

The end of bamboo houses in northern Laos

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Abstract

While we know much about the beginnings of houses, we rarely know about their endings. Yet, to understand the temporality of houses and the entanglement of the biographies of houses and their residents, the analysis of their endings is particularly relevant. The case of Khmu houses is especially suggestive here, for it shows that the end of a house is not an exceptional phenomenon, nor a symptom of crisis, but an inevitable and intended part of its life cycle. Unintended ends, on the other hand, may continue to be animated. While bamboo houses can be assumed to have reached their end due to the widespread use of timber and, increasingly, of concrete. However, bamboo as a building material still appears convenient for fulfilling certain ends, which means that it may resurface even in novel ways.

KEYWORDS

bamboo houses, life cycle, death, Laos, Southeast Asia, materiality

Resumen

Si bien sabemos mucho sobre los inicios de las casas, raramente sabemos acerca de sus finales. Sin embargo, para entender la temporalidad de las casas y el intrincamiento de las biografías de las casas y sus residentes, el análisis de sus finales es particularmente relevante. El caso de las casas Khmu es especialmente sugestivo aquí, porque muestra que el final de una casa no es un fenómeno excepcional, ni un síntoma de una crisis, sino una inevitable y destinada parte de su ciclo de vida. Finales sin intención, de otra parte, pueden continuar siendo animados. Mientras se puede asumir que las casas de bambú pueden haber llegado a su final debido al amplio uso de la madera y, crecientemente, del concreto. Sin embargo, el bambú como un material de construcción aún parece conveniente para cumplir ciertos fines, lo cual significa que este puede resurgir incluso en formas novedosas. [casas de bambú, ciclo de vida, muerte, Laos, Asia Suroriental, materialidad,]

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In upland northern Laos, bamboo houses seem to be approaching their end. Two distinct incidents exemplify the different ways this statement can be understood.

When Sii's¹ new house was to be built in the cold season of 2014/2015, their previous one—a neat but small bamboo house—was to be dismantled. I went with Ma Sen, one of my close interlocutors and neighbors, in the early, still-chilly morning hours in the upland Khmu village called Pliya to the adjacent neighborhood where more and more female and male villagers, all kin in one way or another of the house of Sii, were assembled. “The house of Sii,” as will be detailed below, is a locally common way of referring to a building but also the social unit it houses by including the name of the firstborn in the child's generation, here Sii. Sii, his two younger brothers, and his parents had already moved out of their bamboo house into a bamboo workshop building² close by, which was to be a liminal dwelling period until their new house was built and inaugurated. The bamboo house in which the children had spent all of their lives was dismantled quickly and without any ado, so that it appeared only as preliminary work, after which the preparation of the ground for the new building could begin. Their new house was planned to be a more refined structure intended to reflect the couple's aspirations: though the upper floor was made of wood and built on stilts in a rather ordinary manner, the ground level was encased with a wall of concrete blocks. It was, in fact, the first semi-concrete house built in the village, after which many houses built with concrete were to follow (Stolz, 2021a, 2021d), apparently replacing the bamboo and timber houses that only a few years ago had made up the built landscape of Pliya.

Around the same time, an elderly woman finally moved out of her bamboo house, and also out of the village, to join her elder son, who had moved into his wife's village. Moving out of the village was not simply a logistical matter for Ya Pəŋ. Instead, her belonging to the village in which she had spent the greater part of her life, raised children, and cultivated upland rice fields had to be undone before she could be introduced to her new village and house. Undoing belonging is, indeed, a precarious ritual affair (Stolz, 2021d), and before the ritual disintegration could commence, her house had to be dismantled. Before it was even noon, the house had been deconstructed, and almost no traces were left that would indicate that the plain spot in the village had been a house just hours earlier.

Both of these brief snippets of longer events, parts of which are related below, have the end of bamboo houses as their subject—albeit in different ways. The end of the bamboo house of Sii was a jolly occasion, with Sii's parents awaiting the new, more-modern house that was to be built. Like so many other villagers in Pliya today, Sii's parents wished their bamboo house to be history sooner rather than later, in favor of a variant of the theme of an aspirational concrete house. The end of bamboo houses is, here, ambiguous: firstly, one particular instance of the bamboo house comes to an end to be replaced with a better, nonbamboo house, and secondly, it might be the case that the era of the bamboo house in general is approaching its end. While the latter, especially, might be an end to be mourned for nostalgically minded anthropologists (Angé and Berliner, 2014), the second example points to the local perspective on the value of clear endings: as will be shown, for a person's well-being and belonging, clear-cut beginnings and endings are key, which is why the beginning of a house life in her new village required the elderly woman first to watch her old house being torn down and cease to exist.

