CHAPTER 7

The Challenge of 'Mythology'

Whatever we may think about what the term 'myth' covers, and about the relations between the stories we call 'myths' and others we label 'folk tales', 'legends' or 'fables', for instance, this whole area of human experience, many might say, has nothing to do with science or with knowledge, for we are dealing with purely fictional discourses. Our word originates, of course, from the ancient Greek *muthos*, where it often served as the antonym of *logos*. The latter term had a wide semantic range, including 'word', 'ratio', 'proportion', but it was often used for what could claim to be a 'rational account'. So on that story *logoi* are candidates for truth; *muthoi* by contrast make no such claims. Some have even seen the development of Greek philosophy and science in terms of a progression from *muthos* to *logos* (e.g. Nestle 1940, Snell 1953).

It is well enough appreciated, by now, that that picture of such a progression is a grotesque oversimplification (Buxton 1999, Calame 1999, 2009 [2000]).[1] To start with some very basic philology again, the term *muthos* is often a quite neutral one, referring to stories or narratives of any type, not just those recognised to be fictitious accounts. Conversely *logoi* too can be used quite generally, so that so far from there being an implicit contrast with *muthos*, the two terms can be used interchangeably. When Plato comes to offer an account of cosmology in the *Timaeus* that account is sometimes labelled a plausible *muthos* but sometimes a plausible *logos*. To be sure, the qualifier 'plausible' (*eikōs*) can be read to suggest a contrast with what is certain. But whichever of the two terms is used, the account should persuade us (Burnyeat 2005) as being the best account available of the subject matter in question, the origin and constitution of the cosmos. The question of what kind of account is possible is crucial. Plato wants cosmology to be the topic of a persuasive account though it cannot be a demonstrative one. But other Greek cosmologies and cosmogonies are presented without any such commentary on their claims for truth – which is one source of the challenge that mythology poses for us.

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[1] A far more nuanced set of suggestions concerning what Greek 'rationality', including mathematics and philosophy, owed to, and where it departed from, earlier mythical thought, was proposed from the 1960s onwards in a series of influential works by Vernant (1962, 1983 [1965]), Vidal-Naquet (1967) and their colleagues. I outlined what I owed to their arguments concerning the influence of political developments in Lloyd 1979: ch. 4, and cf. above, Chapter 4. My view is that it was political institutions in general, especially but not exclusively democratic ones, that were the key factor in the development of the demand for accountability in other spheres of intellectual life.

Although the original Greek term *muthos* did not necessarily carry pejorative undertones, our derived term 'myth' certainly often does. Where any self-respecting scientific account lays claims to be true, well grounded, verifiable, those are not qualities we expect in mythical stories where our imagination is subject to no such constraints. They may be designed purely to entertain. They may also instruct, when the moral of the story (as we call it) suggests points about human character and conduct and much else. But if there are elements in the story that are totally implausible and counter-intuitive, how should we react? One reaction is to suspend disbelief to allow the stories to feed our imagination, just as we do for other fictional narratives, but how far will that do as a response to their counter-intuitiveness?

'Myth' has to be sure been a favourite category used in ethnographic reports and anthropological discussion where it may take on a more positive valence as I shall shortly be discussing. But primed with the knowledge that our term has its origins in a distinctive set of Greek preoccupations we must first ask whether or to what extent it represents a viable cross-cultural category. Both other ancient societies and many modern ones should give us pause on that score.

The ancient Chinese, for example, have no equivalent term. The word in modern Chinese used for what we call 'myth' is *shenhua* 神 話, literally 'spirit talk', but we do not find that in classical texts despite the fact that there is nowadays an enormous literature devoted to what is called ancient Chinese 'mythology'. There are indeed plenty of stories of the origins of things recounting the deeds of fabulous creatures, spirits or gods. But our early historiographical accounts move seamlessly from such tales to events more securely tied to known historical figures. In the first great Chinese universal history, the *Shiji* compiled by Sima Tan and Sima Qian around 100 BCE, the origin of each of the first three dynasties is traced to a miraculous birth in which a woman becomes pregnant after stepping into the footsteps of a giant, for instance, or swallowing an egg laid by a black bird (Lloyd 2002: 7). But while the authors elsewhere often lay specific claims for the correctness of their accounts, and the reliable evidence for them, there is no sense of a distinctive break that marks the beginning of history proper from earlier purely legendary tales.

