

Myth and the Disciplines

Report >
General

12 December 2003
Leiden,
the Netherlands

How is it possible that we are able to understand text originating from all sorts of 'foreign' cultures? How can we construct and accept a general definition of myth and mythology that can be applied in analysing specific local contexts and narrative systems? And are myth and modernity incompatible? These were the central questions posed at the lively one-day conference 'Myth: Theory and the Disciplines'.

By Thera Giezen

This article will mostly delve into the theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches of myth as discussed in the first section of the conference. First, however, I will touch upon the second part dealing with in-depth area studies. In their area studies Cosimo Zene and Elizabeth Gunner reconstructed marginality and power tension as expressed in the mythical narrative of the Indian low-caste Dalit and in the mythical figure of the Zulu goddess Nomkaubulwana respectively. In turn, YE Shuxian presented a fascinating reconstruction of the old Chinese goddess worship, based not only on the meaning, but also on the outer shape of Chinese characters. The varied nature of these area studies is the living proof of the complex if not treacherous relationship between theory and empirical data. Be it as it may that comparative research gives us interesting insights into what people all over the world share, there are several possible dangers in constructing general theories on the basis of large corpuses of texts. Details of the individual myths may disappear; or too much attention may be paid to similarities as a result of which differences may be overlooked; it is also possible that focusing on the overall structures of myths causes a neglect of philological aspects.

The eternal problem of definitions reappeared at various moments during the conference and in the final debate chaired by Reimar Schefold, Mark Geller, and Boudewijn Walraven. A crucial question is, whether it is possible to use general concepts thought up in one culture and apply them to local contexts of other cultures. The concept of myth itself is a Western construction based on Western – especially Classical Greek – mythology. It would be wrong to take for granted that this and other concepts are universal. Sometimes Western scholars would call a certain story 'myth', whereas the society in which the story is told uses another name or does not have an equivalent for the Western word 'myth' at all. If this is so, then what is the sense of using general concepts such as 'myth' and 'mythology'? To what extent can we do without definitions? Should we reconsider the existing definitions, taking into account the terms and practises found in non-Western societies? Such questions show the importance of an ongoing dialogue between theoretical work, intercultural approaches, and in-depth area studies.

Killing myths

But even if myth can be applied outside of the West, there also exists an ongoing tension between myth on the one hand and science in general on the other. Is it possible at all to have a science of myth? One aspect of myth, usually taken for granted in Western approaches, is that the society in which a myth is told, ascribes some kind of truth to the text, but that the analyst considered this to be untrue. This means that by acknowledging that a certain narrative is a myth, it ceases to be a myth, because it is no longer considered to be true. In the end, this even entails the question whether mythology as a concept actually exists outside hegemonic North Atlantic science. As a countermeasure against the rupture between the study of myth on the one hand and the narration of myth on the other, 'fusion' has been suggested (Wim van Binsbergen). By becoming part of the living environment in which a myth is told, the researcher will no longer be an outsider who reads the text literally and kills the myth in the process. Instead, as an insider, he will come to see myth as, for example, narrative playing an important role in the construction of identity in the society concerned. On the other hand, one could argue that being an outsider is not necessarily negative and has even certain advantages (Bakhtin 1986:7).

The modern myth

Myth is in a difficult relationship not merely to science but in fact to modernity as a whole. Myth and modernity might even be seen to be mutually exclusive. This hypothesis was raised during the conference. During the nineteenth century, most studies discarded myths as 'primitive' ways to explain the physical world, vowing that modern science ought replace them. The twentieth century by contrast, witnessed many attempts to reconcile myth and modern science by detaching mythology from the physical world. Today, it is suggested that myths can be reintroduced into the world of physical phenomena by interpreting them on the level of playful interaction (Robert Segal). Play is something in-between truth and falsehood. Play is make-believe. In a playful performance, people know perfectly well what is real and what is not, what can happen in reality and what cannot, but



Statue of Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) as Govardhana-Krishna, supporting Mount Govardhana, a famous hill near Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh, India. According to myth, Krishna lifted this mount with one arm and supported it for seven days to provide the cowherds (stick-carrying lower figures) and their animals with shelter from a rain-storm that God Indra sent. Relief from Mathurā, sixth century AD.

Courtesy of Kern Institute



Uende (the sky) used to be near the earth. Whenever the people were hungry, they cut a piece from the sky and ate it. But one day, a blind man lit a torch hoping he could see the sky then. The torch burnt Uende who fled away. Since then, the sky is far removed from the people. (Myth from Mossi, Upper-Volta).

Mineke Schipper, Het Zwaarte Paradys: Afrikaanse Schepingsmythen [The Black Paradise: African Creation Myths], Maastricht: Corrie Zelen (1980), p. 123

in the world of play, they temporarily suspend this reality and replace it by another. The same attitude towards reality and its suspension in play is adopted when people create, listen to, or read myths.

Today, myths are revived, reinterpreted, and used in political debates about leadership or in campaigns against AIDS, for example in South Africa. The Western world also has its modern myths, as in the cult of celebrities that can take on mythical proportions. Worshipped by their fans, celebrities become larger-than-life icons. As saviours of the world, they are the heroes of modern Western myths. Paradoxically, modernity or more specifically, the largely unquestioned believe in the possibility of objectivity, rationalism and scientific 'analysability' of the world around us, is itself a modern myth.

The twenty-first century may be an age of seemingly unlimited scientific progress and technological possibilities, but myths are still very much alive, influencing our way of perceiving ourselves and others as well as our own and each others myths. Hence the importance of looking into our own hidden mythologies. Indeed, myths will always be among us, yet while we will always live with myths, we are not always equally aware of their impact. <

Reference

- Bakhtin, M.M., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press (1986), p.7

Thera Giezen is a student of Slavonic Languages and Cultures, and General Literature at University of Leiden, whose interest lies with Siberian oral literature.

theragiezen@planet.nl

Information >

The above conference was organized by Daniela Merolla and Mineke Schipper and supported by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the IIAS and the Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS). The participants were Wim van Binsbergen, Mark J. Geller, Liz Gunner, Daniela Merolla, Reimar Schefold, Mineke Schipper, Robert Segal, Boudewijn Walraven, Michael Witzel, YE Shuxian, Cosimo Zene. Abstracts of the lectures can be found on: www.leidenuniv.nl/let/nieuws/_files/Abstract.doc

[advertisement]

A Leiden degree makes the difference

Postgraduate Degree Programmes in:

- Arabic Studies
- Austronesian and Papua Descriptive Linguistics
- Islamic Studies
- Javanese Studies
- Malay Language and Culture
- Persian Studies
- Turkish Studies



Leiden University Worldwide
Rapenburg 67, P.O. Box 9500
2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)71 527 7287
Fax: +31 (0)71 527 7298
study@luwp.leidenuniv.nl

www.leiden.edu



Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands