

---

# OUT OF THE DEPTHS OF SAURIAN WATERS: ON PSYCHO-BAKHTINIANISM, ETHNOGRAPHIC COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, AND NAVEN

---

**JADRAN MIMICA**

Department of Anthropology  
University of Sydney

The ethnographic focus of this paper is on the Iatmul people of the Central Sepik region in Papua New Guinea. Over the years, especially after the second world war, the Iatmul became famous in anthropological circles not just because of themselves and their life-world but also due to the renown and *mana* of their first ethnographer and savant Gregory Bateson. However, the most comprehensive ethnographic corpus, including an important ethno-psychoanalytic piece,<sup>1</sup> was produced by a group of ethnographers originally based in Basel whose main monographic works are not available in English. The reflections to follow were prompted by my reading of the most recent Anglophone ethnography of the Iatmul, a book by Eric Silverman.<sup>2</sup> I found this work a valuable addition to the ethnographic documentation of the region, but deficient both as an ethnographic interpretation of the Iatmul and, especially, as a self-certified piece of psychoanalytic ethnography. Since my primary interest is in the life-worlds of New Guinea and in the practice of ethnographic psychoanalysis, I have written this paper as an exercise in critical engagement with Silverman's interpretation of the Iatmul, who are a remarkable and irreplaceable instance of a mode of human existence (*dasein*), whose fullness of being they can no longer actualise. And precisely because of the Iatmul's enduring yet attenuated originality, this critical pursuit dwells on the local existential conditions of creation of ethnographic understanding. In particular, my aim is to elucidate the inner horizons of such conditions of understanding, delimited and demanded by the ethnographer's chosen interpretative framework, namely psychoanalysis. Well then, what does a psychoanalytic ethnography amount to, what are its potentials and pitfalls; how *is* it and how *can* it be done in the context of that basic project of anthropology – the creation of ethnographic understanding? With these questions, a specific New Guinea ethnography becomes transfused into an object of critical theoretical relevance. But by the same token, productive critical theoretical cognition is in the service of the task of comprehension of a given phenomenon, which in this instance is the Iatmul life-world and their *dasein*. Therefore – to the Iatmul themselves.

To start with, Silverman takes virtually all the above referred to ethnographic literature into consideration as he sees fit, for the life-world he writes about is not some generic Iatmul cosmos but that of the Eastern Iatmul. More specifically, this monograph is about the Iatmul people of the Tambunum village, his fieldwork location. He frequently indicates this fact of

---

<sup>1</sup> Morgenthaler, Weiss, Morgenthaler, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Masculinity, Motherhood and Mockery: Psychoanalysing Culture and the Iatmul Naven Rite in New Guinea*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001.

local differentiation, distinction and specificity. At the same time, relative to the one-village local specificities of the cultural *gestalten* and themes, the Tambunum Iatmul are also viewed in the wider perspective of the Iatmul *in toto*. Indeed his "focus is on the metaphoric voices of masculinity and motherhood in the middle Sepik" (p. 2), engaging along the way "with several debates in contemporary anthropology and social thought", most fundamentally the "meanings and misfortunes of masculinity" (pp. 176-7). Accordingly, in his interpretative analysis of all things Eastern Iatmul, Silverman conducts not just a dialogue with the Tambunum villagers but a polylogue with numerous anthropologists from different parts of New Guinea and abroad. These numerous voices give an alluring yet distorting amplification to what is supposed to be primarily a local intra-cultural and intra-psychic dialogue with Eastern Iatmul masculinity and its primal feminine ground, Tambunum motherhood. Nevertheless, a discerning reader can approach the Tambunum Iatmul as any other human being and collectivity in his/her/their world, namely as a singular universal. Only the concrete data will reveal the what and how of a particular human whole and existential project, constituted through the specificities of all of, and every single one of, its concrete sub-regions and parts.

In this regard, the book marshals many beautiful, captivating and informative details ranging from cosmology, embodiment, sexuality, architectural symbolism (Chapters 2-5), kinship organisation and its psychodynamic articulation (6-8; Silverman characterises it as Oedipal), and, finally, the ritual practice focussed on the famous *naven* performances (9-10; Epilogue). Due to Silverman's choice of psychoanalysis as a leading interpretative framework, the erotogenic configuring of the Iatmul *dasein* is discernible in all its splendour and transfigurative sublations. The attentive reader can marvel at the Iatmul imaginary through which the libidinal movement generates the determining shapes and figures of this human life-world. From the sublime to the vile, correlative with the bodily cathexis of the world, the movement spreads and effects its self-modalisation and self-totalisation, making the Iatmul life-world into an irreducibly psycho-somatic totality. Accordingly, it bears the erotogenic signature of its libidinal self-determination in all its parts and substantiality, from the murky waters of Sepik to all other quiddities and denizens existing in this riverine "oecumene".

The material and its interpretive synthesis invite for discerning reflections and for this alone every serious reader of New Guinea ethnography can unreservedly thank Silverman for his fieldwork and this text. Together with the existing corpus of Iatmul and other central Sepik ethnographies, plus several re-interpretative studies of the *naven* rite (most recently a whole monograph by Houseman and Severi, 1998), this new ethnography enables one to meditate on the inner realities of the Sepik life-worlds, the determining ouroboric dynamics and figurations of their structural-institutional arrangements, and their steady erosion and evanescence.

---

### **THE SAURIAN DOMINION OF PRIMAL WATERS, OR THE PRE-OEDIPAL MATRIX AND ITS IMMANENT NEGATIVE CORE**

---

Silverman's choice of leading theoretical concepts is as follows. First, a version of Bakhtin's dialogical view of culture, for which Lipset's (1997) work on the Murik of the Sepik estuary provides a concrete example and precursor.<sup>3</sup> In this derivation the Bakhtinian notion of the

---

<sup>3</sup> For a review focussed on Bakhtin's limitations, see Mimica, 1999.

“moral” and “grotesque” body introduces an external moral-aesthetic determination of Eastern Iatmul embodiment. The applicability of this categorical differentiation is unquestioned, while its conceptually most relevant potential, namely to index the ouroboric<sup>4</sup> dynamics of the human psyche, remains underutilised. In fact, Bakhtin’s views effectively inhibit any more penetrating psychoanalytic exploration of the ouroboric imagination, especially its primary (nuclear) oral-genital configuration and its coarticulation with other libidinal registers. In the Iatmul erotogeneity, the anal register has a heightened saliency and deserves an explanation which takes their libidinal embodiment on its own terms rather than subordinating it to a Bakhtinian verbal iconography stuck, as it is, in Rabelaisian imagery. This iconography manifests only a fraction of that self-eating-copulating serpent whose autoplasmic imagination is in fact infinite, as is the constitutive imagination of numerous human life-worlds generated by the archetypal matrix of the human psychic being.

Silverman chooses to look at the Iatmul with Bakhtinian spectacles as they make a spectacle of themselves; although not for an external connoisseur of the aesthetics of “grotesque” and “moral” embodiment but for their own self-actualisation. This project is, literally, everything that generations of Iatmul male and female egoities have desired, craved for, and endeavoured to make themselves into: a semblance of the archetypal desires of their very own un/conscious<sup>5</sup> being; one of whose many striking mythopoetic self-images is the Iatmul fluvial-crocodilian cosmic scenario detailed in several local variants and reported by different ethnographers (e.g., Wassmann, 1991; Schuster, 1985). In the Tambunum version (p. 27), the cosmogonic inception is pictured as a calm water stirred into creation by a wind (see below).

It is within this mytho-cosmo-poetic dimension of Eastern Iatmul self-imagining, which as such objectifies the depths of their culturally specific un/conscious imaginary, that Silverman focally conducts his Bakhtinian dialogical exegeses. As mentioned, he also employs, and this is his most productive theoretical-interpretive choice, a psychoanalytic framework which provides the means for bringing into perspective the matrix of Iatmul un/consciousness, and the psychodynamics of its articulation in living human egoities. The immediate overt incarnation and expression of this matrix is the human facticity of sexual reproduction. Everybody starts off as a foetal being in a pregnant womb, regardless of whether s/he likes it or not. Accordingly, Silverman first endeavours to show “the centrality of the preoedipal mother-child bond in the cultural imagination of men and, to a lesser extent, women” (p. 9). It is not readily clear whether, by phrasing it like this, he means that

---

**4** The self-eating serpent is an archetypal image (Neumann, 1954; 1973) which encapsulates the most diverse dynamic features and processes constitutive of the pre-oedipal matrix of the human psyche. “Pre-oedipal” labels the mother-child unit as the primary context of human psycho-sexual development and socialisation. There are different and conceptually nuanced frameworks for interpreting the distinctions between the oedipal and pre-oedipal structurations of the psychic being within psychoanalytic (including Lacanian) and Jungian schools of thought.

**5** I put it with a slash precisely because the relation between consciousness and the un/conscious is subject to diverse articulations in different life-worlds. Experientially their mutual articulation does not conform to a universal topography, principally in terms of a distinction between psychic interiority and exteriority. I assume that in terms of the Tambunum life-world-specific ontological underpinning’s of their experiences and existence, the basic dimensionality of their “I-ness” – such as interiority/exteriority and all its derivatives – is a unique inner/outer field. Spirits no less than the soul are not for the Iatmul “internal objects”, but entities either entirely autonomous (e.g., spirits) and external to a given “I” (ego) or in a semi-detachable incorporative/excorporative relation with the body and “I-ness”, as for instance a person’s soul may be. Accordingly ethnographic psycho-analysis has to be phenomenologically grounded in the particularities of self experience and notions about the self in each given life-world. Their psychic being has to be accounted for with maximal fidelity to its constitution in its life-world. So although my use of notions such as un/conscious, egoic self, and internal objects is within the framework of psychoanalytic meta-psychological conceptualisation, this is done as an interpretive exercise which both maintains and amplifies the ontological originality and existential integrity of a given selfhood and life-world, i.e. relative to the structures of a specific *dasein*. Silverman’s use of psychoanalysis, unfortunately, has not this kind of grounding.

for women this bond is less central or that he neutralises it in the scenes whose pictures he paints. All the same, the dialectics of differentiation of the Iatmul femaleness *and* maleness (fe/maleness for short) is generated out of and remains within this fundamental matrix of the Eastern Iatmul archetypal un/conscious. To the extent that Silverman's chief concern is with the constitution of masculinity relative to its pre-oedipal matrix, Tambunum woman's femininity is upheld most unproblematically; yet of course in reality her femininity is co-constituted through its dynamic interdependence on and modalisation by masculinity.

As for Tambunum men and their project of achieving and sustaining their masculinity, they do that, as everywhere else, on the grounds of the primal, maternally determined situation. This is affirmed by men and women alike and Silverman reports that both sexes say "my mother, therefore I am" (pp. 87, 96, 106). Without a doubt, this is an authentic index of Tambunum male and female primary self-identification and self-consciousness, although the implications of its Cartesian scripting may not be wholly intended by them and, more importantly, are not conceptually followed through by Silverman. Therefore I'll give it an appropriate amplification: the only thing I cannot doubt about my self is my mother; ergo, my mothering therefore I am.<sup>6</sup> One's maternal essence is one's existence.<sup>7</sup> But there is entrapment lurking here for the Tambunum men, because "while they do strive to define masculinity in the absence of women and femininity, (they) also express a profound desire (...) to return to an ideal, nurturing mother" (p. 9). Which is to say, Tambunum oedipality, meaning the paternal function and presence in the egoic field of the un/conscious - is occluded and dominated by the primary maternal bonds and adhesions. Contrary to Silverman, it is unproductive and misleading to approach the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious in terms of the concept of "oedipal triangulation". Their manhood, fatherhood and, most critically, their sonship is constituted within an overwhelmingly pre-oedipal (maternal) matrix, and this is what determines both the project and fate of Eastern Iatmul masculinity *and* femininity.

Silverman himself says this much when he stresses the absence of the oedipal punitive father, and that all "oedipal imbroglios (...) revolve around mother-figures" (pp. 9-11). It is fair to speculate, then, that the Iatmul egoity would be constituted in relation to a super-ego configuration whose imaginal objectifications would be dominated by various derivations of the primal maternal object and container.<sup>8</sup> Herein is also the omnipotent nucleus of archaic narcissism in which life and death are modalities of one and the same self-circuitry of instinctual drives. This self-circuitry (I can accentuate it and characterise it as ouroboric), encompassing both the maternal object-container and her contents which, as such, from her un/conscious perspective, are greedily clung to as inalienably her own self-possession. Her content (foetus) reciprocally claims her as inalienably its container. This gives more psychodynamic concreteness to the implications of the dictum "my mother, therefore I am". Despite his self-avowed

<sup>6</sup> As the well known Latin legal tag goes, cited by Freud (1909/1977: 223): "*pater semper incertus est*" (father always is uncertain) whereas "*mater certissima est*" (mother is the most certain).

<sup>7</sup> Both men and women in Tambunum profess to value mothers above fathers. As they say, "my mother, therefore I am", adding that only mothers bore you, fed you, cleansed your body, carried you around the village, and looked after your safety and wellbeing. For this reason, many Iatmul frankly prefer to determine kinship through matrilateral ties (...), thereby allowing maternal affection to eclipse, like skin to bones, or water to trees, the androcentric norms of their society" (p. 87; also pp. 96, 106; in its vernacular original the "Cartesian" phrase is cited in footnote 8, p. 191).

<sup>8</sup> Its determination would in fact be bisexual (androgynous), as is the primal omnipotent maternal container. But its immanent and irreducible bias is, for that very dynamic reason, determining itself as a maximally self-same and self-sufficient figuration, a oneness without its seeming self-same-otherness. This biased nexus of its perfect self-unity is also the source of its omnipotence. In Kleinian terms one could expect to detect variations on the "combined parents" gestalt (Klein, 1932).

psychoanalytic framework, Silverman, however, has nothing explicit to say on the psychodynamics of Eastern Iatmul egoity and the structuration of their psychic being into a scheme of agency-components indexed by the classic trinity ego-id-superego; nor does he examine the dialectics of drive-structuration in the libidinal and narcissistic economy of Eastern Iatmul egoity and its un/conscious matrix. In addition although he is focussed on the Tambunum un/conscious qua its "collective phenomena" (p. 9), it must be stressed that the transpersonal dimension is actualised solely qua the ego-bound eating, desiring, speaking, dreaming, dialoguing, etc, selves of the Eastern Iatmul men and women. There is no one without the other.

Despite these lacunae, given his (and other related ethnographic) material, there is nothing surprising in the fact that "[e]ven the symbolism of male initiation, where senior men dominate their juniors, privileges the maternal rather than the male or paternal body" (p. 10). This vintage pre-oedipal situation features all the other diacritical marks (e.g., "male envy of female parturition and fertility") which among the Iatmul are anally constellated: "(...)men in Tambunum do not only mirror the female body. Rather, they often displace the procreative potential of women with idioms of anal birth" (p. 10).

Again, if one thinks from within the Eastern Iatmul matrix un/conscious, then there is nothing extraordinary about this. Given their primary maternal self-identification, these men are subject to their *authentic* maternal-feminine being and the archaic drive-matrix. It is this facticity of their un/conscious which the Iatmul self-symbolisation renders into what it is, namely the substance and truth of their primal, maternally determined imaginary and its correlate, primal self-world images. For no less than their women, they were all born as foetal beings and shaped by their maternal somatic un/conscious being; and, as Silverman shows in detail, they are in its throes. This is the determining matrix of their cultural life-world, in which fatherhood is subordinated to or is mediated by the omnipotent maternal containment and monopoly of the phallus. Chapter 5 on architectural symbolism brings this into a full relief. However, instead of claiming it for themselves as their undeniable maternal birth-right and legacy of their factual embryogenesis, these men, Silverman says, "carefully disguise their parturient fictions as if the very value of manhood would be divested of its meaning *should it be truly understood by women*" (p. 10).

Here Silverman appears to disregard their pre-oedipal matrix un/conscious, the archaic level of the psyche, which determines the omnipotent strivings of fe/maleness of the Tambunum men and women. At this level there is no pre-existing self-circumscribed meaning of either manhood or womanhood, nor some kind of unproblematic mutual self-recognition between them. In terms of the Tambunum's own self-understanding, it is not clear, then, what is there "to be truly understood by women", especially if both sexes are primed by their Cartesian predicament - "my mother, therefore I am". If anything, the women would have to understand the clear correlate of this un/conscious imaginary truth, equally upheld by them and their men. Here manhood *is* focally mediated by the primal image of motherhood, and, despite all their misgivings, ambivalences, and denials, Eastern Iatmul men still endeavour to make this image maximally real. For instance: "They (men) deny yet acknowledge their somatic inability to give birth" (p. 37); "...everything attests to a yearning by men for the birthing abilities of women" (*ibid.*). "These allusions arise from men's fear of engulfment by the maternal body. They are also coupled to men's envy of female fertility, a yearning that is emphatically denied" (p. 39).

Nevertheless, it will suffice to observe that *it is Silverman who dialogues* in these terms with the Iatmul's facticity, its un/conscious imaginary, and sets up the Iatmul men in relation to their women, but without having a proper grasp of his own scripting, which is

motivated by what seems to be a somewhat different un/conscious project (see below). How *the Eastern Iatmul themselves dialogue* in terms of their mutual and very own un/conscious is a matter for empirical psychoanalytic investigation of concrete individuals, of which Silverman has nothing to show, at least not in this book. As I will discuss later, the problem is that Silverman doesn't give much concrete evidence as to how the Tambunum men verbalise and express their yearnings, desires, and denials.

