

24. JAGUARS, STARLETS, AND VAMPIRES (5/05)

Lévi-Straussian myth analysis is often highly abstract: when set of myths analyzed, comes out to be structured by set of very basic and very abstract oppositions: raw/cooked. But L-S not entirely consistent: in some places says these are fundamental contradictions, discrepancies, problems, and myth is a way that society tries to bridge or mediate those contradictions: ultimately it cannot be done, but myth keeps trying.

Many anthros who followed L-S, tried to use his methods, attempted to show how formal structures of myth related to particular society.

One of L-S's most famous early examples was analysis of myth from Tsimshian of Northwest Coast of North America, story of a hero named Asdiwal. Complicated story of his travels and marriages, to spirits as well as humans.

L-S says to be understood in terms of local social structure, but often not as reflection or justification, but rather in opposition or distinction to it.

L-S tries to classify different kinds of post-marital residence Asdiwal lives in. Critics have shown that his information was poor and his analysis forced.

He says there is a series of oppositions, and though myth cannot resolve them, the scope or amplitude of the oppositions diminishes thru the myth: the oppositions get weaker and weaker. From water vs. land, to sea hunting vs. mountain hunting, to valley vs. peak.

Many problems with analysis. Those oppositions don't strike me as getting smaller.

Been shown that L-S very arbitrary and careless in his use of myths.

But interesting because raises issue of how the story is to be understood in terms of society.

One interesting re-analysis by a local specialist, John Adams, says that the story really doesn't seem the *opposite* of daily life in this society but remarkably similar: often a dynamic outsider will marry into a local group. he isn't a member of the hereditary power structure but he assumes de facto leadership, like Asdiwal. Asdiwal's career is a possible one.

(L-S, "The Story of Asdiwal" in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, Edmund Leach, ed., 1967; L. Thomas et al. 1976, "Asdiwal Crumbles: A Critique of Lévi-Straussian Myth Analysis." *American Anthropologist* 3:147-173; John Adams, "Dialectics and Contingency in 'The Story of Asdiwal'" in *The Unconscious in Culture*, Ino Rossi, ed., 1974.)

The Legitimacy of Solomon

Edmund Leach has very useful example of a myth analysis that related myths to contradictions in society, from Old Testament

L points out that in the OT there are a long series of strange marriages, in which people marry just the people they are not supposed to

These marriages form part of a series of episodes that seem to echo each other, in which action in one episode seems similar to another episode but turned around or shifted or

slightly changed: e.g., as a boy and young man, David is persecuted by Saul, but when David comes to power, he repeats some of the same actions

Extremely complicated dynastic history, with usurpers, coups, counter-coups, esp. complicated because two kingdoms develop, not just one

Story complicated by presence of numerous ethnic groups; in many cases indicated that they are the descendants of different characters in the Bible, and that they are ranked by social distance. E.g. descendants of Leah closer than descendants of Zilpha.

There are a series of strange forbidden marriages. Some of these wrong marriages are even rewarded.

King Solomon himself has a very dubious, messy ancestry, also marries several foreigners

(To oversimplify a bit), L says that the Israelites took much by conquest, but by law they should have inherited the land. L says that the wrong marriages with foreigners mediate or fudge this issue, in effect asserting that they hold land by inheritance as well as conquest, even though shouldn't marry such people.

Also very controversial. But suggests how myth may relate, not just to abstraction but to gut issue, fundamental problem or issue.

Matrilocality and singing

The analysis that Hirschfeld and I did of a Kuna myth follows after some of the ones we have been looking at: we look for contradictions and dilemmas in society; we analyze bundles of relations episode by episode like Turner; we pay attention to exact wording, like Hymes; we assume that story resonates for hearers, and like Hammel, that their creativity shapes the structure and content; and we look for symbolic associations outside the narrative, like Beidelman. We also paid attention to what the Kuna said *about* the story. We also assume that there are multiple dimensions on which the story is structured, decided to examine each one separately.

Kuna myths presented in sacred village meetings: chief sings story, then another leader stands and interprets, makes lesson out of text. Useful, but didn't go as far into story as we wanted, not doing our work for us. But themes in myth basic in Kuna discourse, nothing alien to them.

The fundamental contradiction or problem was right up front: because young married men go live with their wives and work for wife's father, they must leave home, and their own family must give up their labor. Give up sons to get sons-in-law. Mother in story won't play by rules. Man who first told me the story had sons but no daughters, so he screwed by system.

In daily life, the dilemma is mediated by marrying locally, within village: son may live with wife but he goes home to see his mother almost every day, and once in a while he works with father and brothers. But in myth, with extreme moves, not possible.

