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## Myth and its academic reflection

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. 17-27

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

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/141683>

Access Date: 04. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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## 2 MYTH AND ITS ACADEMIC REFLECTION

Myth is above all the oral product of folklore narrative tradition. Even though the discipline of IECM studies myths mediated by literary texts, still for the myth this mode of existence is rather unnatural. Only secondary and occasionally, due to favorable conditions, oral myth is brought into written form.

It implies in the first place that the text of a myth is fully determined by its context. If it was originally uttered by a living man, poet participating in some folklore (i.e. variant, dynamically changing and commonly shared in contagious communication) narrative tradition, in certain social relations, within certain political and historical events, then all the context of myth's composition and performance is a factor of cardinal importance for the constitution of the myth's text.

This knowledge was brought by social anthropologists (for instance A. Lang, R. Benedict, B. Malinovsky, R. H. Lowie etc.; Kanovský 2004; Littleton 1966, Paden 1988) and later folklorists, as they studied narrative folklore of living societies. Their fieldworks showed, that myth is closely related to the situation of its utterance, to ritual, to politics, to communal needs and events. *The context of an item of folklore is a specific social situation in which particular item is actually employed ... how, when, where, to whom, and by whom myth is uttered on a given specific occasion.* (Dundes 1980:23-24)

As many authorities of social sciences pointed out, it is essential to analyze the context of treated cultural phenomenon. Only the familiarity with its context gives the social scientist the chance to its proper understanding (Neusner 1966, Cigán 2009).

But this ideas penetrated rather insignificantly, if ever, to the field of IECM or continental European mythological studies in general. The pioneering IE mythologists of romanticism were criticized by Anglo-American anthropologists just for their context-neglecting approach to myth; an example is the attack of A. Lang on M. F. Müller (Littleton 1966:35). Unfortunately, many European mythologists

scarcely ever accepted this criticism. They studied myth as a text detached from its original context which allowed them to interpret it according to their own personal, philosophical or ideological preferences (S. Freud, C. G. Jung, M. Eliade, etc.; Lincoln 1999). To some extent, this kind of criticism was accepted in the aforementioned approach of C. Levi-Strauss, and among IE mythologists by G. Dumézil and especially by B. Lincoln.

Given the declared aim of this book, to demonstrate the socio-anthropological approach to the phenomenon of IE myth, my ambition is to eliminate the deficiencies still present when it comes to its context-focused interpretation.

However, the methodological imperative of context-focused approach could be easily questioned in this case. The discipline of IECM is still focused on myths created by people long since dead. Unlike the folklorist or social anthropologist, IE mythologist has no opportunity to observe the storytelling community in order to make a thick description of multidimensional contextual background of analyzed tale. Just as a certain historian once asked: *In the absence of fieldwork conducted via time machine, can we hope to understand barbarian anthropology?* (Kulikowski 2002:74)

I believe that there *is* a method to compensate for this disadvantage. Since there is no chance to observe the context of (pre)historical myth, the IE mythologist is obliged *to reconstruct* it. The point is to get a representation of features, conditions, structures and processes in the society which produced the analyzed myth, through the knowledge of disciplines independent of IECM; history, social anthropology, archeology, paleozoology, paleobotany, comparative historical linguistics etc.

The point is to create a model as real and complex as possible. Formal catchphrases and reductive schemas (for example as those proposed by structuralism) would be scarcely useful. On the other hand, there is no need – and it would not be even possible – to handle all the aspects of reconstructed society. A more detailed explanation of a few but important mechanisms is much more than brief descriptive overview of the society as a whole. In this regard the interest should be concentrated on the reconstruction of key structures, processes and potential events of communal social life. The subsequent section brings further argumentation for this kind of an approach; myth as a collectively and politically evaluated folklore product reflects especially this trans-individual, communal level of its contextual background.

Once the context is reconstructed, it can be used as an interpretative platform of analyzed mythological text. And even though the reconstructive modeling of the (pre)historical myth's context is hardly the same as its direct observance, still it is the only way to maintain the scientific line of its interpretation. As the findings of disciplines used for reconstruction are often independent of mythological research, are empirically based and/or they represent consensual outcomes of sci-

entific discussion, they form more or less objective (or towards reality converging) limits for subsequent interpretative efforts. This helps to minimize the danger of argumentation in circles (Jung's or Dumézil's myth interpreted by myth), constructing of ad hoc explanations or results infected by the interpreter's personal attitudes.

