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Claude Lévi-Strauss, 100, Dies; Altered Western Views of the ‘Primitive’By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

[Claude Lévi-Strauss](#), the French anthropologist whose revolutionary studies of what was once called “primitive man” transformed Western understanding of the nature of culture, custom and civilization, has died at 100.

His son Laurent said Mr. Lévi-Strauss died of cardiac arrest Friday at his home in Paris. His death was announced Tuesday, the same day he was buried in the village of Lignerolles, in the Côte-d’Or region southeast of Paris, where he had a country home.

“He had expressed the wish to have a discreet and sober funeral, with his family, in his country house,” his son said. “He was attached to this place; he liked to take walks in the forest, and the cemetery where he is now buried is just on the edge of this forest.”

A powerful thinker, Mr. Lévi-Strauss, in studying the mythologies of primitive tribes, transformed the way the 20th century came to understand civilization itself. Tribal mythologies, he argued, display remarkably subtle systems of logic, showing rational mental qualities as sophisticated as those of Western societies.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss rejected the idea that differences between societies were of no consequence, but he focused on the common aspects of humanity’s attempts to understand the world. He became the premier representative of “structuralism,” a school of thought in which universal “structures” were believed to underlie all human activity, giving shape to seemingly disparate cultures and creations.

His work was a profound influence even on his critics, of whom there were many. There has been no comparable successor to him in France. And his writing — a mixture of the pedantic and the poetic, full of daring juxtapositions, intricate argument and elaborate metaphors — resembles little that had come before in anthropology.

“People realize he is one of the great intellectual heroes of the 20th century,” Philippe Descola, the chairman of the anthropology department at the Collège de France, said last November in an [interview with The New York Times](#) on the centenary of Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s birth. Mr. Lévi-Strauss was so revered that the occasion was celebrated in at least 25 countries.

A descendant of a distinguished French-Jewish artistic family, he was a quintessential French intellectual, as comfortable in the public sphere as in the academy. He taught at universities in Paris, New York and São Paulo, Brazil, and also worked for the [United Nations](#) and the French government.

His legacy is imposing. “Mythologiques,” his four-volume work about the structure of native mythology in the Americas, attempts nothing less than an interpretation of the world of culture and custom, shaped by analysis of several hundred myths of little-known tribes and traditions. The volumes — “The Raw and the Cooked,” “From Honey to Ashes,” “The Origin of Table Manners” and “The Naked Man,” published from 1964 to 1971 — challenge the reader with their complex interweaving of theme and detail.

In his analysis of myth and culture, Mr. Lévi-Strauss might contrast imagery of monkeys and jaguars; consider the differences in meaning of roasted and boiled food (cannibals, he suggested, tended to boil their friends and roast their enemies); and establish connections between weird mythological tales and ornate laws of marriage and kinship.

Many of his books include diagrams that look like maps of interstellar geometry, formulas that evoke mathematical techniques, and black-and-white photographs of scarified faces and exotic ritual that he made during his field work.

‘The Savage Mind’

His interpretations of North and South American myths were pivotal in changing Western thinking about so-called primitive societies. He began challenging the conventional wisdom about them shortly after beginning his anthropological research in the 1930s — an experience that became the basis of an acclaimed 1955 book, “Tristes Tropiques,” a sort of anthropological meditation based on his travels in Brazil and elsewhere.

The accepted view held that primitive societies were intellectually unimaginative and temperamentally irrational, basing their approaches to life and religion on the satisfaction of urgent needs for food, clothing and shelter.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss rescued his subjects from this limited perspective. Beginning with the Caduveo and Bororo tribes in the Mato Grosso region of Brazil, where he did his first and primary fieldwork, he found among them a dogged quest not just to satisfy material needs but also to understand origins, a sophisticated logic that governed even the most bizarre myths, and an implicit sense of order and design, even among tribes who practiced ruthless warfare.

His work elevated the status of “the savage mind,” a phrase that became the English title of one of his most forceful surveys, “La Pensée Sauvage” (1962).

“The thirst for objective knowledge,” he wrote, “is one of the most neglected aspects of the thought of people we call ‘primitive.’ ”

The world of primitive tribes was fast disappearing. From 1900 to 1950, more than 90 tribes and 15 languages had disappeared in Brazil alone. This was another of Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s recurring themes. He worried about the growth of a “mass civilization,” of a modern “monoculture.” He sometimes expressed exasperated self-disgust with the West and its “own filth, thrown in the face of mankind.”

In this seeming elevation of the savage mind and denigration of Western modernity, he was writing within the tradition of French Romanticism, inspired by the 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Mr. Lévi-Strauss revered. It was a view that helped build Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s public reputation in the era of countercultural romanticism in the 1960s and ’70s.

