

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MYTH¹

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For David Riches, Joanna Overing,
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Introduction

In this paper, I explore anthropological interpretations of myths. Myths have fascinated scholars in various disciplines – as well as ordinary people. They have recorded and presented history, expounded philosophical ideas and moral values (Plato, Sophocles, Aeschylus), as well as provided patterns for interpreting language, (Müller), psychology (Freud, Rank, Jung) and structure (Lévi-Strauss, Greimas). One of the more puzzling moments in all these studies was the apparent incommensurability between “myth” and “reality.” How could something as vague or fantastic as a myth be

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regarded as “real”? At the same time, it was exactly the work of anthropologists (like Malinowski, for example) that provided for some alternative models of understanding of other peoples, other cultures, and other myths. Of course, it all had to come from somewhere, and I trace the beginning of the anthropological study of myth to the 19th century Scottish Semitist and Biblical scholar, William Robertson Smith. In this paper I will show the influence of William Robertson Smith’s concept of myth and ritual to the anthropological study of myth. Smith was the first scholar to concern himself with the relationship of myth and ritual – and in doing so he influenced generations of anthropologists. However, his influence was not always obvious or direct. For example, his concept of the primacy of ritual over myth was developed from the concept of religion as a social fact, which influenced Durkheim. It was through Durkheim that this concept made its way to subsequent scholarship. I will show the extent of some of Smith’s ideas that were present in the works of some of the most prominent anthropologists (and, through their work, made their way into the theories of Cassirer and Langer). Paradoxically, myth figured much more prominently in the work of earlier anthropologists like Edward Tylor (1871), but lost importance in the subsequent anthropological literature. I believe that Smith was indirectly responsible for this decline in prominence.

My choice of scholars and their theories is quite subjective and open to criticism, although I believe that most people would agree that F. Max Müller is representative of the philological approaches to the study of myth, Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer for the philosophical ones, Joseph Campbell for the approaches based on psychology, and Mircea Eliade for the ones based on the history of religions. The same is true for the influence of Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Clyde Kluckhohn, Edmund Leach and Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology. I believe that the extent of their influence, as well as their importance in the history of anthropology, is beyond any doubt.

William Robertson Smith is considered to be the founder of the “Myth and Ritual school” – although the approach really took off with Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (cf. Segal, 1999: 37-41). This approach is still present in the anthropological research. It offers interesting insights, but also has serious limitations. I am primarily interested in the exploration of possibilities for overcoming these limitations, as well as looking into the ways that other anthropologists have been dealing with myth. Treating myths as “traditional

tales” (Kirk, 1970 and 1974), I argue that understanding them as narratives can offer important insights. However, before venturing into Smith’s works, I will briefly discuss the meaning and the concept of myth,² as well as some influential theories on its interpretation outside anthropology. After giving an outline of Smith’s life, I will examine his relevant works, as well as the different directions in which the anthropological study of myth has been moving in the century since the publication of the first edition of the *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1894).

Myths have been studied by anthropologists from the beginnings of the discipline (“mythology” is included in the very title of Tylor, 1871; cf. also Rapport and Overing, 2000: 274-275). In most cases, anthropologists have been reluctant to devote their studies exclusively to myth (among notable exceptions were Boas and Lévi-Strauss), preferring to incorporate it within “customs” or “beliefs” of the peoples they have been studying. Joanna Overing notes that in British anthropology in particular, the value of the contents of myth has persistently been ignored or denied (Rapport and Overing, 2000: 276). My stress on some of the authors and concepts from late 19th and early 20th century is also meant to show the degrees of continuities between different theories and methodologies – for example, there are big similarities in the comparative approaches advocated by Frazer and Lévi-Strauss – a fact that many scholars tend to overlook.

The crucial concept introduced by anthropologists in the study of myth is the concept of ritual, and it is this concept and the related studies of it that were fundamentally influenced by the work of William Robertson Smith (1846-1894). Although respected and studied,³ Smith still lacks full recog-

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2. This brief introduction will be concerned only with the explanations of the Western scholars, despite the fact that some of the authors mentioned here were strongly influenced by the Eastern religions (Campbell, 1959-1970; Eliade, 1974) or did significant works related to specific Eastern (Asian) religions (O’Flaherty, 1975). I believe that the fact that the word “myth” and its related meanings are particular to the Western cultural traditions justifies this limitation. On the other hand, a survey of the non-Western concepts and ideas on myth would be more than welcome. Lincoln, 1999 and Segal, 1999 provide recent general overviews of the study of myth. On the ritual, cf. Rappaport, 1999.
 3. Especially Brown, 1964, Beidelman, 1974, Nelson, 1969, 1973, and Bailey, 1970. A brilliant critique of his views on religion is by Warburg, 1989.

nition in the history of social and cultural anthropology.⁴ This is largely due to the lack of understanding of his influence on scholars such as Frazer (with the exception of studies by Jones 1984, Ackerman, 1973 and 1991), Durkheim (1968[1912]), Mauss (1950), Malinowski (1961[1922]), and their followers. A notable exception is Mary Douglas, who wrote in *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966, p. 24; quoted by Sharpe, 1986: 81): "Whereas Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore [*sic*]: Robertson Smith founded social anthropology."⁵

Myth, its meaning and attempted explanations

The English word myth (as well as the Portuguese and Spanish *mito*, French *mythe*, etc.) comes from the old Greek *muthos* (μῦθος), which has been associated with a variety of meanings and different concepts since the antiquity.⁶ According to Hofmann (*Etymologisches Wörterbuch Des Griechischen*, München, 1949; quoted in Popovic, 1987: 7), this word originated from the Indo-European root **maul/mou* and it is closely related to the Lithuanian *mausti* ("to long for something," "to wish something") and the Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian *misao* ("thought"). According to another theory (Chantraine, 1968-1980, Vol. 3: 718-719), it is derived from the old Greek onomatopoeic *mu* (μ), seen, for example, in the verb *mudzo* (μῦδζο) – "to murmur," "to complain."

It is widely recognized today that the distinction between μῦθος and λογος did not take place until late antiquity (cf. Ramnoux, 1990: 1039; Detienne, 1990), despite the fact that our modern (everyday) usage could be

4. This is the case primarily in the American anthropological tradition. Actually, he is the only 19th century anthropologist that is very highly regarded among British social anthropologists (Sharpe, 1986: 81). Except for Beidelman, all of the authors that have been just cited above are not anthropologists.

5. Sharpe immediately asserts that "Tylor, of course, did not found folklore." In all fairness to Tylor, he himself refers to the new discipline he is writing about as *ethnography* (1871, Vol. 1: 1).

6. This outline of the word and its etymology is mostly based on Popovic, 1987.

dated to the distinction made by the Ionian philosophers from the 6th century BCE. The word $\mu\sigma\sigma\omicron\zeta$ is recorded for the first time in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ca. 750-650 BCE), where it has a variety of meanings, although the main meaning seems to be "word" or "speech." However, in the *Odyssey* it also means "a public speech," "excuse," "conversation," "fact," "threat," "reason," and "story" or "tale." This last meaning leaves open the question of whether it is a true or fictional story (Popovic, 1987: 7). The meanings from the *Iliad* include "order,"⁷ "task," "advice" and "intention" or "plan."

Other Greek writers also used $\mu\sigma\sigma\omicron\zeta$ for "saying" (Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 314), "hearsay" (Sophocles, *Ajax* 226), or "report" or "message" (Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 67). After the beginning of Ionian philosophy in the 6th century BCE, $\mu\sigma\sigma\omicron\zeta$ was used to denote a "fictitious story," something that has been made up (Pindar, *Ol.* I, 29; Plato, *Phaedo* 61b), or a "legend" (Herodotus, *Historiae* II, 45). It is this set of meanings that comes close to the modern (at least dictionary) translations of the word "myth." As Burkert (1985: 312) puts it, the great change comes with the age of classical Athens in the 5th century BCE: "Myth is left behind. The word *mythos*, obsolete in Attic, is now redefined and devalued as the sort of story that the old poets used to tell and that old women still tell to their children."

It is from this period on that the now famous distinction between "real" versus "mythic" takes place, as exemplified in the famous passage from Plato's *Phaedrus* (229b-230b):

PHAEDRUS: Tell me, Socrates, isn't it somewhere about here that they say Boreas⁸ seized Orithya from the river?

SOCRATES: Yes, that is the story.

