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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 129, No. 512 (Spring 2016), pp. 171-202

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerfolk.129.512.0171>

Accessed: 26-05-2016 13:22 UTC

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The Waters of Mendangumeli: A Masculine Psychoanalytic Interpretation of a New Guinea Flood Myth— and Women's Laughter

This article corroborates Alan Dundes's psychoanalytic interpretation of flood myths as expressing male envy of female fertility and birth. My data consist of two deluge tales collected in a Sepik River society in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s and 1994. But I do more than simply test Dundes's thesis. I also show that it is possible and, indeed, imperative to embed psychoanalytic analyses of oral tales in the local cultural context. I also update, in a sense, Dundes's framework with insights from Lacanian and feminist anthropology. Last, I discuss how Iatmul women respond—both to the tale and its psychodynamic innuendo.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Flood myths, gender, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology

FOLKLORISTS AND ANTHROPOLOGISTS HAVE LONG GRAPPLED with the effectiveness of Freudian and other psychoanalytic concepts for fine-grained analyses of oral tales among formerly stateless, so-called “tribal” societies. As Michael P. Carroll rightly exclaimed, “vast numbers of people in the scholarly community . . . care little for psychoanalysis and even less for the psychoanalytic study of myths” (1992:289). Such interpretations of culture are often criticized as dogmatic and unverifiable, lacking rigor and sophistication. “It must be admitted that Freudian criticism,” wrote Frederick Crews, “too easily degenerates into a grotesque Easter egg hunt: find the devouring mother, detect the inevitable castration anxiety, listen, between the syllables of verse, for the squeaking bedsprings of the primal scene” (1975:543). In this article, I draw on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among a Sepik River society in Papua New Guinea to challenge these characterizations by corroborating Alan Dundes's (1988a) Freudian interpretation of worldwide deluge tales.

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Journal of American Folklore 129(512):000–000
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It is not my goal to survey the history and scope of psychoanalytic approaches to myth and folktales (see Merkur 2004; Carroll 2009; Sels 2011). Nor do I review Dundes's wide-ranging, extraordinary oeuvre (see Bronner 2007).¹ Instead, I seek to revive interest in psychoanalysis for the exposition of cultural meaning by focusing on a pair of flood tales from Tambunum, a village of some 1,000 Eastern Iatmul horticulturalists, fisherfolk, and petty capitalists who dwell along the middle Sepik River in postcolonial Papua New Guinea (PNG). My fieldwork data, I argue, along with my interpretation of the two tales, confirm Dundes's thesis that flood myths symbolize masculine envy of female fertility.

But I do more than merely replicate Dundes's study. I also promote two broad methodological principles aimed at refining the psychoanalytic understanding of myth and culture. The first tenet is the eschewing of essentialism. It is crucial to embed psychoanalytic interpretations in the vernacular setting. This way, the interpretation does not erase local agency, diminish cultural differences, or amount to an intellectual colonization of indigenous signification (see also Obeyesekere 1990). Second, it is important to listen not just to men's stories but also, within culturally appropriate frames of discourse, to women—specifically, in the Sepik, to their laughter and fury, the precise rejoinders Iatmul men fear. By attending to the full gendered colloquy that is Iatmul or any culture, psychoanalytic concepts allow us to glimpse facets of local experiences that might otherwise escape scholarly attention.

Dundes Redivivus

Simon Bronner summarizes Dundes's legacy as a “call to understand the unconscious symbolic dimensions of human behavior” (2005:414). Dundes's most famous anthropological application of this approach was perhaps his analysis of cockfighting (Dundes 1994, 1979). His foil was Clifford Geertz's well-known essay, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” which attained canonical status after its inclusion in Geertz's anthology, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973a). In the opening and equally celebrated essay in the book, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Geertz advocated for an anthropology that interprets public meanings—“the flow of social discourse” (1973b:21)—conveyed through public symbols. He was particularly critical of paradigms such as ethnohistory and structuralism that reduced culture, in his view, to underlying schemata. But Geertz sometimes proved unable to escape the reductionism he disdained. “What makes Balinese cockfighting deep,” he wrote, “is . . . the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight” (Geertz 1973a:436). Thus Geertz lessened the semiotic complexity of the cockfight to social order.

Dundes criticized this reductionism (1994). He also decried Geertz's failure to employ the comparative method and to consider the unconscious as a source of symbolism and signification. By privileging “the public world of common life” (1973b:30), Geertz's anthropology neglected the meanings persons are unable to access, unwilling to admit, or powerless to voice. For while Geertz argued that “the cockfight enables the Balinese . . . to see a dimension of his own subjectivity,” that “subjectivity” was as sanitized as it was male (1973a:450). There was, in Freudian terms, little id. Thus

Dundes judged Geertz's analysis not deep but "shallow." Lacking consideration of the unconscious, Geertz denied his readers access to the full "thickness" of Balinese experience.

Moreover, Dundes rejected the premise implicit in Geertz's essay, and in much of American symbolic anthropology, that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Instead, Dundes drew on Freudian concepts to propose a causal relationship between a symbol and its meanings. It was significant that men fought *cocks*. Geertz acknowledged the presence in Bali of the same double-entendre so obvious to English speakers—but only in a perfunctory fashion. To Dundes, however, the pun was a decisive clue to the unstated meaning of the event, which he saw as an example of a wider cross-cultural category of male competition to display virility. More precisely, the cockfight was "a thinly disguised symbolic homoerotic masturbatory phallic duel, with the winner emasculating the loser through castration or feminization" (Dundes 1994:251). Dundes never denied that cockfights contain local meanings. But a "deep" understanding of cockfighting or any other social practice, Dundes argued, including myth, required both comparison and, more importantly, contemplation of the unconscious as a wellspring of cultural forms.

Unfortunately, few folklorists or anthropologists since Dundes's untimely death in 2005 took up his call for psychoanalytic analysis. In 2008, a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (vol. 45, no. 1) responded to Dundes's 2004 Presidential Plenary Address to the American Folklore Society (Dundes 2005). No contributor substantively addressed psychoanalysis. Over the past decade, moreover, few articles in the *Journal of Folklore Research*, *Western Folklore*, and even this journal have addressed Dundes's Freudian outlook (but see Tucker 2005; Briggs 2008; Haring 2008:7; Raufman 2009; Raufman and Ben-Cnaan 2009; Bronner 2011; see also Mechling 2008). To stem this tendentious theoretical tide, I show here that it is fruitful to return to, and to build on, the psychoanalytic component of Dundes's legacy.

Like Dundes, I advocate for exploring the unconscious meanings of myth. But I do so by advancing, as I stated in the introduction, several methodological principles. First, psychoanalytic insights into cultural forms can only arise through extensive ethnographic knowledge of the local setting. Access to a flood tale, in other words, is simply the starting point. One must also gain entrée to the thickly textured, often contrary semiotics of local sociality from which myth draws its relevance and symbolism. Sometimes a crocodile is just a crocodile. And sometimes, we will see, it is not. But this recognition requires considerable understanding of the culture and especially, in regard to Melanesia, culturally distinctive constructions of gender (e.g., Tuzin 1977:217). Only after outlining key features of Eastern Iatmul gender, in fact, do I turn to the actual tales.

Second, I do not privilege the male body—nor did Dundes, I add. Freud, as Karen Horney observed long ago, viewed women through an androcentric lens (1926, 1933; see also, e.g., Thompson 1953; Irigaray 1985; Bernheimer and Kahane 1985; Kofman 1985; Doane and Hodges 1992). Such partiality is no longer tenable. In fact, I begin with the assumption that female fertility and birth often serve as foundational tropes for myth and religion. By trope, I refer to "an argument about experience that accordingly is also placed in question by experience" (Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986:10). As

Dundes wrote, after Bettelheim (1954), “males envy female parturition” (1988a:170). Margaret Mead (1949) called this yearning “womb envy.”² But everyday experience generally contravenes any such desire. This reproductive trope, as an argument for and against manhood, infuses Sepik River lives—men *and* women—with pathos no less than with passion.

Third, I do not, as I expressly stated earlier, privilege men’s voices. Or not exactly. As a male anthropologist studying in a region renowned for gendered differentiation, my research unavoidably foregrounds men’s experiences. It could not frankly be otherwise. Nevertheless, I expressly discussed the flood myth with women during my latest fieldwork in July 2014. My analysis will thus include women’s responses both to the psychodynamic allusions men attribute to the tale, as well as to the primacy of masculinity that men so publicly trumpet.

Last, I show that we can fuse psychoanalytic insights with contemporary social theory. Here, I draw on the continuing relevance of the analytic trajectory of Melanesian gender studies initiated by Marilyn Strathern (1988). My analysis also borrows from Lacanian anthropology (e.g., Lipset 2009).³ Additionally, I follow Bakhtin (1984) and argue that “the fundamental condition” of myth, like the Rabelaisian carnival, “is heteroglossia, an irresolvable play of contrary moralities” (Lipset and Silverman 2005:19). This dialogical approach parses myth into irreducible discourses concerning morality and experience that capture what Bakhtin (1984:62) so aptly dubbed the “double-faced fullness of life.”

