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# Cerebral Savage: The Whiteman as Symbol of Cleverness and Savagery in Waurá Myth

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"A myth is a dream that many have begun to tell."
—observation by a Mehinaku man[1]

The initial focus of my research among the Waurá was not myth and symbolic systems but political and social organization. It soon became clear to me, however, that I would have to understand their myths in order to learn very much about the Waurá at all, for they use myth not merely to structure their notions about the cosmos in some abstract and unconscious sense but as an acknowledged frame of reference for nearly every activity in daily life. Allusions to mythological characters and events crop up constantly: in casual jokes and banter, in public rebuke and private criticism, as the irrefutable rationale for political institutions such as chiefly privilege, and even in the highly secret content of sacred chants, the knowledge of which is in itself a major source of political power. In fact, myth is an essential part of the context needed to understand Waurá statements on almost any subject. And so it is that myth is a key to understanding Waurá perceptions not only of the whiteman[2] but of their historical experience with him as well.

Until recently, the best-known studies of myth in lowland South American societies have examined myths primarily as arrangements of intellectual artifacts (Lévi-Strauss 1973). It has frequently been suggested that such an approach be balanced by analyses that also take account of the nonintellective aspects of these myths (Maybury-Lewis 1969; Geertz 1973a); recent work has done this in illuminating ways (E. Basso 1985, 1987). Like the Kalapalo myths discussed by Basso, Waurá myths about the whiteman are concerned not merely with patterns of characters and events but also with "how enacted emotions give meaning to particular contexts" (E. Basso 1987:351). The prominent role of emotion in Waurá

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myth is particularly obvious when contrasted with the marked emotional restraint, even detachment, generally displayed in other Waurá oral genres. Accordingly, I will begin by examining general notions the Waurá hold about the whiteman and then illustrate the contrasting ways these notions are expressed in myth as opposed to historical narratives and song poems. I also will discuss the extraordinary affective intensity of these particular myths, a social dimension unexplored in any other form of Waurá oral expression. Waurá myth serves as both an explanatory system that makes sense of what seems incomprehensible and a means of dealing with the disturbing emotional impact of traumatic historical experiences. Contact with the whiteman has been profoundly traumatic for the Waurá, and among Waurá oral genres, only myth fully explores the feelings of fear and helplessness resulting from contact, specifically from catastrophic disease epidemics and the sudden perception of technological inferiority following exposure to manufactured goods.

## Background on the Waurá

The Waurá comprise a village of about 127 virtually monolingual Arawak-speakers who subsist mainly by fishing and horticulture in the lowland tropical forest region of Central Brazil. The village is located on a tributary of the Batovi River in the southern part of the Xingu National Park, a large government-administered indigenous reserve on the Xingu River. The research on which this discussion is based was conducted during eighteen months in the village between January 1981 and September 1983.

Unlike most of the other peoples discussed in this volume, Waurá experience of outside contact has been largely indirect, through disease epidemics and manufactured goods, as opposed to direct, day-to-day economic and political subjugation (cf. Reeve, Hill and Wright, Chernela, and Rasnake). There are no roads leading from Brazilian towns to the Waurá village; nor is there an airstrip. Access to the village is not only physically inconvenient but restricted by government authorities as well. Consequently, visitors arrive only infrequently, perhaps two or three times a year, and consist mainly of medical personnel, researchers, photographers, journalists, and government functionaries, most of whom stay in the village for less than a day and then leave, communicating with the Waurá through gestures and the rudimentary Portuguese that a few Waurá have picked up. Virtually all other communication with the outside world is through Posto Leonardo, a small cluster of buildings beside an unpaved airstrip, operated by a government administrative agency. Since the Waurá must walk nearly seven hours through the



forest to reach the post, they generally go there only to obtain Western medical treatment or when post functionaries are distributing a government shipment of fishhooks, ammunition, or other manufactured goods to the local tribes. Occasionally, Waurá obtain permission to take government planes to São Paulo or Brasilia for medical treatment or to trade artifacts for manufactured goods. As a result, many Waurá men, and a few Waurá women, have been to a city or town. Such excursions are infrequent, however, and the Waurá do not have direct or unrestricted access to the outside world.

