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The Body of Myth in Melanesia and Beyond

I want to thank all of the reviewers not only for their generous endorsement of *The Lost Drum's* task and their positive assessment of its success, but for the skillful way in which they have poised the Sepik aesthetic, Sepik myth, and its alternative readings of gender against those more southerly Papuan groups upon which I focused in my book. I must say, before anything else, that I do not think it accidental that the panel is composed of reviewers who have all worked in the Sepik River area of Papua New Guinea. In the coastal areas of Papua New Guinea, and Melanesia in general, we find that mythic discourse has a foundational role in the constitution of their social systems,

and every ethnographer of the region has had to take seriously the task of situating what I term “mythopoiesis” at the center of their social analytic.

One could say that it is virtually impossible to describe such systems without reference to the myths that provide a “charter,” in some form or another, for those systems. The term I use, “mythopoiesis,” literally means a bringing into being through myth. And although in *The Lost Drum* and elsewhere (e.g., Weiner 1994, 1988) I have argued against applying the “charter model” indiscriminately as a generalized explanation of myth’s social function, it is hard to deny that it serves this purpose in a variety of ways in societies of the Sepik River, both upland and lowland, in Papua New Guinea.

And yet I feel that the issue of “myth as charter” still needs a more sophisticated examination. What *is* similar in Sepik and Foi myth is the manner in which they serve as narrative “containers” for secret names, the knowledge of which configures a variety of social, cosmological, and political statuses in the two areas. Harrison notes for the Manambu of the middle Sepik that each subclan must “constantly affirm its mythological rights by keeping, or trying to keep, a collective homonymy in existence between the actors in its myth and its own living members” (1990:56). In Foi, while the narrative content of myths circulates freely, the secret names of the actors, which figures in knowledge of magic, are known to only a few adepts. For the Foi and Manambu, myth serves as a form of what the Foi call “tree leaf talk”—allusive and metaphorical language that conceals its true or essential content. These names found a world, in the sense that they bring it into being as an onomastically constituted terrain, but I think that the manner in which their containing myths serve as “charters” for that world is at best a product of a certain specifically Western view of myth.

Myth is both a novelistic or narrative body of language as well as a specific form of verbal behavior. Any bringing into being it is responsible for is subject to the interpretive, transformative properties of language itself. A myth is told, above all, to an audience, and the telling and hearing of myth constitutes its interpretive intrusion into social and linguistic convention.

All three reviewers thus raise the issue of dialogism, and Lipset and Silverman specifically invoke Bakhtin’s dialogism, as against the Lacanian dialectic I employ in *The Lost Drum*. A comparison of Bakhtin’s and Lacan’s theories of the self and language would itself be fascinating, and would deserve a thorough excavation. Anthropologically, a dialogue between Lipset’s recent monograph, *Mangrove Man*, and *The Lost Drum*, where this contrast can be explicated in its Melanesian dimension, is something that deserves more treatment that I can give it in this brief rejoinder.

Let me now turn to the substantive themes of the myths in *The Lost Drum*: Melanesian (and Western) gender and sexuality. David Lipset is quite

right to call *The Lost Drum* an excavation of New Guinea *masculinity*, and I am sure that when I think I am talking about gender, some Melanesianists might retort that I am talking about men, and what is more, doing so from an androcentric position. In this comment, by his request to learn how certain Foi “cosmologies of genitalia” are subscribed to by men and women alike, and in the general way in which he elsewhere enlists dialogism on behalf of the hidden maternal schema in Murik (Lipset 1997), he obliquely raises the issue of what we might delicately term *The Lost Drum’s* “feminist” credentials. Having engaged in a debate with Bernard Juillerat about the relative merits of alternative psychoanalyses, I would have been eager to do the same with, say, Gillian Gillison, whose own psychoanalytically oriented analysis of New Guinea myth (1993) ranks as one of the best recent analyses of New Guinea cultural imagery. This exchange may very well have brought feminist anthropological themes more explicitly into play around the issue of New Guinea gender.

In the absence of such dialogue, however, we must, as Lipset so astutely manages in his own analysis, make the maternal and conjugal exchanges appear through other mechanisms, both imaginal and analytic. And, as Lipset implies, why should this represent an inferior or bogus form of relationality? If we are, as Marilyn Strathern maintains, obliged to compare not statuses, but modes of relationships, then it is just this “masculinist” construction of gender *relations*, as opposed to the construction of the feminine, which has to be poised against its feminist counterpart. In juxtaposing what I identified as male and female myths in Foi, I demonstrated a particular way of making that dialogue visible, but this technique also expects that alternative juxtapositions might reveal different dimensions of this exchange.

