

Decoding Fairy Tales

Chapters 12 and 13 from

MENSTRUATION AND THE ORIGINS OF CULTURE

A reconsideration
of Lévi-Strauss's work
on symbolism and myth

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Abstract

This thesis presents and tests a new theory of human cultural origins. The point of departure is an economic finding: unlike non-human primates when they engage in hunting, human hunters normatively do not eat their own kills. This apparent self-denial, it is argued, is best seen as an expression of a cultural universal, the sexual division of labour, in which women obtain meat which their sexual partners have secured. It is suggested that the female sex may have played a part in the establishment of this arrangement, and – in particular – that menstrual bleeding may have been central to its symbolic underpinnings.

In this context, a model of the “initial situation” for human culture is proposed. In this, menstrual bleeding is (a) socially synchronised and (b) marks a periodic feminine sexual withdrawal (in effect, a “sex-strike”) functioning to motivate and regularize male periodic hunting. On a symbolic level, menstrual blood is identified with the blood of game animals, a generalised avoidance of blood ensuring both a periodic separation of sexual partners (necessary for effective hunting) and the separation of hunters as consumers from their own kills (necessary to ensure economic circulation and exchange of the produce).

The body of the thesis takes the form of an extensive testing of this model. It is shown that it facilitates a much-simplified and internally coherent re-reading of Lévi-Strauss *Mythologiques*, in addition to much other recent writing on traditional mythology, cosmology, ritual and symbolism.

Chapter 12: The Sleeping Beauty and other tales

The European fairy tale, *The Sleeping Beauty*, tells of a king and queen who yearned for a child. Eventually, a baby daughter was born:

Her parents celebrated with a feast, to which the Wise Women or Fairies were invited. There were thirteen of these in the kingdom, but as the King only had twelve golden plates for them to eat out of, one of them had to be left at home.

The feast was held in splendour, and then the Wise Women bestowed their blessings upon the child. The youngest ensured that she would grow up to be the most beautiful woman in the world, the next promised that she would have the spirit of an angel, the third gave her grace, the fourth decreed that she would dance perfectly, the fifth that she should sing like a nightingale. And so the blessings went on. But after the eleventh fairy had bestowed her gift, the doors of the banqueting hall suddenly flew open and the thirteenth fairy burst in. Seeing that no place had been laid for her, she turned her blessing into a curse. “The King’s daughter”, she declared, shall in her fifteenth year prick herself with a spindle and fall down dead.”

Having uttered her terrible curse, the thirteenth fairy disappeared. The king and queen were distraught, and everyone was crying. But the twelfth Wise Woman, whose blessing had yet to be given, came forward to offer help. She had not enough power to undo the evil spell, but she could soften it. Instead of dying when she pricked her finger, the girl would now only sleep for a hundred years.

The good fairy cast her benign spell, but the King was still not satisfied. He determined to evade the consequences of the curse: every spindle in the whole kingdom was to be burnt; on no account was his daughter to bleed.

When the girl reached adolescence, however, the inevitable duly occurred. On her fifteenth birthday, when the King and Queen were not at home, Beauty was exploring the great palace when she came to an old tower. She climbed up the spiral stairway and at the top reached a little door. Pushing this open, she found herself in a little room; and there inside was an old woman with a spindle, busily spinning her flax. Fascinated by the spindle merrily rattling round, the young girl reached out to grasp it – and pricked

her finger on it. She began to bleed, and fell into a deep sleep.

The curious thing was, however, that the dreadful event did not simply send the girl herself into the world of dreams. It affected the entire palace and the entire kingdom. All normal life was suddenly terminated. The King and Queen, who had just come home, fell into a deep sleep along with the whole of the court. The horses slept in the stable, the dogs in the yard, the flies on the wall – all stopped where they were. Even the fire that was flaming in the hearth went still, and the cook, who was just going to hit the scullery boy, let him be and went to sleep. Everyone joined the princess in her magical trance. It was as if time itself stood still.

For a hundred years, all were frozen in their positions. And as the years passed, an immense forest surrounded by an impenetrable hedge of thorns grew around the palace. In the surrounding neighbourhood, people almost forgot about the existence of the mysterious palace deep in the woods.

Yet legend maintained that behind the hedge of thorns was a palace in which lay a sleeping princess. From time to time, young men on hearing the legend would attempt to cut their way through the hedge in order to win the reputedly-lovely sleeping bride. But each would-be suitor was caught in the thorns, which clutched together as if they were alive. As the years passed, more and more suitors were trapped and died.

At long last, when a hundred years had passed, a suitor who had heard the legend decided to try his luck. This time, as he approached the hedge, large and beautiful flowers replaced the thorns, and the branches parted of their own accord to let him through, closing again as he passed. He found the palace, entered inside, stepped over sleeping bodies and eventually found Beauty herself. He kissed her, she awoke from her sleep, the entire palace woke up with her, the two were married and the couple lived happily ever after (adapted from Little Briar Rose, Grimm and Grimm 1975: 237-41).

Discussion: blood, time and “the curse”

We now come to an intriguing finding of this thesis. This fairy tale – along with others of its kind – is in its logic entirely and consistently menstrual. Like Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella and countless other magical tales, it is about “this world” – the world of ordinary marital and domestic life – about “the other world”, and about the transition between the two. “The other world” is a strange place of enchantment in which marital sex is impossible. The structure of fairy tales takes the form of a movement between realm and realm. Something triggers this movement between worlds, and this “something” – as will here be demonstrated – is usually a flow of blood.

Where blood is not explicitly involved, it can almost always be shown that some substitute for blood is being used.

Let us review the story of *The Sleeping Beauty*. In seeking an understanding of the symbolism, we may take as our point of departure a passage by Bettelheim (1978: 232):

“The thirteen fairies in the Brothers Grimm story are reminiscent of the thirteen lunar months into which the year was once, in ancient times, divided... the number of twelve good fairies plus a thirteenth evil one indicates symbolically that the fatal ‘curse’ refers to menstruation.”

A consistently menstrual interpretation along these lines would run as follows. The background is the perennial problem of how to fit a fixed number of lunar months into the 365¼-day solar year. “The earliest calendar year”, writes Lyle (1986: 243), “was not the solar year of 365 days, but the lunar year consisting of twelve lunar cycles, to which an intercalary month was generally added every two or three years to keep the months in line with the natural seasons”. The number of days in a lunar cycle varies between twenty-nine and thirty – on average 29½ – so that a year was either 354 days (twelve lunar months) or 383½ days (thirteen lunar months). In other words, for as long as the year was divided up into observational lunar months – a sequence of directly-observed “moons” – there was no way in which the number “13” could be avoided. At the end of each twelve moons, a part of the thirteenth always made its presence felt, and some place for it in the calendar had to be found. The only way to establish the solar year as fixedly consisting of twelve month-like periods was to divide it into schematic “months”, arbitrarily adjusting the length of each to ensure that twelve of them totalled just 365 days. This, of course, is a feature of the modern Christian (Gregorian) calendar. The thirteenth month has been effectively suppressed. In folklore, however – at least in Europe – the suppressed month, and with it the number thirteen, remains associated with those older pagan traditions which took account not only of the sun but of the moon as well. This liminal, half-excluded thirteenth month finds reflection in “the persistence of the number thirteen” as the standard number of “witches” (“Wise Women” or “Fairies” as Grimm’s tale puts it) in a Coven in pre-Christian European traditions of ritualism (Murray 1921: 16.)

