

## MYTH AS CULTURAL PRAXIS

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### *Introduction*

THE general idea of this essay is to elaborate as far as possible one uncommon intuition about myth: a myth is not a text but a complex of action. To phrase this intuition in a more systematic way, I make use of the general theory of action of Kotarbinski and of the theoretical frame of Bourdieu. The essay is a theoretical statement or mental exercise, not an empirical study.

### 1. *Praxiology*

Kotarbinski and his collaborators developed the general theory of action known as praxiology (Kotarbinski 1965). The conceptual frame of this theory offers to the social scientist an auxiliary method for object identification, starting from a particular philosophical perspective. It is obvious that all research starts from a preconception of what is to be studied, expressed in the terms and concepts of the hypotheses and questions of the researcher. It is important for understanding the argument of the present essay to dwell a bit on this 'vague' or 'deep' level.

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For centuries we conceived of our world of experience primarily or preferentially as a world of appearances (Goodman 1952) or even of 'images'. Aspects of form, structural invariants and other predominantly perceptual (or even only visual) properties of phenomena were seen to be uniquely relevant for acquiring knowledge about these phenomena. In the present century, two major and mutually exclusive theories of knowledge contest the arena in the social sciences, only diverging for their object construction, it appears, at a more superficial level. On the one hand, the subjectivists (phenomenologists, humanistic social scientists etc.) perceive the social object as very much like the subject of the researcher and reach knowledge about it by means of the method of empathy (*einfuehlen*). The objectivists, (behaviourists, structuralists etc.), on the other hand, conceive of the object as maximally foreign (or external) to the subject of the researcher. At the limit, the latter will approach 'the other' with the same attitude(s) he would develop for the study of a stone or a table. In both cases, however, the object to be studied has the characteristics of a solid: it has the thingness feature first and foremost. The researcher acquires knowledge about the object either by 'becoming like it' or by measuring or registering it 'from the outside'. In contrast, the praxiological approach aims to alter profoundly the construction of the object of study: the basic stuff of social realities is practice. It consists of events, actions, interactions and the products or results of action. Social reality is seen as fundamentally dynamic, and the static aspects that were at the heart of the classical approach are taken to be but parts of that reality; they should not be taken for the whole. In this essay I indicate in what way myth can be conceived of as a particular form of praxis. The aim of this perspective is to allow for native views on myth: hence, all existing frames (with their roots in Western theological concepts and distinctions like immanent/transcendent, sacred/profane and the like) will be treated with the utmost reserve.

### 1.1 The praxiological concepts of Kotarbinski

For the time being, praxiology is composed of two rather distinct, but equally relevant theories. The philosophical and functional work of Kotarbinski (e.g. 1965) is to be complemented by the sociological theory of Bourdieu (e.g. 1971, 1980a). The latter does not refer to the former's Polish school, but his concepts can easily be understood as an extension and broadening of it. I will limit my presentation to these two 'schools'. Their relationships with former or present behaviourist (Barker, Wright, Harris) or functionalist (Turner) authors is not discussed here (see especially, Verboven 1986).

Kotarbinski's main concepts are the following:

- (a) Event. The world consists of events, organized in natural regularities or patterns.

- (b) Agent. The agent of an event is the person who causes an event by means of his free impulse. (The notion of 'free impulse' enables us to distinguish between action or praxis and physical or biological events.)
- (c) Actor. An actor is the agent who assumes a role, i.e. one who deliberately acts out the impulse of an(other) agent. (This is my addition to Kotarbinski's frame.)
- (d) Action. An action is the event caused by an agent's impulse.
- (e) Result. The result of an event is independent of the intensity of an impulse. The result of an event is always another event. The result can be kinetic (and hence constitute a change) or static (and hence be a state).
- (f) Goal. A particular event is the goal of an agent if the latter makes efforts such as to produce that particular event (Kotarbinski 1965: 28).
- (g) Product. The product of an agent is the particular object of which the state (of continuation) or the change is the result of the free impulse of the agent. Since products are objects they are made out of a particular material or substrate that the agent has to take into account in the course of his action.
- (h) Instrument. The agent can use or produce one or more instruments in action. That is to say, he can employ objects by means of which a force, an influence, an action, a material part etc., can be transferred from object A to object B. The transfer or transmission can be equivalent, strengthening or weakening.
- (i) Enclosure. Apart from instruments, a second specific type of object is produced: such objects are called 'enclosures'. The agent produces a space wherein actions take place.
- (j) Means. Given a particular goal, and given an instrument or an enclosure, the means of an action is that change in instrument or enclosure that results in the goal of the agent.