Houses are not merely static, physical structures but are in motion and changing, along with the lives of their residents, as is widely discussed in anthropology (Carsten, 2018; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995). Recently, João Biehler and Federico Neiburg (2021) suggested the term “house-ing” to attest to the processual nature of dwelling and the ways in which people and houses mutually shape each other through time and space. In fact, in the dwelling trajectory of the initially mentioned cases, phases of “house-ing” and “de-house-ing” literally build upon each other. While the beginnings of houses, here under construction, are receiving increasing attention in anthropology, the end of houses, though occurring just as often, is strikingly less analyzed and discussed. The end of houses, however, is good to think about. Based on ethnographic observations from long-term fieldwork in northern Laos, I explore different endings of houses and what they can tell us about the intersection of temporality, materiality, and (more-than-human) sociality.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS OF HOUSES

Houses as “dynamic entities” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995, 37) have been shown to change through time, together with their residents, in a joint process. This is discussed for the life cycle, or for even longer time periods (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 1999), but also for the rhythm of daily sociality that often unfolds around hearths (Carsten, 1997). These rhythms of socio-spatial processes in the house are shaped by the materiality of the house, as well as by wider socioeconomic and political shifts (Carsten, 2018; Elinoff, 2016). What is more, in Southeast Asia and beyond, houses are regarded as animated, as living entities, which Roxana Waterson ([1990] 2009) emphasizes with the term “the living house.” While there are differences across Southeast Asia regarding this ascription of vitality and even personhood to houses, a widely shared assumption is that the biographies of houses and their residents are closely connected (Carsten, 2018). The relative flexibility of bamboo houses and their close interconnection with house units in social, cosmological, and economic regards results in a close meshwork of the lives of houses and their residents. The term meshwork, indeed, fits particularly well with bamboo houses, whose walls are made of bamboo meshwork. They can be easily modified, repaired, and extended to meet the changing requirements of the residents. On a sensory level, their relative permeability allows for a diffusion of sounds, smells, and glimpses that produces a “community of voices” (Helliwell, 2006) that does not stop at walls. This is not necessarily idyllic; on the contrary, it can also open the door to social control. Given that houses are also assumed to be permeable for a wide range of nonhuman spirits

and forces, houses built on the wrong spot, from the viewpoint of their residents, for instance, can draw the whole resident group into misfortune and tragedy. The house materials can be contaminated by certain types of “blood” (literal or metaphorical) that are spilled in the house (Allerton, 2013; Zuckerman and Enfield, 2022). Haunting spirits may also sneak into the house and impact the lives of its residents (Telle, 2007). Somewhat comparable to the life cycles of persons, the life cycles of houses can be said to have beginnings and endings as well.

The beginnings of houses, their being built and inaugurated, receive particular attention in anthropology. Often ritually marked, bringing a wide set of kith and kin together, combining work and feasting and often relating to social values and more-than-human socialities and being part of aspirational future-making, house constructions are increasingly sparking the anthropological imagination: the beginnings of houses are discussed in terms of the display of success and consumption (Thomas, 1998), the formation and expression of aspirations (Archambault, 2018), personal networks and ritual continuities in contexts of migration (Leinaweaver, 2009), the performance of middle-class identity (Mercer, 2014; Page and Sunjo, 2018), the materialization of belonging of migrants (Dalakoglou, 2010; Lopez, 2010; Pauli and Bedorf, 2018), the making and remaking of cosmic order and ideologies (Bovensiepen, 2014), and the performance of social and spatial efficacy (Durand, 2016). In fact, house constructions and warmings are events that show how much a house is the result of social processes and is made through conviviality and liveliness (Allerton, 2013).

Houses and the lives of their residents are interwoven in manifold ways—and the passing of time plays a major role in this. A house may come into being or be occupied in a certain phase of a person’s or couple’s life cycle and will be subject to several changes throughout the growing and aging of its residents. In his seminal case, Maurice Bloch (1995) shows that Zafimaniry houses transform along with the life cycle of their residents. A key point in this case is marriage, which is closely entrenched with forming a house and hearth (72). Comparable to the marital unit, the house is assumed to harden. Through time, the house is said to acquire “bones” and, later, to become solid, firm, and dark due to the core wood applied to the house during its refurbishing. Anthropomorphic understandings of houses are, indeed, widespread (Blie, 1983; Buchli, 2013, 105ff; Waterson, [1990] 2009, 129–31).

When houses are assumed to be alive, at least in some ethnographic contexts, might they also be able to “die” (Motta, 2021)? Waterson ([1990] 2009, 135f.) describes an incident in a Torajan village in Indonesia in which she had conducted long-term research. A fire had destroyed the majority of the houses, including two ancestral houses. Waterson observed the rituals conducted after this disaster and found that the village was mourning in a way comparable to that following the death of a person. Yet houses can also be abandoned and left to rot with indifference, as Signe Howell (2003, 31) states with regard to the mobile Chewong of Malaysia. Even though the end of houses is given much importance in the ethnographic case presented here, the endings of houses are, with few exceptions, rarely ever explicitly reflected in ethnographic accounts. This emphasis on the liveliness of houses and their coming into being in the anthropological discourse on houses has interesting parallels with the stress laid in anthropological kinship studies on the beginnings of life (Lambek, 2011). Just as death can be revealing with regard to kinship matters (Lambek, 2011, 3; Stolz, 2021c), the death of a house is also a fruitful starting point for considering the nature of the house and the conjunction of sociality and materiality. Much less emphasis is given to how houses cease to exist, are demolished, or are abandoned. The latter is often presented in terms of crisis, exception, violence, or external intervention—which, in fact, it often is when it is the result of war, resettlement, or eviction, for example. Yet the dismantling, deconstruction, demolition, abandonment, or decay of houses might be intended and actively conducted by residents. Dismantling, as the following case will show, can be a rather ordinary, not exceptional, part of the unfolding of the “biographies” of houses.

HOUSE LIVES IN NORTHERN LAOS

Made of woven bamboo or wooden timber boards, erected on stilts, occasionally thatched with leaves, but nowadays much more often roofed with corrugated iron or roof tiles, Khmu houses exhibit a relative permeability (Stolz, 2021b; see also Damrong Tayanin, 1994, 28ff; Svantesson et al., 2014, 84ff) (Figure 1). Houses basically consist of one large room and a kitchen that may be located in a detached building, in a separate room under the same roof, or inside the main room. Increasingly, blinds or makeshift walls are used for privacy at night. Furniture is scarcely used, and a lack of visible partitions does not imply that the large main room is an undivided space. Quite the contrary, visitors know where or where not to sit down, and some parts of the house, the most intimate sleeping place of the “house father” and “house mother,” where the altar for the house spirits is located, may even be out of reach for some of its inhabitants.

The house is more than a mere shelter: belonging to a house mirrors and simultaneously founds social belonging among house-group members. In fact, the closest approximation to what we name “family” is in Khmu *khon kaay*,³ or “people of the house” (Évrard, 2006; Stolz, 2021c). Adults are aware that when attending a ritual or work event, they do so as representatives of their houses. A statement like “the house of Khwaay married the house of Sen” makes perfect sense to local ears. This is not, however, a house society in the sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1983, 1987) notion of the *sociétés à maison*, for, despite all the uncertainties surrounding the nature of this concept and its applicability to different Southeast Asian settings (see the discussion in Howell, 2003), Khmu houses are not the sole basis of local social organization. Instead, houses are part of patrilineal kin groups and are connected through affinal ties, according to the norm of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage (Stolz, 2021c). This does not in any way diminish the vital relevance of the house for Khmu locals; being part of the same house group connects the residents and urges them to work together, to eat from the same rice barns, and to conduct rituals addressing the ancestors together at the house.



FIGURE 1 An example of a bamboo house. (Photo: Author, 2020)

A bamboo house consisting of two rooms and a ladder leading up to the slightly elevated floor. Firewood and timber planks are stored underneath and clothing hung for drying outside. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

In fact, the house is the abode not only of humans and co-residing animals but also of spirits (*rooy*)—a fact that is tacitly acknowledged in daily life. Closely connected with houses is a particular type of spirit, ancestor spirits. Becoming an ancestor spirit (*rooy ta ya*) is a state of being that is sought after death and is carefully brought about by various rituals, the last of which entails the calling home of the ancestor spirit. After this ritual, the ancestor spirits are assumed to live in the house, which is why they are then merged in the entity called house spirit (*rooy kaan*) and supervise the doings and whereabouts of their subjects in ways that are more typical for spirits' rather than humans' point of view, which is why their sanctioning may appear ambivalent (benevolent as well as malevolent) to onlookers. However, "looking" is the wrong word here, for the spirits are invisible. What can be literally seen in houses is the buffalo skull attached to the back wall that bears testimony to the rituals conducted to venerate the ancestor spirits. Apart from this visual and tangible trace, local awareness of the eventual presence of spirits can be seen from the abstention from certain movements into and inside houses. These prohibited or avoided actions include not raising one's arms above the head, especially in the afternoon hours, for the spirits are assumed to stay in the attic, and not entering other houses indiscriminately and eating at the kitchen table in other houses.

The weight of these restrictions is not as heavy when one is young. With increasing social age, the awareness of these complexities needs to be put into practice. Elderly people will refrain from entering almost any other house because, as an elderly lady told me matter-of-factly, the ancestor spirits knew and may recognize them. Coming across an ancestor spirit and being recognized by them can have deteriorating effects for humans—the latter may be "greeted" (equaling a spirit-infliction) or drawn to join them. Spirits are also key in determining belonging, and they may sanction harshly anyone who does not belong to the house from the spirits' point of view, even if those people stay or live there. In any case, though evading our senses, the spirit dimension of houses is considered, albeit to varying extents, an eventual powerful force—something that is often post-facto acknowledged, as will be exemplified below.

