

## THE HEARTH-GROUP, THE CONJUGAL COUPLE AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE RICE MEAL AMONG THE KELABIT OF SARAWAK

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LÉVI-STRAUSS (1983a, 1983b, 1987) looks at two aspects of what he terms 'house-based societies'. In the chapter on 'The social organization of the Kwakiutl' in *The Way of the Masks* (1983a) he takes a historical approach to his subject and looks in particular at European noble houses. Here he places a good deal of emphasis on the way in which the 'house' perpetuates itself from generation to generation and discusses the house as 'a corporate body holding an estate ... which perpetuates itself ... down a real or imaginary line ...' (1983a: 174).

In his later lectures on 'The concept of house' and 'On Indonesia', published in *Anthropology and Myth* in 1987, Lévi-Strauss is more interested in the way that the 'house' enables antagonistic principles to be resolved. He appears to be arguing that there is one core antagonism, resolved in the house, to which all others may be reduced. This is between descent and alliance. The conjugal couple, which he describes as 'the true kernel of the family, and more generally, of the kindred' (1987: 155) appears to symbolize, for Lévi-Strauss, the focal importance of alliance. He seems to be arguing that the achievement of alliance is what the house is about. Through the conjugal couple, and the house which symbolizes their union, this is made possible.

Discussions of the applicability of Lévi-Strauss's model of the 'house-based society' to particular societies in Southeast Asia (in particular in many of the papers in Macdonald (ed.) 1987) have

concentrated on a consideration of whether or not what may be called houses in these societies actually do have a corporate nature. Rather than attempting to answer this question, I want to look at the other aspect of Lévi-Strauss's discussion of 'house-based societies', that relating to the resolution of antagonisms. I would like to look more closely at the conjugal couple, at the relationship that it has with what may be called the house, and to consider what may be said to be resolved through the conjugal couple and through the house.<sup>1</sup>

While Lévi-Strauss focuses on the husband and wife as representatives of groups which must come to an agreement as well as coming together, I want to look at the individual members of the couple, differentiated by gender. I propose to look at how this difference is handled and at how it relates to the house. In doing this, I will use data on the Kelabit, a cognatic tribal group in Sarawak, East Malaysia.

The Kelabit cannot be said to have alliance relations between corporate groups which persist over time. In each generation, the configuration of relationships between people is remade by marriage. This, of course, happens in all societies; but it may be perceived as happening in the context of the continuing existence of some unchanging entity down the generations. This continued existence is based on an ideology which expresses the mode in which the entity can be perpetuated, such as patrilineality or matrilineality. In such a situation, the different configurations of real-life relationships are seen by members of the society concerned to be simply varying expressions of the same, unchanging thing. Lévi-Strauss is suggesting that the house fulfils this function in house-based societies, including those of Southeast Asia. However, I would argue that the house for the Kelabit does not fulfil this function, and that the couple does not represent a relationship between groups which persists over time. The Kelabit do say that virilocality is preferable to uxorilocality; but in practice there appears to be an approximately equal incidence of the two – as is common in Sarawak – and it does not appear to be of much significance which occurs. Virilocality and uxorilocality are not modes of perpetuation of a corporate group. The significance of the couple is not that it is the expression at a specific point in time of a longer-lasting entity.

I think that Lévi-Strauss is right to insist on the importance of the conjugal couple in Southeast Asia, and to link the couple with



something which may be described as the house in the region. He is also, I think, right in saying that the couple resolves something through its existence. But, for the Kelabit, what is resolved is not the relationship between descent and alliance, nor is the resolution which is achieved about the necessity to bring about alliance. It is rather about the need to negotiate the relationship between the man and the woman as representatives of two genders.

Among the Kelabit, the issue being 'dealt with' through the medium of the house is one that exists within the group rather than being one between groups, as Lévi-Strauss would have it. Other contributors to this volume (Bloch, Carsten, Gibson) present data on other cognatic, 'centrist' groups (see Errington 1989: 207-16; 1990 for a discussion of the term 'centrist') in Southeast Asia which suggest a similar focus on the interior constitution of the group rather than on relations between groups. This inward-directed focus tends actually to represent the group as self-perpetuating, and to play down the importance of alliance between groups.

### THE KELABIT AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The Kelabit are a group of some 5,000 people (Ko 1987: 35) whose homeland is at the headwaters of the Baram river in Sarawak, East Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. They live in an area of fairly flat, relatively inaccessible tableland at about 3,000-3,500 feet above sea level, characterized by a cooler climate, slower rivers and more successful cultivation of rice than is the case in the middle reaches of the Baram and other rivers in Sarawak. The Kelabit traditionally practised both wet and dry cultivation of rice; traditional Kelabit wet cultivation of rice did not involve the creation of permanent fields and thus both techniques of rice cultivation might be described as 'shifting'. Nowadays they are investing a good deal of energy in creating permanent wet rice fields more similar to the classic *sawah* of Java and Bali.

The Kelabit Highlands is predominantly an area of primary forest, interspersed with settlements surrounded by rice fields and areas of secondary forest. Both primary and secondary forest are of great significance to the Kelabit. Traditionally, the forest supplied all the protein food - meat, fish and foods such as insect larvae - eaten on

an everyday basis, a very large proportion of vegetables, and all of the materials used for such things as building and crafts.

The Kelabit living in the Highlands are now mostly resident in the area around Bario, where the only government-administered airstrip is located; during the confrontation with Indonesia, the majority of the Kelabit were resettled in the Bario area. I did my fieldwork, however, in Pa' Dalih, an outlying community of about 120 individuals located in the southern part of the Kelabit Highlands some six to twelve hours' walk from the Bario area. Whilst some imported food is eaten in the Bario area, in Pa' Dalih, apart from rice, the forest continues to provide practically all non-cultivated foods.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF RICE

Despite the importance of the forest as a source of food, the cultivation of rice (*pade* in its unhusked form, *bra* in its husked but uncooked form) is the axis around which life revolves for the Kelabit. Success in rice growing is traditionally equivalent to success in life. This is widely true of Borneo tribal groups which have adopted rice cultivation. The only group which has actually moved away from rice cultivation is the Melanau, and even they buy rice as a prestige food (Morris 1953). For Borneo rice-growers, to be forced to rely on starches other than rice (i.e. tubers or sago) is unprestigious and a mark of poverty (Whittier 1973: 95; Metcalf 1974: 34, 1989: 113, note 37). For the Kelabit, to be able to eat rice produced by one's own co-resident family group or hearth-group (see below), rather than eating rice produced by others, is vitally important to the maintenance of prestige, described as 'goodness'. To eat rice is the mark of a fully human being; to take responsibility for the cultivation, processing and cooking of rice, and to provide rice meals for children and other dependants (who may be said to be symbolic children), may be said to be the mark of the fully adult human being. It is this status which is the basis of prestige, as I will show.

