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Proximity, Interaction, and Social Organization in Lithuania

AUKSUOLĖ ČEPAITIENĖ

It is quite common among ethnologists and social anthropologists to discuss social organization through the lens of structure – be it a family, kinship, neighborhood or any other kind of social group. Today, this view is often developed within a concept of identity, which inevitably draws on classificatory practices and the opposition between "we" and "others." This understanding of social organization is synchronic and rather static; its main emphasis is on aspects of membership, inclusion and exclusion, and boundary drawing. Ethnographies show, however, that human worlds are more complex. Social structures, even if they are stable as concepts, are not stable and static as social units of real human beings. In their lifetimes, people establish different kinds of relationships and move across structural boundaries in one way or another. They reconceptualize their connections, cut or establish new ones, and reclassify the previous ones. Social worlds are reproduced in a variety of forms that link people inside, across, and beyond groups, and are related to different social and cultural contexts and stimuli. Evidently, the dynamics of social interaction are no less significant in understanding society and social organization than structural considerations.

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This article discusses the ways in which Lithuanian people conceptualize social relations, prioritize one relationship over another and transform one into another, and how this relates to aspects of social organization in Lithuania. Attention is paid to the relationships of family, kinship, and neighborhood. The paper suggests that a "spatial" sense and physical proximity are influential factors in social ordering and of the ways that people relate.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Ideas about family, kinship and neighborhood are inseparable from critical thinking about the nature of community and society.[1] Although they refer to different principles of relating and function in societies within their own contexts, which seem to be quite clear, this does not imply their meanings are self-evident, either from a theoretical or from an empirical point of view. This leads us to return to the classics of social thought.

Ferdinand Tőnnies in his work *Community and Society* suggests considering *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* as two fundamentally different and contrasting models of social organization,[2] which he relates to the differences of their structural patterns. He indicates that the ties of kinship and neighborhood, as well as history, language and culture, and individual identity developed within the wider coexisting whole, are characteristic features of community and the rural. He sees civil society and the urban, on the other hand, as grounded on freestanding individuals, a "spatial" rather than "historical" sense of mutual awareness, and an individual identity that precedes that of the wider group.[3] These attempts to understand the specificities of social organization are echoed by other authors, among them Louis Wirth with his "urbanism as

a way of life," urban personality, and heterogeneous and differentiated individuals.[4] In a majority of these works, however, the structural considerations were *a priori*. The relationship between the individual and the community that claims the aspect of collectivity was assumed as the main criterion in classifying the relations and the type of social organization. The ties of family, kinship, and neighborhood seem to belong to the same kind of communal connection.

Later studies in urban anthropology and modernity challenged this view. Attention was directed at the distinction between kinship and neighborhood, emphasizing that kinship and neighborhood are based on different principles of social connectedness. Moreover, it appeared that kinship, which indicates the primal unity of existence and points to family ties as well, does not always actually represent direct social relationships, communal connections, and close proximity. And a neighborhood does not necessarily affirm the patterns of a rural community. It rather identifies the reproduction of social life in segmented and fractured worlds, where the locality and the spatial sense of mutual awareness, the sharing of communal spaces, and the relational consciousness of other neighborhoods' autonomy have a value.[5] The body of anthropological and sociological literature shows that distinction between kinship and neighborhood quite often comes to stand for contrasting rural and urban, homogeneous and heterogeneous or multicultural settings, and even the difference between the disciplinary approaches of anthropology and sociology. But even so, the ethnographic reality reminds us that human worlds are not simple or two-sided, but complex and dynamic. It is an invitation for skeptical investigation rather than ready-made models upon which to hang analysis.

Since the very beginning of studies on society in Lithuania, the family occupies the main position of interest and field of investigation, and kinship is just a small part of it. Neighborhood

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[1]   See for example, Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order*; Strathern, *After Nature*; Godelier, "Community, Society, Culture"; Asch, "Lévi-Strauss and the Political"; Reay, "Kinship and the Neighborhood"; Bestard-Camps, *What's in a Relative?*

[2]   Tőnnies, *Community and Civil Society*.

