

STUDY OF MYTH AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE BODY

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Myth and body may seem rather independent concepts but they are, in fact, deeply interrelated. In my master's degree thesis at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), I tried to identify in Northern Paiute subsistence and rituals some emic gestures that appeared regularly in the historical literature such as scratching, exemplified by the digging-stick and the scratching stick, and associated to femininity; and piercing, the male technique for hunting. The current step of my research is to continue discerning emic techniques and gestures in the Northern Paiute myths previously recorded, but also to conduct fieldwork and collect more stories. My focus on gestures implies an analysis of the concept of body I will try to sketch out in this paper.

Over the last sixty years, diverse social science theories have developed focusing on the body. The most famous example may be Bourdieu's work on the habitus, the way body integrates daily practices. More recently, in the US, a trend in cognitive science has developed under the influence of George Lakoff to explore the hypothesis that cognition is intimately related to the model of the body. This paper postulates that the body is both the pragmatic model of thought and a way of representing ideas through embodiment. In this conceptualization the body is both origin and result of the cognitive processes.

The body is the physical form of animate beings. Therefore the body refers both to a biological reality and to a representational or symbolic model. This definition insists on the idea of animation: the sensorimotor aspect is the most prevalent when we talk about, or study the body. Nevertheless, there are many other characteristics of the body we use to represent and to understand the world: its composite unity and organization with limbs, organs, interiority and appearance, or also its scatological or erotic aspects.

In earlier stages of French anthropology, measuring the human body was standard practice. Although there is not much similarity between this evolutionary physical anthropology and recent theories of body and practice, there is the common idea that the body is imposing and irreducible. The main difference is that in evolutionary anthropology the form of the body was seen as a criterion for classifying humans. From Marcel Mauss (1934) on, the body was characterized by its use, which is culturally specific. Since then, anthropological

classifications about the body should be based on the way people use it and not on its physical characteristics.

The cultural body is transversal in all aspects of ethnography. From subsistence to rituals, from myth to warfare, the body is both a tool and a symbol. Mauss illustrates the cultural body as a total social fact with the example of a company of British soldiers who wanted to use French songs for their marches after World War I. They were never able to march properly on French music because the body's technical training, the rhythm for marching, is radically different in French and British military traditions. This example shows how the training of the body is deeply rooted in the *habitus*. The company wanted to perform a symbolic shift by incorporating their French experience into their parade repertoire. In this case a conflict exists between the technical ability of the body and its use as a representational device.

This dichotomy is based on an opposition between the interior and the exterior. Symbols are representational, being aimed at or produced by others while the 'techniques of the body' are self-serving. Both are normalized but they have different purposes and orientations. Techniques are aimed at autonomy, symbols at social representation. Since we also have ideas and presuppositions about our bodies, the social aspect of the body can be internalized.

Various traditions have added to this dichotomy between the technical and symbolic body. According to Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), medieval political theology ritualized the distinction between a mortal, physical body on the one hand and an immortal, political body on the other hand. This paradoxical situation sounds in the expression "The king is dead, long live the king!" In this case, it is not the physical body that bears strength but the symbolic body that retains power and stability. Here the opposition is even more diametric than Mauss' example since it deals with biology versus sociology: the physical versus the cultural body. In the military march, the body is always culturally defined; in the two bodies of the king, the physical body is construed as non-cultural. This ideology represents culture on the side of abstraction, immortality and public life.

The differences between concepts of the body vary according to space, time, and cultural context. Yet is there always a gap between the physical, the

technical and the symbolic body? The heterogeneity of a body, the difference between multiple bodies and the limitations of the body lead all cultures to dress, make up or ritualize the body in very different ways. Sometimes the distance between the physical and the ritualized body is very short.

According to Lakoff (1980: 3), metaphors permeate our daily life and our language. A metaphor is a contiguity established between two elements of a different nature that could be seen as totally different in other contexts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain and theorize on the metaphor, using examples of many metaphors that create an equivalency between a physical situation, an object, an action or a part of the body and another concept. If metaphor means perceived contiguity, it doesn't mean identity. Some internal difference remains between the two elements of the metaphors, but they are presented as 'partially similar'.