The cultivation and consumption of rice structures Kelabit society. Through the consumption of the rice meal, rice delineates the basic unit of society, the hearth-group which is replicated symbolically at higher levels in the longhouse community and in the whole of the



social universe to include all Kelabit.<sup>2</sup> These levels, like the base-level hearth-group, are defined through the joint consumption of rice meals.

### THE KELABIT LONGHOUSE AND HEARTH-GROUP

Like many other Borneo peoples, the Kelabit live in longhouses; the terms for such houses, *ruma' kadang* or *ruma' rawir*, can be literally glossed as 'long house'. The longhouse is divided up in two cross-cutting senses: into the areas built by different 'households' – I shall return to a discussion of the Kelabit term for this group in a moment – and into two major lengthways divisions, the *dalim* or 'room' containing the hearth at which meals are cooked, and the *tawa'* or 'gallery'. This division is broadly equivalent to that which exists in many other Borneo groups, where longhouses are divided into a more private area, where the hearth is (or was situated in the past), and a more public area, where guests are received. In the past Kelabit houses were similarly divided into two halves (see Figs 4.1 and 4.2) but today these two halves are located in two separate, parallel buildings, joined by walkways, one for each household or hearth-group (see Fig. 4.3).

There are three terms for the Kelabit 'household' or hearth-group: *lobang ruma'*, *ruma'* and *tetal*. The term *ruma'* describes the physical place of the household: in the literature on other Borneo groups, similar entities are referred to as 'apartments'. In particular, *ruma'* is used to refer to the part of the apartment which contains the hearth. The term *lobang ruma'* is used to describe the group of people inhabiting this apartment as a physical space and means literally 'that which is contained within the cavity of the *ruma'*'. The term *tetal*, which may be used to describe the people of the household, literally means 'hearth' (see Fig. 4.4).

The fact that the term *ruma'* is used both to describe the longhouse and to describe the part of the longhouse belonging to one household reflects the fact that, as mentioned above, they may be seen as equivalent entities. Because of the ambiguity involved in the term *ruma'*, and also because I have been told by Kelabit that the term *tetal* or hearth is the one which most truly reflects the basic nature of the

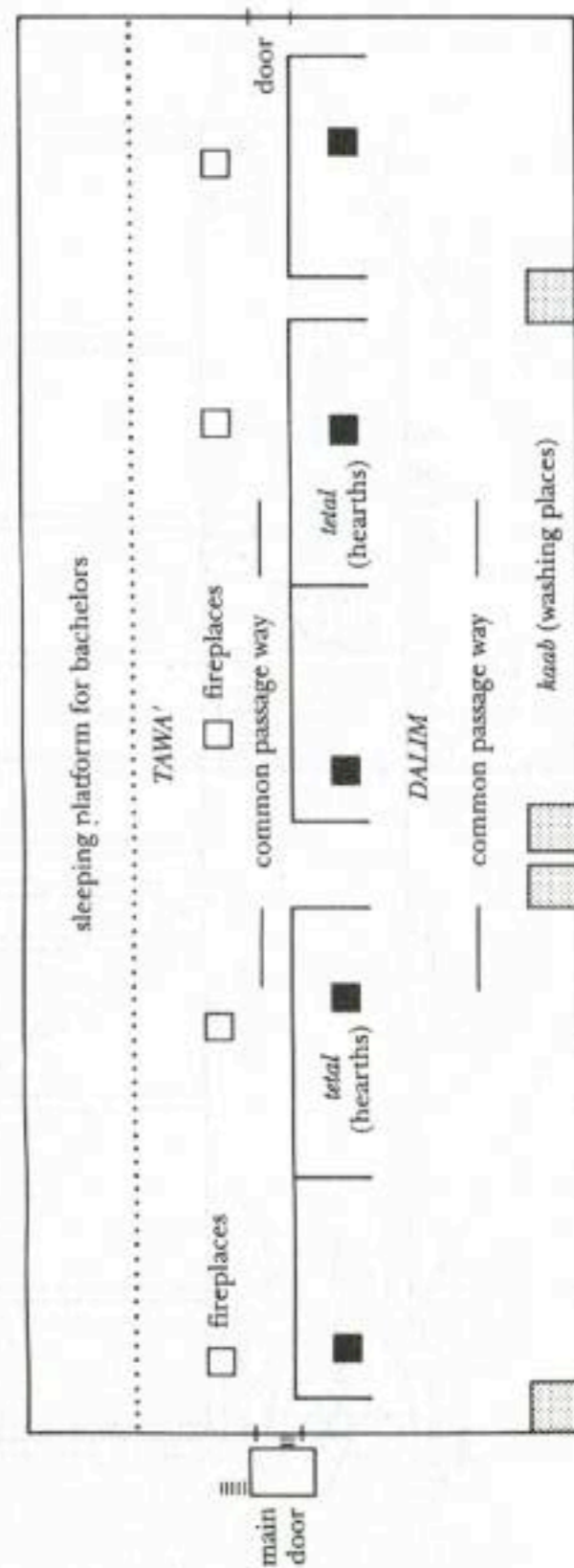


Fig. 4.1 Kelabit longhouse, pre-1945.



