
Power and Speech

Mythology of the Social and the Sacred

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Edited by

Marcin Lisiecki, Louise S. Milne, Nataliya Yanchevskaya



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Foreword

The “sciences” of mythology—studied in various ways and to various ends over several centuries, but especially since the nineteenth through comparison among mythologies—constitute a significant part of European and North American intellectual history and, given a treatment proportionate to this share, would demand a book-length contribution. In fact, numerous very different accounts already exist, and in this Foreword only the barest outline of major landmarks could be expected. Different modern disciplines, among them anthropology, folklore, history of ideas, religion, and philosophy, see our field or parts of it differently and so choose different starting points. My choice would be to emphasize the *comparative* aspect over myth itself and so to begin as our linguist colleagues (“comparative philologists” in an older phraseology) also would and to see the origin of comparative methods in William Jones’s late-eighteenth discovery of the “relationships” between and among an older set of languages, what came to be called the Indo-European languages. And given the leverage of the comparative method, I would propose that the development of the field of comparative mythology is most basically understandable through three phases: the first dominated by linguistic thought; the second, by the social sciences anthropology and sociology; and the third, our own phase, shaped by a new historical conception of the human imagination, only in recent years made possible by prehistorical archeology and by current genetic science. One advantage of this schema is that it immediately becomes clear that very little intellectual baggage must be left behind: good work according to the first and second phase is still of relevance within present-day scholarship.

* * *

In the first phase—perhaps most appropriately symbolized by Adelbert Kuhn, founder of the *ur*-journal of our field, *Vergleichende Mythologie*, but also including other nineteenth-century figures like Jacob Grimm, of great significance to a single language group—the theoretical core derived from language study can be imagined

as centered on reconstructions based on triangulation out of preserved comparable material from myth and ritual. This more or less pure core quickly evolved to comprise also the populations that spoke the languages of the analogues and their culture, especially law, custom, beliefs, and folklore. Alongside this model (which perhaps never actually existed in the hypothetical chaste form), numerous lateral influences entered, the most important being the so-called “nature mythology,” an older pre-scientific vein of thought. Probably all readers of the present book will be familiar with the decay of the reputation of this first comparative mythology, as exhibited in the satires on Max Müller, “the eclipse of solar mythology,” and the like. An interesting question is why this discrediting of the first comparative mythology happened. M. L. West has a technical answer out of the history of linguistics: developments in Neogrammarian linguistics revealed flaws in reconstructions. This would be part of the cause. In my opinion, a larger part would fall to the shadow of inherited “universal mythology,” and West too ridicules the “nature” aspect. In any case, comparison and reconstruction themselves remain in principle valid exercises in the historical human sciences.

In the second phase, anthropology—not so much in the famous form of Sir James Frazer and the ritualists as in that of functionalism—and historical sociology, especially as developed by Emil Durkheim, led to the central figure of George Dumézil. In Dumézil’s mythological thought—captured by C. Scott Littleton as “the new comparative mythology”—diachronic reconstruction and comparatism are continued from the first phase, but now grounded rather in social structures more than in verbal forms. Beyond the study of myth proper, Dumézil became a major figure worldwide in the variegated, but characteristically twentieth-century vision known as structuralism; and competing versions of structuralism may have contributed to the weakening influence of Dumézil’s model, the decay of the second phase, but a decay of extension and modification (as in Nick Allen and Emily Lyle), very little of repudiation (Bruce Lincoln).

The third phase of comparative mythology seeks the mythic component of a deep history of humanity in its trek out of Africa. The chronological horizons are therefore vastly greater than in Indo-European studies. Comparison and reconstruction, as well as vestiges of sociological structuralisms, mix here with the DNA mapping of Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT and with the worldwide archeology of prehistory. All this is captured most provocatively in the amazing work of Michael Witzel. But though Witzel, founder of the International Association for Comparative Mythology and the new journal *Comparative Mythology*, may stand beside Kuhn and Dumézil as the symbolic figure of this phase, he is not alone. For example, side by side within the IACM, Yuri Berezkin works with a vastly extended historical-geographic corpus of mythological symbols. In myth studies generally, it appears that very little is totally “out of date,” but the most pressing questions for our time do appear to be questions for all times. These are *among*

the questions IACM is most identified with, *but* all manner of other mythological investigations have flourished under the auspices of IACM and can be expected to continue flourishing.

* * *

The book now before the reader began with the annual meeting in June 2015 of IACM in Toruń, Poland, ably led by Dr. Marcin Lisiecki, who, with his fellow editors has now assembled a generous collection of scholarly papers on myth under the aspect especially of “power and speech.” Among the nineteen papers one can perhaps trace some lineages back to our three phases of comparative mythology, but of at least equal importance are the heterogeneously varied approaches of this contemporary collection. May the reader enjoy the learning and variety of these studies as much as I did!

Joseph Harris
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