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1 INTRODUCTION: ABOUT THE HOUSE – LEVI-STRAUSS AND BEYOND

Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones

House images move in two directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.
(Gaston Bachelard 1964: xxxiii)

THE ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION are concerned with houses, but not simply with houses as physical structures. They focus instead on the interrelations between buildings, people and ideas, using ethnographic case studies to reveal some of the different ways in which houses come to stand for social groups and represent the world around them. Places in which the to and fro of life unfolds, built, modified, moved or abandoned in accord with the changing circumstances of their inhabitants, houses have dynamic, processual characteristics encapsulated in the word 'dwelling'. These characteristics, shared by buildings and the groups and categories they represent, are also reflected in the chapters that follow.

Inspired by Lévi-Strauss's writings on 'house societies' and based on a workshop held in Cambridge in the spring of 1990[1], our book has two interconnected aims. We take a sympathetic but critical look at Lévi-Strauss's ideas of the house as a specific form of social organization, testing its utility against empirical cases drawn from Southeast Asia and lowland South America. Forms of social organization in these two areas show both striking parallels and marked contrasts and each has a key role in Lévi-Strauss's studies of kinship, South America representing the earliest phase and Southeast Asia the most recent.[2]

Through case studies, set in a comparative context, illustrating the linkages between buildings, groups and categories, we also seek to go beyond Lévi-Strauss's concept of 'house societies', the problematic

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aspects of which are discussed below and in the chapters that follow. Though each explores different facets of the house, taken together our essays suggest that the real value of Lévi-Strauss's idea lies not so much in the creation of a new, unwieldy social type to complement or nuance already threadbare categories of traditional kinship theory but rather in providing a jumping-off point allowing a move beyond them towards a more holistic anthropology of architecture which might take its theoretical place alongside the anthropology of the body. We seek to develop an 'alternative language of the house', one not based on the assumed priority of kinship or economy but which enables us to escape some of the constraints of conventional analysis of these areas, and to bring together aspects of the house previously treated separately. Seeing houses 'in the round' enables us to focus on the links between their architectural, social and symbolic significance. Before discussing Lévi-Strauss's concept of house societies, we begin with a brief exploration of the potential but often neglected significance of architecture in anthropological analysis.

The house and the body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect. House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. A ready-made environment fashioned by a previous generation and lived in long before it becomes an object of thought, the house is a prime agent of socialization. Littlejohn's (1960) article on the Temne house was an innovative exploration of the link between body and house, and between the house and the experience and activities of those who dwell in it. Bourdieu, in turn, describes the house as 'the principle locus for the objectification of generative schemes' (1977: 89) and compares it to a book in which is inscribed a vision and structure of society and the world. Moving in ordered space, the body 'reads' the house which serves as a mnemonic for the embodied person. Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental schemes of their culture. Bourdieu's classic paper on the Kabyle house (1990 [1977]) prefigures the development of his concept of habitus, and the dialectical interaction between body and house plays a key role in his analysis of the logic of practice.

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As our essays will show, houses are frequently thought of as bodies, sharing with them a common anatomy and a common life history. If people construct houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups. At some level or other, the notion that houses are people is one of the universals of architecture. If the house is an extension of the person, it is also an extension of the self. As Bachelard reminds us, the space of the house is inhabited not just in daily life but also in the imagination. It is a 'topography of our intimate being', a 'felicitous space' with protective and comforting associations, a rich and varied poetic image which 'emerges into the consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul, and being of man, apprehended in his actuality' (1964: xxxii, xxxi, xiv). Western children's drawings of houses with two windows and a door – two eyes and a mouth – underline this projection of the self in the house but there are surprisingly few anthropological explorations of this identity between house and self in non-Western societies.[3] The space that surrounds a house is also an extension of the personal space of its occupants. In Andean countries, implicit rules concerning the approach of visitors – whether they remain at the gate or enter yard, patio, porch or house – reflect social distance from household members in a manner reminiscent of Hall's (1959) discussion of proxemics.

