

The Life of the Longhouse: An Archaeology of Ethnicity. Peter Metcalf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 345 pp., 19 figures, appendix, bibliography, 2 indices. Hardback, £82, US \$129. ISBN 9780521110983; 2012 Paperback, £36, US \$57. ISBN: 9781107407565.

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The work of anthropologist Peter Metcalf will be familiar to many archaeologists. His 1992 co-authored *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* is widely cited by burial archaeologists (Metcalf and Huntington 1992). Metcalf's interest in the function and meaning of ritual in small scale communities stemmed from his doctoral research on Borneo in the early 1970s, and those who enjoyed *Celebrations of Death* should seek out his entertainingly detailed *A Borneo Journey into Death* (1982). A further short classic is Metcalf's *They Lie, We Lie: Getting on with Anthropology* (2002), a highly recommended read for all archaeologists involved with community-based projects. In his latest book, *The Life of the Longhouse: An Archaeology of Ethnicity*, Metcalf revisits his study area of the Brunei hinterland on Borneo to write a detailed historical narrative spanning the last 200 years. He explores the contingent relationships between domestic architecture, pre-modern trading systems, political and ritual economies, and ethnicity – all topics which concern archaeologists. Metcalf maintains the high level of scholarship evident in his earlier work, and with his intimate knowledge of the material is able to convey the intricacies of these narratives and make the book a pleasure to read. In short, it is a work that deserves to become as equally well-known and cited as his earlier books.

So far, however, the book has had surprisingly little coverage since publication in 2010. I can find only two previous published reviews with wide circulation, the first in the French journal *L'Homme* (Couderc 2011), the second in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (Steckman 2015). Two reasons possibly explain the book's slow uptake. As a historical analysis of ethnicity in one particular location, Metcalf makes no claim that his

study has any bearing on the question of ethnicity elsewhere and acknowledges that there are likely only a handful of scholars in the world who will be familiar with the plethora of ethnic groups discussed in the book; because of the level of historical detail in the book, researchers working elsewhere may not think it relevant to their research. Second, it may have been an unfortunate accident that the book's title resulted in it being wrongly catalogued. Not that academics discover books by browsing bookshelves, but even the publisher's own bookshop places it under archaeology, rather than anthropology. (I suspect this is the reason it was sent to *Asian Perspectives* for review). Does this matter? Shouldn't interdisciplinary approaches to the study of past and present be encouraged? The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, yes!

It soon becomes clear that Metcalf uses the term 'archaeology' in the metaphoric sense, *à la* Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), of working through the layers of historical archives and narratives to piece together a new perspective on a particular theme. In Metcalf's case, the question is how ethnic identities evolved in one particular region in north Borneo, in what is now in the modern state of Sarawak, East Malaysia. Archaeologists browsing through the book will soon realize that it does not concern archaeology, and are likely to put it back on the shelf. However, the book contains much information that would be of interest for archaeologists, so I encourage you to read on.

First, however, some words of warning. Even after accepting that Metcalf uses the term archaeology in its metaphoric sense, the apparent contempt with which he regards the discipline comes as a saddening surprise; in his opinion, archaeology can only offer

“interesting speculation and discoveries” (p. 6). Metcalf’s lack of interest in archaeology is clear. Although this book was written at the beginning of the twenty-first century, he only references the first edition of Peter Bellwood’s (1985) *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago* to provide a wider and deeper prehistoric context for the study. Perhaps this is a small matter when the focus is on the historic period of the last few hundred years, but Metcalf seems unaware of the interesting historical archaeology by Laura Junker (1998, 1999) on the development of coastal-inland relationships in the Philippines or that of Dominik Bonatz and colleagues (2009) on Sumatra. Not only are such studies of direct relevance to Metcalf’s argument in *The Life of the Longhouse*, but they also demonstrate the added depth and unique perspective that archaeology can contribute to Southeast Asian studies. Such detailed historical archaeology has only recently commenced on Borneo, but the results are already bringing new light to understanding the recent past (Nyíri 2017); this will (hopefully) make Metcalf reappraise his opinion (see below).

On a more general level, given the use of the term in the title, the theoretical breadth of the book would have benefited from considering how archaeology has engaged with the concept of ethnicity (e.g., Jones 1997). Neither is there any discussion of the relevant literature on the topic of ethnicity and state politics in Southeast Asia (e.g., Brown 1994). However, despite the narrow theoretical and geographical focus of Metcalf’s study, *The Life of the Longhouse* is a rewarding read for all those working in Southeast Asian studies, not least archaeologists.

The deceptively simple question Metcalf poses on the opening page is: why did/do people of the interior of Borneo live in large collective ‘longhouse’ structures. Though not unique to Borneo (nor Southeast Asia), these impressively large, raised domestic structures, sometimes hundreds of meters long and housing hundreds (occasionally thousands) of people, have long been a defining feature of indigenous societies there. Viewed as a facet of common Austronesian heritage, some scholars have suggested that longhouse architecture may have been part of the ‘Neolithic’ package of material culture (Bellwood 1997).

Metcalf does not concern himself with the archaeological origins of the Borneo longhouse; rather, as anthropologists often do, he starts his historical analysis from the ethnographic present to reconstruct the economic, social, and political systems that operated within longhouse societies of the Baram valley of Borneo. On a larger scale, Metcalf uses the built environment of longhouses as an entry point into the fundamental question of what shaped the ethnic identities of their inhabitants. Rather than simply using ethnic terms as a necessary prerequisite to a historical study of longhouse societies, the façade of ‘ethnicity’ is viewed side on to examine what is propping it up: what ethnicity meant or means to longhouse dwellers becomes the focus of his research.

