5.1.3. THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH: AN EASTERN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVE

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5.1.3.1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Myth and language are vitally interconnected, although not in the evolutionary way that Cassirer (1946) suggested. The nature of the interrelationship between them depends on how broadly or how narrowly each is defined and the range of content they are envisaged as covering. In this context, I do not propose to discuss current definitions of myth, since that would lead too far outside this particular situation. For the present purpose, I treat it as narrative or potential-narrative material which includes non-empirical content or implications, and which the people concerned regard as having relevance for themselves over and above any consideration of amusement or entertainment.

The region on which I am focussing is in the Eastern Highlands south of Kainantu. Because circumstances there have changed so tremendously since my (and my husband's) research there in 1951-53,[1] I use the past tense in referring to it. At that time the northern part of the region had only recently been brought under Australian government control and the southern part was still classified as restricted. No systematic linguistic work had been carried out there. The language map that emerged in the course of our research is not identical with the picture that has been delineated in subsequent linguistic explorations there (e.g. Wurm 1960:126-7 and further publications since). However, because the material I recorded is set within the earlier framework, I have retained that framework in this discussion. The language and place names I use are those that were given to me at the time. I acquired some speaking and hearing knowledge of Kamano (Kafe), and used this as an intermediary to learn Usurufa, through bilingual speakers of both. Later, I learned a little northern Fore. However, in 1951-53 the label Yate (Jatei) was used as a cover- or linking-name for regional speech

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patterns centred in such areas as Kemiu and Ke'yagana (or Keiagana). These last two are 'big name' places, that we have called 'districts'. Each 'district' included a number of 'small names', usually hamlet or village or garden sites.

The overall socio-cultural scene from the viewpoint of our 1951-53 fieldwork is outlined in a number of publications and manuscripts, and I shall not go over it here (see the list of references for R.M. and C.H. Berndt).

5.1.3.2. MYTH, SONG AND DRAMA

Traditional views of the world and the human and other beings who live in it, were expressed and transmitted through a number of more or less standardised media. In some of these, speech played a very minor part and could even be dispensed with entirely. Apart from sacred rites, there were ceremonies designed predominantly for entertainment and sociability, when members of two or more districts assembled for dancing (see C.H. Berndt 1959). Songs (Kamano **zagame(ra)**) were an essential ingredient in these ceremonies. Some were ascribed to mythical or non-human sources and their form and content were regarded as already set, not to be changed about by human singers. Other songs were 'composed' by contemporary people, including children.

Statements in prose, aside from ordinary conversations, were divisible into three broad categories. One, unnamed and very loosely structured, and transmitted informally in circumstances of everyday interaction, comprised reports of supernatural or mysterious happenings, involving human beings who were mostly unidentified.

The second dealt with the creation of human beings and their physical environment, garden fertility, and the introduction of sacred ritual. We call this 'creation mythology'. It centred on acts of creation and social-territorial-linguistic identification, strung together in partly narrative or potential-narrative sequences. Sections of it were told during, for example, initiation proceedings, but even the story-type narratives that helped to make up the total cluster were rarely told as stories. There was no special name for this category. The Kamano referred to it by an ordinary word (**aglafa**) meaning *'basis'* or *'bottom'*, literally or figuratively: the base of a tree, for instance, or the origin of any practice or belief. The Kemiu and Ke'yagana Yate equivalent was **aipa** *belly*. In spite of the rich symbolic and ritual associations of the creation mythology, the bits that were told in prose were always in the language of everyday speech.

So were the narratives in the third category. This covered some of the same content as the other two, but was locally distinguished from them on the grounds of form, function and, ideally, circumstances of telling - summed up under a separate name: Kamano **kinihe(ra)**; Kemiu and Ke'yagana Yate **kaltane**; Usurufa **manI-**; Agarabe **kIrIhe-**. We call these 'secondary myths', or a 'mythology within (deriving from) a mythology', because their origin was attributed to instructions laid down by the main characters in the creation mythology. Their actual telling constituted a rite designed to ensure garden fertility - a linkage that has been reported from other parts of New Guinea as well. They were told most appropriately in a collective setting at the beginning of the rainy season, following an oven-feast of edible greens - preferably **kamora** (Kamano). Normally, they were arranged *as* stories, a sequence of events leading to climax and resolution, in some cases with minor climaxes along the way. They were introduced with a conventional phrase, or simply the cry of '**KinIhera!**' (etc.). And they concluded with a formula that had two main facets: one or more of the characters in a story emphasised that what they had been doing in that story was not for human beings to imitate; and they ritually planted crotons, sometimes splashed with the warm blood of pigs killed for the purpose, to underline their words and 'close' the story. Optionally, a narrator could follow this with a brief maxim, noting the 'wrong' behaviour that the story revealed, but adding some positive injunction deriving from it. Finally, the listeners were expected to sing a short conventional song, stipulated in the creation mythology. Like some of the songs in the **kinihera** themselves, it was presented as a single unit, made up of sounds which had no individual or collective lexical meaning. The meaning lay in the action-sequence of which the songs were a part, and not in more specific associations.