A dispute also exists as to whether menstruation should be considered a blessing or a curse. Retaining consistency with our previous analyses, we will assume the existence of an early tradition according to which menstrual bleeding was associated with the moon – and therefore with the number thirteen – and was considered a manifestation of women’s ritual power. Menstruation was, in other words, included among the other blessings with which a woman could be endowed. The newer custom – and certainly the Christian one – has been to attempt to suppress this manifestation, just as the thirteenth month has been suppressed. In both respects,

lunar time is being denied.

This, then, is the background to the story. The story itself tells of how a king and queen attempted to reject the “blessing” of menstrual bleeding altogether. All they wanted – or rather, all the king wanted (for we are not told of the queen’s attitude in all of this) – was for the baby daughter to grow up to become a perfect wife. The blessings given by the “good” fairies are all “marital” ones: they are the attributes which any would-be suitor would look for in a bride – good looks, grace, dancing skills, a melodious voice etc. etc. No husband would be attracted by the menstrual condition of his bride, and so the thirteenth fairy with her own peculiar gift is spurned. The king, we are told, has only twelve places laid.

But the menstrual blessing cannot be ignored. If suppressed, it simply makes its presence felt in malevolent form. It takes on the nature of a curse. Menstruation in its normal or traditional form is a periodic but purely temporary “death” to marital and domestic life. The injured and angered thirteenth fairy utters her curse: when the girl comes of age, no force on earth will prevent her from bleeding. But in this case, she will bleed until she dies.

The commutation of this death-sentence determines for the princess a fate somewhere between normal monthly seclusion and permanent death. The menstrual seclusion will last for a hundred years. And the penalty to be paid by the king and queen is to be subjected to the full rigours of the traditional menstrual spell – in exaggeratedly prolonged form. The traditional logic was for menstruation (particularly, we might suppose, a royal person’s first-menstruation) to cast its spell widely over society, the ban on marital sex lasting for several days (or at most a fortnight). According to the template outlined in Chapter 5, the menstrual “sex-strike” launched society into a profound process of metamorphosis, as profound as the transition between waking life and sleep. But this certainly did not last for a hundred years. The century-long seclusion featured in *The Sleeping Beauty* is a community’s punishment for its attempt to escape seclusion altogether.

The menstrual spell is a cyclical occurrence, just as is seasonal change. Time, in the traditional view, is itself cyclical. The king, in attempting to destroy all spindles, is symbolically attempting to suppress the spinning by women of the threads of time – threads which wind like yarn around a spool. We may also infer that he is hostile to “spinsterhood”. A traditional occupation for unmarried or secluded women may have been spinning, so that a woman who never married became seen as permanently a “spinster”. Be that as it may, when the princess explores the unfamiliar stairway and discovers the old witch spinning flax in her turret in the sky, she is contacting the world of seclusion and discovering for herself the ancient feminine mistress of lunar time. Like the thirteenth fairy, this old woman brings menstrual bleeding as a gift – or, if socially-rejected, as a curse.

The girl “pricks her finger.” She bleeds, as any girl of her age eventually must. The

King was foolish to try to banish the spinning-wheels or spindles, for time cannot be suppressed – every girl will come of age and bleed, her cycle itself being among the most ancient of all clocks. And as the princess bleeds, the ancient power of the blood strikes out with a vengeance against all who had believed they could defy it. The whole palace, the whole kingdom is plunged into another realm beyond waking life. All normal domestic activities cease. It is as if time stood still. Those who believed that they could alter the ancient calendar, they could abolish the thirteenth month, they could suppress the hallowed logic of menstrual time are now put firmly in their place. They will be excluded from time’s flow for a hundred years.

As the princess sleeps on, it is as if her blood had erected around her an impenetrable barrier to her ever getting married. Would-be suitors are kept at bay by a deadly hedge of thorns. She herself is now in menstrual seclusion of a particularly rigorous, long-lasting kind, with the whole palace in seclusion with her.

But every period of seclusion – even a hundred-year one – must eventually expire. And when the time has come, lovers are free once more to approach. The spell breaks, the thorns turn into flowers. The hedge parts, allowing the young hero to enter and deliver his kiss. The sex-strike and the cooking-strike are over; the palace servants resume their domestic chores. Marital relations are resumed, and are celebrated in the palace with a royal wedding and feast.

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Jack and the Beanstalk

Two versions of this story will be drawn on here. The earliest known published version appeared in London in 1734, under the title *Enchantment demonstrated in the Story of Jack Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean* (Fenwick 1796: 32-45). However, this version seems to have been forgotten; all later tellings seem to derive from a version printed much later – in 1807. This was a sixpenny booklet called *The History of Jack and the Beanstalk* and is abridged below (Opie and Opie 1980: 214-26). It should be added that another version published in the same year – *The History of Mother Twaddle, and the Marvellous Achievements of Her Son Jack* – is broadly similar, but ends with Jack killing the giant and marrying the damsel who had welcomed him and protected him in the giant’s house (Opie and Opie 1980: 213). Jack moves, then, via a monster-slaying, from a relationship with his mother to one with a wife.

The 1734 publication is significant in that it is the earliest known version, and substantially different from the others, allowing a perspective on the familiar versions which all stem from the same printed source (Opie and Opie 1980: 212). In this alternative version, Jack’s initial incestuousness is stressed. We are told that though Jack “was a smart large boy”, nevertheless “his Grandmother and he laid together, and between whiles the good old Woman instructed Jack in many Things...” The

woman says to her grandson:

“Jack, says she, as you are a comfortable Bed Fellow to me, I must tell you that I have a Bean is my House which will make your Fortune....”

The old woman accidentally loses the bean from her purse; it falls into the ashes of the hearth, where the cat finds it just as Jack is making his grandmother’s fire:

‘Odds Budd’, says Jack, I’ll set it in our Garden, and see what it will come to, for I always loved Beans and Bacon; and then what was wonderful! the Bean was no sooner put into the Ground, but the Sprout of it Jumped out of the Earth, and grew so quick that it gave Jack a Phillip on the Nose, and made him bleed furiously....”

Bleeding “furiously” from his nose, Jack runs to his grandmother crying “Save me! I am killed!”; she tells him that now her enchantment will be broken in an hour’s time, whereupon she will be transformed. Angry at Jack’s theft of her bean, she tries to thrash him, but he climbs up the Beanstalk, which is now a mile high, and escapes. As her hour expires, the old woman turns into “a monstrous Toad and crawls into a cellar on her way to the Shades.

Meanwhile Jack climbs and climbs. The template used in this thesis specifies that food should not be available to him, on account of his nose-bleed. Little attention is usually given to the motif in the familiar version in which Jack (after a scolding from his mother) is sent “supperless to bed.” In fact, however, there is more to this than meets the eye. The version we are now examining lays laborious stress on Jack’s hunger, which afflicts him from the moment he loses blood. Jack calls at an inn in a town on one of the beanstalk’s leaves:

“Here he thought to rest for a Time, and goes strutting like a Crow in a Gutter: What have you to eat Landlord, says he’ Everything in the World, Sir, says the Landlord: Why then, says Jack, give me a Neck of Mutton and Broth: Alas, says the Landlord, to morrow is Market Day, how unfortunate it is’ I cannot get you a Neck of Mutton to Night If it was to save my Soul: Well then get me something else, says Jack. Have you any Veal? No, indeed, Sir, not at present; but there is a fine Calf fattening at Mr. Jenkinson’s, that will be killed on Saturday next. But have you any Beef in your House, says Jack? Why truly, Sir, says the Landlord, if you had been here on Monday last, I believe, though I say it that should not say it, you never saw so fine a Sir Loin of Beef as we had, and Plum Pudding too, which the Justice who dined here, and their Clerks and Constables entirely demolished, and though I got nothing by them, yet their Company was a Credit to my House! Zounds, says Jack, have you nothing in the House? I am hungry, I am starving....”

