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Indigenous Architecture and Relational Senses of Personhood: A Cultural Reading of Changing Dwelling Styles among Forest-Dwelling Foragers

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Abstract: Given anthropological theories of how houses reflect and regenerate symbolic schemes, I propose to address in this presentation this question: what, if anything, can be learnt from the materially simple dwellings of indigenous forest peoples, who to date still partially maintain hunting and gathering traditions? While these dwellings may give outsiders the impression of "temporary shelters" and "huts", they have constituted for their dwellers a "permanent" way of dwelling, which presumably embodies and regenerates their specific cultural values, including specific senses of self and community. Drawing on an anthropological study of a forest-dwelling tribal people in the Nilgiri-Wynaad of South India (Nayaka, 1978-2004), I explore these senses, paying attention to cultural constructions of inside/outside, public/private, and separate/shared domains of life.

Keywords: Forest Dwellers, Hunters and Gatherers, Nayaka, Huts, Building and Cultural Values, Relational Personhood

"**THIS," SAID THE** ten-year-old who was explaining to me the exhibit that his classmates were making, "is early man." And "this," he continued, "is his hut, where he lives." The small figure, namely "early man," which the children had made from clay, stood on a raised surface strewn with grass and small stones. He stood in the front of a structure flimsily built from twigs and grass, namely "the hut." The display in itself was no more noteworthy than other school projects on "early men" that I had seen before in England. Or, for that matter, in some Natural History museums that exhibit in life-size elaborate show-cases how "early man" lived. But this one was remarkable because it was constructed and shown at a school for tribal children run by a local development organization in Gudalur (Tamil Nadu) less than 30 kilometres distant from a place where a few of the pupils' families still lived in forest abodes constructed lightly from bamboo, branches and grass. What for these families were their contemporary homes were akin to the model of the "primitive hut" exhibited in the nearby West-influenced school.

The conflation of such contemporary exotic families with "prehistoric people" in popular Western/ized discourse and imagery, and the ironic complexity of development work and education in post-colonial Third World countries, are not the subject of this article. Instead, it focuses specifically on the contemporary indigenous dwellings that too often are conflated with "the primitive hut" in Western/ized imagination. I seek to examine ethnographically what these indigenous dwellings mean to their contemporary dwellers. Too easily such dwellings are seen in some views as the work of backward people, who lack technological know-how. Or, to the opposite, as testimony to environmentally ingenious builders, whose technical wisdom is romanticized for its functional problem-solving answers to the native

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environmental limits. These dichotomized views, I argue here, are both over-simplistic. By weaving an argumentative path between them, I want to begin elucidating how these indigenous styles of building relate to particular cultural constructions of self, social relations and society. These dwellings, I suggest, embody and mould a relational personhood that hinges on plural living-together and sharing.

The article draws on a long-term study of a tribal group called Nayaka, who live in the lower forested slopes of the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu, in the region of the aforementioned school. The study includes Bird-David's fieldwork in 1978-9, followed by short revisits in 1989 and 2001, and Naveh's fieldwork, 25 years later, in 2003-4, under the doctoral guidance of Bird-David. Each of them carried out participant-observation fieldwork for about a year, living respectively with one, and in Naveh's case two, particular local groups. Each of them further visited other local groups: Bird-David six, and Naveh sixteen. Nayaka lived (and by and large continue to live) in small local groups, dispersed among other populations. These local groups fluctuated a great deal in size and composition, but most of them were (and remain) very small. Often, abodes are changed frequently, even when many Nayaka can no longer sustain the degree of nomadism which they enjoyed in the past because of expanding plantations and changing laws. They frequently abandon old huts and build new ones in more or less the same locality: in Bird-David's 1970s-1980s study-group, for example, every year or two. Bird-David's intensive study, on which this article largely draws, involved 15 huts (divided into five clusters, at a distance of a few hours walk from one another, each cluster comprising between one to six huts). By the early 2000s, brick-and-cement houses had been built in two of these hamlets. All the Nayaka under study continued to subsist on gathering and honey collecting, combining it variously with trade in minor forest produce, then with wage work, and since the 2000s increasingly with cultivation and animal husbandry. The study project resulted in a series of earlier articles,[1] which the present article builds on and continues.

