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## Lévi-Strauss

## Maison and Société à Maisons

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*The definition and descriptions of "house" and "house society" introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss are not as straightforward and unproblematic as he might have believed, as subsequent scholarship has shown. His failure to develop this model in any detailed case study left nagging questions unresolved. Furthermore, his intention to utilize the house as a new social structural "type" alongside clan, lineage, and family reveals a notable flaw in his conception, for in his own discussions he eschews the simple classification of societies according to rules that arrange people into corporate descent groups, and the "house" is considered too variable a category to serve classification purposes. Nevertheless, aspects of his notions of house and house societies have proved so intriguing as to tempt other ethnographers to develop and clarify them. In the process, his definition of the house as an organizational institution found in some societies at a certain level of political-economic complexity has increasingly been abandoned, while the symbolic or fetishistic portions of his model have been highlighted in studies that see in the house a new means for elucidating social group relations that may have universal applications. These critiques and the subsequent reconceptualizing of the Lévi-Straussian house are reviewed in this chapter, but it concludes with a call to return to his original formulation (although not the static notion of a classificatory type). Lévi-Strauss's definition and characterization emphasized the materiality, locality, and duration of the house along with the use of the "language of kinship and affinity" to bind its members and to perpetuate the estate from which their identity was derived. In addition to focusing on kinship in terms of practice, discourse, and negotiation rather than as rules to be obeyed, and on the long-term outcomes of strategic decisions and actions rather than on idealized characterizations of social groupings, Lévi-Strauss recognized in the house a societal configuration*

*probably common in the past but now on the verge of extinction. This distinction should not be lost; indeed, comparing the role of kinship past and present adds immeasurably to our understanding of social organization.*

The "house" has become a key analytical unit in anthropology and related social sciences, but, as noted in Chapter 1, only one scholar—Claude Lévi-Strauss—developed a model of the house as a specific kinship category of considerable comparative utility that simultaneously coincides with indigenous terminology (Lévi-Strauss 1982). Lévi-Strauss explored the role houses (*maisons*) play in house societies (*sociétés "à maisons"*) in a course of lectures from 1976 to 1982 at the Collège de France (Lévi-Strauss 1984). An expanded version of his earliest exposition on this topic was published in a 1979 essay (1979b) entitled "Nobles sauvages," which was reprinted as a chapter in his revised edition of *La Voie des masques* (1979a). This book became available in English translation (1982), as did his 1976–82 lecture synopses on house societies (1987), and a brief review of this construct appears as a dictionary entry (1991).

In all these publications, Lévi-Strauss's definition of house has remained unchanged since his 1976–77 course, but its singular characteristics and cross-cultural variability were further elaborated by his subsequent inclusion of additional ethnographic examples (Lévi-Strauss 1984, 1987). His studies of house societies relate to his other work on structuralist analysis, alliance theory, and a dichotomy between "elementary" and "complex" societies that centered on marriage practices and carried with it certain evolutionary implications. His discussions on this topic should also be seen in the context of the contemporary critique of kinship theory. Lévi-Strauss's general intent was to demonstrate how adopting the house as a social structural type would clarify ambiguities inherent in anthropologists' struggles to map their classificatory kinship schemes onto rather intransigent indigenous principles and practices. An important consequence of this scholarship was the revelation that the house can transcend the traditional problem-riddled taxonomic approach to kinship and social structure, which was coming under serious attack (e.g., Kuper 1982; Schneider 1972, 1984). The house also bridges the analytical divisions between literate and nonliterate societies, and thus the distinction typically maintained between the concerns of history and those of anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1983), with all that such a division implies in terms of the conceptualizing of the "other."

Despite his intention to clarify the study of kinship practices, Lévi-Strauss instead garnered a great deal of criticism on virtually every point. His definition of the house has been ignored or rewritten. His characterization of the

house as a fetishization of marriage alliance has been considered inappropriate or simplistic, although the fetishistic or representational aspect of the house has been carried even further. He has been reprimanded for having ignored what should have been a major object of inquiry—the physical house itself—and rebuked for treating the house as a new classificatory type within an outmoded evolutionary trajectory. Finally, he has been criticized for failing to rise above the naive conceptions of kinship that he himself argued against. This chapter considers all these developments, but concludes that there is still much to be gained from the original vision of the house of Lévi-Strauss.

#### THE HOUSE AS A *PERSONNE MORALE*

Lévi-Strauss (1979a, b, 1982) introduced the house firmly within the context of kinship studies, specifically with regard to problems encountered by ethnographers attempting to classify societies according to their dominant kinship principles. He began with Franz Boas's unsuccessful efforts to explain the social organization of the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast of North America as the result of some historical chain of events in concert with those of neighboring societies. The Kwakiutl had a patrilineal orientation that contrasted with that of their matrilineal neighbors to the north, but certain of their practices did not strictly align with patrilineality and, Boas believed, indicated a possible shift towards matrilineality.

For example, authority over a gens was inherited by a son from his father, yet, among the Kwakiutl aristocrats, certain types of property were passed from father to daughter, and sons also inherited from their mothers. Moreover, affinal relations seemed to be substitutable for descent. Husbands could acquire the property and affiliation belonging to their wives, and, if no marriageable daughters were available, men seeking an alliance with another family would "marry" a son instead, or a part of their future father-in-law's body, or even a piece of furniture, in order to claim some access to that family's property. Boas eventually gave up trying to account for Kwakiutl practices in terms of presumed historical ties with their neighbors to the north and south. Being unable to explain the Kwakiutl descent group as either an agnatic gens or a matrilineal clan left him with only the indigenous term, *numaym* (*numayma*), to refer to their principal kinship unit, a culture-specific name that had no known counterparts and hence no utility for comparison and explanation (Lévi-Strauss 1982:163–170).

Lévi-Strauss then compared the travaux of Boas with those of Alfred Kroeber, who had similarly failed to find a good match between the analytical

terminology of ethnology and the kinship practices of the Yurok of California. Unexpectedly, the patrilineal Yurok did not capitalize on that descent principle to divide themselves into circumscribed groups "capable of constituted social action." Instead, kinship operated bilaterally and diffusely, with kindred-like ties extending out in all directions incorporating innumerable other persons. Kroeber actually reached the unlikely conclusion that the Yurok lacked social organization in the anthropological sense, although the populace did live in distinct settlements in which they formed individual households occupying substantial dwellings (Lévi-Strauss 1982:172; see Joyce, this volume).<sup>1</sup>

These two pioneering anthropologists failed to understand the nature of social relationships among certain North American peoples because their "institutional arsenal" was incomplete, limited as it was to such modeling concepts as tribe, village, clan, lineage, and family (Lévi-Strauss 1982:173–74). They could thus do little other than characterize Kwakiutl and Yurok kinship organization in negative terms, explaining which principles and types of units were absent without adequately accounting for what was present. Yet the answer had been before them all along, and is still available in their accounts, for both the Yurok and the Kwakiutl had described to the anthropologists their relationships with one another in terms of their various "houses." "Voilà le mot lâché"—"At last, the word is out" (Lévi-Strauss 1979b:46, 1982:172). They had talked about their houses as named, perpetual establishments that served as the principal "jural entities" (*personnes morales*). The houses, rather than individuals or families, were the actual subjects of rights and duties, and houses engaged in long-term exchange and debt relationships with one another. The anthropologists, however, took this word to refer only to the dwellings, nothing more (Lévi-Strauss 1982:172–73, 1987:151).

The Yurok house was defined less by kinship ties among its members—for it was composed of hereditary occupants, their close agnates and cognates, more distant relatives and affines, and even non-related clients—than by its operation as a corporate body focused on a physical structure (Lévi-Strauss 1987:152). Yurok houses were, in principle, long-lived entities with distinct names deriving from their location, the decoration of the physical house façade, or ceremonial functions that were carried out at the house. Kwakiutl houses were named for ancestral or mythic founders and for real or legendary places of origin.