Kinihera themes were used in another setting, as a basis for short dramatic performances on ceremonial occasions. These performances (Kamano **krI:na**) drew also on hearsay and other reports of incidents involving human beings, including material from the first category (above), and the exaggerated erotic exhibitions which have been noted too for several New Guinea areas. In the context of a ceremony, no negative implications were either stated or implied. They were, however, in the **kri:na** that were shown to novices in a men's-house setting in the course of initiation.

Most **kri:na** had some verbal accompaniments, but a few were completely silent. In this respect they shaded into the wordless tableaux that were also a feature of ceremonial scenes, and these in turn shaded into the ceremonial emblems which men carried either singly or in pairs or groups.

All of these verbal and dramatic and graphic forms were locally acknowledged as facets of a larger whole, which provided both source and means of expression for symbolic statements about the human, non-human and natural universe.

5.1.3.3. KINIHERA AND LANGUAGE-AFFILIATIONS

The creation mythology supplied positive statements, not open to question. **Kinihera**, on the other hand, were negatively framed as far as their overall structure was concerned, but the nature of interpretation indicated plainly that any or all of their main content was negotiable. This content ranged from creation-accounts through site-naming and language-allocating episodes to rather slight just-so stories. They included fantasy and magical episodes as well as mundane advice on social relations and on practical issues such as gardening and dry-season hunting. They were told by both men and women, as individual narrators with some audience response; but of course, some narrators were more skilful and more effective than others. Each story was told as a single, traditionally more or less fixed unit, handed on from one generation to another - a view spelt out explicitly in symbolic references to continuity of local human populations and the **kinihera** associated with them. Nevertheless, the **kinihera** are actually bundles or combinations of items, assembled in various ways to provide different stories. This is quite clear from analysis of the 536 **kinihera** (or **kinihera**-bundles) I recorded, mainly from women, and of the further **kinihera** that R.M. Berndt recorded from men.

In a larger study of this topic, I suggested (C.H. Berndt, n.d.:129-30) that:

> The nearest analogy is perhaps the blocks of various shapes, sizes and colours that children use in sets to construct a certain range of buildings. If the first couple of blocks is labelled, for instance, 'A man sees smoke in the distance and goes to investigate', we know that the choice of blocks and therefore of the subsequent building is, within limits, fairly wide. The same is the case when a man, or a pregnant woman, goes alone to the bush in 'sun-time', the dry season. But some foundation blocks indicate roughly what kind of construction is likely to follow. Two examples are, 'An old man was hungry, he cut off his testes'; and 'Two brothers cleared out the rubbish from their house, and a new shoot came up in it'.
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> As the blocks are placed in position, so the general nature of the building becomes clear. Some blocks are most likely to be found together, and some buildings are usually constructed from the same or almost the same set of blocks; but there is no fixed design for any of them, and even when the building is nearly completed a choice still remains. In other words, the overall theme influences the range of available shapes, but within that range does not specify the exact kind of blocks to be used.

And, 'This limited flexibility is inherent in the construction of the **kinihera**'.

The **kinihera** that I recorded came mainly from the 'districts' ('big names') of Kogu, Moiife, Agura, and Anonana (Usurufa), Grufe, Hintegrufe and Numaga (Kamano); Kemiu and Tatagufa and Weyu'epa in Ke'yagana; and Busarasa, Moke, Ora and Ifusa (northern Fore), with a few from Agarabe districts near Kainantu. Virtually all of them were told by people who belonged to (or, in some examples, had married into) the districts where these particular stories were mythically located. In a few cases, they were repeating stories that they had heard from others who had such connections. Conventionally, there was no bar on telling stories from other districts; but the tie between **kinihera** and garden fertility and the perpetuation of local traditions and local solidarity, was believed to be strongest and closest when a person on his/her home ground was telling a story directly associated with that place.

