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Maya "Nested Houses"

The Ritual Construction of Place

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Lévi-Strauss's minimal discussion of the physical house concerned how, as a central symbol of unity, it was conceived and created as a miniature image of the universe. The representation of the house as microcosm has been well documented for many societies, including the Maya peoples of Mesoamerica, and is related to overlapping notions of the house and the body, a means by which people and houses are co-identified. Susan Gillespie draws on ethnographic and archaeological data encompassing over two millennia of Maya occupation to look beyond the mere form of the Maya house as microcosm and examine the active agency of the social house members who used their dwellings and analogous constructions to orient themselves and the spirits with whom they interacted within a specific locus in space. These spirits include the ancestral dead, who are ritually contacted at domestic altars that are miniature houses at the same time that they are made to resemble beds, resting places associated with immobility, permanence, and potency. Archaeological evidence demonstrates the longevity of this practice, which once involved burying the dead under altars or beds within the house compound and constructing miniature houses as containers for certain spirits that were part of the intangible estate of noble houses. In enclosing and thus unifying diverse elements, the house is a means of creating place and sociocosmic order within the landscape. Building such order into existence requires specific ritual actions to produce and activate all these material houses, actions undertaken by those who thereby define themselves as a group with a common stake in the house.

In choosing the word "house" to name a social category, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1982:172) recognized a very common indigenous practice whereby the term for a social group is the same as that for the physical structure in which house

members live or carry out ritual activities, or which otherwise can represent their ties with one another and with other houses. He never developed an analysis of the physical house, concentrating instead on the corporate group and the strategies of kinship and affinity that reproduced it (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:45). Nevertheless, his ideas have led others to pay more attention to the relations constructed and dynamically enacted between houses as buildings and houses as social groupings (Hugh-Jones 1995:251), especially in house societies, where a heavy load of significance is borne by the physical house precisely because of its close identity with its inhabitants (Keane 1995:110). In house societies there is a more immediate co-signification of the physical house as place—a specific location in a spatial network—and the social house as place—a locus within a network of relationships. These two allied concepts of house as place anchor people within society in both practice and ideation (Forth 1991; Waterson 1990:91–92).

Another common means of expressing the joint identity of people and houses is conceiving the house as a living being, that is, personifying the house (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:43). This is discursively expressed by using the same terms to names body parts and house parts, indicating an analogous, even homologous, relationship between the two. Both are containers for the entities that inhabit them—the person within a physical body, the group of such bodies within a house (e.g., Errington 1979:13; Kan 1989:63–64).¹ Houses also have a life cycle like humans (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:42)—they must be brought to life, regularly nurtured, and mourned upon their deaths, and they may experience reincarnation. As living entities, houses are often thought to have a spiritual counterpart or soul. Roxana Waterson's (1990:115) study of the "living house" linked these beliefs in Southeast Asia to the widely shared concept of a vital force that animates the universe, referred to as *semangat* or its cognates. Everything shares in this life force, which is sometimes viewed as a soul, a discrete portion of invisible energy housed, or made manifest, within a material container. The house may acquire its life force from the method of construction, for example, by being built of living trees that are "planted" in a prescribed way as house posts, or it may become animated via a ceremony performed when the house is completed or dedicated (Waterson 1990:121, 1993: 223–24).

The link between the house and the body goes beyond a sharing of form, identity, and life force: "the body and the house are the loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:3). It is with regard to the house as such a model that Lévi-Strauss made his brief remarks on

the physical house, commenting on how the dwelling could function as a fetish in house societies, such as the Karo Batak of Sumatra and the Atoni of Timor, among whom "the wealth of decoration, the complicated architecture, the symbolism attaching to each element in the total construction, the arrangement of furniture and the distribution of its inhabitants 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" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:156, emphasis added).

The sociocosmic symbolism of the physical house is especially well documented for Southeast Asian house societies in studies that explicate the analogies between the categories and organizing principles of residential architecture and those of society in general, and ultimately of the cosmos itself as the largest order representation.² Some of these studies have been criticized, however, for privileging the house as the most unitary or exemplary cosmic representation. As Roy Ellen (1986:3) and Roxana Waterson (1988:54, 1990:xvii) have observed, the house is one of several such symbolic models, along with the human body and the village, for example, "all of which feed into each other and within which the meanings of symbols or their opposition to each other may shift according to context" (Waterson 1988:54).

In this essay I draw on ethnographic, ethnohistorical, and archaeological information to examine the physical house as a microcosmic model for Maya peoples that both anchors people in place and orients their proper movements in space. "Maya" refers to a large cultural-linguistic subarea of Mesoamerica whose geographic boundaries extend from the Yucatan peninsula south to the Pacific coast, encompassing southern Mexico and parts of adjacent Central America (Figure 7-1). This region was populated by persons speaking related (Macro-Mayan) languages throughout most of the known prehispanic period (ending c. 1525 A.D.). Large, complex polities developed here in the Classic period (c. 250–1000 A.D.), especially in the tropical forest lowlands of the central region. The famous hieroglyphic texts inscribed on stone monuments and portable objects date to this period. The last centuries of the Classic into the subsequent Postclassic period (A.D. 1000–Spanish conquest) saw a decline in population in the southern lowlands, but important political developments occurred in the northern lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula and in the southern highlands bordering the Pacific Ocean. Ethnohistoric evidence recorded in the early Spanish Colonial period referring to Postclassic practices and beliefs is especially rich for these two widely separated regions, and it is here that most descendants of the ancient peoples, several million Maya speakers, live today.