Modern ethnography provides massive evidence to supplement the point. The anthropologist Stephen Hugh-Jones is well aware of how individual Amazonian myths have been discussed by his colleagues and even, in the hands of Lévi-Strauss, been turned into a veritable system conveying the essence of what he called 'concrete science'. But dealing with the Barasana among whom he did fieldwork Hugh-Jones offers a subtle and complex analysis that may be thought to show up some of the difficulties in our using the term 'myths' in this context. As I have had occasion to note in an earlier study (Lloyd 2020a) his observations are of fundamental importance if we are to get past the crude oversimplifications, even distortions, our terminology may import, and to restore some sense of the indigenous categories in play. This is what he had to say (Hugh-Jones 2016: 160):

> The Barasana category *bukūra keti* ['old people's stories'] is normally applied to narrated myth but can also be used to refer to other historical narratives, to genealogies and to stories about the deeds of previous generations and past clan ancestors. At the other extreme the word *basa* covers song, dance and instrumental music. The category *keti oka*, which might be translated as 'sacred, powerful speech, thought or esoteric knowledge' applies, in particular, to ritual chants . . . But in a more extended sense *keti oka* applies not only to chants and shamanic spells, but also to dance songs, to the songs latent in the melodies of Yurupari flutes, and also to ritual objects, petroglyphs and sacred sites.

Obviously these distinctions do not map at all straightforwardly on to our general contrast between myth as fiction versus rational account. But it would be absurd to complain that the Barasana categories are faulty because they observe no such difference. Rather we must first take on board that they find other distinctions relevant to an analysis of modes of discourse and types of communication – a point we clearly have to bear in mind when we are faced with the problem of understanding their stories, ritual speech acts, spells and so on. The basic lesson we should take away from this is that the modes of discourse reported from among the Barasana do not all carry the same valence, the same kind and degree of commitment.

As a second example that further illustrates the difficulty of the mismatch between the relevant indigenous categories and our own let me take what Lewis (1975, and cf. 1980: 56–64) reported for the Gnau of Papua New Guinea. Encountering the term *malet* Lewis commented that it is the most common word for 'spirit' in Gnau, though they also have another word, *bely'it*, which he glosses as 'song spirit'. But it soon became apparent to him that just as *bely'it* stands for both 'song' (as well as 'dance' – these two are not distinguished) and 'spirit', so *malet* means not only 'spirit' but 'myth'. It is 'used to refer to a genealogical narrative, and also to any myth – to myths about great spirits who taught certain rites and to myths about witch-like spirits which are told as diverting horror stories' (Lewis 1975: 158–9).

But then Lewis adds the revealing comment (159) that while the translation of *malet* as 'spirit' was soon clear to him, that was not the case with the translation 'myth' or 'story'. 'The time I took to understand reflects the ease with which I could assimilate concepts of personified spirits but the difficulty I had in grasping the concept that a spirit and a myth, or a spirit and a ritual song are in some sense the same thing.' So while *malet* is used to refer to a man's ancestors as a collectivity and so to what we may equate with spirits in that sense, there is far more to it than that. A request by someone to tell a person's *malet* is 'met by the telling of the myth linked with a lineage, its history and the account of the man's pedigree' (Lewis 1980: 56).

Thus far we have seen good reason to be cautious about the applicability of the category of 'myth' cross-culturally,[2] and similarly that of 'mythology', which Detienne (1986) showed to be an idiosyncratic Greek invention. Both Hugh-Jones and Lewis continue to use the term 'myth' in relation to the narratives they are commenting on. But both recognise that this is their, observers', category, questioning just where it does or does not fit those their subjects themselves apply to discourse. Some may still want to argue that we can find traces of 'mythopoetic' thought in most societies. But we have to be clear that there is often no indigenous concept that corresponds at all precisely to whatever we hold this picks out.

At the very least we must be wary about one type of move that would contrast others' fictions with our true scientific accounts. Both the Barasana and the Gnau sources and those for many other groups suggest that a contrast between truth and fiction may not be the key criterion used in distinguishing different genres of communication.[3] But that still leaves open how, without such a contrast, we can find anything relevant to our own knowledge and understanding in these pre-modern or non-modern materials. If one side of the opposition fails the test of applicability, how can the same not be true of the other?

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[2] For a further detailed anthropological discussion of the mismatches between indigenous categories and our own taxonomy of 'myths', 'sacred tales', 'folk tales', 'legends' and the like, see Goody 1997, who draws on his own field notes concerning the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana. In ch. 5 ('Myth: thoughts on its uneven distribution') Goody points out that the LoDagaa have no specific word for 'myth'. However he still allows himself the use of the term in connection with the Myth of the Bagre, on the grounds that it may be considered such in virtue of its status as a 'long recitation deemed central to a particular society or group' (Goody 1997: 156, 160).

