3 The symbolic landscape

- **Geopolitics: writing power on the landscape**
- **Relationships of inclusion and exclusion**
- **Iconography and symbolism in the landscape**

In the last chapter we saw the landscape interpreted as shaped by the energies and practices of peoples to accord with their culture. This chapter takes a closer look at the landscape as symbolic system. That is, how it is shaped according to the beliefs of the inhabitants and the meanings invested in that landscape. In this chapter, then, we shall look upon it as a signifying system showing the values through which a society is organised. In this sense landscapes may be read as texts illustrating the beliefs of the people. The shaping of the landscape is seen as expressing social ideologies, that are then perpetuated and supported through the landscape. This chapter will start from the most intimate of spaces – that of the household – and examine how the form of the household and its relationship to the world can be seen relating to beliefs about social life. Such a view of the household will link the *cosmology* of people with the material shaping of their landscape. In the second section the quintessentially English landscape of country houses and parks will be examined in terms of the contested and changing meanings that underlay the relationship of house and grounds. From this the next section will examine how royal palace landscapes in medieval China united cosmological beliefs with geopolitical imperatives for the rulers. The fourth section will suggest how this continues in deliberately created symbolic landscapes – looking especially at the reshaping of places to convey ideas of nationalism.

House form

It is very easy to think of homes as 'natural'. They are something with which the inhabitants become so familiar they become taken for granted. However, just because something is an everyday landscape does not mean it has no meaning. On the contrary we might look at it as being the outcome of a whole set of routine practices that give meaning to daily life. To illustrate this we can look at different forms over time or over space.