The importance of houses in the lives of residents might escape the casual observer: houses are neither lavishly constructed, nor is it common to spend much time in one's own or others' houses. The working lives of Khmu villagers draw them away from houses and villages to the surrounding fields and forests, or to other destinations as labor migrants. Visiting other houses in the evenings is not done indiscriminately, and politeness and ritual prohibitions limit interhouse visits beyond those between close kin and neighbors and those on ritual occasions. This does not belie so much as underline the importance of the house. The intersection of the life cycle of human residents and the physical house, however, can be best seen in its dismantling.



FIGURE 2 A bamboo house is dismantled in almost no time. In its place now stands a semi-concrete house. (Photo: Author, 2015) The already widely dismantled remaining structure of a bamboo house is in the center, with a few people tearing down the wooden frame. To the left, women are watching the proceedings and chatting. Rice barns and bamboo plants are in the background. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

NOT MEANT TO BE PERMANENT: THE DISMANTLING OF KHMU HOUSES

When I went to participate in the erection of the new house of Sii (see Stolz, 2021d), I was surprised to find myself taking part in the dismantling of their older house first. The house that was to be demolished was a slightly elevated bamboo house, cozy but relatively small, for the couple and their three children. Occupied for several years by then, it was torn down in almost no time (see Stolz, 2023) (Figure 2). Houses whose walls and floors are made of woven bamboo mats could be erected without hammers or nails; the mats are tied to the wooden frames with bamboo strings. Detaching the parts and dismantling the structure went quickly; women, men, and even children were involved, and what could be reused was kept aside, while what was considered trash was either burned, thrown away to rot, or played with by the children. After only a few hours, there was almost nothing left, and the work group proceeded with preparing the soil for the new house.

This was not a sad occasion. On the contrary, the old house had to make way for the new one, which was regarded as a great improvement by the house-building couple, Ma and Yoḡ Sii. After the dismantling of their previous house, they had to move with their belongings into a temporary shelter for the duration of the construction. For the upcoming weeks, they would stay in a small workhouse, a workshop building that is an important vernacular public space and is used for certain ritual purposes (Stolz and Petit, 2020), where there is rarely enough space for cooking utensils, storage sacks, and persons at the same time; the spaces beneath the elongated roof at the front and under the roof were used as additional storage space. With their construction site immediately in front of the workhouse, their life and the rhythm of the house group was very much focused on the building process.

In their case, the need to dismantle the house was obvious, for the new house was to be erected on the same spot. But in all cases, the dismantling of the old house and the move to a temporary shelter or workhouse is a routine step in the construction of a house. When the new house is located elsewhere in the village, the dismantling may occur later, but in any case, it must take place before the final stages of the erection process that are heralded by the ritual “climbing” of the new house (*ka kaay*). During this ritual, the house-owning couple enters the house and is supported by the great wife-giver, who then makes the hearth and lights the first fire on it to ensure the well-being and fertility of the house group. It is not possible to stay in the old house until the new one is ready. For a new house to be erected properly, the previous one needs to be made absent.

While in the case of Ma and Yoḡ Sii’s new house, the dismantling marked not the end but the continuity of a house, in another case that I observed, it was very much meant to be final and irreversible. This was the house of Ya Pəḡ, mentioned above. The old woman had recently been living alone in a small bamboo house. Her house, in which, months earlier, her youngest son used to live with her, was pitied for its dilapidated state by fellow villagers. The house (group) was poor and had a history of wrong marriages, regarded as highly dangerous, and the ensuing ritual prohibitions on social interaction between the kin groups involved contributed to its social isolation. It became much worse, however, with the deteriorating mental health of her co-residing son and stories about his awkward behavior. At one point, he started to haunt the neighborhood during his nightly strolls, even going into houses, which evoked much fear among the neighbors. Eventually, he threatened his mother so much that she fled temporarily to

the village into which her eldest son had married. She was pitied for having to leave her house in her old age—the nightmare of any elderly Khmu woman, who is assumed to belong as much to the house as the house to her (Stolz, 2021c; see also Waterson, [1993] 2006, 233).

Finally, after her younger son disappeared, she decided to follow her eldest son and to live in his house permanently. As she was the only remaining member, her house (group) in Pliya would cease to exist. Moving into another village was not just a matter of physically relocating a person, however. A closely choreographed set of disintegration rituals in Pliya, and subsequent integration rituals in her new village, mediated the complex processes of moving an older person, who is firmly tied to house and village (Stolz, 2021c). Though her house was certainly not among the most respected and well-integrated ones, where one would expect a lot of guests during the ritual proceedings, the commitment of the rather small group of participants was tangible and indicated the importance of the successful ritual mediation of this move, both for her well-being and for that of the whole village. Thus, not only the house was undone—to replace it with a new one, as in the case of Ma and Yoŋ Sii—but the entire house unit in its material, social, and cosmological senses had to be ritually disintegrated so that Ya Pəŋ could be incorporated in a new village.

