



Questions of recognition

Competent mediation and giving form

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Oceanus Occidentalis

Perle Møhl

OMENS AND EFFECT

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES
ON EMERILLON
TIME, SPACE AND EXISTENCE





When scientists present their versions of the world –in writing, maps, inventories, figures– they pose their imprint upon it. Like *omens*, their representations not only reflect the world, they *do things*, they have effect.

Perle Møhl has been working with the Emerillon (*Teko*) of French Guiana since 1989, both as an anthropologist and as a filmmaker and collaborator in media productions.

In *Omens and Effect*, she traces the tangible effects of established scientific descriptions - *omens* - in the daily lives of the Emerillon, and explores the creative activities the Emerillon have engaged in to counter such omens, opposing them with their own inventive and optimistic descriptions of the world, and their place and possibilities within it.

What appears to be a classic monograph, establishing the veracity about Emerillon past and present, evolves into a playful analysis of a semiotic field of tension about what goes into the category "Emerillon", a struggle for definitions, for the right to make them - and to make them count.

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OMENS AND EFFECT
divergent perspectives
on Emerillon time, space and existence

by Perle Møhl

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8

Competent mediation and giving form





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To inform, *informare*, in its classical Latin meaning, means to give form to or to furnish with knowledge (O.E.D. 1989). It is a transitive verb, indicating a relationship. In one sense, it is a semiotic relationship, between the act of giving form and that to which form is given, namely knowledge. In the other sense, the relationship is social, existing between the one who informs and the one who is informed. It is, therefore, important to distinguish between knowledge and information, as Pierre Bourdieu also continuously points out (e.g. 1998). For one does not mechanically reflect the other in a one-to-one relationship. Knowledge refers to a mental process – "both the activity of knowing and what is known" (Collingwood 1939 in Herzfeld 2001: 24) – or a body of knowledge, a more or less abstract, amorphous and unsituated corpus that may be equally collective and individual, even if it is not equally distributed (Barth 2002). Information refers to concrete communicative interaction, exchange between specific persons, and to knowledge given form. One could also say that *information is knowledge reified*.

However one chooses to describe the relationship between knowledge and information, it is essential not to confound them and think that information directly reflects knowledge. For the act of giving form implies intention, choice and competence, and the process is social, intersubjective, taking place between subjects who will not interpret the signs in the same way, rendering the relationship between knowledge and information even more complicated, less direct, less one-to-one. In connection with anthropological fieldwork, what the so-called informants choose to divulge to the attentive anthropologist is thus not knowledge in a supposed raw form, but in the recognisable, objectified form of information. It has been given form. In anthropology, knowledge can only be inferred from, among other things, information.

In the following I will discuss a series of situations in which I was informed about elements of Emerillon life, and I will mainly do this on the basis of situations in which I was *not*. Again, I use the term "informed" because what I deal with here is knowledge shaped in a particular form, designed for direct communication and comprehension, and intentionally given – or withheld. One of the objectives of the chapter will be to investigate both the motivations and the circumstances that characterised the different situations in which information was either given or withheld, as well as the forms given and the act of mediation itself. For in order to understand and analyse the specific knowledge that was communicated, it seems vital to include, and even in some instances to give preference to, those situations in which no knowledge was communicated – that is, to include the failures (cf. Fabian 1995). For although they could be seen as *communication failures* and, in passim, be experienced as very frustrating in the concrete situations, they were certainly not failures of comprehension, for in their own way they shed light upon what *was* communicated and under which conditions. And they



form an integral part of the fieldwork experience, especially in a case like this, where the field of investigation is indeed a field of tension, made up of representations, counter-representations, affirmations, obliterations, negations, non-recognitions, etc.

Furthermore, the examples described in this chapter will suggest that the anthropologist's access to knowledge must be analysed against a background of general Emerillon skills of handling knowledge and information, their mediational competency. Such competency is, as we shall see, deployed when dealing with both humans, spirits and other beings. The chapter will thus further demonstrate the wholeness of the world from an Emerillon perspective, one in which spirits, anthropologists and other subjects are dealt with alike.

In writing this chapter, I am as indebted as ever to the authors of the volume, *Writing Culture*, and to other works by the same authors, e.g. Crapanzano's *Tuhami* (1980), as well as the works of Johannes Fabian (1983, 1991), Renato Rosaldo (1989) and George Stocking (1991), when it comes to the contextualization and presentation of anthropological knowledge, by anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike. Time has passed and much water has run under the bridges, but these reflexive issues, even if they cannot stand alone and must have an object, are as relevant as ever. For without them, without continually questioning one's position, one's own access to knowledge and the ways in which one presents it, as well as the power relations that still make anthropologists the prime storytellers, without maintaining its own making as part of the representational object, the object comes to stand as intransient, i.e. timeless, truthful and unaffected by the social – because irrelational – outside the intersubjective, outside contingency. Indeed, all of this may be what best describes what *objectivity* would be: an object without subjects – or, in the Peircean perspective, a sign-relation without interpretants – a pure impossibility in the world of knowledgeable living beings.

contingent knowledge I: where there is question of an Emerillon monograph

Anthropology in its extensiveness is based on the close collaboration between anthropologists and their indigenous interlocutors. But such collaborations, usually mutual exchanges based on specific and more or less explicit agendas on both sides, are not often part of the final picture, the monograph or the ethnography they have formed the basis for (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Among the more notable exceptions we find the collaboration between Marcel Griaule and his tutor, Ogotemméli (1965), and between Vincent Crapanzano and the Moroccan tile maker, Tuhami (1980), and more recently, in the excellent work of Jennifer Deger and her close collaborator



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and friend, Bangana (2006). As Michael Fischer says, such collaborations often constitute instances of "mutual transference", each partner allocating a specific role to the other, a role that the anthropologist perhaps only becomes aware of at a later stage (1986). This is also clear in the relationships that unite Peter Gow with a Piro shaman who treats him as a colleague and seeks his advice (2001), and those that exist between Jeanne Favret-Saada and her local hosts who must perceive her in the role of either bewitched or unbewitcher in order to talk (1977). There must be a reason. And there usually always is, although anthropologists sometimes overlook the motivations of their seemingly subservient informants for collaborating. The quest for recognition can constitute such a motivation.

I have already mentioned that, thus far, no extensive ethnological works or monographs existed about the Emerillon, although Maurel and Navet have works in progress. Since my fieldwork, a linguistic thesis on Emerillon "morphosyntaxe" has come about (Rose 2003) but, although it does constitute an implicit acknowledgement of Emerillon existence – or at least of an Emerillon language, *Teko* – the thesis does not invalidate the overall discourse of doom, but rather sustains that the Emerillon language is "in danger" due to the fewness of its speakers (ibid. : 8, 19). In other words, apart from the old articles predicting doom and the aforementioned mythological editions, as well as the small book, *Contes des Indiens Emerillon* (Couchili and Maurel 1994), edited by the members of the Emerillon cultural association, *Kobué Olodju* (see page 242ff), hardly any assertive works on the Emerillon exist, and certainly no works of a general ethnographical scope.

