

'Dan Sperber and the Anacondas'. An Ethnographic Comment on  
Sperber's Theory of Symbolism

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This paper has a double aim since it is both ethnographic and theoretical. On one level it is concerned with the interpretation of a particular myth motif - anaconda seduction - which is widespread throughout the whole of Amazonia. The analysis may have some limited general implications, but since I will be concentrating on the motif in one particular society this will not necessarily be the case. On a second level I will be conducting the analysis with reference to a recent and popular book on symbolism - 'Rethinking Symbolism' by Dan Sperber - in which we are offered a "prolegomenon to a general theory of symbolism." By following through the method outlined in that book, I hope to demonstrate that the theory is based on some false assumptions concerning the nature of symbolism itself, and that, since it is based on unsatisfactory premisses, its programmatic intentions are vitiated.

The Waiwai, a group of Carib speaking Indians who live in the watershed region of the Essequibo and Mapuera rivers on the borders of Guyana and Brazil, possess a detailed and intricately interwoven cosmology. Within this cosmology the anaconda, or water-boa, holds a particular position. The first Waiwai women are said to have been anaconda women, and the men regard themselves as being in a brother-in-law relationship to the snakes. The men make the statement unequivocally: "Okoimo-yenna (anaconda people) are our poimo (brothers-in-law)." The question begged by such a statement is a perennial one for anthropologists: how do we make sense of such seemingly absurd assertions?

If we follow Sperber's advice, the first thing we must do is to decide whether or not the statement is symbolic, and we do this by ascertaining its literal falseness.

"I note then as symbolic all activity where the means put into play seem to me to be clearly disproportionate to the explicit end, whether this end be knowledge, communication or production - that is to say, all activity whose rationale escapes me. In short the criterion I use in the field is one of irrationality" (Sperber, 1975, 4).

Following this line we may say of the statement "Okoimo-yenna are our poimo" that, since brothers-in-law generally live in Waiwai villages and not in the wild, and since, in any case, snakes cannot be men, or vice versa, it is literally false. But since the Waiwai ultimately extract meaning from it we have no alternative but to accept it as symbolic.

Having located the statement in a field which defines its minimal properties we must now decide how to analyse it. Sperber rejects at length a Freudian or Turnerian perspective and is led to the conclusion that of all the interpretations of symbolism so far expounded, ~~Levi-Strauss's structuralism proves to be the most satisfying.~~ He is critical of Levi-Strauss, but nevertheless accepts that a symbolic framework based on oppositions, homologies, inversions and the like is a useful and necessary device for laying bare symbolic structures.

So the next step will be to situate the symbolic statement in a wider context, and this requires some more detailed ethnography.

Anacondas make four major appearances in myths, but for the limited purposes of this paper we need only detail two of them.

### The Creation Myth

Mawari, hero and first Waiwai, and his twin brother Washi were born of the union of a female tortoise and a male grasshopper. After the tortoise was killed by the jaguar people, an old jaguar woman taught the twins how to hunt, fish and grow cassava. Eventually, after growing enormous penises, they felt the desire for women.

Both brothers went down to their fish trap and there found an otter. They both had intercourse with the otter through its eye. The otter strongly reproached them for this, saying: "Why do you do this to me as if I were a woman? Go find yourselves women over there in the river." Mawari began to fish the river with an arrow, sticking it into the water five times. On the first four occasions he fished up feminine articles (a menstruation mat, red and yellow dyes, an apron, some beads and a cotton spindle). On the fifth attempt he drew up an anaconda woman and he took her to wife. He repeated the whole operation and gave the second woman to Washi.

Now that they had women the twins naturally wanted to have intercourse, but the women warned them of piranha fish which lived in their vaginas. Washi however could not contain himself and the piranha fish cut off his penis. Mawari managed to cure him, and Washi even grew a new penis, but it was of normal size. Mawari bathed his wife's vagina with strong-smelling fluids which caused the piranha fish to fall out so that he could safely have intercourse with her.

