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THE GREAT MYTH

field notes

Puerto 14 de Mayo, 6 October 1989

Today I decided that I will organize the Great Ishir Myth according to the version narrated by the conjoined voices of Clemente, Bruno, and Emilio (the first two men are Ebytoso; the last is Tomárahó). Although I have in the past three years already collected dozens of versions—whole, fragmented, and overlapping versions—this one strikes me as the fullest and most complete. I will use it as the foundation of my own narration and confront it with other versions I, or other authors, have come across, filling in the blanks and interspersing (my own or others') commentaries throughout its dense discourse.

Correction: I do not know if this is one of the most complete versions. Perhaps the circumstances in which the Great Myth is now being presented to

me—intense oral performances on the very ground on which the events of the myth supposedly took place—accentuates its thick atmosphere and its intricate architecture. Jorge, my brother, and I take down whatever notes we can in Karcha Balut, open to the Paraguay River and lodged atop enormous mounds of old snail shells, the fearsome remnants of ancient divine banquets. We arrived this afternoon via a motorboat from Bahía Negra and are awaiting a group of Tomáraho who will bring us horses tomorrow morning and take us to Potrerito (Peishiota), the current location of the Tomáraho settlement.

As he stokes the fire, Bruno speaks about the forces that inhabit this strange place. Clemente and Emilio sing at length, shaking their maracas to scare off shadows, mosquitoes, and who knows what other evils. The river has become an enormous mass of pure dark presence. The dry rustle of the rattles has spread a pool of silence over our campsite. Now the men sit back on their heels and begin to say the true words.

THE GREAT MYTH, ACT ONE

The Birth of the Gods

I WILL begin before the beginning. It is afternoon in the brutal Chaco summer. A small group whose number varies, according to different versions, between seven and ten women, have fallen behind as they follow the tracks of a nomadic group that is moving the village to which they belong. They make jokes and laugh; they are young and unmarried. “They are jútoro,”¹ says Bruno. “Whores,” Clemente translates with little hesitation, offering the semantic equivalent of a term that lacks negative connotations in his culture. One of them, the narrator continues, feels the caress of a plant stem between her legs. She shivers and comments, pleased, that the sensation reminds her of a lover’s touch. Intrigued and still laughing, her companions begin to pull on the stalk only to find that an enormous force holds it firmly in place. They do not however lose heart, and turn to the *alybyk*—the stick used by women to dig for food—and remove the dirt until they find an *ahpora* (wild watermelon).² Terrified, they discover that it is being held by a monstrous being. This being rises out of the ground with awful cries, accompanied by clouds of smoke and deep earthly rumbles (according to the tale told after, or before, by Flores Balbuena).

Bruno interrupts him. “I don’t want to contradict my father,” he says slowly, trying to avoid the unforgivable discourtesy this would imply among the Ishir. “I hope he corrects me if he considers that I am wrong, but according to Chypyló, the wisest of the five teachers that I had in the *tobich* (the site where the initiation of young men takes place), the women were thirsty and stopped to look for a wild watermelon. When they found one while digging with the *alybyk* they saw that it was swelling before their very eyes to unnatural proportions. The *jútoro* cracked open the fruit with their sticks and the ferocious stranger emerged from inside the watermelon, amidst a violent fountain of water quivering with fish that poured from the broken fruit.” Although he respects the erudition of Chypyló, Clemente prefers the Tomárahó version.

Both groups agree, however, that a creature emerges from the earth and that though its features are humanoid, it also exhibits clear evidence of its exceptional nature. It is an *anábsér*, a demon-god, a monstrous and somewhat brutal superhuman. The identity of the first *anábsér* varies according to the informants. Most of them, especially the Ebytoso, insist that this first *anábsér* is none other than the terrible Wákaka, the cannibal; but others, especially the Tomárahó, maintain that it is the one-eyed Houch Ylybyd, or even the healer Wioho, one of the generous *anábsoro* (plural of *anábsér*). Regardless of who emerges first, it is immediately followed by a group of other *anábsoro* (as many of them as there are women in the story) that burst from the ground amid deafening shrieks.

The appearance of these beings is imposing and the women cower in terror. They lack facial features. Their bodies are covered with protrusions that resemble dense feathers, copious furs, multicolored scales, or patterns of drawings and colors never before seen by the human eye. Although it is impossible to locate their eyes or mouth, these beings can see through the densest fogs and breathe and scream through their ankles. Their knees are backwards (“like the ostrich,” say the Tomárahó) and this gives them a peculiar gait. According to Cordeu, female *anábsoro*’s genitals are located in the same place as the human navel (1984, 213).

Aside from these common characteristics, each one possesses unique features. Wákaka bears the sharp fangs of the giant piranha. Pohejuvo lacks arms but his prodigious virility more than compensates for this serious defect. Pfaujata fires deathly glances of frozen yellow flames. Purt is a dwarf. Manume is lame. Holé has feathers instead of fingers. Okío has unusually large ears.

Each of them possesses a particular excess or lack that sets them apart from each other and from humanity. The costumes that the women and, later, the men, will use to represent the deities simulate their idiosyncrasies. Ashnuwerta's head is crowned in tongues of fire; the flaming crest radiates from the occipital bone only to burst into a shivering beam of many colors. A thicket of fog that shakes with the whitest of tremors sprouts from Nemur's head. Apepo's body is covered in thick hair and frizzy fur. Almost all anábsoro have temples, necks or napes, waists, and wrists or prickly ankles of uncertain thickness that resemble multicolored manes. Each one of these dense appendices will be represented in performance through feathers, just as the spots, textures, and drawings that brighten and darken, calm and agitate the different divine bodies are reproduced through corporal painting.

Each demon-god emits its own cry: intense, stuttering whistles, dismal howls, hoarse bellows, or disquieting whispers that forever perturb the fields and distant woods. Each one, finally, has his or her own way of walking: some hop swiftly, others rush aggressively; some prance proudly or glide slyly, others can walk with a measured pace or wander hesitantly; some move with dignified long strides, others trace spirals and crazy cross-steps that, briefly, fill the scene with light whirlwinds of feather and dust.

References on the Anábsoro

Rudolph Otto's studies regarding religious experience, published in 1917, have contributed to a richer understanding of the sacred in different cultures, especially in so-called "primitive" cultures (Otto 1958). Human beings sometimes face situations that exceed them, and realize they stand before unknown powers that point to the existence of supernatural realms. Otto speaks of a "numinous" (*noumen* = god) feeling regarding the uncanny or the markedly different. This feeling, which promotes more intense and dramatic visions of reality, does not exhaust itself in what is simply natural, but is animated by forces and traversed by transcendent powers and complex meanings that fill the human horizon with concerns, defining it against the backdrop of death.

The experience of the sacred begins with situations that elude the ordinary, with moments saturated with significance, with moments that concentrate power. The Chamacoco name this extraordinary power, this overflowing and strange energy that can both help and harm them, *woso*. *Woso* is the im-

pulse that perturbs certain moments or places, beings or things, tearing them from their banal facticity and bringing them face to face with the thresholds of meaning. The numinous operates on the basis of such an experience of power, much like the aesthetic, which accentuates the object's form so as to name obliquely the unattainable secret of its doubled meaning and its ancient lack. Both the numinous and the aesthetic appeal to the cunning recourses of artifice and the errancy of poetry in order to challenge the obviousness of the object, its ordinary presence, its innocence and calm. This is why both the numinous and the aesthetic re-present the object: they place it onstage, under a new light; they veil and mask it; they reflect and elude it. They seek to reveal the object through what it is not, through the intimate absence that lurks beyond it and opens it up to limitless articulations, to foreign powers that seize it.

Like the aesthetic experience it closely relates to, the experience of the numinous requires images and figures that start from sensory experience and mobilize the impression it awakens. This experience provokes contradictory and shocking reactions: on the one hand, its uncanny terror is repulsive; on the other, the fascination for the profoundly unknown is attractive. Human beings want to flee the dark forces of numinous power but are simultaneously seduced by the enigma's dangerous beauty. They want to participate in its strange aura.

The anábsoro are the essential Other. They condense numinous potency and overflow with extraordinary powers. They are radically opposed to mortals. Their strange features are the inverse of human ones, and the few anthropomorphic aspects they present only establish a common ground from which to digress in their differences. Thus they are supremely divine beings who tear apart secular time; powerful figures who forcefully expand human horizons; superior beings who regulate and condemn, distress, and redeem; who, for one instant, soothe.

The Secret

When the anábsoro emerged from their subterranean world, the women were struck down by their strength and overwhelmed by the power they exuded, the *woso*. According to Luciano's account, Wioho brought them back to life by blowing into their ears. Then the terrible strangers surrounded them.

“Do not fear us,” one of them said, “we don’t want to harm you, we only want to talk.” And so they talked. The anábsoro promised to show them unknown things and give them new powers, and the women agreed to take them to their village to establish a *tobich*, the center for initiation where they would receive divine instruction. Since the women wanted to be the only ones to profit from the new alliance, they denied the existence of men and took the gods to a secluded part of the village instead of to the *lut* (where the houses were concentrated).

Digression on Deceit

The decision to hide the existence of men and the anábsoro from each other constitutes the first deception. Every symbolic system is built on pacts of silence, trickery, concealment, hoaxes, and simulacra. But for hunting cultures, the practice of the ruse that confuses and distracts is especially valuable: the hunter faces the animal’s cunning and whoever is better at deception wins. The survival of the forest community depends on the use of tricks, baits and traps, camouflage and decoy. But survival also depends on the indigenous people’s capacity to deceive the white man’s invading arrogance: in his presence they simulate and dissimulate, trick and elude, mimic and mask. Words are powerful weapons in the difficult relations humans maintain among themselves and with the gods: through words silence and norm are imposed, battles fought and negotiations reached. It is with words that people deceive.

No one knows how, but when the group of anábsoro and women arrived at a clearing amid the carob trees, Ashnuwerta was already waiting for them. The Great Goddess of Red Splendor, the Lady of the Anábsoro was surrounded by her female retinue and by a large group of new anábsoro, gleaming in their unknown textures and red, white, and black colors; quivering in their supernatural manes and plumes; resplendent in their pure strange power. They were now submerged in a silence laden with an infinite clamor that disquieted the plains, the river, the mountains, and the swamps.

They immediately began to prepare the space where the original initiation would take place. According to Luciano—who told this story on another hot, mosquito-filled night in San Carlos—the *tobich* was established toward the west, in Nymych-wert (etymologically, “red earth”). This place is located

about twenty kilometers south of Bahía Negra, on the great Paraguay River in Karcha Balut, known today as Puerto 14 de Mayo. Karcha Balut literally means “the great deposit of shells.” There the anábsoro used to bathe and eat piranhas and snails (do they still?). The ceramic and bone fragments found there, as well as the millions of large shells that cover the ground, speak of divine banquets and preserve, even today, the dangerous aura of their excesses.

The first *harra*—ceremonial circle where the sacred dances are represented—was set up in a clearing in the woods. According to some Tomáraho narrators this original *harra* was located forty or fifty kilometers west of the first *tobich*, in a place called Nahyn. According to the Ebytoso, the place was called Moiéhene and would correspond today to Caacupé, located 120 kilometers from Bahía Negra.

Aided by the anábsoro, the women cleared a straight path from the secret initiation grounds (*tobich*) to the site for ceremonial acts (*harra*). They hoed the scrubland and laboriously ripped out roots with their newly acquired tools. The strangers did it effortlessly with their hands and feet; pushing weeds, herbs, and spiny bushes; knocking down palms and carob trees; using their hardened fingers to dig and fill the *depich*, the secret path that would unite the Ishir with the gods and that would render them fully human.

