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The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society

There is little doubt that the public's interest in primitive matriarchies has been revived. Suddenly magazine articles and books appear attesting to a former Rule by Women, as well as to an archaic life-style presumed to differ radically from our own. Because no matriarchies persist anywhere at the present time, and because primary sources recounting them are totally lacking, both the existence and constitution of female-dominated societies can only be surmised. The absence of this documentation, however, has not been a deterrent to those scholars and popularists who view in the concept of primitive matriarchy a rationale for a new social order, one in which women can and should gain control of important political and economic roles.

Bachofen and Mother Right: Myth and History

The earliest and most erudite study of matriarchy was published in Stuttgart in 1861 by the Swiss jurist and classical scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen. His *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother right: an investigation of the religious and juridical character of matriarchy in the ancient world)¹ had an impact on nineteenth-century views on the evolution of early social institutions. Arguing from mainly poetic and frequently dubious historical sources (Hesiod, Pindar, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Herodotus, and Strabo),² Bachofen tried to establish as

The editors, Louise Lamphere and Michelle Rosaldo, deserve special thanks for their extremely useful criticisms of an earlier version of this paper. I would like to thank also Eugene Goodheart, Eva Hunt, and Robert A. Manners for their helpful comments on the final revision.

¹ Excerpts from *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) are available in translation in Ralph Mannheim, ed., *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (Bachofen, 1967).

² The accuracy of these classical sources on matriarchy is questioned by Simon Pembroke (1967). He concludes a scholarly investigation of a number of Bachofen's Greek citations with the opinion that "What the Greeks knew about their past, and

moral and historical fact the primacy of “mother right,” which he thought sprang from the natural and biological association of mother and child. Matriarchy, or the dominion of the mother “over family and state,” according to Bachofen, was a later development generated by woman’s profound dissatisfaction with the “unregulated sexuality” that man had forced upon her. A gradual series of modifications in the matriarchal family led to the institution of individual marriage and “the matrilinear transmission of property and names.” This advanced stage of mother right was followed by a civil rule by women, which Bachofen called a “gynocracy.” The rule by women was overthrown eventually by the “divine father principle,” but not before mother right had clearly put its stamp on a state religion. Indeed, it was this sacred character of matriarchy, founded on the maternal generative mystery, that represented for Bachofen the bulk of his evidence in favor of ancient matriarchies.

In the same year that *Das Mutterrecht* appeared, another scholarly work was published that supported an opposing opinion, namely that patriarchy was “the primeval condition of the human race.” Henry Sumner Maine’s *Ancient Law* sought to establish, by the method of comparative jurisprudence, that all human groups were “originally organized on the patriarchal model” (1861: 119). Maine’s argument rested on information contained in the Scriptures, in particular the early chapters of Genesis, and on Roman law. With the simultaneous publication of *Das Mutterrecht* and *Ancient Law* it may be said that the contest between the matriarchists and the patriarchists was launched in the intellectual circles of Western Europe. That neither side won a victory is owing to a paucity of evidence on both sides. The theory of matriarchy attracted such staunch supporters as John F. McLennan (another lawyer, who introduced a matriarchal hypothesis in 1865 independently of Bachofen; see Rivière’s introduction to McLennan’s *Primitive Marriage*, 1970), Lewis Henry Morgan (1877, whose influence on Friedrich Engels’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is well known), and Edward Burnett Tylor (1899). The patriarchal theory was defended with considerable skill in *The History of Human Marriage* by Edward Westermarck (1891), who successfully demonstrated that males could be dominant in both family and political affairs in societies with systems of matrilinear descent.

What is known about the past and present conditions of primitive

about their neighbors, turns out to be very little.” I am indebted to Mary Lefkowitz of the Department of Classics, Wellesley College, for calling my attention to Pembroke’s paper.

and early peoples does not augur well for any future discovery of a clear-cut and indisputable case of matriarchy. Patriarchal societies, however, seem to abound in fact as well as in theory, although admittedly there is still no certifiable way of documenting the political and jural relations of the earliest human societies. It is certain that if matriarchies ever existed, they do not now exist. Did they evolve perhaps long ago into patriarchies, as Bachofen supposed they did? This question, unanswered in history, once again raises interesting problems that today serve as foci for the contemporary women's movement. If anthropologists and scholars of classical jurisprudence no longer read Bachofen, the advocates of the current feminist movement do. They have rediscovered in his theory of mother right a scholarly precedent for the privileged position of females in primitive society.

