

Rupture and fusion in the approach to myth¹

Situating myth analysis between philosophy, poetics, and long-range historical reconstruction, with an application to the ancient and world-wide mythical complex of leopard-skin symbolism

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1. Introduction/ Abstract

On the basis of my engagement with myth over the decades, the present paper seeks to present some prolegomena² to the study of myth today. It does so, in the first place, by a short overview of philosophical contributions and implications of the study of myth. After formulating and discussing a possible definition of myth, the argument focuses on two complementary perspectives in the scholarly approach to myth: the objectifying perspective

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² Cf. the title of Müller 1825.

of rupture versus the participatory and identifying perspective of fusion. After indicating the pros and cons of both, and giving an example (notably, the ‘hero fights monster’ mytheme) of extensive continuity in myth through space and time, the paper concludes with a summary of the main results of the author’s current long-range comparative research into leopard and leopard-skin symbolism, which is informed by loosely interlocking mythical complexes extending all across the Old World and part of the New World, over a time span from the Upper Palaeolithic to the present.

2. Philosophical approaches to myth

Within the framework of this conference, myth seems to be taken for granted as a self-evident genre of symbolic production. As an Africanist empirical scientist I have often followed that approach. However, as an intercultural philosopher, it is my task to deconstruct self-evidences.³ Hence the present argument.

It is not as if philosophy offers a wide and generally agreed-upon perspective on myth, or as if myth has been one of philosophy’s central concerns in the last hundred years.⁴ Students of myth in the literary and social sciences including history will find that philosophers may occasionally take for granted such conceptual usages as have been adopted by the very fields of scholarship whose foundations philosophy is supposed to examine critically.⁵ This is largely the case for myth, as it is for philosophers’ none too innovative use of the concept of culture.⁶ At one level this may seem to be true even of a post-structuralist philosopher like Derrida. He does engage in debate with Lévi-Strauss on the interpretation of myth of the South American Bororo people,⁷ and with Plato⁸ on the interpretation of the myth of

³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999b, 1999c, 2003a.

⁴ Thus symposia like Poser 1979 or Schrempp & Hansen 2002 do not offer much that is substantially new. Perhaps this is different for Scarborough 1994 or Lincoln 1999, *non vidi*.


⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999a, 1999b, 2003a.

⁶ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999a, 1999b, 2003a.

⁷ Derrida 1967: 149f.

Thamos and Thoth as recounted in *Phaedrus*, and in so doing appears to take for granted conventional notions concerning the nature and confines of myth as a self-evident unit of analysis.⁹ However, at a more fundamental level Derrida's deconstruction of the binary opposition (central to Lévi-Strauss's approach to myth) through the notion of *différance*, and his critique of logocentricity, do offer some of the essential elements for a meaningful approach to myth today.

Myth has certainly featured in main-stream Western philosophy from its very inception, in the pre-Socratic Xenophanes' (c. 570-480 BCE) attacks¹⁰ on his contemporaries' mythical beliefs (without using the Ancient Greek word *muthos*), and somewhat earlier even in Theagenes of Rhegion's allegorical interpretation of such stories featuring divine beings.

The etymology of *myth* is charmingly uncertain. Most authoritative sources refuse to trace it beyond the Ancient Greek *muthos*. Partridge¹¹ proposes an admittedly conjectural Indo-European root **mud-* or **mudh*, 'to think, to imagine', and sees cognates of the Greek form in Lithuanian, Old Slavonic and Old Irish; although he explicitly discusses Latin *muttīre* ('muttering, mowing') as part of a complex centring on the English *mute*, he does not suggest a link with Greek *muthos* on this point. Such a link is however claimed by van Veen and van der Sijs,¹² who thereby exhaust their inventiveness, in the sense that they, too, refrain from tracing the etymology beyond Ancient Greek. Largely relying on and popularising Astour, Martin Bernal has placed controversial but often plausible proposals of Ancient Egyptian etymologies for Ancient Greek words at the heart of his *Black Athena* thesis.¹³ If *muthos* was not among Bernal's original proposals, it might have been. For in Ancient Egyptian, *mdwj*  means 'speak,

⁸ Derrida 1972.


⁹ Also cf. Derrida 1971; van Binsbergen 2005b.

¹⁰ Diels 1951-1952: 21, *Fragmente*, 14, 12, 15, 16; cf. de Raedemaeker 1953: xiii f, 100f.

¹¹ Partridge 1979, s.v. 'myth'.

¹² van Veen and van der Sijs 1997, s.v. 'mythe'.

¹³ Astour 1967; Bernal 1987, 1991; cf. van Binsbergen 1997c, *Index*, where Bernal's major etymological proposals are listed.

talk; word, saying’, and *mdwt*  ‘speech, matter’.¹⁴ In general, the combination of both a semantic and a phonological fit is considered a strong indication for a valid etymological connection.¹⁵ But rather than concluding to specific Egyptian-Greek borrowing, we are reminded of a pattern where correspondences between Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Latin occur rather more frequently than could be predicted on the basis of the cladistic disparity of these languages: Egyptian being classified as belonging to the Afro-Asiatic family, the two latter languages as Indo-European.¹⁶ A possible explanation would be in terms of a postulated proto-Nostratic or pre-Nostratic substratum from which the various language families and languages could have emerged in the mid-Holocene – somewhat along the lines of Kammerzell’s argument on the intermediate position of Egyptian between Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European, of various claims as to the relative affinity between Egyptian and Hittite, and of my own emergent argument on the continuity of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Delta with West Asia and South-eastern Europe.¹⁷

The word *muthos* was common from Homeric times onwards, denoting ‘speech, spoken word, story, fable’, usually without implications as to the truth or falsehood attributed to its contents.¹⁸ What we classify today as myth, is told by Plato, e.g. the myth of the original duality and bisexuality of

¹⁴ Gardiner 1994: 571; Hannig 2000: 1206. Because of the nature of Ancient Egyptian writing the vocalisation of its words is nearly always somewhat uncertain.

¹⁵ Purists among historical linguistics would add, as a third condition, the explicit formulation of correspondence rules setting forth the systematic transformation of linguistic forms between the language which a proposed etymology brings together – despite extensive attempts (e.g. Ehret 1995; Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994) this third requirement is not yet met in the present case (Takacs 1999, 2001) – I am grateful to the historical linguist V. Blažek for this reminder.

¹⁶ For examples cf. the lists of lexical items in Bomhard 1983, Bomhard and Kerns 1993.

¹⁷ Kammerzell 1994; Ray 1992; van Binsbergen, forthcoming (b). Both the excessive antiquity and the wide spread of the root underlying *myth* are suggested by the fact that an apparently cognate form is also claimed for proto-Bantu, as **-biud-* (6.3), ‘speak, talk, say, tell, announce, ask (question) (Meeussen 1980). Kaiser & Shevoroshkin (1988) consider Niger-Congo (of which the Bantu languages constitute a major branch) as belonging to ‘Mega-Nostratic’, but this view is contentious.

¹⁸ Liddell & Scott 1968, s.v. ‘μῦθος’.

all human beings in *Symposium*,¹⁹ the myth of Er at the end of *Republic*, or most famous the myth of the cave in Book VII of the same work. Gradually the opposition was installed between *muthos* and *logos*; the former would increasingly denote the furtive, oral statement in specific situations, a statement which could be just hearsay and need not be true; while the latter would increasingly denote the compelling expression of law and order, immutable philosophical truth, divine rule, the divine creative act, and hence a transcendent form of truth which was increasingly denied to *muthos*. The emergence of philosophical rationality in classical Greece has often²⁰ been described in terms of the transition from *mythos* to *logos*, a process in which Aristotle rather than his teacher Plato appears ultimately as

‘...’l maestro di color che sanno’²¹ –

‘the master of those who know’, that is, of *those who have left myth behind them*.²² In the process, the critical approach to what we now call ‘Greek myths’ was further developed, e.g. in the work of Euhemerus (300 BCE), who saw all mythical divine characters as originating in deified historical human beings.

However, literary criticism, not philosophy, became the field where scholars pondered over myths, and the concept itself was not philosophically belaboured until the late 18th century CE, when Schelling developed a very subtle philosophical approach to mythology. He thus gave the decisive impetus to the development, as a major component of classical studies which

¹⁹ Plato 1921: *Symposium*, Aristophanes’ speech.

²⁰ Cf. Nestle 1941; Dupré 1973-1974; Hatab 1990; Heidegger 1984; Gadamer 1996; Brisson 1982; Detienne 1981; Edmonds 2001; Morgan 2000.

²¹ Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inferno* IV: 131.

²² Cf. *Metaphysics* 1074b 1f, where Aristotle could be construed (cf. Dupré 1973-1974: 949) to use *muthos* more or less in our present-day sense, although it is more likely that he simply means ‘oral tradition’:

‘Our forefathers in the most remote ages have handed down to their posterity a tradition, *in the form of a myth* [*ἐν μῦθου σχήματι*] that these [celestial] bodies are gods and that the divine encloses the whole of nature.’

Cf. Hegel 1992: 20, where the same idea is expressed:

‘Die Mythe gehört zur Pädagogie des Menschengeschlechtes.’

were an emergent scientific discipline at the time, of a science of mythology, whose first major exponent was Karl Ottfried Müller.²³ It needs no longer surprise us that the word ‘myth’ was only first attested in the English language as late as 1830,²⁴ a quarter of a century later even than in Dutch (1804-1808).²⁵ Classicists, anthropologists (Tylor,²⁶ Lang, Frazer) and comparative religionists (Max Müller, Otto) grabbed hold of the relatively orphaned concept of myth, and it is in the hands of these disciplines that a common, consensual scholarly understanding of myth has arisen between 1850 and 1950 – as the expression of a mythopoeic constructing of world and meaning that, while not impossible to understand, still was considered to be worlds apart from the scientific rationality which the pursuers of these disciplines attributed to themselves. From this relatively recent context, so replete with Faustian rationality and condescending objectification, arose the notion that we *know* what myths are and how we can identify them – that they are *out there*, to be drawn into the orbit of our scholarly analysis.

None has more emphasised than the neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer (1874-1945) the extent to which the articulation of a mode of knowing beyond mythical thought was absolutely constitutive of the Enlightenment.²⁷ And it is mainly to Cassirer that we owe, in modern philosophy, an extensive body of reasoning on the nature of myth, on mythical thought as a phase in the intellectual development of humankind, and on the use of myth in the construction of viable, even dangerous, socio-political communities. For Cassirer, the only way to appreciate mythical thought is by contrasting it with scientific thought. This operation is claimed to highlight²⁸ what Cassirer considers to be the two principal characteristics of mythical thought:

- a. unity of being between subject and world, as well as
- b. the immediacy of experience.

²³ Müller 1825 ; cf. Momigliano 1984; Blok 1994, 1997.

²⁴ Little *et al.* 1978, s.v. ‘myth’.

²⁵ van Veen and van der Sijs 1997, s.v. ‘mythe’.

²⁶ Tylor 1948 (1971)

²⁷ Cassirer 1946, 1953-1957, 1955, 1961. Peter Gay’s 1973 authoritative intellectual history of the Enlightenment cites Cassirer as his main inspiration.

²⁸ In ways reminiscent of his contemporary Lévy-Bruhl, but, in Cassirer’s case, methodically worked out by reference to Kantian *a-priori* categories.

Here Cassirer shows himself a true heir of the Enlightenment. No less rationalistic than that great twentieth-century CE anthropologist of myth Lévi-Strauss, Cassirer sees in myth *a way of thinking, of conceptualising, the world*, rather than a mode of religious existential signification.²⁹ However, Lévi-Strauss shows the anthropologist's fascination for the beauty of such mythical thought, for which he seeks to formulate a systematic poetics (in terms of deep structure and transformation, among other concepts) thus rendering systematic comparison and identification possible. Cassirer, by contrast to Lévi-Strauss, remains even truer to the tenets of the Enlightenment, in that Cassirer considers mythical thought an essentially *erroneous* mode of thinking about the world. Whatever the merits and limitations of Cassirer's approach to myth, throughout the twentieth century CE philosophy has been mainly fascinated by other themes than myth, and has approached these from other perspectives than Neo-Kantianism, and as a result Cassirer's impressive edifice remains largely isolated. Some of it was circulated in the social sciences, in a somewhat attenuated and bowdlerised form, by Cassirer's admirers Suzanne Langer, Karl Mannheim, and C.W. Hendel. Few philosophical handbooks carry even an entry on 'myth'. Rather than reflecting on the processes of identity formation, and on the construction of world and meaningfulness through verbal articulation, that lie implied in the concept of myth, many philosophers content themselves with using the word 'myth', without further problematisation, in the loose, modernist i.e. disenchanted, and one-sidedly pejorative, sense of 'a collective representation³⁰ that is patently untrue and that serves specific functions of justification and rationalisation for those who bring it in circulation and/or adhere to it'.³¹

²⁹ Cf. de Vries 1961: 169f. This book, available in international translations, is still a useful and authoritative guide to the study of myth analysis up to the 1950s. For more recent overviews of the same material, cf. Segal 2001; Dubuisson 1993; Strenski 1987.

³⁰ My choice of words is deliberate: such myths are considered to be the stuff out of which, in a way theorised by Durkheim (1912), society brings its members to venerate itself under the guise of the sacred.

³¹ Cf. Barnes 1944-1945; Bouveresse 1996; Cassirer 1961; Davidson 2001; Dickie 1969; Hountondji 1983 (however, the reference to myth only appears in the subtitle of the English edition and was not there in the original French); Oosterling 1989; Vloemans 1930. For the application of the same conception of myth in recent political discourse, cf. Ivie 2002.

