# 1

# Beyond Kinship

## An Introduction

Susan D. Gillespie

The anthropological study of kinship has been dominated by two central issues: 1) the relationships linking families to larger kinship groups that incorporate multiple families and endure longer than a single family; and 2) the relationships between kin ties and locality, that is, between "blood" and "soil" (Kuper 1982:72). Since the founding of anthropology in the nineteenth century, abstract models and classificatory types have been offered to account for these relationships from comparative and evolutionary perspectives, but they have generally failed to live up to expectations. Ethnographic descriptions have dispelled the notion that prescriptive and proscriptive kinship "rules" govern social life. Kin ties are acknowledged to be optative and mutable rather than established at birth or marriage, and "fictive" relationships can be considered just as legitimate as "biological" ones. Indeed, even the presumed irreducible, natural component of kinship—a link between persons resulting from procreative acts—has been exposed as a Western notion that misleadingly privileges one construction of social relationships over potential others (Schneider 1972, 1984).

A more useful perspective assumes a processual rather than a classificatory approach to kinship, focusing on the practices and understandings by which relationships are constructed in everyday social life, rather than on abstract or idealized rules. One such approach specifically examines how, in certain societies, people conceive and enact kin or "kin-like" relationships as a group by virtue of their joint localization to a "house."[1] The house as a social group, as characterized by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1982, 1987), is much more than a household. Groups referred to by the term "house" are corporate bodies, sometimes quite large, organized by their shared residence, subsistence, means of production, origin, ritual actions, or metaphysical essence, all

of which entail a commitment to a corpus of house property, which in turn can be said to materialize the social group. Houses define and socially reproduce themselves by the actions involved with the preservation of their joint property, as a form of material reproduction that objectifies their existence as a group and serves to configure their status vis-à-vis other houses within the larger society.

Examining social organization from the focal point of the house, where this unit is applicable, can help to explicate both long-lived extra-familial relationships and the link between kinship and locality within this dynamic and processual perspective. Studies of "house societies" are especially concerned with how local life—the actions and structural integrations of groups and their members within particular political and economic contexts—is intertwined with genealogy, that is, kinship through time (Lévi-Strauss 1982:171). Diachronic investigations of houses emphasize the differential success of long-term strategies for acquiring, keeping, or replacing resources that are the basis for status and power, strategies whose outcomes constitute hierarchy and result in historical change.

In addition to overcoming some of the obstinate problems of kinship analysis, studies of house societies reflect growing interdisciplinary interests in material culture (e.g., Miller and Tilley 1996) and in the construction of place—the "cultural processes and practices through which places are rendered meaningful" (Feld and Basso 1996:7; see also Forth 1991; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Waterson 1997). Houses link social groups with architectural units that facilitate their physical delimitation and position in society, thereby integrating the social with the material life in its pragmatic and semiotic aspects.[2] In turn, the interpretation of enduring social formations as mediated by substantial material constructions, such as houses, allows for the incorporation of archaeological information, vastly increasing the time depth available to understand the variability and evolutionary trajectories of specific social systems. These efforts contribute to the ongoing disciplinary convergence sometimes called the "historicization of anthropology," providing a critically important historical dimension to ethnography (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990:1). This convergence can also help to erase the artificial boundary separating the sociotemporal periods labeled "prehistory" and "history," as anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists find themselves engaged in comparative studies of societies once considered incomparable, each discipline enriching and, where necessary, correcting the results of the others.

The essays in this volume bring together, for the first time, the concerns of ethnography, archaeology, and history in a cross-cultural, cross-temporal comparative study (Figure 1-1) centered on the house as an enduring social group



that is materially represented by a physical structure and the objects that go with it—furnishings, curated heirlooms, and graves—within a designated locus in the landscape. In highlighting the material dimensions of house societies, the authors emphasize not just the objects themselves but the "person-object" relationships that emerge from the various uses by actors of tangible (and also intangible) phenomena "to constitute crucial parts of the self and world" (McCracken 1988:75). Their concerns are with the politico-economic factors that constitute resources and constraints with which houses must contend, as well as with the meaning systems engaged in the construction and continued maintenance and embellishment of houses or house-locales and related objects. These meaning systems are subject to contestation and ultimately serve to differentiate social groups, especially in terms of hierarchical differences; thus, they are necessarily pragmatic and functional, and not merely representational (e.g., Hodder 1991a:154). Because the phenomena that act as the focal point for group identity often outlive the specific individuals who first created or used them, they are constantly subjected to resignification, and the portable objects and even houses may be moved about in the process.

Analysis of the material dimension of house societies thus entails a consideration of the temporal and spatial dimensions as well; indeed, a key function of houses is to anchor people in space and to link them in time. The temporal dimension includes the domestic cycle of individual house groups, the life history of the structures, the continuity and changes experienced by social houses over generations, and the time depth inherent in the ideology of the house or its valued heirlooms that serves to embody a collective memory about the past, a reference to origins that often forms a salient bond uniting house members. The spatial dimension includes the arrangement of individual furnishings or features and people within the house, the definition of the spatial boundaries of a house (which may extend far beyond a single building), the disposition of houses and their properties within a community whereby the relationships that they signify become naturalized along with other features in the landscape, and the sociopolitical and economic relationships between house societies and their neighbors on a regional level. Time, space, and material come together at the maximal scale in considering the different trajectories of house configurations within and between regions over many centuries.

