

Blaming the house: women's efforts to preserve marriage in a rural Sinhala village

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In rural Sri Lanka, marital tension, frequently leading to violence, is an increasing problem. This article explores how the house becomes both the source of problems and a possible solution to them. By examining the way that the social, material, and symbolic dimensions of houses are made to interact, I show how women effect the shaping of social relations and homemaking. Specifically, I focus on how houses become spaces where women are expected to embody the ideals of wifehood and motherhood, thereby creating and maintaining a 'good house'. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted over fourteen months in a rural village, I illustrate the ways in which women actively engage in strategies to construct and preserve their houses as spaces free from violence. I describe how women, in addition to their traditional caregiving roles, employ the science of architecture (*vāstu vidyava*) to restructure their houses as a way to promote peace and prosperity. As a result, houses emerge as strategic allies in women's lives, facilitating their pursuit of the desired 'good life'.

Whilst walking through the rural Sri Lankan village in which I did my fieldwork,¹ I noticed a perfectly built house seemingly being demolished. I asked my companion Anusha, a woman who lived in the village, if she knew why the house was being dismantled. She explained that it was the home of Karuna, a woman in her early forties, her husband, and their children. Anusha's verdict was that there 'must be problems' (*prashna venna æthi*). As we approached, Karuna was in the garden inspecting the work done by two men. She walked towards us, and I enquired further as to why her house was being demolished. As she went on to explain, the assault on the house came after a long series of misfortunes:

Two houses could have been built with the money we spent renovating this house. We first built the house, as we wanted it. Then my husband fell sick. The astrologer told us that it is the fault of the house and to change the main door, and then another [astrologer] told us to break down the fence on the veranda. If we start using the inside toilet, we should change where the hearth is. For now, the toilet is not built, so we do not use it. There was a fault in the beams of the roof too. We had to take down the roof and redo it. And he said [astrologer] to make a window for our daughter's room. Somehow, we must do it because if not it will affect us.

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Later, Anusha divulged to me that Karuna was grappling with additional complications involving her youngest son, who had become entangled in an inappropriate romantic relationship. The disruptive behaviour of the youngest son continually precipitated turmoil within the household. On one occasion, he had been physically assaulted by his girlfriend's older brother. Another incident involved the girlfriend's father, accompanied by a few other men, visiting Karuna's home and publicly berating them, subjecting the family to humiliation owing to their son's actions. It was unmistakable that Karuna and her family were enduring a prolonged phase of considerable adversity. Anusha's familiarity with Karuna's tribulations underscored that these challenges were not merely confined to the realm of private suffering but had permeated into the realm of public awareness and scrutiny. That people in Sinhalese communities are acutely aware of and interested in their neighbours' troubles is not an unfamiliar phenomenon. What struck me as particularly intriguing in this scenario, however, was the manner in which the house emerged as a mediator between the internal conflicts evident within Karuna's household, on the one hand, and the external perceptions and interpretations of these struggles, on the other. What's more, it appeared that the house itself was being held accountable for these misfortunes.

This article contributes to the diverse body of literature on houses and homes by focusing on the lived experiences of women within rural domestic spaces in Sri Lanka. To begin with, I explore how the setbacks and difficulties encountered when homemaking disrupt routine, order, and harmony, replacing them instead with discord, strain, and even violent conflicts. As I argue further, many households in the region I studied struggle to secure enough resources to meet basic subsistence requirements, let alone achieve aspirations of upward social mobility. The shifting economic landscape in rural Sri Lanka breeds tension within household dynamics and introduces a potential for 'tyranny' within the ideals of 'structured domesticity' (Douglas 1991: 293). Within the deeply entrenched patriarchal societal norms of village life in Sri Lanka, women typically bear the brunt of blame for domestic issues. The subsequent line of argument I wish to develop concerns the physical structure of the house itself. I argue that, rather than being a mere container for domestic existence, the rural Sri Lankan house becomes an active entity. It serves as an object onto which the internal emotions and states of its inhabitants are projected. In fact, not only individuals but also buildings navigate life with an astrological awareness of auspicious times and spaces. Buildings, too, can be mis-placed and mis-timed, potentially becoming the cause of misfortune and subsequently being attributed with blame. The house is also employed as a medium for communicating with the broader public and signalling an aspirational position within the village's moral hierarchy. The substantial effort that women invest to conceal problems stemming from emotional relationships within the household is noteworthy. Failing to do so risks tarnishing one's reputation and incurring shame. In conclusion, I suggest that the house operates as an indispensable ally for its occupants. It plays a crucial role in deciphering women's individual domestic challenges and also those encountered by others. Before developing this argument ethnographically, I want to situate the discussion theoretically.

Houses and homes

Houses are physical structures that coincide with the normative, subjective, and imagined perceptions of what constitutes a home. However, despite their simultaneous existence, houses and homes do not always align seamlessly (Samanani & Lenhard

2019: 2). Houses are often conceptualized as containers in which social life unfolds. Lévi-Strauss's concept of house societies regarded noble houses as structured institutions designed to consolidate elite power by establishing alliances between houses through marriage, effectively transforming allies into kin (Gillespie 2000). Bourdieu's interpretation of the Kabyle house sees it as a reflection and reproduction of the structured worldview in which it is embedded (Bourdieu 1990). Examining the hearth as the core of the house, Carsten (1997) contends that houses serve as spaces where kinship is formed and perpetuated through communal food sharing. Bloch (2018), in his exploration of the developmental process of houses and marriage, emphasizes the interconnection and interdependence between them. Consequently, houses embody the cultural beliefs of a society and act as vessels that contain the kinship practices of each society.

