Rupture and Fusion in the Approach to Myth: Situating Myth Analysis Between Philosophy, Poetics and Long-Range Historical Reconstruction

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Abstract

On the basis of my engagement with myth over the decades, the present paper seeks to present some 'prolegomena' to the study of myth today. It does so, in the first place, by a short overview of philosophical contributions and implications of the study of myth. After formulating and discussing a possible definition of myth, the argument focuses on two complementary perspectives in the scholarly approach to myth: the objectifying perspective of rupture versus the participatory and identifying perspective of fusion. After indicating the pros and cons of both, and giving an example (notably, the 'hero fights monster' mytheme) of extensive continuity in myth through space and time, the paper concludes with a summary of the main results of the author's current long-range comparative research into leopard and leopard-skin symbolism, which is informed by loosely interlocking mythical complexes extending all across the Old World and part of the New World, over a time span from the Upper Palaeolithic to the present.
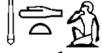
Philosophical Approaches to Myth

Myth is often taken for granted as a self-evident genre of symbolic production. As an Africanist empirical scientist I have often followed that approach. However, as an intercultural philosopher, it is my task to deconstruct self-evidences. Hence the present argument.

It is not as if philosophy offers a wide and generally agreed-upon perspective on myth, or as if myth has been one of philosophy's central concerns in the last hundred years. Students of myth in the literary and social sciences including history will find that philosophers may occasionally take for granted such conceptual usages as have been adopted by the very fields of scholarship whose foundations philosophy is supposed to examine critically. This is largely the case for myth, as it is for philosophers' none too innovative use of the concept of culture (cf. van Binsbergen 1999a,b, 2003a). At one level this may seem to be true even of a post-structuralist philosopher like Derrida. He does engage in debate with Lévi-Strauss on the interpretation

of myths of the South American Bororo people (Derrida 1967a: 149f), and with Plato (Derrida 1981) on the interpretation of the myth of Thamos and Thoth as recounted in *Phaedrus*, and in so doing appears to take for granted conventional notions concerning the nature and confines of myth as a self-evident unit of analysis (also cf. Derrida 1971; van Binsbergen 2005b). However, at a more fundamental level, Derrida's (cf. 1967b) deconstruction of the binary opposition (central to Lévi-Strauss's approach to myth) through the notion of *différance* and his critique of logocentricity do offer some of the essential elements for a meaningful approach to myth today.

Myth has certainly featured in mainstream Western philosophy from its very inception, in the pre-Socratic Xenophanes' (ca. 570–480 BCE) attacks[1] on his contemporaries' mythical beliefs (without using the Ancient Greek word *muthos*), and somewhat earlier even in Theagenes of Rhegion's allegorical interpretation of such stories featuring divine beings.

The etymology of *myth* is charmingly uncertain. Most authoritative sources refuse to trace it beyond the Ancient Greek *muthos*. Partridge[2] proposes an admittedly conjectural Indo-European root **mud-* or **mudh*, 'to think, to imagine', and sees cognates of the Greek form in Lithuanian, Old Slavonic and Old Irish; although he explicitly discusses Latin *muttīre* ('muttering, mowing') as part of a complex centring on the English *mute*, he does not suggest a link with Greek *muthos* on this point. Such a link is however claimed by van Veen and van der Sijs,[3] who thereby exhaust their inventiveness, in the sense that they, too, refrain from tracing the etymology beyond Ancient Greek. Largely relying on and popularising Astour, Martin Bernal has placed controversial but often plausible proposals of Ancient Egyptian etymologies for Ancient Greek words at the heart of his *Black Athena* thesis.[4] If *muthos* was not among Bernal's original proposals, it might have been. For in Ancient Egyptian, *mdwj* ⌐🗃⌐ means 'speak, talk; word, saying', and *mdwt* ⌐🗃⌐ 'speech, matter'.[5] In general, the combination of both a semantic and a phonological fit is considered a strong indication for a valid etymological connection. But rather than concluding (as Bernal would do) to specific Egyptian–Greek borrowing, we are reminded of a pattern where correspondences between Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Latin occur rather more frequently than could be predicted on the basis of the cladistic disparity of these languages: Egyptian being classified as belonging to the Afro-Asiatic family, the two latter languages as Indo-European.[6] A possible explanation would be in terms of a postulated proto-Nostratic or pre-Nostratic substratum from which the various language families and languages could have emerged in the mid-Holocene – somewhat along the lines of Kammerzell's argument on the intermediate position of Egyptian between Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European, of various claims as to the relative affinity between Egyptian and Hittite, and of my own emergent argument on the continuity of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Delta with West Asia and South-eastern Europe.[7]

The word *muthos* was common from Homeric times onwards, denoting 'speech, spoken word, story, fable', usually without implications as to the truth or falsehood attributed to its contents.[8] What we classify today as myth is told by Plato, e.g. the myth of the original duality and bisexuality of all human beings in *Symposium*,[9] the myth of Er at the end of *Republic*, or most famous the myth of the cave in Book VII of the same work. Gradually, the opposition was installed between *muthos* and *logos*; the former would increasingly denote the furtive, oral statement in specific situations, a statement that could be just hearsay and need not be true; while the latter would increasingly denote the compelling expression of law and order, immutable philosophical truth, divine rule, the divine creative act, and hence a transcendent form of truth that was increasingly denied to *muthos*. The emergence of philosophical rationality in classical Greece has often been described in terms of the transition from *mythos* to *logos*, a process in which Aristotle rather than his teacher Plato appears ultimately as '. . .[i] l maestro di color che sanno'[10] – 'the master of those who know', that is, of *those who have left myth behind them*.[11] In the process, the critical approach to what we now call 'Greek myths' was further developed, e.g. in the work of Euhemerus (300 BCE), who saw all mythical divine characters as originating in deified historical human beings.

However, literary criticism, not philosophy, became the field where scholars pondered over myths, and the concept itself was not philosophically belaboured until the late eighteenth century CE, when Schelling developed a very subtle philosophical approach to mythology. He thus gave the decisive impetus to the development, as a major component of classical studies which were an emergent scientific discipline at the time, of a science of mythology, whose first major exponent was Karl Ottfried Müller (Müller 1825; cf. Momigliano 1983; Blok 1994, 1997). It needs no longer surprise us that the word 'myth' was only first attested in the English language as late as 1830,[12] a quarter of a century later even than in Dutch (1804–1808).[13] Classicists, anthropologists (Tylor (Tylor 1948 (1871)), Lang, Frazer) and comparative religionists (Max Müller, Otto) grabbed hold of the relatively orphaned concept of myth, and it is in the hands of these disciplines that a common, consensual scholarly understanding of myth has arisen between 1850 and 1950 – as the expression of a mythopoeic constructing of world and meaning that, while not impossible to understand, still was considered to be worlds apart from the scientific rationality which the pursuers of these disciplines attributed to themselves. From this relatively recent context, so replete with Faustian rationality and condescending objectification, arose the notion that we *know* what myths are and how we can identify them – that they are *out there*, to be drawn into the orbit of our scholarly analysis.

None has more emphasised than the neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer (1874–1945) the extent to which the articulation of a mode of knowing

beyond mythical thought was absolutely constitutive of the Enlightenment.[14] And it is mainly to Cassirer that we owe, in modern philosophy, an extensive body of reasoning on the nature of myth, on mythical thought as a phase in the intellectual development of humankind, and on the use of myth in the construction of viable, even dangerous, socio-political communities. For Cassirer, the only way to appreciate mythical thought is by contrasting it with scientific thought. This operation is claimed to highlight[15] what Cassirer considers to be the two principal characteristics of mythical thought:

a. unity of being between subject and world, as well as
b. the immediacy of experience.

Here Cassirer shows himself a true heir of the Enlightenment. No less rationalistic than that great twentieth-century CE anthropologist of myth Lévi-Strauss, Cassirer sees in myth *a way of thinking, of conceptualising, the world*, rather than a mode of religious existential signification.[16] However, Lévi-Strauss shows the anthropologist's fascination for the beauty of such mythical thought, for which he seeks to formulate a systematic poetics (in terms of deep structure and transformation, among other concepts) thus rendering systematic comparison and identification possible. Cassirer, by contrast to Lévi-Strauss, remains even truer to the tenets of the Enlightenment, in that Cassirer considers mythical thought an essentially *erroneous* mode of thinking about the world. Whatever the merits and limitations of Cassirer's approach to myth, throughout the twentieth century CE philosophy has been mainly fascinated by other themes than myth, and has approached these from other perspectives than Neo-Kantianism, and as a result Cassirer's impressive edifice remains largely isolated. Some of it was circulated in the social sciences, in a somewhat attenuated and bowdlerised form, by Cassirer's admirers Suzanne Langer, Karl Mannheim and C.W. Hendel. Few philosophical handbooks carry even an entry on 'myth'. Rather than reflecting on the processes of identity formation, and on the construction of world and meaningfulness through verbal articulation, that lie implied in the concept of myth, many philosophers content themselves with using the word 'myth', without further problematisation, in the loose, modernist i.e. disenchanted, and one-sidedly pejorative, sense of 'a collective representation[17] that is patently untrue and that serves specific functions of justification and rationalisation for those who bring it in circulation and/or adhere to it'.