The *tobich* is the house of words, the center of myth, but also the antechamber of image. In its hermetic space the Ishir prepare the re-presentations that are to take place at the *harra*. Teaching and discussion, control and regulation happen in the *tobich*. There, the shamans endlessly sing and pray and the masters of ceremonies meticulously organize scenic details. There, one only fasts and eats ritually; one learns the methods of purification and the value of silence. In the *tobich* one works on memory and forgetting, suffers severe tests to temper the spirit and body, and listens with an open mind to attain wisdom—or at least brush up against it, no small task if one is still maturing.

The mythical *depich*—path between the first *tobich* (located on the river) and the original *harra* (cleared in the middle of the jungle)—was very long and hard to travel. Because of this, the anábsoro invented a mechanism to abolish distance: by blowing hard on the earth, they installed a powerful spring at both ends of the trail. Thus, to get from one end to the other, it was enough to jump on the contraption and be propelled by it through the air. The passage was sudden and instantaneous: the anábsoro and the women effortlessly appeared at one end or the other.

Commentary on Dualities

The forest/river duality plays an important role in Chamacoco thinking inasmuch as it clearly illustrates two of its basic figures. On the one hand, it marks a difference: the sophisticated mechanisms constructed by society to elaborate pairs of identity/alterity. On the other hand, it is an axis to various sets of intersecting or counterpoised positions. These opposing positions confront one another but they can also reach agreements, enter into association, and even neutralize each other through various leveling and balancing mechanisms. In principle the other is my “opposite,” but I can negotiate with him by “exchanging words” and we can agree to provide each other with companionship and aid, thereby converting us both into *ágalo* (associates). For Chamacoco thinking, therefore, contradictions are not resolved through synthesis (in the western, Hegelian sense of the word); opposites can become allies or eternal adversaries. But they can also compensate for the asymmetries generated by difference through a complicated system of social, ritual, aesthetic, and mythical codes that generally combine all the above variables (agreement, clash, and equilibrium). In addition, difference can be negated, but not abolished, through efficient cultural mechanisms. One of the poles in tension can (temporarily or not) assume the powers of the other, identify with it, and take its place—or some of its place—although it never completely dissolves into the other. This relationship is a figure called *cet*.

The basic scheme of Chamacoco logic is certainly binary, but its movement complicates this model to incredibly refined levels through astute mechanisms of pacts, confrontations, compensations, and counterbalanced intersections. Chamacoco thought, myth, and social organization are constructed through intricate ascending spirals of successive moments that aim to resolve the controversies generated by the twisting movement itself. It is difficult to label such a complex culture as simply “dualist,” first, because of the complexity produced by the above-mentioned interplay of opposites. Also, there are so many axes of antagonism and so many possible diagrams of equivalence and contradiction that can be traced, that they end up blurring into one another in a web of connections so dense that it is difficult to define the place of the desired postures. For the sake of orientation, we can consider these dichotomies to be formal ones, but only if they are not granted stable or definitive places nor assigned an essential function.

The disjunction established between the river (*tobich*) and the woodland (*harra*) is related to the difference between the Ebytoso, who consider themselves river people, and the Tomáraho, who consider themselves forest dwellers. In many of the Ishir ritual games and encounters, as well as in the classification of the anábsoro and shamans, the distinction between “those of the forest” and “those of the river” defines the occasional challengers, the enemy, or simply the inverse term of any conflictive relationship. Once *tobich* and *harra* are organized in terms of contrary signs, their difference is emphasized. Once a path and mechanism that enables such distances to be crossed is established, mediation with other men and the gods becomes possible. Today, says Emilio, the white man has reduced the map of the Chaco: *tobich* and *harra* are located less than a kilometer from each other and the secret of the springs has been forgotten, though some sky shamans frequently use it still.

field notes

Puerto Esperanza, 16 August 1986

We are sitting on a tree trunk in the San Carlos *tobich*. In the seemingly distracted presence of Palacio Vera, Emilio Aquino traces the ritual map on the sand: a small circle is the *tobich*, a bigger one is the *harra*; between the two circles he carefully draws two parallel lines that represent the *depich*, the Path of Knowledge and Silence that is now shortened because the springs that catapulted the anábsoro and the women no longer exist. A noisy flock of birds glides above us and settles on a tree that trembles and quivers for an instant. “*Kuréeky* [parrots],” my informant comments laconically, without raising his eyes. “Long ago the parrots were soothsayers; they belonged to the Tahorn clan. Their cries announce that a moment has ended and another begun: something special happens to time when a flock of *kuréeky* screeches like that,” he says, and then falls silent. He continues his story. His non-story. The figure traced on the sand has been shadowed by the early nightfall of the harsh Chaco winter.

On the Power of Beauty

One night something special took place. The *wyrby*, the spring that facilitated the movement between both extremes of the ritual space, was already in place and the women, who had crossed the distance without the travails of a long march, now found themselves standing around the *harra*, the ritual scene. "Something special happened then," Emilio repeats.

For the first time the *anábsoro* perform their ceremonial circle in front of human eyes. The spectacle is terrifying. The women are first frozen by fear and then, later, enthralled and excited. The men, who spy on the scene in the darkness behind thorny fronds, are too scared to consider approaching. They hear, from an increasing distance, the burst of the numinous bubble that concentrates all the possible sounds of the universe and intensifies all essential colors until they are but ciphers of fire and blood, of the deepest darkness and of absolute silence.

Bruno affirms that the first performance was that of the terrible *Wákaka*, followed by the benevolent *Wioho* in counterpoint. Clemente and Emilio insist that *Ashnuwerta* was the one who erupted first in the ceremonial circle amidst a trail of red flashes, unleashing a chorus of cries that tore primeval time in two, much like the flock of parrots. Whoever came first, he or she was escorted by their respective retinues and followed by the women, the first human beings to participate in the dark secret that renews time.

In the following days, this participation opened up various possibilities to the women. On the one hand, the great *anábsoro* mothers taught them the use of techniques and tools that would, from then on, be characteristically theirs. *Kaiporta* taught them the art of gathering food and provided them with the *alybyk*, the stick women use to dig. (The men, who use larger versions of this instrument, make the ones the women use with the hard wood of the *guayacan*, or *palo santo* tree,³ but once given to the women, the men can never again touch the wood. And so, symbolically, the distributions of tasks intersect and compensate for each other.) *Pfaujata*, the fearsome *Chamacoco* *Arachne*, gave them the *caraguata*⁴ and taught them how to use its fibers to fashion the cloth used in everyday domestic use and ritual dress. On the other hand, the male *anábsoro* seduced the women with the power of their voices, the beauty of their colors, and their alien forms. And so the furtive visits undertaken by the women to their husbands and children under the pretext of

bringing them food became less and less frequent until they settled definitively in the *tobich* and became lovers to the gods.

On Knowing the Divine

Cordeu argues that the mythical women were at a disadvantage regarding their access to knowledge of the divine (1991a, 117). The men reached the divine through *eiwo*, intellectual reflection, while the women experienced the sacred through the most superficial aspects of perception (image, color, shine, and physical appearance of the *anábsoro*). However, it is probable that for the Chamacoco culture (and I suppose, for culture as such) the aesthetic experience, sensible perception, is as important as reason in the search for a superior knowledge of things (form is an essential instance of access to the numinous). Perhaps Ishir culture assigns men a more discursive relation to the divine, while women are given a more figural relation. The gleam of a verb is as important as the concept it shelters from any direct assault, from any attempt to get to the bottom of what is bottomless. The gods dispose of an imposing repertoire of images comprised of contrasts, textures, and tones of skin; the terrible lightness of feathers; and the explosion of cries that knocks down birds and unleashes a chorus of subterranean, aquatic, or celestial thunders that echo to the very limits of the Chaco.

All these dramatic figures the *anábsoro* pass on to the Chamacoco are as important for their human plenitude as is the clear path opened up by knowledge. For this indigenous group, myth does not contradict logos; it provides essential arguments that logos lacks. The women's bedazzlement by form and their consequent sexual relations with the gods provides access to another moment, one that is necessary in the creation of the alliance: the moment of the *imitatio dei*. The women identify with the gods and convert themselves into their image and likeness. The Chamacoco call this rhetorical mechanism in which a being takes on the powers and features of another being *cet*. *Cet* names a play of identifications, which keeps the extreme difference between the two positions visible.

Deceits and Discoveries

To resemble the *anábsoro* and acquire their supernatural powers, the women were taught to disguise themselves in their likeness. Thus, when they entered

the ceremonial circle, they painted their bodies with stripes, circles, spots, and various figures. They created different colors from ashes, coal, vegetable juices, and minerals of bloody tones. In order to simulate the strange divine skins they covered their bodies with the feathers of ostriches⁵ and parrots, malicious ducks, storks, flamingos, and spoonbills, and with coarse fabrics made of caraguata and the thick furs of the anteater. They used masks to hide their human faces, and hung wild seeds and animal hooves from their wrists, ankles, and waists to ape the creaking sounds made by the dancing gods. They also learned to shout.

At this time the anábsoro did not know the men existed; nor did the men know the truth of the event that would change their lives. But they could feel that something was different. They thought the women's actions strange. It is likely that they also found the women themselves different, since they had surely changed in their intercourse with the divine. One day a young man, intrigued when he discovered the vermin a widow carried (to feed the supernatural appetite of the foreigners), decided to follow her in secret. Susnik doesn't discard the possibility that the spy was Syr himself, the first Ishir leader (1995, 189). What is certain is that a Chamacoco discovered the deceit and informed his companions. Neither he nor they ventured into the lands occupied by those uncanny strangers they had discerned from afar. And not only did the men not take action to dismantle the fraud but, in their sheer terror before these unknown beings, they became accomplices of those who swindled them. According to Emilio, the men secretly passed on meat, honey, and fruit to their wives as the women spent their days absorbed in the initiation and pleasures of ritual splendor and Olympic love.

But harmony does not last long, even in myths. In the village, unbeknownst to the gods, a man found himself in trouble: his wife, absorbed in her godly affairs, had forgotten her prosaic obligation to return every so often to breastfeed her child. Since the man could not reach the *tobich* he asked his wife's sister to find her, remind her of her maternal duties, and bring her back to the village. But neither the child's hunger nor the husband's pleas moved her in her enthusiasm to see Kaimo preparing to enter the stage. The motley colors of Kaimo's skin made him one of the most impressive anábsoro. "She was enamored of his colors," Clemente explains. And bewitched by the complicated interplay of tones that stretched across his powerful body, she imprudently demanded that her child be brought to her. ("I won't budge," she

told her sister.) Not even the anxious sucking of the child, delivered to her with frightened urgency, distracted her from her rapture: she carried him in her arms, tilted awkwardly, not noticing that the *pypyk* (a diaper made of caraguata) was sliding until it fell to the ground and exposed his small genitals to the astonished eyes of the *anábsoro*. Thus it was that the gods learned of the existence of the Ishir men, and of the first deceit. Bruno's version (that of the Ebytoso of Puerto Esperanza) differs little from this one: the *anábsoro* discovered the fraud because the child urinated; the arch traced by the liquid in the air clearly indicated that it was produced by a male.

The *anábsoro* were furious. After holding various long and heated discussions at the center of the *tobich*, they summoned the women and forced them to reveal the existence of the men. From this moment on in the tale, Ashnuwerta begins to take center stage. She orders all the *nagrab* (adult men) to present themselves that very night on the sacred grounds.

