Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking

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IT IS the purpose of this paper to draw together some information on and interpretation of certain features of mythology that are apparently universal or that have such wide distribution in space and time that their generality may be presumed to result from recurrent reactions of the human psyche to situations and stimuli of the same general order. Addressing a group from a wide range of disciplinary affiliations, I shall utilize recent writings that are, as yet, generally familiar only to anthropologists and folklorists. I shall also add a modest effort on my own part to sample independently the distribution of a small number of mythic elements. The result makes no pretensions to completeness or indeed to more than approximate accuracy on the materials surveyed. But even a crude and tentative synthesis may have some interest and provide some stimulation to more comprehensive and precise research.

Literary scholars, psychiatrists, and behavioral scientists have, of course, long recognized that diverse geographical areas and historical epochs have exhibited striking parallels in the themes of myth and folklore. Father-seekers and father-slayers appear again and again. Mother-murder appears in explicit and in disguised form (see Bunker, 1944). Eliade (1949) has dealt with the myth of "the eternal return." Marie Bonaparte (1947) has presented evidence that wars give rise to fantasies of patently similar content. Animal stories—at least in the Old World—show likenesses in many details of plot and embellishment: African tales and Reynard the Fox, the Aesop fables, the Panchatantra of India and the Jataka tales of China (see Herskovits and Herskovits, 1958, p. 118). The Orpheus story has a sizable distribution in the New World (Gayton, 1935).

In considering various parallels, some elementary cautions must perforce be observed. First, levels of abstraction must be kept distinct. It is true, and it is relevant, to say that creation myths are

universals or near-universals. But this is a far more abstract statement than are generalizations about the frequency of the creation of human beings by mother earth and father sky, or by an androgynous deity, or from vegetables. Second, mere comparisons on the basis of the presence or absence of a trait are tricky and may well be misleading. Although there are cases where I have as yet no positive evidence for the presence of the incest theme, there is no corpus of mythology that I have searched carefully where this motif does not turn up. Even if, however, incest could be demonstrated as a theme present in all mythologies, there would still be an important difference between mythologies preoccupied with incest and those where it occurs only incidentally and infrequently. Nevertheless, the methodological complications of reliable ratings upon the centrality or strength of a given theme are such that in this paper I must deal almost exclusively with sheer presence or absence.

Most anthropologists today would agree with Lévi-Strauss (1955) that throughout the world myths resemble one another to an extraordinary degree; there is, indeed, an "astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions." The differences are there too, of course, between cultures and culture areas, even between versions of "the same" myth collected on the same day from two or more individuals of a particular culture. Some myths appear to have a very limited geographical distribution; other themes that have a very wide or perhaps universal distribution are varyingly styled, weighted, and combined. These differences are very real and very massive, and there must be no tacit attempt to explain them away. For some purposes of inquiry the focus must be upon questions of emphasis, of inversion of plot, of selective omission and addition, of reinterpretation, of every form of variation. The similarities, however, are also genuine, and it is upon these that I shall concentrate. After all, presumably no two events in the universe are literally identical. But there are formal resemblances at varying levels of abstraction that are interesting and significant.

Let us begin with some broad universals. I have already mentioned the creation myth.[1] This may seem so broad a category as to be empty. Yet Rooth (1957) on analyzing three hundred creation myths of the North American Indians finds that most of them fit comfortably into eight types and that seven of these types appear likewise in Eurasia. She interprets the similarities in types and in congruence of detail motifs between North America and Eurasia (and also some

between Peru, Meso-America, and the Pacific Islands) as due to historic diffusion. Were this inference to be demonstrated as valid in all respects, there would still remain the fact that these plots and their details had sufficient psychological meaning to be preserved through the centuries.

There are two ways of reasoning that bulk prominently in all mythological systems. These are what Sir James Frazer called the "laws" of sympathetic magic (like causes like) and holophrastic magic (the part stands for the whole). These principles are particularly employed in one content area where the record is so full and so exceptionless that we are justified in speaking of genuine cultural universals. No known culture is without myths and tales relating to witchcraft, and the following themes appear always and everywhere:

1. Were-animals who move about at night with miraculous speed, gathering in witches' sabbaths to work evil magic.
2. The notion that illness, emaciation, and eventual death can result from introducing by magical means some sort of noxious substance into the body of the victim.
3. A connection between incest and witchcraft.