Cassirer wrote at a time when, inside Academia at least, scientific rationality went through an unbroken series of triumphs, when the cultural and somatic Other was largely absent from practical experience and nicely tucked away in distant colonies, and when the modernist heritage of the Enlightenment appeared to be humankind's main defence against such frightening forms of mythical irrationality as nationalism, state communism and national socialism that marked the first half of the twentieth century.

He died a few months after Horkheimer and Adorno, in their American exile, published their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969; cf. Freyberg n.d.), where the taken-for-granted juxtaposition between myth and Enlightenment is reconsidered: '. . . schon der *Mythos* ist Aufklärung, und: die Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück' (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969, p. 14). In Horkheimer and Adorno's book, the (mythical!) image of the Homeric hero Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship while his comrades submit to the luring chant of the Sirens, for scores of pages conjures up the tragic interpenetration of rationality and mythical thought which produced nazism and fascism.

Cassirer did not quite engage in such dialectics. His attempt to deal, once for all, with mythical thought is impressive, but fails to convince in our post-modern, re-enchanted, globalised world of today where the proliferation of identities has been raised to one of humankind's major industries, and where myths (from Christian, Islamic and Hindu religious fundamentalism, to New Age, to human rights and democracy as a justification for state violence, to the neo-liberal idea of the market) remind us every day that they, as myths, are here to stay. At the same time Cassirer reminds us, especially in his last book *The myth of the state*, of the all-important political dimension of myths and their study: if myth creates a collective life world (and by implication often renders its built-in structural and physical violence invisible to the participants in that life world, the believers of myth), then the workings of myth are inevitably opposed to the assertion of individual knowledge, freedom, responsibility and criticism: the ideals of the Enlightenment but also the foundations of modern human rights. Pitch sticks, and it is hardly surprising that some of the major students of myth in the course of the twentieth century, such as Jung, Eliade, de Vries and Dumézil (cf. Horstmann 1998; Ellwood 1999; García Quintela 2001; Frauenfelder 2002), had strong conservative tendencies often accused of bordering on fascism. To this political dimension we will return when, below, we discuss the role of the intellectual in the approach to myth, torn between, on the one hand,

- fusion with myth for the sake of individual sanity, the experience of beauty and a sense of social belonging; and, on the other hand,
- deconstructive critique of myth for the sake of society's sanity and transparency, and the rational pursuit of valid scientific knowledge.

Leaning on Cassirer, but rather more promising and inspiring, is the approach of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dupré,[18] who (unfortunately without the benefit of such inspiration as post-structuralist philosophy – Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari – might have brought to his argument) goes back to Schelling's subtle understanding of myth as forming, and relating to, a whole,[19] and therefore as far from allegorical. Dupré tries to make (at least, that is how I read him) the most of myth's nature as context-informed, lived verbal expression *in the here and the now*,

as against the ambitious, intimidating, transcendent, aspirations of *logos*. Reflecting the work of Eliade (1963: 192f) which was largely conceived before the work of such theoreticians of orality as Ong, Finnegan, Derrida, Goody, Havelock, etc., Dupré reminds us that the tension between *mythos* and *logos* is congruent with that between oral literature and writing. He stresses the kaleidoscopic nature of myth and of the world it creates. Myth revolves on a verbality which creates meaning and truth through articulation, and which appears to reside (especially in situations where writing is absent) in what (at least in my reading of Dupré) is implied to be an interlocking or alternation of immanence and transcendence, rather than external, transcendent procedures of verification and legitimation. The narrative then appears as the core, not only of myth, but of the human existence *tout court* (Dupré 1973: 951). This leads Dupré to distinguish four complementary tasks in our approach to myth:

1. To understand myth and mythology (not so much as antithetic to ratio, but rather) as the matrix within which the play of ratio (*Verstand*) and symbol takes place – and it is out of this play that culture is constituted.
2. To realise that inevitably there are not only many mythologies but (within each mythology) pluralities of myth, whose interrelations we have to investigate, for it is these interrelations that constitute the community in tension with the individual person.
3. To identify the liminal situation where the *logos* of speech determines the *mythos* to such an extent that it begins to coincide with the latter as self-reflecting theorising – in other words, as *philosophy*.
4. On the one hand, theory has to illuminate the mythical, but on the other hand, it has the task of verifying the mythical element within the horizon of humankind – it has to become a self-reflective theory of the development of the mythical, i.e. a philosophy of history.

Little wonder that Dupré's final conclusion is that 'das Problem des *Mythos* ist leztlich das der Fundamentalphilosophie' (Dupré 1973: 955f.). Situating myth in the ubiquitous phenomenon of human verbal enunciation, of narration (as does McDowell 2002), implies that for Dupré myth is in itself a ubiquitous and self-evident aspect of the human condition, rather than a special form of thought reserved for narrowly circumscribed circumstances.

Dupré's emphasis on the narrative element, which would make myth appear as primarily a form of orature, has a peculiar implication for mainstream myth analysis. Since so much of the latter deals, not with living myth orally presented in informal situations, but with established written texts and with pictorial and other artistic references to such written texts, it would seem as if in the academic practice the concept of myth has hardened, even fossilised, to the point where myths have come to appear as a distinct and self-evident genre of texts readily available for processing in the hands of scholars. The rediscovery of orature in the last

quarter of the twentieth century CE has done much to remedy this one-sidedness.

Dupré's position is reminiscent of Barthes's, whose *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957) traces the structuring orientations behind late capitalist bourgeois life (so that for Barthes 'myth' comes close to the Marxian 'false consciousness' – the mythical orientations in question are held to be *mistaken* conceptions of reality).

A similarly central place is attributed to myth by Kolakowski (1984, cf. Kesselmeier 2000, on whom my summary leans heavily), who defines as myth any mental construct that imposes meaning, order, direction upon the human world (Kolakowski 1984: 6). People construct myth in order to acquiesce themselves: in order to experience the empirical world as meaningful, in order to satisfy their desire for immutable values capable of underpinning their orientation in the world, and in order to escape from the temporal finiteness of their personal existence and of that of the world. In crucial contradistinction to Dupré (for whose approach to myth I highlighted the oscillation between transcendence and immanence), Kolakowski insists that any true myth represents a transcendent value, in which abstraction is made from the finiteness of human experience (Kolakowski 1984, p. 41).

Kolakowski does not, in this connection, investigate the specific historical and socio-political conditions under which such transcendence may be attained as a technical accomplishment of thought. He implies it to be a universal and perennial human capability, per definition as universal as he claims myth itself to be. In one way he is right: such transcendence is already given with the *word*, on the principle posited by the great Dutch linguist Reichling that 'language is a vicarious act' (Reichling 1967). But such a view of mythical transcendence is not very useful, because it would no longer allow us to distinguish between language in general, and myth as a very special form of language. I would rather suggest that, given the transcendent capabilities of the word (by which the here and now, by the mere act of speech, can be subsumed under words (*any* words) that have per definition (. . . !) a much wider application than just the here and the now), myth uses this capacity to the full and, as it were, raises it to the power 2, by conjuring up a world that

- is not only *not* here and *not* now but that may have *no empirical existence whatsoever* anywhere at any moment in time (which brings myth into the realm of the hearsay, the imagination, and the poetic),
- that is brought to life and to credibility by using narrative modes analogous to (although not always identical with) the conventional methods of narration by which reliable, true reports on the empirical world outside the here and now are rendered; and finally a world that
- is not idiosyncratic, not exclusive to the narrating individual, but one whose narrative accounts are shared, circulated and reproduced within a wider community (which thus constitutes and perpetuates itself).

Thus myth creates an effective world that may or may not be real but whose main characteristic is that it appears as real to those who produce the tales on that world and to those who listen to them. Producing this appearance of reality involves an active process of captivating and persuading the listener with specific literary means. Principal among these means is *analogy* with the real-life world of the here and now, even though this analogy may involve specific inversions, distortions and transformations. For the narrators and the listeners, therefore, the mythical world is scarcely distinguishable from, and scarcely discontinuous vis-à-vis, the empirical world.

