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Domestic Space, Social Life and Settlement Biography: Theoretical Reflections from the Ethnography of a Rural African Landscape

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1. Introduction: Ethnography and Material Culture Theory

This chapter is intended to provide some exploratory theoretical suggestions, or at least a theoretical provocation, for the archaeological cases examined in this volume by offering a few anthropological reflections on the theme of domestic space and social life grounded in research among living people. We attempt this from the perspective of ethnographic (or, more specifically, “ethnoarchaeological”) research conducted in a rural context in Africa over a period of approximately three years (see Dietler, Herbich 1989, 1993, 2006; Herbich 1987; Herbich, Dietler 1991, 1993, 2008).

Before moving into a discussion of that work, however, it is necessary to say a few preliminary words about why this exercise should be useful, or even relevant, to the archaeological cases examined in this volume. This is not necessarily self-evident and it requires some explicit justification lest the goal of the chapter, and of ethnoarchaeological research in general, be misunderstood. Let us be clear in stating from the start that the point is *not* to provide an ethnographic example that can be imposed upon archaeological cases as a direct analogy in order to fill in the gaps in archaeological data. That would be a dangerous thing to do and would inevitably lead to serious errors. It is clear that a present day African society is not an Iron Age Iberian society, and neither one can serve as a direct model for the other. Each has its own complex history and culture. There may be some similarities between them, but there are also enormous differences, and those differences are just as important as any commonalities –and just as informative. So, let us reiterate that the point is manifestly *not* direct analogy.

Rather, the goal is to develop a broader comparative theoretical understanding of the relationship between domestic space and social life from a wide range of ethnographic contexts that can be used to open up new questions, illuminate interpretive possibilities, expose hidden assumptions, and help in assessing the plausibility of different interpretive models for archaeological cases. This is necessary because, ultimately, all archaeological interpretation relies funda-

mentally upon some form of analogical reasoning. When archaeologists call something a house wall, a door, or a hearth during an excavation, it is because the form resembles other walls, doors, or hearths we have seen: we impute a similar function based upon a similarity of form for an object whose function we can no longer observe. The problem is that we make such judgments based upon the range of our personal experience, and this usually amounts to what is called “common sense”. But our common sense is not a universal logic. It is simply our own implicit, ethno-centrally constrained view of the world. And, as the historian David Lowenthal (1985) has reminded us, “the past is a foreign country”: present day Spanish people are no closer culturally to ancient Iberians than are present day Africans. This is perhaps not so problematic at the level of walls and doors (although it certainly can be). But it becomes much more of a problem when we move to the level of such things as space and social organization.

The value of a comparative anthropological perspective is that it opens up the range of our experience and thereby exposes our implicit assumptions and forces us to confront new questions. It enriches the possibilities for seeing the archaeological record of the past in new ways and gives us new tools for evaluating competing interpretations. But it must be done carefully and rigorously, and analysis must pay vigilant attention to both similarities and differences. Anthropological theory is not a magic bullet that will solve all of our problems easily: it is simply one necessary tool among many that archaeologists should have at their disposition.

Unfortunately, information of the kind necessary by archaeologists generally has been somewhat limited in the social sciences literature. Social anthropologists, for example, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Comaroff, Comaroff 1991, 1997; Thomas 1991), have tended not to pay much serious attention to material culture over the last several decades, being much more interested in abstract social and cognitive structures, symbolic systems, kinship forms, and the like. In fact, the recent flurry of activity around the concept of “materiality” by social and cultural anthropologists (e.g. Miller 2005) derives largely from a belated recognition of the neglect of material culture in ethnographic work and the problems that the dominance of linguistic and discursive models pose for understanding

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Figure 1. Interior of a Luo homestead showing houses, granaries and work areas.

the material world. Unfortunately, the materiality literature has generally failed to move beyond attempting to theorize a way out of this problematic void, and there is little evidence so far of a systematic empirical engagement with the material dimensions of social life that would enable more insightful theoretical advances. This recurrent neglect has meant that archaeologists, who depend crucially upon understanding the relationship between material culture and the non-material aspects of society and culture, have had to invent a sub-discipline called “ethnoarchaeology” in order to acquire the information that other scholars have ignored (see David, Kramer 2001). Ethnoarchaeology consists of doing ethnographic research among living people, where both sides of this relationship can be observed, but a kind of ethnographic research that pays careful attention to the creation and operation of material culture in its social context. When done well, this means that the investigator must employ all of the standard techniques that a social anthropologist would use to understand the culture and social life of a group of people (that is, long periods of participant-observation living among the people, doing interviews, taking censuses, constructing models of kinship relations, observing rituals, etc.). But the ethnoarchaeologist must also set these features within a detailed, systematic study of the material world in which this social life takes place (that is, mapping and measuring houses, documenting craft production, cooking practices, and other techniques, taking inventories of material possessions, documenting consumption practices and the flow of objects over the landscape, etc.). It is only in this way that information useful to archaeologists can

be generated – again, not with the intention of providing a specific analogical case, but always toward the construction of a broader comparative theoretical understanding that can provide multiple kinds of insights. The rest of this paper is based upon one such ethnoarchaeological study carried out in rural Kenya among a people called the Luo.

