

MYTH AND MATERIAL CULTURE: SOME SYMBOLIC INTERRELATIONS

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The purpose of this paper is to try to show that the possession and use of a certain material or technical item may be linked to the view which a society may have of itself and of the world in which it exists. There is an old and admirable precedent for this type of approach in Marcel Mauss' essay on the Eskimos (1906) in which he points out that the Eskimos' failure to adopt the snow shoe from the neighbouring Indians--an adoption which would have permitted them to hunt in winter and thus to make more use of their meagre environment--was related to the seasonal variation in their economic activities which, in turn, had social and ideological concomitants. Hunting in winter would not have fitted in with the organization of the last two aspects of Eskimo society. More recently Lévi-Strauss has sought confirmatory evidence for conclusions reached in his South American myth analyses by reference to the distribution of certain material objects. One of these items comes under the generic term of hollow tubes which cover such miscellaneous things as blowguns, musical instruments, cassava squeezers, canoes, and drink troughs.

Lévi-Strauss' original interest in hollow tubes seems to have arisen from the examination of the part played by the sloth in South American mythology (1965-66). One of the conclusions arrived at in this study is that in South America there is a moral philosophy preoccupied with certain immoderate usages of the digestive tube and that its distribution coincides with that of the blowgun which is seen as the technological inverse of the digestive tube. The blowgun is a hollow tube through which passes a dart, propelled by breath from the mouth and which will turn game into meat, which, in its turn, is taken in through the mouth and after passing through the digestive tube is expelled as excrement. Lévi-Strauss has since dealt at greater length with the subject of hollow tubes (cf. 1966), and it seems clear that their variety, their distribution, and, perhaps, their symbolic importance, are extremely widespread in tropical South America. However, as with too many of Lévi-Strauss' claims, the evidence is not too well portrayed nor sufficiently controlled to be convincing. In this essay, while readily and willingly admitting the influence of Lévi-Strauss' ideas, I want to concentrate on the existence of hollow tubes in one particular area and to investigate how far the presence or absence of two particular forms of hollow tube, the blowgun and the hair tube, can be related to other social features.

I

The specific area of which I treat is the Rupununi district and the Upper Essequibo region of southern Guyana (ex-British Guiana) and

the small part of Brazil across the Sierra Acarai from the Upper Essequibo, an area drained by the headwater tributaries of the Mapuera and Trombotas Rivers. The northern part of this whole region is mainly savannah grassland, but there is a considerable amount of tropical forest which appears either as galleries to the numerous watercourses or as cover on many of the hills and mountains. Travelling southward from the savannah region one first passes through a strip of low bush and then comes to tropical forest, the form of vegetation which covers the whole of the southern area.

The northern or savannah region is inhabited by a number of tribes of which the most important are the Carib-speaking Macusi, and the Arawak-speaking Wapishiana together with their subgroup, the Atorai.<sup>2</sup> The southern or forest region is inhabited by a number of small groups, some of which, like the Waiwai and the Parukoto, are Carib-speaking, and others, like the Taruma and the Mawayena,<sup>3</sup> are Arawak-speaking. Thus both regions contain tribes from the two linguistic groups so that the differences between the tribes of the two regions are not the result of linguistic differences, and here, as elsewhere in South America, cultural boundaries are not coterminous with linguistic ones. The cultural difference between the two regions with which this paper is concerned is the fact that the tribes of the northern region possess the blowgun but not the hair tube, while the tribes of the southern region possess the hair tube but not the blowgun.<sup>4</sup> First will be examined the distribution of the blowgun and an attempt made to explain it by geographical, historical, and environmental reasons.

The Danish ethnographer, Jens Yde, posed the question as to why the Waiwai have not adopted the blowgun, and he wrote,

The absence of blowguns is another feature which distinguishes these peoples from those to the north. Curare is known, but only for arrow points to be used with the bow. The absence of the blowgun among the Waiwái and the Mawayéna may be accounted for by the simple fact that the *Arundinaria Schomburgkii* which must be used for the inner blowgun tube does not grow in the region.... Still a relatively brisk trade has been going on for years between the Waiwái and the Wapisiana; the latter receive bows and cassava graters from the Waiwái in return for cutlasses, axes, and other useful objects. It should therefore be quite natural if the Waiwái had been interested in acquiring blowguns from the Wapisiana. The explanation may be that the Waiwái did not really get acquainted with their northern neighbours until the time had come when blowguns had become obsolete among the Wapisiana, and replaced by introduced firearms, after which the blowguns were reduced to mere toys for the Wapisiana boys, as they are in our days.