It would be misleading to speak of transcendence, in this connection, as if it were a universal and self-evident condition. Only under certain conditions could the mythical world be said to be transcendent, in the sense of being strictly distinguished from the empirical world, at a totally different plane, absolutely incomparable to the empirical world and its inhabitants, and representing a totally different order. I submit that, in a pure form, such transcendence can only occur (i.e. can only be thought) in situations where people experience external forms of the exercise of authority and control, which are completely discontinuous with the ordinary and familiar forms of exercise and control informing their everyday-life world here and now. Such external forms of authority and control are brought about mainly by writing, the state, an organised priesthood and science – four devices that, separately or in combination, make it possible for an absent, dead or even completely imaginary person (such as a testator, a king, the state or a god) to exercise near to complete control over a situation here and now through the vicarious means of language. For all we know, writing, the state, an organised priesthood and science only emerged in a very circumscribed spatial and temporal context: the Ancient Near East (including Egypt) by the end of the 4th millennium BCE. Only under such conditions would I expect myths to emerge that evoke a transcendent world absolutely incomparable to the ordinary-life world – so absolutely that, for instance, a prohibition on graven images (like in Ancient Israel and Islam) may be entertained; yet even there the transcendent God is supposed to have created Man after his own image, as if even in a thoroughly literate and priestly context myth shies away from total transcendence. I consider the emergence of transcendence as a mode of thought the outcome of a long historical process, not as an immediate and inevitable implication of writing, the state, an organised priesthood and science. The latter achievements did exist in 3rd millennium BCE Mesopotamia, yet one of the greatest specialists could still describe the mythico-religious orientation of that place and time as overwhelmingly *immanentalist*.[20] Meanwhile we should realise that the four conditions listed here do not always occur in combination. State formation has been a widespread phenomenon on the African continent from the late 4th millennium onwards, yet in many cases these were states without writing.

That even so statehood would amount to discontinuity with the cultural orientation of the here and now of local communities, and hence might constitute a growth point for transcendent thought, is suggested by my study of the Nkoya state in terms of such cultural discontinuity (van Binsbergen 2003b).

These are some of the ideas that, in the background, will inform the argument that follows now.

A Provisional Definition of Myth

There is no dearth of definitions of myth. Above we have already considered elements towards such a definition. Dupré gives a succinct one: '*Mythos* im weitesten Sinn verstanden beteutet Wort, Rede, Erzählung von göttlichem Geschehen. Er begründet eine Tradition' (Dupré 1973, p. 950). Famous is Eliade's definition, whose extensive work on myth surprisingly continues to impress for its profound insights, in my opinion, now that I am re-reading it after more than 30 years:

> 'le mythe raconte une histoire sacrée; il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des "commencements". Autrement dit, le mythe raconte comment, grâce aux exploits des Etres Surnaturels, une réalité totale, le Cosmos, ou seulement un fragment: une île, une espèce végétale, un comportement humain, une institution. C'est donc toujours le récit d'une "création": on rapporte comment quelque chose a été produit [*sic*], a commencé à *être*. Le mythe ne parle que de ce qui est arrivé réellement, de ce qui s'est pleinement manifesté. Les personnages des mythes sont des Etres Surnaturels. Ils sont connus surtout par ce qu'ils ont fait dans le temps presti-gieux des "commencements". Les mythes révèlent donc leur activité créatrice et dévoilent la sacralité (ou simplement la "surnaturalité") de leurs oeuvres. En somme, les mythes décrivent les diverses, et parfois dramatiques, irruptions du sacré (ou du "sur-naturel") dans le Monde. C'est cette irruption du sacré qui *fonde* réellement le Monde et qui le fait tel qu'il est aujourd'hui. Plus encore: c'est à la suite des interventions des Etres Surnaturels que l'homme est ce qu'il est aujourd'hui, un être mortel, sexué et culturel' (Eliade 1963, p. 15).

While splendidly evocative and bringing out many points that are essential aspects of humankind's most cherished myths (but not all myths are myth of origin or of aetiology), this famous definition has a number of unmistakable shortcomings. Instead of a definition aiming merely at identifying elements of empirical reality open to further analytical scrutiny, it amounts to a theory in a nutshell, in that it already postulates specific relations between the various features of myth that the definition allows us to identify, and, in so doing, imputes such generality, even universality, into these features and their specific relations as could never be ascertained by a mere application of the definition in itself, but as could only be established on the basis of subsequent, painstaking empirical research. Moreover, the definition narrows down the occurrence of myths to

such times and to such human communities as have a well-defined and interculturally recognisable notion of the sacred, of primordial time, of origins, of supernatural beings (so, by implication, cultures that explicitly make the distinction between nature and the supernatural), of creation, of the world. And it imputes to all contexts where myths are found, the notion (a notion, moreover, to be explicitly identifiable *in the consciousness of the human actors* native to such contexts) that the world and humanity, not only of the past but also of today, is constituted by the events recounted in the myths. For Eliade's definition not only points out that the life world of the owners of a particular myth is (as could be argued from an analytical distance, by a scholarly outsider) constituted by that myth and other myths – but also that the myth owners themselves *are conscious* of the fact that this is how their world is constituted. We can easily grant all or most of these requirements when referring to the creation myths of the Ancient Near East, such as *Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian creation myth) (Pritchard 1969), or the creation stories of Genesis – products of a literate, state-based society with organised religion including a specialised priesthood defining, canonising, keeping, transmitting and publicly representing these myths as major components of the specialised professional science. But these specific socio-political features, however typical of the Ancient Near East, have only a very limited distribution throughout human history and across the continents. Most of these features, and many of the other specific stipulations of Eliade's definition, would be absent in the African situations I have studied at close range for decades, for instance among the Nkoya people of western Central Zambia. Let us see if their situation can help us formulate a myth definition that is less theoretically presumptuous, and that therefore might have wider applicability than just literate, state-based societies with an organised priesthood.

A relative paucity of myths (by some conventional definition) as compared with other continents has often been claimed for Africa. Like other parts of Africa that (albeit for little more than half a century) happened to be colonised by the British (1900–1964) and explored by predominantly British scholarship, the Nkoya people of Zambia have been understudied as far as their myths, legends, folktales and other forms of oral literature is concerned.

Especially in regard of parts of Africa once colonised by the British, much work has been done on the possibility (or, considering myths' dependence on latter-day political processes, the impossibility) of extracting, from African myths, objective historical information, especially concerning processes of state formation (cf. Vansina 1966, 1985; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Willis 1978, 1981; Miller 1980; Schoffeleers 1992). After the enthusiasm for this approach in the 1970s and 1980s, we are now gradually realising that much of this work, including some of my own (1992), was based on the – less and less convincing – assumption that myths documented in

Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century encoded actual historical processes of only a few centuries' time depth, and could be thus decoded. In fact, it is now dawning upon us that this mythical material is often millennia old and that it is usually impossible to sort out how much of this ancient and entirely mythical contents has been projected onto relatively recent actual historical events. This line of argument has been advanced by Wrigley (1988), whose argument may be summarised as follows:

> 'The work of M. Schoffeleers on Mbona, presiding spirit of a famous rainshrine in southern Malawi, is exploited in order to cast doubt on his reconstruction of 16th- and 17th-century political history. It is suggested that Mbona was the serpentine power immanent in the Zambesi; that reports of his "martyrdom" at the hands of a secular ruler are versions of an ancient myth of the lightning and the rainbow; that his journey to, and subsequent flight from, Kaphiri-ntiwa, scene of the Maravi creation myth, is a variant of the visit made to the sky by Kintu, the "First Man" of Ganda tradition. It is not very likely that such stories attest the rise of a great military State *c*.1600 and the ensuing suppression of religious institutions' (African Studies Centre n.d.).

