

# Listening through houses

## Changing communities of sounds in northern Laos

**Rosalie STOLZ**

Heidelberg University

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**ABSTRACT:** In the uplands of northern Laos, in which bamboo and timber houses have so far prevailed, concrete houses are now on the rise. It will be argued that houses can be used as prisms to illuminate processes of social change. Drawing on experiences of staying in both a timber house and a new concrete one over the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the Khmu, a key experiential difference will be analysed: their different soundscapes. While one can easily listen through the cracks and spaces between timber boards, concrete walls produce a perceivable barrier between inside and outside. It will be argued that the changing materiality of the house and its (sonic) repercussions contribute to shaping a different relationship between the house, its residents, and the village. Finally, it will be argued that when inquiring into the shifting sensory experience of living in concrete houses in a social context in which houses are of central importance yet are not the places where locals spend much of their time, emphasis should not solely be given to the house but to other meaningful locales of sociality.

**KEYWORDS:** HOUSES; MATERIALITY; SOUNDS; KHMU; LAOS.

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This article discusses the changing acoustic experience of new concrete houses in upland northern Laos. It presumes that when the materiality of houses changes, so does the sensory experience of the house space. This assumption is based on the ethnographic experience of staying in one of the newly erected concrete houses in a Khmu village, having already been familiar with living in timber houses. Drawing and reflecting on this experience, this article will shed light on the ways in which one can listen (or not) through houses – an aspect of the changing materiality of new vernacular houses that still awaits more comprehensive anthropological attention.

Houses are more than mere architecture; their social, ritual and – overall – processual nature has been testified to in an enormous body of anthropological literature<sup>1</sup>. Yet, also “less tangible phenomena such as light, sound and air, are part of the sensuous experience of buildings” (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 159). In his article “Lighting up the Atmosphere”, Tim Ingold (2016) poses the question “Can there be architecture without atmosphere?”. He proposes that “a building is as much a thing of air, light sound and mood as it is a construction wrought from solidary elements” (*ibidem*: 163). These intangible dimensions of houses play an important yet so far rarely considered role when discussing the interrelationships between houses and their residents.

Transformations of the materiality of houses, which go along with the increasing preference for concrete over bamboo and timber houses in northern Laos, are a good entry point for approaching the shift in sensory experience that is tied to the changing materiality and design of houses. Being familiar with a particular sensory house environment, that is, with the sensory qualities of the house that surrounds the inhabitants, the experience of a new house environment brings one’s sensory expectations to one’s attention and triggers reflections among residents<sup>2</sup>. Here, this article is inspired by the phenomenological approaches to sociality in and across houses developed by Christine Helliwell (1996, 2006) and Catherine Allerton (2013). For the purposes of this article, I will particularly focus on the village

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1. See, for instance, the collections edited by Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995) and by Stephen Sparkes and Signe Howell (2003).

2. In order to emphasise this sensorial quality of everyday sociality and moving in the home, based on her research in Spain and the UK, Sarah Pink (2003) suggested the term “sensory home”. See also Irene Cieraad’s discussion of the role of sound in memories of the childhood home (Cieraad 2010: 99).

soundscape and the changes in the acoustic and relational dimensions of the emerging concrete houses. The term “soundscape” is used here to denominate the acoustic environment, understood broadly (Samuels *et al.* 2010; cf. Schafer 1994)<sup>3</sup>. Yet the aim is not to pursue an anthropology of sound (Cox 2018; Feld, Brenneis 2004) more widely but to approach the qualities of (acoustic) sensations in relation to social processes, local meaning-making and social commentary (cf. Stasch 2013).

This focus is an outcome of my ethnographic experience of the changing sensory qualities of concrete houses in contrast to bamboo and wooden houses, as well as of the local renderings of this difference, also in connection to additional rumours that surround ideas and valuations of boundaries and permeability, drawing inspiration from works that use reflexive accounts of the ethnographer’s perception of relational aspects of house materiality (Allerton 2013; Helliwell 1996, 2006), I will relate to my own experience by comparing the impact of living in a wooden and a concrete house in the field. Since 2013, I have been conducting research in an upland Khmu village in northwestern Laos and have lived most of the time in a small wooden house, together with my son and husband, and, during later stays, I have lived with closely related interlocutors in their wooden, sometimes bamboo houses, and, most recently, in a concrete house. It is the awkward mixture of feeling both familiar and unfamiliar with this new sensory environment of the concrete house that I will use to reflect upon sensory and relational expectations cultivated in the field and those reminding me of my home expectations beyond the field<sup>4</sup>. Before discussing these shifts in the sensory experience of houses, the ethnographic setting and the transformation of vernacular houses will be briefly presented.