In contrast to this literary absence, the neighbouring Wayana and Wayãpi have been subject to intensive ethnographic studies in the Guianese, as well as Surinamese and Brazilian contexts, living on both sides of the borders as both groups do. Indeed, the Emerillon group is the only indigenous group that lives exclusively within the borders of French Guiana, and therefore work on them to a large extent depends on research carried out within the French ethnological context.¹ Quite a few monographs exist about the Wayana and the Wayãpi², as well as numerous articles and several films. Despite a promising title, the already cited photographic book, *Indiens de Guyane: Wayana et Wayampi de la forêt* (Grenand et al. 1998), prefaced by Lévi-Strauss himself,

1 Foreign anthropologists are generally absent from French Guiana, which is largely dominated by French institutional ethnology (IRD, CNRS, universities). A few exceptions are Dominique Gallois, who has been working on the Brazilian Wayãpi and, by extension and only peripherally, the Wayãpi of French Guiana; and Sally and Richard Price, who have been working on Surinamese Maroons, some of whom have fled into French Guiana. Daniel Schoepf of Geneva travelled in French Guiana at a certain period and has written about the Wayana, mainly in Brazil. More recently, Alan Passes has done fieldwork and written about the coastal Palikur, living on both sides of the French-Brazilian border (Passes 2004a, 2004b, 2009).

2 About the Wayana: (e.g. Barbosa 2002; Chapuis 1999; Hough 2008; Hurault 1985; Lopes 1994; Magana 1992; Schoepf 1979; Velthem 1995, 1998) and about the Wayãpi (e.g. Beaudet 1978, 1983; Campbell 1982, 1989, 1995; Fuks 1987; Gallois 1986, 1988; F. Grenand 1972, 1980, 1982, 1989; P. Grenand 1980, 1982; Olson 1982; Santos 2002; Sztutman 2000).



depicts the Wayana and Wayãpi, but formally omits the third forest group, the Emerillon.

This lack of literature concerning the Emerillon can be characterized as *scientific silence* and, apart from the general misrecognition they have been exposed to, it can be explained both by a reluctance of the Emerillon to communicate information to scientists, upon their request and for the sole purpose of science, and as a result of the less spectacular character of Emerillon rituals and other collective – and scientifically valued – activities, in comparison with what could cautiously be described as their more ostentatious or eye-catching neighbours.

As an example, the initiation rituals of the Wayana take place and are described as outstanding collective events, in which groups of youngsters undergo various spectacular ordeals, like enduring the painful bites of stinging ants. In contrast, the Emerillon children undergo transition rituals one by one and contingently: girls, when they reach biological puberty, and boys, at the latest, when they become fathers. The initiations thus depend on individual events and cannot be planned or carried out as collective transitions of age-sets. It could easily be argued that this is an historical result of fewness, limiting the number of persons in the same age group, and geographical distancing that would complicate assembly. Had the Emerillon been more numerous, they would have had collective rituals like their neighbours. But for one, the Emerillon do not hesitate to travel on important occasions, such as parties or funerals, so collective age-set rites could well be organized. And secondly, my experience of other ritual practices suggests that they are carried out in a very inconspicuous and intimate mode, an observation that is sustained by Viveiros de Castro, who describes the discreet and confidential nature of Araweté rituals and shamanistic performances (1992). It is therefore rather the inconspicuous nature of Emerillon rituals and other cultural forms, rather than their absence, that explains why they have not been described. Although they are certainly *significant events* in the lives of the Emerillon, they have not been registered or characterised as such by bypassing observers and scientists. The reasons for non-representation therefore must be found in the interface between incongruous Emerillon practices and scientific paradigms, so the identified losses are rather the result of the deficiencies of the methods and theories with which the Emerillon have hitherto been approached than of actual cultural absences. If there has been absence, it was rather of *observant anthropologists*.

This sense of incongruity reflects not only my own, but also the Emerillon appreciation of the situation, it would seem. One can imagine that, for the Emerillon, this sense of scientific inattentiveness and ineptness at first merely led to a slight shrug of the shoulders and a possible chuckle, and only later spurred a wish to rectify the unfitting observations, as their social and political impact gradually became clear. For from the perspective of the Emerillon,





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the discourses of absence and doom can only be rejected. The work of the cultural association, the reasons for its establishment and the simple and affirmative nature of its name, *Kobué Olodju*, "We exist", along with the many commentaries I heard or was told directly during my stay, all testify to the Emerillon experience of incongruity and express their overt frustration over this *non-representation*, which is also identified as a *non-recognition*. So not only did many Emerillon express their frustration at being misrecognised and underestimated but they also, on many occasions, showed their will to defer what had become a public impression of the Emerillon as cultureless and doomed. In doing so, they expressed a certain willingness to break the silences and the reluctance to communicate, both internally and externally. And the elders generally accepted these conditions, as we shall see. My work, both written and filmic, as well as my general access to knowledge obviously has to be seen against that background, both when it comes to acceptance and refusal to collaborate. Indeed, my fieldwork was one long equilibrist dance, teetering on the fine line between the two, and my material is, to a large extent, comprised of my continuous analyses of the likely motivations for either.

So my Emerillon interlocutors were acutely aware of the lack of literature on them and clearly wanted to make up for this absence. But at the same time, they remained very careful about their communication, and this cautiousness especially came to characterise my first period of fieldwork, which took place in Elahé. Ti'iwan, who was my initial Emerillon interlocutor, had also accepted to become my collaborator for the current fieldwork and film. But as things turned out, she was fairly disinclined to work with me, and although she generously housed me during my stays in Elahé, she was often away or busy with other activities. In the light of the considerable work she had begun after our first encounter in 1989 – work that had initially consisted of recording Emerillon myths and, later, documenting forms of handicraft and other skills, as well as her ongoing work on a *Teko* dictionary – I began to believe that, although her general attitude was to welcome work and literature on the Emerillon, she was apparently not completely settled on *who* should be the agents and authors of such work. Furthermore, the significance of the whole representational sphere and of possible miscomprehensions clearly rendered all communication extremely delicate, precisely because previous scientific representations – and omissions – had been so effective. She clearly felt the need to speak in first person and to be in control, a position that I could very well understand. The camera and the film gave her such an opportunity to speak in first person, and she seized it in those situations where she could largely control the content, i.e. when she was working on her *ronds*, teaching *Teko* classes or addressing cultural-political discourses to the camera. I was also allowed to film when her father was telling her mythological and historical accounts and teaching her about Emerillon symbolism and





iconography, situations in which the content was already to a large extent ordered and pre-framed by her father. But my requests to film various Emerillon activities with her were generally ignored and my proposals to teach her how to film herself, putting the 2nd camera at her disposal, were not taken up.

