Chapter 13. The cosmological theory of myth

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Abstract: I think now is the time to stress that I have a new theory of myth which I can call the cosmological theory. I have been much inclined to credit my predecessors and this may sometimes have resulted in the impression that what I am saying is not new. But it is, and it is important for our understanding of modern people as well as ancient culture. I have learnt much from predecessors and it is inconceivable that I could have usefully approached a work of this scale without them, but when I look at their oevres as a whole, I can see that I have drawn on one aspect of their work, and often quite a small one. I do not carry over the baggage from their whole theory but merely had my ideas sparked by one element of what they were saying. So to understand what I am saying it is unnecessary and irrelevant to grip the whole life work of the often voluminous scholars of the twentieth century. Let us make a fresh start with the twenty-first century, and a new millennium, and listen directly to the evidence from the past (and even sometimes from the present) and build, build, build, as we need to do if we want to turn over in our hands the intricate structure from which our mythic heritage stems. I plan to lay out a set of core particulars during my presentation. If other scholars find that they have ideas that overlap with mine, let them build them in or use them to modify or refute parts of the structure. The cosmological theory of myth depends on the concept that an oral society was fused together in a different way from a literate one, and that all our written evidence by definition is flawed. Although we naturally need to use written evidence for the vanished past we need also to create models of what kind of society could have operated the systems that can be postulated on the basis of the surviving evidence. The model is at once conceptual and social; it has static elements relating to place and dynamic elements relating to time and also to the narratives unfolding in time that are our myths. Comparison is one of the means to understanding. and the results of one comparison will give rise to formulations that can be explored and tested through other comparisons. We have the world before us as we set out on our enquiries.

1. Introduction

The view I am putting forward is – relatively – new. My major statements began with a contribution to *History of Religions* in 1982 and continued with a book-length study (1990) and a series of articles. Throughout I have tried to remain aware of the contributions and lines of thought of other scholars and to relate to them where possible, but

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it has become increasingly clear that what is really required to move the subject forward is for the field to include published reactions to the view that I have been articulating as clearly as I can in the virtual absence of scholarly discussion. Debate, as is well known, leads to the refinement and clarification of theory and methodology, as well as to the assimilation of unfamiliar approaches and materials. It seems to me that scholars have continued to work with outworn concepts without taking on board the alternatives presently on offer, and I suggest that it is high time for a re-assessment. Although the new view I am referring to has its core in the Indo-European material that I shall discuss later, I shall first offer some general comments on the broad field of cosmological theory in which it is embedded.

2. Cosmological theory

I shall take as my starting-point some remarks by Robert Segal in his recent book on myth (Segal 2004: 2). He argues that 'what unite the study of myth across the disciplines are the questions asked' and he raises three key questions, which are those of origin, function and subject matter. I shall offer brief answers to these three questions with the aim of setting my specific theory in context.

As regards origin, I have found the approach taken by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman a useful one (Berger and Luckman 1967; Berger 1969: 3-101). Since human beings are not hard-wired, and have bewilderingly wide choice, they have had to participate in creating social and conceptual worlds to shore up the identities of the individual and society. Since these worlds are self-created, humans, sometimes in relation to specific environments, have adopted different schemas. The origin is the same and lies in the nature of the human being and it is hypothesised that all human beings have a cosmology and related myths. However, individual societies have created their own distinctive cosmologies (either because they were in isolation from each other or by way of contrast with neighbours) and these cosmologies can vary in their degree of complexity and integration. For this reason, it is necessary to study individual cases.

As regards function, although a cosmology is constantly subject to adaptation, once created it soon acquires the force of tradition and tends to remain in place, serving to give the individual person, and the society as a whole, ontological security in an unquestioned universe. The overall scheme may also serve to privilege certain sections of society which would accordingly have a vested interest in retaining it and would act to reinforce the status quo.

As regards subject matter, I would see myth as the part of a cosmology that is expressed as verbal narrative, the primary myths being those that treat the establishment of the universe, in all its facets, including the human one. Although it can be interesting and fruitful to study myths merely as verbal forms, the information is much richer, and the conclusions that can be drawn are much more secure, in cases where a cosmological setting can be established.

3. A cosmological model based on Indo-European sources

The wide range of Indo-European materials and the depth of recorded Indo-European history make the field an excellent one for the study of cosmology. Since cosmology is not language-bound, information about an early cosmology derivable from sources in Indo-European languages will not necessarily be found only within that field and the question of boundary should initially be left open. The process of enquiry is a dialectical one, with a model being built on the basis of materials present in one or more of the components available for comparison, and then being subjected to scrutiny in the light of more detailed study of all the components. In cosmology, as opposed to purely linguistic enquiries, there are non-verbal relationships to consider.

As regards stories alone, an exploration of the use of the analogical discovery method to reach back from a range of narratives to a posited myth may be found in Lyle 2007. As regards the non-verbal, Georges Dumézil posited a code by which gods in a polytheistic system corresponded to three aspects of society – 1 the sacred, 2 physical force, and 3 prosperity and fertility – that at one time he saw embodied in priests, warriors and herders / cultivators (for overviews, see Littleton 1982 and Belier 1991). By so doing, he opened the door to cosmological study but he did not step through. Two scholars have since gone through the door into a world of 'primitive' (or cosmological) classification. They are Kim McCone who recognises the triad as belonging to an age-grade system with: 1 old men, 2 young men and 3 mature men (McCone 1986; 1987), and N.J. Allen who understands Dumézil's three as survivals into the historical period of a prehistoric system including kinship bonds which rested on four rather than three (Allen 1987; 2000).

There has not been up to the present sufficient recognition of the fundamental difference that this makes for our study methods. We can now posit an origin point and work forwards through history to illuminate the diachronic changes that would have resulted in the situations we find in our sources. Both synchronic studies of the modelled cosmology and diachronic studies of the stages of revision are urgently called for. Naturally, this will require some rethinking by interested scholars in specific areas of specialisation whose contributions will be essential to the success of the enterprise. When a great deal of effort has gone into creating integrated systems resting on all the information obtainable within one country or one language group, there is a natural reluctance to see them broken apart to be re-aligned in another way. However, from a long-term point of view, we can see that these areal groupings are not being abandoned but will offer exciting possibilities for the diachronic study of change and development once a suggested model has been put in place.

Since cosmology operates in space and time, as well as in relation to human society and the human body, it is a totality with many levels that has to be understood as macrocosm, mesocosm and microcosm. The nature of this overall analogical system enables us to run checks by studying each of a series of parallel registers. As Burkert noted (1972: 399):

> Order and pattern … which the human spirit craves, are to be found not only in the form of conceptual rigor and neatly logical structure, but, at an earlier level, in richness of mutual allusiveness and interconnection, where things fit together 'symbolically.'

I think that we have sufficient information among our widely scattered Indo-European materials to rebuild this harmonious structure – 'harmonious' in this context meaning 'fitting together well', rather than necessarily implying the existence of an ideal conceptual environment to live in.

4. Building and testing the model

The actual process of building the model has been one of trial and error, and this work still continues, so we are at an interesting stage when there is enough of a set outline for scholars to relate their own insights to it, while at the same time there remain obvious points of enquiry where matters are still fluid. What I would regard as my own key insights have mainly come through the shedding of assumptions. It is because we all operate in terms of deeply ingrained views that it is so necessary to have debate so that the positions and the grounds they rest on can be brought out into the open. It does seem to me, as my scheme has developed, that more recent forms of the model are solid improvements on earlier forms, although I remain open to further possibilities.

I shall take the case of the three axes of polarity that I currently posit as underlying the structure. These were already present in my theory when I published *Archaic Cosmos: Polarity, Space and Time* in 1990 and were explored more fully in Lyle 1995. The main thing I was doing in these earlier works was insisting that we have to articulate things in such a way that we have the tools we need to work with. Dualities are all over the place, as we might say, but can we do nothing else than just note their existence? I am not inventing these polarities but am simply finding them and positing their importance in an overall structure and seeing them as applying generally and not just in one register, *i.e.*, for example, spatial dualities would have equivalents in terms of time. There is certainly nothing new about positing spatiotemporal correspondences (see, *e.g.*, Gaborieau 1982).

This concept of the three axes of polarity has stood up well and remained useful over the course of the years and, up to now, I have not felt the need to depart from it. However, responding to a query raised by the Slovenian scholar Mirjam Mencej, when she visited Edinburgh as a Cosmos Fellow in April 2007, concerning an apparent lack of fit in my model between the fertile summer half of the year and the period of human maturity (then placed in winter), I undertook a re-examination of the polarities on the three axes and concluded that the plus and minus signs needed to be reversed, one effect of this being to locate the male superior half in the winter (which should apparently be regarded as the sacred half), while the inferior female and Dumézilian 3rd-function half would be connected with summer. A related change to the model made at this time was the identification of the female quarter with the first

part of the summer half (the summer season) rather than with the second part (the autumn season), as had been previously proposed. For an update on these changes, resulting from my internal testing, see Lyle 2008a and forthcoming, 'Celtic'). It was interesting to find that when confronted with challenge it was possible to modify the structure in this rather radical way without there being any danger of the whole system collapsing like a house of cards. A much better overall harmonisation has been achieved which can now be subjected to scrutiny in its turn.

The wider point I would make about the three-axis system (that appears to be present in the Indo-European materials) is that, when we are wondering whether another society outside the Indo-European area shares the same cosmology, one question to ask is whether a three-axis system can be traced there (*cf*. Lyle forthcoming, 'Complex'). Cross-cutting dualities are very commonly found but could potentially be confined to a two-axis system. We can test for the number of axes initially by exploring the registers of space and time where they are likely to be most evident.

I mentioned one of the Dumézilian functions above, and this gives an entry into the question of how we can test the validity of Dumézil's theory and others related to it. One approach is the simple one of going over all the materials Dumézil uses and seeing whether his interpretations carry conviction. There is a danger of subjectivity when the often elusive points in a narrative or other source are caught up into a schema, and, of course, the originator can never be free from this danger. I now see an interesting opportunity arising of reviewing these materials afresh with alternative interpretations in mind and assessing the different strengths of the two possibilities offered. In this way, it should be feasible to arrive at a more objective view.

I concluded long ago that Dumézil's argument that there was an overarching schema of three functions of the sacred, physical force and prosperity was a sound one, and it can be suggested that this academic position has been significantly strengthened by the realisation that the schema could have very ancient roots in a system of life-stages (Lyle 1997; 2001). However, I did not consider his ideas about the pantheon securely based, and I think scholarship has been going into unnecessary contortions in an attempt to make things fit – when it has not simply withdrawn from a field that has been found so unrewarding. I shall briefly consider here the case of the divine twins (the Aśvins, the Dioskouroi). Dumézil places them both in the third function, but their separate natures have been studied and have led scholars who concentrated attention on them to place one in the second function and one in the third (see, *e.g.*, Ward 1968: 20-24). Although this in itself is not conclusive, it is certainly an alternative that should be considered and it throws doubt on the force of the reasons adduced by Dumézil for placing them both in the 3rd-function slot – mainly, I think, their being named third in the Mitanni treaty (Dumézil 1945: 34-40; 1994: 81, 232). We should remain aware that there may be other triads in the system besides the functional one (Lyle 2004). The other problematic thing that Dumézil does in relation to the Aśvinic pair is to conflate them with the Romulus / Remus, Manu / Yama pair. This royal pair is so different from the Aśvins that Donald Ward, in his study of Indo-European twin gods, had no hesitation in distinguishing them (Ward 1968: 6-11), and

the opposition between the Romulus / Remus pair, who are sometimes presented simply as brothers rather than twins, has been fruitfully studied without reference to the Aśvinic pair (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Puhvel 1987: 284-290; Lyle 1990: 105-118).

In the face of problems like this, which arise when we take Dumézil's hypothesised composition of the pantheon as our base, I feel that we should discard it entirely and make a fresh start, while always, of course, checking back to his formulations to see if his wide reading and detailed reflections resulted in insights that should be retained and built in to the new model or that might serve to complement it. Testing can lead to rejection and I think this step should be taken in relation to the part of Dumézilian theory that deals with the pantheon.