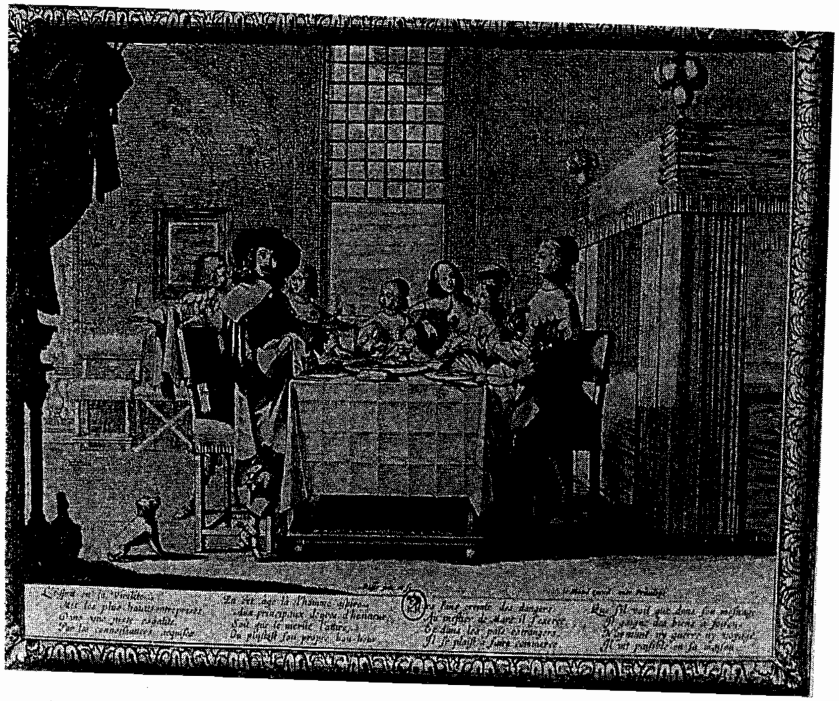
Western homes and social divisions

Over time, we can see how the sort of practices involved in 'homes' have changed. If we look at the West we might characterise the last three centuries as being about a process of segregation and division. For instance, the medieval merchant's house, with a front/commercial room abutting the street, with storerooms above or behind, then 'family' rooms above that and above that perhaps workshops, was an integrated space of industry and domestic life. In differing places and times, commercial work moved to factories. Different forms of work moved at different times – affecting the relationship between genders and the values accorded to their work. The outcome profoundly structures contemporary Western life, where 'productive' labour, i.e. that which counts as 'economic', occurs outside the home while the 'reproduction of labour', feeding, clothing yourself, sleeping or childcare occurs in domestic settings. Such a division is a situated historical and geographical arrangement embodying a cultural geography where activities in different spaces are accorded different status and economic values. So the home may be seen as part of a gendered landscape, one that has served to maintain the idea of a working man's wages, as the 'breadwinner', and maintain the idea of a 'woman's realm' in the home. Such landscapes have been shaped and reshaped of course and it does not do to be too sweeping about all this. Thus if we look at the British town house, we can see great changes in the 1930s and into the post-war era. The size of dwelling declines and its internal shape changes as economic and cultural changes occur about what comprises a family unit. It is vital to remember that until the First World War the badge, almost the definition, of being middle class was to employ a servant. So town houses were arranged with this in mind, with servant rooms in the attic or 'downstairs' and out of sight of guests. The maintenance of the household, the food preparation, the laundry and so forth, was hidden away in these quarters. With the decline of domestic service, the modern house becomes designed more for the efficiency of such tasks rather than to hide them away.

The routine spaces of homes speak to us about the sort of social relationships we believe in and the practices that sustain them. We can think how much practices of separation have come to constitute the Western idea of a proper home. Economic activities occur elsewhere. The decline of servants means the house is often inhabited by a family, a kinship group, on their own. Within its very structure the spaces of display to visitors, 'front rooms' and best furnishings, are separated from those of everyday life and rest – the bedrooms (see Figure 3.1). Indeed we can chart through the last two centuries the changing moral geographies in first the separation of sleeping quarters from living, then the separation of adults from children and the separation of children by gender. Judgements about morality and sexuality are written into the fabric of the house through the creation of private spaces.

Kabyle housing

We can put Western arrangements in context if we look around the world at other peoples. We could look to Malaysia where the Dayak's of Sarawak traditionally lived in longhouses that contained far more than the individual family group. As a detailed example we shall look at the Kabyle of Algeria based on work by Pierre Bourdieu (1990). Their dwellings tend to contain an extended family group in a covered single-storey rectangular building, along with spaces for weaving, storing agricultural produce and fodder, and indeed stables for animals. The arrangement of these activities can tell us about the world-view of the Kabyle themselves, how their cosmology structures their daily practices (Figure 3.2). The house tends to be on a slight incline to allow drainage; a slope that structures activities so the down-hill end contains all that is damp, dark and green – also then becoming the place for natural human activities of birth, sex, sleeping and death – while the upper end contains all the activities associated with light, fire and entertaining guests forming a division of the civilised and natural. A slighted guest will thus complain of being made to sit against the dark wall of the house. Women's work tends to occur in the dark sections of the house while male labour occurs outside. Thus the house with its sets of oppositions of man and woman, light and dark, high and low, natural and civilised also



ure 3.1 **‘L’esprit en la virilité’ *(The Spirit of Virility)* by Abraham Bosse, c. 1630. *In 's picture of a well-to-do family in seventeenth-century Paris there is nothing rprising in having a meal in the same room as beds. The separation of these activities the West spread socially and spatially so that the rural peasant houses in Figure 2.1 ll have combined sleeping, dining and cooking areas in the nineteenth century.***

rce: Bibliotheque Nationale, Oa 44, pet.fol., p. 22.

interacts with wider cosmologies. Thus men will leave the house before dawn, so the outside is male space and the inside is feminised. Male friendships are then described as ‘outdoor friends’. The house is then thought of as separated against all the outside world. In short the oppositions that structure its internal spaces structure how it relates to the outside world:

> Considered in relation to the male world of public life and farming work, the house, the universe of women, is h′aram, that is to say, both sacred and illicit for any man who is not part of it.
>
> (Bourdieu 1990: 275)

Bourdieu observes that the house itself is divided according to the principles that divide it from the outside; the same oppositions organise both. It is thus possible to look at the spatial arrangement of the landscape and the practices that shape it in order to look at the cosmologies of both ourselves and others. There is no simple natural disposition of activities in the landscape, they are always bound up particular cultures. We have then a geography on two levels, the way cultures use geography, investing meanings in certain spaces, and then (but not only) the geographical distribution of these cultures.

