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# Blinding the Snake: Women's Myths as Insubordinate Discourse in Western Fiji

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Copies that are not copies: But just when it looked so neat and tidy, the ground starts to shift.

— Taussig, 1993: 115

**Abstract:** How and in what cultural arenas do women contest, contradict or invert dominant ideologies of gender? This article examines how myths told by women in western Viti Levu, Fiji, represent a site of resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990) wherein hegemonic understandings of gender are contested. This is achieved through a “transformation of signs” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 1978) that sees authoritative male figures depicted as powerless, challenges a spatial order that privileges men, and attacks an order of knowledge that declares vision the dominant mode for the apprehension of knowledge. By contravening dominant meanings, these myths present a “rupture of representation” (Sharpe, 1995) that subverts reigning constructions of truth. I argue that anthropology’s understanding of the legitimizing role of myth must be tempered by an appreciation of its potential as a “risk to the sense of signs” (Sahlins, 1987: 149).

**Résumé:** Comment et dans quels domaines culturels est-ce que les femmes contestent, contredisent ou inversent les idéologies liées à la condition sexuelle? Cet article examine comment les mythes racontés par les femmes de l'Ouest de Viti Levu, Fiji, représentent un site de résistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990) où les perceptions hégémoniques de la condition sexuelle sont contestées. Cette contestation s'accomplit par une «transformation de signes» (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 1978) qui voit les figures d'autorité masculines dépeintes comme sans pouvoir, qui défie un ordre spatial qui privilégie les hommes et attaque un ordre de connaissance qui prend pour acquis le mode dominant de perception de la connaissance. En s'opposant aux significations dominantes, ces mythes présentent une «rupture de représentation» (Sharpe, 1995) qui subvertit les constructions reconnues de la vérité. Je soumets que la compréhension anthropologique du rôle légitimant du mythe doit être tempérée par une reconnaissance de son potentiel comme «risque du sens des signes» (Sahlins, 1987: 149)

## Introduction

Over the past 20 years anthropologists have so radically altered their view of culture as an object of study that Jocelyn Linnekin has referred to this change as a paradigm shift within our discipline (1992: 250). Rather than regard culture simply as a consensual, homogeneous system of understanding, it has come to be seen as a socially constructed, sometimes socially imposed and much negotiated discourse. This shift in perspective is reflected in an increased concern with the political processes involved in the production, legitimization and representation of culture. Specifically, where are dominant meanings formulated within a culture? Who wields the power to control the processes of cultural production, elevating some versions and denouncing others?<sup>1</sup> How are cultural meanings inscribed and validated or alternatively debated and contested? What media constitute potential “sites of discourse” (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 194) for the circulation of ideas regarding the nature of society, being used either to forward “elite” models (Linnekin, 1992: 253) or generate contested renderings of social reality (Williams, 1991: 14)? And finally, how and why are certain versions silenced? Within this field several important issues have been raised concerning the politics of culture as it relates specifically to gender. What role do women as a status group within society play in cultural production, either as consumers of certain versions of reality or as “generators of signs” (Levi-Strauss, 1969: 496),<sup>2</sup> and how and in what cultural arenas do women contest, contradict or resist dominant ideologies of gender?

In this article I explore the politics of meaning as it relates to gender ideology by examining how myths told by women in Magodro, western Fiji, represent a site of resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 324) wherein hegemonic

constructions of gender are challenged.<sup>3</sup> The understanding of the concept “gender ideology” that I apply here takes into account three factors: distinction (Bourdieu, 1984)—being the culturally informed discrimination of gender categories and their attending roles; value—where categories are assigned an equal or different social value as reflected in their status or prestige level (Ortner, 1990: 37); and cultural representation—which takes into account “socially dominant representations” (Moore, 1996: 178) of genders as well as the ability to produce subversive ones.

Myth consists of a specific type of narrative whose anthropological significance rests in their addressing the “central philosophical and intellectual concerns” of a culture (Cruikshank, 1983: 16). These issues include world origins, cosmology or the design of the supernatural and natural worlds, the lives of heroic and supernatural figures, and the nature of human social order, including gender differentiation. I identify the narratives of women related here as myths for the western Fijian word used to describe them, *na kwalekwale*,<sup>4</sup> is also the term used to refer to those tales about deities, heroic figures and supernatural beings that are told by men.<sup>5</sup>

In the Magodro district of Fiji, there is one genre of myth told amongst women that centres around the activities of a grandmother and her young granddaughter. These narratives recount the often-amusing adventures and conversations of this pair as they weave mats, prepare meals or work together in Grandmother’s garden. In this paper, I analyze two myths of this genre that illustrate how these stories provide a site wherein a number of this society’s primary hierarchizing structures are contravened: authoritative images of male power and superiority are challenged, a spatial order that symbolically elevates men above women is disregarded and a dominant system of knowledge that empowers men through the exclusion of women is attacked. In so doing these myths serve as one means by which women maintain a continuous critical commentary on social practice, one that challenges an order of meaning that both defines respective gender categories, rules and powers and sets the relative value of each as status groups within this hierarchical society.

For this analysis, I regard myth as a reservoir of social knowledge, in this case one that contests a hegemonic order of knowledge and truth that ideologically privileges men in Magodro society. Here I am concerned with the politics of knowledge, a field situated within the study of knowledge and power and drawing on the “political economy of cultural meanings.” In Eickelman’s terms this field examines “the reproduction and trans-

mission of systems of meaning and how these shape and in turn are shaped by configurations of power and economic relations” within society (1979: 386). Studies of the political economy of knowledge (Keesing, 1981: 296) recognize that orders of meaning are an essential part of dominant ideologies and that the ability to define social reality—to bestow meaning, set values, and produce “authoritative knowledge” (Lambek, 1993) within a culture—is a crucial instrument of domination and its legitimization particularly, as Bourdieu (1994: 167) points out, where that definition of the social world is consistent with one’s own interests. But while the production, legitimization and control of knowledge play a crucial role in sustaining practices of power in stratified societies, I argue that it is equally important to take account of how such knowledge is undermined: that is, how it may be delegitimized either through its contestation or through the production of alternative or counter-knowledges (Foucault, 1980; Ginzburg, 1982). In the course of my research in western Fiji, it was evident that while a culture of male dominance was continually being asserted and reproduced by men on several different fronts—through ritual, myth, kinship ideology, economic control and the use of force (see Aucoin, 1990), it was also apparent that in a variety of ways women participated in the denunciation of that order, a process that constitutes a truth-debunking as opposed to truth-building strategy and one that may potentially subvert reigning constructions of truth.

I argue further that rather than regard a culture’s mythology as a set of narratives that simply justifies or legitimizes a shared view of social reality, it should be recognized as a potential arena for debate amongst members of a society and a possible “tactic of resistance” (Ong, 1987: 202) for some. Malinowski’s (1931) view of myth as a “charter” that carries the power of “fixing custom” and strengthening tradition has long held sway in anthropology (see Cohen, 1969; Leach, 1982) and continues to prevail in current discussions that compare myth with ideology. Paul Friedrich (1989: 300), for example, describes myth as a way to “legitimate, validate or hallow customary ways of doing things,” one that “often informs ideological tactics and parallels ideological superstructures.” Yet others, such as Myron Aronoff (1980) and Maurice Bloch (1992), see its role not solely in terms of the orchestration of hegemonic meanings but also appreciate its potential as a site for contestation and the formulation of rival or “competing ideologies” (Aronoff, 1980: 25). Bloch (1992: 99) argues that myth and practice can no longer be viewed simply as being in a “direct relation” to one another for at times they may be

dialectically opposed. In contrast to organized practices such as ritual, myth may allow for a “freer speculation” (ibid.: 92) or forward a “potential challenge to order” (ibid.: 101), one that may be critical of existing relationships. Bloch proposes that “such speculation may hover in the background and occur quite frequently in the minds of [people] . . . but, nonetheless, only rarely achieve the public formulation which would make the recording of this type of thinking likely” (ibid.: 99). In this it may represent a “radical intellectual adventurousness” (ibid.: 100), thus constituting not merely a means of reality construction but also of contestation.

