



Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology

19-21 Augustus 2008, Ravenstein

by Wim van Binsbergen

In August 2008 the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) held its Second Annual Conference at the Soeterbeek Conference Centre (a former convent) near the small medieval town of Ravenstein. Here 22 scholars from 5 continents met during three days for intense discussions of current work on comparative mythology. The 22 papers to be presented and discussed were divided into four clusters: 1) the mythology of death and dying; 2) mythological continuities between Africa and other continents; 3) theoretical and methodological advances; and 4) work-in-progress.

The conference was opened by the convenors: Wim van Binsbergen and Eric Venbrux (Radboud University, Nijmegen). Next, Michael Witzel (Cambridge, MA), the Association's President, gave his presidential address.

Every participant made a formal contribution to the scholarly exchange, not only by her or his paper, but also by an arrangement according to which each paper was subjected to one selected participant's detailed critical examination, before the meeting proceeded to general discussion.

In the session on *the mythology of death and dying* (which reflects the research programme currently being pursued at Nijmegen by Venbrux) 6

papers were presented on a variety of topics, including myths concerning the avoidance of dying in West-Africa, by our African Studies Centre colleague Walter van Beek.

This session was followed by a *business meeting of the Board of Directors* (i.e. the Executive) of the IACM. Wim van Binsbergen's motion to extend the membership of this Board to Dr Bukola A. Oyeniyi from Nigeria, which would give the Association a formal footing in the African continent and would stimulate the pursuit of comparative mythology by African scholars and institutions, was accepted.

The next session likewise comprised 6 papers. It was devoted to *mythological continuities between Africa and other continents* – probably an all-time first in the history of comparative mythology, and a topical choice which reflects the research programme currently pursued at Leiden and Rotterdam by Wim van Binsbergen. African-Eurasian continuities were examined with regard to: myths on the appearance of the first humans; the nature and functions of political myths in West Africa during the last few centuries; the examination of specific detailed parallels between African and Eurasian mythologies as seen from HABARI 22 | 19

perspective of the Nkoya people of Zambia; Witzel's revision of his Laurasian (i.e. Eurasian and N. American) / Gondwana (including African) distinction as applied to flood myths; an etymological discussion of the case for identity between Ancient Greek Hephaestus and Ancient Egyptian i.e. Northeast African Ptah; and the relevance of Japanese mythology for comparative Eurasian mythology in general.

Five papers were presented in the session on *theoretical and methodological advances*, whilst a final paper session dealt with *ongoing research* in the context of PhD and MA projects, on rather diverse topics.

The conference concluded with a general discussion, prospects for the 2009 annual conference, and a consideration of options for the publication of the conference papers. The convenors have decided to aim at a two-stage publication process: first, lightly edited *Proceedings* containing the full set of papers (proposed date of publication August 2009); to be followed by the publication of one or two carefully selected sets of papers, revised under extensive editorial feed-back, as special issue of a peer-reviewed journal, or in an edited volume with

an established university press.

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