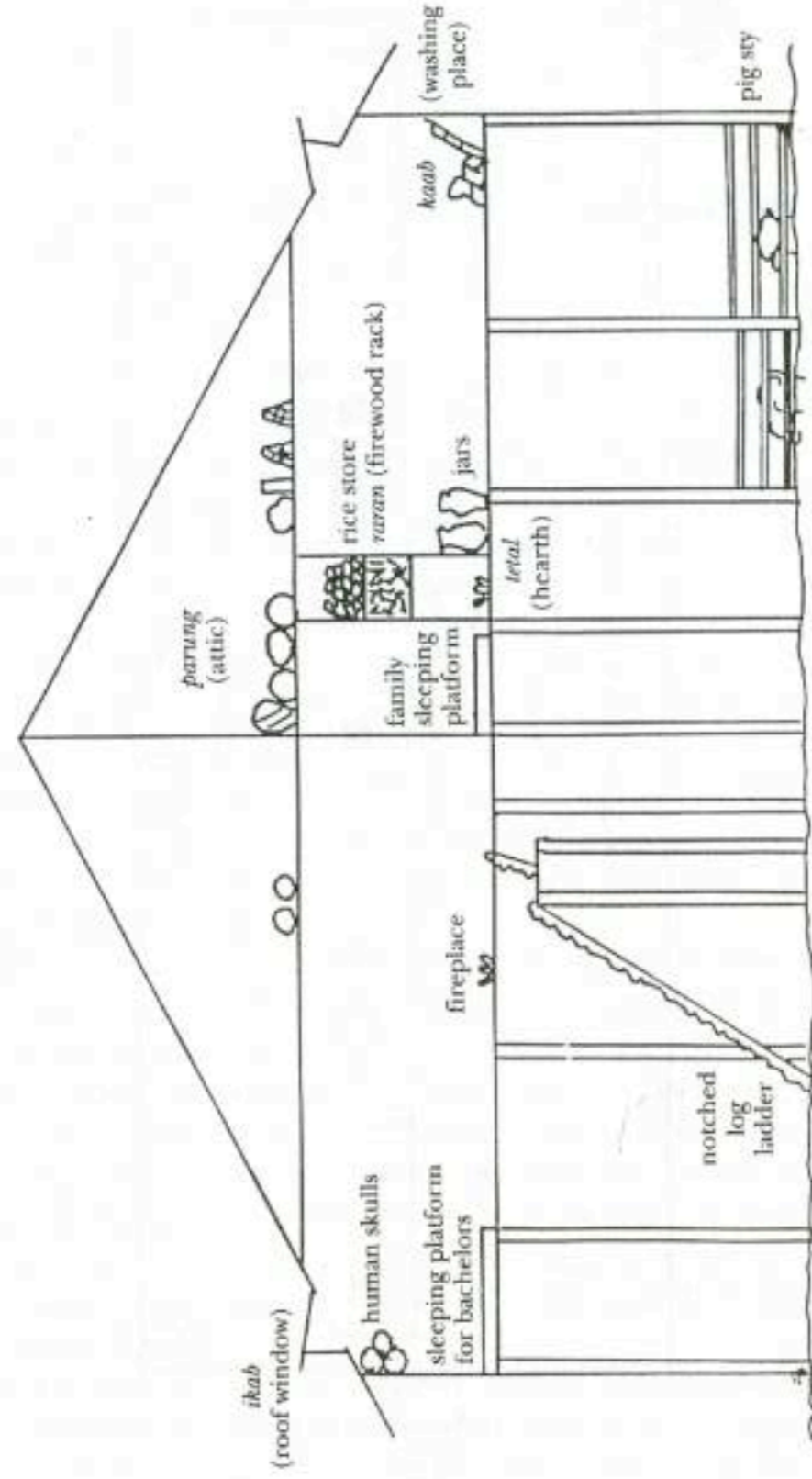


Fig. 4.2 Cross-section of a Kelabit longhouse, pre-1945.

