Structuralism in Eastern Indonesia:
An Origin for a Theory in the Social Sciences

Yancey Orr and Raymond I. Orr

Biodata: Yancey Orr is an anthropologist at the University of Queensland.

Biodata: Raymond I. Orr is a political scientist at the University of Melbourne.

Abstract

Structuralism in anthropology is often attributed to Claude Lévi-Strauss and the ethnography of Amazonian tribes. Over a decade before Lévi-Strauss first published on the subject, the publication of van Wouden's Sociale Structuurtypen in de Groote Oost in 1935 inspired a robust program of structuralist ethnographic studies in eastern Indonesia that has only recently slowed down. This article examines the key structuralist insights from ethnographies in Nusa Tenggara to demonstrate an alternative origin of one of anthropologies most important theories and the contribution that this part of Indonesia has made to social science and the study of culture.

Keywords: Structuralism, Nusa Tenggara, Leiden School, Asymmetric Connubium

Introduction

Structuralism is often attributed to the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure or the myth and kinship analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Over a decade before *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Dutch colonial officials and anthropologists called the "Leiden School" developed a type of social analysis that could be categorized as *structuralist*. Though J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong was the central figure of the Leiden School because of his direct links to French and German traditions (Otterspeer 1989, pp. 307), it was his student, Van Wouden, who best codified this brand of structuralism in his *Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia* (1968 [1935]). The Leiden School held the view that all "social phenomena are formerly rooted in the totality of culture" (van Wouden 1968; pp. 1) and used ethnographic evidence to demonstrate the nature of this totality. According to van Wouden and other Leiden Eastern Indonesianists, the totality of culture sprang from kinship and marriage rules which were the organizing principles of society, thought, art, mythology, belief, material culture, *et omnia*. In van Wouden's introduction to *Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia* (1968 [1935]), their ambitious view of the explanatory power of marriage is succinctly explained:

> We hope to be able to show that this marriage custom [originally cross-cousin, but then a asymmetric marriage alliance emerged as the important category][1]
> is the pivot on which turns the activity of the social groups, the clans. The scheme of social categories thus found serves as the model for an all-embracing classification. Cosmos and human society are organized in the same way, and

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[1] The insertion is my own and not the translators.

through this there emerges the essential interconnection and similarity of the human and the cosmic. (pp. 2)

The novel insight and ethnographic discovery that launched structuralism in anthropology before Lévi-Strauss was the asymmetric marriage alliance, or as it is known in Dutch and French anthropology, the *asymmetric connubium* of Eastern Indonesia (Fox 1980, pp. 5). In this article, I will refer to the asymmetric marriage alliance as the asymmetric marriage system because "system" suggests the degree to which it influences symbolic meaning and structural patterning beyond marriage alliances. As I have elaborated in my essay on the household, the basic law of the asymmetric marriage system is that group *a* take wives from group *b* who take wives from group *c* who take wives from group *a* (appendix: figure 2). The discovery of this type of social structure was the most influential structuralist work in anthropology from the Leiden School (van Wouden 1935; deJong 1951; Lévi-Strauss 1949) and had a strong influence on Lévi-Strauss.[2] Though it is a precursor to a theory of culture that certain sections of modern anthropology used to analyze culture with from approximately 1960 to 1985, it originated in what now seems like the archaic attempt to show the development of patrilineality out of matrilineality in the social evolution of man (Fox 1980, pp.4). Though the impetus may have been from another epoch, van Wouden's structuralism and theory of culture gave creative energy to structuralist studies in this part of Southeast Asia which is broadly described as Eastern Indonesia. However, what van Wouden and others describe as "Eastern Indonesia" is more appropriately defined as the Lesser Sunda Islands and the South Moluccas (appendix: figure 1).[3] This being said, I will continue the tradition of referring to the Lesser Sunda Island and the South Moluccas as Eastern Indonesia for the sake of simplicity and continuity.

The enthusiasm of van Wouden's claim that the pivot on which culture turns is marriage, and thus kinship organization, started a zealous program that at times came close to a form of ideologically induced *apophenia*. However, those holding to a unifying theory of symbols have investigated many forms of Eastern Indonesian culture with interesting results. I will start by describing the asymmetric marriage system because it is credited with shaping the other elements of the social world and was the most significant contribution from this region for the discipline of anthropology as a whole. Next, I will examine how structuralism has studied the expressions of this ordering in: a) the house; b) the village; c) ritual exchange; d) language; and e) textiles.