So far as I have been able to discover, the only cultural variability here concerns minutiae: details of the magical techniques; which animals are portrayed; what kinds of particles are shot into the victim or what kinds of witchcraft poisons are employed. It is, to be sure, conceivable that once again we are dealing with diffusion: that all known cultures derive eventually from a generalized Paleolithic culture in which these items of witchcraft lore were already evolved. But, again, their persistence cannot be understood except on the hypothesis that these images have a special congeniality for the human mind as a consequence of the relations of children to their parents and other childhood experiences which are universal rather than culture-bound.

While a comprehensive interpretation of any myth or of mythologies must rest upon the way in which themes are combined—upon, as Lévi-Strauss (1955, 1957) says, "a bundle of features"—nevertheless the mere recurrence of certain motifs in varied areas separated geographically and historically tells us something about the human psyche. It suggests that the interaction of a certain kind of biological apparatus in a certain kind of physical world with some inevitables of the human condition (the helplessness of infants, two parents of

different sex, etc.) bring about some regularities in the formation of imaginative productions, of powerful images. I want to consider examples of these, only mentioning some but discussing others at a little greater length. I have selected themes that have been stated by various students of comparative mythology to be nearly universal in distribution.

In most cases we cannot say strictly that these images are universal, either because of incomplete evidence or because of known exceptions, but we can say that some are known from all or almost all of the major culture areas of the world. To avoid egregious sampling errors and generally to make the inquiry more systematic, I have used Murdock's (1957) "world ethnographic sample." He presents a carefully selected sample of all the cultures known to history and ethnography, classified into sixty culture areas. Richard Moench and I tried to cover one culture from each of these areas but were able to work through only fifty—and this not exhaustively. The fifty are, however, distributed about evenly among Murdock's six major regions (Circum-Mediterranean, Negro Africa, East Eurasia, Insular Pacific, North America, South America). To the extent that time permitted, we used standard monographic sources on the cultures in question (or excerpts from these sources in the Human Relations Area Files at Harvard). We also had recourse to certain compendia: the Hastings *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Myths of All Races,* Stith Thompson's *Motif Index,* and others.

Our results are far from satisfactory, but they do represent a start. On the positive side, they ought to be almost completely trustworthy. That is, where we report, for example, that brother-sister incest is a mythological theme in Micronesia, this can be regarded as established. It is on the negative side that doubt must be raised. For instance, we did not discover an androgynous deity in the mythology of the Warrau. This, unfortunately, does not necessarily mean that no such deity exists in Warrau mythology—only that we discovered no reference in the one original source and in the compilations we checked. Without question, a more intensive search than we were able to conduct would enlarge—we cannot guess by how great a factor—the number of features to be tabulated as "present."

Flood. We found this theme—usually, but not always, treated as a punishment—in thirty-four of our fifty mythologies. The distribution is not far from equal in five of the six regions, but we encountered only one reference from Negro Africa. There is the possibility that

some of these tales take their ultimate source from the mythology of the Near East and, specifically, Jewish-Christian mythology, although many ethnographers are careful to discriminate explicitly between those that may have this derivation and others that seem definitely "aboriginal." Li Hwei (see Bascom, 1957, p. 114) has traced fifty-one flood myths in Formosa, South China, Southeast Asia, and Malaysia that it hardly seems plausible to attribute to Jewish-Christian sources.[2] At any rate, if one adds earthquakes, famines, plagues, etc., it is likely, on present evidence, that "catastrophe" can be considered as a universal or near-universal theme in mythology.

Slaying of Monsters. This theme appears in thirty-seven of our fifty cultures, and here the distribution approaches equality save for a slightly greater frequency in North America and the Insular Pacific. Not infrequently, the elaboration of the theme has a faintly Oedipal flavor. Thus in Bantu Africa (and beyond) a hero is born to a woman who survives after a monster has eaten her spouse (and everyone else). The son immediately turns into a man, slays a monster or monsters, restores his people—but not his father—and becomes chief.