2. Settlement Biography

Having proposed this initial justification for the endeavor, let us now move on to consideration of one of the central problems confronting archaeologists in trying to understand the relationship between domestic space and social organization, and see how the Luo case can help us to grapple with this issue.

Houses and settlements, the objects that constitute the cultural landscape of social life, are dynamic material culture constructs. They are also, in many ways, incremental social processes. Like the people who create them and live in them, they have complex life histories that are shaped simultaneously by ideal concepts of proper behavior, by an embodied *habitus*, and by practical decisions resulting from the course of daily social life over a long period of time (Bourdieu 1990; Dietler, Herbich 1998; Herbich, Dietler 1993). One of the primary contentions of this paper is that the structure of a house, or an entire settlement, at one moment in time can yield very little insight into the cultural concepts and dispositions generating that structure or into their symbolic import, and that only an approach that recognizes and responds to this dynamic quality, what we

call “settlement biography” (Herbich, Dietler 1993), has the possibility of penetrating beyond mere description of static spatial organization.

This discussion is intended as a demonstration of the complex link that exists between domestic spatial organization, structuring principles, practice, and symbolic meaning in an ethnographic context where these elements and their relationship can be discerned in operation. It is also intended as a caveat against the occasional tendency of some archaeologists to propose a spurious evolutionary distinction between “organized” (or “planned”) and “non-organized” settlements on the basis of a rectilinear pattern in the arrangement of houses and streets. As will be seen, *all* settlements are structured by some kind of organizing principles, and we should not mistake our inability to recognize those principles for the absence of organization. Similarly, those who speak of “planned” settlements as if the organization of houses and streets simply appear in a given form as the result of an abstract concept or decision by some central authority need to think seriously about the ways that settlements actually get constructed and reconstructed – about who actually builds houses, under what conditions, over what span of time, and how builders and dwellers understand their own actions and what they imagine themselves to be doing. The construction and habitation of settlements is a complex incremental process that involves the constant solving of a series of small social and technical problems through the implementation of a set of culturally inflected dispositions within a particular evolving political context.

3. Luo Space and Time

The case examined here centers around the Luo people of western Kenya. The Luo are a Nilotic speaking people inhabiting an area of approximately 10,000 square km surrounding the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria (Herbich 2002). As noted, we conducted an ethnoarchaeological research project here of approximately three years duration that was focused particularly on Siaya District, the roughly one third of Luo territory located north of the Gulf. This was supplemented by more limited sojourns in the rest of Luoland (South Nyanza and Kisumu Districts).

The Luo have a subsistence economy based upon cereal and tuber agriculture, stock herding, and fishing. At the time of our study, the Luo population numbered about 2.5 million. Regional population density is relatively high, but the settlement pattern consists of separated patrilineal extended-family homesteads scattered over the landscape without any larger concentrations of population (Dietler, Herbich 1993, 1998; Herbich, Dietler 1993; Southall 1952). The Luo do not have cities, towns, or even villages in the sense that Europeans know them (although there are now large concentrations of Luo living in cities such as Nairobi and Kisumu). Each homestead, which is called a *dala*, is occupied by a polygynous extended family consisting, over the course of its life cycle, of a man, his wives, his sons and their wives, and the children of his sons (fig. 1). A man must

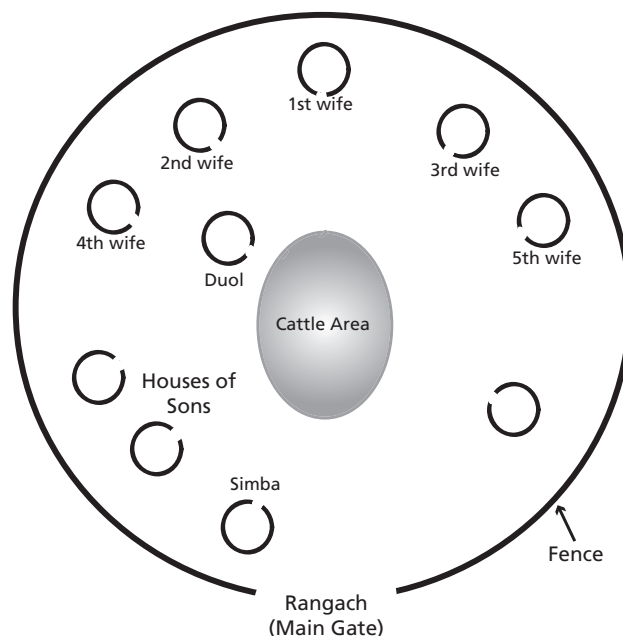


Figure 2. Schematic representation of ideal model of spatial organization in a Luo *dala*.

always marry in the homestead of his father, rather than his grandfather's; consequently, when a man's eldest son is ready for marriage, he will at that point move out from his own father's *dala* and found a new one of his own with his sons and, eventually, their wives and children. Thus, each homestead has a three-generation life cycle. When the last of the original inhabitants of a homestead have died, the settlement (now called a *gunda*) will be left fallow for a period and then used as farm land by the sons of the former head of the homestead, who are at that point all heads of their own homesteads in the neighborhood.