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[2] I have cited the original dates and not the publication dates of the English translations to show that asymmetric marriage alliances were the subject of incipient structuralism.

[3] Their structural analyses rightfully exclude the complex wet rice societies of the island of Sulawesi and the Province of West Papua (the Melanesian Zone) that comprise the vast majority of the land and people of Eastern Indonesia but are not part of the system orientated around asymmetric marriage alliance (see figure 1). Though East Timor is not part politically of Indonesia, it falls in this cultural grouping.

Asymmetric marriages

Asymmetric marriage, according to structuralists, does more than combine reproductive units in prescribed ways. Lévi-Strauss (1963) claimed that asymmetric marriages resulted in symbolic systems of "concentric dualism." This differs from the more common "reciprocal dualism" or "diametric dualism" of exchange or moiety systems (Errington 1987). Defining marriage and kinship in the context of houses creates a condition in which one can only marry through the relation of their house (in East Sumba class is also relevant). This is unlike in Western Indonesia, where households are less coherent structures and one can marry according to one's status but that status is not completely defined by one's house. Societies that preference the material and moral relationships between "houses" through generations over the relationships among people within a generation, have been traditionally called a "house society" (Lévi-Strauss 1982). East Sumba fits this category and Eastern Indonesia was one of the places that inspired this conceptual categorization.

At a tangible level, marriage rules also create different forms in which people are socially defined. Shelly Errington (1987) demonstrated how marriage rules in Western Indonesia created sets of siblings (cousins and distant cousins) who are marriageable or not depending on specific idioms of taboo. Social siblings, who may be similar or not in age, are of the same generation within a kinship system (their extended uncles and aunts were siblings at the same number of generations). Under this system, people cannot marry outside of their sibling set because their offspring could not properly be placed into a generational grouping or having a sibling set of their own. However, in asymmetric marriage systems, people are not defined by generational associations, but through house relations; thus, they can marry vertically between what could be described as generations (pp. 411). This means that there are two fundamentally different ways in which people relate to their social world and are constituted by it. Society in a house society with the asymmetric marriage system, instead of being sliced into generations of siblings, which are better described as cousins, is vertically separated between households that span generations.

There is a much more encompassing and profound approach to the asymmetric marriage systems that has implications for the entire structure of reality according to certain theorists. According to Lévi-Strauss (1971), Fox (1980), Adams (1980), Kuiper (1987), Keane (1994) and Errington (1987), asymmetric marriage systems reflect a different type of the universal expression of dyadic oppositions through symbols. Instead of diving straight into the implications of the theory, I will present how asymmetric marriage systems are different than symmetric ones while they also deal with some similar dyadic opposition. In an asymmetric marriage system, male and female siblings begin as opposite yet complementary sets within the household. This unity is broken when sisters are moved from their natal homes to those of the wife-takers. They are replaced with someone else's sisters from the wife-givers. This may appear to be a similar dynamic if people either *exchanged* women between groups or practiced another form of exogamous/endogamous marriage system. It is different in this regard. Though the original unity is temporarily broken and then temporarily mended, it is

ultimately reconciled three generations later (or more depending upon how many households participate). If *a* gives wives to *b* then in the next generation *b* will give *a*'s granddaughter *c* will then in the generation after that *c* will give *a*'s great-granddaughter back to the men of *a*. The unity of the womb becomes complementary opposites in brother and sister siblings who are then rearranged within one generation and ultimately united in three (see top part of figure 2).