Housing the Argument

In their introduction to the edited volume *About the House*, social anthropologists Janet Carsten and Steve Hugh-Jones (1995) caution that ethnographers pay too little attention to the houses in which their studied people live. These authors suggest that one reason for this is that houses are so commonplace, so familiar, so much a part of the way things are, that they are often taken for granted by their own dwellers. Furthermore, the houses may attract ethnographers' attention at the beginning of their fieldwork, but the first revealing architectural impressions soon fade away as ethnographers immerse themselves in local life as part of their participant-observation study. Often the houses then become for them "merely the context and environment for the increasingly abstract and wordy conversation of ethnographic research" (ibid.: 4). Still more, an existing theoretical division of labour leaves to architects the study of houses, and distributes the study of what goes on in houses among anthropologists of the "family," "housekeeping," "subsistence," "property," etc.

Houses of indigenous communities, who in orthodox anthropological terms are classified as "modern hunting and gathering people" because of their actual subsistence practices and/or their cultural traditions, have been insufficiently addressed for yet another reason:

[1] For a few selected articles see Bird-David 1999a,b, 2004a, b, and Bird-David and Naveh 2008. For a list of further articles see http://hevra.haifa.ac.il/~soc/new/en/staff/publications_eng.php?id=51

often their dwellings have not been seen as "houses" at all. In popular views, and certain scholarly traditions, such peoples live on the threshold of society. They are distinguished precisely by *not* interfering with their environment and not transforming it into a "built" one (Ingold 2000). Peter Wilson (1988) went so far as to draw an evolutionary line between hunting and gathering peoples who lack architecture, and all other societies that do have it. Ethnographers who studied this kind of societies have helped to perpetuate this impression, if only inadvertently, by the language they use to describe the dwellings in published and oral discourse. Some ethnographers use the word "*shelters*" (sometimes, in specific combinations such as "*leaf-shelter*," "*rock shelter*," etc.), when this broad term can be used also for animals, and can describe something that may just as well exist in nature, not designed and created by humans. Or they describe the dwellings as "*huts*," when "hut" in common English is associated with outdoor camping and military life (see OED), taking its meaning from the inherent opposition (from a bourgeois perspective) between indoor and outdoor life, temporary and permanent dwellings, the house and the outside. They describe the cluster of "huts" as a "*camp*", acknowledging the degree of nomadism that prevails among many societies of this kind, which, like "hut," is associated with outdoor (as opposed to indoor) living, and with temporary (as opposed to permanent) dwellings. The language of "shelter," "hut," and "camp" intuitively suggest to bourgeois sensibilities that the local dwellings are *not* houses. It meanwhile also obscures the fact that far from being temporary and liminal, the dwellings for *their dwellers* are not temporary but a "permanent" form of houses, and the normal way of dwelling. They have lived in such houses for a very long time (cf. Ingold 2000:180). For all these reasons the cultural significances and meanings of such indigenous dwellings have hardly enjoyed ethnographic attention (see Whitelaw 1994).

Anthropologists, most notably Bourdieu (1990[1970]), paid attention to "houses" as early as the 1970s. While their work did not lead to the development of "anthropology of houses" as a sub-discipline, it laid promising and firm foundations for it. Bourdieu famously posited in his classic study of the Kabyle house that in non-literate societies the house is "the principal locus for the objectification of generative schemes" (to use his later phrase: Bourdieu 1977). The house orders the space in which a person moves, and in which are inscribed visions and structures of society and the world that his or her body "reads." Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) pursued this point further. They pressed the analytical potential of approaching "the house" as not only a place to live in but more as a prime agent of socialization and an instrument of thought. House, body and mind, they wrote,

> are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. (1995:2)

This approach underlies the analysis undertaken in this article. True, the indigenous dwellings may give outsiders the impression of "temporary shelters," "huts," and "camps". But if we do credit them as houses for the dwellers themselves, who have after all rich cultural traditions, questions arise: what, then, can be learnt from these materially simple dwellings about the indigenous visions and structure of society? Do these dwellings, just like other traditional and modern kinds, embody and regenerate certain ways of thinking, socializing, and living? Do they reflect indigenous senses of self, relations, and community? Here I probe (with Carsten and Hugh-Jones) the ways in which these local dwellings "enable, mould, inform

and constrain the activities and ideas which unfold within [their] bounds." I seek (with Bourdieu) what "generative schemes" they objectify, and what can be learnt from them about the dwellers' sense of their social world.