What is important about this process for the current discussion is that unlike some other aspects of Luo material culture, such as pottery, the layout of the homestead is heavily imbued with symbolic meaning and governed by a shared ideal model and a strict and rigidly-adhered-to set of ritual procedures and structuring practices. Indeed, the homestead is perhaps the most symbolically laden element of Luo material culture, as it underlines and reinforces through a physical spatial model the segmentary-lineage-based social structure and the relations of authority. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the actual layouts of individual homesteads evince considerable variation. This apparent inconsistency is explained by examining a homestead over the course of its three-generation life-cycle and demonstrating how the ideal model is translated in practice and showing how the organization of the homestead reflects the life-cycle stage and composition of the polygynous extended-family residing in it.

First, a few general comments about the Luo homestead are necessary. Each homestead is surrounded by a Euphorbia hedge fence with one main, ritually important gate, called *Rangach*, and several minor less official gates (fig. 2). Each co-wife in the homestead, including the wives of the sons, has her own house, called *ot*, in which she lives



Figure 3. A Luo *ligala* (newly founded homestead).



Figure 4. A Luo house (*ot*) under construction, with materials gathered for the project.

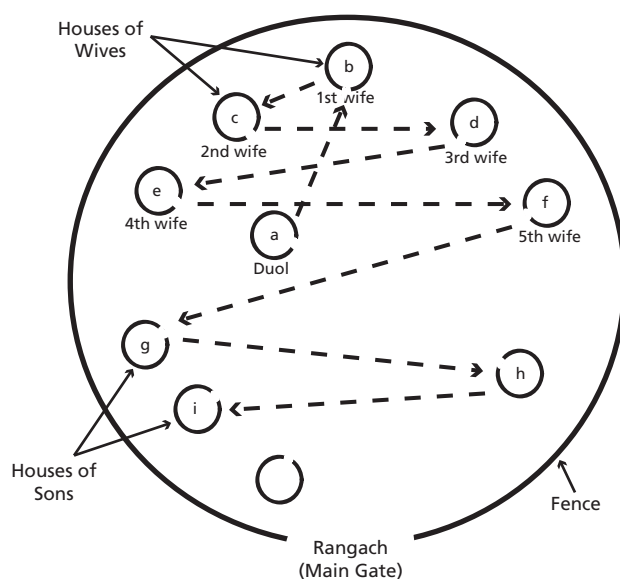


Figure 5. Schematic representation of obligatory order of construction of houses in a Luo *dala*.

with her children. Each of these households not only constitutes a separate physical structure, but a separate economic unit responsible for growing its own food in its own fields, stocking its own granary, and cooking its own meals. In contrast to the women, who are called *wuon ot* (or owner of the house), the founding father and husband is head of the homestead, and is known as *wuon dala* (or owner of the homestead). He does not have his own house, but sleeps alternately in the houses of the different wives. He does, however, have a small independent structure called *duol*, in which he eats and entertains other male guests. Another important structure is a house called *simba*, which is built as a collective residence for boys, especially once they reach the age of puberty. They live in this house, and entertain girlfriends there, until the eldest one marries; at which point a new *simba* is built for the others. Young children of both genders live in the mother's house. When they are about five years old or so, the boys go to the *simba* and girls go to live in the house of a grandmother, who instructs them for their future role as wife and mother. Cattle are kept in the center of the homestead and granaries are located next to the houses to which they belong.

The founding of a homestead and the building of these structures is governed by strict ritual regulations governing both the spatial arrangement and the temporal order of construction. These regulations have severe supernatural consequences: breach of the proper procedure results in a dangerous state called *chira*, which leads to death (Abe 1981; Dietler, Herbich 1993).

A new homestead at the time of its founding is first called a *ligala*, (an example of which you see in fig. 3). The act of founding a new settlement is initiated through a complex ritual called *goyo ligala*, in which several symbolically significant objects (a rooster, a quail basket, an axe, a machete, firewood and embers of fire from the *duol* of the father) are carried from the former *dala* to the new homestead. This is usually done at the beginning of the harvest season, although other times are permissible. The houses are traditionally of wattle-and-daub construction on a post frame, and with a thatched roof (fig. 4); and building materials are assembled and the houses are constructed by means of collective labor organized through a work feast (see Dietler, Herbich 2001). The first consideration to be worked out in terms of the spatial orientation of the settlement is the eventual position of the first wife's house and the main gate (or *rangach*), as these two must face each other along the main axis of the homestead, with the *rangach* being downhill from the first wife's house. However, the first structure to actually be built is the *duol* of the *wuon dala* (fig. 5:a). This is placed either to the right or left of the eventual position of the first wife's house, and more toward the center of the homestead, with the door facing the center. The first wife's house (fig. 5:b) must then be built directly opposite the *rangach* gate, with its door facing the gate. The next structure built must be the second wife's house (fig. 5:c), which must be to the side of the first wife's house, with its door oriented toward the middle of the settlement. The third wife's house (fig. 5:d) is then built on the opposite side from the second wife's house, and the houses

of subsequent wives follow suit, alternating across the central axis formed by the line between the first wife's house and the *rangach* gate (fig. 5: e, f).