Washi had a number of children by his wife and he took his own daughter as an extra wife. Their progeny became the 'civilised Brazilians'. Mawari kept to his one wife, but all his children, save one son and one daughter who later married, died. His progeny eventually became all the Indians and Europeans. When Mawari's first daughter became emasi (had her first period) his wife told him to place her in a wayapa (seclusion hut) otherwise the okoimo-yenna would come to take her because they were poimo. (1)

This myth is clearly about the origin of marriage, and by implication the origin of the incest taboo. The twins are initially endowed with huge penises which they are particularly careless in using; sexually therefore they are both highly potent and incontinent. The otter, as the object of the twins' sexual attentions, is an appropriate choice since, given that women are eventually derived from water, it has a certain feminine valency. But being amphibious, it is also associated with land and is therefore cosmologically too close to the twins to

be wholly suitable. This cosmological proximity is reinforced by the copulation which takes place through the eye rather than the vagina; that is to say above rather than below. And we might also assume from its rebuke that, in spite of its feminine valency, the otter is male rather than female (cf. Levi-Strauss, 1973, 213). Thus we have three sets of oppositions: land and water, eye and vagina, and male and female, which can all be subsumed under the general cosmological opposition of above and below, the conjunction of which is the mediatory function of the otter.

This conjunction is ultimately creative because it gives the twins access to women who bear them children; but it has its dangers. The sexual incontinence of which both twins are at one stage guilty now gives way to a division. Mawari refrains from approaching his wife until he has taken steps to rid her vagina of piranha fish. Washi, on the other hand, cannot contain himself and suffers dire consequences. Still, he does regain his penis, albeit in diminished form. Thus Washi is a sexually incontinent man who loses sexual potency, whereas Mawari is sexually continent but retains his original sexual potential. The continence/incontinence contrast is further reinforced by the fact that Mawari remains monogamous, unlike Washi who takes his daughter as an extra wife. Mawari, though reluctant to let his daughter marry an anaconda man since he places her in a wayapa, does not indulge in sexual relations with her himself.

For the moment we will say no more regarding this myth. If it is symbolic, we cannot yet say to what it refers. So far we have simply followed Sperber's advice and elucidated some of the structure which inheres in the myth itself by reference to a series of oppositions. Sticking to the original task of understanding the symbolic role of the anaconda, it will now be necessary to refer to a second myth.

#### Okoiimo-yenna

Once long ago the Waiwai village was deserted save for an old chacha (grandmother/old woman) and a girl secluded in a wayapa, which she was allowed to leave after a couple of months. The next day the chacha asked the girl to go to the river to fetch some water but warned her not to cast her eyes to the centre of the river. The girl disobeyed however. She looked at the river and immediately saw the whole of the anaconda people rise from the water.

Being scared, the girl ran back to the village and told the chacha what had happened. The chacha hurriedly hid the girl under a pot. The anaconda people arrived at the village and danced outside the house. The chacha tried unsuccessfully to dismiss them with burning pepper. Next she tried to convince them that it was her and not the young girl they had seen. The anaconda people were not fooled and continued dancing.

Meanwhile, an armadillo began to dig a tunnel up from the river to the house, which started to get damp from rising water. Two small fish and two frogs (2) came up the tunnel and discovered the girl under the pot, but the

chacha threw them on the fire to stop them gossiping. Eventually the anaconda people became resigned to the fact that the girl was not there. They went but left behind a series of male articles - feather and bead ornaments, arm bands and hair tubes. Leaving them on the roof of the house they said: "Here is something for poimo to look at when they return." The floor of the house continued to dampen and soon the whole house was flooded. The chacha tried to save its contents but only the anacondas' gifts survived intact. Later they all turned rotten, though the Waiwai never forgot how to use them.