The "aristocratic" or "chiefly" houses also owned or controlled considerable property, consisting of both immaterial and material components. For the Kwakiutl, the immaterial portion included such hereditary prerogatives as names or titles, mottoes, dances, offices in secret societies, and the right to make and use certain emblems. The material portion was quite substantial,

composed of hunting, gathering, and fishing territories as well as the house itself and its portable contents—the well-known masks, costumes, canoes, boxes, ceremonial dishes, and so forth. In societies such as the Kwakiutl, in which houses were ranked and individual house members were hierarchically ordered, marriage was necessarily anisogamic and was an important strategy for perpetuating and increasing the house estate. Both exogamy and endogamy were practiced concurrently, one to increase access to property and the other to prevent portions of the estate from leaving the house in marriage (Lévi-Strauss 1982:167–83).<sup>2</sup>

To understand the house as a social category, and not merely an architectural form or the locus of a household, Lévi-Strauss then turned to medieval and early modern Europe (1982:174ff) and feudal Japan (1983), a far cry from the hunter-gatherer Kwakiutl and Yurok, who typified the more traditional focus of anthropological inquiry. Here was an important breach of the conceptual division commonly maintained (including by Lévi-Strauss himself) between complex literate societies and those considered “primitive” or “archaic”; the distinction between “our” form of society and the “other,” and thus also between the concerns of history and those of anthropology. As Lévi-Strauss explained, “modes of social life and types of organization well attested in our history can throw light on those of other societies, where they appear less distinct and as if blurred, because [they are] poorly documented and observed for periods that are too short” (1982:194, see also Lévi-Strauss 1983).

Historians, in their characterization of the noble houses of Europe, had described the same kind of unit that had confounded Boas and Kroeber in North America, but the historians had the advantage of the lengthy temporal span of record-keeping and a long-term view of social process. The documentary information revealed that, despite a patrilineal bias, strict lineage rules for succession and inheritance did not apply to the noble European house, nor was house continuity dictated by the biology of reproduction. Indeed, the medieval house has been characterized by one historian (Schmid 1957:56–57) as something quite different from a family or lineage, consisting instead of a “‘spiritual and material heritage, comprising dignity, origins, kinship, names and symbols, position, power and wealth’” (in Lévi-Strauss 1982:174). Such a description, Lévi-Strauss noted, is comparable to Boas’s conclusion that the Kwakiutl *numaym* is best understood by disregarding the living individuals as constituting a kin-based group, and considering instead that the *numaym* was composed of “a certain number of positions to each of which belong a name, a ‘seat’ or ‘standing place,’ that means rank, and privileges. Their number is limited, and they form a ranked nobility” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:169).<sup>3</sup>

In these diverse societies, seemingly noncomparable on many dimen-

sions, the same institution was present, which in every instance was referred to indigenously as a house. On this basis Lévi-Strauss established a definition of the house as a social unit that succinctly encompassed the key common features he observed. The definition remains the same in his various publications, except that in his 1991 encyclopedia entry for “maison,” given here, he numbered for clarity the six features that characterize a house and, in his words, thereby distinguish it from a clan or lineage:

La maison est 1) une personne morale, 2) détentrice d’un domaine 3) composé à la fois de biens matériels et immatériels, et qui 4) se perpétue par la transmission de son nom, de sa fortune et de ses titres en ligne réelle ou fictive, 5) tenue pour légitime à la condition que cette continuité puisse se traduire dans le langage de la parenté ou de l’alliance, ou 6) le plus souvent les deux ensemble. (Lévi-Strauss 1991:435)

The two published English translations of his studies of house societies (1982:174, 1987:152), on which much subsequent scholarship has relied, present slightly differing versions of this definition of the house as “a corporate body [moral person] 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 [descent] line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship [descent] or of affinity [alliance] and [or], most often, of both” (1982:174) (bracketed words are from the 1987 translation).

This definition emphasizes the perpetuation of, and the maintenance of an estate by, a *personne morale*, a long-lived entity subject to rights and obligations. The “language” of kinship and/or affinity is employed to achieve these twinned goals by providing the means to legitimate the intact transfer of the estate across generations of house members. As for the people who must maintain the house, they assume a physical and social “place”—they are given an identity for themselves and a framework for interacting with others—by their membership within, or attachment to, a house (Claudine Berthe-Friedberg in Rousseau 1987:182; see Forth 1991).

#### *Further Applications of the House Model*

Having established a definition of the house, in later lectures Lévi-Strauss (1984, 1987) turned his attention to other possible *sociétés “à maisons”* (variously and ambiguously translated as “house societies,” “societies with houses,” and “house-based societies”) elsewhere in the world. It is important to note that while his original exposition of the house concerned “patrilineal” so-

cieties, his subsequent lectures concentrated on cognatic societies (1987:185) especially those of Austronesia. Cognatic kinship systems—also known as bilateral and undifferentiated, terms to replace the negative-sounding “nonunilinear”—had long confounded anthropological classification in this part of the world (Davenport 1959; Goodenough 1955:72; Murdock 1960). The absence of the unilinear principle, as it had been explicated by African descent theorists, should have precluded the formation of African-like long-lived corporate groups in this region; yet they did exist (Barnes 1962). Shared territory was posited as a substitute for the descent principle as a means of limiting group membership; territory or residence had simmered in the background for some time as an alternative to the priority ascribed to descent (e.g., Kroeber 1938; Leach 1968; Lewis 1965). Combining descent and residence gave rise to the idea of “localized” descent groups that were acknowledged to include members not related by descent, a solution that nevertheless retained the primacy of the descent principle (Scheffler 1973:774–75). However, these various attempts alternatively to privilege descent, inheritance, residence rules, or some combination of them all to explain the emergence and operation of cognatic kin groups had still proven unsatisfactory (Lévi-Strauss 1987:154).

In addition, Lévi-Strauss briefly examined social systems in Africa, “generally considered by anthropologists as the favourite domain of unilinear institutions” (Lévi-Strauss 1987:185). But even in Africa, ethnographic accounts from many areas suggested that the segmentary model was inadequate in the face of the latent (or even explicit) operation of undifferentiated filiation, and patrilineages were found to include many non-agnates among their members. Furthermore, despite the overarching importance given to abstract lineage models, African lineages were actually difficult to distinguish from residential units, indicating some of the same overlapping of kinship and territorial principles as that operating in Austronesia (1987:186). Lévi-Strauss’s purpose in reviewing this literature was to demonstrate that the anthropologists’ analytical distinctions themselves are misleading, and thus the source of these problems lies in our constructs and terminology, not with recalcitrant societies: “One is therefore led to question whether, when anthropologists multiply labels by which to distinguish each shade of difference in systems called patrilineal (but with matrilineal aspects), matrilineal (but with patrilineal aspects), bilinear, double descent, cognatic, etc., they are not the victims of an illusion. These subtle qualifications often belong more to the particular perspective of each observer than to intrinsic properties of the societies themselves” (1987:187). Similar conclusions were being reached in other anthropological critiques of kinship at this time (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Keesing 1970; Kuper 1982; Leach 1968; Schneider 1965, 1972, 1984).

In proposing that his characterization of the house be applied to all these societies, Lévi-Strauss further demonstrated how the problems encountered by anthropologists resulted not just from some incomplete set of structural types but, more fundamentally, from a non-workable substantivist or essentialist orientation to social organization. A major source of difficulty, he suggested, was the assumption that the social phenomenon under investigation—to be defined and explained according to principles such as descent or residence—was a “corporate group.” This is a jural unit derived from English juridical applications that, as he noted, does not match exactly its French equivalent, *personne morale*. Marcel Mauss (1985[1938]:18–19), for example, had characterized the *personne morale* as an entity with a moral and legal personality in the sense of being autonomous and responsible, possessor of rights and subject to obligations, but the notion of a *personne* is first defined by its roles and relationships to other such entities and to the larger society. Lévi-Strauss observed that in Anglo-American anthropology, with its emphasis on assigning people to specific corporate groups, it had become axiomatic to “cut up social reality” into groups with bounded and mutually exclusive membership and to classify various kinship practices into types based on the specific principles (e.g., descent or residence) followed in any single society to delimit such a group (Lévi-Strauss 1987:153–54; see also Errington 1989:234–35). Thus the cognatic societies of the Pacific region presented a problem, because the peoples there appeared to organize themselves into corporate groups despite the absence of consistently applied “rules” of descent, inheritance, and residence. Furthermore, group boundaries were unexpectedly indefinite and porous, all of which called into question their function as jural entities as well as the presumed fixity of kin-based social identity.

Lévi-Strauss therefore suggested that attention should shift away from bounded groups as “constitutive of the social order and considered as legal persons” (1987:155). In the first place, there is a certain optative aspect to group membership. Individuals may often choose what group to join based on various criteria and strategies, and groups may choose who shall be their members; the latter is particularly evident at funerary rites when rival claims are made for the corpse (Lévi-Strauss 1987:179–80; see also Fox 1987:175; Waterson 1995b:207). More important, an overemphasis on the principles used to delimit group membership undervalues the relationships established and maintained *between* groups. According to Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of what he was calling house societies, houses are most visible in their interactions with other houses. The house as a social institution “is a dynamic formation that cannot be defined in itself, but only in relation to others of the same kind, situated in their historical context” (Lévi-Strauss 1987:178).