5. The kinship code

A kinship structure is a relatively recent addition to my theoretical model (Lyle 2006: 103-106), since a long period of preliminary exploration was required before it was possible to arrive at what currently seems the optimum formulation. It is highly complex and carries a great deal of information, and this makes it all the easier to refute. If it does not 'work' and succeed in throwing light on later forms that are assumed to be derived from it, it can be considered detail by detail. If some details survive the process, it may be that a more satisfying model can then be built. The idea that a kinship structure would be the base for rich, all-embracing Indo-European cosmological statements is tied in with the recent view that our historical evidence goes back to prehistory and a time when 'primitive' classification would have been in force. A society with such a classification could reasonably have been expected to draw on its social organisation to create a divine mirror image. Paradoxically, in the course of time the organisation of society was totally revised, and we have to work in reverse and posit a type of society that matches the traces of mythology that have remained.

The proposed family set consists of ten members. The pantheon can be presented as a block, as in Fig. 13.1, or as selected people in a kinship diagram as in Fig. 13.2. Fig. 13.1 shows the sequence of components of space and time which has four regular parts and also makes special provision for the representation of kingship (Lyle 2008b and forthcoming, 'Cosmic'). An important distinction made in both figures is that between the old gods (shown above) and the young gods (shown below). The system offers the precise number of ten slots which relate to divisions of space and time as well as to elements of kinship and succession. A major difficulty which has confronted comparative mythology has been the question of defining the number of gods (for sometimes we find gods split into several aspects and at other times we find gods merged together), and I suggest that it may be useful to explore these materials further when the limits are set in this way.

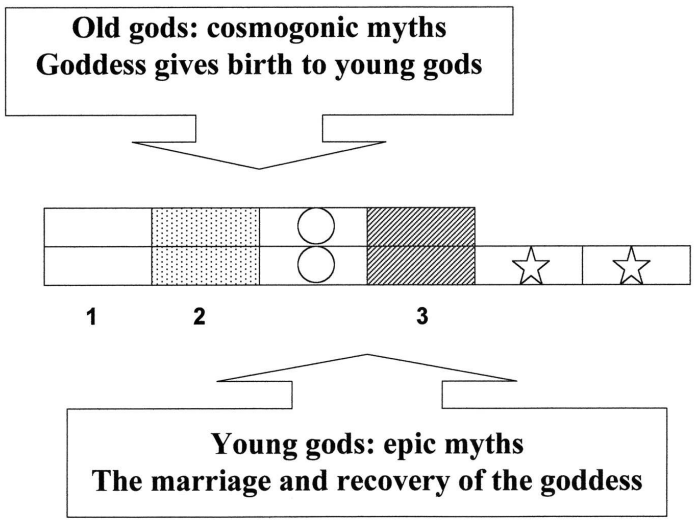

Fig. 13.1. The tenfold pantheon and related mythic patterns.

The numbers are those of Dumézil's three functions. Females are indicated by circles and kings by stars.

For example, in the case of the female component, studies in the past may have explored a single 'great goddess' or may have looked at three goddesses expressive of maiden, wife and crone. The firm suggestion of the structure offered here is that there are two goddesses, one of whom is the primal source of everything and so could be 'a' great goddess, but not 'the' great goddess since there is another powerful goddess who is young queen rather than ancestress. Both goddesses relate to the triad of gods and so have three aspects which could readily have been given separate identities. In the representation of the pantheon in Fig. 13.1, special attention is drawn to the roles of the goddesses as central components of two mythic patterns, which I have explored in recent articles that deal respectively with the old goddess in relation to three old gods in a treatment of the cosmogony (Lyle 2007), and with the young goddess in relation to a set of five young gods, one of whom steals her away so that an expedition has to be mounted to recover her (Lyle 2008c). Since the young goddess is the figure previously identified as the sun goddess (*cf., e.g.* West 2007: 227-237), this theme can be connected to the story of bringing the sun back from being hidden in darkness that has been explored by Michael Witzel (2005) and Kazuo Matsumura (2010, this volume).

The actual kinship-and-succession structure (see Fig. 13.2) shows how power in a matrilineal system could be spread between two lines of males that supplied one of its members to take the central role of king in alternate generations (*cf.* Finkelberg 2005: 65-89). In the generations before that of the current king, the important predecessors are the king's mother's brother, who was the previous king, his father's father, who was the king before that, his father and his maternal great-grandmother. It is hypothesised that these four correspond to the four old gods.