So the absence of the blowgun may be regarded as an evidence of the lack of intercommunication in earlier times between the Waiwái and their neighbours to the north (1960:89-90).

Yde is undoubtedly right about the curare, and Lowie who assumed a correlation between the distribution of the blowgun and curare was wrong (1963:11). For while it is true to say that the blowgun is

unlikely to be adopted (at least, in its South American form) unless a powerful poison is available, the reverse is not so acceptable-- the possession of a powerful poison will not necessarily lead one to abandon the bow in favour of the blowgun. Indeed the type of poisoned arrow point used by the tribes of the southern area is technically very similar in construction to the blowgun dart used in the northern area; in both areas the poisoned point is nicked so that it will break off in the wound.

On some other aspects Yde is not so correct, for while the material used for the inner tube of the blowgun may be absent from the southern area, the palm used for the outer casing does grow there. It was recognised by a Macusi who accompanied Schomburgk to the region in 1843 (1845:50), and more recently Nicholas Guppy, a botanist, noted that the Waiwai traded this palm wood (Cuatrecasea Spruceana) to the Macusi and the tribes beyond (1958:52). Thus there are in the southern area two of the necessary raw materials, and a trade route which leads to the source of another.

Nor is it correct to say that the tribes of the southern region are unaware of the blowgun because by the time contact with the Wapishiana had begun this weapon had become obsolete among the northern tribes. The Mawayena knew of the blowgun and Schomburgk expressly states that "the remarkable tube, or blow-pipe, the Cura of the Macusis, is known to them only from description" (1845:50).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in 1843, there was less than two days walk between the closest Taruma and Atorai villages, and, by luck, Schomburgk actually mentions the blowguns hanging up in the houses of the most southerly Atorai village (1845:32).

In other words there seems to be no chronological,<sup>6</sup> geographical, and technical reasons why the tribes of the southern region should not have adopted the blowgun if they had so wished. Nor can the distribution of the blowgun be readily explained by reference to the obvious environmental differences between the savannah and the forest. The modes of subsistence and forms of economic exploitation are very similar in the two environments; the tribes of the northern region are not truly savannah Indians but forest ones and they still rely on the forest for most of their livelihood, that is to say all their agriculture and most of their hunting and gathering. Nor would there appear to be anything in the nature of the blowgun which makes it a more suitable weapon for a savannah environment. The Guyanese form of the blowgun is about 10 ft. long and may not be the easiest weapon to carry through dense forest but there are numerous examples of jungle dwellers who use the blowgun, even types which are twice the length. Furthermore the northern tribes do not necessarily limit the use of the blowgun to the open country. This is not to say that there is not some ecological reason which I have failed to identify that may account for the distribution of the blowgun through this area, but simply to affirm that the most obvious ones provide no adequate explanation. Furthermore, if an ecological explanation can be found which will explain the distribution of the blowgun in this area, it will not nullify the subject of this paper which is concerned to show that other aspects of the respective cultures can be correlated with the absence or presence of the blowgun.

The argument so far has followed the assumption which is implicit in the writings of Yde (1960) and Lowie (1963) that, given

the availability of certain material necessities, knowledge of the blowgun will automatically lead to its acceptance. There may well be people who, on becoming aware of the blowgun, have abandoned their traditional weapons in favour of it--the Jivaro are an example (cf. Stirling 1938)--but one could equally well argue the opposite, particularly with reference to the area under consideration. The Macusi and Wapishiana restrict the use of the blowgun to shooting birds and monkeys, and use the bow and arrow for other game. Thus the hunter from the northern area needs to carry two weapons, while his counterpart from the southern region can accomplish the same tasks with a bow and a variety of different arrows. The situation is even more problematic since the Macusi shoot wild pig with a poison-tipped arrow of the same construction as the southern group's poisoned arrows (Farabee 1924:56). The single, and often mentioned, advantage of the blowgun is its silence but this feature can be exaggerated since I have seen monkeys shot with a bow and arrow not disturbed by the relatively small amount of noise which this weapon makes. It is also difficult to reconcile the noise advantage of the blowgun with the speed by which it was rendered obsolete by firearms. While the gun is a far more effective weapon in terms of killing power, it is not only very noisy but also suffers one clear disadvantage in comparison with the curare point. The relaxing effect of this poison means that the monkey frequently loosens its hold as it dies and thus falls to the ground while the animal killed by gunshot rarely does so.