The men were so terrified that only the prodding of the women could make them obey. They arrived one by one in silence, their eyes lowered to the ground. (Luciano says that the men were grouped in twos and threes each night during the ritual.) Another act begins at this moment, as if the afternoon had been torn in two by a noisy flock of parrots.

On the Divinity of the Anábsoro

I have been referring to the *anábsoro* as divine. Yet what kind of deities are they? Jensen (1963) defines three ideal types of gods that predominate in traditional societies: the "Masters of the Animals" in hunting and gathering societies, the sky gods of pastoral societies, and the Dema-deities of agrarian societies. The Chamacoco forests and plains are populated by Masters of the Animals, but these belong to a different dimension than the *anábsoro*, though they can sometimes intersect. Considering Jensen's classification in its formal scheme, Cordeu estimates that the Ishir gods blend the last two divine prototypes. "One can speak," he says, "of a typical modality that is in part similar to the sky-gods . . . and of a dema modality that closely resembles the Dema-deities." Although they lack the cosmological and anthropogenic responsibilities of the sky gods, the *anábsoro* resemble them "in their coarse and terrible nature, [as well as in] the morality of their actions and commands" (Cordeu 1984, 257).

According to Jensen (1963), the essential traits of the Dema-deities are that their activity develops at the end of a primeval time and produces cultural gifts and the consciousness of death; that they are sacrificed at the hands of the men of the time; that they are distant deities, active only through the order they impose on mortal beings; and that human beings are morally obliged to remember their divine actions by ritually performing the events of this primeval time. The similarities of these traits with those of the anábsoro are evident.

field notes

Puerto Esperanza, 18 August 1986

Today Palacio Vera tells me about the moment when Ashnuwerta begins to acquire a more distinct profile. It seems that the relationship with the men requires the entry of this Super Woman; in fact, she ends up intimately linked with a Chamacoco leader called Syr. Palacio speaks at length in an expressionless voice. His gaze is absent. The fact that my translator, Clemente, lets so much time pass without intervening in the flow of narration worries me. But when he does translate I am reassured by Palacio's brief nods of agreement and small corrections and notes. (Palacio seems to understand Guaraní well, although he refuses to use it when speaking the "heavy words.") After all, I know the Chamacoco have an incredible facility with words: they remember easily and speak with enviable ease. Now the nearby forest throbs with heat and confused sounds. Now the shadows of the trees grow. The two men fall silent and look at me. Courtesy impedes them from getting up before their guest but they are waiting for me to leave. In any case, soon I won't be able to write.

The Time of Ashnuwerta

"The Ebytoso mix things up," Palacio Vera said in the San Carlos *tobich*. (The old shaman refuses to speak of the essential if he does not do it in the *tobich*.) In reality it wasn't the women who brought the Ishir to the anábsoro. It was Ashnuwerta herself who went out to meet the most valiant of men, who was

called Syr, and demanded that he bring the others. Syr was a *pylota*, a warrior-hunter of strong and clear words. On his forehead he bore a wreath of jaguar skin, the arrogant insignia of chiefs respected for their boldness and lucidity. Syr encouraged the frightened men and together they presented themselves before the anábsoro.

“From now on and forever you will occupy the place of the women, who will be expelled from the *tobich*.” Ashnuwerta’s words did not and do not allow for the possibility of a response because they are the original words. “*Ishir poruta uholó*,” Luciano says. “Words of those that come before the humans.” Without objections, therefore, the women retire to the village and yield their privileged places to the *nagrab*.

Note on Ashnuwerta

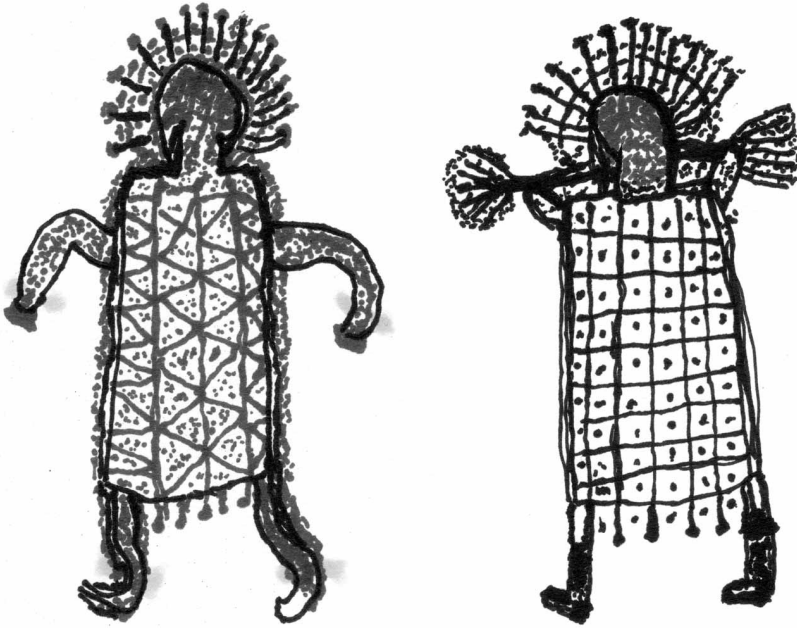
Ashnuwerta represents the exemplary model, the quintessence of the anábsoro. Like all superior deities, she condenses various paradigms and articulates different, intense meanings. She incarnates the Chamacoco concept of opposition as a difference between two terms that can be resolved through words (and produce an alliance), or through collision (leading to conflict). However, as noted, there are other possible outcomes to any encounter: mediation and doubling, displacement, identification. Ashnuwerta condenses all these possibilities. On the one hand she acts as an ally: she is the Great Mother who favors the Ishir, the Teacher, the Giver of Words, she is the one who institutes the cultural order, who establishes the symbol. And she is in fact a powerful ally: she plays the part of the Anábsoro Lata, that is, the mother, matron, or master of the anábsoro. They are considered her *ebiyo*, her children or subalterns. Cordeu criticizes Baldus’s and Susnik’s translation of *lata/ebiyo* as “mother/child,” and their references to Ashnuwerta as the Ishir proto-mother (Cordeu 1990, 167). But it is indubitable that, though it is not the only meaning, there is a strong sense of filiation in these terms: the Chamacoco translate *lata* as “the greatest,” “the principal,” but also as “the mother.” What is important is to emphasize the figurative sense in the use of the “great words.” I do not believe that the Chamacoco include the biological connotations of maternity when using this term. But without a doubt their rhetoric is meant to emphasize her superiority and power as well as the protection and respect associated with mothers.

Ashnuwerta, however, can also be terrible. As the Mistress of Water and Fire she can, and does, bring on plagues and catastrophes. (Such were the floods of what is today called the Paraguay River, provoked to avenge the anábsoro. This disaster led to the death of young novices during the first initiation ceremony of the new times.) Ashnuwerta is the Mother of the Birds of the Benign Rain, but also Mistress of the Dark Blue Storm (Susnik 1995, 197–98). It is she who, before abandoning the earth, gave Nemur the mission of punishing the Chamacoco for not following her prescriptions, cloaking them forever with a tragic shadow.

This dual character of the deity, which prompts Cordeu to consider her a summary of the positive and negative qualities of the anábsoro, is expressed in the doublings of her figure. Sometimes she becomes an animal or human, seeking to attain experiences or dimensions that surpass her own divinity. While she is associated with the color red, Ashnuwerta can turn into her opposite, into Ashnuwysta the dark: both are opposite sides of the same entity and mark the counterpoint between the mythic and ritual, gift and punishment; between the naked brilliance of the numen and its nocturnal side; between the luminous force of the image and the somber power of cries. (Ashnuwysta, in her Hopupora phase, appears only on ritual occasions, in darkness, and only through sounds.)

Thus Ashnuwerta signifies the universal nexus: she acts as the prototype of mediation. Through her complicity with the Ishir, her union with the human Syr, and her metamorphoses into Arpylá, the woman/ doe, she links feminine and masculine, human and divine, symbolic and natural. She connects the earthly and celestial from her relationship with the Milky Way (in whose vicinity she eventually establishes her dwelling, and with which she is ritually identified, as will be seen). The brief intersection of her path with that of certain shamans knots the greatest divine power with maximum human potential: she is the protector of certain *konsáho* of the rain and her celestial abode shelters the “invincible shamanic souls” (Susnik 1995, 200).

OBEYING the orders of Ashnuwerta, men begin to participate in the *debylyby*, the Great Ceremony through which each day the gods renewed the ties that unite all beings, called upon elusive favors from the sky, earth, woods, and waters, and affirmed the permanence of the goddess’s words and the timeless value of her commandments. Men began to accompany the anábsoro in their rounds through the *harra* and to learn their calls, movements, and gestures.



Depiction of Nemur and Ashnuwerta. Drawing by Bruno Sánchez Vera. Potrerito, 1998.

They also learned to copy their appearances: now it is the men who cover their faces and paint their bodies, covering it with furs, feathers, and fabrics in order to imitate the sacred features.

The entry into the ceremonial circle does not only presuppose the identification (*cet*) of men with gods through performance. It also sets in motion a complex process of apprenticeship that promotes the growth of human faculties. For this reason, men were also initiated into the mysteries of the *tobich*. And thus they learned the names of unknown things and beings and were instructed in how to manipulate the forces that animate them and on how to reach *eiwo*, understanding, the faculty prized by the Ishir as one of the gods' precious gifts.

Note on Knowledge

Analytical capacity promotes a discriminating knowledge of the world. Now the Ishir know how to distinguish, classify, and oppose. These differences en-

tail rules. Ashnuwerta introduces the canons and codes that govern community life, taboos and prohibitions, rites, rules of social etiquette, and the order of sex. Desire emerges from the restrictions. And with this desire, comes art: the symbol, culture in its entirety. Now things carry meanings: they bear enigmas and opacities; they are linked by arbitrary relations; they point to memory and dream; they are filled with powers, promises, and threats; they become beautiful, feared, desired. The Ishir theory of knowledge presupposes a long path toward the comprehension of the mystery of things. Every object, every being, insofar as it belongs to a symbolic order, harbors a potential, a hidden dimension that can be revealed and assumed. For this reason, the world is populated by unknown forces, which can be either allies or adversaries depending on whether or not one knows how to grasp their deeper meanings. Many secrets can be accessed by observation and the efforts of patient study; some through the interchange of words or revelations (which are generally dreamed). The wisest are the most powerful: they know how to use, neutralize, or divert the power of things. Shamans are wise by definition: they are the ones who know the depths of men, things, and natural phenomena and can, therefore, appropriate their energies.

Gifts

Knowledge, however, also applies to the practices and norms of subsistence. If the goddesses taught the women the art of gathering, the gods instructed the men in the use of instruments for hunting. The primitive Ishir killed animals at random. They had no system to organize a hunt, select animals, or govern their ingestion. In the new time, men and anábsoro paired up to go into the woods. If the men learned about the “superior words” in the *tobich*, they began at the same time to penetrate the secrets of ordered survival in the woods. The Ishir learned to identify the confused tracks of the turtles and the terrible scent of the jaguar; they were trained to summon the delicate meat of the anteater; they learned how to skin silky iguanas and bristled peccaries and to catch slippery eels by grabbing them from the warm mud of certain swamps.

The anábsoro enjoyed qualities that allowed them to catch whatever animal they wanted without the necessity of strategy or weapon. Their powerful shouts, fired like bolts from their ankles, knocked down their prey instant-

neously. Susnik writes that they knocked down birds, sauroids, and beasts simply by pointing and screaming. But Bruno insists that this act was intended simply to disorient the humans who could not know that the gods' power (and weakness) lay in their ankles.