The house and the garden: English country houses

This section looks at how a familiar landscape uses space to embed certain meanings by looking to English country houses, and thus links to material discussed in *Historical Geography* in this series. The English country house has been used to symbolise the very heart of English national identity; indeed enthusiastic commentators have gone so far as to suggest it is *the* contribution by the English to global civilisation. It has been used as a talisman for a conservative vision of organic rural values; a landscape of squires and reciprocal relations between classes that has been consistently mobilised as the opposite of state welfare, contrasting the personal attachment of people and places, the way people are known and know their place in these landscapes with the impersonal bureaucratic welfare state. If such landscapes are at the ‘heart’ of England then their spatial arrangement says a great deal about the values that have formed that heart, and the political connotations of that landscape. These are not neutral expressions of innate values; they are social landscapes that tell us about the social relationships and beliefs in society.

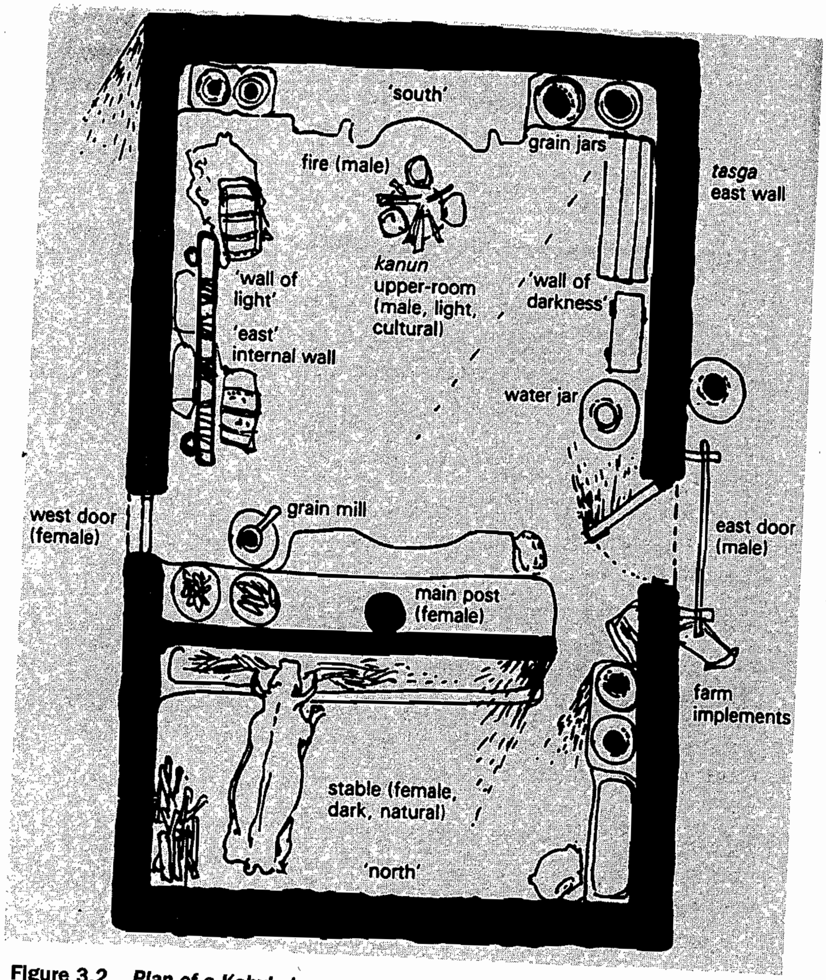


Figure 3.2 ***Plan of a Kabyle house***

Source: adapted from Bourdieu 1990 by Oliver 1997.

