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Cosmology Performed, the World Transformed: Mimesis and the Logical Operations of Nature and Culture in Myth in Amazonia and Beyond

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Introduction

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his groundbreaking essay “The Structural Study of Myth” (1955:429), states:

Mythology confronts the student with a situation which at first sight could be looked upon as contradictory. On the one hand, it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity. Any characteristic can be attributed to any subject; every conceivable relation can be met. With myth, everything becomes possible. But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. Therefore, the problem: if the content of myth is contingent, how do we explain that throughout the world myths do resemble one another so much?

In his article, “Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male,” Alan Dundes (2007a:329) proceeds from the same starting point: “the fact that many, indeed, the majority of myths are found widely distributed throughout the world.” He further points out that it is “a fallacy to analyze a world-wide myth as if it belonged to only one culture” (2007a:330). Both Lévi-Strauss (1955) and Dundes (2007a, 2007b) seek the solution to this problem in universal features of the human mind: the former in the basic structure of human thought, the latter in Freudian psychoanalysis.

Lévi-Strauss and Dundes both operate on the assumption that the global distribution of myths could not be the result of diffusion and must therefore reflect universal properties of the mind. However, this is by no means certain. Dundes points out the remarkable stability of oral narratives (2007a:328). Religion tends to be highly conservative. In traditional societies myth is generally regarded as the expression of the ultimate sacred truths (Eliade 1963:8–20), and this belief would militate against changes of a fundamental nature, even over a very long period of time. Lévi-Strauss (1978:233) chastises Stith Thompson for proposing that the oldest version of the Star-husband Tale is a few hundred years old and that the relative age of the other versions could be measured in decades, with the “porcupine redaction” appearing not later than 1892.

These estimates are surprising, to say the least, especially in the case of North American myths, which, as I have established, are absolutely straightforward transformations of South American ones. Those of both North and South must correspond to patterns common to the two hemispheres, and their age should be calculated not in decades but millennia.

But bearing in mind the generally conservative nature of religion, if a myth could survive in an oral tradition for thousands of years there is little reason why it could not survive in a relatively stable hunter-gatherer economy for tens of thousands of years. With regard to Lévi-Strauss's work on myth, Hans Jensen (2007:55) states the following:

Nowhere (to my knowledge) has Lévi-Strauss explained why his comparative project, which finally perceives South and North American myths as belonging to one great mythology (and, hypothetically, generated from one "unique myth"), could not, in principle at least, be extended over the Bering Straits into Siberia and from there, step by step, constantly relating the mythical subsystems to their particular ethnographic and historical contexts, to the shores of the Atlantic and the Cape of Good Hope.

It will be argued below that Lévi-Strauss's "unique myth" is itself a variant of a creation myth with a global distribution. Lévi-Strauss states that:

European folktales preserve themes and motifs that are very ancient and had lots of time to spread across the world. . . . Thus, it cannot be ruled out that, in archaic times, when exchanges were occurring in the North between the shores of the Pacific Ocean, entire myths or mythical elements passed from Asia to America (Lévi-Strauss 1995:184–85).

It follows from this that the structural similarities that exist amongst the vast body of myths analyzed in the *Mythologiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1970, 1973, 1978, 1981) need not necessarily be expressions of the structure of human thought as such, as he claims. They can also be explained in terms of the history of an intellectual system, the common legacy of early humans, adapted to many new environments as they dispersed across the planet. Chris Knight (1983, 1991, 1998) has combined the global distribution of some of the key mythic motifs discussed below with archaeological evidence to argue convincingly for a Paleolithic origin of the data in question. This article will attempt to show that the mythology that Lévi-Strauss reveals as pan-American does in fact stretch all the way to the Cape of Good Hope and Australia and Polynesia.

It should be emphasized that, in terms of this approach, the global distribution of a particular myth does not imply that such a myth, or its underlying structures, has the same meaning or function for every society that possesses it. It simply means that, a very long time ago, before the myth was dispersed across the planet, it formed part of a particular intellectual system or cosmology, which related it to the other myths and motifs under discussion. And although the structures fundamental to this system can still be shown to underlie myths in their present form, the complex and more or less unique history of a myth in any given culture over such a long period of time would determine to what extent, if at all, this structure is still meaningful in the myth's present-day context. Indeed, in terms of this historico-cultural approach, the differences in meaning and function of a myth, as one moves from one culture to the next, are as important and interesting as the underlying similarities. There is no room in this article to elaborate on these differences, but their significance should always be borne in mind to avoid a one-sided and ultimately misleading impression.

It will be demonstrated below that the intellectual system or cosmology in question has an extraordinary feature: all the mythic motifs are related to each other in terms of rigorous logical processes of homology, inversion, transposition, and transformation with a level of sophistication that is quite remarkable. Significantly, Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*, which takes a thoroughly scientific approach to the analysis of myth, presents and analyses these mythic structures in algebraic terms.

The reader might object that the sophisticated structural relationships between mythic motifs, as demonstrated below, are probably a much later development. However, it will be

shown that the motifs themselves, in their most basic form, can be logically generated through homology, inversion, transposition, and transformation (as found in these myths) from a single motif that is based on the careful observation of astronomical and biological phenomena. In other words, they seem to owe their very existence to these logical skills—unless these structural relationships were the result of pure coincidence. But the elaborate and logically consistent nature of these transformations makes this highly unlikely. This striking feature of myth raises some questions about the evolution of human cognition that will be briefly considered in the conclusion.

Outline of the Article

The following survey of myths is divided into sections that deal with various aspects of the proposed cosmology. Firstly, there is the *solar hunt*, in which the main protagonists are the sun as hunter, his Lunar Prey, and the menstruating woman who is mystically linked to the animal prey. The woman is sometimes identified with the earth. This mythic concept, based on the observation of certain natural phenomena, is fundamental to the entire system. The next two sections deal with the concept of the *mythic age* and the related *fragmentation of the continuous*, respectively.¹ Both of these are shown to be logical implications of the solar hunt concept. Next comes the concept that *culture precedes nature*, i.e., that a natural phenomenon is preceded by a cultural archetype. This is a corollary of the concept of the mythic age. It is followed by the interdependent concepts of the *Earth-mother* and the *Rainbow-snake* respectively. Various features of the latter two are treated under separate headings, such as *the equivalence of sex and eating*, the *symplegades*, *the Monster Snake*, *cosmic conjunctions*, and *the Snake-ferryman*. Then, in the section on anthropomorphic logic, the underlying logic that unites the whole system is laid out. These remarkably sophisticated mythic concepts are mutually clarifying: they are dependent on each other for their significance within this system as aspects of a single cosmological argument that is ultimately based on the careful observation of natural phenomena, ranging from the anatomical, zoological, and botanical to the meteorological and astronomical. As such, even though they are logically related to each other through operations such as homology and inversion, they are not merely variants or transformations of a single concept—each one of them has its own specific role in the argument of the cosmology, one that cannot be reduced to the roles of any of the others. Finally, the theories of Merlin Donald are used to place all of this within an evolutionary context. Particularly significant is his theory that a mimetic culture preceded the evolution of language. Fundamental features of myth and ritual can be explained as the legacy of such a mimetic culture, which would have left a strong imprint on myth even though the latter developed when spoken language had already superseded Donald's proposed era of mimetic communication.

The Solar Hunt

The lunar cycle of slightly more than twenty-nine and a half days corresponds to the human menstrual cycle, and this fact plays an important role in mythologies all over the world (Lévi-Strauss 1978:221–23, 500–506; Knight 1983:28–30, 1991:328–29, 411–13, 1997:142–44). Direct observation shows that the sun causes this important cycle. Furthermore, the sun “wounds” the moon, thereby causing it to wane when the latter is full, i.e., when it is in the opposite side of the sky. Therefore, it inflicts the fatal wound from a great distance, and, in Paleolithic terms, it could only do so by hurling a spear or shooting an arrow at the moon, which implies that the sun is a hunter, the moon his animal prey, and that his rays are either arrows or spears.

Thus, in a myth of the !Xam of southern Africa, *The Sun Pierces the Full Moon with His Knife*, the sun stabs the moon with his knife (i.e., rays) as he rises in the morning when the full moon, which rose at sunset the previous day, is setting on the opposite horizon. He continues to do so every day, causing the moon to wane (Bleek and Lloyd n.d.). Since the sun and moon are at the maximum perceived distance from each other when the initial

wound is inflicted, according to the story, the knife would probably originally have been a spear or arrow.

In a Mbuti hunting ritual observed by Leo Frobenius in 1905, hunters, accompanied by a woman, set off before dawn for a hilltop clearing where they drew an image of an antelope in the earth. At the exact moment when the first rays of the sun struck the drawing, a hunter shot an arrow into it; simultaneously, the woman, who had reached out as if to embrace the rising sun, cried out as if she had been struck by the solar arrow: “[Here is] an explicitly sexual symbolism in which the rays of the sun, and the arrow of the hunter, are made to be homologous in their penetration of the antelope figure to a sexual penetration of woman” (Zuesse 1979:25–26). Thus, the hunter identifies himself with the sun, which implicitly identifies the antelope with the moon, the sun-hunter’s prey. Furthermore, by implication, the antelope’s bleeding arrow-wound is identified with the menstruating vagina of the woman, since the moon’s cycle of death and resurrection, which is inflicted by the sun, coincides with the feminine cycle. After the actual hunt, the hunters returned to smear the blood and hair of the slain animal onto the drawing exactly at sunrise the next day (1979:26).

The Baka of the Gabon-Cameroons have a myth in which God transforms animals slain in the hunt into the first women (Zuesse 1979:34). Since the first women here are these miraculous transformations, the husband’s act of sexual penetration (of his new wife) is implicitly nature’s copy of his prior act of penetrating her (as hunted animal) with his arrow or spear, and the bleeding spear wound is the archetype of the menstruating vagina. This identification of women with the hunted prey underlies major aspects of Mbuti culture, such as hunting and courtship, which are symbolically homologous activities (1979:30–36). Mbuti love medicine uses the exact same herbs and techniques as their hunting medicine (1979:30–31). Furthermore, in the love magic of the San of southern Africa, men shoot miniature arrows from miniature bows at the flanks of women they desire, as if they were hunted prey (1979:62). In the San Eland Dance, the bleeding vagina of a young girl at first menstruation is ceremonially identified with the bleeding arrow- or spear-wound of the hunted prey (1979:61–62; see also McCall 1970:12–14). This equivalence of sex and hunting is found amongst hunters as far afield as Siberia and the Amazon jungle: “In all these cases, women are identified with the prey men hunt; the kill is a sexual penetration, producing dead flesh, food, in the hunt, children in marriage” (Zuesse 1979:62, 72 n. 12). It follows from this that the phallus is identified with the spear or arrow, while the (menstruating) vagina is identified with the (bleeding) spear-wound (Knight 1991:395; Gregor 1985:153).

This motif is also found in mediaeval and Renaissance Europe, where, in the sixth panel of the famous Unicorn Tapestries of circa 1500 (in The Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) the hunter (identified with the sun) penetrates the unicorn (identified with the moon) with his spear (Williamson 1986:75–78). The spear is iconographically identified with the phallus and the wound with the vagina (1986:147, 182–84). This is underscored by the fourth panel in the series, *The Unicorn Defends Himself*, in which the unicorn is depicted goring a dog. The sexual symbolism of the phallic horn penetrating the vagina-like wound is supported by a wealth of iconographic details—mostly of plants, fruit and flowers—that emphasize the point (1986:147–49). Furthermore, in mediaeval art and literature, the unicorn is identified with Christ (1986:78, 142, 163), and the blood pouring out of its wound identified with the blood that pours out of the wound of the sacred Lamb and into the Holy Grail, as in Hubert and Jan van Eyck’s painting *The Mystic Lamb* (1986:180–82, 163). Thus a Paleolithic myth of a solar hunt seems to have survived in Mediaeval Europe as the hunt of the unicorn, and, along with its fundamental features, it was assimilated to a remarkable extent into Christian culture: the spear that pierced the side of Christ was identified with the phallus, and the grail or cup that receives His blood with the vagina or womb, so that the same homology between menstrual blood and the blood from the spear-wound of the hunted prey is expressed (1986:182–84). John Williamson also reproduces a mediaeval English poem in which Christ is likened to a hunted stag whose blood breaks the gates of Hell (1986:180). In the fifth panel, *The Unicorn is Tamed by the Maiden*, as in *the Lady with the Unicorn* tapestries (circa 1500) in the Musée de Cluny, Paris, a virgin is shown who pacifies the unicorn so that it can be captured. The triad of solar lion,

lunar unicorn, and maiden in the latter series of tapestries corresponds to the triad of Solar Hunter, lunar unicorn, and maiden in the former, and Williamson identifies the maiden with the Earth-mother of pre-Christian European religion (1986:64, 141–42, 158). Thus all three protagonists in the drama of the Mbuti hunting ritual are present here, and the symbolism of the menstrual blood that flows from the Lunar Prey's wound is essentially the same.

