

Article

Community's House and Symbolic Dwelling. A Perspective on Power

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Abstract: For anthropologists and archaeologists, the study of cultural change is the greatest challenge. Initially, the subject was considered from perspectives that included too few variables, resulting in an approximation that proved to be incomplete and inadequate. Since the end of the last century, important efforts have been made to document cultural change in a broader context, revealing the variability of the processes involved. These new studies highlight social relations and their changeability as key components to understanding the dynamic of any community or cultural system. This article explores social and spatial organization based on one such approach, Lévi-Strauss' "house society". This analysis results in a view where multiple dwellings may constitute one conceptual "house". This perspective should facilitate the archaeological investigation of contexts that nurture the power relationships that structure society.

Keywords: house society; community; power; hierarchy

1. Introduction

One of the major concerns of anthropology and archaeology has been the study of power relations in human societies. Until the 1970s, the power, at least in the way that anthropologists such as Eric Wolf conceived it, rivalled anthropological concepts such as culture in importance [1]. The idea of Wolf's "structural power" [2] certainly encompassed society in the same way as the idea of "culture" did. Wolf characterizes structural power as "a power that shapes the social field of action so as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible" [2] (p. 587). Wolf was not the only anthropologist interested in the idea of power; Elman Service, Morton Fried and Marshall Sahlins constructed their own theories focusing on concept. In his comparative analysis of the history and type of leadership in Polynesia and Melanesia, Sahlins [3] attempted to identify and "isolate" the characteristics that made it possible to draw a line between those leadership based on power versus transient status. In *The evolution of political society*, Fried [4] stipulates power and authority as the most important factor in arranging societies—egalitarian, rank, stratified or state—into an evolutionary scheme. In his book, *Origins of state and civilization*, Service [5] similarly argues that the power of leaders holds the key to understanding cultural evolution. For the most part, these approaches focusing on the characteristics or consequences of power have neglected the context in which it originates. This particularly applies to archaeologists, whose dependence on empirical data originating in material culture and its context drove them to study cases in which power had already manifested itself by fundamentally transforming material culture. To move away from these trends, it is imperative that our studies are oriented to understanding of the context that makes the emergence of structured power differentials possible. This context is none other than the community that nurtures inequities and allows the concentration of prestige and power in some sectors.

In the following pages, I will first consider approaches to documenting and understanding power. Then, I will use ethnographic data to examine a possible context in which structural power emerged. I employ Lévi-Strauss' house societies as a heuristic device to



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understand the transition from equality to inequality. My purpose is to refine the conceptual tools we might use to assess circumstances in communities where structural power could have emerged. One way to approach this research problem is by discussing what is considered by many a prime example of Lévi-Strauss' house society, the Northwest Amazonian Maloca. This exercise will result in an analytical separation of the "house" as a concept and as a dwelling, thereby removing an obstacle from understanding house society from an archaeological point of view.

2. The Complexity of Power

Towards the end of the 20th century, archaeologists focused on "chiefdom" as a prototype of emerging power. The evolution of this type of organization was conceived as a case of leadership responding to economic and ecological problems with centralization. Therefore, cultural evolution and the emergence of power structures could be understood by studying the conditions that required centralized management [6]. This approach soon made it clear that the number and type of variables used in the study of societies that adopted a central power structure were insufficient. Consequently, other variables such as demographic density [7,8], the type of finance—basic or sumptuary—[9] and chiefdom defined as individualized or group [10,11] were introduced.

Numerous case studies have been developed as the logical derivations of these ideas. Festivities and ceremonies figured importantly in these studies [12–17]. In addition, some considered warrior activity as a way for leaders to acquire and multiply their power [18–22]. Studies of ideologies sustaining powerful chiefs soon followed [23,24]. All these studies focused on the person of the chief, as well as strategies used by these individuals to accumulate, maintain and administer power. These unscrupulous self-aggrandizing individuals who pursued their own interests were seen as contributing to the creation of norms such as private property, inheritance, primogeniture and dowry [16,25]. The power of leaders, as the basis of more recent work on social complexity, is evident, even in those studies that consider power as part of a network [26].

Although it is true that anthropological and archaeological research shed light on the behavior of leaders, they relegated society to the background. Issues such as the capacity of political agency of subordinates in communities, alternative forms of hierarchical organization [27–31] and differences in trajectories towards inequality [32], became imperceptible. To solve, at least in part, this omission, a dual-process approach has been suggested. Even though still centering on the individual figure of the chief, this approach allowed considerations of group dynamics [33]. This epistemological shift opened the door to conceiving the history of societies as an act of cooperation [34] in which social complexity was, in a large part, defined by collective action [35–37]. However, it was evident that the horizontal variation in structural power was still poorly understood and cultural change's multi-linear character was ignored [38,39].