Jack hears a cock crowing and demands that this be killed and broiled; the Landlord refuses because the cock “belongs to the squire”. Jack asks for a hen to be killed; but all the hens are incubating eggs, which should hatch in a week. “Have you no Eggs in the House?”, asks Jack. “No, Sir, indeed”, answers the Landlord, “but Jest Eggs, which we make of Chalk”. “Why then”, says Jack, “what the Devil have you got?” “Why to tell you the Truth, Sir, I don’t know that I have any thing in the House to eat...” At this point, the narrator explains: “Thus was poor Jack plagued by the Enchantment of his Grandmother, who was resolved to lay him under her ill Tongue, so long as her Power lasted.”

At last, however, the old woman’s spell breaks; at this point, the marital phase is entered. While the old grandmother turns into a toad, Jack finds himself at last in the presence of the opposite kind of woman – a “fair lady” who is called “Empress of the Mountains of the Moon”; she used to be the grandmother’s black cat. It is explained that this beautiful woman is entirely at Jack’s disposal, and that he now has the full power of possessing all the pleasures he could desire. The couple go to bed and “play their Rantum scantum Tricks until the next Morning”. Jack is so tired from his amorous exertions that he sleeps long in the morning, dreaming about killing the giant Gogmagog and rescuing “several thousand young Ladies” from being crushed in the monster’s jaws.

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The later version will be more familiar. Jack sells his mother’s cow “for a few paltry beans”, which the old woman angrily throws into the garden. Not having anything to eat, “they both went supperless to bed”. In the morning, Jack sees a huge beanstalk growing in the garden and climbs up it to the sky. Jack finds himself in a barren world: “he concluded that he must now die with hunger.” He arrives at a castle and is taken in by a woman at the door; she agrees to hide him in the oven where he will not be seen by her husband, a giant who eats only human flesh. The giant enters and declares that he can smell fresh meat, but Jack remains safe in the oven. Having eaten his usual cannibalistic meal, the giant falls asleep. Jack escapes, seizes a magic hen which lays golden eggs and climbs with it down the beanstalk to his mother. Some time later, Jack resolves to climb to the sky again. His mother refuses to give permission, so Jack “rose very early, put on his disguise, changed his complexion, and, unperceived by any one, climbed the beanstalk.” The complexion-change is achieved with “something to discolour his skin.” He is soon back at the castle, is not recognised by the giant’s wife and events are repeated – this time with Jack stealing gold and silver in two bags. On the third occasion, it is midsummer’s day. Jack disguises himself completely, goes to the castle and this time escapes with the giant’s magical harp. The harp cries out to warn the giant, who wakes up and chases the boy down the beanstalk. But as Jack reaches the ground he fetches an axe, chops down the stalk and brings the giant crashing down to his death. Jack and his mother live in wealth and comfort to the end of their days (Opie and Opie 1980: 214-226).

Discussion. Bleeding from the nose may be regarded as a technique of “male menstruation” (nose-bleeding for this purpose is common in Papua New Guinea; see, for example, Read 1966: 131). The story of Jack and the Beanstalk may in this light relate to some long-forgotten tradition of male initiation in England.

The relevant menstrual magic is stated in the myth to be derived from an incestuous relationship with womankind: Jack acquires the bean from his grandmother, or in exchange for his Mother’s cow. He is under the spell of this relationship as his nose bleeds and as he climbs the beanstalk. The immense, growing beanstalk doubtless has phallic connotations. These, however, are inseparable from the incest-motif: the magic is sexual, but it is also menstrual and symbolic of the mother-son connection. This is not marital sex.

True to the template, while blood is flowing, food becomes inedible (see previous chapter). While under the spell, Jack is hungry (this is stressed in all versions) and when he arrives at the castle he is in fact (to use the language of so many Australian Aboriginal myths) “swallowed”. He is taken into an oven, a pot and/or other receptacles in the giant’s kitchen. Far from eating, he is himself almost eaten alive. His flesh is raw, the odour of blood exciting and arousing the giant. “Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!”, as the English Yurlunggur thunders in the pantomime versions, “I smell the blood of an Englishman”.

Three trips are made into the giant’s kitchen, and three treasures stolen. When Jack “changes his complexion” and hides in a symbolic womb (the oven) he is undergoing a role-change similar to that undergone by women in entering menstrual seclusion, and when he emerges and escapes from the monster’s jaws in possession of the treasures, it is as if he were “reborn”. The stolen goose, gold and harp take the place of the stolen blood and fire – or the stolen sound-making instruments or ritual paraphernalia – featured in the “primitive matriarchy” myths analysed earlier in this thesis (see Chapters 6 and 11). The number 3 appears frequently in myths of this kind. A lunar/menstrual interpretation would be that this is because once a month, the moon is absent from the sky for a period which corresponds, ideally, to the time of the menstrual flow. The “third time lucky” motif derives from the idea that the moon is “lucky” – i.e. it arises from its temporary “death” – on the third night after its first disappearance.

When Jack has travelled to the sky three times, he chops the beanstalk down, ending the menstrual/incestuous spell and the possibility of further journeys to the sky. A lunar interpretation can be placed on the fact that this occurs on midsummer’s day. When the lunar light/dark cycle is mapped onto the seasonal cycle, midsummer appears as “full moon”. This is the traditional time of emergence from seclusion – a moment often marked by ceremonial love-making (see Chapter 5).

Little Red Riding Hood

If Jack-and-the-Beanstalk relates, possibly, to an ancient English ritual of male initiation, Little Red Riding Hood by the same token probably relates to a feminine counterpart – a first-menstruation rite whose theme is a major change of status conceptualised as a metamorphosis, change of identity or change of “skin”.

This tale, which has a long French tradition, was told from the late Middle Ages up to the present. Its prominence between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries was connected with the great superstitious belief in werewolves current in the period; in the course of numerous werewolf trials, thousands of men and women were persecuted and killed on the charge of being secret wolves (Zipes 1983: 28-9). Werewolves, as is well-known, are apparent humans who undergo a metamorphosis and reveal themselves temporarily to be wolves, the process being connected with the changing phases of the moon.

Menstruation, as shown in Chapter 6, is associated with the idea of temporary death – death followed by rebirth. It may also be viewed as a change of “masks”, “skins” or roles (the “change of complexion” in Jack-and-the-Beanstalk is a male version of this). In this thesis, such themes have been viewed as expressions of the transformational template outlined in Chapter 5. In retreating into seclusion together, women lose their former identities and become incorporated (as if “swallowed. into a larger identity of both human and animal “blood”. When they emerge once more, they regain their separate identities as if being regurgitated and restored to new life.

The focus of dramatic interest in Little Red Riding Hood is the extraordinarily-changed appearance of what the heroine takes to be her grandmother. The old woman has suddenly grown enormous eyes, ears and teeth, as well as a ravenous cannibalistic appetite. In the early French oral versions from which Perrault derived his familiar literary tale (Zipes 1983: 28), the werewolf invites the young girl to join in the cannibalistic feast. The wolf

“ ... arrives at the grandmother’s house, eats her, and puts part of her flesh in a bin and her blood in a bottle. Then the little girl arrives. The werewolf disguised as the grandmother gives her the flesh to eat and the blood to drink.” (Zipes 1983: 28).

The little girl then obediently eats her grandmother’s flesh and drinks her blood.

Like Jack’s nosebleed, this detail once again indicates the power of the template. It expresses the basic structural fact underlying all these tales – namely, that in order to travel to the world beyond (in order to be initiated) it is necessary to bleed or come into the most intimate contact with blood – in this case, maternal blood. Wearing a red head-covering may be regarded as symbolic of this.