The Shipaya of western Bolivia have a version of a pan-American myth about the incestuous brother and sister who become the moon and sun, respectively. The guilty brother, as the moon up in the sky, is wounded by an arrow, causing his multicolored blood to pour down to earth. The birds, who had a uniform white plumage at the time, bathe in the pools of blood, thus acquiring the variously colored plumage they have today. People are also splattered with the lunar blood. The men wipe it off in a downward motion while the women do so in an upward motion, which is the origin of menstrual bleeding (Lévi-Strauss 1970:312). Thus, the blood from the lunar wound once again pours down to cause menstrual bleeding. Sometimes this mythic concept is condensed. During the mythic age women had no vaginas, so the violent “opening up,” with a sharp phallic instrument, of the sealed womb of a primordial woman directly caused menstruation. Thus, in an analogous Warao myth from Venezuela a girl without a vagina (the Wooden Bride) is opened up by the beak of a certain bird, and the birds acquire their diversely colored plumage from the blood that spurts out of her wound (Lévi-Strauss 1973:217). In a Tariana myth from the Vaupés region of Amazonia, one of the first women, Ceucy, who is pregnant but has no vagina, is “opened up” by the Thunders, using the sharp point of a cigar-holder. Cigar-holders in this region are “stylised representations of men and when inverted with a cigar in place, they represent a man with an erect penis” (Hugh-Jones 1979:154, 211, 267, 293, 302–4). The use of the cigar-holder to cut open a vaginal passage in the heroine is therefore an example of the identification of the phallus with the spear or other sharp instrument/weapon and the vagina with the wound made by this weapon. In a Zuni creation myth from New Mexico, the Earth-mother's sealed womb is likewise opened up by celestial Hero Twins with thunderbolt knives to release all of living nature from her womb (Eliade 1967:130–35). That the Tariana heroine's womb is opened up by personifications of thunder wielding a sharp phallic instrument, instead of by thunderbolt knives, suggests that she, like the Zuni Earth-mother and the woman in the Mbuti hunting rite, has a cosmic significance. Furthermore, these thunderbolt knives, as phallic celestial weapons, are meteorological counterparts to the phallic arrow-rays of the Solar Hunter in the Mbuti rite. In Eurasian mythologies the dragon-slaying hero uses a sword or other weapon which, according to Emily Lyle (2015), is the phallus of the Sky-father, left embedded in the Earth-mother when the sky was separated from the earth. (In both Celtic and Greek myth, the separation of the sky and the earth entails the castration of the sky god (Leeming 2010:117–18, 78)). When the hero plucks out this phallus-sword he releases the chthonic waters from the goddess's sealed womb. Furthermore, in Indo-European myth, he “completes this action by opening a passage for the birth of the sun goddess and her twin brothers” (Lyle 2015:7). Lyle (2015:7) also compares this weapon to the thunderbolt of Zeus, the vajra of Indra, and the hammer of Thor. Thus, the thunderbolt knives used by the Hero Twins in the Zuni emergence myth are homologous with this celestial phallic weapon. Chris Knight (1991) draws on ethnographic data from all over the world to demonstrate the Paleolithic origins of the identification of the bleeding wound of the hunted prey with the menstruating vagina, as well as the identification of the lunar and menstrual cycles.

The identification of the phallus with the spear and the vagina with the wound, i.e., the equivalence of sex and hunting, is therefore a logical consequence of the perception that the sun is a hunter who fatally wounds his moon prey every month combined with the observation that the human menstrual cycle coincides with this lunar cycle, so that the vagina bleeds in mystic sympathy with the lunar wound. This concept is also expressed in secular terms in cultures all over the world: men are commonly described colloquially as “killers” and women as the prey or victims that they hunt, conquer, or devastate. The phallus is universally described as a weapon that executes the kill (Roscoe 1994:59–66).

Furthermore, this close identification of the bleeding lunar wound with the menstruating

vagina in myth implies that the lunar being (or hunted prey) is androgynous. The widespread sexual ambivalence of the lunar being, as well as of therianthropic representations in myth and ritual, can, to a considerable extent, be explained by this (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1978:193–95, 223–25; Power and Watts 1997; Knight 1998:80–81).

The Mythic Age

The mythic age is a fundamental concept in myth worldwide. This primordial age is often portrayed as a time of perpetual daylight (the *long day*) or perpetual night (the *long night*). Likewise, it is presented as a time of perpetual life, and, consequently, as a paradisiacal age. But, according to some myths, night, death, pestilence, or disease escapes from a sealed container when the latter is opened, usually in response to a noise from within the container. This brings the mythic age to an end. The regular alternation of night and day replaces continuous daylight, just as the alternation of life and death replaces immortality, which is forever lost. Thus daily, monthly, seasonal, menstrual, and human periodicity are established as characteristic features of the present age (Lévi-Strauss 1970:59–60, 149–61, 1973:416–17, 1978:156, 174–75, 221–22, 279–80, 500–6, 1981:186, 589–90; Hugh-Jones 1979:153, 267–68; Frazer 1919:282; Eliade 1960:59–72, 96–97, 110–15, 222–23, 1963:10–53, 79–88).

A biological counterpart for this mysterious sealed container exists in the form of a sealed womb (or woman without a vagina). Vaginas and menstrual periodicity come into existence through the violent opening up of a mythic woman's sealed womb by means of a sharp instrument (e.g., Hugh-Jones 1979:303–4; Lévi-Strauss 1970:130, 1981, 153; see also n. 4 below). The sealed container sometimes takes the form of a cosmic womb. In the Zuni emergence myth referred to above, the Hero Twins use their thunderbolt knives to open up the sealed womb of the Earth-mother, releasing the ancestors along with all the other creatures of nature onto the earth's surface (Eliade 1967a:130–35). In a Caraja myth from Brazil, *How Men Lost Immortality*, the first humans emerge from the bowels of the earth, where they had been living, in response to the call of a seriema bird (Lévi-Strauss 1970:149–50). This myth, in which the protagonists are inside the earth and emerge in response to a noise from outside this telluric container, reverses the situation found in the above myths, where the noise comes from within the sealed container, but with the same result—the loss of immortality. With the opening of the sealed container, death (like night) enters this world, and this brings the mythic age to an end. Thus, as indicated above, the opening of the sealed container or womb is a logical corollary of the phallus-spear/vagina wound concept (the solar hunt).

The Fragmentation of the Continuous

Lévi-Strauss (1970:50–55, 155–60, 219–26, 278–81, 319–27, 341, 1978:339, 360–63, 1981:466–69, 501–3, 586, 590–92, 674–80) demonstrates in great depth that the mythic concept in which a continuous entity is fragmented into discrete units is a fundamental feature of Amerindian myths. This concept has a global distribution (Liebenberg 2016b). The fragmentation of continuous daylight into discrete units of alternating night and day transforms the mythic age into the present world (see above). The cosmogonic fragmentation of various manifestations of primordial wholeness (Eliade 1965:115) is a spatial counterpart of this. Thus, for example, a primordial giant is cut into pieces, which become the sky and the earth as well as the heavenly bodies, mountains, plants, animals, and the rest of nature. This creation myth is found amongst the Algonquin of Canada as well as the Aztecs of Mexico. It is also found in China, India, ancient Babylon, and Northern Europe (Leeming 2010:18, 36–37, 55).²

The separation of the sky and earth is a fundamental motif in this myth. In a variant thereof, it is presented as the violent separation of a cosmic couple, usually an Earth-mother and a Sky-father, who represent primordial wholeness by being fixed in a sexual embrace that is “too close”—either because it is incestuous or because it physically cramps their offspring who are trapped in the darkness and confinement between them (Leeming

2010:16–19, 117–18, 78; Seidenberg 1970:188–89).

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss shows that, in American myths dealing with the long day and its counterpart, the long night, the fragmentation of the continuous is represented either diachronically or synchronically, i.e., through the dividing up of continuous daylight into the regular alternation of day and night, or through a transformation of absolute night into a night sky differentiated by the moon, stars, Milky Way, comets, and shooting stars, and a homologous transformation of absolute day into daylight moderated by the rainbow and winter clouds (Lévi-Strauss 1978:153–54, 157–58). That the same mythic concept or process is expressed diachronically in some myths and synchronically in others indicates that space and time are homologous in this context.

In the third volume of his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that the conjunction of the sky and the earth, which is conceived in vertical and spatial terms in myths dealing with the origin of cooking fire and related themes, is expressed in horizontal and temporal terms in the myths that deal with the canoe journey of the Sun and the Moon. Thus, the long day (or long night), which is “brought to an end by the introduction of the regular alternation between life and death, and between day and night,” replaces the conjunction and subsequent disjunction of the sky and the earth. The conjunction of sky and earth—i.e., the state of primordial wholeness—is the spatial counterpart of continuous time. And, as the myths move from the vertical to the horizontal axis, the cooking fire (or domestic hearth) is replaced by the canoe in its mediating function (Lévi-Strauss 1978:181–82, 188, 157–58).

Thus, the long day and its inevitable termination are conceived in temporal as well as in homologous spatial terms. From this it follows that a ritual return to the long day (or primordial mythic age) can be achieved by bringing about its spatial counterpart: the ritual conjunction of the sky and the earth brings a return to primordial wholeness (the spatially continuous). This is done by means of the ritual ascent up the cosmic ladder, stairway, pole, tree, or homologous device that conjoins the sky and the earth. This reverses the progression from the continuous to the discrete (the separation of the sky and the earth)—a process that occurs in certain myths and rites (Lévi-Strauss 1970:289–91, 302–5, 320, 324; Hugh-Jones 1979:153–54). Mircea Eliade’s thesis that the ritual ascent to the sky, i.e., the ritual conjunction of the sky and the earth, is in effect a return to the primordial age is therefore given compelling support by Lévi-Strauss’s demonstration (Eliade 1960:59–72, 95–98, 110–15, see also 1963:10–53, 79–88, 1965:114–15).

Celebrants ascend this cosmic ladder or stairway to return to the sacred time when the sky and the earth were one. But if the ritual ascent to heaven is a return to the primordial age, then the heaven thus attained would be homologous with the primordial age itself and share the attributes of that age. Thus, for example, a paradisiacal mythic age would logically have a spatial counterpart in an idyllic heaven that is, in a certain sense, contemporaneous with the present age.

In terms of the above, the opening of the telluric womb (which results in discrete units of time) can be represented in inverted form as the cutting up of the snake-penis or a homologous creature. The snake, as shown below, is an ideal representative of the continuous. The Ka’apor (Urubu) myth *How Men Lost Immortality* presents the fragmentation of the monster snake-penis as a direct inversion of the mythical opening up of women’s sealed wombs. Instead of an initial situation in which women had no vaginas (see p. 5 above), it is the men who had no penises, and each man acquires a member as a result of cutting up and distributing parts of the snake-penis, just as the birds acquire their plumage from the cutting up and distribution of the snake’s rainbow-colored skin in the Amazonian myth discussed below (Lévi-Strauss 1970:157; 1973:418–19). Thus, the fragmentation of continuous time into discrete units of night and day (by opening the sealed telluric womb) is transposed onto the spatial register to become the fragmentation of continuous primordial space or volume (the snake-penis), which, in this myth, focuses on a particular anatomical aspect of the cosmogony.

Culture Precedes Nature

Central to the present argument is the widespread mythic idea that the universe was created from pure thought or from mental images inside the mind of the creator-god (see, for examples, Eliade 1967a:83–85). In the Zuni creation myth, of which the emergence myth cited above forms a part, the All-father Awonawilona performs the initial stage of the cosmogony by means of pure thought, and his cosmogonic mind is clearly a male counterpart of a cosmogonic womb:

In the beginning of the new-made, Awonawilona conceived within himself and thought outward in space, whereby the mists of increase, steam potent of growth were evolved and uplifted. Thus, by means of his innate knowledge, the All-container made himself in person and form of the Sun whom we hold to be our father and who thus came to exist and appear (Eliade 1967a:130–1).

The primacy which is thus given to the idea, the mental image, and the dream image, is logically extended to the work of art—the mental image fashioned in clay, carved in wood, or painted on cave walls. In a creation myth told by the Unambal of northwest Australia, Wallanganda, the Lord of Heaven, projected images from his dreams onto rocks and into caves in the form of paintings, which he then transformed into living creatures. These paintings, which can still be seen today, are the spiritual centers of the creatures that they represent (Eliade 1967b:226). The widespread type of creation myth that states that the first humans were fashioned out of clay or stone (Leeming 2010:312–13) is a variant of the “creation from pure thought” myth, since the creator is giving plastic expression to an idea in his mind through these sculptural media (2010:8). According to the Nuxalk (Bella Coola) of the Pacific Northwest coast of America, a team of supernatural carpenters chiselled out of wood the first humans, as well as the animals, birds, trees, flowers, fish, mountains, rivers, and perhaps even the moon and stars. Each animal and bird was painted to endow them with their distinctive plumage or fur (McIlwraith 1948:34–37). The Nuxalk Winter Ceremonial features a dance in which a large masked figure carved out of wood, representing Mother Nature, “gives birth” to a sequence of masked dancers who represent all the flowers and trees—in the order in which they will actually appear or sprout new leaves in the following spring (1949:196–200).

In the Zuni creation myth, Awonawilona next creates the Earth-mother and the Sky-father. The Earth-mother then holds up a great terraced bowl with water in it, a model of how the earth shall be, and proceeds to spit on the water, stir it up with her fingers, and blow on it with her warm breath. This produces the archetypal model of the meteorological cycle in which clouds are formed over the waters, float up and cluster about the mountain terraces, and finally rain down again (Eliade 1967a:131–32). Thus, the terraced bowl, a cultural object, is the archetypal form of the earth, with its mountainous topography, while a cultural act (the Earth-mother spitting in the bowl, stirring up the water, etc.) is the prototype for a natural event, the cycle which produces rain. This concept has an exact counterpart in actual rainmaking rituals performed in the Americas and many other parts of the world (Frazer 1987:62–78). The following example is typical:

[In] a village near Dorpat, in Russia, when rain was much wanted, three men used to climb up the fir-trees of an old sacred grove. One of them drummed with a hammer on a kettle or small cask to imitate thunder; the second knocked two fire-brands together and made the sparks fly, to imitate lightning; and the third, who was called “the rain-maker,” had a bunch of twigs with which he sprinkled water from a vessel on all sides (1987:63).

