, in many areas only a little rice can be grown, and this is achieved with some difficulty. Arguably this has the effect of making rice a particularly high status crop and food, since some skill, luck (i.e. an association with the divine or the spirits) and/or access to the labour resources of others is required to achieve success. In these contexts, even though not all households are able to eat only rice as their starch food at meals, high status households will eat only, or mainly, rice. Rice is often mixed with other starches so that at least some rice is eaten at each meal. In societies where there is very little rice grown, it is the starch food consumed at ritual meals and socially significant meals. Even in groups where no rice at all is grown, such as the Bajau Laut, rice may be bought in for consumption at important meals.

The association between status and rice means that feeding rice meals to others is generative of status for the feeding couple as well as generative of kinship. Where a couple feeds those within their own household they are demonstrating that they are able to provide this prestigious, difficult-to-grow food for their dependants. Where they are able to feed it to others outside their household, such as at feasts, this is even more generative of status. Feasts are the context for a good deal of competition for status (for an overview of status-generating 'feasts of merit' in Southeast Asia see Kirsch 1973). This occurs both through the provision of lavish rice meals at the feast on the part of the feast-giving couple and through the gifting of uncooked rice and animals to the feast givers on the part of guests (a common practice in the area),

who will then get a return in kind at their own feasts, making their own provision at their own feast more lavish. Competitive provision of rice meals for others through feasts is a major arena within which relative status is negotiated. This status is arguably founded in the kinship relations generated both through everyday meals and through feasting. The conflation of kin relations and hierarchical relations in the region is expressed through the use of kin terms between those of different status (e.g. see Kerlogue, this volume; Janowski, this volume).

Feeding Ancestors and the Flow of Life

I want to return at this point to the feeding of ancestors, which inverts the direction of feeding among the living, which is from ascending to descending generations. Why are ancestors fed? While the feeding of ancestors is common in Southeast Asia, the reasons for this have not been explored in the context of the fact that this feeding entails a reversal of the usual direction of feeding.

Three chapters in this volume focus on the feeding of ancestors: Sparkes' on the Isan of NE Thailand, Nguyên Xuân Hiên's on the Têt Festival among the Kinh in Vietnam and Telle's on the Sasak of Lombok. In all three cases it is rice which is the most important food offered to the ancestors. In NE Thailand and in Vietnam, this is glutinous rice, which, as Nguyên Xuân Hiên shows, is more ritually significant than non-glutinous rice and is more strongly associated with the ancestors and with building kinship. Rice beer is also offered to the dead in Vietnam, and used to be poured on graves in Lombok. Rice, in all of these cases, builds a complete community of kin, both among the living and with the dead.

The explanation for the feeding of the ancestors is generally given by the living in terms of the needs of the dead: they need the food of the living. However, feeding the dead can also be understood in relation to the transmission of potency or life force from the dead to the living. Feeding the ancestors is said, in all three cases dealt with in this volume, to cause 'blessings' – fertility, health and worldly good fortune – to be transmitted from the ancestors to their descendants. The world of the dead is a major source of fertility for the living throughout the region (see for example articles included in Chambert-Loir & Reid 2002b). Most ancestors enter the general kin group of unnamed individuals, and as such are part of a generalized source of fertility for the living (Bloch 1971); a small number, in particular village founders, remain as named individuals and are especially strong channels of potency (Chambert-Loir & Reid 2002a).

An important part of the relationship which the living set up with dead ancestors is through food. This is, in rice-growing societies, most importantly through

rice, and often through rice meals including meat, as we find in Lombok (Telle, this volume). Among the Isan of NE Thailand, the dead are 'cared for' (*lieng*) through being offered rice by women (Sparkes, this volume) – using the same word as that used for 'caring for' children, thus underlining the inversion of the usual direction of feeding.

Fertility is transmitted through various channels from the dead to the living, and one of these is food. In return for being 'cared for', the Isan believe that those who offer food receive 'power' or 'potency' (*saksit*) from the ancestors. Among the Kinh in Vietnam, the food (mainly rice) offered to the dead at the kin temple (*phan*) is taken home and shared among all kin, to whom it brings health and happiness (Nguyên Xuân Hiên, this volume). Among the Tai Yong of Northern Thailand, the offering of all rice to the ancestors before it is eaten by living people unites the living and their ancestors in commensality and transforms the food eaten by the living into ritual left-overs (Trankell 1995: 134). In Kerek in Java and among the Sasak in Lombok it is believed that the vapour from the steamed rice rises up the ancestors implying, in a similar way, that the living are eating the ancestors' ritual left-overs (Heringa, this volume; Telle, this volume). The ancestors eat the 'essence' of the food, but not its material substance, which is consumed by the offerers. Thus, it would seem that sharing food with the ancestors causes blessings/life/potency to be transmitted from them to their living descendants.