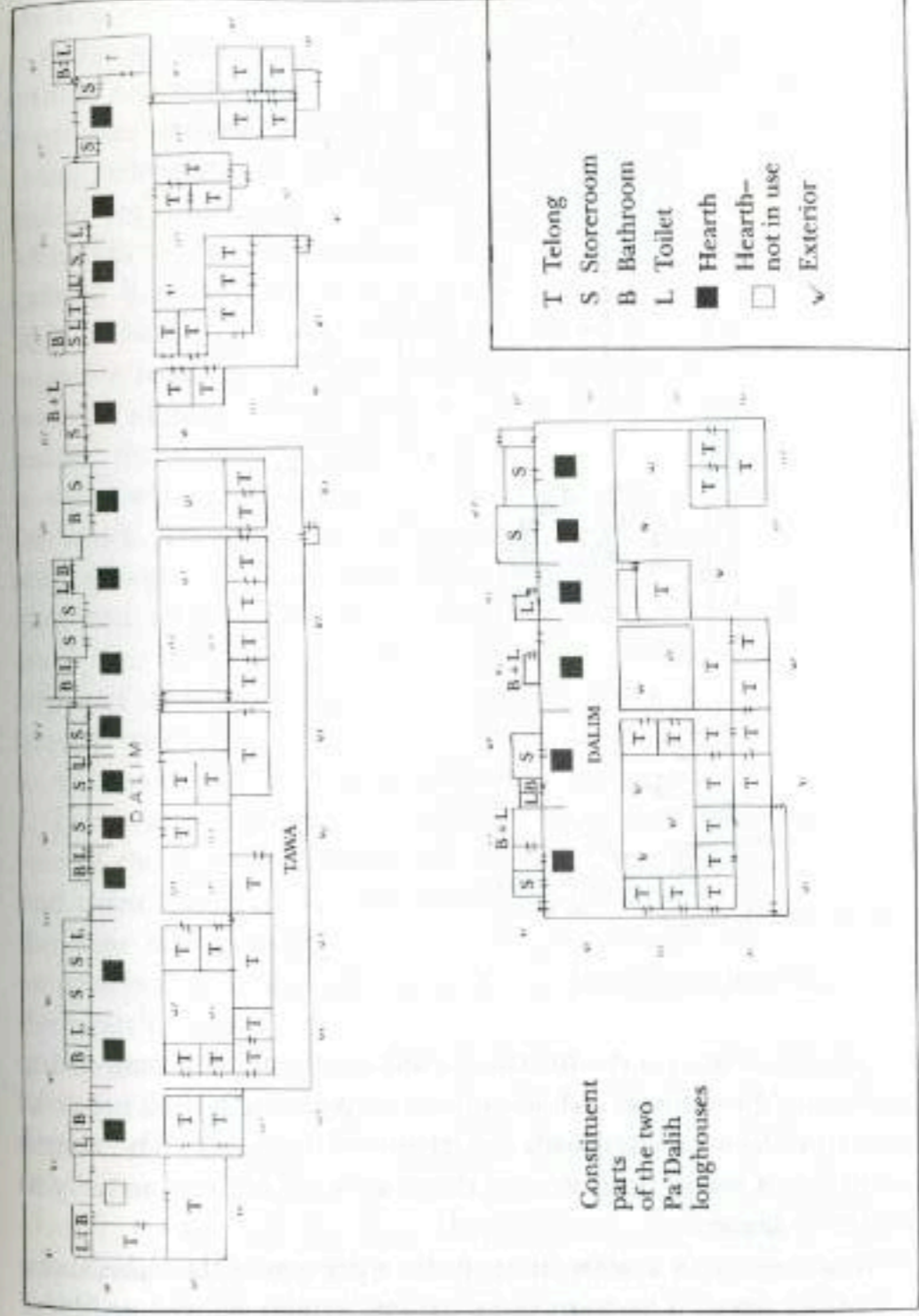


Fig. 4.3 Constituent parts of the two Pa'Dalih longhouses.



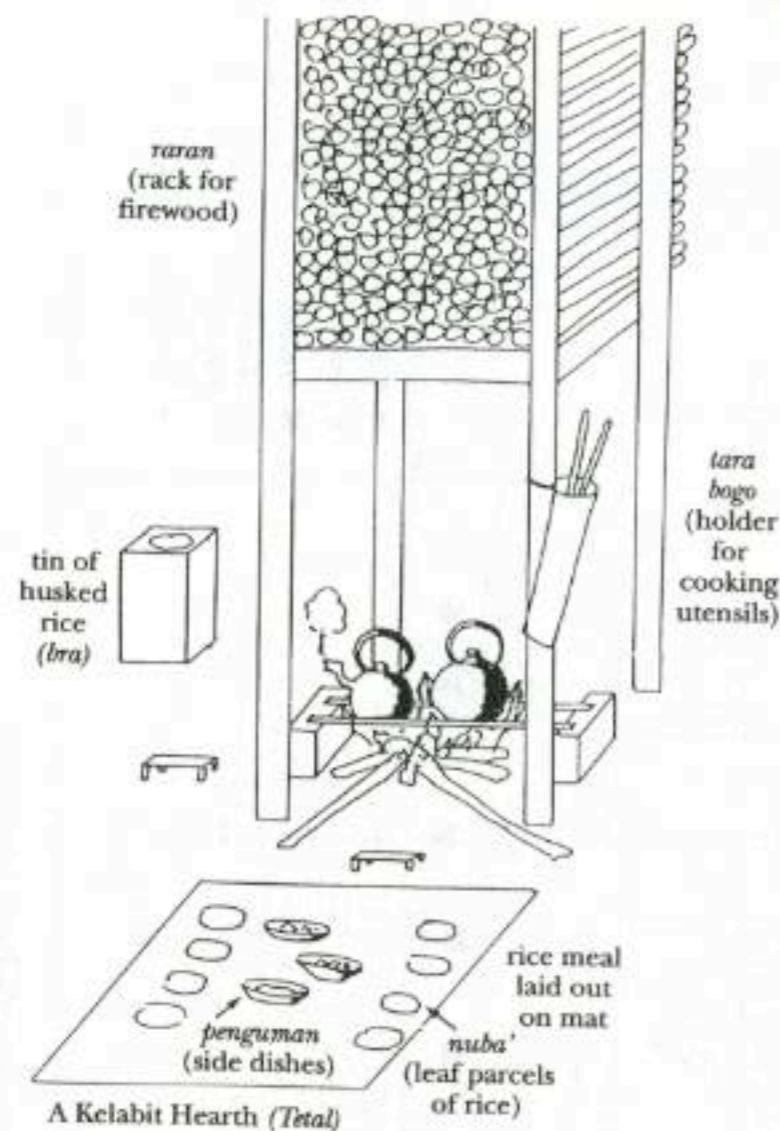


Fig. 4.4 A Kelabit hearth (*tetal*).

household as focused on the hearth, I shall use the term hearth-group to describe the household. I shall argue that the hearth itself is one of the core symbols associated with the nature of the house. The hearth is what makes a house possible and therefore may be seen actually to constitute the house.

The hearth-group's apartment includes a portion of the *dalim* and a portion of the *tawa'*. The term *dalim* means 'inside', as well as 'deep' and 'true'. The *dalim* is the core of the apartment. Its focus is the hearth where rice meals are cooked and next to which they are eaten by the hearth-group. Only the area around the hearth itself is truly private and it is not intruded upon by members of other hearth-groups except by invitation; other parts of the apartment, including

the washing areas and bathrooms adjacent to the *dalim* and the *tawa'*, are freely entered and used by anyone.

Although the parts of the *dalim* built by the different hearth-groups are only separated by very low walls extending a few feet from the outside wall, the conceptual division between hearth-areas belonging to different hearth-groups is very definite. The gallery or *tawa'*, on the other hand, is a long, undivided area. Although each hearth-group builds their own portion of the gallery, it is used freely by all and sundry without regard for who built which part. The Kelabit define the *tawa'* in explicitly negative terms as 'not-*dalim*', i.e. not inside, rather than giving it a positive identity of its own. It is the place of those who are not inside; the young, on an everyday basis, and visitors. In the past, it was used predominantly in the evening. Fires were made on it (at which, however, only snacks, not rice meals, could be cooked) and groups of individuals belonging to different hearth-groups gathered to socialize. Now that fires are no longer built on the *tawa'* (in order not to dirty modern possessions stored in the adjacent *telong* compartments used for sleeping and storage), such groups meet in the *dalim*, by one of the hearths as it is too cold to sit around in the evening without a fire.

The hearth is closely associated with the preparation and consumption of the rice meal. While snack foods, including maize, root crops and meat (eaten on its own, roasted) could in the past be cooked on the fires in the *tawa'*, rice, as well as vegetables and meat (in this context boiled) to be eaten with the rice meal, may only be cooked at the hearth in the *dalim*.