One of the most striking features of **kinihera** distribution throughout the region, in 1951-53, was the combination of stability and variation in their sequences. Differences and similarities in the **kinihera** I recorded did not coincide with language alignments. When I drew people's attention to what seemed to be similarities, and asked what they thought about this, the usual reply was that these particular stories had travelled along the same road or path. The same word was used when a person telling about a dream would begin, 'On (the) dream-road I saw...'. Overlapping in this sense was taken as a matter of course. When I drew their attention to what seemed to be differences, the usual reply was that each 'district' or place had its own **kinihera** and that these were, naturally, different. In either case, the comparison was apparently of not much concern to them. Beyond a certain point, internal variations in same-theme stories were said to identify them as 'different'; the district names associated with them were not enough in themselves to make them so. By 'beyond a certain point', I mean that there was some flexibility in regard to choice of vocabulary, ordering of minor se- sequences, and incorporation or omission of details. Themes, plot-sequences and characters were crucial ingredients in differentiating one story from another.

Variation between stories within one district, attached to its small-name sites, was matched by variation between districts throughout the region. Uniformity between stories within one district was matched by uniformity between districts, again throughout the region. This was obliquely acknowledged in local comments, such as this from a Fore-speaking woman at Busarasa, who complained that 'Those Usurufa women have told you all the stories!'.

Fundamental to such assessments is the basic cultural lexicon which is not compartmentalised in accordance with purely or predominantly linguistic divisions. The items of vocabulary common throughout the region included, for example, pigs; crotons; gardens; warfare, with its techniques and paraphernalia; the complex of religious ritual (and its equipment), including initiatory procedures for males and females; ovens, and the sharing of food (not necessarily eating together) as a visible sign of friendship. And so on.

Sharing and differentiation in these items of vocabulary is expanded and reinforced in situations ranging from everyday activity, with informal interchange and observation, and the movement of small trading parties (e.g. in search of areca nuts), to the coming together of groups of people from different districts and different language units - on ceremonial occasions, or in warfare; and in further interlinkages through marriage. And the circulation of songs and kri:na and ceremonial emblems (the 'language of objects'), and presumably of kinihera, provided a major means of communication, both of style and of content.

Songs of human composition alluded to personal experience without specifying content or context. Outside a very narrow time-and-space range, they were transient and anonymous. But they were designed for public transmission and outward movement; Usurufa-speaking people, for instance, never composed songs in their own language, but always in one of the 'larger' languages around them. Kinihera and creation mythology, however, were locally, territorially focussed, but their outside ramifications were to some extent overtly recognised.

I suspect that this kind of assessment could be extended over a much wider regional range. Anyone who has looked even cursorily at myth-and-tale material in Papua New Guinea can hardly fail to have noticed the similarities which appear (certainly, alongside marked differences) from one side of the continent to another. This is not merely a matter of distribution of 'Folkloristic Motifs', such as Lessa (1961) notes as occurring more widely in Oceania - 'Open Sesame', 'Magic Object Answers for Fugitive', 'Inexhaustible Object', and so on. The convergences have more substance than this, and relate to content as well.

5.1.3.4. THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH

On one hand, there is the question of the verbal language used in myths and songs - the personal and regional styles that these exemplify. On the other hand, there is the nature of the discourse which is the essence of myth as such: the symbolic, emotionally based, commitment-oriented approach, which is evident here in both creation mythology and

kinihera. Then again, there is the much wider regional spread of both cultural vocabulary and potential combinations and reflections of this in myth and myth-tale form.

If we refer to myth as a meta-language, this is not to deny the importance of verbal communication within particular, named language-alignments. Nor does it suggest, as Lévi-Strauss sometimes seems to do, that speech tends to conceal the most important messages. What it does mean is that over a spatial spread where at least some cultural similarities are acknowledged, where the cultural setting is reasonably familiar, the people concerned can be expected to 'speak the same language' in a general sense. And an intrinsic feature of that general, cultural 'language' is the language of myth.

This common 'language' has very wide currency indeed, over the whole of Papua New Guinea and into the outlying islands of Melanesia in the east, Indonesia on the west. Divergence in cultural (and/or linguistic) vocabulary is significant for certain purposes, but it takes place within a frame of potential mutual understanding. Myth, in some respects a closed system, is open-ended in others. Along with its non-verbal accompaniments and the related fields of ceremonial drama, art and song, it connotes, and charts the contours of, familiar or almost-familiar territory: an area of belief and behaviour in which people from otherwise divergent cultural and linguistic regions in Papua New Guinea can find a traditional basis for common action in the present.[2]

NOTES

1. My field research there was financed by an Ohio State Fellowship from the International Federation of University Women.

2. I have omitted, for lack of space, detailed documentation of all these statements, including examples of stories from Arapesh, Kutubu, Marind-Anim, Elema and other areas which have very close parallels indeed in the Eastern Highlands area.

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