### *Khmu housing change*

Until recently, among the Khmu, Mon-Khmer speakers in upland Laos, houses have commonly been built on stilts. Their walls and floors have been made either of woven bamboo mats or, more recently, of wooden boards; they have been covered with either leaves, bamboo mesh, corrugated iron or, recently, modern roof panels. Houses usually consist of one main room

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3. In this sense, the term is used as heuristically here, not necessarily implying that there is such a thing as a soundscape comparable to a landscape; see Tim Ingold’s critique of the concept (Ingold 2007).

4. Early research was funded by a doctoral scholarship from the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne and recent fieldwork by a postdoctoral research stipend granted by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the connection between houses and kinship (Stolz 2021b), and on the importance of my family’s residence for the research process and our becoming in the field (Stolz 2020).

which is sparsely furnished with a shelf, a few low wooden stools, nowadays often a TV, and sleeping mats that are rolled up against the wall during the day<sup>5</sup>. Kitchens are either detached rooms that are connected to the main room by a veranda or, in continuation with local building traditions (Évrard 2006: 128; Tayanin 1994: 36f.), the hearth is included in the main room. Nowadays, separate kitchen buildings may also be built next to the new concrete houses. Although the main room often does not have visible divisions, there are important distinctions: Access to the house for guests and the places of ancestor worship are based on the directions uphill/downhill (for more details see Stolz 2021b: 43-47). More than an architectural object, a Khmu house is also a social entity that embraces and unites its residents, the house group, and connects them with other houses, ancestors, and house spirits (*ibidem*: 47-53; for the neighbouring Rmeet see also Sprenger 2006). It is not uncommon to say that “the house of Ta Man” participated during harvesting, rather than spelling out the names of the individual members of this particular house. While certainly not in all contexts, in some more pronouncedly ritual contexts, persons are seen and behave as representatives of the houses they belong to. Accordingly, the local word for house (*kaan*)<sup>6</sup> denotes the physical object as well as the house group it shelters.

Concrete is becoming highly attractive, and not only in upland Laos. In Pliya, an upland village in northwestern Laos that was characterised by a variety of bamboo and wooden houses until only a few years ago, the shift to concrete is remarkable. In fact, given the accelerated pace with which local inhabitants envisage concrete house building projects, concrete appears to be the key future building material. Concrete houses appear to manifest and underline most visibly the inhabitant’s aspirations, their success and progressiveness. Although the earlier move from bamboo to timber (for a discussion, see Stolz 2021c; for the neighbouring Rmeet, see Sprenger 2021) already entailed many transitions related to work, technology, monetary resources, rituals, and gender, the shift to concrete appears particularly noteworthy – in terms of construction work, the shifting articulation of aspirations (Stolz 2021a), associated and wider socio-economic change, and last but not least also in terms of the daily experience of living in concrete houses.

5. There has been a recent yet moderate increase in furniture. A few households have invested in manufactured shelves that are offered irregularly by mobile vendors coming through the area. Apart from this, home-made shelves are the main items of furniture.

6. Foreign words in italics are Khmu terms. The transcription of Khmu terms largely follows Svantesson *et al.* 2014.



**FIG 1:** *A particularly refined exemplar of the now popular concrete houses in Pliya. Photo by Rosalie Stolz (2020).*

Concrete is surely one of the iconic materials of modernity (Forty 2016: 14) and is celebrated and disapproved of at the same time. In the present, while Western architecture is turning to natural and renewable building materials in search of a sustainable architecture, concrete is conquering ever more areas in which such building materials have reigned until now. There is some irony in the contrast between the attitude towards bamboo among scholars of vernacular architecture, on the one hand, who regard it as a “sustainable building resource for the future” (Vellinga, Oliver and Bridge 200: 33), and among my Khmu interlocutors, on the other hand, for whom bamboo houses are largely associated with the past and have become an index of poverty (Stolz 2021a). However, bamboo houses will continue to exist as long as the house owners lack the means to replace them. Commonly equated with modernity (Archambault 2019: 692; Forty 2016: 14ff.), cement has produced a contrast with local, now backward appearing building materials (Gowlland 2020: 127) and is a major factor in the “aesthetic politics” in which house building projects are involved (Elinoff 2016). Discussing this change in rural Isan, Thailand, Claudio Sopranzetti (2018:



94) states that the Isan villagers now come to see their wooden houses as “incomplete houses, waiting to be contained by cement walls”. Indeed, the inclusion of concrete parts is a trend to be observed in Laos as well, as Holly High has shown with regard to southwest Laos and Pierre Petit for the northeast (High 2014: 75; Petit 2020: 177ff.).