In the Sri Lankan context, the Sinhala term for a house is *gedara*. This word merges the concepts of home and house. Consequently, *gedara* is used flexibly and refers to multiple aspects of Sinhalese social life and organization. Throughout much of the history of Sri Lankan anthropology, the notion of *gedara* was primarily understood in connection with the Sinhala kinship system and inheritance patterns (Leach 1961; Tambiah 1958; 1965). Tambiah elucidates how incorporating the name of one's physical *gedara* into one's personal name or *ge* name establishes a link between the individual and a broader kin group, entitling the individual to rights associated with the *gedara* and its accompanying land (Tambiah 1958: 24). Leach's investigations in Pul Eliya, on the other hand, did not yield comparable *gedara* names. For him, kinship was fundamentally rooted in property relationships, thereby rendering the compound and the houses within it pivotal in defining kinship and serving as the archetype for the *gedara* (Leach 1961: 97). Challenging the prevailing Africanist conventions of that era, both Tambiah and Leach stressed that the *gedara* couldn't be accurately classified as a descent group, as sharing *gedara* names or residing in the same compound didn't necessarily indicate agnatic kinship (Leach 1961: 101; Tambiah 1958: 25). Both scholars asserted that the Sinhala kinship system is characterized by a flexible structure that permits individuals to relate to one another in ways beyond descent. Offering an alternate perspective on the concept of *gedara*, Yalman (1967) delved into the symbolism of the *gedara* in the Kandyan village of Terutenne. His focus centred on the significance of a distinct hearth and granary for newly married couples. His interpretation suggests that a *gedara* fundamentally represents a commensal unit comprising a wife, unmarried children, and a husband who utilize their individual hearth for cooking and granary for rice storage (Yalman 1967: 102). In these accounts of the *gedara*, the physical structure serves merely as a backdrop against which kinship relations, particularly inheritance, are worked out.

A deeper examination of the spatial arrangement within the house is presented by Robert and Bonnie MacDougall (1977), who meticulously documented domestic life in the Kandyan Highlands during the 1970s. Their research explores the socioeconomic context in the village of Rangama, describing spatial configurations of houses, furnishings, utensils, and the various ways in which house inhabitants utilize the space throughout the day. Through intricate detailing of roles and activities undertaken at different times, their work reveals the house as an exclusive and private realm inhabited by individuals connected across generations. Notably, the belief in the 'evil eye' (*æ vaha*) results in the expectation that non-kin should not enter the house, use the hearth, or partake in meals without an invitation. The hearth is the symbolic centre of the house and is designed to shield cooking activities from the prying eyes of outsiders.

Similar observations are evident in Winslow's exploration of houses in Walangama, a village located in North Western Province, Sri Lanka. Winslow (2016) considers the interplay between private and public spaces within the *gedara* and how the internal layout and the exterior of the house reflect normative social interaction. The front veranda (*istōppuva*) of the house represents the most public area, while the kitchen (*kussiya*) at the rear, along with the latrine, are designated the most private spaces. Visitors enter the *istōppuva*, where they interact with household members, but typically do not proceed beyond the main rooms of the house without an invitation. In the village of Walangama, the villagers have transitioned to building more resilient houses using brick and cement, enabled by the prosperity of their pottery businesses. Nonetheless, Winslow demonstrates that despite this modernization, the utilization of space within the house has remained largely consistent from the ancient *pil gē*² to today's brick structures. Winslow claims that the internal layout of the house reinforces flexibility and togetherness rather than inviting separation and rupture (2016: 249). The exterior of the house acts as an index of economic prosperity but there is no social or economic stratification, as the occupants are united by their caste and occupation as potters (2016: 254). Furthermore, Winslow observes that the physical house and the domestic life inside it consistently influence each other and that more ethnographic study is needed to understand this relationship (2016: 255).

One direction that ethnographic study has taken is to focus on women's roles, responsibilities, and emotions in the home. Feminist literature has illuminated that homes not only cultivate a sense of belonging, security, and self-worth, but also serve as arenas of tension, discord, and violence. Within the home, women's lives can be confined by intersecting influences and by gender-based hierarchies often reinforced by state authority. The theme of care and responsibility is a prevalent thread in attempts to understand this ambivalence. While a substantial portion of anthropological literature concerning Sinhalese houses emphasizes the connection between the *gedara* and men (Heslop 2022; Leach 1961; Tambiah 1958), in practical terms, it is women who are more intimately tied to the *gedara* owing to their roles as wife and mother. An essential obligation for women within a *gedara* is food preparation, a time-intensive task in rural settings (Leach 1961; R.D. MacDougall & MacDougall 1977; Yalman 1967). Additionally, women shoulder the responsibility of caring for children and elderly family members residing within the house or nearby (Chapin 2014; Gamburd 2021; Schrijvers 1985). Hewamanne's (2003) and Lynch's (1999) studies of women employed in free trade zones and rural garment factories illustrate that the proximity of women to their homes and whether they return before nightfall serve as markers of their respectability and morality. Furthermore, Gamburd's work in Southern Sri Lanka presents a compelling illustration of the challenges women face when attempting to move away from the house. Her research explains how women's roles as wives and mothers transformed when they took on the role of the family's breadwinner after migrating to the Middle East as domestic labourers. However, the absence of a wife and mother in the household is publicly noted and seen as a cause for a husband's gambling, smoking, drinking, and infidelity, as well as unruly and reckless behaviour in children. The caregiving responsibilities undertaken by wives and mothers are categorized as 'women's work', which, if performed by a man, is seen as diminishing his masculinity (Gamburd 2000). Consequently, men are socially constrained from adopting caregiving roles, leading to disruption within the family and the household. Reflecting on these societal norms, regulations pertaining to female migration were

