

Archaic songs for preserving and transmitting the mystery of birth, love and time

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Abstract

Since the most remote times oral tradition has passed down linguistic-communicative materials that the adult uses for the caring relationship in the “nursery”: these pluri-semantic materials (consisting of sounds, rhythms, gestures, words, etc.) are structured in sequences that accompany the birth and evolution of the child’s mind, from the symbiotic relationship to the perception of duality and, finally, of the social environment.

These materials originate from and have their foundation in the mother’s experience regarding the birth and growth of the child. A sort of progressive catharsis accompanies the worried imagination with the sweet music of the lullabies, toward the more urgent rhythms of the games on an adult’s lap or on the changing table, to reach the veritable polyphonies of the first group games of the child.

The “ready to use” characteristic of this linguistic material and the thoughts contained in it make it memorizable, interesting and available for the child and the adult who enters into a relationship with him.

At the centre of interest and pleasure present in the preservation and use of the oral patrimony of the poetic production for early childhood, there is the presence of a space that can contain the projections of individuals and groups: this has in a certain sense a narrative function - since it creates thought connections – which precedes those more articulated by the traditional fairy-tales.

Key words: child, stories, thoughts, anthropology, rhyme

Introduction

In this co-authored article we report our reflections on an experience in training for teachers in the nursery schools of the city of Naples, a sort of moving laboratory, having the aim of connecting various territorial realities with extremely different culturally characteristics: from the large housing districts on the very edge of the city, to neighbourhoods that are more shaped as communities. Using the fairy-tale based on oral culture as an “engager of thought” (Lafforgue, 1985), we have tried to help establish a relaxed atmosphere in the groups of nursery school teachers, in which they were able to express their feelings and spontaneous thoughts on their experiences of relating with their little charges. The themes that came up over and over again were those of weaning and of the birth of language.

For each session we selected a fairy-tale, for each group, in relation to what we felt we had perceived in the contents and the dynamics of the first encounter.

Annamaria Di Stefano, anthropologist and “cuntastorie” (itinerant-story-teller), had the role of narrator of fairy-tales, and Susanna Messeca, child psychotherapist, that of conducting the group.

In the last encounter we gathered from the nursery school teachers themselves a true “corpus” of lullabies, nursery rhymes and children’s rhymes and games, which they remembered from their childhoods and used with the children. Later we transcribed these into a booklet distributed in all the nursery schools.

The reflections that arose from this experience are the subject of this article. They deal on the one hand with the context of oral culture, and on the other, with the presence of “phantasms” that are common to the mother and the child.

Since it has been written by two authors with different backgrounds, this article will be divided into two sections with different approaches. The first section is more an anthropological section, whereas the second is more psychoanalytic, but both are the fruit of common reflection, together with the colleagues of the “Lupus in fibula” group.



*Luna, luna, santa luna
vui siti la patruna
la patruna, ' i tutti banni
salutatimi a Sanciuvanni
(Palermo)*

*Moon, moon, holy moon
You are the mistress
The mistress of everyone ...
give my greetings to Saint John
(Palermo)*

From a historical-anthropological point of view, traditional singsong rhymes, nursery rhymes, children’s rhymes nonsense rhymes and songs for very small children are the descendents of magical formulas connected to rites of passage and seasonal cycles belonging to the agricultural-herding civilizations, which expressed through them a strongly anthropomorphized religiosity.

This instance of anthropomorphism, rather than producing only simulacra, seems to us to delimit the sacred space of the cultural relationship between man and nature, in which the precious areas of knowledge tied to birth, death, the changing of the seasons and of the generations are preserved.

The considerations regarding the “historical roots” that are the basis for so-called “magic thinking” are not always well received by modernity, which has difficulty admitting how impossible it is for technological progress to do without a primordial awareness of “creatureness”.

These roots should thus be explored as a cultural heritage which can mirror the cosmos in the structure of thought.

