

Cigán, Michal

## Introduction

In: Cigán, Michal. *Priest-king of the warriors and witch-queen of the others : cargo cult and witch hunt in Indo-European myth and reality*. First published Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2019, pp. 7-9

ISBN 978-80-210-9341-6; ISBN 978-80-210-9342-3 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/141680>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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# INTRODUCTION

This book deals with anthropologically reassessed matter of Indo-European (IE) comparative mythology. Two themes are focused on directly; the primordial creation of stratified society and the conflict of elite with female witches. Invariant textual structures attested to throughout the comparative analysis are interpreted as reflections of social processes running in the contextual background of myths.

The chosen approach is based on a well-founded assumption that myth generally reflects the social life of the community by which it has been produced. All the other possible influential factors (material basis of society, historical events, natural phenomena etc.) are of secondary importance, as the point of their mythological reflection is still to demonstrate the social affairs.

Socially and anthropologically oriented comparative analysis can be considered a kind of methodological challenge in the case of IE myths. They used to be analyzed as an internally coherent and culturally exclusive set of texts. Here a different approach is demonstrated; an attempt to interpret IE myths as a matter of mechanics innate for human societies in general. Thus the methodological clash typical for humanities – exclusiveness versus universality – is evidently present. However, it will be shown that this double track interpretation is not contradictory at all.

A primary aim of this book is to bring a reassessed, more complex interpretation of well-established IE creation myth as well as to introduce a new IE mythological theme, the so-called witch-hunting myth.

Its secondary aim is to propose an alternative interpretative model for Indo-European comparative mythology (IECM). As far as I know, a thoroughly context-focused socio-anthropological approach to IE myths has not been practiced so far. The origins of discipline are drowned in idealistic romantic mythology

of natural phenomena. What is more, under the heavy influence of historical comparative linguistics interest has been centered more on the nomenclature of mythical entities than on the myths themselves. Therefore, the social processes in the background of the myths simply could not grab the attention of pioneering IE mythologists.

Comparison of the mythological texts *per se* was first introduced by the well-known work of G. Dumézil. However, Dumézil focused upon a narrow set of identified inter-textual structures rather than on examination of a myth's content in connection with its context. And even though the sociological nature of his approach often used to be stressed and praised, as far as the character of his work is concerned, this was a formal methodological catchphrase rather than a real analytical device.

The first call for change came from S. C. Littleton (1966), with his sketch of *anthropological reassessment* of IECM. But the first systematic effort to anthropologize the IECM can be considered the works of B. Lincoln (1981, 1986, 1991, 1999). As a postmodern Marxist he proposed to interpret myth as a political utterance of elites, by which they set social hierarchy determined by the existing economic base of society. An accent he put on political, economic and ecologic background of myth naturally led to reflections of social processes and their possible influence on the content of the myth.

Ideally, one would like to study each /narrative/ variant not only in its relation to all other variants, but also with attention to the social and historic situation in which each variant made its appearance and found its reception, so that one could get a sense of how interplay between narrators and audiences produced narrative innovations, taxonomic modifications, and consequent shifts in the distribution of advantages over the course of time. To put it differently, our task is not finished until we have considered texts, contexts, intertexts, pretexts, subtexts, and consequences. (Lincoln 1999:150)

Another significant attempt was made by J. G. Oosten (1985). Unfortunately, his interpretative line fully copies the techniques of Levi-Strauss' schematizing structural analysis of myth.

Thus the by-goal of this work is to present a direct socio-anthropological approach to IE myth, to provide its pragmatic, context-focused, empirically oriented interpretation. The point is not to discover some predetermined philosophical construct hidden inside the text of the myth and typically detached from its original background – social as well as any other (romantic M. F. Müller). The point is not to explore the internal structure of the myth *per se* through the prism of variously designed structuralism with its rather formal interest in the social background of myth (C. Levi-Strauss, G. Dumézil). Instead, the point is to identify the mythological textual structure, which is a reflection of processes observed,

or reliably postulated to be more specific, in its social and historical background.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first chapter is devoted to theory; it introduces the basic terminology, more closely describes and argues for the chosen methodology, interpretative model as well as the criteria of the material's selection. Subsequent parts represent attempts to apply the suggested anthropological interpretation of IE mythological themes in practice. In the second chapter the issue of IE creation myth and in the third one the IE witch-hunting myth is discussed. Thus the last two parts of the work bring a very comparative analysis of original mythological texts followed by interpretation of their invariant textual structures according to the criteria and assumptions stated in the theoretical chapter.

The core of this work was composed as a dissertation thesis defended in summer 2016 at the Department of Linguistics and Baltic Languages of Masaryk University in Brno. I am grateful to my thesis supervisor Professor Václav Blažek as well as other colleagues for all the guidance and support. My thanks go to the thesis opponents, Professor Ivo Budil and Pavla Valčáková, and also to Zbyňek Holub, for their feedback helpful in the process of manuscript writing.