Incest. This is overtly depicted in thirty-nine mythologies. In three cases (Celtic, Greek, and Hindu) mother-son, father-daughter, and brother-sister incest are alluded to; eleven cases mention two forms of incest; the remaining twenty-five mythologies apparently deal with only a single type. In our sample we encountered only seven references to mother-son incest (none in Negro Africa and only one in East Eurasia). In other reading we did find an additional seven reports—one more from East Eurasia but still none from Negro Africa. Brother-sister incest was easily the most popular theme in the sample (twenty-eight cases). There are twelve cases of father-daughter incest. In creation stories, the first parents are not infrequently depicted as incestuous, and there are numerous references to the seduction of a mother-in-law by her son-in-law (or vice versa).

Sibling Rivalry. We discovered thirty-two instances of this theme, which appears from all six "continental" regions but—so far as our sample goes—is appreciably more frequent in the Insular Pacific and in Negro Africa. The rivalry between brothers is portrayed far oftener than any other, and usually in the form of fratricide. There were only four cases of brother-sister quarrels (one resulting in murder) and only two of sister-sister. There are some indications in the data that a larger sample and a finer analysis would reveal some

culturally distinctive regularities as regards the age order of siblings depicted as rivalrous. For example, in parts of Negro Africa it appears that it is always two siblings born in immediate sequence who are chosen as protagonists.

Castration. We found only four cases where actual castration is mentioned in the myths, and one of these (Trobriand) is self-inflicted castration, ostensibly as a reaction to guilt over adultery. There were in addition five cases in which the threat of castration to boys is mentioned in myths as a socialization technique. There are also instances (e.g., Baiga) where there are reports of severed penes and injured testicles. However, if one counts themes of "symbolic castration," then there is an approach toward universality. The subincision rites of the Australian aborigines have been so interpreted. And in our browsing (beyond our sample) we encountered the *vagina dentata* motif among the following peoples: Arapaho, Bella-bella, Bellacoola, Blackfoot, Comox, Coos, Crow, Dakota, Iroquois, Jicarilla, Kwakiutl, Maidu, Nez Percé, Pawnee, San Carlos Apache, Shoshone, Shuswap, Thompson, Tsimshian, Walapai, Wichita; Ainu; Samoa; Naga; Kiwai Papuan.

Androgynous Deities. From our sample we can document only seven cases (all from Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, and North America). Eliade (1958[a], p. 25) says that divine bisexuality is not found "in really primitive religions." The numerous examples he gives (1958[b], pp. 420-425) are all from "advanced" religions, though we could add a few from "primitive" cultures.

Oedipus-Type Myths

Let us now turn to a brief examination of two patterns in which themes are combined. The Oedipus story has long haunted European literature and thought, even if in very recent times the myth of Sisyphus may have replaced that of Oedipus in popularity (see Kafka, Camus, and many others). Jones (1954) has tried to show that *Hamlet* is basically an Oedipal plot. Others insist that Great Mother or Mater Dolorosa tales are simply special variants.

At all events, some scholars have regarded the Oedipal tale as prototypical of all human myths. Critical scrutiny of this generalization, and particularly one's conclusions as to the prevalence of Oedipus-type myths outside the areas the story may have reached through historical diffusion, will rest on how much credence one is

prepared to give to psychoanalytic interpretations of latent content, on the one hand; and on how many elements of the Greek myth one demands be replicated, on the other. Thus Róheim's (1950, pp. 319-347) contention that certain Navaho myths are Oedipal strikes many as strained. The main emphasis is upon the father killing his own children—even here Róheim must argue that it is the father's *weapon* that is used (by another). And he must contend that the giant who makes amorous advances to the mother and is killed by the sons is a *father substitute.*

Actually, the forty-eight Oedipal myths in the Euro-Asiatic area analyzed by Rank (1952) and Raglan (1956) do not show a very striking fit in detail (see Bascom, 1957) to the Greek myth. In only four of these does the hero marry his mother. Indeed, in only eight others is an incestuous theme of any kind explicitly present. Again, in only four of the forty-eight myths does the hero cause the death of his father. In nine other cases the hero kills (or in one case is killed by) a close relative (grandfather, uncle, brother, etc.). One can make a good case for "antagonism against close relatives—*usually* of the same sex" as a prominent motif, and a fair case for physical violence against such relatives. But neither parricide nor Raglan's regicide motifs will stand up literally without a great deal of farfetched interpretation.