altered in 2013, limiting women's departure from the household to work abroad (Abeyasekera & Jayasundere 2017). These circumstances illustrate that even the state subscribes to the belief that women should be confined to their traditional domestic roles, as their absence is perceived as a catalyst for moral decay and the disintegration of the family.

The women I discuss in this article mostly rely on their husbands or other male relatives for financial support to fulfil the caregiving duties entrusted to them. This dependency grants men power over women, sometimes backed up by domestic violence. Schrijvers (1985) and de Zoysa (1995) contend that women employ strategic and shrewd approaches to assert their authority and resist male dominance.³ Notwithstanding such tactics, Abeyasekera claims that domestic violence is normalized in urban Sri Lanka. She argues that women are revered in religious and cultural contexts not only for their nurturing abilities but also for their capacity to endure violence. This is considered an embodiment of idealized feminine qualities such as selflessness, patience, and endurance (Abeyasekera 2023). Across all these accounts, it becomes evident that women often do not openly communicate their emotions or feelings about what goes on within the home. Instead, they resort to strategic measures or simply accept the treatment they received as an expression of the feminine virtues necessary for an ideal home environment. Marecek (2006) indicates possible consequences of these contradictions in her research into suicide and self-harm among young women in Southern Sri Lanka. She identifies how these tragic acts become ways of expressing difficult emotions between family members. In my own research, I focus on women's efforts to prevent such dire consequences within the home whilst striving to uphold the moral standing and public reputation of the family. In the next section, I describe the place of the house in the village in which I lived and its role in women's lives.

The village

Divulvæva is claimed by its residents to be a *purana* (ancient) village in which everyone belonged to the cultivator or *govigama* caste. This is not only the highest caste in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy but also the one with most members.⁴ In the early 1970s, the village had come under the Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP).⁵ The village of Divulvæva was made a part of its System H.⁶ The original *purana* village lost much of its original physical and social structure as a result of the MDP. For instance, the state claimed the lands owned by elites and implemented a programme of redistribution ensuring that every married couple received half-acre plots to build a house and two and a half acres of paddy land for cultivation. Consequently, the feudal patron-client system was dismantled and in its place a power hierarchy based on class emerged (Hettige 1984; Perera 1985). The village was reshaped along a network of eight roads with houses situated on either side of them. The road network served as the basis for grouping the villagers for different tasks by the newly established village organizations (*samithi*). Such alliances were crucial to build familiarity and neighbourly bonds among those who lived along the same road (Udalagama 2018).

Although the majority of villagers still make a living by cultivation, population growth has put considerable pressure on the plots given to the original settlers. Paddy lands have been divided through inheritance or sold as families struggle to make enough from cultivation. There has been much diversification of employment within families. A phosphate factory nearby was a source of employment for the men in the village. In addition, employment with the military was also popular. The wealthiest in the village

were entrepreneurs who had businesses in the nearby town. The poorest worked as tenant farmers. The women in the village mostly worked in the house carrying out domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and rearing children. Most women in the village used two-seater scooters to get about. It was a common sight in the village to see women taking their young children to school or for tuition classes. Sometimes, they would take sacks of grain to the mill or baskets of laundry to be washed in the canal on their scooters. Going to the tank or the canal to wash laundry and bathe was a social event for the women. It is here that the village women would discuss their favourite teledramas and update themselves on village gossip. Accompanying village women to the canal or the tank proved to be one of the main ways in which I got to know them, their lives, and the problems they faced.

In the first three months of my fieldwork in Divulvæva, I completed a household survey to get to know the village better. Anusha, who was from a respectable family in the village, assisted me in the survey and I learned much about Divulvæva and its inhabitants from her. The village at the time consisted of 256 households and I managed to obtain information from 235 of them. From the houses that were surveyed, 68 per cent were nuclear households. All married couples had opted to build a house of their own rather than live with parents. For 51 per cent of the couples, Divulvæva was the husband's village (*diga*), and for 26 per cent, it was the wife's village (*binna*).⁷ Eight per cent of the couples were newly settled in Divulvæva and 15 per cent claimed that both partners were from the village. Most women surveyed led traditional roles as wives and mothers depending on their husbands to provide an income. For them, to be recognized positively in the community was mostly evaluated in terms of the state of their marriage and family life. This point is illustrated in the stories of two village women, Manjula and Lata.