After the houses of all current co-wives of the head of the *dala* have been built, then the houses of the sons are built (fig. 5: g, h, i). These are built in the opposite half of the *dala* from the parental generation (that is, the lower, down-slope half near the *rangach*), and they also work downward toward the *rangach*. Again, seniority is very important in determining placement and order of construction. The *simba* is immediately to the left of the gate as one enters. The house of the first son of the first wife will be the closest to the upper half of the settlement, and other sons will be placed lower down the slope toward the *rangach*. Of course, after the initial installation, the precise order of future construction will depend upon the timing of the arrival of new wives and the marriage of sons. But the spatio-temporal logic and procedures are clear.

This entire layout is, in fact, a spatial representation of the principles of complementary opposition and genealogical seniority, which are the foundations of the socio-political structure of the society (fig. 6). Moreover, the entire kinship structure is clearly modeled in the homestead, and this is not some sort of fanciful etic construct imposed on the data, but a feature clearly recognized by the Luo themselves. The term for the maximal lineage, for example, is *dhoot*, the same term for the doorway of a house, and it implies that the people of a lineage originally issued from one mother (that is, one co-wife of a *dala*). It is recognized that each household in a homestead represents the kernel of a potential future lineage segment. Tellingly, although the kinship system is strongly patrilineal and political action is in the hands of men, the basis of segmentation of lineages is seen to reside in the opposition among houses each of which is centered around a woman (a *wuon ot*), and the lineage names often are traced to the names of female ancestors: the wives of an ancient male *wuon dala*.

The traditional Luo political system has been a strongly egalitarian, acephalous one with a classic segmentary-lineage system as outlined by Evans-Pritchard (1949) and Aiden Southall (1952). The ideology of political action prescribes that it takes place through flexible alliances at various levels according to the principle of complementary opposition (even if this did not always happen in practice). That is, lineages or lineage segments unite according to kinship affiliation; but the level at which they unite depends upon the level of opposition for a given incident of conflict. For example, two minimal lineage segments may oppose each other on a particular issue, but unite as a higher-level segment to oppose another segment of similar size and social distance. Those former enemies may, in turn unite as a maximal lineage to oppose another maximal lineage. This system has been overlain since the early 20th century with an administrative framework of local "chiefs" imposed by the British colonial government as part of their bureaucracy of indirect rule, and this structure was continued by the post-colonial Kenyan state. However, the generally egalitarian political ethos (with authority distributed according to age and gender) and the

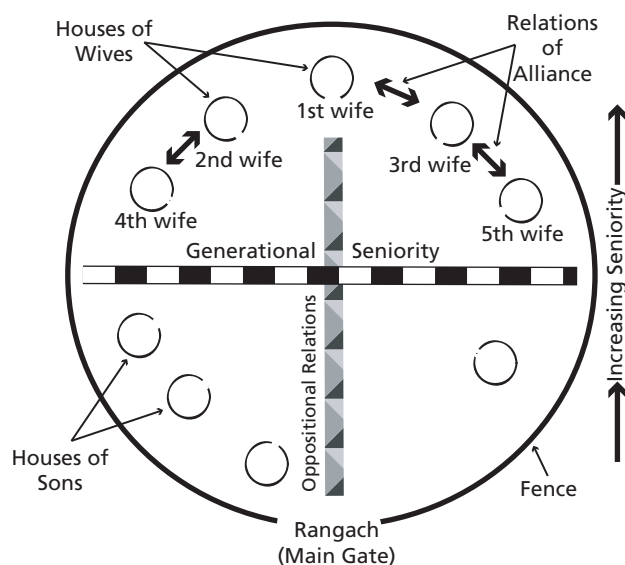


Figure 6. Ideal structural model of the Luo *dala*, showing the relations of generational seniority and complementary opposition modeled in the spatial organization of the settlement.

segmentary lineage ideology have continued to exert a powerful influence in Luo political practice.

The underlying principles of complementary opposition and authority are accurately modeled in the layout of the homestead, with alternating co-wives aligned in descending order of seniority on opposite sides of the main axis of the settlement. A certain amount of tension is expected between all co-wives, but relations are expected to be most cordial and cooperative between even- or odd-numbered wives. That is, wives 1, 3, and 5 are expected to be helpers and allies among themselves, as are wives 2, 4, and 6. For this reason, although it is considered desirable to marry sisters, it is very bad to marry two sisters without marrying another woman between the two. Marrying two sisters in succession would place them in what is considered a naturally oppositional relationship.

These concepts are translated into a clear spatial model in the settlement layout, with alternate wives on opposite sides of the homestead. And the oppositional relationship is continued with the position of the houses of their respective sons.