Zipes (1983: 29) points out that the blood-drinking episode “acts out an initiation

ritual...” “In facing the werewolf and temporarily abandoning herself to him”, he continues (p. 30),

“the little girl sees the animal side of her self. She crosses the border between civilisation and wilderness, goes beyond the dividing line to face death in order to live.”

Seeing “the animal side of herself” is explicable in the template’s terms: to menstruate is to bleed “as if” bitten by a carnivore or pierced by a spear. It is to adopt an identity symbolised by blood and shared by women and wild animals alike. “Facing death in order to live” refers us – in the template’s terms – to menstruation as a “temporary death” from which rebirth ensues.

In the familiar version, the cannibalism-motif is less explicit, but both the girl and her grandmother are conjoined in “excessive” maternal intimacy (reminiscent of Jack’s incest) in the monster’s belly. They emerge once more as separate individuals only after the wolf is cut open and they are rescued. From this point on, the girl enters a new life. As Bettelheim (1978: 179) comments:

“Little Red Cap and her grandmother do not really die, but they are certainly reborn. If there is a central theme to the wide variety of fairy tales, it is that of rebirth to a higher plane.”

* * * * *

Cinderella

The following is Charles Perrault’s version of this “best-known fairy story in the world” (Opie and Opie 1980: 152):

There was once a girl who lived among the cinders of the hearth place and was called “Cinderella” as a result. Her mother had died and her father had remarried. Cinderella’s step-mother and two step-sisters continuously taunted her and made her work for them: it was they who forced her to wear rags and to sleep in the fireplace.

One day it was heard that there was to be a royal ball. The two step-sisters and the step-mother dressed up in their finery; Cinderella was forbidden to go. While everyone was at the ball, however, a fairy godmother appeared and conjured up a magical means of travel to the ball, together with clothes of silver and gold cloth. Unrecognised, Cinderella arrived in splendour at the royal palace and danced with the prince. The spell broke at midnight, whereupon Cinderella had to run home in rags, leaving her glass slipper behind. The prince toured the kingdom, searching for the woman whose foot would fit the slipper he had retrieved. At last, he arrived

at Cinderella's home. The step-sisters tried on the slipper in vain, while Cinderella's tiny foot fitted perfectly, qualifying her to become the prince's bride (abridged from Opie and Opie 1980: 161-65).

The spirits of blood and fire

The dramatic interest of this story centres on the relationship between Cinderella and her step-sisters. A vast number of versions of Cinderella have been recorded (Cox 1893). In all of them, the contrast between the “good” and the “bad” bride or brides can be shown to concern the contrast between the two roles of womankind discussed earlier in this thesis: namely, her marital availability on the one hand, and her menstrual solidarity and (from a male point of view) “unattractiveness” on the other.

Cinderella's association with fire is unambiguous. Even if we leave aside versions in which she is explicitly the bringer of cooking-fire to a cold hearth (Cox 1893: 490-98), the evidence is plentiful. In the familiar version, she sleeps every night in the fireplace; in a Scottish version, she hides “behind the cauldron” (Cox 1893: 128); in an Armenian version, she “sits in the stove” (Cox 1893: 142). In short, there is no doubt that she is, as Cox (1893: xxxvi) puts it, “the guardian of the hearth”.

Role-exchanging is also a prominent theme. In some versions, the “good” and “bad” sisters exchange dresses, so that one is taken for the other (Cox 1893: 144). Even in the familiar version, Cinderella is unrecognised by anyone at the ball. All this can be interpreted in terms of the template: the exchanges of roles, slippers and clothes in the myth appear in this light as expressions of a lunar logic of metamorphosis and alternation between opposite states.

In what follows, it will be shown that these opposed states or roles are linked with “blood” and “fire” as symbols of marriage and kinship respectively.

What is certainly noticeable is that Cinderella lacks menstrual attachments or solidarity. She is detached (by death) from her Mother and also gets married; the other two sisters (note that there are two of them – their sisterhood defines their identity) do not marry. They stay with each other and with their Mother. That is, they put kinship-bonds first. In terms of the template, then, whereas we would expect Cinderella to be “cooked” as a mark of her marital availability, the other two sisters ought to be labelled “bloody” and “raw” on account of their primary attachment to “their own blood”.

The fact that Cinderella's flesh is “cooked” is suggested unequivocally: Cinderella sleeps every night in the fireplace. But do the other sisters really menstruate?

The answer is that they do. In Grimm's version (pp. 121-28) – paralleled in this respect by hundreds of others (Cox 1893) – the following events take place during the

final slipper-trying episode. The king's son has arrived with the slipper, which the two step-sisters are determined to try on:

“The eldest went with the shoe into her room and wanted to try it on, and her mother stood by. But she could not get her big toe into it, and the shoe was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said: ‘Cut the toe off; when you are Queen you will have no more need to go on foot.’ The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the King’s son” (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 126).

The prince now rides off with the eldest sister. However, they have to pass the grave of Cinderella's mother, on which grows a tree with two pigeons perched in its branches. As the prince and his bride pass, the pigeons expose the false bride's bloody secret. They sing out to the prince:

*“Turn and peep, turn and peep,
There’s blood within the shoe,
The shoe it is too small for her,
The true bride waits for you.”*

It is therefore not because the sister is “ugly” that the prince rejects her. In fact, he is perfectly prepared to accept her as the beautiful woman with whom he had danced at the ball. He rejects her purely and simply when he is informed that she is bleeding from her “shoe” (an obvious vagina-symbol – see Dundes 1980: 47). Grimm's narrative continues:

“Then he looked at her foot and saw how the blood was trickling from it. He turned his horse round and took the false bride home again, and said she was not the true one..”

The other sister tried on the shoe and – when it did not fit – cut off her heel. This, too, deceived the prince until he was informed by the pigeons of the blood in this sister's shoe:

“He looked down at her foot and saw how the blood was running out of her shoe, and how it had stained her white stocking quite red. Then he turned his horse and took the false bride home again. This also is not the right one, said he...”

Cinderella is summoned and the shoe fits her like a glove. “No blood is in the shoe... The true bride rides with you...” the two pigeons confirm (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 127).

So Cinderella is “cooked”, whereas her sisters' wounds are bloody and raw. An Icelandic version clarifies this contrast even more starkly. The two ugly sisters are

sent off to fetch cooking-fire from the cave in which it dwells, but each comes back unsuccessfully – one with a cut and bleeding hand, the other with her nose bitten off. The beautiful youngest daughter, however, arrives in the cave, finds the fire, cooks some bread and meat “well and carefully”, and comes back with the gift of cooking. She then marries a prince who, in his former incarnation, had been the terrifying monster guarding the secret of fire in his dark cave (Cox 1893: 490-98).

Not only is Cinderella “cooked”, whereas her step-sisters are bloody and raw – she is also associated with light, whereas the step-sisters are left in the dark. Grimm’s version has it that Cinderella’s dress, when she goes to the ball, is of gold and silver. A Norwegian version specifies that the three dresses correspond to “sun, moon and Star” (Cox 1893: 490-98). The bleeding Sisters, by contrast, in Grimm’s version have their eyes plucked out by the two pigeons which settle on each of Cinderella’s shoulders as she gets married in the church. Just as Cinderella (In Grimm’s version) had been forced by her step-mother to separate a bowlful of lentils from the ashes into which they had been thrown, so now the prince has separated lightness from the dark, beauty from ugliness, “the good” from “the bad.”