These essays refer to the specific conceptualization of "house" and "house societies" first proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1970s (Lévi-Strauss 1979a, b). His explication of house societies has been heavily scrutinized, even disparaged, resulting in significant criticisms and clarifications (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; Macdonald, ed. 1987; Waterson 1990). The analyses presented here acknowledge this critique, but in highlighting the material

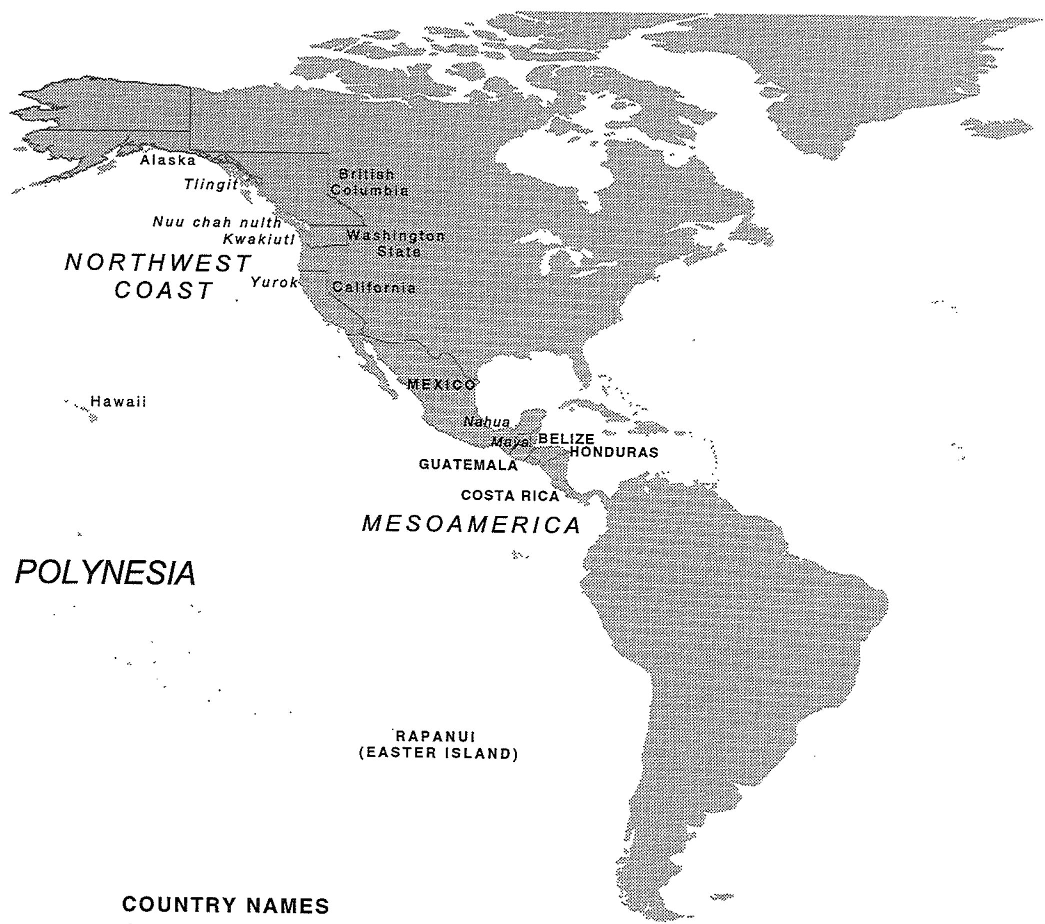

Figure 1-1. Regions, countries, and peoples discussed in this book.

dimensions of house societies, they deviate from some current research trends and also go beyond Lévi-Strauss's minimal attention to the most prominent aspect of house societies, namely, the houses themselves. The major characteristics of his model and how they are utilized by the authors in this volume are briefly reviewed in this chapter. Distinguishing the full heuristic value of the house as originally envisioned by Lévi-Strauss requires a more lengthy review of his work on the subject with a discussion of how other scholars have modified or refined his ideas; this is presented in the following chapter.

## THE HOUSE AS A SOCIAL UNIT

The "house" emerged as an important analytical concept in anthropology and related social sciences beginning in the 1970s, the result of independent scholarship that examined many different societies in various parts of the world (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Macdonald 1987). This development resulted, in part, from the increasing realization that the established analytical vocabulary of kinship failed to adequately characterize social units (e.g., Kuper 1982; Schneider 1965, 1972, 1984), and the concomitant recognition of the heuristic significance of indigenous concepts and terms (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Lévi-Strauss 1979a, b). This epistemological shift contributed to the revelation that in many societies the word for "house" also refers to a group of people associated with some spatial locus, one that most often includes a dwelling or other structure. In practical discourse and action the house may represent social, economic, political, and ritual relationships among various individuals, who may form a permanent or temporary collectivity.