This type of marriage system orders, or reflects an order, of symbolic systems in several ways. It makes notions of original unity, intermittent separation, and ultimate unification central themes of society and it gives the cosmos a more sublimated form of binary opposition. Lévi-Strauss, as I mentioned earlier, the asymmetric marriage system creates a "concentric dualism" rather than the more common "diametric dualism" found in moiety exchange systems (see the opposition between circles in figure 2). The society and cosmos are unconsciously constructed as the outer circle. The inner circle is the person, couple or house. In the asymmetric marriage process, the house through the person of its daughter, contacts the outer circle, but through the process of asymmetric marriage, the great-granddaughter returns back to the house (the red arrows in figure 2). "The flow of life," as James Fox called it (1980), has its headwaters in the house but life flows out to society but then ultimately return back to the house. The conception of cosmos and society in a moiety system is that of diametric dualism where the essential relationship is not between micro and macrocosm regulated by a flow out, then around, and finally back in, but one of opposition that is overcome in a different manner or not at all (Lévi-Strauss 1973; Downes 2003). Moreover, hierarchy is a natural result of concentric dualism because the outer circle (the social world) only exists in its relation to the inner circle (the house), which is closer to the cosmic and biological center of *conception* (Lévi-Strauss 1963, pp. 140). Though there exists hierarchy and a "spiraling flow"[4] of people and objects back into the house, duality still exists (examples of duality are boxed in the bottom of figure 2) and the concentric system is a means by which that duality is only managed and reordered but never fully overcome.

The apparent overcoming of separation through the flow of the asymmetric marriage system has hidden consequences for the structural ordering of the cosmos at an even more abstract level. First of all, the duality of male and female (and of all things) remains at fundamental levels. Just as importantly, there are now three different symbolic systems through which the cosmos is understood: a) unity; b) duality; and c) the asymmetrical triadic relationship between wife-givers and wife-takers (Lévi-Strauss 1973, Adams 1980, Downes 2003) (the bottom half of figure 2). The following are examples of how social structure and symbolism in Eastern Indonesia have been understood as expressing these structural unities and oppositions modeled off of the asymmetric marriage system. They express the importance of dualistic systems of metaphor, the pairing of complementary yet opposition concepts, triadic divisions and the rearrangement of all these orderings of reality.

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[4] A spiral seems to be the most accurate representation of the flow from the outer-world back into the inner-world but I have yet to see it used as a metaphor in this context.

House and island

Physical aspects of the house (not the household) have been interpreted several times by structuralists in Eastern Indonesia. Though the house can be read symbolically, I can see little evidence from these analyses that succinctly demonstrates that the specific asymmetric marriage systems with its concentric dualism explains its underlying structure or terminology of the house. Likely many Eastern Indonesian cultures, the Savunese who live on the island of Savu approximately 100 km east of Sumba, have a set of metaphors linking the social and physical world. They have a double system of metaphors which are both complementary and opposing about the landscape and house (Kana 1980). The island is spoken about and referenced with both aspects of a body and a ship. The island has a head, mouth, tongue and tail (Kana, pp. 222). The Savunese also refer to it as a ship with a bow where hilly and stern where flat and rudder where mountainous (ibid, pp.223).[5]

The house should follow this pattern because when placed on an east-west axis facing west making it is metaphorically "sweet"—a desirable state according to the Savunese. If a house does not follow this prescription, it is believed to be cursed. The only constructions built on a north-south axis are graves for those who died in ways contrary to the natural order such as drowning, being struck by lightning, committing suicide, or falling from the important lontar palm (ibid, pp. 225). Such deaths, and the tombs for the victims, are called "salty". Elements of the house share both ship and body names. Houses have tails and heads as well as hulls and masts (ibid, pp. 228). The theme of unity and division expressed in kinship terms and marriage arrangements finds form in the division of the house between male and female. Women are associated with the part of the house that is dark and in the back. It is either the area where guests do not visit or an area that is literally dark such as the attic where women's goods such as cloth and food are storied (ibid, pp. 229).

Village

The metaphor of the ship extends to the organization of the village. I will use Moni Adams's *Symbols of the Organized Community in East Sumba, Indonesia* (1974) instead of the example from Savu because of the greater detail and symbolic cohesion of the example and further analysis. In East Sumba the ship is paired with the tree instead of the body but there remains the dual metaphor pattern in Eastern Indonesia (Fox 1971, Lévi-Strauss 1963, van Wouden 1968). Adams analyzed the ritual village of *Paraingu Bakulu* (Big Capital City) of the Kapunduku inhabiting the highlands of East Sumba. The village is only occupied during the dry season and for certain ceremonies (Adams 1974, pp. 328). The migration pattern, which may also be a case of transhumance, reflects the concentric dualism because uma live in their private dwellings for most of year but return to the social world in the form of the ritual capital each year to perform their specific functions for communal ceremonies.