Despite her apprehensions, the film work was nevertheless advancing, and mostly young people, but also some elders, were willing to let me participate in and film their activities. Some actively took up the challenge, as previously mentioned, and began devising activities and testing out their own ability to accomplish them under the auspices of the camera. But my invitations to explain in words the constituents of Emerillon identity or to detail Emerillon uniqueness, as compared to Wayana practices, were usually met with silence. This was not only a question of not finding the reasons for asking / answering, but also, as it gradually became clear, my interlocutors did not consider themselves significantly distinct from the Wayana, at least not when it came to daily life activities and certainly not, in accordance with a certain perspectivism, when addressing someone neither Emerillon nor Wayana. As I explain in the introduction, I was initially focussing on distinctiveness because my original project entailed comparing daily to politicised expressions of ethnicity, and in a general theoretical framework this inevitably amounted to sentiments and expressions of similarity and uniqueness as opposed to different others, a point to which I shall return. Interestingly, the method determined the answers, for my abstract questions about differences were left unanswered, whereas invitations to show what Emerillon were *good at* were readily answered in front of the camera in practice.

All in all, the first stay was somewhat frustrating, although I knew I was learning a lot. The frustration also directed my attention and, where I had already been interested in the representational interface, the field of tension between the Emerillon and the rest of the world, I later became acutely aware of my own position *within* that field, as well as of the various other actors that moved in it at various positions, and of the conditions and modalities by which information travelled or didn't. And I redirected my attention to this field and made it my main empirical object, despite its very intangible nature. This alleviated neither the difficulties nor my feeling of frustration, but it gave them a whole other significance.

So I settled into this situation of apprehensive collaboration, in which I was housed by Ti'iwán and she thereby implicitly endorsed my presence and my undertakings. The film work continued, and I filmed ongoing daily life situations, as well as the aforementioned situations in which people reacted to my request to film particular Emerillon activities. As a result, the endeavour started to take form, although it had a considerably low degree of *wholeness* to it. But I also recognized that it could not be otherwise, as it took place in such an intersubjective, interactive zone and with a large number of interacting parties. I was not filming or analysing "Emerillon culture", but vari-



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ous expressions of the desire to communicate Emerillon existence, and they could not be less fragmentary and tumultuous, more "whole" than the rest of life, even if they were staged to varying degrees, i.e. framed and ordered. So this first fieldwork in Elahé was mainly characterized by frustration and silence, punctuated by sudden outbursts and a growing sense of an Emerillon predilection for concealment and secrecy in their practical interaction with the rest of the world, as well as among themselves.

Defining the lack of information as secrecy, thus not simply as absence, as others had done before me, was accentuated on my second fieldwork, which took place among the Emerillon inhabitants of Camopi. For only in hindsight was I able to see that my interlocutors in Elahé had indeed been concealing something, that the communicative absences did not reflect cultural absences. Ti'iwan had clearly been aware of my frustration and also of her own reluctance to respect our initial agreement entirely. But her wish to collaborate eventually seems to have outweighed her reluctance and, on my second trip, she accompanied me to Camopi and set me up with members of her family there, people who like herself were active members of *Kobué Olodju*.

Some might define the differences that I experienced as regional differences. I would rather define them as differences between individual motivations and projects, expressed in the ways people related to me and *my* project. And if I had become used to dealing with silence in Elahé, I was totally taken aback by the reactions I was met with in Camopi, where I would soon have to deal with something quite different, namely an almost incessant stream of information about Emerillon ways. After the local elections, during which I had been filming a group of candidates campaigning along the rivers and their daily discussions on the flow of affairs and, later on, the possible reasons for their defeat (see chapter 10), the people who housed me and their relatives had, for one, become quite confident in the utility of my presence and project and, secondly, found much more time to deal with me and carry out *their* project. A certain kind of compatibility settled in between my project and theirs, after some adjustments.

I didn't notice at first. I was simply overly delighted by the flow of information about things and phenomena that I had not experienced the slightest sign of in Elahé and by what could, in comparison, only be defined as lavish and candid talking. And as with my former work on communication and coexistence in *Saint Brumaire* (Møhl 1997), I came to acknowledge silence, as well as the significance of silence itself, mainly when it was *breached*. Only then did the silences take the form of communication and become significant silence – something withheld – and not just the absence of meaning that I had perceived it as, at first. For silence is only significant when it has an object, i.e. when it refers to a *something else* that is withheld.

James was the nephew, neighbour and political ally of Ti'iwan's cousin, René, who was housing me. James worked for the regional park project





mentioned above, which was in such abeyance that he had nothing to do, other than occasionally transporting park officials and gear. But he could not take on other projects. He had to be on standby for the Park Mission, so his frustration may have been similar to mine, albeit for different reasons. Nevertheless, he had time to spare. And he and his peers certainly couldn't miss out on the chance to have an open-earred, receptive and positively attuned anthropologist all to themselves for a while.



James describes the different layers of the universe, Saint Soit, 2001

Again, this is in retrospect. At the time, James and René, in particular, simply began talking to me about Emerillon ways on a very regular basis. Under normal circumstances, I would not take notes on the spot, but only afterwards – other than for language-learning purposes, which were usually framed as regular learning-sessions that implied pencil and paper.³ But in this new situation, the flow of words became such that I sometimes had to stop the discussion and make some excuse to run back home to note down what I had been told. This procedure became rather awkward and somewhat questionable, even inconsequential since I was indeed being presented "data". So at one point I decided to bring the notebooks back with me and directly note down what was being said. And my notebooks suddenly started filling and growing in numbers at an unusually high rate. My interlocutors were obviously satisfied with this procedure. They had probably been expecting it and had been worried that I was not getting everything right, although no one had directly said so. I was also reassured, for I was finally collecting tangible data and thereby securing my project, for once acting like a real anthropologist, whereas I had hitherto been focussing on very abstract and intangible phenomena and was continually frustrated. By the same token, my interlocutors had been transformed – or rather, had transformed themselves – into informants.

But somehow, this was too simple, too easy. Although I was extremely interested in all the information I was being let into and grateful for the open-

³ When not filming, I purposefully relied on my own selective memory for taking notes and generating the significant anthropological information, feeling the same aversion to gathering and recording data that Alcida Rita Ramos expresses (1995: 313) and interrupting the flow of action by taking notes, as James Clifford observes (1990: 51). Writing is a solo matter, the attention is turned to the notebook, unlike filming where the attention stays with the action, the discussions and the other people present.



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ness, my immediate satisfaction was soon accompanied by a certain puzzlement at the situations. Generally, I was not the sole listener. The huts were soon filled with an attentive crowd of youngsters, even if the discourse was clearly directed to me and related to my occasional comments and questions. And the sessions – for that was indeed what they were becoming – often unfolded as forums for discussion, in which several adults, generally men, gathered and discussed and corrected one another. They happily watched me note, sometimes checking and correcting my writing, as if the notebooks had become collective property. Like Rosaldo with the Ilongot, I was becoming their scribe, with the difference that I didn't feel I was transcribing "tedious stories" in a state of "uncomprehending boredom" (Rosaldo 1980: 16).

