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NOTE



## Lévi-Strauss, Poronominaré and the Cicadas. A footnote to *The Jealous Potter*

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Lévi-Strauss's book *The Jealous Potter* is devoted to an exploration of an Amerindian moral philosophy preoccupied with myths about the regulation of entry into and exit from the digestive tract. Sloths and howler monkeys are exemplars of continence and incontinence. Sloths have both a feeble whistle as a voice and fastidious excretory habits – on the rare occasions that they defecate, they come down from the trees to leave rock-hard droppings in one specific place. By contrast, howler monkeys both howl and are proverbial shitters. The blowpipe, weapon of choice for killing sloths, monkeys, and other arboreal game, is the material correlate of the gut. Propelled by breath from the mouth, poisoned darts shot upward from blowpipes kill animals to produce meat that is then taken into the mouth, passes down through the gut, and later expelled through the anus.

In his exploration of these themes, Levi-Strauss makes reference to the story of Poronominaré, a Baré myth from the Rio Negro area recorded by Brandao de Amorim (1928, p. 131-147). The point of this brief note is simply to confirm and embellish Lévi-Strauss's analysis by pointing to some details that he seems to have missed.

Lévi-Strauss condenses Amorim's story as follows:

Poronominaré was an inveterate womanizer and adventurer, envied by the Indians, who attempted to kill him. He defeated them one after the other and turned them into animals, allotting to each the physical appearance it would henceforth have. Sloth, his last opponent, was sly and swore his good intentions. He talked the hero into climbing to the top of a tree and then threw him down. Poronominaré, propelled by his weight, crashed through the ground like a meteor and reached the underworld. The Sloth rejoiced: he saw himself as the sole master « over the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, waters, birds, and other animals, everything... » (Amorim 1928, p. 138-145). He intended to make a flute from one of the bones, and attract girls with his music.

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In the underworld, Poronominaré was welcomed by the Cicadas. They said they would take him back to earth with them at the end of the summer, at the new moon (the season of cicadas starts toward the end of August or the beginning of September). On the appointed day the cicadas helped Poronominaré climb up to the earth through the interior of his own blowpipe. He saw Sloth singing under the moon, boasting of having killed him. The hero riddled him with darts from his blowpipe, and the Sloth fell into the underworld. Poronominaré climbed the tree, unhooked his enemy's hammock, and threw it to the ground, where it turned into the sloth as we see it today: « From now on you shall never sing under the moon; you shall whistle in the silent night. You shall be the chief of the sloths. » (*ibid.*).

In this brief summary, sloths and blowpipes already figure prominently while penile incontinence (inveterate womanizer) and oral incontinence and continence (loudly singing sloth vs. feebly whistling sloth) lurk beneath the surface. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss's extract is but a small part of a much longer story. It seems odd that he did not make even more of the other tubes and orifices that figure in this extraordinary myth.

Here is another brief summary of some other parts of the story containing bits about tubes that Levi-Strauss left out.

The story begins with Poronominaré's sister Amau (also Amaru) who lacks a vagina but is then pierced by a jacundá, an elongated fish with a large mouth. In the well-known Jurupari myth, the jacundá used his mouth to show women which of vagina or mouth they should use to play the Jurupari flutes they had stolen from the men. In the Barasana language the jacundá is called *múha buhua*, with *buhua* the word for blowpipe.

This incident is followed by a version of the Jurupari myth itself. Here we find disobedient youths, acting « as if they had no ears », who first eat forbidden foods and are then eaten and then vomited up by Jurupari. Jurupari is all of cave, canoe, snake, and man; holes in his body emit music and thunder; his bones are first transformed into a palm tree and then into flutes; and finally he advises another youth that he should seek « perfect » women who are patient, do not spy on things (restrained eyes), and do not tell tales (restrained mouth). As Duvernay-Bolens observes, in an analysis of Jurupari myths much in the style of *The Jealous Potter*, « *une femme à la bouche fermée représente donc, tout comme une femme au vagin fermé (cf. Amaru), un type de femmes "perfectionnées"* » (Duvernay-Bolens 1967, p. 53).