The construed contiguity of heterogeneous things is the definition of *bricolage* as Lévi-Strauss developed it in the *Savage Mind* (1962, I). So-called "primitive societies" know the world in an alternative logic that is labelled the science of the concrete. Things that we would say differentiate are associated with each other because they fit together practically. The *bricoleur*, the person who fixes things by diverting other objects best exemplifies, according to Lévi-Strauss, the classificatory improvisation that characterizes myth. The *bricoleur* decides to divert a thing from its normal use and places it contiguous to something else to serve his purpose. The logic of this diversion is similar to the logic of myth but also to the logic of metaphor: the actor creates a relation between *a priori* heterogeneous objects. In addition, in this *bricolage*, the fixing is partial, contingent and fortuitous; the two objects do not become identical. On the contrary, the aesthetic of it is that they are obviously disparate but that they fit together in a given circumstance after this manipulation.

In Northern Paiute mythology, the body often monopolizes the telling of the narrative. The Northern Paiute are a traditionally semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer culture of the American Great Basin. The myth of how Coyote kills the Giant Cannibal, Nemedzoho (Kelly, 1938: 410-411) illustrates the use of the body. Nemedzoho always carries a grinding stone or a mortar on his back to grind his victims. He finds Coyote, who plays sick in order to negotiate with the

giant to play a game rather than being ground up right away. They agree to play at smashing each other with rocks. Coyote goes out to defecate and asks his intestinal worms what to do. Following their advice, Coyote gets in the mortar and removes his skin, puts it in the center of the mortar and the flesh and bones on the outskirts. After Nemedzoho hits the skin without harming Coyote, the trickster takes his turn, killing the giant and grinding him. In this story, Coyote dismembers his own body in order to be insensitive to the grinding. He diverts his own body, exemplifying *bricolage* on himself. In so doing, he reverses the situation, becoming the grinder and Nemedzoho the ground, a symbol for food. Since Nemedzoho is a cannibal, this completes the circle: his own flesh being treated like food is the inversion of his cannibalistic habit.

The character of the intestinal worms remains unexplained, and I would like to offer an interpretation of it. How can we explain the appearance of the worms to advise Coyote? In addition to their scatological comic effect, the physical nature of the worms might participate in the *bricolage* or transformation of Coyote. Worms are invertebrates and so could be the pragmatic model for the trick. Grinding is an effective way to break the hardness of materials. Worms being soft by nature motivates Coyote to divert his nature, to magically change his constitution in order to deceive Nemedzoho. In contrast to the giant's failed grinding attempt, Coyote reduces the giant to mush. The narrative reversal of situation is produced through the physical inversion of the characters: Coyote makes Nemedzoho soft by force after having made himself soft by trick.

The magical dismemberment of Coyote's own body to be like the worms could be an "operational metaphor." Nevertheless, the concept of metaphor and the concept of transformation are not identical. They each associate two objects, do so in different manners. Metaphor is a symbolic association, using one reality for another one, sharing partial identity. Transformation, on the other hand, denotes a complete physical change. Structuralist transformation insists that if the form of the reality changes, the internal structure remains mostly similar. The structure can be subject to variation or inversion, but its logical articulation remains consistent in a structuralist transformation. The structure is the logical relation among elements constituting an object, and so is internal. The form is

the perceived reality, thus being external. Similarly, Lakoff insists that in a metaphor there is coherence between the two partial objects. In other words, Lakoffian metaphor and Lévi-straussian transformation share an internal coherence of structure between the two objects and an external disparateness, semantic distance in the case of metaphor and physical change in transformation.

In both traditions, the goal is a better understanding of cognitive processes, which for Lévi-Strauss is ‘the mind’. Studies in the tradition of Lakoff have tended to focus only on metaphors of the native language of the researchers, English in most of the cases. As a socio-cultural anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss has been more dedicated to exploring the symbolic world of other cultures, with a few exceptions (1952, 1993, 1994). Lévi-Strauss has tried to seek transcultural patterns in the cultures of North America. The objective proposed here is the opposite, to look for minimal structures within a given cultural area. In that sense it aims to combine cognitive studies with anthropology’s interest on alterity. If Lévi-Strauss is a model for the study of myth, some aspects of his methodology can be refined. The critiques of Geertz (1975: 14, 359) and Victor Turner (Deflem, 1991: 10-11) also invite more concern for emicity in symbol analysis and in the study of myths. The minimalist attitude here defended also takes this into consideration.

144

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