Mutatis mutandis, the same criticism could be levelled against my own work on the ethnohistory of the Nkoya people of Zambia, especially my *Tears of Rain* (1992).[21] This research (conducted in close association with what was once the Manchester School of Gluckman and his associates) did touch on myth and oral traditions, but the main foci of my research in that connection have been ethnicity, kingship and cults of affliction, against the background of social organisation at the village and urban–ward level. I never sought a comprehensive account of myth and other forms of orature in late twentieth-century CE Nkoya society. Nor was the way in which elements of myth circulated in everyday life and rituals, conducive to such an endeavour: in nearly three decades of intensive association with the Nkoya people through nearly annual spells of fieldwork, hardly any myths were ever formally recounted in full in my presence (and, as I am reasonably sure, neither in the presence of born Nkoya people). Instead, scraps of disconnected mythical elements were hinted at in songs, rumours, fireside stories and informal conversation, often disguised as allegedly historical events occurring in the lives of people still alive, or within, or at the border of, living memory. At first I fell into the trap of this historical illusion, producing my book *Tears of Rain* (1992) as a reconstruction of the last few centuries of precolonial Nkoya history based on these mythical elements. It was only in subsequent years, when reworking on this material comparatively (across Africa and even intercontinentally) that I awoke to their truly mythical nature. It was only then that I began to realise that what I (along with my interlocutors) had taken to be oral history of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries CE was in fact a recasting of millennia–old mythical material, small parts of which could be retraced to Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Near East, and Ancient South and South-East Asia, and in its specific local Nkoya application probably devoid of all objective historicity.

A very central myth among this people details the origin of kingship (Nkoya: *wene*), which the Nkoya consider one of their most central institutions, at a par with female puberty rites, funerary rites and courts of law. The foundation myth of kingship is known to a great many people and enshrined in the oral–historical collection *Likota lya Bankoya* which their first Christian pastor, Rev. Shimunika, compiled in the middle of the twentieth century. Since the myth and its background have been published elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1992), we may immediately proceed to the definition of myth which a consideration of this one case inspires. Let us then define myth, provisionally, as:

- a narrative
- that is standardised
- that is collectively owned and managed
- that is considered by its owners to be of great and enduring significance
- that (whether or not these owners are consciously aware of this point) contains and brings out such images of the world (a cosmology), of past and present society (a history and sociology) and of the human conditions (an anthropology) as are eminently constitutive of the life world in which that narrative circulates, or at least: circulated originally
- to this we may add that, if this constitutive aspect is consciously realised by the owners, the narrative may be invoked aetiologically, to explain and justify present-day conditions
- and that therefore is a powerful device to create collectively underpinned meaning and collectively recognised truth (regardless of whether such truth would be recognised outside the community whose myth it is).

Discussion of the Definition

This definition helps to bring out some of the contradictions we have to consider in the study of myth.

I have avoided, in this definition, to introduce an element that many students of myth have considered important: the distinction between gods (who are supposed to be paraded in myth, constituting its distinctive feature) and heroes and ordinary mortals (who are supposed to feature in epics, which are held to be different from myths. My reason is that such a distinction between gods and mortals is predicated on the concept of transcendence, which we take for granted in late modern times and in the Western intellectual tradition but which yet, as I have argued, only emerges in its true form under very specific conditions of relatively limited distribution: writing, the state, priesthood and science. I submit that typical of mythical narratives is not, statically, the evocation of gods, but the *tension* between two kinds of ontological conditions:

a. one godlike and moral, and the other
b. human/only-too-human (Nietzsche),

in such a way that the image of the world oscillates between occasional but unsystematic transcendence and a more standard condition of immanence.

The definition mixes *emic* elements (i.e. elements that are consciously recognised by the owners of the myth themselves in their very own concepts and language), with *etic* elements (that can only be formulated in the meta-perspective of scholarship and that tell us what a myth does, provided the owners do not realise that this is what it is doing: constituting a life world, actively creating meaning and truth as if these were not self-evident and universal givens). According to a widespread view in philosophy and the social sciences today, human life worlds are not given but culturally created within narrow horizons of space and time, and meaning and truth – when considered from the scholar's meta-perspective – are therefore far more contingent and relative than they would appear to be from the perspective of the local horizon constituted, precisely, by myth.

This is the standard view, based on a presentist perspective of mainstream sociology and anthropology, in which all culture is axiomatically considered to be individually acquired through a social learning process, life worlds are recognised to be recent and, under the onslaught of cultural globalisation supported by new technologies of communication and information, *ephemeral*. Under such conditions it is often possible to trace the relatively recent origin of specific myths, e.g. the foundation myths of world religions. 'Relative' is here taken against the time scale of the 200,000 years of the existence of Anatomically Modern Humans. However, there is evidence suggesting that in this longer time scale, these axioms may need to be reconsidered. The converging evidence from human cultural (near-) universals and from mythological archaeology reconstructing the oldest myths of anatomically modern humans (cf. Witzel 2001, 2003; van Binsbergen 2006) brings out a picture of such immutable cultural inertia of key myths and key cosmologies that we must seriously consider the possibility that some mythical contents may be species-specific, and inherited through biological rather than social means. This, of course, is reminiscent of Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, with this proviso that for Jung that collectivity did not necessarily encompass the whole of (anatomically modern) humankind, but could also be situated at the more restricted levels of major clades ('races', 'gene pools'), nations, clans and families.

The paradox that now opens up is that at the emic level myths may appear as universal and cross-culturally recognisable statements on the human condition, while at the etic level myths appear primarily as the kind of illusions that allow *others*, against all odds and against our better judgement, to create and maintain a human society. *Analytically*, from the *etic* perspective, myths are in the first place *other* people's myths, and the task of scholarship in the field of myth is to describe and compare mythical contents and develop a meta-perspective in the light of which a more fundamental scientific truth may become detectable behind the particularistic

myths that inform specific, narrow horizons of time and space. Ever since Xenophanes and Theagenes, and especially since Euhemerus, narratives have (through a process of labelling) become transformed into myth under the estranging gaze of the analytical scholarly outsider, for whom the myth does not contain truth, at least not the truth the owner and narrator consciously recognise. Hence, the construction of a specialist field of scholarship of myth risks to imply, in principle, an implicitly violent hierarchical re-ordering of the world on the basis of a radical distinction between

1. the collective owners/narrators of a myth, and
2. the scholarly analyst of the myth.

Here the analyst claims a privileged position which, if adopted by owners/narrators of myth, would destroy the latter's position as well as the very myth itself. In recent decades, more than two millennia after the Ancient Greek debunkers of their contemporaries' myths, such hierarchical analytical constructions often coincide with the juxtaposition between

• 'the West' (where most analysts of myth reside in fact, or − if residing elsewhere − which they have taken as a reference group)
• and 'the Rest'.

Hence the deconstruction of myth (especially of such myth as underpins other cultures than the Western one) has been argued[22] to belong to the overall installation of North Atlantic hegemonic violence, by materially and physically coercive means as well as by the claim of a monopoly on scientific rationality − without which there would be no science of myth as distinct from the narration and living of myths. The emic/etic distinction and the superiority claim involved in the etic deconstruction of myth are typically modernist, and, as such, obsolescent in a postmodern world. In our largely postmodern world, mythical analysts' claim of a privileged position (just like any such claim in the analysis of social and political life, the arts, religion etc.) has become profoundly problematic.[23] *Such a claim would appear to amount to a myth in its own right.*

Rupture and Fusion

But meanwhile the modernist pretence of having access to such a privileged position has brought us, as scholars interested in the study of myth, a wide but converging variety of insights into the literary, historical, psychological, cultural and socio-political manifestations and workings of myth. These insights carry their own fascination and justification. Perhaps more than anything else they respond to the Kantian admonition *sapere aude* ('have the courage to shed your ignorant naivety'), of which the Neo-Kantian Cassirer has been the most vigorous representative in the twentieth century. We would therefore be reluctant to sacrifice these insights on the altars of post-modernity and of, usually ephemeral, political correctness

(such as is embodied in the emphasis on the hegemonic implications of an analytical perspective on myth that claims greater insight than the myth owners themselves can have). The scholarship of myth, in the broadest possible sense, is at the core of the construction of modernity from the Enlightenment onwards. The hallmark of modernity is the self-proclaimed capability of exploding other people's myths, and of replacing them by more valid truths characterised by scientific rationality, objectivity and universality (cf. Harding 1997 and my extensive, largely positive, reaction: van Binsbergen 2007). Here the scholar's principal approach to myth is that of *rupture*: the double movement by which the analyst of the myth

a. dissociates from the owners of the myth, and
b. by which the myth (analytically diagnosed to contain a particular meta-message about history, cosmology, psychology etc. of which the owners are necessarily unaware) is torn apart from the life world in which it was originally cherished; is subsequently transformed; and is finally reproduced in the (meta-)terms of a different (typically North Atlantic or global) life world.

