

VENUS AND THE STAR WOMAN

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Abstract

Like several other Gran Chaco indigenous groups, the Wichí identify several constellations in the sky; among them, Venus appears as an important celestial object generally identified with the mythical motif of the Star Woman. This character (*kates lhukwetah*) is crucial in an important myth associated with Venus. The mythical motif of the Star Woman will therefore be analysed. The cultural meanings implicit in Wichí representations of women and gender relationships are tracked in several social, symbolic, celestial and material contexts. Meaningful relationships between celestial beings (Venus), cosmological representations (Star Woman) and feminine social life (material culture, string figures, marriage alliance, initiation rites) are verified and analyzed.

Key words: Wichí, Venus, Star Woman, myth, woman, string figures.

Introduction

The Gran Chaco indigenous groups identify several constellations in the sky. Among these, Venus appears as an important celestial object generally identified with the mythical motif of the Star Woman. Among the extensive mythical narratives that have been documented in these groups, one of the most recurrent motifs is the one about the Star Woman. The heavenly reference to this character is “the bright star” Venus. The representation that the Wichí address as *kates lhukwetah* will be at the core of this paper. Our final objective will be to describe how this representation reveals a social, material and stellar representation of women.

Venus, the Star Woman Myth and Social Life among the Wichí

Known until recently as “Matacos”, the Wichí of the Gran Chaco form the linguistic group Mataco-Maká together with the Chorote, the Maká and the Nivaclé. The Wichí do not constitute a homogenous unity, but are organized in an “ethnic chain” made up of many peoples who share certain linguistic characteristics while at the same time upholding different linguistic and cultural traditions (Braunstein 1976).

From the Wichí point of view, the Star Woman (*kates lhukwetah*) is a crucial character in an important myth associated with Venus. One version says: “Once there was a man so ugly that no woman would marry him. One night his mother heard him speaking with a woman. The following morning she asked: ‘With whom were you talking last night?’ She did not know that the woman was the daughter of ‘The two brothers’ (the name of a constellation). The son remained silent. The mother asked again: ‘Who was she?’ But he still re-

fused to answer. Every night the Star Woman would leave her home to visit her lover, and then return. She combed his hair and gave him necklaces. Finally the man became good-looking. All the women fell in love with him but he would have nothing to do with them as they had despised him when he was ugly. The Star Woman took him to the sky with her as her husband. He met his wife’s family. One day his wife and the women of her family went to pick wild beans. Before leaving, the Star Woman said: ‘Do not touch the fire; it is bad; it will burn you.’ The man did not obey her; he touched the fire and it exploded. He fell down dead. His wife put his head and bones in a bag and dropped it near the house of his parents. The bag full of bones fell with a thud. The mother, seeing what was in the bag, knew her son was dead so she buried his bones” (A. Métraux, quoted in Wilbert y Simoneau 1982, p.48). In several versions of the myth collected among different Wichí groups, it is said that the Star Woman had a bead necklace on her chest, or either a necklace that was really bright. It is often also said that, as it was winter and therefore a dry season, there was nothing to eat. The Star Woman, however, was able to make food appear on condition that nobody would ever see how she had accomplished the deed. The food was duly distributed to all the community, but when the woman tried once more to make food appear, she was spied on. As her condition was not fulfilled, she was not able to present food again and she returned to the sky utterly offended. Her lover followed her home, where he finally died. In yet other versions, the Star Woman’s father burned his daughter’s husband and ate him, whereupon his soul turned into an owl called *tyustáx*, which always makes the noise “Wek, wek, wek”.

As for any oral narration, the Star Woman myth has many versions since the narrative performance depends

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on the specific context in which the myth is being told. Under these circumstances, despite their differences or their inevitably fragmentary nature, we consider the different plot variants as parts of the same story. Starting from the standard premise that the sense of a myth becomes increasingly clarified as more narrative variants are taken into account, we present parts of some of the variants of the Star Woman myth among different groups of the Wichí complex recorded throughout the decades in the ethnological literature.

Working with different versions of the Star Woman myth (Palmer 2005, p.288-296; Braunstein 1993, p.41-46; Dasso 1989, p.32; Barúa and Dasso 1999, p.261-262; Métraux quoted in Wilbert and Simoneau 1982, p.48-49), the most fundamental idea being conveyed seems to be the union between astral and human beings. Nevertheless, it is productive to examine some of the finer details.