Apart from the question of Bachofen's accuracy as a cultural historian, there is the question of the value and desirability of his moral defense of female rule. If I have read him correctly, Bachofen's matriarch is a far cry from today's liberated woman. Not surprisingly, she bears a closer resemblance to mid-Victorian conceptions of the perfect woman, "whose unblemished beauty, whose chastity and high-mindedness" inspired men to deeds of chivalry and bravery for her sake (Bachofen, 1967: 88). In his particular romanticization of womanhood, Bachofen was echoing his contemporary John Ruskin, who wrote that women, by virtue of their innate moral perfection, would exercise power "not within their households merely, but over all within their sphere'" (quoted in Scanlon, 1978: 12), although this sphere was invariably exclusive of the male political arena. The Victorian vision of woman elevated her to the status of goddess, but it did little or nothing either to promote her independence or to offer her opportunities to fulfill herself outside the home. Bachofen was, it appears, no more enlightened than other Victorians in extolling the virtues of chaste love and monogamous and fruitful marriage.

Thus, in spite of all his so-called advanced notions about archaic matriarchies, Bachofen continued to promote through fiction and fancy a status quo that by now has become all too familiar. Motherhood, outliving mother right in its many guises, was brought firmly under the protective guardianship of father right, where it has flourished. It can only be said that Bachofen added little that was new to modern opinion concerning prehistoric social development. Not even the Amazons of classical reference, those single-minded, single-breasted warrior maidens, could account for an enduring political system in which women were the de facto rulers. The Amazons, for all their brave social and sexual

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innovations, were considered by Bachofen to represent an extremist group who, because they had a preference for working and living outside the acknowledged social system, were condemned to failure in their enterprise.

To give Bachofen credit, it must be realized that when *Das Mutterrecht* was first published, the city of Troy had not yet been excavated, and little, if anything, was known of the ancient Mediterranean world apart from what was recorded in the standard classical sources. Fully aware that such texts as the Homeric epics were not written as histories in the strictest sense, he nevertheless accepted these mythological accounts as a reliable reservoir of actual history. In thus mistaking myth for history, Bachofen committed what is even today a not uncommon error of judgment. But whatever Bachofen's confusions were, he did admit that the subject of his researches presented him with certain "difficulties." He saw that the absence of archaeological evidence meant that he could not support his mother right hypothesis with solid data, and he reminded the reader that "the most elementary spade work remains to be done, for the culture period to which mother right pertains has never been seriously studied. Thus we are entering virgin territory" (1967: 69).

Since the publication of *Das Mutterrecht* this "virgin territory" has been explored by a horde of archaeologists and social anthropologists. Their diligent searches into the prehistory of Mediterranean cultures as well as into the present conditions of primitive societies around the world have not uncovered a single undisputed case of matriarchy. Even the Iroquois, once a stronghold for "matriarchists," turn out to be matrilineal only, although Iroquois society still comes the closest to representing Bachofen's ideal "gynocratic state," since Iroquois women played a decisive role in lineage and village politics. Yet in spite of the substantial power wielded by women, men were chosen consistently as political leaders. At most, the Iroquois today are considered a "quasi-matriarchy" (Wallace, 1971).

To have cast doubt, as I have just done, on the historical evidence for the Rule of Women is not the same thing as challenging the significance of the mythologies of matriarchy. The main issue would seem not to be

³ Numerous cases have been recorded of societies in which the inheritance of lineage membership and property is transmitted legitimately only through females (matriliny). This system is understood to be quite different from that in which women have been purported to rule (matriarchy). Neither Cleopatra nor the queens of England were matriarchs in this narrowest sense, because their regimes were initiated by accidents of birth. In general, a female monarch has succeeded to the crown only when the requisite male heir was under age or when there was none.

whether women did or did not hold positions of political importance at some point in prehistory, or even whether they took up weapons and fought in battle as the Amazons allegedly did, but that there are myths claiming women did these things, which they now no longer do. This mythological status of primitive matriarchies poses as interesting a problem as any generated in the nineteenth century about the credibility or viability of matriarchy as a social system. Undoubtedly the false evolutionism and mistaken prehistory led to the obfuscation of any real contribution Bachofen might have made to the study of myth, since he did not consider that the “events” related by myths need not have a basis in historical fact.

Bachofen supports an erroneous view of myth as history throughout *Das Mutterrecht* by forceful assertion but without proof. “All the myths relating to our subject embody a memory of real events experienced by the human race. They represent not fictions but historical realities. The stories of the Amazons and Bellerophon are real and not poetic” (1967: 150-51). The relationship between myth and history is further distorted by Bachofen’s use of mythical fragments rather than whole myths, and his frequent allusions to classical narrative texts assume a historicity never intended by their authors. Fragmentary references and disparate source materials combine to render weak the argument that myth is the equivalent of history.