The most striking thing about this myth is that many of its structural elements are the reverse of those in the creation myth. In the first place we have a village occupied solely by women. And secondly the anaconda people who rise from the river are all male. Thus land is associated with the female, and the river with the male. Using the above/below distinction we thus find that above; below; female; male; land; water. Another contrast to which the myth calls our attention is that between a young girl who menstruates and an old woman who is presumably passed her menopause. The anaconda people are interested only in the young girl and reject the chacha outright. Other salient 'mythemes' we might point out are: 1) the young girl suffers visual incontinence; 2) the armadillo effects a conjunction of the two cosmological levels; 3) this conjunction is ultimately destructive; and 4) the anaconda people leave behind a series of impermanent male articles. These all represent further inversions. In the first myth the otter's eye is the passive recipient of human sexual attentions, whereas in the second myth the girl's eyes are the active agents which bring about non-human sexual attentions. In the first myth the twins take a series of feminine articles from the anaconda people, whereas in the second myth the Waiwai are offered a series of male non-articles (because they turn rotten) by the anaconda people.

Here we should pause to catch our breath, since we can play the structuralist's game for a long while yet. Although the 'structures' we have uncovered so far are by no means exhaustive, I think we have done enough to establish an outline of the transformational relationship between the two myths. Where do we proceed from here? Were we to take a Levi-Straussian position we might simply say that: "... if it is now asked to what final meaning these mutually significant meanings are referring the only reply ... is that they signify the mind that evolves by making use of the world of which it is a part" (Levi-Strauss, 1970, 341). Sperber finds this unsatisfactory. We should point out why.

First and foremost Sperber objects fundamentally to the ideas that symbols can be said to signify anything at all, since, he maintains, to say that symbols mean is to mask those features which are constitutive of them. Words are said to be linked through a conceptual mechanism to those areas of knowledge which he calls encyclopaedic and semantic; encyclopaedic knowledge being about the world (e.g. 'The anaconda is a snake with yellow and black markings.'),

and semantic knowledge being about categories (e.g. 'The anaconda is an animal.'). The conceptual mechanism is seen as that which links signifier and signified to give the word or statement its sense or meaning. But in symbolic representations:

"The symbolic signifier, freed from the signified, is no longer a real signifier except by a dubious metaphor whose only merit is to avoid the nature of symbolism, not to resolve it" (Sperber, 1975, 52).

Thus in order to make sense of the statement "okoimo-yenna are our paimo" we must first of all realise that, since the statement is symbolic, its reference is at least twice removed from its utterance, and if we want to uncover its reference we have to undertake two quite distinct mental operations. In the first place we have to discern a "focalisation on the underlying condition responsible for the initial defect and (an) evocation in a field of memory delimited by focalisation" (ibid. 123). Thereafter the conceptual mechanism can be said to interpret the statement. But the 'focalisation' and the 'evocation' are prior to the interpretation. Thus a symbolic utterance cannot be said to mean anything in and of itself.

The best way of understanding what Sperber means by 'focalisation' and 'evocation' is to follow through his method with reference to the material at hand. Our two myths are symbolic statements and they are in a transformational relationship. But as yet we have given them no ultimate meaning. In them men have married anacondas, anacondas have walked into Waiwai villages and anacondas have given men gifts. In terms of common-sense such accounts of events are defective. What are the conditions responsible for these defects? Any statement can be said to be a focalisation of attention, but symbolic statements, because they are referred to the encyclopaedi' and rejected, are focalisations which are secondarily referred to another store of knowledge in the passive memory. From this second referral, the individual tests the information in the statement against all the information in the passive memory until he arrives at something which will give the initial statement relevance. This is the process of 'evocation' and the information which is recalled by it represents conceptual knowledge which can be processed by a code which will give it meaning. What sort of knowledge or information which a Waiwai man might possess would count as suitable for giving relevance to our mythical statements within a field of evocation? Since the myths deal explicitly with themes concerning access to women, we could search for information in the conditions of kinship and marriage which apply to Waiwai society.