The question which deserves asking is "Why did not the northern tribes abandon the blowgun when they became acquainted with (and even started using) the detachable, poisoned arrow point?" While no definite answer can be given to this question, a possible solution presents itself. Skill with the blowgun may be the means by which the hunter's prowess is judged, and the use of the weapon be more related to a system of values than to a mode of subsistence.<sup>7</sup> If this is so, it does help explain a number of other things. It gives a clue as to why the tribes of the southern region did not accept the blowgun--because among them the blowgun was not concerned with the evaluation of the good hunter, there was no reason for them to adopt a weapon which is difficult to make and to learn to use, and is probably less effective than the weapons they already possessed. It also helps explain why the tribes of the northern area retained the blowgun while not only aware of but actually using poisoned arrow points, and why the blowgun was so quickly superseded by firearms: the last not merely being more efficient but also carrying high status value which a variant of the bow and arrow would probably lack and thus the bow would not be a competitor to the blowgun in the status system.

The other hollow tube with which this paper deals is the hair tube which has limited distribution in Amazonia, but the centre of its use and elaboration lies in the southern region of the area with which this paper is concerned (see Yde 1965:208-12). Furthermore the hair tube is completely absent among the tribes of the northern region, and the limit of the distribution of the blowgun thus coincides with the boundary of the hair tube's distribution. It must be understood that these tubes are not the only ones possessed by the tribes of the two regions, but they are the only ones which are mutually



exclusive and it is therefore worth concentrating attention on them. It is quite possible that the other tubes which all the tribes share, such as flutes, have different symbolic values in the two regions but the ethnography, particularly that of the northern tribes, is not good enough to allow easy recognition of such variations.<sup>8</sup>

The hair tube is made out of either bamboo or palm wood.<sup>9</sup> The hair is fixed in a pigtail and bound with cord, and the hair tube is threaded on to the pigtail. Hair tubes are worn by males only, but very young boys do not wear them since their hair is kept short in order to help them grow. Slightly older boys and unmarried young men wear long undecorated tubes (usually made from palm wood), while adult men wear shorter decorated tubes of bamboo. Both types of tube finish over the buttocks indicating that the older the man the longer the hair; this assumption is supported by the ethnographer's statements that boys wear longer tubes than unmarried men and that the tip of an adult man's pigtail should show through the bottom of the tube. The adoption of the adult tube coincides with the adoption of other signs of manhood such as the wearing of white bead armbands and the piercing of the nasal septum so that feather decorations may be worn in the nose. It is not until this is done that a man may wear full ceremonial dress (Fock 1963:159-60). At the same time a man loses the designation *okopuchi*, a term which has the connotation of child but literally means 'little corpse' (Fock 1963:151), and is thus a clear indication of the non-social status of the uninitiated man. Yde stress the great importance that is attached to the hair tube by the Waiwai and mentions that a man will continue to wear it even in situations in which it would appear to be an inconvenience, such as while sleeping or bathing. In mourning a close relative removes his hair tube while a more distantly related man cuts off the tip of his pigtail. Women do not wear hair tubes, and they let their hair hang loose (although it may be knotted while they are engaged in energetic work) and long. Girls have their hair cut at shoulder length, and the youngest girls, like their male counterparts, wear their hair short. A woman's hair is cut at her first menstruation and when she is in mourning.

Fock makes clear statements about the meaning of hair among the Waiwai; of men, he writes, "A long pigtail is a Waiwai's pride, and probably also a sign of manhood" (Fock 1963:163), and of women, that "the seat of laziness is in the hair and the ornaments" (1963:154). This strongly suggests an opposition between virile activity associated with the constrained hair of men and passivity and laziness associated with women's loose hair. Certainly the treatment of the hair, here as elsewhere, would appear to symbolise social status; full social status for men and women being indicated by full length hair, among the former constrained and among the latter loose. This further fits with ideas about hard and soft which are regarded as male and female qualities respectively. One would like to know how far full social status reflects full sexual status, but the evidence, other than the circumstantial indications which are implicit in social status, is slight and there is little in the ethnographies concerning sexual behaviour. A girl must avoid sexual intercourse at the time of her initiation, that is when her hair is cut short (Fock 1963:157). There are also two other situations in which sexual intercourse is prohibited: for a man while he is making curare

(Yde 1965:113), and for a woman while she is making the most popular type of cassava beer in which fermentation is induced by the growth of mold (Yde 1965:45-46). These two activities clearly have something in common since they are both processes by which purely natural products transcend their normal quality and take on exceptional powers. The list of prohibitions associated with these activities (of which abstinence from sexual intercourse is only one) clearly indicate the temporary non-social status of those involved in their production, and supports the idea that full social status and full sexual status are closely interwoven.