Cassirer wrote at a time when, inside Academia at least, scientific rationality went through an unbroken series of triumphs, when the cultural and somatic Other was largely absent from practical experience and nicely tucked away in distant colonies, and when the modernist heritage of the Enlightenment appeared to be humankind's main defence against such frightening forms of mythical irrationality as nationalism, state communism and national socialism as marked the first half of the twentieth century.

He died a few months after Horkheimer and Adorno, in their American exile, published their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*,³² where the taken-for-granted juxtaposition between myth and Enlightenment is reconsidered:

‘...schon der *Mythos* ist Aufklärung, und: die Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück’.³³

In Horkheimer and Adorno's book, the (mythical!) image of the Homeric hero Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship while his comrades submit to the luring chant of the Sirens, for scores of pages conjures up the tragic interpenetration of rationality and mythical thought which produced nazism and fascism.

Cassirer did not quite engage in such dialectics. His attempt to deal, once for all, with mythical thought is impressive, but fails to convince in our post-modern, re-enchanted, globalised world of today, where the proliferation of identities has been raised to one of humankind's major industries, and where myths (from Christian, Islamic and Hindu religious fundamentalism, to New Age, to human rights and democracy as a justification for state violence, to the neo-liberal idea of the market) remind us every day that they, as myths, are here to stay. At the same time Cassirer reminds us, especially in his last book *The myth of the state*, of the all-important political dimension of myths and their study: if myth creates a collective life world (and by implication often render its built-in structural and physical violence invisible to the participants in that life world, the believers of myth), then the workings of myth are inevitably opposed to the assertion of individual knowledge, freedom, responsibility, and criticism: the ideals of the Enlightenment but also the foundations of modern human rights. Pitch sticks, and it is hardly surprising that some of the major students of myth in the course of the twentieth cen-

³² Horkheimer & Adorno 1944; cf. Freyberg n.d.

³³ Horkheimer & Adorno 1944: 14.

ture, such as Jung, Eliade, de Vries, and Dumézil,³⁴ had strong conservative tendencies often accused of bordering on fascism. To this political dimension we will return when, below, we discuss the role of the intellectual in the approach to myth, torn between, on the one hand,

- fusion with myth for the sake of individual sanity, the experience of beauty and a sense of social belonging; and, on the other hand,
- deconstructive critique of myth for the sake of society's sanity and transparency, and the rational pursuit of valid scientific knowledge.

Leaning on Cassirer, but rather more promising and inspiring, is the approach of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dupré,³⁵ who (unfortunately without the benefit of such inspiration as post-structuralist philosophy – Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari – might have brought to his argument) goes back to Schelling's subtle understanding of myth as forming, and relating to, a whole,³⁶ and therefore as far from allegorical. Dupré tries to make (at least, that is how I read him) the most of myth's nature as context-informed, lived verbal expression *in the here and the now*, as against the ambitious, intimidating, transcendent, aspirations of *logos*. Reflecting the work of Eliade³⁷ which was largely conceived before the work of such theoreticians of orality as Ong, Finnegan, Derrida, Goody, Havelock, etc.,³⁸ Dupré reminds us that the tension between *mythos* and *logos* is congruent with that between oral literature and writing. He stresses the kaleidoscopic nature of myth and of the world it creates. Myth revolves on a verballity which creates meaning and truth through articulation, and which appears to reside (especially in situations where writing is absent) in what (at least in my reading of Dupré) is implied to be an interlocking or alternation of immanence and transcendence, rather than external, transcendent procedures of

³⁴ Cf. Horstmann 1998; Frauenfelder 2002; Ellwood 1999; García Quintela 2001.

³⁵ Dupré 1973; this makes one curious after his 1975 book, *non vidi*.

³⁶ Cf. Witzel 2001, who stresses that myths should be compared not in their constituent parts, but as wholes.

³⁷ Eliade 1963: 192f.

³⁸ Ong 1982, 1988; Finnegan 1970, 1988; Derrida 1967, 1978; Goody 1968, 1986; Havelock 1971.

verification and legitimation. The narrative then appears as the core, not only of myth, but of the human existence *tout court*:

‘Im Erzählen der Welt wird zwar die Ungesicherheit und Sinnbedrohung des Menschen erst wirklich offenbar, zugleich bedeutet jedoch die Tatsache, daß all das erzählt werden kann, Teilnahme an jenem Sinn, der dem Erzählen, oder besser, dem Artikulieren grundsätzlich eigen ist. Aus diesem Grunde kann das Wesen des *Mythos* nicht auf diesen oder jenen Bericht Beschränkt werden. Es ist vielmehr Artikulieren und Artikulation des Gegebenen als Tat und Tatschade des Menschlichen.’³⁹

This leads Dupré to distinguish four complementary tasks in our approach to myth:

1. to understand myth and mythology [not so much as antithetic to ratio, but rather] as the matrix within which the play of ratio (*Verstand*) and symbol takes place – and it is out of this play that culture is constituted
2. to realise that inevitably there are not only many mythologies but (within each mythology) pluralities of myth, whose interrelations we have to investigate, for it is these interrelations that constitute the community in tension with the individual person
3. to identify the liminal situation where the *logos* of speech determines the *mythos* to such an extent that it begins to coincide with the latter as self-reflecting theorising – in other words, as *philosophy*
4. on the one hand theory has to illuminate the mythical, but on the other hand it has the task of verifying the mythical element within the horizon of humankind, it has to become a self-reflective theory of the development of the mythical, i.e. a philosophy of history.

Little wonder that Dupré’s final conclusion is that

‘das Problem des *Mythos* ist letztlich das der Fundamentalphilosophie.’⁴⁰

Situating myth in the ubiquitous phenomenon of human verbal enunciation, of narration,⁴¹ implies that for Dupré myth is in itself a ubiquitous and

³⁹ Dupré 1973: 951.

⁴⁰ Dupré 1973: 955f.

⁴¹ As does McDowell 2002.

self-evident aspect of the human condition, rather than a special form of thought reserved for narrowly circumscribed circumstances.

Dupré's emphasis on the narrative element, which would make myth appear as primarily a form of orature, has a peculiar implication for mainstream myth analysis. Since so much of the latter deals, not with living myth orally presented in informal situations, but with established written texts and with pictorial and other artistic references to such written texts, it would seem as if in the academic practice the concept of myth has hardened, even fossilised, to the point where mythshave come to appear as a distinct and self-evident genre of texts readily available for processing in the hands of scholars. The rediscovery of orature in the last quarter of the twentieth century CE has done much to remedy this one-sidedness.

Dupré's position is reminiscent of Barthes's, whose *Mythologies*⁴² trace the structuring orientations behind late capitalist bourgeois life (so that for Barthes 'myth' comes close to the Marxian 'false consciousness' – the mythical orientations in question are held to be *mistaken* conceptions of reality).

A similarly central place is attributed to myth by Kolakowski,⁴³ who defines as myth any mental construct that imposes meaning, order, direction upon the human world:

'Er [der *Mythos*] umfaßt einen elementaren, wenn auch quantitativ geringfügigen Teil der religiösen Mythen, namentlich die sogenannten Ursprungsmythen, und erstreckt sich darüber hinaus auf bestimmte Konstruktionen, die (verborgen oder explizit) in unserem intellektuellen oder affektiven Leben gegenwärtig sind, und zwar auf diejenigen, die es uns gestatten, die bedingten und veränderlichen Bestandteile der Erfahrung teleologisch miteinander in Zusammenhang zu bringen, indem man sie auf unbedingte Realitäten bezieht (auf solche wie "Sein", "Wahrheit", "Wert").'⁴⁴

People construct myth in order to acquiesce themselves: in order to experience the empirical world as meaningful, in order to satisfy their desire for immutable values capable of underpinning their orientation in the world, and in order to escape from the temporal finiteness of their personal existence and of that of the world. In crucial contradistinction to Dupré (for whose

⁴² Barthes 1957.

⁴³ Kolakowski 1984, cf. Kesselmeier 2000, on whom my summary leans heavily.

⁴⁴ Kolakowski 1984: 6.

approach to myth I highlighted the oscillation between transcendence and immanence), Kolakowski insists that any true myth represents a transcendent value, in which abstraction is made from the finiteness of human experience:

‘Ich nenne jede Erfahrung mythisch, die nicht nur in dem Sinn die endliche Erfahrung transzendiert, daß sie nicht deren Beschreibung ist [...], sondern auch in jenem, daß sie jede mögliche Erfahrung relativiert, indem sie diese verstehend auf Realitäten bezieht, die grundsätzlich ungeeignet sind, durch Worte beschrieben zu werden, die eine logische Bindung mit der verbalen Beschreibung der Erfahrung eingehen.’⁴⁵

Kolakowski does not, in this connection, investigate the specific historical and socio-political conditions under which such transcendence may be attained as a technical accomplishment of thought. He implies it to be a universal and perennial human capability, per definition as universal as he claims myth itself to be. In one way he is right: such transcendence is already given with the *word*, on the principle posited by the great Dutch linguist Reichling that ‘language is a vicarious act’.⁴⁶ But such a view of mythical transcendence is not very useful, because it would no longer allow us to distinguish between language in general, and myth as a very special form of language. I would rather suggest that, given the transcendent capabilities of the word (by which the here and now, by the mere act of speech, can be subsumed under words (*any* words) that have per definition (...!) a much wider application than just the here and the now), myth uses this capacity to the full and, as it were, raises it to the power 2, by conjuring up a world that

- is not only *not* here and *not* now but that may have *no empirical existence whatsoever* anywhere at any moment in time (which brings myth into the realm of the hearsay, the imagination, and the poetic),
- that is brought to life and to credibility by using of narrative modes analogous to (although not always identical with) the conventional methods of narration by which reliable, true reports on the empirical world outside the here and now are rendered; and finally a world that

⁴⁵ Kolakowski 1984: 41.

⁴⁶ Reichling 1967.

- is not idiosyncratic, not exclusive to the narrating individual, but one whose narrative accounts are shared, circulated and reproduced within a wider community (which thus constitutes and perpetuates itself).

Thus myth creates an effective world that may or may not be real but whose main characteristic is that it appears as real to those who produce the tales on that world and to those who listen to it.⁴⁷ Producing this appearance of reality involves an active process of captivating and persuading the listener with specific literary means.⁴⁸ Principal among these means is *analogy*

⁴⁷ There is an echo here of Geertz's (1966: 4) famous definition of religion:

‘Without further ado, then, a religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.’

Meanwhile, as far as religion is concerned, Geertz's definition leaves much to be desired. I am not convinced that religion comes in countable, discrete units, for the same extensive reasons why I do not believe that it is useful to speak of ‘cultures’, plural (van Binsbergen 2003a). Moreover, like many definitions of religion and myth Geertz's definition is not really a definition but a nutshell theory: it tells us not only how to identify religion in empirical reality, but also claims to reveal its inner workings such as can never be immediately manifest upon empirical scrutiny. Geertz's personification of ‘a religion’ (‘which acts’...) leaves unsolved the puzzle as to how, precisely, the cognitive elements that Geertz places at the centre of the religious process (‘formulating conceptions’...) manage to inspire the specific moods and motivations that allegedly constitute (‘a’) religion. And if we are tempted (on the basis of sound comparative and theoretical considerations) to propose that all these cognitions, moods and motivations remain up in the air, utterly ineffective in shaping a religion and, through religion, a ‘uniquely realistic’ life world, *until they are put into practice by the believers’ specific actions both in the ritual sphere and in everyday life*, then it is clear that apart from the personification of religion as an acting agent, action is the one major missing element in Geertz's definition of religion.

⁴⁸ For the nature-myth school of Max Müller, myth was primarily a ‘disease of language’, allegedly springing from the postulated imperfections of prehistoric and proto-historic language (cf. Rose 1961). This is an obsolete position in the sense that the oldest language forms directly or indirectly *attested* (i.e. over the past 10,000 years) are found to be every bit as advanced and as complex as modern languages. This, at least, is the result of a statistical analysis which Marsico (1999) conducted on a database of proto-languages, albeit with specific emphasis on phonological aspects of language. We have no attestations of earlier language forms but must inevitably postu-

with the real life world of the here and now, even though this analogy may involve specific inversions, distortions, transformations. For the narrators and the listeners, therefore, the mythical world is scarcely distinguishable from, and scarcely discontinuous vis-à-vis, the empirical world.

It would be misleading to speak of transcendence, in this connection, as if it were a universal and self-evident condition. Only under certain conditions could the mythical world be said to be transcendent, in the sense of being strictly distinguished from the empirical world, at a totally different plane, absolutely incomparable to the empirical world and its inhabitants, and representing a totally different order. I submit that, in a pure form, such transcendence can only occur (i.e. can only be thought) in situations where people experience external forms of the exercise of authority and control, which are completely discontinuous with the ordinary and familiar forms of exercise and control informing their everyday life world here and now. Such external forms of authority and control are brought about mainly by writing, the state, an organised priesthood, and science – four devices that, separately or in combination, make it possible for an absent, dead, or even completely imaginary person (such as a testator, a king, the state, or a god) to exercise near to complete control over a situation here and now through the vicarious means of language. For all we know, writing, the state, an organised priesthood, and science only emerged in a very circumscribed spatial and temporal context: the Ancient Near East (including Egypt) by the end of the 4th millennium BCE. Only under such conditions would I expect myths to emerge that evoke a transcendent world absolutely incomparable to the ordinary life world – so absolutely that, for instance, a prohibition on graven images (like in Ancient Israel and Islam) may be entertained; yet even there the transcendent God is supposed to have created Man after his own image, as if even in a thoroughly literate and priestly context myth shies away from total transcendence. I consider the emergence of transcendence as a mode of thought the outcome of a long historical process, not as an immediate and inevitable implication of writing, the state, an organised priesthood, and science. The latter achievements did exist in 3rd millennium BCE Mesopo-

late that the truly oldest forms, as spoken by Anatomically Modern Humans over 100,000 years ago, may have been less complex (cf. Aitchison 1996). In a long-range historical perspective (to which we have only access through conjectural reconstruction on the basis of *extrapolation* of attested forms), Müller's position has a point in that it rightly acknowledges the basis of myth in language-based forms of narration.

tamia, yet one of the greatest specialists could still describe the mythico-religious orientation of that place and time as overwhelmingly *immanentalist*.⁴⁹ Meanwhile we should realise that the four conditions listed here do not always occur in combination. State formation has been a widespread phenomenon on the African continent from the late 4th millennium onwards, yet in many cases these were states without writing. That even so statehood would amount to discontinuity with the cultural orientation of the here and now of local communities, and hence might constitute a growth point for transcendent thought, is suggested by my study of the Nkoya state in terms of such cultural discontinuity.⁵⁰

These are some of the ideas that, in the background, will inform the argument which follows now.

