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Experience and Myth in a Colombian Chocó Case of Attempted Murder

Thinking through myth in the context of individual lives may reveal the strengths and weaknesses of mythic logic when played out in practice. Culture's myths about men and women structure the possibilities and limits of experience. But more often than not, the lives of individuals diverge from myth's collective promise. In cases of abuse, tellings from personal experience may challenge customary expectations regarding forms of social alliance such as marriage. The true story of how an Emberá Indian grandmother came to have only one leg provides a dramatic example. Her husband wanted another woman and so took her way into the forest, threw her off a waterfall, and left her for dead. She crawled out and survived to tell her tale. Then there is the Emberá myth, the one about a husband who wanted another woman and so took his wife way into the forest. In contrast to Grandmother, the mythic woman got saved by her shaman-father and brothers.

This essay presents a dramatic instance of the push and pull that may occur between discourses of experience lived and experience as prefigured in myth. The structural homologies between this personal history and this myth invite attention to the relation between these discursive forms. The relation is a contestative one. My interest in it stems from a more general concern with how it might come about that patriarchal myth, as a mode of interpreting, representing, and constructing experience, continues to have a certain cachet among men and women in society despite personal histories that contradict mythic illusions. This interest led me to question whether or not folklorists and ethnographers, carrying patriarchal presumptions with them, have perhaps been overemphasizing the importance of patriarchal myths as scripts-for-

living in the indigenous societies they study. I label the Emberá Indian myth in question here as patriarchal because it presents only male kin as active agents and women as passive, protected objects of exchange. This is consistent with gender asymmetries that pervade the Emberá mythic corpus, and indeed, the larger corpus of South American myth with which it shares many affinities.

The myth and personal experience narrative was recorded in 1985, in the course of ethnographic fieldwork among the Emberá (Chocó) of Darién, Panama.¹ The Emberá are a lowland tropical forest people whose homeland extends from Ecuador to the Darién of Panama. Many of the Emberá in Darién are first or second generation arrivals from the Department of Chocó in Colombia (hence their popular name the “Chocó”). Emberá is their native language, but many also speak Spanish. Youths who have been to school and older men who learn Spanish in the context of trade with non-Indians speak the most fluent Spanish. I recorded the mythic text in Emberá and translated it into Spanish and English as part of my regular collection procedures. A teenage girl in the Chico River recited it to me. Earlier that same year, while working in the neighboring Tupísa River, I had come across the old woman with one leg. She’d come there to visit her granddaughter, here named Melani, from the next village downriver where she lived with Melani’s father. In Emberá communities of 10 to 100 households, where houses are built up on stilts and water is fetched by climbing down often slippery riverbanks, Grandmother’s one-legged condition could not go unnoticed. One day, while translating tape-recorded myths, I asked the young man with whom I worked how it was she came to have one leg. He said he knew the story but didn’t know if it was true or not, and that I should ask his mother, who knew better. Anyway, he said, it happened in Colombia. She had a mad husband who took her far, far into the forest to a high waterfall where he pushed her off the top and left her for dead. But slowly, slowly she crawled out of the river, where a *kampuniá* (black non-Indian) saw her, and helpful and kind like they are, brought her right down to the doctor where she got her leg cut off.

Walking upriver with Melani on our way to a canoe-making party, I asked her to tell me the story. She told it as we walked the path, she in front and me behind, she turning round to gesture and exclaim at various points. Then I got Grandmother, who barely spoke Spanish, to tell me her version in Emberá. Her version turned out to be too difficult to use, both because of technical problems with the tape recorder and because instead of telling the chain of events in sequence, she focused most of her telling on how she was given milk to drink in the hospital. So I sat down with Melani and her grandmother once more, and Melani told me the story again in Spanish, interrupting to ask her grandmother questions in Emberá on occasion. This is the version I analyze here.

The striking resemblance between these texts of myth and experience leads me to consider them in the same analysis, despite the fact that the former is based on wisdom handed down from what the Emberá call Ancient Times and the latter is based on memories of direct experience. Differences in genre and the social context of telling contribute to the distance with which one would usually treat these texts in analysis. But this distance collapses. For on the level of structure, they are identical. Or, better said, they are nearly identical, and the differences between them are critical.

Running with Lévi-Strauss' intuition that "a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (1963:213), I expand the field of mythic comparison into the genre of experience narrative, the kind anyone can tell about themselves or someone they know. The formal discursive features are different from myth, yet, as demonstrated here, the elements and logic of myth are present. Comparison reveals the power of myth to structure the discourse of experience. At the same time, it reveals how the discourse of experience, produced by known speakers in specific historical circumstances, may contest myth's pervasive power, with a different kind of authority and truth value. This analysis contributes to Foucauldian discussions of authorship and authority that are central to evaluating the conditions in which oppositional texts are produced and the effects that they may have (Foucault 1977). Because Grandmother's experience demonstrates the failure of patriarchal myth and the fortitude of a woman in the face of this failure, I consider it here as an oppositional text that shapes Emberá gender consciousness.