Also in contrast to some of the other societies described in this volume, the Waurá remain essentially autonomous in the management of their internal political affairs. Unlike most contemporary Amerindian communities, in which the local political leader is a middle-aged man, fluent in the national language, who acts as a power broker in relation to the dominant society, the Waurá chief is the oldest and most conservative man in the village, a man who stubbornly disdains to speak Portuguese and who discourages contact between his village and non-Indians. Indeed, other Xingu chiefs have told me he is the last of the traditional chiefs in the region. The Waurá's conservatism is recognized by neighboring tribes, who alternately admire their faithfulness to the old ways and look down on them for their ignorance of modern Brazilian society.

Despite this seemingly moderated and benign contact experience, the Waurá have been profoundly affected, even traumatized, by the entrance of the whiteman into their world. Their perceptions of this experience are expressed in casual conversation, in popular aphorisms, in formal complaint songs, in historical narratives, and in myth. But the treatment of this historical experience in the various genres is anything but uniform. As I will show, these perceptions surface in strikingly different ways depending on genre, context, and other factors.

## The Waurá View of the Whiteman and the Experience of Contact

The Waurá's ordinary conversational observations on the whiteman are generally negative. The whiteman is seen as intellectually clever but morally repugnant. In the Waurá view, self-control over violent aggressive impulses, compassion for children, and acceptance of the responsibility to share material wealth are all basic attributes of human beings. Those who lack such attributes are considered either malevolent witches or monstrous, not-quite-human creatures.

The Waurá are puzzled by the whiteman, whose extraordinary ability to make tools and objects is in bizarre contradiction to his manifest

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inability to get along with others without constant resort to physical violence or the threat of it. Neither can the Waurá understand why this strange creature, blessed with fabulous quantities of material wealth, does not know how to share and indeed seems to lack ordinary human compassion. The whiteman is not ashamed to ignore suffering of others who are hungry and impoverished, even when they are children.

Thus, despite the generosity, friendship, and camaraderie the Waurá may display toward individual whitemen, there is a general and vague perception that non-Indians as a group are not quite human. This view is reflected in the two uses of the frequently heard Waurá expression, "the whiteman is not human" (*aitsa ĩyãu kajaipa*). The first, often accompanied by an appreciative chuckle, is a compliment, usually voiced in reaction to some new article of Western manufacture: "Wow! That whiteman, he's not human! He really knows how to make things." The second, however, reveals an underlying sense of fear and distaste toward whitemen: "The whiteman is not human; he's bad. He is angry, violent, and dangerous."

This is certainly not to say that the Waurá view themselves as perfect or their own behavior as above reproach, for they are the first to point out that their behavior frequently falls short of their own standards. However, they are quick to add that selfish or violent behavior, and especially cruelty to children, is considered shameful and that people who openly behave in these antisocial ways lose the respect of the community. A Waurá who indulges in such behavior typically will hide or try to deny it.

What amazes them about the whiteman, the Waurá say, is that he does these things with no indication that they are shameful and wrong. A Waurá man who loses his temper typically will keep a low profile for days, hoping people will forget his disgraceful behavior, or at least pretend to forget it. But when the Waurá make a trip to Posto Leonardo and listen to whitemen trade stories over dinner, they are horrified to hear them actually boast about fights they have gotten into and people they have punched or physically intimidated.[3]

Similarly, while the Waurá frequently grumble about having to share food with the children of parents who are sometimes too lazy to provide for them, they nevertheless do share the food. It may annoy them to have to do so, but it would be unthinkable for someone who has food to openly refuse a hungry child. The Waurá are particularly disturbed that the whiteman is not ashamed to ignore such suffering.

> The whiteman is not like us. He is so clever at making objects that he does not seem human. How does he know to make these things? He surpasses us completely. We are not skilled that way.



> But even though he is so clever, he is also very ignorant. For whitemen do not live as human beings. I have been to your cities and seen hungry children sitting on the streets begging for food. People pass them right by and don't take pity on them. Maybe they think they are dogs. That is what the whiteman is like. He has no shame. He even beats and kicks his own children; this too I have seen. This is not the way human beings behave.
>
> That is why the whiteman is so angry and brutal. He mistreats and abuses his children when they are small, and so they grow up filled with the anger their parents have put into them, and do not know how to be men.
>
> Look at the whiteman. He shouts and yells and bullies everyone around. His father has not taught him anything. When he hears evil words, he does not know how to listen quietly. Instead he returns them in kind; foolishly he spills his angry words like water slopped on the ground. He becomes violent and has no control over himself.