PHAEDRUS: Was this the actual spot? Certainly the water looks charmingly pure and clear; it's just the place for girls to be playing beside the stream.

SOCRATES: No, it was about a quarter of a mile [*sic*] lower down, where you cross the sanctuary of Agra; there is, I believe, an altar dedicated to Boreas close by.

PHAEDRUS: I have never really noticed it, but pray tell me, Socrates, do you believe that story to be true?

7. That is to say "to order someone to do something."

8. The North Wind.

SOCRATES: I should be quite in fashion if I disbelieved it, as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was said to have been seized by Boreas, though it may have happened on the Areopagus, according to another version of the occurrence. For my part, Phaedrus, I regard such theories as no doubt attractive, but as the invention of clever, industrious people who are not exactly to be envied, for the simple reason that they must then go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable monsters of legend flocking in them. If our skeptic, with his somewhat crude science, means to reduce every one of them to the standard of probability, he'll need a deal of time for it. *I myself have certainly no time for the business* [emphasis mine], and I'll tell you why, my friend. I can't as yet 'know myself,' as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I don't bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries, as I have just said, rather to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature. By the way, isn't this tree we were making for?"

Of course, one must add that even in this ancient Greek "age of reason," the same author (Plato) uses myths to explain and expand his own philosophical theories – like, for example, the myth of the Prometheus and Epimetheus in the *Protagoras* (320d-322e), or the allegory of the cave in the seventh and the myth of Er in the tenth book of the *Republic*, etc.¹⁰ But the die has been cast, and the new horizons opened.¹¹ Another good example of these new horizons comes from Herodotus' famous discussion

9. Translated by R. Hackforth. (The translation of the original Greek measure was done by the editors of Plato's dialogues [Plato, 1963]). This is the same passage that F. Max Müller uses to begin his discussion of comparative mythology (Müller, 1909), as well as Cassirer to begin his masterly essay on language and myth (1953: 1-2).

10. Cf. Ricœur (1969: 165): "We are encouraged in this attempt [toward dissociating myth and gnosis] by the great example of Plato. Plato inserts myths into his philosophy; he adopts them as myths, in their natural state, so to speak, without trying to disguise them as explanations; they are there in his discourse, full of enigmas; they are there as myths, without any possibility of confusing them with knowledge."

11. For the early views on the nature of myths and their relation to the science, see Feyerabend (1981: 1-5, 8-9).

of the flooding of the Nile (*Historiæ* II, 23-25), where he uses deductive reasoning to arrive at what he believes to be the correct answer.

In his study of the ancient Greek attitudes toward myth, Paul Veyne claims that “in Greece there existed a domain, the supernatural, where everything was to be learned from people who knew. It was composed of events, not abstract truths against which the listener could oppose his own reason...” (1988: 24).¹² Veyne goes on to offer a definition that is based on the understanding of myth in antiquity, up through the 6th century CE:

Myth is information. There are informed people who have alighted, not on a revelation, but simply on some vague information they have chanced upon. If they are poets, it will be the Muses, their appointed informants, who will tell them what is known and said. For all that, myth is not a revelation from above, nor is it arcane knowledge. The muse only repeats to them what is known – which, like a natural resource, is available to all who seek it. [Veyne, 1988: 23]

It was only after the advent of a radically different system of knowledge in the Middle Ages that this *Weltanschauung* began to change. But the debates of antiquity are in many ways re-enacted in modern scholarship. And one of the many paradoxes of the study of myth is the fact that interest in it peaks in the 20th century, the age of great technological discoveries and the desperate human search for meanings.

The word “myth” became established in the English language only after the 1850s. F. Max Müller wrote “mythe,” and even “meith” was not an uncommon spelling (Müller, 1909: 4n). However, Müller (1823-1900) was one of the first scholars to attempt a rational analysis of myths. In his case, this analysis was based on language, and led him to conclude that myths are products of some sort of a “disease of language.” Mythology (which for him meant both the body of myths and a “scientific” attempt to explain them) was a product of the primordial sense of awe in the face of the forces and phenomena of nature.¹³ “Mythology is inevitable,” wrote Müller, “it is

12. This sharply contrasts with O’Flaherty (1988: 25-27), who states that the opposition between myth and truth comes from Plato.

13. This brief summary of some non-anthropological attempts to explain myth is based on one of my earlier articles (Boskovic, 1988: 409). Cohen (1969) and Segal (1980b) both represent excellent examples of studies that take into account more anthropological works.

natural, it is an inherent necessity of language, if we recognize in language the outward form and manifestation of thought; it is in fact the dark shadow which language throws upon thought, and which can never disappear till language becomes entirely commensurate with thought, which it never will" (*Introduction to the Science of Religion*, London, 1873, p. 353, quoted in Cassirer, 1953: 5).

The criticism of Müller's theory marks the beginning of the anthropological approaches to the study of myth (Lang, 1884 and 1911). Müller was himself quite aware of the limitations of his approach, and limited himself only to the area of his linguistic expertise (Indo-European languages) – unlike his followers. However, despite his heroic efforts (and his brilliant critique of evolutionism in anthropology!), most of Müller's linguistic analogies now seem extremely naïve. Although people recognize the *connection* between the natural phenomena and the names of the deities, no one would today attempt to base an entire theory on these connections (cf. the discussion in Burkert, 1985).

The philosophical attempts to interpret myth reach their most elaborate level with the works of Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945). In the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer (1953-57, Vol. 2) sees myth as one of the stages in the process of "humanization" (cf. Cassirer, 1922). It is on a lower level than philosophy or science, but the stage of "mythic thinking" has in itself (in a Hegelian way) the kernels of the stages that are yet to come. Although "lower" and "primitive," it is a necessary stage in human development – and any higher stage is simply unthinkable without it.

Cassirer worked exclusively with secondary sources, and he had at his disposal a fantastic ethnographic collection in the library of his close friend Aby Warburg (cf. Krois, 1987: 22). His first critical study of myth was published in 1922, during his close association with the Warburg Institute. However, the anthropological data that he had access to have not always been assembled in a critical manner – as becomes apparent to anyone reading his essays on myth today (Cassirer, 1922 and 1953). Nevertheless, the fact remains that Cassirer clearly recognized the importance of myth, as well as the connection between language and myth (1953) and the importance of language in human understanding (1942, 1946). This last aspect is of particular interest to me, and I will come back to it later.

The psychological approach to the study of myth culminates in the work of Joseph Campbell (1904-1987). In the third volume of his monumental

The Masks of God he states the four functions of mythology (1959-1970, Vol. 3: 519-522). The first one is installation of a sense of awe before the "mystery of existence," a feeling that incorporates the recognition of the numinous, which is characteristic of all religions. The second basic function is the establishment of a cosmology, or image of the universe. The third one is support for the existing social order, since myths are always essentially conservative. Finally, the fourth basic function is introducing the individual to the order of reality of his own psyche, leading this individual towards his or her spiritual self-realization.

Despite his enormous contributions to popularising interest in myth, Campbell lacks any serious theoretical background (except for the strong influence of C. G. Jung). Another problem with his work stems from his emphasis on one specific cultural horizon (India); this makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to have an equal amount of information about different parts of the world (which is what he was attempting).

Another very influential theory of myth is associated with the impressive oeuvre of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), who regarded myths primarily as sacred stories related to the events that occurred *in illo tempore*, in the mythical time following the creation of the world, and long before the advent of history. This mythical time, *illud tempus*, is separated by an immeasurable gap from our (modern) time, and the only way to approach it is through myths. Unlike Campbell, Eliade did not allow his strong background in India (Hindu religion, yoga) to bias his research. On the other hand, in shaping his theory of myth, Eliade was strongly influenced by the conceptions of the native Australians – particularly regarding the concept of the Dreamtime, the *altjeringa* of the Arunta of Western Central Australia. Despite the claim that he was interested in two basic types of understanding myths, ancient and modern, he put strong emphasis only on the former aspect (Masuzawa, 1989: 321).

The fundamental difficulty with his approach is that, although it stimulates phenomenological understanding of myths¹⁴ (as well as religion; for Eliade, these two concepts are closely related) from *within* the tradition

14. I am using the term "phenomenological" here in accordance with Husserl's original usage: a model of explanation from the phenomena themselves, essentially transsubjective. In this sense, it would mean the effort to interpret myths "from the native's point of view." Eliade himself preferred the term "morphology."

where they originate and generates some kind of empathic *Einfühlung*, it is hard to see how this theory can be tested less subjectively, and this poses serious obstacles for any serious scholarly research. For, if the gap is immeasurable, why try to measure it at all? If something is unspeakable (by its very nature), why try to speak about it at all?