For the Kelabit, the cooking and eating of rice meals represents what it means to belong to one hearth-group (as in Langkawi, these activities are equivalent to being of one house – see Carsten 1987a; this volume). The rice belonging to a particular hearth-group is always cooked at its own hearth and hearth-group members practically always eat their rice meals by their own hearth. Not only will they strongly resist eating rice belonging to another hearth-group, but they are extremely unwilling even to eat their own rice by another hearth-group's hearth. It is very important that rice meals be shared and eaten together at their own hearth by co-members of that hearth. This applies particularly to the morning and evening rice meals, when everyone belonging to the longhouse who is not away on a visit to



another longhouse or who is not spending the night at their field house is present.

If possible, midday rice meals should also be eaten at the hearth in the longhouse. At lunch time, when co-operative work groups are often in the middle of a day's work in the fields of a particular hearth-group, individuals prefer to return to the longhouse to eat their midday meal separately at their separate hearths since, if possible, they prefer to eat at their hearth rather than in the fields. They take back a side dish prepared by the hearth-group sponsoring the work and this they eat at their own hearth along with their own rice. If the longhouse is too far away (more than about ten minutes' walk) then the workers eat in a field house, usually the one belonging to the hearth-group whose fields are being worked. But even here, though the rice meal is shared by people, mostly 'big people', from different hearth-groups, they arrange themselves in such a way that they appear to replicate the hearth-groups to which they belong. Turning inwards to face each other in a semi-circle, husband, wife and any dependants pile up the packets of rice they have brought with them and share them out along with side dishes supplied by the group for whom they are working.

### THE COUPLE AND THE SYMBOLIC UTILIZATION OF GENDER

I would suggest that the two key symbols that are important in the ideological construction of the Kelabit house are the focal conjugal couple – termed *lan merax*, or 'big people', full social adults – and the hearth. The focal couple has a close relationship with the hearth and with the rice meal which is prepared and eaten there by members of that couple's hearth-group. However, this relationship is not a straightforward one.

I would suggest that, in the Kelabit context, gender and the conjugal couple can be viewed from two different perspectives. From one of these, the conjunction of the two genders is emphasized whilst, from the other, the distinction between them is played up. The conjunction of the two genders, in the form of the focal couple or 'big people', is highlighted when they are contrasted with the *anak adi*' or junior members of the household, the children and young adults who

as yet lack children, all of whom are referred to by the same term. The conjugal couple, as an undivided entity, is associated with rice, with the hearth and with the 'inside' of the hearth-group, whilst the *anak adi*' or 'young people' have an eminently peripheral, 'outside' character associated with the extended gallery. Furthermore, in the conjugal couple or 'big people', the two genders are clearly combined whilst amongst those who are not yet 'big people', they remain separate and distinct.

The hearth area is closely associated with the 'big people', who ideally spend the majority of their time there when they are in the longhouse. The growing of rice for cooking and consumption at the hearth is the job of the couple working together; the longer they have been married the more time they spend together and the more time they spend on rice cultivation. Although *anak adi*' belong to a hearth-group (usually that of their parents), they are much less closely anchored to it than are the 'big people'. They spend most of their time with their peer group and wander around a good deal within the longhouse. Rather than spending their time by the hearth, they spend it in sleeping or in storage rooms allocated to one of their number. Such rooms, called *telong*, are conceptually part of the *taua*' or are, at least, distinct from the *dalim*. They are thus associated with areas which are not the hearth, that is with what is not 'inside'. Among the young, the two genders come together only for social purposes, never for economically productive purposes and in theory not for reproductive purposes either. Outside the longhouse, young people spend most of their time in activities unconnected with rice-growing, and in separate gender groups. Young men hunt, and young girls pick cultivated vegetables and gather wild ones. However, girls are drawn into rice cultivation and processing earlier than young men; I shall return to the significance of this below.

In contrast to the merging of the male and female aspects of the conjugal couple discussed above, in other contexts these two aspects of the couple stand out as being separate, something which becomes explicit only at naming feasts, *irau pekaa ngadan*. On an everyday level this separation may be perceptible but it is pushed below the surface of explicit discourse. Seen from this perspective, there is an association between women and rice – hinted at by the earlier involvement of young women with rice-growing mentioned above – and between men and the forest and meat.



I return below to this emphasis on a separation between male and female. I want first of all to deal with what may be seen as the more explicit perspective from which there is emphasis on the undivided nature of the couple and their association with rice-growing and the hearth.

### THE FOCAL COUPLE, THE HEARTH AND RICE

The transition from *anak adi* to *lun merar*, from being a young person to being a 'big person' or adult, is associated with two things: the relationship of a couple to the growing of rice, and the birth of children and grandchildren. With a deepening association with rice-growing, an individual gradually becomes a full adult. Without children, however, an individual is not treated as a full adult, regardless of marriage or of his or her involvement in rice-growing. With the birth of their first child, the young parents are gradually drawn more and more into rice-growing and into co-operation with each other; they are criticized if they resist this. A new name is given to the young couple at the naming feast, shortly after the birth of the first child, and this marks the beginning of the transition. The peak of adulthood is reached at the entrance into grandparenthood, which is again marked by the taking of a new name at a naming feast held 'for' a real or classificatory grandchild, and at which the child's parents take parental names. Although a hearth-group may be made up of more than one couple, i.e. a husband and wife living together with a married child and in-married spouse, one of these is always dominant over the other. Which one acts as the focal couple, the couple with whom decision-making rests, depends on their relative age and strength. To begin with the senior pair are dominant and it is the duty of the junior pair to help them in rice-growing; as they gradually age and give up their own active role in rice-growing, the junior pair take over. All other individuals in the hearth-group, even if they are involved in rice-growing, are considered dependants without the right, or even the ability, to make decisions.

It is not proper for there to be two active, fully proficient, rice-growing couples in one hearth-group. Normally, this does not seem to occur; by the time the younger couple, now in their forties, reaches full proficiency in rice-growing, the elder couple retires from an active

role. However, if it does happen, the two couples will cultivate rice separately, although in the one case of this kind in Pa' Dalih, they pooled their rice. I was, however, told that they should not really pool their rice nor should they share a hearth. Separate cultivation of rice should mean separate households.