[3]   Ibid.

[4]   Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life."

[5]   Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 186.

is treated as a type of communal relationship.[6] This article, however, approaches all three ideas about family, kinship, and neighborhood as the focus of inquiry on social organization.

The empirical basis of this article is the lengthy ethnographic research I have carried out in Lithuania since 1997. Its aim rests mainly on the critical investigation of kinship and the other forms of social organization of contemporary Lithuanian society, with traditional contexts taken into consideration as well. The ethnographic insights into people's understandings of kinship and social organization are acquired during my stays and conversations with local people in different Lithuanian locations. My visits are random and informal chances to meet and talk with people I did not know before. The ethnographic interviews focus mainly on people's understandings of kinship. However, all of the topics the interviewees include – their family backgrounds, life stories, and personal experiences, as well as the details and circumstances that surround our talks and events that occur during my visits – are taken into consideration. I allow people to guide me along their thinking about human relatedness and follow them obediently. It is research that conventionally might be termed "ethnography at home," where home is "a mixture of geographical, emotional, social and cultural components brought together under the rubric of familiarity."[7] I am a stranger and "the other" in that home, despite the fact that I am of the same society as my interviewees and speak the same language. The position of a researcher as "the other" establishes the possibility of entering their lives, which sometimes seem so puzzling.

A Relationship: A Kin Who is Not a Kin, but a Neighbor

In a village in the Varėna district of East Lithuania, where I went at the very beginning of my research in 1997, I met an elderly woman named Elžbieta.[8] She was living alone, and only her brother-in-law's daughter (*dieverio dukra*) lived nearby. Elžbieta agreed to talk to me, and we sat in her kitchen for hours and discussed a variety of issues. Although my research interest rested mainly on kinship, I was also interested in her family and village life. During our conversation, I learned that Elžbieta's surname is the same as a woman's I had met in this village before. To my question about this coincidence of surnames, Elžbieta observed that there are a lot of people in the village with the same surname as hers – "they all are kin." Her statement, however, contradicted the woman I had met earlier, who denied the ties of kinship among villagers with the same surnames.

Elžbieta was born in another village not far away. She came here after her marriage in 1932. The newlyweds at first lived in Elžbieta's husband's father's house. It is common in Lithuania to stay in a husband's father's house (or perhaps in a wife's father's house, if he has no sons) after marriage, a practice known as patrilocal residence. Elžbieta's father-in-law owned a farm with thirty hectares of land. He lived with his second wife and his married and unmarried children, who included the oldest son (Elžbieta's brother-in-law) and his wife, the second son and Elžbieta, and three unmarried daughters (Elžbieta's sisters-in-law). "I came to a large family where a father lived together with his children," she said.

Elžbieta's father-in-law's family is a type of joint family quite often called a *didžioji šeima*, "grand family."[9] Joint families are the second most common type of family in Lithuania, after nuclear ones. According to ethnographers and historians, they were more common in Lithuania in the nineteenth century and began to break down after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 in particular, at the end of the nineteenth century.[10] However, in the eastern part of Lithuania they persisted until the middle of the twentieth century, and Elžbieta's case is an example. A joint family is usually composed of several nuclear families, either

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6 See Witort, *Zarysy prawa zwyczajowego*; Vyšniauskaitė, "Kaimo šeima"; Vyšniauskaitė, "Lietuvių valstiečių šeima"; Kalnius, "Miesto šeimos"; and others.
7 Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, 46.
8 The name of the intervewee is changed.