In order to examine how anthropologists studied myth, it is time to move back towards Victorian Britain and the foundations of anthropology as we know it. At the same time that F. Max Müller was teaching at Oxford, another bright star flashed on the horizon of 19th century British anthropology and what we would today call the “human sciences,” William Robertson Smith.

The life of W. Robertson Smith

William Robertson Smith was born on November 8, 1846 in the valley of Don, parish of Keig, Aberdeenshire, Scotland.¹⁵ His father, William Pirie Smith, was a minister in the parish’s Free Church of Scotland, which came into existence after the 1843 split in the Church of Scotland. His mother “was a woman of great force of character, who retained till her death, at seventy-six years of age [in 1900], the full exercise of her keen intelligence” (Bryce, 1903: 312). A man of extraordinary erudition, Pirie Smith taught his children at home until it was time for them to attend the university. Among other things, he taught them Latin, Greek, mathematics, and “rational conversation.” According to his biographers, Black and Chrystal (1912a: 11-12), Smith learned the Hebrew alphabet and was able to read Hebrew words before he was six.

Smith entered the University of Aberdeen in 1861 and graduated in 1865 with a Master of Arts degree and the Town Council Medal. In 1866 he entered New College in Edinburgh, where he studied under A. B.

15. This overview of his life is based on Black and Chrystal, 1912a, with some additional information from Bryce, 1903, Brown, 1964, Beidelman, 1974, and Muilenberg in Smith, 1969. A complete list of Smith’s works has been published by Brown (1964, Appendix B). A bibliography of the publications related to his trial has been published by Beidelman (1974: 85-92).

Davidson, Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis, who made a profound influence on him and probably pushed him decisively towards Semitic studies. However, at the time Smith was very much interested in physics and "natural philosophy," and got his first teaching experience as assistant to P. G. Tait, Professor of Physics at the University of Edinburgh in 1868/69. From 1865 to 1869 he made several trips to Germany (Bonn and Göttingen), where he continued his studies of physics and mathematics, but also became acquainted with the works of the Old Testament scholars associated with "higher criticism"¹⁶ (Albrecht Ritschl [1822-1889], Abraham Kuenen [1828-1891], later Julius Wellhausen [1844-1918]). These scholars made a lasting impression on him.

With the support of Davidson, in 1870 he was elected to the chair of Oriental Languages and Old Testament exegesis of the Free Church College at Aberdeen. Smith taught there until 1876, when a controversy surrounding several of his articles for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (especially "Bible," published in 1875¹⁷) forced him to withdraw from teaching. He was accused of heresy and tried, but successfully defended himself, so the formal charges had to be dropped.¹⁸ The controversy was renewed after the publication of his article "Animal worship and animal tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament" in the *Journal of Philo-*

16. A school of thought associated with the more scholarly (critical) approaches to the Bible, including comparative linguistic and historical approaches. It gained prevalence in Europe especially after the breakthroughs made by Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831) in philosophy, but also following investigations by Adolf Bastian (1826-1905) in ethnology. The most prominent British scholars who supported this new comparative approach were A. B. Davidson and T. K. Cheyne. For the relationship of the proponents of this approach and Smith, see Brown, 1964 and Bailey, 1970.

17. A nice summary is given by Bryce (1903: 313): "The propositions he stated regarding the origin of the parts of the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch, excited alarm and displeasure in Scotland, where few persons had become aware of the conclusions reached by recent Biblical scholars in Continental Europe. The article was able, clear, and fearless, plainly the work of a master hand. The views it advanced were not for the most part due to Smith's own investigations, but were to be found in the writings of other learned men. Neither would they now be thought extreme; they are in fact accepted today by many writers of unquestioned orthodoxy in Britain and a (perhaps smaller) number in the United States."

18. For a more detailed account of this trial and all the circumstances surrounding it, cf. chapters VI-X in Black and Chrystal, 1912a. A somewhat broader context is presented by Glover (1954) and Riesen (1985).

logy in June 1880, after which he was forced to resign from teaching. However, W. R. Smith did remain ordained in the Free Church of Scotland.

The publicity surrounding the trial brought him immense support, not only from leading European scholars like Kuenen and Wellhausen, but also from the younger clergy and many of his countrymen. He was invited to give a series of lectures in Edinburgh and Glasgow. These lectures were a huge success, and they were published in 1881 as *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*. Another series of lectures was given the following winter, and they were published in 1882 as *The Prophets of Israel and Their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century B.C.* In 1881 Smith became the assistant editor and in 1883 editor-in-chief of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a post that he held until the completion of this edition in 1889. The ninth edition was essential in setting standards for the years to come, and it brought together an unprecedented number of highly qualified scholars, partly due to the immense breadth of Smith's knowledge. He contributed over 200 articles himself.

Under his editorship, Andrew Lang (1844-1912) published the article "Mythology" in Volume 17 (published in 1884), an article that decisively argued *against* the philological and *for* the anthropological study of myth. In this period, Smith also met another fellow Scot, James G. Frazer (1854-1941), and asked him to contribute articles on "Totem" and "Taboo" for the *Encyclopædia*. Smith has himself written of a totem as "an animal (less often a plant); the kindred is of the stock of its totem; and to kill or eat the sacred animal is an impiety of the same kind with that of killing and eating a tribesman" (1886: 135; cf. also 1914: 124 ff; Cook, 1902). However, he preferred that Frazer do the work for the *Encyclopædia*.¹⁹ In a letter to the publishers, he wrote:

I hope that Messrs. Black clearly understand that Totemism is a subject of growing importance, daily mentioned in the magazines and papers, but of which there is no good account anywhere – precisely one of those cases where we have an opportunity of getting ahead of every one and getting some reputation. There is no article in the volume for which I am more solicitous. I have taken much personal pains with it, guiding Frazer carefully in his treatment; and he has put about

19. It was under Smith's influence that Frazer developed his concepts of the sacrifice of divine kings.

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seven months' hard work on it to make it the standard article on the subject.
[Black and Chrystal, 1912a: 494]

Smith's major classical works were published during this period: *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885), written under the strong influence of his friend John Ferguson McLennan (1827-1881), and *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (first edition 1894). Between these two volumes, the extremely influential article "Sacrifice" was published in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1886. *Lectures* was the first in a series of three given in response to an April 1887 invitation by the Burnett Trustees of the University of Aberdeen to deliver lectures on "the primitive religions of the Semitic peoples, viewed in relation to other ancient religions, and to the spiritual religion of the Old Testament and Christianity." The first two series "were devoted to mythological matters and the main features of Semitic polytheism, and the third to Semitic views of the creation and government of the world" (Black and Chrystal, 1912a: 535). The second series was delivered in March of 1890, but very little was known about it – until John Day rediscovered the original manuscript in the early 1990s (Day, 1995). The general subject of the third and last series, delivered in the Marischal College, on December 10, 12 and 14, 1891 was "[t]he nature and origin of the gods of Semitic Heathenism, their relations to one another, the myths that surround them, and the whole subject of religious belief, so far as is not directly involved in the observances of daily religious life" (Black and Chrystal, *ibid.*; cf. Smith, 1914, Preface to the first edition). Unfortunately, illness prevented Smith from completing these other two series for publication. Only two weeks before his death, Smith completed revisions to his original *Lectures* manuscript, which he passed on to his friend J. Sutherland Black (Smith, 1914: xi).

In 1883 Smith accepted Lord Almoner's Readership in Arabic at the University of Cambridge and became a fellow of Trinity College. He became a fellow of Christ's College (the same Cambridge college attended by men like John Milton and Charles Darwin before him) in 1885, and a year later, University Librarian. In 1889 he was appointed to the chair of the Professor of Arabic, a post that he held until his death, at Cambridge, on March 31, 1894.

On the occasion of his death, the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland (the same institution that had tried him as a heretic during his

lifetime!) adopted a formal resolution, stating that: "His intellectual energy and industry, his quick apprehension, his singular command of his varied knowledge, along with a rare power of clear and felicitous expression, combined to rank him among the most remarkable men of his time" (Black and Chrystal, 1912a: 560).