Freud offered a similar view. Classic anthropology often understood myth as validating social institutions and moral codes. In the absence of such artifice, Freud theorized—not unlike Hobbes before him—that unrestrained libidos would thwart social order. Thus myth sustains “civilization” by sublimating or repressing instinctual desires (Freud [1930] 2005). Yet civility, Freud recognized, takes its psychic toll, and thus culture is fundamentally ambivalent.⁴ This tragicomedy, at once sustaining and subverting social morality and masculinity, lies at the core of the Iatmul flood tale.

Water and Birth

Myth is a sacred narration of primal, ancestral world-making (Bascom 1965). In the Sepik, myth traces the origins of social institutions, topographic features, moral precepts, and natural phenomena such as the moon and river. But Iatmul myths also contain magical or totemic names that bundle ancestral potency. Thus any public recitation affirms a group’s esoteric patrimony. Since the loss of names and myths erodes ancestral power, even today, groups jealously guard their totemic phenomena, and react furiously to any perceived usurpation, including an unauthorized retelling. Iatmul myths, too, like sacred tales everywhere, comment on the predicaments of social life. The flood myth is one such narrative arena for expressing, but not resolving, as we will see, the entanglement of cultural morality.

Flood tales have been reported from many regions of the world, including India, China, and Aboriginal Australia in addition to Melanesia and the Near East (e.g., Dundes 1988b). These tales continue to generate scholarly interest (e.g., Morton 2006; Witzel 2010). In many flood myths, writes Dundes, a male deity destroys the world



Figure 1. A man paddles a canoe across the river in the morning mist.
Photo by the author.

to punish humanity for immorality (1988a:170). But the wrathful god spares a male survivor to repopulate the earth and re-establish order. The flood is both destructive and generative.

Most deluge tales, like many creation myths, background the role of women (Weigle 1989). Indeed, the biblical flood myth (Gen. 6–10), the focus of Dundes’s analysis, never names the wives of Noah and his sons.⁵ But without women, of course, Noah and his progeny could hardly make good on God’s charge after the flood “to be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 9:7). Why should male gods destroy the world, only to regenerate life anew, through floods? And why should the rebirth mute women? To answer, Dundes looked to childbirth and the watery tide released from the amniotic sac (1988a). Many creation myths encode aquatic uterine imagery, sometimes directly but often refracted into a masculine embodiment.⁶ The latter metaphors erase maternal agency but allow men and male deities to perfect parturition through a rite of rebirth.

Before I turn to Iatmul, I want to further examine the biblical flood. The tale begins with illicit intermingling between “the sons of god,” or “divine beings,” and “the daughters of men” (Gen. 6:1). The resulting offspring were the Nephilim (Gen. 6:4), or “fallen ones,” who later appear as cannibalistic giants (e.g., Num. 13:33). Appetitive sexuality, so it seems, dangerously blurred the boundary between the human and divine realms (see also Leach 1962). This transgression necessitated a cleansing rebirth. Thus God destroyed the world. But one man, Noah, “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8). This optical intimacy, suggests Dundes, hints at erotic desire (see also Exod. 33:12–13). As I see it, the tale construes Noah as God’s wife—for it is Noah who symbolically rebirths the world from the ark as a masculine womb. Indeed, as noted above, by omitting the names of women, the tale recognizes no other wombs.

During the flood, the ark floats on the waters for slightly more than nine months. After this symbolic gestation, the sea recedes, and out of the uterine vessel springs forth life anew. Noah and the survivors present God with “burnt offerings” (Gen. 8:20). In return, they receive divine blessing and the decree to “replenish the earth” (Gen. 9:1). Why are women largely absent from the tale? Because their presence, I maintain, calls into question the underlying theme of the myth.⁷ We will see much the same pattern in the Iatmul tales.

As documented by Geza Roheim (1952), in many mythic deluges, male beings mic-turate on the world. Roheim, following Rank (1912) and Freud ([1900] 1965:67–73), traced this motif to vesical dreams. I prefer Dundes’s suggestion that the mythic association of urination with floods arises from male womb envy (1988a:171–2). Since human birth entails water flowing from the genitals of women, men symbolize parturition through an equivalent bodily idiom. In biblical Hebrew, the word for “water” resembles “semen” (e.g., Isa. 48:1) and “urine” (e.g., 2 Kings 18:27). Likewise, the house of Jacob “issued from the waters of Judah” (Isa. 48:1) while later, in Greek, “rivers of living water flowed from Christ’s “belly” or “uterus” (John 7:38). All these flows, including mythic floods, imply a transfer of uterine fertility to male bodies.

God eventually quieted the tempest with “wind” (Gen. 8:1). Earlier, masculine gusts initiated Creation and infused life into the first human (Gen. 1:1; 2:7; see also Isa. 26:18). Throughout global folklore and myth, in fact, winds impregnate animals and women (Jones [1914] 1951; Zirkle 1936; Carroll 1989, chap. 2). These cosmogonic breezes and exhalations represent masculine agents of conception and parturition—specifically, procreative flatus (Dundes 1976b). Numerous incidents in the biblical flood tale, then, evidence the pattern of masculine fecundity and birth.

We can discern a similar theme in Genesis 2 when God molded the first human from the ground. More specifically, He shaped the creature from the *‘aphar* of the earth, a Hebrew word typically translated as “dust” but which also refers to clay, loam, mortar, and rubbish. In my view, as unpalatable as it might now seem, God wrought the human from a moist substance akin to feces—an act of male birthing also enacted, as I discuss later, in Iatmul initiation rites. Although “the human” in Genesis 2 is a masculine noun (*ha-adam*), the word does not imply a sexual identity. God placed this human, whom I understand as a male androgyne, into a trance-like slumber to extract a body part called *tse’la* to build into woman. The verb “to build” implies that God is now working with a hard substance (Alter 1996:9). The word *tse’la* generally refers to an architectural element such as a plank, beam, or rib. It is not from woman’s body that man is born. Rather, woman is birthed from a rigid, elongated part of a masculinized androgyne—a phallus, I suggest.⁸

Eve’s Hebrew name, Chavah, resembles “life” (*chaim*) and “to live” (*chaya*). “She,” remarks Adam, “was mother of everything that lives” (Gen. 3:20). Despite this celebration of global motherhood, Eve was non-existent during all the key acts of masculine generativity, including the naming of animals (Gen. 1:19–20). Eve’s uterine powers, as recognized by Pardes, challenge the “parturient fantasies” of God and man (1992:49). And Eve does directly respond to male engendering. After birthing Cain in Genesis 4, she ignores her husband and identifies God as a mere assistant, exclaiming “I have got me a man with the help of the Lord.” There is, then, a complex dialogue in the

Genesis cosmogony over the gender of procreative power—as there is in the Iatmul flood tale, to which I now turn.

Totems and Flutes

Eastern Iatmul social structure is patrilineal. Clans consist of lineages (*yarangka*) subdivided into extended-family branches (*tsai*). Descent groups are largely endogamous, and residence is normatively patrilocal. Eastern Iatmul envision their society through an arboreal metaphor. Women, likened to creeping plants, entwine patrilineal trees through marriage. Like vines, too, women are hardly passive, exercising both agency and refusal in marriage. Indeed, I recall one instance in the late 1980s when a group of classificatory sisters erected an impromptu bamboo fence around the house of their betrothed brother to thwart any would-be seducers. In this society, patriliney does not wholly mute women.

Despite patrilineality, too, Iatmul voice deep matrifocal sentiment. Indeed, an ideal of nurturing motherhood is a central script of Sepik sociality (see Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986). In Tambunum, motherhood evokes feeding, care, cleanliness, warm hearths, and shelter. A boy's first meal of sago pudding, fed by his mother, remains in his belly for life, providing strength and courage.⁹ Glowering spirit faces hewn into house posts recall the watchfulness of mothers. And while men normally sit on wooden stools (women squat in the dirt), men affirm that mothers are the real “stools” of the village since mothers birth and nourish children. Women agree with this sentiment, saying that men are as productive and helpful as dogs or children. Both



Figure 2. Posts for a new men's house (never built due to the erosion of the river). Notice the vigilant, maternal eyes—and the phallic noses and tongues. Photo by the author.

men and women, then, steadfastly affirm that the totality of their society, however androcentric, rests upon the fortitude and fertility of motherhood. By voicing this declaration, women offer a muted rejoinder to masculinity. When men do so, they call into question their own manhood.