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9 Vyšniauskaitė, "Kaimo šeima"; see also Löfgren, "Family and Household."
10 Vyšniauskaitė, "Kaimo šeima."

of parents and their married children, often sons, or of married brothers' families, sometimes living together with their married children as well.[11] It is a coresidential, productive, and consuming domestic group, which forms one social and economic (and labor service) unit based on joint labor and capital, with some autonomy for the individual needs of its nuclear families. A joint family usually consists of three or more generations, and the relations between their members are based on kinship and authority. Concerning overall household matters, a father or an eldest brother acts as head of the family, and concerning domestic matters, especially food and eating, a mother or an eldest brother's wife.[12] Elžbieta remembers life at her father-in-law's house and says that it was "like hell. [...] I had cows as my dowry, but was not able to milk them." The father-in-law was head of the farm, and his wife was the main housekeeper.

But the stay of the couple with the family was temporary, because her father-in-law decided to break down their living together. He divided the land into three parts shared between his two sons and himself. Traditional rules of inheritance underlay this decision. In Lithuanian tradition, all of the children hold equal inheritance rights to the property of a household, despite gender or birth order. The share might be given as land, money, education, buildings, cattle, etc. In the case where the household is left to one child – either a son or a daughter – the others receive their share when they leave the household. Although the method of sharing the property is determined by the parents, it is more common in west and southwest Lithuania to leave a household to one child, and in southeast Lithuania to share it between all the children. Sons (or a son) usually inherit the household and land. Daughters usually leave their parents' house and get their share as a dowry in money, cattle, furniture, textiles, etc. When there are no sons in a family, the household is left to a daughter (or daughters).[13] Elžbieta's father-in-law, it seems, followed the traditional customs of inheritance. He gave

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

the first part of the land to one son with a wife and the eldest daughter; the second part he gave to Elžbieta's husband and her and the second eldest daughter, and the third part he took for himself and his wife with the third, his youngest daughter. The sons were obliged to give dowries to their sisters, if they married and decided to move out. Elžbieta and her husband gave cattle, furniture, and textiles to the second daughter when she married. They made a contract stating that her rights of inheritance had been satisfied. After the partition, both Elžbieta's husband and his brother built separate houses on their inherited parts of land. These houses stand close to each other to this day. Elžbieta's brother helped the couple build the house, and her husband paid for that help.

At the end of our conversation, Elžbieta shows me her vegetable garden with its strawberries, cucumbers, and cabbage. She also shows another part of the house, which is quite large. Nobody lives there, and it is used for special occasions only. Her daughter's wedding party was held there, as well as the funeral of her husband, whom she calls *dziedulis, mano žmogus*, "the old man, my man." In one room, I see an altar to the Virgin Mary. Elžbieta explains that every evening in May the village people come together to pray the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary there. This tradition has been followed for several years.

When I return to the question of kinship, Elžbieta says it is *iš prigimties*, by birth. But at the same moment she turns away from this abstract and classificatory idea, and in her kinship thinking includes practices that come from reality of life. She says, "kinship is a dear thing, because it is one's own flesh and blood, but life goes on in the opposite way, one lives as one wishes." She explains this in more detailed way:

> The closest kin are the children of brothers and sisters. [...] But you communicate either with close, or with distant kin, or sometimes with a neighbor. If he [a neighbor] is good, he is the same as kin. [...] Sometimes a good neighbor is more important, because kin are far away. When a bad accident happens, the neighbor is there first. When I broke my leg, I called on my brother-in-law's daughter (*dieverio dukra*); my kin live far away – my

sister and two sons are in Vilnius. So I hurried to the neighbor's. […] You just thank the neighbor for the help; you do not give money, for there may be times you help him or her too.