'fectible nature

There is a substantial literature on garden history and its relationship to prevailing social understandings. Here we can only tease out a few suggestions and examples. From the medieval period the garden was designed as a place of contemplation and 'earthly delight', but how this has been expressed has changed over time. For instance, in the William and Mary period in the late seventeenth century, garden design was marked by geometrical patterning. Now the idea of using geometry on large gardens produced layouts of radial avenues symbolising power emanating from the house at the centre. In more modest gardens and those near the house it was expressed in an extremely formal layout, with flower-beds in geometric, often rectilinear shapes, sharply marked off by paths. Hedges were often planted, as small box hedges to separate different flower-beds, or as larger creations and, along with trees, as objects for topiary – trimming into cones and angular shapes was common. What does this say about how people thought about nature? The geometric regularity and order of the garden seem to express a stark contrast with ideas of a wild nature, often signified by walling gardens off from the rest of the world. Walls and bounding hedges thus play a significant role:

> The highly structured and artificial patterns in the gardens they surrounded made the best visual sense when clearly segregated from the less ordered environments around them. To the modern observer these gardens appear as places where nature has been ordered, tamed, even tortured – quintessentially 'unnatural'. Whether contemporaries would have seen them quite like this is less clear. Their more educated owners would perhaps have explained them in Neoplatonic terms, as expressions of the perfect forms underlying the imperfect shapes in the natural world.
> (Williamson 1995: 31)

Neoplatonism is a view of nature where humanity is seen as having a duty to reveal the divine order behind nature. Geometric layouts were thus not opposing nature but striving to perfect it, or to bring out the perfect essence within it.

Parkland and prospects

As beliefs altered so too did garden form. Thus, as the eighteenth century began, an increasing proportion of grand gardens was set aside as 'wilderness' expressing a new relationship to the land; visual command of property through the idea of the vista (that is, the appearance of an object at a distance). Such vistas were created by opening up alleys through woods to reveal the spires of churches or buildings in the distance. The role of this can be seen if we consider Moseley Wood where Cockridge Hall has walks laid out through the woods that provide 65 intersections and 306 different views. One significant feature was the rise of the ha-ha (a sunken ditch at the edge of a garden or lawn). When cut into a hill, the garden is on the upward side and separated from the outside world by a wall or bank below foot level that leads to a ditch before the outside land. As such it is designed to stop animals wandering into the garden. In contrast to seventeenth-century walled gardens the ha-ha is invisible and nothing interrupts the sweep of the eye from garden to outside land – which is included in the overall view rather than separated.

The significance of this rather obscure garden feature is, then, the visual mastery offered. The owner of the garden no longer sees their 'patch' set off from an uncontrolled outside world; rather this was an expansive owning vision – conflating visual and social mastery. We can connect the rise of this visual mastery with the creation of 'natural settings' for country houses – the 'park land'. The removal of perimeter walls illustrates the continuing rise of the park and the growing importance of a naturalistic setting for the mansion (Williamson 1995: 47). This landscape was shaped by the struggle to control physical and visual access. There are numerous cases of villages, cottages or farms being moved to make the gentry sole occupiers and sole possessors of the scene. So although the removal of walls around properties might seem to mark an opening out of a landscape, country houses were still set in landscapes shaped by exclusions.

olite society, power and exclusion

These parks corresponded with the mania for hunting among the gentry, forming game larders as well as grazing land. The rise of woodland in part reflected the rise of pheasant shooting – with many small woods planted as estates competed in terms of the total slaughter they could create. This competition continued into the nineteenth century and meant that exclusive shooting rights, the protection of game from unauthorised people, became more important. At the same time the creation of exclusive parks and the consequent immiserisation of the peasantry created considerable conflict. The traditional rights of rural folk to gain sustenance off common and wild lands were being removed, and replaced with the exclusive hunting rights of the gentry. A measure of the conflict's bitterness is how the Poaching Game Act (1770) meant, on the word of one witness, anyone going about the woods at night could get six months gaol; that of 1773 meant that a second offence could lead to a public whipping; and by 1800 gamekeepers could arrest people without a warrant if in a group of two or more, the perpetrators would then be classed as 'incorrigible rogues' and subject to two years in gaol, whippings or being press-ganged into the armed forces. Perhaps most telling of the scale of struggle over this landscape is that one-sixth of all the convictions in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century were for game offences.

