

Spirits, Shamans, and Stars

Perspectives from South America

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Creative Process in Ritual Art: Piaroa Indians, Venezuela

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In 1967–1968, while doing ethnographical fieldwork among the Piaroa Indians in the forests of southern Venezuela, I was able to observe some phenomena at a seasonal rite that may throw light upon certain features of the creative process. The present paper is an attempt to sum up the problems of analysis on this subject.

For the examination of the creative process appearing under ritual conditions it was also necessary to ascertain secular relationships among creators, interpreters, and participants.

In their economic formation, the Indians under examination hardly differ from the other tropical-forest tribes. Besides their horticultural activity other ways of obtaining food — hunting and gathering — also play important roles. As to the social aspect of obtaining food we can establish above all that a clear and consistent division of labor prevails according to sex. The cultivation of plants, and some of the gathering and the preparation of food belong to the women's scope of duties, while the men are chiefly engaged in hunting (Boglár 1971). The economic basis of existence is secured by the integration of the cultivation of plants and the hunting activity — neither branch can be neglected. At the same time, primarily male dominance is typical in their life. A male bias arises from the fact that certain very important ritual functions can be performed only by men.

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RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS AND THE PERMANENT RITE

The head of the local group is the religious specialist whose duty it is to perform a series of ritual functions. His most important activity is a partly preventive, partly curative "struggle" against illnesses, but he is also responsible for organizing the ritual ceremonies, such as initiation and masked dance. He is the one best acquainted with mythical traditions and his duty is to prevent their sinking into oblivion. Finally, he is the master of preparation and use of the ritual objects.

According to observations he is also highly respected in everyday life if he fulfills his duties "without fault." This refers particularly to the magical chants concerning mythical animal relations which are performed almost every day. Searching for the sources of the prestige of the *menyerua* [man of the songs],¹ we have to observe, above all, the field which is in the center of his activity, namely, hunting or to be more exact, *the animal which is hunted*. As the animal also carries magical powers, its meat has to be sung "pure" before eating it in the evening, in order that it may not bring "danger" (illness) to those who eat of its flesh. The epic content of the *menye* [magical chants] deals with the killed animal, referring abundantly to the myths.²

Clearing up the relations of myths and rites is of utmost importance first of all because of social resonance. It is the questions concerning, first of all, the language, that occur in connection with the magical chants and mythical narratives. I would refer to the fact that besides the everyday language there also exists an esoteric one: the mythical narratives are usually only understood by the initiated, and sometimes only by "the narrators." (The fact that the men hiding behind the masks sing in a changed voice during the dances is also relevant here.)

The role of the prohibition of language is remarkable in other cases, too: the names of certain objects and representations are identical to the denomination of the raw materials. The real or ritual denomination remains hidden. The ritual "instrumental language" is a further step in hiding: by means of a certain instrument it is possible to contact

¹ One of the guarantees of the religious specialist's prestige is a good memory: this particularly pertains to the magic songs performed almost every day. We know an example when the group expelled its *menyerua* because he did not sing the magical chants correctly. This man was a narcotics addict, so his mind became disturbed and because of lapses of memory he could not recite the ritual texts correctly.

A way of learning for the *menyerua* is that he meets highly respected and skilled religious specialists, and he repeatedly listens to their narratives. Even mythology refers to the importance of remembering Wahari, the culture hero. To avoid being forgotten by people he created illnesses, which are carried by animals, so the meat-eating Indian is bound to "remember" the creator day by day.