These questions become more pertinent and theoretically intriguing for anthropologists, and I think for designers, as these indigenous populations are rapidly changing in the contemporary world (but not at all in the unidirectional, linear and progressive course imagined by Euro-American thinkers, going back to the 17th century). Indigenous houses and house uses keep evolving, as part of complex processes involving state and NGO intervention, indigenous resistance, unforeseen adaptation of modern technology, ever-scarcer natural building materials and their replacement by cheap modern ones, changing life-styles, etc. These complex and dynamic processes of change in indigenous houses highlight the need to go beyond the dichotomous simplistic impasse - i.e., the "primitive" or "genius" indigenous buildings - by examining how these buildings intermesh with the indigenous social world, and with the indigenous senses of self, relations, and community.

Nayaka Dwellings: Recurring Patterns

Photographs 1 and 2, taken in 1979 by Bird-David in her participant-observation study group (henceforth "Gir Nayaka"), depict the traditional end of the diverse houses in which the Gir Nayaka lived. Since the 1950s, these Nayaka have depended partly on wage work on the tea and coffee plantations that have been spreading fast in the region, eating into virgin and secondary forest. But they have not stopped living in such dwellings, alongside other dwellings that continue to evolve, including, at the other extreme, a few one-room brick-and-cement buildings built in the early 2000s by a development organization. In the rest of this brief article, I focus on cultural meanings of some features of the traditional houses and how, to some degree, they are reproduced despite and through the changes.

Photographs 1 and 2 (Nurit Bird-David 1979)

Close communal living is apparent in most settlements, with little separation between the public and private arenas. Life is generally lived outside in the open air, in close proximity to other people. In the traditional small forest settlements, people often slept, cooked, and

ate outside their houses, around small fires that burned throughout the night, except in the rainy season. The houses were built very close to one another. The walls, often made from strips of bamboo, offered little audible or even visual privacy. Occasionally several houses were joined together in a row, with barely any partitioning walls between them. Lean-tos that rested against rocks, or other dwellings, and lacked walls, also met housing needs, and no effort was made to wall them in on all sides. Some built houses remained wall-less for months on end, as their construction took place at a very leisurely pace or was never completed, while people meanwhile dwelled in them. The dwellers took weeks, and even months, to build what could have been built in a day or two, meanwhile living in full view - and *with* a full view - of everybody around them. The erosion of land in some settlements made it necessary to build the houses on raised platforms made of beaten mud rather than directly on the ground or on a rock face. These houses were built so as to leave a veranda around them over which the thatched roof protruded, creating more open living spaces. In the 1980s and 1990s, when deforestation accelerated, and timber, bamboo, and grass became harder to obtain in the forest, in some places black plastic sheets were purchased to replace the fast-decaying grass roofs. These plastic sheets were costly, and, as it turned out, no more durable than the grass. The houses stood with torn, ragged roofing, and where the landscape allowed it, lean-tos were once more built directly against rocks, to save on building materials. The jumble of rock shelters, shanty shacks, and decaying, traditionally-built shelters looked far more pitiful than before, and attracted the attention of government and non-government organizations. But even where such agencies constructed brick-and-mortar buildings for Nayaka, the inhabitants, weather permitting, continued to live a great deal of their domestic lives outdoors. They added to these buildings lean-tos made of wood and grass, or substitute plastic sheets. The centre of their domestic life gravitated to these lean-tos, leaving the built space for storage. Life *together* continued to be the norm and common practice. People not only lived in full view of one another, they engaged in conversations across semi-partitions and flimsy walls, while carrying on with their own respective domestic affairs, with no pretence to exclusive privacy.

As well as life in public view, the indigenous house style supported a fluid and flexible social life that blurred distinctions between inhabitants and visitors. Some houses underwent a developmental cycle of sorts, starting as a single-space structure and ending up comprising two or three living spaces, in which different families lived. When the need arose a lean-to was added, and walls were later put up - or not. These living spaces had their independent entrances from the outside. At the same time, they were not strictly separated from one another by internal walls. In some observed cases, only rows of short sticks, sparsely stuck into the ground, and no more than knee height, demarcated adjacent families. Not out of technical or economic necessity were the houses built this way. Sufficient land and forest building materials were to be had to build separate houses.

The living-spaces were added *ad hoc*, as needed. For example, they were built for a family that came for a short-term visit and stayed on; or for a widowed person who had vacated his or her former house; or for a son or daughter who started living with a partner. A lean-to was only added if no other living space was then vacant in the settlement. Often, vacant spaces *were* available, as previous occupants had left them, going to visit or live in another place. A sort of "musical chairs" went on. At any given moment the population of a compound house somehow reflected the comings and goings of relatives in the community, providing

a sort of snapshot of chance sequences of love and death, visits and work opportunities, friendship and tension.