Cultural anthropology which now tends towards interdisciplinary syncretism, with interest observes that child psychoanalysis hypothesizes archaic modalities of thought and deep and contradictory contents in the mind of the child, from the very first days of life.

On the other hand, the small child is immersed in a network of psychic relationships, which preserve and transmit to him “the secrets” of the ancient magical-ritual formulas, in order to protect his fragility and encourage his growth.

We can thus note interesting parallels between the cultural heritage of archaic rituality and the corpus of nursery rhymes which are even today transmitted orally and preserved for and by childhood.

- In all “rites of passage” the intended initiation speaks of interiorizing contents regarding knowledge and experience (talismans and charms). Both in the formulas of ancient rites and in the regional collections of nursery rhymes, one can also perceive the awareness that an “end” is the indispensable presupposition to every “beginning”: in the rituals connected to the work of harvesting, the officiants would thank the “live” ear of wheat for its final product: bread. Bread, as the death of wheat, will feed new life. The experience of the child with respect to the presence and the absence of the mother also needs to be accompanied by rituals. The old woman, the moon, the scythe are all symbolic figures that mirror the thoughts of the child.
- Both archaic thought and the thought of a child cannot avoid being fascinated by the mystery of sexuality: the seed that makes the earth fertile, the mother that gives birth to new children, the body of the child separated from the maternal body.
- Archaic thought with its rituals internalizes the meaning of common shared space by means of the dominion of the linguistic code, which precedes narration and, later, writing. In the same way, the child will internalize separation and, being aware of his mental space, also be able to represent, in his “ring-a-ring-a-roses around the world”, his being separated from and together with the other people in the world.
- Singing seems to be an indispensable ingredient of containment in childhood, in the process of separation and individuation, in the same way as ritual crying accompanies funeral rites for the working-through of mourning (E. De Martino). Music guarantees space for the meanings of loss and mourning, lending support to working through the pain.
- What precedes linguistic learning seems to be a pre-comprehension, through music, of the meaning that language contains. This meaning is “thinking the absent mother”. The poetic productions of archaic societies, on the other hand, were simply unimaginable without the music that was born in a synergy with the word in the line.

We must therefore conclude that the mournful contents of singsong rhymes are the expression both of maternal anxieties and of the experience of the child related to the separation of birth.

Old women, wolves, moons (more or less tamed representations of the “woman with the scythe”) are present in lullabies as apotropaic figures or talismanic projections: they are the first phantasms that give “form” to children's imagination.¹

These figures, which are often amusing portrayals of anguish, will produce, just a little later, real “theatrical interpretations” on the part of the mother in the games on the changing table.

Children's songs seem to be a preparation of the mind for the reception of language and of the narration of fairy-tales.

From them are “born” masks (real fluctuating images in the perception of the maternal face), talking animals (which “speak” about the parts of the body and of the body as parts), until the circle is reached: the first abstraction that designates the space of the mind both in the “cephalopods” of children’s drawings and in ring-a-ring-a-roses games.



Fig.3. Joan Miró (1933)

Songs and nursery rhymes already include all the narrative structure of fairy-tales, with characteristic formulas of beginning and ending which characterize the narrative pact.

The “metaphor”, although it cannot yet be “understood” by the child, is received and transmitted by the mother as a mechanism of a game that the child can more and more autonomously “inhabit”.

¹ In Italian traditional culture death is a female figure, and the representation of death as a skeleton with a scythe is imagined to be an old woman. In other cultures the skeleton with a scythe is a male figure; in fact, in English he is referred to as the Grim Reaper and pictured as a man. (translator’s note).



Fig. 3. Auguste Rodin (1942)

*Man is born with hard work
and birth is at a risk of dying.
He feels pain and anguish
first and at the very beginning
his mother and father
take him to comfort him for being born*

.....