Any understanding of the significance of myth to society must take into account its role as a forum for representation and identity formation as well. As Yanagisako and Delaney (1995: 2) have noted, “we have ignored the extraordinary power of myth to provide identity to a community and meaning to individual lives”; in their words, myths “affect how people imagine themselves to be.” Yet here the issue of contested subjectivities is raised: do members of specific social groups within society conceive of and portray themselves and each other similarly through mythology and/or accept their respective representations uncritically?

This view of myth raises issues of inclusion and narrative authority with respect to ethnographic practice and the politics of representation, particularly in gender-stratified societies. Whose narratives have been recorded and included in ethnographic texts and to what extent do they constitute a selective representation that presupposes a “unitary, authoritative narrative voice” (Linnekin, 1992: 251-252) as opposed to accommodating multiple renderings and differently positioned voices with respect to gender, rank, age, race or class? If presenting only an elite or master narrative about society, one that “articulates an interested perspective” (Lederman, 1990: 54), then how can they be approached as anything but ideological constructions? Analyzed in this light, the comparison of both women’s and men’s myths may reveal something of what Linnekin (1992: 252) has described as the “dialectical symbolic process” that is involved in the negotiation and representation of culture—and of genders as part of culture.<sup>6</sup> While presenting a greater challenge to ethnography, this accommodation would enable anthropology to better account for the role of myth in maintaining ideological dominance as well as explain how our webs of meaning come to “fall apart” (Williams, 1991: 14).

In the analysis below, I briefly outline the social organization and gender system of Magadro. This is followed by the texts of two myths and a description of the

social contexts within which they are told, contexts which allow us to see them as part of a wider critical discourse conducted by women on male dominance. I then provide an ethnographic account of the hierarchical political order within which this commentary is situated. As my analysis of women’s myths as contravening texts refers to these practices, an understanding of this system is essential to an appreciation of its contravention.

## Gender Differentiation and Structures of Male Dominance

The political district or *yavusa* of Magadro lies in an interior, densely forested region of Ba Province, on the western side of Viti Levu, the largest of the Fiji Islands, and is distinguished as an area where the Western Fijian dialect is spoken (Biggs, 1948; Pawley and Sayaba, 1971). Western regions of Viti Levu have historically been characterized as less stratified in terms of chiefly rank than eastern areas (Spencer, 1941), though over the past century British colonial practice has strengthened hierarchy throughout Fiji by administering through “local chiefs.”<sup>7</sup> Greater respect for age is expressed here however, and in his ethnographic comparison of eastern and western Viti Levu, Nayacakalou (1978: 58) has observed that in western areas women demonstrate “definitely more respect” toward men: they “retire more readily to the background when men are present” and are “less free and more respectful in expressing themselves in the presence of men.”

There are six villages in Magadro, with the village housing the district chief’s residence being the focus of my research. Adjacent to this village is a small government compound, Methodist church and elementary school. This village is divided into six clans, these being the primary landholding and controlling units within the larger district. Subsistence relies on shifting cultivation, hunting, fishing, domestication and the sale of cash crops such as bananas, yams and *yagona* or *kava* root, though some revenues are also realized from the rent of district lands nearer the coast for sugar cane production.

Clan membership is reckoned patrilineally, marriage is strictly clan exogamous and residence is virilocal. Primogeniture and birth order are important principles of seniority within patrilineal units, hierarchically ordering individuals within the family and ranking families within each clan. As well, seniority by age gives elders authority over juniors, though it should be noted that skill, personality and knowledge contribute to an individual’s prominence within each village or clan. While patrilineal relationships are hierarchical, however, relations be-

tween cross-cousins, *na vei kila* (also referred to using the Bauan term *tavale*)<sup>8</sup> and hence between affines (for ideally all marriages take place between cross-cousins) are not. These relationships are marked by equality over rank, co-operation and sometimes competition rather than obedience and obligation, and informality over restraint and respectfulness.

In Magodro, men exercise authority over women. Men are said to be the owners, *na leya*, of land, clans, house sites and villages and hold and control leadership positions at the clan, village and district levels as well as within the family.<sup>9</sup> The authority of men stems from several sources and is asserted through a number of hierarchizing structures and practices. Being leaders at every societal level justifies extension of their “traditional authority” (Weber, 1958: 296) over family members, including wives. They control traditional religious practices that centre in the clan’s men’s houses, *na beto*, from which women are excluded, and they are physically more powerful than women and strength is valued and practised in this society (Aucoin, 1990).

Gender distinctions between men and women are perceived to be marked. Men, *na tagone* or *na turaga* (the latter also refers in a general sense to chiefs or to older men; see Hocart, 1913) are described as “*qwaqwa*,” meaning strong, hard or resistant while women, *na lewa*, are said to be *malumaluma*, meaning soft, weak and easygoing (the term *malumaluma* also refers to one who is ill). Men’s character is said to be illustrated in their bodies: in the strength of the right, *matau*, arm when throwing a hunting spear or fishing lance, of their shoulders on which they carry heavy loads, or in their fortitude as when they withstand the effects of vast amounts of the mildly narcotic drink *yagona*, or *kava*.<sup>10</sup> Women, *na lewa*, are associated with the left, *mauwi*, side, and with fluidity, *wai*. Their perceived weakness is said to be demonstrated by their need for baskets in which they carry loads on the midsection of their backs. They do not spear fish as men do, they collect them. Women’s bodies are described as soft, as epitomized by the lower, *bale*, abdomen or stomach, *na wa*; they are likened to the paw-paw, *na wi*, a soft, juicy fruit that is said to be drunk rather than eaten. They are fluid or pliant, moving between clans or villages over the course of their lives. Men, who own and control the clan and village sites on which they reside throughout their lives, are considered rigid and likened to enduring, hard substances. They are associated with the sacred world inhabited by the ancestor spirits, *na nitu*, a world considered to be higher (*tu* or *i yate*) symbolically than the human world. As Asesela Ravuvu notes of Fiji in general, men are “the manifesta-

tion of the spirit and the link with the supernatural world” (1987: 340, n.6); “men and their ceremonial objects of value occupy the position between the supernatural and the temporal, whereas women and their valued objects are relegated to the temporal, secular sector” (1987: 263). In being connected with the profane, lower (*bale* or *i ra*) realm,<sup>11</sup> women are also associated with the earth: when pregnant, women are said to be *bukete*, their rounded bodies being similar to *na buke*, the raised mounds of earth in which the root crop taro, or *dalo*, is planted, both of which nurture life.

This system of gender differentiation is reflected in the language of Magodro, particularly the language of the body. The word *tu*, meaning to stand, be above or erect, or to be immortal or enduring (Capell, 1984: 239-240), is an important root which forms part of a complex of meaning that brings into association words referring to status, gender, power and space. It is found in the lexical terms *tui*, *turanga*, *nitu*, *tutua*, *vatu*, *tua*, all associated with maleness, where *tui* refers to the district chief (who is always male), *turaga* to chiefs in general or to older or married men, *na nitu* to ancestral spirits, *tutua* to senior patrilineal kin, *vatu* to stones or mountains and *tua* to bone, the latter two being perceived to be hard and strong and closely associated with masculinity. In contrast, terms tied to femaleness configure the roots *wa* and *wi* in a set of words that draws together the meanings soft, lower, weak/left and fluid: where *lewa* means women, *wa* the soft lower, *bale*, stomach area—with *bawale* meaning lower abdomen or genitals, a *tabu* or prohibited area, *wai* meaning water, *wi* a soft fruit, *waci-waci* a variety of watercress that grows only in wet locations—also significant in that the root *ci* means vagina, and *mauwi* meaning the left, less powerful side.