The focal couple is responsible for the provision of the rice meal for other, dependant members of the hearth-group. The provision of the rice meal may be seen as the practical and symbolic equivalent of the biological reproduction of the hearth-group in the form of children and, as has been noted, the production and provision of rice and the reproduction of children are both essential to the status of full adult or 'big person'. If the hearth-group regularly fails to produce sufficient rice, it does not run the risk of starving; no Kelabit would be allowed to go hungry by fellow members of the longhouse. Its 'big people' do, however, run the risk of losing their status. This happens if they reach the point of being unable to maintain a separate hearth-group and become the dependants of the focal couple of another hearth-group. This would, in the past (before the Second World War), have meant their becoming slaves (*demulun*). Being a 'big person' means being able to maintain a separate hearth-group.

The way in which the rice meal is eaten is indicative of its symbolic importance. Rice meals, especially when taken in the longhouse, are eaten quite quickly and in silence. This is not a time for social communication. There is a heaviness, a seriousness in the air. Such rice meals are eaten three times a day, each hearth-group forming a semi-circle turned inwards to face the hearth itself. Eating rice together indicates joint membership of the same hearth-group and makes a statement about responsibility – on the part of the 'big people' – and about dependency – on the part of the young and old (and, in the past, of slaves as well).

Rice is very explicitly owned and it is owned by the hearth-group. Transactions involving rice are fraught with insinuations. Rice cannot be given away without the implication that the 'big people' of the recipient hearth-group are in need of rice, that they are unable to grow enough to provide for their own people. Rice-growing labour cannot be given away either, without creating a debt; debts created in the co-operative labour groups which are the core of the production of rice are carefully repaid. Where labour for rice cultivation is donated to a hearth-group this threatens the status of its 'big people'



just as the receipt of rice as a gift would. Even the sale of rice is problematic because to buy rice implies that you are short of it. Those who could afford to buy rice do not do so. I know of no instances of rice being sold to other Kelabit.

## ADULTHOOD AND PRESTIGE

One can equate the prestige of the 'big person' who is able to maintain a separate hearth-group with the prestige of people of high status. The same term, 'good people', *lun doo*, is used to describe those who are able to maintain a separate hearth-group and those who are prestigious in society. The prestige, characteristic of *lun doo*, is the very nature of what it is to be a true human being.<sup>3</sup> It derives from the production of rice and the provision of rice meals for other people who are dependants: the more dependants provided for the better in terms of the generation of prestige. Thus there is considerable eagerness to provide rice meals for others but an extreme reluctance to accept them.

Focal couples of successful separate hearth-groups provide these prestige-generating rice meals every day; at a higher level, the 'really good people', *lun doo to'oh*, sometimes referred to in the literature on the Kelabit as 'aristocrats', provide such meals at naming feasts where the whole Kelabit population is fed a rice meal by the host hearth-group. At present, by far the most important kind of feast is the naming feast; in the past very important feasts were also held at the secondary funerals of 'really good people' but these are no longer held since the Kelabit converted to Christianity in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Rice meals at naming feasts generate not only the status of 'really good person' but that of full adult as well; all couples hold a feast at the birth of their first co-resident grandchild and this confirms that they are now full *lun merar* or 'big people'.

Symbolically, the rice meal at naming feasts may be said to be making the statement that the whole Kelabit population is equivalent to one hearth-group and that all those present are the dependants of the host hearth-group. This is why it is generative of prestige in the same way and of the same kind as that generated by the everyday rice meal, and explains why the same term (*lun doo*) may be used both for the focal couple of the hearth-group and for people of high status in

society at large. The status of 'good person' is achieved to varying degrees; characteristic of the Kelabit system of prestige differentiation is a lack of clear distinctions between named 'strata'.

Although naming feasts are held for all young couples, and are hosted by the focal couple of the hearth-group to which they belong, normally the parents of either the young husband or the young wife, there is a lot of variation in the scale involved. The difference lies in the number of people who attend as well as in the provision for the guests. It is prestigious to have as many guests as possible. The symbolic hearth-group which is generated through the meal held at the naming feast varies in size according to the number of guests and the larger it is the better in terms of prestige. Thus different naming feasts make very different statements about the prestige of the hosts. This creates the basis for the system of prestige differentiation.<sup>5</sup>

Thus both the base-level hearth-group and a higher-level symbolic hearth-group are brought into being and prestige is generated, through the holding of rice meals. It is through the rice meal, whether the everyday rice meal or the rice meal held at feasts, that the nature of the hearth-group is stated.

## THE TWO COMPONENTS OF THE RICE MEAL: RICE AND WILD FOODS

The rice meal consists of two complementary components. One is rice;<sup>6</sup> the other is the foods which are eaten with rice. These consist, at everyday rice meals, of any combination of meat, fish, other protein foods, and vegetables.

Foods eaten with rice are either wild or are, in important respects, treated as though they were wild. They are derived from plants and animals which are said to 'live on their own' (*mulun sebulang*), in other words, without human help. Rice, on the other hand, cannot, the Kelabit say, live unless humans help it do so. This is the basic distinction between the two components of the rice meal.

While rice, as discussed above, is owned, foods eaten with rice at the everyday rice meal – meat from wild animals, wild vegetables and cultivated vegetables – are not treated as though they belong to the person who obtains them by hunting, gathering or collecting or who planted them. Such foods are shared between hearth-groups quite



freely in both their raw and cooked states; this applies both to those foods which are to be eaten at the rice meal and to those to be eaten as snacks between meals. Unlike transactions involving rice, this kind of sharing does not create any indebtedness.

The two components of the rice meal have different status on an everyday level. The rice meal is described as just that – *kuman nuba*, 'eating rice'. At everyday rice meals, the wild foods which are eaten are not accorded any value, and are freely given away. The situation is different, as we shall see, at *irau* feasts.