Anthropology, religion, and myth

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who wrote extensively about peoples and cultures that they had never seen, Smith was able to make several trips to the geographic area of his expertise. In the winter of 1878/79 he went to Cairo and Palestine. His relatively dark complexion, the fact that he wore native clothes, and his excellent command of Arabic enabled him to blend easily with people and make friends. Smith returned to the Middle East in 1880, and then travelled extensively throughout the Arabian peninsula all the way to Suez, spending two months at Jeddah and visiting Palestine, Syria, and Tunis (Smith, 1912b). He again travelled to the Middle East in 1889 and 1890.

Details and observations from the 1880 trip were preserved in a series of 11 letters published between February and June 1880 in the *Scotsman*. In this ethnographic account Smith demonstrates great knowledge of the countries that he travelled through and the customs of the people inhabiting them. Unfortunately, he was also a prisoner of the prejudices of his time, quite happy with his own Britishness (*ibid.*: 493, 500), and not particularly well disposed towards Islam (p. 511). In regard to the distribution of Christian books in the area, Smith noted that "in the interests of civilisation and of that progress which is seriously retarded by the current Moslem notion that their dry and barren literature is the most perfect that can be considered, it is heartily to be desired that a door should be opened to the circulation of Christian literature" (pp. 566-567). This, among other things, because he believed that "[t]he Koran is the bulwark of all the prejudices and social backwardness in the East" (p. 568).

Smith came to anthropology after the publication of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), and he shared an evolutionist perspective (cf. Smith, 1914:

2; Jones, 1984: 50-51)²⁰ with his fellow anthropologists.²¹ He firmly believed that Christianity (especially as exemplified in Scottish Presbyterianism) is the highest possible form of religion, although he did give credit to the ancient Semitic peoples (especially the Jews) for being essentially on the right track. Both the Arabs and the Jews, he felt, represented religious practices that Christian religion had to pass in the past, so it was very important to understand these religions (as well as other, “primitive” ones, which could be successfully contrasted with them) in order to fully understand Christianity.

The “comparative method” that he advocated was based on the concept of “survivals,” made especially popular by Tylor (1832-1917). These “survivals” were traits of the ancient beliefs and social customs that have been preserved in the contemporary societies, even though their original function and meaning were lost. Through exploring survivals among the ‘uncivilized’ peoples, Tylor hoped to show both the origin of modern concepts and customs, as well as some pointers for the future development (Boskovic, 2003). The main problem with this method, as pointed out by Margit Warburg, was “that deciding whether something is a survival or not must be based on a *a priori* suppositions of the direction and character of historical development. As a consequence the method easily leads to tautologies and/or becomes supported by prejudices” (1989: 45).

In his article “Sacrifice” for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Smith makes a distinction between “natural” and “positive” religions (1886: 132). The former ones (“nature religions of the civilized races of antiquity”) are defined as

... [the] religions which had a predominantly joyous character, and in which the relations of man to the gods were not troubled by any habitual and oppressive sense of human guilt, because the divine standard of man’s duty corresponded broadly with the accepted standard of civil conduct, and therefore, though the god

20. The following lines from *Lectures* provide a good example: “Savages, we know, are not only incapable of separating in thought between phenomenal and noumenal existence, but habitually ignore the distinctions, which to us seem obvious, between organic and inorganic nature, or within the former region between animals and plants” (1914: 85-86).

21. With the possible exception of Lang who, while drawing heavily on Tylor’s work in his earlier publications (1885, 1887), is very critical of both Tylor and Frazer in his *Magic and Religion* (1901).

might be angry with his people for a time, or even irreconcilably wroth with individuals, the idea was hardly conceivable that he could be permanently alienated from the whole circle of his worshippers, ? that is, from all who participated in a certain local (tribal or national) cult. [Smith, 1886: 134; cf. also Smith, 1914: 285]

On the other hand, “positive” religions are the ones of the inhabitants of the ancient Near East, or, as Smith put it, “Judaism, Christianity and Islam are positive religions” because they “trace their origin to the teaching of the great religious innovators, who spoke as the organs of a divine revelation, and deliberately departed from the traditions of the past” (1914: 1). Smith also saw these religions as “tribal or national” (1892: 281), a concept which introduced a very important social component into the study of religion.

The god, it would appear, was frequently thought of as the physical progenitor or first father of his people.²² At any rate, the god and his worshippers formed a natural unity, which was also bound up with the land they occupied... The dissolution of the nation destroys the national religion, and dethrones the national deity. *The god can no more exist without his people than the nation without its god* [emphasis mine].²³ [Smith, 1892: 281]

The supreme deity is associated with the concept of the ruler or king (1886: 133).²⁴ The local god is in this perspective seen as a mediator between the people and the various aspects of their environment (“nature”), so the worshippers are in a permanent alliance with selected aspects of a

22. On the concept of the deity as father (“progenitor and lord”), cf. Smith, 1886: 135.

23. Cf. Smith, 1912a: 463: “There is nothing surprising in the conception that the worshippers are sons of their god.” On the “kinship between gods and men,” cf. also Smith, 1914: 87-88. “Broadly speaking, the land of a god corresponds with the land of his worshippers; Canaan is Jehovah’s land as Israel is Jehovah’s people,” in the same way as “the land of Assyria (Asshur) has its name from the god Asshur” (1914: 92). Smith also ventures in the attempts to explain the concept of the holy (1914: 91ff), making the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. Like many other aspects of his work, this distinction came into the anthropology *via* Durkheim.

24. This closely corresponds to information that has been gained from subsequent research into the extensive written records of the ancient Near Eastern cities, since it seems that all of them had a principal deity, who was paired with a consort (Pritchard, 1991: 68). The ancient Greek texts, beginning with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, indicate the same pattern.

natural life (1914: 124). The beginnings of the sociology of religion do not seem too far from realizations like this one:

We are so accustomed to think of religion as a thing between individual men and God that we can hardly enter into the idea of a religion in which a whole nation in its national organisation appears as the religious unit, – in which we have to deal not with the faith and obedience of individual persons, but with the faith and obedience of a nation as expressed in the functions of national life. [Smith, 1902: 20]

This social concept of religion predates Durkheim and, in fact, Durkheim (1968: 61, 109n, 455; cf. also Beidelman, 1974: 58) was quite clear in giving Smith the credit that he deserves.²⁵

Like the great majority of his contemporaries (with the notable exception of Müller and his followers), Smith believed that the best way to study religion was to examine its most primitive form. In the case of the Semitic peoples, this form was preserved in the life and customs of the Bedouin pastoralists, an argument that he already made in his book *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885). His emphasis on the social components of religion led him to postulate that it is the *action* that matters, much more than the *belief*. The ritual, therefore, must come before the myth. The passage where Smith argued for the supremacy of ritual over myth is one of the most influential passages in the history of anthropology, so I will quote from it extensively:

In all the antique religions, mythology takes the place of dogma; that is, the sacred lore of priests and people, so far as it does not consist of mere rules for the performance of religious acts, assumes the form of stories about gods; and these stories afford the only explanation that is offered of the precepts of religion and the prescribed rules of ritual. But, strictly speaking, this mythology was no essential part of ancient religion, for it had no sacred sanction and no binding force on the worshippers. The myths connected with individual sanctuaries and

25. "Émile Durkheim indicated that he owed Smith his insights regarding the close relation between people's perceptions of nature and their experience in society, his views on the periodic need for ritual to reinforce social beliefs and values, and his method of explaining religion in terms of the irreducible elements exhibited in its most primitive state" (Beidelman, 1987: 366).

ceremonies were merely part of the apparatus of the worship; they served to excite the fancy and sustain the interest of the worshipper; but he was often offered a choice of the several accounts of the same thing, and, provided that he fulfilled the ritual with accuracy, no one cared what he believed about its origin. Belief in a certain series of myths was neither obligatory as a part of the true religion, nor was it supposed that, by believing, a man acquired religious merit and conciliated the favour of the gods. What was obligatory or meritorious was the exact performance of certain acts prescribed by religious tradition. This being so, it follows that mythology ought not to take the prominent place that is too often assigned to it in the scientific study of ancient faiths. So far as the myths consist of explanation of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper. [...] As a rule the myth is no explanation of the origin of the ritual to any one who does not believe it to be a narrative of real occurrences, and the boldest mythologist will not believe that. But if it not be true, the myth itself requires to be explained, and every principle of philosophy and common sense demand that the explanation be sought, not in arbitrary allegorical categories, but in the actual facts of ritual or religious custom to which the myth attaches. The conclusion is, that in the study of ancient religions we must begin, not with myth, but with ritual and traditional usage. [Smith, 1914: 17-18, *passim*]

Smith believed that ritual should be considered before myth not only in order of importance (unlike the majority of the studies of his time), but that ritual literally preceded myth in time (Beidelman, 1974: 64). Actions come first, human attempts to explain and rationalize them afterwards.²⁶ This passage can also be understood as a reaction against the generalizations on the lines of the idea of the “primitive science” of the “savages,” as expressed by Lang (1884, 1887, 1911). Smith obviously believed that too much attention in the works of his time was being devoted to the beliefs and “stories about gods,” at the expense of the rituals. Rituals should form the basis of any serious scholarship on “primitive religion,” since they are essentially social in character, and since they reaffirm places and roles of average human beings within their communities (ethnic groups or tribes).