Rather than replicating a historical reality, myth more accurately recounts a fragment of collective experience that necessarily exists outside time and space. Composed of a vast and complex series of actions, myth may become through repeated recitation a moral history of action while not in itself a detailed chronology of recorded events. Myth may be part of culture history in providing justification for a present and perhaps permanent reality by giving an invented “historical” explanation of how this reality was created.

No clearly defined rules exist for determining a “true” story as opposed to a fictional one when dealing with the oral literature of preliterate societies. Therefore, distinguishing historical from mythical events can often lead to confusion. The problem is greatly simplified when myths relate stories about talking animals and supernatural beings, since they can be more easily classed as myths, legends, or folktales than as histories. In accepting the Amazons and Bellerophon as historical personages, Bachofen did not observe this distinction. Instead he chose to build a history of human marital and legal practices upon the narrative experiences of mythical creatures, a tactic that twentieth-century anthropologists would reject as unsound. Present-day followers of Mali-

nowski's "myth as social charter" theory (1926) prefer instead to view myth as spelling out, in symbolic terms, associations between social roles and institutions on the one hand and psychobiological aspects of the myth tellers on the other. This view regards myth as cultural history only insofar as a particular society makes use of its myths to replicate or reorder its social experience. Myths are rarely, if ever, verbatim histories, although they probably can be demonstrated to reinterpret certain crucial events in the growth and development of individual life cycles.

I propose to look at the myths of matriarchy as social charters in this essay. My strategy is first to present two constellations of myths about the Rule of Women that derive, not from the classical stock of Bachofen's numerous examples, but from recorded accounts of several South American Indian societies.⁴ I then provide interpretations for these myths based on published ethnographic sources.

In South America, the most complete series of myths of the Rule of Women come from geographically and culturally distinct areas – from Tierra del Fuego at the extreme southeast tip of the continent, and from the tropical forests of the northwest Amazon and central Brazil. There have been a number of versions reported from other regions as well (see Métraux, 1943; Schaden, 1959). The myth itself has a venerable history in the annals of South American exploration. Variants of the myth were collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists who made their way along the rocky coasts and into the wild hinterlands of Tierra del Fuego, and by others who traversed the unknown waterways of the northwest Amazon territory.

Working in Tierra del Fuego in 1918-24, the Austrian-born anthropologist Father Martin Gusinde and his contemporary E. Lucas Bridges (born in 1874 in Tierra del Fuego), the son of an English missionary, collected several narrative accounts of the origins of the Yamana (Yaghan) and Selk'nam (Ona) male secret ceremonies. Both Gusinde and Bridges were accorded the unusual honor of admittance to these rituals as initiates, a fact that lends their reports on these extinct aboriginal Fuegian ceremonies a special authenticity .

⁴ Although the discussion could be reinforced by many examples from other parts of the world, the South American bias reflects my own particular interest and training in central Brazil. I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in three villages of northern Kayapó (Gê) Indians in 1962 and 1963, and again briefly in 1966. For their encouragement and assistance in this research, I am grateful to the members of the Harvard Central Brazil Research Project, directed by David Maybury-Lewis (Harvard) and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira (University of Brasilia).

Mythical Origins of Fuegian Male Ceremonies

Among the Yamana-Yaghan people the Kina is both a ceremony and an architectural structure. Called the Great Hut, or men's lodge, its membership is restricted to adult initiated males. On occasion a woman has been admitted to the Kina, but only after she satisfies the male members that she can be trusted with the Kina secrets. In 1922 Gusinde attended a ceremony in which one woman was singled out to receive this honor.

The following version of the Yamana origin myth of the Kina is shortened from Gusinde (1961: 1238-49):

The chief goal of the group of men at their Kina is to remind the female population anew of their superiority and to make all the women definitely feel their greater power The women were the first to perform Kina. At that time the women had sole power; they gave orders to the men who were obedient, just as today the women obey the men. The men also sat in back at the stern, the women in front at the bow of the canoe. All the work in the hut was performed by the men, with the women giving orders. They took care of the children, tended the fire, and cleaned the skins. That is the way it was always to be.

The myth continues to relate how the women invented the Great Kina Hut "and everything that goes on in it", and then fooled the men into thinking that they were spirits. "They stepped out of the Great Hut...painted all over, with masks on their heads." The men did not recognize their wives, who, simulating the spirits, beat the earth with dried skins "so that it shook." Their yells, howls, and roars so frightened the men that they "hastened into their huts, and hid, full of fear." The women continued their dreadful performances, holding the men in "fear and submission" so that they should do all the work as the women had ordained.

One day the Sun-man, who supplied the women-spirits in the Kina hut with an abundance of game, while passing a lagoon overheard the voices of two girls. Being curious, he hid in the bushes and saw the girls "washing off painting that was characteristic of the 'spirits' when they appeared." "They also were practicing imitations of the voice and manner of the daughters of the Sun, both prominent spirits in the Kina hut. Suddenly the Sun-man confronted them, insisting that the girls reveal to him "what goes on in the Kina hut." Finally they confessed to him: "It is the women themselves who paint themselves and put on masks; then they step out of the hut and show themselves to the men. There are no other spirits there. It is the women themselves who yell and howl;

in this way they frighten the men.” The Sun-man then returned to the camp and exposed the fraudulent women. In revenge the men stormed the Kina hut, and a great battle ensued in which the women were either killed or transformed into animals, and “from that time on the men perform in the Kina hut; they do this in the same manner as the women before them.” A new social order thus came to prevail among the Yamana. The women, once the proud owners of the Kina and its secrets, gave them up and became subordinate to the men.

Bridges (1948: 412-13) recounts the origin myth of the Selk’nam-Ona Hain, or ceremonial men’s lodge, which is strikingly similar to the story of the Kina. The Kina and Hain ritual lodges appear to have had identical functions in the two cultures. They differed primarily in that the Hain was an exclusively male institution from which women were definitively barred.

In the days when all the forest was evergreen, before the parakeet painted the autumn leaves red with the colour from his breast, before the Giants wandered through the woods with their heads above the treetops; in the days when the Sun and Moon walked the earth as man and wife, and many of the great sleepy mountains were human beings: in those far-off days witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona-land. They kept their own particular Lodge, which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and even death to all those who displeased them.

The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to supply the camp with meat, yet, they asked, what use were such weapons against witchcraft and sickness?

As this “tyranny of the women” became worse, the men decided to kill off all the women: “and there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form.” After this debacle the men were forced to wait to replace their wives until young girl children matured.

Meanwhile the question arose: How could men keep the upper hand now they had got it? One day, when these girl children reached maturity, they might band together and regain their old ascendancy. To forestall this, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the women’s Lodge in which so many wicked plots had been hatched against them. No woman was allowed to come near the Hain on penalty of death. To make quite certain that this decree was respected by their women folk, the men invented a new branch of Ona demonology: a collection of strange beings-drawn partly from their own imaginations and partly from folklore and ancient legends-who would take visible shape by being impersonated by members of the Lodge and thus scare the women away from the secret councils of the Hain.

Given the geographic propinquity and cultural similarity of the Selk’nam and Yamana peoples, the resemblance of their myths is not surpris-

ing. Both texts tell the same story: at the time of Creation the women ruled, keeping the men in subjection and fear until they discovered the source of female power and decided to wrench it from them. The myths are clearly misogynist, although, in this regard, the Selk'nam myth has the edge on the Yamana, if only because in it the women are described as loathesome witches, the harbingers of sickness and death. It is of some interest that Selk'nam and Yamana women are differentiated in the myths according to the degree of harm they are capable of inflicting on the subjugated males. In the Yamana version the women profit simply through a clever impersonation of the spirits, whereas in the Selk'nam version the women are instructed in the magical arts to be used against men.

The distinction between Yamana spiritual authority and Selk'nam power to inflict actual evil is ritual as well as mythological. Among the Yamana, for example, both sexes are processed through a lengthy initiation ritual called *ciexaus*, in which adolescents are taught the precepts of the tribe, whereas only the males among the Selk'nam go through the double *klóketen* initiation ceremony, from which women are barred. Occasionally, exceptional Yamana women are privileged members of the male Kina lodge, but this honor is never given to Selk'nam women. The origin myths of the Kina and Hain lodges emphasize a discrepant conceptualization of women by the two tribes, and the rituals reenacting the myths serve to maintain these distinctions.

In the Yamana myth the women invented the Kina hut and the ceremonial that took place in it. By their vivid performances and elaborate disguises the women managed to fool the men into thinking they were indeed fearsome spirits. In the Selk'nam myth the women were portrayed as witches who held the men in thrall by use of black magic. The Yamana women were clever spirit impersonators. They reigned by a ruse rather than by magical malpractice, as their Selk'nam neighbors did. Cleverness and reliability among the Yamana women were rewarded by an occasional invitation to join the men's lodge, but Selk'nam women could not qualify for a similar privilege. The myth of their past misbehavior is used over and over again to exclude them from the all-male initiation ritual. The utility of a myth that accounts for the origin of the men's lodge, separating men from women in action and in space, is easily demonstrated. As part of a cultural code distinguishing men from women in moral terms, the myth incorporates values that permit males a higher authority in social and political life. The myth, although it represents a time before the social order was established, fixes the invariance of that order.