In a very interesting paper Lessa (1956) has suggested that the Oedipus-type story spread by diffusion from the patriarchal Euro-Asiatic societies to Oceanic peoples with whom the situation is very different. He writes:

> . . . we find such stories limited to a continuous belt extending from Europe to the Near and Middle East and southeastern Asia, and from there into the islands of the Pacific. It seems to be absent from such vast areas as Africa, China, central Asia, northeastern Asia, North America, South America, and Australia [page 68].

In an examination of several thousand Oceania narratives Lessa found twenty-three that bore some resemblance to the Oedipus tale. He points out, however, that none meet all three of his major criteria[3] (prophecy, parricide, and incest) nor his minor criteria (succorance from exposure, rearing by another king, fulfillment of prophecy); only a third meet the combination of parricide and incest. Lessa also calls attention to various "substitutions": mother's brother for father, father's sister for mother, son kills father rather than the other way

round, incest merely threatened rather than consummated, baby abandoned but without hostility.

Nevertheless, even if one grants Lessa's inference of diffusion (with culturally appropriate substitutions), I do not think one can at present assent to his main argument without exception. Róheim's (1950) case for Oedipal pattern in the myths of Australian aborigines, Yurok, Navaho, and others does indeed involve too much reliance upon "unconscious ideas" and "real motifs." And yet, in my opinion, something remains that cannot altogether be explained away. Lessa asserts flatly that Oedipal tales are absent from Africa, but they are found among the Shilluk (Bascom, 1957, p. 111); and the Lamba (central Bantu) have a story of a son killing his father, in which there is a fairly overt motif of sexual rivalry for the mother.

Herskovits and Herskovits (1958, p. 94) make two significant points as regards testing generalizing conclusions about the Oedipus myth in cross-cultural perspective. The first (abundantly confirmed by the present small study) is neglect of rivalry between brothers. Then they say:

> In analyzing the motivating forces underlying the myth clusters that fall into the Oedipus category, we must take into account not only the son's jealousy of the father, but also the father's fear of being displaced by his son. Parent-child hostilities, that is, are not unidirectional. As manifest in myth, and in the situations of everyday experience, they are an expression of the broader phenomenon of intergenerational competition. These tensions, moreover, begin in infancy in the situation of rivalry between children of the same parents for a single goal, the attention of the mother. This rivalry sets up patterns of interaction that throughout life give rise to attitudes held toward the siblings or sibling substitutes with whom the individual was in competition during infancy, and it is our hypothesis that these attitudes are later projected by the father upon his offspring. In myth, if the psychological interpretation is to be granted validity, we must posit that the threat to the father or father-surrogate is to be seen as a projection of the infantile experience of sibling hostility upon the son. It may be said to be the response to the reactivation of early attitudes toward the mother under the stimulus of anticipated competition for the affection of the wife.

The hypothesis that the main direction of hostility is from father to son received much confirmation from our reading from the following: fourteen North American peoples; four Circum-Mediterranean peoples; five from East Eurasia; three from the Insular Pacific; four from Africa. These were noted incidentally in searching for material

on our selected themes. In many cases the myth states as an explicit motif the father's fear of being killed or displaced by his son. In some instances a prophecy is mentioned. Sometimes the son is expelled by the father rather than killed. An Azande father is depicted as destroying an incestuous son by magic. An Alor father orders his wife to kill the next child *if* male. There are many variants, but the basic theme is certainly a prevalent one.

The Myth of the Hero

It strikes me that the Oedipal pattern may best be considered as one form of a far more widespread myth, which has been treated by Rank (1952), Raglan (1956), and Campbell (1956). Rank abstracts the following pattern in thirty-four myths from the Mediterranean basin and western Asia:

> The hero is the child of most distinguished parents; usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness or secret intercourse of the parents, due to external prohibition or obstacles. During the pregnancy, or antedating the same, there is a prophecy in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father, or his representative. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or lowly people (shepherds) and is suckled by a female animal, or by a humble woman. After he is grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a highly versatile fashion; takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged on the other, and finally achieves rank and honors [page 61].