In addition to these overall moral concerns, the Waurá have more immediate reasons for their strong negative feelings about the whiteman. At the end of the last century and again around 1954, the Waurá, along with countless other American Indians, suffered devastating measles epidemics which they recognize to be a result of white contact. The initial epidemic, the Waurá say, was brought to the area by the very first whitemen to visit their village, led by one whom they call "Tsariwa."[4] The pestilence he brought reduced them overnight from three large villages to a single small one. The remaining village site, formerly called "Deer Place" (*Yutapwihi*), was renamed "Tsariwa Place" (*Tsariwapwihi*), in memory of the catastrophe that occurred there.

Although the Waurá have since moved to their present village site, about two days downstream, they still speak proudly of Tsariwa Place as their last true village. There once had been a great circle of fine houses, they say, not like the mere handful, most of them small and in poor repair, in the present village. The Waurá were numerous then, and unlike today, the chief's oratory at dawn was complemented by the ritual replies of formally recognized auxiliary chiefs (*inamula ipalukaka*). Many of the old ceremonies performed at Tsariwa Place have since fallen into disuse, and even the vast *piqui* groves, tended lovingly by generations of Waurá ancestors, now lie abandoned, like the graves of the ancestors themselves. And so Tsariwa Place, the last of the traditional, archetypal Waurá villages, bears the name of the whiteman who annihilated it, a bitter irony not lost on the Waurá.

The second measles epidemic, which took place more than thirty years ago, was also a turning point in Waurá history. Despite the lack of

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reliable census data for that period, it is safe to say that the Waurá lost about half their remaining population. This disaster remains so important in their history that the Waurá commonly reckon time in living memory as "before the measles" and "after the measles."

In compiling genealogies, I found that of the thirty-one Waurá who are still alive and who lived through the last epidemic, nearly 70 percent lost a first-degree relative, that is, a parent, child, spouse, or sibling; and over a third of all survivors lost two or more such relatives, that is, a mother and a husband, or a wife and two children, and so on. As a result, many children were orphaned by this disaster. I refer here not to adults, such as the Waurá chief, who lost a beloved parent, or to children who lost only one parent, but to children who were too young to marry and suddenly found themselves with no parents. Of all the Waurá alive today who lived through that time, nearly 20 percent were such orphans.

The Waurá describe this terribly traumatic experience in their historical narratives:

> Suddenly in every household, people were sick and dying. Our mothers and fathers, our children and our wives were all dying in their hammocks, and there was nothing we could do. We tried to bury them with dignity, but we were too weak ourselves, and could only dig shallow pits and push them in. They were not even cleansed or painted or prepared for their journey. Because the graves were so shallow, the dogs just scratched away the dirt, and ate the arms and legs of our dead.
>
> People became frantic with fear. Some of them untied their hammocks and took their families into the forest to escape the disease. We tried to stop them, but they wouldn't listen. Afterwards we found only their bones, picked clean by the vultures.
>
> As the days passed, we were too weak ourselves to do anything but wait for death. There was no one to bury the dead. People died in their hammocks and their corpses began to rot in the same house where others lay dying. Infants lay against the bodies of their dead mothers, crying with hunger, but no one listened to them. People went outside to defecate and collapsed behind their houses. There they died, and there the vultures came to eat them.

Not surprisingly, memories of this episode are so painful that some Waurá still cannot talk about it, even more than thirty years later. Several of my female informants had to change the subject when they became choked up and began to weep. Even the chief, a man of formidable emotional self-control, abruptly ended one of our interviews after mentioning that his mother had died in the epidemic. He stood up and told me that the whiteman had killed off all his people; and then, apparently not wishing to comment further, retired to the solitude of his hammock.



## The Whiteman in Waurá Oral Literature

In view of some of these strong negative associations with the whiteman, one might expect to find him linked to images of anger, fear, and hostility in Waurá oral literature. To my surprise, however, I found this was generally not the case. Although the chief expressed resentment toward the whiteman for bringing the measles epidemic that killed his mother, such sentiments generally do not surface in the standardized historical narratives told in the men's house and by the hammock fires at night. As in the narrative above, the facts are allowed to speak plainly for themselves, without any embellishing metaphors or explicit appeals to emotional response. Such narratives typically are recounted with impressive dramatic skill, but unlike myth, they maintain a markedly unemotional tone.

I should emphasize that I refer here not to myth but to what the Waurá distinguish as "mere truth" or "mere factual accounts" (*kamalajita*). Since this distinction is important both to the Waurá and to my argument, it merits clarification.[5]

The Waurá term for any formal prose-style narrative is *aunaki* (story), a broad category that includes two distinct genres: myth (*aunaki yaji;* literally, "true," "real," or "great" stories) and historical accounts (*aunaki* in the unmarked form). When pressed for a qualification of *aunaki,* Waurá typically added some deprecatory suffix, such as *-ta* (mere), *-tsãi* (little), *-juti* (inferior), *-malũ* (worthless), or *-ipwitala* (a mere imitation of). Or they said simply, *"Aitsa aunaki yaji, kamalajita":* "It's not a great myth; it's just a fact, something that happened."