Brief Commentary on Primitive Life

At the beginning of time, or before it—before the arrival of the gods, at least—humans lived a colorless, grey existence, an undifferentiated life without markers or direction. They did not know methods, techniques, rites, or social forms. They did not dance or sing. Their hunting was random and disorganized. They lacked adequate tactics and instruments; they did not organize hunting expeditions or have any taboos on consuming the prey. They gathered plants without knowing which fruits they should eat or how best to use them. Life was purely organic, a second-class existence. For the *os póruwo* (primitive men) life, love, and death were neutral physical processes that held neither enigma nor mystery, neither beauty, flash of astonishment, nor desire. The Ishir gods do not create anything in nature. What they do is create meaning. They introduce words, law, and symbols: they introduce the necessity of ordering life in order to face death.

THE use of weapons and hunting strategies that the gods had recently passed on to the Chamacoco could have caused great ecological damage. Ashnuwerta therefore instituted prescriptions, methods, and figures to prevent ecocide by rationalizing the distribution of food and regulating hunting. Both the eating taboos as well as the complex rules of social etiquette, ceremony, and clan institutions wisely and rigidly restrict what animals can be hunted and eaten, and under what conditions. (There is another mythical institution that promotes the balanced use of natural resources: the figure of the Master of the Animals. Every animal has its master—its *balut*, “spokesperson,” or *cabezante* as the Ishir translate today—who simultaneously facilitates hunting and severely sanctions its excess.)

“Initiates and teachers went off into the woods in teams composed of one man and one god,” Palacio repeats. He was referring to the fact that the initiation/warfare/hunting/ritual camaraderie had been established between men and gods. They had become *ágalo*: that is, they became mutual counterparts of a formalized masculine socialization; they are companions, allies, ac-



Depiction of an *anábser* teaching an Ishir to hunt. Drawing by Flores Balbuena.

complices. (The figure of the *ágalo* has important weight in Ishir culture. The pact implied by this institution was sealed in myth not only with the presence of the men in the ceremonial circle but also with the exchange of foods and the participation in the Great Game. This alliance in spite of, or thanks to, the difference and opposition between men and gods, is well expressed in their encounter in the ceremonial ball game. The *póhorro*, as the game is called, signifies both companionship and rivalry, link and opposition, a recreational moment and sacred time, and constitutes a passionate metaphor of the Chamacoco ideal of compensation—if not conciliation—between opposite terms.)

According to Ebytoso informants, it so happened that men and *anábsero* had opposite diets. (Again we see the resurgence of the basic frame of oppositions, so dear to Chamacoco logic.) While men ate fish, meat, and fruit, the gods fed off of snails and various poisonous vermin. Thus when an Ishir

hunted tarantulas, snakes, or scorpions he gave it to his supernatural *ágalo*; and when the god snatched a wild boar or a found a swollen honeycomb he passed it on to his human partner.

Adversities

Even in myths, ideal moments are brief and quickly disrupted by conflicts. The harmony between such different beings could not last long, and many factors intervened to break that idyllic relation and initiate another time. On the one hand, the men had crossed the categorical threshold of the terrain of symbols and had thus lost forever the innocence of those who do not see the dark side of things. They were irreversibly located in the new times of norms, of “words” as they say. And for the words to be sanctioned and fixed, their givers had to retire. The possibility of return had to be cancelled. Bruno takes up the thread of the story like this: “The Ishir had already learned everything the anábsoro had to teach them, and the gods were now nothing but a nuisance.”

On the other hand, the daily coexistence of men and gods generated the inevitable friction, competition, and tension that arise when different groups share a crowded story. Things become even more complicated when one considers that the anábsoro had the same desires, virtues, and defects as the humans. The coupling between the women and the gods had produced hybrid offspring who inherited certain features from their divine fathers, but not their powers; they were mere mortals (with the possible exception of Pfaujata, as we shall see later). The love affair between Ashnuwerta and Syr also complicated the coexistence of gods and men, as the Chamacoco chief had in effect two women: the mortal one lived in the *lut* and the divine one in the *tobich*. (Bigamy is considered perturbing and is rejected by the Ishir social order.)

Parenthesis on Myth

The time of myth has no time: it takes place in a dimension that does not compute its moments in terms of duration nor count its phases according to a single measure. Some aspects of a mythic event can last years while other aspects last but a few instants. It is therefore impossible to know how long the stage of female deception, and subsequent moment of male ritual hege-

mony lasted. Neither, therefore, do we know how long it took to establish the Ishir Olympus in the first *tobich*. But the various informants agree that when the next generation reached adolescence it was necessary to initiate them into the mysteries of men, gods, animals, and woods.

ASHNUWERTA ordered that the pubescents be brought to the site of first knowledge. Then one night a group of adult males invaded the village, forcefully grabbed the boys amidst the frightened cries of the women, and herded them through the dark path leading to the place of mysteries. There the *wetern*, as the novices are called, were submitted under the personal instructions of Ashnuwerta to the hard training that would turn them into *nagrab*, adult custodians of the words.

The inclusion of the youth in the *tobich* generated new problems. For one, jealousy and competition arose among the different generations. Susnik writes that the process of the first male initiation “displeased the anabsonic children” (that is, the hybrid descendents of the anábsoro and humans) because Ashnuwerta did not treat them any differently than the human children (1995, 191). In addition, the novices inevitably failed some of the several difficult tests or committed mistakes in the observance of the ceremonial etiquette governing the *tobich*. These failings exacerbated the impatience of the anábsoro and led to unfortunate excesses. There were cases in which some *wetern* could not resist the exaggerated rigors of the initiation and fell to the ground, literally dying of exhaustion. In other cases some youth were sacrificed because they violated dietary taboos or other restrictions. Wioho, the anábser healer, brought them back to life by blowing on them or caressing them softly with the powerful feathers of his strange body. But the death of the *wetern* woke Wákaka’s cannibalistic impulses and he began to devour some of the initiates as soon as they died.

“In these cases,” Luciano explains, “the *wetern* could also be resuscitated through Wioho’s intervention, but once they were brought back to life they were changed. In the process of being swallowed by Wákaka their bodies had lost too much blood, which is the liquid that completes them as human beings.” Depending on the quantity of recovered blood, the revived *wetern* could either closely resemble their former selves or be reborn as faded, weak copies. In extreme cases, some *wetern* were brought back as mere ghosts of their original selves.

Achilles' Ankle

The Ishir did not react until Syr's son became one of the victims. There are different versions of the manner of his death. Some say that Jolué died because he could not bear certain "tests of endurance" required by the stoic ideal of the Ishir. In other versions he was sacrificed for eating the flesh of eels (taboo for the initiates), or because he violated rules on the exchange of food (he did not return a gift to Kaimo). Others, finally, claim that he was killed in punishment for tempestuously abandoning the *tobich*, an action that is prohibited by the strict norms of ritual courtesy that reign during the meals of the *anábsoro*. It is said that Kaimo killed him and that he was devoured instantly by Wákaka. Either because he was charred as soon as he was thrown into the banquet fire, or because Wákaka drank all his blood as he was eaten, or because the good doctor Wioho was delayed, Jolué could not be saved. Wioho anxiously dug into the wet earth trying to recover the youth's blood, Luciano continues, but could only gather a fistful of the sticky and bloodied mud. He could do little with it; a spectral body appeared and then instantly dissolved into nothingness.

Syr vowed to avenge his son. He would kill his son's assassin's himself, he said. One of the signs of Ishir mourning are the grooves cut by tears on a painted face. The warrior decided to conceal his son's death in order to better plan his revenge, and he wiped his face clean as he entered the village. He appealed only to the complicity of his Ishir *ágalo* (or his brother, in another version). Early the next morning, he and his companion went out hunting with Wákaka and Kaimo. At a site far away from the village both Ishir cut off the heads of the gods with their clubs (*noshikó*). When they returned to the *tobich*, however, they were terrified to find the *anábsoro* alive and well.

The arrogant chief fell into a profound depression. (Chamacoco depressions acquire ontological proportions and, one could say, a Heideggerian brilliance: they are dark disturbances on the edge of nothingness.) Syr could no longer conceal his pain and, abandoning political and conjugal duties, he wandered alone in the woods for days. Ashnuwerta found herself in a difficult situation: if she helped Syr she betrayed her numinous race. Yet, both the nature of her relations with him, as well as the possible fact—in some versions—that Jolué was her own son, prompted her to reveal the secret of *anábsoro* vulnerability to her lover.

Emilio and Clemente perform before me the indirect method used by the great goddess to reveal the secret to Syr. Emilio takes off the anklet of plumes he had put on to dramatize the tale and covers his hardened bare foot with dry palm leaves. “This is what Ashnuwerta did in front of Syr,” he says. The lower part of anábsoro legs are covered with dense hair so that they resemble a feathered anklet; Ashnuwerta lifted the feathers on hers and bared her ankle, quickly covering it with a small pile of leaves. When these began to quiver rhythmically, Syr discovered that the beat was produced by the hidden, divine extremity. Ashnuwerta gives him instructions: “You need to strike the exact place indicated by the pulse, and then bring me back to life by blowing in my ears.” Some Tomárahó versions maintain that Ashnuwerta indicated another procedure for resurrection: after killing her, Syr had to spit on the ground around her in order to revive her. Clemente offers another variation at this point in the story: the goddess ordered that Wioho be brought to resurrect her. Emilio and Clemente agree (and demonstrate through a performance) that Syr killed Ashnuwerta by kicking her in the ankle and then, following her instructions, immediately brought her back to life and to her powers.

Syr thus discovered that the ankle (*diorá*), the place from which the anábsoro breathed and let out their imposing cries, also harbored their only weak point.⁶ The Chamacoco chief gathered the men of his village and, after revealing the secret to them, plotted his vengeance. After the ritual representation of every killer anábser, one Ishir will go off to hunt with him and kill him in the woods. In principle, only the killers of the young novices would be killed in turn, but in their enthusiasm the *nagrab* began to indiscriminately strike down every anábser they found, even those that had been their benefactors, as many had in fact been. Realizing they were under attack, the anábsoro reacted and confronted the humans with their supernatural powers. A terrible battle ensued between gods and men, one that took place between the *tobich* at Karcha Balut and the *harra* at Moiéhene. Although both sides experienced ruin and devastation, the combat was unequal: the knowledge of the secret gave the humans a tremendous advantage and they aimed directly at the ankles of the gods (the anábsoro were stronger and more powerful, but the humans were more agile). Worried that the anábsoro were losing and faced with extermination, Ashnuwerta decided to intervene. She ordered the men to stop the slaughter, but they were out of control and—for the first time ever—they did not heed her command.

At this point, the Tomárahó and Ebytosó versions part ways. I will follow the Tomárahó tale, basing myself primarily on one long and unexpected session with Luciano as we plied the Paraguay River on a particularly still night. My Tomárahó informant assures me that there were three basic kinds of *anábsoro*: the *nymych-ut-oso* (literally, “those that come from the depths of the earth”), the *eich-oso* (“those that come from the forest”), and the *niot-ut-oso* (“those that come from the bottom of the river”). Those under Ashnuwerta’s power were subterranean *anábsoro*. When this group was on the verge of extinction at the hands of the Ishir, the goddess telepathically pleaded for help from the wood gods, and these promptly appeared to aid their threatened kin. The Ishir, in turn, asked for reinforcements of warrior armies from other nations so as not to lose the equilibrium in the numbers of men and gods (yet another example of the importance of the symmetry of opposites for Chamacoco thinking). But since the wood gods displayed the same weakness as their subterranean kinsmen, the massacre soon recovered its enthusiastic rhythm. Then Ashnuwerta warned the men that she would be forced to call on the terrible aquatic beings, and that this would imply the extinction of the human race: for these were *huwyrö*, implacable cannibals. There is no defense against them because their “place of breath and death” is concealed under their armpits, under small stumps in place of arms, which they hold tightly against their body to protect their weaknesses. The greatest of all horrors was that these *anábsoro* were mute, which for the Ishir signifies a perversion of alterity. Since they are mute it is impossible to negotiate with them through words, an essential avenue for dealing with otherness. But the threat of Ashnuwerta was too late: aside from herself and Nemur, all the *anábsoro* had been eliminated.