Examples of this continuing scholarship include studies of societies in South America (Gudeman and Rivera 1990:1–2), Micronesia (Parmentier 1984), early modern Germany (Sabean 1990), ancient central Mexico (Carrasco 1976; Chance 1996), nineteenth-century Northwest Coast of North America (Ames 1995), and most especially Africa (Gottlieb 1992:50; Gray and Gulliver 1964; Grinker 1996; Kuper 1993; Şaul 1991) and Southeast Asia. In these last two areas especially, ethnographers were recognizing that the term usually translated as "clan" is the word for "house" (Fox, ed. 1980; Gottlieb 1992:50), and in Southeast Asia it has become common practice to adopt this indigenous usage, referring to localized kin groups as houses rather than imposing an etic classificatory term (e.g., Barraud 1979; Fox, ed. 1980; Traube 1986). This has become even more frequent as ethnographers have adopted the Lévi-Straussian concept of the house (e.g., Boon 1990b; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; Errington 1989; Macdonald, ed. 1987; McKinnon 1991; Waterson 1990). At this same time, significant studies were also beginning to appear concerning the physical house as a meaningfully constituted architectural unit around and within which people organize their behaviors (e.g., Bourdieu 1973, 1977; Cuisenier 1991; Cunningham 1964; Ellen 1986; Fox, ed. 1993; Kent, ed. 1990; Rapoport 1969; Ruan 1996; Samson 1990; Vom Bruck 1997; Waterson 1988, 1990).



Despite the growing attention to the house as an important cultural category found across the globe, only one scholar—Claude Lévi-Strauss—developed the idea of the "house" (*maison*) as a specific analytical category of comparative utility that coincides with a recurrent indigenous concept (Lévi-Strauss 1982). He introduced the notion of house as a "type of social structure" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:151) to be added alongside the familiar taxa of family, lineage, and clan, with the following definition: "a corporate body [*personne morale*] holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles 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" (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174).

The differences between a house and a unilineal descent group are somewhat subtle and must be drawn out from the various examples Lévi-Strauss (1982, 1987) gave of *sociétés "à maisons,"* "house" societies. In characterizing societies as divided into lineages or clans, anthropologists classify them into presumably distinct types (e.g., patrilineal, matrilineal) in which a singular form of social relationship—descent—is primary. The primacy of descent is expressed as "rules" of succession, inheritance, marriage partners, and often postmarital residence. Furthermore, every member of society is equivalently impacted by these governing principles; that is, everyone belongs to one specific lineage or clan within societies that, due to exogamy rules, must include multiple descent groups. Houses turn all these classificatory assumptions on their head. Although houses, like clans and lineages, are long-lived corporate entities to which persons belong and from which they construct their identities and configure their social interactions, there is no singular form of affiliation. Descent and inheritance may flow through either or both parents depending on circumstances; endogamy and exogamy may coexist; postmarital residence is contingent on a number of factors; and marriage patterns, exchange relations, co-residence, or shared labor may be the primary determinants of social relationships, rather than their outcomes.

A significant factor in Lévi-Strauss's crystallization of the house as a long-

lived property-owning social unit is that this term is actually used in the various societies that were organized into houses—they recognized the overlap between the house as a dwelling that shelters a social group and/or its property and the group itself. Even more important is the source of his information on house societies. Lévi-Strauss drew his examples from a wide range of societal complexity, from hunter-gatherer peoples such as the Kwakiutl and Yurok of North America, to the extremely varied mixed-subsistence and agricultural societies of Austronesia and Africa, to the noble houses of medieval Europe and Japan (1982, 1983, 1987). With these last examples he explicitly sought to show the organizational similarities between Western and non-Western peoples and to demonstrate the utility of historical documentation for long-term studies.[3]

In his cross-cultural comparative analysis, Lévi-Strauss (1987) further argued that, by emphasizing descent principles to classify societal types, some anthropologists were ignoring other kinds of relationships, especially marriage alliance. Alliance and descent are cross-cutting relationships that give rise to conflicting tendencies and loyalties among persons and groups, all of which come together in the house. The conjugal couple that establishes a house unites the wife-giving and wife-taking groups that provided each spouse, and produces children who express certain relationships to both paternal and maternal kinsmen as well as affines. The house therefore projects an outward façade of unity, one that masks these underlying tensions and conflicting loyalties. Lévi-Strauss thus considered the house a "fetish" in the Marxist sense, as the representation of a relationship between allied (wife-giving and wife-taking) houses (1987:155–56).

Moreover, house membership usually does not impact everyone equivalently. There are societies in which some persons may belong to more than one house simultaneously, or some persons may not belong to any house, or all persons may be considered members of a single house. Hierarchy is generally present both within and between houses, such that there are high-ranked and low-ranked houses (the latter may be attached to high-ranked houses, and thus may not actually be considered as houses), whose members express their relationships with one another and with other houses quite differently. It is "the language of kinship or of affinity, or most often, of both" that makes the house what it is. In many societies only some groups are able to strategically utilize and stabilize certain relationships—manifested as kinship and marriage ties—in order to maintain their connection to an estate (and thereby to each other and to other houses) over generations, while other groups are not able to do so. This is a basis for social hierarchy, which may be experienced as considerable



differences in prestige, wealth, and ritual and political power, both within and between houses. In the process, rules are often ignored and kinship itself is "subverted" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:152).

A focus on the house can thus enable anthropologists to move beyond kinship as a "natural" and hence privileged component of human relationships. Houses are concerned with locale, subsistence, production, religion, gender, rank, wealth, and power, which, in certain societies, are expressed in principles and strategies of consanguinity and affinity. Furthermore, the continued existence of a house is dependent on the successful execution of strategies for maintaining its estate and reproducing its members over multiple generations, a process that is best observed with the long time span available to historical pursuits (Lévi-Strauss 1983, 1987). Studies of house societies thus require the addition of a historical or diachronic dimension to ethnography.