3. A provisional definition of myth

There is no dearth of definitions of myth. Above we have already considered elements towards such a definition. Dupré gives a succinct one:

‘*Mythos* im weitesten Sinn verstanden bedeutet Wort, Rede, Erzählung von göttlichem Geschehen. Er begründet eine Tradition.’⁵¹

Famous is Eliade’s definition, whose extensive work on myth surprisingly continues to impress for its profound insights, in my opinion, now that I am re-reading it after more than thirty years:

‘le mythe raconte une histoire sacrée; il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des “commencements”. Autrement dit, le mythe raconte comment, grâce aux exploits des Etres Surnaturels, une réalité totale, le Cosmos, ou seulement un fragment: une île, une espèce végétale, un comportement humain, une institution. C’est donc toujours le récit d’une “création”: on rapporte comment quelque chose a été produit [*sic*], a

⁴⁹ Jacobsen 1976. For a study tracing (largely on the basis of an analysis of myths) the emergence and evolution of the concept of magic in the Ancient Mesopotamian context, cf. van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999.

⁵⁰ van Binsbergen 2003b.

⁵¹ Dupré 1973: 950.

commencé à *être*. Le mythe ne parle que de ce qui est arrivé réellement, de ce qui s'est pleinement manifesté. Les personnages des mythes sont des Etres Surnaturels. Ils sont connus surtout par ce qu'ils ont fait dans le temps prestigieux des "commencements". Les mythes révèlent donc leur activité créatrice et dévoilent la sacralité (ou simplement la "surnaturalité") de leurs oeuvres. En somme, les mythes décrivent les diverses, et parfois dramatiques, irruptions du sacré (ou du "sur-naturel") dans le Monde. C'est cette irruption du sacré qui *fonde* réellement le Monde et qui le fait tel qu'il est aujourd'hui. Plus encore: c'est à la suite des interventions des Etres Surnaturels que l'homme est ce qu'il est aujourd'hui, un être mortel, sexué et culturel.⁵²

While splendidly evocative and bringing out many points that are essential about definition humankind's most cherished myths (but not all myths are myth of origin or of aetiology), this famous definition has a number of unmistakable shortcomings. Instead of a definition aiming merely at identifying elements of empirical reality open to further analytical scrutiny, it amounts to a theory in a nutshell, in that it already postulates specific relations between the various features of myth that the definition allows us to identify, and, in so doing, imputes such generality, even universality, into these features and their specific relations as could never be ascertained by a mere application of the definition in itself, but as could only be established on the basis of subsequent, painstaking empirical research. Moreover, the definition narrows down the occurrence of myths to such times and to such human communities as have a well-defined and interculturably recognisable notion of the sacred, of primordial time, of origins, of supernatural beings (so, by implication, cultures that explicitly make the distinction between nature and the supernatural), of creation, of the world. And it imputes to all contexts where myths are found, the notion (a notion, moreover, to be explicitly identifiable *in the consciousness of the human actors* native to such contexts) that the world and humanity, not only of the past but also of today, is constituted by the events recounted in the myths. For Eliade's definition not only points out that the life world of the owners of a particular myth is (as could be argued from an analytical distance, by a scholarly outsider) constituted by that myth and other myths – but also that the myth owners themselves *are conscious* of the fact that this is how their world is constituted. We can easily grant all or most of these requirements when referring to the creation myths of the Ancient Near East, such as *Enuma Elish* (the

⁵² Eliade 1963: 15.

Babylonian creation myth),⁵³ or the creation stories of Genesis – products of a literate, state-based society with organised religion including a specialised priesthood defining, canonising, keeping, transmitting and publicly representing these myths as major components of the specialised professional science. But these specific socio-political features, however typical of the Ancient Near East, have only a very limited distribution throughout human history and across the continents. Most of these features, and many of the other specific stipulations of Eliade's definition, would be absent in the African situations I have studied at close range for decades, for instance among the Nkoya people of western Central Zambia. Let us see if their situation can help us formulate a myth definition that is less theoretically presumptuous, and that therefore might have wider applicability than just literate, state-based societies with an organised priesthood.

A relative paucity of myths (by some conventional definition) as compared with other continents has often been claimed for Africa.⁵⁴ Like other parts of Africa that (albeit for little more than half a century) happened to be colonised by the British (1900-1964) and explored by predominantly British scholarship, the Nkoya people of Zambia have been understudied as far as their myths, legends, folktales and other forms of oral literature is concerned.

Especially in regard of parts of Africa once colonised by the British, much work has been done on the possibility (or, considering myths' dependence on latter-day political processes, the impossibility) of extracting, from African myths, objective historical information, especially concerning processes of state formation.⁵⁵ After the enthusiasm for this approach in the 1970s and 1980s, we are now gradually realising that much of this work, including some of my own (1992), was based on the – less and less convincing – assumption that myths documented in Africa in the 19th and 20th

⁵³ Pritchard 1969.

⁵⁴ Cf. Finnegan 1970; however, cf. Okpewho 1983. Also: Soyinka 1976; Appiah 1994; van Binsbergen 2005a.

⁵⁵ Cf. Atkinson 1975; Bourdillon 1972; MacGaffey 2003; Mason 1975; Miller 1980; Morton 1972; Nugent 1997; Okpewho 1998; Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi 1990; Packard 1980; Pettersson 1953; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger 1988; Reeve 1981; Schoffeleers 1992; Shepperson 1966; Vail 1979; van Binsbergen 1980a, 1985b, 1992, 1998, 1980, 1985; Willis 1978, 1981; Wrigley 1988; Yoder 1980. Much of this work was based on principles pioneered by Vansina (1966, 1985).

century encoded actual historical processes of only a few centuries' time depth, and could be thus decoded. In fact, it is now dawning upon us that this mythical material is often millennia old and that it is usually impossible to sort out how much of this ancient and entirely mythical contents has been projected onto relatively recent actual historical events. This line of argument has been advanced by Wrigley (1988), whose argument may be summarised as follows:

'The work of M. Schoffeleers on Mbona, presiding spirit of a famous rainshrine in southern Malawi, is exploited in order to cast doubt on his reconstruction of 16th and 17th-century political history. It is suggested that Mbona was the serpentine power immanent in the Zambezi; that reports of his "martyrdom" at the hands of a secular ruler are versions of an ancient myth of the lightning and the rainbow; that his journey to, and subsequent flight from, Kaphiri-ntiwa, scene of the Maravi creation myth, is a variant of the visit made to the sky by Kintu, the "First Man" of Ganda tradition. It is not very likely that such stories attest the rise of a great military State c. 1600 and the ensuing suppression of religious institutions.' (African Studies Centre, n.d.)

Mutatis mutandis, the same criticism could be levelled against my own work on the ethnohistory of the Nkoya people of Zambia, especially my *Tears of Rain* (1992).⁵⁶ This research (conducted in close association with what was once the Manchester School of Gluckman and his associates) did touch on myth and oral traditions, but the main foci of my research in that connection have been ethnicity, kingship, and cults of affliction, against the background of social organisation at the village and urban-ward level. I never sought a comprehensive account of myth and other forms of orature in late twentieth-century CE Nkoya society. Nor was the way in which elements of myth circulated in everyday life and rituals, conducive to such an endeavour: in nearly three decades of intensive association with the Nkoya people through nearly annual spells of fieldwork, hardly any myths were ever formally recounted in full in my presence (and, as I am reasonably sure, neither in the presence of born Nkoya people). Instead, scraps of disconnected mythical elements were hinted at in songs, rumours, fireside stories and informal conversation, often disguised as allegedly historical events occurring in the lives of people still alive, of within, or at the border of, living memory. At first I fell into the trap of this historical illusion, producing my book *Tears of*

⁵⁶ As I began to realise by the end of the 1990s (van Binsbergen 1998; Vansina 1993 however seems inclined to accept my 1992 argument as to the historicity of these mythical traditions.

Rain (1992) as a reconstruction of the last few centuries of precolonial Nkoya history based on these mythical elements. It was only in subsequent years, when reworking on this material comparatively (across Africa and even intercontinentally) that I awoke to their truly mythical nature. It was only then that I began to realise that what I (along with my interlocutors) had taken to be oral history of the 17th-19th centuries CE, was in fact a recasting of millennia-old mythical material, small parts of which could be retraced to Ancient Egypt, the Ancient Near East, and Ancient South and South East Asia, and in its specific local Nkoya application probably devoid of all objective historicity.

A very central myth among this people details the origin of kingship (Nkoya: *wene*), which the Nkoya consider one of their most central institutions, at a par with female puberty rites, funerary rites, and courts of law. The following myth is known to a great many people and enshrined in the oral-historical collection *Likota lya Bankoya* which their first Christian pastor, Rev. Shimunika, compiled in the middle of the 20th century:

‘WHERE THE KINGSHIP OF THE NKOYA CAME FROM: THE STORY OF THE COOKING-POT OF KINGSHIP

4 ¹⁵⁷ The kingship of the Nkoya is said to have started with the large cooking-pot full of game meat. Many of the Nkoya in the past said that Mwene [= Lord] Nyambi is a bird; and that Mwene Nyambi has a child, Rain (*Mvula*), also a bird; and that two clans in this world are the relatives of Rain: the Nkwehe [= Eagles] on the part of the birds, and the Mbunze [= Hawks] on the part of the people.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Deliberately, Shimunika sought to enhance the authority of his compilation of myths and oral traditions by emulating, typographically, the only major text he knew: the Bible, divided in chapters (indicated by a large uncial-like letter), and verses. In my edition I have retained this feature; for extensive discussion of this interpenetration of orature and biblical literacy, cf. van Binsbergen 1992.

⁵⁸ In our present search for a definition, we cannot give this text the full analytical attention it deserves. In fact at least three myths are involved here:

1. one regulating the differential claims of local clans to the kingship;
2. another one associating the kingship with Rain, the Demiurge (*Mvula*; among the Nkoya a popular etymology connects this with *kampulu*, ‘leopard’, the spotted animal whose speckles are like raindrops – the etymology may or may not be tenable from a professional linguistic point of view);

2 Shikalamo sha Mundemba was therefore the one who prepared the large pot with game meat he had bagged; he put the pot on the fire and started cooking the meat. The meat had been cooking from the early morning till midday, and when the pot of meat was still on the fire Mpungumushi⁵⁹ sha Mundemba called all the people. He said to them: “Anyone who can take the large pot of game meat off the fire will become Mwene of all the people in this area.” All clans in that area tried very hard to take the pot of meat off the fire. 3 Some went to cut poles long and strong enough to take the pot of meat off the fire, but they could not go near, for the fire was very big and could burn them: it was very dangerous for them to go near. 4 All the clans: Mbunze, Lavwe, Ntabi, Nkomba, Shungu and Nyembo, tried to the best of their ability but they failed to take the pot of meat off the fire. Then the daughter of Shikalamo sha Mundemba fetched water in a tight basket; with the aid of this basket she managed to go around the fire, pouring water and extinguishing the fire. 5 With great efforts she got near the pot of meat and using her pole she managed to take the pot off the fire. Then she called her relatives and all the people, saying: “Let us eat.” After they had eaten one of her relatives shouted: “Come so that you can lick the plates of the Sheta⁶⁰ who have gone

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3. and finally one about the original cosmic characters to have been two specific birds of prey: the High God (as male, or more likely, female, or even both; gender is not expressed in Bantu languages, and this fact is – cf. van Binsbergen 1992 – a central aspect of my reading of Nkoya myths), and the latter’s demiurge.

The third mythical theme is particularly interesting because, like the symbolic complex centring on speckledness which features centrally in my analysis of leopard symbolism, it has a very wide distribution throughout the Old World. In the somewhat narrower but still very extensive Nostratic realm (whose precise composition is subject to disagreement, but which by many current conceptions ranges from Mauritania to the Scandinavian North Cape and the Bering Street, and then on to Greenland) very few names of animal species can be claimed to have made part of the proto-Nostratic lexicon; but the speckled hawk (proto-Nostratic **hr*, cf. the Ancient Egyptian hawk or falcon deity Ḥr, ‘Horus’) and perhaps the eagle are among them (van Binsbergen forthcoming (b), with data derived from Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994). In South Central Africa (where the Nkoya are located), the speckled hawk is contrasted with the evenly black-and-white coloured fish eagle. Evoking the symbolic juxtaposition of speckledness versus homogeneous coat texture, this third Nkoya complex appears to derive from very old layers of a common Old World symbolic complex, going back to the Upper Palaeolithic. So does the bird theme in itself: A reconstruction of humankind’s oldest mythical repertoire brought out that, out of a corpus of about twenty attested on African cosmogonic myths and on Old World mythology in general, only three Narrative Complexes can be argued to have been part of the original pre-Out-of-Africa package, ca. 140,000 BP, and one of these three is the theme of the lightning bird, whose egg is the world.