Luciano’s tale ends here and the Ebytosó narrations I could collect on this incident are confused and extremely poor. In order to confront Luciano’s version on these incidents my reference point is the sequence written down by Cordeu (1984, 242), which is based upon various Ebytosó versions that essentially coincide. According to the versions Cordeu refers to, once Ashnuwerta’s orders to stop the killing are ignored, the *anábsoro* seek reinforcements under the earth. The Ishir do likewise, and militias of subterranean men appear to fight against the *anábsoro* that emerged from the depths of the earth, thus reestablishing the balance of oppositions. Ashnuwerta warns about the unspecified danger of the aquatic cannibals, but this warning does not stop the battle either. She attempts therefore a reconciliation through ceremony, the mechanism that compensates for differences. Arrayed in pairs symmetrical in

number and appearance (feathers, bodily paints, cries, and movements) both armies need to proceed together to Moiéhene to perform a rite to repair the conflict. But, determined to eliminate the anábsoro, the Ishir once again disobey the divine mandate. In the *tobich* of Karcha Balut, they use the *wyrby*, the spring that allows them to reach the *harra* instantly. Once they are there, they deactivate the machine in order to prevent the anábsoro from using it to escape. In this way they are able to surround and exterminate the threatening invaders, their teacher-gods, their allies and opponents, their other faces.

Notes on Nemur

The final act of the first part of the Great Myth waxes on the persecution of Nemur, the last of the anábsoro, and his exemplary dialogue with Syr. The plot of this episode articulates both the Tomáraho and Ebytoso versions and coincides essentially with the versions collected by Susnik and Cordeu. Nemur is the complement and counterpart to Ashnuwerta: the other, the counterweight to the great presence of the goddess. Although he thus occupies a fundamental place in the Chamacoco pantheon, strangely enough it is only at the end of the tale that he makes an appearance. He is only present in the Great Myth for this brief, albeit intense, incident. Ashnuwerta represents the benefactress, the “Great Teacher” and “Giver of Words.” Although she delivers the Law, the figure of Ashnuwerta stresses the moment of mediation, alliance, and even complicity with humans. Nemur, however, signals the severe moment of punishment for the violation of the norm: for this reason he is called the “Great Prosecutor,” “The Avenger,” “The Punisher,” “The Vigilant,” “The Patron of Tóbich,” “The Bringer of Sadness,” and even “The Exterminator” (see Susnik 1995, 201–2).

For Cordeu, Nemur represents the prototype of the terrible dimensions of the sacred inhabited by the essence of these deities: his prophecies are as inexorable as the apocalyptic commandments of Ashnuwerta, with whom he shares the highest of powers. Nemur’s power is represented through his capacity to metamorphize into a serpent or jaguar and identify with the great ostriches and a certain kind of sparrow hawk, which implies not only vigilant control from on high but also permanent communication with Ashnuwerta. This link is what bestows on him the title “Lord of the Birds of the Wind” (Cordeu 1992b, 224ff.).

But—it is important to insist—although Chamacoco thought works in dualities, these dualities are not frozen into place and are not conceived in Manichean terms. The ties between opposites are quickly complicated and often their functions are bartered, their positions interchanged. This is why if Ashnuwerta is the paradigmatic bringer of cultural goods, her positive features coexist with terrible threats (destruction through plague, water, and fire). And this is why, though Nemur is assigned severe judicial and sanctioning missions, he also ensures order and guarantees social and existential stability for the Chamacoco (whenever the norms are respected, of course). Nemur's scepter, the *ook*, which is sumptuously covered in somber feathers, represents the bastion of rule and punishment as well as the staff of equilibrium.

The Nemur/Ashnuwerta antinomy therefore presupposes a complicated nexus built on the basis of affinities and discrepancies. Between norm and sanction, between the poles of a shared power, a web is woven of tensions, encounters, disagreements, antagonisms, and reciprocity. In order to differentiate between them in appearance, Nemur's trappings are characterized by their dark color, the somber *wys*, which marks his patterns. The goddess bears the reddish tones of *werta*, the color that dyes her name and that signifies the symbolic antithesis of the Nemurtian black. As the counterpoint to Ashnuwerta's relation with an Ishir, Nemur is conjugally linked to Pfaujata, a figure of mortal origin who ascends to divine status. (Pfaujata, in turn, is opposed to the god with whom she is paired: hunter/gatherer, black/red, large ostrich/middle-sized ostrich.) In order that his powers be comparable to those of Ashnuwerta, Nemur also transcends at some point the space of the Great Myth and crosses over into distant celestial and shamanic spaces. Thus, as the goddess is a tenant of the Milky Way, Nemur dwells in the Third Sky (from which he grants powers to the sky shamans) and is Master of the Highest Sky. Just as Ashnuwerta bears the status of the Mother of Water, Nemur displays the rank of Master of the Terrestrial Species: using the sparrow hawks as vehicles, he brought down from the sky all the models that gave rise to zoological differences (Cordeu 1992b, 231–32). In this episode Nemur encounters (challenges/cohabits with) Debylybyta, Mistress of the Aquatic Species.

Both the fluctuations in Ishir logic and the observations and commentaries of certain informants allow me to venture the hypothesis that Nemur belongs to a different group than that of Ashnuwerta. The fact that the power of the Great Prosecutor is as strong as the Mistress of the Word leads to the

suspicion that he is the chief of some of the anábsoro armies she summoned, say Clemente and Enrique Ozuna. The possibility that Nemur does not belong to Ashnuwerta's lineage can be reinforced by an incident noted by Susnik (1957, 26): the only effect produced by the lance that Syr sinks into the ankle of the persecuted god is a trickle of honey. The hypothesis of the two castes was not explicitly confirmed by any of the informants I spoke to; only Faustino Rojas affirmed that "Nemur was of a different kind."

The Last Dialogue

When Nemur finished his performance in the *harra*, all the other anábsoro had already been exterminated. Syr tried to reach him but the anábser, who bounded away like an ostrich, was much too quick for the human. Syr was able to rope him as he fled, but the god was so strong that he could not stop him: the rope burned his hands and his arms fell numb. Nemur easily escaped. Syr, a fast and well-trained runner, followed him quickly but the anábser used his powers to place obstacles between them: estuaries boiling over with piranhas, trenches covered in thorns, fences of fire, pastures infested with serpents, clouds of maddened hornets, sands bristling with sharp stones and scorpions. Susnik says that Nemur is able to call upon the help of the North Wind, which brings "pain and exhaustion," according to an Ishir expression. But the fury of Jolué's father permits him to dodge the pitfalls. When Nemur felt the human drawing up on him—they were already in Karcha Balut—he scooped up a snail from the soil or pulled it from his body's thick plumage (depending on the versions) and with an extravagant gesture produced a raging river that sprouted out of its shell. In Luciano's version, Nemur made the river spring forth by striking the ground with his right foot. The man and the anábser, separated by the river known today as the Paraguay River, "exchange words" for the last time.

"You can run, but your destiny is to remain forever alone," pronounces Syr, standing on the riverbank. "Your people are numerous," replies Nemur from the opposite bank, "but they will be forever obliged to follow the words. If they fail, sickness, hunger, and enemies will decimate then until the last Kytymáraha [name of the clan of Syr] is extinguished." The man voices the



A representation of Nemur. María Elena, 2002. (Photo by Nicolás Richard.)

price of immortality: solitude. The god the price of the symbol: death. (And with it desire and guilt, and the forms of myth and art.)

The Ishir had rid themselves of their gods but the curse of Nemur subjugated them eternally to the representation of these same gods. From this moment on they were required to occupy their places and supplant them in the ritual so as to not forget the dark reasons of the social pact, nor lose the uncertain path of meaning. (Culture turned them into slaves of the image.)

field notes

Potrerito, 10 October 1989

When the sun sinks, the village lights up with small fires and stories whose whispers blend with the night noises. Ebytoso and Tomáraho, united in a new common space, exchange minor tales, *mónene*. Although these are not part of the central mythic corpus and cannot match its gravity or brilliance, they enliven and enrich it. They also entertain the audience, compensating for the excess of night brought on by winter. These small tales can be told by anyone, before anyone, and in any place. They do not therefore require the sententious intervention of the wise: the authentic transmitters of the “heaviest words,” as the Chamacoco translate into Spanish with the light-hearted freedom with which they so quickly appropriate foreign tongues. (“The gift of illiterate peoples,” Susnik used to say.)

To the delicious terror of the children, some say that although the anábsoro no longer exist on the earth, their threatening presence forever haunts men from the depths of the water, earth, or woods. Faustino says that when Syr spoke of Nemur’s solitude, he simultaneously (as if contradicting himself) pointed to the eastern hills, seething with obscure sounds, signaled the reeds lifting out of troubled waters (the aquatic anábsoro use them to breathe) and struck the ground forcefully, setting off, in response, the dull echoes that announced the presence of the earth’s sullen inhabitants. One Tomáraho narrator maintains that when the Ishir first attempted to kill off the gods (before they knew the secret of their ankles) some of the anábsoro were set on fire and, instead of dying, turned into animals that speedily fled to the nearest trees.

Many beasts, birds, and reptiles that populate the surroundings are, in fact, anábsoro that have become *ymasha*, adversaries, as a consequence of man's attempt to assassinate them. Luciano affirms that Ashnuwerta recommended that the Ishir cut off the heads of the anábsoro after they had killed them and place them, still warm with life, over their own in order to appropriate the powerful wisdom contained there. Not all of them remembered the advice; only the ones who later became the most prudent shamans and the valiant leaders followed it.

It is the hour when buzzing clouds of mosquitoes harass the sleepless village. There is no protection against them other than the asphyxiating proximity of smoke and heavy ponchos or thick mosquito curtains (when they're available). According to Baldus, the ancient Ishir used to bury themselves up to their necks at night to escape the biting Chaco torment or use thick blankets of caraguata as little awnings. Even now, women and men use square cloths of this vegetable fiber to fan themselves constantly and keep away the implacable *nenyr*, *kytybe*, or *asykyporo*. An enigmatic old man affirms suddenly: the mosquitoes and other plagues are also a consequence of a forgotten divine commandment. Ashnuwerta had ordered that the bodies of the anábsoro be burned once they were dead. In the midst of the excitement, however, the men forgot to do so and the great corpses filled with venomous power released vapors of sicknesses and swarms of mosquitoes, which until then had not existed. The mosquitoes, Clemente says, without contradicting the old man, are a product of a lover's snub. The moon (male in the myth) loved a woman but she, finding the spots on his face repulsive, rejected him. The spiteful moon sent her a fan crafted from the feathers of various birds that turned into mosquitoes after the first rainfall. These same waters washed off the spots on the face of the moon, and he was then able to conquer his beloved. The mosquitoes, however, were here to stay.