## THE DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

Ethnographic studies concerned with the house model have tended to concentrate on the symbolism of the house and the everyday behaviors out of which house members enact and reify relationships (especially in Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; see also Barraud 1979; Fox, ed. 1980; Howell 1990; Lewis 1988). This is a largely synchronic and idealized within-house viewpoint that considers all houses as essentially equivalent. It is especially pertinent in more egalitarian situations in which there are no substantial differences among individual houses or in which the entire community is envisioned as a single house, and from perspectives in which economic and political factors are held stable. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995:46) proposed even more such studies to provide "a strong, ethnographically-based view of the house understood in holistic terms which takes account of processes of living that may be said to be universal."

In contrast with this approach, the houses in Lévi-Strauss's examples become most visible in the context of competitive between-house interactions that are inherently asymmetrical and shift over time. All houses are not the same. No two houses will incorporate exactly the same estate; each will have its own names, heirlooms, ritual privileges, and material property that serve to differentiate houses and form a basis for ranking them. Houses are also differentiated in the context of their interactions with each other. For example, for some marriage alliance relationships a specific house stands as (usually superordinate) wife-giver, while for others the same house will be (usually subordi-

nate) wife-taker. These permutations of rank and difference may be relatively enduring, but they can succumb to the exigencies of external factors and the failure of internal strategies to maintain the house or its estate, especially in the face of competition from attached groups or junior branches that aspire to househood. Within-house and between-house rivalries may intensify, and house statuses may fluctuate due to unstable economic or political factors, as new sources of wealth become available or interactions with other societies change the local dynamics.

These two contrasting approaches to the study of the house thus constitute more than a difference in orientation—within-house versus between-house relationships—since both must come into play in understanding a total social system. Investigating the house of Lévi-Strauss entails an enlargement of the temporal and spatial fields. The disjunction between these two approaches is well illustrated in Thomas Gibson's (1995) study of the elaborate house rituals in Ara, a Makassarese village in South Sulawesi. He determined that these rituals function to highlight the unity of sibling sets *within* each individual house. This conclusion led him to dismiss Lévi-Strauss's characterization of the house, because its emphasis on the conflicting relations of alliance and descent did not seem to apply to this case (1995:146).

In an aside to these conclusions, however, Gibson noted that in terms of *between*-house relationships, these same rituals *in the past* once functioned to promulgate status differences among nobles, commoners, and slaves. He further suggested that in "pragmatic" rather than "symbolic" terms, the house of Lévi-Strauss did become apparent when these processes were viewed over a period of time. Relationships among houses were accentuated in competitive rituals, honors and titles were accumulated and inherited, and achieved status was sometimes converted into ascribed status as social differences were naturalized by interhouse dynamics: "One of the purposes of rituals was to push claims to higher status. If a house was allowed to get away with using certain symbols, its new rank would be secured. In this respect, Ara in the nineteenth century would have looked very like one of Lévi-Strauss's ranked societies where the 'rules' seem made to be broken" (Gibson 1995:147–48). In other words, when the analyst's attention turns away from the ideology of kinship and idealized shared living and working arrangements within the individual house, toward competition for rank and status on the societal or supra-societal political level over a period of generations, then the house in the Lévi-Straussian sense may suddenly reveal itself. Thus Gibson (1995:148) remarked, "It is perhaps at this more 'historical' level that we should look for the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's argument, for it is here that his concern with myth and history, kinship and class, is located."



This same opinion had previously been emphasized by Lévi-Strauss himself (1983, 1987:158, 193–94) in his preference for historical materials over ethnographic (short-term) descriptions of societies in order to conceptualize the house as a cross-cultural category. He suggested that the long view of history is essential to understand the mechanisms of consolidation and eventual dissolution of houses, because by definition they are perpetual bodies that outlive individuals. To be certain of the existence of houses in a *société à maisons* (houses plural), one must discern the cumulative outcome of strategic choices made by generations of individuals from the alternatives available to them, based on what they believed would improve or at least maintain their status and property rights (Lévi-Strauss 1983:1225), outcomes that would, inevitably, result in difference over time (as historical change) rather than the sameness that derives from timeless universal processes.

Despite this diachronic emphasis in Lévi-Strauss's own discussions and his own recourse to historically known societies, few after him have looked to the documentary record to reveal the operation of houses in various world regions, so the potential for understanding house societies from this perspective has generally been unrealized.[4] However, although the outcomes of maneuvering for status and position are best seen over the long run, historical documentation is not absolutely requisite to investigating the temporal component of house societies. As Waterson (this volume) points out, all our data—ethnographic, documentary, archaeological—are historical and contingent to local situations.

The dimension of time within house ideology has been abundantly attested by ethnographic description. One important component of temporal depth available to anthropologists is the life cycle of houses as lived through their members, which is observable and accessible through long-term observation and by recourse to memories (Sandstrom, this volume). Marriage alliances between various houses, when they are repeated over generations, form another common reference to time. These are not simply an expression of social structural "rules" within the time frame of the present, but are exegetically explained as instances of following an established precedent, referencing a timeline going back many generations. Alliances between Indonesian houses, for example, are often predicated on the notion that an original brother-sister pair, separated by the departure of one sibling from the natal house to marry into another house, is continually reunited in the subsequent marriages of their cross-sex descendants (their replacements) generations later; this is the symbolic basis for the well-known Indonesian asymmetric connubium first detailed by F. A. E. van Wouden (1968 [1935]; see, e.g., Barraud 1990; Boon 1990b; Errington 1989; Fox 1980; Howell 1990; McKinnon 1991).