⁵⁹ A name or title which is evidently not modern Nkoya, and in which the Luba words *mpungu* (‘buzzard’, ‘fish eagle’) and *mushi* (‘village’) can be detected; their present-day Nkoya equivalents are *chipungu* and *munzi*.

⁶⁰ ‘The Dizzy Ones’, affected by the circling around the pot of meat.

around the pot of meat which was on the fire.’’ Then Shikalamo sha Mundemba told all the people: ‘‘You have all failed to take the pot of meat off the fire, but my daughter Shilayi Mashiku has managed to do so. She has eaten the meat with her relatives. She is ‘the bird⁶¹ that takes good care of its young ones’ and she is to be your Mwene. You who have licked the plates are the junior Myene henceforth known as Nkonze⁶². The Sheta and the Nkonze are the same people, all Myene.’’ 7 When all the clans heard this they said to the people of Shilayi: ‘‘You are from now to be called Sheta, for you have gone around and around the pot of meat when it was on the fire.’’ To the others they said: ‘‘You are from now to be called Nkonze for you have licked the plates of the Sheta.’’ At the end of the ceremony it rained so heavily that the fire was extinguished. The people said: ‘‘Our Kingship comes from the Raindrop.’’

On the basis of this one example, a useful definition of myth begins to articulate itself. Let us define, provisionally, myth as:

- a narrative
- that is standardised
- that is collectively owned and managed
- that is considered by its owners to be of great and enduring significance
- that (whether or not these owners are consciously aware of this point) contains and brings out such images of the world (a cosmology), of past and present society (a history and sociology) and of the human conditions (an anthropology) as are eminently constitutive of the life world in which that narrative circulates, or at least: circulated originally
- to this we may add that, if this constitutive aspect is consciously realised by the owners, the narrative may be invoked aetiologically, to explain and justify present-day conditions
- and that therefore is a powerful device to create collectively underpinned meaning and collectively recognised truth (regardless of whether such truth would be recognised outside the community whose myth it is).

⁶¹ Here the bird theme with which this passage began, comes back. It would look as if calling rain was predominantly a female affair (even the gender of Mwene Nyambi and of Mvula is left sufficiently unspecific to allow it to be interpreted as female), and one which evoked (through the bird theme) major representations of the supernatural.

⁶² ‘Lickers’.

4. Discussion of the definition

This definition helps to bring out some of the contradictions we have to consider in the study of myth.

I have avoided, in this definition, to introduce an element which many students of myth have considered important: the distinction between gods (who are supposed to be paraded in myth, constituting its distinctive feature) and heroes and ordinary mortals (who are supposed to feature in epics, which are held to be different from myths. My reason is that such a distinction between gods and mortals is predicated on the concept of transcendence, which we take for granted in late modern times and in the Western intellectual tradition but which yet, as I have argued, only emerges in its true form under very specific conditions of relatively limited distribution: writing, the state, priesthood, and science. I submit that typical of mythical narratives is not, statically, the evocation of gods, but the *tension* between two kinds of ontological conditions:

- a) one godlike and moral, and the other
- b) human/only-too-human (Nietzsche),

in such a way that the image of the world oscillates between occasional but unsystematic transcendence and a more standard condition of immanence.⁶³

The definition mixes *emic* elements (i.e. elements that are consciously recognised by the owners of the myth themselves in their very own concepts and language), with *etic* elements (that can only be formulated in the meta-perspective of scholarship and that tell us what a myth does provided the owners do not realise that this is what it is doing: constituting a life world, actively creating meaning and truth as if these were not self-evident and

⁶³ In the background this argument on transcendence and immanence, and its application to myth, is inspired by similar criticism which could be levelled against a related juxtaposition, that between sacred and profane, which Durkheim (1912) made into the distinctive category of religion, and the cornerstone of his theory of religion as veneration of society through the intermediary of arbitrary symbols. Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (c), with extensive discussion of the relevant literature.

universal givens). According to a widespread view in philosophy and the social sciences today, human life worlds are not given but culturally created within narrow horizons of space and time, and meaning and truth – when considered from the scholar’s meta-perspective – are therefore far more contingent and relative than they would appear to be from the perspective of the local horizon constituted, precisely, by myth.⁶⁴

The paradox which now opens up is that at the emic level myths may appear as universal and cross-culturally recognisable statements on the human condition, while at the etic level myths appear primarily as the kind of illusions that allow *others*, against all odds and against our better judgement, to create and maintain a human society. *Analytically*, from the *etic* perspective, myths are in the first place *other* people’s myths, and the task of scholarship in the field of myth is to describe and compare mythical contents and develop a meta-perspective in the light of which a more fundamental scientific truth may become detectable behind the particularistic myths that inform specific, narrow horizons of time and space. Ever since Xenophanes and Theagenes, and especially since Euhemerus, narratives have (through a process of labelling) become transformed into myth under the estranging gaze of the analytical scholarly outsider, for whom the myth does not contain truth, at least not the truth the owner and narrator consciously recognise. Hence, the construction of a specialist field of scholarship of myth risks to

⁶⁴ This is the standard view, based on a presentist perspective of mainstream sociology and anthropology, in which all culture is axiomatically considered to be individually acquired through a social learning process, life worlds are recognised as recent and, under the onslaught of cultural globalisation supported by new technologies of communication and information, *ephemeral*. Under such conditions it is often possible to trace the relatively recent origin of specific myths, e.g. the foundation myths of world religions. ‘Relative’ is here taken against the time scale of the 200,000 years of the existence of Anatomically Modern Humans. However, there is evidence suggesting that in this longer time scale, these axioms may need to be reconsidered. The converging evidence from human cultural (near-) universals and from mythological archaeology reconstructing the oldest myths of Anatomically Modern Humans, bring out a picture of such immutable cultural inertia of key myths and key cosmologies that we must seriously consider the possibility that some mythical contents may be species-specific, and inherited through biological rather than social means. This, of course, is reminiscent of Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious, with this proviso that for Jung that collectivity did not necessarily encompass the whole of (Anatomically Modern) humankind, but could also be situated at the more restricted levels of major clades (‘races’, ‘gene pools’), nations, clans, and families.

imply, in principle, an implicitly violent hierarchical re-ordering of the world on the basis of a radical distinction between

1. the collective owners/narrators of a myth, and
2. the scholarly analyst of the myth.

Here the analyst claims a privileged position which, if adopted by owners/narrators of myth, would destroy the latter's position as well as the very myth itself. In recent decades, more than two millennia after the Ancient Greek debunkers of their contemporaries' myths, such hierarchical analytical constructions often coincide with the juxtaposition between

- 'the West' (where most analysts of myth reside in fact, or – if residing elsewhere – which they have taken as a reference group)
- and 'the Rest'.

Hence the deconstruction of myth (especially of such myth as underpins other cultures than the Western one) has been argued⁶⁵ to belong to the overall installation of North Atlantic hegemonic violence, by materially and physically coercive means as well as by the claim of a monopoly on scientific rationality – without which there would be no science of myth as distinct from the narration and living of myths. The emic/etic distinction and the superiority claim involved in the etic deconstruction of myth, is typically modernist, and as such obsolescent in a postmodern world. In our largely postmodern world, mythical analysts' claim of a privileged position (just like any such claim in the analysis of social and political life, the arts, religion etc.) has become profoundly problematic.⁶⁶ *Such a claim would appear to amount to a myth in its own right.*

⁶⁵ Clearly somewhat myopically, considering the very recent installation of North Atlantic global domination (18th century CE or later), and the very great antiquity of Greek criticism of Greek myths (from 6th century BCE onwards).

⁶⁶ For a Foucaultian critique of this illusion, based on the concept of genealogy (which is ultimately Nietzschean), see: Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1977. Cf. also Kimmerle 1985; and: Nietzsche 1887. The impossibility of an epistemological Archimedean point is also argued in: Rorty 1979; and from a totally different point of view in: Putnam, 1978, 1981. Such impossibility, in other words, is a received idea in present-day philosophy.

5. Rupture and fusion

But meanwhile the modernist pretence of having access to such a privileged position has brought us, as scholars interested in the study of myth, a wide but converging variety of insights into the literary, historical, psychological, cultural and socio-political manifestations and workings of myth. These insights carry their own fascination and justification. Perhaps more than anything else they respond to the Kantian admonition *sapere aude* ('have the courage to shed your ignorant naivety'), of which the Neo-Kantian Cassirer has been the most vigorous representative in the twentieth century. We would therefore be reluctant to sacrifice these insights on the altars of post-modernity and of, usually ephemeral, political correctness (such as is embodied in the emphasis on the hegemonic implications of an analytical perspective on myth that claims greater insight than the myth owners themselves can have. The scholarship of myth, in the broadest possible sense, is at the core of the construction of modernity from the Enlightenment onwards. The hallmark of modernity is the self-proclaimed capability of exploding other people's myths, and of replacing them by more valid truths characterised by scientific rationality, objectivity and universality.⁶⁷ Here the scholar's principal approach to myth is that of *rupture*: the double movement by which the analyst of the myth

- a. dissociates from the owners of the myth, and
- b. by which the myth (analytically diagnosed to contain a particular meta-message about history, cosmology, psychology etc. of which the owners are necessarily unaware) is torn apart from the life world in which it was originally cherished; is subsequently transformed; and is finally reproduced in the (meta-)terms of a different (typically North Atlantic or global) life world.

This analytical, reductionist assault on myth has been very much the dominant trend throughout the social-scientific study of myth since the late

⁶⁷ Cf. Harding 1997 and my extensive, largely positive, reaction: van Binsbergen 2002c.

nineteenth century. It has produced a number of seminal approaches, such as:

- Bachofen's and Graves's meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of a lost world of gender equality and even female domination over men;⁶⁸
- Max Müller's⁶⁹ meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of recurrent astronomical processes involving the great luminaries sun and moon, and other observational regularities of the night sky;
- Frazer's⁷⁰ meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of kingship, magic and primitive science;
- Harrison's⁷¹ meta-narrative explaining away important mythical material in terms of the universal precedence of myth over ritual, or ritual over myth
- Freud's and Jung's meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of universal human drives, dilemmas, contradictions and collective images;⁷²
- Lévi-Strauss's⁷³ meta-narratives explaining away important mythical material in terms of (essentially content-less) binary oppositions and transformations as constitutive of any human thought and of society in general;
- historical approaches seeking to extract what little objective history may lie hidden under myth, and which we have already discussed above.

What often amazes the literary scholar (and *a fortiori* the literary writer), and even more so the owner of myths both in the North Atlantic and outside, is the sustained Faustian and tendency to appropriative, subordinating reduc-

⁶⁸ Bachofen 1861; Graves 1964, 1988. Cf. Borgeaud *et al.* 1999.

⁶⁹ Müller 1873, 1880.

⁷⁰ Frazer 1890-1915, 1918, 1970.

⁷¹ Harrison 1903, 1948.

⁷² Freud 1918, 1963; Jung 1987; Jung & Kerenyi 1951.

⁷³ Lévi-Strauss 1960, 1968, 1969-1978, 1971, 1973.

tion inherent in such primarily analytical approaches to myth. I am not implying that these approaches specifically declare myths to be untruths and falsehoods, to be mistaken science; yet, clearly, they are only satisfied once the myth is deconstructed and transformed into some totally different statement which is no longer recognisable to the original owners of the myth.

Being ourselves owners, admirers, beauty-stricken commentators, and scholarly and literary transmitters, of myth we realise only too well that not *rupture*, but *fusion*, is existentially our most rewarding approach to myth. While the rupturist approach to myth may be situated in the Enlightenment, the fusionist approach is rather rooted (together with so much of enthusiastic scholarly research into myth and folktales from the early nineteenth century CE onwards) in subsequent Romanticism.

Our tasks as global intellectuals studying myth is thus situated between rupture and fusion, in the *field of tension* between

1. *celebrating* such myths as create and communicate – well in line with current notions of human dignity and self-realisation – beauty, cosmological meaning, sociability, self-respect, power and freedom (often through their transformative incorporation in literary, musical, dramatic and graphic artistic expression; or alternatively, through their underpinning an equitable social arrangement, a justified socio-political cause, or even more in general, because the myths in question are enshrined in the collective representations of our society); and
2. *exploding* the kinds of myths (ranging from, e.g., the male myth of the polluting female body, to the White myth of lazy, dirty and incompetent Blacks, the fascist myths of power, order and superiority, etc.) that so very often, result in the opposite of human dignity and self-realisation, – and having this result in principle by virtue of – *mutatis mutandis* – the very same mechanisms as summed up under (1).

6. The scholar's adoption and celebration of myth

A field of tension,⁷⁴ in order to be sustained, requires *both* poles of a contradiction to persist. This means that the scholar must at the same time

- deconstruct myth, and,
- (deferring such deconstruction), *adopt* and *celebrate* myth.

At first glance, the adoption of myth and the pursuit of scholarship (as under (b)) would appear to be incompatible and mutually exclusive, but that is a premature and unjustified conclusion.