The concept of seniority, not simply in terms of age, but rather in terms of structural position within the kinship system, is very important in defining the structure of authority relationships, duties, and rights in the society (see Dietler, Herbich 1993). And this also is clearly reflected in the settlement layout through the position and order of construction of the houses of the wives and their sons. It is further reinforced by a variety of other practices such as the order of construction of granaries, the order of planting and harvesting of fields, and even the order of first entry into the homestead through the *rangach*. The first wife has considerable authority over other women within the homestead. It is she who assigns agricultural land to her co-wives and initiates a variety of activities for the homestead. Her authority, symbolized in the spatial organization of the *dala* and the sequential order of construction of houses, is



Figure 7. House of a dead co-wife (on left) being allowed to deteriorate alongside house occupied by a living co-wife (on right).

further reinforced by a variety of other practices such as the order of construction of granaries and even the order of first entry into the new homestead through the *rangach*. Moreover, the first wife must continually initiate a number of sequences of activity for the homestead at large. Each year, she must be the first woman in her homestead to sow her crops, and no others can begin until she does. Among many other initiatives, the first wife must also be the first to begin harvesting and the first to begin brewing beer from the new crop. Likewise, as a widow, the first wife must be the first to undergo the ritual mating (*lago*) with a brother of the husband which signifies the end of mourning. Until she does this, no repair can be done on the roofs of any of the houses in the homestead.

Similarly, the senior wives (located in the upper half of the *dala*) all have considerable authority over the wives of their sons (located in the lower half of the *dala*), including the power of deciding when they can begin cooking in their own home rather than assisting in the house of the mother-in-law, where they can grow crops, and so forth (Herbich, Dietler 2008). Hence, within the homestead, generational seniority is embodied by both temporal sequences of action and physical elevation, in the division between the upper and lower halves of the *dala*, while the relations of seniority between co-wives are also reflected in elevation within the upper half, as the first wife's house occupies the highest ground and others descend in order. Finally, this principle of the linkage between seniority and elevation is also reflected in the prohibition against a son building his *dala* uphill from that of his father. This principle was expressed by one Luo

elder in terms of water flow: "*Ohula* is water that runs from the house of *jaduong* (that is, the senior man) towards the house of the child, which is right. But the water that runs from the house of the child to the house of *jaduong* is the one which the Luo do not want."

In a society without institutionalized political roles, this spatial modeling of the socio-political structure has an important role in the enculturation, or embodiment, of such concepts for children and in naturalizing and reinforcing the ideology of authority and proper political action. It forms the physical environment that structures practice and channels the flow of social interaction. This structuring of settlement spatial relationships is taken seriously and encapsulated in a strict code of behavior. For example, the death of one woman was explained as the result of her having brewed and served beer before the first wife of her homestead had done so. The death of another man was attributed to the fact that his younger brother had married before he did. In one case a man lived alone in his new homestead for months (with his wives passing his cooked food over the fence) because his first wife was ritually prohibited from entering the gate before she had completed another prerequisite activity that required the presence of another person who was away from home. However, despite the strict and morally imperative code of behavior guiding the construction and inhabitation of the *dala*, there are a number of practical problems that would greatly obscure this highly elaborated structure to archaeological investigation. Indeed, one early British colonial administrator named Hobley even observed in 1902 that in Luo homesteads "the huts are not arranged in any particular order."

But how can such highly regulated practices guided by a tightly constrained model of spatial and temporal order result in such diversity? In the first place, the size and composition of the extended families inhabiting different homesteads vary greatly. For example, the number of wives and sons is extremely variable, and these factors will determine the number and position of houses. Furthermore, the configuration of extant houses changes over the course of the life cycle of a homestead. For example, some individuals may die and the house of a dead person cannot be occupied. Others are expected to move out and found their own homesteads at a certain point. Houses abandoned due to death or movement may be allowed to simply deteriorate (as you see in the case of the house on the left of fig. 7), they may be pulled down and some materials used for firewood as the remains of the walls gradually disintegrate, or they may be used temporarily as storage places by other women, depending upon their relationship. Additionally, other relatives may be accommodated in the *dala* due to special circumstances, and the position of those houses will be worked out according to principles of kinship and seniority. Moreover, a man and his family may move out of one homestead and establish another for various reasons (including, especially, suspected witchcraft or conflict); and the configuration of the new *dala* will depend on the life cycle stage of the family at that point in time.

Finally, there is a cycle of multiple stages of rebuilding for the houses of individuals within a given homestead. For example, the initial house of each wife is really a temporary structure which is destined to be replaced by a larger structure located adjacent to it after a few years and the first one is pulled down. When her husband dies she moves into another house, called *ot moloki*, which is built next to the previous one. Until *ot moloki* is built and she moves into it, no other building or house repair is allowed in the entire homestead. Finally, after several years in *ot moloki* during a period of mourning, another house is built adjacent to that and *ot moloki* is pulled down. The positions of these various houses often overlap.