26. A similar view was expressed in the early 1940s by Susanne K. Langer (1971: 126 ff), who noted that “[i]t is not at all impossible that *ritual*, solemn and significant, antedates the evolution of language” (1971: 128). Cassirer also believed (following the predominant anthropological theories of his time) that ritual comes before myth (cf. Krois, 1987: 85-99).

What these individuals *believed* (or did not believe) *in* was a matter of their personal choice. What they were *performing* or *participating in* was not. Therefore, the importance of myths was based on their role in the society – another aspect of his work that became more prominent through the writings of Durkheim.

In the commentary to the third edition of the *Lectures*, Stanley A. Cook noted that myths “are specifically of *personal* interest, but, in general, they appeal differently to the different types of mind in normal mixed communities” (Smith, 1969: 502). The notion of the “personal interest” is very important here, considering Smith’s emphasis on the social components in all religions. Naturally, since the “positive religions” are much more elaborate and “advanced,” this social component becomes more prominent in them. Myths might have been more important to the less civilized cultures, but in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they play a secondary role, more as a remnant and a reminder of the less civilized stages through which even these religions had to pass.

In his commentary Cook distinguished between “primary” and “secondary” myths (Smith, 1969: 500-503). The “primary” ones are connected with the system of beliefs and the specific worldview, and they are primarily associated with the ritual action. On the other hand, “secondary” ones are less important in terms of their value. “They are based upon misunderstandings (e.g. of images, words, names); they are explanations of explanations, the key to an old tradition having been lost” (Smith, 1969: 501). It is possible for these myths to get “purified” and reworked into the “pleasing tales,” but in all cases these myths are very remote from the concepts associated with them in “primitive” cultures. While accepting the concept of the greater importance of ritual action, Cook also noted “the risk of going into another extreme and making the distinction between myth and ritual too absolute” (*ibid.*).

Although Smith’s theory received high praise by some of the leading scholars at the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Reinach, 1911: 437-438), it stood in sharp contrast to the view about the complexity of the material that myths consisted of (Lang, 1884, 1911). Andrew Lang has already profoundly influenced the study of myth with his notion that myths should be studied as some kind of a “primitive science.” The idea of the essential difference between different cultures was the fatal blow to the comparative study of myths. There is a degree of similarity necessary for any compa-

riation, and Lang showed that this degree is not present in, for example, ancient Greek and Australian Aboriginal cultures.

The concept of the subordination of myth to ritual was already challenged in the articles for the another monument of scholarship, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Fallaize, 1924). In the same project, Hartley Burr Alexander (1924: 752) noted that “the meaning does not stop with the notion of act, it is also the attitude.” The attitude is influenced by the belief, which is in its turn influenced by the faculty, etc. The explanation of ritual action is extremely complex, and if we attempt to understand myths primarily as something subordinate to rituals, we will not get very far. The implications of Smith’s views for the study of totemism have been criticized by Cook (1902),²⁷ ignored by Frazer (1996), and completely rejected by the disciples of Durkheim, especially Mauss (1950). It is no wonder that Smith’s view of myth and ritual did not exercise great influence in the history of religions, sociology of religion, and related disciplines. Anthropology, however, was a completely different story.

Anthropological approaches to the study of myth

William Robertson Smith was the first scholar who tried to define the relationship between myth and ritual. As already shown above, he clearly gave the preference to ritual. This influenced anthropologists after him to the effect that they were primarily looking at the *social* (sociological) aspects of the cultures and societies that they were studying. The myths were considered important primarily because they could tell something about the social organization, kinship, customs, etc.

The importance of myths was clearly recognized from the beginnings of anthropology as a scientific discipline in the late 1880s. Chapters on “beliefs” and “rituals” were standard in all major ethnographies. A view of the founder of the American anthropology, Franz Boas (1858-1942), was that the native peoples’ customs and rituals were rapidly disappearing in light of

27. S. A. Cook actually noted that if Smith was still alive, he would have modified his position (1902: 447).

huge technological advances and enormous colonial expansion. This was leading to the permanent disappearance of something that Boas saw as the legacy of the whole world. One way to preserve this legacy was to go to the field and record Native American narratives – as many as possible.

Of course, now we know that the Native American societies were constantly changing and adapting under new circumstances, not disappearing, but the misconception of Boas and his disciples led to the production of some excellent collections of narratives. In fact, no period can match the amount of ethnographic data gathered on the Native American cultures in the two decades at the beginning of the 20th century. *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916) stands as perhaps the finest example of scholarship from this period.

In this magnificent volume, Boas attempted to present a summary of the customs and society of Tsimshian Indians from the British Columbia. This account was based on the stories collected by a native Tsimshian, Henry W. Tate. Boas also attempted to make a distinction between myths and tales (1916: 31), but without much success, since for the Tsimshians, there was no difference – at least none that the outside observer could be aware of. In the end, he settled for a compromise, describing the subject of this volume “a series of tales all of which are considered by the Tsimshian as myths” (1916: 595).

The issue of distinguishing between myths and “ordinary” or “folk” tales has puzzled anthropologists since Andrew Lang. The problem was clearly recognized by the functionalists, beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942).

Malinowski’s field work experience came virtually as an accident, since he was stranded at the Trobriand Islands, off the North-eastern coast of Papua New Guinea, during the WW I (1915-1918). This experience eventually resulted in a monograph devoted to the Trobriand islanders (Malinowski, 1961 [1922]). Parts of this monograph deal with the myths and rituals connected with the Kula. Malinowski believed that myths represent a “pragmatic charter,” a set of rules or codes of conduct, that enable the social functions of the culture to flourish. “The *myth* comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity” (1926: 28). Like Boas before him, Malinowski sought to distinguish between three types of tales that he encountered in the Trobriand Islands. Unlike fairy tales and legends, which are told “for amusement” and as “a social statement” intended to “satisfy

social ambition" (Malinowski, *ibid.*), myth is "a reality lived" (1926: 18), "not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality" (1926: 19).

This, of course, stood in sharp contrast to the words of Smith, since for Malinowski, myths offer justification for belief. They are again intimately associated with rituals (on mythology of the Kula, see Malinowski, 1961: 299ff), but in an inverted order of importance. Even if rituals do come first, myths are necessary in order to comprehend their meaning and true function. If rituals form a re-enactment of the events that are considered to have happened in another reality,²⁸ myths are necessary in order to place individuals (and the society or the culture itself) within that reality.

In the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski distinguished between several classes of myths (1961: 304-305). The "*oldest myths*" describe events that occurred when the earth was being inhabited from the underworlds, and they are related to the origin of the first human beings, clans, and villages, as well as the relationship between this world and any future world. The "*kultur myths*" relate to ogres and cannibals, as well as to the human beings that institute certain customs and ceremonies. They relate to the events when human beings already inhabit the earth, and when the social customs are already established. Stories about the Trobriand culture hero, Tudava, were also included within this class. Finally, the third class consists of "*myths in which figure only ordinary human beings*". These human beings do have extraordinary powers (magic, which is, for Malinowski, closely related to religion), and these stories describe the origins of witchcraft, love potions, flying canoes (1961: 311-316), as well as some Kula myths.

Of course, many myths fall within two or even all three of these categories (1961: 305), and the distinctions between them are not always clear. The main force that lies behind the life of the Trobriands is "the inertia of custom" (1961: 326). Since the Trobriands pay so much attention to the customs, Malinowski concluded that "the past is more important than the present" (1961: 327). Stories from the past also possess an element of

28. Which is, nevertheless, as real as the one that we live in.

universality (everybody knows them and everybody talks about them), and this contributes to the normative function of myths.