Concrete houses appear to fix residence much more than timber houses do. As they cannot easily be deconstructed and moved, they are much less flexible in terms of their life-cycles. Before the usage of concrete, the physical house was subordinate to the housegroup (*khon kaan*) and its cycle: when a housegroup ceased to exist, for instance when a widow living on her own died or a couple moved elsewhere, the house was deconstructed. Bamboo houses, in particular, can be erected rather quickly and, in general, can quite flexibly mirror the developmental cycle of the housegroup. Unoccupied houses, until now, did not exist. Now, with substantial investment being made in apparently more permanent concrete houses, the question arises as to whether the life-cycle of the housegroup will be predicated upon the changing life and durability of the physical concrete house. Concrete not only cements particular social relations and appears to give them a more durable form, but it might also cement socio-economic differences (Stolz 2021a). Yet concrete also shapes the experience of the living space that it encloses.

### *The experience of living spaces*

One of the general tenets of the anthropology of the house is that houses are more than mere physical shelter (Carsten 1997, 2018; Carsten, Hugh Jones 1995; Howell 2003; Janowski 1995; Sparkes, Howell 2003; Waterson 2009 [1990]). It is also “an ordinary group of people concerned with their day-to-day affairs, sharing consumption and living in the shared space of a domestic dwelling” (Carsten, Hugh-Jones 1995: 45). The social processes unfolding in, at and against the background of houses are tied to the physical form of the house. Taking a processual view, the processes of kinship and sociality and the process of the house can be intimately connected (*ibidem*: 40). This has been illustrated by Maurice Bloch’s (1995) study of the house among Madagascar’s Zafimaniry: the choice of wood used for the house mirrors the stages of the lifecycles of its inhabitants; the houses of newlyweds were described by Bloch as relatively flimsy, permeable buildings when compared with the more stable, less permeable, hardwood plank houses of established families. With time, hardwood planks will be added, and the house is said to harden, to acquire “bones” – thereby drawing an analogy between human bones and the dark core wood (*ibidem*: 78). The

shape and set up of buildings have been described as being closely tied to images of human bodies (Blier 1983, 1987; Carsten, Hugh-Jones 1995: 3-4). This might extend beyond the anthropomorphism of the house (Blier 1983) and might quite literally mean that the house is to some extent alive as well. Roxana Waterson (2009) thus speaks of “the living house”.

The materiality of the house, as increasingly argued, thus not only reflects but has noteworthy effects on the social processes taking place in and around houses (Gillespie 2000). Materials can trigger aspirations (Archambault 2018), can entail dangerous qualities, for instance, of blood that one needs to get rid of (Zuckerman and Enfield forthcoming), and they certainly leave an imprint on the experience of the living space. The case of the potentially perilous effect of “blood” in houses particularly highlights that the experience of materials and especially house materials is intricately tied to locally cherished perceptions and qualities, as well as local notions of “substances” and their connotations. One cherished aspect of vernacular houses in Southeast Asia is their permeability.

Wooden and bamboo houses have received the most attention with regard to the sensory experience of living spaces – with an emphasis on their permeability. The permeability of timber and bamboo houses is a feature that is directly connected with the experience and practice of sociality. This permeability “allows an almost unimpeded flow of both sound and light” (Helliwell 2006: 52), but also of other substances, or, as Catherine Allerton points out, for smells and spirits. In her study of Gerai Dayaks of Borneo, Christine Helliwell (1996, 2006) speaks of a “community of voices” that is established within and across the permeable bamboo and wooden walls. She recounts how she was puzzled and irritated by the fact that her host appeared to be constantly talking to herself, only to find out that her host was, in fact, engaged in conversations with neighbours and passers-by (*ibidem*). In other words, conversations do not stop at walls.

Given the permeability of houses, floor plans accentuate walls more strongly than they are truly relevant, as Catherine Allerton (2013: 51) has argued. Floor plans might only be of limited help in the understanding of social boundaries, for a wall might not be a barrier in the social and sensory sense – at least not when walls are permeable. Indeed, this is especially the case for house walls made of bamboo mesh, which do not hinder light, sounds and smells from entering. As can be seen in Figure 2, a bamboo house does not entirely shield those inside the house from the outside. Sitting inside this house during a wedding feast, one can still talk to those who are outside. The gap between the floor and wall mats allows things to be handed over from the outside into the house. In any simple floor plan, sketched by an anthropologist who is at least as untalented at architectural drawing as I

am, this gap would be omitted. But as well as really crossing the “boundary” of the walls, light comes in and bathes the room in soft light and, as I wish to focus on more in detail, it also allows sounds to enter and leave and does not trap them inside.