Intimately linked both physically and conceptually, the body and the house are the loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world. Yet if the body has long been a focus of anthropological research which has revitalized the study of kinship and had a major impact on other disciplines, the same cannot be said for the house. As Humphrey observes, 'architecture has been curiously neglected by academic anthropology' (1988: 16). Although the interconnections between the material, social and symbolic aspects of houses are explored in several regional ethnographies,[4] her comment that 'dwellings tend to be thought of as "cases" of symbolism or cosmology rather than a subject in their own right' (1988: 16) still holds. Indeed, much of the more comparative and theoretical work on the anthropology of architecture has been done not by anthropologists but by architects and art historians.[5]

One reason for this neglect is that houses get taken for granted. Like our bodies, the houses in which we live are so commonplace, so

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familiar, so much a part of the way things are, that we often hardly seem to notice them. It is only under exceptional circumstances – house-moving, wars, fires, family rows, lost jobs or no money – that we are forcibly reminded of the house's central role and fundamental significance. Anthropological field research is another such exceptional circumstance. To enter another culture is to stand nervously in front of an alien house and to step inside a world of unfamiliar objects and strange people, a maze of spatial conventions whose invisible lines get easily scuffed and trampled by ignorant foreign feet. But these first, revealing, architectural impressions, reinforced by the painful process of learning who is who, who and what lives where, and what to do where and when, soon fade into the background to become merely the context and environment for the increasingly abstract and wordy conversation of ethnographic research. In time, for both anthropologists and their hosts, much of what houses are and imply becomes something that goes without saying (see also Bloch 1993a).

Institutional divisions and specializations also underlie anthropology's neglect of architecture – what might have been a more holistic anthropology of the house has been fragmented between various subdisciplines and theoretical traditions. Family and household are basic units of analysis in studies of demography and kinship; economic anthropology deals with the physical and mental activities implied by the notion of 'housekeeping', treating the household as a basic unit of production and consumption;[6] cultural ecologists deal with subsistence as an adaptation to an environment whose architecture, the result of human activities and perceptions, is often masked by the term 'natural'. We have not considered here the relationship between the house and the landscape in which it is situated. Ingold (pers. comm.) suggests a homology between the relations body : house : landscape, and organism : dwelling : environment. The former set emphasizes form, the latter function. This provokes the further question of where each entity in the sets begins and ends.

On the other hand, architectural works focused on the more material aspects of dwellings typically say much about environmental conditions, resources, technology, techniques of construction and types of building, and about the spatial organization, symbolism and aesthetic values of buildings, but they often say relatively little about the social organization of the people who live inside.[7]

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Despite this fragmentation, several recent works, written from quite different perspectives, have in common a more holistic focus on the house, a focus which implicitly evokes the pioneering works of Morgan (1965) and Mauss (1979). Hodder (1990) and Wilson (1989) give houses pride of place for an understanding of the development of human society in an archaeological or evolutionary frame, emphasizing the theoretical significance of domestication as an intellectual, political and sociological process which has both temporal and logical precedence over the more technical aspects of the Neolithic revolution. Ingold (n.d.) draws on Heidegger's (1971) insight that dwelling as being in the world is logically prior to and circumscribes the activity of building, to challenge Wilson's distinction between societies with and without architecture and the more general distinction between human culture and a given, neutral and objective 'nature' (see also Guidoni 1975, Egenter 1992). Authors such as Cuisenier (1991), Gudeman and Rivera (1990), Kuper (1982a; 1993) and Sabean (1990) all give weight to the house as a crucial practical and conceptual unit in the economies, kinship systems and political organization of widely different societies. Finally, both Wilson (1989: 58) and Bourdieu (1977: 89) stress the significance of the house as instrument of thought, especially in societies without writing.

According to Gudeman and Rivera, throughout much of rural Latin America, 'material practices are organised through the house, and the lexicon for them comes from the vocabulary for the physical dwelling: the house as shelter is a metaphor for the house as economy' (1990: 2). They stress that this ancient house model was brought from Europe at the time of the conquest but evidence from the Andean world (Arnold 1992, Gose 1992) suggests that it would have also struck a chord with indigenous ideas. Furthermore, though they say little about social and ceremonial ties beyond the household, these Andean data also show that where houses are concerned, economy, wider social interaction and ritual are not always easily disentangled.

The house economy, aimed more at balance and survival than at increase and profit, is opposed physically and conceptually to the corporation, modelled on the body and the domain to which neoclassical economic theory applies. Gudeman and Rivera note that, under the spell of Maine's one-sided emphasis, anthropologists have largely failed to see the potential significance of this dialectical relation between house and corporation. 'The onlooker can only wonder how

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the history of descent theory might have appeared had theorists of the 1940s, instead of exporting their own market experience, used a model of the home and the hearth, as Evans-Pritchard's own foundational work suggested' (1990: 183–4).

Despite this early ethnographic insight, it was Lévi-Strauss, following local imagery from native North America and matching it up with historical data from medieval Europe, who first drew attention to the potential theoretical significance of the house, who saw in house societies a specific and widespread social type, and who emphasized the significance of the indigenous category of house in the study of systems of social organization which appeared to make no sense when seen in terms of the categories of conventional kinship analysis. It is to his work that we now turn.