Elžbieta's comment on kinship is informative in many aspects; first of all, in understanding the ways in which people conceptualize, denote and classify relations, establish values, and project their behavior. In describing what kinship is, Elžbieta emphasizes both aspects – being and doing, or classifying and practicing – as two different lines of relations that are autonomous and exist in parallel, without any priority of one over another. In concrete situations, those lines might be on opposing sides, or they may shadow or enhance each other. Perceiving kinship as multifarious opens up the possibility of introducing other, alternative kinds of relationships. Elžbieta says a good neighbor is like kin, and sometimes a good neighbor is more important. To illustrate this, she takes an example from her experience and speaks of her brother-in-law's daughter, living nearby, who helped her once. Although Elžbieta's story about her broken leg involves a relative, and Elžbieta calls her by a kin term (*dieverio dukra*) at the beginning of the story, she immediately ignores their kin relationship and denotes her as a neighbor (*kaimynė*), saying her kin live far away. She translates their kin relationship into neighborliness without hesitation, and this seems natural to her. This shadowing of kinship ties and the establishment of neighborly relations in its place contains different meanings. First of all, it bears witness to Elžbieta's life story – her marriage, the partitioning of a joint family, the establishment of her own family and household, and the brother-in-law's family living close by. It might seem that kinship here is the main context that arranges life and its matters, and is inseparable from neighborhood.[14] But Elžbieta presents her brother-in-law's daughter as an example of a good neighbor, not of a relative, or of both. She confirms that being and doing are two different and parallel lines of relations that open the gate for mobility and openness in the restructuring of social connections. The significant factor that influences the reinterpretation of relations and the transfer of kinship into neighborliness, in this case, is the physical aspect of living in close proximity.

A Village of Neighbors or a Village of Kinsmen?

To discuss further the dynamics that stretch between kinship and neighborhood, I would like to recall another example. In the summer of 2003, I was staying in the town of Pajūris (in the Šilalė district of western Lithuania), together with a group of ethnographers and historians who were collecting material for a monograph. One day, I was walking along the street of a village called Tūbinės, known since the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The village has a wooden church built during the middle of the nineteenth century, although a parish was established there only in 1937. In Lithuanian, a village with a church is called a *bažnytkaimis*. In the 1920s, there were twenty-two farmsteads with 158 inhabitants in Tūbinės.[15] At that time, there was a primary school run by few farmers in turn, a post office, a center for buying milk, and two shops. There was also an estate close to the village that was leased by a lawyer from Kaunas. The estate, as well as the surrounding farms, were engaged in agricultural production. In Soviet times, Tūbinės belonged to a kolkhoz named "Soviet Lithuania." Today, the village is a settlement with 203 inhabitants (as of 2001), and is the center of the smallest administrative territorial unit, a *seniūnaitija*. There is a post office and a library there.

Walking along the street of Tūbinės, I meet two women chatting in a yard, and we started a conversation. A man from nearby joined us as well. It appeared they were all indigenous to the village. They were raised there, went to school, worked, and lived their lives there. The interviewees were of retirement age, born in the 1920s and 1930s. Their parents were farmers who owned small plots of land. During the interwar period, their family income was mainly from agriculture, although their parents made some additional earnings working

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[14] See Reay, "Kinship and the Neighborhood."

[15] Kviklys, *Mūsų Lietuva*, 197.

as servants, builders, or blacksmiths. In Soviet times they all worked at the kolkhoz.

When I told the interviewees that I am an ethnographer interested in kinship, they all doubted they would be able to help me, stating they know nothing about kinship. One woman explained, "we are living in families," and added that she knew nothing about the others. Every family has a house, and people are concerned only with what is going on in their house, not in the others. Their houses, built in Soviet times, stand close by each other along the main street of the village. They were built, as the interviewees say, "house-upon-house." In another part of the village, the interviewees add, the farmsteads are scattered over a large territory, but in this part they live close to one another.