The feeding of dead ancestors is not the only example of feeding going from descending to ascending generations. In SE Asia, as in most parts of the world, the elderly are fed by their children and grandchildren. This is because of necessity: as people become older they become unable to perform productive tasks and need to be looked after. However, the rationale for feeding them may also have a cosmological aspect. In Southeast Asia, the elderly are regarded as close to the world of the spirits, as Heringa (this volume) points out is the case in Kerek. This may mean that they, like dead ancestors, are seen as able to access and transmit life force, because they are closer to the source of that life, which is the spirit world. Indeed, in the Austronesian world those who are socially and cosmologically senior are widely regarded as being older in precisely that sense – that they are closer to the 'source of life' – than those who are socially inferior, even where they are not chronologically older. However, as an individual becomes chronologically older he also grows closer to a return to that source of life. It may be that we should see the reversal of the direction of feeding – which reaches its culmination after death, when ancestors eat only the 'essence' of food – as a gradual process which is linked to this growing proximity to the source of life: as people become older, their partaking of food involves a transmission

of life force to that food, just as the ancestors pass life force to the food. This can then be passed on to their descendants who share it with them, just as the sharing of food with dead ancestors leads to life force being transmitted to their descendants.

Conclusion

Food is, in all the societies dealt with in this volume, an important basis for the construction of ties of relatedness – 'kin' ties. Such ties are based on local ideas about the reproduction of successive generations of people, which relate both to sexual reproduction and to feeding certain kinds of food. Kinship in the region is not fixed at birth; it is malleable and is believed to be based on feeding. In much of Southeast Asia it is rice meals which are the key eating event, the basis for constructing kinship through feeding. The chapters in this volume clearly show that eating rice meals together, and in particular feeding, are an important basis for the construction of kinship. This is true both in creating kinship between the living and in constructing a community of kin including the dead.

The core starch food – rice in most of the societies discussed here but sago in Inanwatan and cassava cakes (*embali*) in Banda Eli – is the key food in the construction of kinship for all the societies dealt with here. It has in each case a clear association with one of the two genders. While rice and *embali* cakes are associated with the female principle, sago in Inanwatan is associated with the male. The mother and father of a child have complementary roles in providing different foods for the child, and at ritualized meals the complementarity of the core food, associated with one gender, and other foods eaten with it, associated with the other gender, may be made explicit. At feasts in rice-growing societies, (female) rice is almost always accompanied by (male) meat as the main side dish, whereas at ordinary meals vegetables may be eaten with rice. This suggests that kinship in these societies, although founded in the reproductive relationship between male and female, is expressed and articulated not only through sexual activity but also through feeding complementary male and female foods. This is emphasised by the fact that eating together is often cast in a sexual light in the region.

I have suggested that it may be useful to look at the construction of kinship through feeding, discussed in all the chapters in this volume, in the light of the importance of the 'flow of life' in the region (Fox 1980b). Among the living, there is an indigenous (as well as a 'common-sense') logic in the suggestion that one should see the married couple as the source of life for their descendants; and the ultimate source of life is stated by Southeast Asian groups to be unified male +

female. The fact that the ancestors, as a source of fertility, are often related to as an undifferentiated group also implies the conflation of male and female[9], which is in concordance with this logic. Among the living, the flow of life occurs through the feeding of descending by ascending generations; between the living and the dead, it occurs by means of the feeding of dead ancestors by the living. Feeding the dead constructs a commensal relationship with the dead, and may be interpreted as making possible the transmission of life force through the food shared, which flows in the opposite direction (from the fed to those doing the feeding) from the direction in which it flows between the living. Viewing the feeding relationship as central to the construction of kinship in the region, and understanding this relationship in the light of the well-documented importance of the 'flow of life', also central to kinship in the region, makes it possible for us to understand all of the societies dealt with in this book in the same frame of reference: a concern with the continued, and correct, channelling of life from one generation to the next, both between the living and from the community of dead kin to their living descendants.

