

COMPARING MYTHOLOGIES ON A GLOBAL SCALE

A REVIEW ARTICLE BY N.J. ALLEN

E.J. Michael Witzel, *The origins of the world's mythologies*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2012, xx, 665 pp.

Michael Witzel, Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, started out as an Indologist, specialising in the early period when Vedic Sanskrit was closely related to the Avestan of the Zoroastrian texts from Iran; but like some other Indologists, for instance Sylvain Lévi or Madeleine Biardeau, he did not confine himself to texts and, while living in Nepal for nearly six years during the 1970s, seized opportunities to observe ancient Hindu rituals. Already as a graduate student he had glimpsed the possibility of comparing Vedic and Japanese mythology, but the ideas leading to this book only took off during a sabbatical in Kyoto in 1990. He began reading myths from all across the world and founded the International Association for Comparative Mythology.

The basic theoretical impetus comes from tree diagrams, such as are used by philologists seeking to express relationships within language families or within sets of manuscripts deriving from an archetype, as well as by biologists organising species into phyla. The equivalents of the individual languages, manuscripts or species are here not individual myths but mythologies – the bodies of myth told by particular societies. Attested mythologies fall into two classes. Laurasian mythologies are found across North Africa, Eurasia and the Americas, while Gondwana ones occur in sub-Saharan Africa, the Andaman Islands, Papua and Australia, with smaller remnant pockets elsewhere, e.g. among the Todas in South India and the Semang in Malaya.

The distribution is explained in terms of the Out-of-Africa account of the spread of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. An initial exodus from Africa about 65 kya (thousand years ago) carried Gondwana-type mythologies eastwards around the coasts of the Indian Ocean (leaving few remains for the archaeologist because of the subsequent rise in sea level, which also isolated Australia). The birth of Laurasian mythology, ascribed to Upper Palaeolithic shamans, is tentatively located in South-West Asia about 40 kya, allowing plenty of time for it to be carried across the Bering Straits into the Americas ca 20 kya. The same type of mythology can be found in societies of very different technologies, from Mesopotamians and Mayans to Tierra del Fuegians. The two types diverged from a common origin, here labelled 'Pan-Gaeon'.

The enterprise is obviously ambitious, and some may regard it as wildly or impossibly so. Witzel defends himself, reasonably I think, by presenting his book as heuristic and provisional, as a stimulus to further work which is likely to lead to modifications. Moreover, he gives a fifth of his space to various other disciplines bearing on world history and supporting his arguments about myth. Human genetics casts light on the early migrations; long-range comparative linguistics tries to operate beyond the range of the well-established language families (for instance, by subsuming Indo-European within Nostratic or Eurasiatic); archaeology helps us date the appearance of artefacts or species mentioned in myths (e.g. of dogs, from 15 kya). Though Witzel is well aware that new findings, either in these auxiliary fields or within mythology itself, may necessitate adjustments in the theory, he presents the basic split with some confidence.

Laurasian mythologies are presented first and at twice the length of the Gondwana ones, the latter being studied less in their own right than as a ‘countercheck’ on the validity of the other group. Laurasian mythologies are said to possess a single story line running from the creation of the world to its destruction, while other typical features include the creation of Father Heaven and Mother Earth; four or five generations of supernaturals; heaven pushed up; killing the dragon; flood as punishment for hubris; trickster deities bring culture; local history begins. In Gondwana mythologies the existence of Earth, Heaven and Sea is taken for granted and not narrated, nor is there any final destruction with the emergence of a new heaven and earth. Despite certain overlaps, for instance regarding floods and culture bringers (323, Table 5.3), many features of Laurasian mythology are simply absent. The ‘forest of tales’ found in Gondwana contrasts with ‘our first novel’ – the ‘well-laid-out garden of symbols’ in Laurasia (430).

Whether or not the contrast could be expressed in different or less value-laden terms, the more important theoretical question is the validity of the whole diachronic/phylogenetic/cladistic approach. Cross-cultural similarities in myth, as in many other domains of culture, can be explained in at least three ways other than common origin: human universals, independent invention and diffusion. As Witzel notes, psychological universals such as Jungian archetypes (which were preceded by Bastian’s *Elementargedanken* and are favoured by the still popular Joseph Campbell) cannot explain the detailed Laurasian story lines; nor could Lévi-Strauss’s binarism, let alone independent invention. Diffusion, in the sense of the influence of one mythology on another, certainly occurs, for instance along the East African ‘North-South Highway’ (293) or in the wake of proselytising literate religions. But the

situation in mythology is much as in historical linguistics, where loan phenomena modify the strict realisation of the basic branching tree model; diffusion is real but secondary.

The early chapters here include some useful assessments of other mythologists' approaches. Often Witzel introduces figures who are probably little known in the Anglophone world, such as Ina Wunn in Germany with her (critiqued) views on Stone Age religion, Mislav Ježić in Croatia with his Proppian analysis of the *Mahābhārata*, and Yuri Berēzkin in St Petersburg. The latter uses computer methods to update the Stith Thompson approach and produces distribution maps of mythemes, showing, for instance, the patterned occurrence of different concepts of the Milky Way (40). Some of the critical comments concern better known figures, for instance Pater Wilhelm Schmidt and Robert Bellah, or Wendy Doniger and Bruce Lincoln in Chicago.

A common origin approach to world mythology is merely an application on a larger scale of the approach taken by Georges Dumézil (and others) to Indo-European mythology. Having used the latter paradigm for several decades, I am no doubt predisposed to favour common origin approaches, and I see no a priori objection to expanding a language family-based approach to tackle world-historical questions – precisely the route I took when a study of some Tibeto-Burman kinship terminologies led me to the tetradic theory of kinship.¹ However, the fact that a reviewer finds a theory congenial is not an argument for the theory's validity. The validity depends on how well the theory applies to the data it cites and, even more, to other data that it does not cite. According to Witzel's theory Himalayan mythology should be Laurasian, and since I wrote my D.Phil. on the myths and legends I collected among a Tibeto-Burman-speaking group in East Nepal,² the obvious question for me to ask is how well Thulung mythology accords with Witzel's account of Laurasian mythology.

It would take a whole article to answer the question adequately, so I limit myself here to quick answers to two questions. First, does Thulung mythology possess a continuous story line extending from creation to destruction? Though none of my informants covered my whole corpus from beginning to end, I believe a continuous story line did exist, covering at least most of it. Creation narratives certainly existed, and although only one narrator referred

¹ 'Tetradic theory: an approach to kinship', pp. 221-235 in R. Parkin and L. Stone (eds), *Kinship and family: an anthropological reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

² N.J. Allen, *Miyapma: traditional narratives of the Thulung Rai*, Kathmandu: Vajra, 2012. It is clear from Karen H. Ebert and Martin Gaenzler, *Rai mythology: Kiranti oral texts* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, especially pp. 7-13), that my Thulung corpus was reasonably representative of Rai mythology in general.

to Heaven and Earth, a better established account tells of a female being called Miyapma on earth, who falls in love with one star and conceives by another, giving birth to vegetable and animal species, including Mini, the first man. However, none of these beings are currently ‘gods’, in the sense of beings with powers to help or harm their worshippers. Moreover, evidence of world destruction is ambiguous. One myth, ‘Salewaceo’, from relatively late in the cycle, ends with a curse that wipes out nearly all the inhabitants of the original Thulung village, but it is not clear whether this is interpretable as a shrunken and watered down cosmic catastrophe.

Secondly, are there within Thulung mythology pan-Gaeian mythemes that have survived into Laurasian mythology without being fully integrated into the story line? Witzel mentions this phenomenon more than once, proposing the birth of humans from trees as one instance (363); he suggests a contrast between ‘grandfathers’ tales’, constituting the ‘official’ story line, and ‘grandmothers’ tales’, which are closer to folklore. Be this as it may, my Thulung corpus includes one awkwardly located story in which Mini, the first man, takes refuge in the womb of Mother Sandalwood Tree and is apparently reborn from it.

Cursory though these remarks are, the Thulung data seem to accord with the Laurasia concept sufficiently well to suggest that the concept merits further testing. The lofty theoretical objectives are no obstacle to down-to-earth application to ethnographic details – indeed, they invite it. In a work of such scope one can naturally find points to criticise. For instance, it is not the *Latin* people who arrive from Troy in the Aeneid (501), and Robert Graves is scarcely a reliable source for classical myth. More generally, it has to be said that the drafting is distinctly repetitive; thus (at the risk of sounding both self-centred and churlish) I wonder whether it was not over-generous to give twenty references to one of my papers. Proof-reading too could have been better: Frazer’s *Golden Bow* appears on p. 161, and the mysterious Phicles on 490 is Iphicles. Finally, since an author’s publications are referred to by date, it is irritating that the bibliography lists them alphabetically. But these are small defects in such a *magnum opus*.

The theory may or may not survive in anything like its current form, but social anthropology needs serious attempts to look at myth in a world-historical framework. Some people think that myths are easily invented and change quite quickly so as to keep in phase with other sorts of social or ecological change. They should consider the sort of material that Witzel assembles.

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