Myth precedes experience. Following Lacanian interpretation, we become subjects in culture and society as we learn language. We enter language through chains of signifiers that form our sense of self and our desires through connections of meaning and context. Categories of thought, like men and women, are linked in relation to each other and to the context in which we come to understand their meaning (cf. Gallup 1982:8–13). Grandmother's story demonstrates this Lacanian thesis, as it yields to myth in concept and organization. But it also works in history against cultural illusions that create men as women's saviors, for myths do also fail speakers who confront experience of an irregular sort. It is this discursive juncture, where myth fails and the speaker diverges from the anonymous mythic text, that is examined here. At this juncture, Grandmother assumes the role of active agent, breaking out of the isolated symbolic geography of myth and entering into the symbolic geography of history. Her experience, as told by her granddaughter, defies the power of patriarchy portrayed in myth, releasing it and realigning it with a more open, risky, and self-reliant view of Emberá women. Her physical presence—pulling her mutilated body around the forest clearing using her one leg, her arms, and a wooden staff—together with the story of her

victimization that everyone who sees her must know, dramatically indexes the potential failure of patriarchal relations to either protect or avenge. But when her presence is absent, when the telling of her experience circulates beyond her own travels, her image catches in the constantly repatched net of patriarchal mythologizing. This dynamic inter-effectivity between personal history and social myth is also explored here.

The relation between myth and history analyzed here is not a simple dichotomy, however. Intervening in these texts is shamanic discourse, a third mode of interpretation, textuality, and social action. Emberá evoke shamanic discourse when mystery surrounds events, e.g., in cases of illness, sudden death, crime, unnatural combinations of signs. In Grandmother's narrative, shamanic discourse intervenes twice: her ex-husband uses it to explain her disappearance to her family and her family refers to it as a form of criminal justice that supplements the efforts of the state. Shamanic discourse rides between myth and history, the unknown and the known. It also rides between language and action, such that its assertions affect perception but can never be proved. Shamanic discourse lends an air of undecidability to both the husband's alibi (at least until Grandmother shows up alive again) and the family's final retribution (in the form of snakebite). The air of undecidability produced by shamanic discourse is a characteristic feature of the Emberá interpretive universe, one that subverts the coherences and sureties in tellings of myth and experience (Kane 1990, and in press).

Prying apart structuralist totalities

Myths of indigenous American peoples have provided the foundation material for Lévi-Straussian structuralism, and the latter in its turn became a powerful influence on South American ethnography. While myths analyzed according to the structuralist method have been a source of great insight into the cultures from which they come, analytic focus on one myth of each kind per culture has tended to fortify orthodox, albeit native, views of sociocultural process. For Lévi-Strauss (op. cit.) one version is sufficient to find *the* logic of a text, *the* resolution of a contradiction. As I have discovered in the collection and analysis of Jêröpoto, a foundation myth in the Emberá corpus, attention to multiple versions of a mythic text leads to an understanding of how contradictions and ambiguities enable the production of logics that contest one another (Kane 1988). Rather than assuming that the logic of patriarchy as represented in a mythic text is an adequate reflection of social structure and process, shifting between versions of myth, and between versions of myth and personal experience, is an alternative approach that presents a more dynamic, less deterministic view of society and culture. In the case of attempted murder at issue here, this alternative method throws into

question the dominance that patriarchal mythic representations actually hold in the lives of men and women.

When Lévi-Strauss (1963:213) declared that a myth consists of all its versions, he was rejecting a prior quest for the true or earliest version. From then on, any one version could be the subject of analysis. Myth studies became democratized. Taking inspiration from Enlightenment themes in the *Science of Mythology*, Lévi-Strauss (1975:1) turned up the universal and rational aspect of indigenous American myth for Euro-American readers. "Starting at the heart of tropical America and leading to furthestmost regions," he constructs a logical and transformative totality out of multiplicity and divergence, a totality that posits common origin in the human mind. But by using difference to demonstrate ideal unity (1975:5–6), the power of difference to transform perception is reduced to a surface that mirrors the Euro-American mind and enforces delusions of universality where there may be mostly narcissism.