Other Deceptions

After failing to capture Nemur, Syr returned to the Moiéhene *tobich*. He bore with him the frustration of his fruitless chase and the profound anguish caused by the last god's curse. He knew that his people, who had until then

lived a calm and unperturbed existence, would soon know the disquiet and anxiety bequeathed them by the “Bringer of Sadness.” Gloomy moments of collective depression, apocalyptic anguish, and unease afflict the Chamacoco: they remember an ambiguous guilt and sense an ancient punishment. (It is possible that the devastation wrought on them by the whites is a facet of the fugitive god’s punishing sentence.)

Ashnuwerta awaited him in Moiéhene. She could no longer remain among the humans: her cycle was ending. She still had to proffer her last words, her most serious words, those on which human destiny would hang. She gathered all the Chamacoco in the *tobich* and spoke thus: “You have killed the anábsoro; now you must occupy their ceremonial places. And just as the women deceived you, hiding from you the existence of the anábsoro, now you will deceive them, denying the death of the anábsoro and taking their place in the *harra* until the end of days. This is the Great Secret, which can never be revealed. Now you know their cries and movements, their appearances and patterns. Imitating them in the rites you can use their powers and guarantee the survival of the Chamacoco people and the observance of the words.” Ashnuwerta lay down exhaustive rules concerning the attire, corporal paints, choreography, rites, and performance of each of the assassinated anábsoro. Negligence would bring down upon them the doom prophesied by Nemur (now transformed into the Great Guardian of the Tobich).

Comments on Missionary Acculturation

The acculturation of the Ebytosos at the hands of certain fanatical, evangelical Christian groups is visible in certain changes in their store of myths. The most notable example of such a group is the New Tribes Mission.⁷ Driven by messianic fundamentalism and an intolerant creed, the missionaries of this sect are convinced that theirs is the only truth and that it must be imposed over and above any other belief in order to redeem the heretics (who hold other beliefs). Any religion other than theirs implies a satanic deviation that must be abolished at any cost. The cross has been, from the first days of conquest, the other side of the sword. Despite its declared high principles, the missionary ethnocide to which I now refer (insofar as it affects the Ebytosos) is part of an essentially pragmatic system of colonization. On the one hand, it clears the land of indigenous peoples, concentrating them in missionary reductions. On

the other, it promotes their subsequent integration as cheap labor into the establishments built on those very lands. The New Tribes missionaries installed themselves in Bahía Negra, Chamacoco territory, in 1954. They began a systematic campaign of pressure, repression, intimidation, and various kinds of blackmail to force the Chamacoco to abandon the “festival of clowns” as they called the Great Ceremony, the *debylyby*. (The name of “clowns,” divested of its derogatory connotations, was subsequently adopted by the Ebytosos to designate their gods.)

It is obvious that the missionaries act in historical situations that favor ethnocide. These are complicated conditions that I will not delve into here, and that I have addressed elsewhere (Escobar 1988). It is obvious that these acculturative processes are not solely due to missionaries, and neither are they infallible. In many cases indigenous peoples elaborate a complicated synthesis between their beliefs and Christian beliefs, or adopt superficial Christian elements that allow them to survive and accommodate themselves to new conditions. The Tomárahos were not affected by the missionaries and continue to practice their rituals. Many Ebytosos, in contact with the Tomárahos, are now recovering their traditions. They are no longer the same, of course, and betray the presence of vital processes of adaptation and transculturation; processes that signal a possible antidote to the siege of an intolerant Paraguayan society.

Susnik says that the doubts fostered by the various processes of acculturation have produced an opposition between older men, who are more attached to Ishir tradition, and the youth who are seduced by new truths (1957, 69; 1995, 202ff.). In order to combat the loosening of bonds of identity, the former emphasize the figure of Nemur as vigilantly watching over the faithful performance of rites. The Guardian of the Tobich makes his rounds through the villages to control and sanction the Ishir. But the missionaries use Nemur’s threatening aspects to encourage conversion to Christianity. The fear of extinction and punishment, the collective anxiety and sadness (figures associated with the role of the Great Prosecutor) are contrasted with the promise of eternal Christian delight, the idea of salvation, and the image of an indulgent protecting god. Nemur is Satan. Not only does he harm the Chamacoco, but he has deceived them as well, the missionaries insist. In 1957, a group of Ebytosos living in Puerto Diana decided to set up a Great Test. Fearfully they decided to forego the *debylyby* for one year. When they confirmed that they have not

been visited by the terrible curse of the Exterminator, they abandoned their ritual and converted to Christianity. (The echoes of Christianity, which do not displace the *debylyby* of the Tomárahó, provoke other associations for them: Ashnuwerta is vaguely linked to the Virgin Mary, and Nemur to a strange synthesis between Christ and the devil.)

The Canon of Ashnuwerta

After Ashnuwerta gave her instructions on the forms of the *debylyby*, the Great Ceremony, she established the taboos, norms of initiation, severe codes governing the *tobich*, and, in general, all norms regarding the many other rites that rule communal life. Next, the goddess of flamboyant splendor began to structure the society that had hitherto been amorphous. She established age, sexual, and professional distinctions, and the delicate norms of sociability that articulate, compensate, and balance the different segments. The complex scaffolding that orders ethics, rights, love, leisure, religion, aesthetics, and power sprang from her words, converted forever into figures, images, and ideas; converted also into obsessions that would mark every act and dream of those men and women, redeemed and condemned by the pressures of memory and the imposition of silence.

Ashnuwerta finally organized the system of clans based on the deicide. From her place in the *tobich* of Karcha Balut, the goddess asked each group of men which group of gods they had killed. "We killed Kaimo and his retinue." "Well then, you will belong to the Poshárahá. You are linked to the anteater and will wear a cap made of the skin of the ocelot. In the ceremonial circle you will fight with the Kaimo but will end up blessed by them, and your descendents will be protected by the Kaimo Lata, the Great Mother of the lineage of the Kaimo. Your offspring will have the ability to manipulate words and thus penetrate deceit and understand the secrets of things. They will be decisive and vindictive. They will be silent and will move somewhat slowly, like the anteater. But in the word games their insults will be mordant, their replies as subtle as the dragonflies whose name they bear. In the ritual they will be responsible for controlling the dress and adornments of those who will represent the *anábsoro*."

Ashnuwerta then called the killers of Wákaka. “You and your children will be the Kytymáraha, protected by Hoho Lata. You will have the privilege of wearing a hat wrought from the skin of the jaguar; the hat of the most valiant warriors and hunters. The duck, which represents you, signifies the wisdom, prudence, and virtue of deceit this lineage will display. Your clan will be serene, their words severe. They will defend the interests of your people: they will negotiate in instances of conflict and will know how to persuade adversaries and obtain advantageous positions. They will be responsible for the annual realization of the Great Ceremony. The last man, according to Nemur’s curse, will be a Kytymáraha, and will guard until the end the weight of the words that make the Ishir Ishir, and that enable them to die with their memory intact.”

And in succession the goddess classified the assassins of the anábsoro and established other groups. The Tymáraha, the clan of the monkey, is protected by Wawa Lata, identified by headgear from the ocelot, and recognized for their strong and stubborn nature, their jokes, and quarrelsome disposition. Those who killed Wioho are the Tahorn; they are friendly and gentle and are represented by the parrot. The silent Namoho of the lineage of the jaguar came next; they were given the right to wear a crown of wolf skin and given the protection of the Great Mother of the Kaiporta. The symbol of the Dosypyk is the ostrich; they wear the coati on their head and are known for their happy nature, a breath of hope in the somber moments of collective anguish.

Those who killed Pohejuvo are the Datsymáraha. Little is known about them because that line is extinct. They were guardians of myth and counselors of the Ishir. They used words to resolve conflicts and were known as conciliatory, impartial, and prudent.

When Ashnuwerta asked the last group of men which anábsoro they had killed they answered that they had not killed any. According to the Ebytoso this was because these Ishir belonged to Syr’s group and could not kill any anábsoro because he was pursuing Nemur. The Tomáraho deny this. Syr belongs to the Kytymáraha: he is a bold leader, a cautious negotiator, an authentic guardian of words. But the versions coincide in the fact that Ashnuwerta, disconcerted because she could not connect these strange men to any anábsor, decided to assign them their own clan family. From then on, the group of people who did not participate in the anábsoro massacre belonged to the

Dyshykymser clan, represented by the figure of the carancha bird⁸ and protected by the sinister Pfaujata. It is the only endogamic clan, the dark organizer of the most cryptic and most essential moments of the Great Ceremony: its members are entrusted with imposing the secret names. But it is also the only clan that does not participate in any dramatic representation (for they cannot supplant someone they did not eliminate), nor in the ritual ball game (*póhorro*) that expresses the elaborate system of reciprocal interactions between different social segments.

Ashnuwerta complicated the system of classification even further by introducing a new variable. The groups that were protagonists in the battle are considered “strong clans” and occupy a hegemonic position; the clans who distinguished themselves less in battle are known as the “weak clans” and occupy a subordinate position. The first are composed by the Kytymáraha, Tymáraha, Posháraha, and Tahorn; the latter by the Namoho, Dosypyk, and Datsymáraha. The lineage of the Dyshykymser, in spite of its marginal role during the battle, is considered a powerful clan, due to its mysterious weight during the ceremony.

The interplay of particularities and interclan ties are completed by the rules of marriage and attire that Ashnuwerta established for each group, along with the prescriptions on social etiquette and performance during ritual dramatizations and athletic competition. Each group received, in addition, a style of song (Boggiani [1894, 56] mentions the existence of singing competitions between clans that no longer seem to exist.) Lastly, Ashnuwerta sealed the institution of clans with a banquet that established the tradition of great ritual feasts among the Ishir. These symbolize both community cohesion and the community differences from which the larger unity is articulated. Susnik details how the meat of the ant eater was distributed in this “first mythic feast” (1995, 138). The lineage of the sacrificed animal (the Posháraha) ate the hair on its tail; the clan of the monkey (the Tymáraha) ate the lungs; the head was given to the group of the jaguar (the Namoho); the liver to the parrot clan (the Tahorn); and the entrails to the ostrich-people (the Dosypyk). The members of the carancha clan, the solemn Dyshykymser, participated only with their silent, stoic presence.

Now the Ishir were definitively tied to their gods/victims not only through ritual representation but also through the destinies of the clans they share. Order was consummated, and the circle was now closed. Ashnuwerta

no longer had a place in the circle. In truth, she no longer had a place anywhere, Bruno comments, because she could no longer return to the underground with her kin since she had betrayed them by revealing the secret of their mortality. So Ashnuwerta retreated to an unknown place in the south. The wind that blows from that direction is so strong and cold that not even the sun can resist it.

Commentary on the Clans

The system of clans is the spine of Chamacoco society. It is the efficient regulating mechanism of unity and difference, an obscure poetic trope conjured up to explain the inexplicable relation between men, nature, and gods. For a society of hunter-gatherers such as the Chamacoco, the daily confrontation with nature needs to be worked out meticulously. Nature is subjected to a careful rhetorical process that simultaneously traces frontiers between different kingdoms and facilitates traffic between those domains. Displacements, free associations, identifications, substitutions, and sleights of hand enable free circulation, rapid passage and, above all, the provisional nature of this movement between the human and the natural. Scientific ethnographic readings neglect the metaphoric level of these transactions, which is why I find it necessary to emphasize that the associations of hunters with their prey (and gatherers with their fruit) are better understood metaphorically than in terms of strict causality.