*The Objectification of Perpetuity*

In house societies (and in some non-house societies as well), perpetuity—the maintenance of links between past and present that are requisite to the notion of precedence—is a fundamental value even if, though publicly claimed, it may have little basis in fact, as may happen when persons attempt to create a higher status. The legitimacy and status of the house qua house often derives from the acknowledgment of ties to illustrious founders, usually house ancestors; ancestor veneration itself is a "historicist" means for "implementing dynamic options in social life" (Boon 1977:89). Authority for actions in the present is based on precedence extending back into a legendary or even primordial past. Descent in the biological sense is only one component of a larger concern for shared origin, which serves to localize and bind a social group (Fox 1987:172, 1980:12).

The allusion to origins and its linkage to the living may be expressed in various ways. For example, house members may own (as immaterial property) and perform origin narratives. These include "elaborate accounts of the emergence and/or the arrival of predecessors; traditions of the migration and journeying of groups and individuals; tales of the founding of settlements, of houses, or of ancestral shrines; accounts of contests to establish priority, to secure the rightful transmission of ancestral relics, to assert the often disputed ordering of succession to office or, in some areas, to establish precedence in affinal relations" (Fox 1993:16). Such narratives are frequently signified by material objects—features in the landscape, the house itself, and the curated heirlooms that are a focus for social memory and "provide physical evidence of a specific continuity with the past" (Fox 1993:1; see Joyce, McKinnon, Waterson, this volume). They represent yet another objectification or fetishization of a relationship among house members, a relationship through time.

In Lévi-Strauss's definition, houses are dependent for their continued existence on the maintenance of linkages of members to these objectifying phenomena, both material and immaterial, through various kinds of ongoing actions. Intangible property, such as names or titles, is continually embodied by living persons, often in a cycle of generations, as when grandchildren take the names, and hence the identities, of their grandparents (Lévi-Strauss 1982:175; see also Hugh-Jones 1993:115; Kan 1989:71). As noted above, other inherited immaterial property that refers to the past may include dances, songs, and ritual performances, the ancestral spirits themselves, and claims to potential spouses in allied houses. Objects that are acquired in the context of marriage exchanges also serve as mnemonics for alliance relationships linking houses, representing a kind of social history. These and the other inherited heirlooms



are often kept in a special area within the house, an action that may thereby sacralize that structure.

The physical house itself may be an icon of origins and a material witness to critical episodes in the life history of the social group. The "living" house, as it is enlarged, modified, and embellished over generations, objectifies the changes that signify longevity and accrued value (Waterson 1993, this volume). Other physical manifestations of continuity within the house may be the incorporated portions of previous structures that had once stood in the same place (Tringham, this volume), as well as the literal remains of the ancestors themselves, as subfloor burials or curated bones (Gillespie, Kirch, McKinnon, this volume).

Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995:36–37) argued for a processual view of kinship in which people and the houses they occupy are viewed in the same analytical terms—both are living, spirit-inhabited phenomena that "build" and maintain each other (see Chapter 2, this volume). But from the perspective of house perpetuity, there is an important distinction between people and the structures upon which house relationships are constituted. The physical house (or temple or shrine), heirlooms, ancestral relics, and immaterial property represent a concentration of value, which is the key component to the standing of the house as an institution and its prestige in relation to other houses. The house so objectified signifies stability over time, although it is often rebuilt or even moved as part of the aging process (e.g., Carsten 1995a). In contrast, the individual members of the house as a social group cycle through the house, their own existences much shorter in duration. They represent perpetuity only as they conscientiously and legitimately—through the language of kinship and affinity—replace and metaphysically embody their forebears, the sum of their life spans contributing to the status of the house as a *personne morale*. Susan McKinnon (1991, this volume) explains this contrast as the ideal of generalization and concentration of value in the house versus its particularization (in the actions of specific individuals) and partial dispersal of value (e.g., in marriage exchanges).

The dialectic of stability and change reflected in the relationships maintained between property and people has been dichotomized in more general terms according to a concentric spatial model of "center" versus "periphery" in Shelly Errington's (1989) characterization of Southeast Asian house societies (see also McKinnon 1991:177–78):

> I suggest that Houses in this part of the world are profoundly centered entities, consisting of a center and a serving group. The center is often a stable object, such as a temple, a palace, or a set of regalia. The center is often regarded as the descendant or visible

remains of an ancestral "root" or "'source." . . . Because the center does not reproduce or die (it often consists of leavings of the dead, or of objects called "inanimate" in Euro-American cosmology), it lasts through long periods. The center is retained by the serving group. . . .

The serving group, or caretakers, or worship community, of the center consists of humans. Humans do die, and consequently they must recruit more humans to the service group if the central object is to be served in the future. . . . The service grouping forms the periphery around its central objects; because it consists of humans who die and breathe and move around, the periphery is metaphorically and usually literally more mobile than its center. What is central (if I may so put it) to the House in island Southeast Asia—what defines the service grouping as an entity—is not the periphery, the "social group," but the center. (Errington 1989:239)

Perpetuity is thus manifested in concrete form in the ongoing activities of persons with respect to localizing phenomena, as a medium for enacting relationships with one another. By the same token, the permanent form of these objects and structures (which may actually require their replacement) facilitates the perpetuation of the *personne morale*, as long as an ethos of preservation, rather than dispersal, of the estate is maintained.