Just as the differences among the indigenous people whom Euro-Americans study are obscured by this technique, so are differences among Euro-Americans themselves. This is where this analysis becomes a feminist one.² As described by Irigaray (1985:68–85) in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, the feminist project examines the conditions under which patriarchal texts are produced. More specifically, the aim is to examine the conditions under which systematicity itself is possible (p. 74). While Lévi-Strauss' move to allow any one myth to carry the meaning of the whole corrected the fixation on origins that characterized the times in which he wrote, it nevertheless perpetuated a suppression of alternative versions and, to create systematicity, his method re-instituted a biased separation of meaningful from meaningless. The feminist project is double. In this case, it entails a contrast of different versions of the same myth, or mythic texts with other representations that are structurally (or contextually) linked, so that the analyst can arrive at cultural interpretations with greater ethnographic and historical validity. And at the same time, it is important to challenge the way that mythic texts are taken up and recycled by scholars like Lévi-Strauss who are themselves caught by the comforts of patriarchal mythologizing. In this way, it is possible to point out the way that texts may be misused and how the influence of mythic texts on real relations between the genders may be misrepresented.

The popularity of Emberá myth-telling invites this approach. The mythic corpus is large and lively, composed of elements that can be strung together and broken apart in almost as many different ways as there are storytellers. Stories are told in all kinds of situations, storytellers may be male or female, old or young. The repertoires of most Emberá storytellers consist of more or less the same set of elements and they tend to combine these in particular named sequences (texts) that are familiar

throughout the culture. In this sense, the mythic corpus is a coherent body of shared knowledge. Yet the ordered elements of which mythic texts are composed—as well as the social and narrative logic that underlie them—are not confined to myth's corpus or genre.

Geographies of myth and history

In myth and history, geographical sites become symbolic sites (see Figure 1). Since the Ancient Times of myth, the center of Emberá culture has been home, built along the river in an area cleared of forest. In relation to that center, the distant forest became the domain of animals (both real and spirit) and other Indian peoples (both real, although not quite as human, and spirit). Traversing the region between Emberá settlement and upriver forest signifies movement within and without culture, between Culture and Nature (where Nature is also figured as an Otherworld entry point). In Ancient Times, that was all there was.

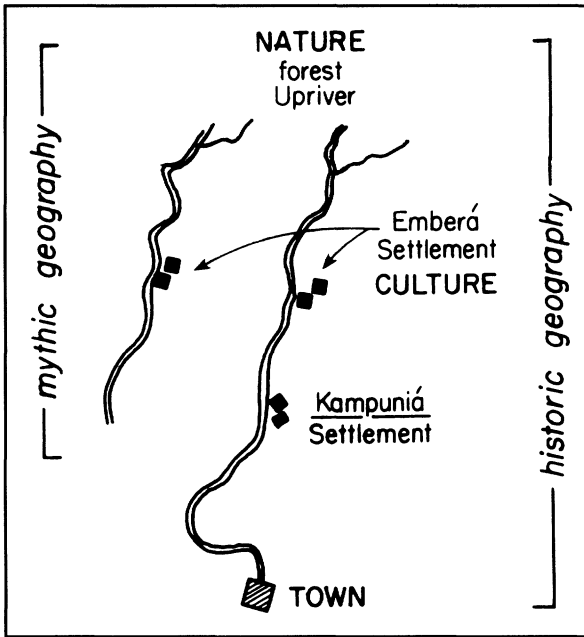


Fig. 1 Map of mythic and historic geography

In historical times, the Emberá hold on to this center. Downstream, non-Emberá have multiplied and become more foreign. Animals and some other Indian peoples persist outside Emberá Culture, but they are not the only inhabitants. Now there are the *kampuniá*, the non-Indians who settle in the lower reaches of the rivers. The *kampuniá* that most

living Emberá have come to know are black people of African ancestry. Descendants of freed slaves, the blacks settled towns at the mouths of the major rivers and built them into centers of regional trade and politics. We know that at least since the conquest, the Emberá have been moving their houses up the rivers of the forest that stretches from what is now the Colombian Chocó and the Darién of Panama. They have moved up where the myths of Ancient Times still have a hold, but where they are not too far away to engage in trade with the world outside. They moved up the rivers until there was no more upriver to go. Now they try to hold on to the lands they already occupy. As the distant forests diminish in size and importance, the towns of other races are reaching out, the lengthening roads are connecting this hinterland to the international urban center of Panama City.

Because the gendered division of labor corresponds to this symbolic geography, it is an integral part of a feminist analysis. In myth, women are associated with the settlement site, or Culture, and men with the act of traversing settlement site and distant forest, or Culture and Nature. In present times it is clear that reality does not correspond exactly to mythic restrictions on women's movement. Women are not restricted to Emberá upriver settlements. In fact, except when they have a newborn, they participate fully in agricultural labor, sharing with men the work of production and transport to the exchange centers downriver. Yet, myths of gender do still have a hold on women's lives. They structure women's roles in the regional economy, inhibiting women's participation in the discursive process of exchange. While women do their share of hauling canoes of plantains down to town with their husbands, when they get there, it is the men who are usually the ones to talk business with the *kampuniá*.