Before the rituals could proceed, however, first thing in the morning, her house was dismantled. Like in the case of the house of Sii, the deconstruction of the small bamboo building went quickly, and within less than two hours, nothing was left other than a bit of biodegradable debris on the ground, which was instantly foraged by free-roaming hens. In contrast to the case of the house of Sii, however, this dismantling evoked strong feelings in Ya Pəŋ, for whom all these developments, though certainly not surprising, were deeply upsetting. The insecurity of what was to come and the unfortunate circumstances that had brought about the end of her house in this village troubled her. The dismantling of her house itself, though sad to watch for her, was acknowledged as important in safeguarding the move to her new homestead. If anything of her old house remained, I was told, her souls might cling or seek to return to it, with all the potentially harmful consequences this might have for her well-being and health. The end of her house in Pliya was inevitable and even productive in the sense of enabling the creation of her new house elsewhere. Well-prepared disintegration rituals followed, after which she left the village with her few remaining belongings, knowing that there was no house that she could return to or that would remind people of her former presence.

Late that night, returning from yet another ritual, I took the path back home that led along the side of her former house grounds to catch another glimpse of the site. One of the village's ritual specialists, who lived in the neighborhood, was sitting on a low stool in the middle of the former grounds together with his wife; listening to radio music, they were warming themselves by a log fire, on which larger pieces of the bamboo debris were burning. He had not only occupied the grounds but had declared it public village space. This was not the house grounds anymore; the house of Ya Pəŋ was factually undone, nonexistent.

IMPROPER ENDINGS

The village of Pliya, in which the houses of Sii and Ya Pəŋ were dismantled, was resettled in 1985. While the mobility of settlements and houses, given the ease with which bamboo houses can be deconstructed and rebuilt elsewhere, was far from uncommon in the history of the uplands in which the Khmu Yuan reside (Évrard, 2006, 110), the involuntary relocation that took place in 1985 is remembered as a watershed in local history. During the conflicts in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War in 1975, fighting continued between those who are now classed as *satru* (enemies of the revolution) and *ayncəŋ*, proponents of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which became the ruling party in 1975 and has remained so until today. The Khmu and other upland populations were torn between the two sides (Badenoch and Shinsuke, 2013; Lutz, 2021), and the middle-aged and elder generation vividly remember the fighting and bombings that occurred in the area. The village of Pliya was, despite a more complex and ambivalent reality, classified as a *satru* village, which was causing trouble for the stability of the new regime in the area. It was mainly for this reason that Pliya, like so many other villages of this upland area, was relocated.⁴

Thirty years later, in 2015, I visited the site of the “old village,” as the previous village from which the Khmu of Pliya relocated is referred to. Ma Khwaay, her husband, and I embarked on the two-hour hike into the forest high up the hill to the site where old Pliya was located. They were used to visiting the area surrounding the old village during hunting and gathering trips and connected lively memories and (mythical) stories with particular trees, locations, and stone formations. This is a dense landscape—dense not only in flora and fauna but in personal memories, spirit forces, and mythical traces, among others (Stolz, 2022). At first, I did not realize that I had already entered the former village grounds. I had noticed Ma Khwaay's quiet movements through the landscape; Yoŋ Khwaay went before us and—a prolific hunter—merged with his surroundings. Ma Khwaay went around slowly and thoughtfully. Only then I started seeing it: amid the trees and bushes were house and barn posts, some overgrown with ivy (Figure 3). These were house ruins, not a forest! Ma Khwaay kept relatively quiet, only hushing me in response to my questions: Are these the posts of a house? Are those the posts of a barn? Interrupting my flow of questions, Ma Khwaay modestly urged us to move on. It was only when we came to a plateau at the village's upper edges, where a rocky outcrop enabled a splendid view over the adjacent mountain area and as far as the river Tha, that Ma Khwaay started speaking in her normal voice again, telling me how much she had cherished this spot when she was young.

Why were house posts left standing? As the memory of the forced move from the old to the present village site was frequently evoked, I was told by several interlocutors how hastily the move took place and how limited were the prospects of moving the dismantled houses, the livestock, and the children from the high-lying old village to the new location. The climb to the old village site is indeed steep: there is a rock cliff one has to



FIGURE 3 Abandoned wooden posts at the previous village locale, which is now hard to distinguish from the surrounding forest. (Photo: Author, 2015) A woman with a netbag on her back watches by a building's posts, obviously abandoned, that stand in a forest. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

pass, and frighteningly long stairs (made of bamboo, now deteriorated), which were already a regular challenge for the inhabitants of the old village when descending, usually with small children tied to their backs, to tend the rice fields. Yet, passing them loaded with belongings was described to me as so strenuous that the heaviest parts of the houses, the posts, were left where they were. In fact, the relocation was not such a clear-cut and linear process; some secretly stayed or moved back to the old village before realizing that it was no longer a true village where lives could be forged (in contrast with the case described by High [2021], for instance). What sounds highly pragmatic or born out of necessity may imply that these are mere house posts, wooden debris, becoming increasingly overgrown and decomposed, left to rot. Are the remains of the house posts of the former houses ruins?