There is some justification for accepting in this context Berg's hypothesis of hair as a symbol of genital displacement (1951), but more for taking Leach's reformulation of it in sociological terms and interpreting Waiwai hair as symbolising libidinous energy (1958). This association appears at various points in Waiwai ideas. In their version of the Yurupary myth, a theme which is found widely spread through Amazonia, a man persuades his daughter's husband to go into a cave. There the young man meets a dragon which tries to swallow him. The young man saves himself by hanging on to a tree, but as a result of his experience he loses all his hair, becomes covered with black body paintings, dies temporarily, and becomes an infallible hunter (Fock 1963:91-92). There is clearly a vagina dentata motif in this myth<sup>10</sup> and the man who survives, although he dies temporarily and is shorn of his sexual power (he is quite clearly not castrated which suggests that hair represents sexual power not the genitals per se), achieves full manhood as symbolised in his hunting prowess and a full cultural personality as symbolised in the body paint.

Certainly one cannot fail to note the almost total lack of interest in the penis throughout the Guiana region, and the great expenditure of time and care which is bestowed on the hair. Among the Waiwai this reaches its apotheosis in the highly decorated hair tube of the full adult man, and it is to the meaning of ornaments which one must turn next. It has already been indicated that full ceremonial dress is the prerogative of adult men and is thus associated with full socio-sexual status. This can be taken a step further by reference to the Waiwai myth about the origin of ornaments which were given to them by an aquatic people, usually represented by the anaconda (Fock 1963:48-50). The ceremonial hair tube is specifically listed as one of the items received, and it is quite explicit in the myth that all the decorative objects received from the anaconda people are cultural items. This same theme of ornaments being symbolic of culture crops up elsewhere; there is an interesting incident in another Waiwai myth where a sloth at a dance festival is dressed in ornaments and is invited by a woman to have sexual intercourse with her. The sloth takes off his costume to do so and is immediately rejected by the woman because he is so ugly. He is thus condemned to become or remain an animal, a fate which overtakes other characters in the myth when they fail to marry (Fock 1963:56-67). It is clear that marriage is a sign of human quality (culture), and that no man is a complete man without a wife is demonstrated by the fact that an unmarried man cannot become or remain (if a widower) a village leader because he is not regarded as a fully valid member of the community (Fock 1963:205). It seems that marriage symbolises not simply full adult status but because it is concerned with sexuality it also

represents legitimate and socialised sexual intercourse which is ultimately creative, and is in contrast to the extramarital relationships which are the main source of conflict in the society and thus ultimately destructive.

To try to summarise some of this; among the Waiwai full social being is expressed by marriage and by wearing ornaments, particularly that one related to the hair, the treatment of which is another indicator of social status. Hair, however, as a symbol of sexuality represents, by itself, a highly ambiguous force with power both to create and destroy. This suggests that the hair tube is not simply a symbol of social being but a socialising agent; the hair is not simply physically constrained in the tube but the power it symbolises is, at the same time, figuratively constrained. Thus the ambivalent symbolic value of the hair is directed through the tube towards a cultural end, and once again this happens both literally and figuratively, for the mass of ornaments at the end of the hair tube is a symbol of culture and the ambivalent force has been socialised.

Turning back to the blowgun, it is now apparent that there are some clear parallels between it and the hair tube, and also some interesting variations. Firstly, there is the posited status bestowing function of the blowgun which compares with the undoubted similar function of the hair tube. Secondly, there is an inversion between them; the blowgun starts at the front and goes up, the hair tube starts at the back and points down. But finally, and perhaps most important of all, is the nature of what passes through the tube; in the case of the hair tube this has just been made clear so it is possible to concentrate on the blowgun. Through the latter passes a dart which turns game (nature) into meat (culture) which, in itself, would afford an interesting comparison with the transforming power of the hair tube but which is almost devoid of interest when one considers the motive force behind the dart--breath. Throughout this area breath is regarded as a highly ambiguous force with the power both to kill and to cure.<sup>11</sup>

The claim is now made that these tubes are not simply technical or aesthetic objects but also some sort of energy transformers, and thus their distribution will have concomitant variation at the level of ideas. To investigate this certain mythic themes will be examined.

## II

Three myth themes have been selected for this examination: these are those dealing with the origin of women, the origin of cultivated plants, and the origin of fire. The selection is not purely arbitrary since I have been concerned to choose themes which deal with creation and versions of which are well represented from both regions. I have further limited myself in selecting from the northern region those myths collected in Guyana, that is to say that area most closely juxtaposed to the southern region, and have not included versions from the Macusi and Wapishiana who live in Brazil. For the sake of space it has been necessary to summarise the myths and concentrate on the incidents which I regard as immediately relevant.