The Tukanoan Myth of Jurupari

Masked dancers and men's lodges are not confined to Tierra del Fuego, but appear to be widespread throughout South America. Wherever they are discovered, however, these cultural manifestations of male authority represent restrictive measures invented to frighten and coerce women into socially acceptable behavior. Women (and children) are forbidden access to the men's lodges. They are kept ignorant of the manufacture and use of the spirit masks "on penalty of death." Among certain tribes of the northwest Amazon, and in central Brazil, sacred trumpets and flutes serve the same functions as the Fuegian masks. Knowledge of them is prohibited to women; and as in Tierra del Fuego, the origins of the sacred male paraphernalia are the subject matter of local myths. In particular, a complex ritual and myth cycle, known popularly as Jurupari (Yurupari), is common to a number of tribal peoples in the Vaupés region of the Colombian and Brazilian northwest Amazon.

The Jurupari myth and rite, in the many recorded variants, constitute part of a large inventory of cultural traits shared throughout the northern Amazon area by the Tukanoan-speaking Indians: the Tukano proper, the Desana, Uanano, and Cubeo, as well as the Witoto and Tukuna groups. Common shared elements include subsistence farming, with bitter manioc as the staple crop, the blowgun, bark cloth, the dugout canoe, pottery, large communal houses, patrilineal exogamous sibs, mythical ancestor cults, initiation rites, and sacred musical instruments. The myth of Jurupari relates the invention of these instruments, their ownership, and the ancient traditions associated with the playing of them.

One of the earliest and fullest accounts of the legend of Jurupari is that recorded by the Italian traveler Ermanno Stradelli in 1890. According to his narrative (Stradelli, 1964), Jurupari was considered the culture hero and lawmaker of the tribes of the upper Rio Negro. Born of a virgin girl-child who had become impregnated by the sap of a forbidden fruit, Jurupari almost at birth became the headman in a tribe of females whose men had died in an epidemic. It was Jurupari who subsequently taught his people that women should not be permitted to meddle in the affairs of men, or take part in the secret male rites when the sacred musical instruments were played. The woman who violates the prohibition stands condemned to death, and "any man who shows the instruments or reveals the secret laws to a woman" is obliged to kill himself, or be killed by his fellowmen.

The myth cycle is devoted to recounting numerous episodes in which women discover the men's hiding place for the sacred trumpets and

observe the secret male ceremony, which they then make known to other women. The final episode of the myth ends on a singular note of despair. Jurupari, sent on a quest on behalf of the Sun (his father) for the perfect woman, appears to be without success:

“And what is the perfection that the Sun desires?”

“She must be patient, know how to keep a secret and not be curious” answers Jurupari (Stradelli, 1964: 66), who concludes: “No woman today exists on earth who combines these qualities. If a woman is patient, she does not keep secrets; if she keeps secrets, she is not patient; and all of them are curious, wishing to know everything and to experience everything.”

Incomplete and less poetic versions of the Jurupari myth include Goldman’s (1963: 193) relation of the origin of the Cubeo (Tukanoan, Colombia) sacred trumpets, which were part of an ancestral cult; and Murphy’s (1958: 89-91) account of the Mundurucú (Tupian, central Brazil) myth, “The Invention of the Sacred Trumpets.” Both the Cubeo and Mundurucú variants begin with ownership of the musical instruments in the hands of the women, who kept them hidden in the forests where they convened secretly to play them. In the Mundurucú myth, the women devoted so much time to playing the flutes that they eventually abandoned their husbands and their household duties. “The women, as possessors of the trumpets, had thereby gained ascendancy over the men. The men had to carry firewood and fetch water, and they also had to make [manioc bread] But the men still hunted and this angered them for it was necessary to feed meat to the trumpets... So one of the men suggested that they take the trumpets from the women” (Murphy, 1958: 90). This they eventually did, forcing the women to return to the dwelling houses and to remain subservient to the men. Among the Cubeo, the culture hero Kuwai “took the trumpets from the women and gave them to the men, warning them never to allow the women to get them back” (Goldman, 1963: 193).

Nimuendajú (1952: 77-78), reporting on the Tukuna, who occupy the banks of the Solimões River on the Brazilian side of the Amazon basin, mentioned bark and wooden trumpets brought out under cover of darkness in the celebrations of girls’ puberty ceremonies. The musical instruments were used to frighten women and children, who were forbidden to view them. A Tukuna text (Nimuendajú, 1952: 78) tells how a girl broke the rules and spied upon the flutes. In revenge she was killed and quartered. Her flesh was afterward smoked and made into mush for a village feast, to which both her mother and sister were summoned.