From my point of view, the biggest difference between Bakhtin’s dialogicity and Lacan’s relationality revolves around the avowed “unfinalizability” of the former and the Freudian focus on the technique of “concluding” in the latter. It is true that in an important empirical sense, dialogue is forever unfinished, as is the ceaseless flow of words and objects between persons. But myth, ritual, and the novel are importantly bounded things, with ostensive beginnings and endings. They serve to close off and make possible a perspectivalizing rupture between the unfinalizable everyday and interpretive closure. This is the point of Wagner’s suggestion that in Melanesia, myth belongs to the nonconventional.

But let us not belabor the point. Obviously, any living system of narrative praxis, including the mythopoietic worlds of the Murik and the Foi, must allow for the open-endedness engendered by the creativity of language, as well as the caption points of interpretive perspective and narrative bounding. More important is that both dialogism and Lacanian psychoanalysis rep-

resent alternatives to the psychologism that dominated earlier analyses of the Melanesian psyche.

Here I dispute Guddemi's criticism: It is not enough to merely maintain that all alternative analytical frameworks are worthy. We must also use them to critique all the others and keep ourselves on our intellectual mettle, ready to convince others why we maintain the perspectives we maintain. I am all in favor of working towards a plurality of interpretational perspectives, as long as we continue to commit ourselves to defending those we think are better and more efficacious than others and to thus forcing each other to defend what we view as their analytical merits.

In the case of the psychological anthropology I discard at the beginning of *The Lost Drum*, Guddemi I think misunderstands the notion of "the real" in Lacan's own triadic schema of "symbolic," "imaginary," and "real" (see, for example, Lacan 1977). "The real" does not ontologically precede either the domain of body image ("the imaginary") or language ("the symbolic") but is a residue or effect of them—"the Real is that which escapes symbolization," Lacan says (*ibid.*). It is, in Wagnerian fashion, a *by-product* of the human focus on symbol-making rather than a consciously constructed *product*. It is what, in being left out of symbolic consciousness, subsequently intrudes itself into it as if from the outside.

Therefore, the alleged advantage of the "clinical" techniques of an earlier psychological anthropology cannot be assigned to their preoccupation with empirically observable behavior, however important that analytical moment is in a total anthropological account. What an interpretive psychoanalysis (surely a redundant description) seeks is an account of the sedimented history of relational traumas and their subsequent concealments that impels an agent to "act out" repressed and hidden significances in a particular form.

All this is another way of addressing the point that Silverman quite properly demands that I treat, and which is raised by the "myth as charter" question: How then does myth make "the real" emerge? And what aspect of that "reality" is made visible in the conjunctural appropriation by myths of other myths and other bodies of discourse? Let me return to the continuities between Sepik and Foi myth, on the one hand, and between my mythopoietic task and what Sahlins terms "mytho-praxis" on the other.

Instead of radically dissociating structure and event, both Wagner and Sahlins find a contrast *within* the domain of mythic language between cosmological and historical accounts themselves. A myth, and its telling, is all by itself an "event" in Wagner's terms because it uses nonconventional imagery to impinge upon conventional "structures." An argument could be made that those who continue to posit myth as a form of historical consciousness, and then attempt to collapse historical and mythic narrative (e.g., Hill 1988), preserve a narrow and somewhat straw-man model of myth.

But what if myth was more like art or literature than it was the analogue to historical narrative? Would not the continued pairing of myth and history preserve the “charter” theory of myth even as it would appear to critique the “charter” qualities of historical narrative? In Foi and Manambu, the social function of myth as containers of secret and important names is only partially related to its overt narrative content (and this relationship must be established through various interpretational methods). Perhaps there is an ethnographic contrast here between South American and Melanesian myths that needs comparative treatment before the myths, and their respective analytic methodologies, can begin to speak to and critique each other.