A further significant feature in Grimm’s Cinderella is that the royal ball lasts for three nights. Three times, Cinderella’s appearance is transformed; three times, she dances with the prince in her dazzling finery but is recognised by no-one; three times she runs home afterwards to hide, allowing her face to become dirty and putting on rags. The significance of a spell which lasts for three days has been touched on already, in our consideration of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. Cinderella’s three trips between home and the ballroom and her disguising of her identity in fact match closely Jack’s repeated trips to the sky and his discolouring of his face so as not to be recognised. In Cinderella, too, the motif of incest is present. The “ugly” sisters are associated with “blood” and matrilineal kinship; Cinderella has no female kin and instead prioritises marriage. Not only is she not incestuous: she makes a strong point of escaping from incest – the motif of Cinderella’s father’s incestuous advances and her escape from them is quite explicit in numerous traditional versions (Cox 1893). In Grimm’s version, she has to repeatedly escape, in fact, from her own father, who is in league with the prince in attempting to catch her before she is ready for marriage. But she escapes, in a process which involves not merely hiding but also the exchanging of one identity for another. After the ball, the prince tries to accompany her home:

“She escaped from him, however, and sprang into the pigeon house. The King’s son waited until her father came, and then he told him that the unknown maiden had leapt into the pigeon-house. The old man thought: ‘Can it be Cinderella?’ and they had to bring him an axe and a pickaxe that he might hew the pigeon-house to pieces, but no one was inside it” (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 124).

Cinderella has escaped through the back of the pigeon-house, left her dazzling dress on her mother’s grave and seated herself back among the ashes in her grey gown.

This happens twice. It is only on his third attempt that the prince succeeds in catching Cinderella, by pouring pitch on the staircase of the ballroom so that her shoe gets stuck in it for him to retrieve. The suggestion is that Cinderella is only ready for marriage after her three trips to the ballroom and her three escapes. It is all a matter of timing (as Perrault's version confirms, with its story about Cinderella's obligation to return from the ballroom at midnight). Had she allowed herself to be caught earlier, this would have been to violate the special three-day period of magical self-transformation which she had been given by her mother's spirit. Once her three days of disguises, escapes and hiding were over, marriage could properly ensue.

Chapter – 13: Amerindian variations

In each one of our four fairy tales, then, blood turns out to be involved in the casting of a spell. This spell is of a kind which carries away young men or women from marital life into another realm. The enchanted realm is an inversion of the normal one: instead of eating, one is treated as food; instead of marrying, one returns to the womb; instead of being awake, one is immersed in the realm of dreams. And the process of moving from world to world involves a profound transformation of the self: one falls into a deep trance or sleep (*Sleeping Beauty*), the nose bleeds, the face is blackened (*Jack-and-the-Beanstalk*); huge eyes, ears and teeth render the familiar face unrecognisable (*Red Riding Hood*); dazzling clothes and finery suddenly turn back to rags and vice versa (*Cinderella*). There is a moving to and fro – or a bobbing up and down – between states:

Cinderella: between dazzling splendour and dark humiliation or even blindness, between fire and blood, between marital union and the bonds of kinship, between the “true” bride and the “false”;

Jack-and-the-Beanstalk: between earth and sky, poverty and wealth, mother’s hearth and giant’s oven;

Red Riding Hood: between the real mother-figure and her false counterpart; between the inside and the outside of the wolf’s belly;

Sleeping Beauty: between sleep and waking life, stillness and movement, curse and kiss,

Of course, in any conceivable plot or story-line, events would have to occur, and it would be easy to contrast all the events and situations with one another in various ways. This would not prove anything, for any tale whatsoever would be consistent with the pointing out of contrasts of such a kind.

What makes matters much more interesting is that in the case of magical tales, constraints do seem to apply. The term “magical tales” refers to stories of the kind already discussed in this thesis — myths of primitive matriarchy and other stories purporting to explain the nature or origins of ritual power. Magical tales – in short – are those originating within the context of magical ritual; they are stories designed, literally, to enchant.

In this context, it is not at all the case that the imagination of the story teller is

permitted to invent any sequence at will. In particular, the central argument of this thesis would be demolished if a single accurately-recorded traditional magical tale depicted a person's bleeding as the immediate prelude to legitimate marriage. In every case without exception, it will be found that blood triggers not marriage but its opposite (incest "swallowing" etc.). Moreover, whenever any one of the previously-mentioned pairs of contrasts enters the story, it does matter which way round it is. Assuming menstruation to be coded negatively (as it usually is), the pairs of contrasts include:

Menstruation	Emergence from seclusion
Raw	Cooked
Blood	Fire
Wet	Dry
Darkness	Light
Incest	Marriage
Kinship	Affinity
Hunger/being eaten	Feasting
Curse	Kiss
Ugliness	Beauty
Rags	Riches

If the story-teller were at liberty to invent any event or situation and make it combine with any other, then items from either side in these columns could be selected at random and strung together to form a story. But the story teller is not free in this sense – not free, in any event, if the aim is to produce a tale expressive of magical power.

It will be found that the constraints which operate are those specified in the template outlined in Chapter 5. Accordingly, a hero cannot get married and suddenly find that he is hungry. Hunger goes with menstruation, not marriage. A plot about a hungry newly-wed husband might, therefore, make an interesting story, but it would not be magic. For magic to work, marriage, cooking and feasting have to occur together, just as incest, rawness, hunger and being eaten or swallowed occur together. This is because menstruation, according to the template, generates kinship-solidarity at the expense of marital coupling, making cooking, feasting and marital sex all dependent upon a successful outcome of the sex-strike and the hunt. This "initial situation" – it is here argued – is the point of departure for menstrual symbolism in human culture generally. It is a logic of periodicity faithfully preserved at a structural level within the world's traditional magical myths.

The story-teller, consequently, cannot take one element from one of the above two columns without having to imply or connote all the others. This does not mean, of course, that every single item must be explicitly referred to in every telling of every tale. The story-teller has much freedom in this respect: that he or she can make a

selection of the contrast-pairs which are to be exploited in the tale. For example, a choice might be made as to whether the story concerns the struggle between beauty and ugliness, or the conflict between earth-dwellers and the celestial beings. Or the narrator may choose whether to emphasise the conflict between light and darkness, or that between fire and blood. These kinds of choices can be made. But once made, the selected contrast-pairs can be related to one another only one way round. No-one has ever heard of a menstruating cook, a marriage celebrated in the belly of a wolf, a true bride whose bridal gown is stained or a false bride who remains in purest white, menstruation on midsummer's afternoon or a honeymoon during an eclipse or storm. It is often thought that in magical myths, anything at all is allowed. In reality, the constraints – although seemingly-subtle and unobtrusive, and although they have hitherto eluded precise specification – are rigid, consistent and identical throughout the world.

The bird-nester

The subject of *universal* constraints shaping the construction of myths brings us, naturally and inevitably, to the later theoretical achievements of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the remainder of this thesis it is hoped to show that Lévi-Strauss's intuition concerning the existence of "universal structures" was not misguided. Such structures do exist: yet it can be argued that despite the monumental endeavours of his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss himself does less than justice to his own initial insight concerning them. The "universal structures" whose influences he discerns prove elusive to his grasp; he can argue plausibly for their presence, yet never states at all concisely what they are. The shapeless immensity and scale of *Mythologiques* and its lack of a concrete conclusion prove, ultimately, more a liability than an asset, since we are led to the suspicion that Lévi-Strauss himself is uncertain as to the nature of the structures in which he wishes others to believe.

In this and the following two chapters, it will be 'shown that the constraints partially uncovered by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques* can be more fully and succinctly presented and are capable of precise description. They are in fact quite adequately defined by the transformational template already outlined in Chapter 5.