### THE OTHER PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER: THE SEPARATE ASSOCIATIONS OF MALE AND FEMALE

At that point I want to go back to the two perspectives that I mentioned above. From one of these, the couple is an undivided whole and opposed, as 'inside', to the 'outside' represented by the young. From the other perspective, the two genders within the couple remain separate. Within the perspective from which the couple appears as undivided, there is an association between 'big people' and rice-growing on the one hand, and between young people, the 'outside', and uncultivated land, including both primary forest (*polong kora*) and secondary forest cultivated in the past (*polong adi*), on the other. Within the other perspective, from which there is a separation of the genders within the couple, there is an association between women and rice, and men and the forest.

I have pointed out that the married couple, the 'big people', are closely associated with rice, while young people, not yet parents, are associated with these wild and semi-cultivated foods. However, there is no doubt that there is a sense in which women are more closely associated with rice cultivation than men. As has been mentioned above, young women begin to involve themselves in the cultivation, processing and cooking of rice to some extent before they become parents, while there is often difficulty in persuading even young fathers to help in the rice fields; young men who are not yet fathers practically never enter the rice fields. Women also are more responsible for ritually important parts of rice cultivation, such as sowing of nursery beds and transplanting. It was certain women who,

before the Kelabit began to convert to Christianity, used to have dealings with the deity associated with rice, *Deraya*.<sup>7</sup>

There is also no doubt that men are more closely associated with the forest than are women. Although women gather and also fish, they only do so in secondary forest while men hunt animals for meat, fish and gather forest produce in both primary and secondary forests. Men enter the primary forest without fear, they say, of spirits of which women are quite openly afraid. In the past, men, particularly when young, sometimes had personal relationships with a spirit of the forest called *Puntumid* which is associated with hunting success and some own powerful charms which they find in the primary forest. I know of no cases of women having such relationships or owning such charms.

At *irau* feasts, the rice meal is reduced to its clearest statement, consisting of rice and meat, with no vegetables. Here, the association of women with rice and of men with that which is eaten with rice<sup>8</sup> – here, meat – is also clear. While women usually cook meat for everyday rice meals, at feasts men cook it, boiling it in huge pots outside the longhouse<sup>9</sup> while women cook the rice at the hearth. The meat is distributed by the men; young men distribute the flesh, *uang*, while older men distribute the fat, *lemak*. Fat-eating contests are sometimes held in which the older men compete; in fact the ritual eating of fat is a major aspect of these feasts, with men pressing lumps of fat on each other and sometimes on women. Fat seems to be considered very appropriate, and even essential, to men, particularly older men who are *lun merar*, while it appears to be considered inappropriate and perhaps dangerous for women, particularly young girls; I witnessed a mother, in panic, telling her daughter not to eat fat because it would give her stomach ache, while she watched her son eat it. Fat may perhaps be seen as being the most 'meaty' part of the meat; an extreme statement of its derivation from the forest and thus appropriately associated with men rather than women.<sup>10</sup> The core event at the present-day *irau* is the rice meal, preceded by the distribution of sweet drinks and crackers which have replaced rice wine and *senape*, rice steamed in leaves and eaten without side dishes. The women distribute all foods made from rice or which have replaced foods previously made from rice. Young girls who are not yet parents, and new mothers, distribute the crackers and sweet drinks, while older women – established 'big people', mothers of teenagers and of young mothers – distribute the *nuba*, rice to be eaten with meat.



Thus, at *irau*, there is a rice meal consisting of what may be construed symbolically as male and female food, meat plus rice, and a separation of the focal couple into its constituent parts, the husband and wife. The male role as rice-grower appears to be negated; this is underlined by the fact that it is those men who are most closely associated with rice as members of successful couples, *lun merar* men, who are here most closely associated with fat. Rice and the female are associated with 'inside', with the hearth, where the rice is prepared for *irau*, while meat and the male are associated with the 'outside', the non-hearth, where the meat is prepared.

Rice, then, is associated with women but also with the couple, male and female, while meat is associated with men but also with the young (*anak adi*). The man is both part of the couple, which itself is the essence of what constructs the hearth – rice-growing success – and yet he is the epitome of what is opposed, though complementary, to rice.

It is the male role as one half of the married couple, itself the core of the hearth-group and of the house, which is emphasized on an everyday level. From this perspective, male and female are jointly associated with the cultivation and provision of rice. It is young people, those who do not grow rice and who do not have children, who are associated with the 'outside'. From this perspective, the 'outside' is not represented as positive. It is merely the absence of the 'inside', of rice-growing. But from the other perspective, which is made fully explicit only at *irau*, men are represented as being associated with the 'outside'. In this context, the 'outside', the forest, is represented as something positive and necessary to the successful celebration of the rice meal.

The very great importance of *irau*, in the generation of differential prestige between hearth-groups, and in the fact that they are held to confirm the position of their hosts as full *lun merar*, highlights the presentation of both rice and wild foods as essential to the rice meal.

### GENDER SYMBOLISM IN THE KELABIT HOUSE

The internal division of the Kelabit house and hearth-group apartment reflects both the perspectives on gender which have been discussed. There is no explicit gender symbolism associated with

different parts of the house. There is simply an 'inside' and an 'outside', respectively the hearth in the *dalim*, associated explicitly with the couple, and the *tawa* or gallery. However, despite explicit Kelabit ideology, the hearth does appear, even on an everyday level, to be more closely associated with women than with men, just as rice is more closely associated with women. Women do most of the cooking, and are more assertively present in the hearth area than are men. Even men who are 'big people' do spend some time on the gallery, making baskets and doing other craft work, while women never do. Even in the past women would only spend time on the *tawa* if visitors from outside the longhouse were present. In the past young men slept on the *tawa*; young women slept in the loft above their parents. I have been told by women that they find that men get under their feet in the hearth area and that they send them to sit in the *tawa* if this is the case (although I never saw this happen).<sup>11</sup>

The Kelabit house can be seen both as a statement of the focal nature of the couple, as contrasted to those who are not yet married, and at the same time, but from another perspective, as a statement concerning the differentiation between the two halves of the couple, which involves an association of the female half with the centre, the *dalim*, the hearth and rice, and of the male half with the *tawa*, the periphery and the wild. The latter perspective, however, is less explicit and becomes apparent largely through observation.