The same principle can be found in acts of sorcery in many parts of the world. Typically, as in an Ojibwa example, an image of an intended victim is penetrated with a sharp instrument or weapon in order to cause the same harm to the actual victim (Frazer 1987:12–13).

All these examples express the notion that culture (or the mind) has precedence over nature. This concept is fundamental to the solar hunt of the Lunar Prey (see p. 4 above), where it is presented in a dual form. Not only does a cosmic cultural act (the solar hunt) cause natural events (the lunar and menstrual cycles), but the Mbuti rite which acts out the cosmic event is performed in the belief that a cultural act (the rite) will be followed by the natural event that it represents (i.e., the actual slaying of an antelope) (Zuesse 1979:26–27).

This precedence of culture over nature is also presented, in a dramatic way, in a Tupi myth, *The Origin of Night*, from Amazonia. When night is released from a sealed palm nut, the long day comes to an end, and human artifacts are transformed into animals. Thus, a basket turns into a jaguar, and a fisherman and his canoe become a duck (Lévi-Strauss 1973:416–17). In a Barasana creation myth, the door that keeps out the primordial cosmic waters is opened and the waters flood the earth—at the same time flooding the interior of the longhouse. In Barasana mythology these floodwaters are homologous with the night that escapes from the sealed container in the Tupi myth.³ Furthermore, the longhouse is treated in this myth as homologous with the earth/universe, so that the “sealed container”—the longhouse/earth—is opened up to let the waters flood in instead of letting night or darkness flood out. The artifacts inside the longhouse become alive:

The manioc-beer trough and the long tube for sieving coca became anacondas; the post on which resin is put to light the house became a cayman and the potsherd and other flat objects became piranha fish (Hugh-Jones 1979:151, 176–77, 263, 267–68).

The Barasana *maloca*, or ritual longhouse, is a microcosm of the universe itself: the roof represents the sky, the house posts the mountains that support the sky, and the floor space is the earth (1979:151). This mythic concept that a human-made structure is a microcosm of the universe has a worldwide distribution ranging from hunter-gatherer cultures to the so-called “high civilizations” (Eliade 1954:6–17, 1963:43–46, 1967a:159, 211–16; Frazer 1987:78; Zuesse 1979:24–26).

In the Nuxalk creation myth the entire Creation takes place within the celestial house, Nusmāta (The House of Myths), as if inside a carpenter’s workshop (1948:34). This suggests that the sacred cultural space with its archetypal artifacts represents the archetypal form of the universe and all the natural phenomena in it. The Barasana myth suggests the same. During the main Barasana ceremony, *He House*, celebrants return to the mythic age by ceremonially reconstituting the continuous form of the ancestral anaconda and entering the ritual longhouse in this serpentine procession (Liebenberg 2016b:180–82). Thus, by virtue of the space-time homology discussed above, they return to primordial wholeness and therefore also to the time of the Beginning, which, by implication, resides within the sacred ritual space. And, according to the creation myth, artifacts inside this space constitute the archetypal/cultural form of natural phenomena existing outside, in the secular world/present age. Therefore, the sacred space with its artifacts and cultural acts (rituals, music, dance) is the archetypal form of the natural universe and all within it. In other words, this eminently cultural space is homologous with the mythic age itself—the age of pure culture (in which the universe was a cultural space that housed cultural objects and acts) that preceded the present age of nature, of natural events, cycles, and creatures. It also follows that, by ritually returning to this sacred space/mythic age, celebrants can perform the archetypal cultural acts that make up the cosmogony itself, thereby controlling and determining the outcome of all sorts of natural events and phenomena.

This concept underscores rituals and ceremonies in many parts of the world. For example, the central African Mbuti use the village and the surrounding forest to create a model of the universe. Within this microcosm long twigs stripped of bark indicate the

direction that the planned hunt will take (Zuesse 1979:24–25). Among the Californian Karuk (Karok), Natinixwe (Hupa), and Olekwo'l (Yurok), a ritual return to the mythic age is undertaken in order to rebuild the sacred cabin, which represents the universe—so that the universe itself is thus recreated in an event that coincides with the advent of the new year. The same concept is found amongst the Lenape (Delaware) of eastern North America (Eliade 1963:43–6, 1967a:159). In Asia's Altaic religion the sacred yurt represents the universe, containing all seven, nine, or twelve heavens. The shaman ascends to these heavens by climbing a ladder or stairway consisting of seven, nine, or twelve notches in the trunk of a young birch tree stripped of its lower branches and standing in the center of the yurt—a cosmic tree that also serves as the cosmic ladder or stairway. The seven, nine, or twelve notches represent the heavens (Eliade 1967a:211–16).

“[In] ancient Egypt the king, as the representative of the sun, walked solemnly round the walls of a temple in order to ensure that the sun should perform his daily journey round the sky without the interruption of an eclipse or other mishap” (Frazer 1987:78). Here again, the temple represents the universe in its archetypal, purely cultural form, while the king represents the sun in its original, human form. And the cultural act or ritual performed in this archetypal space will necessarily be followed by nature in the present age. Likewise, the Altaic shaman's ecstatic ascent to the heavens inside the sacred yurt is no mere play-acting. This archetypal action occurs within the sacred space and in the sacred time of the mythic age. Sacred space and sacred time, as we have seen, are one and the same (see Liebenberg (2016a) for a more detailed account).

All the above examples are manifestations of the concept that culture has precedence over nature and, more specifically, that ideas and images conceived inside the human mind, as well as the man-made artifacts and rituals that are physical expressions of these ideas, stand in an archetypal relationship to the natural phenomena to which they refer. These cultural forms are the originals of which nature is the copy (compare Frazer 1987:324). All of this could be read as a logical extension of the mythic concept that holds that the universe and all it contains were created inside the mind of the creator god—as opposed to the cosmic womb of an Earth-mother (compare Lattas 1989:465–76).

The Equivalence of Sex and Eating

In myth, as well as in everyday life, North and South American Indians often equated eating with coitus. Thus, in many cultures, the vagina is said to “eat the penis” and *vice versa* (Lévi-Strauss 1970:265, 269).⁴ This equivalence is found all over the world (1970:269; Roscoe 1994). The following section will focus on this concept in a specifically mythological context.

In South America, the mouth of an Earth-mother is represented as a *vagina dentata* in a number of iconographic motifs (Eliade 1961:62–63). The mythic identification of the telluric goddess's mouth with the *vagina dentata* is a global phenomenon (1958b:61–66). In Malekula, a dead man's soul is confronted at the mouth of a cave by Temes, a terrifying female figure that devours him if he cannot find the road to the abode of the dead after she has obliterated half of a labyrinthine design drawn on the ground in front of her (1958b:62).⁵ According to Mircea Eliade

[The] labyrinth is presented as a “dangerous passage” into the bowels of Mother Earth, a passage in which the soul runs the risk of being devoured by a female monster. Malekula gives us other mythical figures of the threatening and dangerous female principle; for example, the Crab Woman with two immense claws, or a giant clam (*Tridacna deresa*), which, when it is open, resembles the female sexual organ. These terrifying images of aggressive female sexuality and devouring motherhood bring out still more clearly the initiatory character of descent into the body of the chthonian Great Mother (1961:62).

Likewise, the Australian Earth-mother Kunapipi, in her manifestation as Mumuna, has an alimentary canal that, like a vaginal tract, directly connects her mouth to her womb (Hiatt 1975:156).⁶ Moreover, the equivalence of coitus and eating is a fundamental feature of her rites (Berndt 1951:25, 39, 148–52, 162–63). Similarly, in Barasana myth (from the Vaupés region of Amazonia), the grandmother of the Ayawa (Thunders) conceives through the mouth by eating a fruit filled with their sperm. In a Tariana myth (from the same region), the virgin Ceucy, who, like all the other women of the mythic age, has no vagina, conceives through the mouth in the same way. The Thunders themselves are created from a cloud of tobacco smoke from a cigar smoked by Coadidop, the Tariana creator-goddess, who has made a cigar-holder out of her own legs. Such actual cigar-holders, which were used to smoke ceremonial cigars in this region of Amazonia, are, as we have seen, phallic in their symbolism. The ceremonial cigar in Tariana and Barasana religion is, in fact, a symbolic penis (Hugh-Jones 1979:154, 211, 267, 293, 302–4). The motif of eating a fruit filled with sperm suggests that this fruit is likewise identified with the penis. Another Barasana myth supports this, in which the hero, Yeba, disguises himself as a “double testicle-shaped fruit” hanging from the branch of an *ucuí* tree. When it drops to the ground it is picked up for eating by an unsuspecting woman, Yawira. But instead of her eating this penis-fruit in an act symbolic of intercourse, it is he who sexually violates (or “eats”) her (1979:296). In Mehinaku myth (from the upper Xingu region of the Amazon) the *pequi* fruit is explicitly equated with the penis of the slain Alligator Spirit (the first pequi tree having arisen from his buried corpse), and the two young women who were his lovers, when eating this new fruit, “found the outside bitter, but the inside, the penis of the Great Alligator Spirit, was sweet and good” (Gregor 1985:78–79). In this way both the cigar and the fruit convey the motif of conception through an act of fellatio, i.e., an act of “eating the penis” (see also Eliade 1958a:305).

The Mehinaku symbolically identify the vagina as a mouth. This idea appears at many levels in their culture, and one of its most striking applications is the *in̄ja* belt, which symbolically transforms the genitalia of the wearer into a face—complete with forehead, nose, lips, and mouth—so that the sexual act becomes an act of eating. This garment is unique to the ten societies of the Upper Xingu region (Gregor 1985:47–49, 70).

Although it might appear bizarre, it is quite logical that an Earth-mother should have a mouth that functions as a vagina, as the above material indicates. Observation shows that every morning she gives birth to the sun, and the eastern horizon (her vagina) is red with the blood that accompanies birth, while every evening she devours this child of hers, and the western horizon (her mouth) is covered in her victim’s blood. However, for a new sun to be born, it has to be fathered on the Earth-mother by the previous day’s sun. Therefore, the sun must commit incest with his mother, during which act he is devoured by her. But he can only perform this fatal sexual act in the west, where his mother’s mouth is, and consequently it must be an act of fellatio. The Earth-mother’s mouth therefore serves as a vagina—a mouth-vagina—and her alimentary canal as a vaginal tract that leads directly to her womb.

It is through such a mythic event that the sun and the other heavenly bodies are perpetually reborn from the loins of the earth. Eliade, discussing the pattern of a return to the womb found in initiatory myths and rites from various parts of the world, refers to “a number of myths of an initiatory traversal of a vagina dentata, or a perilous descent into a cave or crevasse assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth—a descent that brings the Hero to the other world.” Furthermore, he shows that the mouth of the Earth-mother is sometimes identified with the vagina dentata and that it is homologous with the symplegades as well as with the jaws of a giant fish or whale that are entered by heroes and shamans (1961:52, 58, 62–63, 66).

Thus, the equivalence of sex and eating has a profound mythological significance in this particular context. The material discussed by Eliade suggests that the goddess “eats the penis,” thereby actually devouring the celestial hero, while the victim fecundates her orally so that he might be reborn as the sun or moon from her telluric womb. The hero’s symbolic sex-death or love-death is therefore essential to securing his subsequent rebirth.

Red ochre is an important feature of Chris Knight’s “sex-strike” theory. He shows that

in Aboriginal Australian mythology it is often positively identified with menstrual blood (1991:441–48). Commenting on the intensive use of ochre in prehistoric Europe, he states that “in the Upper Paleolithic, graves were richly ochred and whole caves painted red—suggesting, as one writer has put it, ‘the magic making of life deep in the earth, as though in the menstruous womb of a woman’” (1991:436). On the subject of red ochre, menstrual blood, and the womb, he cites Ernst Wreschner to the effect that “the womb is in many cultures equated with the tomb and both associated with the earth, the source of fruits. It is believed that ores grow inside the earth like an embryo in the womb” (1991:437). Furthermore,

Wreschner mentions prehistoric burials on the island of Malta—burials in which the corpses were not only heavily ochred but provided with bowls of additional ochre set alongside them. “The placing of a bowl of ochre in the grave,” comments Wreschner, “recalls the Maori legend of the woman who went to the netherworld and found there a bowl of red ochre; she ate the ochre, became strong again, and was restored to life” (1991:437–48).

All of this suggests that red ochre signifies menstrual blood, particularly that of an Earth-mother, so that the cave or grave painted red is homologized with the womb of this Earth-mother from which the deceased hopes to be reborn.

The Symplegades

The symplegades, clashing rocks or swinging doors, prominently featured by Lévi-Strauss in the last volume of the *Mythologiques*, are a widespread and important motif, of which the vagina dentata is an anatomical counterpart (Lévi-Strauss 1981:402–3, 414, 437–38). The mythic hero passes through the symplegades in order to get to the otherworld, and in the process his tail feathers or other extremity of his body are clipped off (Lévi-Strauss 1981:402–3). As Lévi-Strauss points out, these are veiled references to castration (1981:403), which make them homologous with the “initiatory traversal of a vagina dentata, or a perilous descent into a cave or crevasse assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth” that brings the hero to the otherworld (Eliade 1961:52, 58).