² The central figure of the mythology, Wahari, appears during the creation in the form ("mask") of several animals. After his death his soul went into the tapir, which is under taboo.

the women who are excluded and cannot see the men playing the music.³

Concerning the ideology, it is important to clear up the relation of idea and act. It is the religious chief and some chosen who possess the idea (with all its important details). The mythical texts mentioned several times are mostly incomprehensible to the members of the community, but they can hear them and they know that the religious chief "fulfills" his duty. He performs traditionally maintained rites; this is most important for the audience, which reacts with a real social resonance.⁴

According to an informant the chants sung in the hut in the evenings belong together, like "pearls on a necklace." He could hardly have pointed out more correctly and poetically the complexity of the phenomena. Describing the connection of a magical chant (pearl) and the chain of the magical chants (necklace) is not only an example of dialectical thinking but it also allows one to suppose the social need for totality. It casts a light on the problem if we draw our attention to the all-embracing rite of the Piaroa culture: the rite connected with the seasons.

RITUAL "SCHOOL": THE CEREMONIAL CONDITIONS OF CREATIVITY

The *warime* rite is the grandest event of the Piaroa Indians. During the masked rite many concepts of mythology are revealed as well as ritual painting, sculpturing, music, and dance as a chain of manifestations of expressive culture. During the ceremony the mask bearers represent animal spirits or, more exactly, the "lords" of certain animals. These are the peccary, the monkey, and the wild bee. According to the idea of the Piaroa, spiritual identification with the animal makes their relationship with the animal more intimate, and at the same time it induces them to multiply.

During the preparation of the masked rite the members of the local group (summoned from several settlements) under the direction of religious leaders and under ritual circumstances prepare the ritual accessories (masks, musical instruments) while they are initiated into the knowledge of mythology, religious ideas, and activities. Women and girls are forbidden to see the preparations; they do not know the identity of the mask bearers, nor can they see who play the instruments. The organization of the rite is an important task of the religious leader. He has his

³ The *muotsa* [leaf-whistle] made of palm-tree wood is a ritual instrument, an accessory of the masked ceremony. Indians playing this instrument can ask different questions, also related to everyday life. They can play the Piaroa name of palm nuts and fruits favored by birds on another instrument, the *dyaho* flute, which bears the name of the toucan bird.

⁴ The situation with nonritual narratives (tales, "true" stories, etc.) is different, as described in an earlier paper of mine (Boglar 1970).

assistants who are to a certain degree acquainted with the ritual "crafts," yet all the responsibilities of organization are his. The masks and the musical instruments are made under his supervision, and he directs the course of the ceremony. In the view of the Piaroa Indians, however, it is not simply a matter of organization and staging; it is another proof that the religious leader is capable of controlling the powers of nature. The oldest religious chief I have met owes his distinguished authority to the fact that in his lifetime he has organized several *warimes*, or masked rites. During the rite and its preparations the harmony of individual and collective actions also defined from the point of view of relationship is clearly expressed. This dialectic chain of relations can be summed up as follows: the rite results from social needs; the making of ritual accessories is directed by an individual; securing the raw materials is the duty of specialists; the basic operations are done by specialists; the painting is the operation of individuals; although the rite is communal it enhances the prestige of the individual.

IDEOLOGICAL BASES

The basic concept, which is expressed in myths, religious ideas, and acts, is the humanization of nature. In the following I would like to mention identification as an important means of humanization. While examining the world concept of tribal societies it is repeatedly stated that man identifies himself with certain natural phenomena. Several factors — environment, cultural milieu, mentality, etc. — can determine the group of phenomena preferred by a community. It is evident that animals are particularly suitable for such purposes. What factors can play a role in establishing the man-animal relationship with the Piaroa Indians?

This relation is the most striking in the *warime* rite, where the animals are represented by forms, voices, and movements. Representation of the mythical "lords" of animal spirits is not only a formal act, but contextually they are also an animation and direction "from within." (Representation and identification are well conditioned by an intense situation established by the common presence of rhythmical sound and motion.) The figure of the peccary, which is to be found in several myths and magical chants, rises out of the threefold unity of animal spirits, and it is determined by the incestuous relation of Wahari (the culture hero, the Creator) with his sister from which the peccary was born. The myth also explains the origin of the *warime* rite, and makes the community conscious of the "relation" of man and animals which has existed since ancient times.