Not unexpectedly, Lévi-Strauss considered marriage alliance to be the most important relationship linking houses. Alliance was at the core of his earlier theory of kinship in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969[1949]) (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:9; Gibson 1995:130) and was a major component of his critique of Anglo-American anthropology with its overriding emphasis on descent (Errington 1989:236). In his examples of interhouse alliances, Lévi-Strauss concentrated on eastern Indonesian societies that ritually recognize the important social relationship maintained between wife-giving and wife-taking groups, groups that are often referred to by the indigenous term for house. These alliances, and especially the exchange systems that are tied to them, are what create or reiterate an asymmetrical relationship between houses (e.g., Barraud 1979:88; 1990; Errington 1989:234; Fox, ed. 1980; McKinnon 1991).

More fundamentally, Lévi-Strauss noted that the basis of any house—the family itself—was established in an act of alliance represented most saliently by the conjugal couple. Their marriage creates a union of conflicting tendencies—virilocality and uxorilocality, patrilineality and matrilineality—that are played out in various ways (Lévi-Strauss 1987:155). Thus, he demonstrated how the Anglo-American emphasis on delimiting the principles of social group membership was the wrong approach: “Anthropologists have therefore been mistaken in seeking, in this type of institution, a substratum which they have variously thought to find in descent, property and residence. We believe, to the contrary, that it is necessary to move on from the idea of *objective substratum* to that of *objectification of a relation*: the unstable relation of alliance which, as an institution, the role of the house is to solidify, if only in an illusory form” (1987:155, emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup>

On this subject Lévi-Strauss then added another level of understanding to the house that has subsequently received much attention: the house is a “fetish” in the Marxist sense. It is the representation of a relation (between wife-givers and wife-takers) perceived as a thing “objectified in the house” but which, “as a relation, cannot be the substratum of any attribute” (Lévi-Strauss 1987:155–56). The house projects an outward face of unity—exemplified by the marriage of husband and wife—but this unity is “greatly fictitious” and masks underlying tensions that threaten to fragment it. The house is the hypostatization of the opposition of wife-takers and wife-givers, of the conflicting obligations of filiation and alliance, and of the tangible antagonisms resulting from the differential claims on members of the new family made by the exogamous groups who contributed the spouses (1987:157–58, 1982:185). The family is therefore not a substantive phenomenon of unproblematical definition; it is the objectification of contested perspectives and contrary expectations: “the father, as wife-taker, sees in his son a privileged member of his lin-

age, just as the maternal grandfather, as wife-giver, sees in his grandson a full member of his own. It is at the intersection of these antithetical perspectives that the house is situated, and perhaps is formed” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:186).

Moreover, the physical house itself may materially represent the fetishized aspect of the house as the juxtaposition of relationships that constitute person and society. Lévi-Strauss briefly mentioned in this context the elaborately decorated dwellings of the Karo Batak of Sumatra and the Atoni of Timor, whose architectural layout and corresponding distribution of activities “make of the house a veritable microcosm reflecting in its smallest details an image of the universe and of the whole system of social relations” (1987:156). Other material phenomena that make up the house estate, or immaterial property such as names or claims to potential spouses in allied houses, may also objectify the house, represent its longevity, and serve as a central pivot for the construction of social memories grounded in the house (Boon 1990a:136–37; Errington 1983b; Lévi-Strauss 1987:160; McKinnon 1991).

The notion that kinship and affinal relations were hypostatized as a house contributes to a broader understanding of how the ties that people perceive among themselves emerge from practical action, what Pierre Bourdieu (1977:37) called “practical” as opposed to “official” kinship (see also Waterson 1995b), from the perspective of “strategies” rather than “rules” (Bourdieu 1977:9). Lévi-Strauss (1987:180) similarly observed that with regard to the house, concepts of descent, marriage, inheritance, residence, etc., are not “ideal rules, static by definition,” but rather “the strategies elaborated and put into practice, not by individuals, but by moral persons assured of a lifetime longer than those of the individuals composing them”; this is a departure from his earlier “deterministic, rule-bound version” of structuralism (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:9). Indeed, although he spoke of the house as a “type” of social structure, Lévi-Strauss proposed to see the house as emergent in the negotiated outcomes of strategic choices made by groups and individuals against a backdrop of collective constraints and demands (Lévi-Strauss 1983:1229–30).<sup>5</sup>

Although Lévi-Strauss intended the house to be an addition to the classificatory terminology of social structure, as the objectification of a relation it cannot easily be added alongside lineage and clan. Neither does it fit with existing concepts in terms of scale. Family, lineage, clan, and tribe or caste can be arranged in a linear scheme based on increasing size, complexity, and inclusivity, but the house may exist at all these levels, expressing this entire range of variability (Lévi-Strauss 1987:160). An example is the Balinese *dadia* described by Hildred and Clifford Geertz (1975). As Lévi-Strauss (1987:158) noted, “When they [Geertz and Geertz] encounter it in an aristocratic context, the word ‘house’ comes spontaneously and with justification to their pen; but

in the village context they no longer know what definition to choose, and hesitate inconclusively between lineage, caste, cultural association and faction. It is 'a little of all these, and even sometimes a political party', as Boon [1977:145] acutely comments" (see also Boon 1990b:217).

In sum, Lévi-Strauss concluded that the house as a social category confounds the usual classificatory efforts of anthropologists, in that: 1) it is a "moral person" but not a corporate group delimited by rules of descent, inheritance, or residence; 2) it is better perceived in operation as the objectification of relations rather than as a substantive phenomenon; 3) it can exist at what we recognize as various societal levels; 4) it unites what anthropologists consider to be antithetical and mutually exclusive principles of kinship, marriage, residence, and succession, principles which themselves are actually illusory; and 5) it thereby transcends the categorical distinctions among different types of societies that have been distinguished using those principles. He emphasized its differences from traditional classificatory units and principles as follows:

On all levels of social life, from the family to the state, the house is therefore an institutional creation that permits compounding forces which, everywhere else, seem only destined to mutual exclusion because of their contradictory bends. Patrilineal descent and matrilineal descent, filiation and residence, hypergamy and hypogamy, close marriage and distant marriage, heredity and election: all these notions, which usually allow anthropologists to distinguish the various known types of society, are reunited in the house, as if . . . this institution expressed an effort to transcend, in all spheres of collective life, theoretically incompatible principles. (1982:184)

#### *The Protean Quality of Houses and House Societies*

Despite his stated interest in process, Lévi-Strauss's description of the house as a unity of oppositions has been considered static and thus limited in its utility (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:36–37). His published lecture summaries provide general descriptions of social organization drawn from a cross-cultural survey, but there is no in-depth examination of the everyday interactions and processes by which the tensions of conflicting rights and obligations—the within-house and between-house relationships—were manifested and negotiated to present some "outward face of unity." On the other hand, Lévi-Strauss was more concerned with the long-term perspective, believing it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to discover the distinctive characteristics of the house solely from short-term ethnographic observation (Lévi-Strauss 1983, 1987:158, 193–94). He considered historical documentation, where available, a better source of information to understand the operation of the house

over time as the result of strategic decision-making whose goal was to reproduce a corporate body linked to a perpetual estate, as if the house becomes most visible only in retrospect. He never published a detailed study on this topic; instead, he illustrated his discussions with various but brief examples from the works of others.

It is from the long-term perspective that Lévi-Strauss saw the house as a dynamic institution and house societies as permutating rather than fixed in the number and ranking of their constituent houses. Houses, *personnes morales*, are the agents of historical change, especially in reference to the between-house relations Lévi-Strauss most emphasized (Lévi-Strauss 1987:180). They "come into being and fade away" (1987:148) because they require consistent success in negotiations and manipulations to maintain themselves in the face of competition from other houses and the aspirations of low-ranked or non-house groups that desire to elevate their status.

The actual historical trajectories of house societies will therefore vary. Houses may continually rise and fall in rank and power relative to one another over a period of generations (Boon 1990b:216–17). Some houses may manage to exist (at least in name) over centuries, as in the case of certain noble houses of Europe. In other societies their number may be permanently fixed by societal consensus, such that it would be inconceivable for a house to cease to exist (e.g., Barraud 1979:88). In some cases, even when a house did perish, its name and the place where the physical house once stood would be remembered and referred to in special contexts (Waterson 1988:42), and it could be resurrected later (Waterson 1995b:203). Under certain conditions entire societies might transform themselves into *sociétés à maisons*, only later to become less "housy" (Boon 1990b:214).