To the extent that he primarily deals with the transpersonal, cultural productions of the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious, it is precisely within this field of evidence that the "dialogical" scripting becomes a critical problem. Its author is not the Tambunum villagers but Silverman *in relation* to them. To be sure, this transpersonal - cultural - dimension of Tambunum male and female egoties has a maximal range of objectification, from the Iatmul language, numerous forms and genres of explicit verbalisations (myths, spells, idiomatic formulations, etc), to social morphology, kin classification, marriage preferences, symbolism of architectural shapes and spaces. In fact, there is still more - ritual activities and iconography of all sorts, from the flute-blowing, initiations, to the centrepiece of *naven*, the maternal uncle's act in which he slides his arse (anus) down his nephew's shin. The *nggariik* act, as it is called, condenses, expresses, and consummates the full quandary of Iatmul masculinity which Silverman endeavours to unravel in no uncertain terms, namely as the "tragedy" and "misfortunes" of Tambunum man-kind.

In this regard it can be said that the contrarities and ontological (qua psychodynamic) antinomies of Eastern Iatmul male selfhood, regardless of the opacity, self-occlusions, and diverse modes of denial and suppression, especially by Tambunum men, are nevertheless given a full array of manifestations. In fact, there is very little that appears to be effectively "repressed". Everything denied is still acted out most colourfully. Put somewhat differently, no matter how much the Eastern Iatmul - Silverman stresses that it is principally men - would like to see themselves in an idealised light (mediated by the maternal image), all the same, they act out and give vigorous expression to all those less palatable aspects of their being, indeed to the point of subjecting themselves to most painful humiliations and shame. Their women are not just excluded from so many contexts where men's narcissistic vulnerability bleeds in the open its most painful acid, but they also have ample opportunities to add more faecal acid to these festering wounds, most spectacularly when they take part in *naven* ceremonies.

Thus, Silverman says that the Eastern Iatmul women do not "passively acquiesce to men's psychodynamic encounters with motherhood" (p. 10). This is a careless wording. No man or woman has such an encounter; archaic motherhood is a vital dynamics of their un/conscious which starts long before men (or women) would have to deal with it as adolescents or adults and long before any ritual acting out. Indeed, exemplary of this is a fleeting observation of a Tambunum mother and her toddler son, which impressed the ethnographer so much so that he uses it as a vignette to introduce the entire subject-matter of his book. He saw a toddler disregarding his mother whereupon she "playfully" called him back "bad sperm, little sperm" (p. 1). To the extent that Silverman's book can be read as an explication of the universe of meanings contained in this vignette it can also be used to point to the obvious: the Eastern Iatmul men experience their mothers' *negation* of their masculinity long before they deal with it as adults. What they each do as initiated men is intrinsically related to the experiences of their self qua its originary maternal matrix, intrinsic to which are specific modes of negation, on a par to men's own maternal yearnings, self-exalted superiority, phantasies of procreation, and anxieties.

These aggrandisements and phantasies are also experienced in infancy by male and female children. Which is to say, it is not that the Eastern Iatmul mothers' manifest, as well as un/conscious negativity, makes their sons grow up into negators of Iatmul women and envious males plagued by maternal self-images. That would be a naive misconception falling short of what psychoanalysis has to offer as the foremost means for interpreting the human condition. Rather, as a first approximation, it can be said that Eastern Iatmul men are the authentic sons of their mothers, indeed the foremost actualisation of their mutual negativity, and both are the embodiment of the truth of their common un/conscious matrix, but men give it its most crystallised form. The question is, what specifically is this negativity for which Silverman's vignette provides its seemingly most innocent shape.

It is appropriate at this junction to stress that this problematic of negativity in the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious matrix and intersubjectivity is not recognised within Silverman's theoretical framework. This is a framework which can be quite appositely called psycho-Bakhtinianism. So he says "(...) I fuse my psychoanalytic perspective with the contrapuntal imagery of Bakhtin's moral and grotesque (...). During the naven rite, women and mother-figures respond to masculinity with thrashings, ribald jokes, and the hurling of debased substances. Not only do women thus contest the nostalgic yearnings of men and vividly portray men's fear of female sexuality, but they also invert the idealised nurturing capacities of motherhood. In so doing, women during naven doubly disgrace manhood since they call into question both the foundations and fables of male self-worth" (p. 10).

This being so, one has to ask what could possibly be the character and source of the women's self-worth, articulated inside and outside the ritual context through the same imaginary framework which informs their men. It is hardly the case that the Eastern Iatmul women are the masters of their "reality" when this itself is constituted through the same ontological imaginary as all their, male and female, "fictions" and reality. Women too, are determined by their maternal being – "my mother, therefore I am". Except that Silverman seems to assume that their omnipotence is therefore legitimate and "real" whereas men's is in some way illegitimate and "fictional".

Even if reduced to the bare facticity of pregnancy and life-giving,<sup>9</sup> no Iatmul woman is self-conceiving, although she may well be convinced that she is. This fully granted, in the absence of the Western technology of genetic cloning, she'll definitely have to procure some "bad/little semen" to make herself, not self-conceived, but, second-best, self-conceiving with men's critical mediation. And she may well want to deny that any semen was involved in getting her pregnant. This omnipotent phantasy does not seem to be crystallised in the Eastern Iatmul imaginary and lived as such by the women (or men) although, I am inclined to think, it is immanent in them.

This being so, what would be the inner meanings and truth of the women's seemingly unperturbedly self-satisfied narcissistic self-equilibrium which they so vigorously act out in rituals on a par to the men's equally vigorous self-debasement and seeming de-fictionalisation? There is no ready answer to this since there is an internal self-occlusion in Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinian dialogism that precludes the presentation and documentation of genuine intra-cultural and intra-psychic perspectives on the Eastern Iatmul's *negative* mirror-symmetry between men and women. What I am indicating here is another deficiency and lacuna in

---

<sup>9</sup> I can give it a familiar cosmic-aesthetic determination – only women bleed and give birth to babies.

Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinian analysis of the Iatmul cultural life-world and naven. There is no treatment of the narcissistic dynamics and economy of their un/conscious being and intersubjectivity. I will come to these omissions again later.

---

### **PSYCHO-BAKHTINIAN SCRIPTING AND THE DIALOGICAL DRAMATURGY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTION: THE EGALITARIAN MYSTERIES OF MOTHERHOOD**

---

At this point I will dwell a bit more on the way Silverman constructs and scripts the apparent Eastern Iatmul cultural dialogics. Here is a symptomatic example. At the inception of a section entitled "The Mysteries of Motherhood" (p. 56), Silverman gives his ethnographic imprimatur to Bateson to the effect that he "was *absolutely correct* when he wrote that "matrines represent a more mysterious aspect of personality" than paternal names (ibid). Then he expands in the register of Bateson's epithet - "mysterious". "After all, the female and maternal bodies are themselves mysterious to Iatmul men (*sic*). These bodies contain gestational and birthing capacities that are *entirely unknown to men (sic)*. They undergo physical changes *in the absence of male ritual*" (ibid). Thus now, "mysterious", "entirely unknown" to - supposedly exclusively (?) - "men". But in earlier pages Silverman reports in a matter of fact fashion that "[c]onception and gestation, in the local procreation ideology, are essentially egalitarian" (p. 29). That is, "[i]n Tambunum, conception occurs when paternal semen mixes with maternal blood. A single act of sexual intercourse is sufficient (...). During gestation, semen congeals into bones while menstrual blood develops into organs, skin, and regular blood. Accordingly, the materiality of the body is male and female" (p. 47). What's more, "[t]he sex of the child is said to be determined by the more powerful gendered substance, semen or menstrual blood.<sup>10</sup> But to ensure a male offspring, one man confided, the husband must penetrate the women from behind during intercourse, (...). The 'missionary style', he said derisively, tends to result in the birth of girls" (p. 47). And to top it off, one of Silverman's informants "claimed that the ultimate determinants of human pregnancy are senior crocodile spirits (...)" (p. 30). More pointedly, Silverman goes on to say that "a proverb states that the crocodile spirits alone give birth to children and initiated men. In this idiom, the procreative capacities of women are ultimately administered by numinous crocodiles" (ibid.); and still slightly more accentuated - "... the birth mother in Tambunum has proprietorship over her womb. Yet the crocodile spirits cause the presence or absence of the foetus" (p. 31).

Here it is evident that the matters of gestation and birthing capacities are anything but "mysterious", etc, as Silverman, echoing Bateson's prose, declares in the "after all" manner. But what "after all"? Apart from the procreative "egalitarianism" the Tambunum Iatmul men's knowledge of gestation process seems so cock-sure that they can even manipulate the sex of the foetus; if "from behind" than male, if "missionary" than female. It seems, also, that they don't tamper with the gestation process with spells, or observe various behavioural and dietary self-regulations that apply to pregnant women *and their* husbands, as is so in other Eastern Iatmul villages (Hauser-Schaublin, 1984) and elsewhere in Melanesia and the world over. The Tambunum expectant first time fathers, however, follow certain behavioural interdic-

---

<sup>10</sup> This is an intriguing idea scripted very equivocally. There is no discussion of how the Tambunum think and talk about this power-determined conjunction of maleness and femaleness that engenders conception.

tions, which intend to protect the foetus (Silverman, op. cit. 54). As for a connection between men's ritual and women's reproductive powers Silverman reports that "... ritual is as perilous for women as it is for men. Any woman, who views "too carefully" the sacred woodcarvings during a ceremony, or even glances at the flutes and other sound-producing objects, imperils her reproductive powers. This is explicitly stated by both men and women" (p. 36). And as the ultimate cause, the crocodile spirits have their decisive share in female fertility. All this indicates a diversity of knowledge of, attitudes to, and beliefs concerning conception and gestation whose differential epistemic and doxic valuation for the Eastern Iatmul is unspecified.<sup>11</sup>

However, the real problem is with the way Silverman frames and scripts his own data presented as "Iatmul dialogics". Even if there is a "mystery of motherhood" why would it be something so exclusive to men? Why would one want to presume, following the implications of the above cited statements, that the Eastern Iatmul women have an un-mysterious attitude to and knowledge of their bodies, the gestation process and procreative powers? If so then what is that knowledge? Self-indifference, self-contented ignorance, "factual" self-knowledge, "purely experiential-practical" knowledge with no omnipotent un/conscious phantasy and self-objectification? If factual and practical then what is that "factuality" and "practicality"? Or is it their deep secret? No matter what, it would still be the product of their experience, rather than Western academic self-experience, phantasy and self-interpretation. Every which way, there is nothing in Silverman's ethnography that would provide a more concrete sense of Tambunum men's and women's self-experience and valuations, not even a more detailed transcription of a conversation between himself and informants, male or female; or transcriptions of conversations between the villagers themselves. Such material wouldn't necessarily make his exposition less problematic but it would increase the ethnographic value of the book as a whole, which for me is its most relevant aspect.

Instead of informants' verbatim or approximate synopses of such accounts, Silverman's book is composed primarily as a dialogical disquisition on the "tragedy" of Tambunum masculinity via engagements with various external interlocutors such as Bakhtin, Dundes, Bateson, Mead, M. Strathern, and a number of other anthropologists. Numerous paragraphs pivot conceptually on their invocation with descriptions and argumentation frequently having openings, junctions and closures formulated in this vein: "As Bakhtin might have said, the male initiation is a grotesque dramatisation of moral reproduction and motherhood" (p. 38); "As Bakhtin might say, *iai* women turn everyday motherhood inside-out and upside-down" (p. 99); "Rather, the *awan* engenders the ambivalent laughter of Bakhtin's carnival" (p. 153); "menstrual blood emerges from what Bakhtin called 'the lower bodily stratum'" (p. 145); "... persons who are degraded during naven will pay the perpetrators since, as Bakhtin (ref.) wrote, ..." (p. 152); "... ribald joking of the *iai* women, as Bakhtin would surely have recognized, efface the distinctions between upper and lower body." (p. 155). Even the anal *nggariik* act performed by the MB on his ZS requires Bakhtin's midwifery, so: "There is so much about this gesture that would strike Bakhtin as decidedly grotesque" (p. 165). Another sample, Dundes for instance: "neophytes are smeared by mud that, after Dundes, bespeaks masculine anal parturition" (p. 38); "Once again, Dundes (ref.) offers an answer:

<sup>11</sup> I am inclined to think that all of these views are not a motley collection of ideas but a very symptomatic expression of their un/conscious imaginary and its *logos*. It may be that an internal consonance of these procreation views amounts to a scheme of generative sexuation and may well be echoed in the schemes of the Iatmul naming complex.

Men in their emulative desire for birth ..." (p. 52); "... the naven actions of these women, as Dundes (ref.) might say, wipe it back on the adult person" (p. 151).

References to informants, sparse as they are, create a different mood; thus "A younger man named Koski unknowingly confirmed this interpretation" (p. 31); "Casual conversation with men upholds this analogy" (p. 54); "In a private discussion Mundjiindua (one of Silverman's female and "closest confidants") confessed to knowing that ancestresses once enjoyed blowing the flutes ..." (p. 42). I am not questioning the validity of Silverman's connections, associations, insights and interpretations distilled from the driest and the most incidental information chanced by the villagers. What I find unsatisfactory is that the "dialogical" tension between Eastern Iatmul men and *their* motherhood is overwhelmingly generated through the application of externally derived psycho-Bakhtinian formulas and distorting dramatic scripting, rather than the exegeses being rooted in the intra-cultural experiences and self-objectifications of the Iatmul themselves.

A productive ethnographic application of psychoanalysis requires the elucidation of the subjects, *their* un/conscious, and the existential project they live for the sake of themselves, to make themselves become what and how they are. The constructive psychoanalytic interpretative activity strives to achieve the comprehension of the what and how of the project itself, in its own terms, i.e., the desires and egoities of those who are its subjects and objects, or with a different edge, servants and executioners, losers and victors. But among the Eastern Iatmul, since they are in a fluvial-saurian universe, and genetic engineering is out of question, whatever they do on the grounds of their own imaginary is in the service of self-creation in their own self-image forged within this ontological matrix, as exactly the kind of men and women that they originarily were and are still trying to be.

---

### **WHY TAMBUNUM WOMEN DON'T YEARN FOR THAT WHAT THEY ALREADY HAVE: AQUEOUS COUNTERTRANSFERENCE AND DIALOGICS**

---

Let me now reflect on what seems to be the root problem of Silverman's scripting and dramatisation. According to him there is only one formula that supposedly drives the Eastern Iatmul's own dialogics. It runs like this: Men claim their superiority over women yet, despite all ambivalence, their very masculinity is determined by all and sundry feminine-maternal attributes and derived powers. By contrast, women don't aspire to be like their men (or fathers), to have any of their attributes and powers. Since, apparently, all creation comes from the feminine-maternal being, women's cosmic primacy is all theirs. And they make sure that men see their own "fictional" supremacy, including their ritual procreativity, as nothing more than a tragic failure. Even if it is cosmic, it still is a failure. Underlying this formula is the assumption of the non-identity of men's and women's desire. What men yearn and desire for women don't, i.e., they don't need any of men's masculinity, for at any rate, it is all theirs.

Here is a critical example of Silverman's scripting of this dialogical formula. I will mention again that conception and gestation are "egalitarian", and neither maleness nor femaleness will come into its own, i.e., become a foetus, without each other. Now, and this is symptomatic, "whereas men model their identity after motherhood, women *rarely* aspire to be fathers" (p. 11). They "*hardly ever* seek out paternal physiology" (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> To be sure,

---

<sup>12</sup> Also: "... masculinity mirrors motherhood. No such parallel yearning, however, exists for femininity" (p. 33).

Silverman doesn't give any concrete evidence that would show in what way and how specifically some such women express their desire for masculine-paternal qualities and attributes. Given this scripting, Silverman's own, he concludes that it is the male gender that is "more androgynous" (ibid.).<sup>13</sup> Silverman reinforces this with exegeses of mythopoeic motifs all of which converge on the theme of the primordial power of women's fertility and the origin of the overt sexed bodily difference. Following M. Strathern (1988), he interprets a myth of the hornbill's larceny of long avian beaks as depicting "the partibility and common pool of Eastern Iatmul gender" (p. 33). Originally a species of small female birds lost their long beaks; consequently they now have small beaks. Their voicing is said, by a male informant, to be the longing for the lost beak.

Silverman scripts this as follows: "This avian lament suggests that the beaks are in some sense *rightfully* feminine rather than masculine. In this myth, I suggest, the long beak is an androgynous appendage of phallic aggression. (...) Neither gender (male and female birds), however, can be said to 'own' the bill exclusively. The mythic proboscis is a transactional element in a common pool of gender. But gender in Tambunum is not merely androgynous and transactional. This is a vital point. In this culture, (...) masculinity mirrors motherhood. No such parallel yearning, however, exists for femininity. Hence, the male bird gained awareness of his somatic limitation only after he gazed at the body of the female bird. He then desired, and stole what she displayed. True, the female bird today longs for the beak. But she does not aspire to assume a masculine form (meaning what? JM). She wants only to regain what she lost. Her yearning is restorative, his mimetic" (p. 33).

What I see here is Silverman's own desire and phantasy shaping and scripting the Eastern Iatmul mythopoeia. To restate the above more bluntly, he seems to be saying that the female bird (i.e., Iatmul women) don't yearn for a male version ("masculine form") of the androgynous phallus (the long beak); she (women) wants what was "rightfully" her "androgynous appendage of phallic aggression". Therefore her yearning, if at all, is "restorative" while, and here is the problem, the mythic hornbill's *or* the Iatmul men's, is "mimetic". This is an unduly self-confounding piece of scripting; the mythic hornbill can't be characterised as miming the "stolen" beak. He stole it and kept it ever after. In the sphere of human reality neither do men mime their actual penes dangling at their groins. What they yearn for is the primal omnipotent maternal, generative self-sufficiency, which in this instance is predicated of her very own "uterine" phallic determination. It is this imaginary gestalt that informs both men's and women's un/conscious and is given semblance in ritual practices. The beak here is on a par to the flutes the men blow in secrecy, and the bull-roarers, all of which also were originally owned by women.