## THE HOUSE IN THE PRESENT AND PAST

Integrating the concern for the materialization of the house over time, as a consequence of ongoing group practices, at a societal or regional perspective and with an accompanying interest in sociocultural change, should open up the study of the house beyond the temporal limitations of ethnography and even of history to the vast time span accessible via archaeology. The house can serve as a nexus for the meaningful convergence of ethnography and archaeology (and related social historical disciplines), with ethnographers fleshing out the rich contextual details of the immaterial aspects of life not immediately accessible to archaeologists as well as providing examples of the diversity of cultural forms, while archaeologists supplement the recent past with knowledge of configurations no longer extant, enlarge on the life histories of physical houses, and detail the sequential progression and transformation of house societies in various world areas. Both fields of endeavor are needed to write the "biographies of built forms" (Waterson, this volume).

In the spirit of such a cooperative interdisciplinary enterprise, this collection of essays engages ethnographers and archaeologists to delineate the material dimensions of houses and house societies, emphasizing the actions and strategies that they manifest. The tenor and perspective of these papers are



necessarily different from the few previous published anthologies on the house and house societies (see Chapter 2). While the authors acknowledge the important contributions made in earlier attempts to refine Lévi-Strauss's house, they highlight certain aspects of his model and pay correspondingly less attention to issues that have been well studied by others. For example, there is little discussion of idealized kinship principles and practices, and greater concern for practical and especially long-term relationships enacted among the individuals who form houses, between people and physical houses, and between houses.

Moreover, unlike some previous attempts to determine the definitional criteria whereby societies could be properly classified as house societies or not (e.g., Macdonald, ed. 1987), the emphasis here is on the heuristic utility of the concept of the house, especially its dynamic and processual aspects, rather than its classificatory status. The essays therefore vary in their emphasis on specific aspects of the house model, and not all of these case studies involve bona fide "houses" in the Lévi-Straussian sense. The inclusion of this range of variation allows consideration of the degree to which his model can be useful in various kinds of ethnographic and archaeological situations, and to prevent it being seen as a universal proposal or a panacea for the ills plaguing traditional kinship studies.

Indeed, the nature of the archaeological record generally prevents prehistorians from dealing with such intangible issues as kinship relations or metaphorical representations of the house as a fetish. Archaeologists cannot, except in some instances of historic archaeology, determine whether ties of descent or affinity were strategies used by particular individuals to maintain the integrity of an estate; in fact, they cannot identify the actions of specific individuals except in extraordinary circumstances. However, they can examine the outcomes of group actions that have enduring material components, especially those that occurred repeatedly within long time frames. Utilizing the house model eliminates the problem of trying to interpret what configuration of kin or descent group occupied physical houses or house compounds, with the understanding that the house is an institution that used multiple strategies to recruit members whose everyday practices integrated kinship, economics, religion, and politics.

The most comprehensive archaeological interpretations of house societies will probably be those aided by the continuity of archaeologically known practices into the more recent historical past and the ethnographic present (e.g., Gillespie, Joyce, Kirch, Marshall, this volume). Nevertheless, even for those investigating the deep past, the house model has value for understanding such mundane practices as the continued rebuilding of houses in the same

location. In many parts of the world, houses were rebuilt (after being destroyed by natural or intentional means) in the same place, either continuously or following slight temporal gaps, sometimes with the remains of the old houses incorporated into new ones. Interpreting this rebuilding as part of a complex ideology that serves to localize a social group and, in effect, organize kin-like relationships in the process, provides a far richer context than seeing it merely as the outcome of some unexamined custom or the consequence of presumed social or ecological constraints on house location.

The continuity of house location must have been socially meaningful, as Ruth Tringham demonstrates in her chapter on Neolithic houses of southeast Europe. Most of the houses in that space-time were made of clay, a cheap and relatively ubiquitous material, and they were frequently burned as part of the life cycle of individual dwellings. Far from being a simple act of destruction, however, the burning of clay houses is what transformed them into enduring phenomena, as it also facilitated their incorporation into the new structure that replaced the old at the same location. Tringham's comparison of Neolithic house continuity patterns in Southeast Europe and Southwest Asia reveals an unwarranted bias in the common evolutionary assumption that Southwest Asia was more precocious in its advancement toward urbanism. She suggests that instead of experiencing evolutionary differences, the peoples of these two regions developed different trajectories in siting their houses—manipulating the built environment—to construct a continuity of place.

Identification with a specific house, against the panoply of other houses, therefore "offers people a kind of immortality" (Waterson, this volume). It lengthens the temporal span of their individual identities because the house itself is a reference to the past, as social and historical memories are focused on houses or empty places where houses once stood (see Tringham, Marshall, Joyce, Waterson, this volume). Roxana Waterson explores this theme in some detail in her examination of the elaborate "origin houses" in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. She demonstrates the interconnection of Sa'dan Toraja people and houses, as they are ritually linked not just to their own dwellings but to certain highly elaborated noble houses, whose physical and spiritual components—the heirlooms, bones, and spirits of the dead as well as the placentas of the newly born—anchor people to place and to ancestral origins. Houses are what the Toraja refer to when they talk about their interrelationships, in effect, seeing themselves through the biographies of the houses through which they trace connections to each other and to the landscape. Waterson's explicitly diachronic perspective demonstrates how meanings of "place" are dependent on the changes that occur over time, opening the way for a direct connection between ethnographic and archaeological investigations.