This dynamic, even transitory (in the long run) quality of houses and house societies raised the question as to why houses have appeared in only some societies and at certain time periods. In response, Lévi-Strauss noted the presence of noble, aristocratic, chiefly—that is, higher-ranked—houses in many of these societies: Northwest Coast, Yurok; medieval Europe, feudal Japan, Bali. The high-ranking houses were the ones most likely to successfully preserve their property, perpetuate their estates over generations, make strategic marriage alliances, and substitute affinity for descent and descent for affinity. Lévi-Strauss suggested these societies had achieved a certain degree of complexity in which kinship was becoming no longer sufficient to organize political and economic life, but in which class-, contract-, or market-based relationships were not yet dominant. These societies, at these particular points in time, might be considered instances of a transitional situation between kin-based and class-based organization, "where political and economic interests, on the

verge of invading the social field, have not yet overstepped the 'old ties of blood,' as Marx and Engels used to say. In order to express and propagate themselves, these interests must inevitably borrow the language of kinship, though it is foreign to them, for none other is available. And inevitably too, they borrow it only to subvert it" (1982:186–87).

Once again, his leading example was the Kwakiutl. For historical reasons (namely, the introduction of European trade), new forms of property arrangements were governing Kwakiutl economic and political relationships, leading them to "disguise all sorts of sociopolitical maneuvers under the veneer of kinship" (Lévi-Strauss 1982:171). In contrast to this "transitional" situation, the house should not exist or will do so in only an embryonic form in societies not at a level of complexity that involves the accumulation of wealth and expressions of rank and power, and especially those in which marriage alliance does not have a strategic economic and political importance for the perpetuation of an estate (Lévi-Strauss 1991:436). And conversely, as noted in Chapter 1, houses, as the basis for sociopolitical/economic organization, are superseded in class-based societies, particularly the capitalist formations of the modern era.

#### ABOUT AND BEYOND THE HOUSE

Lévi-Strauss's definition and further characterization of the house as an analytic unit of cross-cultural utility have been subjected to critical review by scholars applying this concept to some of the same societies he examined, as well as to many others (for reviews of his model, see, e.g., Boon 1990b:213–15; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Errington 1989:233–38; Macdonald 1987; Waterson 1990:138–39). On the one hand, he meant to clarify several thorny issues that have impeded scholarship on the nature and variety of kinship practices. He moved beyond the usual assumption that kinship is an isolable feature of simpler societies, and he incorporated into the house such factors as "wealth, power and status, normally associated with literate and class-based societies" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:9). On the other hand, his discussion was founded on certain traditional understandings of kinship principles, and he failed to advance his ideas sufficiently beyond them to adequately replace them. Lévi-Strauss has thus been blamed for moving too far away from those understandings (by scholars trying to maintain conventional classificatory nomenclature) as well as for sticking too closely to them (by scholars seeking to surpass the limitations of older kinship theories).

As a result of this critique, Lévi-Strauss's definition of the house, from

which he never wavered, became detached from his characterization of the house as an objectification of the conflicting obligations of descent and alliance. His definition of the house has been attacked as both too specific and too ambiguous to adequately serve as a social type, although its ambiguity has also been credited with providing the opportunity for other scholars to refine it by applying this concept to more detailed case studies (e.g., Waterson 1990, 1995a; Sandstrom, this volume). However, attention has generally not been focused on his definition of the house; instead, the emphasis he gave to marriage alliance and the related notion of the house as a fetish have received the most criticism and have undergone the most revision.

Lévi-Strauss's ideas have taken hold primarily among scholars working in Southeast Asia (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; Macdonald, ed. 1987; Waterson 1990) and secondarily in Amazonia (Hugh-Jones 1993, 1995; Lea 1995; Rivière 1993, 1995), large regions where cognatic kinship principles are not infrequent and where the "house" was already becoming well recognized as an indigenous referent for a socio-residential unit (see Chapter 1). In their attempts to apply his model to detailed case studies of specific communities, anthropologists encountered recurring problems that begged the question as to how, or even whether, Lévi-Strauss's notion of the house and house societies should be utilized analytically and cross-culturally. Their concerns have appeared in a number of individual studies as well as in several anthologies dedicated to examining the Lévi-Straussian house (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; Macdonald, ed. 1987).<sup>6</sup> What has happened to the house of Lévi-Strauss is that it has been both adopted with some success and rejected for its lack of any heuristic utility (e.g., compare Waterson 1990 to Rousseau 1987). Where adopted, it has frequently been stripped of its original conceptualization and merged with, if not replaced by, various other indigenous and analytical usages of the term "house." Despite these criticisms, most scholars have continued to see value, although not always the same value, in Lévi-Strauss's proposal to employ a house-centered focus in the study of social organization.

#### *When Is the House a "House"?*

An early attempt was made to refine Lévi-Strauss's house model by applying it to more detailed ethnographic studies in a cross-cultural investigation that could better delimit the parameters of house societies. This project was undertaken in 1985–86 by a group of scholars associated with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris who had conducted fieldwork in western Island Southeast Asia. The outcome of their comparative study is aptly named

*De la hutte au palais: sociétés "à maison" en Asie du Sud-Est insulaire* (Macdonald, ed. 1987), for it proposed that within this area of the world the house as a *personne morale* is clearly associated with hierarchy, and the more hierarchical the society (up to the level of kings in their palaces), the greater the likelihood of discerning houses meeting the criteria established by Lévi-Strauss and functioning as residential, economic, ritual, and political units (Macdonald 1987:7–8; Sellato 1987b:34–35).

Because there is a great deal of variation within the region, with societies ranging from highly stratified to egalitarian, these scholars considered it essential to distinguish the different manifestations of house societies. For example, there are variable forms even among the hierarchical societies. Some have only a single royal house, while others are composed of competing noble houses. A "vertical" situation in which one ruling house holds sway over commoners (who are not themselves organized into houses) was classified as distinct from a "horizontal" configuration in which virtually everyone is organized in this way, and social interaction is conducted within the framework of houses as *personnes morales* (Sellato 1987a:204).

Furthermore, houses of a different sort were observed in the more egalitarian societies in this region, for, as noted above, "house" is a common indigenous term for a social unit in Southeast Asia. Importantly, these usages were included within Lévi-Strauss's house model by divorcing his definition from his later characterization of the house as a unifying image of certain relationships, treating these as two separable concepts. In his introduction to the CNRS volume, Charles Macdonald suggested that these two views of the house represented distinct forms which seemed to exist in different types of societies, and that they must have become conflated due to an evolution in Lévi-Strauss's own thinking when he had to apply his original abstract definition to diverse societies. Macdonald framed this as a dichotomy between the house as a "concrete group," the *personne morale* of Lévi-Strauss's definition, which he termed the *maison-institution*; and the house, not as a concrete group but as an ideal representation, the *maison-fétiche* (Macdonald 1987:5; although Sellato 1987a:202 in the same volume disagreed as to whether the *maison-fétiche* should be considered a house).

As a minor modification to Macdonald's revision, Stephen Headley (1987: 214), another CNRS researcher, suggested that the house-institution/house-fetish dichotomy be considered endpoints on a comparative spectrum of house societies ranging from "strong" to "weak," which corresponds roughly to a scale of hierarchy from stratified to egalitarian. In this perspective the house remains a useful concept even where it is "weak" (i.e., it fails to meet the definitional criteria set by Lévi-Strauss), for example, in peasant rice-growing

societies of Java and Malaysia. In these societies an idiom of consanguinity (expressed as "sibblingship") maintains the identity of a house as a kin group and allows it to be extended far beyond the household. Rather than considering the house as absent in these societies, Headley proposed that it was present only in a fetishized form—"the projection of unity through the extension of the idiom of sibblingship to virtually everyone" (Headley 1987:217).<sup>7</sup>

The CNRS scholars were not alone in detaching Lévi-Strauss's definition from his characterization of the house, and this has become a critical issue in subsequent attempts to deal with the concept. The simultaneity of the house as both institution and fetish, assumed in Lévi-Strauss's discussion, has often been split asunder and considered to refer to two different versions of the house in different types of societies. Furthermore, the more frequent criticisms of the Lévi-Straussian house refer to his characterization, ignoring his definition. A common complaint is that he highlighted marriage alliance in the hypostatization of the house as fetish to the exclusion of other key signifiers of house unity, especially the unity of the sibling group in Southeast Asia and Oceania, which itself is intimately related to the predominant cognatic kinship systems in those regions (e.g., Marshall, ed. 1981; see critiques in Carsten 1995a, b; Gibson 1995; Headley 1987; Howell 1995; Hugh-Jones 1995; Janowski 1995). The fetishized house that may result from sibling ties extends itself outward through sibblingship rather than downwards through descent (Carsten 1987:166), and the temporal dimension (perpetuity) associated with descent is therefore moot.<sup>8</sup> In any event, marriage alliance is often transformed into, or conceived as, consanguinity rather than affinity, with a husband-wife pair conceptualized as a brother-sister pair (Barraud 1990; Howell 1990).