Another variant of the myth is that given by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971:

169-70). The first Jurupari (Yurupari) trumpet was manufactured by the praying mantis, who used the instrument to denounce the incestuous crime of the Sun Father, who had violated his prepubescent daughter. The myth continues:

Some time after the introduction of the flutes and the ceremonial playing of them ... some women followed the men when they went to the landing to hide the instruments. When the men had gone, the women took out the flutes to look at them; they took them into their hands and touched them with their fingers. But when they touched their own bodies with the hands that had been touching the flutes, suddenly hair grew on their pubis and under their armpits, places that previously had no hair. When the men returned to the landing, the women seduced them, and although they belonged to the same phratry, they cohabited with them. Only after supernatural punishments, which the myth does not describe, were the men able to establish order again. Since then the rules that are observed at present have been enforced.

It seems clear, even from the fragmentary forms given here, that the Jurupari myths and those of the Fuegian Hain and Kina lodges share a common set of themes that are their hallmark. First, the secret objects belonging to men (masks, trumpets, ritual lodges, songs, and the like) originally were invented by women and owned by them; or, if they originated with the men, their secrets were discovered by women, who contaminated their sacredness by viewing or touching them. Among the Desana, pollution resulted in the growth of body hair and in an incestuous union initiated by women who seduced the men of their own phratry. Punishment followed the forbidden sexual act. Among the Tukuna, and in Stradelli's version of Jurupari, the women were put to death for a lesser crime than that of incest. Spying on the sacred instruments was a death warrant for all violators of the prohibition. An obvious relationship is established in these myths between viewing, touching, and forbidden sex, although the association is a symbolic one and should perhaps be seen as part of a complex set of cultural laws establishing the proper set of behaviors expected between the sexes.

A second theme running through these myths is that a position of authority adheres to the possessors of tribal secrets, and that those who sit in authority, whether females or males, may also enjoy a life of relative leisure. The trumpets and lodges are the badges of this authority, permitting one sex to dominate the other. However begun, the myths invariably conclude with the men in power. Either the men have taken from the women the symbols of authority and have installed themselves as the rightful owners of the ceremony and its paraphernalia, or they invoke violent sanctions against the women who have dared to challenge male authority. In no versions do women win the battle for power.

Instead, they remain forever the subjects of male terrorism, hidden in their huts, fearing to look out on masked spirits and trumpeting ancestors. It is not clear from the published reports whether the women actually believe the tales told them by men, although the penalties brought to bear on women and children for infractions of the ceremonial injunctions seem to be real enough.⁵

The collected versions, not all of which have been cited here (see Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 271ff), of the South American myths of the Rule of Women establish guidelines for sexual behavior, at least in the minds of listeners. In Stradelli's account the desirable characteristics of the ideal woman are enumerated, whereas in the Tukuna fragment the punishment of the unhappy girl who spied on the trumpets is a cruel reminder of the rules of good conduct for women. In yet another version of the myth, a Tukano informant (Fulop, 1956: 341-66) insists that its true title is "Sexual Relations," a crucial piece of evidence that the anthropologist has relegated to a footnote. Reichel-Dolmatoff's Desana informant (1971: 171) tried to convey the same bit of information when he reported that "Yurupari is not a person; it is a state – it is a warning not to commit incest and to marry only women from another group." Clearly, he meant to distinguish Jurupari, the culture hero, from the precepts of Jurupari, given as the founding principles of the social and sexual order and transmitted from generation to generation by recounting the myth and replaying the ceremony. The two aspects of Jurupari appear to be inseparable. Jurupari, depicted as the offspring of a virgin birth or as the son of the Sun, is made the vehicle through which the cosmic order becomes established. His laws are the laws of a tribal system that upholds a sacred convention wherein a separate set of values is maintained for men and for women. The laws stipulate that women are excluded from participation in important social and religious events because all females fall short of perfection as defined by the Sun Father and his earthly protagonist, Jurupari. Sexual differences, defined by and legislated in myth, are demonstrated in ceremony. To preserve these sexual distinctions in social life, supernatural sanctions are invoked. It appears to make little difference whether these penalties take the form of male spirits that make

⁵ Women are punished throughout the Amazon area by gang rape for such misdemeanors as viewing sacred male paraphernalia. During my stay among the Gorotire Kayapó in 1962, a small girl attempted to peek under the palm frond costume of one of the ceremonial masked dancers. The incident took place at night, so the identity of the girl was never discovered, but a gun was fired to warn the village of the consequences of an infraction of the rules pertaining to sacred masks. The following morning male informants said that if they had been able to determine which little girl had violated the prohibition they surely would have killed her.

themselves known to women and children through eerie reverberations on sacred instruments or through the frightening masks worn by men, for the principle itself remains the same, in the northwest Amazon as in the southernmost reaches of Tierra del Fuego: men rule through the terror of a well-kept secret.

