Structuring Ignorance: The genesis of a myth in New Guinea[1]

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RÉSUMÉ

En 1953, on découvrait une source saline sur le territoire d'une tribu Dené habitant les Hautes-Terres de la Nouvelle-Guinée. Les Dénés eurent soin de cacher les circonstances de la nouvelle découverte, mais des rumeurs naquirent chez les Siane voisins qui donnaient de cette événement une certaine explication qui devint un mythe assez généralement accepté.

L'analyse du mythe et de ses développements démontrent que les bénéficiaires d'un mythe n'en devraient pas être en même temps les inventeurs. Ce sont les auditeurs eux-mêmes qui, en cherchant à comprendre, vont structurer et standardiser en termes mythiques les événements inexplicables.

Since the early 1900's it has been out of fashion to theorize about the origin of myths; people have stressed functional interpretations of the relations between myths and the current activities of a society. Malinowski's discussion of myths as "charters" exemplifies this, as does Firth's (1961:175) detailed analysis of how variant forms of traditional tales are "pressure instruments (used by different groups) for keeping alive competing claims" and reflect "not so much... differential memory as... differential interests". Yet such analyses, like those of how far myths reflect history, all imply a view of how myths originate. Crudely phrased, they imply that myth-makers have a vested interest in justifying their own present behaviour by making it appear to be the outcome of important events in the past. Myth-makers are the prototype propagandists.

A second series of interpretations of myths stresses their internal structure (cf. Levi-Strauss 1958), and how this structure symbolizes some fundamental aspect of relationships in the

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society. Such interpretations, applied to highly standardized narratives or versions collected from single informants, provide dramatic insights, but suffer from an over-static view of myth. Some elaboration of the structural position is needed to account for the existence of variation, over time and synchronically, as well as for regularity.

The present paper seeks to contribute to these two areas by considering a specific historical event of 1953 — the discovery of a salt spring in the Highlands of New Guinea. It discusses how, in the week following the discovery, a relatively standarized (though mythical) account of it developed. It will be shown that the mythmakers were not the individuals owning the spring, who might be expected to have tried to justify their possession of it. Rather, the myth evolved progressively among people with little accurate knowledge of the facts, each person adding details that appeared to make the story more "true" for him. It is argued that the audiences for such story-telling, with their existing cognitive structures of religion and myths, then select versions which they approve, and so give them a structuring.

Discovery of the Spring

On February 15th 1953, I was told in my house at Pira in Siane[2] territory that a new salt spring had just come up in Keu, a Dene-speaking village some seven miles away, across the precipitous divide of which Mt. Erimbari forms part. The first man to tell me was the local Government interpreter who ostensibly came to say that the Agricultural Extension officer was due to visit my house. But he seemed more excited by the news of the salt spring, and by the fact that the headmen of several Siane villages had decided to travel to Keu to claim plots of land. The plots he said, would be the site of workshops which their villages would use for purifying salt. Their trip would be on February 17th. I said I would like to go.

The Agricultural Officer's presence made it impracticable for me to go then, but without prompting, headmen (*luluai*) from

[2] For an ethnography of the Siane and a map of tribal and linguistic areas see Salisbury (1962a). Salisbury (1965) gives a somewhat fuller outline of religious beliefs.

several Siane villages came in to say that they would like to accompany me on the 18th instead. Each one, with his accompanying villagers, stayed to talk about the salt spring, so that for three days I was subject to an increasing spate of rumours, some cumulative and many conflicting. These form the subject of this paper.

Besides the luluais and the Government interpreter, 12 men and three women of my own village said they wished to accompany me. All the men, except the village headman, were young adults, newly married or actively searching for wives; the women were two wives, married in from Dene-speaking groups, and a girl with mother's-brothers living in Keu. It turned out that all had other business near Keu — the new wife of one man had run home to a nearby village, and the group was going to secure her return. En route the luluais later mentioned no interest in building workshops, but stressed that they were coming on a trip, and had other business to perform — taking pork to a sister, or settling a long outstanding court case in Keu village.

The first rumour changed the site of the discovery from near the village of Keu, in Duma tribe, to near a village four miles further west at the Government Rest House of Gun. Then the story was elaborated that a man had been walking in the bush and had seen an area of discoloured kunai grass, and as he wondered about it, he had been struck by water bubbling out and had tasted the water. It had been "sweet" (i.e. salt). Next I heard discussion of where the man had come from, and it was agreed that he was "from a long way away". At this point I asked both the Government interpreter and the luluai of Roanti, the last Siane village before Keu, about property rights in the new spring — salt being a precious commodity in Highland New Guinea — and they reconfirmed that people from foreign tribes would not be barred from working the salt. By the evening of the 16th an agreed version of the story seemed to have emerged. "A man from a long way away was walking along, far from his home, when he saw a woman on the path in front of him. When he caught up with her, she had disappeared, but then she reappeared further ahead on the path. After several recurrences of disappearances and reappearances further ahead, he finally got to a spot where, when she disappeared, strange murmurings underground

were heard. He fell down on the ground and began praying. When he finished praying he struck a stick in the ground. Through the hole in the ground came bubbling up a white liquid, like milk. He tasted it and found that it was salt, and so began to work the salt."

On the 17th, the luluai from Rofaifo a Siane village halfway to Keu arrived, and told me that I had only part of the story. The thing that had attracted the man to the woman was the way in which she had tossed her head so that her hair shook like kunai-grass in the wind (yet most Siane and Dene-speaking women now have very short hair). When the woman disappeared he had picked up a stick, and had been plunging it into the ground all over the place to discover the hole through which she had disappeared. The strange sound he had heard had been a rhythmical beating like that of a *kudu* drum. The luluai laughed at my suggestion that the discoverer had prayed, asserting only that he was a mission helper by the name of Pis.

From him too I tried to obtain details of the process of salt manufacture and trade. (I had previously read Vial's (1941) descriptions of the process some eight miles west of Gun, and knew the outlines of how roughly a year elapses between initial collection of brine and eventual production of a large salt cake). He said that a house was already built for salt manufacture, watched over continuously by one man. At the start of manufacture they had killed three pigs, and mixed the blood of the pigs with the brine. Now those who came to get salt would have to contribute pigs. I could not obtain from him a clear statement of whether these pigs would give the right to work the salt, or would be in exchange for salt cakes manufactured by the Gun people.

Talking over this version of the story I tried to establish what the meaning of the woman's tossing hair was. Several people said that to shake one's head from side to side is the common way to show that food is good, and that the incident indicated that she was telling him about the salt. Others disagreed and said that it was the way some women seduce men.

On the 18th the party from my own village set out for the ten mile walk, and by the time we had climbed the pass several

luluais from other villages had joined us. In Keu, the first Dene-speaking village over the divide, everyone sat down and was entertained by friends, while several court cases were discussed. As the hours dragged on I became impatient, and accompanied by the men from my own village, (most of whom were bilingual in Dene) and a Government interpreter from a Dene village in Gomia tribe four miles to the north, who was also going to Gun, we pushed on. The interpreter had a slightly different story. The discovery of the spring had originally been reported by a Seventh Day Adventist mission helper, and on hearing his story, several luluais had searched for the spring, but without success. He insisted there was no spring. Yet when I asked him who would manufacture the salt, if one *were* found, he was adamant that only Dene-speakers could work it. Villagers at Gun would ask friends and relatives in nearby villages to help. When the salt was eventually ready he would come and tell me and I could come to the feast, bringing a pig perhaps. He was not trying to hide anything from me. He was only angry that I had heard such a deceitful story from a mission helper, causing me to come all this way. He had never heard the name Pis. This behaviour did not inspire my confidence and I wondered what interest he, a foreign Dene-speaker, might have in secrecy.

Nearing Gun Rest House it became clear that my own villagers were beyond the range of friendship or affinities; house styles had changed, and no one knew the way. When we reached the village, the *tultul,* or assistant headman, was the only person present. He also denied that there was any spring. No one offered hospitality to my accompanying Siane. We waited an hour and no local villagers came bringing food or firewood to sell. All my questions were answered in the negative. Against such stolid refusal to assist in any way, I realized that staying would collect no information and would mean a cold and hungry night. I turned and left for home.

In Keu I met the other luluais ready to return to Siane, together with the paramount luluai of Duma tribe, whose jurisdiction covered Gun village. The latter was quite straightforward but said he didn't know how the spring was discovered. He had two men guarding the spring, and was directing the operations

of soaking grass in the brine, letting the grass dry and then burning it. The collected ash would then be dissolved in water and dried in clay cylinders placed over heated rocks, but the workshop for this task had not yet been built. It would be allowed to see it, when he sent word that the first cakes were ready for sale. With that I had to be satisfied, and hurried home, leaving my own villagers to amourous adventures in Keu, and a search for an errant wife in the next Dene village to the south.

Needless to say, no word arrived to invite me to Gun, before I left the field in November.