Exclusion and conflict were thus symptomatic of the landscape of polite society: 'The mansion thus lay in the midst of an insulating sea of turf, hidden from view by encircling belts [of trees]. And once established as a sign and symbol of exclusivity, the patterns of social contact which the park engendered could only serve to perpetuate the emerging divisions in rural society' (Williamson 1995: 102). The turnpike roads formed the arteries of this polite society, as gentry moved from park to park observing the intervening country from within a coach. Such a practice symbolises the divisions in rural life on which the country house was founded. Embedded in these avenues is a politics over access. To ensure seclusion in the park, roads would be closed – a process that, after 1773, involved just two magistrates, who were generally of the same social set as the landowner anyway. The divisions these landscapes were founded upon can be found in the writing of a poet, from Bedale in Yorkshire, about the local Rand manor house:

> And now them roads are done away,
> And one made in their room,
> Quite to the east, of wide display,
> Where you may go and come,
> Quite unobserved from the Rand,
> The trees do them seclude,
> If modern times, do call such grand
> It's from a gloomy mood.
> (Hird, cited in Williamson 1995: 106)

Thus Humphrey Repton, the landscape gardener, argued for the use of woods around the edge of the property – both to seclude and, on smaller parks, give the impression of added depth and distance belonging to the park. These trees formed objects of beauty and profit, symbols of ownership and nationalism. For a start, the return on trees was low, though on marginal land it was as good as grazing, so it symbolised having the cash to take a long-run view. Likewise Britain was terrified of running out of oak, especially for the naval dockyards, so planting oak was a patriotic investment in the future of the nation. To succeed it also required exclusive property rights and allowed the rearing of game. The park and the trees form part of complex constellation of meanings and values.

Moreover in the changes from the landscape of geometric patterns we can see the evolution of society. Social relationships were becoming more fluid *within* the gentry, even as they excluded the rural poor from the scene. Social events had been very hierarchical, involving the presentation of various people to the hosts according to status. By the eighteenth century, such formality was declining; people would expect to 'circulate' between activities – cards, dancing or conversation. The park thus became a landscape allowing slowly changing views and the circulation of people rather than the fixed and ordered viewing points described earlier. The social vision of a cohesive polite society was part and parcel of a vision that wanted exclusive ownership.

Geopolitics: writing power on the land

The sacred landscape

A different example of landscapes purposefully shaped to reflect cosmological visions and related to geopolitical situations can be found in the ancient Chinese summer palace of Chengde. This was built between 1703 and 1792 by the Manchu emperors who succeeded the Ming dynasty. The very location of Chengde is north of the Ming heartland and north of Beijing, reflecting the new powerbase of the Quing empire, which centered on Manchuria and Jehol, and the expansion of that empire to both sides of the Great Wall. The landscape itself was shaped by explicit beliefs in geomancy – the magic powers of the earth and in *feng shui*. Thus the 'male' mountains surrounding the site are balanced by creating 'female' elements of gardens and lakes. These lakes formed eight pools and nine islands, echoing the Buddhist proverb that the world consists of nine mountains and eight seas. The idea of a universe consisting of concentric mountain ranges leading to a central mountain, Mount Sumeru inhabited by Indra, is reflected in the erection of a central, artificial peak crowned by a temple. Forêt (1995) argues the palace showed a non-Chinese dynasty trying to establish a geopolitical claim over the diverse territories of an empire. Key symbolic elements of other centres were brought to the new palace from Beijing, Lhasa, or Wutai Mountain; the summer capital can be read as a composite landscape that reproduced the map of the Manchu empire where the order imposed within the garden mirrored the larger order imposed on the conquered territories.