Lévi-Strauss also shows that when the hero actually exposes his penis to the two blind old women (or two beautiful blind young girls) who are a borderline form of the symplegades motif, he does so without running the risk of real castration. Furthermore, the two blind girls fulfill the function of “blocked characters” (1981:402–3). The hero “pierces” the eyes of the blind girls with the tip of his penis, and this is homologous with the phallic opening of the sealed womb—just as the clipping off of the tail feathers or crest of the trickster blue jay are veiled references to castration.⁷ The two motifs of the opening of the sealed womb and the cutting off of the penis are given an identical treatment here: they are transposed from the lower to the upper region or from the front to the back (in various myths). Through the juxtaposition of these two motifs, as well as through their homologous treatment, the myths seem to indicate that there is a significant similarity between them. And, indeed, one is an exact inversion of the other, as shown below. The vagina dentata, as Lévi-Strauss points out, is an anatomical equivalent of the symplegades, of which the two blind women are a borderline form. Furthermore, as Eliade shows, the vagina dentata and the symplegades can both operate as the mouth of an Earth-mother (see p. 11 above).

Moreover, in Assiniboine myth the symplegades are described as two chasms, the sides of which are rapidly moving away from each other and coming together again. The hero throws a tiny fish into the chasm and, as the earth closes up to swallow it, he jumps across. A Cree version refers to the symplegades as “the earth’s mouth.” In certain Algonquin myths they are replaced by two blind old women whose forearms and elbows are spiked with bones as sharp as daggers, thereby confirming Lévi-Strauss’s hypothesis that the two blind women, the symplegades, and the vagina dentata are homologous motifs (1981:511–12). And since the fish, in American mythology, is widely identified with the penis (as shown immediately

below), the tiny fish being swallowed by the closing chasm would once again refer to the motif of castration and thereby homologize the symplegades with the vagina dentata so that, by implication, it becomes the mouth-vagina of Mother Earth.

Thus, for example, the Mehinaku of the Upper Xingu region of the Amazon identify their fish trap with the body of a woman, the entry to the trap being her vagina. The fisherman uses charms and spells to lure the fish, identified with the penis, into this feminine trap so that the entry of the fish into the trap becomes a symbolic sexual act (Gregor 1985:75–76). Significantly, the fish-penis dies during this “sexual act.” An Arecuna (Pemon) myth from southeastern Venezuela features a mother-in-law who feeds the hero, Jilijoibu, on fish taken from her uterus (Lévi-Strauss 1970:244). This mother-in-law’s womb is therefore homologous with the Mehinaku fish-trap. In Barasana myth the heroine Yawira refuses to eat a Jacunda fish offered to her by Yeba, saying that it is her father’s penis (Hugh-Jones 1979:296). This daughter who refuses to eat her father’s penis is an inversion of the (Earth-) mother who must eat her son’s penis (to effect the rebirth of the heavenly bodies).

In another Barasana myth Kanea, the youngest of the Ayawa, becomes pregnant from eating a fish. Since he has no vagina, the help of two woodpeckers has to be elicited to make a hole in his body to deliver the baby (1979:270). This motif is a variant of the Tariana myth (from the same region) in which Ceucy, a girl without a vagina, falls pregnant after eating a fruit which, like this fish, is identified with the penis. The Thunders cut a passage into her abdomen to deliver the infant Juruparí (1979:303–4). In an Amazonian myth, *The Story of Amao*, a young virgin girl becomes pregnant when a fish gets inside her vulva (Lévi-Strauss 1970:263). In a Cubeo version of the *Wooden Bride* myth (from northwest Amazonia) the heroine, who initially has no vagina, takes an anaconda as lover. Her husband, Kúwai, kills the snake and cuts off his penis, which he transforms into four minnows and gives to his wife. While she is eating the fish, he tells her that she is eating the penis of her lover (Goldman 1963:148). Another wife of Kúwai’s eats the actual penis and the entire lower half of the stomach of a cayman who tries to rape her (1963:182). The motif of a woman who is made to eat the penis of her slain bestial lover—snake, alligator, or tapir—is very common in South American myth. Sometimes the penis is simply cut off, roasted, and served up as food, but she also eats it in a transformed state, as fish or fruit (Lévi-Strauss 1970:265; see p. 11 for a Mehinaku example of the alligator-lover’s penis eaten as fruit). This motif is homologous with that of the symplegades in that it refers, in a zoological or botanical code, to the same event that the latter refers to in a geological code—the eating of the penis.

In a Nlaka’pamux (Thompson Indian) myth from British Columbia, Coyote offers salmon to a group of bathing girls and, when the youngest one accepts his offer, he gives her his long penis instead (i.e., he copulates with her across a river) (Lévi-Strauss 1981:372). Earlier in some versions of the same myth, he gives salmon to all those river communities who accept him as a son-in-law, i.e., those who accept his offer of a penis (1981:435). In another Nlaka’pamux version Coyote subsequently throws his wife into the Columbia River, where she changes into a rock, which forms a kind of natural pool between her petrified legs. He decrees that a plentiful supply of salmon will henceforth be caught between his wife’s legs. Here again we find a situation that is homologous with the Mehinaku fish trap. In a Sanpoil version of this myth, found also among the Nlaka’pamux (Lévi-Strauss 1981:375), Coyote causes a huge boulder to roll into the middle of the Columbia River, making waterfalls on each side:

Then Coyote cried out, “Daughter, oh daughter! Don’t face upstream; face downstream!” The big rock turned completely around. The part above water on the side facing downstream had a large oval shaped crevice in it, several feet above the surface. “From now on,” Coyote continued, “whenever the salmon come upstream to spawn they will jump into your vagina when they try to get above the falls” (Ray 1932:173).

This daughter turned to stone, whose vagina receives the salmon who wish to spawn, is homologous with an Earth-mother. By the same token, the tiny fish swallowed by the

Assiniboine symplegades is homologous with the bodily extremities clipped off by the swinging doors in other myths, in that it is a symbolic penis.

In all these myths the fish-penis appears as the victim swallowed by a woman or the symplegades or trapped inside a woman's vagina. However, like the snake-penis, the fish can also play the opposite role—that of the swallowing monster. Both in myth and ritual a giant fish, shark, or whale swallows initiates, shamans, or heroes who thereby undergo a symbolic death followed by a rebirth from the precosmic darkness of the monster's belly (Eliade 1960:224, 1961:52). Thus the fish, like the snake, can operate as a penis that takes over the role of the mouth-vagina. A mouth filled with sharp teeth and a smooth, elongated body makes the fish an ideal candidate for the sexually ambivalent role of *penis dentatus* (see p. 20).

Theme and Inversion

As will be shown below, the vagina dentata, mouth-vagina, or “eating the penis” motif is a direct inversion of the phallus-spear/vagina-wound motif. The male changes from aggressor to victim and the female from victim to aggressor. In this respect the following myths are particularly interesting.

In the Tariana myth referred to above, Ceucy conceives through the mouth by eating a substance containing the juice of a certain fruit. She has no vagina and, to release the baby, the Thunders cut a passage into her womb (Hugh-Jones 1979:303–4). The Sambia of Papua New Guinea have a similar myth in which the first two humans were both men, Numboolyu and Chenchi. One day Numboolyu showed Chenchi (who at this point is verbally transformed from a man into a woman) his penis. He started copulating with her in her mouth. But she complained that his penis was too short, “whereupon she fetched a bamboo knife and slit open his foreskin, exposing the glans penis. The penis grew bigger and nicer. The ‘woman’ declared: ‘Now it is good; I will eat it [suck the penis, ingest the semen].’” Chenchi's stomach then began to swell. She had no vagina, and Numboolyu had to make a vertical slit in her pubic area with his bamboo knife to release the baby. This happened inside the menstrual hut, to which Chenchi had retired when the labour pains started (Herdt 1981:256–57).

Both Ceucy and Chenchi are girls with sealed wombs who conceive through the mouth and need to have vaginal passages cut into them to release the baby. Ceucy is fertilized by a concoction containing the juice of a certain fruit, and myths from this and other areas of Amazonia clearly identify fruit with the penis,⁹ and her act of eating the fruit is homologous with Chenchi's act of fellatio. Furthermore, in the first part of the Sambia myth, Numboolyu observes that his sperm “looked just like the juice of pandanus nuts” (Herdt 1981:256), which indicates that the fruit-penis homology also exists in the Sambia myth. Ceucy's act of “fellating” the penis-fruit is a repetition of the first part of the myth, where the goddess Coadidop creates the first male beings, the Thunders, by smoking a cigar with a cigar-holder that identifies it with an erect penis (see p. 5)

In the Sambia myth Chenchi interrupts the act of fellatio to slit open Numboolyu's foreskin with a knife. Having done so, she promptly declares: “Now it is good; I will eat it.” This act of “circumcision” is thus homologized with that of “eating the penis,” and it is contrasted in the myth with the act of cutting a vertical slit in Chenchi's pubic area. The former is done by the woman to the man, the latter by the man to the woman—but with the same instrument, a bamboo knife. The second operation is performed inside the menstrual hut, so that the bleeding pubic wound is identified with the menstruating vagina, just as the knife, by penetrating the sealed pubic area, is implicitly identified with the phallus. However, the myth also states that “when women kill the moon [menstruate], they go to the menstrual house” (1981:257). This statement, which makes women out to be the sexual aggressors, is in direct opposition to the above concept of menstruation, in which women are clearly the sexual victims.

Thus, as in North American myths dealing with the symplegades discussed above, the motif of “eating the penis” is juxtaposed with its inversion, the penetration of the sealed womb by the sharp phallic weapon or instrument. The reference to “killing the moon” once

again brings in the cosmic dimension and recalls the Earth-mother who fellates and eats her lunar son in order to give birth to him again. Menstrual bleeding, which coincides with the monthly “dying” of the moon, is thereby identified with the blood from the moon’s fatal genital wound.

The South American myth of *The Wooden Bride* presents the same juxtaposition of the above theme with its inverted form. As mentioned, the heroine initially has a sealed womb and is “opened up” by a sharp instrument, usually a bird’s beak (Lévi-Strauss 1973:215–24). In one of the previously described Cubeo versions a wayward wife is informed by her husband that she has just eaten her Anaconda lover’s penis after he has fed her minnows that originated from the penis of the slain reptile (Goldman 1963:147–48). This myth juxtaposes the motif of the blocked character who is pierced (i.e., the opening of the sealed womb) with that of the castration and eating of the penis (i.e., the inversion of the former motif). Likewise, in a Waiwai myth two heroes try to copulate with an otter through the eyes. He directs them towards real women, who have vaginae dentatae. The otter, in American mythology, is a blocked character, homologous in this regard with the Wooden Bride (Lévi-Strauss 1973:203; see note 7). This animal also appears in another Cubeo version of *The Wooden Bride*, where it directs the hero towards the heroine who initially shared its blocked nature (Goldman 1963:147–48). This leads us to a more detailed discussion of the phallic snake. In myths dealing with this creature, the above logical processes involving eating, coitus, and birth are brought together in an extraordinary way.

The Monster Snake

In the charter myth of the Australian Kunapipi rites, the Rainbow-snake Yulunggur pokes his head into the hut, inside of which are the Wawilak Sisters and their two sons, and swallows them all. This Monster Snake is explicitly identified with the penis, and its act of penetrating the hut is explained by an informant as that of the penis entering the vagina. Furthermore, “[when] the Julunggul [or Yulunggur] swallows the Wawilak, that is like a penis being swallowed by a vagina, only we put it the other way around” (Bernt 1951:13, 25, 39; Warner 1937:250–59).

Here again “eating the penis” (the hut-vagina¹⁰ “swallowing” the snake-penis) is juxtaposed with its inverted form: the snake-penis eats the women and children.¹¹ As will be shown below, the monster snake-penis, like the phallus-spear, is an inversion of the mouth-vagina (or vice versa)—it is in effect a *penis dentatus*.

In myth, Yulunggur swallows the Wawilak Sisters and their two sons, thereby preventing them from carrying out their intended circumcision of the boys (Warner 1937:250–9; Elkin 1951:xv), while in the relevant Kunapipi rites, the initiates are symbolically swallowed by Yulunggur (Berndt 1951:37, 40–41). In the Yolngu (Murngin) version of these rites, “the little boys who are to be circumcised are told by their fathers and the other older men, “The Great Father Snake smells your foreskin. He is calling for it” (Warner 1937:261). The Yolngu say that during circumcision the snake comes, and a great flood covers the earth (1937:287), while in their version of the Kunapipi myth a great flood likewise covers the earth when Yulunggul swallows the Wawilak Sisters and their two sons (1937:250–59). This indicates that circumcision is here identified with the Great Snake’s swallowing of initiates, as is the case in the Northern New Guinean rites referred to above (see note 14).

However, young initiates, like all other celebrants, are also symbolically swallowed by the Earth-mother Kunapipi when they enter the sacred ring ground and reborn from her uterus when they leave it (Berndt 1951:147). This indicates that the Snake-monster’s act of swallowing and vomiting up initiates is homologous with the Earth-mother’s act of swallowing initiates and giving birth to them again (compare Hiatt 1975:155–57). This is supported by the fact that one meaning of the name Kunapipi is “whistle-cock” (i.e., a sub-incisure). The sub-incised penis symbolizes the Rainbow Snake Yulunggul, while the incisure itself symbolizes the uterus of the Earth-mother (Berndt 1951:16). This bisexual Monster Snake is therefore well suited to expressing the complexity of the concept of the sexual swallower. The sub-incised penis is also a womb that has been “opened” by a (phallic) knife,

and this presents us with a threefold juxtaposition of a motif with its two inversions: the Earth-mother's act of swallowing, the snake-penis's act of swallowing, and the opening of the sealed womb by the phallic knife (through sub-incision).

Since circumcision is identified with the snake-monster's act of swallowing initiates in the Yolngu version, the following Yolngu material is significant. One of the songs performed during Kunapipi tells of how the Mungamunga Sisters (counterparts of Kunapipi herself) kill and eat a snake:

The uncoiling snake refers to a penis in the process of erection, and roasting and eating the snake symbolically refers to a woman's receiving a penis for coitus. Colloquially a native woman frequently uses the word "eat" for coitus (Berndt 1951:162–63).

Here we have the Earth-mother Kunapipi/Mungamunga swallowing the snake-penis—an act that is also one of coitus and a direct inversion of the central mythic concept in which the snake-penis Yulunggur swallows the Wawilak Sisters (who also represent the Earth-mother) and their sons (whom they intend to circumcise). This gives further support to the informant's statement that the snake entering the hut is the penis being swallowed by the vagina and that they "put it the other way around" by making the penis swallow the Earth-mother (Wawilak Sisters) and her sons (i.e., the contents of the hut/uterus). There is a hidden meaning here, in which it is the Earth-mother Kunapipi's vagina (the hut) that swallows the snake-penis. Furthermore, in the song that immediately precedes the one referenced above, the Mungamunga Sisters watch men pulling back the foreskins of their *uncircumcised* penises in order to urinate. This is followed directly by the phrase "snake coiled up uncoils itself" from the above-mentioned song (1951:162). The uncircumcised penis is clearly identified with a snake here, and this suggests that the killing and sexual eating of the snake-penis by the Mungamunga Sisters is homologous with the act of circumcision, performed here, implicitly, by female representatives of the Earth-mother. Circumcision, in this context, is therefore identified with the Earth-mother's act of sexual swallowing/devouring.

In a Ma:ra myth Kunapipi or Mumuna gets her two daughters, the Mungamunga, to lure men to their camp, where Kunapipi or Mumuna invites them to have sex with her daughters while she pretends to sleep. When, exhausted from copulation, the men fall asleep, she kills them with a huge boulder, roasts them, and eats them whole, having first cut off the heads, hands, feet, testes, and penises, which she leaves for her daughters. She regurgitates the skeletons. (Informants explicitly compare this to the ritual swallowing and eventual emergence that they themselves undergo during the Kunapipi ceremony). The daughters are unwilling to eat the penises that had given them so much pleasure despite their mother's urging that "that is good beef." Day after day the same action is repeated with fresh victims, and each time the narrator lays much emphasis on the severed penises and testes, and on the refusal of the daughters to eat them. Furthermore, "these Mungamunga very much enjoyed copulating, and could take quite a number of men, one after the other, as is done during ceremonial intercourse at the Kunapipi rituals" (Berndt 1951:148–51).

Thus, the old woman Kunapipi (the Earth-mother) kills the men after coitus with a huge boulder (the symplegades) and eats them. She urges the young girls (also representing the Earth-mother) to eat the penises they had coitus with—clearly an act equivalent to her own act of devouring or swallowing the whole body. This is an important point, since it shows that the "biting off" and "swallowing" of the penis can represent the swallowing of the whole body, so that the penis (in its mythological role as snake-penis) performs a metonymical function (see p. 21). It also stresses the equivalence of sex and eating, thereby suggesting the Earth-mother's mouth-vagina be in juxtaposition to the symplegades (the boulder).

It is interesting that the Mungamunga refuse to literally eat the penises that they metaphorically ate the night before. As representatives of the Earth-mother it would logically be their mythological role to eat the penises (in both senses of the phrase) of their celestial

sons. Likewise, the Amazonian Barasana heroine Yawira doubly inverts the Earth-mother's mythical act by refusing to eat her father's penis (see p. 12).

This Ma:ra myth serves as the basis for their Kunapipi rites (Berndt 1951:152) and is explicitly compared to ritual death and rebirth. After Mumuna swallows novices they reside in her womb, and they are brought back smeared with red paste, which the women are supposed to believe comes from her womb. Likewise, in Murinbata myth, Mutjingga, the Old Woman, swallows ten children who are subsequently found, still alive, in her womb and not "where the excrement is." In the rite of Punj, the highest in their ritual repertoire, initiates are supposedly swallowed alive by Mutjingga and then vomited up. The Gadjari cult of the Walbiri centers on the myth in which the two Gadjari ogresses devour their children. Lester Hiatt, in these contexts, briefly discusses the important question of a cannibal All-Mother who, like Yulunggur, is not only a swallower and regurgitator of neophytes but also a cosmic creator (1975:151–54, 156–58). We have seen the strong relationship between the Monster Snake and the Earth-mother. The following section demonstrates this same relationship in myths from South and North America and compares the American to the Australian material discussed here, elaborating on the intricacies of this relationship that may be found on all three continents.

Cosmic Conjunctions

In eastern Bolivia, in the Tacana myth of *The Moon's Lover*, we find a scene that is strikingly similar to the one in the Yulunggur myth. A man makes love to a beautiful woman, the Moon, in preference to her sister Venus, with the result that his penis becomes so long that he has to carry it around coiled up in a basket. One night the penis, which behaves like a snake (prowling at night for sexual prey while its owner is asleep), enters a hut where a young girl is sleeping. However, her father, who has mounted guard and stands waiting beside the hut's entrance, cuts off the head of the penis as it crosses the threshold, and the severed head (significantly) turns into a certain species of snake (Lévi-Strauss 1973:207). Although it is not explicitly stated, this snake-like penis's act of entering the hut (intending to penetrate a sleeping young girl) appears to have the same sexual symbolism as the snake-penis Yulunggur's equivalent act of entering the Wawilak Sisters' hut (see p. 15).

This snake-penis's fate shows the same ambivalence found in the Yulunggur myth. In both cases the snake-penis is the sexual aggressor. Nevertheless, in the Australian myth informants state that it is the hut/vagina that is swallowing the penis, even though they "put it the other way around," while in the Tacana myth the penis, which intends to rape the young woman inside the hut, turns from aggressor to victim the moment it enters the hut (i.e., is "swallowed" by the hut).

The Nlaka'pamux of British Columbia tell a myth, *The Bird-nester*, referred to above, in which Coyote offers salmon to a group of bathing girls on the opposite bank of the Columbia River. When the youngest says "Yes!" he sends his long penis across a river to copulate with her. The giant member gets stuck inside her vagina, and her fellow bathing girls try in vain to cut it off with knives and sharp stones, after which, on Coyote's advice, they succeed by using a certain kind of swamp grass (Lévi-Strauss 1981:372–73). Lévi-Strauss states, quite rightly, that this girl's vagina is emphatically not a vagina dentata, since the knives and sharp stones are of no avail (1981:438). However, the identification of her vagina with the knives and sharp stones, and therefore with the vagina dentata, is quite clear since her vagina is "eating the penis." The myth makes deliberate play of this contradiction between the vagina dentata and the innocuous vagina of a helpless young sexual victim. The girls' attempts at cutting off the penis tip with these instruments resemble the act of circumcision, as does the girl's father's act of cutting off the head of the long penis in the Tacana myth.

This does not mean that these myths refer to actual circumcision rites; rather they present the same symbolic logic associated with circumcision in the Australian material discussed above—that of the vagina dentata. In the Tacana myth it is the hut (with the knife-wielding father mounting guard beside the entrance) that "eats" the penis, whereas in the

Nlaka'pamux myth it is the girl's actual vagina, in conjunction with the knives, sharp stones, and swamp grass, that does the same. In the Yulunggur myth it is a hut—which represents a vagina—that “eats” the penis. As in these other two myths, the penis in the Nlaka'pamux myth plays an ambivalent role—as sexual aggressor and as sexual victim. While in both the American examples the eating of the penis by the hut or vagina is associated with a vagina dentata motif (the cutting off of the tip), this motif in the Kunapipi example is presented in a masculine inversion (or androgynous version) as swallowing by the monster snake-penis. However, it is significant that the Kunapipi songs and the Ma:ra Kunapipi myth discussed above also present this motif in its feminine form found in the American myths.

The Nlaka'pamux myth, and more specifically a Sanpoil version thereof, also includes an episode, referred to above, in which Coyote rolls into the Columbia River a boulder with an oval-shaped hole in it that, as Coyote indicates, is his daughter—the hole being her vagina. This stone vagina, into which the salmon leap when they try to get above the falls, is a variant of the symplegades, as Lévi-Strauss demonstrates. Therefore, this symplegades or stone vagina that “eats” the fish-penis is homologous with the Assiniboine symplegades that eats a tiny fish dropped into it by the hero (see p. 13). It is also homologous with the vagina of the bathing girl in conjunction with the knives, sharp stones, and swamp grass that are applied to cut off Coyote's long penis in the same Nlaka'pamux myth. Note that Coyote offers the girl fish and, when she agrees to it, gives her the penis instead, so that the fish-penis homology is clearly operative here. In this Nlaka'pamux myth the vagina is therefore identified with both the vagina dentata and the symplegades, whereas the penis is identified with the fish as well as with the snake. In one version, every time one of the bathing girls accepts his offer of salmon, “he allows the fish to swim up the river and his penis at once wriggles through the water like a snake in order to penetrate the girl” (Lévi-Strauss 1981:374). This relationship between the phallic snake and the Earth-mother has cosmic implications. The following section elaborates on this aspect of the snake's mythic role.

The Snake Ferryman

When the snake assumes the role of ferryman, this cosmic aspect comes to the foreground. The snake-ferryman (or alligator-ferryman) of North and South American myth has an ambivalent nature: it agrees to take the hero across the river, but at the same time it tries to swallow him; or it swallows the one brother and takes the other one to the far side (during the same journey). Lévi-Strauss shows that the conjunction of the near and the far is homologous with the conjunction of the high and the low (i.e. the sky and the earth). He also shows that the long penis and the snake-ferryman are homologous with the arrow-chain, the cosmic ladder, the cosmic rope, the cosmic tree and the cosmic mountain as devices that conjoin the sky and the earth or the near and far shores (Lévi-Strauss 1978:157–58, 181–89, 436–37, 443–46, 1981:446–47, 469, 503).

The Australian Rainbow-snake Yulunggur, immediately after swallowing the Wawilak Sisters and their sons, stands erect like a phallus and touches the clouds, thereby conjoining sky and earth. In this act, it is therefore like a rainbow, which likewise conjoins the sky and the earth (Berndt 1951:24–25). Thus, the Rainbow-snake and the Snake-ferryman both implicitly return their passengers/victims to the mythic age (the continuous) by conjoining the sky and the earth or the near and the far shores (see p. 7). Furthermore, according to Mircea Eliade (1960:224), initiates who are ritually swallowed by a monster return to pre-cosmic Night that resides inside its belly. Thus, both the Rainbow-snake and the Snake-ferryman return the people they swallow to the mythic age. The Snake-ferryman's act of swallowing his passenger is therefore homologous with his act of transporting him to the far shore, just as the Rainbow-snake's act of swallowing is with that of standing erect and conjoining sky to earth—as the myths indicate by either juxtaposing or conflating these motifs.

Moreover, Coyote's long penis, in the Nlaka'pamux myth, conjoins the near and far shores, just as the Australian snake-penis conjoins the sky and the earth, while the Tacana hero's long penis conjoins him to a female personification of the moon. These myths are all

essentially variants of the myth of the cosmic couple—typically the Sky-father and Earth-mother who are engaged in a sexual embrace (see p. 6). In the Egyptian variant, the earth-god Geb’s phallus reaches up across the cosmic expanse to his twin sister, the sky-goddess Nut. The long members of Coyote and the Tacana hero, as well as the snake-penis Yulunggur, are homologues of Geb’s cosmic member. (For an in-depth analysis of this mythic concept of “exotic love,” see Lévi-Strauss 1978, where it is a central theme running throughout the work. For a more detailed account of this issue in the present context, see Liebenberg 2016b:188–92). In all these cases, as also with the arrow-chain, cosmic rope, tree, etc., this conjunction is inevitably followed by a disjunction of sky and earth or near and far—the cutting off of the penis, the breaking of the arrow-ladder, and so on. The disjunction of sky and earth is represented in the Australian myth by the Rainbow-snake falling back to earth after standing erect and touching the sky (Berndt 1951:24–25). This fragmentation of the continuous is equivalent to a cosmogony and, accordingly, it often results in the creation or transformation of some aspect of nature (Liebenberg 2016b). In a North American example (Mandan) the Snake-ferryman is destroyed by a lightning bolt after conjoining the near and far shores, whereas in a South American myth (Mundurucu) the alligator-ferryman, after effecting this conjunction, thrashes about furiously and breaks all the trees that grow along his back (Lévi-Strauss 1978:436–37, 443–46). These trees are homologous with the cosmic tree that conjoins the sky and the earth (which is equivalent to the alligator-ferryman itself), so the disjunction of the sky and the earth is succinctly homologized here with that of the near and far shores. In the next section the widespread distribution of the snake in its cosmic capacity, along with that of homologous cosmic agents, is briefly outlined. This global distribution will be elaborated on further in the section on “anthropomorphic logic.”