Ultimately, such an indirect reconstruction of myth's social background appears to be, at least from a certain point of view and to some extent, even more exact than its modeling by means of fieldwork in a living community. It was a bitterly acquired knowledge of social anthropologists; interviewed informants, instead of their own opinions, tend to express rather the ideas they believe the researcher wants to hear (Baret & Dunbar & Lycett 2007:39). Thus, however strange it sounds, in this case some theoretically and methodologically positive consequences of time-space gap between the mythologist and object of his or her interest are present.

But there is also another reason which makes an effort for reconstruction of myth's context important for IECM. As it was pointed out, the discipline is based on a premise about the diachronic transmission of PIE mythological motives, themes as well as whole tales to historical IE traditions. Nevertheless, the notion of long-term diachronic stability of mythological texts as an inherent feature of myth *per se*, is a wish of romantic mythologists rather than obligatory folklore process (Cigán 2009).

According to D. Ben-Amos, any change in the context of folklore tradition generates synchronic and diachronic change of its text (Ben-Amos 1971). Therefore, one of the key features of any folklore tradition is dialectics of conservativeness and innovation. Folklore textual patterns are constantly reshaped according to actual needs of their audience.

Also Boyer (1990) considered the diachronic changes in traditional orally transmitted texts to be caused by diachronic changes in society; in its structure, processes and general character. In addition, as he further pointed out, there is always the naïve conviction of audience (let alone the observing outsider) about myth's textual antiquity, even when there is evidence of relatively recent textual changes in traditionally performed texts.

A similar inconvenient conclusion was brought by several researchers (Goody & Watt 1986, Ong 2002) in the case of narrative genealogies, i.e. the genre that represents the very flagship of all the romantic beliefs in the diachronic stability of myth. Dynastic genealogies or foundation myths of orally based cultures are constantly reshaped in accordance with the actual political situation. Broad masses, recipients of those changed narratives, however, are never aware of the process of their transformation.

Therefore, in any folklore tradition in every moment new "ancient" and "traditional" texts are produced. This is another reason, why the direct observance

of community may not be the best way to interpret the text it is producing. The question of real antiquity of treated folklore narratives can be properly answered only after the analysis of their contextual background, with emphasis on its diachronic development.

Methodological consequences of this knowledge for discipline of IECM are obvious; any assumption about diachronic stability of text has to be supported by analysis showing at least basic diachronic continuity of its social background. It is then the duty of the IE mythologist to reconstruct not only societies of historical IE groups, but also the society of PIE Urheimat. This step is a necessary condition of proper analysis and further interpretation of IE myths as well as assumptions about their possible origin in PIE folklore tradition (Cigán 2009).

### 2.1 Mind and Society behind the Myth

All seem to suggest that the main factor of myth's constitution is the social life in time and place of its emergence as well as further diachronic and synchronic persistence. The intimate relation between the myth and its society was stressed by many authorities during the history of mythological research. What had started as an idea of romantic philosophy (W. Humboldt, E. Cassirer) was later adopted, this time more or less free from political motivation, by French sociologists and structuralists or Anglo-American anthropologists. As Mary Douglas pointed out (1996/1970/:124) – to quote only one of the many examples of this interpretative attitude – *the choices people make about how they deal with one another are the real material which concerns the student of comparative religion.*

The social conditionality of myth seems to be confirmed also by contemporary anthropological approaches. According to B. Boyd (2009), myth is an evolutionary emerged tool, which evolved in order to support cooperative behavior, internal coherency and formation of group identity in human societies.

However, in addition to the social matters, another significant aspect of myth's constitution seems to be present. If myth arises in the process of social interaction, it is just the interaction of human minds. It implies, in addition to social, also the cognitive determinism of myth.

Also this mind-focused way of myth's interpretation has a long tradition; since the times of self-reflexive insight of phenomenology to contemporary empirically based neo-modern cognitive anthropology, with its ambition to study the relation between evolutionary determined cognition and culture. Hence the analysis of myth should take into account both individual and social cognition.

Of course, both aspects of myth's background are closely related. It is assumed that even the very evolutionary enlargement of AMH's neocortex was caused primarily by the need for the development of social thinking (Barret &

Dunbar & Lycett 2007). Therefore, the human cognition is socially embodied in general, and reversal, human social life generally depends on inherited mental biases.

For this reason, myths seem to be shaped by cognitive processes on two levels; directly, internally, and indirectly, externally. By direct inner influence is meant the fact that the human mind forms an immediate environment of creation and transmission of myth. By indirect external influence is meant that cognitive processes determine the way AHM perceives and organizes his social environment, whereas this environment in turn shapes the body of myth. Cognitively determined myth is then reflecting the society, while the society itself is to a certain non-trivial extent, determined by the same cognition. Therefore, from the analytical point of view, myth is above all the matter of both social and cognitive processes or of their close mutual relation.