*there is no kinder act
that parents do for their children
(G. Leopardi Night-Song of a Nomadic Shepherd of Asia)*

In all cultures since very old times the lullabies sung by nursemaids and mothers can be considered from a psychoanalytic point of view as universal expressions of maternal reverie. Archaic cultures gave voice to phantasms of life and death, which were naturally shared between mother and child, and interpreted them, giving them a musical form. Music, which acts as counterpoint to the images expressed in words, allows the child to evoke the experience of pre-natal rhythms. The baby perceives above all the rhythm of the music and that of the rocking that accompanies it. Only later will he understand its contents.

D. Anzieu speaks of sensory envelopes provided by the mother to the newborn, which contribute to creating in him a “psychic skin”; one of these, the “sonorous envelope”, is made up of the modulations of the mother’s voice, perceived also during pre-natal life (Maiello, 1993). In those moments other “envelopes” contribute to the sense of well-being of the child, experienced as the feeling of the “continuity of existence”: the muscular and tactile sensation of the maternal arms, the visual

perception of her gaze, and the mother's smell, which the child recognizes at a very early age.

The words and the music are initially perceived by the child as a rhythmic flow, just like the milk that flows into his mouth, following the rhythm of his sucking and of the initiation of milk secretion. These rhythms, at various sensory levels, will later be found by him in nature (day/night, the seasons, etc.), as my anthropologist colleague has described, and are perceived as elements that contribute to the "beauty of the world" (Meltzer, 1989).

*Dondolò dondolò
Questo bimbo a chi lo do
Lo darò alla befana, che lo tiene una settimana,
lo darò all'omo nero
che lo tenga un mese intero,
lo darò all'omo bianco
che lo tenga un anno santo
(Pistoia)*

*Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye
Who shall I give this baby to?
I'll give him to the Befana (the Epiphany crone), and she'll keep him for a week,
I'll give him to the black man
to keep him for a whole month,
I'll give him to the white man
to keep him for a holy year
(Pistoia)*

This Tuscan lullaby emphasizes, like Leopardi's poem, the universal preoccupation of parents in taking care of a newborn (what Winnicott calls the "primary maternal worry") and that of the fragile and disoriented small being while confronting the unknown. They are strong words, that evoke the fears of the child and the anxiety of the mother, but they acquire a cathartic sense by virtue of the mere fact that they are expressed and shared, accompanied by reassuring sonorous rhythms. These unconscious thoughts are even more explicit in an ancient lullaby:

*O nonna nonna, nonna nonnarella
o lupo se magnaie o pecuriello,
o pecuriello mio, commo facisti
quanno in mocca allu lupo te truvaste
(Napoli)*

*O Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye
the wolf ate the little lamb
o little lamb of mine, what did you do
when you found yourself in the mouth of the wolf*

(Naples)

In these images phantasms of being devoured are present, and we will find them again in a more articulated form in nursery rhymes and fairy-tales.

The maternal mind is instinctively able to make contact with the archaic fears of the child and to “theatricalize” them, as if to act them out. Playful nursery rhymes have been handed down, which are chanted by the mother to the baby on the changing table, entering his visual space with her face. In the “transitional area” that is created, in which the baby bursts out laughing, those phantasms related to the fear of being devoured are made lighter. Here is an example:

Granciu

granciu

granciu

ca ti mangiu

ca ti mangiu

(Sicilia))

Crab

crab

crab

I am going to eat you

I am going to eat you

(Sicily)

In the first phases of growth popular nursery rhymes bring into focus the intuition in the maternal mind regarding the potential abilities of the baby, who begins to have experiences of the world, first of all of his own body, as distinct from that of the mother and divided into various parts.

Gatta gattella

mano manella.

Gatta gattella

mano manone,

nu bellu schiaffone

(Napoli)

Cat little cat

hand little hand.

Cat little cat

hand big hand,

a great big slap

(Naples)

This chant is sung by the mother to the child sitting on her lap, to let him experience the differentiation between his body and hers; at the end she uses the child’s hand to

give him a playful slap, showing him the strength of his hand and the dosing of aggressiveness.