Traditionally, father-son relationships were, and still often remain today, tense and oedipal. Sons are said to “replace” their fathers. Moreover, a man’s ideal bride is a woman classed as a second-generation cross-cousin, that is, a father’s mother’s brother’s son’s daughter (FMBSD). The prospective groom calls this kinswoman *iai*; his father terms her “mother” (*nyame*). Eastern Iatmul describe this marriage preference as “the father gets his mother back” (see also Juillerat 2005). The term *iai* also refers to the “belly,” which conjures a mother’s body and the interior of houses. Men decorate the façade of a dwelling with a woman’s face, ornaments, and breasts. Traditionally, a man aspired to build a large house—likened and called a “mother”—for his sons; he then relocated to a small shelter. That is, sons “take the place” of their fathers in both the structure of society and in an architecture structure that recalls and resembles motherhood.

Today, many villagers accept the Western ideal of engaged fathering learned from schools, church, and modern civic discourse. But men still voice unease with the idea of emotional intimacy with their children, especially sons. Traditional taboos still persist that limit such interaction. By contrast, mothers’ brothers and their sisters’ children—that is, a maternal uncle and his nieces and nephews—continuously exchange food, affection, and valuables. Maternal uncles are seen as “male mothers.” In public forums and disputes, nieces and nephews are expected to speak on their behalf, even if it means withdrawing support from one’s own father. Eastern Iatmul, too, often determine kinship relations through matrilineal ties. The emotions evoked by motherhood, in other words, overshadow the patrilineal social structure. “My mother,” as men say, “therefore I am.”

We can also discern the cultural significance of motherhood in myth. The original state of the Iatmul universe was a featureless sea. A gust of wind stirred waves and land surfaced. A “totemic pit” (*tsagi wangu*) cleaved the ground, and non-human spirits emerged who, along with culture heroes, created the world. The totemic pit, as a dark and undifferentiated font of life amid a primal sea, symbolizes, as my male informants agreed, a cosmic chthonic womb.

Once born from the primal womb, the originary ancestors named the world into existence along migratory “paths” (*yembii*). These male beings did not utter everyday words but powerful totemic names that refer to all manner of phenomena, including mountains, streams, groves, villages, stars, and animals (Silverman 1996). Totemic names also serve as personal names, repeating every alternate generation, as well as the existential charters for descent groups. Were it not for these magical names, conferred by male ancestors and chanted by men during ritual today, the world and society would cease to exist. The totemic system, then, validates manhood amid the recognition that motherhood is primary.

Descent groups refer to their names and sacra as “fathers and grandfathers” (*nyai’nggwail*). In this regard, yet again, cosmic creation eclipsed feminine fecundity and motherhood. Or, rather, the maternal component of reproduction is encompassed



Figure 3. Men blowing the sacred flutes to impersonate the voices of crocodile spirits. Photo by the author.

within masculine agency. Ritual recitations commemorate “paths” of cosmic creation and publicly certify a group’s rights over those names and affiliated ancestors. Ritual, too, typically requires men to display enchanted woodcarvings, blow bamboo flutes, and produce other mysterious noises, all of which embody spirits that govern human and cosmic fertility. Indeed, the ultimate determinants of conception are crocodile spirits (*wai wainjiimot*) who “speak” and “cry out” through the flutes (*wainjiimot*). Yet only men propitiate and impersonate the spirits (Silverman 1996:37). Ritual, then, celebrates masculine begetting.

During large-scale male initiation, crocodile spirits were said to consume neophytes, then later rebirth them orally as adult men. Novices were secluded in the “belly” of a cult house “mother” that was, and remains, barred to women (see Silverman 2001:78–80). Neophytes were shown ritual objects, especially flutes and bullroarers, and forced to drink fetid water, taste enemy flesh, and suffer physical miseries, including beatings. Initiators also sliced neophytes with bamboo blades—today, razors—in order to purge the last drops of maternal and birthing blood that would stymie the boys’ transformation into men. To women, the resulting welts appear as scrapes from the teeth of the saurian beasts that consumed and regurgitated their sons. To men, the patterns resemble the scales of crocodile spirits, and embody their ferocious powers. Men also see the designs as suggestive of female breasts and genitalia—yet further evidence that Sepik masculinity is defined in terms of maternal fertility. Of course, men never make this admission to women.

Lengthy initiation ceremonies ceased in Tambunum after World War II. But the initiation process still shapes men’s representations of manhood, and some men opt

for a quick impromptu rite during week-long funerals. Moreover, the patterns once etched into male bodies are also carved and painted on cult house posts, sacred objects, and even tourist art. Despite the absence of the ceremony, its meanings and symbolism visually and psychologically persist. The ubiquity of these artistic motifs communicates everywhere the message that men envy female fertility and birth.

Myth and ritual often convey messages through a vocabulary of symbolic inversions and substitutions. Thus I earlier discussed how flood myths and other creation tales allow men to mirror female partition through a comparable bodily topography. This way, myths often define manhood in contrary terms, both emulating female fertility and affirming procreative autonomy. The Genesis cosmogony, for example, encrypts the following transformation during God's use of soil to mold the first human:

male mud/clay (feces):female birth :: male anus:female vagina

Dundes (1962) employed the very same semantic equation to interpret Native American Earth-Diver legends. In these tales, culture heroes mold the world using muck retrieved from beneath primal waters (see also Carroll 1982). The same symbolism explains why initiators in Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia often smear mud, sometimes feces, on the novices they rebirth into manhood (e.g., Roheim 1942; van Baal 1966; Panoff 1970; Hiatt 1971; Herdt 1984; Knauff 1987). These rites served many



Figure 4. Newly scarified Iatmul initiates slathered in mud.
Photo by the author.

functions, including creating core-gender formation, preparing men for warfare, and redressing oedipality that arose from long postpartum sex taboos and mother-son sleeping arrangements (see, e.g., Herdt 1982). But a key theme of these ceremonies was the transformation of uterine fertility into masculine anal fecundity.

Initiators in Tambunum were called “mothers” (*nyame*). During the final weeks of the ceremony, these mothers zealously fed their neophytes to increase weight and brawn—so much so that, after the boys emerged from seclusion, their real mothers ideally failed to recognize them. The rite, in this sense, erased entirely the mother-son bond. But much of the initiation ceremony was a grand rendition of maternal care refracted through masculine competition and bravado. At the same time, initiates were counseled in the protocols of manhood: fear women’s bodies, moderate sexual intercourse, avoid the domestic spaces of the village. Motherhood was thus made both dangerous and desirable.

Despite modernity, the dialogical construction of Sepik River manhood remains in force. One of my key research assistants, Gamboromiawan, took moderately ill during my fieldwork in 2014. The cause of his persistent cough, upset stomach, and fever, he decided, was the postpartum behavior of his son’s wife. After giving birth, Iatmul women should wait five days before passing through the doorway of their dwelling; they climb a ladder through a window. But the wife of Gamboromiawan’s son was too hasty in crossing the threshold, and her polluting birthing fluids allegedly dripped on the doorway, causing his affliction. For a cure, Gamboromiawan killed a chicken, chanted the house spirit’s totemic “path,” and fed the meal to his nieces and nephews, who ate on behalf of the spirit. Real mothers, we might say, born from other mothers, befoul the house mothers “born” from men.

I have shown that Eastern Iatmul men, like their biblical counterparts, symbolically appropriate female fertility into their own construction of masculine empowerment. But we need to explore another nuance of gender. Western notions of male and female typically pivot on capitalist proprietary metaphors, argued Strathern (1988). In this view, organs and dispositions are “the property” of one or the other sex.¹⁰ By contrast, Melanesians traditionally understood gender in terms of fluid and “transactional” idioms. In this system, aspects or dimensions of a person’s gender circulate through networks of reciprocity or gift-exchange. In some settings, Melanesians act as singularly or exclusively male or female beings. Thus men in Tambunum paddle canoes while standing; women sit. Men enter the cult house; women do not. But in other, typically cultic, settings, Melanesians embody what Strathern calls “cross-sexed” or androgynous agency; they act on the basis of a male *and* female identity. In other words, Melanesian sociality is not premised on the categorical difference between male and female. Instead, gender pivots between separateness, or male as opposed to female, and masculo-feminine combinations.

Despite the passing of a quarter-century, Strathern’s masterful synthesis of Melanesian gender remains a theoretical cornerstone to regional studies and anthropology (e.g., Lipset 2008). I noted earlier that custodianship over ritual objects is essential to traditional and postcolonial male identity in the middle Sepik. But in the distant mythic era, men say, women held all sacra. This legend is known only to men and also, until recently, an elder woman sworn to secrecy. (The last such woman, one

of my adoptive mothers, Mundjiindua, died in 1989.) “Women had flutes and gave birth,” one man told me. “We had nothing” (see also Hogbin 1970:101). Or almost nothing. Ancestral men did possess the bullroarer, which, one day, they twirled. The noise frightened the primeval women, who fled, allowing men to filch the flutes and other sacred objects (see also Hays 1988). Since then, men ritually display spirit woodcarvings and produce mysterious sounds, largely for women. Yet men conceal the carvings with elaborate ornamentation and always hide the instruments, lest women, men say, try to steal back their purloined sacra. The flutes, magical objects, totemic names, and initiation scars all symbolize men’s desire for female fertility. And men in Tambunum agree with this interpretation.