This fact brings both methodological and interpretative implications. Methodologically it evokes the need of theories, conceptions and tools of social and anthropological disciplines in order to perform a proper study of myth. In the field of interpretation it means that the question of the meaning of myth should be examined in connection with cognitive and social affairs of human existence.

Considering this traditional problem, the meaning of myth's existence, B. Boyd (2009) proposed a solution shaped exactly in this twofold socio-cognitive manner. He assumes the basic function of myth is to demonstrate model social situations in order to stimulate the development of human social skills and social cognition. And further, by rather wide operational area of myth due to its oral folklore existence it makes the treated models commonly known; thus, by myth the common norms of behavior are distributed among the population. In these two – cognitive as well as social – operational lines myth stimulates the cooperative behavior and social cohesion of human groups.

Note, however, that the demonstrations of norms need not to be always explicit. As Douglas pointed out, it is important to notice

...what is not said in each world view. Each theory has its hidden implications. These are its unspoken assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality. They are unspoken because they are taken for granted. There is no need to make them explicit because this is the common basis of experience. Such shared assumptions underlie any discourse... They are the foundations on which social reality is constituted... (1996/1970/:145)

It means that myth speaks even through its silence. In the light of this assumption, the claim to examine contextual background of myth is even more urgent. The only way of identifying its implicit contents is to relate it to its social background.

Mary Douglas (1996/1970/) proposed the complex model of relation between the society and its cosmology, including the official communal narratives, myths. According to her, in every society, there are two basic principles which determine dominating worldview. The first one she proposed to call *Group*; generally it is the intensity and weight of interpersonal relations, the feeling of being a member of community and significance of these factors for one's life. The second one is so called *Grid* and it refers to the complexity of cultural patterns and models of behavior as well as their significance for the life of an individual. Varying strength of both principles and their combinations produce certain sorts of society; its typical economy, cosmology, social tensions, attitudes towards human body, etc. Her theory then allows to predict the nature of narratives in certain social conditions or generally to examine the relation between social and narrative reality. For this reason, some of its ideas will be used in interpretative analysis of subsequent chapters, together with their more detailed explanation.

Nonetheless, the fact of myth's social embodiment can be supported also by knowledge (and self-critique) associated with postmodern approaches to the phenomenon of storytelling. As B. Lincoln (1999) pointed out, myth is far from being only a passive reflection of social reality. As any human utterance, it is biased, manipulative and ideological entity, which mainly reflects the interests and intentions of its creator. Accordingly, demonstration of social norms and hierarchies, by which the narrator of myth and his audience are identified, is one of the typical aspects of storytelling.

Especially in the case of IE myths this postmodern point of view should be borne in mind. Their existence is inherently linked with society ruling elites, which is the environment primarily and naturally focused on issues of power and politics. A significant portion of IE myths are products of politically engaged poets, who performed their texts in the center (or on the pike) of social life, in the role of ideologists and propagandists of their rulers. As such, the traditional poets participated in the creation and objectification of social norms and cultural constructs. It indicates that their texts are inevitably linked with the existing authorities, established hierarchies and current social mechanisms (Cigán 2010).

It can be summarized then, that myth neither contains some mystic knowledge of our "noble" and "national" ancestors, nor is allegoric personified interpretation of natural phenomena or manifestation of some inner *sui generis* structural patterns. Just the contrary, it is rather a reflection – even though not always conscious, explicit or unbiased – of structures, patterns and processes of human social life.

## 2.2 From Singing to Writing

As pointed out above, the discipline of IECM examines archaic myths of supposed preliterate oral folklore origin mediated by later literary traditions. However, literature and oral folklore are different modes of communication. And moreover, their exchange – most often the general replacement of oral tradition by literature – was usually related to the process of complex cultural change. This implies possible transformations of the texts which had successfully penetrated the boundary between both media. New spokesmen of elites, the emerging men of letters were often deeply engaged in political and economic aspects of an ongoing process. Their confrontation with obsolete oral texts took the wide range of possible forms, with positive as well as negative attitudes towards the old tradition. It would be naïve to imagine them as objective scholars who tend to record original mythological texts.

In the following lines are briefly sketched the possible consequences of this cultural change in respect to IECM studies.

### 2.2.1 Interferences and Discontinuities

Oral folklore is, just as literature, a tale transmitting medium. The very phenomenon of narration is probably one of the points out of which emerge certain interferences between both media.