The very general frame of simple actions is made sophisticated in order to describe composite actions of multiple agents with multiple instruments, goals or results.

My next step is to complement this frame with some notions from Bourdieu's social-action theory. This will complete the analytic frame, which will then be used to characterize mythical praxis.

## 1.2 The praxiological concepts of Bourdieu

Bourdieu's theoretical programme is complex. One of the moves he advocates is to complement theoretical knowledge (as it is recognized in the structuralist outlook) with practical knowledge. In the social sciences, this brings him to complement the analysis of culture as a deep-structural notion with the praxiological characterization of actions, products of actions, habits etc. (Bourdieu 1980a: Chs 1 and 2). In the second place, Bourdieu describes social phenomena with reference to the body as a basic frame for organizing one's experience. Thus it can be said that 'the elementary structures of corporeal experience coincide with the principles that structure objective space' (1971: 192, my translation).

Bourdieu's general aim is to develop a general theory of culture, including power, symbolic features, social life, taste and art, and so on. In that perspective, the mere perception of isomorphisms (between bodily aspects and sociocultural features) does not suffice. He develops a set of categories that encompass the socio-cultural domain. The categories draw on his synthesis of insights from Durkheim (e.g. the notion of social integration), Lévi-Strauss (e.g. communication), Marx (e.g. power, dominance), Freud (e.g. negation, censure) and Weber (e.g., legitimization, materialism, field theory) (see Bourdieu 1971, 1972 and 1980a).

The main categories of interest for our purpose, are as follows:

- (a) Field. A field is the set of positions, intrinsically defined, i.e. independent of the characteristics of the agents. The field specifies interest, agents, the monopoly of legitimate violence and the sharing of interests. In essence, a field specifies the power relationship between human agents (Bourdieu 1980b).
- (b) Habitus. A habitus is a collective phenomenon that can be understood as the common code for actions performed by a particular set of agents. It stands both for the interiorization of goals realized and for the set of particular recipes, goals and teleological objects. Any habitus is dialectically positioned between praxis that has been manifested on the one hand and intentions towards manifestation on the other. Actual praxis is the product of the dialectic relationship between an 'adequate' habitus and a field (Bourdieu 1980a: 87-111).
- (c) Practical beliefs. This notion refers to the implicit knowledge about the capabilities of the body in a particular field. The bulk of gender-related metaphors of a culture can be seen to be particular forms of practical beliefs. (*ibid.*: 4).
- (d) Symbolic capital. This term refers to the set of social and cultural ties, values and all (other) forms of 'credit' that a group can bestow on the agent who has been experienced as offering, or who is expected to offer, the best material and symbolic guarantees for the persistence of the group. Myths play an important role in the increase or decrease of symbolic capital in a community (*ibid.*: 7).

In my opinion, this set of four categories can be conceived of as the praxis-correlate of what is often referred to as 'world-view' or 'ideology' in the more classical and static analyses: practical beliefs structure action at the output level; the habitus would then be comparable to long-term memory; the symbolic capital corresponds to the socially explicit system of beliefs and values that 'guide' behaviour; and the field correlates with the notion of 'contexts' in such an approach.

## 2. Praxiological Analyses of Myth

### 2.1 A preliminary statement

My basic intuition is that a myth should be characterized as an instance of praxis and not merely as a text. The latter view is probably a by-product of the fixation of myths in a written form in our tradition, to be kept in a book as a revealed and hence unalterable message. Over many centuries of theological dominance we have come to look upon myth as primarily or even exclusively text.