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[5] Flat and hilly has no necessarily geometric relations to shape of the bow or stern of a ship. Kana and the Savunese do not explain why there is this connection.

The ritual village layout is that of an oval (the middle sketch in figure 3 from Adams 1974) divided lengthwise into three sections named corresponding to the terms used to describe the sections of a ship (ibid, pp. 332). The symbolic sides of the village are given the same name as they are in the ship and "warrior" uma live at the edges with the "priest" uma stay in the center. This creates a trinity, dualism and symmetry within the village (see the middle of figure 3). The large wooden poles, depending on the specific ceremony, are referred to as either masts of a ship or branches of a tree (ibid, pp. 333). Dualism exists within the unit of the ship-tree-village. Houses line two sides of the courtyard facing one another creating another form of symmetry. The two lines of houses are conceptualized as houses of the morning side and houses of the afternoon side and they have complementary and opposing ritual functions (ibid, pp. 327). Offerings are also divided into the categories of natural and man-made which can either be defined as cooked and raw or natural fruit and constructed images of fruit that are associated with the ultimate duality of male and female (Friedberg 1980). Typically food offerings are hung from the symbolic tree[6] or forked pole at the center of the village. Offerings of man-made objects themselves are further divided between masculine and feminine in metal and cloth respectively and placed at the village altar associated with the rudder of a ship (Adams 1974, pp.333).

Ritual exchange

Though Lévi-Strauss, Fox, van Wouden, Adams and Errington contend that concentric dualism places exchange within an overarching cosmic flow where exchange has a less vivid hold on the ordering of the world, exchange still exists if only momentarily in the context of the whole system. Women, things and animals are exchanged in marriage ceremonies and men and *marapu* (spirits/ ancestors) exchange the same things for blessings. The exchange between men and spirits sometimes takes place during wedding ceremonies while at other times concurrently with crop harvests or sowing. Webb Keane uses the dualism pattern of Eastern Indonesia to explain ceremonial and sacrificial offerings and blessings between men and spirits (Keane 1994). Keane extended the duality from within similar substances such as women/men, sunset/sunrise or natural/manmade, to between what are generally considered different substances such as words and things. Whether or not this is keeping with the tradition of duality in Eastern Indonesia is debatable, but by doing so, he gives a unique analysis of sacrifice and how it has changed in West Sumba.

Keane noticed that Calvinist missionaries during the 1980s in West Sumba had emphasized, as they did during the Reformation, that words do not have power in and of themselves and objects, specifically offerings, are not mystical (see Keane's *Christian Moderns* (2007) for a thorough analysis of this process). Where Calvinists were successful, ritual sacrifices of buffalo at marriage ceremonies were conducted without ritual words and

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[6] In West Sumba these trees often were the places were skulls taken from captives were hung. The term "skull tree" is used to describe the dead tree or collection of branches pointing toward the sky that are found in villages throughout Sumba. However their association with skulls should likely be limited to West Sumba though it is applied throughout Sumba.

became only means of feeding the wedding guests making it a variation of a barbeque. This transformation did not go unnoticed by older Sumbanese at the event who were distraught because the spirits did not receive their sacrifice because they can only understand ritualized speech (Keane 1994, pp. 607). Similarly, prayers made to the spirits (or God) in a church without offerings leave the spirits hungry and unsatisfied. As with other dualities in Eastern Indonesia, words and things are connected to other dualisms. The art of verbal expression, which is highly stylized in pre-existing matching couplets, is the domain of men while textiles, the major visual art in Eastern Indonesia, it associated with women. Though some masculine items are exchanged such as swords and gold, the most common and quintessential item exchanged with other men during marriage ceremonies or spirits during funerals are textiles (Keane 1994; Forshee 2000; Adams 1969; Hoskins 1989).