The Waiwai are fairly typical of Guianese Indians in that their kinship exhibits: "... a lack of emphasis on descent, importance of residence in ordering relationships, bilateral cross-cousin marriage and a tendency towards matrilocality" (Riviere, 1969, b, 162). On bilateral cross-cousin marriage first. Waiwai kinship terminology classifies all female parallel cousins with sisters, and all parallel aunts and uncles with parents. Maternal uncles are classified with fathers-in-law and paternal aunts with mothers-in-law (Fock, 1963, 185-193). Logically then, cross-cousins are actual or potential spouses and this category is known as wayamnu (literally 'my tortoise')

and meaning 'allowed sexual partner'). Ideally therefore marriage is with WZD or MRD. It will be remembered that in the creation myth Mawari placed his daughter in a wayapa in order to stop the anaconda people from taking her. Yet according to normal practice the relationship of the girl to anaconda men would be that of FZD. Thus the anaconda men's claim on Waiwai women as portrayed in both myths, and an initiation ritual which all girls who are emasi must go through, is ostensibly a fair one. Yet the Waiwai clearly regard it as dangerous.

Residence rules go some way in explaining this peculiarity. Ideally the Waiwai village is stamped by three sets of relationships known as eta, epeka and awale (ibid. 194-202). Each village is said to consist of an epeka group made up of several individual etas, where etas are individual families and the epeka group an agglomeration of such families related by siblingship. The village is therefore seen as an extended family group and this does conform to the actual grouping in most Waiwai villages, though they all exhibit this tendency to some degree. Village identity and consanguinity are therefore strongly confounded, though in many cases kinship ties, in terms of actual consanguinity, are clearly fictitious. When a stranger comes to a Waiwai village, and his kinship status is unknown he will normally be declared epeka. This will release him from sexual obligations (since all non-epeka are potential affines) and give him mere economic ones.

Village identity and kinship can therefore be said to operate by the same paradigm, and the epeka itself forms an ideal group of co-operating kin. Sentimentally and economically there are very close ties between siblings, parents and children. Brothers, sons and fathers will willingly share their duties to the family such as hunting, fishing and field-clearing. Sisters, mothers and daughters share their work both in the fields and at home. Indeed the epeka would be a neatly self-contained unit were it not for one thing - the incest taboo - which means that a man must seek a wife outside his epeka.

In most cases, because of the strong epeka identity of any particular village, a man will have to take a marriage partner from another village. If the matrilocal rule is followed this means that he must leave his epeka and live in another village where his relationship to the core of villagers will not be epeka but awale (in-law) and, more specifically, he will be in a mutual relationship of poimo to his wife's brothers. Matrilocality is therefore usually a tremendous wrench for a Waiwai man, and he will do everything in his power to avoid it. One way of doing this is marriage with the ZD, but although the ZD category can be interpreted as being wayamnu, this does not represent an ideal, and this technique of staying within one's own village and natal group has not been systematically exploited as it has been by some neighbouring tribes such as the Trio (Riviere, 1969 a).

The resentment of matrilocality is only heightened by the fact that the husband has to undertake a form of brideservice known as washma. Washma means that a man's father-in-law or brothers-in-law can request him to perform a number of tasks such as field clearing,

hunting or fishing. Such tasks are always undertaken grudgingly and the request is always made through the interlocution of the man's wife who mediates the potentially strained relationship. Ideally matrilocality and washma are lifelong requirements, though they are avoided in a number of ways, the best of which is for a man to let his sister marry his wife's brother. In this way the rights of the two men cancel each other out. But this is seldom possible and the best a man can normally hope for is a favourable negotiation prior to marriage.

Marriage is always preceded by a ceremonial dialogue between the fathers or brothers of the intending spouses, the function of which is to decide the value of the woman who is to be married. In this it is similar to the ceremonial dialogue which is conducted during ordinary trade enterprises (Fock, 1963, 217). The man's father will normally press the case that the woman is not worth a great deal and that brideservice should be waived. In return the woman's father will press for lifelong washma obligations. The resultant decision will primarily concern the length of time washma will have to be served, and this agreement is conventionally binding.