As is characteristic of "hunting and gathering peoples" generally, "most of life went on around the houses rather than in them" (Wilson 1988), including sleeping, bathing babies, cooking, eating, etc. Furthermore, withdrawal *into* a house carried negative associations. Rather than the English image of the house as one's castle, which is associated with security and sovereignty, the Nayaka house in their (mind-)setting was associated with fatal illness: very sick people remained within, and died. Staying inside the house was also associated with stinginess: a miser, in the local version, hides in the house so that nobody will ask him or her to help or share what he or she has with others. Living in the open, one was less susceptible to being accused of meanness. This was a contributing factor to the tolerance for, and even attractiveness of, living in lean-tos and in open houses, and to the leisurely pace of building houses.

To get away from others in a culturally acceptable way one did not withdraw inwards but moved outwards to the forest. Normally, couples who wished to be alone did not withdraw into a bourgeois, lockable bedroom. They went to forage in the forest. Love affairs became public not through a couple being seen sleeping together night after night, but being seen going off to forage together in the forest day after day. From a modern bourgeois perspective, there is a peculiar twist here on what is public and private. Privacy is associated with subsistence work (e.g., foraging and collecting firewood), and with going away from home, while home-life takes place in public view.

The particular local sense of living-together, which shapes and is shaped by the indigenous house styles, even as it changes, is also expressed in sleeping patterns. Risking over-simplification, one may say for the sake of polemic juxtaposition that in common White middle-class individualist views, sleeping alone is the normal and "natural" state, except for sexually-connected couples, who "sleep together" (note: "sleeping together" is a euphemism for sexual engagement). Parents ideally sleep in their own separate and often lockable room; in the evening a bedtime ritual takes place when young children are removed from the adults, and despite their wishes and cries of resentment, they are made to sleep in their separate room, and separate bed. Among the Nayaka with whom I worked, sleep-alone was frowned upon, if at all it happened. Adults and children commonly slept together; sexual intercourse took place in the forest, or occasionally quietly beside the children. Old widows slept with adolescents. Teenagers slept with one another. Neither age nor gender differences were a barrier. Sleeping-alone was a graver matter than mixed-gender or mixed-aged co-sleeping. As far as possible, nobody was allowed to sleep alone. Such a circumstance was a sign of uneasy relations with that person, a social pathology which usually signalled the latter's imminent departure to another place. Rather than the modern experience of alternating between sleep-alone to sexual sleep-together, on moving from single to conjugal life, here bodies experience instead the ease, flow, and indeterminacy of *joining-and-separating* others. They experience sleeping in a series of pluralities, unfolding from each other, a cluster of children, a couple, parents-and-child, widow-and-adolescent, and so on.

Indigenous Architecture, Relational Personhood: Concluding Remarks

The above ethnographic snippets suffice for us to ask as to what senses of person, relations, and community do the indigenous dwellings "enable, mould, inform, and constrain." My

argument is that part of the traditional Nayaka style of dwellings, which reproduces itself through its changes and evolution, "enables, moulds, informs, and constrains" a particular indigenous concept of person and plurality that can be described as relational. Associating "the person" with "self" and "individual" reflects a historically unique European construction of "the person," as Marcel Mauss (1985 (1938)) famously posited well back in the mid-20th century, and Louis Dumont (1980; 1986) traced its Greco-Judeo-Christian roots. Students in the last few decades have been exploring alternative senses of personhood in non-Western and indigenous contexts, and now increasingly also in various Western/ized ones, elaborating on what they describe as a socio-centric and relational kind of personhood, rather than an individualist one. In these terms, I argue, the Nayaka dwelling styles express and reproduce a relational and socio-centric sense of personhood, a personhood construct which hinges on plural living-together and sharing.

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I am a cultural Anthropologist with BA in Economics and Mathematics (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel), and PhD in Social Anthropology (Cambridge University, UK). My work draws on long-term fieldwork since the 1970s among a group of Nayaka, a foraging people who live on the remote forested slopes of the Nilgiri Hills in South India, and on research in the 1990s into a regional development project in the dry Machakos district of East Kenya. An author of many articles, my interests included cultural economics, cultural conceptions of the environment, senses of personhood and community, and their embodiment in such diverse domains as visual art and medicine. I am currently interested in their embodiment in local building traditions, both among indigenous forest people, and -- beginning a new research -- among middle-class home- renovators and builders in Israel.

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