Susan McKinnon's chapter takes us into the house to observe how a single crafted object can quintessentially symbolize the unity of contradictions that Lévi-Strauss originally suggested the house should fetishistically represent. Her discussion of the beautifully carved wooden ancestral altars (*tavu*) that once graced the noble houses of Tanimbar, Eastern Indonesia, reveals how links to ancestors and house history are embedded in the physical form of this altar and enacted in the practical behaviors associated with it. The ancestors are the "base" or "root" (*tavun*) of the house as a social unit; this is a common botanic metaphor. They are represented by the *tavu*, which is given the form of an abstract standing human figure with upraised arms that originally reached from its base on the floor to a shelf on the roof support that housed ancestral relics and heirlooms. On certain ceremonial occasions the head of the noble house sat upon the bench at the foot of the *tavu*, representing thereby the "tip" that developed out of its ancestral "base." The *tavu* thus served as a material bridge between ancestral spirits of the past and their descendants in the present. A hard, enduring object that abstracts the human form rather than representing any particular individual, the *tavu* also manifested the ability of the noble houses to generalize and objectify the house value that signifies their high standing, something that the Tanimbarese commoners are unable to accomplish. It further represented the tension inherent within any house between the obligation to concentrate value and the contrary strategic desire to control its dispersal, as an investment in the form of marriage alliances, to ensure the social reproduction of the house.

The ancestral altars of the Maya peoples of Mexico and Guatemala, as discussed by Susan Gillespie, have a similar function as a material focus for contacting the souls of the house's ancestral dead, and in the prehispanic era the dead were actually buried under these altars or similar forms. The altars were built and sometimes used in the same manner as benches or beds, so that, as in Tanimbar, the metaphysical link to the past was maintained in a practical manner by sitting upon the objects that served as a bridge to the ancestors. The Maya altars are not meant to depict a human being, however, but are considered smaller versions of houses. This is a meaningful alternative representation in that houses and people are co-identified; houses are personified and persons (bodies) are objectified (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:43). Gillespie draws on Lévi-Strauss's discussion of the fetishized house as a microcosm, as well as notions of the house and body as parallel conceptual models (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995), to explore the various levels of Maya "houses" that served as containers for house spirits, multi-family groups, communities, and ultimately the entire cosmos in a concentric spatial arrangement. In enclosing and thus unifying diverse elements, the house is a means of

creating "place" within the landscape. Significantly, specific ritual actions are required to create and activate these nested houses, actions undertaken by those who thereby define themselves as a group with a common stake in the house.

As both a social and a physical place, the house locates persons within a complex web of categories and relationships (Forth 1991:56) that can be mapped against materially defined spaces, as Alan Sandstrom explains in his chapter on the Nahua village of Amatlan in central Mexico. Amatlan exhibits many, if not all, of the characteristics of a house society, and its inhabitants were, until recently, distributed among various named cleared areas in the forest that they called "houses" and that played a significant role in their social identities. Sandstrom highlights the salient features of these "embryonic" houses and discusses the economic factors, primarily the scarcity of agricultural land, that impede the maintenance of house estates. He further demonstrates the changing residential patterns over individual life spans, as married men acquire the wherewithal to move out of their fathers' dwellings and build their own (usually nearby). His mapping of the movement of siblings to their own or spouses' houses within the local landscape revealed that married sisters and brothers continued to live close to and interact with one another across their respective households. This proxemic analysis demonstrates in a pragmatic form the latent and long-term significance of cross-sex sibling ties that is masked by the discursive emphasis on agnatic male relationships. Sandstrom (and also Waterson and Gillespie) points out that the "house" as a spatial locus may encompass more than a single structure, and its investigation requires examining the interactive relationships of various kinds revealed in the spatial orientation of structure groupings with their surrounding or associated cleared areas. An archaeological example of this scenario is provided by Patrick Kirch's (this volume) explanation of the Polynesian *marae* as a set-aside "open" space.

The long-term perspective of archaeology and documentary history makes it possible to trace the life history of individual structures—to determine their stages of enlargement and elaboration; to account for the decline and demise of the house, possibly as a result of the growth of rival houses; and to demonstrate, where applicable, the transformative changes to houses that materially encode the correlative changes to the social groups associated with them. Yvonne Marshall accomplishes this last feat with her historical overview of the changes to the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) houses since the last century. Her examination of a Northwest Coast people, one of Lévi-Strauss's original exemplars of house societies, fills in important missing details from his defining work by concentrating on the physical structure of the houses, as well as by tracing them



through time in concert with the demographic and economic changes that transformed Nuu-chah-nulth society. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Nuu-chah-nulth dwelling underwent a rapid metamorphosis from an externally undifferentiated residence, housing people, to an externally elaborated but essentially vacant building, housing paraphernalia and symbolizing the increased wealth of the social group that maintained its ritual and representative functions. In a matter of decades, even this form disappeared as the social houses gave way to a new socioeconomic configuration based on wage labor and a cash economy.