At this point we may turn to the "bird-nester" motif with which Lévi-Strauss begins and ends his extraordinary and epoch-making study of North and South American Indian myths. The "key myth" of the entire four-volume work is a story told by the Bororo Indians of Central Brazil (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 35-37). It may be thought of as an Indian Jack-and-the-Beanstalk.

In olden times, the women used to go into the forest to gather the palms used in the making of penis-sheaths which were presented to adolescent boys at their initiation ceremony. One youth secretly followed his mother into the forest as she did this, caught her unawares, and raped her.

As punishment, his angry father forced him to steal three noise- making instruments (a bell and two rattles) from the souls inhabiting the other world. The boy journeyed three times to the land of the dead, returning safely with the trophies thanks to the help of various animals who took his side.

Then his father made the boy climb up a steep rock-face to the sky, using a pole as ladder. The father claimed that some macaws were nesting in the face of the cliff and the boy was to capture them. But when the boy had reached the nests the father knocked the pole down, stranding the bird-nester in the sky.

Feeling hungry, the boy set off along the top of the rock and began to look for food. But when he had killed some lizards, which he strung around his waist, they went rotten, producing such a smell that he fainted. While he was asleep, vultures – attracted by the rotting meat – came and ate the lizards, and then began eating the boy himself. His hindquarters were completely gnawed away.

Before they had devoured him completely, however, the vultures lifted him into the air and deposited him at the foot of a mountain. The hero regained consciousness “as if he were awaking from a dream.”

Having tried to eat food without success – the food passed straight through his body without being digested, owing to his lack of a rectum – the boy moulded himself an artificial behind of dough. Having thus stopped himself up, he ate his fill.

When he returned to his village, neither his grandmother nor his younger brother recognised him – he looked like a lizard. However, he revealed himself to them, resuming his human appearance. That same night, a violent thunderstorm extinguished all the fires in the village except his grandmother’s. Next morning, everybody had to come to her for hot embers to rekindle their fires.

Finally, the hero changed himself into a deer and rushed at his father who was out hunting, killing him. The boy dropped his dead father into a lake, in which cannibalistic fish devoured all but the bones. The boy then killed his father’s wives, including his own mother.

Discussion

The Bororo story of the “bird-nester” can be interpreted as follows. The myth is an American Indian version of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. In both stories, we have an

incestuous relationship with the mother (with the implication that mothers cannot be trusted to control their own sons), followed by a trip to the sky, hunger, the experience of being treated as food, descent from the sky and revenge upon the personage held responsible for the suffering endured. In both cases, we have the motif of three trips to the other world, and the stealing of three trophies. And in both cases, we have a disguised reference to male menstruation: in Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, Jack's blackening of his own face (In the familiar version) or his nosebleed (in the earliest published version) connotes menstrual bleeding and what may be termed "skin-change"; in the Bororo "bird nester" story, the hero's lack of a behind and consequent incontinence may refer to a male ritual substitute for menstrual blood-loss. If this were the case, then just as bleeding from the nose would be interpretable as one means of simulating "menstruation", so inducing diarrhoea would appear as another. In support of this, we may note that in his own analysis of this myth, Lévi-Strauss (1970: 124-135) links menstruation, as a potentially-excessive degree of "openness", to various other kinds of "incontinence" or "lack of control over bodily orifices". Certainly, the condition of the Bororo "bird-nester", whose food runs straight through him as if he had no rectum at all, would be a familiar initiatory experience in the eyes of many South American tropical forest peoples. The next section below will illustrate this with an example from the north-west Amazonian Barasana, among whom male initiation involves drinking yagé – a beer which induces diarrhoea (Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 200-01).

In order to emerge from her seclusion, a menstruating woman must, in effect, cease to be "open". She must, so to speak, stop herself up. At the end of his ordeal, the "bird-nester" stops himself up with a behind made of dough; it is suggested that in this, he is mirroring the role of a menstruating girl stopping up her flow as the condition of emergence from seclusion.

The Bororo bird-nester performs or is involved in a number of operations, each of which is quickly followed by its opposite. He goes to the land of the dead, but comes back miraculously alive. He climbs a steep cliff-face, but is later carried down again. He has his hindquarters removed, but then succeeds in stopping himself up with dough. He is slowly eaten alive, and is unable to eat food himself, but later eats his fill. He faints, and then wakes up again. Rains fall, putting out almost all the fires, but on the following morning the fires are all kindled again. The hero becomes a lizard but then resumes his human form again. These changes of state can be tabulated in this way:

First state	Second state
Death	Life
Sky	Earth
Open	Closed
Eaten	Eating
Hungry	Full

Asleep	Awake
Rain	Fire
Animal form	Human form

The elements in the first column are all those appropriate to the menstrual phase, while those in the second are appropriate to the marital phase. The initial states are those brought upon the boy by his initial act of incest with his mother. The myth does not tell us whether the hero eventually finds a wife, but we know that he negates the possibility of further maternal incest, since he kills his mother. A further reversal concerns his relationship with his father. Initially it is his father who sends him to the likelihood of a watery death (the land of the souls can be reached only by flying over a lake) and who subjects him to the suffering of being eaten; at the end, the boy drops his dead father into a lake where he is eaten by carnivorous fish.

Male menstruation among the Barasana

Lévi-Strauss does not interpret this myth in terms of its function within the context of male initiation ritual. Nonetheless, it can be shown that the elements in the first column above correspond to the experience of entering the seclusion of a male initiation-rite (or the seclusion of menstruation), while those in the second column correspond to emergence from this state.

The Bororo bird-nester myth is explicit about its own connection with male initiation ritual. As the myth opens, the boy is about to be initiated. Why? The myth immediately provides an answer: the youth rapes his mother as she is obtaining the necessary penis-sheath. Women, then, cannot be trusted to exercise proper sexual control over their own sons. Men must therefore do it for them. So the boy's father now takes the necessary action. The young bird-nester's adventures are a punishment for his incest, and, we might say, "take the place of his initiation. He would have been initiated; Instead he is sent to the world of the dead, stranded in the sky, eaten alive etc. We may take it, then, that these adventures are in fact a coded reference to the experiences involved in initiation itself. The "bird-nesters" temporary "death" (encounter with "rotteness", fainting, being eaten etc.) followed by "rebirth" (waking up, resuming his human form etc.) would then correspond to the usual logic of male initiation-rites discussed earlier in this thesis.

In this context, a detailed account of Bororo male initiation ritual night help us in understanding the myth. Crocker (1985: 66, 106) gives a sketchy description based on informants' memories: initiation involved an encounter with the *aigé*, a kind of Bororo Rainbow Snake. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 414-15) writes that this monster gave off a vile stench of rotteness; it lived in rivers and marshlands, and its voice was the sound of the bullroarer. Australian and Amazonian analogies – particularly in the light of the argument of previous chapters – would lead us to expect an equivalence between this vile-smelling *aigé* and the "smell" and "rotteness" of "death"

associated with menstruation.

Given the difficulties in reconstructing an adequate picture of Bororo male initiation, however, we may at this point turn for help to one of the most thorough modern studies of male initiation ritual to have been conducted in the South American tropical forest region. This is Stephen and Christine Hugh Jones's account of *He House* among the Amazonian Barasana (see above, Chapter 6, pp. 200-201). In addition to being good ethnography, this happens also to be one of the few accounts of fieldwork in South America designed to test some of the theoretical findings made by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. It is here proposed to elaborate on the description of *He House* presented in Chapter 6.