The Macusi origin of women myth runs as follows: The sun placed the alligator in charge of his fish trap, but the alligator always



ate the fish himself. The sun was very angry and in order to appease him the alligator offered him his daughter as a wife. However, the alligator had no daughter so he carved a woman out of the wood of the hogplum tree, but he failed to complete his work and left the woman without a vagina. This part of the woman was made by a woodpecker who was looking for food (Roth 1915:135). Thus the woman was created as a result of two incidents of oral greed--first the alligator's and secondly the woodpecker's.

The Wapishiana myth on the same topic is, as recorded, very brief. The first woman was made from the dung of the alligator but she was displeasing to man because of her smell so she was remade from man's left forearm (Ogilvie 1940:64-65).<sup>12</sup> To help fit this myth in with the scheme outlined further on, I must resort to some special pleading, and in spite of Ogilvie's experience query the use of the word 'dung.' One of the particular natural habits of the alligator is that it collects inside itself the undigestable parts, such as skin and bones, of the animals which it eats. From time to time it comes out on to the bank and vomits out this matter which has congealed into a ball weighing as much as 6-8 lbs. (von Ihering 1963:108). My plea is that it was from one of these deposits that the first and unpleasing (the bad smell fits well with the alligator's foetid breath) woman was made.

All the myths dealing with this same theme which have been recorded in the southern region, there are five--two Waiwai (Farabee 1924:172-3; and Fock 1963:38-42), two Taruma (Farabee 1918:143-5; and Ogilvie 1940:70-72), and one Mawayena (Farabee 1918:159) are basically similar to one another. They all tell of twin culture heroes, and in each case they want a woman and go in search of one. A number of different animals, which also vary from one myth to the next, help the twins in their quest. In two versions (one from each language group) the final assistance comes from an otter whom the twins mistake for a woman and rape (in the eye, in Fock's Waiwai version). The otter then tells the twins they must fish for the woman which they go and do, but when they have caught her they find that she is useless because she has a fish in her vagina. The younger brother ignores the warnings about this, copulates with the woman and is castrated. He is repaired by his elder brother, who, by use of a vegetable juice, also removes the woman's impediment. In this series of myths both the woman and her completion result from sexual desire.

The interpretation of these myths and the identification of the opposing themes from the two areas will be delayed until the other myths have been retailed. In the northern region the myths dealing with the origin of cultivated plants are very similar for both the Macusi and the Wapishiana and have a Tree of Life motif. In the Macusi version the twin culture heroes are hungry, but the agouti who knows where the food is will not help them. The twins are helped by a squirrel who shows them where the Tree of Life which bears all the cultivated plants is located. The twins cut the tree down and plant the seeds (Farabee 1924:83-84). In the Wapishiana version, it is the younger of the two heroes who is the guardian of the cultivated food, and who provides for the other Indians. However, the Indians are greedy and go in search of more food, find the Tree of Life, and collect all the food they want.

The culture hero is angry and cuts the tree down, thus leaving men to fend for themselves (Farabee 1918:110-12). In both the Macusi and Wapishiana versions, cultivated plants are the result of oral greed, but the story does not end there since in both versions the cutting down of the Tree of Life results in a destructive flood which wells up from the felled tree. In the Macusi myth the twins save themselves by climbing a palm tree and for the duration of the flood the sun does not shine. In the Wapishiana story the majority of the Indians perish in the flood but a few save themselves by using a duck's beak as a canoe.

In the southern region, the origin of cultivated plants exists as an incident in the myth concerning the adventures of the twin culture heroes, and is closely related to the part dealing with the origin of women although in the Waiwai version it occurs before the appearance of the woman and in the Taruma version after. In the Taruma myth the cultivated plants are obtained from the father of the woman whom the heroes fished up from the river. The woman's father is an anaconda and he comes to pay a visit to his daughter and son-in-law. Before his arrival the woman warns her husband that he must ask her father for the cultivated plants which he owns, but the husband when confronted by his father-in-law is too frightened to do so. The anaconda leaves without being asked for the plants, and as he slips back into the water the woman, in despair, cuts off her father's tail on which he carries all the cultivated plants (Farabee 1918:147-9). There are two points to be made here; firstly, the cultivated plants were nearly lost because of the man's oral continence, and secondly, they were obtained through what is undoubtedly the woman's sexual incontinence.<sup>13</sup>