FIG 2: A wedding scene in a relatively permeable bamboo house. Photo by Rosalie Stolz (2020).

Though allowing less light and sound to enter than bamboo houses, wooden houses are relatively permeable as well. The generous gaps between the wooden boards allow glimpses of the outside and vice versa, as well as conversations across walls. Especially in a bamboo house, but also in a wooden house, the sounds of the daily rhythms of activities are to be heard everywhere in the village. The cock crows, there is the early sound of water from the well hitting the empty plastic buckets hard, the sound of rice being winnowed each morning and evening, the noise of splitting firewood at the hearth, the later sound of machetes being sharpened on the wet stone. All of these sounds contribute to the rhythmisation of village life (see Allerton 2013: 50 for a similar and vivid description of the sounds of village life on Flores, Indonesia). The village is perhaps best captured, to borrow and



expand Helliwell's (2006) expression, as a *community of sounds* pertaining to the village soundscape that enters every home. This community of sounds comprises not only the voices of persons but also the sounds of handling tools, the sounds of animals but also of spirits. Paying attention and listening to sounds is an important element of navigating this community of sounds<sup>7</sup>. Part of this navigating is the detecting of uncommon, significant sounds: at night, the usual amount of dog barking does not lead to any reaction, but notable intensive dog-barking will be inquired into either by peering through the planks and boards or by descending the staircase with a torch. Many can tell any passer-by by the sound of his footsteps.

Gauging and evaluating the meaning of sounds takes place as well. The sounds of animals, especially the cry of raptors, are listened to and evaluated in order to inquire into whether this is "a normal raptor's" cry or whether this sound rather indicates the presence of the tiger spirit (see Stolz 2018; cf. Bubandt 2014). A baby crying incessantly at night is also listened to with heightened awareness; and soon, some neighbours will be heard to open their doors to go and check on the infant. One night, our neighbour's small child, Aay Man, was plagued by a serious cough and was heard crying at night. His classificatory grandmother came to us in order to ask for remedies against the diarrhoea that he had developed as well. When his crying did not stop and I heard several more doors open, I went myself to see what was going to happen. Entering the house of Aay Man<sup>8</sup>, I was astonished to find not just a few neighbours but almost the whole neighbourhood and even close kin from other neighbourhoods assembled, all sitting and watching poor Aay Man and his mother. Anyone who had a charm or healing power tried to give it to Aay Man. In this case it was not so much the cough that concerned these neighbours and close kin, but the fear that the tiger spirit might try to get hold of the baby (for more background on this case see Stolz 2018). When Aay Man suddenly stopped crying and sucked his mother's breast, this was to the relief surely not only of those who had come to the house upon hearing the incessant crying, but also of others who had not gone but who were still paying attention to what was happening. This participation in the lives and problems of others is expressed in the local normative notion of "watching (over) each other" (սղօայ յժ) – which entails cooperative and supporting acts but also simply the taking notice of and interest in what happens to others. Yet, in such a dense community of sounds, selective ignoring of sounds is quite important as well.

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7. For the role of sounds and listening in multispecies encounters see Feld 2012 and Kohn 2013.

8. All names have been changed.

Permeability can also have its downsides. For one, “[k]nowledge of the gaze of others” (Helliwell 2006: 56) might be a constant aspect of behaviour and a source of continuous social control. Within a village of bamboo and timber houses one can rarely be sure of being beyond the earshot of neighbours and passers-by. There is a notable difference between my interlocutors’ more intimate accounts when beyond the village, in field and forest, and the accounts verbalised in the village, in which an element of diplomacy and awareness of potential listeners is involved. Permeable bamboo and wooden houses might also enable spirits to sneak in (Telle 2007: 201), and unripe blood in its metaphoric quality may stick to parts of the house (Allerton 2013: 37; Zuckerman, Enfield forthcoming). The materiality of the house and its ascribed properties (not all of which are tangible), as these examples hint at, extend beyond the control of its residents. This is also mentioned by Kari Telle (2007: 202), who states that an “often overlooked aspect of material things is that they cannot be fully mastered”.