*Mano mano piazza,
di qui passò una lepre pazza
questo la vide (la nutrice prende il pollice del bimbo)
questo l'ammazzò (prende l'indice)
questo la mise in pentola (prende il medio)
questo la mangiò (prende l'anulare)
e al povero mignolino (prende il mignolo)
non gliene restò neanche un pezzettino.
(Da Incisa Valdarno)*

*Hand hand public square,
through here went a crazy hare
this one saw it (the nursemaid takes the child's thumb)
this one killed it (the nursemaid takes the index finger)
this one put it in the pot (the nursemaid takes the middle finger)
this one ate it (the nursemaid takes the ring finger)
and for the poor little finger (the nursemaid takes the little finger)
not even a little piece was left.
(From Incisa Valdarno)*

This Tuscan nursery rhyme instead stimulates the child, who is again seated on his mother's lap, to distinguish himself as a part of his family group in the "theatre of the hands". It invites him to distinguish among the various fingers of his hand, so that they "become" as many characters. On the whole, the nursery rhyme acts out the anxieties of the child about being the last and the least defended in the world of "big people".

Still other nursery rhymes, with the child on his mother's lap, act out the separation between the body of the child and that of the mother, "theatricalizing", in a playful way, the archaic fears of falling, by tipping the child's body suddenly backwards. Usually the child bursts out laughing loudly at the end of this game and asks to repeat it.

*Sega sega
Mastu Ciccio,
na panella e nu sasicciu
a panella c'a magnammo
e o sasicciu c'o stipammo.
(Napoli)*

*Saw saw
Master Ciccio,
a loaf of bread and a sausage*

*we shall eat the loaf of bread
and save the sausage
(Naples)*

A last nursery rhyme invites the child to perceive himself as an integrated whole, in front of a mirror, and reminds him that he has received contributions from the world of his family to exist and grow. This inner experience accompanies the experience of beginning to walk, which will lead him to explore a wider space on his own.

*Un naso,
due occhi,
una bocca, due orecchie,
sì... babbo, mamma, nonno, zio,
questo qui sono proprio io!*

*One nose,
two eyes
one mouth, two ears,
yes... daddy, mummy, grandpa, uncle
this one here is really me!*

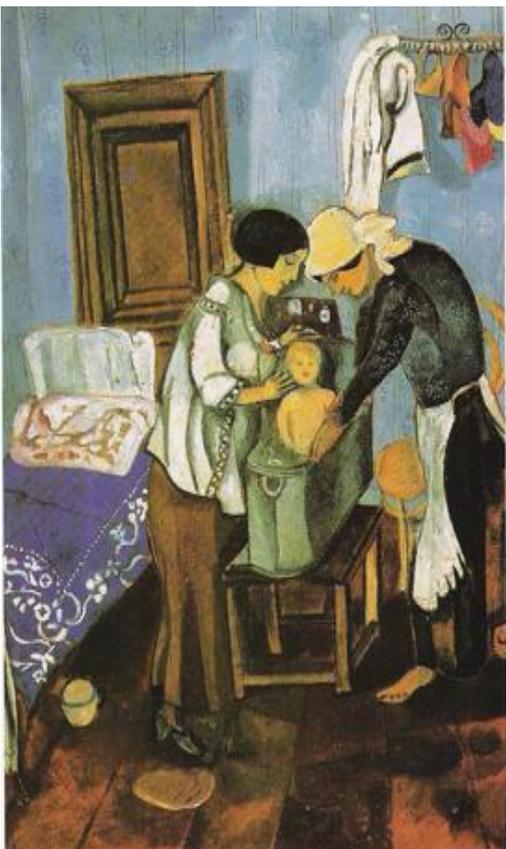


Fig.4. Marc Chagall (1916)

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