Nationalising space through monumental landscapes

A more recent example of creating places to symbolically bind together territories can be found in central Jakarta, which is striving to represent an independent Indonesian nation state. Indonesia was created out of a collection of principally Dutch colonies, comprising different religions (mainly Muslim, but also Hindu, Christian and others) and various ethnic groups. The task confronting President Sukarno on gaining independence was to weld one of the most populous and diverse parts of South East Asia into one state. Macdonald (1995) suggests the symbolic landscape was manipulated to support this project. The purpose of looking at the manufacture of these symbols is 'not to measure their authenticity against some historical yardstick but rather as a means to tease out the complexities of representing a viable geo-political basis for a collection of territories recently emerged from colonial domination' (Macdonald 1995: 272). In Jakarta, the colonial administration was clustered around 'Konigsplein', which became renamed as Medan Merdaka, to symbolise the Indonesian state rather than the intrusion of Europe. The former centre of colonial administration was rewritten as the heart of series of concentric circuits, centre of Jakarta, centre of Indonesia and part of a world of co-equal modern states. As such it rewrote what had symbolised European rule as symbolising Indonesian-ness in a subtle way, for while it asserted its newly won independence, it also reincorporated the heart of colonial power (important since the claims of the Indonesian state to rule its territory were based on inheriting that territory from the prior rulers), so the governor's palace smoothly became the presidential palace. It was by no means inevitable that a singular, Indonesian state would emerge – it could have been founded on Javan ethnicity, Communist liberation movements or Islamic law – all these forces were shaping the state and any could have tipped the balance. The final landscape expresses how it was that a nation state emerged on a particular model, that was legitimised though the landscape.

For instance, state power was set up as autonomous from the powerful Islamic forces in the region that had always contributed to Indonesian identity. Thus a national mosque was an obvious part of this national landscape; but there are subtle messages in its design. Unlike neighbouring Malaysia the national mosque is not built in Asian style but rather using the domed architecture of Arabist styles. The architecture thus identifies Islam with a pan-national identity, not a national one; it relocates Islam's claims away from controlling the national polity to a realm of international influences. This is further stressed by the fact that next door to the mosque remains the Dutch Catholic cathedral. Ostensibly a gesture of tolerance and reconciliation after independence, its presence counterbalances that of the mosque symbolically – suggesting that many outside world religions have played a part in shaping modern Indonesia. However, Christianity is a minor religion (and Catholicism a sect within that) compared to the prevalence of Islam; by suggesting their equivalence the new rulers also suggested Islam had no especial claim on the polity.

The centre of Medan Merdaka square is a tower, the Monas monument, raised to stand over the former colonial buildings. In the monument is a series of forty-eight dioramas, bound into a narrative through their spatial logic – simply walking from one to the next is enough to link them into a story leading up to the creation of Indonesia as a modern state. They form a purposeful sequence, chosen especially and in particular order to make the final outcome appear foreordained (what is called a *teleological* story). Thus the different forces that shaped Indonesia are given different significance by what role they are depicted as playing in this story. In the first, there is a picture of forced labour and plantation life showing the position allocated to Indonesian people in a brutal colonial system – that of agricultural producers for the benefit of the West. The next picture is also of the Dutch world order but is of the Protestant church, captioned as the 'role of the Protestant church in uniting the nation' – as though that effect was foreordained – and showing the need to reject the colonial legacy yet also to claim it to legitimate the territorial claims of the state. A whole panel is devoted to the United Nations building in New York, not the people just the building – symbolising the moment when the international community recognised the claims of Indonesia as a nation state. Likewise, a little distance from the square, is the separate monument to the accession of West Irian, now Irian Jaya, the last territory ceded by the Dutch. The monument of an individual rising up and breaking their chains is meant to symbolise the final bonds of colonialism lifted.

However, it is important not to give the impression that this reworking of themes to support a particular idea of the Indonesian state is entirely successful. The dioramas are captioned in Javanese, the language of the dominant island, and English, the most common language of tourists – any of the other peoples of Indonesia cannot read them. After Sukarno's downfall, the all too obvious phallic statement of the tower in the square became known as 'Sukarno's last erection'. Meanwhile the monument to struggles for freedom at West Irian takes on a new meaning given the struggles of the peoples of Irian Jaya and East Timor against the Indonesian state to become separate nations based on their own identities rather than be incorporated into Indonesia.