Given that permeability is mentioned here with its potential of fostering social ties, making up the community of voices, occasionally with harmful potential, as in the case of spirits potentially sneaking in, the shift to concrete is likely to inhibit the diffusion of sound and light, with implications for social interactions within and across walls. Geoffrey Gowlland has discussed the sociopolitical context of the shift from slate to concrete (and back) among the Paiwan of Taiwan (Gowlland 2020), but also what he calls the “atmosphere of living spaces”. The latter includes not only sensory qualities, but also the experience of temperature and air circulation. Concrete, according to Gowlland (2020: 138), “creates a sealed, impermeable envelope” that is “a more efficient, impermeable barrier between the inside and outside of homes”. This barrier, as Gowlland (*ibidem*) argues, impacts the subjectivity of residents, who begin to think of themselves as modern Sinicised subjects. This connection between aesthetic decisions by housebuilders, their subjectivities, conceptions of citizenship and political world-making has been drawn by Eli Elinoff. Elinoff (2016) has argued that in northeastern Thailand “a house is more than a house”, but that it is a site and medium for forging identities and belonging ingrained with politics: “[T]he aesthetics of the house and the rearrangements of its materiality construct new modes of political and moral being and belonging that remake, but do not completely disassemble, existing hierarchies of power” (*ibidem*: 612f.). As Kari Telle (2007: 212) shows for concrete houses on Lombok, “[o]pting for this [modern, concrete] style, people signal adherence to the value of independence associated with modernity”. The physical and

sensory barrier of concrete walls might reinforce the resident's ideal of or striving for selective disconnection and personal autonomy. Choosing cement, on this basis, is about much more than choosing a popular building material but appears to be connected to the cultivation of a subjectivity that is deemed modern, as Gowlland (2020) and Elinoff (2016) argue, to a shift in values, as Telle (2007) suggests, as well as in the relational nature of dwelling in a changing community of sounds, as I wish to show in the following.

*“There are no winds”*

The number of concrete houses in Pliya has risen over only a few years; where there were only 2 houses with concrete elements in 2015, in 2020 21 houses had already been built with concrete. The diversity of these new concrete houses is striking, varying from villas to two-storey houses. Astonished at the rising and apparently uncontested popularity of concrete houses, in daily conversations during my more recent research stays in September 2019 and January and February 2020 I asked the residents of the new houses what they found particularly “good” (*la*) about living in their new houses. Actually, not many advantages were related to me in a clear-cut manner, apart from the fact that these houses were better because concrete was widely regarded as preferable generally. What I was told by Eem Sen and others was that in the new concrete houses “there are no winds” (*pəə a hntrəy*). Arguably, there is more to wind in these statements than air circulation. As mentioned above, the striking feature of wooden houses, and even more so of bamboo houses, is their permeability for sounds, smells, and often also glimpses. Anyone living in a house of wooden boards or plaited bamboo is aware of the fact that what happens inside can either be seen or heard outside or both. Arguably, the locally circulating remarks that the nice thing about concrete houses is that winds (*hntrəy*) cannot easily enter them refer as much to sounds as to ventilation.

A concrete house is like an envelope, producing a perceptible boundary between the outside and the inside, and shielding the inside from the sounds outside. Compare the impression of the interior of the bamboo house (Figure 2) and of a new concrete house (Figure 3): while there is a certain sense in which the interior of the bamboo house during the wedding is marked as separate from the outside – it is not just anyone who is allowed to enter and the socio-spatial dimensions of the interaction in the interior are predicated on relative kin ties – the interior cannot be said to be completely shielded off from the outside. The permeability of the walls brings the outside to the attention of those inside and the other way around. When all the doors and

windows of the concrete house are closed (windows being non-existent in bamboo houses), the main room is in relative darkness and, in general, appears to be set off from the outside in a way that cannot be experienced in any of the other vernacular houses that the villagers of Pliya were used to. While the sounds from outside are muffled, the noise level during ritual negotiations seems even higher inside the concrete houses.



**FIG 3:** *The interior of one of the new concrete houses. The smaller rooms are separated from the main room by concrete walls and proper and lockable wooden doors. Photo by Rosalie Stolz (2020).*

Interestingly, Ta Σεην, an old man whose son had just build a semi-concrete house, mentioned to me, sitting in front of his new house, that the annoying thing about the new house is that small animals – chickens in search of stored rice, and even free-roaming pigs – need to be prevented from entering. This is not immediately related to concrete itself but to the ground-level construction of these houses. Ta Σεην, a couple of years ago, was still emphasising that bamboo houses, which are now built only by those who cannot afford a “proper” wooden or simple concrete house, were

thatched with leaves and were pleasant to stay in during the sticky months of the hottest periods of the rainy season, but comfortably warm in the coldest months, which can become quite chilly. While praise for bamboo houses is becoming rare, in fact, those who can afford it prefer to reconcile the old comfort of wooden houses with the new desire for concrete: several houses are a hybrid mixture of the two, such as a two-storey house with a concrete room on the ground floor, where guests are received, and an upper floor of wood where the house group sleeps.