Preserving the marriage

When I was introduced to Manjula, a woman from the village, my friend Nandavati said 'this is a courageous woman' (*me inne diriya katak*). When I later asked Manjula why Nandavati had described her that way, she began to describe the hardships she had endured in her life. She was married to Kumara at the age of 17. The couple had four children. Kumara raised cattle and was a tenant farmer. However, one season, about five years ago, the family had lost their harvest owing to floods. As they farm on tenancy, the couple still had to pay the landlord. This incident had led Kumara to become a drunkard and to attempt suicide. Kumara, who joined the conversation, explained that he attempted suicide because Manjula argued with him about his behaviour:

I took the one bag of rice we had in the house and sold it to buy a bottle of arrack. While drinking, I wondered whether to live or die. When I came home, a landowner had come and shouted at her [Manjula]. She also shouted at me. I took the can of Round Up⁸ and drank it while walking up the hill away from the house. I started vomiting; I think most of the poison was out because I vomited. Then some people took me to the hospital. It did not matter to me if I lived or died.

Manjula then took over the story: 'After that day [the day Kumara attempted suicide], I took the burden onto my shoulders; I knew that he could not handle the problems. I had to safeguard him'. She went on to describe how she took on various jobs: working in a hotel kitchen, weaving coconut mats and cane baskets. At a point at which her household might have fallen apart, Manjula was able to earn enough to keep it together, and this was why she was known as a courageous woman. She later told me that they

had managed to buy four cows and were now able to pay the debt they owed to their landlord. Moreover, the children were now grown up and so could help her in the home and with her other work. After enduring much suffering and hardship, Manjula had achieved a degree of stability in the home: 'I know there are women who break down at the slightest problem; I tell them to take me as an example.'

A similar narrative was related to me by Lata, a woman I got to know during the household survey. Lata lived with her husband, Navaratne, in a house surrounded by a banana cultivation. I was told that Lata is the one who maintains the cultivation as Navaratne is suffering from kidney disease (*vakugadu amaruva*).⁹ However, Navaratne's illness was only the most recent problem they'd had to face. They had received land from the MDP in 1970s which they farmed and earned a livelihood from. However, a dispute over the land saw them entangled in a legal case that went on for about thirty years. By the time they had won the case, Navaratne said they had 'grown old and lost the energy to farm.' The tension created by the ongoing land issue had led Navaratne to drink poison three times. Lata explained how she dealt with the problems:

I was tolerant (*ivasuvā*); I always thought I would win one day. He would get drunk and hit me. He broke my arm once. But I was scared that he would abandon me with the children. I walk in the fields and do some work and forget the problem. If a woman has no tolerance, the family is over. Only a woman can make a man good or bad. I could tolerate; I used to think of the problems. I had no one to take advice. He will get angry and go away. But a woman cannot get angry.

When I asked her how she could tolerate such violence, she explained the importance of a woman's acceptance of her problems and the consequences of not doing so:

My mother always told me to preserve my marriage (*digē kadā ganna epā*). A man will never bow down to a woman. My parents were very good. They do the housework together, they go to the *chena* [slash-and-burn cultivation] together, to bathe in the tank together. I remember what she told me. I taught my daughters the same. I taught them to cook and do farming. I would wake them early in the morning even at the weekend. Their father would say to let them sleep a bit longer as it is the weekend and I tell him that I have to teach them to be married without problems. My eldest daughter tells me of this even now. She has a good family life because I taught her well. Nowadays, children break marriages because they have no tolerance. When my daughters tell me of problems, I tell them your mother had more problems than that and won so your problems are nothing. I have gained peace now because of my tolerance then.

Lata's explanation illustrates the responsibilities that women must carry on their shoulders in the interest of maintaining the home. They should not show anger and often tolerate domestic violence. Even in the face of serious physical and emotional abuse, women are not expected to quit the marriage. If a marriage does founder, it is invariably the woman who is shamed and blamed by society. To divorce is to leave 'marriage ajar' (*kasadē ærila*), and this carelessness is seen as the fault of the woman. In a similar vein, Kapadia illuminates how women in Tamil Nadu have internalized the values that are commended to them and see their roles as wives as founded upon suffering and self-sacrifice. Women do not publicly express the difficulties they face but in private acknowledge that 'kinship burns!' (Kapadia 1995: 43). As in Divulvæva, the women Kapadia describes recognize that kinship and family can prove destructive to their interests, but they opt to hide their difficulties and only speak of it with other women, if at all.

In this section, I have presented instances highlighting the challenges that women encounter in striving to attain the ideals of domestic life. These challenges stem from immediate factors linked to the economic hardships experienced by families, which

subsequently manifest as domestic conflicts. In this unfortunate cycle, women are often held accountable and subjected to victimization – a circumstance they are expected to endure with courage and resilience. Men's acts of self-inflicted harm or harm towards others convey their inability to manage mounting pressures. For their part, women assume responsibility for the family and thereby conform to gender norms. In the next section, I introduce the house as a key element in attempts to understand and manage domestic conflict. This analysis places houses within a moral hierarchy. Subsequently, I explore how houses become instrumental in supporting women's endeavours to preserve their marriages and potentially avert the occurrence of violence.