Comparative and cumulative studies can allow for more general conclusions involving larger regions and more extensive time spans. Drawing on ethnographically-described Tikopia as a type case for a Polynesian house society, Patrick Kirch interprets his archaeologically-derived data from that island to provide a more complete picture of Tikopia, past and present. He begins with a review of Raymond Firth's ethnographic findings here to argue that the Tikopian *paito*, "house," fits the criteria of Lévi-Strauss's house, and as such has significant utility for interpreting the island's archaeological remains. Kirch further demonstrates that the well-known Polynesian temple complex evolved out of an older and more widespread Austronesian pattern whereby ordinary dwellings were sacralized over time by the interment of the ancestral dead within their walls, becoming thereby "holy houses" or cult centers. Significantly, the transformation from holy house to temple in eastern Oceania, but not in the western half of this world area, provides archaeological evidence for regional transformations of social configurations, like those that ethnographers have determined for living house societies (see Chapter 2).

The interpretation of archaeological structures as Lévi-Straussian social houses is made stronger by such practices as burial under or around houses or the curation of skeletal remains, which may be evidence of ancestral veneration or more generally a desire to maintain perpetuated links to deceased members within the house (see Kirch, Waterson, McKinnon, Gillespie, this volume). A related convention that is archaeologically visible is the caching of objects within houses or their associated tombs, some of them having been curated for centuries prior to their deposition. Viewing these objects as the materialization of historical memory of the house, and not merely as proof of one's wealth or economic status, adds a new dimension to understanding their value. Rosemary Joyce locates the prehispanic Maya practice of ritually depositing valuable goods within this social context. Those that have endured through the ages are primarily costume ornaments of stone or shell, and they have been recovered archaeologically from special locations—under house or temple floors, in tombs, and in sacred natural features. Joyce demonstrates that

these were not simply wealth objects taken out of circulation for ritual purposes; they were curated heirlooms, virtually all of which were deposited long after they were first made as markers of house prestige. Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions were frequently added to the objects to identify their "owners," allowing for a tentative start to writing the biography of Maya noble houses by way of the valuables that preserved the house in social memory, from their manufacture to their final deposition centuries later.

Joyce's closing chapter further reiterates the major themes of this book, beginning with the critique of traditional kinship theories and the multiple ways that the house of Lévi-Strauss can resolve the difficulties embedded in traditional taxonomic approaches and incorporate more contemporary processual and practice-oriented concerns in social anthropology. Her in-depth examination of the Yurok of California fills a major gap in the literature on the house. Lévi-Strauss (1982) considered the Yurok pivotal to his understanding of the house, but he never provided enough information on them to explain why they held the key to house societies. Joyce draws on the rich details from Alfred Kroeber's original ethnographic field work to illustrate how the Yurok were an exemplary house society, as their houses represented continuity and identity, localized social relationships within the larger community, and were maintained by group actions and negotiations for status.

Joyce's discussion emphasizes the material dimensions of the house and its manifest utility for linking interdisciplinary research on culture and society. Her explicitly comparative approach, especially when added to previous studies, reveals how the same symbolic and pragmatic concepts reappear in house societies: the requirement of group actions invested in the house estate to continually and actively define the membership of the social house; the abiding emphasis on ancestral origins and precedence; the importance of naming as a way to assign value and permanence to people, places, and other phenomena; and the mapping of social relations across a landscape by the identification of people with houses or house locations, an identification maintained by social memories materialized in concrete signs.

The essays in this volume also highlight the value of research among existing ethnographic and historic archives and museum holdings to obtain the long-term perspective needed to realize the emergence, operation, and transformation of house societies. This brings up a final point: all these studies, not just the archaeological and historical cases, deal with the past. The ethnographic descriptions of house societies, here and in the published literature, refer to societal configurations and house materializations no longer extant or else on the verge of extinction, as modernizing forces sweep the entire globe. These include the imposition of colonialism and capitalism, religious missionization displacing the ancestors, and political marginalization preventing the accumulation of wealth or achievement of rank, with an accompanying rearrangement of economic and social structures. In particular, the contractual relationships inherent in the wage-based, cash economy of modern class society supersede the legitimacy of social relationships that draw upon the "language of kinship and affinity," as Lévi-Strauss (1982:186–87) himself noted (see Chapter 2). "House societies" are disappearing, although "houses" are more resilient; witness the popularity of fraternity/sorority houses and similar fraternal organizations that maintain a long-term actively engaged investment in a corpus of material and nonmaterial property, using "the language of kinship" to link house members.



In this sense the house per se—a phenomenon belonging to a time when virtually all social ties were still referenced in terms of kinship, however defined—may not appear to have much significance for contemporary sociocultural anthropology, although the value of kinship analysis to the study of past societies has recently been reiterated (Godelier et al. 1998:3). However, the many aspects of the temporal and material dimensions of houses explored in this collection transcend the boundaries of house societies in the Lévi-Straussian sense. These topics include: 1) a focus on material objects, structures, and landscapes for enacting and maintaining relationships among persons, even over generations as the objects or their physical signs outlive individuals; 2) the objectification of social difference as hierarchy; 3) the house as a localizing force within a physical landscape and a multidimensional social network; 4) the imbuing of social memory in fixed features and in portable, transactable goods; 5) the active negotiation of the boundaries and obligations of persons and social groupings organized around a common investment in property; 6) and the historical changes, as well as evolutionary trajectories, that can be traced in societal configurations. All these issues can inform our understandings of all societies, present and past. Out of these shared concerns, ethnographers, historians, and archaeologists can recognize their common interest in the house.

This chapter has been greatly improved by discussions with Clark E. Cunningham, Susan McKinnon, Rosemary A. Joyce, David C. Grove, and Edward M. Bruner. I thank them for their earnest comments, suggestions, and criticisms.