Yet not only do winds not enter easily, but nor do guests. As far as I heard and could observe during my recent stays, people's reservations about entering other houses is even greater with concrete houses. Entering other houses generally is not exactly forbidden, yet it is uncommon to enter other houses without obvious reasons to do so, unless this is a close relative's house. In the past, workhouses – which are houses for communal purposes – were the places in the neighbourhood where villagers, mainly male, met, sharpened and repaired their tools and traps, and held rituals and negotiations. Women visited one another in their homes, but commonly only after dark – which a close interlocutor, Ta Loŋ, explained to me in the joking phrase “one went to see one another, when one did not see one another anymore” (“*priaŋ yɔh pɪp yɔ yam plɔ pɪp yɔ*”). With the decreasing importance of communal houses and the spread of more spacious timber houses, visiting close kin and neighbours who possess a television has become quite common – alongside visits to workhouses and fireplaces in the open spaces in front of the houses.

As if concrete houses were not as inviting, there was an obvious decrease in such visits. My main point of experience is one particular household with which I have been familiar since 2013. I stayed and spent many days and evenings in their earlier wooden house and, in 2020, in their new concrete house. While their wooden house was regularly full of guests, who sat on the mats reserved for visitors to watch television, to do handicrafts under the neon lights, and to chat, the new concrete house was deserted except when ritual or other purposes required a discussion or meeting indoors. While especially the house father, Ta Khwaay, preferred to spend his evenings inside in his earlier wooden house, at the new concrete house he mainly sat at the fireplace outside, where neighbours occasionally came to sit down and chat. When I talked to Ya Sii about the new house of Ta Sɛɛn, she mentioned that others would not go there anymore, out of embarrassment. The two-storey houses, she explained, were too large and too uncommon for them to enter. In fact, the number of open fires where the residents of the newly built concrete houses sat appeared to be increasing. We can only guess as to



whether this is a temporary moment in which the villagers, though keen to build their houses in concrete, have not yet become accustomed to the privacy and isolation of concrete houses, and thus prefer to sit at the log fires outside, where they find neighbours and kin to chat with.

### *Unfamiliar familiars*

Living in a wooden house, and even more so in a bamboo one, one is constantly aware of what is happening outside. With the sound of the cockcrow, at the latest, the increasing number of sounds reminds one to start one's own early morning routines. The sound of water buckets being filled at the village's wells, the sound of someone fetching firewood from the store beneath the house, the squealing of dogs being chased away, fill the village's soundscape. The sounds of rice being pounded, of machetes being sharpened on grindstones, the sounds by which the pigs are called for their meal, characterise the early mornings and early evenings. Only the torrential rains of the monsoon season, especially when one is living in a house with a corrugated iron roof, make the typical sounds of the village fade into the background. Leaving the village after the morning routine to head to field and forest also means leaving behind the soundscape of the village and entering the soundscape of the forest, where the sound of birds, macaques and other animals are skilfully read by the skilled ears of the villagers.

At night, the sounds of barking dogs, who are flushed out by wandering adolescents paying each other secret night-time visits, or by malevolent spirits roaming around the village, can easily enter one's sleeping place. But the sounds of coughing neighbours, of crying babies and quarrelling couples can also be heard well. Whether one wishes or not, one cannot help noticing the village surroundings, of which one is perceptually a part. Given this aural connectedness of the villagers, I was always amazed at some of our neighbours' abilities to pretend, without any hint at irony, that they had not heard this or that sound, even including the sound of a gun that was shot in the village. They inquire into which direction the barking of a dog comes from, and in which direction footsteps are moving away. Yet noticing a sound and publicly acknowledging one's taking notice of the sound are sometimes two different things. An infant crying incessantly for no apparent reason at night, as already mentioned, is always taken seriously, and often, then, the sound of tripping footsteps and the entering of doors can be heard – especially as closely related women go to see what is happening.

Finding that I had become used to the aural permeability of bamboo and wooden houses, the new concrete house of Ya Khwaay, into which I moved in early 2020, had something awkwardly familiar and at the same time

unfamiliar to me. It was familiar because it reminded me of the privacy I am used to in my German home. At the same time, it was highly unfamiliar because it was so different from my usual experience of staying in houses in Pliya – including the wooden one in which I had lived for more than a year. When working on my fieldnotes in Ya Khwaay's new concrete house, she advised me to shut the windows and keep the doors closed. The dark interior thus became a place shielded from the outside, where my doings were invisible and not to be heard by others. And, in fact, I felt more separated from my surroundings than I had ever felt when staying in wooden houses.