We can find some way to alleviate part of the difficulty if we go back to Lévi-Strauss's magnum opus, the four volumes of *Mythologiques* (1970–81 [1964–71]). In that context he used the French term *science*, which equates not so much with what we label natural science in English, as with systematic knowledge more generally. One of his great originalities was indeed to see an extraordinary variety of tales collected from across the Americas as forming a system. The myths deal with fundamental issues of origins and relationships and can be seen as a complex set of transformations conveying lessons on how things are or should be, on the rules of behaviour that must be obeyed, on the relations between humans and other kinds of living beings, and much else besides. The claim was that this was 'concrete science', distinct from the abstract theoretical science with which we are familiar in Western modernity, but 'science' (in the French sense) nevertheless.

There are many aspects of Lévi-Strauss's thesis that have been called into question. Is it indeed one and the same system of transformations at work in all these many variant stories from different parts of the Americas? That presupposes that we can treat peoples widely dispersed across the continent as in a sense a single cultural entity or at least as drawing on a common fund of lore. Yet the positive lesson we may take away from this exercise relates to the roles these stories may play precisely as the medium for instruction concerning fundamental issues of understanding. Where the label 'myth' inevitably, for us, tends to carry associations with the speculative, the counter-intuitive, the arbitrary, Lévi-Strauss showed us how we can and should see past that smokescreen to take their seriousness seriously.

By that I mean that looking past the format in which such stories are cast, we should recognise that they sometimes deal with subject matter that we think of as belonging to cosmology, cosmogony, philosophy or science. Now the difference in the format is important. Tales of the activities of divine beings who split the heaven from the earth to make the cosmos draw on a totally different vocabulary, a different register, from explorations of the Big Bang. Our own theories of how humans evolved from other animals contrast with many indigenous accounts that claim that all living beings were originally humans, only for some of them to lose their humanity and to become the other animals we know today. In many indigenous stories the issues are what we should call moral, social or political ones, the rules that should govern correct behaviour, how one group of humans, seniors or juniors, males or females, kith or kin, should treat another, who is allowed to marry whom, how to honour the dead and the like. Those rules may be implied or suggested by the accounts of the paradigmatic behaviour of strange and wonderful figures before the present dispensation was established.

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[3] That is not to say, of course, that such a distinction cannot be made in other contexts. To cite Goody on the LoDagaa again (Goody 1997: 156): 'among the LoDagaa . . . there is a firm verbal distinction drawn between *yelmiong* ("proper affairs or true telling") and *ziri* (lies), though it is possible to argue that the LoDagaa concept of tales (*sũnsuolo*) represents a third category, approximating to that of fiction, where there is no intention to deceive'.

So concessions need to be made on several fronts, particularly first on the question of expectations, or the lack of them, concerning the verifiability or the testability of the stories, secondly on the contexts in which these communications take place, and third on the grounds on which the authority of those telling them is founded, that is on what basis they claim and get attention. On the first point we can recognise that to demand that accounts should be limited to those that are strictly falsifiable is very likely to be hopelessly over-restrictive, though that still leaves us with the question of how they should be assessed, if indeed assessment is thought to be appropriate. Some stories are told to entertain rather than to instruct, and where instruction can be thought to be an aim, that may be merely a matter of relaying what everyone already in some sense knows.

On the second point we may reflect on the difference that audience and occasion may make. As was so often discussed when the relationship between 'myth' and 'ritual' was the focus of anthropological attention,[4] the telling of a story may sometimes be just one part of complex behaviour the outcome of which included, even if it was not limited to, the reaffirmation of social bonds. That is a far cry from the way in which we officially prefer knowledge to be conveyed, where our own custom, in one context at least, favours or even demands that scientific papers be written in a totally impersonal style, as if no personal author was responsible or had been present as the study was planned and accomplished. To be sure myths too are (generally) not subject to personal ownership. But in their case their impersonality is not an aspect designed to bolster if not to guarantee their objectivity. On the other hand the very language in which myths may be recounted contributes to their power and exceptionality (cf. Tambiah 1968), as does their giving access to a sacred domain clearly marked out from the profane and everyday.

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[4] The controversy over the relation between myth and ritual goes back to the nineteenth century when extreme positions were often advocated, that myth was to be interpreted in the light of ritual or vice versa, see Tylor (1871), Robertson Smith (1889) and Frazer (1890). But it has continued to have reverberations both in anthropology (e.g. Leach 1961, 1967, Douglas 1966, 1975) and in classical studies down to Kirk (1970), Burkert (1983) and Johnston (2018). Cf. also Ackerman 1991 on ongoing assessments of anthropological debates, and Eliade 1963 on the relation between myth and reality.