Public assessment of houses in Divulvæva

What struck me as curious in Divulvæva was that most houses appeared to be half-built. Many of these houses were situated in the half-acre plots given by the MDP. As the village had grown, these plots were now occupied by several generations, with the majority being young families living in classic nuclear family arrangements. The floor plans of their half-built houses suggested modern houses in the making: that is, ones that would eventually have asbestos or clay-tile roofs, tiled marble floors, ceilings, inside toilets, and pantries. Another feature of such houses would be parapet walls or fences with gates bordering their land. In the midst of these houses-in-the-making could be found the ancestral houses inherited by children or grandchildren of early settlers in the village. Some of these houses had been renovated by subsequent generations to look more like a modern house by including tiled floors instead of cement floors and installing pantry cupboards in the kitchen. Other ancestral houses were not so well maintained and had fading paint, broken roof tiles and floors, and windows and doors that would not shut properly. At the time of my fieldwork, there were only one or two of the original thatched houses in the village.

The visible state of a house was an obvious and very public reflection of the economic condition of the family living in it. Those whose house construction was finished were assumed to be successful and comparatively wealthy. Those with a half-built house or an unmaintained ancestral one led people to draw the opposite conclusion. Indeed, for the majority of families in the village, the economic struggle they were facing was evident from the appearance of their houses. As one farmer said, 'We build our house in the same way as a wasp builds its nest, little by little'. Those who engage in farming earn most of their money after harvesting the main or *maha* season crop of rice. It is only at this time that they are likely to have money to add another bit to their house. Building a house may prove to be a lifetime's work. As one villager put it: 'Ultimately, we never get to live in a completed house. My goal is to have a completed house at least to keep my dead body. And at least my children will have a good house to live in'.

Another aspect of the public evaluation of houses was the way in which the women I spoke with would differentiate houses as 'good' (*hoñda geyak*) or 'problematic' (*prasna tiyena geyak*). When I further enquired about what they meant, they would report details of what had gone on in the houses, and especially in the problematic ones. Houses were clearly being used as a way of indexing families within a moral hierarchy. Anusha provided just such an assessment:

Shanti *akka's* [classificatory elder sister] house is a good house. Anura *aiya* [classificatory elder brother] and Shanti *akka* were very close. They never argued or shouted at each other. Even their two children are very good. The daughter represented Sri Lanka in netball. She went to Malaysia for a tournament too. The son is also a very good boy. He is working in a hotel in Trincomalee now. Even

I take them as an example to live well. But Anjali's house is not a good house. Her husband Nissanka doesn't do any work. He stays inside the house all day then goes drinking with friends in the evening. Anjali wanted to go to work at a garment factory, but Nissanka fought with Anjali and did not let her go. When he starts hitting her, we must go to save her. But that Nissanka is not easy to handle. He is such a bad man; he comes and watches when I bathe at our well too.

In Anusha's estimation, one of the main things that identifies a house as a problem house is the occurrence of violence. This is hardly surprising in a society in which Buddhism is deep-rooted and a quiet calm is expected where conduct is concerned. Loud voices and breaking objects alert neighbours to domestic dispute and strife. Such incidents draw in neighbours and gossip soon travels around the village. Problem houses and the families that live in them impact on the moral status of the family in the community. Public knowledge of the problems the family is facing is a humiliation for them. As Obeyesekere argued forty years ago, public perceptions of the failure to meet the expectations of others results in a profound sense of shame (*læjja*). The pairing of shame with the fear (*baya*) of being shamed is a powerful feature of the socialization of Sinhalese children (Obeyesekere 1984: 504). In adult life, notions of respectability, particularly for women, are deeply engrained (de Alwis 1997), and this may go some way to explaining why women go to such lengths to remedy or conceal things that may bring shame upon their families. A wide range of issues fall into this category, including children involved in unsuitable love relationships, husbands struggling with alcoholism and unemployment, fertility problems, extramarital relationships, suicide attempts, and teenage elopements and pregnancies. These are among the primary sources of shame for a woman and her family. All of these adverse events disrupt the normative order and cast a negative light on the moral standing of both the household and its inhabitants. In the following section, I delve into the question of causality and explore how the house comes to be perceived as the origin of a family's problems. Once we position this within a broader cosmological framework, we can begin to explain misfortune and social conflicts originating from the house, making it possible to seek remedies or, at the very least, alleviate these problems.

The fault of the house

When out walking, I noticed that at the side of Anjali's house, an area had been separated off with a piece of string. Anjali was tending to her plants in the garden, and I asked what the string was for. She explained that the string marked out an area where a new kitchen was to be built. Anjali's mother had brought in an astrologer, Sunil, to help diagnose why they were having such a lot of bad luck in the household. The astrologer informed them that the hearth was in the wrong direction, and they should build a separate kitchen. Sunil had travelled from a village about 15 kilometres away from Divulvæva. He was known for his ability to read horoscopes and to identify the faults (*dosha*) in houses that are causing problems for their inhabitants. He is well known in Divulvæva, and when he visits a house for a consultation, other women in the neighbourhood often request him to visit their houses too. He takes 500 rupees (GBP 2.50) from each house for his services and easily makes more than 3,000 rupees (GBP 15.00) upon one visit to the village.¹⁰ He was knowledgeable in an architectural and design theory that originated in ancient India known as *vāsthū vidyāva*, which translates literally as the science of architecture, thereby making an explicit link between the configuration of the house and material prosperity.



Figure 1. The gaps in front of Premalata's *gedara*. (Photograph by the author.)