While the wooden-cum-bamboo workhouse in which I used to stay was located in the midst of a neighbourhood, where several paths crossed and led into different neighbourhoods, Ya Khwaay's new concrete house was located on the dirt road that connected this and the neighbouring village. In fact, if the (re)building of a house is planned in concrete, it is done either close to the main road or on the comparatively spacious paths in the village, if possible. Although four-wheeled vehicles, for which access to the main road is advantageous, are still rare in the village, their future existence appears to be anticipated, at least. Set at some distance from the middle of the village, passers-by on the dirt road could be observed, and there were a few neighbours who regularly sat at the fireplaces together, but still, the above-mentioned relative lack of visits produced a feeling of distance. In the workhouse we were frequently visited and never sat alone for long. Furthermore, we were constantly aware of the social gaze of others and, when we briefly forgot about it, such as when we slept in after daybreak following a long night of ritual, neighbours would peek through the gaps of the plank at my sleeping place and speak in a louder voice than necessary: "Ma Ayton [my local name], haven't you got up yet?". This was unthinkable in the concrete house, because no one knew whether I was in the house or not. While I could work alone and concentrate on my fieldnotes, the feeling of distance remained awkward to me. I remembered Ya Khwaay's house a few years earlier as being a meeting place for several neighbours, where gossip reached one's ear easily and in which *ad hoc* meetings took place, because at that time her husband was still a headman. Now their television, in front of which the guests used to gather in the evenings in their previous house, was broken, and no one bothered to replace it as visits to their home had become rare anyway.

At the same time, a new type of unwelcome visitor has entered local talk and gossip, the thief, and door locks have found a ready market. My hosts, who a couple of years ago had always left their house unlocked – which is quite convenient with few keys but many residents – now urged me to lock

the door behind me every time I left. In fact, keys attached to necklaces, that is, fibre strings, almost ubiquitously adorned the schoolchildren's necks, so that they would be able to enter their homes after school. Whereas in 2015 only a few villagers locked their doors, by 2019 door locks had become omnipresent. Among the new, conspicuous concrete houses, one can find impressive exemplars of door locks and handles. Thus, over a relatively short period of just four years, locking one's door has changed from a rarity – often commented upon depreciatively in gossip (“what do they have to hide?”) – to a self-evident fact that today no one questions. When I voiced my surprise about this sudden change, an interlocutor, Ma Sen, noted that things were quite different from when I was there before. “These were simply different times,” she proclaimed. “Back then we did not have so many thieves as we do today.” No one was short of stories of how even the best hidden valuables had been stolen by unidentified thieves. A neighbour disclosed to me where she kept her money these days: she had a pouch tied around her belly, just like tourists' belt pouches, that she would always take with her when leaving the house.

Who were these “thieves”? With the increasing traffic on the improved dirt road that bypasses the village, foreigners nowadays regularly come through the area, including Chinese entrepreneurs and adolescents from neighbouring villages, and the fear of thieves has obviously also come into the village. Yet, whereas former talk about thefts, with few exceptions, centred around the theft of small livestock such as chicken and goats kept in the village, for which unnamed foreigners were mainly held responsible, now the subject of suspicion seems to have encroached on the intimate space of the house. This phenomenon is grounded, I wish to suggest here, first of all in an increasing detachment of the domestic space. The fear of theft, rational or not, seems to be the other side of the coin of the new, concrete houses, which are otherwise cherished for their keeping “winds” at bay – a promise they do not seem to keep.

Not only does the fear of theft increase despite the more elaborate doors and door locks, but sounds are also increasing. More motorbikes, the sound of electric rice mills, an increasing number of vehicles passing by the village on the dirt road, have led to an increase in the sound level. During my last stay in January 2020, a local shop opened where school children could buy noodle soup at midday and where, especially during weekends, the village youth spent their money on beer and listened to the thumping sound of Thai and Lao pop music. The shop, a provisional, ground-level bamboo hut, is the last building on the side of the dirt road, close to the village primary school, and thus set at some distance from the village interior. Though located at

the edge of the village, the noise, and the roaring of the motorbikes of the enthusiastic and often also inebriated young men, entered the village. Even the concrete house, which was not far from the shop, could not shield us fully from the party sounds. Though young men and women are allowed to enjoy themselves, they are expected to do so out of sight and earshot of others. Memories abound of the joyful days when youths sang and played at the distant field huts while watching the ripening rice, or in the distant barns while hunting rats. Now, the sonic presence of the youth is a notable indicator of a generally changing present, in which concrete walls muffle the village's soundscape, which consists of the "sound of modernity" (Colombijn 2007: 266) to an increasing degree.