The Rainbow Snake in Africa, Australia, and South America

In Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), in western Africa, the Rainbow-snake raises its head up to the sky while keeping its tail on the earth and drinks a prodigious amount of water. The water that he spills from his mouth while drinking causes rain (Meyerowitz 1940:48). Thus, the Rainbow-snake here again conjoins the sky and the earth. The Rainbow-snake has a wide distribution in Africa (Hambly 1929:659–60). It is also well represented in South America, where its identification with the continuous and the fragmentation thereof is particularly strong and elaborate (Liebenberg 2016b). Furthermore, the conjunction of the sky and the earth by means of the cosmic tree and their subsequent disjunction, which brings an idyllic mythic age to an end, is well represented in African myth (Eliade 1960:59). The Rainbow-snake’s function here in establishing the continuous is thus homologous with that of the cosmic tree, as is the case in the Americas and Australia. In the Yolngu version of the Australian Kunapipi myth, for example, the Rainbow-snake Yulunggur is directly compared to a cosmic tree when it stands erect to conjoin the sky and the earth (Warner 1937:254, 520–23; see also Liebenberg 2016b:30). The Pyramid Texts from Egypt enumerate the cosmic ladder, the cosmic stairway, the cosmic rope, and other homologous devices in sequence as the means by which the dead Pharaoh ascends to the sky (Eliade 1967:353–55). The pyramid itself represents the cosmic mountain, which is homologous with the cosmic tree as well as all of these devices (Eliade 1960:59–60, 63–66; Lévi-Strauss 1970:289–91, 293; 1981:31–32, 462–65, 501–3, 601; Liebenberg 2016b:178–80). This distribution from Africa to Australia and South America, with the same highly evolved associated logic, is significant (see also p. 20–24 below).

The Homology Between Space and Time

The homology between time and space, a fundamental feature of the mythological system under discussion, has been dealt with above, but the remarkable sophistication of this concept warrants some further elaboration. In the Tupi myth *The Origin of Night*, darkness falls instantly when night is released from the sealed palm nut. Realizing what has happened,

the daughter of the Snake decides to separate night from day, thereby fragmenting continuous time into discrete units. In order to do this, she transforms a ball of thread (which, like the Snake itself, represents the spatially continuous) into an *inhambu* bird (whose song at dawn marks the discrete units of day and night), while another ball of thread is simultaneously transformed into a *cujubim* bird, whose calls at regular intervals throughout the night have an analogous regulatory function (Lévi-Strauss 1973:416–17).¹² Thus the transformation of the continuous into the discrete, which brings the long day to an end, is represented in a manner which explicitly homologizes time and space in this crucially important context: continuous space (the ball of thread) is transformed into discrete time (the periods demarcated by the regulatory bird-calls).

At the same time, the ball of string, a man-made thing, represents the category of pure culture (as found in the long day). It is transformed into nature, as represented by the two birds. Thus, two major mythological dimensions—space-time as well as culture-nature—are treated in a single and seemingly insignificant detail with extraordinary concision.

The Dakota express a homology between space and time in a cosmic context when they say that “the year is a circle around the world [i.e., around the initiation cabin representing the universe].” Likewise, certain Californian societies say that “the world has passed” when a year has passed (Eliade 1963:46).

Anthropomorphic Logic

In this section we will review the preceding analysis of interconnected motifs to reveal how logical relationships of homology, inversion, transposition, and transformation structure their interconnection. This logic is expressed in anthropomorphic (and zoomorphic) terms. The reason for this will be explained in the next section. As shown above, the concept of culture as the archetypal form of nature follows logically from the myth of the solar hunt. The fragmentation of the continuous, caused by the opening up of the sealed womb/container, is likewise a corollary of the solar hunt.

The correspondence between the lunar and menstrual cycles that underscores the solar hunt identifies women with the hunted prey. The Solar Hunter’s act of phallic penetration therefore not only kills the Lunar Prey, but also regenerates it by fecundating the wound-vagina. The monthly lunar cycle is echoed by the daily lunar cycle of setting and rising. Since the former is seen as a cycle of death and resurrection, the latter would likewise be one of death and rebirth. Thus, the earth must be a mother who gives birth daily to the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies, only to swallow them again in endless cycles. But, just as the sun fecundates the lunar wound-vagina through a violent male act of sexual penetration, so the Earth-mother needs to be fecundated by her celestial sons through a violent female act of sexual swallowing. In other words, the Earth-mother’s act of sexually devouring her lunar son is a female version of the sun’s act of phallically penetrating the Lunar Prey, and it likewise leads to the regeneration of the lunar victim. Her death-dealing mouth-vagina is an exact inversion, along gender lines, of the solar phallus-spear. The phallus becomes the victim of this violent act, and the vagina the aggressor, instead of the other way around. The Earth-mother is therefore a female counterpart of the Solar Hunter, generated logically from the latter through a systematic inversion of sexual roles.¹³

To play the part of victim in the Earth-mother’s act of “eating the penis,” the Lunar Prey has to be transformed into an animal more suited to this role—the Snake-penis or Fish-penis. This metonymical creature allows the Earth-mother to sexually devour a penis that, at the same time, represents the entire animal, so that the entire victim is devoured during this sexual/swallowing act (see Lévi-Strauss 1973:411, 419).

The snake is a particularly good choice because it lends itself to further logical developments that are truly remarkable. The simple elongated form of the snake makes it the ideal representative of the category of the continuous. In *The Origin of Night*, for example, the Great Snake maintains the long day by keeping night trapped under the waters. Likewise, the bullroarer, which heralds the ritual return to the long day or mythic age by driving away the women, is commonly said to be the voice of the Great Snake, so that this creature is strongly

associated with the long day. This instrument, which is used to this effect by societies on every continent, dates well back into the Paleolithic period. It consists of a flat piece of wood attached to the end of a string that is whirled around in a circle to produce a continuous, roaring sound (Mathews 1898:52; Lévi-Strauss 1973:418–19; Gregor 1985:105–6.)¹⁴ As the Rainbow-snake, it represents the continuous in a particularly thorough way. Its rainbow-colored skin is a chromatic continuum just as its body is continuous. And, like the rainbow, it conjoins the sky and the earth, so that it can represent a return to primordial wholeness (see above p. 18).

In the mythic state of primordial wholeness sky and earth, male and female, are as yet undifferentiated. Thus, for example, Purusha, the Hindu primal giant, is cut up to form the sky and the earth, as well as the rest of Creation. In another version he is androgynous, like a man and a woman in close sexual embrace, until the two parts are separated into a man and a woman. In many creation myths the Sky-father and Earth-mother initially represent the state of primordial wholeness by being locked in a close and perpetual sexual embrace, and they have to be separated (in some versions, cut apart) by their children. A single creature that represents this initial undifferentiated state must therefore logically be androgynous (see Eliade 1965). And, indeed, as a swallowing monster, the Rainbow-snake combines the sun-hunter's death-dealing penis with the Earth-mother's being a great sexual swallower: it is a penis that swallows like a vagina (Hiatt 1975:155; 1971, 85). It is, in effect, a penis dentatus that operates as a logical intermediary between the all-male phallus-spear with its penetrating action and the all-female vagina dentata with its swallowing action (compare Lévi-Strauss 1981:438–39).¹⁵

This bisexual nature is quite explicit in the Kunapipi rites, where there is a male as well as a female Yulunggur (the Rainbow-snake). And it is the female Yulunggur that swallows the Wawilak Sisters and their two sons—and consequently appears pregnant—even though this Snake-monster is explicitly a penis that stands erect, touching the clouds, after swallowing them (Berndt 1951:24–25). Furthermore, its belly is homologous with the Earth-mother's womb. Ritual entry into the sacred ground signifies being swallowed by the Earth-mother and entering her womb as well as being swallowed by the snake-penis, since the ground is identified with both their bodies. And, just as initiates are reborn from Kunapipi's uterus, they are regurgitated as “reborn men” from the belly of Yulunggur (Hiatt 1975:155–57).

As mentioned above, the name Kunapipi, amongst other things, means sub-incisure. While the sub-incised penis is symbolic of the Rainbow-snake, the incisure itself symbolizes the Great Mother's uterus. This bisexual Monster Snake is therefore also an ideal vehicle for expressing the richness of this central mythological concept of primordial wholeness. The sub-incised penis is, amongst other things, a womb that has been “opened” by a (phallic) knife, and this presents us with a three-fold juxtaposition of a motif with its inversions: the Earth-mother's act of sexual swallowing, the snake-penis's androgynous act of swallowing, and the (phallic, solar) opening of the sealed womb (through sub-incision).

Thus, as described above, the Rainbow-snake, especially in its role of the long penis, establishes a logical continuum between opposites: it is the means by which male and female, sky and earth, are physically joined together as a single continuous entity. And the androgyny of this snake-penis greatly enriches the expression of this physical continuum between male and female—the conjoining member itself (in the case of Yulunggur, at least) represents a continuous spectrum from male to female, a primordial absence of discrete sexual polarities.

The long penis of Coyote, the Moon's lover, or Yulunggur conjoins the sky and the earth, or the near and far, and this cosmic conjunction, which represents a return to primordial wholeness, is inevitably followed by a disjunction—brought about (explicitly or implicitly, depending on the case) by the severing of the penis. As seen above, this act of severing is at the same time given another cosmic significance: it is performed by some or other variant of the vagina dentata, homologous with the Earth-mother's mouth. Now, the fragmentation of the continuous (or the disjunction of the sky and the earth) is homologous with the phallic opening of the sealed container/womb, since it is the latter event that initially gives rise to the fragmentation of continuous daylight into discrete units of

alternating day and night (see p. 6 see also Liebenberg 2016b for a more detailed discussion). The Earth-mother's act of sexual swallowing is an inversion of opening the sealed womb, as we have just seen. In all three above myths, primordial wholeness (or the continuous) is represented by the conjunction of the sky and the earth, or the near and the far, as well as by the continuous form of the phallic snake. This allows each of these myths to present, in their respective ways, the fragmentation of primordial wholeness in terms of some or other representative of the telluric mouth-vagina biting off the cosmic penis. To appreciate the sophistication of the logical operations present here it is necessary to summarize them in point form:

1. The solar phallic penetration of the sealed telluric womb, which results in the fragmentation of continuous daylight.
2. The translation of point 1 from temporal to spatial terms to produce the fragmentation of continuous space or volume (primordial wholeness) into discrete units of sky and earth (the separation of the sky and the earth).
3. The inversion of point 1 along gender lines to produce the Earth-mother's mouth-vagina, which sexually devours the snake-penis.
4. The transformation of the Lunar Prey, the primary victim of the solar phallic penetration in point 1, into the metonymical phallic snake, so that the latter can conform to the mythic requirements of point 3.
5. The expression of primordial wholeness in terms of the continuous form of the snake-penis that conjoins the near and the far or the sky and the earth. This allows point 2 to be combined with point 3 to produce the climactic event, the severing of the cosmic penis, in all three of the myths.

In Egyptian myth, it is a male earth, Geb, whose cosmic penis stretches up toward his celestial twin sister Nut, even after their incestuous embrace has been forcibly ended, whereas in a Yolngu myth, *The Willy-willy*, the hero's long penis extends from the sky down to the earth to coil like a snake around a young woman and pull her up to the sky (Leeming 2010:103; Warner 1937:254, 520–23; see also Lévi-Strauss 1981:438, 503 for the equivalence of the cosmic rope and cosmic mountain with the long penis in American myth).

Since the Rainbow-snake is representative of primordial wholeness, it follows that it should encompass the various attributes of not only the Sun-hunter and the Earth-mother but also of the Lunar Prey. And this is in fact the case. Firstly, its bisexual nature allows the snake to assimilate the role of the Lunar Prey, which is likewise sexually ambivalent (due to the identification of the lunar wound with the bleeding vagina). It also assumes the Lunar Prey's role of cosmic victim. The onset of temporal periodicity caused by the lunar wound (see p. 6) is represented in spatial terms by the fragmentation of the continuous form of the snake-penis, i.e., the establishment of spatial periodicity. Thus, the Sun-hunter's act of fatally wounding the Lunar Prey becomes the Solar Hero's act of cutting up the Monster Snake or dragon, as, for example, in the Babylonian creation myth, where the dragon, Tiamat, is female. Marduk, the mighty god who slays this dragon, is a solar deity, whereas Tiamat represents the principle of primordial darkness and chaos (Muss-Arnolt 1894:19–20). This pattern of the Solar Hero, or hero that represents the principle of light slaying the dragon of darkness, is found all over the world (Knight 1991:493). Thus, the Monster Snake assumes the Earth-mother's role of swallowing monster, the Lunar Prey's role of androgynous cosmic/cosmogonic victim, and the Sun-hunter's role of death-dealing penis, making it a perfect and thoroughly thought-through representative of the mythic age of primordial wholeness.