He House means “menstrual house” – or rather, it means the large communal dwelling in which men menstruate in a seasonal ritual designed to bring on the annual rains. The rite of *He House* is in essence a three-day collective menstrual period undergone by men. It is of particular relevance to the themes of this thesis, not least because on the level of symbolic intention, everything which happens in northern Australian male initiation ritual is precisely mirrored among the Barasana, although the materials and techniques used in embodying these intentions (for example, the use of red paint instead of blood or ochre) do differ from their Australian counterparts.

Prominent in the rite of *He House* are a variety of flutes and “trumpets” (in fact large megaphones). These trumpets, which represent a great Snake – an anaconda – produce “a terrifying noise”, compared to thunder; this noise is made by the player blowing with pursed lips down an open tube “and is thus like an amplified fart” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 200). An intrinsic feature of the trumpets is that they are “open-ended”; they are said to “open up” women at puberty (causing them to menstruate). If a child should see the trumpets (or other *He* instruments), its anus would be opened up disastrously – it would suffer from violent diarrhoea until it wasted away and died. Consistently with this, initiation – which involves contact with the trumpets – does “open up” boys (rather – we may note – as the “bird-nester” has his behind eaten away). A feature of *He House* is that the participants drink *yage* beer to give themselves diarrhoea. It also makes them vomit (p. 200). It is clear that this male activity of self-opening and cleansing by the release of vomit and excrement is conceptualised as a counterpart to the more natural “self-purifying” process of female menstruation (pp. 200-01). A girl's vagina is “opened up” for the first time when she reaches puberty and has her first menstrual period; myths say that the first “opening up” of women for menstruation was achieved by means of the trumpets (p. 266).

At the beginning of this chapter, it was pointed out that in four of the most familiar European fairy-tales, blood was involved in the casting of a spell. This is certainly the case – at least metaphorically – in the rite of *He House*. The climax of the rite is the melting of beeswax in a sacred wax gourd. The wax “has a specific association with

menstrual blood”, while the gourd container is “like a womb containing children”. The melting of the wax produces a symbolic menstrual flow which brings on the annual rains (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 167, 178). During the ritual, the novices and others are covered with red paint “identified with menstrual blood” (p. 184); women are not to touch this paint or they “will immediately start to menstruate”, their blood being this paint (p. 76).

He House is not only a “metaphorical menstruation” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 153), it is also “a symbolic act in which adult men give birth to the initiates” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 132). In order to give birth, men “must first be opened up and made to menstruate” (p. 132). The boys to be born are metaphorically “swallowed” by an immense snake – an anaconda (p. 218). The boys are made “dead” by being coated with black paint, said to make the flesh rot (p. 77). When the youths have been “rotted” with this black paint, they are then “sat down....in a foetal position with their knees drawn up to their chests” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 77). That is, they are now foetuses inside the maternal womb. It is an extremely vulnerable condition – an exposed state which is “compared to that of crabs and other animals that have shed their old shells or skins” (p. 120). This is to be understood in the context of the belief that menstruation, like *He House* as a whole, “is an internal changing of skin” (p. 183). The boys in their vulnerable condition are like crabs or menstruating women in the process of self-renewal.

The boys are subsequently reborn and are then carried by the men exactly as if they were newborn babies. Finally, they are ritually “cooked” by being bathed in smoke (p. 83).

For about two months after the rite, black paint remains on the Initiates, who are subject to rigid dietary, sexual and other restrictions. The boys are said to be dangerous and contaminated “like menstruating women”; any woman who touched the boys in this state would be penetrated by *He* “in the form of an anaconda” (p. 87).

In her discussion of the logic involved in all of this, Christine Hugh-Jones notes the contrast between the organised reproductivity of men and the isolated, randomised reproductivity of women. The nub of the matter is that *He House* as “male menstruation” brings men together as an organised group – in starkest contrast with female menstruation, which “sets women apart in an order which is purely random (C. Hugh-Jones 1979; 155, 159).

In order for the rains to be brought on, then, collective menstruation among humans must occur. It is an implication of the myths that originally, this task was performed by women, in the beginning, say the myths, came “*Romi Kumu*, Woman Shaman, the prototype shaman from whom all shamans derive their power...” (p. 100). Using her magic vagina, which contained both water and fire, she created the seasonal cycle by first submerging the world in a flood, then burning it in a universal conflagration (p. 263). The rain season is “the menstrual period of the sky” (p. 179), the rain itself

being *Romi Kumu's* blood. The time of the onset of the rains is associated with the Pleiades and with the moon (p. 192); among the neighbouring Desana, this is the moment when the huge anacondas rise up vertically out of the water to “assure themselves of the changing seasons” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1968: 74).

The shedding of the blood-like rain is conceptualised as a cosmic renewal, a moment of “cosmic skin-change”, consistent with the idea that *He House* “succeeds in renewing the natural processes of the world” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156). “The renewal of women, being associated with the moon, is also associated with the opposition between day and night”; it is equally associated with the alternation between wet season and dry (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156). *Romi Kumu* is old in the evening, yet by painting herself with menstrual blood and then bathing to wash it off she “changes her skin” and becomes young again each morning (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 264). Seasonal and lunar rebirth or renewal express the same logic in which death is overcome. These notions are summed up by Stephen Hugh-Jones (p. 250) when he writes that women

“are semi-immortal: through menstruation, they continually renew their bodies by an internal changing of skin – hence they live longer than men – and through childbirth they replace themselves with children. These processes are thought of as being akin to the succession of seasons and the growth of animals and plants in the natural world. The key to female creativity is seen to lie in the fact that women, like the world of nature, are periodic and cyclical.”

The myths say that the ancestors of humanity had the chance to remain immortal but lost it by failing to respond properly to *Romi Kumu's* womb. *Romi Kumu* had offered men her immortality-conferring “gourd” (that is, her vagina). However, men’s response was unwise. “I’m not going to eat from your vagina, it is very bitter and smells”, was the response of Old Star when offered the gift of eternal life. *Romi Kumu* therefore put the magic gourd back between her legs and offered men an imitation (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 264-5). This is the gourd used in the ritual of *He House* today. It is “not the real one but the left-over gourd which gives life but not immortality” (p. 182). It is said that when men foolishly declined *Romi Kumu's* offer, snakes and spiders stepped in, ate from the “smelly” vagina and acquired thereby the power to change their skins periodically instead of dying. Men were left only with the artificial gourd. Since then, when men have died, they have not come back to life (S Hugh-Jones 1979: 264-5).

The boys who, in the ritual, are coated with black paint and are said to “die” and then “come alive”, are said to be following in the footsteps of the Moon, who was the first to die and be reborn in this way (p. 274). Yet the men know that what they do is in some sense only an “imitation” of the real thing. “We were directly told”, writes Christine Hugh-Jones (p. 154), “that *He wi* is like women’s menstruation but that women really do menstruate while *He wi* is *bahi kemoase*, imitation”. The women

say: “The men make as if they too create children but it’s like a lie” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222).

The interchangeability of myths and rites

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to detail the extent to which the Hugh-Jones Barasana ethnography validates and delineates the transformational template outlined in Chapter 5. The aim here is simply to draw on *He House* to assist us in decoding one of the key myths of *Mythologiques*.

The Barasana have their own rich corpus of myths through which to conceptualise and organise the experiences involved in *He House*. However, it is an interesting finding of this thesis that it hardly seems to matter which magical myths are selected as keys to comprehend such processes. It will now be argued that since all magical myths derive from the same template, and since this template is also the point of departure for the corresponding rituals, a “good fit” is automatically guaranteed in advance. In fact, almost any fairy-tale from neighbouring tribes – or even from European folklore – might be usable among the Barasana as an aid to the comprehension of the magic of *He House*. To say – as will now be argued – that the Bororo “bird-nester” myth might be similarly serviceable is therefore not to make any special claims about the relationship between this particular myth and the *He House* rite. Almost any other fairy tale might do beautifully: it is nevertheless true that this myth works beautifully, too.