First, the star can be identified as an object of desire. Second, we are talking about a powerful being that has an unusual capacity as a provider of food and other goods. But its power is not free of ambivalence: breaking an obligation to the Star Woman brings misfortune, and in fact in most versions mere contact with her entails excesses of heat (burns) or cold (frost) or even, sooner or later, death. Third, the stories repeatedly mention the implicit tensions and problems involved in a marriage alliance. Fourth, the Star Woman appears to be associated, quite explicitly, with an opposition between the terrestrial and the celestial planes – and within the latter, particularly with Venus. The end of the tale is almost always unfortunate, as if the myth is insisting that the sky is not a suitable place for human life.

In addition, danger appears to be a distinctive characteristic of Wichí representations of femininity. We can therefore affirm that there are certain correspondences between this myth and social life. In both planes, for instance, the woman performs a crucial economic role: in everyday life she collects wild fruit and seeds for horticulture, whereas in the myth she magically provides people with a great amount of food, knowledge about the harvest, or the creation of art designs. In fact, the origin of chaguar (Bromeliaceae) fibre and bags is strongly related to the celestial plane, since this is a piece of knowledge women brought when they came down from the sky. It has been stated that, in some Wichí groups, these contributions on the part of women are considered gifts to men. In the same way, shame and bashfulness are feminine characteristics dealt with in the myth. The fact that the Star Woman goes back to the sky – in some versions because she feels embarrassed after she has been spied upon when she makes

the algarroba (*Prosopis* spp.) appear in dry seasons; in other versions because humans have not respected her wishes – represents a typical attitude among Wichí women, who react violently when they feel humiliated (for instance, when their husbands are unfaithful).

It is also necessary to point out that the attractive and ambiguous trait of *kates lhukwetah* is not only related to the narrative plane but can influence daily life. As in the myth, *kates lhukwetah* can damage men's health. The riverside Wichí in Ramón Lista (a district of Formosa) accurately describe the symptoms of those men who sleep in the mountain staring intensely at the stars: they start to suffer from such an intense cold that they have to put half-burnt sticks into their mouths. They also lose weight and do not seem eager to talk. These symptoms show that the "soul" (*husek*) has abandoned the body, since it has been attracted by the bright and sparkling necklace of the Star. At the same time, these symptoms are associated with the light blue cold and can only be cured by the shaman, who must beg the Star Woman to give back a soul to its ailing owner by offering her a necklace full of colorful seeds (Califano 1974, p.50).

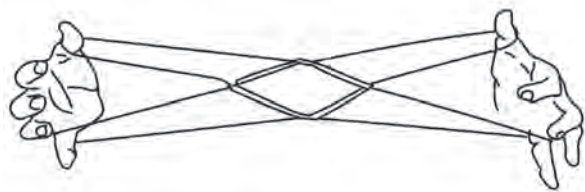
According to the Wichí since the Star Woman is a celestial character, there is a double danger: in addition to being a woman, she belongs to a different plane of existence from everyday reality. Women's beauty, like stars' beauty, provokes both passions and danger. It is worth mentioning that this ambivalence is not alien to Wichí cosmological thought, in which women are primordial, powerful beings (Barúa and Dasso 1999, p.272). In their mythical origin women have a second mouth – a vagina with teeth – an organ that identifies pre-social, celestial women as authentic sexual carnivores. This image easily accords with the idea – current among many contemporary Wichí – that women feed themselves through the coitus (Palmer 2005, p.89). When a myth explains how a trickster breaks the teeth in this mouth, it somehow symbolizes the domestication of the implicit power in feminine sexuality. *Kates lhukwetah*, known as Venus, seduces and even makes ill anyone who observes her for a long period; this makes sense in a cosmology which judges sexual passion as a personal disorder that could cause death or make the victim into an outcast as a consequence (Palmer 2005, p.107).

String Figures and Venus

These beliefs are not the only evidence for the symbolic expression of imagery associated with the Star Woman. Like many others aesthetic patterns, this motif is frequently materialized by means of the string fig-

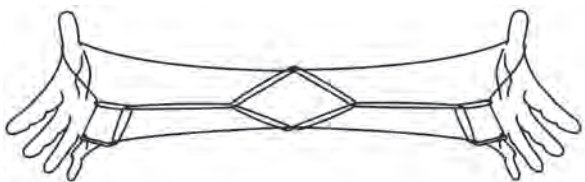
ure, which beyond its recreational function codifies a significant dimension of cultural identity within the Gran Chaco region (Rydén 1934; Braunstein 1991, 1993). Until very recently, these figures seemed to be one of the few means of graphical expression among these peoples and, as is the case with myths, variants of particular figures circulate through considerable geographical areas.