Grandmother's story, taking place thirty or forty years ago in Colombia, indicates that mythic and historic geographies have coexisted throughout the lifetime of most living Emberá. But unlike most, experiences like hers, which break out of mythic and into historic geographies in one narration, challenge the closed world of mythic presumption that reinforces restrictions on women's discursive action in everyday life.

The texts

THE MAN WHO WANTED TWO WIVES: A Young Girl's Myth

This is a rough translation of a myth told to me by a thirteen-year-old Emberá girl on June 11, 1985, in the Chico River of Darién, Panama. For the purposes of structural analysis, the transcription is broken up into sections that correspond to the top part of Figure 2, below (labeled "mythic"). Words that are stretched out in time are indicated by multiple vowels, e.g., looooong.

1 to 2. A man had two women. One of the women didn't like it, his catching the second [woman], they had a fight. She had a fight with her husband. "Already that woman is fighting with you, you're not going to have her" [his wife said to him]. "Let's go to the headwaters" [he said]. Then they went.

When they went they made a house there, there were animals, there were big animals like cows. Then they built a house. Then that woman and her husband went into the forest. They'd go to the forest all the time. Then they went, they said; deer, collared peccary, they brought [the] killed [meat]. Then they were, they went, it was said, to the forest. A little jaguar, so small, they brought. Then the wife was content. The man was [planning] to leave the woman, because of that he left that jaguar [with her].

2 to 3. He left, truth. Then after this, he left for here, the man came in the house, where the other woman lives. Then the wife said [to herself, back in the forest], she kept thinking: "My husband whaaaaat could he be keept doing?" it was said. "He hasn't left [the forest]" [she thought]. Then the woman kept crying, kept crying all night. Crying, crying. That woman's father was a *häämbaná* [shaman].

That Emberá [man] came, the husband spoke, he said: "My wife, an animal ate her. For this it is that I come." Then the old man *häämbaná*: "Why have you really come?" He dreamt, they said, [to see] if truth it were. Then he spoke, he said: "My daughter has not been eaten by an animal," he said. "Animal [devil], she's in the hand of it," he said. Truth it was, then he came.

3 to 4. Then the old man sent out his sons, it was said. Then after he sent them, then [they went] aboooooooooove. The woman had that jaguar, it was growing. Then, the son, after he sent him, the sons were afraid. To go there [because of the jaguar]. They went up the pole. From theeeeeere they yelled below. Then the sister did not hear them, said. She looked on the other side. Then when she looked above, Ai! Then the mother [of the jaguar-sister of the men] came down below and tied up the jaguar, said. "Kuekua, kuekua," [she washed it with] leaves. Then her brother came down, came below, he stayed telling the story. The story of the house, kept telling the story, they asked about her husband. "An animal ate my husband." "Ai sister, lie!" they said, "Your husband is there below [downriver]," they said. "There below," they said, "in the house, he's there with that woman that he caught," they said. "[That he] caught," they said. Then the woman got mad again, thus it was when they told her. Then the next day they brought her [back], they came to the village early.

4 to 5. Then the woman sent the jaguar to the forest, that jaguar, [but as the] deer [and] collared peccary were killed, they brought them [along]. The woman ate the killed ones [meat] that they brought. The woman was fat. She's fat, her hair is long. Then they came. Then the woman, her hair is long, came to the house. She didn't want to let her family see her, it is said, didn't want to let the man see, she hid in her room so that they wouldn't notice.

Then the village had a party, in the nighttime. Then the family painted on *jagua* [Sp., black dye from the *Genipa americana* L. tree], they dressed her prettily, and brought her down. Then when they brought her to the ground, the Emberá were pulling her [to dance], it was said. The Emberá [men] pulled her, then, she that was his [her husband's other] woman saw, it was said. The [second] wife: "Who is that woman that is so pretty?" she said. That one [the husband], came out to see, he said: "Uncle, is that one your daughter?" it was said. Then, "She's my daughter." [Her husband said:] "I'm going to take her to dance." Then the woman [first wife] said thus: "You vile shit, why didn't you want me, then you left me, for what." "[Now] then do you want me," she said. Then, as that woman's father was a *hãimbaná*, he spoke, said: "Early in the morning you'll be here in the river, mouth down, I'm not leaving you loose. I that am," he said. Truth, the following day early when the Emberara saw, he was thrown mouth down.

It was until here no more.

An Episode in Grandmother's Life History: HOW SHE LOST HER LEG

This is a summary of the Spanish version of Grandmother's story told to me by her granddaughter on February 12, 1985, in the Tupisa River. For the purposes of structural analysis, the summary is broken up into sections that correspond to the bottom half of Figure 2, below (labeled "historic"). Numbers follow the sequence of events as they were told to happen in the past. This may differ at points from the exact sequence as told in the original narrative. Emphasized words are in capitals.

1 to 2. Her husband had another woman and returned to talk with her again. But she did not suspect that he would commit this disgraceful act. He took her to pull *bejuco real* [Sp., a liana used for basketry] in the forest. They were walking in the forest and it was already far and he did not clear a path along the way.

2 to 3. Well then they arrived there in the mountains, there on top of a waterfall, they sat and he began to pick lice from her head and all of a sudden he pushed her. Well she fell there. He stayed alone up top there and then came down to her and said, "How do you want to die? Do you want to die at once or would you rather stay this way?" Well she answered that if she was left in this condition as she was, there with a broken leg, that she wouldn't live, she would die, for where could she get to, so FAR, tell me, there in that mountain? Nor had she brought anything to make a trail with when he brought her. Well she stayed right there and he went back up again.

3 to 4. She stayed there for about three days and then thought, "I'll go by the river, down that little stream." Because she couldn't walk. Bit by bit she went on her knees like a little one. Whenever it hurt she stopped and she didn't get far. In two days a little female dog came to where she was and she

thought “I’ll rip my skirt and tie it to the dog’s chest so that my people will think that I am alive.” And she tied it.

And on the other day the dog came to the house again. And her brother it was that said, “My sister is alive.” And then her brother asked of her husband, “Where is she?” And then it was that he said, “She’s coming after. Maybe the devil took her.” As the husband had come back early, they thought nothing of it at first. But when it got to be around 6, they thought he did SOMETHING. But how many times has it been that people have been taken by the devil in the forest?

4 to 5. Well yes her brothers searched and searched but they didn’t find her. Tell me, in this waterfall, WHERE are they going to find her? And she was coming from this river, from this little stream.

Well she came and arrived in the house in about a week. And there were no people when she arrived. The man had said that the devil took her. And though her brother searched for her at first, afterwards they withdrew to another place because suddenly THE DEVIL could arrive and take them too.

5 to 6. Well she was coming downriver a bit more, she was coming and there it was that she met the *kampuniá*. Well, as they already knew her, they came and got her. They greeted her and she told them her leg was broken. She could not stand. When they gave her something to eat, she could not eat. She had been living on pure water. Tell me, one week without eating anything. Right there, the *kampuniá* got her and brought her to the hospital.

They took her to the hospital and when they arrived in the hospital, they gave her no more than pure milk. That’s what she ate. And the other food she couldn’t eat, because I believe her throat was already closing. Because she didn’t eat food, tell me, in the forest. That man who did this to her, he WENT to where this other woman was, his other woman.

6 to 7. And when they called to him, the Law pulled him in. They denounced him there yes. As she wasn’t able to speak, she talked with signs, no more. And when she had already eaten they brought her into the Law and there it was that she said, no, first she said, they were going to pull *bejuco real*, and well, she thought that well, truth it was. Well this was pure lie he told her.

7 to 11. The Law well, the Law grabbed him and put him in prison. He was in prison, in prison, well from there, he was in prison, and later, the man left. And he returned to the other woman.

Well and she, in the hospital they cut one of them off. At once, no, since this was all broken, up to here [upper thigh] it was broken. She was in the hospital and when it healed, she left. There yes. Well, the man was there with another woman and died of snakebite, bite of snake. The man who did evil to my grandmother. Bite of snake and there he died.

Experience against myth: A structural comparison of texts

For the purposes of structural analysis, the texts have been divided up into sections based on movements of the protagonists without and within Emberá culture. In the myth, entitled "The Man Who Wanted Two Wives," all movement occurs in or between upriver forest (Nature) and Emberá settlement (Culture). The rough English translation is broken up into sections that correspond to Figure 2 (mythic). My participation in storytelling was limited to brief responses, e.g., "um, hum," at the end of Emberá lines. These are omitted here. I do not know whether the young girl who told me the story knew of Grandmother's story or not.

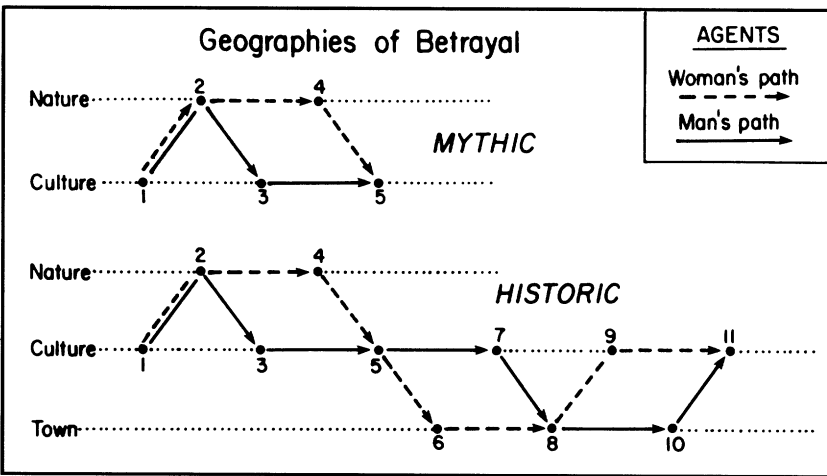


Fig. 2 Geography of betrayal, mythic and historic

In Grandmother's experience, narrative movement also takes place in Nature and Culture, but then, when mythic structure fails to account for experience, proceeds to Town as a third symbolic site (see Figure 2, "historic"). I have removed my questions and responses to the text as it was told to me by the granddaughter, in order to match the sequence of actions with the mythic text.

Figure 2 compares the movement of the two major protagonists, man and woman, in the myth and narrative of experience. In both texts, betrayal of the woman by the man is encoded in geographic movement. He takes her to Nature with hidden and unsavory motives known only to himself (1-2); he leaves her in Nature and returns alone to Culture (2-3). In myth he leaves her in Nature with adequate provision; in history, he leaves her for dead. In myth, she is in the forest alone, waiting unawares until her brothers come to save her; in history, she waits three days then crawls downstream (3-4). In myth, she leaves the forest and returns to

Culture, where her father the shaman takes revenge on the man who did her wrong; in history, she returns to the site of Culture only to find it empty of kin (4–5). In both myth and history the husband uses otherworld intrusions (kidnapping/killing by animal/devils) as an alibi for her disappearance.

As far as the geography by means of which narrative action is encoded, history duplicates myth until this point. But there are important differences between the texts not coded by geography. These have to do with agency. In the myth, everything is done to or for the woman who is the first wife. Her husband brings her to the forest and leaves her there. She doesn't even know that she has been left intentionally until her father, the shaman, can see in a dream that she is there and sends her brothers to save her. They bring her home where her father-shaman avenges her betrayal. The mythic order of patriarchal authority is replayed. Before the husband is killed, the woman is transformed from an object of her husband's scorn to an object of his desire. Nevertheless, the woman (as wife, daughter, sister) appears to play no active role of import.

Although mythic order would have been a preferable solution to Grandmother's predicament, in fact, it fails her. She has no shaman-father, her brothers cannot find her even after she contrives to let them know she is alive (by tying a piece of her skirt to her dog), and when she arrives home her family has fled, fearing the false alibi of her betrayer that a devil got her. If Grandmother does not rescue herself, she will die. After her husband tries to kill her, she becomes an active agent out of necessity. She gets herself out of there and when she finds her family gone, she continues downstream, breaking out of myth's geography and into history's.

In this situation of crisis, distinctions based on gender and race that normally constrain women's social interaction with *kampuniá* are suspended. Common humanity, compassion that transcends racial difference, and the emergence of woman as active agent is revealed in narrative. As explained above, black *kampuniá* often mediate between Emberá in upriver settlements and the town, but their mediation usually proceeds through Emberá men rather than women. Grandmother's stubborn will to survive brings her, still crawling, to the black *kampuniá* who live downriver from her family settlement site. They take her to a hospital, a state institution foreign to Emberá medical practice (5–6). While in town, she condemns her husband before the state institution of discipline, "The Law" (6–7). He is brought down from the other woman's house (in Emberá Culture) and put in the Town's prison (7–8). Thus reversing the mythic structure of his betrayal, she returns to Culture and he remains in the Town prison (8–10). But as Law in the hinterland is never effective enough, the man gets out, and is eventually killed by a snake (10–11). To the Emberá, the man's death by snakebite signals shamanic revenge.

Unlike the myth, in which shamanism is linked to patriarchy in the figure of the shaman-father, in Grandmother's personal experience narrative, shamanic revenge is anonymous and invisible. There is a homologous reversal in both mythic and historical texts, however: the false claim of otherworld interference the husband used as an alibi for attempted murder (that his wife was taken by an animal/devil) is reversed and resolved by an (actual?) claim of otherworld interference (by drowning in the myth; by snakebite in the history).

In Emberá shamanic practice, the snake is the shaman's messenger of death. The text suggests that Grandmother and her family waited for the Law to mete out its justice, before carrying out their own, more permanent form of punishment. As Grandmother's narrative presents the criminal justice procedures of the state and as the mythic text presents the criminal justice procedures of the patriarchal family, there is no doubt about the link between the crime and the punishment. The singularity of judgment in these instances can be contrasted with the implied link between crime and punishment as meted out by Grandmother's family and presented in her experience narrative—for that remains open to interpretation.³ True, most Emberá would interpret death by snakebite as a form of shamanic retribution, but no one could ever prove it. Should the state, for instance, choose to investigate the family or shaman for killing the prisoner released after serving his time, it would be impossible. For who is to say the snake was not real, i.e., merely an animal?

Paradigmatic logic in practice

The text of "The Man Who Wanted Two Women" may be considered as a myth with one major episode, each segment of narrative action functioning as mythemes of structural analysis (Lévi-Strauss 1963:202–28). In mythemes 1–4 the man's act of betrayal is set up and worked out, and in the final mytheme 4–5, the wrong done to the woman is righted and the man punished. Using active agents who are all male, the myth reverses the act of betrayal, literally leaving the culprit mouth down in the river.

Grandmother's narrative of experience may be considered as a historicized version of myth: its mythemes 1–4 correspond quite neatly with the text of myth from Ancient Times. The mythemes of experience may be aligned with those of the myth using the same method Lévi-Strauss applies to a series of episodes (see Figure 3). This elaboration of the structural method allows us to see how the paradigmatic logic of betrayal and its consequences work out in practice.

As the paradigmatic alignment in Figure 3 shows, mythic logic of betrayal and its consequences is replayed in experience. It also shows how myth is complicated by reality; how mythic logic goes through transformations when actualized in practice.⁴ Moreover, when a version of myth

<i>TEXT OF MYTH FROM ANCIENT TIMES</i>	<i>TEXT OF MYTH EXPERIENCED</i>	
1-2 man and woman leave Culture and go to Nature	1-2 (same as myth)	5-6 woman leaves (deserted) Culture and goes to hospital in Town
2-3 man betrays woman, leaves woman in Nature and returns to Culture	2-3 (same as myth)	6-7 woman condemns man's betrayal before law in Town
3-4 man stays in Culture woman left in Nature	3-4 (same as myth)	7-8 man brought to prison in Town woman has leg cut off
4-5 brothers return woman to Culture father/shaman kills man TEXT OF MYTH ENDS HERE	4-5 woman returns herself to Culture but finds her family gone	8-9 woman returns to Culture man left in prison in Town 9-10 woman in Culture man left in prison in Town 10-11 man leaves prison, returns to Other Woman in Culture, then is killed by snakebite TEXT OF MYTH EXPERIENCED ENDS HERE

Fig. 3 Paradigmatic structure of myth: The text of the myth is broken down into mythemes, then aligned with the text of experience. The two texts are analyzed here as Lévi-Strauss analyzes mythic episodes.

in women's history is considered within the same analysis as a version of myth from Ancient Times, historical transformations provide evidence for a critical feminist perspective.

In the narrative of experience the betrayal sequence (1–4) is identical in structure to the myth from Ancient Times. But when it comes to the consequences of betrayal, the myth fails. Grandmother is neither saved nor avenged by her male kin. Myth abandons her when her ordeal should have ended. The logic of reversal still motivates action, but that logic is achieved, in the first place, through Grandmother's stubborn will to survive, and in the second place, an expanded geography that includes non-Indians but in which the patterns that normally govern social interactions between genders and races are abandoned. The action of myth in history is thus not nearly as effective as mythic texts represent. The structure of narrative experience must recur more than once to settle the final account achieved with neat closure in myth (in Figure 3, recurrence is indicated by arrow).

There are a number of other critical transformations that take place when mythic logic is forced to work through a feminized agency in an expanded, inter-racial geography. Although the logic of betrayal and its consequences is eventually reproduced in the narrative of experience, the means by which it is carried out differs from myth. The active agents of rescue and retribution are not the woman's male kin, but the woman herself and black *kampuniá* unmarked with respect to gender. In her history, the patriarchal model fails and when it does so, the victim suffers along with her victimizer. In the myth, the man does not directly harm the woman in the forest and she is eventually brought back safely. In experience, the man tries to murder her and leave her for dead. While her life is saved eventually, she must live the rest of it disabled.

In history, the gendered closure implicit in the Nature/Culture opposition is broken. The presence of Town, a culture outside of Emberá Culture, with its own state institutions, exists as a site of resource and exchange for women as well as men. In addition, the black *kampuniá* are represented as people who may serve as mediators between upriver Emberá Culture and downriver Town for both women and men alike. Note also that from the Emberá perspective, the criminal justice system of the state does not completely resolve the affair. The state's failure to hold the man in prison (8–9) motivates the last and final episode, which returns the narrative of experience again to Emberá Culture. Final resolution is achieved through shamanic discourse, but not in its mythic patriarchal aspect (a shaman-father's vision and revenge). Instead, experience narrativizes an anonymous, hidden shamanic power symbolized by the executioner-snake. In this way, the Emberá Culture to which the narrative returns is a terrain of truth-making in which myth and history cannot be clearly distinguished.

Conclusion: Bringing experience to bear against myth

Some years after Grandmother's story ends, one of her sons went back to Colombia to find her and bring her to the Darién of Panama. There she remarried and had other children. She herself was an orphan. Her father died when she was born and all she knew was that her mother's name was Lana. She was raised by people who were not her family, but who were Emberá. Perhaps it is because they were not her biological family that their fear outweighed their courage on her behalf.

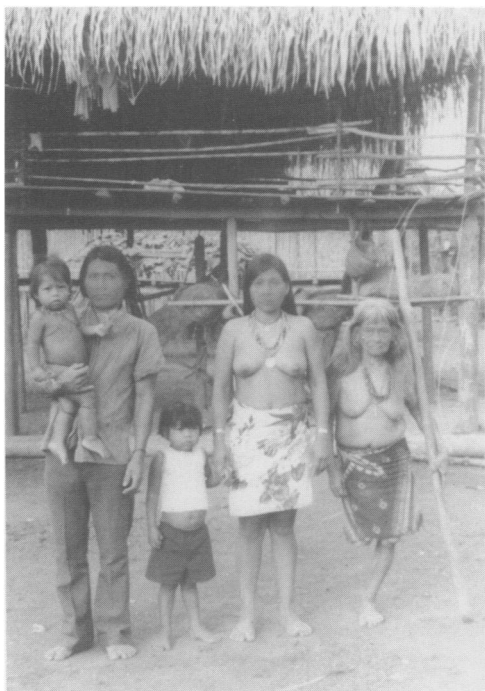


Fig. 4 Grandmother with family

Polygyny is acceptable in Emberá culture, but it is often mentioned as a source of conflict, especially among the women involved. Oddly enough, when Grandmother told me about what happened to her, I thought she said it was the other woman who died of snakebite, rather than her husband. But her granddaughter says no, it was the man who died.

When I worked with a translator on the myth of "The Man Who Wanted Two Women" and began to realize the structural homologies it shared with Grandmother's life history, I asked him if he knew of her. He said yes, he had heard of her. They call her "Bat." Why, he didn't know. I can only suppose that identifying her with a fearful creature—a flying mammal of the night, possibly a vampire bearing disease—is an attempt to push her experience to the margins of the social order, to de-authorize it, to recuperate the mythic power of patriarchy that informed sight of her presence weakens. Thus, an indirect response to her experience is the circulation of a name that works to close the gap between person and myth that Grandmother opens with her life history. In this sense, Grandmother/Bat represents a *disruptive excess* in relation to the texts and practices of patriarchy. Following Irigaray (1985:78), such disruptive excess can be used by scholars to jam univocal processes of truth production.

Grandmother/Bat is both victim and survivor of violence. But there is no evidence suggesting that Bat's story will change the telling of that

Grandmother/Bat is both victim and survivor of violence. But there is no evidence suggesting that Bat's story will change the telling of that

myth which failed her. Even if the adolescent girl who tells the myth sees Bat and hears her story, she has few choices. She has to want to be desirable to men and has to believe that if her future husband hurts her, her father will protect and avenge her. For otherwise there is the highway leading to other men and city slums, not compassionate to young Indian girls. But as ethnographers, we do not have to limit our discourse to match our subject's disempowerment. Grandmother's narrative of experience adheres to the mythic logic encoded in the Emberá corpus, but it also reverses and opposes it in specific and substantive ways. Her story suggests a method of comparing versions of myth and history that will allow us to understand forms of resistance to patriarchal domination as practiced by America's indigenous women. Moreover, the method is useful for feminist analyses because it introduces emergent forms of resistance to academic discourse in such a way that the radical potential of these forms are retained.

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NOTES

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2. . . . and a post-structuralist one. For example, see Foster's essay "Readings in Cultural Resistance," about how cultural differences are absorbed and neutralized in the production of art (1985:157–80).

3. This analysis follows Ellen Rooney's insightful comparison of law and literature (1991:87). Specifically, she discusses how "courtroom conventions of legal interpretation demand the production of a judgment, both in terms of a reading of the relevant statutes and in terms of the evaluation of the evidence—finding the Truth. Literary interpretation, on the other hand, has long been committed to the production of multiple and divergent readings. . . ."

4. This is a more specific example of what Sahlins (1981) demonstrates on a grand scale.

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