One of these interferences is perhaps the converging view people usually hold on both media. The audience as well as the expeditors of narrations, written as well as spoken, often used to perceive them as being the two aspects of the same phenomenon. This kind of naïve approach was present also in early scientific attempts to model the relation between literature and oral tradition. There were established terminological distinctions like *artificial literature* vs. *traditional literature* (Mathesius 1982:242) or *written literature* vs. *oral literature* (Chadwick & Chadwick 1932-1940).

However, several objections can be raised against such a view. According to Ong (2002:12-13), the term *oral literature* is rather an inappropriate concept; it is like an attempt to use a collocation *vehicle with legs* in order to describe and explain the horse to a member of an industrial society who has never seen it. Instead of being two sides of the same coin, literary and oral tradition rather represent two different types of economical communication (barter vs. currency), i.e. two different phenomena.

Yet certain interferences still remain. Both media are connected with ruling elites, being the channels of transmission and operation of stories in their ideological services. Thus, provided there is some measure of cultural continu-



ity, despite the media change still it is likely that old texts will be useful in new conditions.

Generally, for any archaic literature it was quite difficult to prevent the infiltration of older folklore textual structures. Still being the recent (even though currently and inevitably perishing) tool of communication and storing the knowledge, the oral tradition was the only source of ideas that mattered at that time. And even if it was necessary to invent or accept the new views, instead of creating the new forms for their communication, more efficient was their incorporation into the old ones. Eventually the social significance of older folklore structures was strengthened by the fact, that events discussed by high narrative genres of elites, as mythos or epos, were seen as the real historical facts. For this reason even the innovative community tended to use them as a base for composing their new narrations.

Contamination of archaic literature by folklore textual structures occurred even when men of letters strived to prevent it. An example of this kind of vain attempt is the work of Herodotus. His aim was to compose *historia*, i.e. the narration reflecting real historical events, instead of unreal stories of myth. However, in spite of his effort there is much contemporary oral folklore in his work, especially realistic heroic and foundation legends. In those days even the scholar was often unable to differentiate, whether the informant's story is a real event or folklore fiction. For a member of ancient society, where positivistic thinking, scientific critics or complex system of common education were unknown, it was not always easy to assess properly the border between the real and the unreal. Particularly in the cases, when the story did not contain obviously supernatural elements, which eventually an early skeptic could notice about the fictive nature of narration. Due to the aforementioned fact, that many genres of oral folklore were considered a historical reality in general, probability of confusion only increased.

Therefore, any archaic literary tradition is more or less influenced by contemporary oral folklore. In the case of mythological literature, the mission of which is to replace older elite genres of oral folklore or to store and save them before they fade away, naturally the influence of preceding texts can be even more significant, than in historically intended pieces.

On the most general level, the possibility of long-term diachronic stability of prehistoric traditional texts, eventually leading to their conservation in early literature, is strengthened by the relative stability of basic contextual conditions. It can be stated, with a certain measure of generalization that since the prehistoric time of the *Neolithic revolution* till the ancient or even medieval historical period, the social, economic and technological conditions in non-literal societies changed very little. Wood and beasts of burden were the basic sources of energy, wheel and metallurgy represented the most advanced technological inventions, farming and herding the basic sources of food. Options of distant, trans-local communication

(transport, migration, information exchange) were limited. All the knowledge was synchronically as well as diachronically communicated by means of oral tradition; without the presence of external storing memory device of literature, any quantitative and qualitative change of thinking and knowledge was inhibited.

Thus, as far as all the possible historical changes occur and operate within the basic set of these post-Neolithic conditions, there is a certain non-trivial amount of basic probability, that prehistoric orally transmitted texts will find their way, at least to some extent, to the official literatures of historical periods.

On the other hand, divergence of both communication modes should not be underestimated. The literary turn in society was not only the technical change in the way of processing and communicating the information. Often it was caused by wider and deeper cultural change, either due to external influences or as a result of internal development – and most often by interaction of both aspects. Regardless of origin of this innovation, it could trigger positive as well as negative attitudes towards the older oral tradition. In historical Europe the combination of external and internal factors led to the adoption of foreign post-Roman Latin-Christian literary tradition by formerly heathen societies, i.e. groups formerly based on their orally transmitted traditions. In Iran during the reign of Sassanids (or perhaps earlier?) or in India at the end of Vedic period, however, the genuine orally transmitted tradition was registered in literary form in response to more or less internal social development.