Another criticism is that marriage alliance, producing conflicting obligations between wife-taking and wife-giving groups that must be mediated within the house, is not universally relevant to house societies because exogamy is not always a preferred strategy. James Boon (1990a, b) and Shelly Errington (1987, 1989) tinkered with Lévi-Strauss's ideas to adapt them to societies of western and central Indonesia in which high-ranked houses practice endogamy rather than exogamy as a means of preserving an estate. Other scholars have taken issue with Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on descent, the counterpart to alliance. Austronesian societies display a strong emphasis on origins and the maintenance of continuity with the past, which is "essential for social identity and social differentiation," but this is not the same concept as descent (Fox 1993:16–17).

The original rationale for proposing "institution" and "fetish" as separate manifestations of the house, a dichotomy that also maintains taxonomic socio-political distinctions based on hierarchy, was to modify the Lévi-Straussian



house so as to make sense of virtually all societal variability in Southeast Asia (Macdonald 1987:8). The house would thereby retain some heuristic value even in societies that lack bona fide houses (Headley 1987:217). Nevertheless, this attempt to expand Lévi-Strauss's notion of the house to match the empirical studies of Southeast Asian peoples revealed a fundamental problem. Given that anthropologists working in various parts of the world were increasingly aware of the "house" as a common indigenous label for a social group and a useful focus for interpreting kin-based, economic, religious, and political organizations, Macdonald (1987:4) asked quite simply whether what ethnographers and what indigenous persons call the "house" correspond to Lévi-Strauss's concept of the house. Perhaps these multiple kinds of houses are founded on a single underlying principle, but this need not necessarily be so; and even if they are, Lévi-Strauss has not necessarily provided us with that all-encompassing principle. In other words, when is the "house" as it appears in native language and emerges out of native practice a "house" in the Lévi-Straussian sense? From the perspective adopted by Macdonald and Headley, the house as defined by Lévi-Strauss ("institution," "strong") seemed to be only one manifestation within a much larger spectrum of possible forms.

Other scholars bypassed Lévi-Strauss's definition of the house, although they acknowledged his contribution to house-centered studies, and maintained the notion of the house as the metaphorical encompassment of many persons united by fictive and real kin ties and/or economic or ritual relationships. Janet Carsten's (1995a, b) studies of the Malays of Pulau Langkawi emphasized the centrality of houses, women, and sibblingship in understanding social organization at the household level and beyond. In his ethnography from a quite different area of the world, a Mixtec community in Mexico, John Monaghan (1995:245) described the entire community as a "great house" à la Lévi-Strauss, because the acts of commensality that relate community members to one another are the same as those that relate members of a household (see Sandstrom, this volume). Adam Kuper (1993) added Lévi-Strauss's notions to the indigenous concept of the house already being recognized in African studies. He demonstrated the conceptual and organizational links between the homestead and the entire polity as a "royal house writ large" in nineteenth-century Zulu society (1993:486). Stripped of all its distinguishing qualities, the house of Lévi-Strauss has reached the point where it is used to refer to any corporate kin group in the generic sense of a convenient all-encompassing rubric (Helms 1999:57–58).

These various applications of the house concept based on Lévi-Strauss's inspiration, but in the absence of the "institutional" house, ultimately question the status of the house as a type of social structure, as Lévi-Strauss had pro-

posed. As Roxana Waterson (1993:224, 1995a:50–53) noted, the key issue that confronts scholars is whether his definition should be broadened to encompass all the instances where "houses" have been observed. Should it be extended to more egalitarian societies and those that lack critical house signifiers, such as perpetuity in the maintenance of an estate using the strategic "language" of marriage alliance and kinship? At the other end of the political scale, should it include stratified societies in which the polity is conceived only ideologically as a single house to which everyone—noble and commoner—is attached by different kinds of links? Or, should it be limited only to those usually hierarchical societies that exhibit most or all of the characteristic features laid out by Lévi-Strauss?

#### *Is the House a Type of Social Structure?*

At the heart of the subsequent critique and clarification is precisely the analytical utility of both house and house society, as promulgated by Lévi-Strauss, as a new classificatory type. The lack of fit of the house to the taxonomic status of existing terms (family, clan, lineage) referring to corporate bodies was especially troublesome, for it meant that the house could not be accommodated within standard kinship classification. For someone seeking to understand the organization of kin-based groups, this presumably single institution could not account for the many different manifestations of the house even within one region, such as Austronesia, where the "house" as an indigenous concept may encompass a household, a lineage, a clan, a village, or an entire polity (Fox 1987: 172–73).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, if the house, in which patrilineal and matrilineal ties come together, can help to make sense of cognatic societies (and it was these that Lévi-Strauss emphasized in his later lectures at the Collège de France), then a priori this same institution should not also make sense of unilineal societies, if an analytical distinction is to be maintained between them (Howell 1995:153).

A further complication is the realization (alluded to by Lévi-Strauss) that unilineal societies never actually conform to the idealized model in which everyone is assigned at birth to a descent group for the purpose of organizing political or economic activities (Kuper 1982); Edmund Leach had previously suggested that the notion of a "structure of unilineal descent groups" may be a "total fiction" (1968:302, emphasis in original). As noted above, the imprecision in the application of "rules" of descent, inheritance, and group membership observed in Austronesia was being recognized as well in Africa, the heartland of British descent theorists. Here, too, the word translated as "lineage,"

for example, among the Nuer, often refers to the dwelling, with no immediate implications for biological ties (McKinnon 1991:29; see Evans-Pritchard 1940:195), and "kinship" ties are based as much on shared locality as on presumed descent linkages, forming the "duality of 'blood' and 'land'" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:181; Kuper 1982:71). These empirical observations seem to obviate any attempt to maintain a distinction between "house" and "lineage": lineages can be seen as houses and houses as lineages (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:15–16).

Then there is the separate problem of moving from *maison* to a *société à maisons*, "a society of houses" (Macdonald 1987:5). *Société à maisons* was not defined by Lévi-Strauss but considered by him to be coincident with the existence of houses—where there are houses (plural), there is a house society—and he further speculated on the common conditions under which this specific "type" of social structure may have emerged. This raised the same taxonomic problem as did the house, for how could a single category encompass the diversity of cases that already had been classified into many different kinds of societies using various criteria, particularly the distinctions among stratified, ranked, and egalitarian systems (Bloch 1995b:71; Macdonald 1987:4; Sellato 1987a:195)? It seemed to Macdonald (1987:4) an "audacious" act to place the Iban *bilek* (longhouse) of Borneo in the same sociopolitical category as the House of Savoy. In other words, cognitive difficulties arose due to the lack of fit of "house society" within the existing taxonomy used to divide societies into different types.

Lévi-Strauss's proposal "to introduce into anthropological terminology the notion of 'house' (in the sense in which one speaks of a 'noble house'), and therefore . . . a type of social structure hitherto associated with complex societies . . . also to be found in non-literate societies" (1987:151, emphasis added) became a major focus in the debate over the utility of his concept. As his discussions demonstrated, he was borrowing a social structural characterization better known to historians, but his own work revealed that the house could *not* serve as a new type added to existing terminology. Given his stated intention (1983, 1987:151) for the house to blur traditional but now indefensible kinship categories, such as matrilineality and patrilineality, and to span what is actually a continuum from unilineal to cognatic principles, then his new type of social structure, especially as it has been modified by subsequent work, would encompass most of the world's known societies (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:18–19). Lévi-Strauss's examples of house societies are so diverse, representing such great variation in social, political, and economic organization, that the privileging of the house as the common factor in all of them, and thereby treating them all as a single type, is a "disservice" (Howell 1995:150)

to the field, rather than the hoped-for improvement over previous approaches to social organization.