Let us recall the key features of the “bird-nester” myth: the hero’s maternal incest and rape, his punishment by his father, his three errands to the world of the dead and so on. Although some inventiveness and shifts of emphasis may be required, we will see that it is by no means difficult to force the features of *He House* into the conceptual box provided by this myth.

Without claiming complete ethnographic fidelity at every point, the following is one suggested way in which such a “fit” might be artificially accomplished. Beginning with the incest-motif, we are forced to concede that no Barasana boy in being initiated would actually rape his mother. But the ritual of *He House* (a) brings a boy into intimate contact with “menstrual blood” and with a “womb” from which he is “reborn” and (b) gives him power over all women, including his mother. In the rite of *He House*, no Barasana boy – to continue – would be punished by his father by being sent on three errands to the world of the dead. But each *He House* novice is compelled to spend three days in a menstrual hut in which he symbolically joins the ranks of the dead. He comes back from this seclusion in possession of the emblems and paraphernalia of male ritual power (rather as the “bird-nester” returns with two rattles and a bell). No Barasana youth has to climb a cliff-face to the sky. But entering *He House* is certainly travelling to another world. The “bird-nester” is deceived by his father, who knocks away the pole and thereby imprisons his son.

Deception of the uninitiated is an important element in *He House* as in all male initiation ritual; and once in the secluded sphere, no escape is allowed before the allotted time. The “bird-nester” is extremely hungry; so is the Barasana boy (who is not only kept on a restricted diet but is made to vomit up his food).

The “bird-nester” is asphyxiated with the stench of rotten lizards; the Barasana boy is covered with black paint – paint which “is the colour of rottenness and death, and makes the wearer dead”; the boy’s flesh is said to rot (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 149). The “bird-nester’s” rear is devoured by vultures, so that, in the absence of a rectum, all his food passes straight through him; the Barasana boy’s anus is “opened up” as he drinks the diarrhoea-inducing beer. The “bird-nester” stops himself up with an artificial behind made of dough; the Barasana boy is taught “control over bodily orifices” – that is, taught how to become “stopped up” as an essential aspect of his education (which involves being alternately open” and “closed” in accordance with definite rules – S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 202). The “bird-nester’s” adventures immediately precede the onset of a thunderstorm which extinguishes almost all fire; *He House* immediately precedes the onset of the annual rains. The “bird-nester’s” identity is concealed as he assumes the form of a lizard; the Barasana boy undergoes “skin-change” and is said to be “like” various animals as he is concealed from his younger siblings and female kin. The “bird-nester” is brought down from the sky and “wakes up”; the Barasana boy finally emerges from his seclusion and from his trance-like state of temporary “death”. The “bird-nester” restores his own powers and uses them against his parents’ generation; the Barasana boy finally emerges from his ordeal as a socially- mature man who need defer no longer to the adult world. The “bird-nester” ends up in possession of male ritual power – which includes powers of life and death over women. He kills his father. Through his temporary “death”, the Barasana boy has been reborn with power over all women – including his mother – and with the prospect of standing in his father’s social place.

A seemingly-plausible “fit” can, then, be claimed. Yet if this is so, it is not because of any quality peculiar to the “bird-nester” story – it can be shown that countless other myths would serve in its place. We may even be confident that if the Barasana had to make do with the story of Little Red Riding Hood or Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, they would find a way of interpreting either of these, too, in terms of *He House*. In any event, it can be shown that these European fairy tales contain all the necessary ingredients.

We have related the “bird-nester” story to *He House*. To complete the demonstration, the above-mentioned two fairy tales will now similarly be related to *He House*, bearing in mind – of course – the somewhat-forced nature of the “fit” which is being claimed.

Little Red Riding Hood and *He House*

Let us take Little Red Riding Hood. A Barasana boy might feel that he was – in

becoming initiated – taking the part of the heroine in the story. He would be playing the role of a girl. This would not necessarily seem unnatural: to the extent that they are “menstruating” and “giving birth”, all the participants in *He House* are men playing female roles. The girl’s red cap might seem significant: obviously – it might be assumed – it referred ‘to the red paint used in the rite. The “false grandmother” might also seem disturbingly familiar: the “Mother” who is really a sinister male might seem uncannily reminiscent of the boy’s somewhat-frightening male relatives – including his father – claiming to offer intimate contact with “menstrual blood” and Vagina Woman’s womb. By the same token, Red Riding Hood’s becoming swallowed alive might also seem perfectly familiar, for does not a boy in *He House* get swallowed by a giant snake? Finally, the episode in which the wolf’s belly is slit open and its victims released might be read as an obvious reference to what happens at the end of *He House*, when everyone emerges from womb-like seclusion and returns to normal life.

Jack-and-the-Beanstalk and *He House*

Jack-and-the-Beanstalk might seem to the Barasana familiar in much the same way. Jack obtains magical beans from his mother or grandmother; all magic among the Barasana has similarly been obtained from an ancestral mother figure (Vagina-Woman). Jack shows incontinence in bleeding from the nose; the Barasana boy undergoing initiation is painted red, and experiences diarrhoea. Jack is hungry; so is the participant in *He House*. In the giant’s house, Jack seems a miniscule figure; he is popped into the giant’s oven. The young participant in *He House* is said to be reduced to the size of a foetus; he is secluded in a special small compartment within the communal house. The giant smells Jack’s blood and wants to eat him; the Barasana boy is covered in symbolic menstrual blood and is swallowed by a snake. Jack escapes, stealing a trophy, and repeats this three times. For three days, a Barasana boy remains in *He House*; he gains magic trophies which were stolen from women at the beginning of time. Jack blackens his face before climbing the beanstalk; a boy in *He House* undergoes “skin-change” associated with being painted black. Jack chops down the beanstalk; *He House* comes to an end. The world outside *He House* seems as far removed from the world inside as the earth seems from the sky.

Conclusion

The Barasana, then, have their own rich corpus of myths which clarify the logic of their rituals. It might have been rewarding to have studied them here. Yet there is no need. For our purposes it hardly seems to matter precisely which magical myths are selected as keys through which to understand rites such as *He House*. The myths are all products of the same general logic, and can be made to function more or less equally well.

In fact, the Barasana would probably feel at home not only with many of Grimm’s fairy-tales, but also with the myths of Aboriginal Australia or with much of the

mythology of ancient Greece. They could certainly draw significant comparisons with their own mythology – which itself is not a rigid doctrine of faith but a fluid social awareness, rich in contradictions, disputes and variations, and expressed through an indefinite number of myths and tales which have been overheard from neighbouring tribes, borrowed, exchanged, incorporated into more familiar tales, half-forgotten, distorted and amended in the manner common to story-tellers throughout the world. There is no rigid, point-by-point, inevitable correspondence between any one particular myth and any one particular ritual sequence. Rather, a basically lunar logic – that of the template central to this thesis – is at a deep level governing the practice of magical ritual everywhere, the operation of this logic spinning off ritual practices and fairy tales in an endless variety of forms. If there can always be discovered an impressively precise structural correspondence between any one spin-off and any other – whether between myth and myth, myth and rite or one rite and another – it need not be because of any special relationship between them. No one myth need stay anchored to one ritual, nor need any one localised ritual be explained by any one myth or set of myths. All are at the deepest level equally illuminating of one another because they all lead back to the same logical source. As products of a single lunar generator of collective thought and practice, all are, from an external patriarchal standpoint, absurdity or lunacy of much the same general kind.

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