There are two figures that are mainly associated with the Star Woman. The first is called, precisely, *kates lhukwetah*, and is a rhombus which represents the morning star: the “potbellied star”.



Kates lhukwetah

From this image, another figure is elaborated in a progressive way – one figure derives from the other – and this is called *kates lhukwetah lehwís*, the “star with arms” or else “the star that embraces”.



Kates lhukwetah lehwís

This figure of “the star with arms” is linked to a fundamental dimension of Wichí social life, which could be described as the marital agency of women. The central rhombus of the design represents a vagina. In the myth, the trickster had to break the vaginal teeth in order to tame women and to make it possible for men and women to live together on the Earth. At the same time, *katés lhukwetáh lehwís*, the star which embraces, evokes both attraction and danger. Due to the matrilineal conformation of Wichí kinship groups, women are placed at the centre of society; and men are then attached to this centre by playing the role of in-laws and husbands. It is important to understand that, although some parameters are imposed by the male members of the family such as the husband’s exogamy or capacity for productivity, it is the Wichí woman who chooses her mate during social visits within the community or courtship dances. Traditionally, women attract their future husbands by dancing behind them and placing their hand over their shoulder, or seizing them by their belt. They then invite the man to their parents’ home,

and they are told to hunt or fish some meat, which will later be handed to the in-laws by the woman as mediator (Palmer 2005, p.106-110).

Within the set of meanings conveyed by these string figures, we find connotations such as the charm, sexual power and marital initiative of women which can help us to comprehend the way the Wichí conceive the feminine condition. In a more general sense, if these graphical expressions can be accepted as a cultural representation of society and a standardized depiction of mythical phenomena, we can state that, methodologically speaking, string figures can be used as an ideal complement to oral literature.

Final words

To sum up, the complex meaning of a figure such as *kates lhukwetah* can only be partly understood from a narrative point of view. It is also necessary to analyze its graphical representations in string figures, as well as certain beliefs and representations associated with animism and the nature of the human soul, the existential dilemmas of suffering and ambivalence, the cultural conception of the light blue plane, and the active role of Wichí women in sexual relationships and marriage alliance. As with any other relationship among the Wichí, gender ideology seems to be better understood if we bear in mind its multiple contexts of symbolic representation. In other words, different planes of reality (symbolic, ideological, material) are illuminated by each other, since the cosmological dynamics seem to be ruled by a logic that does not presuppose a clear distinction between the terrestrial and the celestial planes, or even between subjectivity and the properties of the cosmos (Lévi-Strauss 1996, p.238-239).

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VENERA IR ŽVAGŽDĖ-MOTERIS

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Santrauka

Gran Čakų (Chaco) indėnų kultūroje aptinkame įdomių kosmologinių sampratų apie dangų. Šios etnoastronominės koncepcijos yra labai svarbios indėnų kultūros ir etninio identiteto supratimui. Vienos iš gausiausių Gran Čakų regiono genčių Vičų (Wichí) požiūriu, Žvaigždė-Moteris (*kates lhukwetah*) yra svarbiausias mitų, siejamų su Venera, personažas. Todėl Žvaigždės-Moters mitinį motyvą mes analizavome vičų genties kosmologijos kontekste. Kultūrinės prasmės, susijusios su vičų moters ir santykių tarp lyčių vaizdiniais, yra atsekamos pagal įvairius socialinius, simbolinius, dangiškuosius ir materialinius kontekstus. Pavyzdžiui, Žvaigždė gali būti laikoma troškimo, galios ir dviprasmiškumo objektu ir priešybių tarp skirtingų kosmologinių lygmenų ženklų. Čia esama aiškaus atitikmens tarp mito ir socialinio gyvenimo, kuriame moteris vaidina labai svarbų ekonominį vaidmenį. Mes išanalizavome ir nustatėme reikšmingus ryšius tarp dangiškosios būtybės (Veneros), kosmologinio personažo (Žvaigždės-Moters) ir moters socialinio gyvenimo (materialinės kultūros, virvelinių figūrų, vedybų, iniciacijos apeigų).

Vertė Algirdas Girininkas