Ruins continue to fascinate anthropological and other onlookers—Archambault (2021, 50) speaks of “ruinophilia.” There are different kinds of ruins, some of which come to be deemed worthy of preservation, while the persistence of other ruins points to neglect rather than intention or reminds people of the violence and conflict that produced them (Navaro-Yashin, 2009). A ruin, Navaro-Yashin argues, is also about “roots,” as “it is sited as a ‘trace’ of a historical event, it is remembered, it is kept, lamented, and cherished in the memory of those who left it behind” (14). Ruins can remind the onlookers of violent pasts, as is the case in Pliya, but also of failed promises and hopes. House-building projects, started passionately, may never be finished due to a lack of resources, producing construction ruins (Archambault, 2018; Nielsen, 2011; Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017). The latter is emphasized by Andrew Allen Johnson (2014), who shows that the ruins of aspirational high-rise buildings in Chiang Mai, Thailand, initially hailed as icons of progress, testify to urban residents that the government’s promises of development and prosperity fail, as their materialization is abandoned and starts to crumble. Worse, the ruins of progress do not only decay; they become animated by rather pitiful and potentially harmful spirits, which he calls ghosts, that haunt the ruins. Ruins matter, apparently, and are meaningful to onlookers or previous residents, if only for the memories they invoke. Yet ruins might turn out to be not that relevant to locals at all, at least not to the extent that the ethnographer might expect, as Julie Archambault (2021) shows. Whereas she reports having been affected by and made curious by the sight of a large number of house ruins in Inhapossa, in Mozambique, her interlocutors appeared not to notice them much in their daily lives at all. The ruins, she argues, were rather met with “indifference.”

My Khmu interlocutors did not talk much about the remaining house posts, and they do not use a term translatable as “ruins” for them. Perhaps that was the reason why I was so stunned to find house posts still standing. Having gotten used to seeing houses dematerialize, I obviously expected this to have been the case here as well. When I referred to my surprise at the sight of the house posts to neighbors and kin in the village, they confirmed that, yes, the “old house posts are still left” (*cntraŋ kaŋ priim nɔɔŋ nɔɔŋ*). The lack of words spent on the remains of the houses, however, does not mean that locals—including former residents of the old village—were indifferent to them. On the contrary, the silence and careful movements around the remaining posts on the grounds of the abandoned village indicate their importance and their potency. Unlike the case of haunted “ruins of progress” (Johnson, 2014), the ruins of the old village are not assumed to be haunted by malevolent ghosts. Yet, the house posts turned out to be more animated than I thought them to be, as the following case illustrates.

When I returned to Pliya in 2019 after a longer absence, I learned that Ta Man had fallen seriously ill. He was in bad shape when we chatted on his veranda. He had the role of the village doctor, selling medicine and bandages, and had basic training in veterinary medicine; thus, he knew

that it might be tuberculosis causing his state. Yet, there was something else that had contributed to or even caused the whole malady, he told me. When the area of the old village site was to be weeded, months ago, in the wake of the plans for erecting a tourist shelter in the vicinity of the old village site, he had made a mistake. Cutting the bushes with his machete while moving along the path, he had accidentally hit a house post with the blade. It turned out that this was not any post, but the post of his own former house. The next morning, he awoke with a high fever, grew ill, and had never fully recovered. A healer divined that he had offended his ancestors and that he would not get better unless he placated the ancestor spirits properly. While he attempted to get biomedical treatment, the district hospital released him, for they would not be able to do anything for him, as he recounted; he was convinced that it was his offending the ancestor spirits at the remains of the old house that had changed his life course and that would lead to his demise.

The remaining house posts, Ta Man's reasoning surrounding his plight reveals, are not inanimate, material traces of the past. Judging from Ta Man's account, these posts are quite animated; for Ta Man and others who commented upon his case, they still seem to be the potential abode of ancestor spirits. Against this background, the careful and quiet movements of Ma Khwaay in the old village can be seen as a precautious and attentive behavior that testifies to the local awareness of the potentialities (positive and negative) of this dense, more-than-human landscape. The status of the old village site and of its remaining posts appears to be unclear: though the village is abandoned, it is still called "old village" and is spatially marked by the remaining house posts. The houses, it appears, have never fully ended in the clear-cut manner that has been shown to be key for the intended ends and new beginnings of houses, but are still in possession of a certain liveliness. The house posts that the villagers had to leave behind in 1985, in other words, are not that abandoned and ended after all, at least not by the spirits.