Furthermore, the snake sheds its skin, just as spiders, crabs, and certain other creatures change their shells. This is a widespread symbol of death and resurrection (or rejuvenation), and therefore of immortality, in myth (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1970:156). As such it forms a link between the Lunar Prey's death and resurrection and the Rainbow-snake's

cosmogonic fragmentation: the Amazonian Rainbow-snake's skin is cut up to produce the many-colored plumage of birds (a variant of the cosmogony). Significantly, in the Shipaya version, the moon, killed by an arrow, explicitly takes the place of the Rainbow-snake in that his multicolored blood, instead of the snake's multicolored skin, is the source of the chromatic diversity of birds' plumage. Furthermore, the Vilela version of this myth clearly homologizes the opening of the belly/womb of the Monster Snake (Lunar Prey's wound/Earth-mother's vagina) with the cosmogonic fragmentation of the primordial being to produce the variance of birds' plumage, as seen in other versions of this myth (Liebenberg 2016b:180–82, 194–96). Thus, the Rainbow-snake is able to fully assimilate the mythic role of the Lunar Prey or victim.

The *ouroboros* or circular serpent, a snake that bites its own tail, is, like the Rainbow-snake, a global phenomenon, being found from Africa to southern and northern Europe, from Asia and Oceania to Central and South America (Van der Sluijs and Peratt 2009:3–18). It symbolizes, among other things, perpetuity, i.e., the continuous (2009:4). Being an endless circle, which it forms by biting its own tail, makes it ideally suited to express this concept of the continuous; already expressed by the smooth, elongated form of the snake, this idea is taken to its logical conclusion here, so that this creature is effectively a further elaboration of the Rainbow-snake. Like the Rainbow-snake, it has a cosmic function and is often described as encircling the earth. It is also closely identified with the primordial cosmic ocean that encircles the world. In some cultures, it is thought to reside in this cosmic ocean, so that the present world is encircled by the primordial wholeness of the cosmic ocean as well as that of its homologue, the cosmic serpent (2009:9–13). The *ouroboros* is therefore homologous with the Rainbow-snake in terms of its cosmic function, its direct identification with the continuous, and its strong identification with primordial wholeness. And its worldwide distribution suggests that it is of similar antiquity, possibly an alternative form or further aspect of the Rainbow-snake that was conceived at more or less the same time. The Fon of Benin in West Africa have a primordial serpent, *Dā Ayidohwedo*, that encircles the earth and is homologous with the cosmic ocean that does the same. It is also explicitly a Rainbow-snake. Furthermore, like the Australian Rainbow-snake, *Yulunggur*, it is androgynous—the red side of this rainbow is male, the blue side female (2009:12–14). Sources that describe the color pattern of the *ouroboros* repeatedly do so in terms of the rainbow. Thus, the Huichol of central Mexico say that it is “painted red, blue and yellow” (2009:14). The *ouroboros* is also frequently identified with lightning (2009:14–15). Like the rainbow, the lightning bolt (momentarily) conjoins the sky and the earth, and, significantly, the tail of *Dā Ayidohwedo* is thought of as doing exactly this when a lightning bolt strikes the earth (2009:15). Moreover, in ancient Egypt, the *ouroboros* was iconographically identified with the conjunction of the sky and the earth (i.e., primordial wholeness), as manifested by the incestuous union of the earth god Geb and his twin sister Nut, the sky. Geb, in physical conjunction with Nut, is depicted holding an *ouroboros* in his right hand (2009:5–6). The circular serpent is also widely identified with the four pillars (that hold up the sky) and with the axis mundi (2009:13). The latter, which is homologous with the cosmic tree, the cosmic mountain, ladder, stairway, rope, or long penis, serves to conjoin the sky and the earth, like Geb's member. The four cosmic pillars, situated at the cardinal points, have the same function. A further common association of the *ouroboros* with rounded objects (2009:13) indicates its signification of the continuous. The circle, as an endless continuum, is the fullest mathematical expression of this mythological concept.

The Fon serpent is one of the most complete recorded mythical expressions of the continuous. As the *ouroboros*, it encircles the earth, doubling as the endless circle of the primordial ocean, while, as the rainbow, it constitutes a chromatic continuum and also conjoins the sky and earth to bring about the state of primordial wholeness. Furthermore, like the Hindu primal giant *Purusha* and the Australian Rainbow-snake *Yulunggur*, it expresses this primordial wholeness through its androgyny. The Babylonian *Tiamat* likewise is both the personified primeval sea and a sea-monster. And, although it is female, there dwell countless monstrous creatures inside her who “had one body but two heads, the one of a man the other of a woman, and likewise in their several organs they were both male and

female” (Barton 1893:3). Furthermore, “there were creatures in which were combined the limbs of animals of every species” (Ibid.). Here the concept of primordial wholeness is expressed not only through the identification of the serpent with the primeval ocean/darkness/chaos, and through androgyny, but also through the motif, related to the latter, of chimerical monsters that combine the features of all species. This concept follows logically from that of the primal giant that is cut up to transform primordial wholeness into the differentiated, fragmented state of the present world. Tiamat herself is such a primal giant, and she is cut in half by the hero Marduk to create the sky and the earth. Just as the androgynous Purusha is split in half to produce a man and a woman, so, by implication, these chimerical monsters could be cut up to produce all the different animal species as we know them today. In the Hindu myth, this differentiation of species is achieved in an apparently different but homologous way: the man attempts to engage in an incestuous union with the woman, who is essentially his twin.¹⁶ In an attempt to escape his incestuous advances, she changes into one animal after the other; he keeps on changing into the male of the same species and proceeds to couple with her every time. Thus, all the different animals are engendered from this incestuous union. Incest here represents the primordial wholeness of the androgynous primal being (O’Flaherty 1975:27–28, 34–35; Liebenberg 2016b:174). This episode, or series of analogous episodes, is a variant of the fragmentation of the continuous motif or the differentiation of primordial wholeness. It is also found in Greek myth, where Leda (or, in some versions, Nemesis) changes herself into a sequence of different animals to escape the advances of Zeus, who finally copulates with her as a swan. She lays an egg from which Helen of Troy is born (Graves 1955:206–8, 125–26). This myth gives a new reading to an older mythic tradition. In the Pelasgian creation myth, the goddess Eurynome, after coupling with her creation, the serpent Ophion, lays the cosmic egg (which represents primordial wholeness). It is split in two and differentiated into the sun, moon, planets, stars, and earth, with its mountains and rivers, its trees, herbs, and living creatures (1955:27, 207–8). This creation myth conforms closely to the structural pattern of cosmogony as outlined in the creation myths discussed above. Note that this cosmic serpent, which also represents primordial wholeness, has an incestuous relationship with its “mother” Eurynome that identifies it with the various examples above of the snake-penis/lunar victim that consorts with its telluric mother—the difference being that it is no sexual victim: the latter role is visited on its cosmogonic counterpart and offspring, the cosmic egg, when it is split in two. In the myth about Zeus’s exploits, however, it becomes an egg laid by Leda or the goddess Nemesis, fathered by a swan and containing only Helen of Troy and a couple of siblings. The association of this “love-chase” with primordial wholeness and the subsequent differentiation thereof is therefore still present but in a more obscure and tenuous form. This can no longer be classed as a cosmogonic myth. The cosmogonic elements have been rearranged to create a new myth, which, incidentally, Robert Graves (following Johann Bachofen) interprets in terms of a patriarchal overthrow of an earlier matriarchal religious tradition (1955:206–8; see also note 13).

Finally, the Rainbow-snake represents the continuous, and as swallowing monster it therefore assimilates initiates or celebrants to the continuous by swallowing them, thereby returning them to the mythic age—the age of continuous daylight and perpetual life. In certain rites and myths, it is indeed the agent of the ritual return to the mythic age. As such it is homologous with the arrow-ladder, as well as the cosmic stairway, tree, pole, or mountain, the ritual ascent of which likewise returns celebrants to primordial wholeness (Liebenberg 2016b:178–82; see especially 180–82 for a discussion of Amazonian rites and myths in which this logic is particularly rich). This survey of the mythic role of the snake gives some idea of the extraordinary complexity of this figure, which is arguably a direct result of its role as representative of primordial wholeness—a role that logically implies that it contains, in their undifferentiated primordial state, all three other primary mythic agents in this cosmology (the Solar Hunter, the Lunar Prey, and the Earth-mother), just as the primordial dragon Tiamat contains a host of chimerical monsters (see above p. 23).

So, the central mythic concept, from which all the others discussed here can be logically generated, is the phallic penetration of the Lunar Prey that opens the sealed telluric womb.

This is based on direct observation of the lunar and menstrual cycles. It follows from this that the cosmogony can be presented in two equivalent registers, temporal and spatial, respectively—as the opening of the sealed womb/container (to release daylight and all of living nature from the telluric womb) and as the fragmentation of the continuous (i.e., the separation of the sky and the earth). This is inverted, in terms of gender, to produce a third type—the sexual death and rebirth of heavenly bodies through the alimentary canal of the Earth-mother. Furthermore, the fact that, in terms of the solar hunt, a cultural act (the hunt), causes the initial primordial onset of the great cycles of nature implies that the cosmogony can be presented in yet another way—as Creation from pure thought (i.e., pure culture) or from a related cultural act. Thus, the mind of the creator god, which conceives the archetypal ideas from which all of nature is born, operates as a logical inversion, along gender lines, of the cosmogonic womb of the Earth-mother. Here a purely cultural process is set in opposition to a quintessentially natural one. This crucially important aspect of the cosmology, which is implicit in the account of relationships discussed thus far, will be dealt with in the following section.

The Legacy of Mimetic Culture

According to Merlin Donald (1991:162–200, 1998:55–56, 2001:262–69, 2005:283–300; see also Tomasello 2008:57–108, 169–241; Sterelny 2012), language was preceded by a mimetic hominin culture in which information was communicated through gesture and mime. This formed the necessary basis from which language proper could develop. Typically, in this archaic form of communication, the characteristic movements of an animal would be mimed to communicate vital information for the hunt.¹⁷

These mimes could be used to communicate an elaborate strategy for a collective hunt and to coordinate the various roles performed in that hunt (Donald 1991:175). For observers to grasp the idea and reap its benefits, they have to be able to read the representation on two levels. A patent fiction (the mime actions and props) refers to something that does not, as yet, exist, but might well become true in the near future (compare Knight 1998:75–77). The audience might also recognize the validity or “truth” of the logic that the representation expresses: here is a deeper level of truth or reality that precedes actual events and objects and which therefore constitutes the “archetypal” form or idea that can be endlessly reproduced “in the flesh.” Thus, the mythic concept that the idea or image precedes the natural phenomenon to which it refers, i.e., that culture has precedence over nature (see p. 7–10), has a very strong basis in the manifest power of logical thought, as expressed in such mimes.

As mentioned above, the Mbuti of central Africa have a Morning Fire ceremony in which a model of the universe, that is, of the village and the surrounding forest, is constructed around the morning fire. Within this microcosm long twigs are laid out as a model of the hunt that will follow. After the actual hunt the slain animals are placed within the ritual circle representing the village before being shared out (Zuesse 1979:24–25). Although this ritual should not necessarily be seen as an archaic remnant of cultural origins as described above, it does give us some idea of how a creative idea can be expressed through mimetic culture, employing such theatrical props as a model of the village and surrounding forest with “arrows” indicating the proposed action of the planned hunt.

Donald (1991:169–70) also points out that mimetic representation still plays a central role in human society, especially in the arts—some of which, like pantomime or ritual dance, are purely mimetic in his eyes.¹⁸

Early Chinese and Indian dance, Greek and Roman mime, and many other forms of mimetic representation in human civilization trace their origins back to prehistory. Archaeological artefacts have verified that the civilizations of Australian and Tasmanian aborigines have remained unchanged for tens of thousands of years; and these groups have maintained autochthonous dance rituals that are still essentially mimetic: each dancer identifies with, and acts out the role of, a totemic animal.

Such a long-standing tradition entailing the emulation of various natural phenomena by human actors is very likely to lead to the personification of nature. Since humans become accustomed to seeing various aspects of nature being acted out by other humans all the time, as well as emulating these natural phenomena themselves, they would naturally tend to think of these phenomena in anthropomorphic terms (compare Boyer 1998; Knight, Power, and Mithen 1998:129–31). Anthropomorphic thought is a fundamental feature of archaic religious representations, and it is probable that, once language proper had evolved, early conceptual models of the human universe, i.e., mythological systems, were expressed through such a long-standing tradition of theatrical mime used to communicate ideas and information. These mimes would have become increasingly elaborate, employing all the arts and the spoken word to facilitate the communication or dramatic representation of these abstract concepts. Rites such as the Australian and Tasmanian ones to which Donald refers might then have evolved out of such an archaic mimetic tradition. This tradition would explain the anthropomorphic character of the cosmological thought discussed above, as well as mythological thought in general.

As mentioned above, the Mbuti of central Africa have a Morning Fire ceremony in which a model of the universe, that is, of the village and the surrounding forest, is constructed around the morning fire. Within this microcosm long twigs are laid out as a model of the hunt that will follow. After the actual hunt the slain animals are placed within the ritual circle representing the village before being shared out (Zuesse 1979:24–25). Although this ritual should not necessarily be seen as an archaic remnant of cultural origins as described above, it does give us some idea of how a creative idea can be expressed through mimetic culture, employing such theatrical props as a model of the village and surrounding forest with “arrows” indicating the proposed action of the planned hunt.