The Waiwai version is limited to the origin of cassava and as mentioned above the incident occurs before the appearance of the woman, and in the context of the myth sequence would appear to have some bearing on the meaning. The twins go out looking for the wild root of which their diet consists, but they find a different plant which they taste. After this they lie down and go to sleep, and while they are asleep they develop huge sexual organs (they had previously lacked any). When they awake they decide that they are bored with eating wild roots and they ask an old jaguar woman to create something better. The jaguar woman goes out to a clearing in the forest and defecates, and from her excrement the first cassava grows. This first cassava is not quite right, and the jaguar woman then burns herself to death and from her bones arises the real cassava. From this brief interlude, the story returns to the twins' new found sexual potential and their search for a woman (Fock 1963:40-42). The order in this myth would seem to be drawing attention to the interchangeable symbolic values of oral and sexual appetites. Also there is a further point here to which it is worth drawing attention and that is the role of the jaguar's excrement. Its structural position is almost identical to that of the otter which was raped and the alligator's dung (vomit?) which proved to be an unsuitable material from which to create woman. Each represents a partial failure.

The last set of myths to be considered are those dealing with the origin of fire. Among the Macusi it appears as part of the main creation myth; an old toad who has become the foster mother

of the twins is the owner of fire. She vomits it up when she wants to use it and then swallows it again. The younger brother develops a great appetite for fire eating as a result of which the fire is lost. The twins are then taught how to make fire by the crane who does it by striking his beak against a rock (Roth 1915:135).

In the Wapishiana version fire is given to a woman by a maam (a small game bird, *Tinamolis elegans*) who then marries her. She is not allowed to tell her family about the fire, and the maam has a row with his father-in-law who cannot understand why his daughter spends so much time collecting old (fire) wood. As a result of this the maam flies away (Farabee 1918:113-4).

There appears to be no recorded Waiwai myth dealing with this topic, and the Taruma one is yet a further incident in the twin culture heroes story. The younger brother is married to the woman who was fished out of the river and she insists on eating alone because she has the secret of fire and can cook her food. The elder brother asks her for her secret, and threatens to rape her whereupon the ball of fire rolls out of her vagina where she keeps it. In the process it loses its heating quality, but the elder brother restores this by adding to it hot plants such as peppers (Farabee 1918:145-7).

There are some striking and consistent difference between the myths of the two areas, but before going on to emphasise these it will be helpful to say a quick word about the cosmological views held by these people. Throughout the area the cosmos is regarded as being divided into layers, one of which is that occupied by human beings. The human level is never the top or bottom one, but always at an intermediate level and in the simplest cosmic forms one has only three layers with one above and one below the human level. Although each layer is regarded as being identical in appearance to the human level, those lower than the human level are associated with water, and those higher than the human level with the sky (Fock 1963:101-3; and im Thurn 1883:360-3). Thus in gross outline the cosmos consists of the earth in the middle, the water below, and the sky above.

The most important distinction to notice between the myths of the two regions is that in the northern region (i.e., the blow-gun area) creation occurs from the upper level,<sup>14</sup> and in the southern region (i.e., the hair tube area) from the lower level. In the case of the origin of women it is from a tree as against water, for cultivated plants it is also from trees as against water, and for fire it is mouth as against vagina which can be understood to reflect the same distinction of above and below. However, one should also note that none of these creations is successful at first attempt. The examples of the alligator's dung and the jaguar's excrement have already been pointed out, but initial failure is a feature of most of the myths. The Macusi and Waiwai women were incomplete, fire is gained but loses its heating quality or is actually lost, and only in the origin of cultivated plants associated with the Tree of Life is this theme not obvious although even here the felling of the tree results in a destructive flood which could well be regarded as a failure. None of the creations is easy and in all of them the heroes are aided by various characters, mainly animals, and it is possible to recognise a pattern in their nature. Thus in the

northern region, the woman is completed by a bird, the art of making fire is taught to the twins by a bird or a woman marries a bird who has the secret of fire, the Indians who survive the flood save themselves in a duck's beak, and the twins in their search for the Tree of Life are helped by a squirrel after an agouti has refused assistance. It is quite clear that all these helpers are above or belong to a realm which is above in relation either to those they are assisting or to the initial failure or to both.