Premalata, a woman in her early sixties, sought out Sunil's services because they were having problems in the house. Her husband, Jagoda, made a living by doing construction work. But in recent times he had not received any contracts. They had to sell their two trucks in order to pay off debts. The year before, Jagoda had had a heart attack that required him to undergo expensive surgery and aftercare. Their two sons were married but unemployed. They lived in half-built houses on the same plot of land as their parents, on whom they relied for support. Premalata worried deeply about the family's problems, opining that 'even at this old age I have no peace'. One response that she was keen to explore was whether the house was the cause of their tribulations. She consulted Sunil and I happened to be at her house when he arrived. He walked around the house and said that they had lost all their 'wealth luck' (*dhana vāsanava*) because their house is very poorly built and does not adhere to the *vāsthu vidyāva*. Sunil said that Premalata's house was full of *dosha* and advised her to change the main door, break the wall dividing their living room and dining room, and change the kitchen altogether by shifting it to the southeast corner of the house. Sunil announced that the hearth is burning all the wealth in the house because it is not built to the southeast.

After Sunil's diagnosis, Premalata began to make changes to her house the very next day. She could not afford to employ others to do the renovations to the house, so she and her husband set to work removing the main door and sealing the old entrance with an old plywood sheet. Their next-door neighbour, Kalubanda, also helped them. Together, the two men broke a part of the front wall as per Sunil's instructions and made a new entrance to the house. A new main door had to be made because the measurements given for the new entrance were different to the old one. Premalata and Jagoda had no money for a new door, so they simply used the old door to cover the gap (Fig. 1). The gaps remained for several months until they had funds to do something about them. In the meantime, the house was filled with dust and regularly visited by stray dogs. It was also a security risk because anyone could enter the house. Premalata was clearly fed up that they had started renovations that they had no way to finish. However, she claimed



Figure 2. Changing the front of Nandavati's *gedara*. (Photograph by the author.)

that after changing the main entrance of the house, Jagoda had secured a construction contract in Polonnaruwa.¹¹ She said that with the money from this work they could finish the repair of the house. For Premalata, the fact that Jagoda found work affirmed Sunil's predictions. She said: 'That man [Sunil] breaks and changes all the houses in the village, but afterwards everyone and everything becomes good' (*ē minihā gamēma geval kadalā venas karanava, ē vunath īta passē hari yanava*).

In another example, Piyasiri and Nandavati, in whose house I lived when in Divulvæva, also made changes to their house. Again, Sunil had said that because the front roof was built incorrectly, it would not allow them to have wealth. Nandavati noted that the existence of many black ants and caterpillars inside the house also signalled that there were faults. The roof of their front porch had three supporting beams. The central beam directly divided the main entrance into two. This for Sunil was a major 'fault' in the building, which had the effect of making wealth leave the house rather than remain within it. The flaws identified were also said to be harming Piyasiri – the head of the household – as he was often falling and injuring himself. Following Sunil's visit, Nandavati asked her son to come over and together with Piyasiri they demolished the front porch and built a long veranda with pillars (Fig. 2). To fund the renovation, Nandavati used the money she saved from selling betel plants and the money I gave her for renting two rooms in the house. In each of these examples, women were keen to identify the physical structure of the house as the source of their misfortunes.

Why blame the house?

In his research among merchants in Dambulla, Central Province, Sri Lanka, Heslop (2022) relates the story of a haunted house. An ongoing dispute among male kinsmen of a merchant family disrupts the harmonious relations in the family. At the peak of the dispute, one household is believed to be haunted by two ghosts (*prēta*). After consultations with an oracle, an exorcism is the proposed solution to rid the house of the source of the family's problems. Interestingly, the exorcism is performed in the ancestral house (*maha gedara*) of the family rather than in the actual haunted house. Heslop goes

on to argue that the ancestral family home is an intersubjective space that connects the men in dispute as kin. The mutual constitution of space and bodies within leads him to conclude that 'the haunting of the house is the possession of the family, not a symbolic rending of the family's problems, because the house is part of the family' (Heslop 2022: 416). This reading of the house, while highlighting that the house and its dwellers are part of one another, allows the treatment of one to heal the other. While Heslop's and my own account both settle on the materiality of the house as something more than just a physical container, my experience in Divulvæva points to a rather different framework of meaning and explanation. I should emphasize that this is not a question of interpretations being right or wrong. Rather, it is a reflection of the complex array of systems that enable people to diagnose their misfortunes. Put bluntly, the diagnosis and prognosis will vary according to which kind of practitioner is hired to do the job (Bob Simpson, pers. comm.).