Independently from these approaches, some anthropologists [40] insisted that social relations are the foundation of societies. For these anthropologists, it was important to ask how these relations had been transformed with the advent of power, or even what were the necessary transformations in society's structure to create the conditions required for the emergence of power differentials [41,42]. Archaeological analysis currently either focusing on the "center" that produces the leader or on the economic base that supports the transformation would similarly benefit from considering structural changes from the perspective of social relationships that constitute society.

It follows from the forgoing that there are two alternative and complementary ways to study the formation of hierarchical structures and their horizontal variability. On the one hand, it is possible to read these trajectories from the multiple indicators of power accumulation—i.e., work mobilization, architecture, sumptuary objects, elaborate diets, and others [32,38,43]. On the other hand, we may study these transformations from the perspective of social relationships. This path selected by some social anthropologists [44–47] is the one we will explore in the following pages.

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss's "House Societies"

Claude Lévi-Strauss offered an alternative way of approaching the emergence of power structures by suggesting that initial changes towards inequality involve the transformation of social relations based on kinship ties. He called societies with these changes "House Societies".

While trying to understand Kwakiutl kinship, Lévi-Strauss found contradictions arising in the way descent systems operated. For example, even though the emblems of the nobility were transmitted through the female line, the head of the family was the father, as opposed to the mother's brother. Furthermore, the authority over "gens" passed from father to son. This resulted in two kinds of nobility titles: those who could not leave the lineage and were inherited from father to son or daughter by the right of primogeniture, and those which the son-in-law received from the father-in-law through the wife and were transmitted directly to the children [48] (p. 164). Therefore, several individuals of noble birth could claim titles inherited from both lines [48] (p. 167). Further probing into the problem, Lévi-Strauss noticed that there was a process in Kwakiutl society that allowed these kinship anomalies to spread by employing fictitious kinship relations. For instance, a new member in families where there were no marriageable women could be included through the symbolic marriage with a child, and in the absence of a child, with a body part (arm or leg) of the head of the community, or even a piece of furniture [48] (p. 166). Lévi-Strauss suggested that this implied a situation in which political and economic interests had surpassed the principle of inheritance through bloodline. The subverted kinship relations and the resulting merger of categories could be grouped under the name of "Houses" or "House Societies" [48] (pp. 186–187). For Lévi-Strauss, these "Houses" constituted a corporate body that possessed a heritage composed of material and immaterial wealth preserved through the transmission of its name, its assets and its titles in a real or imaginary way [48] (p. 174).

Although Lévi-Strauss' idea of "House Societies" was raised long ago, archaeologists only began to engage with it towards the end of the twentieth century. In recent years, both anthropologists and archaeologists have attempted to define the socio-cultural and archaeological signature of this type of society, mainly by studying physical structures, and in particular, ritual houses [45,49–52].

Archaeological data from different parts of the world—Mesoamerica, Central Andes and the Near East—showed that these ritual houses are the foundation of inequality [53,54]. This reinforced the possibility to consider Lévi-Strauss' "House Society" as a point of departure in studying emerging inequality and power differentials in human societies. As a first step, it was important to delineate relevant characteristics of these houses. Ethnographers working in regions such as Southeast Asia noticed that longhouses are key social units functioning as dwellings for the ancestors and sometimes for an elite. Indigenous peoples of the region conceived these "houses" as heirloom storage places [47] that facilitated social relations, concentrated value in permanent forms and aided in multiplying new lines of growth—descendants [55]. In short, these "houses" harbour an origin-place and ritual site.

For anthropologists working in these context, three questions stood out: First, do people themselves consider 'house' as an organizing category? Second, can the "House society" concept aid the analysis of kinship systems? Third, what is the role of social hierarchy in the emergence of a "House Society" [47]? Some ethnographers emphasized the value of the house concept as proposed by Lévi-Strauss as a way to differentiate societies structured by simple kinship system from those exhibiting a tendency for developing a hierarchical structure [56]. For others it is clear that emerging power differentials rest on the process initiated by kinship transformations and how these re-structure social relations [57].

Archaeologists attempting to understand social inequalities and the origin of power have found ethnographers' question concerning the emergence of house societies particularly attractive. This question not only situated the problem within the social relations that structured the community but also allowed archaeologists to delineate a progressive sequence, forcing them to answer questions beyond the classification scheme. Instead of

merely discussing the basis of categories, they would now have to target questions concerning the role of “houses” in the process of management, maintenance and reproduction of power. When attempting to apply Lévi-Strauss’ concepts to particular cases, researchers have often turned to ethnographic studies of Northwest Amazonian Maloca.