To illustrate the nature of the variation produced by these factors, we offer the case of the configuration in 1982 of a homestead called K'Otieno (a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the residents) which was originally founded in 1946 as the second homestead of a man called Otieno, who died in 1965 (fig. 8). Houses A and B are occupied by the 3rd and 4th wives of Otieno. The first two wives died in the old homestead before 1945. While they do not have structures in the new homestead, the place where the first wife's house would have been has been left vacant in order to respect the rules of placement. House C is the *duol* of the son of the long-dead second wife of Otieno, House D is occupied by his wife, and House E is occupied by their unmarried son. House F is occupied by the son of the 4th wife of Otieno with his wife and children. House G is occupied by the son and his wife of a brother of Otieno who were allowed to dwell in the *dala* of an uncle under special circumstances. Another house belonging to the first son of the first wife of Otieno formerly occupied the vacant area

at the lower left-hand corner of the homestead before he moved out to found his own *dala* in 1970. Each of the two surviving wives of Otieno has also, over time, lived in four different houses within the homestead (the position of these are shown schematically in fig. 9).

We have space for only a single such example in this chapter, but it should serve to demonstrate the complexity of arrangements that are possible. The social landscape at any one moment in time will contain homesteads at all stages of the life cycle (fig. 10). None will look exactly alike, although each was generated from the same set of structuring dispositions and practices. The reconstruction of those structuring principles and dispositions from archaeological data is a bit like trying to reconstruct the rules of chess from a random sample of fifty chess boards at various stages of different games. If one knows the rules from the start, one can perhaps imagine how the pieces arrived at their present position in each case. However, to move in the other direction, to define the rules on the basis of the static position of pieces late in the game is virtually impossible, and particularly if one uses only the pieces of one board at one stage of a single game (that is, the equivalent of a single house or village). The caveat for the feasibility of social and symbolic analysis of archaeological data, and for the burgeoning field of "household archaeology" (e.g. Allison 1999), should be obvious. Only through the perspective of settlement biography, through comparative diachronic analysis of the life histories of numerous related dwellings and settlements can one hope to arrive at some understanding of the principles that generated their structural configuration. This procedure, equivalent to observing the sequences of moves on different chess boards rather than simply the final position of the pieces, is, needless to say, a daunting task of uncertain feasibility in many archaeological cases. But it is a procedure that must be attempted by those who would seriously advocate the pursuit of the analysis of settlements to yield information about social organization and cultural logic. Those who ignore the complex dynamic character of settlements, even in the context of a very short time span, do so at their peril.

4. Regional Changes in House Forms, Materials, and Techniques

Another dimension to the biography of Luo settlements, and the relationship between structure and practice, is offered by the fact that on a regional scale, houses are in the process of undergoing a gradual transformation in form, technique of construction, and materials. The change is from houses of round plan to houses of rectangular plan, and from earthen walls and a thatch roof to cement block construction with a corrugated iron roof. However, these aspects are not spreading as a consistent package or at a uniform rate. Although the traditional round house is found only in earthen construction, the rectangular plan is found with earthen construction or (far less commonly) in cement construction. Moreover, the wattle and daub version can be found with either a thatch roof or a corrugated iron roof (figs. 11, 12). Some Luo areas still have almost exclusively round houses, others are mixed (often in