But such simplified romanticism, and the cultural relativism that developed in later decades, was also a distortion of his ideas. For Mr. Lévi-Strauss, the savage was not intrinsically noble or in any way “closer to nature.” Mr. Lévi-Strauss was withering, for example, when describing the Caduveo, whom he portrayed as a tribe so in rebellion against nature — and thus doomed — that it even shunned procreation, choosing to “reproduce” by abducting children from enemy tribes.

His descriptions of North and South American Indian tribes bear little relation to the sentimental and pastoral clichés that have become commonplace. Mr. Lévi-Strauss also made sharp distinctions between the primitive and the modern, focusing on the development of writing and historical awareness. It was an awareness of history, in his view, that allowed the development of science and the evolution and expansion of the West.

But he worried about the fate of the West. It was, he wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, “allowing itself to forget or destroy its own heritage.” With the fading of myth’s power in the modern West, he also suggested that music had taken on myth’s function. Music, he argued, had the ability to suggest, with primal narrative power, the conflicting forces and ideas that lie at the foundation of society.

But Mr. Lévi-Strauss rejected Rousseau’s idea that humankind’s problems derive from society’s distortions of nature. In his view, there is no alternative to such distortions. Each society must shape itself out of nature’s raw material, he believed, with law and reason as the essential tools. This application of reason, he argued, created universals that could be found across all cultures and times. He became known as a structuralist because of his conviction that a structural unity underlies all of humanity’s mythmaking, and he showed how those universal motifs played out in societies, even in the ways a village was laid out.

For Mr. Lévi-Strauss, every culture’s mythology was built around oppositions: hot and cold, raw and cooked, animal and human. And it is through these opposing “binary” concepts, he said, that humanity makes sense of the world.

This was quite different from what most anthropologists had been concerned with. Anthropology had traditionally sought to disclose differences among cultures rather than discovering universals. It had been preoccupied not with abstract ideas but with the particularities of rituals and customs, collecting and cataloguing them.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s “structural” approach, seeking universals about the human mind, cut against that notion of anthropology. He did not try to determine the various purposes served by a society’s practices and rituals. He was never interested in the kind of fieldwork that anthropologists of a later generation, like Clifford Geertz, took on, closely observing and analyzing a society as if from the inside. (He began “*Tristes Tropiques*” with the statement “I hate traveling and explorers.”)

Ideas That Shook His Field

To his mind, as he wrote in “The Raw and the Cooked,” translated from “*Le Cru et le Cuit*” (1964), he had taken “ethnographic research in the direction of psychology, logic and philosophy.”

In radio talks for the [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#) in 1977 (published as “Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture”), Mr. Lévi-Strauss demonstrated how a structural examination of myth might proceed. He cited a report that in 17th-century Peru, when the weather became exceedingly cold, a priest would summon all those who had been born feet first, or who had a harelip, or who were twins. They were accused of being responsible for the weather and were ordered to repent. But why these groups? Why harelips and twins?

Mr. Lévi-Strauss cited a series of North American myths that associate twins with opposing natural forces: threat and promise, danger and expectation. One myth, for example, includes a magical hare, a rabbit, whose nose is split in a fight, resulting, literally, in a harelip, suggesting an incipient twinning. With his injunctions, the Peruvian priest seemed aware of associations between cosmic disorder and the latent powers of twins.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s ideas shook his field. But his critics were plentiful. They attacked him for ignoring history and geography, using myths from one place and time to help illuminate myths from another, without demonstrating any direct connection or influence.

In an influential critical survey of his work in 1970, the [Cambridge University](#) anthropologist Edmund Leach wrote of Mr. Lévi-Strauss: “Even now, despite his immense prestige, the critics among his professional colleagues greatly outnumber the disciples.”

Mr. Leach himself doubted whether Mr. Lévi-Strauss, during his fieldwork in Brazil, could have conversed with “any of his native informants in their native language” or stayed long enough to confirm his first impressions. Some of Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s theoretical arguments, including his explanation of cannibals and their tastes, have been challenged by empirical research.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss conceded that his strength was in his interpretations of what he discovered, and he thought that his critics did not sufficiently credit the cumulative impact of those speculations. “Why not admit it?” he once said to an interviewer, Didier Eribon, in “Conversations With Lévi-Strauss” (1988). “I was fairly quick to discover that I was more a man for the study than for the field.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss was born on Nov. 28, 1908, in Brussels to Raymond Lévi-Strauss and the former Emma Levy, who were living in Belgium at the time. He grew up in France, near Versailles, where his grandfather was a rabbi and his father a portrait painter. His great-grandfather Isaac Strauss was a Strasbourg violinist mentioned by Berlioz in his memoirs. As a child, he loved to collect disparate objects and juxtapose them. “I had a passion for exotic curios,” he said in “Conversations.” “My small savings all went to the secondhand shops.” A collection of Jewish antiquities from his family’s collection, he said, was displayed in the Musée de Cluny in Paris; others were looted after France fell to the Nazis in 1940. From 1927 to 1932, Claude obtained degrees in law and philosophy at the University of Paris, then taught in a local high school, the Lycée Janson de Sailly, where his fellow teachers included [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) and Simone de Beauvoir. He later became a professor of sociology at the French-influenced University of São Paulo in Brazil.