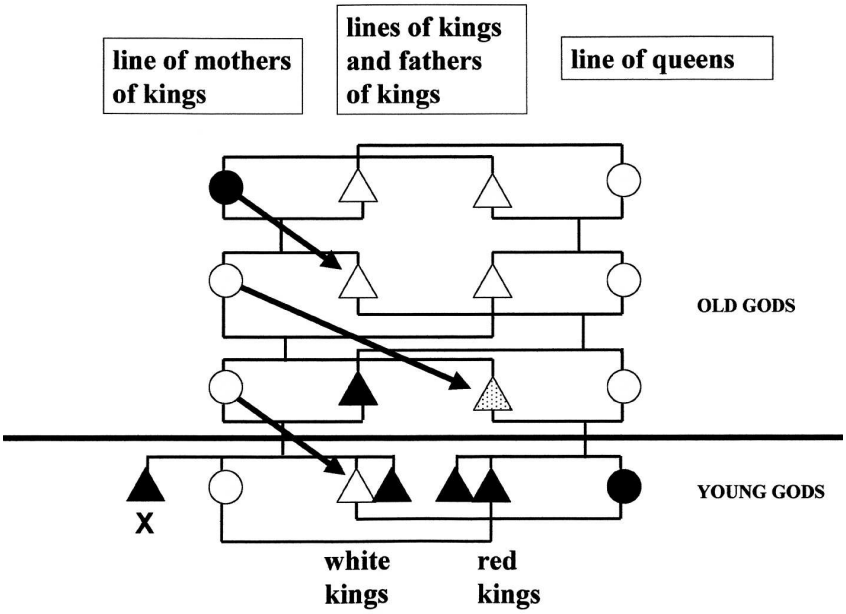

Fig. 13.2. A four-generation capsule with bilateral cross-cousin marriage, showing the ten people who are taken to correspond to gods

The triangles indicate males and the circles females. Lines above indicate sibling relationships and lines below indicate marriage. The figure illustrates matrilineal succession, with kings coming alternately from two different patrilines and marrying into a line of queens.

In the current generation there is the king himself and a brother (marked with a cross) connected with the dead who is also regarded as a king. This, in terms of myth and legend, is the murdered or sacrificed brother of the Romulus / Remus, Manu / Yama pair, and it can be suggested that Baldr, who is killed 'accidentally' by a brother (Harris 2010, this volume), may be another instance of this 'king of the dead' figure. The queen (the sun goddess) has two brothers, who are presented in myth and epic as twins (the Aśvins). It can be noted that the line of succession passes through one of the twins, and that this factor distinguishes him from his brother. I suggest that he is the 3rd-function twin connected with fertility and that his brother is the 2nd-function warlike one. The king also has two brothers and, as already noted, one of these is dead. The other appears to represent the patriline after the king has left it at his inauguration to become the representative of the whole.

We seem here to have before us the leaders of a hierarchically organised society plus the ancestors who were distinguished from the generalised group of the dead and may have been the recipients of special offerings. Some of the relationships among the gods become very clear when this posited set of relationships is kept in mind and I think the structure will prove exceedingly useful in the interpretation of the myths found in various parts of the Indo-European world that supplied the bits and pieces of evidence which initially allowed the model to be put together. It should perhaps be added that not every story about the gods will fit this structure. Story-tellers

had fertile imaginations and a story told for its own sake or shaped to the particular religious or political ends of a specific historical period has a separate identity and may have only a tangential connection with myth even when it names gods. I believe, however, that the comparative study of all available story evidence has allowed some strong patterns of myth to emerge which can be matched to the cosmological structure offered here.

6. Conclusion

As I mentioned, N.J. Allen was one of the scholars who initiated this new method which we can use to approach the Indo-European historical materials on myth in light of a hypothesised structure in order to make more sense of them than previous theoretical approaches have succeeded in doing. He has looked at structures of both space and time in terms that are not so remote from what I am offering (*e.g.*, Allen 1991; 1998; 2001). His system at present is not fully compatible with mine (it gives no overt place to goddesses), but the more important point is that the two systems resemble each other and together point to the existence of a spatiotemporal system that we can begin to grasp.

Cosmological theory seems to be about to come into its own and, of course, I look forward to the further developments that will rapidly become possible when more scholars concern themselves centrally with this field. So far the model is a fairly static one, but I think it may soon reach the point when we can activate it and begin to see how men and women, in tandem with the gods and goddesses that their ancestors had projected, went about the business of maintaining the cosmos as the years and generations (and even millennia) went by.

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