Phillip Guddemi raises the very important point concerning the degree to which obviational models a particularly Melanesian, as well as Melanesianist, aesthetic. I believe that there are two responses to this issue. One is that at the end of *Symbols That Stand for Themselves* (1986), Wagner used the triadic obviational sequence to model a broad development of the Western episteme from medieval to modern. Without doubt, the force of Wagner’s cultural interpretation of the West was somewhat diluted by the fact that he did not use his own analysis to directly critique or inspect other competing (and classic) versions of this transformation, for example, those of Weber, Marx, Heidegger, Sennett, or many others. Nevertheless, it is the case that Wagner has not published any of his previous attempts to apply the obviational model on myths from other areas.¹

The other answer accepts the wisdom of Guddemi’s estimation—that obviational analysis grew out of Wagner’s most intimate familiarity with the shape and narrative content of Daribi myth and the crucial place of myth in an overall Daribi linguistic praxis. It was a similar situating of Foi mythopraxis and mythopoiesis in their total world of language-mediated relationality, as well as the very real structural, thematic, and historical continuities among local bodies of myth in that whole region of Papua New Guinea, that made obviational analysis so critical in my own confrontation with the Foi mythic corpus.

In *The Lost Drum*, one of the major themes I tried to bring out was that obviational analysis showed that there were “bodies” of discourse that had a shape and “thematic” corporeality to them, just as did the literal body parts and substitutes that they primarily dealt with. An important characteristic of the Foi mythic corpus was that such themes and sequences repeated themselves in different myths. A certain myth could be expanded by the addition of one of these sequences, taken as a whole thing. Because the linear spacing of events in each of these set sequences always “stands for” or creates a nonlinear image, these sequences had to alter the significance of myths they entered into in a holistic way—they could not just then be the narrative accretion of further characters and actions. In other words, an obviational view of

myth (and other bodies of language) obliges us to first consider how such juxtaposition of bodies and organs of mythic discourse alters the final turning point of the myth. We then go back and retrace the linear sequence of events that shows this altered corporeal shape of the myth's image, its final product. This, if anything, is the structuralist principle that "founds" obviational analysis. Thus, Lévi-Strauss acknowledged this thematic, holistic way that myths combined in South American myth as well (1976, 1988).

Foi mythic discourse foregrounds not its linear, semantic features but these corporeal, incorporative functions. The subsequent application of such an analytic structure to other mythic traditions would then represent what Marilyn Strathern would call the attempt to fashion a "Melanesian" analytic of Western society. And its perceived utility would rest on how well it succeeded in convincing other anthropologists that such an exercise was the whole point of doing anthropology. If one is inclined to see *The Lost Drum* in an important sense as part 2 of *The Heart of the Pearl Shell* (Weiner 1988), it could then be said that *The Lost Drum* expands the "Foi aesthetic" I develop in that first book to other New Guinea bodies of myth.

The third volume I have planned on myth will then have to try to extend this analytical framework beyond Melanesia. In that volume I will attempt to apply obviational analysis to the Tukana myth of Monmaneki (from volume 3 of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* [the original analysis met with mixed reactions when first presented at a conference of Melanesianists and Amazonianists in 1995]), the Wawilak myth of the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land, and the original Niebelungun mythology that was the basis of Richard Wagner's *Ring*, surely the most important effort in the recent history of the West to enlist myth on behalf of the constitution of the Western polity.

Finally, to return to the "problem" of South American and Melanesian mythology I mentioned above, it would have to address the allochronicity (after Fabian) that the juxtaposition of South American and the Melanesian mythopraxis makes visible. It is undeniable that historically, South American peoples have been using their myths to "explain" the significance of the Europeans for a far longer time than have Melanesians. Following on from Peter Lawrence's (1964) and F. E. Williams's (1977) groundbreaking studies earlier in the twentieth century, contemporary ethnographers such as Andrew Lattas, Andrew Strathern, Roy Wagner, and myself have begun to pay serious attention to the more recently created myths of the colonial conjuncture in Papua New Guinea.

Given the very different notions of Melanesian language and its corporeality that contrast with Western uses of language, the examination of this process as it occurs might suggest something more than just a Melanesian attempt to fashion or appropriate Western historicity for itself. Such an exam-

ination might well have to focus on the kinds of time and temporality that the different myth analytics—structuralism, historicism, obviation—make visible in areas that are distinguished primarily by their different relations to colonialism. A comparison of the major approaches to myth from these areas might provide a fruitful cross-cultural contrast between both regions and the theories that they call forth as part of our analytic and descriptive endeavors as anthropologists.

NOTES

My thanks to Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern for commenting on earlier drafts of this exchange.

1. One of the early drafts of *Lethal Speech* included an obviation analysis of the Tshimshian “Story of Asdiwal,” which Wagner considered one of Lévi-Strauss’s most successful and penetrating structural analyses of a single myth. However, this analysis was removed from the final published version (Wagner 1978). I am grateful to Roy Wagner for allowing me to relate some of these hitherto unknown details of the intellectual genesis of one of his most important works.

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