

Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1978

The Origin *of* Table Manners

*Introduction to a
Science of Mythology: 3*

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M428. Arapaho. 'The wives of the sun and moon' (5)

In former times, there used to be in the sky a big camp circle controlled by a man, his wife and their two sons. This family was innocent, but generous in heart and industrious. Their tent was formed of daylight and the entrance door was the sun; the tent was fastened by means of eagle feathers.

The two boys were on the go all the time and would see many kinds of people and animals. During their absence, the parents who remained at home in the camp thought only about their family and their belongings. They were sedentary and contemplative people.

One night, the two brothers who were resting together consulted each other about looking for wives. They agreed to search for their respective wives. The next night, Sun, who was the elder, addressed

his father in respectful terms, explaining that for their individual welfare and in order to lessen the toil of their aged parents, his brother and himself wanted to marry. They would be more often at home, and the father and mother would not worry so much about them.

The parents reflected and very solemnly gave their consent, along with much wise and prudent counsel. The camp was situated on the left bank of a stream, the Eagle River, which flowed from west to east. Before going off each on their separate ways, the brothers told one another of their plans. Moon intended to look for a human woman or a 'resurrected woman'; Sun wanted a water wife, for he maintained that humans looked homely and ugly about their faces: 'When they look up towards me, their eyes almost close with a mean appearance. I cannot bear to see their disgusting faces. Batrachians are much prettier. When a toad looks at me, she does not make faces like a human woman. She gives all her attention to me, without a single wrinkle about her eyes and she has a charming mouth: the way she sticks out her tongue shows she has a disposition to love dearly.' Moon protested that when human women looked at him they were handsome and benevolent, and that their ways and habits were decent. Whereupon, the two brothers took leave of each other.

The elder went downstream and the younger upstream. They set out the night of the disappearance of the moon, after the full moon. Their journey lasted six days. They had two days of cloudy weather, two days of rest (holy), and two days before the new moon.

Moon travelled westwards up the river until he reached a huge camp circle; he heard much noise of people and dogs. The air was fragrant, the scenery at the horizon was grand. Birds were singing everywhere, as well as reptiles (*sic*) and insects. The river he saw mirrored the trees and the sky. The inhabitants of the camp were engaged in games and various occupations.

Moon was admiring this idyllic scene, when he saw two young women gathering dead wood as they walked along the river-bank. Changing quickly into a porcupine, he attracted the attention of one of them. 'What a splendid porcupine f' exclaimed the young girl. 'Look at his long white quills. I want his quills. As it happens my mother is out of quills ...'

But the porcupine got the girl to follow him up a tall tree (*Popl/IIIS* sp.). In vain her companion beseeched her to come down. When the porcupine resumed his human form and spoke, the woman on the ground could no longer see the other. Charmed by the glorious attire

and beauty of her suitor, the young girl followed him up into the sky without hesitation, after which Moon hastily covered the opening so that his wife might forget the position of the entrance.

The young woman gazed at the celestial camp along the Pink River, which flowed from north to south. The tent of her parents-in-law was further upstream. After showing his young wife the magnificent spectacle of the earth far below, Moon presented her to his parents, who were delighted with her beauty and gave her a robe nicely ornamented with porcupine quills.

Moon, however, was surprised not to see his brother's wife, when the latter arrived from the east. Sun explained that, being shy, she had remained on the bank of the Eagle River. The old woman went after her: she noticed a toad leaping towards her, suspected the truth, and spoke graciously to the batrachian, who changed into a woman and agreed to follow her. As she suffered from incontinence, her father-in-law gave her the name of *Water-Woman*, or *Liquid-woman*. Nevertheless she was given just as warm a welcome as the other one.

Sun was so fascinated by his sister-in-Law's beauty that he kept on looking at her and paid no attention to his own wife. Moon looked at her with contempt, she was so homely and wrinkled. He was displeased with her, and Sun himself regretted his choice. At this time life was being discussed, objects of use mentioned, things were planned and substances named. The desires of men and women were pointed out and precautions were given. [*sic*].

So, the two women were provided with necessary articles by their parents-in-law, while the husbands went hunting to provide meat for the household. In their absence, the human wife devoted herself to the various chores and soon became an industrious housewife. The 'Liquid-woman', on the other hand, remained idly seated on her bed, with her head turned towards the wall, and was paralysed by her timidity. In vain did her parents-in-law encourage and reassure her: nothing did any good.

The hunters came back laden with meat, which their father ordered them to boil so that each daughter-in-law could be presented with a bowl of tripe. The human wife relished the food, chewing noisily and cracking it nicely. The toad woman slyly put a piece of charcoal in her mouth; but since she had no teeth, there was no sound from her mouth. While she was chewing away, black saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth. Moon laughed vigorously.

The old man sent his sons to hunt in opposite directions. As usual

they did not make the slightest objection. Their father thereupon undertook to instruct his daughters-in-law in agricultural tasks. His wife made digging sticks and explained how to use them. The earth had to be struck at the four corners of the vegetable; first, to the south-east, then, in turn, to the south-west, the north-west and the north-east; lastly, the root had to be lifted up on the west side. The human wife helped her mother-in-law as best she could. The other wife remained passive and did nothing.

When the brothers returned from hunting and the meal was being cooked, the old man gave a digging stick to each wife: 'This will be the instrument you use every day,' he said. 'You can use it in erecting the tents and digging up eating weeds and roots.' The two men listened attentively, since it was their wives who were being educated.

'Come over quickly,' the human wife cried suddenly, gasping for breath. The mother-in-law ran to her, felt her body and was astonished to discover a well-formed baby struggling for life under her limbs. Everybody was delighted with the new-born baby's beauty, apart from the toad-woman who sulked. 'You make me tired of your foolishness,' she shouted to her brother-in-law, who was gazing at her with a scornful frown. 'Because you criticize me inhumanely, I will be with you all the time. In this way people will see you plainly hereafter.' She leapt onto Moon's breast and adhered to it.

The old man then spoke to his younger son and explained that he had not finished instructing the women and giving them rules for their behaviour. It was a splendid thing to have children, but a woman should not give birth unexpectedly. When, therefore, had Moon's wife conceived this nice baby? They worked out the dates and went over the incidents which had taken place during the journey, and the details of the elopement. Moon and Sun had set out and returned at the same time: so at that time day and night were of equal length. On the other hand, Moon had brought back his wife on the very day of the elopement, and there had been a witness in the person of the wife's companion.

'I am very proud of your success,' said the old man, 'but I don't like this method of sudden deliveries, for it is not human. Ten moons should elapse between conception and birth. The last month in which the woman had her period is not counted. You then count eight months without a period, followed by a tenth month in which the confinement takes place accompanied by a discharge of blood. By counting in this way on all ten fingers, a wife knows that she has not

been fertilized unawares by some wild beast. She can warn her mother and husband a long time in advance. Indians are descended from menstrual blood; that is why they are fond of boiling blood. In the beginning the child preceded the flow of blood; henceforth it will follow it after a ten-monthly interval. And each bleeding will last from the first to the last quarter of the moon, that is, the same period of time 'which elapsed between Moon's departure to look for a wife until his return' (Dorsey 5, pp. 212-221, 178).