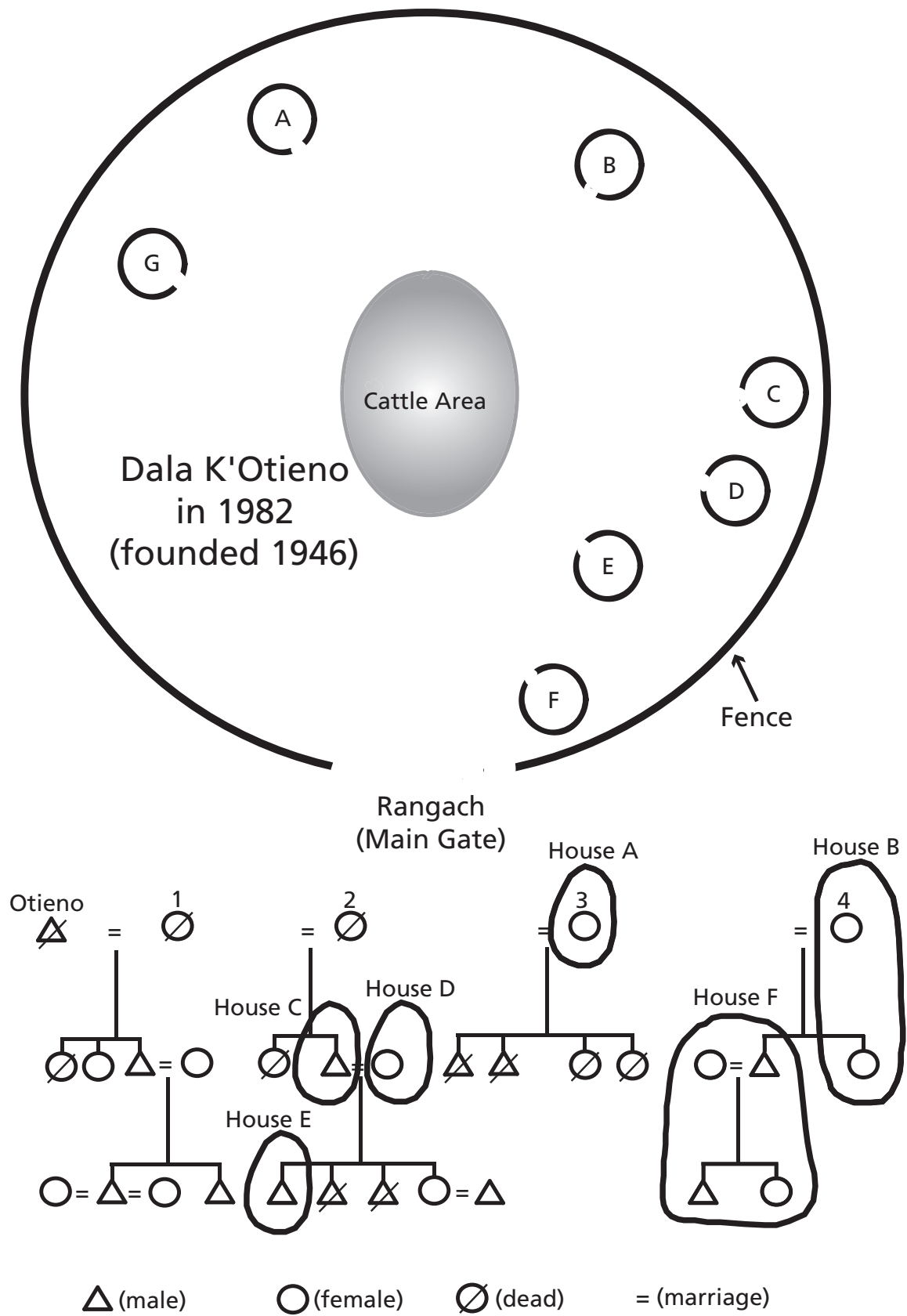


Figure 8. Schematic representation of arrangement of houses in *dala* K'Otieno in 1982 and kinship chart of people living in the houses. K'Otieno was originally founded in 1946 as the second homestead of a man called Otieno, who died in 1965.



Figure 11. Rectangular wattle-and-daub house with thatch roof.



Figure 12. Rectangular wattle-and-daub house with corrugated iron roof.



Figure 13. Round (right) and rectangular (left) houses in same *dala*. the same homestead: figs. 13, 14), and in some areas it is rare to see a round house any more.

What is significant about this situation is to understand what demands are being responded to in these various changes, how inclinations of practice condition changes, and how some changes may have unintended consequences for challenging the unquestioning perception of the “naturalness” of the social and material world in other domains of social practice. In the Luo case, all of these changes are ultimately a response to the impact of European colonial-

ism and the world-economy on the region, but in somewhat different ways. The rectangular form is to some degree an adaptation to the adoption of rectangular European furniture, particularly beds and tables, which do not fit very well in a round house. While the rectangular house form has also come to be felt by many people to be vaguely “modern”, it does not carry particularly heavy symbolic weight as a sign of unusual prestige or wealth (although, to a certain extent, the furniture “implied” by a rectangular house may have this effect). Because of their cost, corrugated iron roofs and, especially, cement construction do clearly and directly carry such implications of wealth and prosperity. In general, the change in house form has occurred gradually, without controversy or, indeed, even much overt discursive attention.

In view of the demonstrated social and symbolic importance of spatio-temporal relationships within the homestead outlined earlier, it may appear somewhat surprising that a change in house *form* could be accomplished with so little apparent concern or turmoil. Yet this is clearly the case. And the unproblematic nature of the transformation of form is further emphasized by the marked contrast with the reaction provoked by experiments with changes in the *position* of the houses due to land shortage: these have been a cause of considerable anxiety, of concerns about supernatural consequences, and of discussions attempting to establish a discursively rationalized orthodoxy where none was previously needed. Yet, as noted, the *form* of the house appears to be a feature open to substantial variation without much comment or concern.

This is not to say that the spatial arrangement of the homestead is inflexible: in fact, as discussed earlier, there are possibilities for all kinds of contingencies in practice that even make the underlying regularity of structure somewhat difficult to perceive for an outside observer. However, as explained, the range of choices is decidedly limited by the *habitus* and reinforced by ritual and the threat of supernatural sanctions (Dietler, Herbich 1994, 1998). There are certain innovative responses of practice (for example, a man building a house behind that of his grandfather—that is, upslope from it within the homestead—for reasons of land shortage) that have called the axiomatic, taken for granted nature of some practices into question and provoked a discussion of the logic of practice, particularly among senior men. As explained earlier, space and time are so important in the context of settlement organization because dispositions governing the relationship of houses are closely linked in their reproduction with dispositions governing the structure of seniority, kinship, and authority. The spatial structure of the homestead (as well as ritual and temporal sequences involved with acts of founding, building, etc.) constitutes a powerful symbolic representation of the structure of social relations because it forms the physical environment in which the *habitus* producing the perceptions of the “natural” order of social relations is formed in the course of daily social life. Changes in the form of the house have been less critical in this case because they have had less of an impact on daily relations of interaction. Moreover, the internal structural relations of domestic space remain unchanged from round to rectangular houses. There is still a female side of the house with the hearth and sleeping



Figure 14. *Dala* with round and rectangular houses.

area, and an opposite side for visitors. This structural principle even determines the proper function of rooms as the innovation of internal divisions appears in houses.