I gradually began to realize what was actually going on and how my own project and that of my Emerillon interlocutors were adjusting to one another, but also somewhat colliding. They were presenting their aggregated knowledge to me in the form of nice bundles of information that, in hindsight, were arranged in a coherent system of separate sections, divided into social and political organisation, cosmology, shamanism, mythological and historical accounts, as well as a few life stories, to break it down roughly. They were obviously working with the idea of an Emerillon monograph in mind. One that would do away, once and for all, with the perception that the Emerillon were cultureless and unworthy of study. One that would stand in the shops and libraries in Cayenne, along with all the other books about indigenous peoples of French Guiana. One that could match those written about the neighbouring Wayãpi. And to do this, my interlocutors had made themselves informants and had started presenting me with all the intricacies of Emeril-



Arthur Monnerville narrating myth to me/the camera, Saint Soit, 2001





lon social, spiritual and cosmological life, almost in the nicely ordered form of chapters. They knew that Ti'iwan had already worked with me on mythology, we had also had many discussions on such subjects here, and now they had decided to add the rest.

But at the same time, these were not the artificially detached presentations, intended for political assertions or for folklore-loving strangers, that indigenous people are so often accused of producing when they attempt to present themselves to the rest of the world in traditionalist terms (e.g. Hanson 1989; Harrison 1992; Kuper 2003). Nor was it the mimetic recitation of what they had come across while reading ethnographic monographs about neighbouring groups (e.g. Haley and Wilcoxon 1997). Little by little, I came to identify these bundles I was presented with, not only as abstract theoretical data, information, or memories from a distant past, but as significant elements in the daily lives of the Emerillon. But contrary to what Rosaldo notes, namely that the forms in which his Ilongot informants presented information to him resembled the forms they used to represent their lives to themselves, through a patterned way of selecting, evaluating, and ordering them (1980: 16-17), this capacity to order and render recognisable was apparently neither very Emerillon nor widespread. These were particularly skilful and enlightened people and, although René often claimed he "knew nothing of all that", his alleged ignorance often failed him. But it also turned out to be not so accidental, in fact. Ti'iwan had knowingly taken me there and set me up with them and, like her, they had scrutinized me for some time to see if I was a worthy collaborator. For all of them, working with me was a natural extension of their work with *Kobué Oloджу*. And that work, as I came to discover, consisted not of recovering – or bringing to life – lost traditions, but of revealing and communicating Emerillon ways to the rest of the world, in this specific case, with me in the mediator position. In order to do so, they were presenting elements of their lives in a form that could be recognised, first of all by me and, through my work, by others. I had simply never worked like that before, since my goal had been and continued to be something else. Nevertheless, the whole situation was extremely relevant to my work, just as all the information I was obtaining was an insight into the vast field of Emerillon cosmology and social practices but also, on another affirmative or meta-communicative level, relativizing the silences of the past and hence defining them as silences in the first place, i.e. as products of incongruities, not of absences.

I will shortly refer to some of the domains into which I was given (an ordered and circumscribed) access – domains that, in their extensiveness, lay outside the scope of the current project. And I hope that those who, for a time, made themselves my informants will nevertheless be satisfied with the overall form of this work, even though it does not take the form of an "Emerillon monograph". I must also mention that, during this trip, I strongly urged



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my knowledgeable and perfectly literate hosts and interlocutors to write a monograph themselves and, on the initiative of Didier Maurel, discussions have since taken place among the other members of *Kobué Olodju*, Navet and me, to undertake such a joint project.⁴

clans: For one, the intricate Emerillon clan-system was explained to me. The clans were named and families and individuals were placed accordingly, including the inhabitants of Elahé, although they themselves had never mentioned any clanic membership. The Emerillon generally observed a cross-cousin marriage preference, and although the marriage system concerning clans was not specified to me, one of my young interlocutors complained that the rules were not being properly followed. I was told about the respective names of the clans and their alleged characteristics, and remarked that some clans had names that seemed to indicate that they corresponded to – or perpetuated the notion of – the aforementioned groups that had been assimilated by the Emerillon in early colonial times. Thus, one clan was called something similar to *Aramiso*, which was the name of one of the Carib groups known to have inhabited French Guiana when the Europeans arrived and integrated into the Emerillon, according to Maurel (1998). It was also explained to me that a clan by the name of *Nambou'apam*, which means "stranger", corresponded to another integrated tribe. Yet another clan carried a name that, to my ears, was strikingly close to the word *Emerillon*, which would account for the origin of the name attributed by French explorers, Emerillon, an origin that would thus be inherent in *Teko* language itself. But I did not, at the time, pursue that matter further.⁵ In all, I was presented with what was probably a non-exhaustive list of seven clans. All those clans, I was told, were recognisable by their external aspect – their skin colour, their type of hair, etc. – and by their manners. So some were named after their widespread toes⁶, others after the white sweet potato because of their whitish skin, yet another after the tapir and its blackness, characteristics they maintained and carried on. I was also told of one clan that had disappeared.

I see now that I could have gone much further in these investigations but, at the moment, I was totally unprepared for the masses of information (the above was delivered within a span of 10-15 minutes), and contented myself to writing down as well as I could the things that people seemed to find im-

4 In a similar vein, a monograph about Kaliña history has recently appeared as the result of collaboration between an ethnologist and a politically active Kaliña (Collomb and Tiouka 2000).

5 My interlocutor noted the following name: *Merejon dju-a-upui*, translated as "Emerillon with muscular arms" (relating to the narrow parts above and below the biceps, as he showed me). *Dju-a-upui* indeed means "muscular arm", so the question is whether or not "Merejon" has been added from the external denomination, Emerillon, or whether it is integral to a pre-colonial clan name – in which case we have a probable origin of the word, Emerillon!

6 These were the "Maramichau" that I likened to the Aramichaux or Aramiso above.



portant to transmit, an endeavour which was also more consistent with my overall project than the simple amassing of ethnographic data.

spirits: An important part of the knowledge conveyed concerned the spirits that inhabit the world, the way they constantly played a part in the lives of the Emerillon and how they were to be dealt with. All spirits were not wholly malevolent, but the more mischievous ones often lingered around humans and played tricks on them, invisible as they were to all, except shamans. So, if someone carelessly talked about the places where he had set out fishing hooks or nets, or where he had spotted a bird's nest or a beehive, there was a good chance the spirits would go empty his fishing nets or seek out the honey before he got there himself. And when travelling, people regularly pointed out sites – rocks, trees, waterfalls – that were known to be inhabited by harmful spirits and were cautiously circumvented.