The discussion presented here about the nature of 'kinship' in Southeast Asia fits into a wider debate currently underway about the nature of kinship, which focuses on trying to understand the concept in a way that is relevant to so-called 'Western' societies as well as to non-'Western' societies. This has been stimulated partly by a growing interest in the implications of an analysis of responses to new possibilities for assisted reproduction (e.g. Edwards 2000; Franklin 1997). It has been argued that the distinctiveness of the 'West', in relation to its propensity to seek out and identify scientific 'reality', is an illusion (Latour 1993). As Carsten points out (2004), when this is applied to kinship, it implies not only that 'Western' societies, like many, perhaps all, other societies, conceive of 'kinship'/'ties of relatedness' which are partially founded in 'biology' and partially in 'culture'; it also implies that the boundary between the two, for 'Western' as for non-'Western' societies, is an illusory, or at least a shifting one. Food, which has been shown in all of the chapters in this volume to be basic to the construction of 'kin' ties in Southeast Asia (and which is arguably significant in delineating groups of related people in all societies), is a very good – perhaps even the best possible – exemplification of this, since it is difficult to know (and this is true for both the outside analyst and for the participant in a given culture) whether to see it as 'cultural' or 'natural'. In fact, it should perhaps be seen as lying between the two, and as a powerful mediating and transformatory substance which acts as a means for turning 'nature' into 'culture' and vice-versa.

Notes

1 Organised by Monica Janowski, Fiona Kerlogue, Ing-Britt Trankell and Enid Nelson.

2 Platenkamp argues that there is no need to demonstrate common origin, but rather a similar 'general orientation to life', using James Fox's phrase, in order to be able to compare societies (Platenkamp, 1990). But what does this mean? At the very least one would have to identify, and demonstrate the sharing of, attitudes which are perceived as pivotal by members of the societies concerned. Indeed it raises the question of whether common origin (for example through borrowing) may in fact be indicated by the sharing of pivotal aspects of 'orientation to life'.

3 I will use the term 'household' for brevity to describe the minimal unit conceived of as being related, although cross-culturally it is a somewhat confusing term since the definition of 'house' varies widely and its relationship with notions of relatedness also varies a good deal.

4 In fact many such groups manage wild plant resources to a significant degree.

5 Hayden has argued that the domestication of plants was prompted by status and that the first domesticates were luxury, high-status crops which are difficult to grow, giving the example of rice in Southeast Asia (Hayden 2003).

6 Initially I found it difficult to eat rice prepared in the way in which the Kelabit eat it (cooked until the grains fall apart and then mashed), and I would eagerly watch out for opportunities to eat cassava chips, which were always offered to anyone in the vicinity in the open-plan longhouse. I vividly remember one occasion when it became apparent to the person who had prepared the chips that I was actually eating out of hunger; she showed concern and offered to prepare a rice meal for me.

7 Although the beverage prepared from fermented rice is often described in English as rice wine, it is technically a beer.

8 There are questions to be addressed which are not tackled here about the association of meat and the male principle in Southeast Asia. There are two major sacrificial animals which are eaten at feasts in the area: the pig and the buffalo. The gender associations of these two animals differ: while the association of the buffalo with maleness seems clear, the pig seems to be associated to some degree, in some societies, with either the female principle (see Geirnaert-Martin, 1992) or human culture as opposed to the wild, and hence by implication, perhaps, a fusion of the male and the female. Among the Kelabit, where the blood of the (domestic) pig was, before the introduction of Christianity, used to effect transitions from the unsocialized to the socialized, small children being initiated into 'proper' human life and men returning from the forest graveyard were given showers of pig's blood (Talla 1979:209, 250; for an analysis of the significance of the pig among the Kelabit, see Janowski 2005c).

9 Although named ancestors are, obviously, of one gender or the other. Whether they can be seen as being related to as part of a married couple (which would imply an emphasis on male + female) perhaps needs to be investigated in the light of the fact that named ancestors are often memorialized in ways which imply a focus on the couple of which they are part. In the Kelabit Highlands and among the Naga of NE India and NW Burma megaliths as memorials to feast givers, which constitute a permanent memorial to such people, may be erected in pairs symbolizing the married couple of which the named feast giver is part (see Harrisson 1962; Hutton 1922a and 1922b; Labang 1962).

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