This analytical, reductionist assault on myth has been very much the dominant trend throughout the social-scientific study of myth since the late nineteenth century. It has produced a number of seminal approaches, such as:

• Bachofen's and Graves's meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of a lost world of gender equality and even female domination over men (Bachofen 1861; Graves 1964, 1988; cf. Borgeaud et al. 1999).
• Max Müller's (1873, 1880) meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of recurrent astronomical processes involving the great luminaries sun and moon, and other observational regularities of the night sky.
• Frazer's (1890–1915, 1918, 1970) meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of kingship, magic and primitive science.
• Harrison's (1903, 1948) meta-narrative explaining away important mythical material in terms of the universal precedence of myth over ritual, or ritual over myth.
• Freud's and Jung's meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of universal human drives, dilemmas, contradictions and collective images (Freud 1918, 1963; Jung & Kerenyi 1951; Jung 1987).
• Lévi-Strauss's (1960, 1968, 1969–1978, 1971, 1973) meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of (essentially content-less) binary oppositions and transformations as constitutive of any human thought and of society in general.
• Historical approaches seeking to extract what little objective history may lie hidden under myth, and which we have already discussed above.

What often amazes the literary scholar (and *a fortiori* the literary writer), and even more so the owner of myths both in the North Atlantic and outside, is the sustained Faustian and tendency to appropriative, subordinating reduction inherent in such primarily analytical approaches to myth. I am not implying that these approaches specifically declare myths to be untruths and falsehoods, to be mistaken science; yet, clearly, they are only satisfied once the myth is deconstructed and transformed into some totally different statement which is no longer recognisable to the original owners of the myth.

Being ourselves owners, admirers, beauty-stricken commentators, and scholarly and literary transmitters of myth, we realise only too well that not *rupture*, but *fusion*, is existentially our most rewarding approach to myth. While the rupturist approach to myth may be situated in the Enlightenment, the fusionist approach is rather rooted (together with so much of enthusiastic scholarly research into myth and folktales from the early nineteenth century CE onwards) in subsequent Romanticism.

Our tasks as global intellectuals studying myth are thus situated between rupture and fusion, in the *field of tension* between

1. *celebrating* such myths as create and communicate − well in line with current notions of human dignity and self-realisation − beauty, cos-mological meaning, sociability, self-respect, power and freedom (often through their transformative incorporation in literary, musical, dramatic and graphic artistic expression; or alternatively, through their underpinning an equitable social arrangement, a justified socio-political cause, or even more in general, because the myths in question are enshrined in the collective representations of our society); and
2. *exploding* the kinds of myths (ranging from, e.g., the male myth of the polluting female body, to the White myth of lazy, dirty and incompetent Blacks, the fascist myths of power, order and superiority, etc.) that so very often result in the opposite of human dignity and self-realisation, − and that have this result in principle by virtue of − *mutatis mutandis* − the very same mechanisms as summed up under (1).

The Scholar's Adoption and Celebration of Myth

A field of tension,[24] in order to be sustained, requires *both* poles of a contradiction to persist. This means that the scholar must at the same time

- deconstruct myth, and,
- (deferring such deconstruction), *adopt* and *celebrate* myth.

At first glance, the adoption of myth (1) and the pursuit of scholarship (as under (1)) would appear to be incompatible and mutually exclusive, but that is a premature and unjustified conclusion.

On the contrary, as literary scholars are well aware, we may engage in the identification and celebration of such literary, pictorial, ideological and

political myths as may be argued to express and reinforce current notions of human dignity and self-realisation, in other words, such myths as may be invoked as demonstrations of more or less dominant and more or less unchallenged collective representations in the current wider society. In North Atlantic society, numerous are the literary critical studies that help us to identify and appreciate the overarching myths informing the details of a novelist's, poet's or playwright's literary product.

Such myths may be described by critics in abstract terms that convey fundamental themes in present-day North Atlantic society: the quest for power, integrity and existential redemption; the conflict between individual drives and collective super-ego-type censorship, or between passionate love and official duty; productivity, creativity, transformation, trust, wisdom, gender balance, identity as the partial and contested outcome of life-long struggles; the fragmentation, performativity, absurdity and human failure inevitably attending such struggles and rendering them, in part, incredible. Here the models of man and of action that are proffered in the mythical narrative, overlap or even coincide with such models as inform social life in the mythological scholars' own society. Of course, mythical models and social models, more or less, pattern and instigate the actual behaviour of human beings without ever totally determining it.

The application of ancient mythical material in concrete present-day contexts of literary and pictorial production, political oratory, etc. often takes a very specific form: *that of the deliberate (typically archaicising) re-circulation of undisguised, stereotypified, ancient mythical contents in latter-day artistic products, with specific mythic protagonists in stereotypified interrelationships and evolving struggles with their respective opposites.* Here usually not the belief in the true historical existence of these protagonists and their mythical history is at stake, but the exemplary, emblematic use to which they are put, allowing the latter-day artist or orator to juggle with standardised positions and relationships triggered by the mere mention of the all-familiar names of the mythical protagonists. The device is an example of intertextuality (latter-day literary products selectively and usually somewhat innovatively referring to ancient mythical texts). In the North Atlantic tradition, this peculiar re-circulation of clearly identified myths[25] pervades Hellenistic, Ancient Roman, European medieval and modern literature and is very far from extinct – to judge by such twentieth-century authors as the Irish James Joyce (*Ulysses*, recycling the mythical contents of the *Odyssey*) and the Flemish Hugo Claus (*Omtrent Deedee*, recycling the myth of the castration of Kronos and the birth of Aphrodite).[26] Numerous other examples could be given outside the North Atlantic region, from mythical complexes as far-flung as the West African Sundjata epic, the South and South-East Asian Mahābhārata, Alexander/Iskander myths throughout Central, South and South-East Asia, etc. (cf. Lombard 1993). The strange attraction of this inveterate literary device of 'bringing ancient myth to life' appears to lie in the deliberately ambivalent nature of the relationship

between the mythical and the modern: the ancient standardised narrative shimmers through its modern trappings, adds extra force and meaning, organises the plot to some extent, yet must at the same time be craftily domesticated, customised, brought to local present-day life, and innovated so as to prevent that the ancient myth becomes intolerably dominant and freezes the life force of modern literary characters and their actions.

Literary scholars cannot convincingly handle such mythical material if they insist on the analytical rupture between themselves and the myth they, and the literary authors under scrutiny, are handling. Their literary comments are likely to become positively mythographic and mythopoeic ('myth-making'), at the same time as scholarly and distant – and they may seek to convey and emulate, in their writings, something of the tension and the beauty that informs the mythically orientated writing under scrutiny, in the first place.

A rather similar situation occurs in a particular form of anthropological engagement with living myth: when it is not the analytical, cross-culturally comparative stance of ethnology that prevails, but the active participation, as observer as well as temporary member, in present-day contexts in which the owners' ceremonial or ritual enactment of myth constitutes the backbone of a social event. This situation is very far from exceptional, and need not be exotically constructed.[27] Imagine a young sociological fieldworker whose PhD research takes her to join the supporters of a prominent soccer club in their European peregrinations. The club's identity, its symbolism through colours, verbal associations, standardised narratives of historical triumphs and defeats, and other attributes, will combine with those of the club's present and past protagonists and corresponding features of the opponent clubs to bring out mythical dimensions of heroic struggle, defeat and victory towards which the fieldworker will often employ fusion, rather than rupture, as a personal position. And for those of my readership who insist that such a North Atlantic present-day example does not apply because myth – in their stereotypical opinion – has to be savoured in a typically exotic setting of totemism, magic, divination and bloody sacrifice, it is enough to be reminded of the many anthropologists, including myself, who have braved the tenets of their academic rationality and have actively adopted, on the basis of a considerable amount of cultural learning and of initiation, the enactment of local African, Asian, Oceanic and American myth during fieldwork outside the North Atlantic. Back home, will they relapse into the appropriative, reductionist rupture in contrast to the fusion characterising their actual fieldwork? Or will they find the forms, literary more than scientific, and beyond the claims of a monopolised access to privileged truth, that will allow them to salvage, to render into discursive and evocative writing, the living myth they have encountered and embodied in the field; and will they do so in a fashion that invites the recognition, and the identification, of the owners of those myths (cf. van Binsbergen 2003a)?