The great conceptual dilemma exposed here is the taxonomic orientation to social structure, in which societies and their constituent units are classified into what are presumed to be mutually exclusive essentialist types, defined on the basis of one or a constellation of features, to be compared and contrasted on that basis. The failure of observed actions to be mapped onto these types has become a paradox in anthropology, out of which an entire "meta-discourse concerning the relation between the ideal and the real, structure and practice" (McKinnon 1995:171; 1991:29) has developed. Although the assumption that people divide and interrelate themselves on the basis of idealized kin types and rules was proving not to be a productive strategy and was beginning to be abandoned (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:2; Errington 1989:238; McKinnon 1995:171–72; Waterson 1993:225), it is nevertheless difficult to escape from this epistemological "straitjacket" (McKinnon 1995:263n).

Thus, Lévi-Strauss spoke of the house as an alternative to traditional kinship analyses while still adhering to an orientation that not only privileged kinship as the most fundamental social relationship, but also derived from the very essentialist approaches he criticized. One reason why his characterization of the house as combining mutually incompatible principles—such as patriliney and matriliney or consanguinity and affinity—is considered vague and problematical, is because these are still treated as artificial kinship types that are expected a priori to be consistent and generalizable and to compose antithetical pairings (Errington 1989:238; see also McKinnon 1995:172). In the end Lévi-Strauss was unable to move beyond the limitations imposed by the concepts he used: "if the notion of 'house society' simultaneously attempts to resolve the problems of both descent-group and alliance models whilst still relying upon them . . . it seems unlikely that the invention of a new category, reliant on the old, will provide a new basis for a synthetic theory of kinship" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:19).

#### *Transcending Types: Transformation and Process*

Those who have found the Lévi-Straussian house most useful have ignored its proposed status as a classificatory type (and even Lévi-Strauss [1983:1227–29] suggested a cladistic or materialist approach to understanding social formulations to replace fixed taxonomies and essentialist types). On the contrary, the house "as a heuristic device . . . may allow us to get away from such types altogether" (Hugh-Jones 1993:116). Instead of simply adding more diverse

configurations to a "house society type," scholars who utilize Lévi-Strauss's ideas tend to focus on processes and practices in which the house serves as an idiom for social groupings (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:20; Hugh-Jones 1995:248). It has become more productive to examine the dynamic quality of kin-like, economic, ritual, and co-residential relations that are enacted within the physical and symbolic framework provided by the house.

While the house may ultimately present an outward face of unity, internally it represents and naturalizes hierarchy and divisions among its members (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:11–12). It is not merely the locus for some unspecified union of mutually exclusive principles, but instead serves as the key arena for the "differential articulation of *mutually implicating* contrastive social forms" (McKinnon 1995:188, emphasis added). As Susan McKinnon (1995:172) observed, the variable forms that marriage, residence, or filiation may assume do not exist as isolable, mutually exclusive categories by which whole societies may be classified, but are principles that take their value from their interrelationship with one another in a single social system. Neither alliance nor descent nor any other principle has some "privileged ontological or epistemological status, but each derives its particular meaning in relation to the rest" (Howell 1995:165). Thus, a house-centered approach demonstrates the impossibility of maintaining traditional taxonomic distinctions. Lévi-Strauss saw the house as something "halfway between lineal and cognatic," but this does not imply three different types of societies (lineal—house—cognatic) as much as it characterizes a single society where the two opposed principles coexist and are mediated within the house (Hugh-Jones 1993:98).

Similarly, instead of classifying entire societies by type, it is better to investigate cultural extremes as evidence of the transformations of social principles (Boon 1990b:213). For example, Boon (1990b:439n.) indicated how the house is actually far more useful precisely when considered as something quite different from a type: "houses muddle conventional analytic distinctions of clan, lineage, guild, *warna*, *jati*, party, etc. . . . Paramount is the fact that 'house' can relate to 'house,' even across presumed boundaries of society, nation, or other construction" (Boon 1990b:439n.). Furthermore, the house can have great heuristic utility for comparative studies *especially* among diverse societies, a contribution to the analytical dialectic between "culture" and "society." Too much detail was being lost in reducing cross-cultural comparisons to their lowest common sociological denominator and then assuming that such labels as "unilineal" or "bilateral" adequately characterize social structure (Boon 1990b:212–13). Errington (1989:237–38) expressed the same misgivings: "Classifying societies by 'kinship type' obscures the very obvious fact that two Indonesian social organizations, only one of which is (for example) 'matrilin-

ear,' have more in common than two 'matrilineal' social organizations, only one of which is Indonesian."

Other scholars have adopted the model of the house on the condition that it not be too rigidly defined (Rivière 1993:511) or serve as some "watertight typology" (Waterson 1995a:48). Waterson further suggested examining the differential functioning of the various principles of house societies as "'variations on a theme'" (1995a:48). Rather than investigating the diversity of societies in Southeast Asia in order to discern which are and which are not house societies (cf. Macdonald, ed. 1987), she instead showed in detail how the ambiguities of kinship systems in Indonesia can be resolved by taking a house-centric perspective, despite the tremendous variation in the scale and complexity of these societies (Waterson 1990:138, 1995a:47). As also noted in the earlier comparative study (Macdonald, ed. 1987), houses, as indigenous constructs, run the gamut from the more egalitarian longhouse societies in which the house *is* the entire community, to those which exhibit a fluid social ranking of houses, to the more hierarchical societies in which the "'house' ideology is largely monopolized by the aristocracy," and finally to centralized states in which the "ideology of kingship . . . was grafted on to ideas about the house" (Waterson 1990:140; for this last category, see also Boon 1990a, 1990b; Errington 1989; Sellato 1987a). This wide range of sociopolitical difference cannot be accommodated by traditional classificatory conceptions that consider egalitarian, ranked, and hierarchical societies as noncomparable; yet, in an anti-taxonomic approach they all can be better comprehended by examining the role of the house as a central and fundamental organizing principle. The demonstration of variation among house societies is, in itself, a productive undertaking: "each application brings out ethnographic particulars that would remain masked without some concept of the house" (Grinker 1996:857). Thus, the broad applicability of the house in Lévi-Strauss's terms, which seemingly makes it "too all-embracing and unwieldy to be a truly incisive tool of investigation," has proven to be an advantage rather than a detriment in providing new insights into the study of Southeast Asian societies (Waterson 1995a:68).

Beyond simple variation, cross-cultural studies within a region, such as Indonesia, may ultimately show how entire societies are "transformations of each other whose common feature is the importance of the house as a focus of social organization" (Waterson 1995a:48). For example, Errington (1987, 1989) was able to include both major strategies of unity—alliance and siblingship, sometimes considered to be at odds with one another—under the rubric of the house by positing a major transformation in house societies across Island Southeast Asia. She contrasted the ideology and functioning of the house in certain societies concentrated in eastern Indonesia, in which alliance and

exchange between multiple houses is a defining principle, and the "centrist"-oriented societies primarily in west-central Southeast Asia, in which a single endogamous house may be coterminous with society itself. The multiple permutations in other societal domains that are concordant with this key difference give the appearance of noncomparability among all these societies; yet from the house perspective, they can be viewed as transformations of each other (Errington 1987:405, 1989:207-9).

Regional studies may also begin to account for the presence or absence of house societies in terms of their *interactions with one another*, as well as in terms of ecological or sociohistorical conditions that advanced or impeded the development of substantial property, ascribed rank, and perpetuated estates. This endeavor goes far beyond the initial attempts to classify individual societies as house societies or to correlate house societies with certain isolated factors, such as hierarchy. An example is Albert Schrauwers's (1997) historical study of a South Sulawesi kingdom and its hinterland. The Bugis kingdom of Luwu' (Luwuq), on the southern coastal lowlands, exemplified a strongly hierarchical society in which the royal house, *kapolo*, was synonymous with the kingdom itself (Errington 1989; cf. Caldwell 1991). In the late nineteenth century, Luwu', in competition with neighboring kingdoms, was extending its reach into the highlands to the north and bringing other peoples under its suzerainty, including the more egalitarian To Pamona.