But since this is a dynamic tension between Eastern Iatmul men and women qua their un/conscious imaginary self-determination, it is clearly the case that, if any woman, not just her mythic imagos, is yearning for what she lost or doesn't have, then she is exactly in the same imaginary pre-oedipal head-space as are the men. In this regard, what she yearns for is her lost omnipotent self-generativity. Therefore, to say that the bird's (women's) yearning, is "restorative" while men's is "mimetic" is to lose sight of the primal ground, the pre-oedipal

---

<sup>13</sup> "... one gender in Tambunum is more androgynous than the other: male" (p. 11). Similarly: "The anal birthing symbolism of the flutes, bullroarers, totemic feces, and riverine sludge all attests to a yearning by men for the birthing abilities of women. But women exhibit no such comparable desire. For while men purloined the flutes from women, primal women did not steal anything from men. In short, masculinity is androgynous, yet maternal" (p. 37).

un/conscious matrix, and confuse the relation between the un/conscious imaginary and its actualisation in the human social-cultural reality. This is the most basic human predilection, but a psychoanalytically minded interpreter ought to be more self-aware of his/her/their un/conscious desires, phantasy and projections, especially when dealing with such powerful and fundamental productions of the human psyche as archetypal mythopoeia. And this seems to be Silverman's driving orientation, or better, the orientation of his own un/conscious.

Everything about his scripting indicates that it is *his* wish to restore to the Eastern Iatmul women their primal omnipotence, which is so intense that he would gladly dispense with all and any phallic or remotely *overt* masculine self-attributions. Indeed, such an image is exactly that of the "feminine formlessness" (p. 22) of the primal water of creation. Here is his scripting: "The feminine water of the primal sea, as the original condition of the cosmos, required no oppositional or complementary 'other' for its existence. Water, like the female body, is self-referential. But land and trees, or the male body and masculinity, are defined *against* the feminine powers of watery creation and dissolution" (p. 86). Whether this is an accurate rendition of the primal situation remains to be demonstrated. However, as discussed above, Silverman scripted women's gestation as a "mystery", but the Tambunum men's coital positioning dispels it. If there is any mystery to be entertained, that would be generated by a phantasy that the woman (and/or man) is all one without any otherness, that she is all female (whatever that may be), self-same and self-generating, and additionally, through her own self-generation – and this is the crux of such a mystery – she produces both her self (femaleness) and her own otherness, i.e., maleness (whatever that may be). This is a genuine piece of archetypal mythopoeia, realised in various approximations as both male-centered and female-centered versions (e.g., Trobrianders; Yagwoia: Mimica, 1981; 1988; 1991; in preparation; Kogi: Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1987). But all this is merely a reference to other life-worlds and their constitutive cosmogonic imaginary.

Whether this kind of narcissistic driveness and the radical negativity that underpins it are objectified in the Eastern Iatmul cosmogonic mythopoeia is a matter for empirical research and demonstration. My point is that it is Silverman who gives the Iatmul imaginary this univocal voicing, not they themselves. This key of feminine omnipotence reaches its most overt negative pitch in the last pages of the book. Here Silverman speaks for himself, although he invokes Winnicott to bespeak his judgement, sotto voce as it were. Before reaching his terminal pronouncement about masculinity as a universal genus he makes a rhetorical deference to the empirical strictures on current knowledge: "My own position, centred here as it is on a single village in Papua New Guinea, is one of temperance and reservation. Right now, I believe, we (*sic*) simply know *too little* about masculinity and masculinities to contrive grand pronouncements" (p. 177; emphasis JM). Then follows a humble pronouncement with which Silverman rounds up his book by saying that "In Tambunum, to evoke Winnicott, *there is no such thing as man*". With this, he "hopes of enhancing the current debate over what, *if anything*, masculinity is" (p. 177; emphasis JM).

Despite his self-confessed limited knowledge of masculinity, Silverman is committed to the demands of an absolute negative, which is not that of the Eastern Iatmul, but in reference to which he declares, through the midwifery of Winnicott, that Tambunum man is an absolute non-entity. And, he is so both in his relational essence and existence, presumably because man is not, like the feminine water and body, formless, allegedly self-referential, and to top it off, non-oppositional and without any otherness. From the local Sepikian situation he extends to the universal, i.e., Western academic middle class scene, to which he hopes to

contribute to what is already the “ontological” desideratum – “if anything”, masculinity is an *is-not*. Why? Presumably for the same reason as in the middle Sepik.<sup>14</sup>

It is this lure of the narcissistic negative and omnipotence, which stirs Silverman into viewing any and every semblance of masculinity in, it seems to me, *all-or-nothing* terms. This is clearly not the position of the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious imaginary and its male and female human agents. It is the desire and judgement of an outsider, the psycho-Bakhtinian ethnographer now turned into an ontologist. Now there is no need to argue against Silverman’s would be ontological pronouncements about masculinity in particular and in general. What solely matters and what is most fascinating is the East Iatmul situation, not just the ontological underpinning of their masculinity but primarily its primal ground: femininity and motherhood. Therefore one has to think deeply through the Tambunum un/conscious imaginary and its archetypal self-imaging. If it is the case that this supposedly self-referential feminine water, so full of her cosmic omnipotent generative being, is the source of male being, which is a nothing, an *is-not*, than the mystery is truly intensified, namely how does out of this feminine all-self-fullness come her, shall I say all-emptiness, a non-entity which is her mirror-self, en-gendered as male?

Not only is it true for both the Tambunum men and women that their respective being is “My mother, therefore I am”, but Silverman relentlessly affirms that “masculinity *mirrors* motherhood” (p. 33). So, if he is to be taken at his word he has to account for his ontological pronouncements, namely by which transubstantiation does the *is-not* “maleness” come specifically to “mirror” not just any kind of being but the self-referential, no-otherness, non-oppositional, omnigenerative being which on the account of all these determinations, would undoubtedly be also maximally self-same. What exactly would be some such “mirroring”; what would be its medium? This is the sum-effect of his scripting and pronouncements, and the only available field of evidence for any clarification and answers has to come from the Tambunum transpersonal un/conscious imaginary and its cosmogonic self-imaging. Silverman does not provide any commentaries that some informants, male and/or female, might have made in reference to their powerful mythopoeic images. Therefore I take it that what he says about the self-referentiality of the primal water and the incipient cosmogonic situation is his own rendition, characterisation, and determination.

Accordingly, this external, i.e., Silverman’s own, cosmo-ontological determination of Tambunum men and women, has to be firmly kept in perspective while reading his ethnography, or else one is unwittingly participating in a self-affirming archetypal cosmic-ontological, moral and epistemic stanza whose tacit un/conscious motivation fabricates this picture of Eastern Iatmul femininity, masculinity, their life-world as a whole, its un/conscious imaginary and its archetypal self-imaging. Overall, Silverman’s Iatmul cultural dialogics is a deficient construction overwhelmingly driven by *his* own un/conscious projections, scripting, and framework of valuation, a refraction of the Western academic ideology, which as yet has to create its own self-satisfying imaginary ontology to appease its own un/conscious cravings

---

<sup>14</sup> This negativity is announced at the beginning of the last chapter in a quote from Tuzin which is part of an answer to his question pertaining to the Ilahita Arapesh situation: “What does it mean for masculinity to die?” I cite in full “Masculinity (...) is a thing of ideology and ontology. It is the valorization of what men do, the symbolic resource members of a culture use to contemplate, understand, idealize, demonize, stereotype, place expectations upon, and otherwise identify men. Strictly speaking, masculinity is the distinct human aspect of what men do” (Tuzin, 1998: 181). Silverman omits the last sentence.

and desire for omnipotence. The very attribution of "oppositonality" as a non-desirable dynamism belongs to the egoic watery "self-inscription"<sup>15</sup> of the occidental academe.

And to the extent that for many interpretative exercises the dictum "*vox populi vox dei*" may be a sound hermeneutic position, in this case, i.e., that of a psycho-Bakhtinian dialogical relation between Silverman and his Eastern Iatmul subjects, the pitch and key of his *vox* definitely does not coincide with the fluvial-crocodilian *vox Iatmuli* which he, as a matter of fact, replaces with that of a singularly archetypal omnipotent feminine presence, perhaps a siren.<sup>16</sup> However, to the extent that this self-referential mono-*vox* is a narcissistic negativity that dominates Silverman's view of Iatmul masculinity, it, nevertheless, does resonate with genuine stirrings in the Sepikian un/conscious imaginary of the Iatmul orientalis. Psychoanalytically speaking, he got occluded by his own countertransference and this has to be put to good use so that it can still, despite motley distortions, be exploited for the elucidation of the Eastern Iatmul realities and the dynamics of their archetypal un/conscious. Therefore, I'll proceed to work through Silverman's, so to speak, countertransference to the Iatmul un/conscious.

I'll *critically* accept everything he says about their male and female gender, from the woman's own rightful share of the originary beak, flutes, bullroarers to all other vintage ph/allomorphic and automorphic certificates of her primal aqueous cosmic omnipotence. In terms of all the mythic images that Silverman presents (and there are enough of them), it is quite clear why women don't have to yearn for masculine or paternal attributes: every which way, they have their own share of the phallus and of maternal omnipotence. But is the question of, and the answer to, what the *absence* of women's yearning is supposed to mean, now clarified? Is it really correct to think that the female gender in Tambunum is omnipotent, self-referential, and for that reason is also *less* androgynous than the male gender which, by contrast, because of men's overt maternal-feminine self-attribution (ritual, mythopeic, architectural, etc), is therefore *more* male-female (androgynous) and less omnipotent than women? The cosmo-ontological situation be as it may (which as such is also a psychodynamic dimension of Tambunum men and women), it is not at all clear what in concrete terms actual women's femaleness and its fertility would be *by itself*, apart from its critical dependence on the male fertiliser, the "bad-little semen". And I emphasise, regardless of the archetypal "self-referential, non-oppositional water" which Silverman has secured for them. But by the same token, how does it work for the primal water itself, all still in its, to be sure, pre-cosmic condition? What may be "her" equivalent of that diacritical bit, the "bad-little semen"?

Now, *overtly* there isn't any (i.e., contra-sexual element), for this is not the factual situation of concrete Tambunum bodiliness, its maleness and femaleness, but its transpersonal, cosmogonic self-image. However, personal and transpersonal intertwine in all sorts of ways, they belong to the self-same archetypal un/conscious matrix and precisely for that reason one

---

<sup>15</sup> One of Silverman's female leads who precipitates his pronouncements on the nothingness of man in the Tambunum is Barbara Ehrenreich's foreword to Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. Silverman cites her: "For if the fascist fantasy - which was of course no fantasy for the millions of victims - springs from a dread that (perhaps) lies in the hearts of all men, a dread of engulfment by the "other", which is the mother, the sea or even the moist embrace of love ... if so, then we are in deep trouble" (p. 176). I presume that, rather than facing the immanent threat of fascism that, as Ehrenreich divines, may be lurking in the hearts of all men, Silverman seems to opt for a wishful ontological final solution: let there be no man. If so, the problem, however, is what will the aquatic mother do in her self-referentiality without her favourite man, her son?

<sup>16</sup> Invoking Winnicott in this context, I wish to stress that one of the most important lessons to be learned from him (as from Jung) is to be attentive to the presence and manifestations of the contra-sexual parts in men and women in transference and countertransference so that the analyst is clearheaded as to whom and what s/he is actually, rather than apparently, dealing with; see Winnicott, 1971.

always has to situate oneself, as much as possible, in the concrete un/conscious of the egoities whose un/conscious imaginary it is through and through. Therefore, what one would like to see are some opinions of these egos as to what the primal cosmogonic situation is all about. This not being available, I'll critically think through Silverman's countertransfereential scripting and renditions.

---

### THE WATER, WHICH SEEMS TO BE WHAT IT IS-NOT AND IS-NOT WHAT IT SEEMINGLY IS

---

Silverman's ontological position on masculinity and man appears to be pitched in an all-or-nothing mode. Because they are not like the self-referential allness without any otherness and opposition, the Tambunum men are therefore nothing-at-all. How does this tally with the Tambunum primal watery self-determination. I'll take a closer look into this potent cosmogonic self-image of their un/conscious imaginary giving it an abstract-formal or "logical" amplification. But I'll also keep in mind its human egoic analogue: when a man looks at his mother he sees himself; she *is* the living semblance of his being. So it is with every Tambunum woman. It is qua maternal being, then, that the archetypal cosmo-ontological auto-imaging originarily reverberates in the un/conscious of concrete Tambunum male and female egoic selves, mothers and infants. Let's proceed primed by this appropriately concrete image (semblance) of everything that Iatmul maleness and femaleness is and is-not. Which is which, is and is-not, will be determined in due course. Here is the cosmogonic depiction as, I assume, retold by Silverman rather than in the exact or approximate wording of his informants (male and/or female).

"The genesis of the Eastern Iatmul cosmos began with calm water, not chaos. Eventually, a wind started to blow over this vast sea (*melemebe*), and land surfaced amid the waves. A chasm opened called totemic pit (*tasagi wangu*) out of which emerged five ancestors" (p. 27). They created the universe, but I will not follow this process further.

It has to be stressed that in the depicted situation there is no cosmos as yet. What there is is a pre-cosmic situation from which is generated the Eastern Iatmul cosmos as it is for themselves. The separation of the sky and earth, and with it the twining of the primal all-darkness into day-and-night follows after this initial sequence: still water > disturbed by a wind > emergence of (solid) earth > cleaving of the earth > emergence of the five male ancestors, who created the local landscape as it is. Whatever the internal determination of the initial situation, at least in appearance, it is not the actual living cosmos which came from that primordium. Therefore it is more accurate to characterise the primal situation as pre-cosmic.

A few pages before, however, Silverman characterises the primordial water as "an aquatic void" (p. 21); "primal watery feminine formlessness" (p. 22); still a few pages earlier, a whole section is entitled "An Aquatic Plentitude" (p. 15). Here he paints a picture of the mighty Sepik in terms of the primordial water - "a dangerous yet sustaining feminine presence" (*ibid.*). Still more, "The river is both generative and dissolving, defining and liminal. Above all, the Sepik is a powerful image of motherhood that nourishes life but erodes the works of men: their houses, trees, villages. In this regard, riverine water is a symbol of femininity against which men and demiurges construct their sense of worth" (p. 17). As for the women, they do not posit themselves against the river. Their self-worth, so it seems, doesn't have to be constructed at all and, as it were, is conterminous with the omnipotence of the pri-

mal water itself. Why its seeming *bias* to “erode” the works of men (but not women) Silverman doesn’t thematise.

From Silverman’s scripting the supposedly feminine primordium is “*calm water*” *not* a-“chaos”; it is a “*vast sea*”, “*feminine formlessness*”, an “*aquatic void*”, yet as the mighty muddy Sepik, an “*aquatic plentitude*”; “*dissolving, liminal, defining, eroding*”. Regardless what could be the Tambunum villagers’ characterisation of their riverine milieu and its primordial archetypal self-image, every which way it is quite clear that its characterisations are applied to it by Silverman. To the extent that the primordium is also “*feminine*”, “*self-referential*”, “*non-oppositional*”, yet “*dangerous*”, “*sustaining, generative and dissolving*”, “*defining and liminal*”, and in particular has one favourite target to negate, “the work of men and demiurges”, all I can say is that this would-be non-oppositional water is anything but. In fact it appears from all Silverman’s attributions that the primordial water is nothing else but *self-oppositional*, characterised most inclusively as at once “void” and “plentitude”. All opposites appear unstable and turn into each other. As for its self-referentiality, I see none at all because it appears that the primordial water has no “self”.

Why? Because these self-contrary attributions suggest that the “calm water” *is not meant to be definable* by any of the specific characteristics that can be discerned, projected into, and attributed to it. To be sure, the entire Tambunum cosmogonic process can be expressed in very simple formulas, eg.: from the formless comes its form and together they gave birth to everything. Or, from otherness that is all-and-nothing comes its self and makes it (her) deliver the world (everything); from a naught that is all comes a one which was two in itself, etc. In the formulations that follow I try to show how in this concrete mythopoeic imagery can be intimated intuitions of dynamic noetic gestalts which amount to a tacit system of fundamental ontological categories and relations that make experience possible. This dynamic noetic-intellective schematism coarticulates with erotogenic dynamics of the psyche. My exposition is deliberately constructed as a repetitive movement through which the chain of ramifications of the dialectical opposition between being and non-being leads into its progressive transformation, differentiation and totalisation. The inner logic of my formulations is guided by information on the Tambunum’s androgyny and on a binary structuration of their naming system (pp. 27-29; 52-55).<sup>17</sup> The entire cosmogonic process is immanently articulated as a series of ontological cuts (twinnings), which effect both the differentiation and the transubstantiation of the primordial watery a-substance (see my explication that follows).

Now, to declare that the primordial water is *both void-and-plentitude* would be a reasonable-enough approximation. But I think that it would be entirely erroneous to fix the “calm water” as *exactly* that – as “*it-is-both-X-and-Y*”. I am inclined to think that this primal water would object to that sort of de-limitation. It would limit its omnipotence, specifically its primal *omni-potential all-ness*. One can, as it were, see in it everything and anything; but, all the same, this watery totality, which is also both void and plentitude, is actually nothing in particular, including this very determination. So if it has a *self*, meaning that it is self-circumscribing, that it holds fast to and determines itself in-and-qua-itself exclusively and inclusively, then this self appears to be something *other* than itself. And this is, I am inclined to think, what the primordial water is all about. This primordium is all *otherness* in-and-qua its

---

<sup>17</sup> My explication purports to work from within a diffuse ethnographic corpus of information that lacks indigenous verbalisations of, projections into, and associations on the cosmogonic imagery.

otherness. Furthermore, this is its immanent dynamics, a ceaseless active-passivity which makes it appear as a “calm water”, yet internally sustains its dynamic othering.