On the contrary, as literary scholars are well aware, we may engage in the identification and celebration of such literary, pictorial, ideological and political myths as may be argued to express and reinforce current notions of human dignity and self-realisation, in other words, such myths as may be invoked as demonstrations of more or less dominant and more or less unchallenged collective representations in the current wider society. In North Atlantic society, numerous are the literary critical studies that help us to identify and appreciate the overarching myths informing the details of a novelist's, poet's or playwright's literary product.⁷⁵

Such myths may be described by critics in abstract terms that convey fundamental themes in present-day North Atlantic society: the quest for

⁷⁴ For the relevance of the concept of the 'field of tension' for the study of situations of interculturality, cf. van Binsbergen 2003a. Such situations invariably present the aporia that truth and meaning can only be constructed and maintained within one culturally distinct domain, which they, in their turn, construct in the first place – so that truth and meaning in principle cannot be negotiated across cultural boundaries. The notion of the 'field of tension' allows us to more or less overcome this aporia: it takes a relative view of boundaries (which are always both firm barriers, and invitations to cross them, at the same time), and it reminds us of the fact that even within one cultural domain, truth and meaning are divided against themselves in ways to which the situation of interculturality does not necessarily make an absolute, qualitative difference. Thus the 'field of tension' invites us, as a practical compromise, to build a liveable human and social world in the face of the irresolvable oppositions invested in each of the many culturally distinct domains, out of which our present-day world consists; the field of tension ushers us beyond the prisons of intransigent local cultural thought constructs.

⁷⁵ Cf. Allen 1970; Bodkin 1934; Grassi 1957; Hunger 1974; Lurker 1958; Panofsky 1962; Seznec 1994; Strelka 1979; Strich 1910; van Gorp 1982; Wheelwright 1942.

power, integrity and existential redemption; the conflict between individual drives and collective Super-Ego-type censorship, or between passionate love and official duty; productivity, creativity, transformation, trust, wisdom, gender balance, identity as the partial and contested outcome of life-long struggles; the fragmentation, performativity, absurdity and human failure inevitably attending such struggles and rendering them, in part, incredible. Here the models of man and of action that are proffered in the mythical narrative, overlap or even coincide with such models as inform social life in the mythological scholars' own society. Of course, mythical models and social models, more or less, pattern and instigate the actual behaviour of human beings without ever totally determining it.

The application of ancient mythical material in concrete present-day contexts of literary and pictorial production, political oratory, etc. often takes a very specific form: *that of the deliberate (typically archaicising) re-circulation of undisguised, stereotypified, ancient mythical contents in latter-day artistic products, with specific mythic protagonists in stereotypified interrelationships and evolving struggles with their respective opposites.* Here usually not the belief in the true historical existence of these protagonists and their mythical history is at stake, but the exemplary, emblematic use to which they are put, allowing the latter-day artist or orator to juggle with standardised positions and relationships triggered by the mere mention of the all-familiar names of the mythical protagonists. The device is an example of intertextuality (latter-day literary products selectively and usually somewhat innovatively referring to ancient mythical texts). In the North Atlantic tradition, this peculiar re-circulation of clearly identified myths⁷⁶ pervades Hellenistic, Ancient Roman, European medieval and modern literature and very far from extinct – to judge by such twentieth-century authors as the Irish James Joyce (*Ulysses*, recycling the mythical contents of the *Odyssey*) and the Flemish Hugo Claus (*Omtrent Deedee*, recycling the myth of the castration of Kronos and the birth of Aphrodite).⁷⁷ Numerous other examples could be given outside the North Atlantic region, from mythical

⁷⁶ While the emphasis here is on Graeco-Roman myth, we are reminded that also Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other world religions have produced mythologies which, over the centuries, have frequently been recycled for literary purposes.

⁷⁷ We only have to remind ourselves of the work of such poets as Yeats (Ireland) and Roland Holst (the Netherlands).

complexes as far-flung as the West African Sundjata epic, the South and South East Asian Mahabhārata, Alexander/Iskander myths throughout Central, South and Southeast Asia, etc.⁷⁸ The strange attraction of this inveterate literary device of ‘bringing ancient myth to life’ appears to lie in the deliberately ambivalent nature of the relationship between the mythical and the modern: the ancient standardised narrative shimmers through its modern trappings, adds extra force and meaning in it, organises the plot to some extent, yet must at the same time be craftily domesticated, customised, brought to local present-day life, and innovated so as to prevent that the ancient myth becomes intolerably dominant and freezes the life force of modern literary characters and their actions.⁷⁹

Literary scholars cannot convincingly handle such mythical material if they insist on the analytical rupture between themselves and the myth they, and the literary authors under scrutiny, are handling. Their literary comments are likely to become positively mythographic and mythopoeic (‘myth-making’), at the same time as scholarly and distant – and they may seek to convey and emulate, in their writings, something of the tension and the beauty that informs the mythically-orientated writing under scrutiny, in the first place.

A rather similar situation occurs in a particular form of anthropological engagement with living myth: when it is not the analytical, cross-culturally comparative stance of ethnology that prevails, but the active participation, as observer as well as temporary member, in present-day contexts in which the owners’ ceremonial or ritual enactment of myth constitutes the backbone of a social event. This situation is very far from exceptional, and need not be exotically constructed.⁸⁰ Imagine a young sociological fieldworker whose

⁷⁸ Cf. Lombard 1993.

⁷⁹ This, at least, was the conclusion of my first, unpublished, exploration in myth analysis (van Binsbergen 1966): a re-study of classical Greek myth in Hugo Claus’s novel *Omtrent Deedee* in polemic response to Weverbergh 1963, cf. Claes 1981, 1984.

⁸⁰ Although it may very well be so constructed; cf. Venbrux 1995: an account of present-day anthropological fieldwork in North-western Australia, where violently conflictive relations between kin are – or so is Venbrux’s conviction on the basis of prolonged and traumatic participant observation – constantly informed, and articulated, by reference to mythical characters to whose mythical roles present-day protagonists in family dramas are irresistibly drawn. There are obvious parallels with the literary devices of Joyce and Claus as indicated above. But also in everyday experience in the North Atlantic such mythical projection occurs frequently, e.g. when

Ph.D. research takes her to join the supporters of a prominent soccer club in their European peregrinations. The club's identity, its symbolism through colours, verbal associations, standardised narratives of historical triumphs and defeats, and other attributes, will combine with those of the club's present and past protagonists and corresponding features of the opponent clubs to bring out mythical dimensions of heroic struggle, defeat and victory towards which the fieldworker will often employ fusion, rather than rupture, as a personal position. And for those of my readership who insist that such a North Atlantic present-day example does not apply because myth – in their stereotypical opinion – has to be savoured in a typically exotic setting of totemism, magic, divination and bloody sacrifice, it is enough to be reminded of the many anthropologists, including myself,⁸¹ who have braved the tenets of their academic rationality and have actively adopted, on the basis of a considerable amount of cultural learning and of initiation, in the enactment of local African, Asian, Oceanic and American myth during fieldwork outside the North Atlantic. Back home, will they relapse into the appropriative, reductionist rupture in contrast to the fusion characterising their actual fieldwork? Or will they find the forms, literary more than scientific, and beyond the claims of a monopolised access to privileged truth, that will allow them to salvage, to render into discursive and evocative writing,

an adversary is called 'a Judas', a treacherous woman 'a Jezabel', a doubter 'a doubting Thomas', nudity becomes 'Adam's costume', etc. Moreover, the interpenetration of myth into everyday experience is both one of the central concerns of magic, and one of our main sources for myth in the first place. For instance, when throughout the traceable history of Ancient Egyptian magic the experiences of Isis and her infant Horus in the marshy environment of Chemmis are invoked to cure snake bite and other dangers, it is not so much the myth that heals the current danger, but rather the current danger that keep the myth and its protagonists from dying. The ancient therapist's view was, no doubt, that the incantation of myth remedies current distress through the intervention of the myth's protagonists; the modern mythographer's interpretation would rather be that it is the curative recitation that keeps the myth and its protagonists alive through attaching it to a context in which meaning and redress are created through a process of symbolic production. The parallel with what Venbrux describes is very close, and we would certainly be wrong to attribute to his Australian Aboriginal research associates some kind of atavistic mythical thought which has elsewhere been banned or overcome by civilisation. Myth is the basis of any civilisation, and of all human social life of Anatomically Modern Humans.

⁸¹ The list of such professionals who succumbed, through initiation, to myth in fieldwork includes: Matthew Schoffeleers, Paul Stoller, R. Jaulin, John Janzen, René Devisch, Micahel Jackson, Frank Cushing, etc.

the living myth they have encountered and embodied in the field; and will they do so in a fashion that invites the recognition, and the identification, of the owners of those myths?⁸²

Literary scholars often write about texts whose authors they have never met, whose authors may have long been dead. Ethnographers temporarily and vicariously living mythical contents within present-day local horizons (be they the Manchester United supporters scene, or Nkoya cults of kingship, or West African Pentecostal church services hinging on the diabolical qualities of globally circulating artefacts, and of moneys, that have not first been whitewashed through the church's selective blessing⁸³) have more immediate reason to appreciate that the personal, practical participation in living myth, involving also the intersubjective understanding of myth at the owners'/narrators' own terms, *is primarily an act of sociability*.⁸⁴ By not explicitly and not publicly breaking out of the spellbound world constructions of shared living myth, one affirms one's fellowship with the myth owners. Since many anthropological scholars (and North Atlantic students of myth in general) believe to have eradicated myth from their own professional sub-culture, and increasingly from North Atlantic culture in general, fusion as a mode of sharing myth is also a form of countering North Atlantic hegemonic assumptions, and creating a possible context for inter-cultural understanding; it admits the fundamental humility of the human condition, notably the unattainableness of a privileged position in intercultural encounters, unless through violence.⁸⁵

7. The scholar's critical battle against myth

Such sociability through participation in living myth is far easier to achieve in expressive domains such as ritual, drama, orature, visual arts, than when myths consciously and explicitly address, discursively, the structure of the

⁸² Cf. van Binsbergen 2003a.

⁸³ Cf. van Dijk 1999; Meyer 1998, 1999.

⁸⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen 2003.

⁸⁵ On these and related issues, cf. van Binsbergen 2003a.

life world, as an unmistakable form of cognitive knowledge production. We have seen that the fundamental act of rupture in the study of myth consists in questioning the truth value of myth (by such standards as objectivity, universality and rationality – the three fundamental qualities which the Sandra Harding (1997) identifies as the central claims of Western science). Where, on the one hand, the fusionist student of myth would see affirmations of identity, standardised models for action, and the active creation of meaning and of empowerment often after long periods of oppression and denial,⁸⁶ the rupturist, on the other hand, would prefer a literalist approach, where the myth is taken, not as myth in terms of our above definition, but as a pseudo-scientific statement of fact, to be assessed, deconstructed and (inevitably) exploded, with the same scientific rationality that constructs the rupturist position in the first place. It is in this way that the great majority of Afrocentrist, feminist, New Age, ethnic, nationalist and so-called fundamentalist (both Christian, Islamist, and Hinduist) writings and related discourses have been relegated (by a host of unsympathetic critics who tend to occupy positions of power in academia, the media, and government circles) to the domain of myth – not in recognition of the uniquely pivotal position of myth in the construction of any society including postmodern globality, but pejoratively, in contempt of the, allegedly, pseudo-scientific overtones such discourses tend to carry. Allegedly, I say – for it is only one little step for such rupturist critics to be made to realise that also their own sacrosanct fortress of scientific rationality, objectivity and universality constitutes nothing but a myth – certainly in the sense of my definition as given above, and very likely also in the very pejorative sense (as ‘untruth’) which these critics give to ‘myth’ and, by implication, extend to the forms of contestation, alternative reflection and liberation enumerated above.

Here it becomes very manifest that one person’s myth is another person’s truth. There is no way in which a responsible intellectual producer can opt to dwell exclusively on one side, at one pole, of the field of tension between rupture and fusion. Complete fusion will mean a total abandonment of the great achievements of critical thought since the Enlightenment (and in fact, as the names of Xenophanes and Theagenes demonstrate, since the very

⁸⁶ Cf. Toelken 2002, with regard to Native American handling of myth today.

beginning of Western philosophy).⁸⁷ As intellectuals, we simply cannot allow ourselves, or even others, to live with an unchecked proliferation of myths that are not subjected to critical scrutiny. On the other hand, complete rupture will lead to the destruction, not only of the myth-underpinned life worlds of others, and of their identity (however much admitted to be constructed), but also of our *own* life world, in which scientific rationality, universality and objectivity can only exist to the extent to which these are themselves raised to the status of myth, and help to cosily cushion that life world amidst North Atlantic modern myths (such as democracy, the market, and human rights) – the latter myths being largely invisible to us, *as myths*, like the very air we breathe in.

8. A near-universal mytheme: ‘hero fights monster’

Bodies of mythological knowledge are among humankind’s oldest⁸⁸ attested and best studied systems of knowledge. The recognition of the similarity of mythological patterns as found in distinct linguistic and cultural traditions was already a fact in Antiquity, when it inspired the practice of the *interpretatio graeca*:⁸⁹ the projection of Greek mythological proper names and concepts onto the mythologies and ritual practices of the Egyptians, Scythian, Celts, etc. at the periphery of the Greek world — a practice well-known from the works of Herodotus and Plato. World-wide, the available mythological material is of an incredible wealth. This extensive corpus includes cases of myths of the most far-reaching continuity and convergence, and in this respect borders on the same spatial globality which Harding has,⁹⁰ rightly, identified as a crucial factor in the universalism attributed to West-

⁸⁷ It is here that the uniquely constitutive role of Kant needs to be appreciated. But does Western philosophy have, independently, the monopoly of such scepticism? Probably not. Cf. Gupta 1981; Chinn 1997.

⁸⁸ Cf. Witzel 2001, 2003; van Binsbergen 2005a. In these long-range studies certain myths are elaborately argued to have a time depth of well over 100,000 years.

⁸⁹ Cf. Griffiths 1980.

⁹⁰ Harding 1997; cf., specially on the point of global distribution of myth, van Binsbergen 2002b.

ern science. To make this point, I prefer to select only one *mytheme*⁹¹, that of ‘hero fights monster’, and to study it by reference to just one, highly reliable and authoritative, source: the account of Fontenrose’s explorations into the charter myth of the famous Delphic oracle in Ancient Greece. The mytheme involves two archetypal characters, the hero and the adversary, to which often a third is added: the usually passive heroine.