Because I still did not understand the distinction between "myths" and "mere facts," I asked the Waurá what appeared to be the next logical question: "Aren't the great myths factual? Didn't those things really happen?" Their reply, seemingly evasive, was actually quite precise. I was missing the point, my informants said, because the great myths refer to events that happened long, long ago. Of course they were "true" (*kamalaji*), the Waurá insisted, adding, "Well, that's not really for us to know. People didn't witness these things, after all. They've only heard about them for a very long time."

And so I found I could predict whether a given narrative would be classified as a myth or a historical narrative by asking whether anyone had witnessed the event (*iyau inubawi*). If the item were a myth, the

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answer would be, "Oh no, this happened long ago"; if a historical narrative, my informant would pause to recall specific individuals. Unlike myths, historical narratives consist of detailed factual descriptions of actual events firmly fixed at a specific point in time—for example, "When it happened long ago, my grandmother's first child was still in the womb." An interesting exception to this rule is discussed later.

It should be noted that such narratives are not merely personal reminiscences. All *aunaki* are community property, ritually recounted with impressive dramatic skill before a respectful audience. The standards for performance are high, and only the old people, and among them only those with a reputation for eloquence, take on the challenge of performance. As one accomplished storyteller explained, searching for an analogy I could understand, "It's like talking on the radio. Your words come out smoothly, but your heart is tight within your chest, because you're always thinking you're going to mess up." Historical narratives are not conversational anecdotes but a formal narrative genre, as their classification with myth under the general term *aunaki* rightly implies.

Another genre that describes the Waurá experience with the whiteman is *kapwijai*, a special type of public complaint song central to numerous ceremonies. These songs are like myth in that they are full of metaphor and allusion, but they are like historical narratives in their treatment of the whiteman. *Kapwijai* maintain a cool distance from any reference to the undeniable pain and terror in the Waurá's historical experience of the whiteman. In these songs the whiteman is either ignored or treated in a lighthearted and sarcastic manner, as in the following verse in which a young man sings humorously about his desire to learn Portuguese:

> Well, mama, you're gonna miss me,
> 'Cause I'm gonna go off and work for Old Baldy
> I'm gonna learn how to talk gibberish:
> mbla-mbla-mbla-mbla-mbla! is all I'll say
> when I come back.

This ritualized use of sarcastic humor about the whiteman has been described for other Amerindian societies (K. Basso 1979) and should not be taken as a sign that the subject is not a serious one. As one shrewd observer points out, "Indians have found a humorous side to nearly every problem and . . . the more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it" (Vine Deloria, quoted in K. Basso 1979:3). However, it is worth noting that such songs, when treating other topics, are by no means always lighthearted. In fact, they can be very serious and somber, since they frequently serve as vehicles for the public accusation and denial of witchcraft and even as direct challenges to chiefly authority. Yet among the scores of examples I taped during Waurá ceremonies, I have found none that reflect the powerful negative associations with the whiteman one might expect in light of Waurá historical experience of contact.



## The Whiteman in Waurá Myth

There are two areas of Waurá life in which reactions to even the most disturbing aspects of contact with whitemen are acknowledged and expressed: dreams and myth. Gregor's (1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1984) description of the sinister role of the whiteman in Mehinaku dream life is entirely consistent with my own Waurá data. This is not really surprising, since the two communities are so closely related that the Waurá call the Mehinaku "our other selves" (*apawanau*). For the Waurá as well as the Mehinaku, a dream of the whiteman is a harbinger of disease and possibly death. In Gregor's (1984) sample, 48 percent of all Mehinaku dreams showed some level of anxiety, while 91 percent of dreams about the whiteman were fearful. Historical narratives and public complaint songs seemingly avoid disturbing and emotionally charged symbols, while dreams of the whiteman are typically dominated by threatening, even terrifying images: disfiguring diseases; fires raging out of control; bombs falling from planes; whitemen who imprison, shoot, dismember, rape, and murder the dreamers and their families. A common element of these dreams is that the whiteman is the aggressor and the dreamer is his helpless victim.