Far from daily life, in which no one marries people from the stars, but in other ways very close: narrator took me out and showed me the medicine the mother used, which medicine men give divorced people so they won't yearn for old spouse.

Q. So how do the episodes in myth play off the normal household system? succession of skewed residence and marriage arrangements. esp. striking that boys ambushing girls etc. is reverse of what happens in real marriage. Goal of production met but not reproduction.

Q. How about hunting? odor?

Q. How does the dimension of union vs. separation subsume other dimensions? Q. How is anticipation relevant? Why does the myth link women's singing and separation?

When article reviewed for publication, one outside reader said we were wrong to make too much of women and emotion, we were stereotyping women; another, equally feminist reader said we weren't making enough of women and emotion.

One could also do a Proppian analysis. In many episodes in Kuna mythology, culture heroes come down to earth on golden platters to teach and civilize. In others, a hero is born from strange circumstances on earth. This myth is variant, though different from others, in that the other heroes are often rejected by people, who don't want to be reformed; here instead, it is that the boys try to capture girls.

This myth one of the most popular among Kuna themselves today. One of my friends named his daughter Nadili.

Vampires and stars

One of L-S's claims is that one myth can be seen as an inversion of another, whether from the same or neighboring cultures. Similarly, Leach, both in the article on biblical marriages and in our assigned readings, not only says one myth can be an inversion of another, but that one must study a whole corpus of myths together, because a single myth is meaningless.

In the case of Asdiwal, L-S's claim has been challenged, and it is a tricky one to verify. I was drawn to try by a Kuna myth that in some ways seems very like the one we have just considered and is also a very prominent myth today, but which in other ways is quite different. It has star-people and children born of union with a star-person, flights to the headwaters of rivers, etc.

A couple worry for their granddaughter, because she will soon reach puberty, and they fear she will be taken by nearby vampire-people, who carry off people to drain them of their blood. The proto-Kuna don't know how to resist. So the couple and their granddaughter flee to the headwaters of a river.

Living there, the couple go off each day leaving the girl alone. They tell her that despite hearing forest noises, no one is there. She is visited by a star-man. She deceives her grandparents, telling them to go to another river where they can catch crayfish, while she is with the starman. She gets pregnant, and when the baby is born, grandfather takes it to the river to let it be carried away on a log. But star-women convince him to keep the child for them for a while, and then they become attached and keep it.

The child, a boy named Twiren, grows up rapidly to manhood. He asks if there is anyone else in the world: his grandparents say no, but he contradicts them, and they return to the village downstream. There he teaches the people how to fight. They invite the vampires to a drinking party, and while they are drunk, they kidnap their children. Eventually, the vampires attack the people in a great final battle, and Twiren and the people destroy them all.

We can see a whole series of parallels: Worry about losing sons/granddaughter. Flight to headwaters. Agricultural work. Boys/couple leave for work. Stargirls/man on golden platter. Signs recognized of girls' visit/granddaughter's pregnancy. Boys try to capture girls/ grandfather tries to get rid of child. Return to village. Star girl/Twiren instructs people.

The other myth was about kinship and domestic relations. This one about foreign policy, how to deal with foreigners. Description of vampires very like traditional enemies of Kuna, Indians called Emberá or Chocó. But also parallel to rebellion against Panama Kuna staged in 1925. Notice defeat enemies in story by getting drunk. In exorcism ritual get spirits drunk. Also in 1925, attacked policemen when drinking in carnival, Mardi Gras.

So story about how one might deal with oppressive foreigners: fleeing, negotiating, and eventually, attacking and killing. How is this connected with domestic issues of first myth? Because both in myth and in 1920s, point of vulnerability was young women, lustful interest of outsiders. In domestic relations, women of household secluded, eventually let in one or two men as sons-in-law. Same vis-à-vis foreigners, except never let them in if possible.

There are other dimensions. Much concerned with union and separation, as in first myth. Even to extent that in Inanatili story, star girl tells young men about star villages and people there, expanding their knowledge of world. Opposite with second story: grandparents deny there is anyone else in the world, try to shut things down socially.

Both stories about unions with star people. In second story they may partially represent helpful foreigners with whom Kuna have allied themselves against their enemies. The illicit pregnancy and bastard birth awfully like the skewed marriages discussed by Leach. There is something wrong, grandparents upset, but ultimately it is the product of this mess who saves the people from their enemies.

We can try out method in last class with some different myths, see what we can make of them tentatively right on spot.