Since it is now clear that the primordium appears at once as what it-is-not and what it-is, then why not affirm it as such in its supposed self-referentiality, which Silverman projected into it, and say: though it appears to be self-referential, it as such is not? But what this really means is that, as a pure otherness, the water’s seeming *self*-referentiality is to be something absolutely other than what it seemingly is; ergo its “self” is not it but its otherness. Therefore, the primordial water is not self-referential but (qua-its-otherness) it is only and always other-referential. This is why one can see in it whatever he or she wants to see in it, i.e. primarily him/herself and his/her desires on display in this otherness which as such immediately appears as something other than what it is in its very own pure otherness. Its determination is, therefore, that it has no *self*-reflection, only other-reflection for it has no self, only its pure otherness. This rendition is in full consonance with the above observation on Silverman’s scripting, namely that in this primal water all opposites are mutually identical. That is why he can write that, without, as it were, noticing that he is doing so, that it is a “void” and “plentitude”. This would mean that its dynamic “identity” is intrinsically wholly negative. It is both self-and-other negating ad infinitum and this is what sustains the impermanence of discernible opposites and its own absolute otherness.

Finally, as a consequence, its very femininity is now in question. As this is not ordinary water I will approach it in its own terms. Its “femininity”, too, may be not what it seems to be and may seem to be what it is-not. So be it. Can it be masculine? Given everything said so far, why not? If it is, then it also is-not. If it isn’t, then it is but also is-not. All one can definitely say about it, so it seems, is that it is not definite in any of its characterisations. To be sure, they are all applicable but none exactly sticks to it either in the mode of either/or or neither/nor or both and also. Why? Well, if “both”, then it, too, it-is and it-is-not; and so also with “also”. Every which way, every mode of its definiteness *seems* to be indefinite. Therefore, although it seems that this watery primordium might be indefinite, it is better to stick with its indefinite indetermination and affirm it as being at once indefinite and not-indefinite, indeterminate and yet not-indeterminate, definite and not-definite, determinate and not-determinate. The same can be said of its other omnipotential, in-finite.

In view of this, what can now be said of it as a substance? In truth, this water has not any determinate substantiality, yet it seems that it does. It is therefore best to characterise it as in-substantial or a-substantial (and as such it is and it is-not). Therefore, I’ll approach it again in terms of its primary self-imagining that Silverman renders as a “calm water”. However, as a rear-guard security measure, “calm”, and even “water”, is to be understood as “not-calm” and “not-water” and, therefore, as such, each, too, is-not “not calm” and “not-water”. And in so far as they are-both-at-once, equally they are “not-both-at-once”. Nevertheless, for the purpose of the cosmogonic exigency let it be “calm” and “water”!

The cosmogonic process is set into motion by a wind that starts blowing – from where? In the cited version there is no information on this, but given the primordial situation, if the primordial water appears to be what it-is-not and is-not what it appears to be, then one can accept that the answer to the where from of the wind can be: “from-somewhere or from-nowhere”, there is no difference. Therefore the wind emerges from-nowhere. But this “from-nowhere” is, all the same, right-there where the calm water in its-all-otherness appears to be, where it-is and is-not. One is tempted to say that this wind is “above” the water, but if one follows the cosmogonic myth in its own image then there was no up and down, or back and forth, since the myth clearly states that the sky was pushed upward later, by the five ances-

tors after the appearance of the solid earth, its cleaving, and their emergence from inside it. Therefore, spatiality was non-existent even if the narrator, given his/her "*hic et nunc*" situation may well have transposed his actual living spatiality into the primordium which is in fact going to bring into existence that very human post-cosmogonic actuality.

---

### **THE WIND, WHICH IS TWO-IN-ONE AND THEREFORE IS-WHAT-IT-IS**

---

Some twenty pages later, Silverman discusses the theme of "procreative wind", refers back to the primordial situation, and says that "land surfaced out of the primal sea through the agency of wind" (p. 51), implying that the wind might have also originated from within the still water. Silverman comments - "A phallic gust, we might say, stirred the maternal waters, thus effecting cosmic birth" (ibid.). Here he gives the wind a phallic shape, which does not say much about its masculinity and/or femininity. He also attributes to the water maternity although, on reflection, she was not exactly a mother before becoming stirred by the phallic wind. Other information evidences that breezes can be female (ibid.) but, he declares, "In an absolute or acontextual sense, wind is androgynous or devoid of fixed gender, much like the flutes and mythic beaks. But in the specific context of totemism and male ritual, as I have just shown, wind symbolises masculine reproduction" (p. 51). This can be accepted in terms of his exact specification, that in and "absolute sense", wind is neither male nor female but both at once, androgynous as indeed all genuine phallic energy and morphism is. Phallus is not just one but a one that is two in one, intrinsically self-identical in-its-own-self-and-qua-its-own-otherness so that either one of the two who are it, male-and-female, can claim it rightfully for and as their own determining self-sameness.

Therefore, the cosmogonic phallic wind is androgynous, neither male nor female but both. This, as pointed out, is also the case with maleness and femaleness as human bodily gender. As Silverman said earlier, of the two, Tambunum men are more androgynous than women. I'll come to this issue in the section after next. What has to be clarified is the gender and fertilising moment of the primordium.

The phallic wind, judged in absolute terms, is of "no fixed gender" but "androgynous". Therefore it is definitely definite, meaning that it is exactly that - "androgynous": neither masculine nor feminine by itself but both, and both-at-once. It should be pointed out that Silverman's emphasis on non-fixed gender = androgyny is misconceived since even when fixed as either male or female it is clear that in Tambunum either sex is still intrinsically bi-, that is, male and female. Whatever masculinity is, it can be said that it is androgynous; likewise with femininity. If Silverman insists, as he does, that men are more androgynous than women, their difference is of the more-or-less order rather than of the substantially different kinds. Either as more-of-it or less-of-it, maleness and femaleness, each by itself is nonetheless nothing but "male-and-female" (androgynous), two-in-one. Therefore, if each gender is one it is so because each is in itself two. Fixed or non-fixed, each gender is androgynous and therefore self-defined in terms of its two internal components, each of which is what it is relative to and because it is indissolubly bound to the other. Without the other, either one in and by itself is not-at-all.

The phallic circle is closed in on itself. And when it is a matter of self-referentiality, it is most obviously the determination of androgyny. Whether there is more of it or less of it, in each measure androgyny is fully self-referential because it is always fully, according to its appropriate measure (as either more or less), two=in=one. In androgyny, each of its

two ones refers only to each other exclusively and inclusively; therefore, through their self-reciprocal self-reference to, qua, and in each other, they are both the oneness which is fully and only self-referential to itself. And if there is a question of any self-generativity, I submit, it seems to be right here, in this two=one.

So, the phallic androgynous wind, regardless of its non-fixity, is absolutely-fixed in its androgynous determination and is entirely *definite*. This is why, unlike the primordial water, the wind in its determination does not appear to be as what it-is and also what it is-not. Rather, what this wind is is definite because it is fixed as both maleness-and-femaleness, in-itself and for-itself, regardless of whether it is, as a whole, either male or female. It can definitely be either one or the other precisely because, being neither just-one or just the other, it is always and only both-at-once. It is a two-which-is-one in and for-itself, and not for-another. Therefore its is-ness is what-it-is and is-not what it-is-not. Every which way, this marvellous wind is for-itself when it is more or less of itself in any apportionment whatsoever, even when it appears that it is not. So whether it may be assumed that it is masculine or feminine, more or less, as the case may be, the wind is still phallographic. Therefore, the androgynous phallographic energy is always and only self-definite rather than indefinite. Its determination and definiteness is contained by and in itself. That is the source and condition of its morphism, its formative-generative power. In a word, the self-absoluteness of the phallographic self-definiteness derives from its infinitesimal self-centricity. In each of its apportionments the androgynous phallographic is its own self-sameness. This is why it can bind to and in itself all unstable, ceaselessly dissolving opposites and all otherness whereby it becomes self-informed and creative, generative.

Although as wind it may appear fluid, seemingly akin to the watery fluid it stirs, it has in itself a self-sufficient autoplasmic, self-forming and self-centring force to be ceaselessly self-determining. Transparent yet pushy and rigid as if it were a solid stick, fluid, elastic and dispersive yet firm like an erect prick this wind is, nevertheless, not a trick; no wonder that it causes a right kind of stir. All this is due to the fact that, because of its androgyny, its, so to speak, determining determination, it is bound to itself through its absolute self-centricity. The two-which-are one are locked in each other; not one or the other, one without the other, but each is itself through the other; maleness has its isness, so it appears, because of its bond to femaleness and vice versa. Now regardless of this ontological amplification of its apparent sensuous qualities and determinations, the wind is and is what it is, definite rather than indefinite because it is two-in-one. It can be said that this phallographic androgyne is the principle of all definite and determinate being, which emerges from the water which is what it is-not and is-not what it is.

But notice: from everything that I have said the wind appears to be a peculiar mirror-image of its primordial watery a-substance that, once in-spired, starts moving and substantialising. I say a mirror-image precisely because the wind now transpires to be, as a self-definite auto-(phallo)morph, an exact counter-image of the water's omni-indefiniteness and amorphousness.<sup>18</sup> If the water were androgynous as the wind then from the very beginning

---

<sup>18</sup> It is useful to think of their mirror relation as a key and a key-hole. A person who knows nothing about either would not be able to recognise by looking, say, into the complex grooves of a key-hole the same yet transfigured gestalt which is cut into the key. Here in a nutshell is stated the problematics of ouroboric dynamic morphology and imagination which underpins numerous New Guinea and other cultural life-worlds and their cosmo-ontological schemata. This understanding has enabled me to formulate the above logomorphic interpretation of Tambunum cosmogonic dynamics.

they would be equipollent. But the water, having no self, has no definite, self-determinate power of omni-binding centrality. Every single apparent determination turns into its otherness and doesn't have any fixity and determination despite its seeming self-fulfilment, since it seems all like one smooth surface. The water is neither one nor two, and if it is then it is so only to the extent that it is-not. So, it is now clear enough that although the primal water is characterised (by Silverman) as "feminine", it is not androgynous and therefore it is not either feminine or masculine, nor one or the other, not both, not all, not nothing. It does not have any kind of actuality, and likewise, it seems now, one cannot really say that it has any self-generativity either. If it has, then it also has not. In other words, the primal water lacks its own principial source of determination and permanently generative is-ness, which would transform its pure, omnipotent all-otherness into its omnipotent self-creativity and self-actualisation.

What becomes now quite well delineated is what I already said above, namely that *the primal water is wholly other to its own otherness*. This alone makes it possible to be anything and everything at all – whatsoever. To the extent that this is so, the primal watery pure otherness needs exactly something entirely other than itself to make it conceive, to become something other than its own otherness. And this other otherness is, exactly, its mirror-other, the phallic wind which is everything that the water is not and is not what the water is in its otherness, namely its own other-referential otherness. Accordingly the water can only and always be something other than what it is, in perpetuity. What in Silverman's projection and rendition seemed to be a watery bliss of self-fulfilling sufficiency can, in the present explication, only be an *other-filling* dynamics without fulfilment at all. And if it were to be so, the water would be its own fulfilling nightmare, were it not for this phallic androgynous energetic gust that issued from the water's own, I shall now affirm, all-otherness which in that very twist becomes stirred into creation. For it appears that if left to its own otherness, within the indefinite stillness of the cosmic water can be generated nothing but ever more of its other-referential otherness. In other words, no change in and of its otherness other than a changeless change or alteration.

Fortunately, its changeless otherness too seems to be what it is not and is not what it is, so much so that in its othering-its-own-otherness it others (alters) its very own otherness out of its otherness which rebounds back into its a-substantial matrix. Therefore out of this indefinite formlessness, or from some other nowhere within<sup>19</sup> this primal watery neg-topology, there emerges its mirror-alter, ergo allomorphic in relation to its amorphous matrix of otherness. But consequently this allomorphic alter is an absolute automorph and is as such its own self.<sup>19</sup> This is the phallic wind, which turns the omnipotent aqueous indefiniteness

---

<sup>19</sup> This is the critical point in the water's othering. In simple terms: "from the formless (amorphous) comes its form (morph)". The primordium is amorphic otherness precisely because it has no self and cannot therefore form itself, meaning all its opposites cannot be captured and bound. The wind is the exact opposite of the water because it binds together the two critical opposites, male and female, which can only be through each other and they thereby become what they are, i.e., male and female. This power of intrinsic binding, centering of opposites, which thereby become determined in themselves as themselves, is what gives the wind its self. It is therefore auto-morphic. When I characterise the wind as the allomorph of the water I keep them in their mirror (inverse) relation. The water is amorphous; therefore the wind, as its other – *allon* – is, by contrast morphic, hence the water's allomorph. By, in, and for itself, the wind is auto-morphic and this is what determines its phallic morphism, its autocentricity. Since it is androgynous, it can be seen that its self-unity is due to its self-copulation. With that power of self-forming secured, it can then form everything else, all otherness, without ever losing itself in it. The automorphic wind is the exact dynamic noetic counter-image of the water's intrinsic absolute allo-de-centricity. *In fact, psychodynamically both are representative of the fundamental polarising mirror-dynamics of archaic narcissism and omnipotence.*

into the equally omni-actualising progenitive definiteness, ergo cosmic creation takes off. So if there is any self-generative potential in the primordial water it is actualised by the androgynous phallic wind. The cosmogonic myth clearly shows that the primal water's self-generation follows because of the phallic stir.

Thanks to it there becomes formed all definite, (at once self-same and self-definite), and mutually differentiated some-things: solid earth, humans, sky, day, night, and so on. A manifold of differentiated and individuated things, a water-bound cosmos. And the water became actualised as self-bound-to-its creation because of its own other-altering otherness, the phallic wind. It alone is the self-binding, therefore self-generating, and self-determining, self-defining, self-positing, in a word the world-creating agency of actualisation. This is the selfhood and is-ness of the primal watery omnipotentia, qua allness that others its otherness into its own auto-generative self; its formative energetic being of everything that there is and can ever be-come out of the primal m/otherness. The androgynous phallic wind then actively makes, qua itself, the primal otherness into its own first self. Only as such that which omni-indefinitely is and is-not, becomes its true being, the m/other of all and everything.<sup>20</sup>

Silverman also establishes the anal aspects of the wind motif: flatulence. Following Dundes, he concludes: "Men in their emulative desire for birth, transform vaginal delivery into a masculine idiom of anal parturition. In turn, this male somatic image is projected outward into the world as a framework for envisioning cosmic creation" (p. 52). I concur with this vital mode of psychoanalytic elucidation whereby the cosmogonic self-imagining of the Tambunum un/conscious imaginary is assimilated into its human erotogenic embodiment. But what is left out of this reduction to the sensuous-bodily dimension of instinctual drives and desire, is the intrinsic noetic-intellective dynamics of the imaginary, whereby the un/conscious constructs a world-image in its own body and its own somatic substance. It is vital to recognise that only as and qua world-self-imagining, does the psyche construct human egoic selfhood, male and female, and the cultural life-world. In this understanding, the human un/conscious is necessarily psycho-cosmogonic, *for if there is no world-image there is no human egoic self either, and so for both sexes.*

Speaking for myself, I am always impressed by the supreme intelligence of un/conscious imaginary constructions. One has to admit that in its transformation into a phallic cosmogonic gust, the human fart shows that there is more to it than just its anal (sensuous) origination. From the archetypal psycho-cosmogonic perspective, the body and all orifices and drives, not just the anus, do show their other determination, namely that they are nothing less than the living psycho-cosmic gestalt, a microcosmic image of the macrocosmos. Silverman's exercise of psychoanalytic formula-translation is unduly biased and insufficiently grounded in the constructive dialectics of the un/conscious matrix of the psycho-somatic being. He shifts from the perspective of the Eastern Iatmul cosmic self-image to a formulaic psychodynamic explanation whose exclusive target is men rather than they and their women. But in fact together they articulate and participate in the same universe of their un/conscious imaginary.

<sup>20</sup> It can be said that the primal water becomes mother and thus feminine because of its retro-injective phallic actualisation. Through it the all-otherness acquires its selfhood. Note that the mythic image follows rigorously a polarising schema of auto-differentiation of the primordium: a-substantial a-morphic (0=0)water<auto-morphic wind(m=f)>cleaving earth<5 humans<sky^earth^night^day separation<creation-shaping of landscape. Herein is indicated the inner autopoietic logic of ouroboric dynamics, to be more exact, its noetic-formative-intellective power. I deal with it and various transformational modes in a forthcoming work (Mimica, in preparation).

To the extent that he seemingly demystifies the archetypal cosmogonic dimension in terms of its somatic anal derivation, doesn't the same kind of demystification apply to women and femininity? What is this primal "self-referential, non-oppositional", etc, "feminine" "calm water" that is biased towards "the work of men and demiurges", as he characterised this image through his realistic and sober, as it were, projections? Isn't it anything else but a projection into the world, not just by the Tambunum men and women but also by Silverman himself? On this view there is no difference between Eastern Iatmul men and women, and the ethnographer who wields psychoanalytic formulas. The Tambunum women are as self-deluded as their men. Men indeed "envy female fertility" but all claims about the women's superiority, cosmic or not, express comparable omnipotent aggrandisements which exceed the factual power of their bodily generativity. And, to be sure, all these delusions have to be explicated psycho-dynamically. What exactly is envy and omnipotence? Most problematic in this pursuit, however, is Silverman's stake in the Tambunum's very own psycho-cosmogony and their dialogics as a whole. They have to create and sustain themselves as men and women in *their* life-world. As a psycho-Bakhtinian ethnographer Silverman's task is to elucidate this life-world in their own terms by the most constructive means possible; by his own self-definition, through a psychoanalysis of their "dialogics". But it is quite evident that he is primarily positing himself as an omnipotent adjudicator of cosmic and psycho-somatic justice, who seems to assume to know better about, or is in a psychoanalytically more lucid position vis-a-vis the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious imaginary than his analysands.