In Divulvæva, women attempt to rid themselves of the problems in their households by restructuring their houses using the knowledge of the science of architecture. The discipline of anthropology views architecture as a significant expression of culture (B.G. MacDougall 2008: 14). In the quest to unravel the significance of architecture in South Asia, a collection of literature encompassing dwelling designs emerges – a rich amalgamation of building practices, astrological postulations, divinatory procedures, and construction rites – serving as a starting point. The roots of this 'science' can be traced back to India and the work of the ancient sages or *rishis*, believed to have received their wisdom from the gods during Vedic times. Within the Sri Lankan context, notable texts such as the Sinhala *Mayimataya* and *Uluwahu Pænima* and the Tamil *Sri Lalitha Navaratnam Manaiadi Sastiram* are encountered (B.G. MacDougall 2008: 15). These texts illuminate the profound connections between architecture and cosmological models, showcasing how buildings influence the social world. This knowledge made its way into Sinhala from Sanskrit, thanks to an unknown author and the text *Mayimata*, which emerged in 1837 (B.G. MacDougall 2008). The original Sanskrit version comprised thirty-six chapters and addressed various building construction methods. However, the *Mayimata* is a significantly condensed volume, consisting of 284 rhyming quatrains. Coomaraswamy, commenting on the *Mayimata*, described it as more of an 'astrological handbook and guide to the reading of omens' than a 'manual of craftsmanship' (1956 [1908]: 121). Consequently, the work provides extensive prescriptions regarding materials, sites, building orientations, dimensions, and the layout of timbers, posts, and doorways. It also emphasizes the importance of commencing different stages of house construction at auspicious times or *nækata*. Adhering to such prescriptions is believed to ensure wealth and prosperity for the household, albeit with a presumption that this primarily benefits the male head of the household (B.G. MacDougall 2008: 49). These diagnostic and divinatory techniques exhibit close overlaps with astrology and Ayurvedic medicine (B.G. MacDougall 2008: 23).

Conclusion

In the recent 'ethical turn' within anthropology, the significance of material objects and spaces is sometimes regarded as a mere context or a backdrop against which complex intersubjectivities shape social life (Lambek 2010; 2015). For instance, in Lambek's exploration of ordinary ethics, he argues that ethics are inherent in the human experience. Humans speak and act with ethical implications, assessing their own

actions and those of others, acknowledging or refusing acknowledgement, engaging in caregiving, and becoming aware of their shortcomings (Lambek 2010: 1). Lambek asserts that the everyday nature of ethics becomes evident particularly in instances of breaches or within situations where the right course of action is uncertain or disputed (2010: 2). Likewise, Keane (2015) proposes that individuals operate within a moral framework that guides their conduct and interactions, leading to the explicit manifestation of ethics. In the village under examination in this article, the failure of wives to align their behaviour with a patriarchal ideology that mandates them to be responsible for harmonious homes and marriages constitutes precisely such a breach. Ideally, women's actions reflect a natural expression of ethics, and, as Das points out (2015: 54), their actions play a crucial role in sustaining their worlds. This implies that ethicality isn't composed of judgements reached from a distance but is rather constructed by directly and actively engaging in relations with others through words and actions. When women conform to expected behaviour, they are acknowledged positively and praised for their courage, patience, and resilience. Conversely, women who fall short of these expectations and whose domestic lives are marked by conflict, turmoil, and domestic violence can be perceived as anything from unfortunate victims of their own karma to active instigators of their predicaments. In this interpretation, the relationships women maintain with others, especially when breaches and ruptures occur, become pivotal in understanding the practical manifestation of ordinary ethics (Das 2015; Keane 2015). In the narratives explored in this article, I have extended this perspective by introducing the physical and cosmological aspects of the house as crucial in managing domestic strife. The means by which these kinds of resolutions are achieved involves resort to ancient texts relating to house construction and notably the science of architecture or *vāstu vidyava*.

In making *vāstu vidyava* resonate in the present day, I would draw attention to three areas of transposition: the focus on domestic strife, the different meanings of wealth, and the rhetorical appeal to tradition. In the original texts, the consequences of not following the rules of housebuilding are primarily reckoned in terms of illness, early death, and a lack of prosperity for the head of the household. In the present day, oversights in proper house construction are also seen as causing domestic conflict between a husband and wife. Within the family, attempts to attach blame are likely to prove counter-productive, particularly if it is women who are doing the blaming. As Premalata pointed out: 'Families become problematic when the woman argues with the man for not earning enough money. After getting married, both should know to share the suffering and comfort'. Widger (2012; 2015) notes that blame is a threat to masculinity that can result in violence directed against the self or others. Therefore, by deflecting the blame for misfortunes onto the house, the unity of the family might be preserved and public standing upheld. As such, the house becomes a suitable object of blame rather than the family members themselves. This kind of transference is evident in a wide range of rituals that deal with misfortune or *dosha* (Obeyesekere 1984). What is worthy of note here is that it is women who do the work of consulting astrologers and identifying courses of action to renovate their houses, and indeed often find the money and labour to do this. For women, the displacement of conflict onto the house in the absence of other means to deal with it is part and parcel of what they feel they must do as wives and mothers.

The second area of transposition is in relation to 'wealth'. In the *Mayimata*, the wealth referred to is primarily agricultural and set against a broadly feudal backdrop. In

present-day Divulvæva, the economy is decidedly mixed. Rice cultivation sits alongside wage labour activities, and consumption practices are those of the modern marketplace. Houses operate as prime sites for the visible translation of wealth into status. Villages such as Divulvæva have undergone significant economic transformation as new forms of wage labour bring in money and a wide range of opportunities for consumption. What follows from this is that houses and even very incremental changes in their appearance also become targets for jealousy (*irsiyava*) and the evil eye, both of which can translate into negative consequences for the occupants of the house. Attempts to realign the house with protective forces in the cosmos thus become serious concerns for householders. In addition to current interests in *vāstu vidyava*, one might consider the increase in *bahirava puja*, the propitiation of deities who are believed to inhabit the land and who have the power to protect houses and their occupants (Langer 2002).