The Maya construct artificial images of their universe in multiple manifes-

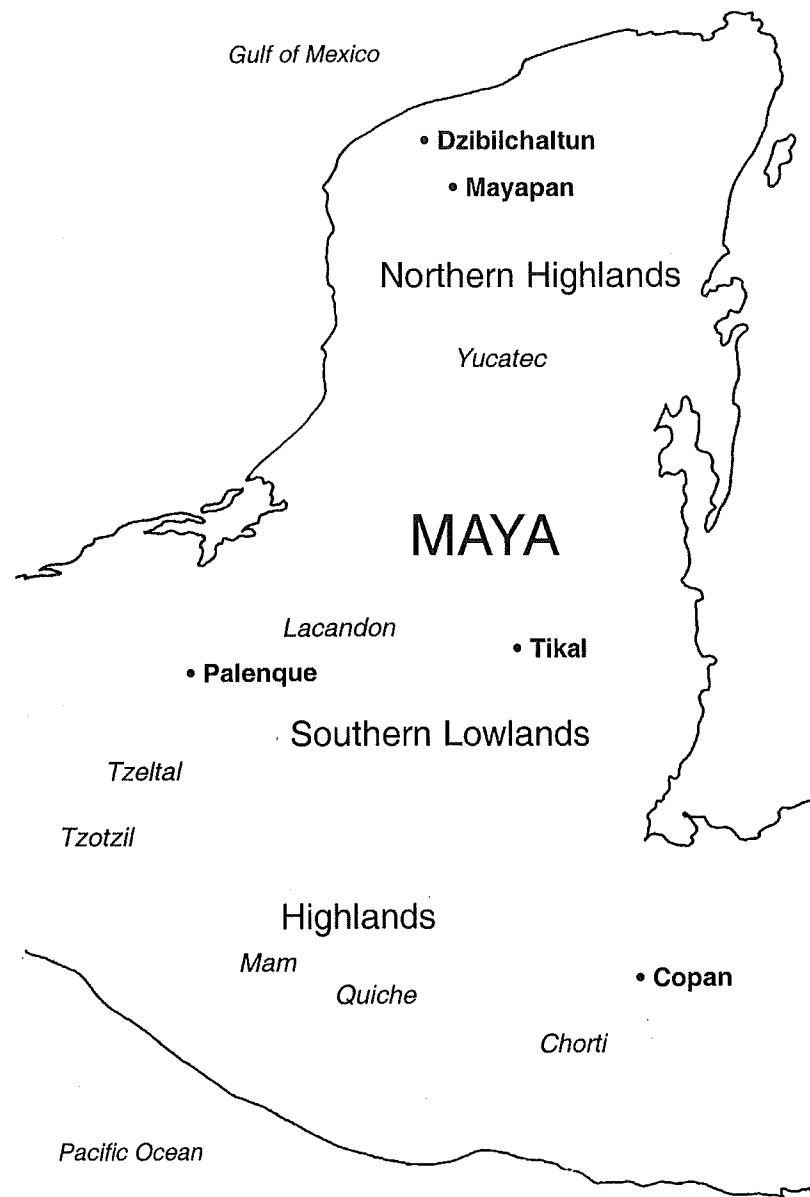


Figure 7-1. Maya area showing its division into subareas, with major archaeological sites and modern language groups mentioned in the text.

tions within the landscape, notably their farm fields, houses, and the altars they use in domestic rituals. In addition, small nonfunctional houses have been recovered archaeologically and may be interpreted as having a meaning similar to that of the altars, sheltering the spirits of gods and ancestors. In practical discourse these various phenomena are linked because they share a common form—a square or rectangle with marked corners—referencing the four-quartered universe. However, this iconic analogy is inadequate, first because it is static, based only on the form of things and not their creation or use, and second because it is incomplete, since some nonrectilinear objects are also referred to as houses. Furthermore, these phenomena are all spatially interrelated according to a dominant concentric orientation to space, such that multiple microcosmic models are nested one within another and therefore evoke one another within a proxemic structure or “semiospace”—space as a system of signs (Drummond 1996).

Creating and activating these cosmic models requires both utilitarian and ritual actions, and it is this agency, not the resulting form, that is highlighted here. The ritual actions in particular manifest another major structuring principle that underlies the system of social relations within space—the complementary opposition of passivity and movement associated with centers and peripheries, which is also common, and better described, in Southeast Asian societies (e.g., Cunningham 1965:372; Errington 1989; Waterson 1990:192–93). Among the Maya, passive behaviors—sitting, resting, and sleeping—are intimately connected to houses; one who is seated in his house is in his place, representing a microcenter. Spirits and ancestors are also petitioned once they have been immobilized, usually by sitting in their own houses. But creating a house as a still and stable center requires the actions of people around its periphery, often enacted as a counterclockwise movement in a ritual that simultaneously identifies the persons who engage in it, or on whose behalf it is undertaken, as a specific social group localized to that space.

The “house” is thus an exemplary symbolic structure represented in multiple material constructs, including actual dwellings. It represents the conjunction of the concrete/visible and the immaterial/invisible components of life. It is a product of the enabling actions of specific impermanent, mortal persons to foster empowering contractual relationships with the generalized unchanging, energetic force, manifested as ancestors and gods. This force originates on the periphery of the world (the space-time of the primordium), a place of dangerous potency, but portions of it can be invoked and even monopolized by social groups if properly contained and located within the boundaries of a house. When materialized and ritually activated, real houses and related microcosmic models—each individually bounded in its spatial extent but simul-

taneously interpenetrating, one inside another—can potentially provide everyone and everything a proper place.

MAYA HOUSES AND HOUSE SOCIETIES

Although Maya house builders today are rapidly converting to modern materials, earlier in this century many houses were still being constructed in ways little changed over the last 2000 years or more (Wauchope 1934:123–24). Despite some variation in overall form (rectilinear or oval), shape of the roof, and building materials, houses today and of the past conform to very similar techniques (Wauchope 1938).³ The buildings are generally framed with tree trunks at the four corners and along the sides, their bases placed in deep holes excavated into the earth. The tops of the trunks are cut off where the branches emerge, leaving a notch to hold the transverse beams that run along the top of the walls. The roof frame is built separately and erected on top of the wall structure, often with an attic of slender poles laid out across the transverse beams, and the roof itself is thatched. The walls are composed of split sticks or canes (sometimes covered with mud, leaves, or plaster), of earth mixed with plant materials, or of sun-dried mud bricks (Wauchope 1934:125–26). Furnishings are sparse, usually consisting of beds or hammocks, a table altar, and low stools or tiny chairs for the men to sit on. Close by the main house are other buildings (kitchens, sweat houses, storehouses, a shrine building, animal pens, raised seed beds, and subsidiary dwellings), together with cleared spaces used for many activities, forming a residential compound with surrounding fruit trees and nearby agricultural fields.

The houses sheltered the dead as well as the living. Ethnohistoric evidence from Yucatan in the early colonial period indicates that most of the dead were buried under or immediately around their houses (Landa 1982[1566]:59), although high-ranking persons were interred (as inhumations or cremations) in special shrine buildings (1982:59), or, in the Guatemala highlands, on mountain-tops (Las Casas 1967[1555–59]:2:526). Burial under house floors was also known as late as the turn of the last century in some remote settlements (e.g., Blom and La Farge 1926–27:2:361–62; Thompson 1930:82), and the Chorti Maya maintained family burial plots within the individual house compounds (Wisdom 1940:119). One explicit reason for this practice was that it would allow the soul of the deceased to re-enter the corporeal world in the body of the next child born in that house or an adjacent one (Thompson 1930:82). This practice reflects a common Maya belief that the souls (and names) of ancestors are passed down to succeeding generations (Carlsen and

Prechtel 1991:26; Vogt 1969:372–73; Watanabe 1990:139). Today the dead are usually buried in community cemeteries.

In the prehispanic era, commoner houses were not much different from those described ethnographically. However, archaeological evidence provides many examples of how the Maya nobility expressed their differences from commoners in the elaboration of their houses and their associated graves. Noble or upper-class houses may have been made of similar materials but were larger and raised up on earthen or stone platforms. Some buildings were elaborate stone and masonry constructions with vaulted roofs and multiple rooms, erected on huge rubble-filled platforms faced with cut stone. They were ornamented with decorations in stucco, paint, and carved stone. In the Classic period stone slabs with engraved portraits and accompanying hieroglyphic texts were erected within the royal house compounds of the paramounts who headed the major Maya polities.

Archaeologically identified house compounds, built around common patio areas, are presumed to have been inhabited by social groups who maintained an identity and association with a single place over many generations, for many of them were constantly modified and enlarged (Hendon 1991). The compounds often include recognizable shrine structures for the veneration of family ancestors (e.g., Haviland 1968:109, 1981, 1988; McAnany 1995:66, 104; Tourtellot 1988), an interpretation based on information provided by ethnohistoric sources and contemporary Maya peoples (e.g., McAnany 1995; Nash 1970; Watanabe 1990). Associated with some of these shrines were the actual physical remains of deceased persons. The rarer cases of shrines of the royal dead include impressive temples built atop tall pyramidal platforms erected over subsurface tombs (Welsh 1988:190).