I was told about the human spiritual substances, how the body is composed of several spiritual elements that separate after death, some occasionally remaining among the living to haunt them, especially after a violent death; others going directly to their respective cosmological domains.⁷ Some of these elements could also leave the living, causing illness and sometimes death. Thus, I was told, one must be very cautious with one's children, especially when outside the home and village sphere, for the further away, the more *kaluwats* there are around. And if a child gets hurt or startled, the shock may cause the child to lose one of its spirits, without anyone noticing. This is also why one must never hit or otherwise startle a child. The spirit that maintains its human form will just sit there on the ground where the accident happened, while the rest of the person walks away. If *kaluwats* of the forest come by, they may take pity on the lost spirit and take it along. And the child will inevitably fall ill.

To get the lost spirit back, a shaman must be called upon, for only a shaman has the necessary capacities to go to the spirit world and to see the *kaluwats* and negotiate with them. The *kaluwats* may be dangerous, but they are not entirely evil, they are just protecting the little spirit and may not give it back easily, since it has already been lost once through human neglect. The shaman therefore has to use all his persuasive powers to bring this vital spiritual component back to the child, and if he fails, the child will die. Seeking out the spirits and negotiating with them to recover their spiritual integrity is also the procedure when an adult is hurt or falls ill, although adults are less fragile and less inclined to losing spiritual parts.

shaman capacities: The strength of a shaman thus resides mainly in his negotiatory capacities, but also in his capacity to *see* the spirits and various animals in the forms they see themselves in, i.e. as humans.

⁷ Couchili & Maurel mention three such spirits composing the human being (1994).



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This capacity to see through the eyes of others is usually what allows a person to recognize their own or other people's shamanistic powers, as a kind of revelation. I was told of a young boy who had disappeared on a tiny island in the middle of a big river during a fishing trip some years back. His family searched for him everywhere and finally were forced to conclude that he must have drowned, since there was no way he could have left the island. But in the afternoon he suddenly walked back into the camp, alive and well, to the stupefaction of all. He later explained to his brother, my interlocutor, that he had been summoned by the people of the river and had gone with them to their village at the bottom of the river, and that they had later helped him back onto land again. My interlocutor concluded that his brother had inherited the shamanistic gifts of their father, for only a shaman would see the anacondas as they saw themselves, that is, in the form of humans⁸, and only a shaman would be able to go to their village and come back again alive.

Actually, I also learned quite a lot about shamanism in Elahé, e.g. in connection with descriptions of their violent deaths. Such events were usually explained by the exceptional shamanistic powers of the deceased and the jealousy that shamans had for each other, Emerillon and non-Emerillon alike.⁹ The role of the shaman was ambivalent, for he had the power to do both good and evil and was as feared as he was respected. The role was just as much sociopolitical as spiritual, and was therefore often evoked in connection with family conflicts and to explain the current state of social affairs. Hence, the family members of a recently deceased shaman detailed the circumstances of his death and named the responsible killers, a group of envious shamans that had encircled him in the forest while he was out hunting and had killed him by piercing his skull with the long pointed pole he himself had brought along as a means of defence. I also once happened to hear a child questioning his mother about his grandfather's shamanistic powers, to which she explained where he had acquired them and how he had discovered that he possessed them. The shaman's father had himself been known as a powerful shaman and had passed his powers on to his son, who in turn only realized this when he got lost in the forest and was guided by spirits and, to everyone's surprise, returned home safely days later.

I was also told about certain food taboos and learned in which situations they were to be respected – usually when I saw them being followed and

⁸ This is clearly an example of the *perspectivism* Viveiros de Castro describes (1998), where the world takes on specific forms according to who sees it and from which perspective it is seen. As such, anacondas look like anacondas when seen by humans, but like humans to their own eyes. Likewise, the stools they sit on look like crocodiles to humans, which is why the Emerillon carve stools with a crocodile head on it. Couchili and Maurel explain this as follows, "Our ordinary visions are only a succession of relative visions. When one passes from one world to another, things don't really transform. They will be seen in a different way by the ordinary person, but the shaman will not be mistaken." (Couchili and Maurel 1994: 29).

⁹ One particular shaman who died not many years ago is said to have been attacked and killed by all his Emerillon and Wayana opponents in unison.



made an inquiry, or when something happened that people said was a result of taboos not being respected, like a child falling ill because the parents had not respected the dietary taboos at its birth.

All in all, the primary lesson of all these revelations concerned the conditions under which they were to be presented. They also put what had happened on my former trip to Elahé in perspective.

So while responding to my curiosity and inquiries, my interlocutors were very competently setting up and delineating knowledge about themselves in a particular form, one that would be recognisable not only by me, but also by potential readers. Certainly, the way they had learned about these issues themselves and the ways they remembered them were far from the way they were telling them to me, just as the way they practised and lived with them were, and this was not only a question of linguistic translation, but mainly of translating experience into knowledge and information, practice into words, i.e. of literalization. They were in sum, to a large extent, doing the job of the anthropologist and, without diminishing the work of anthropology in general or my own in particular, that is very possibly what most anthropologists' informants do, whether the anthropologists recognise it or not. They render the unrecognisable recognisable by ordering it into equivalent categories or into linear, time-logical narratives.

As for Ti'iwan, she had been working on documenting information about Emerillon practices for quite some years, and was probably reluctant to hand me all her work on a silver platter. She was gradually becoming a skilled mediator, having edited several myth collections, raising Emerillon issues when she exhibited her *ronds*, and participating in storytelling events on the coast. So her apprehension was probably linked, above all, to the political issue of representation, considering that it was not my role alone to convey knowledge about the Emerillon to the rest of the world. So she was trying to strike a balance between collaborating and working autonomously, and I believe she succeeded, for one, by setting me up with her knowledgeable family in Camopi and, secondly, by speaking in first person in the film recordings.

The above description of elements of my fieldwork is, of course, based on a compression of time and a distillation of some significant events. Many other things happened and the intentionality I describe here, concerning the Emerillons' intentions and their collaboration with me, may have been less blatant in the instance. But in hindsight it gives a sense to what happened – especially perhaps in the first setting, where frustration and a sense of absence was initially quite intense. And it certainly gives an indication of what has happened over centuries of misrecognition.

Whether the "monographic project" was intentional or not, there is no doubt that my collaborators put great effort into ordering their lives around certain "monographically exemplary" themes for me. And they were quite good at it. Order is always relational and, in this example, it is doubly so. The



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ordering that took place was both an ordering of parts and elements of Emerillon life into a timeless structure, a system, where they became juxtaposed according to monographic norms – a kind of mapping, in Certeau's terms. It is also relational in that the ordering is addressed to someone else – in this case, to the scientific field. Via our joint activities, my local mediators wanted to inscribe Emerillon life and transform it into "Emerillon ethnology" or, dare we even say, "Emerillon culture".