These meanings reverberate in the language of kin terms.<sup>12</sup> Relationships within the patrilineal clan are hierarchically ordered and are distinguished terminologically according to their senior or junior status, with status being determined by birth order or primogeniture. Those of senior patrilineal status, who are referred to as *tutua*, are figures of authority and power, kin to whom those of junior patrilineal status, known as *tacia*, demonstrate respect and deference.

Significant, linguistically, to this hierarchical system of gender is the embedding within the kin terms for senior and junior status (*tutua* and *tacia*) of words whose meanings are cognitively linked to male and female respectively. Within the term *tutua* are found two morphemes, *tu* and *tua*. As noted briefly above, *tu* translated loosely means to be above, immortal, or fixed in one place; while *tua* means bone—a hard, enduring sub-

stance associated with men. As well, metathesis or reconfiguration (see Leach, 1967, 1971)<sup>13</sup> of *tua* gives us *uta*, a *tabu* word meaning penis, an association that loads this kin term with connotations of masculinity; a second term (being the Bauan word) used in Magodro for penis, *uti*, is significant to gender differentiation as well for metathesis of this term gives us *tui*, the term of address for the district chief. In contrast, the kin word for those of junior status, *tacia*, contains within it the root *ci*, which refers to the vagina. The presence of this root in the kin term for junior status, *tacia*, brings notions of powerlessness and deferential status into association with words tied to femininity and its attending attributes softness and weakness.

Gender differentiation in Magodro can therefore be summarized by the following set of distinctions:

male:female :: hard:soft :: strong:weak :: fixed:fluid ::  
 right:left :: senior:junior kin :: chief:commoner ::  
 sacred:profane :: immortal:mortal :: high:low ::  
 empowered:compliant

This symbolic axis or “network of oppositions” (Bourdieu, 1984: 468) forms the basis for those “schemes of perception” (ibid.) which underlie Magodro’s hegemonic mode of gender classification, schemes which intertwine gender ideology with its kinship, religious and political systems.

Yet it must be noted here that in the interrelationships between men and women, the contrast between patrilineal hierarchy and affinal egalitarianism provides an element of contradiction in the reckoning of women’s status. Upon marriage, virilocal residence sees a woman leave her natal clan and reside with her husband’s family where she is drawn into its system of ranked relationships, a system that permeates husband-wife relations as well. Yet the husband-wife tie is made, ideally, between cross-cousins who are status equals.<sup>14</sup> A woman’s incorporation into her husband’s clan is enacted as part of their marriage ceremony (and confirmed when she is buried in its grave site), but throughout her life she will continue to reaffirm social ties with her natal kin by attending and contributing gifts to their ceremonial exchanges. These lines of contact are especially important during times of crisis, such as marital violence, when a woman will seek refuge with her matrilineal kin. Thus a married woman’s identity with her natal kin group and status as a cross-cousin are never totally dissolved by marriage. This cultural inconsistency allows for the potentiality of male-female equality after marriage even though this is not realized in practice. Women’s myths countering male dominance perhaps

emerge from this ambivalence, allowing the possibility of a radical change in women’s status in relation to men to be conceptualized, even if not experienced.

## Women’s Narratives and Their Social Context

The two myths I relate and discuss in this article fall into a category of myth or *kwalekwale* that I have identified as Grandmother-Granddaughter narratives, being a genre of stories that I group together because they share a common theme.<sup>15</sup> Myths of this type similarly recount the adventures and conversations of a grandmother and her young granddaughter (*tatai* and *karua*). Their tone is usually comedic and descriptions of this pair’s adventures or misadventures are met with laughter. They are told by women to an audience of women and possibly their very young children. The stories discussed here are distinguished according to their subject matter as “Looking Up Grandmother’s Skirt” and “Blinding the Snake.”

Several different social contexts exist wherein women gather and where occasion for the telling of stories might arise. Women who have married into the same clan occasionally work together on a collective project, such as collecting and processing pandanus leaves and weaving mats in preparation for an upcoming wedding, or planning and preparing food for a clan feast. Their collective work will see them meet together for several days to complete their project. Women also visit informally during the evening when chores are done and children settled for the night. They gather near the fireplace in their kitchens or in their houses to socialize and exchange news. As they visit or work together, their conversations cover a wide range of topics, recounting baffling events they might have witnessed during their last trip to the coastal markets (an elderly Indo-Fijian beggar rummaging through a trash can for food for example), commenting on eerie sounds they heard while at the stream doing laundry, sounds believed to have been made by spirits, or describing recent trips they have made to visit kin. One occasion heard a woman describe a trip made to visit her daughter, who lived near the capital, Suva. En route, the bus passed by a valley which appeared to be rich in wild yams. She exclaimed in frustration, and to the great amusement of her friends, “I wanted to stop the bus, to tell the driver to pull over! The yams were right there, just outside on the hill! But we couldn’t stop. I wanted to get out and dig them (*akeli na vitua*). But we went right by!” Other visits found women exchanging notes on the location of nearby sites

for collecting wild foods, discussing preparations for upcoming village events, or reflecting on the behaviour or misbehaviour of other villagers, including men.

Some of their commentaries on men's behaviour are highly critical and some are extremely funny, paralleling what Abu-Lughod (1990: 320) describes for the Bedouin as "sexually irreverent discourse." Examples of this irreverent discourse among women abound, including an episode when a woman ridiculed her father-in-law who, after spending all morning at his garden site, had returned complaining of fatigue yet boasting of his hard work and all he had accomplished. Relating her story to her sisters-in-law, she exclaimed that when she returned to this garden later the same day, she found he had actually done very little work; in fact, he had scarcely cleared three small *tavioka* or cassava mounds (approximately one metre square each). As she spoke, she imitated in a ridiculous manner the slashing motion of a machete wielded in the heavy work of gardening—but instead of swinging its blade expansively through the air as one would when clearing weeds, she pretended to grasp its handle with two hands while making small, mincing jabs with the tip of its blade into the earth, actions which made her father-in-law's boasting seem ridiculous and her audience laugh.

A different conversation heard a woman tell sympathetically that one of her sisters-in-law had come again to borrow food (*kerekere*, a term sometimes translated as "to beg" though it usually carries the expectation of a return). This woman's time was taken in the care of an infant, and as a result she depended on her husband to work their garden and bring them food.<sup>16</sup> However the husband was considered lazy and was suspected of stealing food from other people's gardens to support his family. An older woman clucked disapprovingly when she heard that the woman had had to request food of others again, and shook her head as they discussed her husband's laziness. She then said jestingly, "If he comes around here asking for food we'll just cut off his carrot" (*karoti*, from the English), and made a chopping motion with the side of her hand while indicating that she was referring to his penis, a gesture which made her companions laugh loudly. During another visit, a joke made at the expense of men was heard when a young boy, about 18 months old, knocked over a pile of pots making a loud clattering noise that interrupted the conversation of several women. One woman turned and scolded him sharply. She then teased him by telling him to get away from the pots or she would cut his penis, using the *tabu* or prohibited verb *niti* that describes the manner of cutting used during an older boy's circumcision. This small boy was

too young to understand what she had said or its implications, but her companions laughed at her threats. She would certainly not have spoken to him in this way had he been old enough to understand her meaning, just as women are ever cautious and respectful in their conversations when men are present.