The Maya today view their ancestors as a generic, generally anonymous group that includes both males and females, whose ties to their living descendants are not delineated beyond four to six generations at the most (Gillespie 1995). Ancestors are frequently referred to as "mother-fathers," a term that recognizes relationships through both the paternal and maternal lines (Watanabe 1990:139). Nevertheless, despite the absence of a uniline of named forebears, among the Maya as among peoples of Southeast Asia (e.g., Fox 1993:16–17) the continuity of houses and their claims to land and other property was and still is grounded in ties to their ancestral origins. "As keepers of the land and givers of life . . . [Maya] ancestors fuse local affinities and generational continuity to the very landscape itself" (Watanabe 1990:139).

While the long-lived multifamily groupings that occupied the prehispanic residential compounds are usually interpreted as patrilineages (e.g., Haviland 1992; Hopkins 1988; McAnany 1995), multiple lines of evidence indicate that

the ancient Maya, like the central Mexican Aztecs,⁴ were organized into houses in the Lévi-Straussian sense, although our best information pertains only to the upper stratum of society (Gillespie 1995, 1999; Gillespie and Joyce 1997).⁵ Following Lévi-Strauss's example, it seems wise to consider Maya concepts and terminology to understand their social groups. The most frequently encountered word for the multifamily group with its own identity and estate is "house" (e.g., Vogt 1969:140; Wisdom 1940:248). A common lowland Maya term for house is *na*; a highland Maya cognate is *ha*. Documents from sixteenth-century Guatemala relate epic legends of the origins of the four intermarrying noble houses, the *nimha* (literally "great house" in Quiche Maya), each of which had attached vassal groups and was further objectified by a temple-shrine in the capital city for commemorative rituals to its ancestral origins (*Popol Vuh* 1996; *Título de Totonicapán* 1983:38, 204 pictures the four house shrines).

In the lowland Cholan and Yucatec languages, a distinction is made between a house in general (*na*) and one that belongs to someone, a possessed house (*otot* in Cholan, *otoch* in Yucatec). Both categories of houses appear in the prehispanic hieroglyphic inscriptions in which houses are individually named, especially in the context of dedication and termination rituals (Freidel and Schele 1989; Stuart 1998). For example, the Late Classic site of Palenque, Mexico has long texts that relate the local version of the cosmogony, part of a marvelously detailed life history of the ruling house at the turn of the seventh century. In this account a primordial creator deity metaphysically established a named house, *otot*, in the sky as the first significant act of the creation. The text continues with the activities of legendary predecessors followed by a historical event—the dedication of a real named building (*na*) as an *otot*—by the paramount who commissioned the inscription (Schele and Freidel 1990:246–51).

Because of the great geographic extent and vast time span of societies encompassed by the term "Maya," Maya houses and house societies are likely to represent the same degree of diversity found in other world regions, such as Indonesia (e.g., Macdonald, ed. 1987). Nevertheless, across the Maya area past and present, the definitional criteria for the house established by Lévi-Strauss can be found, and it is possible to speak generically of the Maya house. Moreover, even if the Maya were not all organized as house societies, it remains the case that ethnographic and archaeological evidence reveal how the Maya conception of the house as an exemplary model emerges from their experiences of inhabiting and operating within and around their house compounds, and of organizing productive relations as social houses. The physical house is more than an objectified text reflecting social and cosmic relations; it is a locus and frame for daily activities out of which meanings are constituted (e.g., Earle 1986; see also Bourdieu 1973; Errington 1979; Lok 1987; Ruan 1996).

THE MAYA HOUSE AS MICROCOSM

Many Maya ethnographers have commented on the overlapping symbolic structures represented by the house and the cosmos. For example, the highland Quiche Maya construct their houses to mimic the vertical dimensions of their mountainous terrain. The walls are of mud brick made from earth taken nearby, but the attic and roof are all of wood, brought from the forests on the mountain slopes. Thus, the vertical dichotomy of mountain and valley is repeated in the vertical orientation of trees and earth as construction materials (Earle 1986:166).

More frequently, the horizontal segmentation of the cosmos into four cardinal directions or quadrants is signified by the form and structure of houses and certain analogous phenomena, especially the table altar and the maize field (*milpa*). Evon Vogt (1976:11) cited a Tzotzil Maya informant's statement that the universe is "like a house, like a table" and concluded that "all preeminent cultural symbols are square." Charles Wisdom (1940:43) made the same observation for the Chorti Maya: "The square is the only sacred plane, since it has the form of the milpa and the altar and has four corners. *The milpa and altar represent the universe in miniature*. The Indian sometimes refers to his altar as his little milpa, and to the world, as a great milpa. It is said that houses must be rectangular or square in order to be like milpas. The candles set up at the four corners of the altar are said to be both its corner posts (as if it were a house) and its boundary markers (as if it were a milpa [marked at each corner by a coral tree])" (emphasis added).

The house, the table altar, and the milpa are all four-sided; hence they mimic the cosmic form. Though not actually square, villages are also thought of as having four sides, each with an entryway guarded by a shrine composed of one or more crosses atop a stone or masonry altar (e.g., Nash 1970:292–93 for Tzeltal Maya; Sosa 1989 for Yucatec; Vogt 1976:11 for Tzotzil). The cited examples indicate that the square form is explicitly marked on its four corners or its four sides in some way—the corner posts of a house, the trees that mark the corners of a maizefield, the candles set on the four corners of the altar, and the cross shrines at the four entrances to the village.

Maya houses, like those elsewhere, are also considered analogous to another microcosmic model, the human body. The overlapping of names of house and body parts is not uncommon. However, in this respect, it is more often the body that is presumed to take primacy for orienting spatial relationships; the house derives its organization of fixed parts from the body (Earle 1986:163). For example, the door is the "mouth" of the Quiche house, and the porch posts are its "legs." Additional terms from Tzotzil Maya include the

house wall as a "stomach," the foundation rock as a "foot," the corner as an "ear," and the roof as a "head" (Vogt 1969:71). The Tzotzil also place their own bodily detritus—the hair that is combed from their heads—into the cracks of the house walls each day to further materially mark their co-identification with their houses (1969:465). The same body part names are also given to other phenomena, including mountains, maize fields, and tables. In more general terms, a mountain, a field, a house, a table, and a human body are oriented to a single spatial model (1969:580).

