

# The Hunter Monmanéki And His Wives

A Tucuna Myth

1978

The performers (in other words, the reader) are requested to refer back on the score to the third variation, M<sub>241</sub>, *From Honey to Ashes*, II, *i*. This myth told the story of a baby-snatching frog, which perished because of a feast of honey – honey being an exquisite food on the border-line of poison. The same themes are found combined, in a much weaker form and in episodic fashion, in a Tucuna myth, thanks to which our investigation can start off on a new tack.

M<sub>354</sub>. *Tucuna*. ‘*The hunter Monmanéki and his wives*’.

In the days of the first people fished for by demiurges (M95, *RC*, p. 171), there lived an Indian whose only occupation was hunting. He was called Monmanéki. On the way, coming and going, he often passed a frog which would dart into its hole at his approach, and each time the man would urinate into the hole. One day he saw a good-looking girl standing before the hole. Monmanéki saw that she was pregnant: ‘Because of you,’ she said, ‘you always pointed your penis in my direction.’ He asked her to come to his house and live with him. His mother also thought the girl pretty.

Husband and wife went hunting together, but they did not eat the same food. Monmanéki ate meat, but (for his wife) he used to catch a kind of black beetle that formed her only diet. When his mother saw these beetles she said, (not knowing about her daughter-in-law’s tastes): ‘Why does my son soil his mouth with such filth?’ She threw them out, putting peppers in their place. When Monmanéki called his wife to the meal she placed her little pot on the fire and began to eat from it but the peppers burnt her mouth. She ran and hopped into the water in the form of a frog. A rat reproached her with having abandoned her little boy, who was weeping bitterly. She said in reply that she would have another child. However at night she returned to the house and stole the infant from his grandmother’s arms.

Monmanéki again went out to hunt. In the fruit cluster of a bacaba palm (*Oenocarpus* sp.) an arapaço bird was sitting. ‘Give me a gourdful of your drink,’ said Monmanéki in passing. When he returned he saw a pretty girl who offered him a gourdful of bacaba palm wine. He took the girl home to be his wife. She was very pretty, but her feet were ugly. On seeing her, the hero’s mother exclaimed that he could have made a better choice. The woman was annoyed and did not wish to remain with Monmanéki.

He returned to hunting. One day he had a sudden fancy to squat down to defecate directly over the spot where an earthworm was burrowing. She poked out her head and said: ‘My, what a lovely penis!’ Monmanéki looked and saw a girl with an extremely good figure. He copulated with her and took her home with him, where she gave birth to a child. When Monmanéki went hunting, he told his wife to leave the child with its grandmother while she herself went out to weed the plantation. But the child wailed so much that the grandmother decided to carry it to its mother in the plantation. There the earth woman had clipped the roots of the weeds (as earthworms do when moving underground), and they were already wilting, but the old woman did not notice this and criticized her daughter-in-law for laziness. She took a sharp-edged river-shell, and so cut off the lips of the earth woman who was gnawing the roots just below the surface. Only at night did the unhappy wife return to the house. When her son cried, she asked

her husband to give him to her, but she could no longer speak properly. Humiliated by her disfigurement, she disappeared.

Again Monmanéki went hunting. A band of macaws flew over his head and he shouted to them to give him some of their maize beer. When he returned, a macaw-girl was waiting for him with the beverage. He took the girl home as his wife. One day the hunter's mother threw down a quantity of corncobs that hung from the rafters and asked her daughter-in-law to prepare maize beer. She herself left for the plantation. Using only one ear of corn, the girl roasted it and made enough beer to fill five large jars. When the mother returned, she tripped over the heap of unused corncobs and accused her daughter-in-law of having done nothing. The latter had gone off to bathe in the river, but heard the reproaches and refused to enter the hut. When her husband returned, she told him she wanted to retrieve her comb which she had thrown on the roof-thatch. (This is where Indians keep objects of everyday use.) Climbing up the ridge-pole, she began to sing: 'My mother-in-law has scolded me, now drink the beer alone may she!' The old woman realized her mistake and apologized, but the daughter-in-law refused to listen and resumed her macaw form. (Perched on the main beam), she cried to her husband at daybreak: 'If you love me, follow me! Look for the a:ru-pana laurel, the splinters of which, falling into the water, are transformed into fish. Make a canoe from the trunk and follow me down river to Mount Vaipi!' And with this she flew away to the east.