4. Northwest Amazon Ethnographic House (Maloca)

For Westerners visiting the Northwest Amazon, one of the most striking features has been the dwellings of its inhabitants. Travelers such as Whiffen [58] mentioned them multiple times. Wallace noticed the similarity between the Vaupes “great houses” and those of the Dyaks of Borneo [59] (p. 359). However, it was not until professional anthropologists have provided us with detailed information that we began to understand the complexity of these communal houses [60].

Malocas are not the only type of house in Northwest Amazon. However, they are characteristic of the vast majority of agricultural groups; possibly, they are a fundamental feature of what Golman called a “cultural area”. Goldman sees the cultural area as a superculture with a definite structure of formal similarities and differences, a “super community whose members speak the same metalanguage, that is, the language of myth, symbol, and ritual, but do not yield their sense of separate origins” [61] (p. 17). A good number of ethnographers have pointed to this “unity”. For example, Hugh-Jones [62] notes how, despite speaking languages belonging to different linguistic families, a certain number of myths are shared among different groups in this region of Northwest Amazon. Speaking of the Arawak and Tukano narrative traditions of the upper Rio Negro, Hugh-Jones says:

Despite these different traditions, in other respects the narrative histories of these two populations show striking features in common, so much so that, in overall terms, one can speak of a shared Upper Rio Negro narrative tradition distributed between different groups with each one producing its own particular version, giving it a particular slant, and interpreting it in line with its own specific identity [63] (p. 158).

By presenting an expansive system that incorporates the knowledge and specificities of different groups in the Mirititi—Parana region Van der Hammen [64] corroborates this vision of the Amazon Northwest. It is also within these parameters that I will approach the communal houses of this region.

Towards the end of the last century, some anthropologists have begun to move away from an emphasis of Malocas’ physical characteristics. Malocas went from being dwellings to constituting an organizing principle of the universe and social relations within and outside. Anthropologists understood that from a native point of view, these communal houses are models of the universe. Their architecture represents the community’s mythology. The structure of the building replicates the cosmos and reminds its inhabitants of their place in it [65], a phenomenon that is not exclusive to the north-west Amazon [66]. As Hildebrant [67] has put it, the Maloca constitutes the home, the town, the cemetery, and the temple that gives meaning to the daily activities of the community. Reichel-Dolmatoff saw it as “. . . cosmic model, it is a forest, an assembly of kin and allies, a womb, a grave, a tortoise, a microcosm in which every part is named and every relationship between parts is seen as a link in a coherent whole” [68] (p. 49). Anthropologists [69] have shown that the history of Northwest Amazonian peoples can be understood through the identification of ancestor’s mythical “Malocas” that define representations of space and territory.

Wallace’s description of the first Maloca he entered gives us an idea of the characteristics of these buildings:

It was a large, substantial building, near a hundred feet long, by about forty wide and thirty high, very strongly constructed of round, smooth, barked timbers, and thatched with the fan-shaped leaves of the Carana palm. One end was square, with a gable, the other circular; and the leaves, hanging over the low walls, reached nearly to the ground. In the middle was a broad aisle, formed by the

two rows of the principal columns supporting the roof, and between these and the sides were other rows of smaller and shorter timbers; the whole of them were firmly connected by longitudinal and transverse beams at the top, supporting the rafters, and were all bound together with much symmetry by sipós. Projecting inwards from the walls on each side were short partitions of palm-thatch, exactly similar in arrangement to the boxes in a London eating-house, or those of a theatre. Each of these is the private apartment of a separate family, who thus live in a sort of patriarchal community. In the side aisles are the farinha ovens, tipitfs for squeezing the mandioca, huge pans and earthen vessels for making caxiri, and other large articles, which appear to be in common; while in every separate apartment are the small pans, stools, baskets, redes, water-pots, weapons, and ornaments of the occupants. The centre aisle remains unoccupied, and forms a fine walk through the house. At the circular end is a cross partition or railing about five feet high, cutting off rather more than the semicircle, but with a wide opening in the centre: this forms the residence of the chief or head of the malocca, with his wives and children; the more distant relations residing in the other part of the house. The door at the gable end is very wide and lofty, that at the circular end is smaller, and these are the only apertures to admit light and air. The upper part of the gable is loosely covered with palm-leaves hung vertically, through which the smoke of the numerous wood fires slowly percolates, giving, however, in its passage a jetty lustre to the whole of the upper part of the roof [59] (p. 190).