Women's critical comments regarding men are not always humorous, however. On one occasion, a young woman went out of her way to arrange to meet with me in private, asking if I would teach her to sew. We happened to meet during a downpour and the sound of the rain pounding on the tin roof of my house provided insulation against possible eavesdroppers. Here she told me unhappily of the circumstances of her forced marriage, an arrangement which had been agreed to by her father's brothers (her *momo*, or classificatory fathers), with whom she had grown up.<sup>17</sup> She had tried to resist this marriage by running away with her then boyfriend, but her kinsmen followed her. They surrounded the house in which the couple were hiding and after threatening the young man, he fled. She was very frightened, *mataku va levu*. Her male kin continued to wait and threaten her, and when she finally surrendered, escorted her to the village of her proposed husband. This young woman asked rhetorically, in a sad and lamenting voice, "How could my uncles [classificatory fathers] do this to me?" her quiet voice evoking her sense of betrayal.<sup>18</sup>

Another visit among women saw a woman ask me about the lives of women in Canada, specifically whether women may eat at the same time as men, which is not the case in Fiji where women dine only after men have eaten and withdrawn from the dining area in accordance with rules of seniority which prescribe a hierarchical order of service. Upon hearing that women and men eat at the same time, she expressed her displeasure with Fijian customs in a loud stream of invective. This was not the only time I heard women express criticism about the nature of male-female relations. During several conversations, women described to me violence suffered by women in their village or families, severe violence that saw them hospitalized or even killed. One 12-year-old girl told me of the death of her mother who had been killed by her father some years ago; another woman's mother was permanently hospitalized after an attack by her father; and a four-year-old girl offered that if my husband ever hit me (*kwita*, meaning to hit with a stick), I could come to stay with her. Women also express displeasure over the control men exercise over their lives. At a meeting of the local women's group, *Na Sogosogo Vakamarama*, which had been convened to discuss the organization of the village women's co-operative store,

women discussed rumours that the men of the village were planning to take over their business. One woman, who had been closely involved with this store since its earliest planning, expressed vehemently and with some pride, "We cannot give up our store. We planned this store. We work for our store. It is the women's store!"<sup>19</sup>

Women take the opportunity to comment on and even ridicule men and their behaviour during weddings when they gather for a ceremony known as *na tevutevu*. A marriage consists of a series of four rituals which may be enacted over the course of two to three years. The *tevutevu* will take place immediately following the last of these ceremonies and is held in one of the houses belonging to a member of the groom's clan. At this time upwards of 30 women from both the bride and groom's clans come together to collect and lay out, or *tevu*, the pandanus mats, *na loga*, they have woven as gifts for the new bride and her husband. With these mats they also display other household goods such as blankets, curtains, tablecloths, pillows and sheets they have produced or purchased as gifts for the couple. Some of the gifts of these women (referred to as *na yau ni lewa*, or the wealth of women, cf. Ravuvu, 1987: 261) have been laid out in preparation for this gathering but the ceremony also encompasses the procession of women into the house with their mats, rolled lengthwise and carried under their arms in a manner that conspicuously displays the gift and its giver. As a mat is spread out for other guests to see, the giver's generosity is acknowledged with clapping and greetings of "Vinaka! Vinaka!"—"It is good! Thank you!" These gifts are important to the cementing and continuance of social ties between women after marriage, ties which, as noted above, are critical to providing sites of refuge in crisis.

As the women gather for this ceremony, the curtains are drawn at the windows; men are not present, though young teenaged boys often try to peer in the door to watch the goings on. During the *tevutevu* women will drum, sing, dance, mix and drink *yagona* and visit, exchanging news with female kin and friends from whom they have been separated through marriage. The atmosphere of these gatherings is both festive and rowdy. While a group of several women sings and drums on bamboo slit gongs, others joke, dance together side-by-side with arms crossed behind each other's backs (a form of dancing known as *taralala*), tell stories (*talanoa*) and relate myths (*na kwalekwale*). Especially comical are the clowning performances of certain older women.<sup>20</sup> These performances are keyed by an abrupt change in drum rhythm from a melodious singing to a raucous beat. This shift prompts women who have been singing to stop and

who have been dancing together to sit while others stand or move forward to begin their clowning.

With hair and faces whitened with powder, two or three women at a time will come to the fore and begin to imitate in a comical fashion others' behaviour or act out through exaggerated gestures the body and facial expressions of animals such as the mongoose whose distinctive pawing gestures are easily mimicked. At certain times during these gatherings, an older woman acting as a clown will enter the gathering dressed as a man. Typically, she will wear sunglasses (which men don after consuming *kava* to protect their then light-sensitive eyes), trousers (which women never wear)<sup>21</sup> and a man's shirt, both put on backwards and with shirttails hanging out. She walks stooped over, carrying a sack over her shoulders and leaning on a stick as if old or bowed under the weight of a heavy load carried high on her shoulders in the manner that men carry sacks (in contrast to women who carry them on their backs). As well, some may have a ribbon tied around their heads, as young men proudly do when riding their horses out to their gardens. Decoration of the head within the confines of the village is in violation of village rules that preserve the right to adorn the head solely for the district chief, the wrapping of barkcloth or *tapa* (known in western Fiji also as *kumi*) around his head being a potent symbol during his installation ceremony: for anyone else to adorn their head is a sign of disrespect toward him, *sa tam varokoroko*. As this clown proceeds around the room, she will grip her cane as it wobbles wildly or pretend to stumble, her cane slipping out from under her. Such antics bring shrieks of laughter from her audience.

On several occasions during these performances, I have seen women mimic in a highly comical way the formal and ritualized manner in which men serve *yagona* or *kava*, lifting their arms up as if to raise a *yagona* bowl only to then throw them about wildly in a way that would send this drink splashing across the room were their bowls actually full. At another time I saw a woman fall down on her stomach, her body shaking in an exaggerated manner, antics that brought uproarious laughter from her audience. The only other occasion for such shaking or trembling behaviour occurs during episodes of spirit possession among older men (see Katz, 1993; Williams, 1985 [1858]).

Finally, during a clowning performance in a nearby village one woman repeatedly mimed the gestures of drawing a knife across her throat and then falling down. This occurred at the wedding of a man whose mother had been murdered in this way by her husband following a dispute over her alleged adultery. As this clown acted out

these gestures most women laughed, though a few also looked about warily to ensure that several men who were sitting some distance away were not watching.

The humour produced at the expense of men through these performances and through the episodes of irreverent and critical discourse recounted above is also evident in the *kwalekwale* told by women, including the two myths I relate here. I heard the first of these, "Looking Up Grandmother's Skirt," related several times by different women and one of its phrases is often used to make a pun-like joke. Its telling was always met with deep, tearful laughter. In this tale Grandmother and Granddaughter are working in Grandmother's garden when suddenly it starts to rain (*sa luwu*). Grandmother tells her granddaughter to seek shelter under some nearby trees, and when she does Grandmother resumes her work. But the rain continues more heavily and Granddaughter begins to get wet again. "Go stand under the leaves of the banana tree," Grandmother instructs her, and again she continues weeding. As the rain turns into a downpour, Granddaughter complains again. This time, Grandmother tells her to come stand under her skirt, or *liku*, which Granddaughter proceeds to do. As she stands there, Granddaughter looks up and when she does she sees Grandmother's pubic hair. "What's that Grandmother?" she asks pointing upwards, to which Grandmother replies, "*Na vulu*," meaning hair or feathers. "*Na vulu ni cava?*" "What kind of hair/feathers?" Granddaughter asks, the tone of her voice rising distinctively on the third word, *ni*, in anticipation. Grandmother replies with the punch line, "Chicken feathers"—"*Na vula ni toa*." This response is received with uproarious laughter. On several occasions when the topic of hair arose for some reason in conversation among women, I heard the phrase "*Na vula ni?*"—with its characteristic rise on the word *ni*—injected into their discussion, a phrase which in recalling this myth remakes this joke amongst women.