The To Pamona were not organized into houses, but Schrauwers describes how "proto-houses" tentatively emerged out of To Pamona interactions with the Luwu' kingdom, partly as the result of emulation (even veneration) of the royal center, but also in the more pragmatic context of trade in raw materials and exchanges of prestige goods. The proto-houses began as stem families within larger corporate entities (*santina*), which were ideally endogamous "occasional" kin groups that came together as a unit only in rituals of marriage and secondary funerals. On these occasions, elders competed for status and leadership within and between *santina*, seeking to incorporate more members through marriage alliance and to extend the generational depth of these proto-houses. However, these interactions required the exchange of prestige goods (obtained by trade with the southern lowland kingdoms) to affirm the kinship tie. Unlike true houses that keep some prestige goods out of circulation as inalienable wealth (Weiner 1992), the proto-houses of the To Pamona were unable to hold on to their valuables as a perpetual estate and to transform their unstable status into ascribed rank (Schrauwers 1997:365). Nevertheless, other highland societies did manage to achieve "househood" through complex marital and economic interactions with the southern kingdoms in a period of rapid

political change stimulated by major shifts in trade relations with the Dutch and Chinese (1997:374).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to examining the role of the house in the transformation of regional social systems over time, another way to realize the potential of Lévi-Strauss's concept of the house has been to move precisely in the opposite direction: to discover how individual social groups within a society create and enact house-centered relationships out of their mundane activities. This approach is part of the growing acceptance of earlier criticisms (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Kuper 1982; Leach 1968; Schneider 1972) of the primacy assigned to kin-based links and identities as structural or natural givens, and it replaces kinship "rules" with a processual, multidimensional, quotidian, and "practical" (deriving from practice) framework for determining the various forms of interpersonal associations (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:19).

Lévi-Strauss's discussions of Kwakiutl, Yurok, and medieval European societies indicated that people related themselves to one another not just in terms of what anthropologists understood as kinship ties among individuals, but also by the exchange relationships enacted and maintained over time between the houses to which they belonged. From this perspective, points that require more attention are 1) the relationship between physical houses as orienting loci and the social groups that identify themselves with, and are localized by, those houses (people-to-house); and 2) the various ways in which people actually trace their ties to each other to and through houses (house-to-house) (Waterson 1993:224). Individuals spell out their relationships via houses, not to create neatly bounded kin groups, but to respond to specific situations involving individuals or subsets of a larger collectivity, such as when property rights are challenged, bridewealth must be accumulated, or a consanguine is recast as a potential affine (Waterson 1986:92-93, 109, 1995b).

Moreover, houses are not always best considered as kinship or descent groups, a simplistic methodological refuge to which we too often revert (McKinnon 1991:29). Southeast Asian scholars noted that coherent and permanent social entities were better characterized as ritual and/or political units that may or may not coincide with kin-defined groups (e.g., Sellato 1987a:200). A house-like unity has also been explained as resulting primarily from economic factors (e.g., Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Leach 1968; Sabeian 1990; see Joyce, Marshall, Sandstrom, this volume). In some cases the house (the social unit) is so fluid and ambiguous in its membership that as a *personne morale* it is best viewed as an abstraction that may not come into play except in certain contexts, its actual members fluctuating depending on the specific situation (Hugh-Jones 1993:110; Waterson 1995b).

Thus, Lévi-Strauss's claim (1982:187) that in house societies people use the "language of kinship . . . for none other is available" is belied by his own call for a focus on the house as the intersection of pragmatic concerns that overlap the artificially separated domains of kinship, economics, religion, and politics. As Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) observed, the answer to this conundrum should have been obvious to Lévi-Strauss, but he did not fully see it, trapped as he was in the older paradigm: "An alternative language is precisely that of the house. If the language of the house is 'about' kinship, it is no less 'about' economy and just as much about joint subsistence, production and consumption as it is about property. Crucially, this language is also about common spaces and about buildings which are palaces and temples as well as shelters and homes" (1995:19).

Their final sentence alludes to the ongoing scholarship on houses as pervasive structures that orient social identities and interactions as a consequence of the daily actions performed within and around them. The symbolic linkages of the house to the cosmos, society, and the body were being delineated by anthropologists in various world areas (see Chapter 1), especially in Southeast Asia, where house societies are also most recognized (e.g., Cunningham 1964; Ellen 1986; Waterson 1988, 1990). Indeed, a major shortcoming of Lévi-Strauss's explication of house societies was that he failed to examine the house itself, both as an architectural unit and as a locus for social interactions in multiple dimensions (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:12).

This general critique, with its call for a dramatic broadening of the nature of house-centric investigations, was developed in a 1990 symposium at Cambridge University, published in 1995 with the revealing title, *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995). In their introduction to the volume, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995:2) proposed to go beyond Lévi-Strauss's concept and demonstrate the greater value of recognizing in the house an "anthropology of architecture which might take its theoretical place alongside the anthropology of the body," giving primacy to the orientations, behaviors, and ideas associated with the physical house.

In a "language of the house" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:19), the people and the physical house must be investigated on the same terms, not as analytically distinct phenomena. This requires examining the processes, which may be both cyclical and incremental, by which relationships between people, and between peoples and their houses, are enacted and transformed over the lifetime and beyond of a living individual. By the same token, houses must be viewed as living and developing entities just like the people who inhabit (or cohabit with) them. This view of the house is firmly grounded in indigenous conceptions. In much of the world houses are believed to be endowed with

spirits or souls, and they are conceived as living beings whose different parts often are labeled by the same terms as those given to human body parts. Houses must be nourished to prevent their demise, and they are enlarged or modified to materialize the increased status that derives from senescence, often in concert with—and thus objectifying—the milestone events in the lives of their occupants (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:37–38; Waterson 1990). This perspective proposed to bring together what Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995:45) refer to as the two "sides" of the house, both the "ritual" construct emphasized by Lévi-Strauss, embodied in property and linked to ancestral origins, and the mundane aspect of household members engaged in quotidian activities, the actions that, while too often ignored by anthropologists, actually "build" the house.

#### OPENING UP THE HOUSE OF LÉVI-STRAUSS

The proposal to create a "language of the house" has great potential for uniting diverse perspectives to investigate houses and households that have, up to now, been treated as separable concerns. It will also highlight indigenous conceptions and practical actions that have too often been hidden under anthropologists' static analytical labels. Lévi-Strauss is credited with stimulating this broader conceptualizing of the house. However, something has been lost in the intellectual shifts away from his original model; namely, that in the *société à maisons* Lévi-Strauss had discriminated a specific social configuration that is *not* found in every society, although it has occurred in various parts of the world.

A common justification for either broadening or rejecting Lévi-Strauss's definition of the house has quite simply been that it did not match the particular society under investigation, despite the existence of indigenous conceptions of the house as a social unit (e.g., Carsten 1995a:126; Gibson 1995:129; Janowski 1995:85; Macdonald 1987; Rivière 1995:203; Rousseau 1987). The definitive answer to Macdonald's question (above) is that not every house, as this word appears in both indigenous and analytical usages to refer to a social group, is the house as defined by Lévi-Strauss.

Indeed, the "house" that socially and spatially locates a *personne morale* is often a residence but is not always shared by all house members, who may be dispersed among various dwellings, even in different localities. Rather than a domicile, it may be a shrine (e.g., Boon 1990b; Errington 1989; Howell 1995), or as a sacred place it may constitute a fusion of both functional categories (Waterson 1993; Kirch, this volume). In local usage the word "house" may

signify a cleared or bounded space within which structures of various kinds are located, and not any specific building (Gillespie, Joyce, Sandstrom, this volume). As a material phenomenon about which persons are united, it may not be a building at all but a different object, such as a clan boat, fishing net, shield (Lévi-Strauss 1987:160), heraldic device (Boon 1990a:136–37), a box of feathers with flutes and trumpets (Hugh-Jones 1993:110), or a tomb (Bloch 1995b:71; Waterson 1995b). The house need not even have a tangible form; it could be an abstraction represented, for example, as a named place of origin (Waterson 1995a:50), although it is often represented by material signs of its existence (Joyce, this volume). Furthermore, house membership need not govern one's domestic or economic activities; instead, it may be expressed primarily on ritual occasions (e.g. Hugh-Jones 1993; Traube 1986; Waterson 1995b). Studies of the meanings constituted in architecture or in habitual practice within a residence will not apply to all these instances of house in the sense in which Lévi-Strauss's definition applies.

Rather than try to subsume the house of Lévi-Strauss within the general rubric of a "language of the house," it is more productive to safeguard his definition. Lévi-Strauss never intended his definition of the house to apply to virtually every pre-modern society. Hence, he proposed it as a "type," a social structural formation distinguishable from other recurrent formations.