Not all Northwest Amazonian Malocas have the same shape. Some of them feature a front flat façade, with decoration, whereas others are octagonal, rounded or oval and without decoration [58]. Their sizes are not the same either. In Cururú-cuara, in the Vaupés region, Koch-Grunberg [60] (Volume 1, p. 102) saw one that was 18.60 m long by 16.80 m wide and 7 m high. According to ethnographic sources from the early twentieth century, the number of individuals who lived in some of these longhouses was up to two hundred people. Indeed, at the beginning of the twenty century, Whiffen [58] (p. 63) calculated that between sixty and two hundred individuals may live in one of these long houses. Towards the mid-late twentieth century, there was a noticeable decrease in the number of inhabitants, and consequently, in the size of the dwellings. Regardless of size and number of inhabitants, however, they all house the cosmos. After all, the Maloca is the world itself, and the world is a house.

The Maloca can be read on the horizontal axis and the vertical axis. These two axes contribute to the formation of a space in which human activities intertwine through a series of fundamental principles to generate the order of the cosmos which people inhabit. The vertical axis corresponds to overlaying levels associated with different entities that inhabit them. This representation of an axis with multiple levels is common among Northwest Amazonian societies. Peter Roe [70] suggests that this structure is common in many South American native societies' cosmological conception. He further claims that between these levels, there is a polarization between "good" and "bad". Positive values associate with higher levels whereas negative values associate with lower levels. Roe noted, too, that the number of "floors" varies greatly. Indeed, Wright [71] affirms that the cosmos of the Baniwa has at least twenty-seven levels, inhabited by different beings, whereas in the Yanomamo conception there are only four [72]. The Ufania of Northwest Amazon conceived the Universe as an enormous cone made up of thirteen overlapping circular platforms, linked by "the path" through which thought or vital energy rises and falls [73] (p. 180). Through energy flow, these superimposed discs mold the universe and shape rituals and daily community activities. This cosmic structure is taken into consideration when communal houses are constructed. For instance, the different knots used to secure the leaves in the roof of Yukuna longhouses constitute a demonstration to the inhabitants of the levels that structure the cosmos.

As mentioned before, crossing these levels and defining a sacred space inside the houses, an "Axis Mundi" passes through the Maloca's center. It is important to note that

this central axis has gender connotations. For example, in the Ufania long-house, the upward vertical axis represents the masculine whereas the downward the feminine. This separation is repeated in the horizontal axis that with the masculine to the east and the feminine to the west. The cross of these two “axes” marks the center of the Universe—the focal point of the ritual activities in the Maloca [73] (p. 189).

From the horizontal perspective, there is also a segmentation that defines the use of space, both in ritual and daily tasks. Starting from the “center” of the Maloca, Roe describes the horizontal space as follows:

Perhaps the best model for the human geography of the surface of the world-platter would be a series of concentric rings, beginning with that central house pillar; moving out to the walls of the hut itself; and then beyond, to the cleared plaza, a testament to the power of collective human labor to keep the ever-encroaching jungle at bay; then to the house garden and its familiar useful plants; and finally to the bordering lake, river, or stream, where the spirits begin; or in the opposite direction, toward the interior of the dark tropical forest where other spirits dwell [70] (p. 137).

However, it is von Hildebrand [73] who offers a more detailed description of the space distribution inside these houses and the segregation of activities within them. When studying the houses of the Ufania, he identifies six areas inside the Maloca and on its periphery. The clear divisions on the horizontal axis are also projected on the vertical dimension. On this dimension, they are denominated as “skies”. In this way, the Ufania cosmos takes the form of a cone.

The Maloca center is the section considered the most sacred, the place where the most important rituals take place. Moving towards the exterior of the house, there is a decrease in the ritual importance of space (Figure 1). The core of ritual activity is associated with an axis—the very center of the world—that communicates the different levels that make up the cosmos. Anthropologists have tried to the way this “center” contacts with other parts of the cosmos in various ways. For example, Roe [70] has described how, in a more or less generalized manner, Amazonian natives conceptualize a “World Tree” that passes through this point, allowing the flow of energies among contrasting worlds. He describes how this “World Tree” through its roots, penetrates the underworld and allows the souls of the dead to rise up [70] (p. 137). For the Ufania, the upper part of this beam is inhabited by the immortal heroes who established the primordial order of the Universe [73] (p. 181). For the Baniwa, this is the place where the most sacred creatures dwell [71]. The ritual—a constant negotiation with these entities—is anchored in this central point. In the horizontal plane, there is a constant flow of materials and ritual activities that converge in this central point. Transaction results depend on the movement of information and energy. This, of course, does not mean that other parts of the interior and exterior of the Maloca are exempt from rituals. It is rather as if the intensity of the rituals gains in magnitude as it approaches this “center”.

This sacred center is surrounded by what von Hildebrand called the “path of the sun”. This path is a river that surrounds the cosmos, passing between the worlds of music and thought. Beyond it lies the “path of the stars”. For the Ufania, there is a spiral connecting these different paths inside the cone constituting the cosmos [73]. Both areas, the path of the sun and the path of the stars, correspond with activities such as dancing and the preparation of food. In section D, domestic activities take place. This is the location of nuclear family hammocks and small cooking spaces. When a Ufania dies, after being wrapped in a hammock, the relatives bury the body in the place where he/she used to sleep. The dead person is now situated on the border between the communal and domestic world [73] (p. 207). Arhem [74,75], notes that only people of considerable importance in the community, such as shamans and chiefs, are buried in the most sacred area, the ritual center, of the Makuna longhouse. Some Arawak language groups, such as Achagua and Saliva, did the same [76]. In this way, the dead and the ancestors have access to the ritual world, in which they will continue to participate. As Arhem [75] puts it, there is a continuity between

the dead and the living. Indeed, the dead, at least in the Makuna case, as well as in many other Northwest Amazon societies, continue to participate in the world of the living.

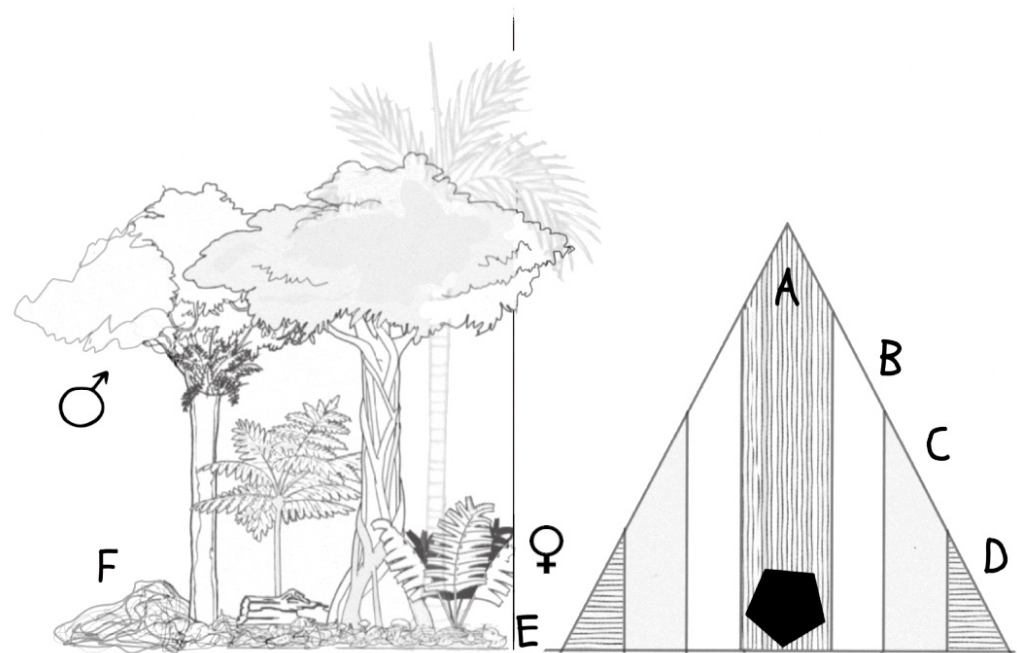


Figure 1. From left to right, the figure illustrates the outside world (forest and agricultural plots), and the front of the Maloca. The black pentagon represents the ritual center (*mambeadero*). (A)—Sacred space, (B)—Path of the sun, (C)—Path of the stars, (D)—Domestic areas, (E)—Agricultural plots (*chagra*), (F)—forest.

Areas E and F are outside the Maloca. The first is identified with women’s work, the “*chagra*,” or agricultural plots. The second, F, with a marked masculine character, is associated with men’s hunting grounds. The Malocas and the sedentary life itself are the result of the complementarities between these two worlds, *junglechagra*, malefemale. This makes it possible to establish marital alliances [73] (p. 187). This spatial distribution of the landscape and its conceptualization is repeated inside the Maloca, similar to a fractal [65,74]. Innumerable mnemonic keys are contained in the objects and the Maloca itself, constantly reminding longhouse dwellers of this cosmological structure. Hugh-Jones says, “The standard layout of the maloca, each one with a near identical structure of parallel rows of supporting posts and a grid of intersecting longitudinal and lateral poles in the roof, provides a ready-made theatre of memory” [63] (p. 163).

Within the Malocas, there is a further horizontal division that is not only associated with gender, but also reveals community members’ position within this microcosm. In his analysis of the Makuna Maloca, Cayon [77] has presented some aspects of this division (Figure 2). This view was accepted by other ethnographers who have worked in the Vaupes region [74,78–80].