Myth and Social Roles

Each myth begins with a prior and chaotic era before the present social order was established, when women were supposed to have ruled over the land. It was said that the women originally created and owned the sacred lodges, trumpets, and masks. They sat in the seat of power, ruling without justice or mercy. Then the situation is suddenly reversed. In Tierra del Fuego the men discover by accident the real source of women's secret power. They plot to recover what they deem to be rightly theirs, and by fighting they succeed in banishing women from the men's lodges forever. In the northwest Amazon, Jurupari, the legendary culture hero of the Tukanoans, establishes sacred legislation in a lawless land of females. His laws proclaim that women are forbidden by threat of death to have knowledge of secret male activities. Everywhere women find themselves restricted in their actions and subordinated to rules set by men. This pattern of male dominance and female subordination is a consistent theme surfacing over and over again in South American myth and ceremony. The repetition of theme and circumstance cannot be entirely fortuitous, nor can it be claimed that they result from the vagaries of history, geography, or climate, for on these counts no two culture areas in South America are further apart. Principles other than historical connection or geographic contiguity therefore must account for the overwhelming likeness of myth and rite. But what principles are these, and can one know for certain that the same principles operate in the southernmost reaches of Tierra del Fuego as in the northwest Amazon territory?

Wherever the myth of the Rule of Women is discovered, there also exists a set of cultural rules and procedures for determining sexual dimorphism in social and cultural tasks. This opposition, separation, and general distinctiveness of male and female realms are hardly exclusive to the mythic order, for it is seen to pervade all aspects of human life. Every society to some extent divides its tasks according to sex. Obvious biological differences provide ready-made distinctions, and each society may interpret them differently according to principles that cannot be taken for granted but, rather, must be satisfactorily demonstrated in each particular instance. In some societies men make the pots and weave

the baskets; in others women do. Who does them is not usually left to chance. The sexual division of labor is established by rules stipulated within each social group. Such rules are sex-related (and age-related), although not necessarily determined by either sex or age. Instead, social roles and tasks become associated with sex and age by an educational process of some kind, whether formal or informal. In preliterate societies the recitation of myth and the performance of ritual serve as educational processes.

In particular, initiations are recognizable educational institutes for those undergoing them. The transmission of cultural values, to boys in the form of esoteric lore, to girls in terms of lifelong prohibitions and restrictions on their behavior, constitutes the major focus of adolescent initiations in tropical South America. Boys are taught proper adult behavior, and sometimes certain male skills and esoteric knowledge. Young adolescent males learn as part of the initiation process that men, not women, rule in their society, although this fact may well contradict other expectations prevalent in childhood domestic experience. As the male offspring of female-supervised households, young boys need to be reeducated with regard to their future social and political roles, and initiation serves this function. The most acute severance of the mother-child bond for both members of the dyad is experienced at the outset of the initiation, when the young initiates are physically removed from their natal households. At the conclusion of the initiation period the boys are introduced ceremonially to the society of adult men, which is a public demonstration of their accession to adult status.

This regrouping of adolescent boys with adult males is prefigured in some societies in myths foretelling the demise of female power and the concomitant rise of male privilege. The myth of the Rule of Women in its many variants may be regarded as a replay of these crucial transitional stages in the life cycle of an individual male. In both sets of South American myths, for example, final accession to the adult male role is gained by capturing the symbols of power (masks and sacred trumpets) from the women. In this battle of the sexes women are consistently portrayed as the perennial losers of their male children to the men's lodges. Male rights and privileges are documented and justified in myth and in ritual. By contrast, female influence and authority are totally absent from these symbolic expressions.

Male initiation ceremonies dramatize the breaking away of adolescent boys from female-dominated households. Among the uxori-local Kayapó of the *Gê* language family of central Brazil, to cite the example I know best, boys between the ages of twelve and sixteen are led in ritual pro-

cession from their maternal households and installed in the men's house after a protracted and elaborate ceremony that takes several months to complete. During the initiation period Kayapó boys are sent into the forest each day under the guardianship of ceremonial companions to learn forest lore and the techniques of stalking game. After the completion of their initiation ceremony, the young men reside in the men's house until they marry and establish residence for themselves in their wives' houses. At the men's house they are taught male occupations: hunting, basketry, and the manufacture of weapons and ornaments, as well as such male secrets as the identity of the ceremonial masked dancers.

The Kayapó share with their neighbors the Mundurucú a male ideology frequently expressed in the ritual humiliation of women. As far as I can determine, no myth of the Rule of Women has been recorded for the Kayapó, but such aggressive male activities as gang rape and enforced ritual intercourse for young girls, which takes place in the men's house, represent the kinds of punishments women are continually threatened with in the mythologies of the northwest Amazon. The Kayapó, it could be said, "act out" their fantasies, and thus have little use for the myth, except for the fact that the punitive element in Kayapó male sexual activity appears to be amply demonstrated in other Kayapó myths concerning problems in male-female relationships. It is only for our purposes that the crucial myth is lacking. Any number of other Kayapó myths might be substituted to make the same point.