The failures in themselves have an important function and one can for example compare the failure of alligator's dung (vomit?) to be a suitable material out of which to create a woman with the twins' rape of the otter. Both these animals are mediators in as much as they belong to two levels, land and water. The otter directs the twins to a lower level and the twins' mistake in thinking the otter is a woman is particularly stressed among the Waiwai where the animal is raped in the eye, that is to say, above rather than below. With regard to the Wapishiana story, after the alligator's deposit proves useless the creation is achieved at a higher level, from a man's forearm. It is now possible to explain why I doubt Ogilvie's description of the material used to make the first woman as 'dung' and suspect that vomit is more accurate. Not only does this relate to a known characteristic of the alligator but when compared with the jaguar's excrement it stands as above rather than below, and it also fits in with the general upward trend in the search of creation which is a feature one has identified in the northern area. The reader's refusal to accept this reinterpretation does not nullify anything since the upward movement is still present, it simply lacks certain reinforcing details.

Furthermore an oral as opposed to an anal symbolism fits in much better with another characteristic which distinguishes the northern from the southern area, for creation is not simply associated with above and below in the respective areas but also with oral and sexual incontinence. The one clear exception to this is the case of cassava in the southern region which results from oral incontinence but it has been pointed out that in the context of the myth the interchangeable symbolic value of hunger and sex is stressed at this point.

This distinction between creation from above and below, and its correlation with oral and sexual incontinence, is coincidental with the distribution of the blowgun and hair tube respectively. It is now suggested that the tentative interpretation placed on these tubes, as means of controlling (or, perhaps, socialising) ambivalent, i.e., creative and destructive, forces can be related to this. In their respective areas the tubes are associated with the cosmic levels which are endowed with creative attributes. In the northern and blowgun area creation is associated with oral incontinence and the upper cosmic level in the southern and hair tube region creation is associated with sexual incontinence and the lower cosmic level.

However, there appears to be a contradiction in this since it can be seen from the myths that creativity is the result of uncontrolled or unsocialised activity, while the tubes symbolise these forces controlled and socialised. This is not quite the stumbling block which it would appear to be at first sight, and in the



southern region, at least, where the ethnography is much better a solution can be offered. Fock has noted the frequent recurrence of the life-in-death motif in Waiwai mythology (1963:100), and this is apparent not only in the myths recounted above but in most of the other myths recorded by Fock. A further key to unlocking this puzzle is the Waiwai story of the origin of cassava which involves just such a theme; real cassava is created as a result of the jaguar's death, but her effort to make it from her excrement was only partially successful. This clearly indicates that defecation is a sort of death, but not quite death enough, and this in turn suggests that continence is life, and more particularly, perhaps, social existence. Continence is another example of hardness<sup>15</sup> which, it has been postulated, is also symbolised by men in the treatment of their hair. Hardness is a male virtue, but it is also, by its constraint and continence, a sterile one and cannot in itself lead to creativity which requires the help of women, incontinence and softness. Tubes are a means by which natural forces are directed towards cultural ends, but even when this is done, nature must still exert itself if the world is to go round.

Much of this is speculative (it is meant to be) and there are certain points about which one would like much more information. Even so, and without going into them very deeply, it is possible to indicate certain other cultural features which fit in with the scheme just outlined. For example, the differences in the rites observed by girls at their first menstruation. A Macusi girl is secluded in her hammock which is hung as high as possible in the roof of the house and after the end of the period she is made to sit on a stone while she is whipped (Roth 1915:310-11). A Waiwai girl at her first menstruation is secluded in a special enclosure, she has to sit on the ground on a piece of soft, white, bark and let her blood drain into the ground (Fock 1963:154-7). There are numerous other requirements common to both areas, most of which are concerned with forms of continence--dietary, visual, oral, and anal--but the features which are different can be expressed in an opposition of above and below, and hard and soft. There is a similar contrast in funerary practices; the Macusi and the Wapishiana bury their dead (Farabee 1918:100; and 1924:81),<sup>16</sup> while the Waiwai and the Taruma cremate their dead (Farabee 1924:171; and 1918:141). Both these sets of behaviour seem to fit well with their respective practitioners' views concerning the nature of the cosmic levels in terms of their creative and destructive attributes.

Within the area under discussion it has been possible to identify certain concomitant variations in the fields of material culture, myth, and, to a lesser extent, in ritual practices; however, it has not been possible to recognise similar variations in social organisation. In both regions the characteristic features of the social organisation are lack of emphasis on descent, the importance of residence in ordering social relationships, bilateral cross-cousin marriage, and a tendency towards matrilocal marriage. It is quite possible that there are subtle variations which the quality of the ethnography has not permitted one to discern (it is equally possible that they are in the ethnography and I have missed them), but in its grosser outlines the social organisation appears to stand as a core invariant around which other aspects of the culture



are changed and elaborated. If this is so then it should be possible to identify other sets of variants throughout the vast region north of the Amazon where this postulated invariant seems to exist. One such variant might well be the use of alcohol, tobacco, and hallucinogens which is unevenly, and apparently randomly, distributed through the region.