Analysis

In the first place it is clear that the owners of the spring, who, presumably, would gain by having a myth to validate their ownership as resulting from a supernatural gift, were not the inventors of the myth. They either denied the existence of the spring, or, in the case of the paramount luluai, denied any knowledge of supernatural intervention and discussed only practical matters. These people, although in the best position to know what the facts of the discovery were, were unwilling to tell the facts.

The myth originators were the people who did not know the facts — who were, perhaps, deliberately kept from knowing the facts, except for a few hints that a spring existed. In such a situation rumours spread like wildfire, as Firth (1956) has shown for Tikopia. Yet rumours tend to have a cyclical life; either they are rapidly proved true by events, or, if they are not confirmed they gradually die for lack of supporting evidence. In this case occasional admissions (e.g. by the paramount luluai) that a spring existed were enough to keep rumours alive, and the refusal by the Gun people to discuss the actual discovery meant that the rumours could proliferate unchecked.

Yet the rumours also developed cumulatively. Several practical details mentioned by early reporters — notably the grass discolouration, the praying and the existence of bubbling brine before the discoverer arrived — all were finally rejected, in favour

of details with more supernatural connotations. To me the prosaicness of these details and the internal consistency of the praying and the consensus that the discoverer was a mission helper, indicated that here was the kernel of fact. But, to quote Shaw, prosaicness is too true to be good; large departures from fact often have a greater ring of "truth".

There was in my experience intense interest among the Siane in establishing what the "true" story was, and in discussing the true meaning of each event of the story. As people narrated the version they had heard, others, with different versions would argue. No one appealed to the authority of first-hand evidence which was unavailable. Favourable audience reactions to the version determined which version was repeated to succeeding audiences. In such a situation the raconteur has the advantage over the factual reporter.

The audience reactions also structured the accepted version in a predictable way — as the repetitions progressed the elements taken as true became more and more like myths already familiar to the listeners.

The name of the mission helper — Pis (the pidgin spelling for "fish") — is an element of this type. The origin story of Emenyo tribe in Siane (Salisbury 1956:470-2) tells how the two (or in some version, three) clans of Emenyo tribe resulted from the cutting up of a water creature (a fish, eel, or tadpole) by the original ancestor. To have the spring discovered by a man, named for an exotic creature, would make this into the same sort of quasi-totemic story. The vagueness of description of the discoverer, merely walking along, coming from a vague distance, and apparently going to no particular place as no Seventh Day Adventist mission was located near Gun, adds to the sense of myth.

The vision of the woman preceding him along the track is a common theme in Siane stories. During my year of residence in Siane two of the sixty men of the nearest village claimed to have visions of this type while walking home from distant gardens around nightfall. One had restrained himself from following the woman, but thought he had recognized a dead "mother". The other man had been heard screaming hideously in the darkness

from the valley bottom near the village. Next morning he was found, scratched by thorns and bruised but still alive, and told of seeing a shadowy female figure on the track ahead as he came home late from the gardens. He had hurried behind her but had missed a turning in the track and fallen into a limestone hollow where the thorns had ripped him. The woman had beaten him with sticks until he lost consciousness.

A youth told me how, after his mother had died when he was aged about five, he had seen her walking along a path near the village and had followed her into the bush. While so doing he had fallen into a limestone hollow, and had rolled over and over to the bottom. There he had come face to face with his mother's body. Adults had told him that it could not have been her body for she had been buried properly elsewhere, but he was uncertain whether the traumatic experience had been an affair of the spirits or a material one. He volunteered this story, soon after the body of a woman who had died of a wasting illness had been summarily thrown down a limestone fissure, before her kinsmen could arrive from her natal village to weep over her and so claim larger death payments. In this case too, the husband's lineage publicly denied that she had been improperly buried.

Most common are varied stories of men hunting opossums, at evening. Commonly the man saw a woman on the track ahead of him, and on following her into the bush found that she had disappeared near a particular tree. On searching he found opossum droppings, and by remaining on watch he was able to shoot several animals. Alternatively stories describe hunters waiting near trees known to contain opossums, and just as they are about to fire, being hit on the head by a female spirit, being torn by her nails, and having their arrows turned aside in flight.

Even the prosaic practical details of the early versions of the story — the discolouration of the grass, the bubbling of stagnant water in it, and the prodding of the ground which appear as rationally connected to the Western observer, also have a supernatural aspect in terms of Siane belief. Swampy areas, where seepage occurs at the foot of slopes and methane gas bubbles intermittently are well known in Siane country. They are widely

believed to be the abodes of "nature demons" (pidgin *masalai*) (cf. Bulmer 1965:153), materially visualized as a form of snake (*reyana*) and also evidenced by smells or lights at night. Only an insane or supernaturally inspired person would deliberately risk death or disease by disturbing a *reyana* by prodding the ground. Increasing supernatural significance is attached to the discovery as first the discoverer was said to have prayed, then to have prodded once, and finally to have prodded repeatedly.