Literary scholars often write about texts whose authors they have never met, whose authors may have long been dead. Ethnographers temporarily and vicariously living mythical contents within present–day local horizons (be they the Manchester United supporters scene, or Nkoya cults of kingship, or West African Pentecostal church services hinging on the diabolical qualities of globally circulating artefacts, and of moneys, that have not first been whitewashed through the church's selective blessing (cf. Meyer 1998, 1999; van Dijk 1999), have more immediate reason to appreciate that the personal, practical participation in living myth, involving also the intersubjective understanding of myth at the owners'/narrators' own terms, *is primarily an act of sociability* (cf. van Binsbergen 2004). By not explicitly and not publicly breaking out of the spellbound world constructions of shared living myth, one affirms one's fellowship with the myth owners. Since many anthropological scholars (and North Atlantic students of myth in general) believe to have eradicated myth from their own professional subculture, and increasingly from North Atlantic culture in general, fusion as a mode of sharing myth is also a form of countering North Atlantic hegemonic assumptions, and creating a possible context for intercultural understanding; it admits the fundamental humility of the human condition, notably the absurdity and violence of any claim of a privileged position in intercultural encounters (on these and related issues, cf. van Binsbergen 2003a).

The Scholar's Critical Battle Against Myth

Such sociability through participation in living myth is far easier to achieve in expressive domains such as ritual, drama, orature, visual arts, than when myths consciously and explicitly address, discursively, the structure of the life world, as an unmistakable form of cognitive knowledge production. We have seen that the fundamental act of rupture in the study of myth consists in questioning the truth value of myth (by such standards as objectivity, universality and rationality – the three fundamental qualities which the Sandra Harding (1997) identifies as the central claims of Western science). Where, on the one hand, the fusionist student of myth would see affirmations of identity, standardised models for action, and the active creation of meaning and of empowerment often after long periods of oppression and denial (cf. Toelken 2002, with regard to Native American handling of myth today), the rupturist, on the other hand, would prefer a literalist approach, where the myth is taken, not as myth in terms of our above definition, but as a pseudo-scientific statement of fact, to be assessed, deconstructed and (inevitably) exploded, with the same scientific rationality that constructs the rupturist position in the first place. It is in this way that the great majority of Afrocentrist, feminist, New Age, ethnic, nationalist and so-called fundamentalist (both Christian, Islamist and Hinduist) writings and related discourses have been relegated (by a host

of unsympathetic critics who tend to occupy positions of power in academia, the media, and government circles) to the domain of myth – not in recognition of the uniquely pivotal position of myth in the construction of any society including postmodern globality, but pejoratively, in contempt of the, allegedly, pseudo-scientific overtones such discourses tend to carry. Allegedly, I say – for it is only one little step for such rupturist critics to be made to realise that also their own sacrosanct fortress of scientific rationality, objectivity and universality constitutes nothing but a myth – certainly in the sense of my definition as given above, and very likely also in the very pejorative sense (as 'untruth') which these critics give to 'myth' and, by implication, extend to the forms of contestation, alternative reflection and liberation enumerated above.

Here it becomes very manifest that one person's myth is another person's truth. There is no way in which a responsible intellectual producer can opt to dwell exclusively on one side, at one pole, of the field of tension between rupture and fusion. Complete fusion will mean a total abandonment of the great achievements of critical thought since the Enlightenment (and in fact, as the names of Xenophanes and Theagenes demonstrate, since the very beginning of Western philosophy).[28] As intellectuals, we simply cannot allow ourselves, or even others, to live with an unchecked proliferation of myths that are not subjected to critical scrutiny. On the other hand, complete rupture will lead to the destruction, not only of the myth-underpinned life worlds of others, and of their identity (however much admitted to be constructed), but also of our *own* life world, in which scientific rationality, universality and objectivity can only exist to the extent to which these are themselves raised to the status of myth, and help to cosily cushion that life world amidst North Atlantic modern myths (such as democracy, the market and human rights) – the latter myths being largely invisible to us, *as myths*, like the very air we breathe in.

A Near-Universal Mytheme: 'Hero Fights Monster'

Bodies of mythological knowledge are among humankind's oldest[29] attested and best studied systems of knowledge. The recognition of the similarity of mythological patterns as found in distinct linguistic and cultural traditions was already a fact in Antiquity, when it inspired the practice of the *interpretatio graeca* (cf. Griffiths 1980): the projection of Greek mythological proper names and concepts onto the mythologies and ritual practices of the Egyptians, Scythian, Celts, etc. at the periphery of the Greek world – a practice well-known from the works of Herodotus and Plato. Worldwide, the available mythological material is of an incredible wealth. This extensive corpus includes cases of myths of the most far-reaching continuity and convergence, and in this respect borders on the same spatial globality which Harding has (Harding 1997; cf., specially on the point of global distribution of myth, van Binsbergen 2007), rightly, identified as a

crucial factor in the universalism attributed to Western science. To make this point, I prefer to select only one *mytheme*,[30] that of 'hero fights monster', and to study it by reference to just one highly reliable and authoritative source: the account of Fontenrose's (1980) explorations into the charter myth of the famous Delphic oracle in Ancient Greece. The mytheme involves two archetypal characters, the hero and the adversary, to which often a third is added: the usually passive heroine.

The table demonstrates the truly amazing, nearly universal distribution of this mytheme across world cultures.

What could explain the persistence and global distribution of this mytheme? At the end of his long quest for comparative data, scanning the local and cultural specifics of the mytheme 'hero fights monster', Fontenrose falls short of inspiration, and all he can offer us is an appeal to the universal human condition in the face of death. Yet, as we shall see in the next sections, this persistence of global distribution also imply an invitation to engage in the study of long-range comparative world mythology on a grand scale – as in the work of Michael Witzel and his Harvard network, within which also my own recent work situates itself.

Living with the Tensions: Towards a Specialised Scholarship of Myth

The field of tension between rupturist and fusionist approaches to myth, signalled above, is too productive than that we should try and resolve that tension by a radical retreat from living myth – which is impossible anyway because we cannot live without collective representations. Yet the contradictions of scholarship produce a relative compartmentalisation in time and place that allows us to engage, as specialists (and only for that part of our existence where we can identify as specialists), in the detached study of myths as if they were exclusively *other* people's. In this respect the possibilities suggested by Table 1 alone are dazzling: there is the suggestion of an underlying pattern informing an incredible variety of cultures in the Old and the New World, across millennia. Is the study of myth a road to the recognition of very old layers of a very widely shared worldview (van Binsbergen 2006)? Or does it, instead, reveal the innate tendencies built into the universal human mind? Detached myth analysis is not only constitutive of the Western intellectual tradition and especially of the Enlightenment – it is one of the most fascinating intel-lectual activities one could engage in.

Over the past decades, I have personally, intensely, and from a variety of different angles grappled with the study of myth. In certain aspects of this work I have identified as a fusionist:

• using my position as a North Atlantic scholar to proclaim and defend an attenuated form of Afrocentrism, as reformulated by me in the context, and in the terms, of scientific rationality,

Table 1. A near-universal theme of systems of mythological knowledge: 'hero fights monster'. Table compiled on the basis of scattered information contained in: Fontenrose 1980. Italics denote female characters

Geographical association	Selected protagonists	Selected enemies	Selected passive heroines
African interior	Perseus	Ketos	*Aso, Andromeda*
Egypt	Ammon, *Athena/Neith*, Geb, Horus, *Isis*, Min, Osiris, Ra, (Set), Thoth, *Uto*	Apep, Bata, Busiris, the Sea, Set, (Thoth)	*Anat, Asherat, (Isis), Nut*
Canaan, Israel, Ugarit, Syria	*Anat*, Aqhat, Baal, *Beltis*, El (Il), (*Judith*), Kadmos, Melqart, *Paghat*, Perseus, Phoenician heaven god, Yahweh	Holofernes, Humbaba, *Judith*, Ketos, Leviathan, Mot, Orontes, Phoenician hawk dragon, Satan, Tannin, Yam, Yatpan	*Andromeda, Asherat, Kassiepeia, Omphale, Phoenician earth goddess*
Anatolia, Cilicia, Hittites, Cyprus	Baal Tarz, Hittite Weather God, Hupasias, *Inaras*, Kumarbi, Marsyas, Perseus, Sandon, Teshub, Telipinu	dragon, Illuyankas, *Medusa*, Okeanos, Syleus, Typhon, Ullikummi, Upelluri	*Aphrodite, Semiramis*
Mesopotamia	Anu, Ea, (Enkidu), Enlil, Gilgamesh, (*Inanna*)/(*Ishtar*), Lugalbanda, Marduk, Nergal, Ninurta, Shamash, Tammuz	Apsu, Asag, Bilulu, (Enkidu), *Erishkigal*, (Gilgamesh), Girgire, Humbaba, Imdugud, *Inanna/Ishtar,* Kingu, *Labbu*, Seven Demons, *Tiamat*, Zu	
India, South-East Asia, Persia	Fredun = Thraetaona, Indra, (*Kaikeyi*)	Azi Dahaka, *Danu*, Garuda, *Manthara*, Nahusha, Namuci, Ravana, Sinhika, Viparupa, Vritra	*(Kaikeyi)*
China	Chu Yang, Li Ping, No Cha, Shen Yi, Yi, Ying Lung, Yü	Ch'ih Yu, Chu Wang, dragon, Fung Po, Ho Po	*Hsi Wang Mu*
Japan	Agatamori, Amewakahiko, Izanagi, Raiko, (Susanowo), Takemikazuchi	Susanowo	*Amaterasu, Izanami*
North Africa and Southern Europe	*Athena/Neith*, Herakles, Melqart, Perseus	Antaios, Atlas, Cacus, Evander/Faunus, Geryon, Ophion	

