Three Montagnais Myths:
A Structuralist Approach

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RÉSUMÉ

Voici une analyse structurale de trois mythes Montagnais. Dans chacun des mythes, l'analyse démontre tout d'abord l'opposition fondamentale de deux séquences ou séries d'événements. Ces séquences sont constituées d'unités plus petites pouvant correspondre d'une séquence à l'autre. Les processus physiques ou géographiques décrits dans chacun des mythes servent à exprimer métaphoriquement des processus sociaux ou abstraits de la société Montagnaise. C'est cette capacité de passer d'une dimension à une autre, sans que la « signification » en soit changée, qui donne au mythe son efficacité culturelle.

Montagnais mythology tells about land, people and relationships. The following analysis of three Montagnais myths proposes to look into how Montagnais culture deals with these domains, and what a structuralist approach can say about this cultural process. These myths (the translators refer to them as legends) constitute a small booklet (Basile and McNulty, 1971), part of a collection on Quebec Indian studies published by Laval University. They were collected in Mingan, a small village located on the northern coast of the St. Lawrence Gulf.

Little has been written about the prehistory of north central Quebec in general and specifically about what the cultures of this area were like before the time of European contact. Early ethnographies of Montagnais groups were first attempted by explorers (Cartier, Champlain) and by Jesuit missionaries.

More recently, Serge Bouchard (1977) has collected and edited a fascinating account of the seasonal life of the Montagnais hunters who lived around Mingan. The traditional Montagnais economy was based on hunting and gathering. The harshness of the environment, with its long winter and short summer, did not permit any form of sedentary life. With the introduction of the fur trade, the Indians became fur gatherers. From early fall to late spring, individual family groups dispersed in the interior to hunt and trap. From year to year the frequency of game varied greatly. This contributed to periods of great misery and sometimes to starvation. These small hunting family groups had to keep on the move and be ready to face any kind of situation. Pressure and stress were inevitable. People had to adjust to changing, unpredictable conditions. Reciprocity, in terms of helping or altruistic behavior was generalized, rather than formalized or institutionalized. Individuals enjoyed a great freedom of action. Many decisions had to be taken individually rather than collectively.

Montagnais society was egalitarian in character. No formal leadership was exercised and no division of labor beyond those based on sex and age was practised. Various forms of divination were used in order to insure the success of the hunt, but few of these were used outside the realm of hunting activities. The summer period coincided with the yearly gathering of several of these groups around a trading post. But on the whole, they remained cut off from other groups, abandoned to the prospects of a harsh environment. Before engaging into the analysis itself, the author wishes to emphasize the experimental character of this analysis, specially with regard to the application of Lévi-Strauss' transformational formula (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 225). This paper intends to offer a parallel to Jensen's analysis of Northwest Coast myths (1980).

I

The first Montagnais myth in our analysis is called "Mesapus and the Bears" (Basile and McNulty, p. 1). We will later refer to it as M_1. This is a story dealing with anthropomorphized animals who engage in culturally familiar activities. The story begins with the social identification of the main character, Mesapus (a huge hare). He is described as living like a man and engaged in activities that are culturally familiar to the Montagnais.

Action starts when Mesapus first discovers a bear path and then meets an old she-bear. She tells him that she is no longer able to walk and that she is waiting for the other bears to return. Mesapus kills her and puts on her skin. As long as he wears it, we will refer to him as "Mesapus-Transformed". Hence there are two characters at the beginning, Mesapus, (a hunter) and an old she-bear. The distinctions between the two are worth mentioning. First, the bear is female and old, while Mesapus is male and relatively young. She is unable to walk because of her old age, while he seems free to move around as he wishes. One character is, therefore, almost "stuck to the ground" and the other is "free moving". As soon as Mesapus transforms himself into the old she-bear, however, he becomes "stuck to the ground" as well. The following events in the story examplify this important change.

Mesapus-Transformed hides some meat away after a big meal. The rest of the bear family shows up, visibly astonished to find the old female away from the campsite. When night comes, Mesapus-Transformed is described as shaking from cold. But in reality, we learn that he is frightened of being found out. Here we have two levels of explanation, one apparent (physical or natural, cold temperature), and one latent (psychological or cultural, his fright). The next day, Mesapus-Transformed stays at the campsite, but he gradually moves a bit farther away to hide more meat. Each night, he secretly kills one bear cub. There is a definite pattern, then, that involves the killing of a bear cub at night, while eating, hiding meat and walking farther away from the campsite during the day.