At the same time, the figure of the clans processes the nexus among humans, and between humans and deities. They weave a formalized web of cultural progenies over a frame of natural filiations, which is touched up symbolically and located in a dense field of social forces. The clans, therefore, propose an intricate and dynamic model of sociality: a totality that is structured and mobilized through an interplay of segments that are opposed or allied continually on different levels that seek compensation (only provisionally, of course). The clan system emphasizes the idea of difference and consequently, that of rivalry, reciprocity, and exchange. The clans instill a precise mechanism that regulates the combination of familial, sociocultural, religious, and economic relations among the Chamacoco. The clans demarcate social positions and distribute movements on the cultural chessboard. The strong dualist slant that traverses Chamacoco social order is well expressed in this system where

places are so clearly assigned. Matrimonial ties, the exchange of economic favors and ritual performances are ruled by categorical figures created by the system. Their distinct forms are stamped with a rhythmic and controlled movement. Trading insults (called *enehichó*) between clans, for example, can compensate for the asymmetries produced by banquet invitations: the hosts insult their guests to repair the imbalance produced by the gift (the roles are later reversed). These insults are metaphors for the rhythmic to and fro of complementary tasks. Moreover, the clans, who are all patrilineal and exogamic (except the Dyshykymser) determine the conjugal compatibility of their filiations according to the classic mechanism of binary oppositions and intersecting equilibriums. Lastly, the clan structure manifests itself in the ritual ball game and in the plot of the *debylyby*, the Great Ceremony (not only in its performance, but also in the organization of the scene and the ceremony's libretto).

Given these functions of the clans, it is understandable that an Ishir is considered a pariah if he or she doesn't have an affiliation with a clan. Susnik writes that one of the great attractions offered to the Ebytoso by evangelical Christianity lay in the idea of having a place reserved in the sky, a concept akin to the assigned positions of clans in the ball games played in the Land of Death (1995, 134).

While the clan structure is practically extinct among the Ebytoso, it survives falteringly among the Tomárahó. The brutal population decline they have suffered upset the balance in the relations between the segments and diminished the number of members in each clan. For this reason, the Ishir today need to make dramatic internal adjustments to adapt their cultural dynamics to the new realities abruptly imposed by the alteration of the traditional modes of survival, the devastation of their lands, and the invasion of strange clanless gods. In fact, some severe restrictions have been reformulated, adapted, or simply abandoned. For one thing, many marriages now ignore the laws that govern clan affiliations. For another, some ceremonial performances need to overlook the requirements of clan functions: many *anábsoro* who appear onstage accompanied by their large entourage could not be represented if the Ishir rigorously followed the rules, which determine that only actors from certain clans can represent certain gods.

Contemporary Chamacoco society must, therefore, take on the challenge of repairing its symbolic articulations with increasing speed. It is an important challenge, but not the only one they face. Just as any indigenous group in

Paraguay, and in South America, the Chamacoco know that their ethnic survival depends on their capacity for rhetorical maneuver. They are experts in this. Meanwhile, they proudly preserve their enigmatic animal names and the stubborn hope that, aided by the Great Mothers, their clan descendents will increase.

THE GREAT MYTH, ACT TWO

Sweet Deception

Ashnuwerta imposed the Great Secret, according to which the women would believe that the men who danced in disguise in the ceremonial circle were really the *anábsoro*, who still lived among them. However, as soon as the men appeared in the *harra* wearing masks, feathers, and paint, the women did not accept the simulacra. Doubled over with laughter, they ridiculed the actors, mocking their attempt to supplant the gods.

The Tomáraho explain this humiliating failure as follows. I rely on Luciano's version (confirmed by Wylky). When the women learned of the existence of honey from the Great Mothers they decided to hide this delicious discovery from the men and enjoy the sweet secret of the honeycombs by themselves. The men were suspicious of the women's frequent and apparently pointless incursions into the woods and decided to send one of their children to spy on them one day. Aware of the youth that followed them, and in order to slip away from him, the women changed the path they usually took to reach home. As they walked through a part of the woods they had never before seen they found the rotting bodies of their ancient divine allies. And so they discovered that the *anábsoro* had been assassinated. Surrounding the bodies, they mourned the death of the gods. When they reached the settlement, the men saw their reddened and tearstained faces. "The sun burned our skin," some said. "The nettles made us cry," others lied. "It was the wasps," an older woman affirmed with authority.

Thus it was that the women discovered that the supposed *anábsoro* were their own companions in disguise. And this discovery made them even more jealous of their golden secret and its lively sweetness and, in revenge, they increased their excursions for honey and redoubled their efforts to hide it from

the men. But the men decided to send another agent to discover the secret: this was an astute *wetern* who managed to follow them unnoticed. The youth saw the women gathering the swollen honeycombs, gorging themselves on the nectar and filling pots with the golden honey to carry back to the village to share with the old women or to feast on when the men were off hunting. Following the women further, he also discovered their secret daily ritual of mourning for the dead *anábsoro*. The youth assembled the men who were off fishing for eels and communicated his grave findings. As proof, he made them taste a pot of the unknown elixir he had managed to steal from the women.

Emilio's version has a number of small differences. Although the women had decided to keep the honey secret from the men, they had decided to justify their continued incursions into the woods by offering the men empty honeycombs to eat (they kept the thick syrup hidden in ceramic jars). When the men put the supposed delicacy in their mouths they tasted nothing but larvae and dried husks. Not only were they disappointed at the bitter and withered flavor of those emptied honeycombs, but they soon began to vomit and suffer from diarrhea. From then on, they decided to avoid the indigestible banquet and left the honeycombs to the women without understanding why they derived such apparent pleasure from it. Following the tortuous path of deceptions and revelations that leads to knowledge, a *wetern* accidentally discovered the wild ambrosia and the cries of the women over the lifeless bodies of those who had been their masters, allies, and occasional lovers. The adolescent's discovery is in turn discovered: his mother, who was among the mourners, pleads for his silence but the *wetern* runs off and reveals the double secret to the men.

The Sentence

The Tomárahó and Ebytoso coincide in the account of the following episode. Ashnuwerta still lingered in the *tobich* giving instructions and preparing for her departure. The *nagrab* approached her and informed her that the women knew the truth of their fraudulent costumes (and, according to the Tomárahó, also informed her of the honey hoax and the women's secret discovery of the divine corpses). To their shock, Ashnuwerta decreed that the women had to be killed. Although the men knew that they could not ignore the divine words

and felt humiliated by their wives' deception, they were not prepared to sacrifice them. Ashnuwerta calmed them down by assuring them that if they followed her instructions, step by step, they would recover their families. "So that no one has to assassinate his own wife, each man will kill the wife of his *ágalo* and in turn his *ágalo* will kill his wife." Afterwards, the goddess designated one woman as the wife of the *pylota*, the leader (Syr, in some versions): through her, the men would have their wives again. She told them thus: "Tomorrow, the one I choose will prepare a *kobo* (a ceramic vase). This will serve to identify her so her husband can recognize her and avert her death."

The Ebytoso affirm that the woman charged with the rebirth of the Ishir women was a daughter or godchild of Ashnuwerta. But according to the Tomárahó, that woman was the goddess herself transformed into a human called Hopupora. Some who know the myth even believe that Ashnuwerta had already turned herself into Ashnuwysta, who then became Hopupora in order to announce the first ritual in which the men participated after the death of the anábsoro (the *debylyby* begins with the calls of Hopupora). Therefore, according to this version Hopupora was the one who decided the death of the first women (*tymycher*) and who, in her human form, offered herself up as the origin of the new women (*tymycher aly*).

On Metamorphosis and Other Conversions

This episode touches on one of the most obscure and complicated moments of Chamacoco mythology: the doubling of beings according to a logic of dualistic oppositions (which are also bifurcations, displacements, and identifications achieved despite or through differences). Ashnuwerta of the Red Splendor is opposed to Ashnuwysta of the Black Brilliance, her opposite and adversary (the black/red antithesis is the paradigm of radical opposition). But she is also Ashnuwysta herself, expressed in all her contradictory aspects: her most somber and negative aspects, linked to sickness and terrible collective punishment. She is her own dark side. The Ashnuwerta/Hopupora opposition speaks to the link between the divine and human that is named through the mediation of myth. Hopupora is the hidden mistress of ceremonies: she is Ashnuwerta—or Ashnuwysta—present in the ritual form that reconciles the order of the gods with that of the Ishir. Finally, the Ashnuwerta/Arpylá relationship (which we will get into shortly) also signals the constant rivalry be-

tween the divine and the human. In this case, it does so by using the organic natural as intermediary: the goddess passes briefly through an animal state (woman/doe) in order to connect the conflicting terms.

AFTER the discussion of the identity of the chosen woman, the versions coincide again. Based on collective hunting techniques, the men began to erect a giant circular enclosure made of tree trunks, surrounding the village so that no one could escape once the sacrifice was under way. Some say that the women, astonished at such unusual activity, asked for explanations. "We are preventing a possible enemy attack," the *nagrab* are said to have responded. Well before dawn (and to the right of the fence), the massacre of the women began. In one corner of the *lut* a woman quietly molded strips of clay to make a pitcher. This activity identified her as the woman chosen to renovate her gender, the one who should be spared from the holocaust. However, in the midst of the confusion of shadows and dust, cries, terror, and disgust, the brother (or *ágalo*) of the chief destined to be her husband lunged toward her brandishing the *noshikó*, the mortal mallet made of palo santo wood. As he was about to reach her he saw her turn into a doe and leap effortlessly over the wall of palm trees. She disappeared among trees, barely outlined in the misty light and early murmurs of the morning.

It was still dawn when the chief (some say it was Syr) and his brother (or *ágalo*) set off to find her. They were accompanied by a large group of strong men. They found the light tracks left by the doe as she rested on the ground, but found no other indication of where she had gone. They sought her in the thickets of caraguata plants, the pasture and swamp lands, under the monotonous palms, the thorn-infested undergrowth and distant lands where the carob trees end, unknown fruit trees grow, and strange beasts prowl. They did not find her. Arpylá, turned back into her human form, was hiding in the branches of a guayacan tree, and from her high perch she blew a wind that erased her tracks and produced strange sounds that confused the men and led them astray.

On the second night, the exhausted trackers returned to the village, which was still sleepless with the mournful song and tears of the widowers. When Arpylá noticed that only her husband was still searching for her she blew in the other direction to orient him. Without knowing exactly how, the man reached the foot of the tree. At that moment he felt the throbbing pain of a

thorn that had punctured his foot. He sat down and bent over to extract it when he felt something cold on his neck. Lifting his head he saw Arpylá, who had spit the cold saliva that is the gift of Ashnuwerta.

The woman taunted him from above. “Come and take me,” she said. Either because, as the Ebytoso say, she was a stranger sent by Ashnuwerta or because, as the Tomárahó insist, she was the goddess herself in human form, their marriage had not yet been consummated. (In the versions of those who insist that Syr was the chief of the story, he had supposedly never lived with her in human form.) It seems that the chief, incited by the woman’s invitation, was anxious to obey her. He tried to climb up to the object of his desire, but his sexual excitement was such that he ejaculated prematurely, smearing the tree trunk—polished and slippery in itself—with his chaste marital sap, rendering the task impossible.

In Ashnuwerta’s grave voice, Arpylá showed him how to overcome the obstacle. He had to climb up the vines hanging from a nearby tree and then swing over to where she sat in the guayacan tree. Following her advice he reached her and lost himself in her amidst the restless rustle of the leaves. Afterwards, in Ashnuwerta’s wise voice, Arpylá gave him disconcerting instructions he could not refuse: “If the men want to recover their women they have to do what you just did. After that they will kill me and distribute my body in as many pieces as there were families, take my flesh to a new village, far away from the old one, and wait there until nightfall when the resurrection of the women will take place. Keep my genitals for yourself.”

