

IV

OVERVIEW

Introduction

The dwelling is an envelope for a complex material environment which is created and utilized by human actors. In these pages we have focused on the internal arrangements and patterned activities of a single example in order to illustrate how domestic space is ordered and manipulated in one society. In this final section we should like to draw out some of the main organizational patterns which appear both in the sample dwelling and elsewhere in Rangama and then turn briefly to a discussion of the implications of this work for ethnography elsewhere, particularly in our own society.

The Rangama dwelling as patterned space

Photographs of the interiors of a number of Rangama dwellings appear below as Plates VII-XII. A frequent first response of uninvolved observers to these photographs is that the dwelling interiors exhibit a high degree of disorganization. Beneath the apparent clutter, however, lies a clear conceptual order in which domestic articles are organized functionally in patterned arrangements.

Since most of the artifacts and activities in the domestic setting pertain to food preparation, the functional focus of the Rangama dwelling is the hearth. It is a symbolically important element as well, since the use of a common hearth defines a household. When a new household is formed, a new hearth is constructed. The hearth in a Rangama dwelling is located in a corner of the room and positioned so that the door into the room opens against it. The strategic location of the hearth makes it impossible to observe cooking activities without entering the room. Privacy in cooking and eating is an important value which is expressed in magical beliefs. Projectors of 'evil eye' are said to spoil food. To the side of the hearth there is usually a container for salt in solution and sometimes a salt stand (lunu karuwə) fixed into the floor. A spoon rack may be found nearby in many households. Photographs of the hearth area appear below as Plates VII (a), VIII (a), IX (a), X (a) and XI.

Above the hearth there is a smoke rack (dum maessə) which usually has two main shelves and often a third slung below. Articles used in cooking such as coconut shell spoons, shredded baskets used as potholders and firewood are usually found in these shelves along with foodstuffs such as meat, beans and chillies contained in labu gourd vessels. On the wall near the smokerack there is a small lamp.

As one moves from the hearth area along the end wall of the dwelling, one finds cooking pots stored. (See Plates IX (a) and X (a), for example). They are often set in depressions on a raised pot stoop (walan piilə). The largest pots are generally stacked in the far corner. The pot stoop often continues around the corner for a short distance. In other cases there may simply be depressions in the floor. In either case, however, the area is used for the storage of water vessels. The depressions in the floor which are often found in this area are intended to steady the largest water vessel (kaləgeDiyə) and when not raised on a stoop are referred to as a kaləgeDi piilə. Both types of piilə terminate at the saddle quern (miris galə) which is mounted in most cases on a mud base at table height. The stone muller is stored on top, covered when not in use by a korəha pot. (The saddle quern is visible in the lower right hand corners of Plates VII, VIII and IX (a)). This is also the area of the dwelling in which the slings (taTTu raeaenə and udəhallə) used to hold shallow eating baskets and dishes are suspended. Along this long wall there are usually two shelves supported by posts set in the floor or hung from the rafters. They contain baskets for clothing and other personal articles and baskets containing foodstuffs in small amounts. One or two smaller shelves (or in some cases a portion of the larger one) are devoted solely to the storage of bottles and tins. There may be a table under these shelves which serves as a storage place for keeping articles used in the betel chew. At an intermediate position along this long wall or along the one opposite, a rotary quern (kurakkan galə) is usually found. (See Plate XIII (b), for example).

On the short wall opposite the firepit and the pots, there may be a rice bin (as shown in Plates VII and VIII (b)), and if not, there are large baskets (peTTiyə) containing rice as well as gunny sacks containing kurakkan millet earheads. Agricultural implements, wood-working tools and miscellaneous articles appear in this location, and sleeping mats are stored and rolled in slings against the rice bin or the wall. Additional shelving may be put up in this area if needed.

Such is the basic organization of the main cooking room in the Rangama dwelling. This room is also used for sleeping by at least some of the householders since women sleep near their hearths. Depending on the composition of the household and the age of the children, males may sleep in this room as well. A young couple newly set up in household sleeps in the same room, as do the members of a nuclear family when the children are small. As the family grows larger and the children older, sexually segregated sleeping arrangements are established so that the father sleeps in another space, either on the porch or in an adjacent room, with the older male children. Infants, regardless of sex, sleep in the room with the mother.

Most cooking rooms open onto a porch, the interactional focus of the dwelling. Unlike the interior cooking room, it is a light and airy yet sheltered space which is free of the dense smoke generated by the fire. It is therefore a safe and healthful place in which to hang an infant's crib. It also provides a sheltered setting in which to conduct outdoor work such as pounding grains during the rainy weather. Above all, however, it is the principal area for relaxing, socializing and receiving visitors, as the array of seating equipment (stools, benches, chairs and charpoys) which is often found there suggests.

A cooking room plus porch arrangement is the culturally defined minimum space necessary for a household. In households with numerous, growing children, another space is often available. Indeed, it is considered necessary to have such a space under these circumstances, if only because sleeping outside on the porch during the rainy season (as males must if the porch is the only alternate space available) is considered an unhealthful solution.

In the one room plus porch plan all domestic articles and some cultivation tools as well are stored within a single space. In such an arrangement foodstuffs and the articles used by women in food preparation are grouped at one end of the room near the hearth, whereas bulk produce bagged in the cultivation areas, and agricultural and woodworking tools used by men are grouped at the others. This standardized arrangement of articles in the dwelling suggests two conceptual oppositions in domestic space, one between processed and unprocessed foods and the other between female and male domains. The latter is reflected in sleeping arrangements as well as in the disposition of articles, for when males and females sleep in the same room, the former spread their mats near the rice bin, whereas the latter sleep near the hearth. These basic organizational principles are evidenced more clearly if the household has the use of two interior spaces. In the two room plus porch plan, one of the rooms is basically a kitchen which is used for sleeping by females; the other is a storage area where bagged produce and cultivation tools may be found and where males sleep.

The Rangama example, cultural knowledge and the architect's intuition

In these pages we have attempted to show how domestic activities and spaces are patterned in one social setting. The picture we have drawn is detailed and deliberately so. The typical dwellings of traditional societies, among which the Sinhalese dwelling must be numbered, are often taken to be simple by uninvolved observers, but as in many other things, the closer one looks, the more one sees. The knowledge pertaining to the organization and use of the Sinhalese dwelling is necessarily incompletely characterized in these pages, but this discussion should nevertheless suggest how extensive that knowledge is.