A Taste for Adventure

Determined to become an anthropologist, he began making trips into the country’s interior, accompanied by his wife, Dina Dreyfus, whom he married in 1932. “I was envisaging a way of reconciling my professional education with my taste for adventure,” he said in “Conversations,” adding: “I felt I was reliving the adventures of the first 16th-century explorers.”

His marriage to Ms. Dreyfus ended in divorce, as did a subsequent marriage, in 1946, to Rose-Marie Ullmo, with whom he had his son Laurent. In 1954 he married Monique Roman, and they, too, had a son, Matthieu. Besides Laurent, Mr. Lévi-Strauss is survived by his wife and Matthieu as well as by Matthieu’s two sons.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss left teaching in 1937 and devoted himself to fieldwork, returning to France in 1939 for further study. But on the eve of World War II, he was drafted into the French Army to serve as a liaison with British troops. In “Tristes Tropiques,” he writes of his “disorderly retreat” from the Maginot Line after [Hitler](#)’s invasion of France, fleeing in cattle trucks, sleeping in “sheep folds.”

In 1941 Mr. Lévi-Strauss was invited to become a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, with help from the Rockefeller Foundation. He called it “the most fruitful period of my life,” spending time in the reading room of the [New York Public Library](#) and befriending the distinguished German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas and the Russian-born linguist (and structuralist) Roman Jakobson.

He also became part of a circle of artists and Surrealists, including Max Ernst, André Breton and Jean-Paul Sartre’s future mistress, Dolorès Vanetti. Ms. Vanetti shared his “passion for objects,” Mr. Lévi-Strauss said in “Conversations,” and the two regularly visited an antique shop in Manhattan that sold artifacts from the Pacific Northwest. The excursions left Mr. Lévi-Strauss with the “impression that all the essentials of humanity’s artistic treasures could be found in New York.”

After the war, Mr. Lévi-Strauss was so intent on pursuing his studies in New York that he was given the position of cultural attaché by the French government until 1947. On his return to France, he earned a doctorate in letters from the University of Paris in 1948 and was associate curator at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris in 1948 and 1949. His first major book, "The Elementary Structures of Kinship," was published in 1949. (Several years later, the jury of the Prix Goncourt, France's most famous literary award, said that it would have given the prize to "Tristes Tropiques," his hybrid of memoir and anthropological travelogue, had it been fiction.)

After the Rockefeller Foundation gave the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris a grant to create a department of social and economic sciences, Mr. Lévi-Strauss became the school's director of studies, remaining in the post from 1950 to 1974.

Other positions followed. From 1953 to 1960, he served as secretary general of the International Social Science Council at [Unesco](#). In 1959 he was appointed professor at the Collège de France. He was elected to the French Academy in 1973. By 1960, Mr. Lévi-Strauss had founded L'Homme, a journal modeled on The American Anthropologist.

By the 1980s, structuralism as imagined by Mr. Lévi-Strauss had been displaced by French thinkers who became known as poststructuralists: writers like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. They rejected the idea of timeless universals and argued that history and experience were far more important in shaping human consciousness than universal laws.

"French society, and especially Parisian, is gluttonous," Mr. Lévi-Strauss responded. "Every five years or so, it needs to stuff something new in its mouth. And so five years ago it was structuralism, and now it is something else. I practically don't dare use the word 'structuralist' anymore, since it has been so badly deformed. I am certainly not the father of structuralism."

But Mr. Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism may end up surviving poststructuralism, just as he survived most of its proponents. His monumental work "Mythologiques" may even ensure his legacy, as a creator of mythologies if not their explicator.

The final volume ends by suggesting that the logic of mythology is so powerful that myths almost have a life independent from the peoples who tell them. In his view, myths speak through the medium of humanity and become, in turn, the tools with which humanity comes to terms with the world's greatest mystery: the possibility of not being, the burden of mortality.

Nadim Audi contributed reporting from Paris.

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