The emphasis on normative and social aspects clearly distinguishes anthropology from the other disciplines that deal with myths, like philosophy (Ricœur, 1990), history (Ricœur, 1987), or history of religions (Boon, 1987). Another important distinction is the emphasis of anthropologists and ethnologists since Smith on the ritual action itself. As far as anthropologists and ethnologists are concerned, this emphasis was mostly taken for granted, and myths and rituals were studied together, without any attempt to clarify their relationship. One of the first anthropologists that attempted to clarify this relationship was Clyde Kluckhohn (1905-1960).

In his seminal article "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," originally presented in 1939,²⁹ Kluckhohn elaborated on the "connection between rite and myth," clearly recognized by the psychoanalysts like Reik and Freud, who "verbally agreed to Robertson Smith's proposition that mythology was mainly a description of ritual" (1942: 45-46). This reference to psychoanalytical interpretations is not an accident, since Kluckhohn was very interested in various psychological explanations (1942: 50-52), which he believed to have been neglected in prior anthropological research. He also pointed at the difficulties of making a clear distinction between myths, legends, and fairy tales (1942: 46-47) – unlike Malinowski before him.³⁰ He did consider a definition of myth as a "sacred tale" (p. 47),³¹ but found it unsatisfactory because of the lack of association with ritual.³² And, while there are cultures that associate myths and rituals (Kluckhohn gave an example of the Christian Mass), there are clearly others (and here he drew on his extensive fieldwork experience among Navahos and Pueblos) that do

29. Several years before this article, an interesting (although very brief) discussion on the value of "Myth and Ritual" approach was published in the September and November 1936 issues of *Man*. On the one side was the greatest anthropological proponent of this approach, A. M. Hocart. On the other side was the famous Classical scholar H. J. Rose. Rose's expertise in a specific area (ancient Greece) outweighed Hocart's general argumentation.

30. A clear impossibility of making this kind of distinction was demonstrated by Kirk (1974: 31-37) on the material from Greece.

31. Nevertheless, there is at least one place in the text (1942: 59) where he does use this definition himself.

32. In this article, Kluckhohn uses words *ritual*, *rite*, and *ceremony* interchangeably.

not. As a matter of fact, “the whole question of the primacy of ceremonial or mythology is as meaningless as all the questions of ‘the hen or the egg’ form” (1942: 54).

The truly important thing is the recognition of the “intricate interdependence of myth (which is one form of ideology) with ritual and many other forms of behavior” (*ibid.*). Here Kluckhohn gave full credit to Malinowski (1926), although he in fact went much further by pointing at the potential absurdity of another “hen or egg” type problem. Together with Boas and Benedict, Kluckhohn opposed any grand generalizations or “simplistic statements.” There is no practical way to establish the primacy of one or the other, but one can only look at the “general tendency” within specific culture. This tendency will depend on a number of specific cultural traits, as well as on the individual responses to these traits (1942: 70). In the end, Kluckhohn remained close to the psychology-influenced theories, since he concludes that “[m]yths and rituals equally facilitate the adjustment of the individual to his society” (p. 74). They have “a common psychological basis” (p. 78), and in a sense they are “supra-individual.” They are both “cultural products, part of the social heredity of a society” (p. 79).

The idea of both myth and ritual as cultural products was further developed by Sir Edmund Leach (1910-1989). Like Malinowski, Leach was caught up during the war (in his case, WW II) in the area where he was doing his field work, Burma (Myanmar). Several years before (in 1938), his fieldwork in Kurdistan had been frustrated by another political crisis (München declaration), so this almost looked like a pattern. However, Leach was able to save most of his field notes, and, after the intensive archival work after the war, he was able to put forth his monograph on the *Political Systems of Highland Burma* in 1954.

Like Smith’s, Leach’s discussion of myth and ritual is rather brief, confined to less than seven pages of the Introduction. Unlike most of his famous predecessors, Leach did not attempt to define ritual, and from his perspective any particular definition (except one as broad as “a system of symbolic communication” [cf. Aimer, 1987: 7]) is irrelevant. What is relevant is the very specific context he provides for any situation where rituals are observed. In this approach, Leach attempted to reconcile divergent views represented by Durkheim, Mauss, and Malinowski before him. The solution, in his opinion, was a view of a *ritual* as something related to *technique* just as *sacred* is related to *profane*. They “do not denote types of

action but aspects of almost any kind of action.” Ritual “is a symbolic statement which ‘says’ something about the individuals involved in the action” (1970: 13).

“Myth, in my terminology, is the counterpart of ritual; myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same” (*ibid.*). In this sense, Leach consciously stepped away from what he regarded to be “the classical doctrine in English social anthropology” which, according to him, claimed

that myth and ritual are conceptually separate entities which perpetuate one another through functional interdependence – the rite is a dramatization of the myth, the myth is the sanction or charter for the rite [...] As I see it, myth regarded as a statement in words ‘says’ the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action. To ask questions about the content of belief which are not contained in the content of ritual is nonsense. [1970: 13-14]

This presents a radical break with the functionalism, and an important step towards the structural interpretations of myth.³³ For Leach, myths are only “one way of describing certain types of human behaviour” (: 14). Furthermore, “ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as forms of symbolic statement about the social order” (*ibid.*). This is possible because rituals in their cultural contexts are always patterns of symbols, and they have the same structure as the other pattern of symbols, consisting of the phrases and technical terms that the anthropologist devises in order to interpret them (: 15).

This structure is “the system of socially approved ‘proper’ relations between individuals and groups” (*ibid.*). Although this system is not always practically recognized, “if anarchy is to be avoided,” members of the society must be reminded of the underlying structure that provides the frame for all of their social activities. “Ritual performances have this function for the participating group as a whole; they momentarily make explicit what is otherwise a fiction” (p. 16).

In a later stage of his career, during his experiments with the interpretation of the Biblical myths, Leach came to regard myths as information

33. The works of Lévi-Strauss became better known in the English-speaking world only after 1955. However, it is reasonable to expect that Leach was aware to a certain extent of some of his concepts before that.

(1969: 8; cf. *supra*, p. 7), not unlike the bits in the contemporary information systems. However, he eventually rejected this view and the structuralist notion of the universal processes in human minds as a kind of “metaphysics.” His negative attitude towards grand generalizations places him as one of the important predecessors of the “narrative approach.”

In 1955, the article “The Structural Study of Myth” by Claude Lévi-Strauss announced the coming of structuralism to the anthropological study of myth. In this extraordinary article, the French professor argued that we should proceed directly from the apparent contradictions that myths pose (1963: 208). Approximately at the same time as Leach, but more clearly and much more explicitly, Lévi-Strauss recognized myths as communication. In fact, he recognized a clear connection between myths and language (since myths are expressed through language). Along the lines of the great Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as Trubetzkoy, Jakobson and Hjelmslev,³⁴ Lévi-Strauss recognized another system of signs that could be interpreted in a similar way as language. Since myth, just like language, is made of constitutive units, these units “presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels – namely, phonemes, morphemes, and sememes – but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and a more complex order” (1963: 210-211). He called these units *mythemes*. It is only through the analysis of the relations of different *mythemes* (whose structure remains in the unconscious) that we can understand the meaning of a myth. Understood in this way, we can say that myth, using Saussurean terminology, should serve as a kind of an allochronic device, bridging the gap between the synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Lévi-Strauss began teaching Amerindian “mythology” in 1952/53, and in an outline of his first course, he presented three ways of analysing a myth: “in terms of the reversible or irreversible character of the sequences present in it,” in terms of “the tests of *commutability*,” and, finally, “the myth, considered as a *thought ritual*, is submitted to a direction which is in some

34. For the practical as well as theoretical aspects of their works, I refer to overviews in Nöth, 1990. See also chapter on myth (almost exclusively dedicated to the structuralist aspects of study) in this volume (1990: 374-377).

way natural and emerges from the analysis of ritual considered as an *acted myth*. This third method provides a valuable verification of the results obtained by the other two” (1987: 200-201).

His view of the relationship between myth and ritual is a little bit more elaborated in his lectures for 1954/55. Unlike his predecessors (especially Leach), Lévi-Strauss pointed at the fact that in many cases (he was still working primarily with the Amerindian material, mostly Pueblo and Pawnee) there is no proof of the interrelationship between myth and ritual.