LEVI-STRAUSS AND SOCIETES A MAISON

Lévi-Strauss's writings on the house (1979, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1987, 1991) take their inspiration from the noble houses of medieval Europe. He first uses the notion of the house as a social group in a re-analysis of Boas's ethnography of the Kwakiutl whose principal grouping, a subdivision of the tribe, seemed to have both patrilineal and matrilineal characteristics. Finding that it fitted none of the conventional kinship categories of gens, sept, clan or sib, Boas admitted defeat and opted for the indigenous term *numayma*. (Lévi-Strauss 1983a: 163–70).

Lévi-Strauss makes a connection between Boas's problem and that of Kroeber in describing the social organization of the Californian Yurok. He argues that the Yurok house, which Kroeber had taken to be a mere building, was a central feature of their social organization and bore a striking resemblance to the *numayma*. Yurok houses were perpetual establishments whose names, taken from their location, decorations or ceremonial function, were used in turn by the house owners (1983a: 170–6).

Noting the similarity between these institutions and European noble houses, Lévi-Strauss points out that 'in order to recognise the house, it would have been necessary for ethnologists to look towards history' (1983a: 174). All these institutions are defined in similar terms as 'a moral person[8] holding an estate made up of material and

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immaterial wealth which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity, and, most often, of both' (1983a: 174).

Like their more exotic counterparts, European noble houses combined agnatic and uterine principles of succession as well as sometimes adopting in heirs, often through marriage. Their wealth consisted of both tangible property and less tangible names, titles and prerogatives, and their continuity was based on both kinship and marriage alliances. Alliances could be both endogamous (to keep the house from losing wealth) and exogamous (to accrue further property or status). The bringing together of 'antagonistic principles' – alliance, descent, endogamy, exogamy – was governed by political considerations and is a central feature of the house in these societies (1983a: 174–84).[9]

Our contributors pick up this definition in their discussions of Lévi-Strauss's work, analyzing its usefulness in the context of their own ethnographic studies. Before placing his notion of house in the context of his earlier work on kinship and examining some of the problems it raises, we underline some of the key points in the definition just quoted.

Lévi-Strauss stresses that the house as a grouping endures through time, continuity being assured not simply through succession and replacement of its human resources but also through holding on to fixed or movable property and through the transmission of the names, titles and prerogatives which are integral to its existence and identity. The importance of such ritualistic property is brought out in several of the cases examined here. McKinnon and Howell discuss the significance of heirlooms as encapsulating the enduring quality of the house amongst the Tanimbarese and Lio of island Southeast Asia whilst, for the Central Brazilian Mẽbengokre and Northwest Amazonian Tukanoans, Lea and Hugh-Jones underline the centrality of names, titles and mythologically sanctioned rights to make and use ceremonial ornaments.

The diacritical, status-marking significance of such property appears to imply that the constituent units of society, the houses, are necessarily hierarchically ranked. However Lévi-Strauss himself is somewhat elusive on this point, and it is not entirely clear whether he considers that this is always the case (see Lévi-Strauss 1983a: 181;

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Waterson this volume). Although working in quite different traditions, Hodder (1990) and Wilson (1988) also stress the role of houses as vehicles for rank; we return to the issue of hierarchy below.

Lévi-Strauss draws attention to the fact that, as a social institution, the house combines together a series of opposing principles or social forms such as filiation/residence, patri-/matri-lineal descent, hypergamy/hypogamy, close/distant marriage, which traditional kinship theory often treats as being mutually exclusive. In this context, the house takes on a crucial significance for, according to Lévi-Strauss, it 'reunites' or 'transcends' these incompatible principles. He writes: 'The whole function of noble houses, be they European or exotic, implies a fusion of categories which are elsewhere held to be in correlation with and opposition to each other, but are henceforth treated as inter-changeable: descent can substitute for affinity, and affinity for descent' (1983a: 187). The house thus gives an appearance of unity to opposing principles made equivalent to each other.