The Tzeltal Maya give an additional rationale for equating humans, houses, and the cosmos based on their shared origins. In their cosmogonic accounts, the earth was created from the sea, the first humans were made out of this earth, and the houses they build likewise have earthen walls. From this homology of creation comes the idea that houses, like humans, must be fed or nourished, and a ceremonial "meal for the house" is provided when the structure is first completed (Nash 1970:13; see Vogt 1969:462 for the Tzotzil Maya). It is also at this house dedication ritual that the house acquires a soul or spirit inhabitant—*ch'ulel* in Tzeltal and Tzotzil (Nash 1970:16; Vogt 1969:71). Among the Quiche of Chinique, the house spirit is personalized and believed to be the soul of the original owner of the house who must regularly be offered "rent" in the form of candles and incense; otherwise, the house will "die." When a new Quiche house is to be built, the house altar is the first thing constructed at the site, and it is here that the spirit, the original house owner, has its place (Earle 1986:164–65). For the Yucatec (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962 [1934]:147) and Tzotzil Maya (Vogt 1969:71), however, the house spirit guardian is more impersonalized, consisting of a portion of the diffuse vital force that, like its Indonesian counterpart, animates the Mesoamerican cosmos.⁶

Ancestors, as spirit beings, are sometimes believed to live in their own houses, which may or may not be the houses they occupied while living. Among the Quiche of Chichicastenango, the spirits of the dead have definite places of residence, especially within their former houses. Here they are "invoked as private persons, as family men and women maintaining order in their homes" (Bunzel 1952:270). Among other groups, the ancestors reside in natural features that are within the visible landscape, but usually beyond the settled areas. The Tzeltal Maya of Tzo'ontahal believe that the ancestors dwell in a specific cave (Nash 1970:22). Their Tzotzil neighbors say that certain mountains contain the houses of the ancestors (Vogt 1969:298–300). The ancestors are the metaphysical link connecting the members of the house to their origins, and they continue to intervene in the daily experiences of the living. They protect their collective descendants from evil, but will also punish them for

breaching social and ritual mores, especially those codified as *costumbres*, "customs" (Bunzel 1952:268; Vogt 1969:300; Watanabe 1990).

The focus for venerating ancestors and similar guardian spirits is an altar or shrine, often located within the house or immediately outside, although some groups also erect ancestral altars on their farmland or other property they claim which is guarded by their ancestors. Altars consist of a raised flat surface provided by a table or platform upon which objects are placed, including crosses (which can be very large), images of saints, food, liquor, candles, incense, flowers, and other offerings. The altar can thereby function as the "ritual attractor" of the house, some object which "has a pre-eminence among the other parts of the house and, as such, represents, in a concentrated form, the house as a whole" (Fox 1993:1). As already noted, the altar is constructed according to the same spatial referents as the house and is considered a small-scale model of the cosmos (Earle 1986:165; Sosa 1989:139; Vogt 1969:403; Wisdom 1940:283).

Although the altar appears to be a Christian introduction—the table form was introduced by the Spaniards and the altar is topped with Christian symbols—it has prehispanic roots (Deal 1987). It is a place for performing rituals to ancestors and indigenous earth deities as well as Christian saints. Even the cross has prehispanic origins and non-Christian signification. The Yucatec Maya refer to the cross as the *ya'axche'*, "green tree" (Sosa 1989:137). This same word names the silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), whose branches take on a cross-like shape when the tree is young. The ceiba tree, which grows to be very tall with a large canopy of leaves, is the premier *axis mundi* in Maya cosmology. Ceibas are frequently planted in town centers and used in rituals (e.g. Redfield 1936), and some Maya peoples posited that their ancestors emerged out of the earth via the roots of the ceiba tree (León-Portilla 1988:139). The souls of the virtuous dead were believed by the colonial Yucatec Maya to rest in the shade of a great ceiba (Landa 1982[1566]:60), and their later Christianized counterparts stated that this same tree was a ladder used by souls to climb to heaven (Tozzer 1907:154).

The green color of the *ya'axche'* cross indicates that it is alive (Sosa 1989:137). Cross-trees are not simply living things; they contain within them the potent force that animates the universe. For example, the four Yucatec town crosses specifically shelter the spirit guardians of the town (Sosa 1989:138). The living aspect of a tree is also the salient factor in choosing materials to make Tzotzil crosses. The wooden cross of the Tzotzil Maya is really a framework for draping fresh green pine boughs, and if no cross is available, arranging boughs on the ground or against a house wall to form a cross shape will

serve just as well (Vogt 1969:586). The Tzotzil cross shrines are likewise points of contact with the spirit world, places where ancestors will sit and wait for offerings (Vogt 1964:499–500).

The analogy between the house as a container for the living and the dead, and the altar with its crosses as the place for the souls of the dead or other animating spirits, can be carried further in that the altar is often made or viewed as a miniature house. The Yucatec Maya of Chan Kom build an altar, loosely referred to as a table (using the Spanish word *mesa*) but constructed in the same way as the house. The parts of the wooden altar (the four forked corner posts and the transverse rods that rest in these forks) bear the same names as the corresponding parts of the house (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:131). The Chorti Maya altar is also built in a way similar to that of a house, and is sometimes referred to as a house (Wisdom 1940:382).

In a similar vein, the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan represent in metonymic abbreviation the physical aspects of the house of the living to contain their dead. Now the dead are buried in cemeteries rather than under house floors, but their graves are often topped with roof thatch (or pine needles to represent thatch) in order to make the grave a replica of a house for the dead (Vogt 1969:220). In northern Yucatan the dead are often disinterred from their graves, and their bones are placed in small concrete mausolea made to resemble miniature houses or churches. Thus, the structures built to enclose the dead and the ancestors are also houses, as is the case in many societies of Southeast Asia (Waterson 1990:217). In this respect, the house does seem to be privileged as an exemplary architectural model, a manmade container for both the living and the deceased, and the altar as a miniature house is a material point of contact between the living and their revered dead, denizens of the spirit world.

MAYA ALTARS AS SLEEPING HOUSES

In addition to mimicking a house in its form and method of construction, the altar is built in the form of a bench or bed (Gillespie 1999). Beds and altars were traditionally constructed in the same manner, raised up on wooden posts that were topped by slats or latticework to form the upper surface; to be used as a bed, it was covered by a woven sleeping mat (Landa 1982[1566]:34). Both beds and altars were still being made in this way in recent times, and as in the past, were often built into the house wall (Sosa 1989:139; Vogt 1969:87–88; Wisdom 1940:132, 382). This homology of form signifies another important referent for the altar that provides clues to a complex of beliefs concerning the ancestors and their behavioral connections to their descendants. Beds and

benches have a specific function—they are loci for sitting, resting, and sleeping. The guardian spirits of Yucatec towns, who are housed within the crosses at the four town entrances, are believed to rest on their benches (*k'anche'*), the stone altars that support the crosses (Sosa 1989:138), just as men today sit upon wooden benches (*k'anche'*) in their houses (Hanks 1990:112); and as noted above, Tzotzil ancestral spirits sit at the cross shrines (Vogt 1964:499–500).

The Quiche Maya ancestral shrine, a small stone rectangular box, is explicitly referred to as the *warabalha*, the "sleeping house" of the ancestors (Tedlock 1982:17). This term is related to ideas of where the house spirit, the "bed and foundation" of the house, rests (Earle 1986:166; see above). This complex of beliefs is thought to have its origin in earlier practices described for sixteenth-century Guatemala (Las Casas 1967[1555–59]:2:527) in which altars were erected over the graves of important persons to serve as shrines for rituals and offerings (Cook 1986:148; Welsh 1988:194). Thus, beyond the metaphysical function of altars as resting places for spirits, there once was a more literal juxtaposition of altars with the quiescent dead. As late as the early twentieth century in some areas, the dead were still being buried under their own beds within their houses (Blom and La Farge 1926–27,2:362).

Additional evidence linking beds, altars, and the dead comes from the prehispanic period, during which altars and bench-beds were virtually identical forms, and both were frequently erected over graves. In high-ranking households, benches and altars were masonry constructions built into the wall. Those identified as "altars" are shorter in length than beds and are usually located just opposite the doorway of the main dwelling or a separate shrine building. Identically built larger benches, or those located against the other walls, are interpreted as beds used for sitting and sleeping (Adams 1970:492–93; Thompson and Thompson 1955; Webster 1989:31), although the distinction between altars and benches is difficult to maintain archaeologically (Andrews and Andrews 1980:307; Webster 1989:31) and benches probably doubled as altars for some rituals (Welsh 1988:192). Burials and cremations were commonly placed under or adjacent to existing benches and altars, or new benches were erected over graves. This long-standing practice extends from at least the Classic through the Postclassic periods in the Maya lowlands (e.g., Andrews and Andrews 1980:307; Rathje 1970:370; Smith 1962:221; Thompson 1954; Welsh 1988:192).

While these bench-altars served as actual sitting and sleeping places for the living, and marked those same places for the dead below, the dead, too, were often laid out on their own beds, as can be seen in the upper-class tombs. Within the subsurface tomb of Temple I, Tikal, Guatemala, the body of a Late Classic paramount was laid on a woven mat that topped a large masonry bench



Figure 7-2. Miniature house carved in stone (16"l x 13"w x 25"h), from the periphery of an elite household south of the main center of Copan, Honduras. An anthropomorphic deity seated on a bench can be seen from the doorway. A hieroglyphic text is on the reverse side of the roof. Peabody Museum, catalog 92-49-20/C20,C21. Photo by Steve Burger, Peabody Museum Photographic Archive, negative 32904, © President and Fellows of Harvard College. By permission of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

(Sharer 1994:163). Sometimes a wooden bed was used for the deceased, e.g., at Classic period La Milpa, Belize (Hammond et al. 1996:89). In a Calakmul, Mexico tomb, pottery vessels laid out below the body were described as serving as a kind of bed, on which a woven mat was laid (Folan et al. 1995:321).

There is some evidence from ethnohistoric sources that immobility was a valued quality associated with centrality and ruling power in Mesoamerica (Gillespie and Joyce 1998), although it is not as well documented here as it is in Southeast Asia. In the latter area, "Immobility and fertility seem frequently associated with the centre; the idea of rulers or ritual specialists 'staying put', often actually in a house, recurs with noticeable regularity. . . . Immobility thus is utilized as a way of representing a concentration of creative, supernatural or political power" (Waterson 1993:230). The Maya references to sleeping, resting, or sitting in the use of altars and benches do connote a condition of fixity. They also relate to the notion of being in one's proper place (e.g., Forth 1991: 60). Among the modern Maya of Yucatan, there is a "cultural premise" that everything alive, including spirits, occupies a stable place from which it will occasionally move, but to which it will eventually return (Hanks 1990:344, 389). As for people, being in their own particular place also involves an activity, namely, to sit within their houses (1990:344; see Monaghan 1995:99 for similar Mixtec beliefs). One's link to the ancestors is thus achieved in part via a replication of their behaviors, which complements the notion that the living are the replacements (*k'ex*) for the dead and thus share in their identities, including their recycled souls (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991). The living house members sit and sleep on their beds, and in the prehispanic period the dead "slept" within or under similar bench forms; today their spirits (as ancestors) use the analogous altars (bed-houses) as a place to sit and rest.

Archaeological information dating to the Classic period has also revealed the use of miniature houses for ancestor veneration rituals of the noble class. These small house replicas served some of the same functions as the ancestral altars, further materializing the conceptual overlap between the altar and the house form. At Copan, Honduras, in the eastern Maya lowlands, several small stone sculptures carved in the shape of houses were found in association with a Late Classic noble residential compound, in an area that suggested their use in commemorative rituals to the revered dead (Andrews and Fash 1992:63). There are hieroglyphic inscriptions on one or both sides of these sculptures (Figure 7-2). The text includes the phrase *u waybil ch'ul*, "the sleeping place of a spirit/divinity" and a personal name (Grube and Schele 1990:3; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:188–89; Stuart 1998:400). The front side shows the doorway in bas-relief, within which a seated anthropomorphic divinity (*ch'u(l)*, Yucatec *k'u(l)*) can be observed, and in the illustrated example it is sitting on

a bench. The naming of a miniature house as the sleeping place of a spirit reveals the same quality as that ascribed today to the Quiche Maya ancestral altar, the *warabalha* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:188–90), which means “sleeping house” (see above). The personal name carved on these house models may refer to the ancestor of a particular noble house, or to its claim to having divine origins or being under divine protection, since the associated name is in some cases known to be that of a deity (Grube and Schele 1990:3; Stuart 1998:400–401).

Also in the Late Classic period, the ruling house at Palenque went to great effort to record its history, especially its origins and connections to particular divinities active at the creation of the world. This epic story is preserved in inscriptions on tablets within the Temple of the Inscriptions and three adjacent temple pyramids arranged around a plaza; these three are referred to collectively as the Cross Group. Each Cross Group temple has a front and back room, and in the back room was built a complete small masonry house as a shrine, about 3 meters high and 3 meters wide (Houston 1996; Proskouriakoff 1963:12; Robertson 1991).⁷ Inside these smaller houses hieroglyphic texts were inscribed on panels erected against the back wall, opposite the door. The small structures nestled inside the larger ones are referred to metaphorically in the inscriptions as “sweat houses,” *pibna*, and each is associated with a specific named primordial divinity said to be under the guardianship of the ruling paramount. As sweat houses, structures to which women have traditionally repaired following childbirth, or in order to give birth, they are linked directly to the notion of origins (Houston 1996).⁸

Like the Copan miniature house models, these small shrines are considered the place of a specific divinity linked to the ruling house, whose claims to legitimacy and identity necessitated the objectification of the houses of these spirits as a medium for localizing and possibly immobilizing them. The named primordial divinities (the “Palenque Triad”) housed in the three Cross Group shrines apparently endowed the royal house with its most treasured sacra (certain costume elements), according to the inscriptions. Conceivably these specific divinities were the “house spirits” that were ritually coaxed (using the metaphor of birth) into their own special houses in the Cross Group compound, which is adjacent to the royal residences, in dedication ceremonies that were the main subject of the inscriptions. The Copan house miniatures probably served a similar function, albeit on a smaller and less expensive scale.

Furthermore, if what sets high-ranked houses apart from low-ranked houses, or from groups that do not belong to named houses, is the strategic and economic means to concentrate value (e.g., McKinnon 1991, this volume), then such immaterial property as specific gods and ancestors can be consid-

ered part of the value or resources claimed by a house. The paramount of Palenque who commissioned these three buildings on behalf of his royal house, at enormous expense, did so in an effort to concentrate his house’s spiritual property by concretizing it. Other valuable material objects were also cached within the buildings, thereby taking them out of normal circulation and rendering them non-transactable (Joyce 1992; see Joyce, this volume).

Palenque also has a most unusual ancestral altar as a sleeping place, constructed literally to contain the remains of one of its paramounds in a tomb beneath the Temple of the Inscriptions (Ruz Lhuillier 1992); this tomb itself is apparently referred to as a named house (*na*) in the inscriptions (Stuart 1998:382–83). Rather than simply being laid out atop a masonry bench-bed, this man—named Pakal in the inscriptions—was actually encapsulated within his bench. His body was placed within the hollowed-out interior of a great rectilinear limestone block, which was raised up on legs as a bench (Figure 7-3). Similar legged stone benches served as thrones for the rulers at Palenque and other Maya sites (Robertson 1985, Figs. 418–35; Gillespie 1999:240). The bas-relief design on the upper surface of his stone coffin depicts Pakal himself with a great cross-shaped ceiba tree, like the tree-crosses that Maya peoples today still place on their ancestral altars. On the four sides of the box are ten depictions of Pakal’s named predecessors, both male and female. Only the upper halves of their bodies are shown, and they seem to erupt out of the surface of the earth (Robertson 1983:65).

Besides representing an ancestral altar as a bench, within which an ancestor was literally immobilized, the sarcophagus within the tomb-house itself resembles a house. It is a four-sided enclosure for a human body (and its spirit), and the icons engraved upon it represent the vertical dimensions of the cosmos in their proper orientation. On the lower portion of its four sides is the earth band, from which the ancestors emerge, each juxtaposed against a fruit tree, while the cover design is framed by a “sky-band” border. One scholar has thus described Pakal’s sarcophagus as “a small cosmic house inside a large cosmic model” (the temple-pyramid itself) (Benson 1985:185).⁹

MICROCOSM OR MACROCOSM?

Contemporary and ancient Maya houses and house altars exemplify a concept that Evon Vogt (1976:11), speaking of the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan, referred to as “scaling”—conceiving small or large-scale models of cultural categories. But he noted that the scale can run both ways; just as the Tzotzil house is a miniature cosmos, so the great mountain in which the ancestral gods live is

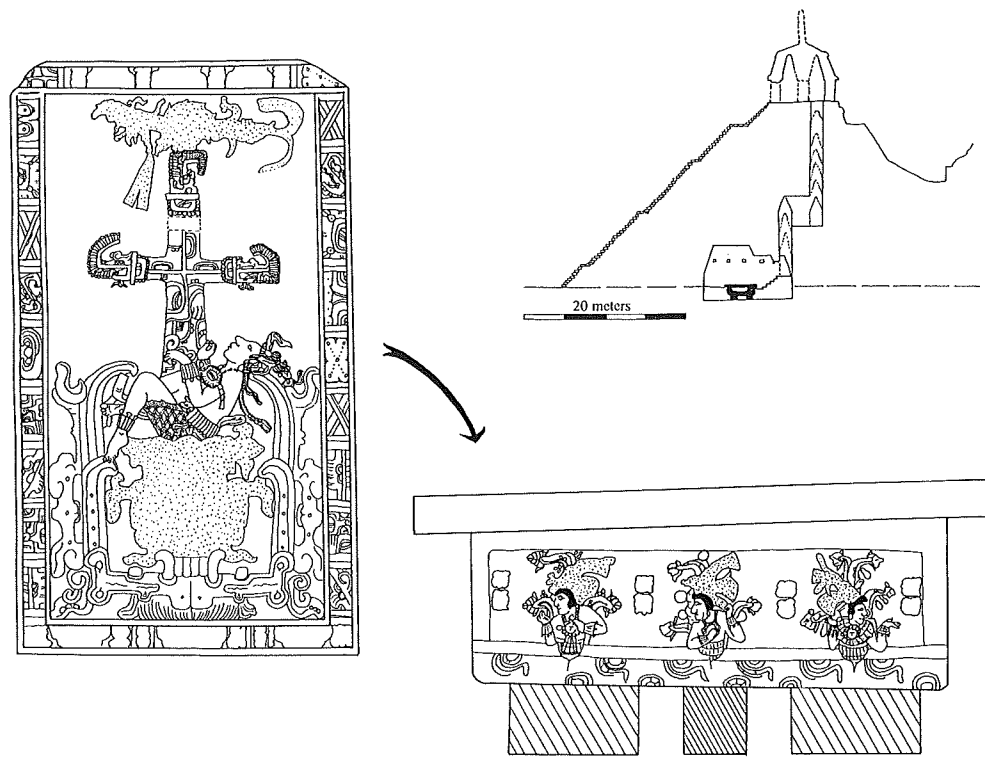


Figure 7-3. Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque. Upper right, schematic cross section showing the vaulted interior stairway leading to the semi-subterranean tomb chamber. The chamber holds the hollowed-out coffin or sarcophagus, with four large legs at the corners and two smaller supports in the center. Lower right, east side of the sarcophagus, displaying three of the ten persons who emerge out of an "earth band," each with a fruit tree. The person on the right is female. Left, main sarcophagus cover with the portrait of Pakal falling into the earth, represented by the double-profile maws of skeletal serpents. Behind him is a ceiba tree with serpent heads on the tips of its branches. The scene is framed by a "sky-band" composed of celestial symbols. Some motifs have been simplified and others, along with the hieroglyphic inscriptions, have been deleted in this composite drawing (based on Ruz Lhuillier 1968).

considered to be a larger version of a Zinacanteco house. As Ellen (1986:3) demonstrated in his study of the Nuaulu (Indonesia) house, microcosm and macrocosm are relative to a specific point of view. If the house is a microcosm of the universe, can it also be that the universe is a house? The Postclassic Aztecs of central Mexico stated the latter point of view explicitly. According to the

sixteenth-century Aztec ethnographer Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún (1963[1575–77]:Ch. 12, 247), the sky was believed to be the roof of a great house whose walls reached down to join the sea which encircled the earth, forming the floor. J. Eric Thompson (1970:214–16) suggested from iconographic evidence that the prehispanic Maya may have shared a similar notion that the world was contained within a great house known as *Itzam Na*, "iguana house." *Itzam Na* appears in colonial Yucatec Maya dictionaries as a deity name representing the totality of the incorporeal primordial power that existed before the creation, also referred to as *Hunab K'u*, "the one (unique) god" (1970:210).

On what basis are Maya scaled replicas, macrocosm or microcosm, identified? As noted above, ethnographers have recorded many statements comparing houses, altars, maize fields, and the cosmos because they share a four-sided form (replicated in the benches and sarcophagi of the prehispanic Maya). However, some Maya miniature houses are not square. The Lacandon Maya of the ethnographic present make ceramic incense burners, which they call "god pots" (*lāk-il k'uh*; McGee 1990:45) because each is used in rituals to invoke specific deities. They are essentially bowls with a modeled anthropomorphic face on the outer rim; the mouth of the face is "fed" offerings. They are kept in the "god house," a special structure built to replicate the metaphysical houses that these powerful invisible spirits are believed to inhabit. Within the god house is the shelf where the pots are kept, which is the god pots' "bed" (Tozzer 1907:186), while palm leaves are spread out on the ground to form "stools" for the gods to sit on (McGee 1990:76), all means of immobilizing these portable objects. Set to one side of the god house is a dugout canoe in which *balché* beer is brewed to feed the gods, and it, too, is conceived as a house, although it is not square. It is painted with the same red circular designs as those that decorate the beams in the god house, and when not in use it is covered with thatch, just like the thatch-roofed houses (McGee 1990:55).

Because it is an intermediary between humans and the spirit world, the god pot of the Lacandon Maya is equivalent in its function to the cross shrines and similar altars elsewhere in the Maya area (McGee 1990:51), although in keeping with the co-identity of peoples and houses, it said to have a human form. The pots are not made to resemble any specific god; on the contrary, they represent a generalized human body, and their parts are named according to the parts of the body. In addition to the modelled face attached to the rim (the sole iconic representation of a human), the front of the bowl is called the "chest," the base is the "feet," and five cacao beans placed inside the bowl represent the major internal organs (1990:52). Since the god pot has a function fulfilled elsewhere by an altar and is likened to the human body, it is referred to, not surprisingly, as a house (*na*) for the god. It is so addressed during the ritual

when a new ceramic vessel is being dedicated, so that the invisible god will willingly reside within it. This is the same motivation as that for house dedication ceremonies described elsewhere among the Maya—to invoke a house spirit or soul to come dwell within (described below). It even is provided with furniture: inside the god pot is a little stone that serves as the stool for the god to sit upon when it consents to occupy the god pot. The ash from burned incense that covers the stone is likened to the thatch that roofs a house (McGee 1990:52; Tozzer 1907:186).

The Lacandon god pot and beer-brewing canoe as miniature houses indicate that something more than a four-sided icon is the prerequisite for this analogy. These objects emphasize how the house is a container for the contained, and how the contained involves some aspect of the invisible animating force, as has been argued for house symbolism elsewhere (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:42; Hugh-Jones 1995:233; Rivière 1995:195). Significantly, it is the process of creation or activation, both utilitarian and ritual, of such containers that frequently involves tracing its circumference, its outer boundary. Ordered space is created out of special types of movement involving ritual circuits in prescribed (usually counterclockwise) directions. These circuits often trace boundary markers, especially at corners, which mark out a path that returns to its initial point (Hanks 1989:100).

This ritual process began with cosmic creation itself, as characterized in a colonial Quiche Maya text (*Popol Vuh* 1996:63–64) as an act involving

the fourfold siding, fourfold cornering,
measuring, fourfold staking,
halving the cord, stretching the cord
in the sky, on the earth,
the four sides, the four corners, as it is said,
[the work of] the Maker, Modeler,
mother-father of life, of humankind.

Their Yucatec Maya counterparts explained the creation of world order by the progressive erection of trees to hold the sky up above the earth. They arose in order in the east, north, west, and south, and finally in the center appeared the green tree, *ya'axche'* (Roys 1967:100), the ceiba tree that was actually planted in the centers of towns and, as a cross, tops many domestic and community altars.

Although cosmic creation was the work of gods, people must continually construct, maintain, and ritually activate their own microcosmic models. Entire communities are annually sanctified by the ritual processions of shamans following a path marked by cross shrines or sacred mountains around the

community's perimeter (e.g., Sosa 1989:135); the Quiche Maya call this procession the "sowing and planting" of the town (Tedlock 1982:82). Members of each Tzotzil *sna* (literally "possessed house," the local group) in Zinacantan regularly make a counterclockwise ritual circuit to the cross shrines within the lands that form its own domain, a legacy from the ancestors, thereby marking off that territory from unused areas and from those that belong to other houses (Vogt 1969:141–44). Vogt (1969:144) observed that this biannual ceremony is what "links together the descendants as common worshipers and members of the same *sna* . . . [and thus] symbolizes the unity of the *sna* as a structurally significant unit in Zinacanteco society."

Similar paths are traced on a smaller scale to dedicate a house and endow it with a soul. Among the Tzotzil, this ceremony, *ch'ul kantela* ("holy candle"), is performed when a new house is completed and is given its house cross shrine (Vogt 1969:462–65).¹⁰ This single ritual succinctly demonstrates the complex aspects of house symbolism. It requires an interior counterclockwise circuit stopping at each of the four house corners, where offerings of candles and chicken broth are made and pine boughs are planted. The roof is also "fed" a meal of liquor and chicken broth. In the center of the floor, a rooster is buried, the earth tamped down in the same way as for a human burial in a cemetery. After the house has been fed, its occupants eat a ritual meal (also chicken). Then the husband and wife who will occupy the new house make a ritual circuit to shrines in the four holy mountains, giving offerings and prayers to the ancestral deities who reside there. Thus the encircling movement to feed the house and emplace its the soul is repeated on a larger scale within the sacred universe of Zinacantan, calling on the generic ancestors who are the keepers and disbursers of the souls (*ch'ulel*) that are distributed to humans and other animate phenomena.

On an even smaller scale, the circuit of the four corners is repeated when a Yucatec Maya shaman "activates" his altar, converting a table into a sacred locus. He does so by invoking specific animate spirits in turn and metaphysically tying each one down, in sequence, to a corner of his altar, thereby immobilizing them and allowing him to interact with them (Hanks 1990:336–38). William Hanks has shown that such ritual circuits are often represented as encompassing four corners, linked to the four directions, and that a center is actually defined by the circuit of the four corners, creating a five-point cardinal frame exemplified by altars, maizefields, the earth and sky: "The path connecting the five points defines the perimeter of the space and hence distinguishes inside from outside. Without its perimeter, a place has no unity and is potentially dangerous" (Hanks 1990:349).

Going back in time to the prehispanic Maya, a common verb in the in-

scriptions for the ritual dedications of houses and other objects, *hoy*, means "to circumambulate" in Cholan languages (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:418) and "to encircle, enclose" in colonial Tzotzil (Laughlin 1988:214), a likely reference to a circuit-completing movement through the four directions. This verb appears in the Palenque cosmogonic text in reference to the raising of the metaphysical house in the sky by the creator deity (see above). While such ritual actions are often unrecoverable archaeologically, texts and images provide clues to their importance.¹¹ For example, the ten ancestors with their fruit trees whose images surround Pakal's sarcophagus may reference the peripheral encirclement that centered Pakal's "house" and his accompanying ceiba tree. A more explicit case of counterclockwise movement through a circuit comes from the three buildings that form Palenque's Cross Group (each with its interior smaller house). They are oriented to the cardinal directions and contain inscriptions that reveal a sequence in their ritual activation (Robertson 1991:12–13). By the chronology of the birthdates of the gods who were sheltered in each shrine, the reading order for the buildings is north, west, and east, referencing a counterclockwise circuit that was probably enacted by the ruler and other notables when the buildings were dedicated and used.

The Cross Group is believed to have been ritually terminated, following the death of the paramount who commissioned it, by the construction of a small structure (Temple XIV) between the main temples of the north and west. Temple XIV blocks the main access to the central patio and hence to the stairways that lead to the temples (Robertson 1991:55). This building also has an interior house shrine, whose tablet shows the deceased paramount himself in a sidestepping posture moving from north to south, as if from the north building towards the west building. He is making the same encircling procession that was begun, according to the inscriptions, in primordial times, but is now frozen by the imagery in perpetual motion.

The spatial division of center and periphery in this recurring model, associated with the ranked complementarity of stability-mobility, reflects the dichotomous character of the social house as described by Shelly Errington (1989:239), in which the timeless and unmoving center is represented by ancestors or house origins, while the periphery, the people who serve the house estate, are mobile both in their actions focused on the center and in the transient quality of their mortality (see Chapter 1). For the Maya, as Hanks (above) observed, orderly movement around the periphery is what creates and animates the stable center. There is a necessary and reciprocal, even contractual, relationship between people and the divine forces that they have stabilized in the center, each defining the other (Watanabe 1990). Those who participate in these circuits express their common interest in defining or pre-

serving the estate that they thereby enclose (on multiple spatial scales), and their actions link them to the ancestors and creator divinities who initiated this manner of ritually constructing one's place.

Understanding the intentional actions that produce spatial order is one basis for viewing the house as a microcosm. Houses, and the spaces and other buildings associated with them, are places where order has been created by building according to specific plans and materials, and dedicating these spaces by ritual processions. This movement creates a sanctified "inside" and opposes it to an "outside." This spatial categorization must be ritually renewed, and the perimeters of the container so enacted are not impenetrable. Villages, houses, and bodies are susceptible to invasion by dangerous, potent forces. By the same token, their animating spirits or souls can escape their bodily (or other) confines, and the protection provided by ancestors and guardian spirits can be withdrawn, resulting in illness and general misfortune (see Errington 1979 for similar concepts in Southeast Asia).

It is important to note that the house as an ordered place may extend beyond the building itself. Among the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan, the term for house (*na*) refers to the extended family that occupies a residential compound (*sna*, possessed house), but it also signifies the space that encompasses the dwellings, granaries, sweat houses, maize fields, fruit trees, and surrounding fence. This entire unit is included in the house dedication ceremonies described above, when the house acquires its soul, *ch'ulel* (Vogt 1969:71).¹² Significantly, the Tzotzil Maya place their altars, which are platforms with three tall crosses upon them, outside the dwelling of the senior family member rather than inside. The house cross shrine is the pre-eminent material symbol identifying the existence of the house as a social unit (Vogt 1969:128–29; see La Farge 1947:114–15 for similar Kanjobal Maya practices). The shrine is called the *ktus ta ti' na*, the "cross at the edge of the house" (Vogt 1969:127). This phrase may indicate that the cross is placed at an invisible boundary of the *na* as encompassing all of the ordered space used by the members of the social house, rather than the house as a single dwelling. The cross shrine is also referred to as a "doorway" to the soul of the house, connoting the same idea of a threshold or boundary to this non-corporeal dimension of the house. When people come to visit the residential compound, they must ritually enter this doorway by making the proper gestures to the cross shrine (1969:128). Thus, instead of the house enclosing the altar, the cross shrine metaphysically encompasses the individual dwellings of the extended family as well as their yard, small fields, and outbuildings.

On a larger scale, the Tzotzil divide the local world into two parts. Areas used by human beings and under human control are all referred to as *naetik*—

"houses"—in contrast with the forest, representing the wilderness; this area is called *te'tik*—"trees." As Vogt (1969:374) noted, this dichotomy is ritually produced: all of the areas designated as *naetik* are annually reaffirmed by ceremonial circuits or processions to enclose them. Among the Yucatec Maya, areas similar to the Tzotzil *naetik*—the house compounds, farm fields, etc.—are under the protection of guardian spirits who watch over these spaces from positions at the four corners or four sides of those spatial units, and to whom ritual offerings are regularly made (e.g., Hanks 1990:341; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962[1934]:113).

Thus, in addition to the formal similarities and ritual actions that link Maya houses and altars as miniature houses, their spatial juxtaposition references another logical principle of their interrelationship, one which conforms to the Mesoamerican concentric world view. The sarcophagus of Pakal as a bench/altar/house/womb was placed within a vaulted tomb chamber, nestled within the Temple of the Inscriptions within the royal residential area. The adjacent house shrines of the Cross Group, conceived as sweat houses/wombs, were built inside other structures that were also within the ruling house's immediate domain. The miniature house sculptures from Copan were probably originally kept within a shrine structure in a noble residential compound. Both ancient and modern ancestral altars are built within houses or erected in maize fields, which are their analogue.

Vogt (1969:571ff.) saw in the ritual circuits of Zinacantan, carried out at various levels from the *sna* to the entire municipality, the manifestation of a principle he called "structural replication." The nestedness of houses and the agency to produce them can also be understood as a generative and transposable schema, following William Sewell's (1992:8) notion of structure as "generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social life." The spatial association of nestedness or encompassing concentricity is what links humans to these levels of space and these forms to one another, creating of the house an entity that is both contained and container, but on multiple levels.¹³ Nested imagery has been used to describe houses elsewhere (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:42; Hugh-Jones 1993:105, 1995:233; Gibson 1995:146) as a means to represent self-containment and unity, as Lévi-Strauss (1987:155–57) himself suggested the house as fetish should signify.

CONCLUSION

The Maya conceive the universe as a series of concentric containers and materialize this functional imagery for themselves at the local level as a series of

nested houses, reflecting the concentric principle of Mesoamerican socio-cosmology that organizes all space (Sandstrom 1996). These houses, great and small, are analogous not simply because their material form is based on a single rectilinear pattern, but because all are ritually created via a circumambulating motion that defines their perimeter (and hence encloses their center)—walking around a village, cornfield, or house, or calling upon spirits to move around an altar. They are interconnected by their mutual encompassment on a graduated scale as the container in turn becomes the contained, and movement between these boundaries requires certain ritual prescriptions; hence, each evokes the others.

These interpretations help to explain why the material models or images of houses as bench-altars and shrines in the prehispanic period refer to more than just an architectural form. As a micro-center, the house is associated with passivity; it is the most appropriate locale for sitting and sleeping behaviors that relate to the notion of properly being in one's place. The ancestors are believed to engage in similar behaviors in the places where they can be contacted by their descendants. These places are materialized in specific forms, most often the altar within the house, which is conceived as and built to resemble a miniature house, but whose shape and method of construction are that of the bench-bed. The altar is usually enclosed within the house, but these relations are reversed when the symbolic referents of the altar—house origins, links to ancestral authority, the animating power of invisible guardian spirits—conceptually encompass the social house and its estate. Beyond the individual house, a larger container is formed by the circumscription of the entire community. Guardian spirits reside at the four entrances to town, or ancestral spirits have their own houses in the surrounding mountains, on the periphery of the familiar landscape. Finally, from the most extensive and abstract point of view, the universe itself is a macrocosmic house.

Considering Maya social organization from the vantage point provided by the house society model yields a meaningful and dynamic integration of architectural and other material remains with the social groups who made and used them. It also has allowed a productive union of ethnographic and archaeological information, but with major caveats. Ethnographic information on house societies demonstrates why archaeologists need to be cognizant that the house as a ritually recognized socio-spatial unit extends beyond the physical building into what may appear to be unmarked space (see also Sandstrom, this volume), it has both immaterial and material qualities, and it need not reference a strictly defined descent group. Moreover, the significant evidence for historical discontinuities is a warning against the facile application of ethnographic "upstreaming" to explain social organization in the prehispanic period. In the

past, noble houses were able to retain their estates, which is a principal mechanism of house identity and membership, as the same residential clusters were continually occupied, modified, and expanded over many generations. Ancestors and gods unique to specific houses were venerated, and huge investments of labor, material, and valuable heirlooms were made to properly house the revered dead and localize their spirits. Such is not the case today. Although rudimentary principles for the development of house societies have been maintained in some contemporary Maya villages, where the house remains the most important social unit whose identity is ritually acknowledged via links to the ancestors, the sixteenth-century European invasion eventually terminated the long-lived estates of the Maya elites, as the Spaniards brought to the New World their own version of noble houses.