It is important from the point of view of the identification examined that according to the myth the peccary was born from the sexual act of "humans." Why does the peccary play the role of the "most human"

animal? What are the common traits of the peccary, monkey, and wild bee that helped them to play a distinguished role in the masked ceremonies?

Assorting these animals on the basis of their way of life we can establish that:

1. all three animals live in the woods — not on savannahs or clearings;
2. they live in communities — rather than alone, like the jaguar, tapir, etc.;
3. they are plant-eating animals, not beasts of prey.

Since obvious questions pertaining to food acquisition are raised, the basic one for the Piaroa naturally is whether the animal (or plant) is edible or not. It is obvious that the hunting of communal animals is more desirable in the woods (where the Indian hunter feels more at home). It must be mentioned that the animals examined provide the raw materials for some ritual instruments too (tooth, bone, bristle, etc.), and the importance of the wild bee is emphasized by the fact that it supplies honey and wax (honey is not simply food but also medicine in the hands of the religious specialist and a symbolic material for the cohesion of the community; wax is used for several works of the religious specialist, e.g. for making masks, sculptures).

Besides the above facts — which can be verified biologically — the Piaroa also establish some secondary marks which indicate the continuity of identification and which make the relation of man and animal more profound. (The silver lip pendant is like the white beard on the peccary; the tongue of the Piaroa men is pierced at the initiation to make it similar to the tongue of the peccary, which has two natural grooves in it.)

Summing up we can establish that identification with the spirit of the animal not only confirms the continuity of the mythic state, but it also promotes the rebirth “from inside” as the creature being represented and finally helps its multiplication.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Studying tribal culture (generally the expressive culture) the investigator has to analyze ready forms and objects. The relation of myths and rites and the idea of identification call our attention to the fact that the forms and objects are the result of a continuous transformation, and their value can be revealed by examining specific cultural surroundings.⁵ Now let us

⁵ We must agree with d’Azevedo (1958:703), that in anthropological literature, “The processes of art are obscured by an emphasis upon its formal products and their value as a source of information about other things.” The paper of Goodale and Koss (1971:190) represents a similar view: “Descriptions of art objects frequently fail to consider the ways in which initial values associated with or achieved in the construction process influence terminal values associated with the finished product.”

sum up some thoughts on the subject, mainly to indicate the process of cognition which leads to representation. In the process of preparing the ritual masks we can observe a line of transformation:

1. For realizing an abstract idea (animal spirit, whose "owner" is the religious specialist),

2. they need a concrete model (peccary, monkey, wild bee) and several materials.

3. Under the direction of the chief certain specialists transform and compose the materials so that the representation shall be identical with the model (and to make identification easier for the interpreter during the performance).

4. The identified representation finally gets the attributes from the religious specialists to raise the world of the spiritual beings to a more abstract sphere.

The transforming process of creation can be well observed in the preparation of the *redyo* [wild bee] mask. The *redyo* is a frequent figure of the narratives, a manifold being which can be benevolent as well as malevolent. As to its representation, the Indian sculptor takes a concrete living picture from nature which represents the abstract spirit, namely the wild bee, and its nest on the jungle tree. During the shaping process the sculpture gradually withdraws from the living picture by means of putting different covers (bark, wax, and paint) on top of one another. Meanwhile the elements of the image of nest and wild bee absorbed in each other return from time to time. At the end the white earth-paint used by the Indian sculptor "to alienate" emphasizes that there is a spiritual being present.

Besides the creative process it is very important that the community should see finished forms. It is only the creators, the initiated, the participants of the ritual "school" who can feel and know, that in a mask there is a line, a process registered, and its further life is full of motion and dance, which takes place before the others' eyes. The interpreters remain hidden like Wahari, the culture hero, who has appeared in front of the Indians in an ever-changing form. Not only the hiding is interesting in this case, but also the fact that, similarly to Wahari, the Piaroa Indian also strives to humanize nature. This is a basic tendency of the man who lives within nature and I believe that this is the essence of "the art of the forests."

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