Finally, it must be made clear that I have not been trying to make causal connexions between the presence or absence of certain material objects and certain cosmic views, but simply trying to indicate that the acceptance or rejection of a particular item may reflect and be reflected in a wider set of ideas.

#### NOTES

1. I am grateful to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for a generous grant which made it possible for me to present this paper at the American Ethnological Society meeting in New Orleans. I have given this paper in various forms at Seminars at University College London, Yale University, Brandeis University, Harvard University, and to the Philadelphia Anthropological Society. At many of these places I received interesting and helpful comments most of which are incorporated in this published version.

2. The Atorai no longer exist but the ethnographic present is assumed throughout this paper.

3. Also referred to in the literature as the Mouyenna or Mapidians.

4. For notes on the distribution of the blowgun see Yde (1948 and 1960) and of the hair tube Yde (1965:208-12).

5. The Trio (amongst whom I did fieldwork in 1963-64) who are the eastern neighbours of the Waiwai and the Taruma do not even know of the blowgun by description. Trio hair tubes, which are rarely worn, are different in construction and elaboration from those of the tribes with which this paper is primarily concerned.

6. I have avoided the word historical since the history of these tribes is so little known (for a résumé of it see Rivière 1966-67). The adoption of the blowgun by the northern tribes was presumably an historical event and almost certainly took place before they came in contact with the southern tribes. I am not, therefore, positing the growth of two cultures side by side, one with blowguns and the other without and I regard their present juxtaposition as an historical accident which is not the concern of this paper.

7. In conversation with an Arecuna Indian (the northern neighbours of the Macusi and Wapishiana) on the border of Brazil and Venezuela in 1967, I was told by my informant that relatively little game is shot with the blowgun (see Roth 1924:147 for the high value placed by the Arecuna on the blowgun). Farabee himself notes that "The blowgun is by no means the most useful of Indian weapons" (1924:56), but also states that the most highly prized meat is that of monkey and birds (Roth 1924:33); i.e., those animals shot with the blowgun.

The use of the blowgun has a close parallel in game shooting in England. A large proportion of the birds are reared, and not only is it wrong to shoot sitting birds but it may well be regarded

as poor form to shoot those which do not fly well. The ideal is to shoot fast, high flying birds. Thus shooting, while in a limited sense a subsistence activity, is a demonstration of a socially approved skill, i.e., being a good shot.

8. The Macusi word for a blowgun is kura; among the Trio who are also Carib-speakers this word refers to another type of hollow tube, a bark horn.

9. Unless another source is referred to the following description of the hair tube is taken from Yde (1965:204-14).

10. A similar motif seems to underly another Waiwai belief. "When travelling Waiwai arrive at a section of river unknown to them and here reach a long straight stretch, they will avoid looking at the banks either by bending their heads or by putting in their eyes water mixed with a little pepper. The Waiwai fear that a breach of this rule will either give rise to fever or cause them to lose all their hair" (Fock 1963:122). One might remark that in this area a straight stretch of river with trees meeting overhead looks very like a tube.

11. See Butt (1965) and Fock (1963:104-16). In particular Fock mentions the danger of blowing on someone to kill them since the breath might float back on the blower. This danger can be averted by directing the breath through a long grass tube (Fock 1963:104-5).

12. This incident occurs in a long creation myth which combines many of the separated stories which are given by Farabee (1918:107-16) although this particular incident is missing. In spite of the strong Christian undertones which pervades Ogilvie's version, Ogilvie, who was a rancher on the Rupununi savannah for many years, accompanied Farabee on his expedition and provided much of the information on which Farabee's work is based (Farabee 1918:9), must be accredited with the same authority as Farabee.

13. The anaconda's tail is widely regarded as a phallic symbol in the area. It is quite explicit in Trio beliefs and also among Macusi--see Farabee, Notebook 18, p. 79 for a woman impregnated by a snake's tail.

14. "the country beyond the sky is more often mentioned as that from which men come than as that to which men go" (im Thurn 1883:361).

15. Among the Urubu there is the suggestion that anal stoppers were used by men going to war (Huxley 1957:245) which is, of course, the time when they must be at their hardest.

16. The Atorai cremate their dead and bury the ashes (Schomburgk 1845:32). This, and the fact that the Trio who have their hair tubes bury the dead, stresses the fact that no necessary connexion between the possession of any of the topics discussed in this paper is claimed.

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