The second myth, "Blinding the Snake," begins with Grandmother and Granddaughter weeding in Grandmother's garden. As she is working, Granddaughter comes across a small snake, *na gwata*. She shows the snake to Grandmother and much to their surprise as they look at it, it begins to sing: "I am the small snake; I live in bamboo, I live in wood; Bursting, bursting forth [*cibote mai*]<sup>22</sup> come I; I am the small snake." [*O'au na gwata lailai; Gi no e na bitu, no e na kai; Cibote 'bote mai; O'au na gwata lailai*]. The pair gather up the snake and carry it home to Grandmother's house where they place it in a small woven basket. But the following day, to their amazement and fear, they find that the snake has grown larger and in so doing has burst apart or torn open

(*cidresu*) the basket. Fearful of the snake, they bring in a small hen to destroy it but instead the snake kills the hen, eats it and again recites its song. Frightened, they approach it, gather it up and put it into a large clay pot. The next day they find that the snake has grown larger still, this time bursting or breaking apart (*cibote*) the pot. They bring a small goat to destroy it, but the snake kills and eats this animal too, singing its song again. This pattern of containment, growth, bursting forth or breaking out and then destruction and consumption is repeated several more times with the snake growing larger and larger and eating ever larger animals, until at last it eats a cow. At this point, frightened Grandmother and Granddaughter find a mongoose and bring it to the snake. The snake sings its song again and is about to attack the mongoose but before it can, the mongoose leaps up and attacks the snake's eyes, blinding it and in so doing, killing it. The myth ends, and with this the audience responds with surprise and great laughter.

Both of the myths recounted here are significant as contravening texts, but what do they contravene? In order to comprehend this dimension, we must turn our attention to the political practices of space, knowledge and representation that prevail in Magodro for these are practices saturated with meaning with respect to gender politics.

### Practices of Male Dominance

One of the most important practices of male dominance found in Magodro is an order of space that establishes and reflects hierarchical status; that is, the status of the chief relative to all other villagers, of the chiefly clan in relation to non-chiefly ones, higher ranking families to lower ranked ones, clan chiefs and elders to junior clansmen and the status of men in relation to women.<sup>23</sup> Hierarchical status is expressed according to a "spatial axis" (Toren, 1987) of high or above *versus* low or below. Above, *i yate*, or upper, *tu*, is symbolically associated with the sacred, supernatural, everlasting and more powerful realm while below, *i ra*, or lower, *bale*, is linked to the profane, less powerful one. According to this spatial order, men's higher status in Magodro is writ large in the geo-symbolic organization of public space throughout the village, the arrangement of clans, positioning of buildings and their internal divisions, and in the division of the body into upper/sacred and lower/profane areas.<sup>24</sup>

Each clan in this village occupies a geographically separate hamlet, with that of the chiefly clan being at the westernmost end of the village, west being its seaward side and east its landward or interior side.<sup>25</sup> The chiefly clan's site occupies the highest elevation of land in the



village, and the house of the chief, referred to as *na suwe levu* or great house, is on the highest piece of ground within this hamlet, facing inland or eastward. The chief is referred to as *Tui Magodro*, the word *tui* incorporating within it the root *tu* which means to stand, be upright or erect or to be immortal.<sup>26</sup> From this vantage, the chief looks out over all other village space, a position signifying his symbolically highest, most sacred and powerful identity. His house is built into one of the slopes of Magodro Mountain, known as *Ulu Magodro* (where *ulu* also means head), which is the highest peak of this region. Being on the slope of this mountain, the cultural order of space within the village is seemingly synchronized with the surrounding topographical landscape. The chief's house is surrounded by those of other members of his clan, all at a slightly lower elevation relative to his. The village's other clan sites stretch to the east, and each of these consists of a men's house, *na beto*, in front of which is found each clan's ceremonial field, or *durata*, surrounded by the clan's domestic houses, *na suwe*, which encircle and face the ceremonial field. Grave sites for each clan are usually removed somewhat from clan sites, set on pieces of land that are higher in relation to most of the house sites. This is spatially appropriate for this is where the clan ancestors (*na nitu*) reside (literally, *ni* meaning "of the" and *tu* meaning "above or everlasting"). The grave site of the chief's clan is positioned highest of all.

Within clan sites, the men's houses are located at one end of the ceremonial field, set apart and located on the highest stretch of land of the hamlet. Its one central door opens onto this field and from this vantage point one can see across the whole of it as well as the surrounding clan houses. These houses are arranged with families of higher rank nearer the men's house and those of lower status below and farther away. Within the men's house the symbolic reckoning of space and status is illustrated by three separately demarcated seating areas: a small raised and comfortably padded platform, nearest the fire pit, along the wall opposite the door in the "upper" end of the building being reserved for clan elders and the clan head; a second larger, mat-covered platform along the right wall reserved for middle-aged married men or guests; and a large, uncovered space immediately inside the door occupying the "lowest" area being allocated to youths and young married men.<sup>27</sup> The domestic houses are similarly divided into "higher" and "lower" areas, higher ones being associated with men and lower ones with women and children. Seating arrangements reflect this order as well. The district chief is always accorded the highest position at any gathering, with other elders

or men of high rank being seated above and served before those of lower rank, and men being seated above and served before women and children.

Around the perimeter of each clan site are found the kitchens and taps, areas where women spend much of their time preparing meals, washing clothes, bathing or washing children (where bathing areas are located in streams, men bathe "upstream" while women bathe "downstream"). As Foucault's (1979) discussion of panopticism has revealed, the ability to oversee is crucial to one's ability to see, to know, and to direct: the chief overlooking the village, the men's houses overlooking their clan sites, higher-ranking families above lower ones, elders above juniors and men's areas above women's.

The spatial ordering of above and below is imposed upon the body as well as on village space. The head, *na ulu*, is the body's highest part and is considered *tabu* or sacred, with the district chief's head being altogether untouchable. One never touches any other person's head either or moves or stands above them without first asking permission; and one *never* steps over another person's body for this would entail a disordering of this axis with the positioning of one person's "lower" body above the other's "higher." Lower parts of the abdomen are profane, particularly for women. Genitals must always be covered under one's skirt, even when bathing. The need to cover this area is firmly instilled in young children, especially girls, who are threatened with a thrashing if they do not cover themselves and admonished with the scolding, "*Sa tabu!*"—"It is forbidden!" A woman's proper manner of sitting in the company of men, with legs together and curled to one side, redirects this area away from others seated around her and is described as respectful, *va rokoroko*. As well, women do not ride horses (which were introduced by the British) in the same fashion as men but instead ride sidesaddle; to sit as a man would, with one leg on either side of a horse, is said to look vile, *rairai ca*. The lowest part of the body, the feet, while not being considered *tabu* are nonetheless symbolically below. This is illustrated by a gesture that is made when making a request or asking a favour (*kerekere*) of someone. When making this request, one touches the other person's foot, a gesture that symbolically puts the requester in a lower position. This establishes a hierarchical relationship between the two with its accompanying tone of obligation for the person put in a senior/upper position who is then made to feel obliged to respond favourably to the request.