The bullroarer signifies a similar set of meanings. Throughout Australia and New Guinea, argued Dundes, the bullroarer resembles a “flatulent penis” in shape and sound to simulate uterine fecundity through male bodily idioms (1976b). Men in Tambunum obliquely corroborate this interpretation by verbally equating their flatulence with a spirit that women must never hear—much like the bamboo flutes, which women must hear but they can never see. Both men and women call the flutes *wainjiimot*—a word men use privately when referring to their own anus and flatus as well as women’s genitals. Men associate flatulence, flutes, and bullroarers with fertility. They also attribute procreative power to wind (see Bateson [1936] 1958:230). Hence, breezes are said to accompany delivery. In this sense, yet again, I join a psychodynamic interpretation with the local configuration of androgynous, contested gender.¹¹

The symbolism of land also illustrates the dialogicality of Eastern Iatmul gender. Recall that the original state of the world was aquatic. In one variant of the cosmogony, ancestresses, understood as “floating islands” (which regularly drift down the river), hatched “eggs” of land. Here, ground is maternal and feminine. In other versions, however, as we also saw earlier, male ancestors alone created land through naming. Additionally, land is masculine in contrast to the feminine river. This is true both metaphorically and topographically, since the river continuously erodes villages and trees, that is, the products of male toil. Land, then, exhibits no stable gender, and shifts with respect to context.

Let us also consider the gender of the flutes. Once the “property” of women, the flutes are now “owned” by men. Are the flutes—long hollow tubes—male or female? Actually, they are both, that is, female phalli and masculine wombs (see Strathern 1988; Gillison 1994:214–20). The primal theft, then, defines masculinity simultaneously as different from, yet similar to, femininity. Gender, I am suggesting, after Strathern, does not constitute a static “ground” for myth, social life, and desire but, rather, serves as a shifting, contrary discourse—a conversation partly revealed through the application of psychoanalytic analysis.

From the perspective of men, the relationship between female fertility and masculinity is one of desire but also equivocation. The fluids of human birth, as I mentioned earlier, as well as menstrual blood and vaginal secretions, are all highly polluting for men’s bodies and the “heat” (*kau*) of masculine power and ritual. Uterine fertility is thus devalued at the same time that it is transformed into potent male procreative symbols. Yet men also call into question their own assertions of reproductive capacity—say, by averring that women are the true “stools” of the community. Men similarly

disclose that the mythic ancestresses excelled at playing the flutes—far more so than the men do today, who fear women’s scorn should they err. In fact, the secrecy surrounding the male cult throughout Melanesia, including myth, serves as a type of psychological defense that protects men from unmediated confrontations with both the fictions of their own manhood and “deep doubts about their maleness” (Herdt 1981:263). Within this theoretical and ethnographic context, we can now turn to the Iatmul flood myth.

The First Sepik Myth

Anthropologists report flood myths from many Sepik societies, including Mountain Arapesh (Fortune 1942:217), Ilahita Arapesh (Tuzin 1977), and Western Iatmul (Wasmann 1991:144–8). These tales also occur elsewhere in Melanesia (e.g., Burridge 1960:154–65; Wagner 1986:24–8; Biersack 1998:45–6; Kirsch 2006, chap. 5).¹² Kirtley, following Stith Thompson’s 1955 *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, classified several Melanesian flood myths as Motif A1010, Deluge. Inundation of whole world or section; and A1018, Flood as Punishment (Kirtley 1980). Not all of these tales fit the Freudian pattern identified by Dundes.¹³ But the two versions of the Eastern Iatmul flood myth I collected in 1989 and 1994, as I detail now, do—and this interpretation was expressly confirmed by men and women in July 2014.

The first version of the myth was told by a group of middle-aged men who served as my regular research assistants. My field notes record that one of the men, Gamboromiawan, the same man I mentioned earlier, repeatedly emphasized the importance of the tale. In his youth, he spent several years apprenticing with elder men, learning the myths and totemic system of his clan. This version of the myth, then, is an authoritative version, which I transcribed in 1989 in a mixture of Iatmul and Tok Pisin, the main *lingua franca* of PNG, and later translated into English. The myth is as follows:

A man from Kumbwinmbitngai village walks into the forest to forage for sago grubs.¹⁴ He finds some, treks back to the village, and mixes the grubs with sago and coconut. He folds the concoction into a large banana leaf, and cooks the meal in a fire. A patrilineal cross-cousin (*kaishe-ndu*) named Wobowi visits and tastes the meal. The morsel is wonderfully sweet. Wobowi asks for the recipe. His cousin replies: “You must slice off your wife’s breast and mix it with sago.” Wobowi walks home and tells his wife about the new dish. She is reluctant to comply. But Wobowi convinces her, saying that the meal is sweet, and that his cousin’s wife allowed her own breast to be severed and survived. She agrees. Wobowi cuts away her breast, and his wife promptly dies. Overwhelmed with grief and fury, Wobowi storms to his cousin’s house and berates him. “You are my cousin; how could you do this to me!?” While Wobowi mourns at home, the rest of the village stages a festive ceremony. Wobowi vows revenge. He brings three clusters of betel-nuts and various shell valuables to the swamp homes of three ancestral spirit crocodiles (*wai wainjiimot*). One of them, Mendangumeli, is the largest and most powerful crocodile spirit. Wobowi drops the gifts into the water and requests the great spirit to destroy the village. Mendangumeli rises from the bottom of his water-hole and asks for an explanation. Wobowi tells

Mendangumeli his tale of woe—how his cousin lied to him, the severed breast and the death of his wife, and the unwillingness of the village to join him in mourning. Mendangumeli agrees to help Wobowi exact retribution and tells Wobowi to return home and build a wooden platform atop a tall coconut palm. After building the platform and gathering his family, pigs, dogs, chickens, and possessions, Wobowi waits atop the coconut palm. After five days, it begins to rain. Two water lilies sprout in the grassy promenade outside the men's ceremonial house. Villagers are puzzled since these flowers normally grow in swamps and lakes. Curious, they pluck the lilies and two torrents of water shoot up from the holes in the ground, flooding the region. Mendangumeli tells Wobowi to spear and kill his deceitful cousin amid the rising water. He does so. The flood kills everybody from the community but Wobowi and his family. The village is destroyed. Still, the waters rise. Fearful of drowning, Wobowi throws shell valuables, pork, and betel-nut into the water in the hopes that Mendangumeli will accept these gifts and halt the flood. Mendangumeli tells Wobowi to place his family and possessions on his back. They climb onto the great reptile, who ferries them down to dry ground. Mendangumeli then clamps his jaws around Wobowi's daughter, takes her to a rival village, and allows them to kill the girl and sever her head.

We can discern several points of convergence between this tale and Dundes's analysis of other flood myths.

First, a male deity—in this case, an enormous crocodile spirit—destroys humanity and the localized world. Second, the tale centers on the actions of men. The narrative is framed by women—but women who perish. More precisely, the myth opens with a deceitful, fatal mastectomy and concludes with a female beheading. There are no heroines. If we focus on the severed breast and head, we can say that the myth castrates women, that is, eliminates women through a culturally salient, albeit normally male, idiom of emasculation.¹⁵ In this symbolic capacity, too, women in the myth double for men's fears. Moreover, men in the tale exercise agency while women passively react to male initiative. This interpretation finds expression in the vernacular whereby one is unable grammatically to say “she had sex with him” but only “*ndu wangii tagwagat*,” or “he had sex with her.” (My effort once to switch gender in this phrase resulted in considerable guffawing.) The myth, then, communicates the message that men recreate the world—and they do so upon the death of women.

In the Eastern Iatmul myth, as in many such tales, depravity prompted the deluge. A man transgressed the ethical norms—trust and support—expected within the *kaishe-ndu* cross-cousin relationship. This treachery resulted in a husband unwittingly slaying his wife by severing her breast. The fatal slice symbolizes not merely castration, as I just noted, but also the desecration of the local ideal of motherhood and therefore, as throughout the Sepik region, a dominant motif and motive for social morality (see Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986). The plot of the myth, then, turns on the destruction of culture herself.¹⁶

Iatmul view women's breasts largely in terms of motherhood, not eroticism. While the village prepared to welcome provincial dignitaries at the inauguration of a new cult house in 2010, for example, men advocated for a “traditional” ceremony that barred “whiteman clothing.” This prompted a heated discussion, again by men, about the

status of women's naked breasts. "*Em i samting nating*," one man said in Tok Pisin, "*samting bilong ol pikinini*." That is, "breasts are no big deal; something for infants." The severed breast in the myth, therefore, represents an assault on motherhood and thus on the essential moral premise of the society.

We must also consider temporality. This theme is not immediately evident from the narrative but surfaces only from embedding the tale in the wider culture. Eastern Iatmul apprehend time in several linear and repetitive modes (Silverman 1997). Linear time, to evoke the river, flows forward into the future. But the annual rain-season floods appear to regress the world back to its originary aquatic state. Moreover, the strong current of the Sepik relentlessly erodes the worldly creations of men and male ancestors. Trees, houses, and large slabs of ground all tumble into the river. Entire villages must sometimes relocate. Indeed, such a possibility is currently under discussion in the community today. The very masculine "ground" of existence teeters on reversion to watery nothingness.