Monmanéki ran to and fro all the next day like a crazy man searching for the a :ru-pana laurel. He tried several trees with his axe until finally the splinters of one turned into fish when they fell into the water around the foot of the tree. Each day when he returned from work he brought back such a quantity of fish that his brother-in-law,<sup>1</sup> who was lazy and incompetent, began to spy on him. The effect of this indiscreet action was to prevent the splinters changing into fish. Monmanéki guessed the reason and called out to his brother-in-law to come and help him. When they finished the canoe they pushed it down the slope. While the brother-in-law was standing in shallow water, Monmanéki suddenly upset the canoe on top of him. The brother-in-law passed the night under the canoe singing and crying. The next morning Monmanéki released him and then invited him to accompany him down the Solimoes. Monmanéki was seated at the stern and his brother-in-law was at the prow. Thus they drifted downstream without paddling. When they arrived among the people with whom the macaw-girl was staying all the inhabitants ran to the bank to see the canoe and its occupants, but Monmanéki's wife hid behind the others. The brother-in-law, transformed into a monan bird, flew up and alighted on her shoulders. The canoe continued downstream a short way, but suddenly its prow turned up perpendicularly and Monmanéki, after changing into an aica bird, flew onto the woman's other shoulder. The empty canoe continued to drift at the mercy of the current and finally entered a large lake where

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<sup>1</sup> In Tucuna, the same word, *caua-áne*, may mean the husband's brother, the wife's brother and the sister's husband (Nim. 13, p. 155).

it turned into an aquatic monster, *dyëvaë*, which is the lord of fish in the Solimões, more especially of the shoals of *piracemas* (Tupi: ‘fishbirth’?), which go upstream periodically to spawn.

After this adventure, Monmanéki married a girl of his own people. Every time she went to the landing-stage, which was some distance from the house, her body divided into two sections at the waist: her abdomen with the legs remained lying on the bank, while her chest, head and arms entered the water. The odour of flesh would attract the *matrinchan* fish and she would catch them with her hands and string them on a liana. Then her torso would crawl on its hands to the bank and adjust itself on the lower part, from which the spinal cord protruded to the length of a finger.

Monmanéki mother was greatly astonished at the amount of fish brought by her daughter-in-law. One day when she was preparing maize beer, she ordered the young woman to fetch water from the river. However, as the daughter-in-law delayed, the old woman became impatient and went to the landing-stage herself. Seeing the lower half of the prone body she immediately pulled off the protruding spinal cord. When the upper half hoisted itself back on to the bank, it tried in vain to adjust itself to the lower half, and finally climbed up to a branch overhanging the path. When night fell, and his wife had not yet returned, Monmanéki lit a torch and went to look for her. As he passed beneath the overhanging branch, the upper half of the woman sprang onto his shoulders where she became stuck. She would not let him eat but, snatching the food from in front of his mouth, ate it herself. He grew thin and his back became filthy with the woman’s faeces.

Monmanéki thought of a trick to get free. He said he had to dive into the water to inspect his fish weir and that if his wife did not keep her eyes closed the whole time the piranhas which infested the river might well tear them out. In order to make the warning more convincing, he scratched her face with a piranha jaw which he had secretly brought along. The woman took fright and decided to stay on the bank, thus momentarily freeing her victim. Monmanéki took advantage of this to dive into the water and swim away. Not knowing what to do, the upper part of the woman perched on one of the posts of the weir. After a few days, she began to sprout parrot-feathers ‘and like a tame parrot, began to speak to herself’. Hidden in the bushes, Monmanéki watched her fly away, still chattering, further down the Solimões towards the mountains (Nim. 13, pp. 151–3).

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The Origin of Table Manners (Introduction to a Science of Mythology, Vol. 3),  
London: Cape, pp. 25–28. <[archive.org/details/originoftableman0000levi](http://archive.org/details/originoftableman0000levi)>

Claude Lévi-Strauss recorded this story and wrote the introductory paragraph.

The folk story mentioned at the beginning can be found here.

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