Kayapó girls' initiation rites are not as elaborate as those held for boys. In fact, the girls' ceremony I witnessed took no more than fifteen minutes to perform, unlike the ceremony for boys, which lasted the better part of three months. Village participation is not a requirement for the girls' initiation as it is for the boys', and indeed, the abbreviated ritual performed for girls does not stress upheaval of the old domestic order or emergence of a new adult regime. Instead, the brief ceremony celebrates a woman's physical maturation, her fertility and future childbearing role.

In the Tukuna initiation ceremony, as described by Nimuendajú (1952), male symbols of power are used to frighten the young girl. Ancestral trumpets are played for her edification, but she is not instructed in their secret lore. The Tukuna ceremony, more elaborate than that of the Kayapó, is directly related to the functions of the girl's pubescent body. Female ceremonies the world over are closely associated with body rituals. They emphasize in dramatic form the biological specialization of women.

Similar concerns with female reproductive distinctions are nowhere in evidence in the myths chosen for consideration here. Perhaps it is not immediately obvious to the tribal peoples of South America that the only or even rightful place of women is at the hearth because of her child-bearing capacity. Certainly the mythical message used to bind women to their household duties in aboriginal South America stresses moral laxity and an abuse of power rather than any physical weakness or disability on the part of women. If the dictates of biology were carefully adhered to, women might well find themselves still in the seat of power, for it is obvious that the biological functions of females are necessary for the continuity of any human group. No male occupation, however exalted, can compensate for the unique ability of the female to conceive, bear, and nurse the young of the species. This important contribution of women to group survival is celebrated in female puberty ritual but overlooked in myth. Why should this be so?

It appears from this cursory study of a handful of South American myths that women frequently are subjected to harsh outside controls because of their putative immorality – or at least this is my reading of male-informed mythologies. And so it seems from myth that less tangible forces than biology were brought to bear on the subversion of the female sex role. When, for example, woman was told that she behaved like a child and, like other children, was kept uninitiated (in the full masculine sense), or when she was compared to an animal, and on this ground became the unwilling victim of a male ideology, she had forfeited her right to rule. The case against her was made out to be a moral one, divorced from the biology that might have given her sex priority under other circumstances.

Whether or not women actually behaved in the manner of the charges recorded in myth is not an issue in understanding the insistent message of the myth. What is at issue is the ideological thrust of the argument made in the myth of the Rule of Women, and the justification it offers for male dominance through the evocation of a vision of a catastrophic alternative – a society dominated by women. The myth, in its reiteration that women did not know how to handle power when in possession of it, reaffirms dogmatically the inferiority of their present position.

Whatever the justification for it, the sacred male order laid down in myth and reenacted in ritual continues unchallenged in many societies throughout the world. One may surmise from this state of affairs that the Rule of Men proceeds unchanged because women, its potential challengers, have been trapped for so long in a closed system that they are unable to perceive how otherwise they might break down the suc-

cessful methods used to inculcate in them an ideology of moral failure. Such feelings, I have suggested, at least for South American societies, are reinforced by the strong arm of a male religion.

Myth and rituals have been misinterpreted as persistent reminders that women once had, and then lost, the seat of power. This loss accrued to them through inappropriate conduct. In Tierra del Fuego the women tricked the men into performing both male and female chores; and in the northwest Amazon they committed the crime of incest. The myths constantly reiterate that women did not know how to handle power when they had it. The loss is thereby justified so long as women choose to accept the myth. The Rule of Women, instead of heralding a promising future, harks back to a past darkened by repeated failures. If, in fact, women are ever going to rule, they must rid themselves of the myth that states they have been proved unworthy of leadership roles.

The final version of woman that emerges from these myths is that she represents chaos and misrule through trickery and unbridled sexuality. This is the inverse of Bachofen's view of pre-Hellenic womanhood, which he symbolized as a mystical, pure, and uncorrupted Mother Goddess. The contrast between mid-Victorian notions of the ideal woman (they are not those of ancient Greece, as Bachofen supposed) and the primitive view, which places woman on the social and cultural level of children, is not as great as it appears. The elevation of woman to deity on the one hand, and the downgrading of her to child or chattel on the other, produce the same result. Such visions will not bring her any closer to attaining male socioeconomic and political status, for as long as she is content to remain either goddess or child, she cannot be expected to shoulder her share of community burdens as the coequal of man. The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth.