

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.

Four types of truth discussed in contemporary theology, philosophy, psychology:

Truth of correspondence

Emotional truth

Truth of coherence

Revelatory truth

D. Kahneman in his famous *Thinking, Fast and Slow* demonstrates astonishing facts about how humans form their beliefs based on alternative types of truth (examples of common beliefs and assumptions in our own world, such as investment consultants, roles of CEO’s and so forth). These models of truth can be applied to myths and magic, which is closely associated with myths.

One must overcome the traditional dichotomy “true/false,” which is a great simplification, and learn how to deal with multiple models of truth: thus if something is not true in terms of the truth of correspondence, it does not at all mean that it cannot have an important role: thus it can be “true” in the sense of having a real practical role or doing something for the society or a person.

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. For example, a conflict of ideas can be

presented as a struggle of great heroes, or the moral rule about not stealing can be taught by way of telling a story about a little boy stealing a bear's honey in the woods.

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. For example, a poet can write a poem about a gloomy, rainy Fall day when leaves are falling and nature seems to be dying. This, of course, is a metaphor for how the poet feels. However, 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. For example, famously Freud discovered that male children have an unconscious desire to kill their father and sleep with their mother. Of course, humans are horrified of such thoughts. So this subconscious desire come in the form of a story about Oedipus who did just that. It is not you who are behaving this way but the story has some strange fascination about it. 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 that produces these traditional stories 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.

The practical task: classifying traditional stories (the next discussion class)

The first problem Malinowski faced is that it is difficult to distinguish between myths (serious traditional stories) and other genres of stories: for example, legends or fairy tales. Again, Malinowski suggests that the only sure method is functional: to observe when and how these stories are used (see Malinowski's text assigned for this class).

One cannot tell whether a story is a myth without examining its social context: by observation or by direct questioning of native informants. Myths contain only hints of information on social structure: the rest must be gained by anthropological work. Myths must have (at least potentially) a serious function in a society. The functional approach studies not what a myth says but what it does.

In this respect an important note is in order: many myths have the form of an explanation (they seem to explain how a rabbit got long ears, how a raccoon got a striped tail, and so forth). However, according to Malinowski, one needs to study what function these stories have. He found out that none of such stories has explanatory *functions* (even though they have such *form*), but their functions are different. So beware of interpreting myths as "explanations" (the etiological school)!

Notes on what to look for in the videos on the Trobriand islands and Malinowski and in texts by Malinowski

Remember that Malinowski's method is functionalism and he uses the approach of field anthropology: studying a society and how it functions in detail: geography, food sources, social organization, and so forth. So the first video will introduce you to the Trobriand society (this is where Malinowski did his famous work on myths). The second video will introduce you to Malinowski and his method and show more details about the Trobriand islanders, their social organization, the role of magic, and to some extent their mythology. You will need those details in order to be able to analyze their myths in two discussion classes. In particular, pay attention to their social organization, which will be important to myths: the clan/subclan system and the role of totemic animals and places, such as caves; their kinship system: is it matrilineal or patrilineal (is descent calculated through the mother's or the father's line) and what difference does this make? is it patrilineal or matrilineal (does the wife live in the husband's village or vice versa)?

Now according to Malinowski's functionalism, all these social institutions should be reflected in traditional stories, such as myths, and myths must have a practical function in this society. In particular, he found, they serve to enforce these social institutions. How can a story do this? Malinowski noticed (see highlighted areas in assigned texts) that myths are known by everybody in an indigenous society, held to be true, and are actively discussed in day-to-day life. This pervasive presence of myths makes them known and readily available as a source of information about the society and its norms. Thus they act, using his language, as legal documents ("charters," "passports," "privileges.")

“precedents,” “testimonies,” “sanctions,” etc.) for the community that otherwise has no laws or law enforcement.

For what he discovered 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