On the third point, on the nature of the authority claims in question, we may remark on certain similarities and also differences in the ways these are established and maintained, as between experts of different types, ranging from sages, gurus, shamans, or 'Masters of Truth' (Detienne 1996) to professional philosophers or scientists in modern institutions. All, we may suppose, depend on some perception of successful performance, however that is judged. Indeed where there are no publicly, indeed legally, recognised qualifications such as those secured by official appointments or university degrees, the need to continue to deliver the results expected will take on added importance. On the one hand, expertise of any type in any domain does not guarantee immunity to challenge, and we have insisted before that we should not underestimate the room for such and for dissent and scepticism in any society. On the other hand, we nowadays expect doctors, scientists, even philosophers, to have undergone a particular, highly institutionalised training. When it comes to judging their latest contributions to knowledge, systematic scrutiny takes on a far more fundamental role within the whole apparatus of peer-group review to which we are nowadays accustomed. Yet evidently no one should suppose that those procedures are infallible.

As we have remarked before, we tend to insist on clear boundaries between moral philosophy and natural science, even though I have had occasion to reject the notion that the latter can be entirely value-free, and part of my overall argument is that those discourses should not be thought to be hermetically sealed off from one another. We have, to be sure, good reason to be wary of attempts to draw positive conclusions concerning human social arrangements from our explorations of the origins of the universe or of life on this planet. We have learnt all too often and all too painfully the dangers that accompany any attempt to read off moral injunctions and even political ones directly from supposedly robust scientific conclusions.

Yet when all the concessions have been made, one basic point remains. While our everyday lives are taken up with mundane activities, negotiating relations with our neighbours, securing the wherewithal to flourish or simply to subsist, our deeper reflections on the circumstances of our existence demand engagement with problems that must often be recognised to be intractable. We are surrounded by phenomena we do not fully understand. Even when we have a reasonable grasp of some particular phenomena thanks to our modern astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, pathology and the rest, our science does not resolve all the questions to which we need answers, and our philosophy often does no more than clarify some unfortunate confusions. We do not generally cultivate mythology to make up the shortfall (though we may draw heavily on the resources of poetry and novels). But if that is not our customary style, we should recognise that what we label, with greater or less justification, 'myths' have often been the vehicle that others have used to explore fundamental aspects of the human predicament. They may certainly convey implicit, even explicit, messages on issues to do with good conduct and human flourishing that for us may belong to the domains of philosophy or religion or both.

But what about problems that overlap with those we consider lie in the field of science? They relate to two topics in particular. First they concern the relationships between humans and other living beings. We have an evolutionary theory to answer some of the questions, but 'myths' too may suggest an understanding of the kinship that unites all living creatures. Indeed in some cases they postulate a far closer bond than we ordinarily accept when we stress the distinctiveness of *Homo sapiens*, especially in the matter of the cognitive faculties that mark us out. Accounts such as those in Vilaça 2016 and 2019, of the encounter between Christian missionaries and indigenous populations reveal how persistent aspects of the belief in the uniqueness of the human species may be even in persons – including the missionaries – who otherwise sign up to the tenets of modernity.

Then the second major domain which complicates our view of the relations between myth and science concerns the fundamental issues of the nature of health and well-being. This is a topic that spans pathology and ethics and one that deserves separate detailed discussion such as will be undertaken in Chapter 9.

The discourse of mythology may well now strike many of us as unfamiliar – the label is sometimes applied in order to alienate – but my argument has been first that we must be aware that the negative undertones of our terminology may be quite inappropriate to the categorisation of indigenous modes of narration. In particular, secondly, condescension is surely misplaced, insofar as it may deflect us from pondering whether or not there are lessons to be learnt from the messages that are conveyed, even especially when these are not lessons that relate to specific areas of modern scientific research, but rather ones that concern the very nature of the contrast between science and other modes of knowledge that we tend to presume.

Thus in the process we can discover that it is not just the concepts we customarily use pejoratively that need overhaul, but their approved antonyms as well, starting with *logos* as rational account, the purview of philosophy and science. The challenge of the subject we label 'mythology' remains, for what is at stake is the nature of what I have argued elsewhere (Lloyd 2018) to be the deep ambivalences of 'rationality' itself. Once again our examination of some ancient and ethnographic evidence reveals the hazards of applying a still commonly used binary, myth versus rational account, that we have inherited from the Greeks. That certainly obscures the fact that the actual actors' categories of discourse that our subjects find important are often very different from our own, with the usual consequence that if we impose our concepts and criteria on our interpretations, we shall be liable to miss the opportunity to call those concepts to account. On whatever other points we may beg to differ from Plato, he was right to insist that on certain issues demonstration is beyond our reach and the most we can attain is a probable account. At the very least we still face problems concerning the status of the more speculative areas of fundamental physics and the nature of the truths that can be claimed to have been secured.