Magodro's spatial-symbolic order reproduces and reinforces status differences in many different social environments: in the physical outlay of the village, the

positioning of the chief's house above all others, the arrangement of the men's house, domestic houses and the work areas of women within each hamlet, all of which are overseen by grave sites from which ancestors look down on their descendants. This geo-spatial arrangement both symbolizes and enacts social distinctions and stratification. Sociologically, this repetitive, symbolic structuring is important for as Eric Wolf (1982: 388) points out

the development of an overall hegemonic pattern or "design for living" is not so much the victory of a collective cognitive logic or aesthetic impulse as the development of redundancy—the continuous repetition, in diverse instrumental domains, of the basic propositions regarding the nature of constructed reality.

The second hierarchizing structure that is significant to the understanding of the contravening nature of women's myths is the traditional religious system of Magodro, including myths told by men in which the central figure is the snake, *na gwata*. Although Magodro is officially Methodist, traditional religious beliefs are deeply held in the villages and daily life is permeated by their rituals.<sup>28</sup> Most of these centre in the clans' men's houses, *na beto*, which are exclusively male arenas. Men gather in their clan's men's house every night to socialize, exchange news or hold meetings to organize upcoming clan events such as weddings, gift exchanges or collective work projects. The *beto* is also the main site for interaction between clansmen and their ancestral spirits, *na nitu*. Gatherings in the men's house always include the drinking of *kava*, or *yagona*. Its preparation follows a ritualized pattern that is accompanied by prayer. Once mixed it is sanctified and must be drunk; it cannot be thrown away. Men take turns donating *kava* for these gatherings, and each donation constitutes a small religious offering, *na madrali*, dedicated to clan spirits or *nitu* whom they propitiate for the protection of their families, their health, the fertility of their land and their crops.<sup>29</sup> On specific occasions (such as after the unexpected death of a clansman) meetings may be called specifically for elders to communicate with these spirits, which they do through dreams or visions. During these interactions ancestors convey knowledge (the identity of a sorcerer for example) that would otherwise be unavailable to these men.

Women are excluded from rituals in the men's houses. As well, I was told that during funeral preparations for the district chief, who died in 1992, men with clubs patrolled the village road in front of the chief's residence where his body lay before burial. At this time

women and children were forbidden from entering or disturbing this area on threat of death; some even left the village in fear, going to stay with relatives.

A central figure in Magodro religion (and throughout much of Fiji) is the snake figure, *na gwata*, who is prominent in myths circulated by men. At the time of contact, Fiji's supreme male supernatural figure was Degei, a half-snake, half-man deity responsible for the creation of the world and establishment of its social order (see Capell, 1984; Williams, 1985 [1858]).<sup>30</sup> In several myths told by men in Magodro, the snake's shedding of its skin effects a transformation which sees this figure change into a man and with its redonning, back into a snake. As a mythological figure it represents a potent symbol of immortality, endurance and rebirth. Williams (1985 [1858]: 217) described the snake as the "impersonation of the abstract idea of eternal existence . . . [s]ome traditions represent him with the head and part of the body of that reptile, the rest of his form being stone, emblematic of everlasting and unchangeable duration." Themes of ritual transformation, rebirth and immortality continue to run deep in Magodro where the circumcision rituals of boys are conceived of as "small deaths," *na mate lailai*, followed by rebirths that separate and elevate circumcised youths and men from women as twice-born humans. Similarly, installation ceremonies for the chief are rites of empowerment that elevate and separate him from other men as a thrice-born figure. In contrast, Valerio Valeri (1985) comments on the twice-born character of chiefs in Hawai'i, their ritual rebirth upon installation being central to the establishment and confirmation of their *mana* or supernatural power. In the case of Magodro, where women are doubly excluded—from rituals held in the men's houses and from holding chiefly positions, I argue that through ritual men in general are held to be twice-born and the chief thrice-born, the circumcision ceremony that boys undergo representing their second birth and the installation of the chief, his third.

One widely known Fijian myth of creation recorded in 1929 by the Fijian ethnographer Rokowaqa, and translated by the contemporary Fijian ethnographer Asesela Ravuvu (1987: 263-266), describes not only the creation of the world by the snake god Degei but also the circumstances leading to the subordination of women to men and justification for their exclusion from ritual practices. In this myth, this occurred when the female character disobeyed Degei's commands, an event that angered this god and led him to banish her and her children from the supernatural world. He then made men more powerful than women, enabling them to continue their interactions with the supernatural, and assigned them their rit-

ual role as intercessors between the human and sacred worlds, in Ravuvu's words (1987: 266), making men the "agents of god."

The snake figure represents a potent "key" symbol (Ortner, 1973) in myths told by men in Magodro. There is a continued belief in the snake's supernatural power, or *mana*, as well and, whenever encountered in the bush, snakes are dealt with cautiously. The belief prevails that an encounter with a snake may bring about the viewer's death. During the course of my research I was told of two occasions when a snake was seen in the forest, both of which involved women. At separate times later in the year, each of the women died and their deaths were directly attributed to their having earlier seen a snake.

Finally, myths told by women must be understood within the context of the prevailing order of knowledge that exists in Magodro. Magodro's system of knowledge is one that excludes women from participation in or the observance of male ritual practices, many of which are performed in the men's houses. During other ceremonial occasions (such as weddings or funerals) which bring together large numbers of men from different clans, temporary shelters are built on a ceremonial field. These are enclosed nearly all the way around and their walls obstruct the view of ceremonies from outside, although they do not prevent the events inside from being heard. Ritual exclusion for women then is both physical and visual in a double sense, being unable to watch certain rituals taking place within ritualized spaces or participate in visions that impart knowledge from ancestors. On the one occasion when a woman may observe these rituals, her wedding, she is referred to as "*matai*," meaning wise or knowledgeable, referring to the fact she had witnessed these ceremonies. The word *mata* means, literally, the eyes, and thus the word *matai*, knowledgeable, indicates a privileging of the sense of sight as the dominant mode for the apprehension of knowledge according to Magodro's "hierarchy of the senses."<sup>31</sup> Recognition of this hierarchy of knowledge is essential for an appreciation of women's myths in Magodro.

## Symbolic Transgressions: The Politics of Signification

Both of the myths recounted here are significant as contravening texts for they carry within them descriptions of behaviour or episodes that invert and transgress Magodro's dominant order of space and knowledge, particularly with respect to gender and the status prescribed for men and women. The first of these myths, "Looking Up Grandmother's Skirt," carries within it an inversion

of Magodro's spatial order, a contravention of its ordering of the body, and a transgression of one of its most stringent of bodily rules. Flaunting the rule which prescribes that genitals be covered, Grandmother invites Granddaughter to stand under her skirt for shelter from the rain (*na luvu*) and in so doing exposes herself (in particular, her *vulu*) an event she should always protect against. Through this positioning, Granddaughter is placed so as to "look up" at this part of Grandmother's body, seemingly a contradiction as this is prescribed as a "low" area relative to the eyes or face according to Magodro's symbolic and spatial order of the body. In this position, the sequence that finds Granddaughter "looking up" to "see below" runs counter to and challenges dominant meanings of the body, particularly for women where this area is negatively indicated or *tabu*. Such symbolic reconfigurations of meaning effect what Stuart Hall et al. (1978: 357), in their discussion of symbolic politics, have described as "transformations of signs." In this case, this transformation involves an inversion of dominant meanings (that is, meanings that have been assigned through domination) ascribed to women's bodies such that the part of their body signifying or carrying the negative quality "below" is placed so as to be accorded the positive meaning "above." This process of inversion is paralleled in this myth by the syllabic inversion found in the words *luvu* and *vulu*, each of these being words whose very meanings epitomize the essence of aboveness (rain deriving from above) and below (the genitals being the body's symbolically lowest point), an inversion which, in itself, bespeaks this mix of meanings. Through this myth, such "shifts in signification" (Hall et al., 1978: 330) call into question the dominant meanings attached to these signs by introducing to them an element of ambivalence. As Homi Bhabha (1995: 33) has pointed out, the presence of ambivalence is central in strategies of subversion for resistance is not simply "an oppositional act of political intention"; rather it "is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of [colonial] power." Transgressions which produce ambivalence such as those introduced in this Grandmother-Granddaughter myth serve to suspend the essential nature of Magodro's order of meanings for space, gender and the body.