I have shown with a sufficient clarity that the watery presence in the Eastern Iatmul un/conscious has a different psycho-cosmo-ontological determination from the one scripted by Silverman. If his characterisations were taken uncritically it would not be clear why there would ever emerge any kind of masculinity in their life-world. Indeed, why would there be any self-differentiation of a pre-cosmic watery totality, which in its omnipotence is totally self-satiated and self-satisfied? This clearly shows that in the Tambunum's own psycho-cosmogonic self-imaging, men and masculinity are anything but non-entities. The phallomorphic formative energy in all those "oppositional" denizens - wind, crocodiles, trees, etc. - featuring in the Iatmul cosmogonic mythopoeia, is crucial. In this psycho-Bakhtinian scripting the phallomorphic and flatulent wind, devouring saurian agitators, and so forth, can be readily dismissed, with Dundes' imprimatur, as a part of a wider scheme of "masculine birth envy" (p. 86). Except that envy is not the terminus of explication of men's and women's embodied being. Nor is woman's bodily procreative power the beginning and end of creation. The profundity of psychoanalytic theories of psycho-sexuality, erotogeneity and libido clearly shows that.

Similarly with the senior crocodile spirits which, at least one of his informants said, are the ultimate masters of all conception and gestation. Silverman, however, banishes these spirits away by saying that "somatic reproduction is magically consigned to the realm of ancestral crocodile spirits and the male cult" (p. 31). What is that supposed to mean? That, therefore, *for the Iatmul* they are less real and omnipotent than the supposed feminine self-referential and non-oppositional water, which is, as it were, less magically posited? Again, this is Silverman running his own show of omnipotence as the master puppeteer, while the Eastern Iatmul imaginary supplies the marionettes. But it is the Eastern Iatmul imaginary and their life-world as they are, *in their own omnipotent terms* that are of concern here. Thus, both sexes harbour phantasies of their own omnipotence, and the transpersonal un/conscious has to be approached in terms of such a total dynamics of intersubjective self-structuration.

---

## FROM OMNIPOTENCE TO OMNI/M/POTENCE

---

Silverman's exegeses are biased precisely in respect of the problem of omnipotence in the Eastern Iatmul's alleged "dialogics" and his position as its conduit. Showing that men are envious is, if anything, the matter to be worked on. For this psychic mode, suggesting immediately men's im-potence and inferiority, is made of and generated by the same narcissistic stuff as the feminine "self-reference", omni-potence and self-sufficiency. Both are differential transfigurations of archaic narcissism and omnipotence and can be treated as mirror-equipollent. This is brought into a sharper relief by my critical reinterpretation of the cosmogonic primordium. This, however, is still the transpersonal, archetypal cosmogonic situation. The economy of its omnipotence has to be accounted for in more concrete terms. Accordingly, what has to be considered are the lineaments of the Eastern Iatmul's narcissistic economy, its different modalities of omnipotence and its derivations (especially the negative ones, envy,<sup>21</sup> jealousy), and, of course, the seeming self-satisfaction, self-referentiality, and seemingly non-oppositional abolition of all otherness. These last three are especially salient in what I have characterised as Silverman's watery countertransference, and given its feminine bias, this has to be taken as a means into the Tambunum women's sense of themselves as cosmically omnipotent mothers, for Silverman doesn't provide any concrete dialogical evidence concerning their self-idealizations.

In the pre-oedipal matrix, narcissistic omnipotence is radically negative precisely because it is maximally omni-centered; it is oblivious to all otherness and, simultaneously and seemingly, has none. I can picture it more concretely by saying that the foetus and the maternal container have no mutual self-recognition in and qua their difference. The inner horizon of the womb and its contents is a universe unto itself, in which maternal un/conscious omnipotence is vitally dependent on its self-fulfilling content, the foetus. It is the un/conscious that drives-informs her egoic self-consciousness. The above-examined Iatmul data clearly show how that intrauterine universe imagines itself qua desires and passions rather than it being imagined by a deliberate egoic fiat. This is why it is constructive to think of this sphere as an IT (in-and-for-itself), and for that reason Groddeck's writings (e.g., 1949; 1950; 1951) still have a good propaedeutic value. This is the narcissistic matrix of archaic human omnipotence, which is irreducibly bi-polar; the more one exceeds in one direction, say superiority, the more s/he is predisposed to be menaced by its counterpoint, abject impotence and its correlates, excessive aggrandisement and defensiveness. Hence why I use the term omni/m/potence for this archaic narcissistic dynamism, as it is inherently extreme and bi-valent. This primary, so to speak, auto-morphogenic sphere of human egoity, is the matrix of its narcissistic structuration correlative with the formative dynamics of instinctual drives and agency (e.g., id-ego-super-ego).<sup>22</sup> With this sketch let me resume my reflections on Silverman's data and scripting.

---

<sup>21</sup> In the narcissistic economy of a single person this transfiguration can be observed in a formidable manifestation of narcissistic negativity, self-envy (see Lopez-Corvo, 1995)

<sup>22</sup> I will not dwell here on numerous issues that are entailed by these formulations. For instance, what exactly is the determination of this nuclear affective (energetic) intensity and its extreme bi-valency (I could also describe it as bi-polarisation or, better, auto-polarisation)? How are such extreme narcissistic modalities generated and what is their dynamic structure: the self-drivenness for maximal self-sameness, all-oneness without self-otherness, either as a self-same fullness, ad infinitum (self-expansion), or as self-same nothingness (self-contraction), ranging from cosmic rage, vulnerability and inferiority to the equally cosmic "oceanic feelings" (Freud, Masson, 1980) or nirvanic self-extinction? For some useful pointers for the problematics of narcissistic dynamics, including omnipotence, see: Gruneberger, 1975; 1989; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; 1977; Ellman and Reppen, 1997.

## THE MATERNAL SELF-CERTAINTY OF SEXUATION: A TAMBUNUM CARTESIAN PROPAEDEUTIC

---

I will invoke again the first “principle” of the Eastern Iatmul *male and female* self-identification which Silverman scripts in Cartesian terms and qualifies as an “adage” (p. 96) and “proverb” (p. 107); it states: “my mother, therefore I am” (pp. 87, 96, 107). Since radical consequences are implied, I will outline them in no uncertain terms: whether male or female, the Iatmul ego’s existence coincides with its pre-oedipal, maternal ground, her body and un/conscious. Herein is also its critical ingredient, omni/m/potence.

What matters at this point, however, is the more immediate human bodily facticity of men’s and women’s maleness and femaleness, the fact that they are, regardless of the measure of their difference, still self-identified in and qua their maternal *fons et origio*. It is in respect of this experiential domain that Silverman offers no satisfactory documentation of men’s and women’s emotionality, desires, tensions, conflicts, self-aggrandisement and self-interpretation. Accordingly, the supposed lesser androgynousness of women in Tambunum remains beclouded in the framework of Silverman’s scripting. Therefore, I find it a constructive exercise to follow the implications of some of his statements, just to tease out some purely formal clarifications of women’s position in the matrix of Tambunum ideas about conception and gestation, *all* of which, undoubtedly, are generated by the same fluvial-saurian un/conscious imaginary.

These basic ideas, especially the relative power of the two substances, semen and blood, which effect conception and sexuation of the foetus, can be now articulated in the Tambunum’s own explicit terms. I am taking this step because Silverman clearly says that no man or woman would deny that s/he wasn’t born out of his/her mother’s body, fed and brought up by her. Accordingly, the characterisation of the procreation process as “egalitarian” has to be pitched in this Cartesian set-up of men’s and women’s indubitable, as it were, equality generated by the primordial matrix of their somatic being, self-recognition, and self-knowledge. Herewith this, so to speak, Cartesian thought-experiment on Tambunum self-generation of sexuation in terms of Silverman’s presuppositions about the relative apportionment of male and female androgyny.

Given the entire Iatmul universe and its pre-oedipal determination, it would be, in formal terms, surprising if women would desire to have more maleness and fatherhood than what they’ve already got in themselves, certified by their maternal self-positing (“my mother, myself”). All their mythopoeia, regardless of Silverman’s scripting, and, no doubt, their un/conscious and the facticity of their bodies, suggest that they’ve got both, in a full measure. This would follow from the most obvious fact that from every pregnant woman’s body both *male and female* babies are born, and as such, from the wombs of Iatmul women come males *and* females as sons, fathers, brothers, sisters, daughters, and they themselves (women) thereby become mothers. Every woman qua her pregnancy and birthing becomes her own Cartesian self-fulfilment whereby her own essence<sup>23</sup> is her child’s existence; she herself becomes a mother qua her child. She alone births the *two* genders and qua these two the

---

<sup>23</sup> Relational or absolute, doesn’t matter one way or the other, for they are absolutely mutually determining.

human social mani-fold. Thus, immanent in women's bodily facticity is the whole generative actualisation of the kinship matrix of genitors and progeny.

If women are self-satisfied, superior, and evince no contra-sexual yearning, as Silverman's renditions strive to ensure every which way, they are self-satisfied primarily with their femaleness qua their motherhood; but men, given the pre-oedipal matrix, are not. If anything, their maternal self-determination, by comparison to women's, is second best, for what every man's sister can do – gestate and birth an actual child – her brother factually cannot. Therefore, it is evidently the case that the proverbial “my mother, therefore I am” is truer in the body of the sister than in the body of the brother, for she can be fully identical to her mother and he can't. But as his sister's brother, rather than as his own son's father, every man can be the mother's brother and therefore be the truth of his maternal-feminine being; ergo he is the male mother, the maternal uncle to his sister's children.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, only as such is he the truth of his maternal self-identity. It is fundamentally as his *mother's* rather than as his *father's* son that every Eastern Iatmul man has to face the travail of manhood in order to become both (i.e., his mother's *and* father's son), and to actualise in the same process, his mother's femininity and his father's masculinity in and as himself.

For every woman this is easy. All she has to do is to get herself pregnant and she'll become full of both herself (femaleness) and her own maleness and, as a bonus, she'll become the full truth of her primal maternal being – meaning a birthing mother. On this view, it is not surprising that hardly any Iatmul woman is craving for having penile strappings and other masculine paraphernalia, beaks and such, when (despite the primal loss of the long beak), *in fact, every woman's masculinity and father power is guaranteed by the originary self-positing of her maternal determination.* Whenever she gets pregnant she has received a sufficient amount of “bad, little semen” from her impregnator and her masculinity is, so to speak, certified, indeed made “certissimus”:<sup>25</sup> *for her masculine project, I suggest, is not to be like man as he is qua his motherhood, but to be as she is qua her motherhood, i.e., to conceive and get pregnant.* This is her immanent phallomorphic and thus masculine *telos* whereby she accomplishes her maternal being, thereby fulfilling her own “therefore I am”. Therefore, every daughter as herself is self-same, the power of her femininity; but to become her fully actualised masculine and thus truly *androgynous* (=phallic) woman, she has to conceive within herself a child. And every time she gives birth to a male child the maleness in her body proves stronger than her femaleness. Her male baby bears the full imprint of her own generative masculinisation. Her own son is her contra-sexual self, the same gender as her own father, her own brother, and husband. *Her son is the very proof that she has been masculinised in the most generative way. Indeed, pregnancy itself is woman's foremost accomplishment of her contrasexual yearning to be masculine in the way it would make her 100% like her mother, i.e., pregnant and therefore truly feminine.* But, inversely, for man it is his maternal being, his “therefore I am” *as exactly his procreative phallic maternal femininity*, that is irreducibly in question.

<sup>24</sup> This is a common position of the maternal uncle in Melanesian frameworks of kinship sexuation and elsewhere. For an extreme case, see Mimica, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> The masculine ending (rather than *certissima* – fem) emphasises the certainty of her pregnancy as the actualisation of her masculinity. Here I am articulating a position inverse from the one expressed in the Latin legal tag, cited by Freud (1909/1977: 223): “*pater semper incertus est*” (father always is uncertain) whereas “*mater certissima est*” (mother is the most certain). What is certain in every Iatmul's pregnancy is her immanent masculine project, which as such determines her relation to her paternity in the un/conscious matrix of the Iatmul imaginary (see the argument in the text).

So, to follow Silverman's scripting of the Iatmul conception and gestation as an "egalitarian mystery", although he didn't intend it as such, the Iatmul men have no problems becoming saurian, pre-oedipal men and fathers, but their maternal being escapes them the moment they recognise that they are born as their mothers' sons rather than as daughters. By contrast, the daughters are assured of their *paternal* inheritance. They don't have to emulate fathers in order to be like them, procreative male saurian sires. There is no mystery of sexuation. Every woman is assured that she has within herself her essential paternal endowment, *the power to bring out a male and female child* out of her own female yet androgynous maternal body.<sup>26</sup> How so? By the sheer fact that she was procreated! If she was born a woman that was because her father's semen wasn't strong enough; but if she gives birth to a son, she has accomplished in her maternity exactly what her father failed to – to make her like him, the body of his own gender. By the way, here the import of the crocodile spirits would acquire a new significance: they may well be seen as the true bisexual (androgynous) spermatic spirits omnipresent in every woman's womb as, (to give it an Aristotelian inflection), the ultimate cause, but whose efficient cause is every man's "bad little semen" that actually impregnates her.<sup>27</sup> Verily, every woman is primordially and all along a *male-enough* (androgynous) *mother* by pregnancy and birthing in the way that her brother will be only through travail of his masculinity.

This, then, is a counter-scripting, which suggests, merely as a formal propaedeutic, why the Eastern Iatmul women don't have to vie in a simple and overt *symmetric* fashion with men for masculine physiological prerogatives, attributes and powers. To repeat: every woman possesses them all along by the sheer fact of being her father's daughter (his semen was weaker than his wife's blood) and, to be sure, the daughter of her pre-oedipal mother (whose blood was stronger than her husband's semen). Women's immanent masculinity is therefore indubitable, and more so since their sons' factual somatic *lack* of identical bodily femininity will be affirming of it in the ceaseless travail of masculinity. *Every male and female embodiment is the equivalent but differential manifestation of the relative victory of one or the other of the two generative substances, male semen and female blood.* With or without this formulation, I can state that the Eastern Iatmul men's project of their masculinity, the work of their self-making, is fully authentic in its entire developmental course. Given the pre-oedipal determination of the initial situation, they are nothing less than the true saurian sons of their fluvial-saurian mothers and fathers.

Still, all this is a critical amplification of Silverman's own scriptings of what he calls the "misfortunes" and the "tragic" "predicament" of Eastern Iatmul masculinity. There are a number of other epithets that he applies in liberal strokes, but the problem is whether they adequately paint the supposed "dialogics" of men and women, their self-experience and self-valorisation, or the inner *logos* of their "egalitarian mystery". I have argued above that his scripting is largely driven by his own narcissistic, negative – idealising countertransference. Accordingly, the really unfortunate aspect of this ethnography is that he doesn't say anything

---

<sup>26</sup> Note that every baby she bears affirms *unquestioned female generativity* agitated by that little bit of extra masculinity that she needs in order to conceive and consummate her androgynous femaleness. But without man's semen no conception will take place, regardless of how androgynous female embodiment is. Therefore, either as a male or female, every Tambunum son and daughter owe their procreation to the fractional power of their *paternal* "bad little semen"; and without it neither gender would ever come into being as a concrete man and woman, son and daughter, mother and father.

<sup>27</sup> Only a concrete exploration of women's egoic un/conscious would show what kind of imaginal form masculine figures assume, especially in the configurations that would have the function of contra-sexual self-images and super-ego.

more concrete about Eastern Iatmul's femininity, the way these saurian women and mothers valorise themselves in their own terms, *including their omni/m/potence*.<sup>28</sup> Silverman indicates that he had at least one close female confidant, but what her sense of herself is, and how she thinks about her, son, husband, brother, mother's brother, and men and women generically, is not indicated. For clearly, whatever the Eastern Iatmul men and women do, they do it by experiencing each other as egoities constituted in the factual determination of kinship; in short as genitors and progeny, kin and affines. That is most pronounced in naven. When an Eastern Iatmul man slides his anus down his nephew's shin, he does it not as some non-descript generic man but as a "male mother". That is, he is a man of the saurian species whose being is "my mother, therefore I am". The species is still of the genus *homo* (man, that is), rather than an absolute non-entity, as he might be phantasised and judged by a Western post-modern *homo academicus*. The saurian man's masculinity is what it is through his labour-intensive travail, which brings his semblance into being from its imaginary archetypal matrix.

But let me still pursue the framing of his scripting in terms of the saurian-Cartesian thought-experiment. Silverman's scripting clearly shows that a saurian man's paternal maleness is truly accomplished when he effectively relinquishes his fatherhood to his son, and most conclusively so when the son marries his FMBSD, who is thereby his classificatory father's mother (*iai*).<sup>29</sup> Thus, the paternal sonship of a Iatmul man is maximally fulfilled when he marries his "father's mother", and, should his wife bear him a son, it can be said that he has given in effect birth to his own father. The Iatmul sonship vis a vis his father is easy; the father may as well be dead; for as long as there are women, men can make them into (classificatory) mothers of their fathers and therefore of themselves.<sup>30</sup> That is, to put it egocentrically, whichever woman gave birth to my father can, through *iai* substitution, give him birth again so long as I, my father's son, am the one who sires him. That seems to be a tacit assumption of the Iatmul sonship of a man vis a vis his father. And there is no anal act involved. In a son's marriage to his FMBSD (as in any marriage), factual conception, gestation and birthing follow. But that is only one half of the project of the Eastern Iatmul's masculinity. The other and the more vital half is man's sonship in and qua his mother, male and female. He may be his mother's "bad semen, little semen", but he is her very own masculine self, and therefore in full concordance with his=her being=existence.