This leads me to a preliminary conclusion, namely that seeking *recognition* also implies rendering oneself *recognisable*, something which must be done by *ordering* ones' qualities in *recognisable form*. In this case, according to the monographic mould.

contingent knowledge II: music, spirits and mediation

Where the above dealt with the casting of Emerillon knowledge in a monographic form – a systematic, timeless mapping (Fabian 1983) – the following will deal with the time-dimensional sense of the word "order", namely *order as succession*, exploring the opposition between codified and arbitrary sequences, and doing so in terms of recognition. For Emerillon skills of mediation and of casting knowledge in systematized, recognisable order, as we have seen described above, also involved doing exactly the inverse, disordering and thereby disguising it *beyond recognition*. These talents were revealed when we recorded a CD for the Emerillon association, *Kobué Olodju*, in 1996 (see Kobué Olodju 1997).

The assignment concerned recording a series of ritual song-cycles, particularly the ritual performed to assure that young girls safely turn into women, at the time of their first menstruation, by invoking the benevolence of the appropriate spirits. The recording had been commissioned by the then-recently created association, and was intended for both their own use and for public distribution, in keeping with their general political-existential efforts. My companion and I were asked to record the songs and subsequently produce the CD. The association members wished to have a clear and comprehensible recording of the song cycles to ensure that they were not completely lost when the shaman died, for he had not as yet managed to find a successor. As mentioned above (chapter 7), the words were incomprehensible to common (i.e. non-shamanistic) *Teko*-speakers and therefore very difficult to memorize. Several persons had tried to learn them and had given up.¹⁰ The shaman was getting old and the Emerillon had learned their lesson, after seeing

¹⁰ The narrative mentioned above (page 194) relates the foreign origins of the shamanistic songs, accounting for their incomprehensibility. Certain songs were thus learnt by a youngster taken captive by the Kaliña. After many years, the young man escaped and returned to his village where he started singing these Kaliña songs. His fellow villagers liked them so much that they immediately discarded their old *Teko* songs, considered unsophisticated in comparison. That is why no one except shamans understand (i.e. recognise) the words (Couchili and Maurel 1994: 129-37).



other specialized shamans die before recording their songs. Obviously, it would take a shaman to communicate with the spirits and understand and retain the wording, but no one had revealed such capacities or even a hint of them, as yet.¹¹ So in the meantime, the songs would have to be recorded.



elements of Couchili's memory strings: tamandua, pestle, post, etc.

The recording equipment was set up, with room for the audience that would surely sit

in on such an occasion. The shaman showed up as agreed but he was a bit reticent about doing this recording. His daughter, on the other hand, was very determined and she managed to convince him, once again, by promising him a new canoe. Indeed, the shamans were always paid in one form or another to perform their song cycles, and such hesitance was possibly a habitual part of the performance, aimed at increasing the payment. But there were also other reasons, as we shall see.

The recording was ready to begin. But the shaman and Dzale'et (master of ceremonies) asked to make a test recording before continuing. He apparently wanted to hear the end result and be sure that his voice and the songs were not distorted. He listened a bit, then nodded in agreement. The singing could proceed.

But hearing the clarity of his recorded voice, the judicious shaman decided to sing the songs *in the wrong order*. Otherwise, he argued, the spirits would be deceived by the clarity of the recording and would be conjured up every time the CD was played. And since it was a CD, he would not be there to deal with them! In the wrong order, he explained, they would not hear them, not recognise them. So according to this argument, it was not only the *content*, the wording of the songs themselves, that invoked the spirits, it was also the *order* in which they were performed that rendered them recognisable to the spirits.

Obviously, if the overall transmission of his shamanistic powers to a successor was to be effective, he would also have to pass on the sense of order omitted in the recording. So he bestowed his daughter with a long string that

¹¹ As we have already seen above, individuals cannot be *trained* to become shamans but must wait until their special powers are revealed. This often happens in situations of distress, in which the powers are put to the test. This point is confirmed in a myth, *The Wife of the Sun*, in which an old woman teaches a group of children magic songs to combat a drought. Her hope is that one or two will reveal their abilities while singing and be seized with shamanistic powers. For only when the songs are sung by a real shaman will they have effect and overcome the drought (Couchili and Maurel 1994: 69).



Couchili makes a tulé flute to communicate with the spirits, Elahé 1996

he had recently fabricated – in fact his own *aide memoire* – in which each song was represented by a small wooden figurine, indicating the right order in which to sing them. By the same token, he bestowed her with the power to conjure the *kaluwats*.

The shaman obviously knew what he was doing. He was a specialist at his work, a specialist of mediation between realms. For one, he could mediate with the spirits, through a process of ordering (suc-

cession), by which his words were rendered recognisable to the spirits. But he was also competent in communicating his knowledge to fellow humans, Emerillon and non-Emerillon alike, who would be listening to the CD. Not only did he protect them from the dangerous presence and manoeuvres of the spirits, but he also withheld and thus protected *his own* power – his mastery of order and mediation with the spirits – by breaking up the correct order into incidental succession, thereby transforming *powerful* knowledge into *blunt* information. Only the memory string could reallocate the power of the songs and their performer.

I was quite impressed by the old Emerillon shaman's excellent communication skills and, while I cast no doubts on his capacities to mediate with the spirits, I had not been aware of his competences in negotiating with non-Emerillon humans, although I did know he had spent many years working with official gold prospectors, as a guide and bosman. This was one of the occasions that made me aware of the possible correlation between communicating with spirits and with other humans, Emerillon and non-Emerillon alike. And when I compared it to the way in which knowledge had been presented to me as information, practically in neat chapter packages by my very cooperative informants in Camopi, I came to consider these incidents as analogous. They both demonstrated how knowledge could be managed and presented in controlled forms, tailored to the very well-defined plans of their performers. In one case, it had been ordered into the timeless, map-like structure of a monograph; in the other, into a blunt randomised time-sequence.

The point here is also to underscore some of the epistemological conditions of fieldwork and to stress the difference between, on the one hand, anonymous, passive suppliers of knowledge, as some informants are portrayed; and



on the other, as conscious collaborators and informants who also proceed in line with their own intentions and maintain a high degree of control over the knowledge they divulge, sometimes by transforming it into information or data – data that, in passim, is thus by no means "raw".

The parallel to Marcel Griaule's so-called "initiation" springs to mind (Clifford 1988; Griaule 1965; Griaule and Dieterlen 1986), especially in the way Griaule and his collaborators described his access to knowledge as a process that had been decided by village elders collectively, designating one of them as their representative and Griaule's teacher. The motivations for this decision are less clear and Griaule simply describes it as the result of his own desire to know, and likens himself to any Dogon initiate, although I would object that his reasons for wanting to know are very different from theirs, and so is the use he will make of the acquired knowledge and the social setting of such use – knowing for the sake of knowing and science, in academic circles (cf. Favret-Saada 1977). But the description certainly resonates with my own experience in the way the information is passed on as a conscious project.

contingent knowledge III: myths and the fiction film

In the context of the two above examples, it might be interesting to look at a third example of a particular situation I, as an anthropologist, came to know under specific conditions. This example concerns my entrance into the field of Emerillon mythology and the particular discussions that surrounded the forthcoming enactment of these mythological stories. It was also on this occasion I initially started collaborating with a group of Emerillon, and it thus laid out the premise for my further work there. Finally, I believe it also played a part in encouraging the subsequent formation and work of the cultural association, *Kobué Olodju*.