The last major element, the recognition that the spring was salt closely parallels a well-known Siane myth, that of the migration of Komunku tribe from their place of emergence to their present territory. Coincidentally the place of emergence is supposed to have been near Gun, is what is now a Dene-speaking area, although Komunku is now the largest Siane-speaking tribe (cf. Salisbury 1962b:10-11). A Komunku man was hunting in the primary forest southeast of where Chuave now is[3]. He shot a bird and cut it open to eat it, but when he ate the crop, he found that it was sweet (i.e. salt). He watched and when another bird flew by, he followed it, and found where it drank at a spring on the east side of the valley. When he tasted the spring he found that it was sweet too. On his return to Gun he told the rest of Komunku tribe and they all moved to live near the spring. It may parenthetically be noted that the spring is no longer salt, and that salt was never manufactured there. The founding clans of Komunku tribe have moved at least twice since the salt-spring episode, once to the south-east towards Emenyo territory, and once, some fifty years ago, to the north into another side-valley of the Mai River. This myth does not validate ownership of a salt spring, nor does it explain the present residence of Komunku tribe.

[3] The myth asserts that this land was unoccupied. It is, however, the same side valley investigated by S. Bulmer (1964) and White (1965) both of whom report a virtually continuous archaeological sequence back to paleolithic times. Their evidence comes mainly from cave mouths and rock shelters. On the evidence of bones White concludes that until fairly recently the area was inhabited by migrant hunters. The myth suggests that the primary forest was used for hunting by nearby agricultural groups, using rock shelters for cooking picnic meals of game. It is unfortunate that no closer correlation of archaeological sites and traditions is possible, as archaeological reports cite only recurrent site names, and not the clan or tribal names within whose territories the sites occur.

Interpretation

To the Western observer the preceding narrative and analysis may be divided into a factual description of actual events, and a series of superimposed supernatural imaginings. Among local informants no such division is made into "fact" and "imagination", or into reality and supernatural. The differentiation is between story-tellers who have the "true" story (*ona*), and those who lie (*suki*) or who "do not hear/understand correctly". The criterion for truth is not objective fact. Although the Siane expressed great interest and excitement in going to Gun, when there I was the only person who questioned about fact; merely to have been to Gun was sufficient for most Siane, who then showed more interest in humdrum affairs.

Truth in Siane is partly a matter of appearing an authoritative inside dopester; partly it comes from a belief that there is some power derived from a precise knowledge of ritual formulae. It is these formulae and their inner meanings that are sought in discussions. Lawrence (1964) and Burridge (1961) have described this intense search for "truth" and inner meaning in other areas of New Guinea and have shown how the search lies behind the development of beliefs in the supernatural origin of manufactured goods, or *Kago*. Virtually any European factual statement about factory production or any missionary discussion of sin can be seen as a distortion of a hidden deeper meaning. If one knew that hidden meaning, the ultimate truth, then one would have power to control the flow of manufactured goods. In the same way those who knew only a few facts about the salt spring sought for the inner meaning of those facts, — invented rumours in our terms; sought the truth in Siane terms, in a normal Siane way[4].

Knowledge of the "real facts" may even hinder the search for "truth" and hidden meaning. The men of Gun, with the most facts available (but with no ties to my friends of Emenyo), and other Dene-speakers with less knowledge but more ties to Emenyo, alike chose to conceal their knowledge, denying that

[4] This is also the Tikopian way of truth-seeking through rumour elaboration. See Firth (1956).

anything had happened. To a Western observer their reasons are obscure; it would seem more rational and prestigeful to advertise the existence of the spring, and so draw customers, even if no salt were yet available. It may be that such promise of wealth would have resulted in excessive demands from fortune-seeking affines. Yet it may also be rational to deny the facts and let other people invent "facts" as a better "soft sell" advertisement. Denial of a rumour has, in technologically advanced countries, become one of the best ways of evoking interest in an already-decided but secret government or business policy decision. In short, ignorance may produce better myths than does historical knowledge; the people who are likely to benefit by a myth (the beneficiaries of the charter) are likely to have historical knowledge, but their interest may be to keep quiet, and to let myths be created by those who know less.