Waurá myths are strikingly similar to Waurá dreams in their symbolic treatment of the whiteman. As in dreams, the whiteman appears in myth as a monstrous, frightening, deadly creature. In one important respect, however, myths and dreams about the whiteman are different. In their dreams about the whiteman, the Waurá are typically helpless and terrified, while in their myths they confront the whiteman in the same gruesome incarnations but are not defeated by him. While the dreams are generally disturbing, the myths are ultimately reassuring.

The anxiety about the whiteman seen in Waurá dreams is eloquently expressed in their creation myth, an epic they refer to as their "true" or most important myth. The whiteman is not mentioned until the very end, when the Sun is distributing various defining attributes to all the tribes of humanity. I have condensed that passage here:

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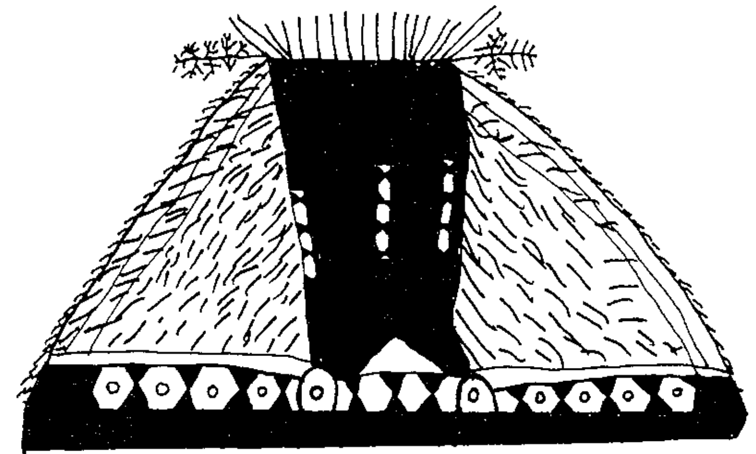
> The Sun offers a rifle to the ancestor of the Waurá, but the Waurá merely turns it over in his hands, not knowing how to use it. The Sun takes the rifle from the Waurá and offers it to the ancestor of the dreaded warlike "wild" Indians who live to the north of the Waurá. This Indian is also baffled by the rifle, and so the Sun takes it away again and this time hands it to the ancestor of the whiteman.
>
> The whiteman immediately lifts the rifle to his shoulder and fires it successfully, thus laying claim to the superior technology that would be his. The Sun then gave hardwood bows to the Indians, with which they were well satisfied.
>
> Next the Sun passed around a gourd dipper from which each man was asked to drink. The ancestor of the Waurá approached, but found to his horror that the dipper was filled to the brim with blood. He refused to touch it, but when the "wild Indian" was offered the dipper, he readily drank from it. When the Sun finally offered the dipper of blood to the whiteman, he drank it down greedily in great gulps.
>
> That is why the whiteman and the "wild Indians" are so violent today; even in ancient times, they were thirsty for the taste of blood. To the Waurá, however, the Sun gave a dipper of manioc porridge. And that is why the Waurá drink manioc porridge today, and why they are not an angry and violent people.

This myth reveals the whiteman as clever, and perhaps even superior in a technological sense, but it also reflects the profound moral repugnance the Waurá express toward all warlike and physically aggressive people. Furthermore, unlike other forms of Waurá oral literature, this myth deals openly, though in a safely removed, symbolic way, with the deeply disturbing emotions the whiteman evokes in the Waurá, revealed here by the jarring image of drinking blood.

Perhaps the most interesting Waurá myth about the whiteman is one that does not purport to be about the whiteman at all. The Waurá explain that this myth is about the Kustenau, an extinct Arawakan tribe that, like the Mehinaku, was closely related to the Waurá. The Kustenau were completely wiped out by the first measles epidemic that swept through the Upper Xingu region at the beginning of this century. The myth describes how two spirit-beings called Atujuá fell from the sky as omens of the demise of this people. The Waurá term *Atujuá* refers to whirlwinds and waterspouts, and the Atujuá spirit is traditionally represented in Waurá ceremonies by huge disklike masks that are spun around their axes, knocking down and scattering people and objects and generally creating chaos. The masks are striking objects, about eight feet tall when worn, in which a man's head and upper body are completely hidden inside an upright disk (see Figure 1). There is so much room inside the masks that the Waurá traditionally used them for





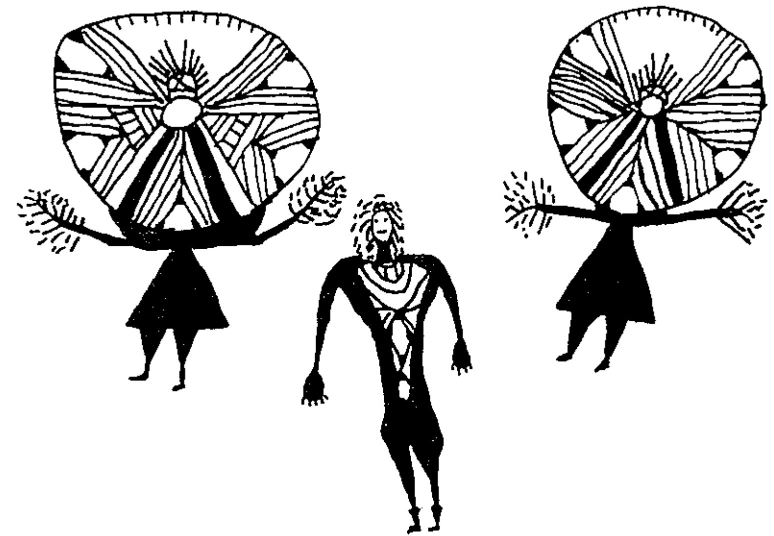


Figure 1. Two masked *Atujuá* ceremonial dancers chase a village woman. Note that the traditional *Atujuá* mask completely covers the head and upper body of the dancer. Drawing by Muri.

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sexual horseplay, where a male dancer would invite a woman to join him inside the privacy of the mask by parting a curtain of straw and having her climb on his back. The reader will notice that the descriptions of the Atujuá spirits in this myth in no way resemble the traditional spirits of Waurá ceremony and are instead an intriguing aberration:

> Long ago, a pair of Atujuá spirit-beings fell from high in the sky. This happened during the last years of the Kustenau. My mother wasn't yet born at that time, but my grandfather may have witnessed it. The Atujuá spirits were harbingers of death; that is why the Kustenau all died out.
>
> One morning, just before dawn, two strange creatures were seen falling from the sky. They were approaching the village like huge storks, making a deep whooshing sound as they fell through the air.
>
> They fell into the forest, burning the trees in the area where they landed. The Kustenau all went to see the strange dead beings. They saw that their body paint and ornaments were the same as ours. Their ankles and feet were smeared red with *urucum,* their cheeks were painted with the proper black designs, and their hair was well trimmed. Macaw-feather armbands were tied around their arms, their wrists and knees were bound with cotton, and their ankles wrapped in bark. Around their necks were fine shell necklaces.
>
> But they were scrawny, hairy, and white-skinned; they were monsters. Their skin was covered with small brown moles and spots. Hair grew out of their faces. Their belts were not shell belts such as we wear, but snakes that had been tied around their bodies. Even their bellies were very hairy. And their legs were covered with straw fiber. From the waist up, they looked like men, but from the waist down, you couldn't see any skin, only straw. They filled the air with their danger and power; just to touch them burned like fire. They were an omen that the Kustenau tribe would soon die out and vanish.
>
> The Kustenau all took pieces of their hair and ornaments and used them to make witchcraft fetishes. That's just like those Kustenau, they really were terrible witches, all of them. Not just the men, but the women, and even the little children, all knew how to work witchcraft, and did, too. That evening at dusk, they were all busy, shooting witchcraft darts into one another.
>
> That's all they did. At night their victims would sicken and die, and they would keep right on shooting darts into others. Those Kustenau were very bad people. We're not like that. They killed each other with the fetishes they made from the bodies of the dead spirits. That's why they all died out, they killed themselves off with their own witchcraft. If you visit their old village, there is no one there. Not even a single person. They have all vanished.

"Didn't the whiteman's diseases wipe them out?" I asked. "No, it was just their own witchcraft," my informant answered.



## Analysis

A feature that makes this myth unique among the nearly 100 Waurá myths I collected is that in the opening lines the narrator refers to a specific point in time, one that is within memory of recent generations ("My mother wasn't yet born at that time, but my grandfather may have witnessed it"). Such reference is precisely the feature that otherwise identifies a text as being a historical narrative and not a myth, but when I asked the Waurá about this, they insisted the Atujuá story was a true myth, or *aunaki yaji.* In most respects this seems reasonable, since the metaphoric style of the Atujuá text conforms to that found in all Waurá myths and absent from their historical narratives.