### CONCLUSION

Lévi-Strauss has argued that the house provides a way for antagonisms to be resolved. He suggests that, in Southeast Asia, this occurs through the conjugal couple. He, however, locates the antagonisms in the problems inherent in the necessity for groups to exchange wives. I have examined the conjugal couple among the Kelabit to see how far Lévi-Strauss's suggestion holds. I have argued that the main symbols associated with the house among the Kelabit are the hearth and the focal conjugal couple. Within the couple, and at the core of the house or hearth-group, is a statement about the significance of the difference between male and female; a difference which might be best described as a dynamic tension. It is not only what is achieved through the bringing together of the two genders that matters, but also what is



made possible through the division of male and female; both of these achievements occur through the medium of the conjugal couple.

The Kelabit conjugal couple is the core of the 'house' (which is, I have argued, essentially reducible to what I have termed the 'hearth-group'), as Lévi-Strauss argues the couple to be for house-based societies of Southeast Asia (1987: 155). However, what is achieved through the couple as the core of the Kelabit hearth-group is possible not because they are the representatives of separate groups of people which include both men and women, but because of the difference in gender between the two people involved. Gender, then, is a very dynamic difference for the Kelabit. Onvlee argues that the expression *mini-kawini* ('male-female') in Sumba, Indonesia is used 'for a relationship between things that are distinguished in their relatedness and related through their distinction' (Onvlee 1980: 46, quoted in Jordaan and Niehof 1988: 173). This seems an apt description of the way in which gender difference is conceptualized among the Kelabit: male and female can only mean what they do divided from each other, at one moment, because they mean what they do when they are seamlessly joined, at another.

Although tensions over the residence of spouses would preclude this in practice, Lévi-Strauss's picture of the significance of the house as the site of the resolution of antagonisms might be seen as implying an ideally unidirectional process and that what would eventually be desirable, worked towards via the joining of man and woman in the conjugal couple, would be some kind of stasis. The impression is that the 'house', focused upon the couple, is utilized as a kind of weapon against disorder. This is not an appropriate way of looking at the role of gender within the Kelabit couple. Among the Kelabit, there is a constant realignment of focus between the achievement of the unity of the two genders and the importance of the difference between them. There is no reason to suppose that this process of constant realignment is in any way problematic; which is why it seems inappropriate to describe as a 'resolution' what is, at certain points, achieved through the presentation of the couple as a 'whole', a seamless united front. It appears rather to be central to the nature of gender among the Kelabit that such realignment should continually take place.

## HOUSES IN LANGKAWI: STABLE STRUCTURES OR MOBILE HOMES?

5

Janet Carsten

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES the applicability of Lévi-Strauss's (1983a; 1983b; 1987) concept of 'sociétés à maison', house-based societies, to a Malay fishing village on the island of Langkawi, Malaysia. While it takes its inspiration from the ideas advanced by Lévi-Strauss, it is also the product of dissatisfaction with a preliminary discussion of these ideas (Carsten 1987a), and of the stimulation of other writings on this theme.<sup>1</sup>

Lévi-Strauss's argument relates principally to the Kwakiutl *numayma*, the medieval noble house in Europe, eleventh-century Japan and to certain Indonesian societies. A number of features of these societies are stressed by Lévi-Strauss. Firstly, continuity occurs through descent, that is, downwards in the inheritance of names and property (1983a: 174; 177-9). Second, he draws attention to the hierarchical ordering of the basic units of these societies. When both the houses themselves and members of these units are ordered according to birth order and proximity to a common ancestor, as he apparently considers to be the case in all his examples, marriage implies unequal status, and plays a central role in the ranking system (1983a: 181).<sup>2</sup>

Third, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes how the 'dialectic of filiation and residence' (1983a: 180) is a common feature of house-based societies. In other words, dual membership in a group with bilateral descent and in the residential unit creates conflicting obligations. He draws attention to a series of opposing principles, such as filiation/residence,



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## INDEX

- Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations
- abandonment of house, 40, 197, 198, 228, 247
- above-below symbolism, 22, 123, 124, 158
- abstract category, house as, 32, 50, 68
- Aceh, 53-4
- affines, affinity, 8, 22, 131, 218, 251
- affinal relations, 150, 175-7, 181-3, 232-3
- and consanguinity, resolution of opposition between, 199-200, 204, 211, 237, 249-50
- and sibingship, 38-9, 115, 116, 127, 144
- transformation into kin, 38-9, 119, 120-1, 122, 132, 144-5
- see also* alliance; wife-givers and wife-takers
- African societies, 13, 15, 16-17, 18, 217, 253 n.2
- agnatic descent, *see* patrilineality
- Akawaio Indians, 189, 194, 198
- alliance, 166-7, 246, 254 n.13
- asymmetric, 22, 24, 26, 33, 122, 124, 155, 163, 248
- and descent, house's role in resolving antagonisms between, 8, 29, 84-6, 105-6, 126-7, 149-51, 249, 261 nn.1 & 3
- symmetric, 33, 227, 231
- theory, Lévi-Strauss's formulation of, 8, 13-15, 18, 84, 106, 126-7, 130-1, 165
- Amazonia, 21, 37, 40, 226, 248, 249
- Northwest, 33, 200, 203, 219, 238, 248-9
- see also* ancestors; mountain symbolism; myth; river symbolism; shaman; Tukanoans
- anaconda, 234-6, 238-41 *passim*, 242, 243-4, 269 nn.11 & 13
- ancestors, 54, 56
- Amazonian, 37, 40, 232, 234-6, 238-41 *passim*, 243-4, 249
- Lio, 154-5, 157, 159, 161, 163, 165, 166, 167, 263 n.10
- Makassarese, 137-8
- Malagasy, 71, 80, 83
- Mëbengokre, 209, 223
- Tanimbarese, 177-8
- see also* genealogies
- Andean societies, 3, 5
- 'androgynous house', 44, 178-9, 241, 245-7
- animate being, house as, 23, 37, 40, 42
- see also* body imagery
- antagonisms, house's role in resolution of, *see* opposing principles
- Apinayé, 219, 267 n.6
- Ara, ritual cycle in, 132-48
- see also* Makassarese
- architectural features, 20-1, 26, 27, 43, 78-9, 228, 241
- and rank, relationship between, 11-12, 58-60
- see also* doors; hearth; houseposts; thatch(ing); structure of house
- architecture, in anthropological analysis, 2-6, 20-1, 226