However, it is beyond any doubt that myth as written text is the exception: of the several thousand cultures we know of, only a few have a written language. Of the latter group, again only a few used writing skills to fixate myths: for example, neither the people who compiled the Tibetan Book of the Dead (a handbook for divination practices) nor those who compiled the Maya codices (a set of calendars for ritual practice (Vollemaere 1983)) wrote down their myths; and while the Vai developed their own written language, they never used it in ceremonial or religious matters. Of the literate cultures, only those of the Indo-European area have written down their mythical sources: the Vedas in India (though they are not used as 'holy texts'), the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the powers of Asia Minor and Classical Greece, the Old Testament in Judaea, the Gospels in the Christendom of the first centuries AD, and the Koran in the Islamic states. There is no doubt that these are exceptions in the frame of universal history, and moreover they seem to correlate most often with important political changes: in the case of Judaism, the Pentateuch was written down after the Kingdoms, and can well be understood as an attempt to regain control over a dissipating group of tribes; the Gospels served the purpose of marshalling the believers according to the rule of the growing church of Peter; and the Koran was from the beginning meant both as a religious and as a political instrument. Although more research is necessary to substantiate this point, it seems at least probable that fixation as text went hand-in-hand with institutional and political interests.

In contrast to these traditions, a look at myth in non-literate cultures shows great care for interpretation and variation. For example, the origin myth of the Navajo is known in a series of versions (six of which were recorded, of which three were published, see Wyman 1975). The multitude of versions is no problem to the Navajo; they do not search for an Ur-myth or mother-version (as Lévi-Strauss (1958) is so anxious to do), but instead urge the anthropologist to visit several good singers in order to enjoy the particular style and emphasis of each. In the field, it was not uncommon for me to be offered a variety of interpretations on a particular theme or to be invited to a variety of performances of the same theme: the stress of elder people would then be on the beauty of this or that version. Similar attitudes have been witnessed in other traditions, for example, the Dogon with their variety of mythological themes stand out in this regard (Verboven 1982).

## 2.2. A praxiological approach to myth

To reach an adequate representation of myth as praxis I will use all the praxiological features of the analytic frames outlined above. The presentation below aims to characterize myth on a general or abstract level; it does not deal with themes, agents, and so on within myths.

Myth as praxis is a form of communication. However, a myth is not only a vehicle of communication (the text or 'discourse' as the structuralist would say; see Maranda 1972: 13), but an englobing verbal action of a group or people. In order to make this point clearly, let us look at the critique developed by Hymes. Hymes (1981) attaches great importance to the practice of recording and representing myths as texts. That is to say, all 'nonsensical' utterances, all noises-on-the-side, all differences in loudness or tone, all movements of the teller, all aspects of clothing and performances, peculiarities in teller and audience and so on, are omitted from the report. What results is something that resembles strongly a Western poem or a Western epic text (such as you can find in the Greek epics or in the Bible). This text can then be analysed by means of simple structuralist procedures. Hymes calls this the work of 'editing censors' (*ibid.*: 7) who cut to size and structure a rich cultural phenomenon to make it fit with their own cultural criteria of intelligibility and manageability. When we do not adopt this truncating procedure and include all sorts of both verbal and circumstantial material in the description of a myth, we have to deal with a cultural complex that looks more like a composite speech act than a text. A myth can be described as an action in the verbal medium that combines several if not all types of speech acts: information is given, assertions are uttered or questioned, emotions of distress, joy, cameraderie etc. are induced in teller and audience alike, and so on. The tale is also or may be primarily an instrument or means; it is not the only aspect of the myth that matters.