Presumably, the unexpected historical reference is a function of this being a relatively new myth. The Kustenau were still thriving until the end of the last century, and so this myth about their extinction could have come into being only since then. In any case, this example illustrates that while the criterion of historic specificity may, for the anthropologist, conveniently happen to categorize collected texts into two groups conforming to Waurá notions of myths (*aunaki yaji*) and historical narratives (*kamalajita*), the Waurá themselves may be using quite different criteria when they draw this distinction. In the Waurá view, this story is a myth despite its taking place in recent memory. Clearly, the Waurá believe that what makes a myth a myth is not merely a matter of history or the lack of it.

What, then, does make a myth different from a text of a different genre? This question leads to perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Atujuá myth: the Waurá do not overtly associate the monstrous beings with the whiteman. This is intriguing because the monsters are described as hairy, bearded, white-skinned men with freckles and moles and even a trouserlike garment from the waist down. More to the point, the monsters are associated with the extinction of the Kustenau tribe, which was wiped out by whiteman's diseases shortly after first contact. Yet when I asked directly whether these creatures did not represent the whiteman, the Waurá flatly replied they were not whitemen but monsters. As far as they were concerned, the myth was about the extinction of the Kustenau and not about the whiteman.

I would be inclined to argue that the striking resemblance of the Atujuá monsters to the whiteman is not merely coincidence and that the monsters in fact represent a Waurá view of the whiteman. However, I am also willing to grant my Waurá informants their separate point that the myth is not really concerned with this issue, in any event. After all, we should not be too quick to put ourselves at center stage of any

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story in which we happen to play a part. That is, it probably does not matter whether the Waurá actually think of the Atujuá spirits as symbols for the whiteman. What is important to the Waurá about this myth, as they readily point out, is that it makes sense of an event that is otherwise incomprehensible in Waurá terms.[6] It offers an explanation for the sudden extinction of an entire people. We should remember that the Waurá do not subscribe to our own germ theory of disease; instead, they believe that all deaths of young and middle-aged people are caused by witchcraft. Traditional Waurá theories of disease simply cannot account for an epidemic of communicable disease, unless it is viewed as the result of an epidemic of witchcraft. What must be explained, in the Waurá view, is not the physical disease itself but the moral breakdown that created it.

That is precisely what this myth does. The Kustenau, as they handled the bodies of these deadly creatures, were infected not with physical disease but instead with an epidemic of social and moral sickness. Because the Waurá see physical illness as being caused by the social ill of witchcraft, it is only natural for them to view an epidemic of physical disease as the product of a breakdown of traditional social and moral codes. As the myth describes, immediately after contact with the deadly creatures, the Kustenau returned to their village and all began shooting witchcraft darts into one another, the very embodiment of the logical extreme of social chaos.

Thus, it seems appropriate indeed that the spirit beings bear the Waurá name Atujuá, belonging to the spirit of whirlwinds and waterspouts. Of more than forty-five ceremonial spirits in the Waurá pantheon, Atujuá is apparently the only one that represents a destructive natural physical force. The vast majority of these ceremonial spirits are associated directly with animals, fish, and birds; a handful, such as the spirits of the sacred flutes and bullroarers, are associated with ritual objects that in turn represent fish or fishlike creatures. There are a few others, such as the ghost-spirit, associated with the dead, and Yamurikuma, the spirit that presides over ceremonial expressions of female dominance. But there appear to be no ceremonial spirits of thunder, lightning, fire, windstorms, rain, and so on, even though the Waurá quite readily personify most of these forces in their myths. So the Atujuá spirit is unusual, if not unique, in that it represents a destructive natural force associated with chaos and disorder.

Just as it is appropriate that the spirit-beings bear the Waurá name of Atujuá, so also is it fitting that they be in the physical image of the whiteman. Recall that the spirit-beings of the myth are unlike the traditional Atujuá figures of Waurá ceremony, which are huge, upright



disks of straw, revealing almost no human feature, no glimpse of face or arms or torso, only the dancer's feet protruding from the bottom. The upper part of a traditional Waurá Atujuá is a nonhuman shape made of straw, with human legs below, but the mythic Atujuá is precisely the inverse: apparently human above the waist, with straw leggings below. The Atujuá of the myth is neither a true human being nor a proper ceremonial spirit but instead a bizarre aberration, an anti-being that, like the whiteman he resembles, fits into no traditional category in the Waurá world. The mythic Atujuá creatures combine symbolic associations with both the traditional Waurá Atujuá spirit, a natural physical force of chaos, and the whiteman, whose unnatural way of life is viewed by the Waurá as one of moral chaos and disorder.