My interviewees are neighbors. But when the first woman introduced the man, she said: "he is both my neighbor and my relative." Later, it is revealed that the second woman is a neighbor and a relative of the man as well. They tell me that, in this line of fifteen houses stretching along the street, there are eleven houses where the occupants are related as brothers, sisters, cousins or children. The interviewees recall the words of a local priest, who once said in surprise, "There is a whole line of relatives here." But to my surprise, the conversation about their kinship relations finishes at this point. Instead, the interviewees continue by discussing what it means to live close to each other. It appears they celebrate a number of various events in their informal community. One example they gave of their communal relationship is the sharing of food – not daily, but special dishes, such as a freshly baked pie. They see sharing food as a very common act of friendly exchange and, at the same time, as a metaphor symbolizing their relationship. Even the words of one of the women, seemingly said in jest, that "nobody brings *me* any food," and the reply from the other, "but *you* have a cow," is a part of this sharing of communality, which concerns the core, but not the surface of living together. Another example of togetherness they gave is collective singing. They sing in a church choir and at funerals, and travel with the choir to a number of other parishes and places. They also sing for themselves. One woman explained, "a sister was going to the hospital, we all – not just the relatives – came together and sang."

However, when I asked about how they consider their kinship relatedness, my three interviewees explained this in slightly different ways. The first woman said "we all are kin-like, we come together and sing; even those who are not kin are like kin, we women like that." The second woman corrects her words: "but we are kin." Whereas the man presented a completely different view: "We men, I don't know, [we are] friends and that's all." To my question about what unites them, they all said, "It's human nature; we know each other; we are together all the time. There is a lot to talk about." Evidently, life in close proximity and daily relations establish a kind of intimacy different from that emerging through the classificatory bias of kinship. This intimacy of living close to each other is filled with stories and histories, mutually experienced events, emotions, and sociality they call "human nature." It might seem unquestionable that, in their case, kin and neighborhood relations overlap, and mutually enhancing practices might be cut, according to the interviewees, only by leaving the place. However, the interviewees do not emphasize and even ignore their kin relatedness as the main factor. On the contrary, they call their connections "kin-like," or even those of "friends," and diminish that great mystery of "blood relations" by the sense of living in close proximity. These interchanging relations of kinship and neighborhood establish a situation of social fluidity that is open to accepting others, strangers and the other, as "kin-like" or "friends." It is an ambivalent and creative situation that, however, poses the question of whether there is any structure that provides stability and autonomy for a person and organizes social life in that process of moving. The woman's words at the very beginning of our conversation – "we live in families" – testify that the family is this structure.

People in Lithuania, when comparing family, kinship, and neighborhood, emphasize that all three arrangements

are different. They say that family (*šeima*) unites husband and wife (who are nonkin), and children (their kin) and is based on coresidence, physical proximity, intimacy of domestic space, daily commitments, and the sharing of duties, rights, and responsibilities that extend over daily routine. Kinship, or as Lithuanians more often say, kinfolk (*giminės*), is a different arrangement than the family and is modeled on the natural or biological fact of blood relations. People do not consider the mother's and father's kin as one group of kinsmen of an *ego*. They separate them and say *tėvo giminės*, the father's kin and *motinos giminės*, the mother's kin, but treat them equally without any preferences. It is a bilateral model of a kinship system. They also distinguish between consanguinity and affinity, and say that in-laws are "not true kin" or even "half kin," although they are "our own" or "our" people (*savi*).[16] Distance plays a role in making kin relations occasional and festive without any sense of duty and obligation. As one interviewee said: "One meets one's kin and just talks with him or her, but all problems are solved within the family." People quite often compare neighborly relations to kinship ties as their alternative. The value and morality of neighborly relations, they say, is grounded on living close to each other, the sharing of communal space, and helping each other when there is a need. The phrase "a good neighbor sometimes is better than kin, because kin is far away and a neighbor is near" repeated by the majority of people across Lithuania, is actually a normative stereotype. It encompasses the meaning of both close proximity and moral concern, and is like an informal rule that underlies neighborhood ties.