THE END OF BAMBOO HOUSES?

On a wider scale, in northern Laos, bamboo houses appear to have passed their zenith. The slightly elevated bamboo houses have been widely replaced with comparatively higher, rectangular timber houses (Évrard, 2006, 129ff). More recently, concrete has been spreading widely in rural areas of Laos. As I describe elsewhere (Stolz, 2021a), in only five years since the erection of the first semi-concrete house in Pliya in 2015 the number of houses built either entirely with concrete or with concrete elements in Pliya rose from 2 to over 20. The pace at which locals employed concrete as a building material left me stunned. Local lay builders related to me proudly how they had taught themselves to work with concrete. This speaks to the role of the aspirations and creativity involved in experimenting with concrete as a new building material, which has been documented in a number of case studies (Archambault, 2018; Gowlland, 2020; Nielsen, 2011). In the face of this unprecedented transformation, one may wonder whether the days of bamboo houses are numbered.

In the cold season of 2014/2015, not only was the house of Sii dismantled to be rebuilt but the elderly woman's house was made nonexistent. I entered the previous village site only to stumble across the remaining house posts. But at the same time, a house for a villager named Raw, who had just returned after a longer absence, was being built—in bamboo. Raw had spent many years abroad in Thailand and had also tried his luck in the provincial capital, with varying, and eventually no, success. However, although he was over 30 and already regarded as an aging bachelor, he had met a widowed woman with whom he planned to finally settle down in his home village. He returned to the village alone, assuming that his partner would follow as soon as the house was ready. The house was built in a straightforward and swift choreography. From the house grounds, a small spot on the steepest side of the village, which is nowadays decreasingly attractive because it is less accessible for motorized vehicles, the women of his kin group and neighborhood sat in lines on the paths of the village, surrounded by piles of split bamboo, which they plaited into the meshwork that would become the walls, as well as by bundles of cogongrass (*srliaŋ*) to make the thatch for the roof by tying the grass to bamboo sticks (Figure 4). The sight of so many women actively involved in the building process was, for me, a welcome sight after so many erections of timber and concrete buildings, during which women are only marginally involved.

I considered myself lucky to participate in the erection of a bamboo house, a choice that I thought was mainly due to the precarious economic and social situation of the young man. A small bamboo house can be built even by someone who enters the village with almost nothing. Thus, I noticed with surprise that a young couple, socially and economically on firm ground, also planned to move into a bamboo house until they had gathered enough money and resources to build a proper house, which is now synonymous with a concrete house. This speaks to the end that bamboo houses have—"end" here understood as function. Bamboo, in contrast to other building materials, is ready at hand. Several bamboo species grow and are quickly replenished close to the village and can be processed with the tools that any Khmu handles and possesses. So, will bamboo houses survive the recent innovations of the built landscape?

The move from one building material to another, allegedly more-modern material is not necessarily teleological, as shown by Geoffrey Gowlland (2020) for the Paiwan of Taiwan. Where concrete has replaced the vernacular slate houses, it has not always passed the test of time; seismic activity challenges the coherence of concrete and makes slate as a building material appear in a different light again. For different reasons, Kri villagers in upland Laos, as Zuckerman and Enfield (2022) show, have weighed the advantages and (cosmological) disadvantages of wooden houses, leading them to replace their wooden houses with bamboo ones. At this point, the local fascination with concrete in Pliya has not yet had to stand the test of time.



FIGURE 4 The women of the neighborhood make the thatch for the roofing of a newly erected bamboo house. (Photo: Author, 2014) A view up a village path flanked by timber houses. Women are sitting on the path, tying cogongrass to bamboo sticks to prepare thatch. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

CONCLUSION: THERE IS LIFE IN THE OLD BAMBOO HOUSE YET

Biographies of persons and of their houses intersect in various ways. The house is very much predicated on the building, with its materiality having vital social properties, yet also extends beyond the building itself. Here, I have shown that the continuity of a house is highlighted when the former house is deconstructed before the erection of a new house can enter the final phase. In the case of the move of an elderly woman and her house out of the village, the building was dismantled before disintegration rituals could commence. In both of the cases presented, the end of the life of a particular building is far from a situation of exception or crisis. On the contrary, the end of the house is an inevitable and even productive phase and eventual starting point in the house's biography.