Although he was born a man (because his father's semen was stronger than his mother's blood), therefore he missed out on fully becoming his maternal generative being (like his sister), he, nevertheless, has her being as his (phalломorphic) destiny. And as the true son of his mother, from the first achievements onward, he will go through the naven cer-

---

<sup>28</sup> Here are a few samples that indicate that it is Silverman's *wax* which articulates the pitch of Tambunum women's omni/m/potence. "Yet women and *not* men are averred to be true supports or "stools" of the village, which is a direct result, men say, of feminine fertility nurture. Since women are associated with interior and hidden, or *atndasiikiü*, powers, the primacy of masculinity is illusory. Appearances to the contrary, the lives and concerns of men pertain to the surfaces and facades of social life" (p. 23). "These interdictions, when situated in the broader context of masculinity, evidence men's envy of female fertility. But there is little evidence to suggest that female restraints during warfare reflect a corresponding jealousy of male prerogative" (p. 105). Numerous similar examples can be cited but no documentation of concrete self-interpretations of the Tambunum men and women themselves is provided.

<sup>29</sup> For the most extreme articulation of this kind of system in New Guinea (and, to the best of my knowledge, elsewhere) I can refer to the Yagwoia situation (Mimica, 1991; also 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Keep in mind that every woman has to become pregnant and give birth in order to maximally actualise her maternal being and truth, i.e., herself become a factually birthing mother.

emonials until such time when he himself will be compelled, in shame and humiliation, to act out as his truth: he is his mother's son and therefore he is her, i.e., a male mother. From his actual birth to his anal embarrassment and mortification, the saurian man acts out what is the truth of his mother's procreative power and hence his "therefore, I am". Male initiation notwithstanding, it is an empirical question whether (and if so, how), the Eastern Iatmul father would drum into his son the new grounds of certitude of their common being, namely that he is not his mother's truth but his father's, ergo "my father, therefore I am". His son's male body, however is the very truth of the fact that when he (father) impregnated his mother, his semen proved stronger than her blood. Therefore, he can say that he is his father's strength, "bone". But that was at the same time the affirmation of his mother's own masculinity. For if she is to bear a male child, her son, then her very femininity has to be weakened. Ergo, in such a case, through the privation of her feminine strength, her blood, effected in coitus by a bit of the "little, bad semen" which beats her to it, she conceives her masculinity and gives birth to her own son.

What can be said, in terms of this thought-experiment, about the apportionment of men's and women's androgyny? It seems that its inner meaning is a variant of the dialectics of phallogomorphic oneness, self-duplication and unification in the interchange of inner and outer, indefiniteness and definiteness, which I outlined in connection with the cosmogonic wind. It would appear that both maleness and femaleness are a composite of self-unified, phallogomorphic oneness made through their dynamic, mutually privative yet conjunctive negation of each other. They cannot be of equal power but always and only one has to be subordinated by the other for conception to occur.<sup>31</sup> The only definiteness that can be affirmed about the saurian man is that without his insemination, woman will not conceive. Reciprocally, the only certitude and definiteness that the saurian woman has in respect of gestation is that, in so far she conceives, there will be a baby and she will become a mother. But the gender of the baby, it seems, will be decided by the actual balance of power between the paternal semen and maternal blood exacted in the moment of coition. The self-privation of the one will be the self-gain of the other one, but their privative - *mutually negating* - conjunction will, all the same, produce a third one, the union of maleness and femaleness of both ones. This third one (foetus) itself will be either one or the other, male or female, yet both at once. And this is the truth of every saurian baby, definitely androgynous, but in accordance to the well-apportioned measure because, whether more or less, gain or loss, he or she is still exactly one, and as such also the other one, ergo two that is one. I think that the saurian spermatic spiritus, which itself is androgynous, may indeed be the immanent "oppositional" yet self-binding *logos* presiding over the Eastern Iatmul woman's archetypal watery "self-reference" (i.e., other-reference), or else, so one can speculate in terms of the implications of these archetypal omnipotent phantasies, "she" (as Silverman determines the primal water) might well remain caught in "herself" ad infinitum.

"She" could "self"-multiply in perpetuity, but not "self"-differentiate and individuate. Being all one in "her" sex would condemn "her" to self-saturation, a "self"-propagating narcissistic sterility which neither dies nor lives, just fills itself with itself; a monopolar "self"-sameness which can generate neither its own pregnant "self"-indefiniteness nor a generative "self"-definiteness and therefore, "self"-multiplicity. Unable to conceive her "self"-otherness

---

<sup>31</sup> Silverman details the cosmological figurations of "adversarial coitus" on p. 60.

"she" could never become "self"-conceived, unless "her" "self"-referentiality twists itself into a some kind of singular loop, like a Möbius strip or a Kleinian bottle, in which the radical interiority smoothly transmutes into its own exteriority. Everything in Silverman's scripting of his data, driven by a countertransfereential omnipotent feminine but self-blinding voice, clearly suggests that some such quandary could eventuate if it were true that in Tambunum "there is no such a thing as man". Fortunately enough for all concerned, there does exist the saurian kind of man, who relentlessly travails on the project of his maternal phallographic desire to actualise his "my mother, therefore I am".

On the other hand, Silverman's ethnography also shows, clearly enough, that the Eastern Iatmul life-world is a genuine creation of ouroboric archetypal imagination and intelligence; therefore it is unlikely that it would delude itself about the truth of its own seeming oneness and self-referentiality. To use the image of the self-eating-copulating serpent, it would delude itself were it to think that it is either all-mouth and no tail, or the other way around, for the all-edible condition of ouroboric eternal self-generative existence is that it is both-at-once, and therefore it is one and self-same, yet self-different in its absolutely self-referential self-copulative-eating. And as it keeps on eating itself (self-negating), in exactly the same measure it keeps on self-generating (self-copulating=positing) itself, ad infinitum. That is, without a self-castrating moment there is no generative self-difference (sexuation), and qua self-difference, self-otherness (twoity), and with it, as many sexual shapes, quiddities, and genders as one can possibly wish. As they say in New Guinea - "saplai mo yet" as long as there is one=two.

Therefore, I am inclined to think that whatever is generated in the Eastern Iatmul cosmos in the way of its omni/m/potent feminine dynamics, there are no non-entities in it. If anything, the would-be radical feminine non-oppositional self-referentiality and self-sameness (to remain with Silverman's specifications), generates everything as its own mirror-image, more or less but, fundamentally, all the same. I would expect that the saurian sons aren't any less omni/m/potent than their fluvial mothers. Like loves to breed like; and I think that, rather like the unbeatable Baron Munchausen, fluvial-saurian women and men constitute a self-referential totality that generates itself out of the Sepikian watery depths, just as he pulls himself and his horse from the quicksand, by gripping fast his pig-tail and tugging skyward, ad infinitum. The result is a well-apportioned self-differentiated measure of omni/m/potence, and a well apportioned androgynous substance, which generates a sustainable human self-semblance of its pre-oedipal un/conscious imaginary matrix.

---

### **MEN'S NAVEN AND WOMEN'S BIRTHING: THE DIALECTICS OF THE FLUVIAL-SAURIAN OMNI/M/POTENCE**

---

From Silverman's data and scripting, however, it might be thought that in respect of their maternal pre-oedipal matrix, the dialectics of Eastern Iatmul omni/m/potence (though not Silverman's countertransfereentially scripted feminine monopolar omnipotence), works in differentiated but interdependent spheres of actualisation of women's and men's corporeal facticity. The motherhood of men comes into its own in the naven ceremonialism, where the negativity of their narcissistic economy becomes acutely manifest. This negativity is not just apparent in respect of men's omni/m/potence, (where the accent falls on their (omni)-*im/potence*), but also in respect of women's, except that in their case the accent is on their *omni-//potence*. The crescendo of naven is *nggariik*, the ultimate Eastern Iatmul act which,

Silverman avers, is also the tragedy topping off all other tragedies that beset the Eastern Iatmul men; but apparently not women. Their selfhood is, as it were, immune to the negativity which drags their men down the spiral ever so basely. From their narcissistic heights, the force of their pre-*oedipal* maternal matrix plunges the men into the mud of shame, humiliation, tears; and even if crocodilian, they are tears of "tragedy", "shame", and "despair" nonetheless. For women, so it seems, it is virtually all mirth and comedy. "When women and mothers depart from the rite, they always seem elated, or vindicated. Men, however, often seem rather demoralised" (p. 167).

I see this situation as the foremost *reality* of their common *omni/m/potence*. In the ritual sphere each sex lives his/her portion of the reality of their common archetypal imaginary, *but in its appropriate mode*. For men shame and mortification in accordance with their factual somatic limitations, which in this context reaches the limits of its (androgynous) femininity. One may rightly call it men's maternal inferiority complex, being the indelible legacy of their "my mother, therefore I am". For women, *naven* manifests the cosmic laughter of their superiority, which in this particular context is not at stake; accordingly it shows its appropriate negativity in full intensity, rubbing as much acidic faeces as they can into men's narcissistic wounds. But evidently, that is the price that the Iatmul men are not just willing but compelled to pay, in order to sustain the semblance of their maternal being. What would have to be explicated is its psychodynamic determination, namely the masochistic underpinnings of men's narcissistic self-equilibrium. In this regard Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinism has nothing to offer, although his impressive material on *naven* requires this particular perspective and reflection.

However, I think that it is mistaken to look at women's *naven* behaviour as the *real* truth of their *omni/m/potence*.<sup>32</sup> No, in *naven* they reign supreme over men's factual embodiment precisely because that context is the limiting condition of men's fluvial-saurian imaginary. If anything, men (like transsexuals) come to manifest its *ideal* semblance, precisely because their maternal being in their factually male bodies can only have *that mode* of realisation - *ideal made flesh*.<sup>33</sup> The women, by contrast, are in a different predicament in respect of their maternal being. Born as daughters rather than as sons, their factual bodies are not the ideal but the factually-*real* vehicle of their fluvial-saurian imaginary matrix. When it comes to birthing they don't have to project a semblance of their archetypal imaginary matrix (as is the case with men's predicament). Women only have to live their birthing facticity in the best way they can. Whether due to their "watery self-reference", "crocodile spirits", "bad little semen", or the combination of all three, or something altogether unknown, a mystery beyond all egalitarian or inegalitarian mysteries, every which way, in pregnancy and birthing, the women's position and determining constitution within the Eastern Iatmul imaginary and *ITs* *omni/m/potence*, is in the *mode of ITs full actualisation*. Women's fluvial-saurian labouring situation is factually real and the unforgiving somatic truth of their generative femaleness: in parturition woman's motherhood comes into *ITs* own.

---

<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, I find Silverman's relentless repetition of his formula self-blinding; for instance: "The exhortation "*lan nyiin tu!*" can also be uttered by a maternal uncle should he slide his buttocks down a nephew's shin during *naven*. Yet there are no comparable expressions by women during ritual, no parallel enactments of demure femininity, and no corresponding terminological assertions of *femine androgyny*" (p. 89; emphasis JM).

<sup>33</sup> In this regard Silverman doesn't provide any concrete "dialogical" data which would give a real sense of men's own self-experience, obsessive seriousness, ambiguity, prevarications, anxiety, which would be the emotional truth of their feminine self-image. It is symptomatic that he doesn't deal with any dream material where these, supposedly, deeply conflictual contra-sexual identifications, would be given most telling selfrepresentation.

According to Silverman (and even more markedly to Hauser-Schaublin, who worked in the Eastern Iatmul village of Kararu), the only *idealisation* that a woman in this situation is expected to project is to endure the experience with fortitude. This experience is the reality and truth of her maternal being now coming into ITs own. Hauser-Schaublin is more informative: "The goal of each woman is to give birth alone. Only after the child is delivered a woman will call out (except for the first birth). It is also expected that women will bear the pains in silence. Women should be strong, informants said, and they are proud of any woman who gives birth alone and without crying out in pain" (1984: 7). This German woman-ethnographer gives some remarkable descriptions of the saurian women's self-comportment in labour. What is significant for my reflections on things Iatmul orientalis, is this specific mode of idealisation – to overcome pain and to be alone in the moment of the facticity of her fluvial-saurian self's self-actualisation. This, I submit, is the self-expression of the Iatmul un/conscious imaginary, the same one which compels men to express its ideal maternal truth in their factual bodies, which cannot do what their mothers and sisters can do, even if they may not want to do it. Indeed, for all one knows, some of them may wish that they never were born as such, as saurian women or men. Silverman does not provide such data or entertain such possibilities.

Be that as it may, it is thought provoking that the only information on women's labour in his ethnography is confined to a footnote, towards the end of the book. He writes: "Women give birth inside domestic houses while squatting and grasping a horizontal bamboo pole. *During delivery, they often scream insults at their husbands who, of course, are nowhere to be seen*" (f.n. 5, p. 200). What can be distilled from this information which, I have good reasons to believe, is in itself an idealisation which reflects Silverman's image of these saurian women as omnipotent "self-referential" water of all creation, rather than as egoities each constituted as an individual, subjective self-synthesis of their transpersonal un/conscious and archetypal imaginary. Now, in his scripting there is no focus on the ideal of "fortitude" or, as Hauser-Schaublin reports, the emulation of such ideals as "giving birth alone and bearing pains in silence". Indeed, she gives several superb descriptions of concrete birthing situations, one of which is particularly telling. She reports that while the labour was going on, the birthing woman's husband was sitting outside the house carving a child's paddle. No crying let alone screaming of abuse at him. Eventually the newborn's cry was heard. When the ethnographer entered the house she saw the following spectacle: "She herself (the woman who just gave birth) sat stretched out on the floor. In the corner of her mouth hung a 20 centimetre long cigarette, and she didn't look at all exhausted or tired out. She looked as though she had been disturbed from an afternoon nap" (1984: 7). This, I submit, may well be the foremost expression of the fluvial-saurian ideal of self-actualisation of birthing motherhood on record.<sup>34</sup>

Silverman's scripting, however, decontextualised that it is, seems to me to have one sole idealising and ideological purpose to effect – to amplify the gutless lowliness of men, as against his idealisation of the Tambunum Iatmul women. But his own rendition of the Tambunum birthing situation suggests a different meaning. Namely, when they actually come to give birth, it seems then that these women's truth is indeed abject somatic pain, and they are overcome by -i/m/potence so that their ideality of being above pain and in need of no

<sup>34</sup> Because of her smoking cigarette I couldn't help not noticing that, in the naven context, one of the funniest details on record is from Stanek who describes how in one situation two maternal uncles (*waus*), who were in the water, "dressed as women swim back to their house, still smoking their cigars. The *yau* (father's sister) gets into the canoe and paddles off in the standing position like a man" (cited in Houseman and Severi, 1998: 50).

other self (aquatic “self-referentiality”, as it were), shows the other side of the narcissistic economy of their archetypal omni/m/potence. This birthing situation I will characterise as the limiting limit of the women’s determination by and within the matrix of the fluvial-saurian un/conscious imaginary. No gender escapes its own limits as determined by the interrelationships between the demands of the un/conscious imaginary, and the possibilities of its actualisations in and qua its somatic facticity. In this regard, Tambunum birthing as crafted by Silverman, suggests the following questions: why is giving birth for these saurian women such a disagreeable experience? Why do they scream abuse at their husbands in that very situation? What are they actually saying? What mode of omni/m/potence is manifesting itself now? Are they angry at their men because their “bad-little” semen eventually made them go through this miserable pain? Still more: Is this for them all agony; is there a sense of ecstasy, or is this entirely an abject aspect of the “egalitarian mystery of motherhood” that they really would be happier to be spared of? Many critical questions can be brought to amplify the psychodynamics of the fluvial-saurian “dialogics” which, as a matter of fact, Silverman’s psycho-Bakhtinism cannot and, I am inclined to think, doesn’t want to pursue, because it refuses to deal with the real psyche and its embodiment. Being a creation of an academic moral-aesthetic fantasy, but graced with some good counter-transference, it can only operate within the limits of its own narcissistic economy of self-other occlusion, exclusion, inclusion, correlative idealisations, and the appropriate modes of literary confabulation. Accordingly, I see no constructive psycho-analytic ethnographic potential for such an interpretive self-pursuit.

I have endeavoured to show that an authentic perspective on men’s and women’s limiting situations, articulates informatively the dialectics of their omni/m/potence, and the overall dynamics of negativity immanent in the narcissistic economy of their archetypal fluvial-saurian un/conscious imaginary. This negativity still needs some more specification and I will return to it in the last section.

Before that, I will reflect on yet another classic Western genre that Silverman uses to construe the quandary and misfortunes of the Tambunum Iatmul masculinity.

---

### **EASTERN IATMUL MANHOOD, A GOAT-SONG OR THE CROCODILE-SONG?**

---

In Silverman’s rendition, Eastern Iatmul masculinity and manhood are an existent non-entity, a species of what he anticipates to be the universal genus. In his exegeses Silverman makes no case for the viability of Tambunum men’s manhood. His voice dominates all dialogical registers of the Iatmul life-world pronouncing relentlessly that, due to *their* delusions about femininity and motherhood, they secure for themselves nothing better than a mode of masculinity the stuff of which is “fragility and fictions”; as they press on with intense zeal and “earnestness”, the Eastern Iatmul men actualise their masculinity as nothing more than a “folly and pathos” (p. 12). In short, Eastern Iatmul manhood is a fiasco or – and this can be taken as his at once reparatory-conciliatory and moral-aesthetic amelioration – Silverman declares it a “tragedy”. No matter what men may phantasise, assert, claim, and do in respect of the omni/m/potent primacy of their masculinity, Silverman shows (and apparently more eagerly and with an absoluteness more intense than, I suspect any Iatmul woman would feel compelled to assert), that it is delusory. He, more so than the naven women, pulverises it by all means and from all cosmic-transpersonal positions.