Curiously, changes in the *materials* from which houses are made have had more profound social consequences than the form of the house, although these have attracted less overt awareness or discursive attention among the Luo. This is, again, because the materials subtly affect practices that underlie dispositions governing social relations. Traditionally, thatched roofs can be built and repaired only by men (fig. 15), while walls must be regularly smeared with clay by groups of women at least once a year. The need for periodic roof repair reinforces relations of dependence between women (the “owners” of houses) and men, and the smearing parties reinforce relations of mutual support and dependence among women.

As a further illustration, upon the death of a male head of the homestead, none of the other co-wives is allowed to have her house’s roof repaired until the first wife’s roof has been repaired; and this is allowed only after she has undergone a ritual to mark the end of mourning and her transition, under the rules of the levirate, to the care of the husband’s brother. Hence, there is considerable social pressure on the first wife to acquiesce to the procedure of the levirate that is reinforced by the material conditions of the dwellings. It is clear that the more permanent construction materials, by eliminating such practical needs for repair, may have a profound impact on relations of authority and dependence. Moreover, when the owner of a house dies, others are not allowed to occupy it: the house must simply be left to deteriorate and fall down or be pulled down. As noted earlier, homesteads themselves undergo a regular cycle of occupation by a three-generation family (a man, his wives, his sons and their wives and children). They are

abandoned after the death of the founding generation and converted to farmland by the sons of the original male head of the homestead. These sons are obligated by custom to move out of their houses in the father’s homestead and found their own homesteads when their own sons are ready for marriage. The building of expensive permanent cement houses is creating strains in this system, which is intimately entwined with kinship relations and political structures

5. Conclusion

One could go on indefinitely exploring the complexities of Luo domestic space and the relationship to social life and organization. But, for the purposes of this brief paper, let us conclude here by posing the question that is most relevant to the other contributors to this volume: remembering our caveat against direct analogy, what are the lessons to be learned from this study for archaeologists? Several features are immediately apparent.

1) First, the Luo example forces us to recognize that *all* settlements are organized by a cultural logic that is instrumental in ordering social relations. Our inability to perceive the organizing principles easily is not an indication that an organization, or order, does not exist. It means simply that we have not yet identified it. As a corollary to this, it is also clear that one does not need centralized political authority to achieve an “organized” settlement pattern. Acephalous societies do this quite easily, and we should be very careful about imputing forms of political organization as being necessary to the structuring of settlements.

2) Second, if we want to uncover the elusive structuring principles underlying settlements, it is crucial to attempt the kind of diachronic comparative analysis of domestic



Figure 15. Man performing roof repair on his wife's house. Only men are allowed to climb onto the roof.

structures and the constructed landscape that were outlined above. We need to define sequences of actions and look for relational connections if we hope to discern the social processes and relations that both created domestic structures and were shaped by living in them. This means looking closely at detailed comparative house and settlement histories and life-cycles in our excavations – looking to construct settlement biographies.

3) Third, this study points out the value of disaggregating the elements of architecture – form, materials, and spatial arrangements – for analytical purposes and considering the relative effects of transformations of each independently, as well as the relationships between them.

4) Fourth, it is clear that cross-cultural appropriations of elements of architecture, furniture, and other material culture items always have unintended consequences, and these can be quite profound. This can be especially important in colonial contexts, such as those in the ancient western Mediterranean, where one sees the creative adaptation of different elements of alien colonial cultures in different contexts. In order to understand the social significance of these cultural borrowings, we need to seek out both the social and cultural logic of demand for the specific items adopted and the consequences of such adoptions for daily life. It is important to remember that objects do not necessarily cross cultural frontiers with the practices associated with them in their original contexts, and we cannot assume that those practices formed part of the reasons they were desired in the new context of consumption.

5) Finally, this case reminds us of the complex ways that structure is created in built form. This does not involve a direct movement from abstract plan to concrete settlement, but rather an incremental vernacular translation of cultural dispositions through practice in a living social world of competing interests and power relations. In other words, social life is the intervening messy process between ideal concepts about form, space, and symbolism on the one hand, and the actual constructed spaces that people inhabit and incrementally transform. Hence, we must develop a more realistic theoretical understanding of the play of social relations and processes in the construction, habitation, and conceptualization of dwell-

ings and urban landscapes if we hope to understand what lies behind the built forms we uncover in excavations.

As noted, there is a great deal more to say about the complex relationship between Luo domestic structures and social life. Indeed, we have hardly scratched the surface here. But it is hoped that these few selected observations will serve to open a path toward some productive reflections and insights over the kinds of archaeological cases considered in this volume. If so, then the value of ethnoarchaeology and anthropological theory will have been demonstrated.

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