Nationalising space through rewriting the past

It is not just new buildings that can be created to alter the symbolic landscape. Ancient landscapes have been given different interpretations over time indicating the way the meaning of places can become a matter of political contest. Cambodia's ruling party in the 1970s, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, found it useful to promote a particular interpretation of the ancient and ruined palaces of Angkor Wat. They were sceptical of urban groups and wanted to pursue an isolationist policy. They found evidence of a Khmer culture existing before any Western contact useful in bolstering their claims that they did not need links to the rest of the world, and their policy of eradicating the legacy of French colonialism in Indo-China. Moreover, they used the elaborate canal system as the basis for creating an irrigated agricultural system – that failed to feed the populace. Such a use of the symbolism of Angkor Wat helped legitimise a policy that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths before the Vietnamese invasion deposed the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

A different example can be found in Zimbabwe, where the ruins of Great Zimbabwe caused symbolic difficulties for the white rulers of Rhodesia. Their rule was legitimated by discourses or stories about the black population being incapable of self-government and being less 'advanced' in some sort of ladder of civilisation, and, in some quarters, as being just as much recent arrivals to the region as the white rulers. Yet here were a set of ruins from the fifteenth century, at least as impressive as anything in Europe. White society dealt with the symbolism of these ruins through a variety of means: from allegedly scientific studies through to popular mythology and romantic histories. Textbooks during white rule thus ascribed them to Arab traders, or some earlier people that had died out (or been destroyed by the current black inhabitants) or even to the mythical figures and lost 'white civilisations'. With majority rule this changed – the ruins now having a symbolic centrality to the state mythology, and appearing as a recurring motif in national symbols, such as bank notes. The current regime can use the antiquity of a Zimbabwean polity to add legitimacy to their claims for the modern state. They can now retell the history of the ruins as the fall from a black-dominated golden age, and a current 'resurgence of our Zimbabwean civilisation' (cited in Kaarsholm 1989: 91). These three examples illustrate the role of landscapes in shaping identities for a people, in a place over time. The shaping of landscape can reflect and reinforce ideas of what constitutes a people, who is included, or excluded – so the polite society of country houses excludes the poor, while Indonesia struggled to invent an inclusive idea of Indonesian-ness. And such can involve 'inventing histories', in shaping ideas of how that people relate to their place and their past (see Chapter 10).

Summary

It should be apparent that we cannot see landscapes as simply material features. We can also treat them as 'texts' that can be read, and which tell both the inhabitants and us stories about the people – about their beliefs and identity. These are not immutable nor ineffable; some parts may be taken-for-granted parts of everyday life, but others may be politically contested. Landscapes are open to struggles over their meanings – be that the political use of cosmology in China or the contested histories of Zimbabwe. Reading the landscape is not a matter of finding a typical 'cultural area', as in the last chapter, but of seeing how landscapes come to mean different things to different people and how their meanings change and are contested.

The situation is complicated by what might be called double encoding of landscapes. That is where landscapes are wrapped in another representation. Thus in the case of country houses, their landscapes had meanings for visitors at the time they were built. Contemporary viewers can see them represented in paintings, book illustrations or television. Each of these might put different spins on the landscape – using them for particular purposes in a programme, say. So we have our own contemporary values on top of those in a landscape that was already saturated in meanings. The situation can then get very complex. To give a brief illustration, we can think of country houses by the eighteenth century as being committed to a managed landscape, one with order that could be envisioned as a whole. It was in the terms of the time an 'improved' landscape – one that showed it was cared for, and owned, by its order. Yet if we think of the paintings of, say, Constable we find them full of features which would have irritated local countrymen such as dead trees, broken gates, or a neglected flock of sheep which were aimed at urban tastes (Daniels 1993: 204). These paintings are now used to promote tourism and to signify a rural idyll away from the speed and bustle of modern urban life. The next chapter will start to think through how places and landscapes are re-presented in literature, and in Chapter 5 will look at the role of films and TV in more detail.

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