There is of course no direct reciprocity in the trading of women in this way, and though it may be fair to regard an individual marriage as part of a general exchange which guarantees the wife-givers a woman in return at some later date, this does not provide immediate compensation for the loss of the services of a sister or daughter. In so far as exchange is direct this seems to involve a payment of bridgservice for sexual and domestic access. Matrilocality, from one point of view, is a way of keeping your women at home and at the same time incurring extra services from <sup>their</sup> ~~husbands~~. However if this is carried to its logical conclusion, any gains from matrilocality are cancelled out by the fact that one's own marriage involves similar duties to one's in-laws. This is why the negotiation of brideservice is so crucial in Waiwai marriage, for it is every man's hope that he will gain a wife but avoid washma. Or to put it another way, one aims to take a woman from the 'outside' without losing the services of one's own female kin, so that taken as a whole an epeka group would aim at maximising its women.

All this information regarding washma, marriage and epeka loyalty is part of every Waiwai man's 'encyclopaedia' - it is knowledge of the world as it actually is. Clearly a search in the passive memory will evoke all or some of these facts of life and give the statements concerning anacondas as brothers-in-law a relevance. In the creation myth we find that maximising his women was something that Mawari was very good at, and his relationship with the anaconda people is conspicuous in its absence of reciprocity. In the first place his marriage to an anaconda woman was not matriloal but patriloal and there were no washma duties undertaken for his poimo. Furthermore, Mawari ~~denies~~ okoimo-yenna access to his daughter in spite of the fact that she is wayamnu to them. In this Mawari is a true hero since he achieves what every Waiwai man himself dreams of doing. Or in structuralist terms, we might say that the myth is an inversion of the sociological facts of life since on one level we have marriages that are patriloal and based on non-reciprocity,

and on the other level we have marriages that are matrilocal and based on exchange.

We can also note another sociological inversion that is pertinent to the myths - the series of attitudes connected with menstruation. When a man marries, the only extra services he receives from his wife which could not have been obtained from a sister are sexual. But when a woman is menstruating sexual intercourse is temporarily taboo. The other side of the coin to the relaxation of sexual ties is the danger of the woman being drawn more comprehensively back to her male kin, a danger that is doubly apparent to a Waiwai man because of the rule of matrilocality. Menstruation is therefore associated with what we might call 'social incest'. Yet in myth we find that although menstruation still represents a danger of women being abducted by brothers-in-law, the women in question are not wives but daughters; not affines but kin. Thus in myth we have a situation where menstruating daughters (kin) are in danger of being abducted by poimo for sexual purposes, and sociologically, a situation where menstruating wives (affines) are in danger of being abducted by poimo for social purposes. This is a particularly artful inversion because it confounds 'social incest' with sexual incest by associating ~~the~~hanacondas with a lust for menstruating women. (3)

Summing up the information which would give the myths relevance we can say: 1) Men desire taking women from the 'outside'. 2) Men do not wish to lose the services of their female kin. 3) There is a great resentment of brothers-in-law and their ability to dictate partially a man's way of life. 4) Menstruation, because it temporarily relaxes sexual connection, contributes more than a little to this resentment. Little wonder then that we find that our two myths are related to one another by inversion since one represents a conjunction of the 'inside' with the 'outside' which all men desire, and the other a conjunction which they all fear.

We could say more about the relationship between myth and 'reality' if we had more space, but it is clear that Sperber's method seems to have stood us in good stead since we have, at least partially, given the myths a relevance which they did not obviously possess on first encounter. But if we retrace our steps we can see that this usefulness may have been more illusory than real. We can question in the first instance our ~~initial~~ criterion for establishing the symbolic - irrationality.