On the third day, Mesapus-Transformed breaks out of this cycle. He first gets out of the old she-bear skin and hangs it up in a tree. Free to move again, he heads toward the mountain, leaving tracks all over in order to blur his trail for pursuers. As the bears come back at the end of the day, they find out about Mesapus' trick. Then they start to follow him, but to no avail; the snow hampers their movements. When they realize their failure, the bears curse Mesapus saying "May you die by the hand of somebody weaker than yourself". Thus Mesapus' escape puts an end to his relationship with the bears. His superiority as a "free moving" animal permits this escape. The bears' curse, however, hints at the potentiality of a less fortunate fate at a later date.

Mesapus in now all by himself. He follows a stream (as if a path) and arrives at the campsite of a lynx family. At their campsite, Mesapus meets two lynx cubs. At first, the cubs are afraid of him, but upon his peaceful insistence, they climb down out of the tree. One of the lynxes is asked to make a fire for Mesapus and the other one to scratch him. The former obeys Mesapus, but the latter is blamed for not doing a good job (i.e. for not using his nails). A struggle follows between Mesapus and one of the cubs whereupon Mesapus burns his own fur and is finally killed. The story ends as mother and father lynx come back to the campsite, learn about Mesapus' death and cook his head for food.

There are several levels of meaning and structures that are related to each other in this story. First, a dividing line can be drawn about halfway through the myth, at the point of Mesapus' escape. The syntagmatic structures of M_1 (i.e. the order of succession of episodes and actions within these episodes), is therefore characterized by a binary opposition of two sequences of events: the first sequence involves Mesapus' interaction with the bears, and the second his interaction with the lynxes.
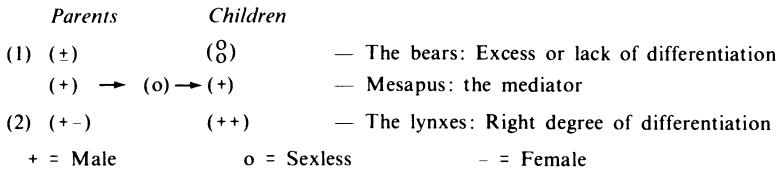
In the first sequence, Mesapus initiates most of the action. He transforms himself temporarily and kills several times. After each killing, he eats a good meal and hides more food away. In the second sequence, the lynxes initiate most of the action. In his struggle with the lynx cub, Mesapus is killed and therefore transformed permanently. Finally the lynxes eat his head.

The similarities between these two sequences are striking. Killing and eating are the complementary aspects of a single relationship, that between hunter and hunted. We will soon come back to this relationship and expand on its meaning and implications. In the first sequence, Mesapus was "struck to the ground". He did not or could not go away from the bears' campsite. He was confined to the bears' path. By following a stream and through his deadly encounter with the lynxes, he is again limited in his movements a second time. Also, the enemy (she-bear) is very old in the first part of the story and very young (lynx cubs) in the latter.

A junction of the two sequences takes place when Mesapus escapes in the snow — "free moving" — and leaves many tracks. The following diagram illustrates the structure of the above distinctions:

(1) Temporary Tranformation .... In-Tracks
(in the old she-bear)   (about the camp)
_____ Junction _____
(tracks all over the place)
(2) In-Tracks .... Permanent Transformation
(along the stream)   (through Mesapus' death)

Characteristics of the participants and of the actions between them form the paradigmatic structure of the story. The old she-bear is not only female, but she is also old. Her old age adds to her feminity by also making her male (hence androgynous). Furthermore, Mesapus' transformation by climbing into her skin has caused the two sexes to blend temporarily. The bear cubs are not differentiated in terms of sex. On the other hand, the lynx family is fully differentiated. The following diagram illustrates this second paradigmatic structure:

	Parents	*Children*	
(1)	$(\pm)$	$\binom{o}{o}$	— The bears: Excess or lack of differentiation
	$(+) \rightarrow (o) \rightarrow (+)$		— Mesapus: the mediator
(2)	$(+-)$	$(++)$	— The lynxes: Right degree of differentiation

+ = Male   o = Sexless   – = Female

Now to test Lévi-Strauss' formula, I have assigned four specific values to the terms and functions relevant in this analysis of M_1.