Though descent ('filiation'[10]) and alliance are equally important and mutually substitutable, Lévi-Strauss, characteristically, emphasizes the centrality of alliance. The spouses are at once the centre of a family but also the focus of tension between their respective families of origin, particularly over residence. In 'house-based societies', where neither descent, property nor residence taken alone are criteria for the constitution of groups, alliance is both a source of antagonism and the principle of a rather brittle unity, the house as name, concept or building providing an image or demonstration of the unity achieved. In earlier writings, Lévi-Strauss had argued that native models could act as 'secondary rationalisations' of a different, underlying and largely unconscious social structure (see Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1956]). As it is close to native idioms, the notion of the house might, at first sight, suggest a less sceptical view. However, Lévi-Strauss cites the elaborate architectural constructions of the Indonesian Batak and Atoni to illustrate his argument that the house is an example of Marx's notion of fetishism. 'Transfixing' an unstable union, transcending the opposition between wife-givers and wife-takers and between descent and alliance, the house as institution is an illusory objectification of the unstable relation of alliance to which it lends solidity (1987: 155). It is given a further illusory quality by the fact that, underlying an institution apparently founded on kinship

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principles, economic and political considerations steer marriage choices, inheritance and succession, helping to determine the house's form and destiny.

If Lévi-Strauss himself provides no single, extended account of his theory of house societies nor sets it firmly in the context of his earlier works, it appears to represent at once a less deterministic, rule-bound version of his structuralism, a continuation of the general theory of kinship first outlined in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969 [1949]), and an extension of this theory to cognatic or bilateral kinship systems. Although here we situate Lévi-Strauss's theory of house societies in the context of his earlier work on kinship, we would also stress the extent to which it represents a new departure in this thinking. He moves away from a theory in which genealogy is primary, to one where it is displaced by other symbols and to a consideration of systems in which the criteria of wealth, power and status, normally associated with literate and class-based societies, begin to play an increasingly important role in the constitution of social groupings.

In his earlier work, Lévi-Strauss made a crucial distinction between 'elementary' and 'complex structures'. Elementary structures are characterized by positive rules of marriage specifying the category of kin from which a spouse must be taken; at the level of the model at least, choice of spouse is based on kinship criteria alone. These positive marriage rules set up networks of marriage exchange which give shape and solidarity to the society concerned. Complex systems have negative marriage rules (the incest taboo) but lack positive rules. Instead, choice of spouse is determined by factors lying outside the realm of kinship such as wealth, power, class and personal attributes. In such systems social integration from political and economic institutions progressively displaces that provided by kinship, and although the fundamental and universal principles of reciprocity and exchange marriage are still assumed to operate, this is obscured by the many other factors at work.

The evolutionary cast of Lévi-Strauss's argument – that complex structures develop out of elementary ones – reappears in his arguments concerning house societies. These exist in a world still ordered and conceptualized in kinship terms but with economic and political interests making ever greater inroads even if they do not yet overstep 'ties of blood'. 'In order to express and propagate themselves,

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these interests must inevitably borrow the language of kinship, though it is foreign to them, for none other is available' (Lévi-Strauss 1983a: 186–7).

This, then, is a key feature of Lévi-Strauss's house-based societies: they constitute a hybrid, transitional form between kin-based and class-based social orders, 'a type of social structure hitherto associated with complex societies [but] also to be found in non-literate societies' (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 151). In their chapters, Gibson, McKinnon and Waterson all pick up this point, questioning whether the cases they analyze can be thought of in these terms. If our contributors would hesitate to take on this evolutionary framework, Waterson, in particular, calls for a closer examination of the role of the house where it is a prominent institution in societies undergoing major social transformation.

Lévi-Strauss links the transitional quality of houses as a social form with the claim that they 'subvert' the language of kinship (1987: 187) by using it to 'naturalize' rank differences and competition over wealth and power. This raises a number of questions. First, as noted above, Lévi-Strauss appears to consider the ranking of the basic units of these societies, the houses, in terms of their wealth, status or prestige, to be a common and perhaps intrinsic feature of their organization (see Lévi-Strauss 1983a: 181). Several of the cases considered here – the Brazilian Mẽbengokre, the Zafimaniry of Madagascar or the Malays of Langkawi – cannot be thought of as hierarchical societies.

To what extent, then, can such broadly egalitarian societies be considered as falling within Lévi-Strauss's rubric of 'sociétés à maison'? This question is central to Roxana Waterson's chapter. She argues that whilst Lévi-Strauss's examples are all more or less hierarchical, societies without marked stratification can still meet his basic criteria of continuity and the passing on of wealth (see also Sellato 1987a and b). In contrast to Macdonald, Guerreiro and Sellato, who try to refine and formalize Lévi-Strauss's criteria (see Macdonald ed. 1987), Waterson proposes a looser definition of 'house society' to cover cases in which the house has a dominant role as a focus of social organization, irrespective of whether the society in question is hierarchical or egalitarian. This of course raises the issue of the extent to which it is useful to take Lévi-Strauss's definition of house society as a strict category, an issue to which we return below.

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