There is no myth underlying the ritual as a whole, and when foundation myths exist, they generally bear on details of the ritual which appear secondary or super-numerary. However, if myth and ritual do not mirror each other, they often reciprocally complete each other, and it is only by comparing them that one can formulate hypotheses on the nature of certain intellectual strategies typical of the culture under consideration. [Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 204]

In a way, this brings us full circle in the consideration of the relationship between myth and ritual. For Lévi-Strauss (as for Smith, but for entirely different reasons), this relationship is not a matter of great importance. Theoretically speaking, any myth can be re-enacted just by being spoken (narrated or written down). As far as the meaning of the myths and their interpretation is concerned, rituals are irrelevant.

Although it exercised enormous influence in anthropology (Mandelbaum, 1987), Lévi-Strauss’ theory of the interpretation of myth was severely criticized (for example, Kirk, 1970; Cohen, 1969: 345-347).³⁵ Some of his basic theoretical assumptions were questioned by Geertz (1973, 1988) and Ricœur (1981, 1987, 1990). While acknowledging its importance, Ricœur criticized structural analysis for “de-chronologizing” the narrative, since “[the] structural analysis tends to reduce the role of plot to a secondary function of figuration in relation to underlying logical structures and the transformation of these structures” (1981: 280).

Barthes (1988: 170) questioned the binary oppositions that form the basis of Lévi-Strauss’ (and all other structural) theoretical models:

35. For the reply to Kirk (and Mary Douglas), see Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 96-101.

Binarism is seductive logical hypothesis: we know its success in phonology, in cybernetics, even in physiology. Yet limits are already appearing, and certain compromises are required; Martinet refuses to grant a universal status to the binarism of phonological oppositions, and Jakobson has completed the schema of the binary opposition (*a/b*) by the adjunction of two derived terms, one neutral (neither *a* nor *b*), the other mixed (both *a* and *b*); Lévi-Strauss himself has often acknowledged the importance of the neutral term or zero degree.³⁶

It can be argued that, by taking the structuralist method from Saussurean linguistics, Lévi-Strauss tries to extend the usefulness of this method far beyond the Saussure's original intent. In doing this, he would have to modify significantly the method itself (which he does not do) in order to succeed. Nevertheless, the structuralist insistence on language (Saussurean *langue* and *parole*, von Humboldt's *ergon* and *energia*), as well as on the use of signs and symbols in the explanation of myths, was the important step forward. In almost a century since Smith's death, the world had changed. It was time for anthropologists to try to do the same.

Conclusion: narration and interpretation

So far I have shown the striking parallels between some of Smith's concepts about the relationship of myth and ritual, and the ones from some later anthropologists – as well as some of the responses to these concepts. The list of scholars and their works presented here is by no means exhaustive, but I do believe that the most influential ones of the 20th century have been presented. In the concluding part of this article, I want to point to some more recent approaches, as well as to some of the questions that the study of myth opens.

Obviously, if we ask someone while that person is performing some ritual why he or she is doing it, we will get the answer "because I believe in this and that." This line of questioning, while providing a secure link between myth and ritual, leads to conclusions that are essentially tautological and uninformative. People usually dress more in the colder weather,

36. For example, see his Introduction in Mauss, 1950. This is also referred to in a footnote by Barthes.

but this has nothing to do with whether they *believe* that they should dress more or not. Many activities (even repetitive ones, like political and other public rituals) are grounded in the social and psychological aspects of societies, not in myths or beliefs.

The main importance of the structuralist approach is that it shifted the focus of the methodology of dealing (that is to say, transcribing, telling, re-enacting, writing, remembering, etc.) with myths to language. The emphasis on structure in a wider sense is characteristic for contemporary structuralist anthropologists – like Viveiros de Castro (1992) and Overing (1995), who use structuralism in a more general context – to present the meanings and values that people express through their myths.

As already noted above, authors as diverse as O’Flaherty, Homer, Pindar, Plato, Eliade, Cook, Boas, Malinowski, and Kluckhohn, have regarded myth as essentially a story. The same is true for Fontenrose (1966) and Kirk (1970, 1974). As vague as Kirk’s formulation “that what the majority of people consider to be the myths” is, it clearly takes into account the fact that the social group might or might not consider something to be “myth,” “tale,” “sacred story,” “historical narrative,” etc. What an anthropologist might regard as a myth, can be regarded by members of the community as a narrative about, for example, some social divisions (cf. Mea Idei, 1952). It is nothing more and nothing less than that. In the Preface of her book (O’Flaherty, 1988), a distinguished scholar noted a Hindu’s reaction to her earlier work on Hindu myths: the very title of the book (*Hindu Myths*) was regarded as offensive!

According to Cohen (1969: 349), “the fact that myths are narratives is of primary importance.” The same author saw this as the institution of the relationship between the present and the past. This relationship is essentially a static and one-sided one. Whenever it is necessary (or simply convenient), the past is being recalled. The argument here is somewhat different from the one presented by Eliade, who believed that the past is constantly being re-enacted in the present – with numerous alterations, but with the basic structure remaining the same. However, Cohen’s argument is based on the experience of the “classical” Western tradition.³⁷ An analysis based on

37. I am well aware of the potential criticism that my use of this general term (and lumping together of so many distinctive culture traditions within “the West”) might inspire, but I use this term here only as a means for illustrating my point.

another type of tradition, like, for example, the one from Mesoamerica (Boskovic, 1989, 1995a) will produce different results, with instances both of the past being “anchored” in the future and the future in the present. There are no simple solutions, and the more different cultures and societies we take into account, the more diverse the answers.

In order to achieve any understanding of the myths of a specific culture or society, it is necessary to take the “linguistic” or “narrative turn,” to regard myths primarily as narratives, culture-specific of course, and to employ all the elements of the analysis of narratives to the analysis of myths. This type of approach has been discussed and criticized in an article by the Swedish anthropologist Göran Aijmer, who regards myth as a “ritual transported into the verbal sphere of life, where it may further develop into fiction and drama.” Therefore, “if we wish to understand myth and what myth is about [...] we must treat myth as ritual” (1987: 21-22). The words of Leach are well echoed in the last sentence of this article: “The nature of myth is the nature of ritual, and the nature of ritual is that of the cultural exploration of possible worlds” (1987: 22). So despite this admirable attempt to reinstate the myth and ritual connection, we are again left with something as vague as “the cultural exploration of possible worlds.”

Myths are stories (*traditional tales*) that shares many narrative features with other types of stories (Todorov, 1981: 48-53). Myth as a story is always recorded in a certain way, as a narrative, and then edited as a part of a larger ensemble of cultural “texts.” This process of “editing” is of great importance, since it also means “translating” myths into another mode (medium or language). It cannot be avoided, but we should always bear in mind this intermediary function that an anthropologist/ethnographer performs.

Myths can be analysed and divided into smaller units (motifs), and the relationship of these motifs can then be examined. The narrative functions of myths can be examined in relation to other narratives (Barthes, 1988: 98 ff). But is there any segment that myths possess and other narratives do not?

The answer to this question may sound surprising: there is none. There is nothing that myths possess and other stories (narratives) do not, so that when we first hear (or read) a myth from some culture (provided that we know the language reasonably well), we could immediately (and positively) identify it as a myth. It is the combination of all the different segments that

matters, as well as the culture-specific rules. For example, Vladimir Propp wrote (and strongly influenced structuralists, discourse-analysts, and many others) about the “morphology of the folktale” (1958). However, had he been a Hopi and doing the same thing, his work would have been regarded as a piece on the “morphology of the myth.” Russian fairy-tales are not regarded as myths by Russians – but they would be regarded by such in a culture significantly different from the Russian. Another example is the work of the Grimm brothers on the European peasants’ folklore, these days almost completely forgotten (that is to say, as far as anthropology is concerned), and hardly anyone would regard the fairy-tales of the European peasants as myths. However, if one would read a book like the *Tsimshian Mythology* and compare the Tsimshian *myths* with the Russian *folktales* or European *fairy tales*, the similarities are really striking.

Hence, there are no universal elements that define a myth.³⁸ The quest for them might be interesting and entertaining, but essentially (as Socrates says in *Phaedrus*) a waste of time. Myths are *traditional tales* that are regarded as special in any specific cultures. They relate (by their structure, content, values they promote, or symbols associated with them) to certain deeply-embedded existential elements, and these elements are always culture-specific. They may be regarded in a similar way by other cultures (for example, we talk about the Greek and Mesopotamian *myths*, but the Arabian *stories* of the 1001 nights).

