

# Chapter 1. Introduction – The Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology<sup>1</sup>

Ravenstein, the Netherlands, August 19-21, 2008

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In August 2008 the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) held its Second Annual Conference at the Soeterbeeck Conference Centre (a former convent) near the small medieval town of Ravenstein. Here twenty-two scholars from five continents met during three days for intense discussions of current work on comparative mythology. The twenty-two papers originally to be presented and discussed were divided into four clusters: 1) the mythology of death and dying; 2) mythological continuities between Africa and other continents; 3) theoretical and methodological advances; and 4) work-in-progress. The papers will be specified below, but let us first introduce the newly founded International Association for Comparative Mythology (legally incorporated in the State of Massachusetts, USA, 2008).

The IACM's origin lies in the Harvard (Cambridge MA, USA) Project on Comparative Myth, and the ensuing Harvard Round Table for Comparative Myth, which – under the inspiring initiative and leadership of Michael Witzel, one of the world's leading Vedic scholars – from the late 1990s onward organised an unbroken chain of interdisciplinary annual conferences attended by prominent scholars from all

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continents, belonging to such disciplines as comparative mythology, anthropology, comparative and historical linguistics, genetics, archaeology, intercultural philosophy, palaeoanthropology, Asian studies, African studies, crop sciences, ethnic studies, classics, etc. From the 2004 Round Table on, when Wim van Binsbergen joined the Harvard Round Tables, these annual exchanges have paid consistent attention to Africa in world mythology. In 2005 the annual Round Table was held at Kyoto, Japan, in a joint venture with the Kyoto-based Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), and the 7th Conference on Ethnogenesis in South and Central Asia (ESCA); in this connection the Asian dimension of the Harvard Round Table was expanded with Australia and Oceania. The next year's meeting (May 2006) was held in Beijing, People's Republic of China, under the title of 'the Peking and Harvard University International Conference on Comparative Mythology'. At this conference the collective decision was taken to establish an International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM). It was also at this conference that the convenors for the 2008 meeting received their mandate. The new association held its First Annual Meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, in August 2007, with up to 80 participating scholars, and 30 papers presented. Most Harvard Round Tables have led to internationally published proceedings. The proceedings of the 2007 First Annual Meeting have been prepared for publication by the convenor, Emily Lyle, and appeared in the journal *Cosmos: The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society*. In addition, there has been a substantial spin-off in the way of books and articles published in established peer-reviewed scholarly journals. To highlight and facilitate the specific focus on comparative mythology, at the First Annual Meeting a peer-reviewed journal *Comparative Mythology* was initiated, whose preparation is now in full swing.

The 2008 Second Annual Conference is the logical continuation of this inspiring series of interdisciplinary and intercontinental exchanges, which are working in the frontline of the contemporary transformation of regional studies and traditional disciplines under the impact of globalisation and of an empowering, multicentred politics of knowledge production.

The conference was opened by the convenors: Wim van Binsbergen (African Studies Centre, Leiden, and Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam) and Eric Venbrux (Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen), both from the Netherlands. Next, Michael Witzel (Cambridge, MA, USA), the Association's President, gave his Presidential address.

Venbrux, van Binsbergen and Witzel had formed the conference's organizing committee, responsible for fund raising, and for the delicate task of making an adequate selection (in terms of quality, thematic fit, and available slots for presentations and participants) from among the great many paper proposals that had come in via the conference website.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This website ( <http://www.iacm.bravehost.com> ) was specifically established for the 2nd Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology; open to the general public until the publication of the *Proceedings*, it contained all draft papers as presented at the conference, and all conference circulars.

In all other respects the conference was the responsibility of just the two convenors: topical focus, structure and format, organisation and finance, and the subsequent publication of papers. The choice of venue (a revamped convent), the in-house provision of board and lodging, and the programming format, all ensured that conference participants would be in intensive formal and especially informal contact throughout the duration of the conference, so that informal factual, methodological and theoretical exchanges would greatly complement the specific formal programme of paper presentations. Every participant made a formal contribution to the scholarly exchange, not only by her or his paper, but also by an arrangement according to which each paper was subjected to one selected participant's detailed critical examination, before the meeting proceeded to general discussion.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned, this conference had four thematic sessions. In the session on *the mythology of death and dying* (which reflects the research programme currently being pursued at Nijmegen by the convenor Eric Venbrux) six papers were presented on, respectively, moon myths in Australia, myths concerning the avoidance of dying in West-Africa, Eurasian myths of travels to the netherworld, Zoroastrian death myths, the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia situated in Germanic mythologies of death and a sociological approach to death myths with special attention to Calvinism.<sup>6</sup>

This session was followed by a *business meeting of the Board of Directors* (i.e. the Executive) of the IACM. A major decision taken in this connection was acceptance of the motion to extend the membership of this Board to Dr Bukola A. Oyeniyi from Nigeria, which would give the Association a formal footing in the African continent and would stimulate the pursuit of comparative mythology by African scholars and institutions.<sup>7</sup> This African appointment complements the representation of Europe, North America, and Asia on the Board of Directors, and implies the need for further work towards the formal inclusion of scholars from South America, Australia, and Oceania.

The next session likewise comprised six papers. It was devoted to *mythologi-*

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to the conference participants, the convenors were pleased to welcome the specialist in West Java ethnography, Dr Wessing, formerly of Leiden, as a special discussant of Mr Djunatan's paper. Mr Djunatan's conference participation made it possible for him to visit his PhD supervisor Wim van Binsbergen in order to complement the usual e-mail based supervision with far more effective and comprehensive face-to-face exchanges.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Venbrux (Nijmegen): 'Death and Regeneration. The Moon in Aboriginal Australian Myths of Death'; Walter van Beek (Tilburg): 'How to Avoid Dying. The Battle against Death in African Mythologies'; Boris Oguibénine (Strasbourg) and Nataliya Yanchevskaya (Cambridge, MA): 'A Journey to the Netherworld. Reconstructing Features of Indo-European Mythology and Funeral Rituals from Baltic, Slavic, and Buddhist Parallels'; Victoria Kryukova (St. Petersburg): 'Death and Defilement in Zoroastrianism'; Joseph Harris (Cambridge, MA): 'The Rök Stone's Mythology of Death'; Hans J. Mol (Canberra): 'Calvin in Myth'. The latter paper was not available for inclusion in the present volume.