Discussing the changing rural soundscapes in Southeast Asia, Nathan Porath states that

[s]tate development projects have forced people to live in designated areas and in timber or concrete dwellings, usually strung along the side of roads. For those for whom the permeability of sounds was a necessary component of social living, the new arrangements are potentially debilitating in relation to social intercourse, blocking the flow of sounds between households (Porath 2019: 37).

Obviously, the relative separation and isolation of being able to live in concrete houses, beyond the sight and earshot of others, is cherished.

However, this trend has to be seen in relation to the nightly flourishing of open log-fires outside, in front of the houses, and at the workhouses, where neighbours can meet on casual terms. When discussing the changing experience of living in concrete houses in contexts such as Pliya, where people commonly do not spend much time in their houses during the day, it is worth taking into consideration their experiences beyond houses as well. Sitting in vernacular public spaces certainly continues to shape the (sonic) experience of village sociality.

### *Conclusion: (Not) listening through houses*

In this article, I have taken the Carsten's argument (2018) quite literally. One can metaphorically listen to houses, which may mean taking them seriously – for instance by giving attention to the intersection of the experience of living in houses and their materiality, as Giacomo Pozzi and Paolo Grassi state in their introduction. We often take the experience of living in houses for granted and have not devoted that much anthropological attention to the everyday effects and perceptions of living in houses, as was noted, for instance, by Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995). Yet, in fact, many inhabitants of houses among whom we live as anthropologists

also take their own experiences for granted. When the materiality of houses changes, however, as it does rather drastically when replacing bamboo or timber with concrete, the changing experience of living in the house comes to the attention of the inhabitants.

When I inquired into the changing experience and evaluation of living in concrete houses, the notion of the lack of winds was reiterated by several interlocutors. Arguing that this statement can be extended to include the lack of diffusion not only of wind but of sounds as well, I have proceeded to unfold some of the meanings of the term and attempted to set them in relation to the comparative experiences of living and observing social interactions in wooden or bamboo houses on the one hand, and concrete houses on the other. Though concrete walls obviously have an effect of enveloping those who are inside, as Geoffrey Gowlland argued (2020), (fears of) encroaching thieves do not seem to stop at walls – just as conversations and the soundscape of the village do not stop at the plaited bamboo walls.

Paying attention to the sensorial experience of being in a house and to embodied engagements in the sensorial environment of houses, as well as with the wider community of sounds, is a fertile pathway for inquiring into the implications of changing house materials. While the sensorial qualities of houses in Southeast Asia have been described in terms of the permeability of wooden and bamboo houses (Allerton 2013; Helliwell 1996, 2002), the walls of the new concrete houses appear to produce a barrier where there was a permeable wall before. Based on local comments and valuations it can be shown that permeability is still discussed, albeit in different terms: while guests are not yet accustomed to entering concrete houses, “thieves” are feared for intruding into the increasingly detached domestic space. Yet the acoustic environment itself is also changing, with an increase of sounds associated with modernity, such as the sounds of vehicles and canned non-local music.

This article thus considered the ways in which one can listen through houses or not. It should be noted, however, that houses – which are certainly of key importance in societies such as the Khmu of northern Laos – are not the places where local villagers spend most of their time. Work means, more often than not, walking through field and forest (for a few residents it means driving to an office for work), spending the midday rest at a fieldhut, and only returning in the evening to the village, where the sociable part of the evening is regularly spent at open fireplaces in front of the houses and in other vernacular public spaces. Giving emphasis to the experiential and socio-processual nature of houses also entails, finally, not only listening to them, but also to the wider environment, built or not, of which they are part.



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**ROSALIE STOLZ**, PhD University of Cologne, is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of Anthropology at Heidelberg University. In her ethnographic research, focused on Southeast Asia (and Laos in particular), she specializes in the topics of houses, kinship, sociality and socio-economic change. As well as being published recently on kinship, spirits and houses, she is co-editor of *Being a Parent in the Field: Implications and Challenges of Accompanied Fieldwork* (Transcript 2020), and author of *Living Kinship, Fearing Spirits: Sociality among the Khmu of Northern Laos* (Nias Press 2021)

[rosalie.stolz@fu-berlin.de](mailto:rosalie.stolz@fu-berlin.de)