Following the Introduction, the book is organized into six parts of two or three chapters each. In a way that will be appreciated by archaeologists, Chapter 1 sets the stage by describing the physical structure and spaces of longhouses and common aspects of their material culture. The subsequent chapters and following sections then populate this empty stage to bring the longhouse to life. Section 2 examines the role of political leadership in the formation and sustaining of longhouse communities (here an understanding of the political pre-colonial and colonial history of the region is required). Section 3 discusses the economic system of trade in rainforest items (i.e., camphor, bezoar stones, birds’ nests, etc.) for luxury items of material culture (i.e., ceramics, textiles, metal work, beads, etc.) which underpinned the expression of status of the longhouse elite and ruling political class. Here, Chapter 7 concerning “Premodern Upriver Trade” (pp. 138–180), the longest in the book, would be one of the most interesting to archaeologists, as it focuses on the socio-political mechanisms by which material exchange took place. While Metcalf’s analysis (based upon historic archival material from the early 1900s and oral histories) concludes that the integration of the coastal-inland trade into a modern colonial system had little effect upon traditional social systems of competing elites, recent pioneering historical archaeological surveys of contemporaneous burial sites in the headwaters of the

Baram, adjacent to the Metcalf's study area, suggest that the influx of material wealth during this period did indeed have a disabling affect upon the acquisition and use of high status material goods, in this case large Chinese stoneware jars used for burial (Nyíri 2017). Whether the same applies to lower Baram is not yet clear, but such studies are beginning to highlight the shortcomings of purely historical anthropological approaches and the potential which archaeology can offer to inter-disciplinary approaches to understanding even the recent past in the region.

Section 4 continues the focus on the processes of longhouse growth and dispersion by examining longhouse populations in terms of language communities and demographics. Section 5 moves on to examine how longhouses were not only held together through political and economic consensus, but were arenas of frequent ritual action, with different levels of community engagement and relevance. Importantly, longhouse communities not only comprised the living, but (even more politically important) the dead were called into being during significant ritual occasions. The complexities of the linguistic, genetic, and demographic composition of longhouse communities, manifest in multiple and competing 'ethnic' identities, were given agency through ritual actions.

The final section describes the political and economic changes to longhouse life during and after the colonial period (broadly coinciding with whole of the twentieth century). What is perhaps lacking from this section is consideration of the effect of the large scale conversion to Christianity on longhouse structure and indigenous concept of ethnicity. Metcalf ends the historical narrative at the turn of the twenty-first century by proposing that the life of the longhouse is over and that indigenous ethnicities have been politically unified into a single ethnic category as 'upriver people'.

Given the intricacies of the historical narratives in terms of the multiple individuals, communities, locations, and events involved, which are returned to from different perspectives in different chapters, a summary timeline would have been useful. In a similar vein, the complexity of movement back and

forth across the landscape of Borneo is not done justice by the level of detail in the three outline map figures of the case study area. (As an archaeologist working in the nearby Niah Caves and the in the headwaters of Baram, I found it instructive to create both a timeline and annotated map to accompany future re-reading.) However, neither of these minor shortcomings should dissuade the reader.

In sum, *The Life of the Longhouse* deserves to be widely read by archaeologists, particularly those working in Southeast Asia. The book provides a useful case study of pre-modern coastal-inland trade in the region, but it is the wider implications of Metcalf's historical analysis of the emergence and dissolution of ethnicities in the middle Baram of Sarawak, and the physical expression of these in the architectural form of the longhouse, that will be of most interest to Southeast Asian archaeologists. Although not stated outright, the implication of Metcalf's illuminating narrative is clear: if the form and character of ethnicities in the Baram were the result of particular trading relationships that emerged in the (archaeologically) recent past of the last 500 or more years, and the expression of such ethnicities in the architectural form of longhouses was historically contingent upon the convergence of particular economic, political, and ritual circumstances, then it follows that the rich ethnographies of the region cannot be used as analogies for interpreting the deeper past such as the Neolithic transition or early Metal Age. At the other end of the story, Metcalf's conclusion that the life of the longhouse is over has turned out to be premature. What Metcalf could not foresee was the convergence between ethnicity, the emergence of local interests in the concept of heritage, and the politics of land rights in modern day Sarawak. All three are bound up with traditional and non-traditional land use, including significantly the persistence of 'longhouse' communities, both as an abstract concept held by increasingly dispersed and globalized ethnic communities and as seen in the re-birth of physical longhouse architecture, often led by émigrés returning home. *The Life of the Longhouse* contains much food for thought for prehistoric, historic, and contemporary archaeologists alike, as well as

those working in heritage related fields. It is not often one can say that of a book with such a narrow geographic and historic focus.

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Glass in Ancient India: Excavations at Kopia. Alok Kumar Kanungo, with 22 additional contributors. Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2013. 475 pp., 597 figures, 144 tables. Hardback, US \$50. ISBN 81-85499-46-2.

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Glass in Ancient India: Excavations at Kopia by Alok Kumar Kanungo (AKK) is a substantial work, reporting on five excavation seasons from 2004 to 2009 at the north Indian site of Kopia, which as early as 1891 was suggested to have been an ancient glass manufacturing site. Excavation in 1949 provided more evidence of glass production, including glass beads and other glass fragments, as well as fragments of reddish brown ceramic vessels thought to have been used as crucibles. Limited chemical

analyses of the glass showed soda glass with high alumina and lower lime and magnesia (Roy and Varshney 1953). Based on this preliminary work, the author planned a new and more extensive excavation intended to focus particularly on the glass evidence, in order to know: the antiquity and history of glass use and production in India; the technological development of glass; the glass furnaces of ancient India; how glass study could be integrated with that of other material