The mythical agent is, again, not a single person. The story-teller is clearly an actor. Different cultures are reputed to have specialist story-tellers (the griots in Africa are well known; see, for example, Chinweizu 1988). In other cultures, story-telling is the privilege of a variety of people: for example, the Navajo medicine man knows several myths (used in ceremonies), and the Navajo thinker-speaker provides myth and comments (Pinxten 1982). In written cultures, myths seem to be related (and eventually interpreted) first and foremost by an actor who is a legitimate representative of the church or institution. Indeed, the priest, rabbi and mullah are respected as the sole interpreters of myths in these religions; actions from other members of the community are liable to be considered illegitimate, that is, heretical.

Apart from the specialist, passive agents (the audience of the myth) can be distinguished. In my understanding, a third type of agent is present in the mythical performance: one or more mythical agents who appear in the mythical story and (can) play a role in the interactions between human agents and the powers outside (natural forces, gods, ghosts or what have you). The mythical agent is referred to

in the myth and serves as a character in it; however, by the mere performance of the myth this agent's relationship to the present community is activated (e.g. Christ in the Gospels, Allah in the Koran, but also Changing Woman in the Navajo Blessingway, or Amma in the Dogon mythology).

In some cases, the mythical agent performs exemplary behaviour: his actions 'show the way' to people of today. In these cases, the myth can be conceived, amongst other things, as an explicative speech act, as in the myth of Asdiwal (Lévi-Strauss 1973). It is in those cases then, that a myth can have a foundational meaning and function, as is stressed rather too generally by the phenomenologists of religion (e.g. Eliade 1965).

In the treatises on myth, opinions on the mythical result diverge. (I reiterate that the result is the action that is caused by an agent.) Eliade claims (*ibid.*) that myths realize or trigger off a (new) relationship between the agent (actor and/or audience) and the 'holy' or religious phenomenon. The authors of the Manchester school of anthropology state that myths cause the solution of (social) problems and hence are functional for a community (e.g. Gluckman 1966; see also Lemaire 1976). In contrast to this view, Lévi-Strauss (1973) claims that myths confront the audience with the insolubility of a problem and hence cause resignation and acceptance of one's lot.

The mythical goal is defined in a vague way by most authors. In a general way, a myth is said to help the believer reach a religious experience of *Ganzheit* (or 'unity') (Eliade 1965; Van der Leeuw 1977). In the Dogon tradition it induces the people to integrate in the cultivated area and to shy away from the chaotic world of the forest (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965). I cannot but suspect that these authors are heavily influenced by the Christian tradition (a documented fact for several of them). What is a religious experience in a non-Mediterranean tradition? Is not the particular distinction between immanent and transcendent realities implied here?

The notion of instrument can be understood in two ways. The Christian authors (such as Van der Leeuw and Eliade) claim that myths are instrumental for the subject in making contact with the transcendental reality. Rituals may be said to have the same function (see, for example, on Navajo ritual, Reichard 1939). In some cases, myth and ritual can work as instruments for one another. On a second level and internal to a particular myth, the use of specific metaphors and symbols and the staging of different mythical agents can act as so many instruments for the believer or performer: a particular symbol will lead on to a particular action, which will induce a specific formula and so on.

The mythical product cannot be identified. Some authors will point to the text of a myth (e.g. Maranda 1972) or to the abstraction of the myth as sign (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1958). In my view, these are by-products. However, the actual reaching of the religious target (God, Nature etc.) cannot be identified in a straightforward way. This is an essential characteristic of the mythical complex (and of religious behaviour in general): the appearance of monsters, hybrids and so on within particular myths is perfectly feasible or 'possible' in the context of the mythical

world, but not in everyday life. In this sense, I say there are no (everyday life) products to a myth.

The mythical means is best known in the form of symbols. In an objectified way, these symbols can be found in religious objects (e.g. the cross in Christianity) or signs and designs (e.g. the drypaintings of the Navajo; see Wyman 1983). On the other hand, the (holy) words and texts of several traditions fulfil a similar role.