Terms: a = bear   *Functions:* x = stuck to the
                                          ground

b = Mesapus   y = free moving
(hare)

With regard to Lévi-Strauss' formula, the relationship and transformation in terms of movement can be displayed in the following manner:

$$\frac{f_x(a)}{f_y(b)} :: \frac{f_x(b)}{f_{a-1}(y)} = \frac{\text{Stuck (bear)}}{\text{Free (hare)}} :: \frac{\text{Stuck (hare)}}{\text{Free (lynx)}}$$

This formula is meaningful because it illustrates the concise and logical transposition of this myth's paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures. The characters' main concern in this myth is food (eating), and how to procure it (killing). As mentioned above, these are comple-

mentary aspects of a unique relationship, that between hunter and hunted. The story tells us that Mesapus' relationship with the bears is inappropriate. In the first sequence, there is no distinction between types of meat eaten: the parts appear to have been consumed raw. In the second sequence, it is clear that the head is singled out and that it is cooked before it is eaten. The relationship between what is morally acceptable and unacceptable treatment of the hunted animal can be synthesized in the following manner:

    (1) Immoral Killing: Food undistinguished in manner
                              and parts eaten
    (2) Moral Killing: Food distinguished in manner
                           (cooked) and parts eaten (head)

Killing and eating, being killed and being eaten, are part of the inevitable reality of the Montagnais. But the context in which these activities are carried out is structured by cultural rules. The relationship Hunter-Hunted involves ideas about reciprocity: what is given must also be returned in one way or another. Similarly, certain expectations are an integral part of the relationship between the old and the young, between those who cannot survive by themselves and those who do. Where the struggle for survival seems to favor the fittest, there is still room for what we would call a moral "order".

We can also view Mesapus' transformation into the old she-bear as an intrusion of the human into the animal world. Mesapus the hunter creates a conflict between these two by his improper conduct among the bears. It establishes the negative value of a familiar relationship (between hunter and hunted) when carried too far. A confrontation was temporarily avoided by Mesapus' flight from the bears' campsite. But as a cultural being, he cannot live without the support of animal food and fur. His encounter with the lynx cubs, however, shows that the same animal kingdom can also be threatening. By making arrogant demands he wants the lynxes to assume a subservient attitude that is totally devoid of reciprocal feelings. The last sequence also expresses the idea that animals and men do share certain qualities. The end of the story portrays the lynx family (mother, father and two *sons*) as humanized beings. This ending suggests the desirability of both realms, and the story itself shows how human behavior can be metaphorically expressed in Montagnais culture.

II

The second myth I am going to analyze is called "Ayahis" (we will later refer to it as M_2). This story starts with a presentation of four characters. Here Ayahew's second wife encourages him to abandon his son by his first wife, Ayahis. He is to be left on an island with the pretext of gathering (birds') eggs. Left alone, the boy starts crying until he falls asleep. In a dream, he is promised help by his grandfather who then appears in the form of a sea-dragon and takes him to the mainland. But the boy is advised not to sing, otherwise the earth will be destroyed by fire. This prescriptive piece of advice runs counter to an important Montagnais tradition. According to custom, the leader or senior member of a family is always the first to perform a song, then he can hand it on to the next senior (male). The proscription on singing in the myth amounts to a breach with this cultural tradition. The lack of a song implies an eventual family split.

Ayahis' departure from the island leaves the boy in a liminal situation. He is no longer in touch with his family (not even his grand-father) or with society. He is told to obey two old women. The obstacles the boy is ·confronted to are evidently perillous, as his grand-father warned. Success depends upon compliance to unequivocal instructions provided by the females.

What this myth conveys so far is the extreme dependence on old people (grand-father, two old women). His safe return home and very survival have become contingent on Ayahis' submission to their knowledge.

The obstacles the boy has to go through also are unusual. They are removed from everyday experience and sharply contrast with one another. But more important, they are the symbols of a transient state. The first one is described as boiling spruce gum. Following one of the old women's dogs through a tunnel constitutes a way to overcome this danger. Swinging human shoulder-blades provide the second obstacle; the trick is to put fat on them. The Montagnais use "animal" shoulder-blades in divination rituals just before the hunting season. Putting fat on them "appeases" the threat of famine. People with sharp-pointed elbows constitute the third obstacle. Ayahis throws his coat at them and they kill each other over it. This scene suggests people suffering from starvation or extreme poverty.

There is a definite structure of meaning in these three obstacles. The first one has to do with the physical environment (spruce gum). It is mediated by a domestic animal (the dog). Human shoulder-blades, the second obstacle, refers to the practice of divination in hunting. Food (fat) is a necessity made available to the Indians by the animals. It is the object of great spiritual effort. Finally, Ayahis' encounter with poverty-stricken people symbolizes a relationship between groups and individuals of unequal wealth. Their reaction to the boy's abandonment of his coat expresses a negative relationship. Wealth is viewed here in terms of the use it is put to. It possesses an ambiguous and ambivalent quality in social terms.

As Ayahis nears home, he hears somebody chopping wood. At first, he cannot recognize (distinguish) who it is. But as she turns around, he realizes that it is his mother, not his father's second wife. Ayahis suspects torture. He sees burns on her face. When he first calls her, she cannot see him. This brief but important series of events provides an inversion of what took place on the island. When Ayahis was told by his father to go gather eggs, the latter took the occasion to leave. Now, the son arrives (instead of leaving) home. He calls out to his mother (instead of he to his grand-father) and then asks her to go to the house announce his arrival. Qualitatively, the latter series of inverted events shows a marked improvement. Ayahis does succeed in calling out to his mother. And she finally does respond to her son's call. Hence, Ayahis' position vis-à-vis his mother is the opposite of his position toward his father. The inversion of the series of events expresses this opposition.

The next series of sequences have to do with Ayahis' welcome home. The laying down of cariboo skins between Ayahis and the house to welcome him suggests a parallel with Ayahis' previous crossing of water, between the island and the mainland. Both emphasize the symbolism of the threshold. Ayahis' reaction, how-ever, contrasts with his father's: he blame his father for having aban-doned him when he was younger. From that time on Ayahis is treated well by his father until one night when he is asked to perform the singing ritual with him. At first Ayahis flatly refuses, but his father finally convinces him. This suggests the idea that Ayahis agreed to conform to family tradition, but as we will see, it involved disastrous consequences.

As Ayahis keeps on singing and drumming, smoke starts to appear. Soon there is fire. As predicted by his grand-father, this divination (singing) is bringing about the destruction of the earth. Despite his father's repeated attempts to stop performing (in contrast to his previous request), Ayahis continues. He takes the initiative, voluntarily giving deadly advice to his father. The fat that saved him, now kills his father. But he saves his mother, and the burns she suffered now consummate his father. Noteworthy is the fact that since his return, Ayahis has given advice to and also taken a generally responsible stand toward his father. From a position of dependence and youthfulness, he moved to one of independence, maturity and adulthood. In a sense, then, the three obstacles and trip back home can be viewed as a rite of passage. Here is a drawing of this spatial dimension of the myth:

3 OBSTACLES

WATER   FIRE
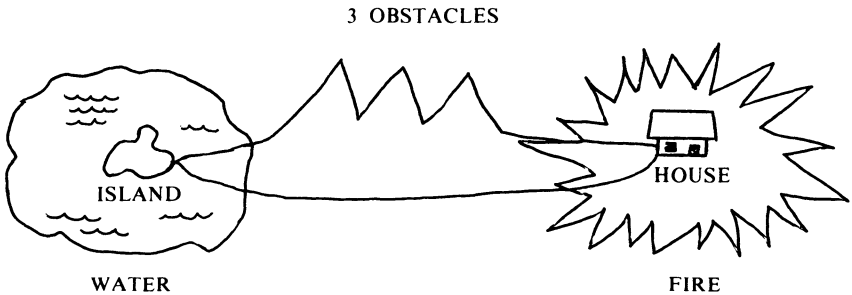
The story ends with a short description of the animals' reaction to the devastating fire: they jump into the water, a safe environment, out of reach of human affairs. Three animals are mentioned: a hare (a terrestrial animal), a beaver (both a terrestrial and aquatic animal), and a seal (an aquatic animal). This triad parallels another one, the three obstacles Ayahis was confronted with:

— Terrestrial (hare)   — Physical (spruce gum)
— Terrestrial-Aquatic   — Physical-Social
  (beaver)   (shoulder-blade for divination)
— Aquatic (seal)   — Social
                                (people with sharp-pointed elbows)

Concluding the story, Ayahis and his mother transform themselves into birds and thereby escape, as do the three animals, from the devastated land.

The presence of two wives in the story is also interesting. At the beginning of the story, Ayahis' mother is not mentioned, while his stepmother clearly expresses her hatred toward him (negative relationship). At his return home, both women are present: his stepmother still entertains malevolent feelings toward him, but his mother is definitely on his side (negative / positive relationships). At the end of the story, his stepmother has disappeared, while Ayahis and his mother come out triumphant (positive relationship). Sequentially, Ayahis' relations with both women could be expressed in these binary terms:

— Beginning of the story: $(-)$
— Middle of the story: $(-+)$
— End of the story: $(+)$

This inversion or transformation of female relationships uncovers a very important dimension in this myth: the opposition between "own" (mother) and "foreign" (mother). The conflict "own / foreign" within the family is resolved by a victory over the villain (the father) and by a transformation of the status of the persecuted son into a higher one, that of a mature adulthood. The relationship which is most emphasized in the myth, however, remains a male-oriented one: the whole story, from beginning to end, revolves around this conflict.

In M_2, then, the relationships between the participants follow a distinct pattern. Each attitude expressed in the first sequence is inverted in the second, except the one between Ayahis and his father: until the end, the latter entertains a hypocritical relationship with Ayahis. It is interesting to note that the father is the only one to die, This could be explained by his failure to "change" his attitude at all from one sequence to the other.

In the light of Lévi-Strauss' formula, the following values can now be ascribed to the major terms and functions:

Terms: a = Boy   *Functions:* x = Dependence
        b = Father   y = Authority

where

$$\frac{f_x(a)}{f_y(b)} :: \frac{f_x(b)}{f_{a-1}(y)} = \frac{\text{Dependence (boy)}}{\text{Authority (father)}} :: \frac{\text{Dependence (father)}}{\text{Independence of an adult son}}$$

The formula could read: the unwilling submission of the boy is to the authority of the father what the unwilling submission of the father to the will of an adult son. This inverted relationship, from the first sequence to the second one, asserts a new "order" that may be considered inevitable, Ayahis' coming of age is also the resolution of a crisis confronting a shift from inhuman to cultural behavior.

An "auditory" code can be seen to expres these ideas as well. The first auditory element is the action of "crying out". Twice in the story "crying out" is ascribed to the same person (Ayahis). These sounds relate him with two different characters, first with his father, then later with his mother. The difference between these two situations resides in the fact that the first cry was unsuccessful, while the latter one was. Both, however, are attempts to suppress a state of disjunction or separation. The second element belonging to this auditory code is a percussion "sound". And again, the story mentions this twice. The first time, a noise is made when Ayahis hits the dragon's horns with a flat rock: here, we have the use of a physical or natural object whose purpose in hitting the horns is to "appease" the weather. Later in the story, Ayahis hears "axe blows" when approaching his father's house. This second sound also coincides with the suppression of a threat. Percussion sounds, then, contain a certain "threshold" symbolism. They emphasize the suppression of a disjunction.

Another area of interest in Montagnais symbolism is the "gustatory" code. We also have two elements which belong to this code, fat and eggs. Both are derived from the animal world and both have to be heated for human use. Fat played the role of mediator to appease the shoulder-blades, Ayahis' second obstacle; and it was used as a pretext to kill the father. Eggs, on the other hand, were given to Ayahis in order to appease his hunger; and also served as a pretext for the father to abandon Ayahis on the island. The following diagram offers a synthesis of these elements of the gustatory code:

Fat	(initiator)	*Eggs*	
(1) Pretext to kill father		(1) Pretext to abandon son	Creation of disjunction
(2) Mediator to appease shoulder-blades	old women	(2) Given to son to appease hunger	Suppression of disjunction

Finally, it is interesting to note that Ayahis' journey starts from his home and also ends there, while the myth itself is the story of a

one-way trip from the island to the house. This apparent paradox finds its meaning in the symbolic character of mythic language: an abstract and temporal process (Ayahis' transition from dependency to maturity) is expressed metaphorically by a concrete and spatial one (his trip from the island to the house of his parents).