The relocation of a village is no trivial matter. It requires the dismantling and rebuilding of the senior men's house, an effort fraught with mystical danger. Men must excavate dirt from under the two main posts that support the existing structure and rebury it beneath the new building. This gesture, using clay said to be molded into the first humans and carried from the totemic pit that birthed the world, allows men to "replant" the totality of ancestral law, the *ara*, in a new settlement. Thus men alone are responsible for "grounding" a new community. But they do so only when the existing ground is threatened, as it is today, by water. By contextualizing the symbolism of water, ground, male agency, breasts, and time in broader cultural concepts and social processes, we understand the flood myth as a commentary on the thickly textured relationship between manhood and mothering. This interpretation complements but does not presuppose a psychoanalytic perspective.

Psychoanalysis allows us to focus on further nuances in the myth that might otherwise escape interpretation. We can analyze the motif of the breast according to Melanie Klein's proposition that infants "split" the first love object into Good and Bad ideal-types (e.g., Klein 1935). The tale clearly violates the Good Breast imago—but also responds aggressively to the Bad Breast. Either way, the interaction between the cousins leads to the tragic death of the mother. From this angle, the myth serves as a cautionary tale about psychosocial development. Men must integrate the moral totality of women into masculine personhood—that is, not annihilate real mothers in the pursuit of ideal motherhood (cf. Tuzin 1997). Nor should men yearn to return to the breast as a symbol of the infantile self who renounces exchange and thus sociality and adulthood (see Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1969:497). The tale construes such regression as an apocalyptic cannibalism that destroys not just the mother but the world (see Stephens 1998). The myth warns against social and psychological disorder.

More recent psychoanalytic theories suggest further significance to the scene of the sliced breast. Lacan theorized that an infant's affective sense of wholeness, derived through union with the mother, is eventually shattered through the "mirror stage" ([1956] 1968; 1977). The child now begins to enter the realm of language, think symbolically, and accept the masculine order of culture. To this, Kristeva adds the concept of "abjection" (1982; see also Gross 1990). In her formulation, the originary form of

the abject is the body of the mother, cast off by the emerging subject who fears “his very own identity sinking irretrievably” into her (Kristeva 1982:64). Only after this pervasive, visceral renunciation of the mother can the subject pursue cultural goals. The abject, then, as the horror that must become the maternal breast, defines the self. Kristeva also traces the abject maternal body to men’s fear of her “generative powers” (1982:77). The Iatmul flood myth accedes to the necessity of disavowing the maternal breast, thus making the mother’s body polluting, even as it enshrines her breast and all it represents as determinant of the fate of the world. The maternal breast in the myth signifies the irreducible role of motherhood to Iatmul masculinity.

We can also interpret the breast motif in terms of the Oedipus complex. Here, too, it proves crucial to embed the analysis in the local context. I earlier discussed the preferential rule of *iai* marriage whereby a man weds a woman his father terms “mother.” This rendition of oedipality reproduces society. That is, a man feeds others through bridewealth gifts, which legally enable his son’s wife to nourish children and also, as a mother-figure, to feed her father-in-law as he ages. In the myth, however, the husband feeds only himself, thereby killing his wife and society. The husband confuses generational distinctions. He figuratively treats his wife as a mother, and behaves as his own child. All the moral foundations of proper sociality—exchange, nurture, kinship—are blurred or negated. Is this a psychoanalytic interpretation? Yes. But it befits, I stress, Iatmul cultural idioms and the local understanding of social order and psychological development.

The crocodile spirit floods the world to punish humanity for repudiating the rules of social life and the inner life. But the spirit enables a man to recreate society. In the final scene, Mendangumeli ferries the daughter to a rival village, where she is killed. Traditionally, vendettas were not aberrant modes of interaction between Sepik villages. Rather, raids formed part of normative regional interaction (Harrison 1993). In the 1930s, moreover, Bateson reported that Iatmul “say that prosperity—plenty of children, health, dances and fine ceremonial houses—follows upon successful head-hunting” ([1936] 1958:140). In other words, deceiving a cross-cousin into killing his wife is unethical. Offering your daughter to a spirit in exchange for assistance in the pursuit of masculine prowess and cultural reproduction is proper and balanced reciprocity, at least in the pre-modern past. Nobody in the village today would do likewise. Head-hunting and formal warfare ceased during the *Pax Australiana* of the 1930s. But nobody censured the myth, at least to me, as a violation of morality.

We can also view the gift of the daughter to another village in terms of exogamous marriage as opposed to incest.¹⁷ In the biblical tale, wives accompany the male protagonists and so postdiluvian reproduction is not blighted by carnal immorality. The Genesis myth foregrounds male parthenogenesis but still acknowledges conjugal reproduction. In the Iatmul tale, the unmarried daughter poses a narrative problem after the flood: with whom will she wed and reproduce? Since even today social groups often exchange both blows and women, the daughter’s fate in the tale, while fatal, hints at marriage.

Her death, too, evidences a type of offering. In a cross-cultural survey, Jay argued that blood shed by men during ritual sacrifice often substitutes for the blood of birth (1992). Sacrificial blood in patrilineal societies, such as Iatmul (and Ancient Israel),

represents what Jay called “male intergenerational continuity” (1992:31). These social ties, moreover, eclipse, or wash away, uterine relationships. Thus sacrifice positions men at the center of social reproduction. Neither the Iatmul nor the biblical tale mentions childbirth. Both myths, however, narrate sacrifice or killing after the flood—male activities understood in both cultures to preserve society and life.

Lévi-Strauss’ famous structuralist analysis of the Oedipus trilogy offers yet another insight into the Iatmul flood tale (1963). Recall that Lévi-Strauss segmented the Oedipus narrative into separate incidents and rearranged the episodes into two sets of opposed “mythemes.” The first opposition pitted the “overrating of blood relations” against the “underrating of blood relations.” I see the same pattern in the Iatmul myth. The tale begins with treachery in a close kin relationship. In turn, this deception results in the overrating of blood relations when Wobowi unites with his own mother, not sexually like Oedipus, but in an act of cannibalism. The second opposition Lévi-Strauss identified in the Oedipus triptych is, generally speaking, the clash between a culturally specific view of asexual reproduction and the recognition that humans are born from intercourse and women. The Iatmul flood myth encodes a similar dialogue between conflicting views of reproduction, one masculine and the other uterine. Lévi-Strauss, of course, renounced psychoanalysis (e.g., [1985] 1988). But the progression of his writings mirrored Freud’s literary corpus (see also Morton 1995:329–35). Ironically, even a structuralist analysis of the Iatmul flood tale reveals psychoanalytic insights.¹⁸

In what ways does the Sepik myth express male “womb envy”? First, as noted earlier, crocodile spirits are said by men to be the decisive agents of pregnancy (Silverman



Figure 5. A man primps an ensorcelled spirit costume of Mendangumeli with Wobowi’s daughter in his jaws. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. Man dressed as an ancestress for a rite that dramatizes the local cosmogony. Photo by the author.

1996:36–7). Like all senior spirits, moreover, Mendangumeli is ritually summoned and impersonated only by men. Males, in other words, govern human fertility. They also associate crocodile spirits with semen and the penis. Accordingly, the river symbolizes female fertility and the womb. Cosmic creation is thus envisioned as sexual intercourse writ large—albeit largely, I have stressed, in the absence of women and female spirits. During one cosmogonic ceremony, in fact, men dress like primal ancestresses, complete with coconut shell breasts. Real women, with their actual breasts, are unable to perform these roles. The efficacy of the ritual requires men to act like women—and women to act only the part of the audience.

My *Iatmul* interlocutors added additional comments not expressly contained within the narrative. The crocodile spirit copulated with the daughter in a riverine inlet before bringing her to the rival village. Additionally, the human protagonists sought shelter atop coconut palms—common Melanesian symbols of male genitals and manhood (e.g., Herdt 1984). Another local myth traces the origin of coconuts to a totemic spirit-pig that clamped its jaws on a man's testicles. The pig's head was split open; its brain sprouted into the first coconut palm. Finally, I add, the symbolism of the two water lilies, at once phallic and testicular, suggests that the flood waters were seminal as much as maternal. In this sense, Mendangumeli symbolizes both the maternal and paternal facets of reproduction, but in an exclusively male body. He is a masculine androgyne.

Overall, the first Eastern Iatmul flood myth supports Dundes's psychoanalytic interpretation. However, I also argued that we cannot simply impose this framework onto the myth. Context matters. Hence, I attuned the paradigm to local concepts and symbols, thus interpreting the myth through a culturally relevant, Freudian lens.

The Second Myth: Variations on a Theme

It was Dundes himself in 1993 who suggested that I seek to collect variations of the Iatmul flood myth. And so I did, during fieldwork the following year. Here is the version of the tale told by Henry Gawi, a classificatory father. I recorded this rendition by pen, like the previous one, from the original oral blend of the local vernacular and Tok Pisin; I later translated the tale into English:

Long ago, men, during funerary rites, would attach a long rattan vine to the end of a wooden carving of a hornbill bird.¹⁹ Women would grasp one end of the vine; men would clutch the other end. Everybody was naked. They would play tug-of-war. When the men pulled the women over to their side, they all had random intercourse. When the women pulled the men over to their side, they did likewise. This was immoral—especially in public. One day, a younger brother was resting in the cult house. He overheard some men discussing their sexual encounters with his elder-brother's wife during the funerary tug-of-war. The younger brother was shocked at the act but especially at the gossip. Later, he told his elder brother what he heard in the men's house. Together, they schemed revenge. The two brothers gathered shell valuables, a dog, a pig, and a chicken. They placed everything into a canoe and paddled to the river inlet that was home to the male spirit crocodile Mendangumeli. They slapped the surface of the water with a canoe paddle to arouse the slumbering spirit. They also threw the shell valuables and food into the water. A small crocodile surfaced and clamped his jaws around the paddle. The two brothers pulled the crocodile into the canoe. It was Mendangumeli. The spirit asked the brothers about their troubles and they told him what happened. The brothers then put Mendangumeli into a woven string-bag, and the spirit suddenly grew to his full, awesome size. The brothers paddled Mendangumeli to a hole in the ground. Meanwhile, everybody at the village continued to play the carnal tug-of-war game. Suddenly, the clouds burst with terrifying lightning and thunder. Rain fell. A water lily sprouted in the middle of the waterhole where Mendangumeli was resting. Normally, this water lily only grows in swamps. But this time it appeared in a waterhole in the ground. The villagers said "Hey, what's this?" and pulled out the lily, snapping the stem. Water gushed from the broken stem. Everybody was surprised. The two brothers placed their possessions—pig, dog, plants, chickens, everything—on a platform atop a tall coconut palm. The water from the severed stem continued to flow, flooding the village, killing everything and everybody. The two brothers feared that the rising waters would also drown them and their families. So they threw shell valuables and other gifts into the water in the hopes that Mendangumeli would halt the flood. But to no avail. The waters continued to rise. So the brothers decorated their sister with shell and floral ornaments, painted her face, and oiled her body. Then they threw her into the water. Mendangumeli chomped and killed her, and the waters receded. Then the two brothers along with their wives and children repopulated the area.

The same themes that animate the previous version are also present in this account.²⁰ A breach of ethical norms leads to aquatic destruction by a male spirit. In the first tale, men violated motherhood and trust; here, men and women together transgressed sexual propriety. In both, bodily wrongdoing mandates a cosmic cleansing. In both, too, males, whether human or otherworldly, exercise agency for reconstituting society.

Dundes argued that rainfall in flood myths represents, through “symbolic reversal,” the urinary-seminal destruction and renewal of the world. No rain appears in the first Iatmul tale. Nonetheless, the same analytic principle proves insightful. The myths, as my interlocutors remarked, invert everyday reality. Thus water lilies grow in unnatural locations. If we envision male micturition as water flowing downward from a bodily tube, then we see that the two myths reverse this process: water gushes upward from a hole in the ground or a broken tube. Dundes’s thesis remains valid.

Am I reading too much meaning into the Iatmul tales? Is there any evidence that Iatmul men also understand the mythic waters to issue from an inverse phallus? Yes. Upon questioning, Henry promptly stated that the single water lily in the second myth *was* Mendangumeli’s penis. He himself offered this elaboration on the motif. I followed up by asking if the tale also concerned male envy of birth. He agreed. Two decades later, Henry remained equally steadfast in his assessment that the myth concerned a phallic rendition of birth. Indeed, he said so outright.

Was Henry lying or fabricating? Did he seek some measure of validation through his relationship with the anthropologist? Absolutely. Ethnographic informants, anthropologists have long argued, are not simply passive baskets, to invoke an Iatmul metaphor, that open at our bequest and spill forth unmediated cultural verities. In the 1980s and 1990s, Henry was a key broker in the village for a then-thriving tourist trade. His renown in the community partly rested on his ability to interact successfully with Westerners. He even travelled to Australia as the guest of a tribal art dealer and tour operator. To me, moreover, Henry often boasted privately of his unmatched knowledge of totemism, magic, and myth—and he continues to do so today. Unlike others, he would tell me the “truth.” Due to the genealogical principle of primogeniture, too, Henry in the 1980s was awaiting his informal ascension as clan leader. But one’s position in the social structure does not guarantee political relevance. Henry also needed persuasive authority, and he viewed his interactions with tourists and me as a source of symbolic capital. Unquestionably, Henry’s response to my interpretation suited his social strategies.

But Henry’s political motivations, I contend, hardly explain or invalidate his approval of my interpretive equivalence between the water lily and the phallus. I often voice tentative analyses with Iatmul friends, and they regularly disagree, Henry included. In the postcolonial era, moreover, no racialized juridical structure exists that would penalize Henry for challenging an anthropologist. And there is no reason to believe that Henry assumed that the future of our relationship hinged on his reply to this specific query. In sum, Henry’s response was legitimate anthropological “data.”

As Melanesian men jockey for political position, they persistently devalue the esoterica of rivals. Sacred knowledge is always fluid. There is no definitive, static, or singularly truthful way to view, then, any significant motif in an oral tale. Likewise, Melanesian societies generally lack a stable or authoritative center. In most instances, public confirmation or refutation reflects momentary political strategies rather than

some acontextual evaluation of a body of knowledge. Veracity is always contingent, and semantic innovation ongoing. Even if Henry outright “lied,” as we understand the term, his mendacity nonetheless took on a particular rhetorical shape suitable to a culture in which noses, tongues, house posts, canoes, flutes, and crocodiles all serve, in certain contexts, as phallic symbols. From any angle, I am suggesting, Henry Gawi’s tale and comments corroborate Dundes’s psychoanalytic analysis of flood myths.

I need mention one other possibility. Perhaps Henry’s interpretation of the water lily was not culturally but psychologically motivated. That is, Henry responded to the water lily as the equivalent of a Rorschach inkblot. The flower, then, is both a public and personal symbol (see Obeyesekere 1981). Maybe Henry’s diminutive stature, his deformed foot (badly burnt as a child), insecurities concerning his position in the political structure of the clan, or unresolved issues arising from the early death of his father all variously contributed to his agreement that the water lily was a grand phallus. This may be true. But the totality of the myth, when contextualized in broader cultural themes, argues against this proposition. The phallic innuendo of the water lily might make sense in Henry’s unique outlook—or my own, for that matter, whether psychological or anthropological. But this interpretation also makes sense within the local cultural setting. Henry’s understanding of the flood myth, I am suggesting, amounted to what Fine called the “external validity” of a psychoanalytic interpretation (1984).

The Iatmul flood, as both Henry and I interpret it, issued from the phallus of a male spirit that governs human reproduction. But water in Iatmul culture also symbolizes, we have seen, the womb and female fertility. The flood thus represents both a phallic seminal emission and uterine female parturition. Or, to put it the terms of Strathern, the flood is a cross-sexed trope that simultaneously foregrounds and backgrounds male and female dispositions (1988).²¹ The two flood myths represent two related voices in an unfinalizable, local cultural dialogue about gender and fertility of which one valence, and an important one, is masculine envy of uterine fertility.

In the second version of the tale, Mendangumeli first appears as a tiny crocodile. The two brothers placed him into a string-bag, called a *wut* in the vernacular. The womb is similarly termed a *nyan wut*, or “child’s string-bag.” In this sense, the brothers symbolically gestate the small crocodile in an external, disembodied, and artifactual womb from which they hyperbolically birth the enormous spirit who embodies the powers of cosmic destruction and regeneration.²² Here, we again see the mythic and masculine inversion of human reproduction.

Women in middle Sepik weave string-bags, never men. The myth, then, not only inverts reproduction but also attests to female primacy since the brothers, by using the string-bag to “gestate” the crocodile spirit, symbolically appropriate uterine fertility. Moreover, Tuzin argued that flood myths in another Sepik society, Iahita Arapesh, partly represent men’s fear of the pollution associated with menstruation and birth (1977:211). This dread of aquatic “ego destruction” arises from men’s fears that women may again reassert ritual dominance (Tuzin 1977:221). The mythic flood lends men a narrative of triumph over the nourishing and dangerous flows of women.

I want to elaborate on the imagery of castration or emasculation in the second flood tale. Humans guilty of sexual immorality sever the penis of Mendangumeli, the great crocodile being who ultimately fathers all human pregnancies, and accordingly

drown in the spirit's urinary-seminal water. This motif expresses father-son oedipal tension. The sons assault the father's phallus and suffer retribution—much as they did in consequence for assailing motherhood in the first tale. In both myths, sons are triumphant, as they must be in all oedipal entanglements linked to communal reproduction. Otherwise society ends. But the ongoing presence of the myth in the local mythic and cultural repertoire, and repeated claims by both men and women of its importance, suggests that the message of the tale is far from irrelevant or outdated. After all, the river does overflow annually, as I elaborate shortly, and so local men never fully overcome the psycho-social anxieties encrypted in the myth.

Both flood tales end with violence against women by male kin. In both, a woman is given, as in marriage or sexually, to the saurian spirit, only to suffer death. In one tale, she is speared; in the other, eaten. We can understand the tales as rhetorical violence that contributes to a wider cultural regime of gendered terror aimed at protecting men's religious and social privileges. At the same time, the myths challenge masculine power, or at least express the fragility of manhood. The tales offer only partial resolution. Even the biblical flood, I add, ends in tragedy: drunkenness by Noah, an allusion to incest (see Bassett 1971), and an eternal curse hurled by the patriarch onto his grandson. By linking death to male yearning, flood myths encode messages that cannot be plainly declared lest men confront directly the fictions and failures of manhood.

The two Iatmul flood myths, as Dundes argued for other such tales, lend expression to a dialogical definition of manhood that emulates yet devalues female fertility. In so doing, I also showed, these myths call into question the very configuration of masculinity they uphold. Additionally, the second Iatmul tale evinces father-son oedipality.²³ In the myth, humans violate sexual etiquette and emasculate a paternal demiurge, who drowns society in revenge. The message of both myths is that social life and culture are problematic and paradoxical, resting on the expression yet suppression of desire.

After the Flood: Women Respond

Thus far, my analysis has centered on men's voices, and might therefore appear marred by the androcentrism of classic Freudian thought, and social science more generally. One could levy much the same criticism at Dundes. Yet Iatmul women, I now discuss, *can* offer pointed rejoinders to the symbolism men perceive in the flood myths. Women do so, however, *only* in certain circumstances, and then *only* in a muted and oblique fashion befitting their subordinate status in what Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead called the "prestige structure" of the society (1981:13).

Iatmul society does not permit women access to a public discursive space in which to comment with unrestrained interpretive freedom on myth or any facet of the totemic system. There is, in this sense, no women's house. Lacking a central location, never mind one barred to men and surrounded by the validating presence of spirits, women's discourse remains officially marginalized in rural, postcolonial Melanesia. How do Iatmul women publicly respond to flood myths? In one sense, they do not.

Women repeatedly stated to me that they are far too busy with the practicalities and necessities of everyday life to enjoy the "luxury" of sitting around, telling tales. I

heard this sentiment by many different women, in different conversations, phrased through different idioms, in both town and the village, and in all my fieldwork visits. It is a constant refrain. Additionally, the flood myth centers on a mighty spirit whose existence is not doubted by any Iatmul person I know, even today, male or female. To call into question the narrative and meaning of the myth is to invite Mendangumeli's considerable ire. When I asked women about the myth, they generally responded in hushed voices that the tale pertains to a powerful spirit who destroyed the world, and they would rather not talk about the matter at any depth or length. "We are afraid." The myth forms part of the wider religious system controlled by men that entails all sorts of secrets, magic, and danger. It is not something to be taken lightly.

Women also remark that they do not know all the details of the myth, only the general plot. For substantive exegesis, I was told, ask men. Both men and women agree that such esoterica is the rightful domain of the male cult and the "men's house." Women who publicly assert interpretive or epistemic authority would therefore transgress the gendered boundary that organizes social life. To ask women to comment publicly on myth is to put them, as they say, at risk of riling both men and spirits.

Despite these cautions, and with some apprehension, I did speak to women in 2014 about the flood myth. But open-ended questioning prompted only brief replies and little insight. A different tack was warranted. Thus I cut to the interpretive chase, as it were, after making certain no other men were present: I told women what men told me. The responses were animated, witty, and even somewhat raucous—*exactly* what men fear.

"Everything," said Henry Gawi in 2014, "begins with women." We were drinking beer with a half-dozen other men from Tambunum at an outdoor café of sorts in Wewak, the sole town and commercial hub of the East Sepik Province.²⁴ "Women gave rise to everything," Henry continued. The other men agreed. I was rather taken aback with how frankly my male companions anchored the totality of the male cult, especially artistic and mythic motifs, to women. Masculinity seemed as hollow as our empty bottles of South Pacific lager.

Do women, I asked, know that the water lily in the flood myth represents the crocodile spirit's phallus? "No." Women would laugh, Henry continued, and scoff at men. "You men are rubbish," women would say, "we women are first, we are the elder-siblings; you men follow us." The other men agreed. There was no doubt at the table that if women learned what men know and think about the myth and male ritual secrets more generally, they would openly mock men. And this is exactly what women do, in a sense. Speaking privately to me, women often berate men for neglecting to assist with everyday tasks. Compared to women, men are like dogs: "They just laze around doing nothing." And while most women enjoy listening to ceremonial flute music, which evokes bittersweet memories of deceased kin, some women grumble, said one of my brother's two wives, when men impose ritual restrictions on the village. "We women have a lot of work to do."

Men, too, women protest with exasperation, often allow their personal political strategies and bluster to foil communal efforts at "development." Thus several men in 2014 repeatedly, some might say obstinately, objected to plans by Digicel, a mobile phone company, to erect a tower on their lineage land. Why? Merely to register wounded pride from some long-ago dispute. "We women know how to cooperate.

We think about raising up the community. But too many men think only about themselves, and end up bringing us all down.” This directional metaphor was telling, insofar as men assert themselves as responsible for building-up or “planting” social life. Far from it, said women: men’s efforts always seem to topple.

Recently, I heard another female rejoinder to masculinity. Some husbands assert dominance over their spouses by threatening to expel them from the house in order to wed a second wife. To this, my village sister said, the first wife may offer a blasé response: “Go ahead. I will be fine on my own. We women can easily take care of ourselves and our children. But you? A second wife will only burden you.” In fact, both men and women openly state that widows can readily obtain food, feed themselves and others, and care for children. Their only hardships are obtaining houses and canoes. By contrast, widowers are pitiful, hungry, and unhappy—hard-pressed to make do since men are inept at cooking, preparing meals, and raising children. No amount of male bravado, including men’s ritual and esoteric prerogatives, can match women’s “innate” abilities to birth and care.

I continued questioning my male friends at the café. Do women know the “truth” about the flutes and other ritual sounds that “speak” on behalf of the spirits? Probably, the men agreed, at least today. They also agreed that women must not openly discuss what they “know,” especially during ritual performances when the spirits are irrefutably “present.” The gendered deception, such as it is, does not destabilize the validity of the spirits or their threat of mystical revenge for any transgression. I asked if women know of the primal theft. “No.” I was unable to verify this claim since, in deference to local sensibilities, I never outright asked women. But no female interlocutor ever disclosed knowledge of the mythic event.

Nor do women admit to knowing the source of the hidden ritual sounds, specifically, the voices of crocodile spirits. They consistently refuse to acknowledge awareness of the flutes. Here, too, women often replied that they were “afraid” to discuss the issue—afraid of men, to repeat, and also the spirits. Moreover, women added, male kin would be required to compensate the men’s house with money and food should women overstep their visual and epistemic boundaries. In 2014, many women seemed palpably uncomfortable with this conversation; I pushed it as far as I could within reasonable limits. Nevertheless, their protestations also seemed forced at times and, despite their disquiet, I detected the occasional sheepish smile that belied, in my view, the very knowledge they decline to concede. Twice in 2014, moreover, women mentioned as offhand comments in unrelated conversation the occurrence of men “blowing the flutes”; one woman was my sister, who lives in Wewak and clerks at the provincial courthouse, and the other was an elderly woman at a village market. But these candid utterances, however telling, were the exception to the silent norm. And men still take great precautions to hide the flutes from women. In sum, a cultural script prohibits almost all public admissions that women “know” the “truth” about male ritual mysteries.

Having thus introduced mockery and denial as women’s responses to male secrets, I now return the flood myth. I expressly discussed the tale with several groups of women in 2014, always in the absence of local men. In all instances, as I mentioned above, women told only abbreviated versions of the myth. They often omitted the episode

about the severed breast and seemed unaware of why the crocodile spirit flooded the world. Unstructured questioning proved ineffective at eliciting frank responses to the tale. Somewhat frustrated with this tactic, I blurted out in one conversation, perhaps intemperately; “Some men say that the flower in the story is Mendangumeli’s penis.” The women *all* erupted into boisterous laughter and then soundly berated and mocked men for the deception. They found the very idea hilarious. But they never questioned the validity of the interpretation. For them, the phallic symbolism was clearly absurd—but also wholly believable given the public architecture of manhood. The women expressed no doubts that men saw the water lily as the crocodile spirit’s penis. Of course, men did! But equally outrageous was that men never told them the truth about the flower. The women chuckled and snickered the entire morning. They responded *exactly* as men feared—with enthusiastic, unmediated ridicule.

Between bouts of jeering laughter, women had much to say. Yes, men are jealous of women’s ability to birth life. But men “talk down to us,” saying “they know everything.” Men are haughty and dismissive of women—but only because men, to repeat, envy women’s fecundity and nurturance. “We women are far more important than men.” Then, in a statement that called into question *everything* men hold dear to manhood, my interlocutors all concurred that “women are the ground”—that is, the very foundation of culture and life. “If women are present, there is ground; if only men, there is nothing.” Women birth and raise children, and thus women are the “ground” of the community—“not men!” Men make a big fuss over themselves, routinely misinform women, and claim that they are responsible for everything. But women are the true “ground.” There could be no more powerful a rejoinder to men’s understanding of the flood myth and the male cult more generally than the assertion by women that they, and not men, are the “foundation” of life. For in many respects, the flood myth is a narrative and interpretive context for men to assert that they, and not women, provide the stable, enduring “ground” for human existence—that men, and not women, reproduce social life. But as my female friends so vehemently claimed, such male avowals are nothing other than empty boasting—worse, sham lies and silly phallic innuendo. Women are the truthful “ground.”

Conclusion

Sepik floods are as real as mythic.²⁵ Each year, the river floods during the rainy season. In most years, the waters rise only a few feet. In 2009–2010, however, the annual flood reached heights rarely experienced, inundating the region for months. Some communities suffered cholera. Anything not secured inside a house floated away or, in the case of dogs and chickens, drowned. Almost everybody in Tambunum fled to a small mountain in the surrounding grasslands—tragically, in some cases. The young son of my village brother, while playing in the tall grass, was set upon by a venomous snake. He died in his mother’s lap.

The flood destroyed gardens and fruit trees. When the waters receded, villagers could only dine on sago starch, river fish, and green leaves. All local tradestores had long shuttered due to the absence of money after the decline in tourism (see Silverman 2012). Local dirt roads were impassable from the lack of maintenance by

the provincial government. And few villagers could afford petrol for their outboard motors. This once-modernizing community felt forsaken. "We are," said many men, "going backwards." The river, once a source of tourists and prosperity, now signified only woe.

Linus Apingari explained the cause of the devastating flood. An enterprising man from another village earned money in town from selling sweet potatoes. A *lesman*, or lazy man, jealous of his kinsman's success, brought on the deluge through magic. As in the myth, the recent flood resulted from a perceived rupture in social relations and the failure to adhere to proper moral comportment.

In July and August of 2010, men took it upon themselves to revive prosperity. One clan refurbished a ceremonial house, registered as a formal "culture group" with provincial authorities, and sought government funds to attract tourists and to stage an opening ceremony during the upcoming Sepik Cultural Diversity Show (see Silverman 2013). But the effort proved divisive since some lineages were excluded from the "culture group" due to a series of nested disputes. Day after day, men gathered in the "belly" of the all-male cult houses to debate preparations for the ceremony, and thus to restore social life. In a real sense, Eastern Iatmul recently experienced and enacted their flood myth. Nature, we might say, confirms culture: the flood myth takes place in the far, distant past—but it also recurs in the present and future. It is far from just a myth.

On the surface, Eastern Iatmul flood tales are simply two examples of numerous totemic myths that form the local religious and political system. On a deeper level, however, these tales encode multiple meanings concerning the ongoing, irresolvable relationship between gender, society, and psyche. Drawing on Dundes's psychoanalytic perspective, I suggest that these myths convey messages concerning the paradoxical nature of masculinity as locally defined in terms of, yet against, female fertility. And these myths also provide women, however obliquely, an opportunity to comment on the failure of manhood to sustain the community—that is, to negate the meanings men attribute to their flood tales. These myths enable local men and women to confront psychodynamic paradoxes of gender and sociality that remain existentially powerful because they remain unresolved.

Last, I have shown that a Freudian analysis of myth does not need to erase local agency and cultural idioms. I insist that it is imperative to attune a Freudian framework to the local imaginary. In so doing, my analysis of the two Iatmul tales corroborated Dundes's analysis of worldwide flood myths. Above all else, these Iatmul tales offer insights into the psychodynamic complexities of Sepik social life by sustaining and subverting the master narratives of local gender and culture.

Acknowledgments

Over the years, many institutions have graciously supported my fieldwork: the Fulbright Foundation, the Institute for Intercultural Studies, and the Graduate School and Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota in 1988–1990; the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and DePauw University in 1994; Wheelock College in 2008; Wheelock College and the Institute for Money, Technology, and Financial Inclusions at the University of California at Irvine in 2010; and Wheelock College, through a Gordon Marshall Fellowship, in 2014. I am also grateful for the comments of two

anonymous reviewers. Needless to say, my gratitude to the people of Tambunum remains profound and inevitably unrequited. For this, I apologize. The topic of this essay was stimulated long ago in a seminar co-taught with Keith Nighthenheler at DePauw University that centered on Dundes's folkloric oeuvre in preparation for his Phi Beta Kappa lecture in spring 1993. I offer this essay as a token memorial to Alan's astounding intellectual scope and inspiration. As my Iatmul friends would say, *em i tsagi-mborl tru!*

Notes

1. For example, Dundes's important notions of "projection" (1976a) and "projective inversion" (2002).
2. The concept of "womb envy" is generally traced to Karen Horney (e.g., 1926), but she never used the phrase.
3. For Lacan and folklore, see Haring (2012).
4. The corpus of anthropological scholarship that draws on Freud and psychoanalysis is vast (e.g., Crapanzano 1981; Obeyesekere 1990; Paul 1987, 1996; Spain 1992; Heald and Deluz 1994; and Moore 2007).
5. The final version of the biblical flood tale, redacted along with the rest of the Hebrew Bible during the Second Temple Period (or earlier, during the Babylonian Exile), drew on at least two distinct sources, one dating to the tenth century, the other post-exilic (Habel 1988).
6. For Genesis, see Dundes (1983); Eilberg-Schwartz (1990); and Alter (1996:3). More generally, see Eliade (1958:188–215).
7. A parallel sequence occurs in Genesis 17, as I argue in detail elsewhere (Silverman 2006, chap. 4), when God "cut" a covenant with Abraham, as signified through circumcision.
8. Dundes argued that Adam's rib symbolized the baculum, or penile bone, that human males, unlike most other mammals, lack (1983, 1988a).
9. Sago, the paradigmatic Sepik meal, is a starch produced from the palm tree *Metroxylum sago*.
10. Strathern's formulation of Melanesian gender somewhat overlaps, of course, with Queer Theory, but also elides over a long history of challenges to gender binaries in Western history; see, for instance, Marcus (2005); for Queer Indigenous Theory, see Driskill et al. (2011).
11. In the famous *naven* rite that celebrates cultural achievements (see Bateson [1936] 1958), a classificatory mother's brother clefs his buttocks down the leg of his celebrated sister's son, a gesture resonant with masculine procreative themes (see Silverman 2001, chap. 9).
12. On Kairiru Island, Kragur villagers tell of a flood-like incident of "rain and earthquake" that destroyed a village called Kafow. "In honor of this, the Kragur Village basketball team in the 1970s was called the Kafow Flooders" (Michael Smith, personal communication, 2012).
13. For a different psychoanalytic discussion of flood myths, see Vandermeersch (1998).
14. Sago grubs are the larvae of a species of snout beetles, or weevils, from the genus *Rhinchophorus*.
15. For a powerful image of emasculation among the nearby Abelam people, see Forge (1966:27).
16. Obeyesekere reports on the Sri Lankan myth of the goddess Pattini, who tears off her own breast in a fit of rage, and throws it on the city of Madurai, which burns to the ground. He also discusses the South Asian symbolic equivalence between breast and penis (1990:30, 36–8).
17. Van reports on a similar theme in flood myths from Southeast Asia (1993).
18. Dundes often commented on structuralism, which he viewed with reservation (e.g., 1978, 1997).
19. Such a spirit carving is displayed during the annual collective funeral of one particular clan. But the usage as described in the myth is fanciful.
20. For a different version of this tale from a non-Iatmul village, see Slone (2001:413–4).
21. Tuzin elegantly interprets male and female meanings in the symbolism of water among Ilahita Arapesh (1977).
22. MacKenzie discusses the symbolic equivalence between the string-bag and the womb in several Papua New Guinea cultures (1991).
23. For myth, religion, and other cultural forms as projections of early childhood experiences, see Wright (1954); Dundes (1976a); and Spiro (1965).
24. Wewak is only 60 kilometers from the village yet requires a full day of travel. In 2014, we voyaged 90 minutes downriver in a dugout canoe powered by a 40 horsepower outboard motor, then trekked for

an hour through the bush and, last, drove four hours by land cruiser on a new dirt road recently graded for large-scale, wholly illegal logging.

25. These tales, some argue, may also recall a prehistoric inland sea that preceded the actual formation of the river (Swadling 1990; see also Nunn 2001).

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