In proposing a “narrative turn” in the study of myths, I really do not think that I am advocating something very distinctive or radically new. The narrative approach has been attempted (with great success) in other fields, most notably in the “ethnography of communication” by Dell Hymes and the post-structuralist hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur.

In his article “The narrative turn” (originally published in 1979), Ricœur distinguishes between two general types of narratives, historical and fictional.³⁹ Both of these types can be analysed in terms of the *common structure* (as done by French structuralists), or their historicity (since they refer “to the same fundamental feature of our individual and social existence”

38. And this is perhaps nicely implied in Lévi-Strauss’ Postscript to the *Mythologiques*.

39. In a very broad sense, the contrasted modes of *explanation* and *understanding* can be applied to historical and fictional narratives, respectively. However, the meaningful

[Riccœur, 1981: 274]). The “impossible logic” of narrative structures opens up another world. In Riccœur’s words:

Everything happens as if the free play of the imagination of mankind in its best storytellers had spontaneously created the intelligible forms on which our reflective judgment can in turn be applied, without having to impose possible stories. If that is the case, we could then paraphrase Kant’s famous formula about schematism and say: the narrative schematism ‘is an art hidden in the human soul, and it will always be difficult to extract the true mechanism from nature in order to lay it open before our eyes’. [1981: 287]

The very distinction between “history” and “fiction” is in itself fictional in many ways and many instances. Riccœur points to the role of the myth as *mimesis* (following the argument from the Aristotle’s *Poetics*), but this is a *creative imitation* (1981: 292-293), not a mere reflection of some “objective” reality. Through the process of this creative imitation, the world of narratives (Riccœur’s “the world of fiction”) brings us “*to the heart of the real world of action*” (p. 296). In conclusion, it seems that “fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality” (*ibid.*).

An attempt on the lines of the “narrative turn” was made by Greg Urban (1991). Urban claimed that anthropologists, if they want “to understand culture,” should “understand the properties of discourse that make it attractive” (1991: 102).⁴⁰ Urban saw myth as a form of oral discourse. On the semantic level, it is not always clear how and in what way specific myths are different from other forms of discourse. Although he did present several examples of formal analyses in the best formalist/structuralist tradition, I do not find his insistence on binary oppositions very persuasive. Even though his book is about “native South American myths and rituals,” he makes no attempt to define ritual, or its specific place within the discourse(s) that he

explanation is impossible without at least some *understanding*, and *understanding* itself requires some *explanation*. The fictional narratives include “myths, folklore, legends, novels, epics, tragedies, drama, films, comic strips, etc.” (Riccœur, 1981: 281).

40. Urban defines discourse as “the means by which the past is kept alive in the present, by means of which a culture is maintained” (1991: 17).

analyses. There is a possibility that the act of speaking (when the final result is a myth) is in itself a form of ritual, but Urban does not elaborate on this. Nevertheless, I believe that the important new horizons lie behind this “discourse-centered” approach.

Although the study of narratives does include what is referred to as “the basic dichotomy” (Nöth, 1990: 369), story and discourse,⁴¹ this dichotomy involves a series of intermediary stages that depict the relationship of story and discourse. The danger of the “narrative approach” may lie in the oversimplification of different concepts. While it is simple to regard everything as sets of binary oppositions, how much information (if any) can we get from that?

In a century after Smith, anthropologists have begun to approach myth from different angles. The connection between myth and ritual and the primacy of one or another has lost its importance (and structuralists deserve the credit for that). Smith deserves credit for stressing the social role and function of religion and rituals, but he clearly underestimated the importance of myth. True, this underestimation should be regarded in the context of his own time and the barriers that he was crossing. This underestimation was dominating the anthropological research until the work of Lévi-Strauss.

The language of myths is deeply embedded even into the contemporary structures of politics and power – for example, the official US government discourse of the “Evil empire” from the 1980s. The more recent examples include postulating other ideologies or religions (like Islam) as the ultimate other (in the form of binary oppositions), as well as the sole remaining world superpower as the “guardian” of the principles of Good and Decency in the world (not unlike the fairy tales heroes). Finally, it is interesting to look at the examples of intertwining of myth and history in the Middle East (the Arab-Israeli conflict following the recognition of the independent Jewish state, in part as a recognition of their claim to their sacred *place of origin*), and in Southeastern Europe. In the latter case, both Serbs and Albanians claim Kosovo/Kosova as their holy land. Both peoples believe that this area holds keys to their claims to statehood. In the Serbian case, most of the

41. Cf. Chatman: “A story is the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse [...] is the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse is the *how*” (quoted in Nöth, 1990: 369).

medieval churches and monasteries are located at Kosovo, as well as the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarchate. According to the myth, in 1389, the mediaeval Serb armies confronted the invasion of the Ottoman Turks at Kosovo. Most of the Serb nobles died in the battle and this heroic defeat is regarded in Serb traditional folklore as the result of the conscious choice of the Prince Lazar, who chose "the Kingdom in Heaven" over "the Kingdom on Earth." Thus, even in their suffering and defeat, the Serbs stood higher than their victors. Of course, from the historical point of view, the claim that the battle ever took place is in some doubt. The Ottoman Turks did not actually gain control of Serbia until mid-15th century, and the leading Serbian historian of the period, Professor Sima Cirkovic, claims that the battle never took place. For the Albanians, who gradually became dominant population in the region following the mass exodus of Serbs after 1690, the Kosova is sacred as well. Several very important battles against the Ottoman Turks were fought there in the first half of the 19th century. The Prizren League was founded there in 1878, and many Albanians put their claim to national sovereignty from that date. Hence, it is easy to see how two mutually exclusive discourses (the Serb and the Albanian one) posit the same area as their mythical sacred space, as their (spiritual, historical and political) *place of origin*, following the events that happened in a very distant past. It is also easy to see how Serbs can see all their suffering (including the most recent exodus from Kosovo in June 2000) as yet another spiritual victory, for once again choosing "the Kingdom in Heaven." Wars in the mythical realms could never be definitively lost or won, they tend to perpetuate themselves as long as the myths exist.

In conclusion, the obvious fact that was self-evident for the ancient Greek philosophers is that all stories (myths included) are expressed by and through language (Plato's *Cratylus* is just one example). Anthropologists have neglected this fact for a very long time. Many different theories have been advanced from different standpoints, but none has achieved any degree of universality.⁴² The reason for this is that none has operated with any-

42. Despite Lévi-Strauss' claims for universality both he and his followers operate with (geographically and culturally) limited models. In order to be valid universally, these concepts should be applicable to other traditions (outside South America, outside Amerindian traditions), and they are not (see Kirk's criticism of the story of Asdiwal in Kirk, 1970; Mandelbaum, 1987 provides numerous references for criticisms of the (Edipus story, etc).

thing that is universal for all myths in all cultures and societies. An interesting way of interpreting myths (“mythology,” as the authors put it) using methods of analogy was proposed recently by Shelley and Thaggard (1996). They asked two crucial questions: “(a) In what way do members of a culture understand their myths? (b) In what way should researchers seek to understand myths?”, and answered: “in the *same way*” (1996: 179). This is a very interesting approach, but it falls into a trap of *universalisation*. The authors would still have to test this theory on some specific examples. Their interpretations of the Oedipus myth are interesting – but what is their possible application in a context of an actually existing society or culture? (Earlier scholars, like Malinowski, *constructed* their own theories, but then *tested* them in an actual *context*.) For example, it is very difficult to see how this theory could provide any insights in the aforementioned conflicting interpretations of the Kosovo/Kosova myth.

On the other hand, the narrative approach at least offers ways of examining the “facts” (and in particular, considering “facts” as culturally and socially constructed) of the actual ethnographic situations. As such, I think that it still presents the key to the interpretation of myths – it is important to see who is telling them, in which context and to what purpose. Whether anthropologists will begin using this key is another question, to be answered in another narrative. Or should I say: another story.

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 ER Encyclopedia of Religion (Eliade, 1987).
 ERE Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics (James A. Hastings, ed., Edinburgh, 1908-1926).
 EU Encyclopædia Universalis (Paris, 1990).
 LCL Loeb Classical Library.

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