During my very first visit, in 1989, I came into contact with the Emerillon of the Tampok River under fairly particular circumstances. My filmmaker companion and I had come to French Guiana on a grant from the French Ministry of Culture, to establish the grounds and make contacts in order to produce a fiction film based on Amerindian myth. The idea was to find a group of people who found the idea of a mythological fiction film interesting and worthwhile, who were willing to work on the film and the scenario with us, telling a series of myths and connecting them to a linear whole, and who would subsequently interpret the roles of the various characters in the mythological accounts, as actors.

After visiting potential Galibi and Palikur collaborators on the coast, we decided to travel to the interior, up the Maroni and Oyapock Rivers. On our way up the Maroni River, where we were going to visit a particular Wayana village, we were coincidentally stranded in Elahé. Housed by T'i'iwán and her husband, we eventually told them about our project. We were going to see



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the Wayana for this project, we said, having read the work of Schoepf and Hurault. So we were mechanically and involuntarily reproducing the classic error of overlooking the Emerillon, as we had not had the opportunity to read anything positive about them. Before leaving for French Guiana, we discussed the film project with both a member of the coastal Galibi and with the ethnologists, Françoise and Pierre Grenand, who had all approved of the idea and our general approach. We had spent some time on the coast, discussing the project with both Galibi and Palikur representatives and were now going to discuss it with members of the Wayana group. But we never got that far. Ti'iwan and her family didn't say much at first, but they were sizing us up, as it turned out. And after some days of reflection, Ti'iwan and her husband declared that they thought the Emerillon might be interested in collaborating. They offered to take us to see Ti'iwan's grandfather in his dry-season settlement, up the Tampok River, some weeks later, so he could recount the myths to us. Apparently, a collaborative setting had been established, and seemingly for what we considered the appropriate reasons – namely a genuine desire to communicate Emerillon myths and ways to others.¹²

Once we settled into the lush, beautiful surroundings of Edouard's remote dry-season camp on the Tampok River, we were introduced to the delights of plentiful fishing and hunting trips, as well as Emerillon cooking and family camp life. There was always a pot simmering somewhere – fish, bird, monkey or iguana stewing in manioc juice. Each woman had her own fire and prepared her own stew. At mealtime, we were treated to a little of this, a little of that. When the others went hunting or fishing, we mostly stayed in the camp with the children, so as not to scare off the prey with our noisy, unaccustomed manners. We were generally having an excellent time. But Edouard kept a polite distance and certainly didn't seem disposed to tell us any myths, even though several "ideal myth-telling moments" seemed to transpire. In fact, we often heard Ti'iwan's grandmother telling stories from her hammock in the dark, with family members answering and laughing from their respective hammocks. Incidentally, this is also where I heard my first howler-monkey, after the fire had gone out and the talking had ceased. My hammock was situated at the edge of the camp, only an arm's-length from the shrub that, a few meters away, became the forest. In the middle of one pitch-dark night, I was awakened by incredible roars, convinced that they came from a jaguar sitting in the shrubs, about to leap out and swallow me up before anyone even woke up. Obviously, no one else took any notice and only later did I learn that the tremendous howling was the work of a male howler-monkey whose voice was carried from far across the jungle, bouncing off the vast tree-canopy.

¹² Although no situation is ever simple and no motives ever univocal, we had, on several previous occasions in other settings, found ourselves entangled in power conflicts, in which the desire to actually communicate mythical accounts to others was obviously secondary.





There were indeed many things to learn, also about myth-telling. For after four or five days of patiently waiting, in which we had only tentatively expressed our wish to hear a myth or two, we finally asked Ti'iwan outright if she thought her grandfather would actually collaborate. And she impatiently replied that she, in fact, was the one who knew most of the myths and was going to tell them to us! Whereupon she sat in a hammock, was immediately surrounded by all the youngsters and started to tell her audience and the recording camera the long, intricate story of Wilakala. Over a period of some seven or eight days, she told us a whole series of mythological and historical accounts, including the Pan-Amazonian story of the twins, in its remarkable and unique Emerillon version.¹³

We eventually turned a selection of those stories into a film script, in collaboration with Ti'iwan. We also continuously discussed all the organisational aspects of the film project, for there were many practical and ethical aspects to resolve, such as finding locations and choosing actors, how to pay people, and how to do so without privileging some at the expense of others. But we also discussed questions regarding the narrative, like how to create a linear storyline from the perfectly non-linear mythological logics. There was also, at a later stage, the crucial work of practical interpretation, of concretely enacting the scenario. For example the problem of deciding which – and thus also *whose* – version to use, as well as who was to play the various roles, notably the central part of Wilakala, the creator. Elsewhere (Møhl 2011), I discuss the insights this long process provided to my understanding of Emerillon myth, both concerning content and context, as well as Emerillon notions of time and change, and also their ideas about, on one hand, what things were concretely like in mythical and historical times, and secondly, how to represent them today – what kind of dress people wore and which plants to make them from, how their hair was cut, what their houses were like, to mention only a few. One discussion even concerned the gender of the creator: whether Wilakala was necessarily a man, or might be a woman or

13 As mentioned, in the classical version, the creator's/cultural hero's wife is pregnant with twins when he leaves her to go to his gardens (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1964; Viveiros de Castro 1992). In the Emerillon version, Wilakala's wife is also pregnant, but initially carries only one child. Wilakala goes off to work in his garden and tells his son, still in the womb, to guide his mother on her long path. On the way, the child asks for leaves to play with. Picking them, the mother is stung by a wasp and angrily slaps her stomach, after which the infuriated foetus refuses to tell her the way. She gets lost and walks into the village of the macaques who, delighted by her arrival, jump on her and make her pregnant once more. Wilakala's son gladly moves over in the womb to make room for the foetus he considers to be his new twin brother. Then they set out on the usual long trip, during which their mother is killed and opened up by jaguars and they are born. – In this version, the monkey child has taken over the trickster role traditionally held by the younger human twin in other versions. He is responsible for all the same mishaps, among them, the loss of human immortality and the creation of "smelly birds", bats. When the two youngsters meet up with Wilakala, he naturally refuses to acknowledge the wretched and destructive monkey as his son and eventually sends him away in a boat. To console his monkey twin, the human brother creates a city for him on the other side of the sea, which later turns out to be Paris. The monkey eventually becomes a rich merchant and offers many modern goods to Wilakala, to make up for his own mishaps (see Blanchet et al. in press).