This contrasts with the third case, the remaining house posts of the former village locale that had to be abandoned in the wake of the conflicts extending beyond the end of the Second Indochina War in the uplands of northwestern Laos. The house remains point to the unintended ends of these houses and the haste with which they had to be left behind. Not merely inanimate ruins, they continue to remind visiting locals of the past and, as Ta Man's affliction pointed out, the house posts are regarded as still animated by the presence of spirits, for better or worse. Whereas in the aforementioned examples, clear endings and beginnings of houses are aimed at, the status of the remains of the abandoned houses is somewhat ambiguous: not having been ritually and physically ended, the remains are still regarded as potentially infused with potency and are still talked about as house posts. These houses have never fully ceased to exist.

By looking into three different cases of possible endings of houses, the first temporary and allowing for continuation, the second a final move marked by relative finitude, and the last an improper end entailing an unforeseen continuation, I wished to turn our gaze to the ends of houses as a hitherto rarely explored dimension of the biographies of houses. Whereas the beginning of houses, their construction and inauguration, their coming into being, has been given the most attention, the fading away of houses, their deterioration and decomposition, has been mainly seen as a result of violence and crisis (which they can indeed be).

Apart from exceptional situations, houses may end in very ordinary and even productive terms—from local viewpoints. For my Khmu interlocutors, clear beginnings but also endings are key, and any diffuse, unclear state of belonging is deemed potentially dangerous. Hence, the elderly woman moving out of the village needed to be carefully mediated by means of rituals and accompanied by a complete erasure of her house. The mere building is here subordinated to the house group it shelters and should only "live" as long as the residents do.

When houses cannot be properly ended, as was the case in the harsh conditions of the Second Indochina War and its aftermath, their material remains—the posts left standing—are, according to Ta Man and others, still infused with the ancestor spirits. Their presence can be potentially dangerous in cases where one accidentally comes across them, as when Ta Man hit the post of his former house while clearing the old village path. "House remains" comes closer to the local expression *nɔɔŋ nɔɔŋ* (still left/remaining) than the term "ruin." The word "remains" entails the past and eventual, somewhat eerie, potential of vitality and animation and calls for proper treatment. There is nothing odd with bamboo houses being torn down, from this perspective; rather, it is the presence of unoccupied houses that is problematic.

House endings are not only a concern for my Khmu interlocutors, who by and large give much emphasis to clear-cut (un)belonging, generally. The ends of houses also provide ample opportunity to think about house lives and biographies. In particular, they entice us to look at how house



FIGURE 5 Bamboo fulfilling new ends: here by making up a drinking hall and providing a new public space for the village youth. (Photo: Author, 2020) A bamboo building with a veranda to the front, enclosed by split bamboo stems. On the right, the remains of a log fire and bamboo growing in the back. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

materials and the passing of time are entangled. In the case discussed here, the relative ease with which bamboo—and to lesser extent, timber—houses can be rearranged, decomposed, and rebuilt has certainly contributed to the recalibration of the life cycles of houses and their residents. I am using the past tense here, for bamboo is less commonly used for building family houses, which raises the question not so much whether but *how* this entanglement of flexible material and life-cycle demands is shifting.

Finally, I have touched upon further meanings of this article's title, "The end of bamboo houses." Firstly, bamboo houses in general appear to be reaching their end, as they are widely being replaced with timber and, increasingly, with concrete. Secondly, however, bamboo houses still fulfill certain ends very well: they provide locally acknowledged and convenient, if only temporary, housing for those who lack the resources to build what are now regarded as more-proper houses. Yet bamboo might not only speak to "traditional" ends.

In February 2020, I stayed among kin in a concrete house close to the road that bypasses the village. Not far from there, a new kind of building had been built: a ground-level stall for selling noodle soups to kids after school, which also served as a drinking hall for the youth on weekend evenings (Figure 5). Made of bamboo and with spacious gaps, this new building allowed the loud sound of recorded music to make an audible, though not unreservedly welcome, mark on the soundscape of the village. Here, bamboo reemerged as a building material to host a new form of public space in the village and, through its permeability, allowed the youth to leave an unprecedented imprint on the soundscape. Bamboo, it appears, continues to fulfill new ends.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹All names have been replaced by pseudonyms, including the name of the village.
- ²The workshop building also translated as “workhouse” is a vernacular public building used by residents of a neighbor for daily social, ritual but also some work purposes, mainly for repairing tools, and is open to the wider public and foreigners such as incoming mobile vendors. The key difference to houses is that workshop buildings are not connected to specific house spirits and are, hence, not subject to as many ritual prohibitions as family houses are. This lends themselves for being a temporary shelter for liminal dwelling periods. For more details on this category of building among the Khmu, see Évrard (2006, 125), Damrong Tayanin (1994, 17–18), Stolz (2021, 238–41), and Stolz and Petit (2020).
- ³Foreign language terms, put in italics, are Khmu terms. Their transcription largely follows Svantesson et al. (2014).
- ⁴On the different resettlement waves in this area, see Évrard (1997). See Sprenger (2021) for a summary of the scholarly debates on the aims and characteristics of resettlement in Laos.

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