Moreover, the media change is not only the outcome or byproduct of social change. The very rise of literacy often triggers the further transformation of society. In particular, it results in marginalization and later complete extinction of specialists of oral tradition. Traditional poets are forced to retreat from their prestigious positions to the social periphery. The exchange of their audience, from elites to plebeians, creates an inevitable pressure on the texts of their songs; singers are to adjust their tales according to needs of their new listeners (Karbusický 1995).

It implies that even the oral tradition itself, due to its confrontation with new medium, often undergoes dynamic transformation. Sooner or later some of its texts fade away, others are transformed and only the originally peripheral genres such as demotic folktales, proverbs, or jokes eventually survive in their more or less original form. This kind of development is present especially when media change is connected with complex cultural change accompanied by conscious rejection of the original cultural tradition (for instance medieval Europe denying its heathen roots systematically). Literary records of folklore tradition then may mediate the oral texts deformed recently and just by the same processes through which this literary mediation was allowed.

Nonetheless, there are many other specific factors, by which the process of literary adoption of folklore texts is determined. One of them is the very nature of relation between folklore muster and its literary reflection. In some cases the

orally transmitted texts seems to be textually codified already during their folklore existence. This was perhaps the case of shorter ritual texts or generally religious texts produced by highly organized specialists of religious tradition. But this moment should not be exaggerated. As Ong (2002) reminded, an example of Vedic texts often cited in this regard should be rather considered in connection with self-confirmative attitude typical for any religious tradition. Note that before the literarization of a certain culture there exists no textual muster to provide (let alone the lack of possibility to prove) the fact of a truly verbatim trans-generational repetition of oral texts.

Any folklore tradition naturally tends to be textually varied. Any of its narrative takes many different shapes, i.e. variants, whereas all of them are, in addition, constantly changing form performance to performance. This natural state of affairs is preserved especially when folklore tradition is produced by less formally organized narrative specialists and/or it consists of texts which are not of an explicit religious nature. Literary output then usually records only one of many available variants of one narrative (for instance mythos and epos of northern Germanic eddaic tradition).

Yet another possibility is that even though the literary myth is by its form and content related to the older oral tradition, there is rather vague and indirect connection between them. Often the text is only inspired by – or it is a compilation of – traditional motives, themes and narrative variants, but hardly represents a reflection of certain traditional tale (for instance *Bēowulf* epos).

Therefore, the scholars' personal attitude and motivation was of the essence. By the specific features of local historical and cultural background, especially its relation to the ongoing cultural change, is determined the motivation of men of letters to record the products of former narrative tradition. Their mindset naturally shape the way they are handling its texts. Literary conservation may be realized in order to use the old narratives with more or less unchanged social function (for instance Avestan or Vedic tradition). On the other hand, written record may be rather a byproduct of literary zeal otherwise indifferent (north of medieval Europe), or even hostile, to the older oral narratives in general (rest of medieval Europe).

However, there also exists significant technically based divergence of both media; immediate vs. mediate interaction with audience, variability vs. stability of transmitted text, improvised real-time composing vs. long-term writing, limitation of human memory vs. relative unlimited memory capacity of external medium (*book is a sort of R.O.M. chip we can plug into our heads*; Turner & Pöppel 1983:6), use of metered poetry vs. inclination towards non-versified prose etc.

Apart from the mentioned social and ideological changes in society, it is possible that only these shifts of technical nature alone may initiate textual transformations in transmitted narratives. For example, Turner and Pöppel argued (1983),

that a human being exposed to listen to versified poetic speech is neurologically stimulated for pro-social, holistic and open-minded thinking. If this bold suggestion is accepted – though reservations remain – to the portfolio of divergences should be added the change of general worldview, necessarily producing the different narrations before and after the literarization.

In any case, one of the most serious causes of potential textual transformations still should be seen in the aforementioned socio-contextual changes. For example, countless times in antique and medieval Europe as well as in Asia, the foundation and progress of cities and rise of their bourgeoisie was a well-known challenge for the traditional cultural system with its chiefs and kings, feasting and fighting elites and oppressed farming and herding commons.

All of those above mentioned factors and processes should be taken into account, as they are responsible for potential conservative stabilization as well as innovative transformation of traditional texts, not only during the process of their absorption by literary medium but also in their further literary transmission.

For all these reasons, the discipline of IECM is obliged to evaluate the mechanism of textual transmission in a particular medium as well as development of media change itself, its features, specifics, background circumstances etc. Only then it is possible to decide, to what extent the examined historical literary myth eventually reflects the textual muster of archaic preliterate and prehistoric tradition or even the original PIE tradition itself.