Yet, when he characterises some of them in concreto, they are anything but non-entities. Thus, one of his informants “is a bright, responsible man, a good father and husband (...)

the son of a noted carver. [He] has a wonderful disposition and great respect for the totemic and ritual system" (p. 31). This sort of scripting is symptomatic of Silverman's idealising dynamics, which isn't kept in check by a more psychoanalytically mindful exercise of critical judgement concerning both the gravity-coefficient and the reality-coefficient of his interpretations of Tambunum men and women.<sup>35</sup> Or should one take his judgements as an indicator that, despite being tragic non-entities qua their maternal-fluvial determination, these saurian men, nevertheless, do achieve a semblance of viable manhood as judged, I presume by the criteria of the Western *homo academicus*?

To follow Silverman uncritically would make one go along with his psycho-Bakhtinian dialogical construction according to which the Iatmul men are entangled in an "egalitarian" "mystery" of motherhood (but not so their women). Similarly with regard to his apportionment of two other Western genres, comedy and tragedy. In ritual, men "camouflage yet express their desire for maternal fertility. They acknowledge yet deny their somatic inability to give birth (see also Mead, ref.). Ritual is a masculine boast, yet a *tragedy of manhood*" (p. 37; emphasis JM). "... during initiations, homoerotic pantomimes are humorous. But this drollery contradicts the very seriousness.<sup>36</sup> of men's birthing fictions and therefore calls into question the local value of manhood itself. Comedy, in other words, becomes tragedy" (p. 40).

Tragedy doesn't end here. Outside the ritual the well-known Iatmul practice of a mode of preferential marriage with one's *iai* (FMBSD), is in Silverman's dialogical figuration a "social tragedy". Why? Because in his arguably misconceived "oedipal" rendition,<sup>37</sup> this marriage introduces "filial discord into patrilineal solidarity" (ibid.). Whether the Iatmul would experience and valorise this practice as a "tragedy" is plainly left out of consideration. Despite the practice, no Iatmul man is reported to end up blinding himself by his own hand or, for the same reason, being blinded by others. Most importantly, unlike the Greek "tragic" deeds deemed so because they conflict with the "*nomos*" of the city-state, *iai* marriage, if anything, is the very fulfilment of their pre-oedipal saurian or, as I typify it, ouroboric "*nomos*".<sup>38</sup>

**35** From a practical psychoanalytic perspective, the practitioner requires a maximally realistic and critically self-reflective approach, which alone can sustain psychoanalysis as a project of knowledge and, fundamentally, as a human intervention into radically unviable human predicaments. I am not assuming that Silverman should do it like a practicing psychoanalyst; but regarding the use of psychoanalysis, though not psycho-Bakhtinianism, one stands by or goes down with its practice either as a practicing analyst or as a psychoanalytically grounded ethnographer.

**36** It is important to emphasise again that Silverman does not provide any concrete documentation of the way Tambunum men express their seriousness about procreation, or their affirmation and denial of their birthing phantasies.

**37** Throughout his analysis Silverman clearly sees the originality of this arrangement, but his formulaic application of oedipal qua tragedian scripting undercuts a more accurate and productive psychoanalytic elucidation of the formation of fatherhood within the specifically Iatmul pre-oedipal matrix of *their* transpersonal, rather than generic, un/conscious. The Tambunum father, as Silverman's data suggest, is more of a self-executioner (see especially, p. 73), than a fearful sire whom his son has to eliminate by risking his own life. And if the father is to fight anybody over his son's *iai* wife, that would be someone who wants her, but is a man other than his son. Thus "As Gamboromiawan, my informant-friend (...) insisted, 'if someone other than your son tries to marry your mother, you must fight him!' (pp. 107-8). However, Silverman's scripting of his data is so tailor-made for his thespian blue-print, that I find it often hard to discern the more authentic fluvial-saurian streamings of passions and cravings, and correlatively the tensions and conflicts they generate.

**38** For an equivalent case among the Yagwoia and the ouroboric problematics and articulation of incestuous desires, see Mimica, 1991. In the perspective of the Yagwoia situation, the Eastern Iatmul *iai* F-S binding can be explicated as follows. As they say, "my mother, therefore I am". Therefore, the truths of the father and his son are their own respective mothers. Qua *iai*, "a woman who walks the same house path" as her paternal grandmother (...), this form of matrimony replicates itself indefinitely, both in structure and names. Since a man has the same patronymics as his paternal grandfather, men often say, he should wed the very same bride" (p. 106). Ergo, the father's truth is the same as the son's and both as the sons of their respective mothers' whom, thanks to the *iai* marriage, they can copulate with on each other's behalf, and give birth to each other in every alternate generation. To put it differently, my father married his own *iai* (FMBSD) who gave birth to me, i.e., his own father; I can marry my own *iai* (FMBSD) and give birth to him, my son who is my father. The circle is closed. This, I submit, is the pregnant truth of all and every fatherhood and sonship that would generate each other within an affinal economy of the pre-oedipal (ouroboric) matrix (see Mimica, 1991).

The incestuous phantasy and violence that such a “*nomos*” generates among the Iatmul, I suggest, has to be socio-poeticised not through Sophoclean legacy and Western middle-class moral-aesthetic sensibilities, but through the mythopoetic sensibilities of the Iatmul’s very own fluvial-crocodilian imaginary and passions. To draw on Wassmann’s work among the Central Iatmul, his informant evinced no tragic pathos when he recounted how the primal crocodile created the earth – by dismembering human beings whose parts made the earth grow into terra firma: “Our present earth came into being out of the bodies of our ancestors, out of their entrails. It was human beings, our earth did not just come about anyhow” (op. cit. 1991: 85). Furthermore, Iatmul sensibilities and ethos ought to be kept in the appropriate life-world historical horizons. One should recall that the Iatmul were head-hunters. Their “filial discord and patrilineal solidarity” (ibid.: 40), like the existential streaming of their life-and-death flow, have to be valorised in the same mode as the desire for anal parturition, which the old Sophocles himself, I suspect, might have appreciated as something definitely not tragic. In other words, in terms of the overall dynamics of their drive-sublimation and the narcissistic economy of the total self and its social self-actualisation.

But from the point of view of Iatmul women, to be her man’s *iai*, or some other affinal categorical choice,<sup>39</sup> might have been anything but a “social tragedy”. Why? Because Bateson reports that “a woman, married into the village, might for purposes of head hunting be considered a foreigner. I even came across one case in which a man wore a tassel for killing his own wife in revenge for a kill accomplished by members of the village from which she had come” (Bateson, 1956: 139). He also gives a poignant vignette where a young woman was captured and brought to the captor’s village where her fate was to be decided. The captor thought of adopting her and, I assume, later on use her for a marriage transaction. At the man’s house she pleaded: “You are not my enemies; you should pity me; later I will marry in the village”. All the critical connections within the Iatmul social matrix of life-death couldn’t be more pointedly condensed: foreigner woman-adoption-marriage-children. In the face of death the girl cries for her captors’ pity, which alone will yield her her own life, and they will be able to extract more life from her (marriage-children-work). Which loop of the Iatmul life-death topology, which is also the topology of their desires, will actualise her fate? The captor’s son invited her to come with him to “the gardens to get some sugar-cane” (ibid.). Here, is the moment of critical life-death equivocation: is it a sexual innuendo, the prospect of a coital act that will yield her life or death? They went there and upon arrival he killed and decapitated her (ibid.: 138). Bateson reports that a boy who had to clean her skull had problems with a resilient ligament. He didn’t know that the skull must not be at any point touched by the hands. Therefore, he discarded the tongs used for the purpose and “seized the ligament in his teeth and pulled at it. His father saw him and was very shocked”. The boy, who much later as an adult told Bateson about this case, remarked to him on his father’s distress: “The

■■■■■■■■■■

**39** Bateson typified these preferential categories as “cliches” (p. 89) which he couldn’t order into a logically coherent whole. The history of arguments concerning the Iatmul “system” of affinal regimes/cliches is well known. As for himself, Silverman declares that “one of his goals (...) is to rephrase this debate in terms of local concepts and experience” (p. 194; on this see my footnote 37, above). Their truth and intelligibility are not to be found in exogenous theoretically motivated kinship analytics or dialogics, for it is not generated by their inner *logos*. And this one is truly the dialectical *logos* of the ouroboric archetypal imagination. One has to take Hegel seriously when he says that the “negative is the soul of the universe”, and every region of its reality has to be understood in terms of its generative “notion” for the patterning of the human life-world is as it is in accordance with its notion. The source and the self-patterning of the “notion” can be most productively elucidated by phenomenologically grounded psychoanalytic explorations of archetypal dimension of the psychic being and its syntheses in and qua understanding.

silly old man! How was I to know?" – an attitude towards taboos which is not uncommon among the Iatmul" (ibid.: 139)

Whatever is specifically problematic in the choice of *iai* wife in the scheme of Iatmul moral-aesthetic sensibilities and valuation of social distress, I have no doubts that, in terms of their self-experience and moral-aesthetic valorisation, there is no "tragedy". This is a vintage Western moral-aesthetic category used as such for that purpose. And it is exactly in terms of that external perception that the Eastern Iatmul men have been endowed with a "tragic" sense of themselves and their life as scripted for them by their ethnographer turned tragedian. On the other hand, when it comes to their authentic self-poeticisation, then the form that one may want to be guided by is the *sagi* song cycles (Wassmann, *ibid*), rather than the "song of the goat" (*tragos-oide*), from which western "tragedy" supposedly derives its name.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, one can think of a "song to the flying fox" or "the crocodile song" mode of connection between erotic desire and its social regulation. Faithful to the Iatmul imaginary, I will call it the saurian mode. Yet, to retain Silverman's western tragic register, the affective-aesthetic effect intended by this authentic fluvial-crocodilian aesthetic-performative form, when applied to Silverman's "filial discord and disturbance of patrilineal solidarity", may be given the following specifications. This alleged "social tragedy", in Iatmul saurian terms will mean that, in the face of all the immanent conflictuality and violence of social life, the head of the Iatmul wife stays intact on her head and, correlatively, that her non-decapitated body germinates many children. As for the head-hunting father and son, the father may well be happy or dead; the discord with his son and disturbances of patrilineal solidarity notwithstanding, in the saurian mode of existence the vilest is the purest and the most reprobate verges on the most virtuous. In the saurian mode opposites easily turn topsy-turvy and transmute into each other; that other Greek knew it all when he said that *logos* (rather than *tragos*) guides everything.<sup>41</sup>

Silverman's data on naven performances among the Tambunum contain novel and remarkable details which supplement those already reported by other ethnographers. In this regard the fascinating tapestry of naven has been enriched, and psychoanalytically, if countertransferentially and uncritically, amplified. Silverman endeavours to show that all the preceding attempts to explain naven are deficient for "the experiential dimensions of the Eastern Iatmul naven are unrelated to the explanations offered by previous analyses, with the excep-

**40** For a critical appraisal of this etymological derivation and the supposed relations of tragedy to sacrificial rituals, see Burkert, 1966. For emphasis on the uniqueness of the classical Greek tragedy as a cultural-moral-aesthetic form which articulates a configuration of the "tragic man" and "tragic consciousness" in the life-world of the Athenian *polis*, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1990. Devereux, 1970, provides an interesting psychoanalytic interpretation of the isomorphic relation between the structure of the psyche and the structure of tragedy, as formulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

**41** Here is appropriate to insert a statement on the crucial significance of ouroboric dynamics as a generic structure which indicates a critical feature of the mythopoetic imagination which constitutes numerous New Guinea life-worlds. This, and many similar mythopoetic images, indicate the operation of an internally oscillating self-closure, and qua it, of self-regeneration, whereby all existential differentiae – life/death, male/female, inside/outside, up/down, incest/affinity – are continuously unified in the imperishable flow of life-death and articulated as such in social practice. I use the mythic image of ouroboros to specify the ontological profile common to myriad social-existential schemata evinced by New Guinea societies (for an example, see Mimica, 1991; 1996). One of their most significant implications is absence of soteriological strivings. I am saying this aware that the anthropological interpretations of Melanesian cargo cults and Christianisation were and are often formulated through a tacit projection of the Judeo-Christian soteriological sense of existence, both in religious and secular-emancipatory variants. The cultures historically dominated by a salvational orientation towards existence, especially of the Judeo-Christian genealogy, internally exclude or, better, repress the ouroboric dimension of being, because such exclusion is the critical condition of the soteriological project itself. It is such diverse internal modifications of the core narcissistic dimension of the self, relative to the problematization of the experience of existence, that animate the constitution of human cultures as specific modes of being-in-the-world, or differently put, as ontological projects.

tion of Juillerat (ref.)” (p. 140). Indeed, the latter’s psychoanalytic exploration of naven greatly facilitates Silverman’s exegesis. But, as I endeavoured to show, the account is bedevilled by the overwhelming framework of the exogenous psycho-Bakhtinian and dramatic-tragic scripting which overrides the Tambunum’s own self-understanding in terms of their own intra-cultural, saurian imaginary, its schematism, categories and valorisations.

Accordingly, the inner logos of the Iatmul life-world, whose *telos* and auto-generative negativity are given a particularly potent and high-pitched expression in the naven ceremonialism, are at once distorted and sanitised. And a tragic physiognomy is conferred upon it in toto, including the *nggariik* anal act. “One would be hard pressed to imagine a more tragic oedipal, ritual. Any misgivings about this interpretation are laid to rest when one considers, yet again, the emotional response by the two central thespians in this tragedy, uncle and nephew, tears of shame” (ibid.: 173). I would suggest that any saurian man may have misgivings about this scripting. If one would look for the most apposite gloss that would immediately make sense to him, then I submit, *nggariik* is more accurately characterisable as a “sorry-arse” rather than a “tragic” act. As for some of the other characterisations that Silverman gives it, especially the idea that “[n]ggariik is a male sacrifice of masculinity” (p. 167), I concur, but I think that he misinterprets its determination in the overall dynamics of negativity and the narcissistic economy of the fluvial-saurian self (see the next section).

What is an exquisite and original ouroboric determination is reduced to Bakhtinian-Rabelaisian refrains and echoes, such as: “By turning the world upside down and inside out, the carnivalesque imagery of naven combines idioms of death and birth, atrophy and rejuvenation, defecation and copulation, desiccation and nurture. Mud smearing and betel nut expulsion evoke both the polluting and generative capacities of the “lower bodily stratum”. The ambiguity of these gestures is enhanced by the expectation that persons who are degraded during naven will pay the perpetrators since, as Bakhtin (ref.) wrote (etc)” (p. 152). And in the tragic register “... from a dialogical and psychoanalytic perspective, naven is revealed for what it really is: a ritual that plays on desire and teases taboo in order to effect emotional and semiotic ambivalence rather than a sociological moral rejuvenation. Naven indeed resembles classic tragedy. It confronts the hidden, repressed yearnings of men and women, and enters these unstated thoughts into wider, ongoing dialogue. Naven, to conclude, enshrines the pathos of culture and rehearses the eternally unresolvable dimensions of masculinity, motherhood, and human experience” (p. 173).

Silverman disregards the internal connection between the catharsis and the “classical tragedy”, but I will not belabour this mis-scripting of the Iatmul life-world in terms of the “goat-song” rather than the authentic saurian mode. What is symptomatic here is that, to the extent that he refers to the “hidden repressed yearnings of *men and women*”, this pertaining to a more general situation, in the next sentence women are left out. Indeed, it is the “hidden yearnings” of the Iatmul women that he not only doesn’t consider, but in his account, as I have emphasised, everything is pitched so as to suggest that Iatmul women have nothing other than a self-fulfilling “aquatic self-referentiality”. And if so, it would follow that this feminine self-satisfaction would be unproblematic and totally unentailed by and unrelated to the “tragedy” of the Iatmul men. But it is here, in this occluded narcissistic core where the self wants to have and be all, without any otherness, not even mirror-otherness, that one has to speculate about the source of the Eastern Iatmul self-negativity, which men live to the full as the very reality and truth of their fluvial-saurian maternal being.<sup>42</sup>

---

## THE NEGATIVE OF THE NEGATIVE

---

It would appear that the narcissistic dynamics of the Eastern Iatmul masculinity is a masterpiece of malignant negativity. The merit of Silverman's ethnography is to bring this dimension into a high-pitched perspective. No matter how much they ascend in their solar self-exaltation, much in their cultural reality, including their ritual modes of self-articulation, seems to work to negate them. And therefore, the solar luminosity transubstantiates into the burning acid of anal exuviae, which corrodes self-esteem but never so conclusively that men's egoity would disintegrate once and for all. If anything, Iatmul male egoity, as Silverman's data indicate, comes out of their own, self-generated experiences and actions, only too willing to be committed to themselves as "sorry-arse" men; and I would say – rather self-accepting and self-satisfied, for they, evidently, do not suicide or grovel in acid depressions, which one might expect them to do as Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinianism, even without its rhetorical weight and tragic scripting, would tend to suggest. There is here a real problem of the actual contents of the Iatmul's men's and women's self-experience. If the men are at the mercy of a lethal narcissistic negativity, to which their women are seemingly impervious, then such female omni/m/potence itself would be precariously balanced over the abyss created by its own negativity. Such intense negativity would simply have to be consummated in and qua the figure which monopolises its *omni*-(m/potent) aspect – the mother. One form this would take is, of course, matricide.<sup>43</sup>

Yet in this regard the Iatmul fluvial-maternal un/conscious of both sexes is optimally self-saturated with its own *omni*/m/potence, and can equilibrate in perpetuity. A graphic expression of such a self-destructive equilibrium would be a perverse sexual self-aesthetisation of a transsexual or transvestic male whose crown-piece theatrics would be, say, self-decapitation tricks involving a real guillotine, or some other comparable, not "grotesque" but, to put it in the dog-Latin, *actus purus macabrus*. In a life-world like the Iatmul, where the human spirit, actualised as spermatic crocodile spirits and phallic flatulent androgynous wind that inspirates the formless water, of necessity, generates its own sound reality orientation, rather than a delusory self-aesthetisation, for it has to create its own life-world in its own image. Accordingly, the solutions are far more profound, spectacular, and cosmically violent. Since the radically negatively determined narcissism, (and this can only be generated at the level of the pre-oedipal maternal (ouroboric) self-circuitry), can only be realised in matricide (not patricide), what would be the cultural form in which the self-sacrificially purest act could be actualised? I suggest that *nggariik* is one. In it, the narcissistic self-ideality is at once cut into and regained. The phallic womb is slit open and stitched up. Correlatively, women's factual child bearing is its foremost somatic truth and experience.