But if it is the whiteman who is morally polluting, then why do the Waurá lay the moral blame for this disaster on the Kustenau? Why not blame the whiteman, or at least the Atujuá beings who seem to represent him? In fact, this question points to an essential dimension of this myth: despite its disturbing aspects, it is profoundly reassuring. Only wicked people are destroyed. Disease epidemics cannot without warning erase an entire tribe of innocent people from the face of the earth. Therefore, although the Kustenau became extinct, the Waurá need not fear it could happen to them. In the words of my narrator, "Those Kustenau were very bad people. We're not like that."[7] Similarly, the creation myth in which the whiteman acquires superior technology and reveals his bloodthirsty nature is reassuring in the end. Although the whiteman may be technologically superior, the Waurá are shown to be morally superior; the whiteman's way of life, however apparently seductive, is unworthy of emulation.[8]

So it seems that, in the Waurá case at least, myths about the whiteman operate on several levels at once. First, and in the most literal sense, they provide explanation of otherwise incomprehensible events. They make cultural sense of what the Waurá so revealingly call "mere truth" or "mere facts." Second, in describing the destructive impact of white contact, and especially of disease epidemics resulting from contact, myth openly deals with a subject that is typically too painful to confront in other, more literal contexts.[9] Yet myth goes beyond this, for it not only deals with the subject in a general sense but actually explores some of its most disturbing emotional associations. In the creation myth, the whiteman is seen as completely surpassing the Indian with his skill and cleverness, but he is also seen as a gruesome drinker of blood. Likewise, in the Atujuá myth, the frightening, physically ugly and morally repugnant images of the whiteman are all graphically described. This kind of exploration is something that generally does not

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occur in other forms of Waurá oral expression. Not in historical narratives, nor in complaint songs, nor in curing chants, but only in myth do the Waurá distance themselves from "mere facts" (such as the literal identity of the bringer of measles), while at the same time going to the heart of another kind of truth—powerful emotional associations that simply do not surface in other genres of oral expression.

In addition, myth is more than just a mirror of physical, social, or psychological reality. Indeed, as the Waurá point out, myths are not "mere facts." Myth can transform the very perception of reality, not only in the sense of rewriting the history of specific events in the past, but in the sense of making statements about the present and the future as well. As Turner states in his commentary, "mythic and historical texts . . . are not to be understood primarily as . . . representations of the events of contact . . . [but] as programs for the orientation of action within the situation of contact." And so it is that in their Atujuá myth, the Waurá have taken a historic tragedy of monstrous proportions and transformed it into an affirmation of their own moral values, and of their destiny to survive as a people.

## NOTES

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1. Thomas Gregor (personal communication, 1985).
2. I have chosen "whiteman" as a gloss for the Waurá term *kajaipa*, referring to non-Indians in general, including Brazilians, Europeans, and Americans, whether white or black, as well as Orientals. While the awkward term "non-Indian" might be more precisely descriptive, the Waurá themselves use the Portuguese equivalent of whiteman, *branco*, as a gloss for *kajaipa*.
3. Compare Keith Basso's (1979:55) description of the Western Apache view of the whiteman as overbearing, arrogant, and tactless: "Whitemen are angry even when they're friendly."



4. Conceivably, this individual was Karl von den Steinen (1886, 1894), judging from the date of the epidemic and the Waurá's claim that the whiteman came a second time, within a few years of his first visit.
5. The Waurá distinction between *aunaki yaji* and *kamalajita* seems parallel to that in Quechua between narratives about mythic time-space (*unai*) and those about historical time-space (*cauchu uras*), described by Reeve in this volume.
6. Compare Lifton's (1967:462ff.) discussion of Japanese postwar monster films and their relation to the bizarre and monstrous devastation of atomic bomb exposure. Godzilla, the most famous of these monsters, is brought to life by the Bikini test explosions and thus is, like Atujuá, causally associated with an overwhelming catastrophe of inhuman proportions.
7. Compare the similarly reassuring message of the Godzilla films, in which Japanese scientists save their people through courage and technical mastery. Although in historical experience the atomic bomb victims were tragically helpless and overwhelmed, in the monster films the would-be victims are competent, resourceful, and firmly in control of their own destinies (Lifton 1967:462).
8. Keith Basso (1979) describes a similar message in Western Apache jokes about the whiteman.
9. Compare the marked emotional numbing and detachment displayed by atomic bomb survivors when describing the horrible details of their experiences (Lifton 1967:31–35).