The table demonstrates the truly amazing, nearly universal distribution of this mytheme across world cultures.

	selected protagonists	selected enemies	selected passive heroines
African interior	Perseus	Ketos	<i>Aso, Andromeda</i>
Egypt	Ammon, <i>Athena / Neith</i> , Geb, Horus, <i>Isis</i> , Min, Osiris, Ra, (Set), Thoth, <i>Uto</i>	Apep, Bata, Busiris, the Sea, Set, (Thoth)	<i>Anat, Asherat, (Isis), Nut</i>
Canaan, Israel, Ugarit, Syria	<i>Anat</i> , Aqhat, Baal, <i>Beltis</i> , El (II), (<i>Judith</i>), Kadmos, Melqart, <i>Paghat</i> , Perseus, Phoenician heaven god, Yahweh	Holofernes, Humbaba, <i>Judith</i> , Ketos, Leviathan, Mot, Orontes, Phoenician hawk dragon, Satan, Tannin, Yam, Yatpan	<i>Andromeda, Asherat, Kassiepeia, Omphale, Phoenician earth goddess</i>
Anatolia, Cilicia, Hittites, Cyprus	Baal Tarz, Hittite Weather God, Hupasias, <i>Inaras</i> , Kumarbi, Marsyas, Perseus, Sandon, Teshub, Telipinu	dragon, Illuyankas, <i>Medusa</i> , Okeanos, Syleus, Typhon, Ullikummi, Upelluri	<i>Aphrodite, Semiramis</i>
Meso-potamia	Anu, Ea, (Enkidu), Enlil, Gilgamesh, (<i>Inanna</i>) / (<i>Ishtar</i>), Lugalbanda, Marduk, Nergal, Ninurta, Shamash, Tammuz	Apsu, Asag, Bilulu, (Enkidu), <i>Erishkigal</i> , (Gilgamesh), Girgire, Humbaba, Imdugud, <i>Inanna / Ishtar</i> , Kingu, <i>Labbu</i> , Seven Demons, <i>Tiamat</i> , Zu	
India, South East Asia, Persia	Fredun = Thraetaona, Indra, (<i>Kaikeyi</i>)	Azi Dahaka, <i>Danu</i> , Garuda, <i>Manthara</i> , Nahusha, Namuci, Ravana, Sinhika, Viharupa, Vritra	(<i>Kaikeyi</i>)
China	Chu Yang, Li Ping, No Cha, Shen Yi, Yi, Ying Lung, Yü	Ch’ih Yu, Chu Wang, dragon, Fung Po, Ho Po	<i>Hsi Wang Mu</i>
Japan	Agatamori, Amewakahiko, Izanagi, Raiko, (Susanowo), Takemikazuchi	Susanowo	Amaterasu, Izanami
North Africa and Southern Europe	<i>Athena / Neith</i> , Herakles, Melqart, Perseus	Antaios, Atlas, Cacus, Evander / Faunus, Geryon, Ophion	
Greece	Apollo, <i>Artemis, Athena</i> , Dionysos, Erechtheus, Eros, (<i>Hekate</i>), Herakles, (Hermes), <i>Io</i> , Kadmos, Kronos, Pan, (Poseidon), Uranos, Zeus [Keraunios] ⁹²	Acheloos, <i>Aigis</i> , (Apollo), Ares, <i>Delphyne, Despoina</i> , Diomedes, (Dionysos), Drakon, <i>Echidna</i> , Gigantes, Glaukos, Hades, <i>Hekate, Hera</i> , (Herakles), (Hermes), <i>Hydra, Kampe</i> , Kepheus, Keto, Ker, (Kronos), Kyknos, <i>Lamia</i> , Laogoras, Laomedon, Linos, Neleus, Ocean = Okeanos, Ogygos, <i>Pallas</i> , (Perseus), Phlegyas, Phorbas, Poine, Poseidon, Python, the Sea, <i>Sphinx, Styx, Sybaris</i> , Tartaros, <i>Telphusa</i> , Thanatos, <i>Thetys</i> , Titans, Tityos, (Uranos), Zeus [Chthonios], Zeus’s hawk ⁹³	(<i>Artemis, Deianeira, Demeter, Ge, Io, Kelto, Leto, Moirai, Persephone, Rhea, Xenodike</i>)

⁹¹ I.e. ‘smallest meaningful unit of mythological narrative’.

⁹² To which could be added, e.g., Agenor, Argos, Eurybatos, Euthymos, Koroibos, Lykos, Pyrrhichos, Silenos.

pre-Christian Northern Europe	Bearson, Beowulf, Hagen, Odin, Ogier the Dane, Parzival, Sigurd / Siegfried, Sigmund, Thor	dragon, Fafnir, Firedrake, Grendel, <i>Grendel's Mother</i> , <i>Hel</i> , <i>Holda</i> , <i>Lorelei</i> , Midgard Snake, Regin-Mimir, <i>Valkyrie</i> , <i>Venus</i> , <i>Ymir</i>	<i>Audumla</i> , <i>Brynhild</i> , <i>Krimhild</i> , <i>Lohengrin</i>
Christian Europe	St Evenmar, St George, St Michael	Satan, St George's dragon, <i>the Woman of Rev. 12 & 17</i>	
Americas	Coyote, Gucumatz, Hunahpu, Xbalanque, Tahoe	Nashlah, Xibalba, Vucub-Caquix, Wishpoosh	

Table 1. A near-universal theme of systems of mythological knowledge: 'hero fights monster'. Table compiled on the basis of scattered information contained in: Fontenrose 1980. Italics denote female characters.

What could explain the persistence and global distribution of this mytheme? At the end of his long quest for comparative data, scanning the local and cultural specifics of the mytheme 'hero fights monster', Fontenrose falls short of inspiration, and all he can offer us is an appeal to the universal human condition in the face of death. Yet, as we shall see in the next sections, this persistence of global distribution also imply an invitation to engage in the study of long-range comparative world mythology on a grand scale – as in the work of Michael Witzel and his Harvard network, including my own recent work.

9. Living with the tensions: Towards a specialised scholarship of myth

The field of tension between rupturist and fusionist approaches to myth, signalled above, is too productive than that we should try and resolve that tension by a radical retreat from living myth – which is impossible anyway because we cannot live without collective representations. Yet the contradictions of scholarship produce a relative compartmentalisation in time and place that allows us to engage, as specialists (and only for that part of our

⁹³ To which could be added, e.g., Admetos, Akrisios, Aktaion, Amykos, Amyntor, Asklepios, Autolykos, Dryopes, Erginos, Eurynomos, Eurypylos, Eurytion, Eurytos, Euphemos, Geras, Heros of Temesa, Koronos, Ladon, Laistrygones, Lakinios, Lityerses, Lykoros, [Peri-]Klymenos, Phineus, Phorkys, Polydektes, Satyros, Theiodamas, Tiphys, Titias.

existence where we can identify as specialists), in the detached study of myths as if they were exclusively *other* people's. In this respect the possibilities suggested by Table 1 alone are dazzling: there is the suggestion of an underlying pattern informing an incredible variety of cultures in the Old and the New World, across millennia. Is the study of myth a road to the recognition of very old layers of a very widely shared worldview? Or does it, instead, reveal the innate tendencies built into the universal human mind? Detached myth analysis is not only constitutive of the Western intellectual tradition and especially of the Enlightenment – it is one of the most fascinating intellectual activities one could engage in.

Over the past decades, I have personally, intensely, and from a variety of different angles grappled with the study of myth. In certain aspects of this work I have identified as a fusionist:

- using my position as a North Atlantic scholar to proclaim and defend an attenuated form of Afrocentrism, as reformulated by me in the context, and in the terms, of scientific rationality,⁹⁴
- and using my anthropological fieldwork to become a practicing diviner-priest (*sangoma*) in the Southern African tradition, propagating that practice worldwide through the Internet, and seriously, incisively analysing that field of knowledge in its own right with a methodology inspired by both mainstream North Atlantic science, and *sangoma* knowledge.⁹⁵

But in many other respects my studies as a mythical scholar have tended to rupture, to analytical distance. This has been the case for my early study of myth in a North African sacred landscape,⁹⁶ and, largely,⁹⁷ for my attempts

⁹⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen 1997c, 2000a, 2000b; 2004; and my website 'Afrocentricity and the Black Athena debate', at: <http://shikanda.net/afrocentrism/index.htm>.

⁹⁵ van Binsbergen 1991, 1998, 2003a.

⁹⁶ Cf. van Binsbergen 1980, 1985, forthcoming (c). I am honoured that Vansina's study (1985) of homeostasis in the use of myth for historical reconstruction uses this study as an example; also cf. Vansina 1993. However, blood being thicker than water, the Tunisian fieldwork features prominently in my poetry, and the only full-length book I published on it so far is a novel, hinging on the tension between the affirmation and the living on local myth, on the one hand, and its scholarly deconstruction (detective-fashion) in the face of methodologically reconstructed historical truth, on the other hand.

to unravel – mainly on the basis of local myth and oral tradition – the pre-colonial post-1500 CE history of state formation, gender relations and ethnicity in western central Zambia;⁹⁸ but particularly for my more recent probings into long-range mythical ramifications:⁹⁹

- mythical continuity of dualist mythical structures informing the worldwide history of, mainly, geomantic divination (including the Arabic, African, and European Renaissance forms) ever since its remotest traces in the Ancient Near East¹⁰⁰
- mythical continuity between Ancient Greece and Ancient Egypt, in the context of the Black Athena debate¹⁰¹ (an idea I now consider obvious – cf. Table 2 below – and perhaps even almost pedestrian, for being over-obvious, because from a long-range perspective comprising dozens of millennia and all continents, like my latest work on leopard symbolism, the affinities between the Egyptian and Greek mythological repertoire are only too predictable, both straddling Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European varieties of Nostratic, in the same narrow horizon of the Eastern Mediterranean basin and the Extended Fertile Crescent)¹⁰²
- mythical themes which connect South Central African kingship with South and South East Asia and the Ancient Near East¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Largely, for here again a combination of a rupturist and a fusionists perspective was pursued, in that I not only wrote the standard history of the Nkoya people, but also joined them in active defence of their ethnic identity and interests at the regional and national level in Zambia, and in the process was adopted as son of one of their two kings, Mwene Kahare Kabambi.

⁹⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen 1992.

⁹⁹ For a related long-range recent approach to myth, cf. Witzel 2001, 2003.

¹⁰⁰ van Binsbergen 1995, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1997b, 1999a.

¹⁰¹ van Binsbergen 1996a, 1997c, 2000c, 2000d.

¹⁰² Very recently I have returned to comparative mythology in the context of the Ancient Mediterranean, because it is here that important clues may be found as to the provenance and inter-ethnic relations of the Sea Peoples who, at the end of the Bronze Age, destroyed the Hittite empire and threatened Egypt; cf. van Binsbergen, in press. To my delight, Goto 2005 covers much of the same ground but with a different objective.

¹⁰³ van Binsbergen forthcoming (b).

- mythical themes emerging in long-range patterns of animal symbolism across the Old World, as exemplified in clan names, divination systems, and systems of astronomical nomenclature¹⁰⁴
- mythical themes emerging in long-range continuities in leopard nomenclature and symbolism as a perspective on the world history of shamanism¹⁰⁵
- African cosmogonic ('creation') myths, the Out-of-Africa package c. 140,000 Before Present (BP), and the mythical implications of Back-to-Africa return migration from Asia as from ca. 20,000 BP.¹⁰⁶

In conclusion, it is the leopard theme that I will now discuss in some detail.¹⁰⁷

10. *The leopard's unchanging spots: Example of an interdisciplinary approach to an African mythical complex*

Using such auxiliary approaches as Lévi-Straussian structuralism, long-range comparative linguistics (in terms of such macro families as Nostratic, Dene-Sino-Caucasian etc.), population genetics (Cavalli-Sforza and his school), archaeology, the history of art, the study of ancient astronomies and other specialist knowledge systems, cultural anthropological perspectives on the distribution of specific traits (especially with regard to ritual and belief) in space and time, and multivariate statistical analysis, I have recently engaged in indicate a form a long-range myth analysis whose main results may be summarised as follows:

¹⁰⁴ van Binsbergen 2002b.

¹⁰⁵ van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2003c and forthcoming (a).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994; Cruciani et al. 2002; Hammer et al. 1998.

¹⁰⁷ van Binsbergen forthcoming (a); an extensive slide presentation covering much of the book's argument (van Binsbergen 2003c) is available at:
http://shikanda.net/ancient_models/leopard/leopardwww.htm.

