Introductory class: the study of myth

A quick brain-storming shows that a contemporary Western person has no clear understanding of what “myth” is. Opinions and definitions vary widely. Especially prominent is the issue of whether myths are true or false. Here the issue and understanding of “truth” comes into play, as well as whether this is the correct angle to study myths.

The situation had been similar until B. Malinowski did his ground-breaking work on myth. Malinowski was the first to use scientific (anthropological) methods to analyze myth. Therefore this course will start with Malinowski’s method and findings.

Up to Malinowski (early 1920’s), the situation in the study of mythology has been as follows (see his brief survey at the beginning of the text assigned for this class).

The most common theory has been etiological or explanatory: myths explain certain natural phenomena that humans are unable to comprehend. Myths thus act as “primitive science.” A branch of this etiological theory was the meteorological theory of myth: myths explain specifically meteorological phenomena. The problem is that not all myths are explanatory.

Similar to the “primitive science” theory, philosophers tried to interpret myths as “primitive” attempts to understand things. As “primitive” people have no developed conceptual thought, as children, simple stories and situations allow them to understand difficult abstract concepts in a very concrete way.

A prominent sociological school of thought (such as E. Durkheim and J. Frazer) linked myth and ritual: myths correspond to practiced rituals. The problem is that not all myths correspond to rituals.

Another theory presented myths as simply literary phenomena, akin to metaphors and symbols. Myths are expressions of human creativity, like literature. Again, not all myths seem to be that way.

Psychologists, specifically psychoanalysts like S. Freud, presented myths as conscious projections of unconscious desires, feelings, and thoughts. The problem with this interesting theory is that there is no solid proof of that; most psychologists still distrust psychoanalysts.

There is also a common opinion that myths are “stories about gods.” This is also not true because many such stories are not about gods.

The only common feature of myths that all can agree on is that they are traditional stories that are somehow important to native and aboriginal societies. However what sort of story? And why is it important? And what is its meaning?
Malinowski’s pioneering approach comes from his anthropological background. He rejects all the above explanations as inadequate and shifts the focus on to the method of studying myths. All previous approaches have failed because they studied myths as separate stories or texts, without their social context. Malinowski suggests, instead of looking at the content of myths, to start with studying the society itself and how it functions, in great detail, and then to study how these traditional stories function in this society: when they are told, under which circumstances, etc. (His method is therefore called “functionalism.”) Only that way will one gain a truly scientific understanding of the role and meaning of these stories.

For what he discovers about myths, including his classification (the topic for next class’s “classification” exercise) read Malinowski’s reading assignment for this class:

**Study Guide for Malinowski’s “Myth in Primitive Psychology”**

For the next two classes (before “Kula”), focus on the following topics:

Malinowski’s classification of traditional Trobriand tales:
- kukwanebu, libwogwo/libogwo, liliu

Relationship between myth and reality in the tribal mind

The anthropological approach to the study of myth: what are its main strategies?
- the importance of context
- field study

Malinowski’s understanding of the role/function of myth in society:
- “charter” myths, myth as a “social charter”

The myths of origin
- main features/contents
- relationship between these myths and tribal ranks/the position of clans
- Malinowski’s explanation of the role of myths of origin

The myths of magic
- when is magic used? the purpose of magic
- relationship between magic and myth