---

<sup>42</sup> Despite the tradition of tragedy in the metapsychology of classical psychoanalysis, Kohut, a leading interpreter of narcissistic dynamics, still thinks that the classical theoretical framework (of conflicts in the sphere of drives) can deal with what he calls the "Guilty Man", but not the "Tragic Man", which is the sphere of his "self-psychology" (Kohut, 1977). Here I will just notice the limitations of such a psycho-ontological typification in view of ethnographic considerations, which, however, does not prevent the use of Kohut's important work. For statements concerning the problematics of the choice of psychoanalytic metapsychologies in relation to the dynamics of ouroboric modes of existence and the constitution of the human self, see Mimica, 1996a; also 1993; 1997; and the coda below.

<sup>43</sup> Life-and-death instinctual drives being undifferentiated, matricidal desire is conterminous with maternal incest. This is the core constellation of the pre-oedipal matrix, not patricide.

However, I am also inclined to speculate that this core-desire of saurian omni/m/potence was further sublimated into and nourished by a substitutive action, namely headhunting. Real heads were severed and real men and women were lethally negated in their omni/m/potence. Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinian analysis of this practice sees in it fundamentally what it put into it, "a mimetic dramatization of female reproduction" (p. 117) and "a grotesque transformation of moral motherhood" (p. 118). But I think that the Iatmul fluvial-saurian un/conscious knows a lot better and gets exactly from headhunting what it desires. Accordingly, it would never be satisfied with a mere imitation. Hence in the pre-colonial times of the self-efflorescence of the Iatmul fluvial-saurian life-world, factually real human skulls were clay-modelled into a semblance of the human flesh made art by real dead-dirty-deeds.<sup>44</sup> That's why that Iatmul mother who admonishes her little son as a "bad little sperm" can do so playfully and harmlessly attuned to her cosmic (un/conscious) negativity one of whose concrete modes is murderousness. Traditionally her son would make sure that she indeed gets away with the murder of both herself and her own son, whom she omni-protectively negates in the ceaseless circuitry of her and his omni/m/potent self-affirmative negativity. Both are the truth of their own initial self-positing: "my mother, therefore I am".<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt in my mind that the Iatmul men always were and still are indeed the authentic sons of their mothers. Just as the saurian men, without whose phallic desire and labour there would be no cosmos and no actual work of Iatmul men and women (i.e., the Iatmul imaginary actualised as their cultural life-world), the omni/m/potent fluvial a-substantiality of the Iatmul women (whose self-totalising mono-polar voice is Silverman's psycho-Bakhtinian scripting), would at best remain the dissipating mud of its own otherness. And in effect, no real Iatmul men and women would have ever ascended to their humanness and made a spectacle of themselves. The balanced measure of negation transforms the infinite, world-generative intensity of the Iatmul un/conscious into its self-sustainable human semblance of transpersonal omni/m/potence. And I think that the Iatmul men, not as "tragic" singers of "goat-odes" but as, indeed, "sorry-arse" saurian men who once were warrior-headhunters, are the true image, nay - being, of their mothers' desires to become truly actualised in-and-for-themselves. Naven, then, is the actualisation and fulfilment of their mutual and constitutive pre-oedipal, anally calibrated symbiotic self-generativity, which is self-devouring and, in each infinitesimal moment of its anabolic-catabolic pulsation and self-negation, self-exfoliating - ad infinitum. To echo Wordsworth in reverse,<sup>46</sup> the travails of the fluvial-saurian son are the true spermatic motherhood of his mother's own maternal "therefore, I am", and through the *iai* marriage, the spermatic manhood of his father. Such might be, as a first approximation, the ouroboric differential equation of Iatmul masculine selfhood in the self-refractions and self-circuitous self-appropriation and generation of its maleness and femaleness.



<sup>44</sup> The saurian man was also the master of the "sublime". Bateson's plate (25, reproduced here on the following page) of a female skull portrait is a striking example of this saurian self-expression of art-become-flesh. "Sublime" is in pips precisely because all characterisations and categorical determinants of Iatmul "aesthetics" and sensibilities would have to be worked out from within their own experiential field and life-world. The main focus would have to be on the constitution of Iatmul sensuousness in the dynamics of the life-death instinctual drive-matrix and the modulations of their erotogeneity.

<sup>45</sup> "... the Eastern Iatmul mother virtuously promotes in her children personality traits that ensure their adult successes. In so doing, however, she must to some degree contravene the ideal moral image of motherhood as seen through the nostalgic lens of manhood. Mothers, it may be said, make strong warriors by tolerating and even encouraging childhood tantrums" (p. 98).

<sup>46</sup> "The child is father of the man; and I could wish my days to be bound each to each by natural piety".



"The portrait skull of a woman. She was a native of Kankanamun who died some three generations ago. Her skull was cleaned, exhibited at mortuary ceremonies, and finally buried as is customary. But as she was considered to be strikingly beautiful, the men later dug up her portrait (and probably substituted another skull in the grave). Since then her skull has been used in *mbwatnggowi* ceremonies. Her long nose was especially admired. In the photograph, the breast is a half coconut shell." (Quoted and reproduced from Gregory Bateson, 1980 (1936), *Naven*. London: Wildwood House, p. 339, plate xxv).

And the daughter? I am tempted to say that in the saurian depths of the Iatmul un/conscious, her desire is even more original than the Egyptian Hathor's, who was the "mother of her father" and "the daughter of her son" (Budge, 1904: 431). An authentic psychoanalytic-ethnographic engagement may well show that the Iatmul daughter is her father's true child, his self-conceiving and conceived femininity.

---

## **CODA**

---

A final reflection on Silverman's ethnographic and interpretive synthesis of Tambunum realities is in order. Psychoanalysis is as old as the last century and so virtually is its pursuit in anthropology. The fundamental entailments of psychoanalytic ethnography and the rigours it demands were explicated long time ago by Devereux (1967), but primordially they were set forth by that great pythian dictum - "know thyself". It applies to the pursuit of the ethnographic project regardless of one's acceptance or rejection of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic interpretations are always in need of a more thorough grounding in a particular field of personal and transpersonal subjectivity. The problem is with the choice of a psychoanalytic framework of understanding, with the depth of the ethnographer's own psychoanalytic self-reflection, and correlatively with his/her ability and will to project him/herself imaginatively into the life-world of a given people who, most importantly, are neither good citizens nor citizen-subjects. The tacit and diverse ontologies of the Melanesian subject and sociality demand that the ethnographer reflects critically on the cultural ontology of the human subject embedded in all psychoanalytic metapsychologies. Such a precaution will not only enhance the hermeneutic potential of psychoanalytic theories (Freudian, Kleinian, Bionian, Ego-psychology, Lacanian, Kohut's self-psychology, Jungian, etc) but will also facilitate the construction of a culturally more adequate representation of any New Guinean subject and his/her society. This in turn will also appropriately modify the metapsychological scheme of understanding. The need for this kind of culturally specific hermeneutic grounding of psychoanalysis becomes evident when one tries to grasp the cultural logics of incest and their articulations in different New Guinea cultures. One deals here with different intra-cultural constitutions and problematizations of "family complexes" or, better, societal complexes and the bisexual matrix of the human psychic being. From this follow all other ontological differences between the subject as constructed by psychoanalytic metapsychologies, shaped by their concrete Western social-cultural conditions of existence, and a particular constellation of New Guinea subjectivity and its cultural life-world.

Crucial to the integrity of ethnographic project, with or without psychoanalysis, is the construction and practice of anthropological understanding. This is the medium of increasingly conceptually deficient but conceited discourses spun by the professional fraternities-sororities who inhabit Western metropolitan academic institutions. In regard to this terminal station, one has to be aware that these discourses themselves are the products of the Western civic un/conscious and its culturally and historically specific modes of objectifications, in the form of "critical" knowledge and moral-aesthetic styles of self-presentation. What starts off as a local field-work situation determined, in the present instance, by its Sepikian existential milieu and un/conscious matrix, becomes refracted and metabolised in a psychic medium and sphere of critical-theoretical understanding which caters for, is driven and determined by, egoties external to the Iatmul originary fluvial-crocodilian cosmos - *which is also their transpersonal, cultural-historical objectified psyche.*

The accomplishments of ethnography as an epistemic project always balance precariously on the relations between some such two (or more) life-worlds, coalescing in the egoity and the un/conscious, at once personal and transpersonal, of the ethnographer. In this perspective, Silverman's ethnographic scales tilt heavily on the side of his American academic sphere of self-synthesis qua understanding, rather than on the Tambunum Iatmul side.

Now to achieve the latter doesn't mean that he would have to become one of them or to abandon the perspective of a critical-theoretical self-un/consciousness. Rather, it is a matter of a self-critical and self-reflective exercise for which the basic tenets of classical ethnography and psychoanalysis are more than enough to serve the purpose of methodical guidance; no need for any hyper-reflexive bravados in vogue since the inception of post-modern anthropological styles of self-presentation. Every productive ethnographic interpretive process critically hinges on the psychoanalytical self-regard of the interpreter him/herself (Devereux, 1967; Mimica, 2001) and is not carried out for the sake of the reproduction of a conceptual framework, which quickly calcifies into a formulaic application exercise, determined by his/her own situation, external to the life-world under scrutiny. The second order formulaic amplifications are at best that – auxiliary amplifications. They cannot carry the crucial work of self-critical analysis, being a work in the service of the elucidation of an alien cultural life-world in its own terms.

Echoing the dramaturgical perspective, for an ethnographer, the perennial task is to seek the truth of his/her characters in the facticity of their own self-creation and self-interpretation. In this regard, they have to be bespoken, refracted and re-synthesised from inside themselves, in their own terms. The ethnographer is the medium of *their* maximally actualised self-semblance. Neither the ethnographer-dramatist, nor the characters themselves, may like the emergent self-semblance. But then who is it that is ready to claim as their own the whole of their own self, sired by critical self-knowledge, rather than glimpsed in the twinkle of maternal eyes that intimate the promise of infinite bliss and perfection, but at the price of narcissistic misrecognition and self-ignorance? Psychoanalytic ethnographers, I expect.

---

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

---

I am grateful to Sebastian Job for his editorial work on this paper and for discussing wider issues that stem from it. I am also grateful to Eric Hirsch of Brunell University (London) for his extremely constructive comments, and to Michael Allen and my wife Ute Eickelkamp who commented on an earlier draft. I also wish to thank Bruce Kapferer, Don Gardner and Michael Jackson for their comments. Finally, I thank Borut Telban for both his comments and the invitation to have this paper published in this journal.

## **POVZETEK**

Članek predstavlja kritično in konstruktivno diskusijo o zadnji etnografski monografiji, ki govori o Iatmulih iz province Vzhodni Sepik na Papui Novi Gvineji. Njihov etnograf Eric Silverman je tamkajšnje ljudi in njihov življenjski svet interpretiral skozi konceptualni okvir, ki združuje psihoanalizo in Bahtinov dialogizem. V pričujočem članku Mimica razkrije različne pomanjkljivosti tega interpretativnega okvirja, ki je sicer v svoji celovitosti popolnoma v skladu z glavnimi akademskimi antropološkimi diskurzi. Ker je interes Jadrana Mimice povezan predvsem s psihoanalitično etnografijo ter specifičnostmi iatmulske biti-v-svetu, se v svojem prispevku prizade-

va oceniti Silvermanove interpretativne konstrukcije na tak način, da bi bila originalnost eksistence teh ljudi prikazana znotraj bolj pravilne kozmo-ontološke perspektive, ki bi bila karseda natančno uglasena z notranjo dialektiko iatmulskega življenjskega sveta. Istočasno poskuša razviti bolj realistično in radikalno perspektivo o praksi psihoanalitične etnografije.

## **REFERENCES**

- BATESON, G.** 1958 (1936). *Naven*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- BUDGE, E.A.W.** 1969 (1904). *The Gods of the Egyptians. Vol. 1*. New York: Dover.
- BURKERT, N.** 1966. *Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual*. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 7: 87-121.
- DEVEREUX, G.** 1967. *From Anxiety to Method in Behavioral Sciences*. Paris: Mouton.
- DEVEREUX, G.** 1970. *The Structure of Tragedy and the Structure of the Psyche in Aristotle's Poetics*. In: Hanly, C. and M. Lazerowitz (eds.), *Psychoanalysis and Philosophy*. New York: International Universities Press.
- ELLMAN, C.** and **J. REPPEN** (eds.). 1997. *Omnipotent Fantasies and the Vulnerable Self*. Northvale, N.J.: Aronson.
- FREUD, S.** 1977 (1909). *Family Romances*. In: *On Sexuality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (The Pelican Freud Library, vol 7).
- GRODDECK, G.** 1949. *Exploring the Unconscious*. London: Vision Press.
- GRODDECK, G.** 1950. *The Book of It*. London: Vision Press.
- GRODDECK, G.** 1951. *The Unknown Self*. London: Vision Press.
- GRUNBERGER, B.** 1979. *Narcissism: Psychoanalytic Essays*. New York: International Universities Press.
- GRODDECK, G.** 1989. *New Essays on Narcissism*. London: Free Associations Books.
- HAUSER-SCHAUBLIN, B.** 1984 (1977). *Reproduction, Pregnancy and Birth in Kararau* (translation by P. Townsend from her *Frauen in Kararau*). Port Moresby: Unpublished manuscript in the library of the Institute for Applied Social and Economic Research.
- HOUSEMAN, M.** and **C. SEVERI**. 1998. *Naven or the Other Self*. Leiden: Brill.
- KERNBERG, O.** 1975. *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. Northvale, N.J.: Aronson.
- KLEIN, M.** 1988 (1932). *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*. London: Virago.
- KOHUT, H.** 1971. *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- KOHUT, H.** 1977. *The Restoration of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- LIPSET, D. M.** 1997. *Mangrove Man: Dialogics of Culture in the Sepik Estuary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LOPEZ-CORVO, R. E.** 1995. *Self-Envy: Therapy and the Divided Inner World*. Northvale, N.J.: Aronson.
- MASSON, J. M.** 1980. *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origins of Religious Sentiment in Ancient India*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co.
- MIMICA, J.** 1981. *Omalycce: An Ethnography of the Iqwaye View of the Cosmos*. PhD Thesis, Canberra: Australian National University.
- MIMICA, J.** 1988. *Intimations of Infinity: The Counting System and the Concept of Number among the Iqwaye*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- MIMICA, J.** 1991. *The Incest Passions: An Outline of the Logic of the Iqwaye Social Organisation*. *Oceania* 62 (1;2): 34-58; 81-113.
- MIMICA, J.** 1993. *The Foi and Heidegger: Western Philosophical Poetics and a New Guinea Life-World (a critical review of James Weiner's *The Empty Place: Poetry, Space, and Being among the Foi of Papua New Guinea*)*. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 4(2): 79-95.

- MIMICA, J.** 1996. **On Dying and Suffering in Iqwaye Existence.** In: Jackson, M. (ed.): *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 213-237.
- MIMICA, J.** 1996a. **Review of *Shooting the Sun: Ritual and Meaning in West Sepik***, ed. by Bernard Juillerat. *Canberra Anthropology* 19(2): 122-25.
- MIMICA, J.** 1997. **Review of *Children of the Blood: Society, Reproduction and Cosmology in New Guinea***, by Bernard Juillerat. *Oceania* 68(2): 140-42.
- MIMICA, J.** 1999. **Review of *Mangrove Man: Dialogics of Culture in the Sepik Estuary***, by David Lipset. *Oceania* 70(2): 182-84.
- MIMICA, J.** 2001. **A Review from the Field (a critical review of Gilbert Herdt's *Sambia's Sexual Culture: Essays from the Field*)**. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12(2): 225-37.
- MIMICA, J.** in preparation. ***Ouroboric Universe: An Ethnography of the Yagwoia Life-World***.
- MORGENTHALER, F., WEISS, F., MORGENTHALER, M.** 1987(1984). **Conversations Au Bord Du Fleuve Mourant: Ethnopsychanalyse chez les Iatmouls de Papouasie/Nouvelle-Guinee.** Geneve: Editions Zoe (original title *Gesprache am Sterbenden Fluss*).
- NEUMANN, E.** 1954. **The Origin and History of Consciousness.** Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- NEUMANN, E.** 1973. **The Child: The Structure and Dynamics of the Nascent Personality.** London: Karnac.
- REICHEL-DOLMATOFF, G.** 1987. **The Great Mother and the Kogi Universe: A Concise View.** *Journal of the Latin American Lore* 13(1).
- SCHUSTER, M.** 1985. **The Men's House, Center and Nodal Point of Art on the Middle Sepik.** In: Greub, S. (ed.), *Authority and Ornament: Art of the Sepik River*. Basel: Tribal Art Centre.
- STRATHERN, M.** 1989. **The Gender of the Gift.** Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- TUZIN, D.** 1997. **The Cassowary's Revenge: The Life and Death of Masculinity in a New Guinea Society.** Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- VERNANT, J-P.** and P. **VIDAL-NAQUET.** 1990. **Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece.** New York: Zone Books.
- WASSMANN, J.** 1991 (1982). **The Song to the Flying Fox.** Port Moresby: The National Research Institute.
- WINNICOTT, D. W.** 1974 (1971). **Playing and Reality.** Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.