Irrationality is an idea that is glossed very superficially by Sperber, but it is easy to see its fundamental importance for his whole exposition because it is that which determines whether a statement will be interpretable conceptually through active memory, or symbolically through passive memory. We need not indulge in a long-winded analysis to show how the conditions of knowledge in any particular society are dependent on the nature of the beliefs of that society and the way in which they are articulated. They have been well enough known since Evans-Pritchard (1937). For present purposes we need only note the following. According to the ethnography, I have no reason to suppose that the Waiwai do not regard their myths as both historically true and logically possible. In



fact the contrary is the case. It so happens that the Waiwai regard themselves as living in a world where animals, in their spiritual forms, are constantly interfering in the human social world. Among other things they are said to consume children, and cause and cure sickness (Fock, 1963, 14-37). No Waiwai man would deny that an anaconda was a danger to a menstruating woman. Everything he knows of his environment tells him that the danger is real.

The fact that irrationality is an observer's, and not a native's criterion has interesting implications for the thesis that symbols are not semantic. If we take Sperber's line that symbols are removed from their conceptual implications, it is indeed possible to posit a series of mental operations whereby a symbolic statement undergoes a double referral, the first being met with a rejection from active memory. This is a partial model of the mind; it is supposed to have universal application, and yet the Waiwai do not apply the criterion necessary to put the mental operations in progress. At the same time Waiwai myths are symbolic discourse 'par excellence'.

But perhaps this is being less than fair to Sperber. After all we have already established that his notion of evocation has proved fruitful in delimiting other fields of relevance for Waiwai myths. Could the process be unconscious? This is possible of course but one of its implications, if true, is that symbolism is basically an individual mode of experience. And indeed, Sperber is quite explicit on this count.

"Symbolism is, in a large part, individual, which is doubly incomprehensible from the semiological point of view. Firstly a system of communication works only to the extent that the underlying code is essentially the same for all; secondly a code exhaustively defines all its messages. Symbolism, which is a non-semiological cognitive system, is not subject to these restrictions" (Sperber, 1975, 87).

For any particular symbolic statement the individual is more or less free to search at random in his passive memory for knowledge which will give it relevance. This freedom naturally follows from the freeing of the conventional rules which link signifier and signified in normal, non-symbolic statements. How then do we account for the fact that cultural symbolism leads to a shared orientation among the members of a single society such as we have outlined for the Waiwai? Sperber's reply is that myths, because they are a collection of several symbolic statements strung together, limit the range of possible evocations which will take place in individual minds.

"The more numerous are the beliefs, rituals etc., which are taken into account the more the evocational field is determinate, the more restricted is the range of possible evocations, and the more the members of a single culture are led to similar evocations" (ibid. 137).

But this is merely sleight of hand. 'Similar evocations', being shared, now have the same status as non-symbolic invocations made from active memory. If it is eventually granted that symbols can

possess common associations then there is no reason to suppose that those associations will not enter into public knowledge, and if so, be no different from encyclopaedic knowledge about the world. It becomes increasingly difficult to see how symbolism can be both individual and shared at the same time. Once the symbolic evocations become shared they become available as elements in a communication structure which has a defined code. In short, once symbolic knowledge becomes public knowledge there is no need to posit any mechanism of rejection and secondary referral to passive memory in order to give it relevance.

But the question of evocation remains genuinely interesting for all that, for it certainly seems to be the case that some kinds of statements, such as those found in myth, do have extraordinary evocative power. Even if we do not accept a psychologistic account of evocation, we still need to account for the fact that the myths which we have analysed in this paper encapsulate so much other information. If we look at Sperber's tripartite division of knowledge - semantic, encyclopaedic and symbolic (ibid. 91) - there is an implicit argument that semantic and encyclopaedic knowledge can be regarded as meaningful, whereas symbolic knowledge, because it is ultimately parasitic on the other two, cannot. Semantic and encyclopaedic knowledge, because they consist of statements which pair signifier and signified, are conceptual, whereas symbolic knowledge does not use this pairing and is therefore merely cognitive. But the signified/signifier pairing is not the only thing we can say about meaning. Another salient point about meaning is that it is ultimately grounded in norms, conventions and social rules; or to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, the meaning of a word is identified with its use or uses in a language game (1953). If we accept this relatively uncontentious assertion it has unfortunate consequences for Sperber's whole theory.