Poronominaré's own adventures begin with an encounter with a sexually voracious woman who lives in a cave and has biting insects in her vagina; to make love to her, Poronominaré must first remove these creatures. Later the woman's jealous husband tries to kill Poronominaré with a massive fart. Escaping from the cave by inserting his blowpipe into a tiny hole in the door and emerging through it, Poronominaré then suffers from a swollen penis caused by biting ants left over in his lover's vagina. Pretending to cure him, a stranded

dolphin reduces his enlarged organ to a tiny stub that stands in contrast with both Poronominaré's previous sexual prowess and the long blowpipe that he carries with him at all times.

Finally, and to complete this compendium of tubes and orifices, Poronominaré first uses his own farts to provoke jealousy in an anteater who lacks an anus and must excrete through his mouth and then provides the creature with both anus and a tail. Lévi-Strauss (1988, p. 99-100) himself explores this theme of the anteater without anus but with reference to ethnography from other parts of South America.

What is of interest here is first that, when taken as a whole, the story of Poronominaré reads like a veritable compendium of tubes. Many of the details that Lévi-Strauss only considers with reference to other myths are condensed into one story. Second and more interestingly, the story relates the regulation of the mouth and anus to the regulation of the other orifices in their vicinity – vagina and penis, eyes and ears. Lévi-Strauss rightly criticizes Freudian psychoanalysis for reducing everything to sex. His own exploration of Pan-American structural transformations is expansive by contrast but its very breadth disqualifies it from close analysis of any particular ethnographic context. There is an ethnographic middle ground that provides a fuller understanding of how a moral philosophy of the digestive tract is contained within a wider philosophy of the human senses and the cultural and physical environment in which myth-tellers live. This philosophy involves all the many tubes and orifices that can be found in the body, in human artifacts (including architecture), and in the natural world. It is a system of education about how tubes work and how they should be used. Without tubes there would be no sexual reproduction but also no social reproduction – indeed no life at all.

As a final point, there is a detail that Lévi-Strauss missed entirely in the particular section of the Poronominaré myth that he considered. This detail would have brought joy to his heart. Why was it cicadas who helped Poronominaré pass from the underworld to this earth? And what was the blowpipe that he used? Here is my answer.

A common sight in the Amazon forest are curious straight tubes or chimneys of carefully worked clay, about 5 centimeters in diameter, that rise to about 50 cm above the ground and lead vertically down to a deep hole below ground – a perfect image of a blowpipe coming up from the world below and piercing the surface of the earth. These tubes are made by the larvae of the cicada *Fidicina chlorogena*. From the end of July onward, as the dry season begins and the larvae become adults, they break open the end of the tube and fly off leaving an open clay pipe behind them<sup>1</sup>. This surely must be the blowpipe

1. See Béguin n.d.; Musa n.d.

through which Poronominaré emerged. I hope that someday someone will ask a wise Baré elder if I am right.

Cicadas are not the only noisy tube makers whose periodic life cycle provides a metaphor for growth and social transformation. Karadimas's (2012) analysis of the Jurupari myth shows a close association between Jurupari and large, solitary predatory wasps (*Eumeninae*) known as potter wasps or mason wasps. These wasps not only produce a loud noise – likened to Jurupary music – but also make mud tubes – likened to tubular Jurupary flutes – in which they incubate their larvae. Had Lévi-Strauss known more about the habits of these insects, he would have delighted in the discovery of these « combinatory variants » among the mud-tube potters of the insect world<sup>2</sup>. \*

\* Manuscrit reçu en décembre 2015, accepté pour publication en février 2016.

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2. I would like to thank the editors of *Journal de la société des américanistes* for drawing my attention to the link between cicadas and wasps.