Table 1. *Continued*

Geographical association	Selected protagonists	Selected enemies	Selected passive heroines
Greece	Apollo, *Artemis*, *Athena*, Dionysos, Erechtheus, Eros, (*Hekate*), Herakles, (Hermes), *Io*, Kadmos, Kronos, Pan, (Poseidon), Uranos, Zeus [Keraunios]	Acheloos, *Aigis*, (Apollo), Ares, *Delphyne*, *Despoina*, Diomedes, (Dionysos), Drakon, *Echidna*, Gigantes, Glaukos, Hades, *Hekate*, *Hera*, (Herakles), (Hermes), *Hydra*, *Kampe*, Kepheus, Keto, Ker, (Kronos), Kyknos, *Lamia*, Laogoras, Laomedon, Linos, Neleus, Ocean = Okeanos, Ogygos, *Pallas*, (Perseus), Phlegyas, Phorbas, Poine, Poseidon, Python, the Sea*, Sphinx, Styx, Sybaris*, Tartaros, *Telphusa*, Thanatos, *Thetys*, Titans, Tityos, (Uranos), Zeus [Chthonios], Zeus's hawk	*(Artemis), Deianeira, Demeter, Ge, Io, Kelto, Leto, Moirai, Persephone, Rhea, Xenodike*
Pre-Christian Northern Europe	Bearson, Beowulf, Hagen, Odin, Ogier the Dane, Parzival, Sigurd / Siegfried, Sigmund, Thor	dragon, Fafnir, Firedrake, Grendel, *Grendel's Mother*, *Hel, Holda, Lorelei*, Midgard Snake, Regin-Mimir, *Valkyrie, Venus, Ymir*	*Audumla, Brynhild, Krimhild, Lohengrin*
Christian Europe	St Evenmar, St George, St Michael	Satan, St George's dragon, *the Woman of Rev. 12 & 17*	
Americas	Coyote, Gucumatz, Hunahpu, Xbalanque, Tahoe	Nashlah, Xibalba, Vucub-Caquix, Wishpoosh	

- and using my anthropological fieldwork to become a practising diviner–priest (*sangoma*) in the Southern African tradition, propagating that practice worldwide through the Internet, and seriously, incisively analysing that field of knowledge in its own right with a methodology inspired by both mainstream North Atlantic science and *sangoma* knowledge.

But in many other respects my studies as a mythical scholar have tended to rupture, to analytical distance. This has been the case for my early study of myth in a North African sacred landscape, and, largely, for my attempts to unravel – mainly on the basis of local myth and oral tradition – the precolonial post-1500 CE history of state formation, gender relations and ethnicity in western central Zambia; but particularly for my more recent probings into long-range mythical ramifications:

- mythical continuity of dualist mythical structures informing the world-wide history of, mainly, geomantic divination (including the Arabic, African and European Renaissance forms) ever since its remotest traces in the Ancient Near East.
- mythical continuity between Ancient Greece and Ancient Egypt, in the context of the *Black Athena* debate.[31]
- mythical themes that connect South Central African kingship with South and South-East Asia and the Ancient Near East.
- mythical themes emerging in long-range patterns of animal symbolism across the Old World, as exemplified in clan names, divination systems, and systems of astronomical nomenclature.
- mythical themes emerging in long-range continuities in leopard nomenclature and symbolism as a perspective on the world history of shamanism.
- African cosmogonic ('creation') myths, the Out-of-Africa package ca. 80,000 Before Present (BP), and the mythical implications of Back-to-Africa return migration from Asia as from ca. 15,000 BP (cf. Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994; Hammer et al. 1998; Cruciani et al. 2002).

Unfortunately, there is no space here to discuss the leopard theme in some detail.[32] I will thus only present the main results of my long-range myth analysis based on such auxiliary approaches as Lévi–Straussian structuralism, long-range comparative linguistics (in terms of such macro families as Nostratic, Dene–Sino–Caucasian etc.), population genetics (Cavalli-Sforza and his school), archaeology, the history of art, the study of ancient astronomies and other specialist knowledge systems, cultural anthropological perspectives on the distribution of specific traits (especially with regard to ritual and belief) in space and time, and multivariate statistical analysis. The main results may be summarised as follows:

1. Rather than exclusively committing oneself to one pole of the rupture/fusion tension in the study of myth, a combination of these stances is the most productive for innovative research; thus, in the best fusionist

tradition, my leopard project started out on the basis of an existential puzzle imposed on me by a high priest in Botswana during my final confirmation as a *sangoma*, but it has triggered an analytical rupturist endeavour whose value, if any, is no longer dependent on these anecdotal origins; the same incidentally applies to my geomantic studies.

2. Continuity in myth, across continents and across millennia, is not merely the perspectival illusion of those who, constitutionally, happen to be 'lumpers'[33] rather than 'splitters' – on the contrary such continuity is a very well-established empirical fact (cf. Table 1). But of course, the scientific value of such an assertion is fully dependent upon the theoretical and methodological care with which such a position, or its opposite, is elaborated. The main finding in my leopard research to support the claim of continuity is: the disconcerting constancy, in the first place the lexical nomenclature of the leopard from Khoi-San (now in Southern Africa) to Sino-Tibetan (East Asia), Afro-Asiatic (northern Africa and West and Central Asia) and Indo-European (Europe, West and Central Asia); but constancy also and particularly of the mythical significance of the notion of *speckledness* – as if throughout the Old World (and probably also in the Na-Dene domain of the New World) a 15,000-year-old mythical cosmology may be traced hinging on the juxtaposition of speckledness versus textural homogeneity, dark versus light, evil versus good, female versus male.

3. Classic diffusionism, cultural anthropology's main stock-in-trade in the late 19th and early 20th century, lacked a theory of cultural borrowing and cultural integration, and was therefore rightly replaced by the (now again obsolete) paradigm of structural functionalism stressing narrow horizons of time and place, virtually total cultural integration within such a local horizon, and participatory fieldwork as the standard anthropological technique to explore such horizons. Diffusion as a paradigm deserves to be revived, provided the well-known and well-taken criticism levelled against it by structural-functionalism is seriously answered at the theoretical and methodological level. And it is being revived (cf. Amselle 2001), notably in the context of recent studies of (proto-) globalisation, and of a recent rapprochement between anthropology and archaeology.

4. One methodological problem in this respect is the recognition, or rejection as the case may be, of underlying similarity or identity in the face of manifest dissimilarity on the surface. Here Lévi-Straussian structuralism remains a uniquely powerful and intersubjective analytical tool. It allows us to see even strikingly different myths in adjacent spaces and times as systematically interrelated through specific transformations, underneath of which the same deep structure may be systematically detected. It has managed to create order throughout New World mythologies, illuminates Indo-European mythologies (cf. Oosten 1985), helps us to argue Egyptian/Greek continuities in myth, and deserves to be systematically

extended to African and Ancient Near Eastern mythologies, as in my own work in progress.

Such a structuralist historical reading of myth complexes may help us towards solving the perennial question of how to demarcate the effects of parallel invention and of innate parallel programming of the – anatomically modern – human mind, as against diffusion. Another problem is how to pinpoint the specific kind of diffusion that is informing such widespread continuity. An accepted anthropological wisdom is that not populations travel, taking their gene pool, their language, and their distinctive culture with them, but that populations remain more or less immobile or move only very slowly across the earth's surface, whereas the travelling of ideas, objects and isolated individuals is largely held responsible for such diffusion as in fact has unmistakably taken place. My leopard research, however, suggests that the model of demic diffusion, which increasingly informs present–day archaeology and genetics, has also some utility for the long–range study of both myth and language families. The distribution of myths, therefore, can be demonstrated to be related to that of genetic patterns and language (macro–)families (cf. Witzel 2001, 2003; and especially, in detail, van Binsbergen 2006). However, in order to account for such unexpected long–range continuities as the nomenclature and symbolism of the leopard bring out, a multi–tiered model of demic diffusion seems required, where relatively constant nuclei are carried from one major wave to the next, somewhat comparable with the genetic immortality of human procreative cells from generation to generation.[34]

I am currently working such an approach and related findings into my book *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots: Long-Range Comparative Research as a Key to Enduring Patterns of African Agency*. I have no illusions about the reception that book is to expect.[35] In African Studies and in anthropology, myth is no longer the hot issue as it was in the 1950s and 1960s; new myths, such as globalisation and multiculturalism, have taken that place. And I have obliged by incorporating these themes into my recent work. Given this unpopularity (especially in African Studies), my current mythical studies (in the stricter sense of the word) are likely to be relegated, in their own right, to the status of pseudo-scientific myth, and to be denied validity. In terms of the framework sketched above, however, that would be rather high praise, even though probably unjustified.