Raglan's first thirteen (of twenty-two) points correspond strikingly to this formula. In a world-wide context Campbell develops essentially the same pattern in a more sophisticated form, tied neither to the doctrinaire psychoanalysis of Rank nor to the limited and culture-bound theories of Raglan.

From the reading done by Moench and myself, many details not cited in any of the above three publications could be added: numerous instances of parricide in myth; virgin and other kinds of miraculous birth; newborn child in basket or pot; care of the infant by animals or humble women; and the like. This would, however, be more of the same fragmentary information. Rather, I shall add to the record two recent pertinent studies that are more systematic.

Ishida (1955) shows the prevalence in the Far East of all of this "bundle" of themes except prophecy. There are, of course, certain

cultural embellishments that are characteristically different, but the plot is patently similar except for the omission of prophecy and the addition of a theme not present in the Rank formula: greater emphasis upon the mother of the hero, and often the worship of her along with her divine son.

But Ishida's research deals with the same continental land mass from which Rank and Raglan draw their data. Let us therefore take an example from the New World, Spencer's (1957, see esp. pp. 19, 73) analysis of Navaho mythology. The following similarities may be noted:

1. These are also hero stories: adventures and achievements of extraordinary kind (e.g., slaying monsters, overcoming death, controlling the weather).
2. There is often something special about the birth of the hero (occasionally heroine).
3. Help from animals is a frequent motif.
4. A separation from one or both parents at an early age is involved.
5. There is antagonism and violence toward near kin, though mainly toward siblings or father-in-law. This hostility may be channeled in one or both directions. It may be masked but is more often expressed in violent acts.
6. There is eventual return and recognition with honor. The hero's achievements are realized by his immediate family, and redound in some way to their benefit and that of the larger group to which the family belongs.

Contrasts between the Old World and New World forms are clearly reflected in content and emphasis. The themes of social hierarchy and of triumph over (specifically) the father are absent in the American Indian version, and the Navaho theme of anxiety over subsistence is absent from the Euro-Asian plot. Yet at a broad psychological level the similarities are also impressive. In both cases we have a form of "family romance": the hero is separated but in the end returns in a high status; prohibitions and portents and animals play a role; there are two features of the Oedipus myth as Lévi-Strauss (1955) has "translated" it—"under-estimation and over-estimation of near kin."

Of constant tendencies in mythmaking, I shall merely remind you of four that are so well documented as to be unarguable, then mention two others:

1. Duplication, triplication, and quadruplication of elements. (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, suggests that the function of this repetition is to make the structure of the myth apparent.)
2. Reinterpretation of borrowed myths to fit pre-existing cultural emphases.
3. Endless variations upon central themes.
4. Involution-elaboration.

The psychoanalysts have maintained that mythmaking exemplifies a large number of the mechanisms of ego defense. I agree, and have provided examples from Navaho culture (Kluckhohn, 1942). Lévi-Strauss (1955, 1957) suggests that mythical thought always works from awareness of binary oppositions toward their progressive mediation. That is, the contribution of mythology is that of providing a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions in a people's view of the world and what they have deduced from their experience. This is an engaging idea, but much further empirical work is required to test it.

In conclusion, it may be said that this incomplete and exploratory study adds a small bit of confirmation to the finding of others that there are detectable trends toward regularities both in myths and in mythmaking. At least some themes and the linking of certain features of them, while differently stylized and incorporating varying detailed content according to culture and culture area, represent recurrent fantasies that have held the imaginations of many, if not most, social groups.

NOTES

1. Myths of the creation of the world are infrequent in some areas (e. g., Melanesia and Indonesia). But stories of the creation of mankind appear to be universal. Many themes recur in widely separated areas but do not approach universality: the first parents are sun and moon or earth and sky; the first impregnation comes from the rays of the sun; the first humans are fashioned from earth by a creator or emerge as vegetables from the earth and cannot at first walk straight. Destruction of an old world and creation of a new is likewise a frequently recurring story.
2. Lord Raglan (1956) relates the flood myth to the flooding of rivers and the whole problem of subsistence in newly agricultural civilizations. But it occurs in many nonliterate societies, including some that do not have even incipient agriculture.
3. Lessa's criteria are those of the Aarne-Thompson classification of folk tales.

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