<sup>7</sup> An interesting detail is that Dr Oyeniyi only managed to have his visa in time and thus to participate in the conference, thanks to the capable intervention of Mrs Maaïke Westra of the Leiden African Studies Centre's Secretariat.

*cal continuities between Africa and other continents* – probably an all-time first in the history of comparative mythology, and a topical choice which reflects the research programme currently pursued at Leiden and Rotterdam by Wim van Binsbergen. African-Eurasian continuities were examined with regard to: myths on the appearance of the first humans; the nature and functions of political myths in West Africa during the last few centuries; the examination of specific detailed parallels between African and Eurasian mythologies as seen from the perspective of the Nkoya people of Zambia; Witzel's revision of his Laurasian (*i.e.* Eurasian and N. American) / Gondwana (including African) distinction as applied to flood myths; an etymological discussion of the case for identity between Ancient Greek Hephaestus and Ancient Egyptian *i.e.* Northeast African Ptah; and the relevance of Japanese mythology for comparative Eurasian mythology in general.<sup>8</sup>

Five papers were presented in the session on *theoretical and methodological advances*. These addressed: the cosmological theory of myth; neurobiology and the origins of myth and religion; postmodernism and the comparative method with special application to comparative mythology; the extent to which myth presents a challenge to philosophy; and parallels between Greek and Sanskrit epics with special attention to the fire-associated gods Hephaestus and Agni.<sup>9</sup> A final paper session dealt with ongoing research in the context of PhD and MA projects, on such diverse topics as the mythological worldview of a contemplative site in West Java, Indonesia; Blumenberg's recent philosophy of myth as applied to irony in Homer; the Tibetan epic of Gesar of Ling, and Indo-Slavic mythological parallels.<sup>10</sup>

The conference concluded with a general discussion, prospects for the 2009 annual conference, and a consideration of options for the publication of the conference papers. The convenors have decided to aim at a two-stage publication process:

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<sup>8</sup> Yuri Berezkin, St. Petersburg: 'The Emergence of the First People from the Underworld: Another Cosmogonic Myth of Possible African Origin'; Bukola A. Oyeniyi, Lagos: 'Myths, Indigenous Culture, and Traditions as Tools in Reconstructing Contested Histories: The Ife-Modakeke Example'; Wim van Binsbergen, Leiden / Rotterdam: 'The Continuity of African and Eurasian Mythologies: As Seen from the Perspective of the Nkoya People of Zambia, South Central Africa'; Michael Witzel, Cambridge, MA: 'Pan-Gaeon Flood Myths: Gondwana Myths – and Beyond'; Václav Blažek, Brno / Pilzen: 'Hēphaistos vs. Ptah', Kazuo Matsumura, Tokyo: 'Can Japanese Mythology Contribute to Comparative Eurasian Mythology?'

<sup>9</sup> Emily Lyle (Edinburgh): 'The Cosmological Theory of Myth'; Steve Farmer (independent scholar, California, USA): 'Reinventing Comparative Mythology as a Rigorous Science. Neurobiology and the Origins of Myth and Religion'; Robert A. Segal (Aberdeen): 'Postmodernism and the Comparative Method'; Willem Dupré (Nijmegen): 'Myth. A Challenge to Philosophy'; Nicholas J. Allen (Oxford): 'Hephaestus and Agni. Gods and Men on the Battlefield in Greek and Sanskrit Epic.'

<sup>10</sup> Stephanus Djunatan (Bandung): ('Sunda. the Account of Affirmative Life. Mythological Worldview of the Contemplative Site of Nagara Padang, West Java, Indonesia'; Nadia Sels (Ghent): 'Blumenberg, Homer, and the Function of Irony in Mythological Narratives'; Karel Jan van den Heuvel Reinders (Nijmegen): 'Travels to Heaven and Hell of Gesar of Ling'; and Nataliya Yanchevskaya (Cambridge, MA): 'Indo-Slavic Mythological Parallels.' Regrettably, of van den Heuvel Reinders' and Yanchevskaya's contribution to this session, no written account was available for inclusion in the present volume.

first, lightly edited *Proceedings* – the present volume – containing the full set of papers; to be followed by the publication of one or two carefully selected sets of papers, revised under extensive editorial feed-back, as special issue of a peer-reviewed journal, or in an edited volume with an established university press.

This Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) has demonstrated that the field of comparative mythology is rapidly and convincingly shedding its sometime connotations of over-specialised antiquarian scholarship, to become (in close collaboration with a wide range of auxiliary fields – from genetics to linguistics, ethnography, archaeology, statistics, and classics) an exciting, rapidly expanding domain of theoretical and methodological reflection, and an ever widening window on humankind's remoter cultural history. Here – in addition to the unmistakable strength of this field among scholars from Europe (including Eastern Europe!) and North America – new growth points can be discerned around death as a mythical domain, and around the understanding of Africa's place in the wider cultural history of humankind as a whole. These developments inspire a sense of gratification and achievement, even though there is a need for the increased involvement of scholars from other continents, and even though the theoretical debates during this conference brought out the fact that we are still far removed from the emergence of a mainstream disciplinary consensus.



## **Part II. Mythology of death and dying**