Returning to the house of Lévi-Strauss requires reconsidering the earlier proposal by some Southeast Asian scholars to separate his definition, as pertaining only to the institutional house, from his characterization of the conflicting tendencies of alliance and descent that are united in the house as a fetishization of relationships. As noted above, the latter idea has been subjected to further reconceptualization, but Lévi-Strauss's definition of the house has received less attention (cf. Hugh-Jones 1993; Sellato 1987b; Waterson 1990, 1995a). This is an important point, because his definition does not make reference to the fetishistic aspects of the house, to conflicting obligations of alliance and descent, or even to kinship groups, households, or physical houses. Waterson (1995a:48–50) remarked that, stripped down to its "irreducible features," it involves the ideal of continuity beyond the life span of individual members of a *personne morale*, a continuity objectified in the maintenance over generations of a corpus of valued material and immaterial property via a transference of its custodianship, accomplished by the "strategic exploitation of the 'language of kinship or affinity'" (Waterson 1995a:48–50).

As noted in Chapter 1, the materialization and perpetuity of the house over time are the characteristics that most discriminate house societies in the Lévi-Straussian sense (Sellato 1987b:34), but they have significant implications: "they must lead us to consider the relation of 'houses' both to systems of

economic stratification and to hierarchies of status, prestige, or ritual power" (Waterson 1995a:51). There is a concentration of often considerable wealth or value at stake in the house, including rights to land and labor—the basis for subsistence. Unequal access to property and the variability in its quantity and quality necessarily differentiate houses from one another and from lower-ranked groups that do not constitute houses, or are attached to houses. This difference further entails the political or religious authority and privileges that high-ranking house members may have over individuals of subordinate status. For instance, the medieval noble house used by Lévi-Strauss as an exemplar, *maison* in French from the Latin *mansio*, refers not to the dwelling (Latin *domus*), but to all persons attached in service to that noble line, who were subject to the authority of their lord (Cuisenier 1991:31–32).

There are also hierarchical differences within houses; as Lévi-Strauss observed for the Kwakiutl, their version of the house (*numaym*) is better treated as a series of ranked positions than as a collection of kinsmen. Houses frequently include close and distant relatives as well as non-kin (Lévi-Strauss 1987:152; Joyce, Sandstrom, this volume), whose social standings are colored by these relational differences. Houses may also incorporate other houses within them or as part of their estate, often expressed as an elder/younger or senior/junior relationship (e.g., Carrasco 1976; Forth 1991:63; Fox 1980:12; McKinnon 1991:98, this volume; Traube 1980:295). Thus the definition of "house" inevitably leads to consideration of the constitution of "house societies" in which hierarchy is a paramount feature (Hugh-Jones 1993:116; Waterson 1995a). This fact should also motivate an investigation as to why some societies, or subsets within a complex political-economic system, fail to develop "houses" even as they may experience temporary "proto-houses" (Schrauwers 1997) or maintain "embryonic houses" (Sandstrom, this volume).

The continuity of the house from one living group of members to a replacement group—its social reproduction—is sanctioned via kinship (*parenté*) or marriage ties, or usually both, which allows for multiple mechanisms for perpetuation that may vary from one society to the next. For example, Maurice Bloch (1995b:72) noted at least two different socioideological means for achieving continuity in Asian societies: stem family systems in which a married pair sequentially succeeds and replaces its predecessor, and those in which houses are permanently associated with a founding ancestral couple that serves as a ritual focus for all their putative descendants.

Strategically manipulating the "language of kinship and affinity" involves more than just legitimately recruiting new members to reproduce the house; this language is often what expresses the mutually identifying relationships between the members of a house and the house's estate. For example, the

origins of valuable house resources are often attributed to ancestors, and links between the ancestral past and the present generation are frequently objectified in various components of the house estate. These may include specific named heirlooms acquired by ancestors (Joyce, this volume); the reuse of names/titles that reference one's forebears (McKinnon, this volume); the house itself, especially as it may incorporate portions of an earlier structure or be relocated in the same spatial locus (Marshall, Tringham, this volume); or images that represent the ancestors (Barraud 1979:10–17; Howell 1990:253; McKinnon, this volume). Other objects symbolize enduring relations of marital alliance and are acquired as part of the exchange obligations that such alliances entail (Fox, ed. 1980; McKinnon 1991, this volume).

Furthermore, the "language of kinship" may be the legitimating ideology applied a posteriori to a quite different de facto motivation for group organization and delimitation, which is always enacted rather than given. What ultimately motivates the house as a social group is a common investment in the house estate (Joyce, Marshall, Sandstrom, this volume), a product of ongoing actions. As Yvonne Marshall (this volume) observed regarding the Northwest Coast Nuu-chah-nulth: "the corporate identity of a house must be performed into existence by a dwelling's inhabitants through their actions as co-residents. Narratives of kinship and descent draw together specific, contingent groups of house occupants by generating traditions of social connectedness rooted in a distant past, but they do not construct or define the house as social group, they follow from it." More generally, Alan Sandstrom (this volume) suggests replacing the "currency of descent (shared substance)" with the "currency of interaction" as the basis for house or house-like groups.

In sum, the "house" is not a helpful typological label; used merely as such, it explains little. Instead, recognition of the potential existence of houses in the more remote corners of today's world or in the "vast territory" of the human past (Godelier et al. 1998:3) should motivate an investigation of the interconnected pragmatic actions and strategic motivations that link persons over time to and through objects or places and thereby serve to define a social group, enable its relations with other persons and groups, and facilitate its social (and accompanying material) reproduction.

#### *The Evolution of House Societies*

The development of strategies of social reproduction to maintain the estate and transmit it intact to the next generation must have been a critical factor in the

emergence of houses and house societies. The accumulation of highly valued objects and rights, often considered as sacra, would have contributed to the growth of ritual power that may have ultimately developed into political power (Sellato 1987a:199–201). A diachronic perspective, as discussed in Chapter 1, must accommodate a frank discussion of the evolution of house societies. Lévi-Strauss's own brief thoughts on the subject were presented in the context of social structural types, with the house as a kind of "hybrid" spanning the perceived chasm between societies based on kinship and those based on class and contract (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:10) along some unilinear, progressivist trajectory. This is a universally discredited aspect of his work (e.g., Boon 1990b:439n; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:10; Gibson 1993:130; McKinnon 1991:31, 1995:173; Schrauwers 1997:357).

However, there is no need to limit inquiry into the emergence of house societies to the outmoded framework of a single evolutionary sequence of social structural types, as Waterson (1995a:68) observed. While the rejection of the house society as some intermediate form is contingent upon the broader rejection of the notion of types, it does not follow that there are not general conditions under which *sociétés à maisons* may emerge as distinct, though quite variable, phenomena. This is especially the case when it is remembered that the house is *not* simply a corporate kinship group; indeed, it has been characterized as "a *dévice* whereby competition for wealth and power can be carried out under the cloak of innate differences in rank" (Gibson 1995:148), indicating its dynamic qualities.

Lévi-Strauss (1982:186–87) had noted that the requisite of differential status and wealth provides clues for the conditions under which house societies may take shape. As other scholars had observed, there is a striking correlation between house societies and hierarchy (Hugh-Jones 1993:116; Macdonald, ed. 1987). Waterson's (1995a) survey of Southeast Asian ethnography concluded that the house, as defined by Lévi-Strauss, was most apparent in those societies whose sociopolitical complexity placed them between the extremes of a continuum running from egalitarian to highly stratified (1995a:51, 68). These are sometimes referred to as "middle-range" societies in a broad spectrum that cannot adequately be characterized as a hierarchical/non-hierarchical opposition (Price and Feinman, eds. 1995). Rather than consider the house a "stage" in cultural evolution, it is more productive to investigate how the house plays a significant role in sociopolitical transformations: "Lévi-Strauss's writings about the house do raise the very interesting question of the ways in which the 'house', as institution and ideology, can be harnessed to the 'enterprises of the great' in societies which are in the throes of a political

transition towards a greater concentration of power in the hands of a few, with a shift from kinship-based to more complex political, economic, and religious structures of organization" (Waterson 1995a:67).

As discussed in Chapter 1, and as the essays in this volume hope to demonstrate, such studies will require the combined efforts of ethnographers, archaeologists, and historians engaged in cross-cultural investigations over the long-term. This interdisciplinary undertaking should ultimately be able to answer questions concerning the conditions under which house societies emerge and disappear, even as they elucidate the historically contingent variation, and the chronological and regional transformations, of what were likely numerous and diverse *sociétés à maisons* within the grand course of human experience.