One after one the Ishir attempted to climb the tree and reach the woman (the goddess, the doe). Each man suffered the same fate as the chief: the anticipation of possessing Arpylá excited them so much they could not control themselves, and with each avid attempt the trunk of the tree became more and more slippery with their semen. Just as she had with her husband, Arpylá showed each of them how to reach her. And following her instructions they reached the top of the tree and copulated with her. When the last man had finished, Arpylá climbed down from the guayacan and lay down over a *pypyk*, a shawl woven out of caraguata fibers. Her husband’s brother, or companion, killed her with the *noshikó*. Then, using their *ybykúú* (small sharp knives), all the men cut her body into pieces they then distributed and carried off in their *boná* (hunter’s bag made of caraguata). Although they had decided to cut the body into equal parts, inevitably some of the men grabbed bigger parts. Others

had to content themselves with simply cradling some blood in their hand. Dazed by the situation, Syr, the husband (*abich*) of Ashnuwerta, forgot to follow her instructions and did not keep for himself the essential part appointed to him. He was never able to recuperate his wife. "From that moment on, Ashnuwerta never again appeared among men," says Wylky, emphasizing the Ishir obsession with those who forget the divine precepts and receive exemplary sanctions.

Commentary on Arpylá

Arpylá's tale is a tight mythic nucleus whose greatest effect is the intense poetry, obscure brilliant metaphors, and suggestive complexity of impenetrable designs. Like other figures whose symbolic weight exceeds them, it emits a beam of meanings that can not be fastened to any vertex. And yet the expressiveness of its fertile mayhem suggests a variety of readings: its own rhetorical generosity makes it the ready accomplice of multiple interpretations and of attempts to reveal a nonexistent key. It is not the function of this book to profit from such attempts or to venture its own hermeneutic gestures. Yet it is evident that many interpretations, despite their failure to account for the whole myth, touch on some of its nerves. They can, if not unveil its structure, enrich its reading, signal its densities and echoes, ambiguously indicate its intricate paths. For this reason I'll mention (and simplify) some suggestive figural or conceptual associations tied to this dense mythic episode.

Arpylá consummates the mediating destiny of Ashnuwerta, whom she represents, supplants, or simply continues. The figure of the goddess/woman/doe fixes an axis of oppositions between the sacred and profane, between the numinous and the merely organic. It confronts human beings with the gods, on the one hand, and with animals, on the other. It works the differences, quarrels, and coincidences between male and female. It elaborates the difficult nexus between reproduction and death, between accomplished time and the present. It establishes instances of mediation, connections through rule and ritual, through the idea of a death that orders and restricts all human industry.

The figure of the men's climb toward the goddess is fairly expressive. It signals, among other things, the elevation required by the craving for the sacred. Human beings need to rise and climb to communicate with deities. They need to overcome difficulties, including their own impatience and clumsiness.

And they must learn: reaching a higher level requires knowledge. (In this case revealed knowledge: the goddess teaches them the steps needed to reach her.) If the guayacan alludes to the cosmic column—the axis mundi, the connection between the earthly and the celestial—the vines suggest the indirect and necessary path of mediation. The desired object can only be reached through laborious detours. Truth is reached at a slant, if it can be reached at all.

The copulation between Arpylá and the men points to and reinforces a notion of unity in the Chamacoco social body. The men identify with each other through their identical effort to reach the goddess, through a single way of climbing up to her, possessing her, and later killing her. The social pact is renovated on a backdrop of eroticism and death, sealed with the collective semen spilled on the guayacan and the precious blood of the last/first woman. Arpylá's instructions reinforce the image of a feminine source of normativity and meaning: she institutes the technical procedures for achieving what is desired, she regulates sexuality, codifies the forms of death, and installs the proportional distribution of goods under the oscillating sign of chance and the uncertain rubric of human justice. She rolls out before their eyes the essential utopia: the ancient dream of a renewed society.

If the men identify with each other through their sexual intercourse with the goddess, the women identify through the common flesh out of which they are reborn. And if the men attain the sacred by rising to the numinous, the women participate in a superior dimension by the very material that comprises their bodies and makes them apt for new progeny. Bearers of divine stock, ephemeral dwellers of Osypyte, the Kingdom of the Dead, they give birth to the generations that will comprise the new Ishir people under the sign of word, silence, and secrets.

AFTER Arpylá's tragic sacrifice and the distribution of her body, the men abandoned the village and established a new provisional settlement not too far away, as commanded. They carefully guarded the valuable bits and pieces of the deity. In order to pass the restless hours remaining before nightfall and to calm the hunger produced by such fateful, intense activities, they went in search of eels in a nearby stream. They fished, but the anxiety of knowing whether or not the miracle had taken place drove them crazy. Finally, at the limits of desperation, they decided to send Tetís, or Pytís, a nephew of the chief (Syr for the Tomárahó) to the village to spy on what was happening and

bring back news. The youth was a *konsaha porro*, that is, a shaman-apprentice who already had certain powers. Converted into an *ave-sastre*, a small swift bird which bears his name to this day, Tetís flew low over the settlement and was chased by a noisy group of women who wanted to capture him. These were, he realized, the new women.

Back in human form, the youth returned to where the men now rested. He lay down on the ground by his uncle on a caraguata mat and informed him of the good tidings. (Here is a minor episode, a *mónene*, which has nothing to do with the dramatism of the narrated events, but which expresses a trait of Ishir culture: the value assigned to cunning and deceit, considered resources to obtain advantages, and the relation of deceit to a certain, often crude sense of humor that is not lost even in the most serious circumstances.) Syr, or whoever the chief was, and his nephew decided, whispering, to hide the news from their companions. “Carrion birds, or perhaps wasps, ate up Arpylá’s flesh. There is no way to recuperate the lost wives,” they said solemnly. Desperate, the men abandoned their *boná* brimming with eels and decided to disperse: some returned to the settlement, others wandered deep into the forest with no destination. The chief gathered the bags and sent Tetís to gather the men again and tell them it had been a joke. When the men run to the village shouting for joy, they find their wives who—ignorant of all that has happened, and ravenous, since they have not yet eaten in their new life—only demand the slippery products of their husbands’ fishing endeavors.

Final act: the chief enters with the bags of caraguata filled with eels, and after reserving the best pieces for himself and his nephew (and attributing to himself the merits of the fishing expedition), he distributes the eels among the carefree *tymycher aly* (new women). The men observe them: they are and are not the same. The unequal distribution of Arpylá’s flesh has made some of them reappear fatter and others skinnier than they had been before. Those who were formed with only the blood of the goddess came back slightly more somber and sad, as if they were faded copies of themselves.

There is one other fundamental difference between the old and new women. Their memories have been erased: they do not remember their encounter with the gods, nor their death and substitution by the men. From then on, when the Ishir reappear in the ritual circle, tearing the depths of the Chaco with their ferocious cries, upsetting the peace of the village with the agitation of their feathered, painted bodies, the women believe they are in the pres-

ence of supernatural beings, of gods who can, like all powerful beings, be either generous or harmful. Then men and women will reverently, fearfully, and even joyfully watch this performance that seeks to reestablish the origin and renovate time, cast away death and reaffirm desire. This is the Great Secret. The day in which the Ishir forget to imitate the gods, and the women stop officiating as guarantors of the profound truth of fiction, the curse of Nemur will fall upon their heads. Then the stage on which the Ishir represent, justify, and reproduce themselves will cease to exist. "Then," says the old shaman Faustino Rojas, watching a fixed point on the horizon, "the Chamacoco will die, or will cease to want to live, which amounts to the same."

Notes on Myth

Myths do not have a meaning, a univocal truth that can be unraveled. They are the vertebrae of different constellations of meaning that a society generates in order to anchor its origin and conjure away the absurdity of death; in order to name its depth, its beyond, and its forever; in order to redesign its profile according to a choice that overlays and counterbalances a natural organic model.

To defend the secret of myth and question the idea that it transmits an exact and decipherable truth does not mean conceiving it as a text that is beautiful but mute, or as a mere arabesque of fantasy. Myth opens up a terrain of knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible. It lodges the real in another scene whose artifices reveal new flanks of understanding.

The difficulty of assuming the rhetorical level of myth is a problem common to the social sciences, which find themselves bewildered in the face of a fact that grounds its truth in fiction. They can not comprehend certain oblique strategies through which society recognizes itself and dramatizes itself, through which society subtracts and justifies itself. To consider myth (as one often considers ideology) a deceptive mechanism that skirts "true reality" is to lose sight of the revelatory potential of figurative language, which conceals and deceives in order to intensify meaning and bring to light dimensions invisible to the prudent gaze of the concept.

Amidst the simulacra and performance of drama, in the very confusion of shadows and reflections, myth smuggles in dark unanticipated forces such as unknown actors or events and dialogues that took place elsewhere.

Myth's lack of clarity is offset by a gain in vigor and vehemence, in the generosity of excess. The complicated wandering of myth recovers lost ground through the shortcuts of poetic detours.

The mechanisms of knowledge of myth begin to operate where those of discourse fall silent. The question of meaning, the theme of the unconditional, the desire for transcendence, and the necessity to grasp the multiple dimensions of the real, exceed the possibilities of reflection and leave behind an excess that cannot be captured through analysis and definitions but only alluded to through suggestions. It can only be broached indirectly through circumlocutions, deflections, and slanted approaches.

Myths address the radical questions of a community: the unanswerable ones. From their obscure narrations, the silhouette of the absolute, the place before the origin and beyond the limit (the event that takes place outside time), is illuminated intensely, if briefly, so that humans can orient themselves. They are furtive reference points through which to glimpse or imagine the direction of essential paths. There can be no clear, definitive resolution. (The wise old Ishir have a saying, translated roughly, that the secret is the guarantee of meaning.)

Notes on the Great Ishir Myth

The Great Ishir Myth is an efficient filter regulating Chamacoco society and a powerful storehouse of meaning. Its vigorous figures pose a central question that orders society and grounds its thought: the links between the same and the other. The elaboration of difference (gender, age, personality, profession) translates into different positions and traces the intricate maps of interpersonal relations. Men and women; the uninitiated, adults, and the old; members of different clans and families; warriors, hunters and gatherers, leaders and shamans assume places endorsed by the power of the "great words," urged and anointed by the obscure work of metaphor.

The great webs of meaning are woven by fastening uncertain figures and masked ideas; by weaving desires and fleeting signs created by fear, engendered by imagination and the delirium of ecstasy, or revealed in dreams. They are also produced by manipulating clear reasons, and by borrowing or stealing alien forms that are then plaited into the plot of the tales.

It is true that myth allows the Ishir to tie, explain, and legitimate social order. It is true that myth produces the great arguments through which a collectivity ensures its own continuity, explains itself, and elaborates its own image. It is also true that the Great Myth does not close off the large questions, but constantly renews them. Challenged by historical situations, myth creates conflicts and unravels crises. It requires change. It destabilizes. The Chamacoco anguish—this restless affliction of the soul that mimics the boredom of palm trees or the threat of white men—is as much the child of myth as is tranquility. Myth wards off chaos on the razor's edge: it molds order out of nothingness. It is only in the language of myth that death can be named.



Clemente López, Ebytoso shaman, crowned with a feather headdress and large neck-guard. Puerto Esperanza, 1986. (Photo by Ticio Escobar.)