Mythical enclosures are not always of a material kind. Whereas a spatio-temporal context for ritual is unambiguously defined in a material referent (a temple, a celebration space, the village area etc.), the mythical event seems to be differently confined by any particular material setting. For example, the Gospels can be recited at any place and time but should be read during Holy Mass. In a different way, Navajo myths cannot be performed during summer, but in winter any place will do. In an abstract sense, the myth itself can realize an 'immaterial' enclosure (Van der Leeuw 1977): the contents of a myth can define a universe wherein both the human beings and the mythical agents hold a place.

The mythical field is identical to the global religious field. Within it, any particular myth can define a subfield. Myths can commemorate, alter or continue the power relationships that are the substance of the field. In the Navajo tradition, this must be taken literally: any performance of a myth has direct impact on reality, that is, on the power field of human beings and other creatures (Witherspoon 1977). In the Christian tradition, the relationship seems to be indirect: the transcendental God has defined the features of the field and the believer can only interact according to the pre-established rules.

Particular mythical practical convictions should be found in a specific way of address or speech, a particular attitude of reverence, and so on. Exclusively mythical convictions might be isolated.

The mythical habitus is an important notion that can help the grasping of the religious dimension, and with it the notion of mythical praxis. In his influential functionalist analysis Malinowski (1948) in fact reduces mythical praxis to habitus. His notion of 'charter' is very close to Bourdieu's concept. A myth is a charter that holds the convictions, the moral and behavioural principles of the agent and which guards the procedures of rituals. The overlap between Malinowski's and Bourdieu's notions is striking, I think. However, the concept of charter has to be amended: often a myth shows exemplary behaviour, rules of excellence and so forth, but as often it seems to warn of things to be avoided or prohibited. I would say that myth thus seems to function as a reservoir of beliefs, procedures and so on (and perhaps of an integrated world-view in some traditions), but this does not mean that myth has primacy over or is the foundation of, in any sense, other aspects of culture. This connotation of 'charter' has to be dropped.

Symbolic capital is relevant for the phenomenon of myth in various ways. On the one hand, mere knowledge of one's mythology may add credit: our informant Curly Mustache was knowledgeable and hence highly respected in this sense (Pinxten, Van Dooren and Harvey 1983), and the same goes for Ogotemmeli in the Dogon tradition (Griaule 1960). The very authoritative figure of Storm in the

Sioux tradition is another case in point (Storm 1972). The status of theologians and prophets may (each in their own way) be mentioned as correlates in Western history. On the other hand, symbolic capital can be lost and, moreover, the accumulation of it may trigger losses of status, or disruption. This is at least my understanding of witchcraft, that old favourite of anthropologists.

In the case of the Navajos, the possession of knowledge in a great amount put the possessor in a double position: he gained respect because of it, but at the same time he grew more and more liable of becoming a witch; that is to say, he could use the precious things he knew against the people. In Western traditions, the strange history of heresy points in a similar direction: to be respected for your knowledge implies running the risk of confronting the power of the institution.

Praxiology is a metatheory and my aim has been to show how it could be used to approach the vast and variegated field of mythical phenomena. It is my conviction that we need a common ground (other than or beyond theological notions) to try and study religious phenomena. Praxiological notions may offer just that. The major work, namely the empirical filling in and testing of this framework remains to be done. Theoretical comparison of this frame with others (for example, the phenomenological outlook) is another major task. Already, however, in this very succinct form of presentation, the frame may, I hope, yield some response from scholars.

### *3. Summary*

A myth can now be circumscribed as an instance of praxis with the following praxiological features:

- (a) Action. A composite speech act, collective.
- (b) Agent. Different types of agents (active, passive, virtual).
- (c) Result. The relationships with the Ur-phenomenon are (re)actualized.
- (d) Goal. To participate with the Ur-phenomenon.
- (e) Instrument. To reach symbolic capital; eventually for ritual, and vice versa.
- (f) Product. None, only by-products.
- (g) Means. Mainly symbols, texts.
- (h) Enclosure. Can be material or ideal.
- (i) Field. Coincides with religious field.
- (j) Practical convictions. Some particular forms.
- (k) Habitus. The charter-concept (minus some features).
- (l) Symbolic capital. Myth can add or lose credit.

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