In the second of these stories, "Blinding the Snake," Grandmother and Granddaughter's coming upon a snake is a significant enough event in western Fiji to warrant comment for the snake is a dominant and powerful religious figure here. Belief in its *mana* and potential power

to destroy is still very strong and the fear it inspires is apparent throughout this tale. The snake's power is made evident in this myth in its ability to kill and consume creatures much larger than itself and to repeatedly break out of each of the "enclosures" it is placed in by Grandmother and Granddaughter. This sequence closely parallels the mythological snake's continual rebirth as it sheds its old skin and emerges renewed and enduring, a sequence that demonstrates its immortality. Yet in this myth, following its series of "rebirths," rather than emerge renewed the snake is killed, a violent deviation from its ascribed mythology. Such an abrupt departure from the hegemonic pattern is significant and constitutes a "rupture of representation," one that introduces movement into "the fixity of signification" (Sharpe, 1995: 99-101) that holds for dominant, powerful male figures as represented through men's myths: the snake is powerful, supernatural, immortal; the snake is dead. That this moment should represent a humour-producing episode is significant for humour denies this death its dignity and divests it of a tragic cast.

But this break is not all that is culturally significant in this Grandmother-Granddaughter myth. Important also is the manner by which this death is brought on, the meaning of which touches on Magodro's order of knowledge, its exclusion of women from men's rituals, and its privileging of the sense of sight in its hierarchy of the senses. It is not insignificant that the death of the snake in this women's myth was brought about by a blinding attack to its eyes.<sup>32</sup>

An understanding of the cultural content of the inversions and transgressions contained within these myths is essential to this analysis, as is an appreciation of their place within the wider social context of women's critical commentaries. In their daily conversations, women observe and criticize the behaviour of men and their treatment of women, sometimes belittling them and at other times simply offering sad reflection. During *tevu-tevu* ceremonies, women mimic the actions of men by parodying their ritual serving of *kava*. These parodies imitate the "semiology" of those in power but here it is an "emulation without deference" (Keesing, 1991: 19), one which constitutes a form of symbolic resistance. Women's use of parody continues in their clowning performances during which they portray elderly men in a ridiculous manner, as stumblers, falling "down," dependant on the assistance of a cane to steady them and keep themselves aright, that is to stay *tu*, upright. These actions expose their human weakness and counter their claims to strength and power, claims which hold to Magodro's hegemonic logic that elderly men, *na turanga*, are

symbolically positioned higher, coming closer to the sacred world as they advance in years and occupy an ever-more-revered stature. The cross dressing of women as men, but with their shirts askew and trousers on backwards, amplifies the wit of these performances as well as their acerbity, pointing to a reversal of both roles as well as meanings.<sup>33</sup>

Such parodies as are represented in these satirical performances and narratives constitute a form of resistance discourse, where semiotic inversion represents both a transgression of and challenge to a hegemonic gender ideology, a resistance to "codification" (Hall, 1993) that is part of a struggle against those powers that confer meaning. On the political significance of this form of resistance, Roger Keesing (1991: 21-22) has eloquently explained (with respect to the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands):

[t]he oppositional cast of discourses of resistance reflects a strategic realization that one must meet the enemy on his own turf. The Kwaio case shows how deep and subtle this process is. If one wants to challenge colonial assertions of sovereignty, one must do it in a language of flags and ancestors-on-coins, in place of Kings. If one wants to challenge colonial legal statutes and Biblical rules by asserting the legitimacy of ancestral rules and customary codes, one must do so through codification, through writing a counter-Bible/counter-lawbook. A recognition that if counterclaims are to be recognized and effective, they must be cast in the terms and categories and semiology of hegemonic discourse, is politically astute, not blindly reactive.

Given the prevailing religious system and order of knowledge in Magodro, and given the real power that men wield in this society, I was surprised to hear these myths and the irreverent and critical comments made by women. I was also shocked to witness the mimicry and satirical dancing of women, and to see the response—laughter—of their audiences. Their myths and commentaries refer directly to figures and themes cast as paramount in a hegemonic male world. Yet in these myths and in the parodies of men's rituals, these themes are both recognizable and yet distorted, divested of their dignity. The respect that is usually attached to them is withheld and thus their meanings are denied. In providing a distorted image of this world, any notion I might have had that the social reality created by men was a seamless, uncontroversial whole was shattered, *cibote*.

## Conclusion

Such moments of disorder as are present in these women's myths are subversive and are significant to society as representing compelling moments of deep political play, a politics of cognition if you will. As Mary Douglas (1968: 372) has explained, such cognitive incongruities serve to bring about "an awareness of the provisional nature of categories of thought . . . lifting the pressure for a moment and suggesting other ways of structuring reality." Being tales that involve challenges to powerful male figures and themes, a disregard of taboos and the order of the body, and an inversion of a knowledge and ritual system that privileges men, such myths of women serve to contravene "heroizing male themes" (Eileen Cantrell, cited in Knauff, 1994: 423) and contradict received, hegemonic understandings of men and women: in so doing, they subvert dominant meanings and may potentially "pervert" (de Certeau, 1988) reigning truths in this society.

In order to appreciate the dialectical nature of the politics of knowledge within western Fiji, therefore, and the role that myth plays in setting out this dialectic, account must be taken of both the construction and disputation of authoritative discourse, the assertions of those with power and those without—which James Scott (1990: 202) refers to as the "public transcripts of dominant groups" as well as the "backstage transcripts of subordinate ones."<sup>34</sup> I view women's myths such as these as examples of such "backstage transcripts," ones that constitute a form of insubordinate, as opposed to merely subordinate, discourse. Subordinate discourse as a concept has been applied by Messick (1987: 217) and refers to "a form of expression characterized by its power relation to a dominant ideology with which it coexists"; a "counterdiscourse" in Janice Boddy's words (1989: 305). I introduce the term insubordinate discourse for this Fijian case as it more closely captures the subversive quality of these women's commentaries.

In conclusion, to view mythology merely as a set of grand narratives that relates positively to hegemonic views of a socially constructed world is to ignore its potential as a place where models of culture can be both "reified, thought about, and contested" (Linnekin, 1992: 253). Anthropology's appreciation of mythology's role as a legitimizer of dominant ideologies must be tempered by an understanding of the potential it poses as a "risk to the sense of signs" (Sahlins, 1985), and recognition must be given to women as generators of those signs.

## Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Robert Shirley, with thanks, on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Toronto.

## Notes

- 1 A discussion of how insights drawn from the study of cultural production can be fruitfully joined with those of political economy is provided in Roseberry (1991: 36). Eric Wolf's (1999) ethnographic comparison of cosmology, ideology and claims to power, *Envisioning Power*, brings together just such insights.
- 2 Micaela di Leonardo (1991: 233) has commented on the significance of women as generators of signs for feminist anthropology.
- 3 Research in Fiji was conducted between November 1986 and January 1988, and again in November 1993, and was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and University of Toronto Doctoral Fellowships. I thank Michael Lambek, Janice Boddy and Jack Kapac for extremely helpful discussions and comments on this work, and Sally Cole and the anonymous reviewers of *Anthropologica* for their suggestions and encouragement. I am indebted to Roger Keesing for discussions, in 1991, of the significance of symbolic reversal to cultural politics in the Pacific, and to Ivan Kalmar for discussions of the semiotics of humour.
- 4 Fijian orthography is employed in this article for western Fijian words, where "c" represents the voiced th, "b" represents "mb," "d" represents "nd," "g" represents the "ng," and "q" represents the voiced "ng" sounds.
- 5 In western Fiji, words used to describe other types of narrative include *talanoa*, meaning to chat or to relate anecdotes, a word I heard translated several times by Fijians as "yarning." The word *talanoa* is given by Capell (1984: 354) to mean a legend as well, though *na kwalekwale* was consistently used in Magodro in this sense. The term *na i tukatuka* is used to refer to "the news," and indicates the relating of current or upcoming events.
- 6 In her analysis of the Gimi of Papua New Guinea, Gillian Gillison (1993) has argued that in some contexts myth may serve as a form of "covert dispute" between men and women.
- 7 Keesing (1991: 16) provides insightful comments on the unintended ironies produced by the introduction of "chiefs" among the egalitarian Kwaio of the Solomon Islands during British colonial rule.
- 8 The Bauan dialect of eastern Fiji was adopted by the British as the standard for the islands stemming from the influence exerted by the island of Bau during the 1800s.
- 9 Although a nationally based Fijian women's group, *Na Soqosoqo Vakamarama*, operates at the village level, women are restricted from performing leadership roles outside this organization. I was repeatedly told that women in Magodro never serve as chiefs or clan heads.
- 10 *Kava*, or *yagona*, is a mildly narcotic drink made from the dried roots of the *Piper methysticum* plant whose relaxant effects are cumulative. Initially one feels a tingling or numb-

- ness in the lips and throat, accompanied by slurred speech and drowsiness. Repeated and prolonged use may bring numbness in the legs, with consequent stumbling or befuddlement. I have also seen individuals in a falling-down, drunken-like state. Its narcotic effect may also bring vivid dreaming (conceived of as visions, *na yadra*). *Kava* has the negative morning-after effect of bad temper, which women fear in their husbands as it may precipitate domestic violence. Variations in the strength of this narcotic result from the use of the freshly cut *versus* dried root, the fresh being more potent. Its religious significance is discussed more fully below.
- 11 I have analyzed gender hierarchy and the symbolic organization of space elsewhere (Aucoin, 1999).
  - 12 For a more detailed explanation of the language of kin terms in Magodro, see Aucoin (n.d.).
  - 13 See Edmund Leach's work (1967, 1971) on the semantics of kin terms, and the use of the concept metathesis as a means of identifying connotative meanings.
  - 14 Kinship in Magodro is Dravidian, a system characterized by cross-cousin marriage.
  - 15 The kin term *tatai* refers to one's real or classificatory maternal and paternal grandmothers as well as one's real and classificatory maternal grandfathers. The relationship between *tatai* and *karua*, grandchildren, is one of affection, with the grandchild often being left in the care of the grandmother, especially the paternal grandmother, when parents are busy or away. In these situations, the grandmother will demonstrate patience while teaching the grandchild, and will joke and entertain her or him. In contrast, the paternal grandfather, *tutua*, relationship is marked by the formality and deference owed to a figure of senior rank within the patrilineage.
  - 16 Women usually return to active food production approximately 10 to 12 months after the birth of a child. At this time, although still breast-feeding, an infant will stay with other female kin for short periods of time and takes solid food well while her/his mother is absent.
  - 17 This type of marriage is not uncommon in this area of Fiji. I met several young women whose marriages had been arranged, but the degree of force and threat applied in this woman's case made her story particularly poignant. In one of these other cases, a man who was in a *vasu*, or sister's son, relationship to a young woman's father, who was his *koko* or mother's brother, asked to marry this man's daughter. The request brought great distress to this family: the young woman did not want to marry this man, and her parents sympathized with her deeply. Yet a request made by one's *vasu* cannot be refused. The young woman went unhappily as a bride while her parents wept.
  - 18 This woman referred to these male patrilineal kin using the English term uncle, but their kin relationship to her was as classificatory fathers, *momo*: her father's younger (*momo sewa*) and older (*momo levu*) real and classificatory brothers. These are men with whom she would have grown up, and whose children she would consider her classificatory sisters and brothers (*vei tacini*).
  - 19 It is impossible to go into the history of this organization here, but it should be noted that during the year of my research in Fiji, women of this village met regularly to raise funds for the building and stocking of this store, and once opened, they met weekly to discuss its operation. After a year's operation, they had raised enough money to purchase a kerosene freezer, and hoped in future to contribute money toward village projects such as improvements to the water system. I learned, upon my return in 1993, that plans were underway for a man, the sister's son or *vasu* (see note 17) of the previous district chief, to take over operation of this store on behalf of the men.
  - 20 Important studies of clowning performances in the Pacific include Hereniko (1995), Counts and Counts (1992) and Mitchell (1992).
  - 21 The wearing of pants by women is akin to their riding horseback "men's style," that is, with either leg astride a horse's back. Both are said to "*rairai ca*," to look very bad (*ca*). Proper bodily comportment for a woman in public is to ride sidesaddle, wear a skirt and sit with legs together and curved around to one side. Men on the contrary sit cross-legged.
  - 22 The word *cibote*, meaning to crack open or break apart—as when a pottery vessel cracks, contains within it the *tabu* word for vagina. In this, it is similar to the word *cidresu*, meaning to tear—as when a mat or piece of cloth tears apart. Use of either of these words in everyday speech elicits a giggling and uncomfortable recognition from women as they are aware of their breach of this *tabu*.
  - 23 See Aucoin (1999) on the order of space.
  - 24 Ortner (1990: 64) reaffirms the importance of understanding distinctions such as sacred/profane within gender systems, the aim of their study being twofold: to determine the role they play "in constituting a given order of gender relations" and to identify "the ways in which their gender claims may be culturally subverted over time."
  - 25 Martha Kaplan (1988) notes the significance of seaward/land orientation in the chiefly/commoner divisions of villages in northeastern areas of Viti Levu, but this spatial axis seems less well articulated than high-low elevations in Magodro.
  - 26 The concept of immortality, as encompassed by the word *tu*, is central to traditional Fijian constructions of the sacred. This notion has been prominent in post-colonial religious expressions, such as the *tuka* movement, as well. The history of this movement has been analyzed in detail by Kaplan (1988).
  - 27 I am indebted to Richard Aucoin for descriptions of the interior of the men's house and their seating arrangements.
  - 28 Katz (1993) has discussed the intersection of traditional and Western religions in Fiji.
  - 29 Details of these *madrali* ceremonies are provided in Spencer (1941).
  - 30 The snake is a prevalent mythical figure in many areas of the Pacific. For the Huli of Papua New Guinea (Clark, 1993: 749), the symbolic significance of the mythical snake figure is strikingly similar to that in Fiji in that it also carries an association with immortality: "the shedding of skin by which the snake emerges "renewed" appear[s] to form the basis for an association of the snake . . . with life and continuity." See also Gillison (1993).
  - 31 I thank Christine Jourdan for introducing me to the concept "hierarchy of the senses" in relation to this work. See also David Howes' *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991).

- 32 It should be noted here that the mongoose is an animal imported by the British to control cane rats. That it is associated with Europeans may be significant to an understanding of this myth insofar as it may symbolically represent the British/colonization as destroyers of Fijian culture. However, as this animal was never described to me by any Fijian as having been introduced by the British, I would not argue for this interpretation.
- 33 Such incongruities are essential to the generation of humour. See Milner, 1972; Apte, 1985.
- 34 See also Wolf (1999: 290) on "aspirations" and "claims" to power.

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