A House Society

When comparing family, kinship, and neighborhood, people emphasize the family. But they also say that each family has a house, and everyone is concerned only with what is going in their own house, even though the houses are very close to one another. Family, in their thinking, is materialized in the

physical structure of a house, with boundaries that are as evident as the walls of the house, social identities that are visible, and subjectivities that hold people together. The house here is a universe that brings legitimacy to the social being of a person with his/her place, history and memory, people and kinship, the wholeness and complexity of relations outside and inside the house, and anchors and reproduces the social being in space and time.[17] The house, which is created by a family and is inseparable from a family, is as indivisible and divisible as the family is. It unites the people inside, both kin and nonkin, accommodates filiation and residence, patrilineal and matrilineal descent, property rights and inheritance, and grounds outside relationships. The structural significance of a house is recognized by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his concept of "house" (*maison*) and "house society" (*société à maisons*).[18] He showed that a house is an "institutional creation that permits compounding forces which, everywhere else, seem only destined to mutual exclusion because of their contradictory bends," and that various known types of society are reunited in a house. The attention here shifts from bounded groups to the optative aspect of group membership.[19]

In Lithuania, a "house" as an institution is a building, but not only a building. It is a homestead (*sodyba*), the place and space of a family, where it lives, works, celebrates, and reproduces itself when the births, marriages, deaths or departures change the family members, but do not challenge the family as a whole. It is the home of the family. In the material sense, the homestead consists of a residential house and nonresidential buildings scattered about the landscape that serve particular functions of the household. It includes also the natural environment and the spaces between buildings, which may include trees, bushes, a flower garden, an apple orchard, a well, fences, and the roads of the holding that belongs to a family and an owner of the homestead. In the Kupiškis district, the

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[16] Čepaitienė, "Imagining."

[17] Carsten and Hugh-Jones, "Introduction."
[18] Lévi-Strauss, *The Way*, 163–187.
[19] Ibid., 184.

homestead is called *kiemas*: literally, "a yard," and is synonymous with *sodyba*. *Kiemas* (or *valstiečių kiemas*, "a farmer's yard") is both a historical notion and a formal word for a structure that contains, not only the household's social, economic, and symbolic meanings and functions, but also administrative, legal, and political ones. It is said that a number of *kiemai* compose a village (*kaimas*), whose collectivity is based on neighborhood relations (*kaimynystė*). The linguistic categories of *kiemas, kaimas* and *kaimynystė* in the Lithuanian language are interrelated in an etymological sense as well.[20] In a variety of respects, they are informative in understanding social organization in Lithuania.

To emphasize with Lévi-Strauss, it is not the individuals or the families that act; it is the houses, which are the subjects of rights and duties.[21] But the house – at once a physical place and a social unit – is in dynamic formation and cannot be defined in itself, but only in relation to the others. Houses are most visible in their interaction with other houses.[22] To discuss a "house" is to discuss the organizing principles of society. In the case of Lithuania, one just needs to make a cultural shift from a "house" to a "homestead."

Concluding remarks

Edward T. Hall said that virtually everything man is and does is associated with space. His concept of proxemics emphasizes the cultural aspects of spatial experience and underlines the role and meaning of proxemics in social organization and in representing cultural differences.[23] The ethnographic examples discussed above show that space and distance is an influential factor of social organization in a structural and interstructural sense. Spatial closeness, mutuality, and the sharing of spaces and matters establish a communicative process that contains the aspect of social creativity that changes, reinterprets, and transfers relations between individuals, social groups, and structures.

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[20] Gudavičius, "Baltų alodo."
[21] Cited in Carsten and Hugh-Jones, "Introduction."
[22] Gillespie, "Lévi-Strauss," 29.
[23] Hall, "Proxemics."

But closeness and distance are not states of their own; nor do they contain any cultural meaning in themselves. They are states and ideas that emerge only in a relational view. Closeness and distance are always identifiable between a subject and an object (or objects) in their interactions. Communication is an inseparable part of proxemics, the study of the communicative process.[24] Closeness and distance are also about localization and place. A place materializes and encompasses closeness, and loads physical proximity with social and cultural meanings. The discussion above has shown that a "house," or, in the Lithuanian case, a "homestead," is a place like an institution that encompasses and localizes that proximity of the social. It is significant in thinking about family, kinship, and neighborhood, and the constitution of group, community, and society in Lithuania.

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[24] Ibid.

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