a young Emerillon girl dressed up to enact the sequence of the creation of the moon, Camopi, 2001

even genderless, an issue that was not settled once and for all, although it was decided that, in the actual social context, it would be best to put a man in the role. Here, suffice it to say that the many discussions, as well as the excellent mythical material produced, provided an important part of the background for the present work, both concerning my knowledge of Emerillon mythological content and practices, but also concerning the relational and epistemological foundations for my position and my further access to knowledge during fieldwork. The film project itself has not yet been accredited sufficient financial backing, although we were able to do some test filmings in 2001 that were, in many ways, enlightening and opened up to a number of the discussions mentioned above.

conclusion: mediational mastery

The three examples above have to do with control of knowledge and mastery of mediation. They are all equally concerned with form, namely with the forms in which knowledge may be cast, so as to be recognisable by others, and the ways it may be mediated to the rest of the spiritual, animal and human world. And this capacity to mediate with spirits, to divulge or withhold knowledge from them, to cast it in a form – a wording and an order – that they may recognise, or conceal it if one does not wish their interference - all in all, the remarkable ability to control communication with such influential beings - is clearly also demonstrated in the way in which the Emerillon exert control with what they divulge to other human beings and in what form they do so.



The shamanistic song cycles addressed to the spirits are articulated in a form – in specific words and a timely sequence – that the spirits may recognise whereas most Emerillon will not; the information divulged to scientists is carefully mapped and ordered; the myths and the events they relate take place in a domain where time has no logical, structuring force, but their narration is nevertheless cast in the chronological framework of speech. In whatever way, what is disclosed is aptly controlled and framed.

But although they may be masters of mediation, all is not controlled, all is not "informationalized". The anthropologist eventually also learns by means other than controlled information and builds up his or her own knowledge.¹⁴ Indeed, the *kaluwats* are inexorably there, in higher or lower densities, according to where one moves about, and they may even venture into hammocks and steal away young girls or children. They are part of every day life, and the effects of their presence, like illness or simple fear, are also experienced directly by the anthropologist. Likewise, ordering the social and cosmological elements of one's daily life into coherent segments, so that the passing anthropologist may perceive and appreciate them, may offer her a helping hand, according to a schema one presumes is already hers. But equipping her with a machete to ward off eventual *kaluwats*, when left alone in a spot in the forest known to be especially inhabited by them, or worrying if she is still there at the riverside waiting in the canoe when one comes back from tracking a peccary, shows her, in practice, what she's been told in words – accompanying that information with action, practiced knowledge. As she is concurrently being informed, her understanding of those often non-verbalized practices is strengthened and transforms what had been information into knowledge experienced.

Likewise, mythology in its many facets also forms a part of everyday life. The stories are continually evoked through allusions and related to in fragments, verbally and in practice. When a young girl jumps back at the sight of a passing shadow under the surface of the river, everyone knows she's thinking of the anaconda spirit, and her movement implicitly evokes the narrative of the young girl who is taken away by the huge animal. If someone says, "His head will soon fly off" regarding a couple that is living together, it is an allusion to the myth that relates how the moon was created through an in-

¹⁴ In saying this, I would nevertheless like to distance myself from Adam Kuper's attitude toward "too knowledgeable informants" and what he calls "the Ogotemmel trap - the trap of the creative informant", a trap the anthropologist can only avoid, according to Kuper, by comparing informants' and locals experts' assertions to what the anthropologist can himself directly observe, and by counting, measuring and compiling data (Kuper 1994). As I see it, no informant is "too creative" or "too knowledgeable", just as collaboration cannot be founded on suspicion and cross-checking. And if there is creativity, as in Kuper's example of Griaule and Ogotemmel, it is most certainly a *joint* creativity and not the sole work of informants. Kuper not only gives a dismal image of collaboration with informants, in general, but also depicts those of his colleagues who actually believe what their informants tell them as overly naïve and credulous. (I will not even comment upon his assertion (ibid.: 550) that there is no point in writing ethnography with indigenous readers in mind).





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cestuous relationship between a sister and her brother. Only occasionally are myths recounted in their entirety, very rarely do they follow a linear chronology and they are never enacted. But when the stories and their elements are to be literalised and communicated to the non-Emerillon, they must be inscribed within a linear sequential logic and sometimes be translated. As they enter the field of tension between the Emerillon and the rest of the world, they will take on a form that can be heard and understood, also by people who do not know their foundations and recognise the elements in their multiple, non-verbal forms. Enacting them is only another step in the same direction. In that sense, mythological narratives can never constitute raw data, the simple narration is already an ordering, a controlled *enformulation*.

Furthermore, what is formulated is a type of analysis. For every narration is also an interpretation, and rarely a coincidental, detached one. Most myths comment upon the contemporary world and attribute sense to current events, even if they seemingly deal with events from the past. Any mythological narration is thus both a giving form to knowledge and an interpretive analysis. It is, by no means, a simple repetition of stories once heard or an open window into "Emerillon cosmology", a concretisation or literalization of something already there. Their meaning is *in the immediate*, and hearing them is *being addressed*. So what is being mediated is not a hypothetical *Emerillon culture*, to which the myths may give *insight*, but an Emerillon comment upon the world and an analysis of events taking place in it.

In that sense, mediation is not making cultural differences explicit, but giving one's viewpoint upon shared phenomena, events and histories. It is adding one's perspective to that of others'. It even encompasses those other perspectives and the ontologies they produce, since the myth is not simply an indigenous variation of other, hegemonic, histories and rationales, but encompasses and interprets those stories and events within its own logic, attributing an *a priori* place to them, as Lévi-Strauss also suggests (Gow 2001). Myths *do the same thing* to Western history that Western history has done to them, namely to include them as local variations of the same story. This resonates with what Peter Gow says, when he talks of Piro mythical interpretations of historical events and changes as "transformations of transformations", a scheme by which myths are able to encompass change within their own cosmological understandings and interpret the newly encountered as logically intrinsic to the origins of the world as a cohesive whole (2001; see also Sahlins 1999).

Here, I have knowingly only very peripherally touched upon the vast and momentous questions of knowledge, its creation and transmission, as well as the creation of scientific knowledge and the relationship between indigenous and scientific knowledge, themes that have been widely discussed in anthropological circles over the last decades (e.g. Barth 1995, 2002; Geertz 1983; Hastrup 1993; Jackson 1989; Turner 1991, etc.). But rather than broadening





8 *Comptent mediation and giving form*

the issues, the core question here has simply been to assert the often conscious and ordered form in which people often present their knowledge to anthropologists, doing away with the picture of the informant as an unconscious, passive conveyor of knowledge, and seeing such exchanges against a backdrop of general Emerillon skills of mediation with others, be they animal, spirits or other humans. The analysis has thus been more concerned with practices of mediation and ordering designed for recognition and less with the question of knowledge in general.