Makuna Malocas, similar to all Northwestern Amazon longhouses, have two doors. The one in the front is associated with the masculine, and the one in the back is related to the feminine. This division is repeated inside, creating an eminently masculine sector in the front of the house and its female counterpart in the back. There is also a clear separation between the space “owned” by the Maloca’s head, those of his older children and their wives, as well as the space occupied by visitors. At the building’s center, there is the *mambeadero*, a place where the most important rituals take place. This is also a meeting place, especially at night, where men come together to plan their activities and discuss community problems. Even though women are not invited to these evening meetings, one can hear their comments on male conversation continuously emerging from the darkness of the private areas of the house.

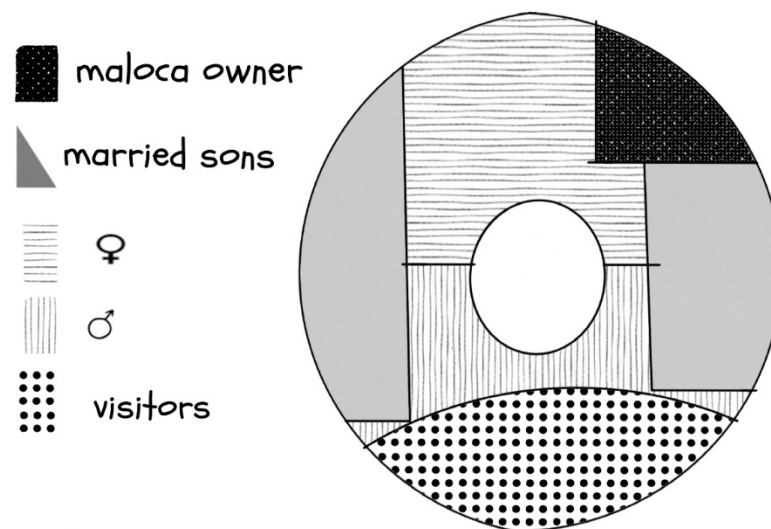


Figure 2. Space distribution inside a Makuna Maloca, accordingly to Cayón [77]. The center is the sacred space, masculine, feminine and visitors' areas are communal spaces.

In short, the Maloca houses the cosmos and contains the community, reflecting the differences between its members and their relative positions in the social world. For Whiffen [58], the Northwest Amazonian Maloca is an “undivided household community... with a common house, under the rule of a chief”. In this undivided world, the chief does not have true structural power. He only achieves what the community grants him based on his positive attitude and desire to serve all members. This world is articulated through exchange and marriage alliances with other analogous and complementary worlds.

Despite an egalitarian ethic, some researchers have noted that in societies such as the Makuna, there is a representation contrary to this ideology. In effect, the Makuna think that the five clans that form the basis of their society are hierarchically organized in a relationship of brothers from oldest to youngest. Each clan is assigned a specialized role: chief, singer (dancer), warrior, shaman and servant. Inside the Taiwano longhouse, the positions of the Maloca owner's sons' dwellings with those firstborn closer to the center mimic this hierarchy [78] (pp. 249–250). Although these positions appear to imply a power structure, in reality structured power differentials are non-existent. Arem [81] referred to this arrangement as the imaginary chieftom. Similar hierarchy expressed in rituals has been documented in other egalitarian groups of northern South America as well [82].

Based on his ethnographic work in the northwest Amazon, Hugh-Jones [80] has published one of the most influential texts on the study of “House Societies”. From his perspective, there are two ways of reading social relations within the Maloca. On the one hand, these relations reflect the hierarchical relationships dividing society. This highlights the autonomy of the group vis à vis outsiders. On the other hand, these relations constitute a system that underscores interdependence, equality, and kinship relations. For him, it is within the opposition of these two principles that social differences generating prestige, status and ultimately power structures, are built.

5. Discussion: Beyond Lévi-Strauss' Ethnographic House

In attempting to use Lévi-Strauss' concept of “House Societies” to interpret longhouses such as Malocas, ethnographers and archaeologists have faced two main problems. First, Lévi-Strauss failed to specify the spatial parameters for this type of society [83]. Second, due to the extremely diverse number of cases around the world [45,55,84,85] it was difficult to characterize “House Societies.” As Carsten and Hugh-Jones [49] (p. 19) stated, they are “a ‘type’ too heterogeneous to constitute an analytic model. Waterson [47], working in Southeast Asia similarly remarks that the vagueness of the category makes its application difficult. In short, “House Society” as a concept is possibly too abstract to confront the

empirical world. As “a land of rigorous abstraction,” these “Houses” are “empty of all familiar landmarks,” and thus “not easy to get around in” [86] (p. 12).