Finally, regarding the third area of transposition, there is considerable rhetorical power in the appeal to ancient texts (Simpson 2004). The idea that present-day problems are rooted in a disregard for the morality and wisdom of ancient ways of doing things is powerfully recalled in the reprimands of Sunil. Knocking things down and starting again so that the material alignment of the house is more auspicious is a powerful metaphor for what needs to happen with relationships within the house. What this amounts to, however, is often the reinforcement of a patriarchal order in which women must learn to live with their subservience in the household domain.

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NOTES

¹ The fieldwork spanned fourteen months, from 2015 to 2016, and was carried out in a village located in North Central Province, Sri Lanka. The identities of all villagers and the village itself have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality in this research.

² Winslow (2016) describes a *pil gē* as a traditional house that measures about 750 square feet, with a raised mudbrick structure, plastered walls, and palm-thatched roof. A typical feature of a *pil gē* is a wide front veranda (*istōppu*), overlooking the *midula* (swept front yard) that's open to passersby.

³ They carried out fieldwork in North Central Province in the 1980s and 1990s. Their fieldsites, like mine, were part of System H of the Mahaweli Development Programme, explained further in notes 5 and 6.

⁴ The Sinhala caste system in Sri Lanka is not based on religion or purity as is the Hindu caste system. The Sinhala caste system was founded on duty to the king (*rajakariya*) that linked up castes with occupations. The structure of the caste system can be best described as an inverted pyramid where most of the Sinhala population were from the highest caste, *govigama*.

⁵ The project built hydroelectric power stations to produce electricity for the country. The course of the waters of the largest river in the island, the Mahaweli, was changed and dammed to achieve the goals of this project. Thirteen newly irrigated systems were developed in the central, northern, and eastern provinces and resettled with landless and unemployed families. This area covers 39 per cent of the island. Villages that already existed in the areas were absorbed into the project. The project has met with much criticism as it changed the socioeconomic structures of the island. Moreover, it is seen as an effort to create a barrier of

Sinhalese settlements between the Tamil-populated North and the majority-Sinhala South. It is thought to have invoked resentment that fuelled the civil war in Sri Lanka (Muggah 2008).

⁶ System H was the first area to be developed under the MDP in the 1980s. It is situated in the Anuradhapura district of North Central Province.

⁷ *Diga* (virilocal) and *binna* (uxorilocal) are two forms of marriage found among the Sinhalese. *Diga* refers to a scenario where a woman is taken to the husband's village after marriage, while *binna* is when the man goes to live in the woman's village after marriage. Leach (1961) explains that these two forms are related to property inheritance. In the case where a man possesses enough property to sustain himself in his own village, he typically enters into a *diga* marriage. However, if a man has less or no property of his own, he may choose to marry a woman who possesses property that needs to be managed, and in such cases, he moves to live in her village. It's important to note that in a *binna* marriage, the man may not hold as much power as he would in a *diga* marriage.

⁸ Round Up is a weedkiller used in paddy fields.

⁹ Chronic kidney disease of unknown aetiology (CKDu) is prevalent mainly in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. According to data reported in the *Annual Health Bulletin* of 2005, there was a doubling in the hospital mortality rate for diseases of the genitourinary system between 1980 and 2005. Several studies have explored the prevalence of CKDu, but no concrete evidence has emerged to support a specific environmental nephrotoxin as the sole cause. It's possible that the high levels of fluoride, the widespread use of agrochemicals like pesticides, and the presence of heavy metals such as cadmium, lead, and uranium in soil and water sources contribute to the high prevalence of CKDu in certain areas. Some studies have also suggested the involvement of mycotoxins, the use of herbal or ayurvedic medicines, smoking, and a history of snakebites as potential factors. It's conceivable that a combination of two or more of these factors, possibly having a synergistic effect, contributes to the development of CKDu, which often starts at a younger age, typically among men engaged in agriculture, around 40 to 60 years old (World Health Organization 2008).

¹⁰ I converted the monetary figures using the average exchange rates from 2015–16, where 1 LKR was equal to GBP 200.

¹¹ Polonnaruwa is a town about 95 kilometres from the village.

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La faute à la maison : les efforts des femmes d'un village rural singhalais pour préserver leur mariage

Résumé

Les tensions conjugales, débouchant souvent sur des violences, sont un problème de plus en plus aigu dans les régions rurales du Sri Lanka. La maison, théâtre fréquent de ces tensions, devient à la fois la source des problèmes et leur possible solution. Par l'étude des interactions entre les dimensions sociales, matérielles et symboliques des maisons, l'autrice montre comment les femmes donnent formes aux relations sociales et à la vie domestique. Plus précisément, elle décrit la façon dont la maison devient un espace où la femme est censée incarner les idéaux de la conjugalité et de la maternité, pour créer et entretenir « une bonne maison ». À partir de recherches ethnographiques menées sur quatorze mois dans un village rural, elle illustre la manière dont les femmes emploient des stratégies actives pour faire de leur maison un espace épargné par la violence conjugale. Elle décrit comment, en plus de leurs rôles traditionnels dans le soin aux autres, les femmes emploient la science de l'architecture (*vāstu vidyava*) pour restructurer leur maison de façon à promouvoir la paix et la prospérité. La maison devient ainsi une alliée stratégique qui les aide à atteindre la « bonne vie » après laquelle elles aspirent.

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