In the light of this it is reasonable to suspect that, for example, the prehistoric Earth-mother postulated above was initially not a goddess as such, but more simply a proto-scientific concept that explained the workings of the universe in anthropomorphic terms. The whole system of death and rebirth of the heavenly bodies, plants, and animals through the womb of an Earth-mother, as discussed above, is based on the careful observation of natural phenomena. Such a cosmology would explain the mysteries of life and universe by using a hypothesis based on empirical observation and presenting this anthropomorphic idea through a multimedia mime theatre such as the one postulated above. Thus, for example, by modelling the figure of a highly pregnant woman out of the earth itself, i.e., out of clay, by carving it out of stone, or by smearing clay all over the naked body of a real woman, the concept can be expressed that the earth is like a mother, who gives birth to all of nature in daily, monthly, and seasonal cycles. This cosmogonic act of birth could then be communicated by means of a mime drama similar to that performed in the Nuxalk Winter Ceremonial, in which a masked wooden figure of Mother Nature gives birth to all the plants and trees in the form of masked dancers (see p. 8). The elaborate ritual dramas performed annually to facilitate the rebirth of nature in spring, as found in the Nuxalk Winter Ceremonial and the Kunapipi rites, might then have evolved from such a rich theatrical tradition employed to communicate important ideas concerning the nature of the universe and the mystery of life.¹⁹

Furthermore, if, in terms of the solar hunt, the lunar-menstrual cycle is caused by the sun wounding the moon, then an act of culture (the hunt) causes this quintessentially natural event; the precedence of culture over nature (and therefore of the mind over the womb) is thus “confirmed” by empirical observation. If culture precedes nature in the heavens, then the elaborate mime performance of nature’s cycles, and, more specifically, the ideas communicated by this performance, would also have priority over nature. This conforms to the fact that the idea, as expressed through symbolic representations, would have constituted, to all witnesses, the “archetypal” form of an event that will subsequently occur in the real world (e.g., the collective hunt; see above previous page). It follows from this correspondence that nature would have been generated from pure thought. Therefore, all

the mythic material that explicitly or implicitly presents the mind as a cosmogonic “womb” and presents thought, artifacts, and symbolic actions as preceding the natural phenomena that they represent would be validated by this.

Donald’s theory about mimetic culture therefore provides a convincing basis for the explanation of the idealism that permeates both myth and ritual in the material reviewed above. This material, to various degrees, tends toward a concept of the mythic age of the long day as an age of pure culture in which the idea and the ritual acts and artifacts that arose from it reigned supreme. In order to control or regenerate nature, celebrants must return to this age to perform the archetypal acts. They are aided in this by the ritual employment of archetypal artifacts, adornments, music, and dance (see p. 7–10). Furthermore, the sophisticated logic that structures the above cosmology can also be explained as a product of this mimetic scenario, and this aspect will be briefly touched on in the conclusion.

Conclusion

In terms of gene-culture coevolution theory, culture played a major role in the evolution of human cognition (Tomasello 1999; Gintis 2007, 2011). An important implication of this is that beliefs influence adaptive strategies (Henrich and McElreath 2007:557–58). In line with this, Merlin Donald argues that

[t]he human mind is a “hybrid” product of biology and culture. . . . [It] cannot come into existence on its own. It is wedded to a collective process, and the very sources of its experience are filtered through culture. The generation of culture is thus a key question in human evolution (2001:xiii).

Our cultures invade us and set our agendas. Once we have internalized the symbolic conventions of a culture, we can never again be truly alone in semantic space, even if we were to withdraw to a hermitage or spend the rest of our lives in solitary confinement. Big Brother culture owns us because it gets to us early. As a result, we internalize its norms and habits at a very basic level. We have no choice in this. Culture influences what moves us, what we look for, and how we think for as long as we live (2001:299).

Furthermore, Donald (1991:215) proposes that language was initially used to construct conceptual models of the human universe. “Its function was evidently tied to the development of integrative thought—to the grand unifying synthesis of formerly disconnected, time-bound snippets of information. . . . The myth is the prototypal, fundamental, integrative mind tool. It tries to integrate a variety of events in a temporal and causal framework.” Referring to present-day hunter-gatherer societies, he states that “myth permeates and regulates daily life, channels perceptions, determines the significance of every object and event in life” (1991:215).

This article’s analysis of myth accords remarkably well with these ideas of Donald. Thus, a mimetic mode of communication that preceded language determined not only the anthropomorphic character of mythic thought but also gave rise to one of its most fundamental concepts—that of the precedence of culture, and of ideas in particular, over nature. Furthermore, this exalted perception of the power of human thought could have inspired early humans to achieve the extraordinary level of intellectual sophistication that characterizes the logical relationships that structure the cosmology outlined above. There is no room here to elaborate on this point or on its possible implications (in terms of gene-culture coevolution theory) for the evolution of human cognition, and this will be the subject of a future article. The conceptual rigor of these structural relationships of homology, inversion, transposition, and transformation suggests that the entire system was logically generated from a hypothesis based on the observed correspondence of the lunar and menstrual cycles. Through these logical operations this concept of the solar hunt of the Lunar Prey gives rise to the mythic age of the long day, the opening of the sealed container,

the cosmogonic fragmentation of primordial wholeness, the Earth-mother with the mouth-vagina, and the cosmic snake that is her son and spouse. Being representative of the age of primordial wholeness, this snake “contains” within its character all the other agents of the cosmology.

Finally, it should be emphasized once again that, in terms of Donald’s ideas, the development of such an intellectual system could only have occurred after spoken language had evolved—but based, nevertheless, on perceptions that were the product of a long-standing mimetic tradition that continued as a central feature of human culture after language emerged.

Notes

¹ Central to these two concepts is that of the *long day* discussed later in the piece. This mythic concept has its counterpart in that of the *long night*, which is only mentioned in passing. The latter has what amounts to its own fully developed mythology, which systematically inverts, point for point, the mythology of the long day. Myths and rites associated with this alternative system likewise have a global distribution. Possibly the most widely distributed of these is the myth of the universal flood. However, lack of space prevents elaboration on this major aspect of the above cosmology, and it will be the subject of a future article.

² Gregory Schrempf demonstrates that the concept of the continuous and the discrete, as found in these myths, has strong affinities with certain aspects of Western philosophy and mathematics, particularly the paradoxes of Zeno of Elea. His highly significant argument involves Immanuel Kant’s “Transcendental Dialectic” (*Critique of Pure Reason*) and Lévi-Strauss’s work (Schrempf 1992, 1998:215–18; see also Vivieros de Castro 2011:138–43; Lévi-Strauss 1978:339, 353–55, 360–61, 362, 363; Liebenberg 2016b). He also demonstrates other notable correspondences between traditional cosmogonic myths and Western mathematics and philosophy (Schrempf 1992, 1998).

³They also have a variant of the Tupi myth that closely resembles the latter (see Hugh-Jones 1979:268; see also note 12).

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of this concept among the Mehinaku of Amazonia, see Gregor (1985:69–91).

⁵ An initiated man would know the design and easily find his way (Eliade 1958b:62).

⁶ The Australian Kunapipi rites, the charter myth of which forms an important part of the present discussion, center on the figure of Kunapipi (or Gunabibi), who is explicitly an Earth-mother. During the rites, initiates are reborn from her earth-womb, represented by the ceremonial ground or “ring place” and, more particularly, a trench inside this ring place. Furthermore, these rites determine the birth and rebirth of humans and of all the different species of animals and plants, as well as the cycle of the seasons (Berndt 1951:14, 43, 54, 81, 83–84, 146–47; Elkin 1951:xvii–xxi; see also Hiatt 1971:84–85; Eliade 1961:49–51). In various parts of the world one finds initiation rites in which the novice symbolically returns to the womb and is then reborn. As Mircea Eliade points out, a return to the womb of Mother Earth is a fundamental theme in many such rites and related myths (1961:51–66). Additionally, many rites and beliefs relating to childbirth, funerals, and so on, such as the practice of burying the dead in the embryonic position, or in a grave shaped like a womb, testify to the mythic presence of an Earth-mother (Eliade 1958a:242–54, 1960:163–72, 1961:56, 1963:82–83; see also Knight 1991:436–38).

⁷ Lévi-Strauss discusses many examples of mythic characters “who are blocked or pierced above or below, or at the front or the back, and whose positive or negative disability may affect the vagina or the anus, the mouth, the eyes, the nostrils or the ears” (1973:203–4, 1978:185–86). That the woman without a vagina, like the Tariana heroine Ceucy or the Zuni Earth-mother, constitutes the primary form of this motif is suggested by the fact that the piercing action often takes on a sexual character, as in this Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) myth in which the hero cures the two girls of their blindness with his penis (1981:462, 404, see also 1970:310–11, 1973:203–4).

- ⁸ The Nlaka'pamux also have a version of the Sanpoil myth in which Coyote's daughter suffers an identical fate (Lévi-Strauss 1981:375).
- ⁹ In an analogous Barasana myth the Ayawa make their grandmother pregnant by feeding her a fruit filled with their sperm (Hugh-Jones 1979:223, 267), whereas in the Mehinaku myth referred to above the fruit of the pequi tree is directly identified with the penis of the Great Alligator spirit (Gregor 1985:78–79). The sexual symbolism of this fruit is built into myth, ritual, and belief in Mehinaku culture (Gregor 1985:78). See also Hugh-Jones (1979:296).
- ¹⁰ According to the same informant “this hut is a uterus too: that is why we have it on the sacred ground.” (Berndt 1951:39).
- ¹¹ The equivalence of coitus and eating makes sense, from an empirical point of view, when it is the vagina that “eats” the penis but not when it is the penis that is said to “eat” the vagina. This suggests that the former could be the primary form of this motif.
- ¹² In a Barasana version of the same myth, the heroes turn into birds and frogs whose calls likewise demarcate daily and meteorological periodicity respectively (Hugh-Jones 1979:268).
- ¹³ Compare this to the lengthy tradition of interpreting such data in terms of a patriarchal overthrow of a hypothetical archaic matriarchal culture, first proposed by Johann Bachofen in 1861.
- ¹⁴ For a discussion of the sound of this instrument as a structural equivalent of the ritual return to the mythic age, i.e., of the progression from the discrete back to the continuous, see Liebenberg (2016b:171–72).
- ¹⁵ The swallowing monster is likewise a global phenomenon. In northern New Guinea, for example, amongst the Yabim, Bukaua, Kai, and Tami, initiates are physically “swallowed” by ritually entering a structure of about a hundred feet long modelled in the shape of the swallowing monster. At one end there are two great eyes and a gaping mouth through which they enter. The structure tapers off towards the other end. The sound of bullroarers from within the monster represents its voice. The circumcision operation the initiates undergo inside the structure is identified with the monster's act of swallowing the young men, and the wound made by the operator's knife is explained as a bite or scratch made by the monster's teeth (Frazer 1987:694–95).
- ¹⁶ The same incestuous union of a male and female half that used to be a single being happens in the North American motif of the split twins (see Liebenberg 2016b:177–78).
- ¹⁷ Donald (1991:163–64, 175–80, 200) argues that *Homo erectus* sustained such a mimetic culture, a successful and stable survival strategy, for over a million years. This enabled them, among other things, to plan and coordinate elaborate collective hunts featuring various specialized roles, establish a sophisticated tool making industry, maintain a seasonal home base, use fire, and cook food.
- ¹⁸ There is reason to suppose that communal song and dance preceded the evolution of mimetic communication. Robin Dunbar (1993, 1996, 2004:193–97, 2009:195–96, 223–29; Dunbar et al. 2012; see also Freeman 2000) argues that social cohesion in the great apes is achieved primarily through grooming, which releases endorphins that create a pleasant, relaxing effect in the subject, thereby creating a bond with the groomer. However, as group size in early hominins increased, this became impractical, since individuals would no longer have had enough time available to groom everyone else in the group. Collective song and dance releases endorphins in participants that have a powerful social bonding effect, and it is probable that such social activity would have played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion as hominin groups sizes steadily increased. This means that collective song and dance would have been a central feature of such early hominin cultures. Furthermore, sustained activity of this sort leads to an endorphin rush that can cause the sensation of an ecstatic or out-of-body experience, as occurs in the San trance dance of southern Africa. Thus, the roots of religion, particularly that of the shaman's ecstatic flight, could go back much further than the emergence of spoken language. While Donald (1991:169–70) argues that collective music and dance evolved out of mimetic behaviour, the reverse might well be true. In a recent article I argue that an early hominin collective song and dance routine, as proposed by Dunbar, would have created ideal conditions for the evolution of mimetic communication and certain fundamental aspects of human cognition (Liebenberg 2017). It

makes sense to suppose that the archaic rites to which Donald refers are rooted in such a collective song and dance routine, which became the central platform for the mimetic communication and “storage” of traditional knowledge once mimesis was established.

¹⁹ Pascal Boyer (1996:92–95) argues that therianthrope and other otherworldly representations are counterintuitive and that the attention-grabbing nature of such representations played a vital role in their successful cultural transmission. Nevertheless, the above suggests that religious thought, particularly that of an ontological nature, is strongly rooted in a mimetic cultural tradition and that the expression through an elaborate mime theatre of an ontology based primarily on the coincidence of the lunar and menstrual cycles led to the personification of nature, i.e., to the anthropomorphism that today seems counterintuitive. Compare this to Chris Knight, Camilla Power and Ian Watts, who explain anthropomorphism in terms of Paleolithic gender politics (Knight, Power and Mithen 1998:129–31; Power and Watts 1997).

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