III

The last myth of this analysis is called "The Abandoned Child". We will later refer to it as M_3. The story starts with a presentation of the environmental setting: once there was a country where it was always winter and another one where it was always summer. The following story is said to take place in the one where it was always winter. The initial situation, therefore, is one based on an imbalance, a seasonal disequilibrium.

The first episode describes a dialogue between a mother and her child and narrates how this child became abandoned at the old campsite. Despite the child's attempts to hang on to his mother, she pitilessly leaves him alone in the cold. Coming along to help is Atsen, a malicious giant, who first frightens the child but soon takes on the task of bringing him back to his parents. From that time, the child calls him grand-father. To feed themselves, Atsen kills beavers from which he only eats the lungs, liver and intestines. When they finally arrive at the parents' campsite, the mother asks the child how he found their place. The child answers by telling her about Atsen's help. The latter adds that she must be the most wicked of all, as only she abandoned the child.

So far, this puts Atsen in a mediating position which has two dimensions. First, Atsen assumes the characteristics of both a bad giant and a (child) savior. Second, accusing the mother of more wickedness than he is himself usually endowed with, puts Atsen midway between her (unnaturalness) and the traditional idea of a mother-child relationship. Hence both are aspects of the same opposition: that between what is a normal, natural mother-child relationship and that which is an abnormal, unnatural mother-child relationship. Atsen's mediating role resides not only in restoring naturalness to a situation previously unnatural in character (i.e. bringing back the child to its parents), but also in clearly formulating both his own and the parents' stand on the matter.

Now we continue the story. The mother's reaction to the child's suggestion of keeping Atsen is almost indifferent. The child's tent being too small, Atsen has to build his own. However, because of his ambiguous nature, Atsen does not fit in the village life anymore than he fits in the child's tent. During his brief stay, it is mentioned Atsen quits hunting. Hence the child must feed him with lungs and the livers of animals that were killed by other villagers. Rejected and accused of laziness, one day Atsen leaves for good. However, the child misses him and nobody can stop his cries.

Asked what can stop him from crying any longer, the child answers that he wants to shoot arrows at birds. But because they live in the winter country, bird hunting is a hardly feasible game for a child. The conclusion the people reach is to go look for the summers (and bring them back). Men as well as animals set out on this journey. First, they meet two old women who warn them about obstacles on their way: these are the muskrat and the woodcock. They also encounter a huge beaver carrying a sack of fat which they soon steal. The woodcock is easily dealt with, but the muskrat hesitates to comply to their demands. Given some fat (food), the muskrat agrees to help the seekers by making holes in the canoes of the summer people and by dragging a log down the river. As they gradually approach the summer country, the story increasingly refers to summer types of animal; this is a recurrent progression.
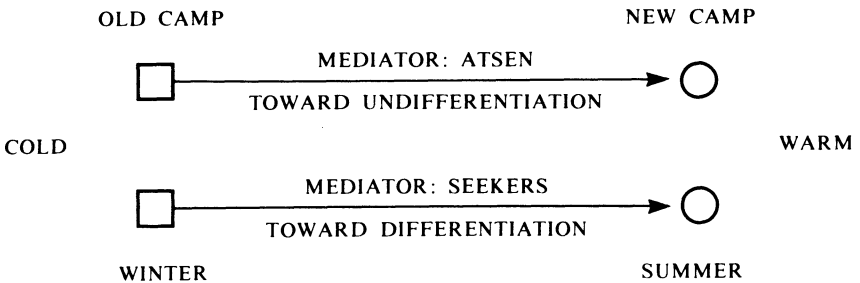
As they reach the campsite where the summers are kept, the owl is sent scooting ahead. The next day, the muskrat performs what he was asked to do. While the keepers of the summers engage in pursuit, the seekers take the occasion to steal this commodity. The cariboo carries the summers back because he is faster than the other animals. Chased through the mountains, the seekers are finally forced to allow the summer people to share their summers: each country will have them for six months. On their way back, they meet the two old women who happily welcome harbingers of summer. Now the snow is melting and the animals are coming back. The child can now shoot at birds. But the story concludes by saying that to punish him for shooting at them, the birds turned the boy into one of them.