Research). I am indebted to Mineke Schipper and Daniela Merolla for inviting me to take part in this Conference; and to Marc Geller, Liz Gunner, Robert Segal, Michael Witzel and Cosimo Zene for stimulating critical points. In this printed version, constraints of space have forced me to leave out extensive citations and much bibliographical material; a fuller version is available at: http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/ myth%20mineke%20defdefdef.pdf/. I am grateful to the editors of *Religion Compass* for accommodating my text in its present, still excessively long version.

Short Biography

Wim M.J. van Binsbergen (*1947, Amsterdam) read anthropology, sociology, religious studies and linguistics at Amsterdam University (Municipal), and holds a PhD from the Free University, Amsterdam (*cum laude*). He is currently Senior Researcher at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, and Professor of the Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Previously he held professorial chairs at Manchester, Berlin, Amsterdam and Durban, and directed Africanist research at the Leiden centre throughout the 1980s and 1990s. His research interests include: religion in Africa (with emphasis on divination, ecstatic cults and healing, (cosmogonic) myth, animal symbolism, shamanism, and long-range comparison, across continents and across millennia, searching for deep structures that go back to the Upper Palaeolithic and further); intercultural philosophy especially epistemology; African and Mediterranean history; state formation, globalisation, commodification, virtuality and mediatisation. He has pursued these interests during extensive fieldwork in Tunisia, Zambia, Guinea Bissau and Botswana, besides historical projects on South Central Africa, the Ancient Near East, and the world history of geomantic divination and shamanism. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles. His books include: *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981), *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (with Schoffeleers, 1985), *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and History in Western Central Zambia* (1992), *Black Athena Ten Years After* (1997; currently being reprinted); *Intercultural Encounters: African and Anthropological Lessons Towards a Philosophy of Interculturality* (2003); and *Commodification: Things, Agency and Identities: The Social Life of Things Revisited* (2005, with Geschiere). Wim van Binsbergen is a published poet/novelist and a practising (also e-based) sangoma diviner-healer in the Southern African tradition.

Notes

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[1] Diels 1951–1952: 21, *Fragmente*, 14, 12, 15, 16; cf. de Raedemaeker 1953: xiii f, 100f.

[2] Partridge 1979, s.v. 'myth'.

[3] van Veen and van der Sijs 1997, s.v. 'mythe'.

[4] Astour 1967; Bernal 1987, 1991; cf. van Binsbergen 1997, *Index*, where Bernal's major etymological proposals are listed.

[5] Gardiner 1994: 571; Hannig 2000: 1206. Because of the nature of Ancient Egyptian writing, the vocalisation of its words is nearly always somewhat uncertain.

[6] For examples cf. the lists of lexical items in Bomhard 1984, Bomhard and Kerns 1994.

[7] Kammerzell 1994; Ray 1992. Both the excessive antiquity and the wide spread of the root underlying *myth* are suggested by the fact that an apparently cognate form is also claimed for proto-Bantu, as *-búud- (6.3), 'speak, talk, say, tell, announce, ask (question) (Meeussen 1980). Kaiser & Shevoroshkin (1988) consider Niger-Congo (of which the Bantu languages constitute a major branch) as belonging to 'Mega-Nostratic', but this view is contentious.

[8] Liddell & Scott 1968, s.v. 'μῦθος'.

[9] Plato 1921: *Symposium*, Aristophanes' speech.

[10] Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inferno* IV: 131.

[11] Cf. Metaphysics 1074b 1f, where Aristotle could be construed (cf. Dupré 1973–1974: 949) to use μῦθος more or less in our present-day sense, although it is more likely that he simple means 'oral tradition'. Cf. Hegel 1992: 20, where the same idea is expressed: 'Die Mythe gehört zur Pädagogie des Menschengeschlechtes.'

[12] Little et al. 1978, s.v. 'myth'.

[13] van Veen and van der Sijs 1997, s.v. 'mythe'.

[14] Cassirer 1946, 1953–1957, 1955, 1961. Peter Gay's 1973 authoritative intellectual history of the Enlightenment cites Cassirer as his main inspiration.

[15] In ways reminiscent of his contemporary Lévy-Bruhl, but, in Cassirer's case, methodically worked out by reference to Kantian *a-priori* categories.

[16] Cf. de Vries 1961: 169f. For more recent overviews of the same material, cf. Strenski 1987; Dubuisson 1993; Segal 2001.

[17] My choice of words is deliberate: such myths are considered to be the stuff out of which, in a way theorised by Durkheim (1912), society brings its members to venerate itself under the guise of the sacred.

[18] Dupré 1973; this makes one curious after his 1975 book, *non vidi*.

[19] Cf. Witzel 2001, who also stresses that myths should be compared not in their constituent parts, but as wholes.

[20] Jacobsen 1976. For a study tracing (largely on the basis of an analysis of myths) the emergence and evolution of the concept of magic in the Ancient Mesopotamian context, cf. van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999.

[21] As I began to realise by the end of the 1990s (van Binsbergen 1998a,b); Vansina 1993 however seems inclined to accept my 1992 argument as to the historicity of these mythical traditions.

[22] Clearly somewhat myopically, considering the very recent installation of North Atlantic global domination (eighteenth century CE or later), and the very great antiquity of Greek criticism of Greek myths (from sixth century BCE onwards).

[23] For a Foucaultian critique of this illusion, based on the concept of genealogy (which is ultimately Nietzschean), see: Foucault 1977; Rabinow 1984.

[24] For the relevance of the concept of the 'field of tension' for the study of situations of interculturality, cf. van Binsbergen 2003a.

[25] While the emphasis here is on Graeco-Roman myth, we are reminded that also Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other world religions have produced mythologies which, over the centuries, have frequently been recycled for literary purposes.

[26] Besides Graeco-Roman mythology which dominated South and West European *belles lettres* from Antiquity to the Baroque era, lrish and Germanic mythologies have been rich soure cs of inspiration for North Atlantic poets. We only have to remind ourselves of the work of Gorter and A. Roland Holst (the Netherlands), and Yeats (Ireland).

[27] Although it may very well be so constructed; cf. Venbrux 1995: an account of present-day anthropological fieldwork in north-western Australia, where violently conflictive relations

between kin are − or so is Venbrux's conviction on the basis of prolonged and traumatic participant observation − constantly informed, and articulated, by reference to mythical characters to whose mythical roles present-day protagonists in family dramas are irresistibly drawn. There are obvious parallels with the literary devices of Joyce and Claus as indicated above.

[28] It is here that the uniquely constitutive role of Kant needs to be appreciated. But does Western philosophy have, independently, the monopoly of such scepticism? Probably not. Cf. Gupta 1981; Chinn 1997.

[29] Cf. Witzel 2001, 2003; van Binsbergen 2006. In these long-range studies certain myths are elaborately argued to have a time depth of well over 60,000 years.

[30] I.e. 'smallest meaningful unit of mythological narrative'.

[31] Recently I have returned to comparative mythology in the context of the Ancient Mediterranean, because it is here that important clues may be found as to the provenance and interethnic relations of the Sea Peoples who, at the end of the Bronze Age, destroyed the Hittite empire and threatened Egypt; cf. van Binsbergen, in press. To my delight, Goto 2005 covers much of the same ground but with a different objective.

[32] van Binsbergen forthcoming.

[33] The expression has a long history in historical linguistics, cf. Baxter & Ramer 2000.

[34] I have called this multi-tiered model the 'fireworks model'. Diagrams, explications and results are to be found at http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/leopard_harvard/leopardwww.htm.

[35] A first indication is already given in the scornful and dismissive treatment of my 'neo-diffusionism' in the otherwise commendable book by my friend Jean-Luc Amselle (2001: 31f, 98f).

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