Language

Ritualized speech is an integral part of exchange between communities and routinely used for communal activities like the building of a house or harvests in Eastern Indonesia. The most common pattern of ritual speech is in the form of rhyming couplets in which the second line complements the meaning of the first. James Fox described couplets in Roti, an island east of Sumba, as language in which "semantic elements comprise prescribed dyadic sets; these sets are structured in formulaic phrases; and as a result, composition generally consists in production of parallel poetic lines" (1971, pp. 215). Couplet speech was generally known by most adult members of the community though only certain men perform them. In West Sumba, the Weyewa have a couplet about the act of performing couplets which will serve as my example: "The complete sets of eyes; the paired sets of lips" to be followed on certain occasions with "because of them, I blow my flute; because of them, I pluck my guitar" (Kuipers1998, pp.6).[7] Though couplets are a common form of ritual speech and poetry, the vast number of couples, (3100 were found in East Sumba)[8] and the broad contexts in which they are used, has been used as evidence for the expression of the unity of asymmetric duality in Eastern Indonesia (Errington 1989).

Textiles

As previously mentioned, textiles are the dominant visual art in Eastern Indonesia. In Kambera, the language of East Sumba, "cloth" is categorized as *banda la uma* meaning "goods of the house" which are feminine and contrasted with *banda la marada* "goods of the field" which are masculine (Adams 1969). The asymmetric unity between the male speech and female cloth is also expressed in the words for weaving and ritual speech used in negotiating marriages. The word *wunangu* means both the wooden heddle used to push layers of cloth together and the representatives of the marriage groups who must speak in couplets during

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[7] Completeness/paired & eyes/lips hints at the asymmetrical complementarity between speaker and listener and inter-sensory perception. Blow/pluck & flute/guitar suggests the harmonic coordination of different actions.

[8] U. H. Kapita, 1987, *Lawiti luluku Humba/Pola peribahasa Sumba*, Waingapu: Lembaga Penyeledikan Kebudayaan Selatan Tenri cited in Keane 1994.

negotiations. Additionally, a woman's planning of the design of a textile, called *pahamburungu*, is also the term used when arranging exchanges of only material (Adams 1980, pp. 213).

Aside from how the cloth was produced and its association with gender, it expresses the elements of the asymmetric marriage system in its formal composition. The textile design contains both dyadic and triadic elements (see figure 3; bottom). The composition is broken into three sections using two elements (facing-animals, ovals, facing-animals). This also fits the pattern of the village-ship broken into three sections corresponding to the three categories of an Austronesian boat in which the front and back are called the same things because they are extended out of the water while the middle is closer to it (see figure 3; top). Within each side tiles, the animals or trees face one another. This breaks down the bilateral symmetry within that section (see figure 4) when the cloth is held horizontally. However, the textile is a *hinggi*, which is draped over the shoulder and diagonally attached to the opposite hip. When viewed on the wearing from the front and back as it is intended to be, it presents the same image regardless of perspective. Within the animal tiles there still remains that confrontational duality of the animals which is a near universal motif in East Sumba (bottom of figure 4). According to Adams (1969), the formal patterning in textiles represents the triadic, symmetric and asymmetric dyadic relationships, and unity both as a whole and within oppositions, that comprise the symbolic ordering of the universe from the asymmetric marriage system (see figures 2, 3 and 4).

Conclusion

There are three overarching insights from the structuralist studies of Eastern Indonesia. Firstly, culture as a totalized system of symbols shaping every aspect of social phenomena was first developed within anthropology in the Leiden School from studies of Eastern Indonesia. Secondly, the type of marriage arrangements structured other cultural forms that altered society. Finally, the asymmetric marriage system was an alternative ordering of reality creating different forms of concepts about how the world was ordered: concentric dualism, symmetric dualism, asymmetric dualism, triadic relations and unity between and among these concepts. The metaphors of ships, trees and bodies (all containing bilateral symmetry) were used in cultural media such as speech, houses, villages and rituals. Just as importantly for structuralism and insightful for anthropology, cultural formations in Eastern Indonesia also expressed the varying types and levels of symbolic opposition and unity that according so some, lies at the core of human individual and social experience.