However, not matter how difficult it was to visualize “House Societies,” for many, longhouses, such as Malocas, came to represent this social type. Indeed, some archaeologists came to view the longhouse as an axiom of “House Society”, as well as a model for classifying any society that lived in longhouses [87]. Framed within specific architectural parameters, these archaeologists assumed a social hierarchical organization or at least a tendency in that direction (87), following ethnographers’ point of view [88,89], as for instance, in discussions of early European Neolithic LBK [90]. This correspondence, however, cannot be taken for granted. Two questions arise: do all longhouses embody a house society, and how can we characterize house societies in empirical contexts? We can begin to answer these questions by considering a widely accepted characterization of “House Societies”:

On the one hand, people and groups are objectified in buildings; on the other hand, houses as buildings are personified and animated both in thought and in life. At one extreme are the lifeless ancestral houses, mountains or tombs, frozen in time but vividly permanent; at the other extreme are those highly animated houses, in a constant state of changing but ultimately ephemeral [49] (p. 46).

This duality results in two realms, the humanized and aesthetic landscape, and the dynamic, transformative relationship of human interactions that take place in the house. This conception, however, creates an artificial division that, in my opinion, makes it more difficult to understand “House Societies”.

Lévi-Strauss’ concept of “House Society” should not be confined to the physical space demarcated by the architectural construct of the longhouse. The “House” defines the community. While at the same time, the “House” established an individual position inside its social structure. This “House” may correspond to physical structures such as a longhouse, but not necessarily so. The “House Society” concept was not designed to explain an architectural form and its structure in the midst of a static landscape. It is, rather, a tool to understand the dynamic social organization imbued in the landscape that includes the house. It is, therefore, more appropriate to visualize “House Society” as a structure with a center that generates transformations in a spatial continuum. Accordingly, it is a mistake to limit analysis to the space within the longhouse. It is better to identify the center of the house and ask, how the type of relationships that structure this conceptual space radiates from it and transforms the periphery, whether inside or outside the confines of the physical dwelling.

In the following examples from Southeast Asia, spatial analysis has become the guiding principle. Instead of taking the house, the architectural object, as their starting point, researchers in these examples focus on the “center” used by aggrandizers to consolidate their power inside the house. This focus helps these anthropologists to unveil a hierarchy system [47]. This is the case with Metcalf, who sees the distribution of architectural space as key to making inferences about social relations. In the longhouses he studied in Borneo, the dominant families located themselves in the middle of the building with direct access to the veranda in front of their “apartment” to accommodate public gatherings and make displays of heirlooms and other objects [89]. This center is defined in terms of social and ritual activities. In this way, the physical space and the mythological space that justifies it overlap in a delimited area that coincides with some elite members’ dwelling. However, this seems to be only one of the strategies used, and it cannot be accepted as a rule in all house societies. If “House Societies” can be characterized by something, it is by their wide spectrum of solutions provided both to the problem of organizing the social and the conceptual worlds of the community. For this reason, it is absurd to conceive them in a small discrete space. Some ethnographers, particularly those who work with groups living in multiple buildings, such the Mebengokre in the Brazilian Amazon, have distinguished between the “House” and the dwelling [88].

By targeting the center even more closely, McKinnon [55] elevates her analysis to a level of abstraction that transcends the physical limitations of the dwelling to include the

surrounding landscape. In her work on tavu altars, this researcher identifies a center as an essential source of power that is used to establish multiple social relationships defining the hierarchical order. The tavu altars bring together the past and present. Ancestors and their descendants are linked in an orderly system that warrants power. McKinnon says that "...during a ritual or an exchange negotiation, the head of the house sat in his place directly in front of the tavu, it was said that his ancestor descended along the tavu and sat beside him" [55] (p. 169). MacKinnon adds that:

The hierarchical superiority of named houses was marked by their ability to maintain not only a link to their immediate ancestors (through their skull and neck bones and the small carved images), but also a link (through the tavu altar and heirloom valuables) to the founding ancestors of the house complex as a whole, and thus to distant and successive ancestral sources of life and power [55] (p. 173).

In short, the power that structures society radiates from these altars, configuring physical space based on a genealogical and mythological justification. Through ancestry, these altars and their association with heirlooms give a connection to a section of the community that holds prestige and the ability to claim land ownership [56]. In the northwest Amazon, longhouse center (*mambeadero*) analogously connects the vertical dimension with its horizontal counterparts, allowing the flow of ancestors' energy. In this way, this center generates the coherence and meaning needed to create the space that humans inhabit. Without a doubt, ancestors are a fundamental part of the structure of stateless societies [91].