This lengthy story involves a lot of details which I purposefully do not explore. Rather, I confine myself to the analysis of processes and oppositions that occur on a larger scale. First of all, there is an inversion of processes here which it is interesting to consider:

From:	*To:*
Unnatural situation	Natural situation
(1) Differentiation mother-child (abandonment of child)	(1) No differentiation of mother-child (reunion mother and child)
(2) No Differentiation of seasons	(2) Differentiation of seasons (winter and summer)

In the second sequence, the mediating process is carried out by the "seekers". These are described as including both, men and animals. These figures assume the role of bringing back to "normal" a situation previously witnessed as "abnormal". Of course, if we are to acknowledge this transformation process, we must consider as normal the six-month periods of cold and warm weather in north central Québec. The role of the seekers is one which is therefore similar to that of Atsen. Both these mediators constitute social and cultural mechanisms which aim at re-affirming the normality of things (the family or the weather). The mediating role they play is not inherent in their character but temporarily acquired for the purpose of the myth.

The following is a diagram illustrating and summarizing these processes of opposition, mediation, and transformation:

OLD CAMP   NEW CAMP

☐ ─── MEDIATOR: ATSEN ────────▶ ◯
     TOWARD UNDIFFERENTIATION

COLD   WARM

☐ ─── MEDIATOR: SEEKERS ──────▶ ◯
     TOWARD DIFFERENTIATION

WINTER   SUMMER

Lévi-Strauss' formula provides a framework for expressing the opposition and transformation of these several structural elements:

Terms: a = Family   *Functions:* x = Disjunction
                                                (differentiation)

          b = Seasons   y = Junction
                                                (non-differentiation)

The formula

$$\frac{f_x(a)}{f_y(b)} :: \frac{f_x(b)}{fa\text{-}1(y)} = \frac{\text{Abandonment of a son}}{\text{Junction of seasons}} :: \frac{\text{Disjunction of seasons}}{\text{Reunion of generations}}$$

Hence, the rejection of a son is to the junction of the seasons what the permanent disjunction of the seasons is to the reunion of family members. The differentiation of seasons acts as a metaphor, as a concrete process to express a more abstract one, that of the family reunion.

IV

The three myths I discussed in the preceeding pages may first look quite different from each other. The stories involve various characters who come to play equally various roles and entertain toward each other various relationships. But at closer look these contrasts should permit us to uncover certain regularities and similarities of elements which, taken individually, do not yield any substantive meaning.

The first and highest level on which the three myths can be compared is in terms of the binary oppositions between their sequences. In each myth, there are two basic sequences which oppose each other and express processes of different value. The first process describes some aspect of conflict or source of tension that can be found in Montagnais culture. The second one indicates how these can be or should be solved in Montagnais terms.

In the syntagmatic structures, smaller units of actions or episodes also have their parallels in each sequence. These provide the dynamism for an exploration of dilemnas that are raised by a confrontation of cultural-social situations. The sequential counterbalancing of units is also closely associated with the formulation of interpersonal relationships and attitudes. Lévi-Strauss' transformational framework has provided a basis for synthesizing these various patterns.

The relationships between characters and roles sometimes appear to be contradictory from one myth to another, for instance, the

mother-child relationship. At other times the structure remains quite consistent across myths (the old people or grand-parent-child relationship). Even within the same myth, then the role of a character may differ from one sequence to the other (the case of Atsen). This is why an analysis should be directed at the larger structural units.

Finally, the use of physical processes to express social ones puts myth to the level of language of symbolic thought. This appropriation of the concrete to express the abstract also gives meaning to the apparent contradictions in the story, marking the plot with actions or statements that inevitably lead back to the abstract. With the abstract in concrete actions and statements, myth unfolds the story of Montagnais worldview.

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