For the word okoimo we can see that it has a number of possible uses. We find that it can be used in statements about brothers-in-law, menstruating women, wives and the river, to name but a few. We need have no criteria for judging their meaningfulness other than the fact that the Waiwai use them. Similar lists could be drawn up for such words as emasi and poimo. One of the major conclusions of 'philosophical investigations' which has been put to such devastating effect in recent anthropology (cf. Needham, 1972 and 1974) is that in a search for a theory of meaning it is a mistake to presume that any particular word will have a singular meaning. Rather it will have one or more uses.

But this is precisely the error which we have committed throughout this whole analysis since our irrationality criterion initially allowed us to designate a particular use of the word okoimo as meaningless. Sperber's argument is that statements are 'true' when they are semantically coherent or in correspondence with the world 'as it is', and that by implication only such statements are meaningful - an argument which falls squarely on the side of a positivist interpretation of meaning. But our problem is to locate a statement such as "Okoimo-yenna are our poimo" in the Waiwai 'language-game', not to see whether it violates universal rules of truth.

And what of evocation? This now becomes a question of how many different uses the word okoimo actually has in the language. Thus okoimo can be said to partake in a semantic field (cf. patching, 1975) along with several other words to which it will stand in relationships of opposition, contiguity and overlap. The more a particular word partakes in a wider or narrower field, the more or less it will connote other meanings; the more evocative power it will hold. This is why our initial structuralist analysis still proves illuminating (4): it allows us to sketch roughly some of the conceptual boundaries. Such fields will however be difficult to represent graphically because they will have something of the form of "elastic rubber sheeting" (Leach, 1961, 7). But we can certainly see how okoimo shares and participates in several mutually relevant conceptual spaces along with other terms such as poumo, roupo (menstruation) and incest.

Such sorts of conceptual analyses are of special interest when finally compared with Sperber's theory. They are located, not in psychological notions such as memory, but firmly in the social norms, rules and conventions which govern language use. And since symbols are undoubtedly collective representations this is where they presumably belong. Sperber is under the misapprehension that a criterion of irrationality can allow him to escape the interpretation of symbolism as a social fact. As for Homans and Schneider, so for Sperber:

"Whenever a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon we may be sure that the explanation is false" (Durkheim, in Needham, 1962, 126).

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#### Notes

1. This myth, and the one which follows, have been quickly summarised for the sake of space. This has inevitably resulted in a great loss of detail that would be only marginally relevant to the purposes of this paper. For full versions of the myths see Fock (1963, 38-53).
2. The term okoimo-Yenna is generic and includes not only anacondas, but also fish and frogs.
3. There are a whole series of associations in Waiwai thought which corroborate this. Menstruation is connected with the moon, about whom there is an incest myth. There is also a ritual which was learned from the anaconda people and seems to be a re-enactment of the moon myth. See Fock (1963, 54-5 and 171-2). Also Yde (1965, 236).
4. It is quite possibly still illuminating from the psychological perspective too. Whereas ordinary language also presumably utilises oppositional logic, it does not seem to be as rigorously structured as myth. Levi-Strauss's analogy between myth and music is perhaps pertinent to this. Sperber is after all chiefly interested in memory,

and memorability is a quality which myth and music undoubtedly share. Indeed this may even hint at a reason for Sperber's pre-occupation with symbolism as individualistic. Music is, more or less, pure form and thus perhaps more than any other mode of communication open to individual interpretation. Mythologiques is a formal analysis of myth and this is why the myths used in that 'laboratory' appear to be so meaningless. We can only uncover the meaning of a myth by reintegrating form with content, a procedure which returns us to cultural particulars and not formal universals.

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