In every single case, the ethnographic sources confirm that the forces promoting the differentiation between the living emanate from the living's relation with the ancestors. The "House's" connection with the ancestors is at the center of its power structure. For example, in the Tanimbar Islands of eastern Indonesia, there are two types of "Houses": those with a name and those without a name. The named "Houses" have higher prestige and an enduring relation to land due to their connection to it through the ancestors legitimizing its possession. The unnamed "Houses" have relation to the trees, but not the land [56]. The ancestors similarly exerted a direct influence on the possibilities of chiefs to hold power in the Northwest Amazon. Referring to the Wanano chiefs, Chernela [92] says:

... headmanship of any Wanano village is held by its highest-ranked male. His authority rests on his position as the senior living descendant of the founding ancestor of the local senior sib; he is the "oldest brother" in his generation, known as *mahsa wami*, "the people's oldest brother" [92] (p. 126).

Helms [93], has drawn our attention to two different kinds of ancestors that communities recognize. This is important because it helps to explain the differential position among the members of the community. Helms denominates certain ancestors—those considered "wide-ranging"—, as the "first principle ancestors". These ancestors are cosmological and are a condition for the creation of human beings; therefore, they precede the house. They appear in mythical stories, as part of the founding history of the people. As an example of this principle, Reichel-Dolmatoff [94] points out that the Tukano groups of the Amazon Northwest recognize tapirs as ancestors. Mythical accounts explain how tapirs, associated with agriculture and Arawak-speaking groups, provided wives for the first Tukano who arrived in this region.

Helms' second type are "emergent" ancestors [93]. These were people who, throughout their lives, stood out for their skills and gifts which contributed to the well-being of the community. The most prominent among them support and justify social differentiation and inequality. These ancestors not only have a special space inside the houses, but are also represented by portable objects. Undoubtedly, leaders obtain part of their power through economic transactions, or their ability to carry out negotiations and the exploitation of their immediate family. Despite this, they need to legitimize their power and their lineage throughout time [94,95]. For this, they must resort to ancestors and their representation through heirlooms. These objects are portable, inherited by kin and maintained in circula-

tion for a number of generations [96]. Some researchers suggest that these types of objects had enormous value, as part of the construction of social memory and the reaffirmation of social differences in complex “House Society” systems. This is the case of certain complex systems, such as the Maya [44]. However, heirlooms could also fill this same function in simpler systems as in the Neolithic [95]. In both contexts, even though a high symbolic content defines heirlooms, their material form stands them apart from other objects, and they may reflect some type of specialization in their production.

Power, authority and prestige are the result of negotiation. Ritual and celebration are part of this negotiation that takes place between different worlds in a “House Society” system. All things considered, “House Societies” function as a network [33,97] in which individuals try to exert their influence based on symbolic capital—exoteric knowledge and prestige—aided by the distribution of objects of emblematic value.

6. Conclusions

The “House Society” concept represents a spectrum characterized by a series of traits identified in societies with different levels of complexity. It occurs in varied geographical and historical settings, from the Japanese medieval societies and Northwest Amazonian communities to the European Middle Ages and Asian chiefdoms. However, variations notwithstanding, the most important heuristic value of the concept lies in its ability to shed light on community relations that promote the inequities that contribute to the origin of structural power in the sense of Wolf’s definition, as “a power that shapes the social field of action” [2] (p. 587).

Lévi-Strauss’ house society does not constitute an architectural form. It is a social organization that implies some type of ranking, supported by an ideology that makes it possible to pass on wealth. As Mauss noted,

The houses and decorated beams are themselves beings. Everything speaks—roof, fire, carvings and paintings; for the magical house is built not only by the chief and his people and those of the opposing phratry but also by the gods and ancestors; spirits and young initiates are welcomed and cast out by the house in person [98] (p. 43).

While encouraging a collective identity, the “House” also defines and organizes categories of people into hierarchical structures. Esoteric knowledge and prestige as symbolic capital are at the center of community segregation. The main strategy for creating social differentiation is marriage alliances and their ability to mobilize the workforce.

A distinct advantage of this framework of analysis is that it replaces past typologies based on lists of characteristics with a continuum. Nonetheless, archaeologists using the idea of “House Society” to study the rise of power will face a number of challenges. As ethnographic data show, the concept implies a wide spectrum of conditions. This gradation makes visibility difficult. For the model to be useful, archaeologists will have to identify ancestors, heirlooms and the content, context, and form of celebratory rituals in particular cases. The closer we are to the early stages of the system, the more challenging it will be to visualize these features. Despite this, it is feasible to study past social relations and their transformations using the “House Society” concept, through the analysis of archaeological contexts. The footprints of such organizations are ancestors, the relics and symbols associated with them, as well as high ritual activity and festivities. This organization is also mapped on the spatial distribution of settlements. It is of utmost important to dissociate the “House” as a concept from physical dwellings, such as longhouses, because the organizational form represented in the concept can project onto the landscape in multiple ways. In short, from an archaeological perspective, partition of space, both physical and symbolic, allows for the conceptualization of specific functions and values that uncover this type of organization and its relation to power.

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