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Appendices

Figure 1: "Eastern Indonesia"; Lesser Sundas and the South Moluccas

Sumba

Figure 2: Asymmetric Marriage System and Types of Structural Relationships House/Uma A
Perspective

SOCIAL WORLD

Granddaughter

Thing

Male   Female
UMA C

Thing

Male   Female
UMA A

Thing

Male   Female
UMA B

Daughter

Great-granddaughter

Thing/Word

Asy Duality:
Thing/Word

Asy Duality:
Wife/Thing

Triadic:
UMA: A,B,C

Asy Duality :
Husband/Wife

Unity:
House
Siblings

Notice that the types of
symbols: unity, duality and
trinity have their own
unifying yet triadic
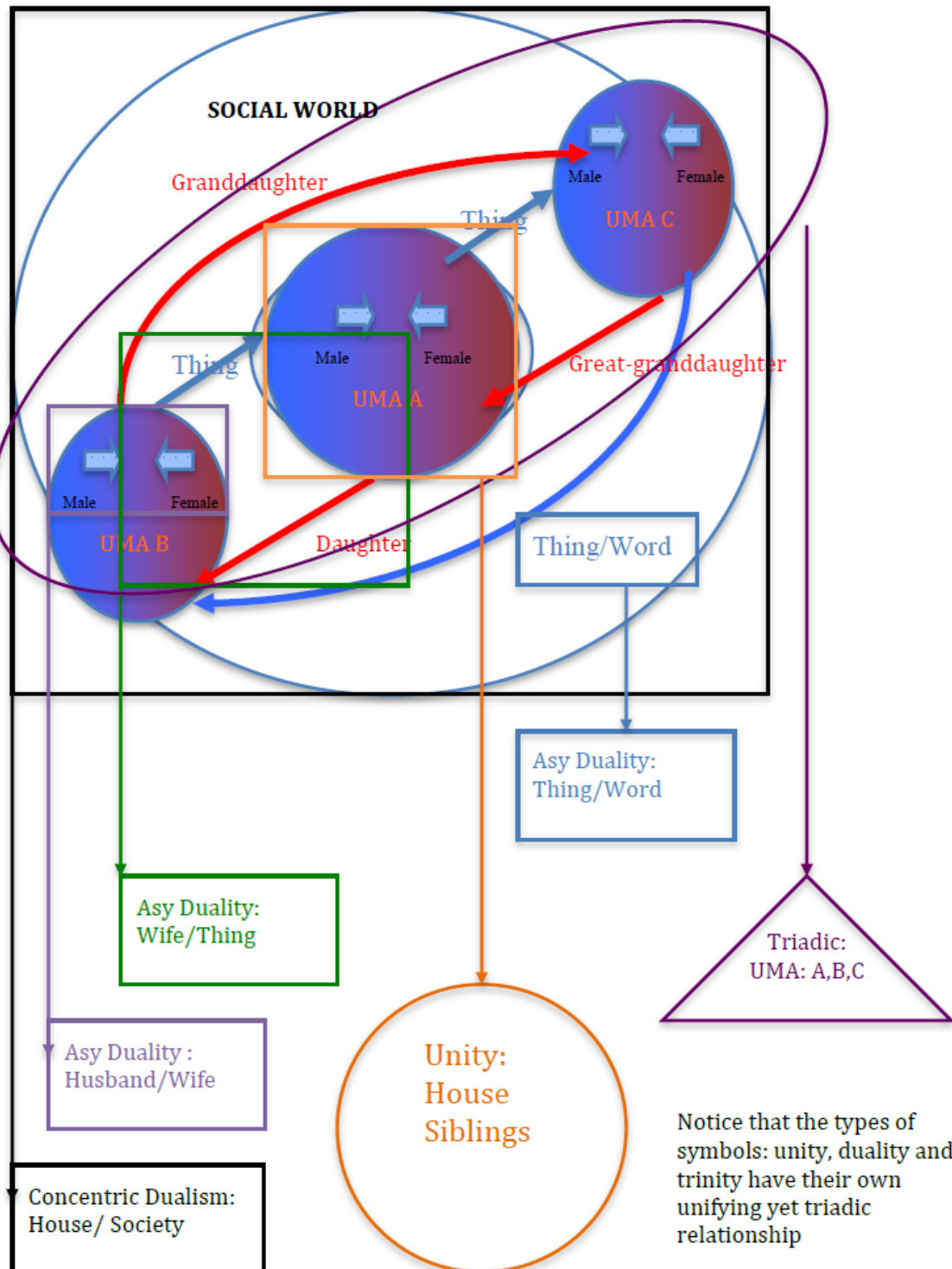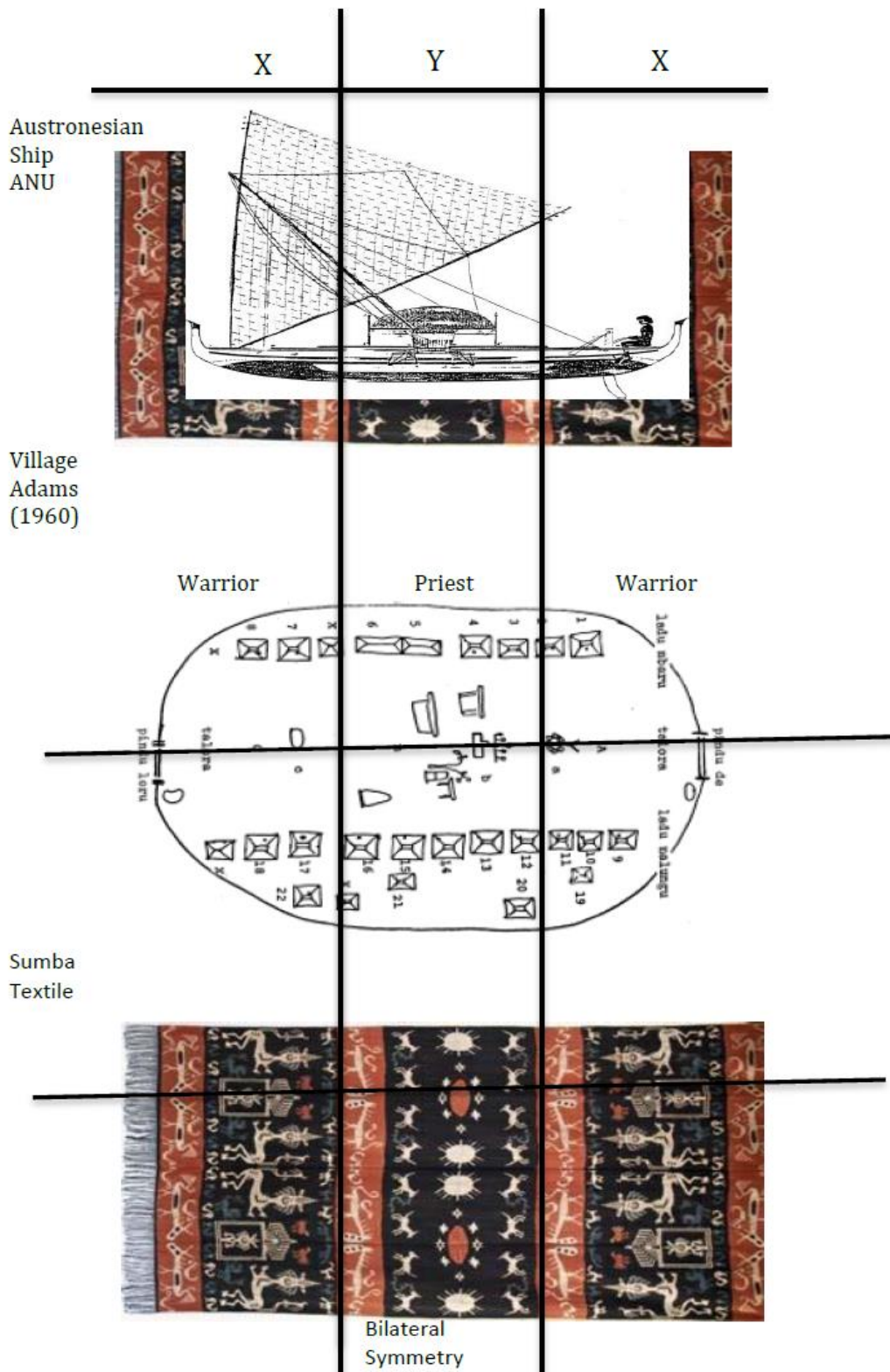relationship

Concentric Dualism:
House/ Society

Figure 3: Triadic patterning

Figure 4: Forms of Symmetry/Duality

Asymmetry from the perspective of the whole composition

Horizontal Symmetry

Asymmetric Duality

Symmetric Duality