Rupture and fusion in the approach to myth
Theoretical and methodological perspectives from anthropology, history, religious studies, and intercultural philosophy

Wim van Binsbergen
Theme group on Agency in Africa, African Studies Centre, Leiden/
Chair of Intercultural Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam

ABSTRACT

Before we can engage with theories and methods in the study of myth, we need to consider a more fundamental issue.

The study of myth is predicated on a paradox. Myths are in the first place *other* people's myths. Ever since Hellenistic scholarship at Alexandria, a narrative only becomes transformed into myth under the estranging gaze of the analytical outsider, for whom the myth does not contain truth, at least not the truth the owner and narrator consciously recognises. Hence, the construction of a specialist field of scholarship of myth implies, in principle, an implicitly violent hierarchical ordering of the world. Here the analyst claims a privileged position which, if adopted by the owner and narrator of myth, would destruct the latter's position as well as the very myth itself.

Such constructions have been argued to belong to the overall installation of North Atlantic hegemonic violence, by materially and physically coercive means as well as by the claim of a monopoly on scientific rationality – without which there would be no science of myth as distinct from the narration and living of myths. In our largely postmodern world, the claim of a privileged position (in the analysis of social and political life, the arts, religion etc.) has become profoundly problematic (Foucault, Mudimbe, Postcolonial Theory). *Such a claim would appear to amount to a myth in its own right.*

But meanwhile the pretense of having access to such a position has brought us, as scholars interested in the study of myth, a wide but converging variety of insights into the literary, historical, psychological, cultural and socio-political manifestations and workings of myth. These insights carry their own fascination and justification. Perhaps more than anything else they respond to the Kantian *sapere aude* ('have the courage to shed your ignorance'). We would therefore be reluctant to sacrifice these insights on the altars of ephemeral political correctness. The scholarship of myth, in the broadest possible sense, is at the core of the construction of modernity.

In other words, with regard to myth our tasks as global intellectuals are situated in the field of tension between
1. celebrating such myths as create and communicate beauty, cosmological meaning, sociability, self-respect, power and freedom (often through their tranformative incorporation in literary, musical, dramatic and graphic artistic expression; or alternatively, through their underpinning an equitable social arrangement, a justified socio-political cause, or more in general as enshrined in the collective representations of our society); and

2. exploding such myths as, so very often, result in the opposite of (1), in principle by virtue of – *mutatis mutandis* – the very same mechanisms as under (1).

This means that the study of myth has to be undertaken from a number of complementary perspectives at the same time.

(a) The scholar's personal, practical participation in living myth (e.g. in any of the forms enumerated under (1)) reminds us that the intersubjective understanding of myth at the owners'/narrators' own terms is an act of sociability, and often (since scholars believe to have eradicated myth from their own professional sub-culture, and increasingly from North Atlantic culture in general) of inter-cultural understanding; it also admits the fundamental humility of the human condition, notably the unattainability of a privileged position unless through violence. My paper will briefly give two illustrations of the scholar's participation in living myth: the author's personal engagement with spirit possession and mediumship in Southern Africa, and with Afrocentricity as a global idiom of identity.

(b) The scholar's critical battle against myth (as under (2)), which may take any of the myriad forms in which intellectuals manifest themselves critically in the modern world, from the critique of North Atlantic hegemonism, male chauvinism, racism, scientific rationality, to the critique of fundamentalism, pseudo-science, New Age, sects, mass consumption etc. etc. Here it becomes very manifest that one person's myth is another person's truth. Although this point (b) is implied in any scholarship of myth, the paper will not dwell on specific examples.

(c) Clearly, the field of tension signaled above is too productive than that we should try and resolve that tension (e.g. by a radical retreat from living myth – which is impossible anyway because we cannot live without collective representations). Yet the contradictions of scholarship produce such relative compartmentalisation in time and place as allows us to engage, as specialists (and for that part of our existence where we can identify as specialists), in the detached study of myths as if they were exclusively other people's. Here the paper will briefly dwell, with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, on the author's current research projects into long-range mythical ramifications.

- mythical themes which connect South Central African kingship with South Asia and the Ancient Near East
- mythical themes emerging in long-range patterns of animal symbolism across the Old World
- mythical themes emerging in long-range continuities in leopard nomenclature and symbolism as a perspective on the world history of shamanism

(d) Using such auxiliary approaches as lévi-straussian structuralism, long-range comparative linguistics (in terms of such macro families as Nostratic, Dene-Sino-Caucasian etc.), population genetics (Cavalli-Sforza and his school), archaeology, the history of art, the study of ancient astronomies and other specialist knowledge systems, cultural anthropological perspectives on the distribution of specific traits (especially with regard to ritual and belief) in space and time, and multivariate statistical analysis, long-range myth analysis is sufficiently impopular (especially in African Studies) to be relegated, in its own right, to the status of pseudo-scientific myth, and to be denied validity. In terms of the framework sketched above, however, that would be the highest praise possible, even though it appears to be unjustified.