1. Rather than exclusively committing oneself to one pole of the rupture/fusion tension in the study of myth, a combination of these stances is the most productive for innovative research; thus, in the best fusionist tradition, my leopard project started out on the basis of an existential puzzle imposed on me by a high priest in Botswana during my final confirmation as a *sangoma*, but it has triggered an analytical rupturist endeavour whose value, if any, is no longer dependent on these anecdotal origins; the same incidentally applies to my geomantic studies.
2. Continuity in myth, across continents and across millennia, is not merely the perspectival illusion of those who, constitutionally, happen to be ‘lumpers’ rather than ‘splitters’¹⁰⁸ – on the contrary such continuity is a very well established empirical fact (cf. Table 1). But of course, the scientific value of such an assertion is fully dependent upon the theoretical and methodological care with which such a position, or its opposite, is elaborated. The main finding in my leopard research to support the claim of continuity is: the disconcerting constancy, not only in the lexical nomenclature of the leopard from Khoi-San (now in Southern Africa) to Sino-Tibetan (East Asia), Afro-Asiatic (northern Africa and West and Central Asia) and Indo-European (Europe, West and Central Asia) but also and particularly of the mythical significance of the notion of *speckledness* – as if throughout the Old World (and probably also in the Na-Dene domain of the New World) a 15,000-years-old mythical cosmology may be traced hinging on the juxtaposition of speckledness versus textural homogeneity, dark versus light, evil versus good, female versus male.
3. Classic diffusionism, cultural anthropology’s main stock-in-trade in the late 19th and early 20th century, lacked a theory of cultural borrowing and cultural integration, and was therefore rightly replaced by the (now again obsolete) paradigm of structural functionalism stressing narrow horizons of time and place, virtually total cultural integration within such a local horizon, and participatory fieldwork as the standard anthropological technique to explore such horizons. Diffusion as a paradigm deserves to be revived, provided the well-known and well-taken criticism levelled

¹⁰⁸ The expression has a long history in historical linguistics, cf. Baxter & Ramer 2000. For instance, Martin Bernal, in the context of the Black Athena debate, prided himself on being a lumper rather than a splitter (Martin Bernal, contribution to the discussion, Leiden conference ‘Black Athena Ten Years After’, September 1996).

against it by structural-functionalism is seriously answered at the theoretical and methodological level. And it is being revived (cf. Amselle 2001), notably in the context of recent studies of (proto-) globalisation, and of a recent rapprochement between anthropology and archaeology.

4. One methodological problem in this respect is the recognition, or rejection as the case may be, of underlying similarity or identity in the face of manifest dissimilarity on the surface. Here Lévi-Straussian structuralism remains a uniquely powerful and intersubjective analytical tool. It allows us to see myths in adjacent spaces and times as systematically interrelated through specific transformations, underneath of which the same deep structure may be systematically detected. It has managed to create order throughout New World mythologies, illuminates Indo-European mythologies,¹⁰⁹ helps us to argue Egyptian/Greek continuities in myth, and deserves to be systematically extended to African and Ancient Near Eastern mythologies, as in my work in progress. Reading the well-known Graeco-Roman myth of Aristaeus's bee cultivation and bugony (the generation of bees from rotting bull's carcasses)¹¹⁰ from the perspective of Ancient Egypt, I present in Table 2 one sample¹¹¹ of the kind of analysis that suggests very extensive Egyptian-Greek continuity in myth.

episode in the classical Greek myth	comment	interpretation in Ancient Egyptian terms ¹¹²
1. Aristaeus,	= 'The Best', and as such a standard epithet of several principal Greek gods	Osiris, being the final compromise produced by the confrontation between the Neith cult and the Heliopolitan, masculine, bureaucratic offensive
2. son of Apollo		Horus, H̄pri, or Rē ^c , the sun-god and male creator-god

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Oosten 1985.

¹¹⁰ Main classical sources on Aristaeus are: Virgil, *Georgica* 4; Pander, *Pythian Odes*, 9, 26-70; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, 2,500ff; Pausanias 10, 17, 3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, 5. Cf. Rose 1958: 142.

¹¹¹ Based on van Binsbergen, forthcoming (b). Of course, without that book's argument the specific entries will carry little conviction, but the general idea will be clear.

¹¹² With the typical inconsistency of transliteration, I have dropped the somewhat pompous Egyptological transliteration of divine names, without vowels, whenever a standard North Atlantic rendering is available.

3. and Cyrene,	= 'Sovereign Queen'/ Libyan town of Cyrene	Neith
4. (Aristaeus,) master of bee-keeping,		<i>bit</i> , 'bee', high-priestess of Neith and Ruler of Lower Egypt ¹¹³
5. has, or covets, illicit sex	narrative adornment, but perhaps also	an evocation of attempted amalgamation of the Neith cult with the Heliopolitan theology
6. with Eurydice, the wife of	'Wide Justice', an evocation of the moon, to whom human sacrifice was made by way of poisoning with snake's venom, ¹¹⁴ in Ancient Mesopotamia, it is the all-seeing sun which is the heavenly personification of justice	Nut; Tefnut (by contrast to Ḥorus, Ḥpri, or Rē ^c)
7. Orpheus.	'Hereditary Prince' (Ancient Egyptian: <i>irp^ct</i>) ¹¹⁵ Orpheus is claimed ¹¹⁶ to have visited Egypt	Geb; ¹¹⁷ Shu. Graves's etymology of Orpheus' Greek name as 'Him of the River Bank(?)' ¹¹⁸ cannot be supported, although it does suggest a link with Osiris and Neith as water-gods
8. Eurydice then flies,		confrontation of the Heliopolitan theology and the Neith cult
9. trips on a snake, is bitten and dies.	an extension of the Neith motif to that of the primordial snake enemy, Apophis, whom Neith produced by spitting ¹¹⁹	power of the Neith cult evoked

¹¹³ Of course, the priestly and/or divine bee complex is not peculiar to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Delta, but (as exemplified by the priestly offices called *melissa* in Asia Minor and the Aegean especially in the cult of Artemis and of Cybele, the role of the bee as saviour in the Hittite Telepinu epic – Pritchard 1969 – and bee motifs on Minoan Crete – Woudhuizen 1997) pervades the entire eastern Mediterranean, in a linguistic context that is Palaeo-Mediterranean or Indo-European speaking, rather than Afro-Asiatic (Ancient Egyptian is generally reckoned to belong to the latter language family, but not without problems, cf. Kammerzell 1994, Ray 1992, and references cited there). For Gimbutas (1982, 1991), the bee is an attribute of the mother goddess – which suggests that even the extensively pocked or indented wall of the Neolithic temples of the Malta islands could be interpreted as representing beehives; however, my leopard research (see below) suggests that in the Malta case an interpretation in terms of the universal theme of speckledness (also an attribute of the mother goddess, as I demonstrate) is more convincing. Note however the correspondence in colour scheme (black/yellow) between certain popular bee races, and the leopard.

¹¹⁴ Graves 1964.

¹¹⁵ Bernal 1987: 71f.

¹¹⁶ Graves 1964.

¹¹⁷ Bernal 1987: 71f.

¹¹⁸ Graves 1964.

¹¹⁹ Hart 1993, *s.v.* Apophis.

10. Eurydice's sisters	other goddesses of the sun-god's entourage	Isis and Nephthys (or W3dyt and Nḥbt as the Two Ladies (<i>nbtj</i>) accompanying the pharaoh as Horus?)
11. subsequently kill Aristaeus's bees.	i.e. his power as <i>bit</i> , or the power of <i>bit</i> in itself, or his <i>bit</i> retinue, the Neith priest(ess)hood, curtailed	Heliopolitan theology curbing the Neith cult; Neith priestesses killed as funerary human sacrifices at First Dynasty royal tombs
12. Aristaeus, on the advice of his mother Cyrene,		insistence on the power of the Neith cult or of Libyan (more or less, = Delta) culture in general
13. fetters the Pharos-based oracular sea-god Proteus.	Proteus = 'The First', cf. above, row (1).	a narrative adornment, evoking the Delta and oracular possibly indicative of divination as a cultic innovation; but since Neith is called 'One' and often considered 'the First', and a water goddess, the male minor god Proteus may well be a transformation of Neith rendered harmless
14. Aristaeus thus learns that the bees have died in retaliation for Eurydice's death.		the Neith cult's powers curbed by the rise of the masculine, bureaucratic pharaonic state as religiously and symbolically underpinned by non-Neith related themes; the Neith priestesses killed
15. Aristaeus kills four bulls and four cows as propitiatory sacrifice.	Neith cult has to symbolically defer to the Heliopolitan theology revolving on the Ennead headed by the male sun-god who, as the 'Bull of the Ennead', has usurped Neith's creative prerogatives ¹²⁰	the bull element has to be transmuted into the original bee/ <i>bit</i> element through a process of transformation. The bull element evokes the Heliopolitan cult with its Nine Gods (minus one), but probably also the various Egyptian cults of divine bulls, e.g. Apis, and K3mtf, -- in the latter name, 'bull of his mother', again a reference to the mother goddess can be detected)
16. Aristaeus, on Cyrene's advice,		insistence on the power of the Neith cult or of Libyan culture in general
17. leaves the bovine carcasses in a copse	the arboreal element stems from Thracia, where some of the goddesses involved in the Greek version appear as dryads, i.e. tree (specifically oak) goddesses	the bull element (evocative of the Heliopolitan cult) has to be transmuted into the original bee/ <i>bit</i> element through a long process of transformation
18. for eight days.		the Heliopolitan Ennead minus its leader and progenitor, Atum ¹²¹

¹²⁰ There is an alternative interpretation possible, in terms of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, i.e. the eight deities of Khemnu (Greek: Hermopolis, modern: al-Ashmunein), who appear in neat, gendered pairs; but I do not see the point.

¹²¹ Atum is a male primordial god who produces the first creatures, Shu and Tefnut, in a way which involves bodily fluids and which is variously described (masturbation, spitting; cf. Rē's creation of humankind from his tears) but always in terms implying the absence of female reproductive organs. In my reading of early Egyptian history (van Binsbergen, forthcoming), Atum represents the male usurpation, in the course of the consolidation of the early Egyptian state, through the Heliopolitan theology among other means, of female centred cosmology exemplified in the Neith cult.

19. After a funerary sacrifice to Orpheus, who had meanwhile died, ¹²²	narrative adornment but also →	evocation of Neith as the mistress of death and the underworld
20. on the ninth day		the Heliopolitan Ennead
21. the carcasses are teeming with bees		the bees as the sign of life resurrected from death; but also a symbolic triumph of Neith's living emblems over the dead and decaying substance of the masculine, bureaucratic state cult; all this amalgamated in the character of Osiris who is at the same time the expression of masculinisation, and (as Neith's vizier, and as the ultimate larva resurrecting from death) the continuation of the Neith cult in a new form.

Table 2. The Graeco-Roman myth of Aristaeus interpreted in the light of Ancient Egyptian religion: Evidence of Egyptian-Greek continuities

5. Such a structuralist historical reading of myth complexes may help us towards solving the perennial question of how to demarcate the effects of parallel invention and of innate parallel programming of the – anatomically modern – human mind, as against diffusion. Another problem is how to pinpoint the specific kind of diffusion that is informing such widespread continuity. Accepted anthropological wisdom is that not populations travel, taking both their gene pool, their language, and their distinctive culture with them, but that populations remain more or less immobile or move only very slowly across the earth's surface, whereas the travelling of ideas, objects, and isolated individuals is largely held responsible for such diffusion as in fact has unmistakably taken place. My leopard research, however, suggests that the model of demic diffusion, which increasingly informs present-day archaeology and genetics, has also some utility for the long-range study of both myth and language family. The distribution of myths, therefore, can be demonstrated to be related to that of genetic patterns and language (macro-) families.¹²³ However, in order to account for such unexpected long-range continuities

¹²² To which a late version of the myth adds: 'after having tried, in vain, to rescue Eurydice from Hades with the power of his music; his head [perhaps embalmed in honey?] was set up as an oracle but was ultimately silenced by Apollo'.

¹²³ Cf. Witzel 2001, 2003; and especially, in detail, van Binsbergen 2005a.

as the nomenclature and symbolism of the leopard bring out, a multi-tiered model of demic diffusion seems required, where relatively constant nuclei are carried from one major wave to the next, somewhat comparable with the genetic immortality of human procreative cells from generation to generation. I have called this multi-tiered model the ‘fireworks model’; diagram 1.

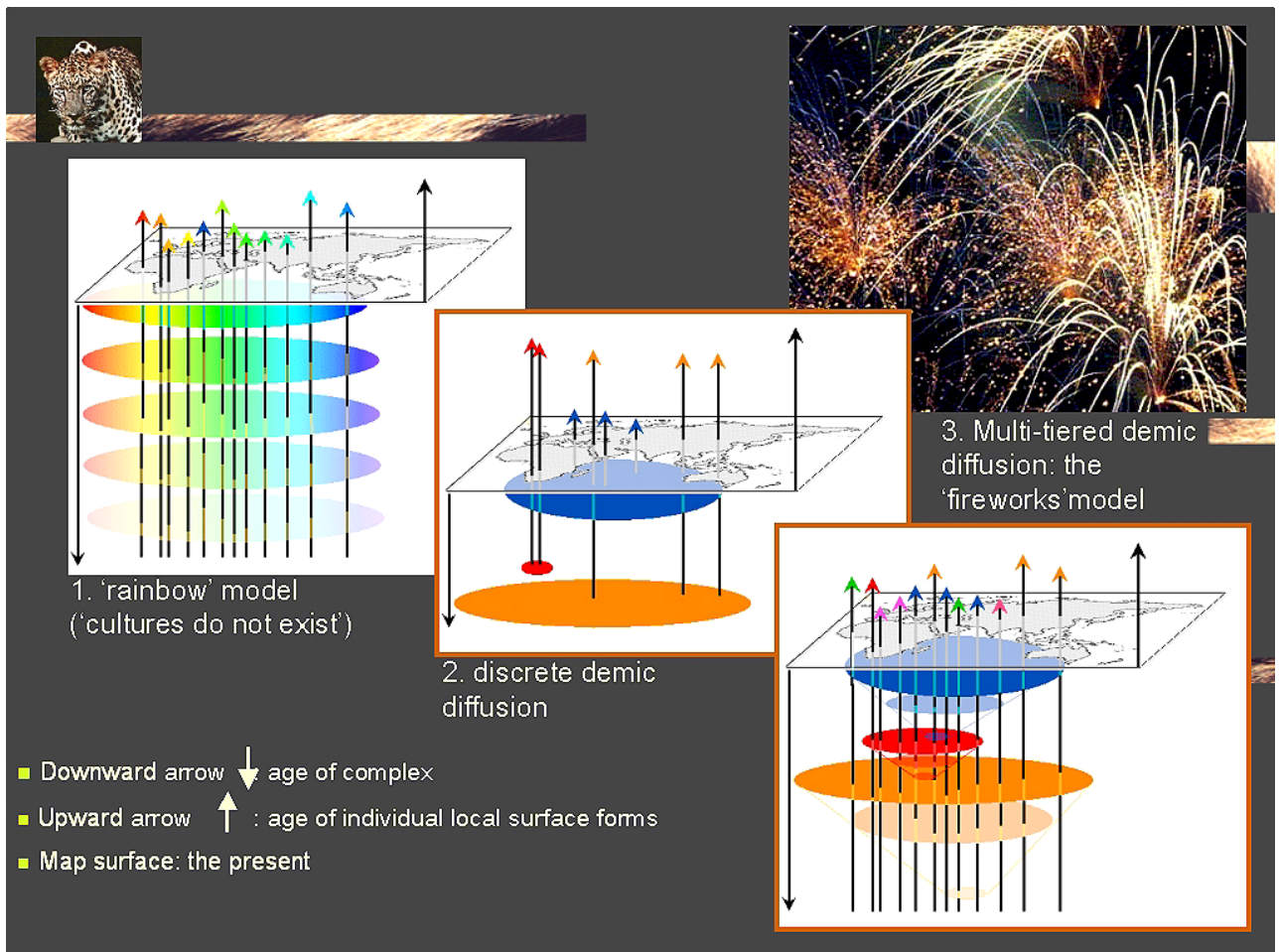


Diagram 1. The model of multi-tiered demic diffusion:

(3) the ‘fireworks’ model: within a previous tier a kernel is engendered that grows into the next tier, which is highly different yet represents some continuity with the tier from which it has sprung – like cascading fireworks. The ‘fireworks’ model (3) is here contrasted with (2) the ‘rainbow’ model (which is in line with my earlier theoretical position to the effect that ‘cultures do not exist’): differences and boundaries between cultures are fluid, both horizontally (in space) and vertically (in time); and with

(1) the model of discrete (or simple) demic diffusion, which is based on the simple succession of totally discontinuous cultures.¹²⁴

6. The succession of tiers brings out a historical sequence whose phases (each coinciding with a particular tier) do not necessarily have the same contents and structure. While in every tier, myths create life worlds and make these saturated with truth and meaning for the myth owners, these life worlds are demonstrably different. My long-range, comparative research into leopard symbolism has yielded evidence to postulate the following sequence informing a systematic of cosmologies in identifiable spatio-temporal contexts throughout the Old World:
 - a. the mythical cosmology hinges on the mythical leopard–ungulate juxtaposition, which reflects Lower and Middle Palaeolithic situations (40,000 to 40,000 BP) directly inspired by natural conditions (for the ungulates are the leopard’s nature prey), in a context closely associated with early shamanism; inspired by the unpredictability of a hunting mode of production, images of the leopard help to give rise to the widespread mythical figure of a divine trickster
 - b. The mythical leopard–lion juxtaposition hinges on speckledness and brings together, because of the power of human symbolic thought, two species that (although competing for the same preys and therefore occasionally mortal enemies) usually avoid each other under natural conditions but that are eminently ‘good for thinking’ (Lévi-Strauss), in considerable abstraction from naturally given situations (for lion and leopard are not each other’s nature partners or prey – although their competition over the same prey animals may lead them to confront each other) ; this reflects an Upper Palaeolithic condition (40,000 to 10,000 BP)
 - c. The leopard–lion juxtaposition was subsequently, in early Neolithic times (Çatal Hüyük, the fertile Neolithic Sahara), worked into an elaborate, utterly dualistic (also gendered) ‘cosmology of the lion and the leopard’, traces of which are found all over the Old World, in Kammerzell’s lexical pair **prd/*prg* (‘leopard’, where the *-pard* element itself is an example of this root) versus **rw/*lw-/*LB’/*leu* (‘lion’), and mythically

¹²⁴ This illustration is derived from van Binsbergen 2003c.

elaborated in von Sicard's Luwe¹²⁵ (with a great many name variants) mythical figure, paired with a female companion Mwari (also with a great many name variants). Significantly, we are here in the domain of the few language families that have gender: Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European, and Khoi-San; for all three families a West Asian origin c. 15,000 BP may be very tentatively postulated.

- d. Cosmological/astronomical notions accrue to these figures, so that the leopard's skin comes to represent the star-spangled sky especially the circumpolar northern sky and the night, while the celestial axis, noon, and the ecliptic comes to be associated with the lion; the pole, spear, stick, club (representing the celestial axis) is one of Luwe's most conspicuous attributes
- e. This cosmology is implicitly immanentist in the terms set out in section 2 of this paper, in that its paired constituent elements are complementary, and readily transform into each other, without very sharp boundaries. However, the emergence of writing, the state, organised priesthood and science in Late Neolithic times created the conditions for the emergence of transcendentalist modes of thought. When transcendentalist thought emerges, the ancient cosmology of the lion and the leopard offers the mythical framework for dualist cosmologies of death and rebirth, often expressed through leopard or tiger *skin* garments (what I have called *pardivesture*), whose converging symbolism can be traced throughout the successive civilisations of the Ancient Near East (Indus, Sumer, Egypt, Greece, with ramifications into South Asia and China). A cluster of leopard-associated goddesses (Cybele, Hera, Aphrodite, Circe), and male figures vicariously associated with them (Dionysus, Orpheus, Jason, Menelaus, Antenor), merges with goddesses combining feminine attributes (spinning, childbirth) with military prowess: Neith, Athena, Anath, Anahita, with more distant resonances in the weaving goddesses Proserpina and Harmonia, with the African spider goddess Anansi/Nzambi/Nyambi, and with the leopard or tiger associated South Asian goddesses of death and transformation Durga and Kali. From this complex but consistent repertoire springs the Osirian/ Orphic/ Dionysian/ Christian tradition – a prime source of transcendentalism that has largely shaped Europe and the Near East in the last few millennia. All this testi-

¹²⁵ Cf. von Sicard 1968-1969.

fies to a gradual but most fundamental shift in gender power, with male gods and male prerogatives replacing female ones in the millennia between the early Neolithic and the early Iron Age.¹²⁶

- f. In post-Neolithic Africa the Luwe complex is widespread but fragmented and little incorporated in current cultures, as if it were a remnant of a West Asian / northeastern African context which (at least, according to my tentative reconstructions, which are in part inspired by recent genetic findings as to a Back-into-Africa return migration from Asia), appears to have coincided with the emergence of Khoi-San and Niger-Congo as language families. The cosmology of the lion and the leopard has not survived in Africa as an integrated dualist complex, instead the leopard has largely shed its complement the lion, and has taken on (or reverted back to) the immanentist shape of the Exalted Insider – power-hungry and treacherous. Nonetheless, Sacred Outsiders, full of leopard-skin symbolism, are to be found in an eastern and northern fringe of sub-Saharan African, as an interface with the Eurasian domain of transcendentalism centring on the Sacred Outsider. (diagram 2)

These are some of the findings which I am currently working into my book *The leopard's unchanging spots: Long-range comparative research as a key to enduring patterns of African agency*. I have no illusions about the reception that book is to expect.¹²⁷ In African Studies and in anthropology, myth is no longer the hot issue it was in the 1950s and 1960s; new myths, such as globalisation and multiculturalism, have taken that place. And I have

¹²⁶ Ye Shuxian 2003 makes clear that also for China there is evidence of the early prominence of a female goddess (identified by him with the Nü Wa 女媧 of Chinese tradition), to be subjugated and eclipsed by a male god (identified with the culture hero Fu Xi 伏羲 of Chinese tradition). This is in line with the Chinese strands in my own analysis of leopard symbolism, which tends to revolve on the mother goddess and/or her junior male companion. These strands include: the conspicuous place of the Dene-Sino-Caucasian linguistic group in leopard nomenclature in four continents; and 'Dionysian' and 'Osirian' themes (not necessarily to be taken to have diffused from a postulated origin in the Ancient Near East and South East Europe) in classical Chinese iconography and symbolism, especially in the imperial context, where also the leopard, *bao* 豹, is conspicuous.

¹²⁷ A first indication is already given in the scornful and dismissive treatment of my 'neo-diffusionism' in the otherwise commendable book by my friend Jean-Luc Amselle (2001: 31f, 98f).

obliged by incorporating these themes into my recent work. Given this unpopularity (especially in African Studies), my current mythical studies (in the stricter sense of the word) are likely to be relegated, in their own right, to the status of pseudo-scientific myth, and to be denied validity. In terms of the framework sketched above, however, that would be rather high praise, even though probably unjustified.

Ultimately, such an analysis conveys the following lesson: Myth cannot be studied in isolation – far more illuminating is an interdisciplinary approach that combines a number of long-range research efforts, from genetics to archaeology and from linguistics to comparative ethnography.

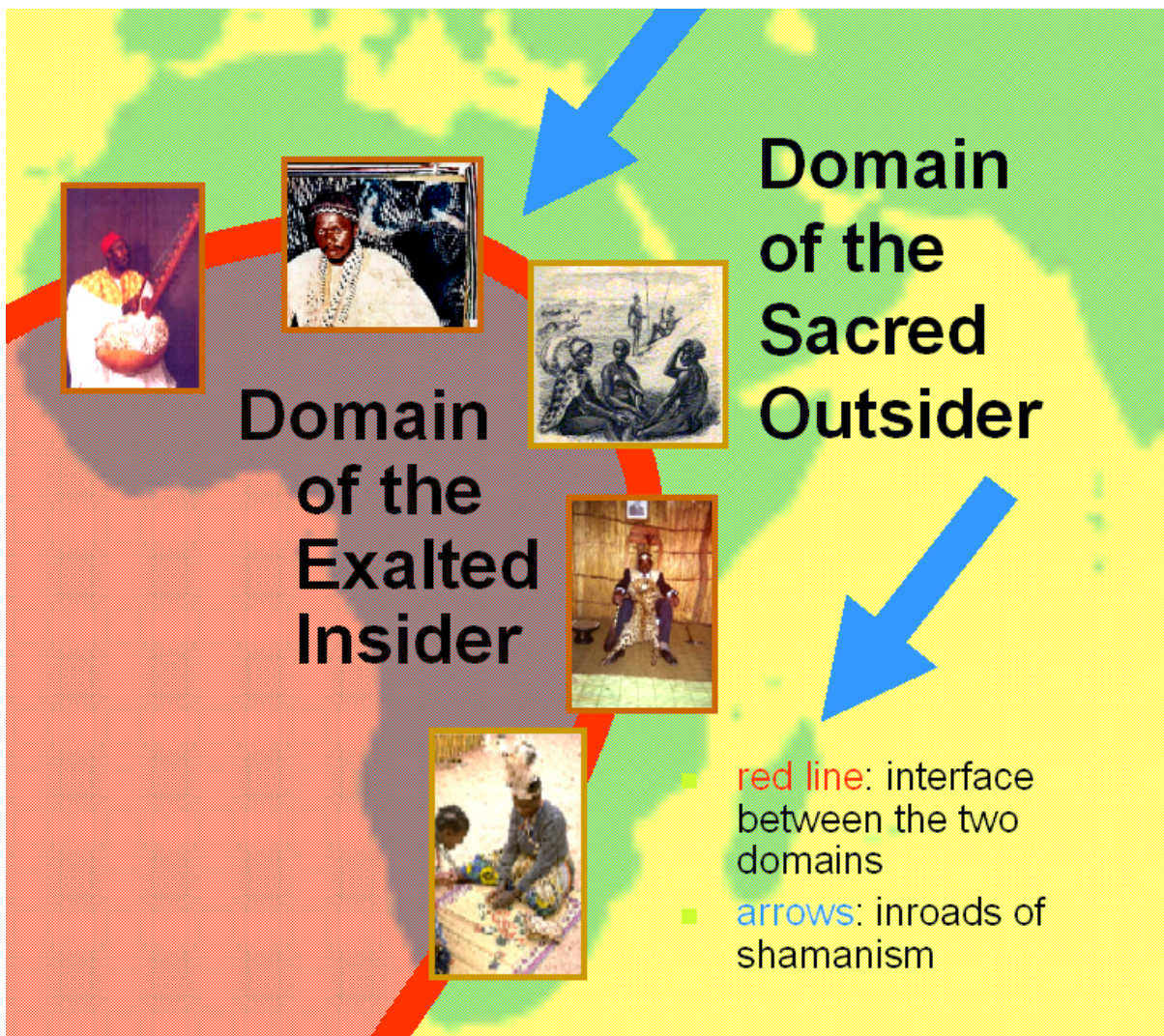


Diagram 2. The five prominent instances of pardivesture ('the ceremonial or ritual wearing of leopard skins') in Africa during the second millennium CE are, from west to east and from north to south: bards; Islamic saints; Nilotic leopard-skin chiefs; kings; and diviner-priests in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition. My intercontinental comparative and historical analysis of leopard symbolism suggests that these five instances may be interpreted as being situated at the interface between two very extensive cultural domains, and as resulting from the recent (2nd millennium CE) interaction between these domains: (a) the implicitly transcendentalist domain of the leopard-skin wearer as the Sacred Outsider (usually with shamanistic connotations), widely distributed in the Old World except in West and South-West Africa; and (b) the implicitly immanentist domain of the leopard-skin wearer as the Exalted Insider (usually without shamanistic connotations), in West and South-West Africa.¹²⁸

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¹²⁸ Also this illustration is derived from van Binsbergen 2003c.

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