How then do the ignorant make their myths? A substratum of historical fact is needed — in this case knowledge of the discovery, its general location, and an indication that the discovery had been made by an outsider. The first step is to fill in the elements of the story that are practically predictable — the way in which salt would kill the grass, the need to taste the salt etc. The story then has a structure of practical experience but the added detail does not add to the "credibility" of the story as any story-teller could invent these items, and their meaning is obvious.

Next follows an effort to fit the inherently unpredictable elements of the story — "why did he happen to be walking where he did?", "why did the event happen at that particular time?", — into a framework of cultural understandings of human motivation and the nature of chance events — the man wandered in there because a female ghost enticed him, and (being a mission helper) the spring emerged because he prayed. The elements added at this point may be those of other myths, but clearly any one of a number of elements can be inserted to provide each explanation. Prayer was clearly appropriate for a mission-helper to use, yet his merely prodding the ground was the alternative explanation which most people accepted. At this stage it is the reaction of the audience which crystallizes the form of the myth.

A final stage would seem to involve aesthetic and formal re-structuring — the myth is fitted into new frames, elements are added to complete the "balance" of those frames, and other "embroidery" elements enter, which nevertheless have an important relationship with the cruder form of the myth. Thus in the present case the motif of appearance and disappearance, common in stories of seduction by female ghosts, is linked coherently with the prodding of the ground. The murmurings underground then become, not a threat which the discoverer had to pray to avert, but an incitement to prod, — they sounded like *Kudu* drums being beaten for an imminent religious ritual. The entire story therefore is re-phrased as a single incident, with indications of spiritual influences becoming steadily more explicit, and climaxing with the drum beating and the disturbing of the spirits by prodding. The bubbling up of the salt is then only the epilogue, the practical moral of a supernatural story.

But such a neat story, I would also maintain, leaves no room for doubts about its meaning. The really skilful raconteur introduces new elements both to make a more exciting story, and to add something that is not immediately explicable — something truer, as it has more hidden meanings. The mention of hair waving as the spirit tossed her head seemed to do this for my evening audience of February 17th, who argued about the meaning of this new motif.

Their arguments did not exhaust the potential significances. The most seductive female action is usually said to be the motion of her *konto*, the strip of barkcloth hanging from the back of her belt, which swirls like a kilt as she walks. For a man to grab her *konto* is to accept seduction; to walk behind a woman along a path is to expose oneself to seduction. But in this story it is her hair that waves, not her skirt, and it is said to wave like kunai grass. To me the mention of kunai evokes the report explicitly placing the spring in a kunai-grass seepage area. It suggests, perhaps, that the distracted discoverer could not distinguish between the wind in the kunai, and the spirit figure movements.

For the Siane too, long hair on women has certain connotations. It is a pre-mission influence style, worn by independent-

minded women, especially at times of religious ceremonials when the ringlets hang down heavy and matted with pig grease. Young girls taking part in Yam-taro dances knot lengths of shredded bark fibres into their hair and oil them with red pandanus oil to appear like waist-length hair. This style, parallelling styles more common for boys elsewhere in the Highlands (cf. Read 1952), has implications both of sexual attractiveness and of contact with spirits (Salisbury 1965). Any one (or several) of these connotations might be implied by the added phrase that the mission helper was attracted by her tossing hair. This embroidery of the story is "true" for a Siane audience, not as clarifying the story, but for the additional hidden meanings it implies — it maintains ambiguity in the story, and a sense of ignorance in the audience.

In summary, the present analysis would suggest that the common assumption that myths are created by the groups which use the myths to support claims, is not necessarily correct. It ignores the potentialities for myth-creation implied by imperfect factual knowledge in audiences, and the interest audiences have in fitting ambiguous untoward events within their frames of cognitive understanding.

The present study confirms Firth's (1961) discussion of how traditional tales are told in many variant forms, and suggests that his finding, (p. 176) that the greatest degree of variation occurs in tales about the most distant past, may be generalized — most variation occurs where factual accuracy is least checkable. In the present case deliberate concealment of facts was the cause. The existence of variation and change, while throwing doubt on *structural* analyses which appear to account for every detail of a particular version, nevertheless provides the basis for explanations in terms of dynamic principles of *structuring*. Tales are seen in the present case as undergoing continuous elaboration by their tellers in three main directions — amplification of detail deduced from what is known, reorganization and additions to give structural form, and "embroidery" to add hidden meanings. It is the reactions of different audiences which give the stamp of approval to different versions, accepting those structurings which fit audience needs. In those areas where there is most ignorance, structuring is most likely to be effective.

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