

‘Giving oneself air(s): The 2010 Radcliffe exploratory seminar on Comparative Mythology at Harvard’

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Introduction

Air¹ plays an interesting role in comparative mythology.² The space in between Heaven and Earth is an obvious theme in a worldview (which has been argued to have been dominant throughout Eurasia since the Neolithic or earlier, with extensions into Africa, Oceania and the Americas) hinging on the Separation of Heaven and Earth (and their subsequent reconnection), and major deities such as Enlil (Sumer) Shu (Ancient Egypt), Vayu (South Asia), Hera (Late Graeco-Roman), the unilateral being Luwe (sub-Saharan Africa), perhaps Heimdall (Northern Europe), have been interpreted as personifications of air. In African mythology air often appears as thongs or poles uniting heaven and earth, along which seeds, domestic animals, a demiurge, descend in order to compensate for humans the traumatic effects of the separation of heaven and earth. Widespread as an evocation of air is also the Tower into Heaven, allowing humans to ascend to the sky to pursue and pillage the divine. Air also features in various versions of an elemental transformative system throughout Eurasia, and there may be personified again into a mythical character.³

In the history of science it is a common expression to claim that certain ideas were ‘in the air’, to surface almost simultaneously in the work of several individual scholars who were not in direct contact. In close-knit academic communities such as disciplinary associations this effect may be enhanced. Under recent conditions of the

¹ No convincing etymology beyond Greek *aēr* (Chantraine, P., 1968-80, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque, I-IV*, Paris: Klincksieck). Meillet, A., 1925, *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris*, 26: 7f, reads its meaning as ‘suspension’. Perhaps we might distantly connect this root with Kartvelian **čwer-*, ‘to sink (also of the sun)’ (Starostin, Sergei, & Starostin, George, 1998-2008, Tower of Babel etymological database, participants: Russian State University of the Humanities (Center of Comparative Linguistics), Moscow Jewish University, Russian Academy of Sciences (Dept. of History and Philology), Santa Fe Institute (New Mexico, USA), City University of Hong Kong, Leiden University, at: <http://starling.rinet.ru/babel.htm>, ‘Kartvelian etymology’). This Kartvelian word is semantically akin not only to ‘suspension’ but also to Hera – the mythical adversary (as setting sun?) of protagonists projected into the South Caucasian context and having strong solar connotations (Aëtes, Medeia – as rising or midday sun?). For an extensive semantic study of the Greek, Latin and French uses of the root *aēr* etc., cf. Mudimbe, V.Y., 1979, *Air: Etude sémantique*, Wien-Föhrenau: Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität Wien / E. Stiglmayr.

² For an interesting selection cf. Clarke, Helen Archibald, 1913, *A guide to mythology*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, pp. 269-335.

³ Cf. Bachelard, G., 1948, *L’air et les songes: Essai sur l’imagination du mouvement*, Paris: Corti; first published 1943.

incessant and instant flow of information via new media (specially the Internet), and the greatly enhanced availability of stored information worldwide, even more favourable conditions are being created for ideas being ‘in the air’ and materialising simultaneously in multiple explicit statements.⁴ Here as elsewhere, air may stand for that aspect of our reality with which we are implicitly so familiar that we no longer perceive it consciously – ‘like the very air that we are breathing’.⁵ Air has become an increasingly powerful symbol of the inchoate, unbounded, fluid forms of concepts and relationships associated with (post-)modernity.⁶

Three ideas ‘in the air’

The recent ‘Radcliffe exploratory seminar on Comparative Mythology, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard, Cambridge MA, USA (6-7 October 2010) offered a number of instances of important ideas in Comparative Mythology being ‘in the air’.

(a) ‘It was probably geographical blockage by Neanderthals which prevented Anatomically Modern Humans to leave Africa (c. 60-50 ka BP) and to diffuse into Eurasia beyond the Levant’

This excellent point, made by the palaeoanthropologist David Pilbeam at the Radcliffe seminar,⁷ reiterated an idea long in the air – already driven home in representations of Middle Palaeolithic Neanderthal geographical distribution in the literature of several decades ago.⁸

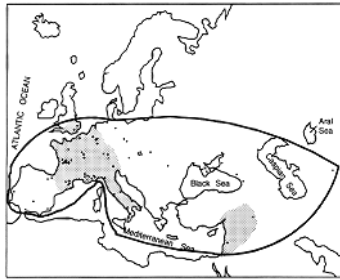
⁴ Cf. Goldstein, I.F. and Goldstein, M., 1981, *How We Know: An Exploration of the Scientific Process*, Boulder/San Francisco/London: Westview Press, p. 255; Peters, J. (1999). *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago. A useful list of simultaneous discoveries is offered by: Simon, Pullikattil, ‘Simultaneous Discoveries’, at: <http://ezinearticles.com/?Simultaneous-Discoveries&id=573362> ; it includes such items as Newton’s Law, Boyle’s Law, the jet plane, electrons, the anthrax bacilla, malaria, the Periodic System of Elements, etc.

⁵ Cf. Irigaray, Luce., 1999, *The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger*. Austin : University of Texas Press, 1999; English translation of : *L’oubli de l’air chez Martin Heidegger*, Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983.

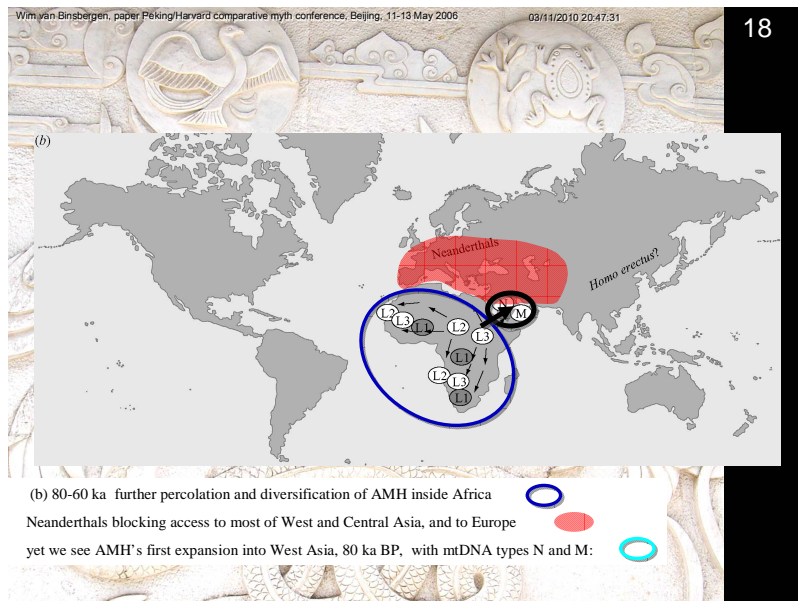
⁶ Berman, M. 1982. *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁷ Pilbeam, David (Harvard), 2010, ‘A brief review of the evidence concerning the evolution, distribution, and possible interactions of hominins (humans and their ancestors and relatives) over the past fifty thousand years’, paper read at the Radcliffe Exploratory Seminar on Comparative Mythology, Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 6-7 October 2010.

⁸ Giacobini, G., & F. Mallegni, 1989, ‘Les Neandertaliens Italiens: Inventaire des restes et nouvelles découvertes’, in: G. Giacobini, ed., *Hominidae*, Milan: Jaca Books, pp. 379-385, whence the distribution map shown here derives originally; cf. Vandermeersch, B. 1989a. ‘The evolution of modern humans: Recent evidence from Southwest Asia’, in: P. Mellars & C. Stringer, eds. *The Human Revolution: Behavioural and Biological Perspectives on the Origins of Modern Humans*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, pp. 155-164. The distribution map reproduced via: Cavalli-Sforza, L.L., Piazza, A., & Menozzi, A., 1994, *The history and geography of the human genes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Fig. 2.1.2. The well-known evidence for a much earlier penetration of Anatomically Modern Humans into the Neanderthaloid Levant (cf. Stringer, Chr. & C. Gamble, 1993, *In Search of the Neanderthals: Solving the Puzzle of Human Origins*, London: Thames and Hudson, ch.



It was also argued by me in my Beijing elaboration of the Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology;⁹ cf. there, slide 18:



5, and references cited there) was acknowledged repeatedly by Pilbeam and others (Blažek, Harrod) during the Radcliffe seminar.

⁹ Cf. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2006a, 'Mythological archaeology: Situating sub-Saharan cosmogonic myths within a long-range intercontinental comparative perspective', in: Osada, Toshiki, with the assistance of Hase, Noriko, eds., *Proceedings of the Pre-symposium of RIHN and 7th ESCA Harvard-Kyoto Roundtable*, Kyoto: Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), pp. 319-349; also at: http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/kyoto%20as%20published%202006%20EDIT2.pdf; van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2006b, 'Further steps towards an aggregative diachronic approach to world mythology, starting from the African continent', paper read at the International Conference on Comparative Mythology, organized by Peking University (Research Institute of Sanskrit Manuscripts & Buddhist Literature) and the Mythology Project, Asia Center, Harvard University (Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies), May 10-14, 2006, at Peking University, Beijing, China; until very recently considered to be in press in: Duan Qing & Gu Zhenkun, eds., *Proceedings of the International Conference on Comparative Mythology*, Beijing; preprint at: http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/Further%20steps%20def.pdf, Section 5: 'The Neanderthal connection'. The original slide show is to be found at: http://shikanda.net/ancient_models/further_steps_beijing/index.htm.

(b) ‘It was primarily in Asia that the crucial transformations and innovations took place producing the main mythologies attested in historical times on the basis of the pre-Out-of-Africa mythological inheritance of Anatomically Modern Humans’

This statement, now made in passing as a commonly accepted point during the Radcliffe seminar,¹⁰ has constituted a central claim of my Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology (2006a, 2006b). At the time, this was welcomed as a new and illuminating insight, which it well may have been – although chances are that, rather, it too had already been ‘in the air’.

(c) ‘Once we have a theoretical model of the development of global mythology in prehistory, we can use it to systematically read / interpret prehistoric iconography, while the latter, in turn, can be used to corroborate our theoretical model’

This point, made by Witzel in his 2010 Radcliffe presentation,¹¹ was clearly another example of ‘ideas in the air’. During the Radcliffe seminar this idea was taken up by archaeologist James Harrod, who used Witzel’s theory of long-range mythological development to find additional support his own fascinating and visionary (though still insufficiently conceptualised and operationalised) efforts over the decades of reading very specific structure and meaning in even Lower Palaeolithic artefacts.¹² Again it is an idea ‘in the air’: for instance, it was earlier applied at length in my statements at Kyoto (2005), Leiden (2005) and especially Beijing (2006), on the basis of my own Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology, initially inspired by but (cf. Diagram 1, below) substantially departing from, Witzel’s.¹³

¹⁰ In: Berezkin, Yuri, 2010, ‘Can we know something about European Mesolithic cosmonymy?’, paper read at the Radcliffe Exploratory Seminar on Comparative Mythology, Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 6-7 October 2010. Incidentally, Berezkin’s paper, based on a perceptive (if entirely *etic*) analysis of Berezkin’s massive, and enormously detailed, global comparative mythological database, constitutes one of the major advances in archaeoastronomy in recent years – consolidating, far beyond conjecture and merely regional analysis, the common claim of Upper Palaeolithic knowledge of constellations, and the transcontinental convergence of such knowledge; cf. Rappenglueck, Michael A., 1999, *Eine Himmelskarte aus der Eiszeit? Ein Beitrag zur Urgeschichte der Himmelskunde und zur palaeoastronomischen Methodik*, Frankfurt a/Main: Peter Lang; Gurshtein, Alex A., 1993, ‘On the Origin of the Zodiacal Constellations’, *Vistas in Astronomy*, 36: 171-190; and very extensive references there.

¹¹ Witzel, Michael, 2010, ‘Homo fabulans: Deep reconstruction of early mythologies’, paper read at the Radcliffe Exploratory Seminar on Comparative Mythology, Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 6-7 October 2010.

¹² Harrod, James, 2010, ‘Four memes in the two million year evolution of symbol, metaphor and myth’, paper read at the Radcliffe Exploratory Seminar on Comparative Mythology, Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 6-7 October 2010.

¹³ van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2005, ‘Mythological archaeology and the visual arts’, short presentation, 16 December 2005, participation in the International Conference on Creation myths and the visual arts (M. Schipper & Daniela Merolla, convenors), Leiden: National Museum of Ethnology; at: http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/myth_and_visual_arts/mythical_archaeology_&_visual_arts_December_2005_Leiden_2005.htm ; van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, *o.c.* Of these, however, only the Kyoto paper has so far reached the point of formal publication – the Leiden paper was a very short oral presentation confided to the Internet; the Beijing paper was elaborately prepared for publication by the Beijing convenors (Duan Qing, Witzel and Gu Zhenkun), but – as happens often – these proceedings never materialised (beyond a small collection of papers with direct Chinese relevance). Only at the 2010 Conference of the International

Having previously attended, on Harvard-paid tickets, earlier annual conferences of the Harvard Round Table / Comparative Mythology conferences in 2004 (Cambridge MA, USA), 2005 (Kyoto, Japan), 2006 (Beijing, People's Republic of China) and 2009 (Tokyo, Japan), and having convened and published, with my Dutch colleague Eric Venbrux, the 2008 event (Ravenstein, the Netherlands),¹⁴ I was (for reasons of historical justice; and also because of the Radcliffe Institute's blatant scarcity of funds and of accommodation) one of the very few participants to be allowed to attend this conference only informally, to pay his own way, to be excluded from the after-hours social events, and not invited to give a paper. That somewhat unsettling state of affairs made it all the more gratifying to note that at least the air at the Radcliffe seminar was full of ideas with which I could identify.



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So much for ideas circulating freely and beginning to be taken for granted within a dedicated community of scholars. The opposite would be ideas that are systematically ignored to the detriment of scholarly debate as a truth-finding strategy. Also of this the Radcliffe seminar offered an interesting example.

Association for Comparative Mythology it was announced informally in Witzel's presidential address that the Beijing proceedings had now been given up as a project. I will now make a point of finding an alternative publication venue for his Beijing paper at his earliest convenience.

¹⁴ Wim M.J. van Binsbergen & Eric Venbrux, eds., *New Perspectives on Myth: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Ravenstein (the Netherlands), 19-21 August, 2008*, Leiden / Haarlem: Papers in Intercultural Philosophy and Transcontinental Comparative Studies; also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/PIP/New_Perspectives_On_Myth_2010/toc_proceedings_IACM_2008_2010.htm .

2. The precarious distinction between Northern and Southern mythologies, and their true relationship

Michael Witzel opened the Radcliffe seminar with a full statement (based on his book now in the press with Oxford University Press) on his own theory of the earliest development of human mythology. In his paper, Witzel explicitly and graciously adopted my 2009 definition of myth.¹⁵ However, not for the first time Witzel ignored the fundamental theoretical and knowledge-political debate he and I have had since 2005¹⁶ about the merits and demerits of Witzel's radical absolute distinction, in the classification and historical development of global mythology, between 'Gondwana' (Southern, 'primitive': Africa, Andaman, Australia, New Guinea) and 'Laurasian' (Northern, 'advanced': Eurasia, Oceania and North America) mythologies. At the Radcliffe seminar, during the discussion, I expressed the view that rather than looking at Witzel's distinction as a historic split into two cladistic branches of world mythology, it should be seen as a processual development, in such a way (cf. diagram 1) that

- (a) the Southern variety would correspond more closely with the common mythological package (in my terms: 'Pandora's Box') with which Anatomically Modern Humans left Africa c. 60 ka BP;
- (b) subsequently, the Northern variety was to develop out of the Southern one, *largely inside Asia*¹⁷, but with two major qualifications:
 - the Southern variety would continue to constitute a mythological substrate globally, also in the regions now marked by a Northern mythology;
 - the 'Back-into-Africa' movement from Eurasia c. 15 ka BP¹⁸ would mean that Northern mythologies would be taken into sub-Saharan Africa, where they have been largely dominant in historical times.¹⁹

¹⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2009, 'Rupture and Fusion in the Approach to Myth: Situating Myth Analysis Between Philosophy, Poetics and Long-Range Historical Reconstruction', *Religion Compass*, 3 (2009): 1-34; full text at: http://shikanda.net/topicalities/RECO_128_def.pdf.

¹⁶ This started with: van Binsbergen 2006a, *o.c.* (my Kyoto 2005 paper), in response to Witzel 2001, *o.c.* For the latest installment in this debate, giving both theoretical models and extensive detailed empirical description for African-Eurasian continuities in myth, see: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2010, 'The continuity of African and Eurasian mythologies: General theoretical models, and detailed comparative discussion of the case of Nkoya mythology from Zambia, South Central Africa', in: van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010, *o.c.*, pp. 143-225, also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/PIP/New_Perspectives_On_Myth_2010/New_Perspectives_on_Myth_Chapter9.pdf.

¹⁷ Also see above under heading 1.

¹⁸ As identified by molecular genetics in the last 15 years; for discussion and references see van Binsbergen 2010, *o.c.*

¹⁹ This point is argued in great detail in van Binsbergen 2010, *o.c.*

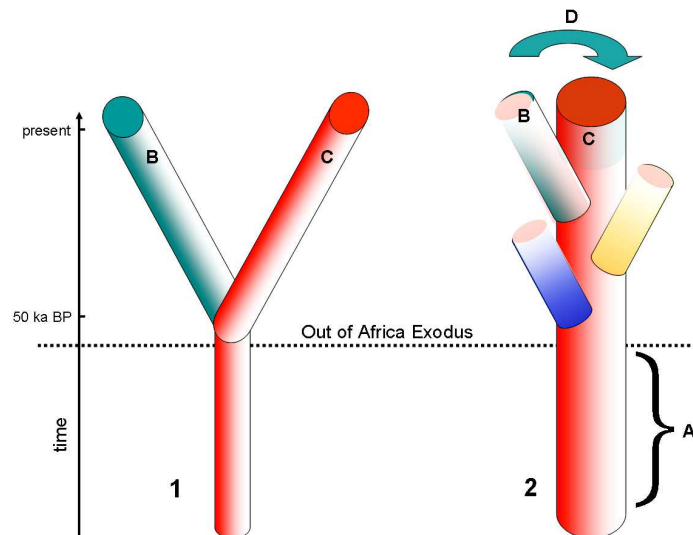


Figure 1. Diagrammatic comparison of the Witzel's (1) and van Binsbergen's (2) models of global mythological history

A. Pandora's Box; B. Eurasian etc. mythologies ('Witzel: 'Laurasian')' C: African etc. mythologies (Witzel: 'Gondwana'); D. feedback from B to C in the context of the 'Back-into-Africa' movement. In (1), note the absence of the A (red) substrate in B, and in general the absolute difference between B and C.

In (2), note the presence of the A substrate (red) in all later developments including B; the branching of B from C; as well as the feedback D (green) from B to C; hence the overall approachement between B and C.

In the subsequent discussion, Witzel continued to reject my view and to stick to his equal-level bifurcation. However, my view was supported by geneticist Nick Patterson (MIT / Broad Institute) on genetic grounds: whereas the population cluster owning the Northern mythologies might be considered a true clade (a clearly defined branch sprung from the population tree), the African genes associated with the Southern mythologies have been demonstrated to be equidistant from all other non-African genes, and can be therefore considered, in fact, a substrate.

Apparently, Michael Witzel has invested so much time and energy into his absolute Laurasian / Gondwana classification that he finds it difficult to see it reinterpreted towards greater overlap and historical connectivity of the Southern and Northern varieties of humankind. Yet it will be the sustained and global consciousness of such overlap and connectivity, rather than the analytical mind's brilliant absolute distinctions, that will save humankind from extinction in the foreseeable future.

I am rejecting Witzel's view on this point, on two counts. In the first place on empirical grounds within comparative mythology and its ancillary sciences, especially population genetics and long-range linguistics (see especially my 2010 article). But in the second place on intercultural-philosophical and knowledge-political grounds.²⁰ Dualist views of the nature and composition of humankind, claiming an absolute

²⁰ van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2003, *Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological towards a philosophy of interculturality*, Berlin / Boston / Muenster: LIT; also at: http://shikanda.net/intercultural_encounters/index.htm

difference to divide Anatomically Modern Humans up into Blacks and Whites, Civilized and Barbarians, Women and Men, Jews and Gentiles, Jews and Aryans, Muslims and Infidels, Christians and Pagans, Capitalists and Socialists, etc. etc., not only have done great injustice to historical fact and to the situational and fluid nature of human distinctions – they also create a justification for negative stereotyping, hatred, slavery and genocide. If one does not wish to extend to other people the benefits, rights and dignity one cherishes as one's own, the most effective strategy is to deny these others membership of the community of humankind. If that goes too far for reasons of external social control or inner programming, bracketing the others in a category defined as absolutely different from one's own is still an effective step in the same regrettable direction.

Witzel and his associate the comparative historian Steve Farmer have been involved for years in a tough battle with Hindu fundamentalists about the region (inside or outside the Indian subcontinent) of origin of the Vedic scriptures (that are constitutive on Hindu civilisation), and about the alleged literate nature of the Indus Valley civilisation (3300–1300 BCE). In the process, many members of Witzel's and Farmer's academic network (including myself) have been rallied to loyal partisanship. A great deal of verbal, digital and juridical violence has been exchanged between the protagonists in this battle (which amounts to a battle of the claims of regional identity with its distorted views of reality, versus the claims of universalising science),²¹ in ways little conducive to intercultural, respectful subtlety; and much more conducive to a resolute casting overboard of all considerations of political correctness. I was initially trained as an anthropologist, among other fields, and humble (even if sometimes performative) yielding to the others' culture is part of anthropologists' professional stance, with an inveterate tendency towards what has been called, ever since the 1980s, political correctness. Admittedly, such a meek response has its limitations in an age of ever more sinister identitary struggles. However, also the combination of scientific universalising truth claims with intercultural callousness has its limits, and can count on wider loyalty only up to a limit.

Witzel's absolute distinction between 'Laurasian' and 'Gondwana' (geological terms conjuring up a primal separation going back not just a handful of millennia, but hundreds of millions of years) risks to be a recent manifestation of the extreme 'othering' / alterisation Africa and Africans have been subjected in the North Atlantic intellectual tradition since the trans-Atlantic slave trade of Early Modern times, and since the reach for simple geopolitical global models during and after the Enlightenment (Kant, Hegel).²² This potentially pernicious and factually wrong approach must not be allowed to get a grip on comparative mythology as a field, in these years of its splendid rebirth.

²¹ Albeit in this case, somewhat obsolescent, a non-relativist science that does not realise that the main purpose of scientific results is not to proclaim immutable universal and absolute truth, but to be replaced by better results still unpredictable today.

²² Bernal, M., 1987, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol. I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1987*, London: Free Association Books/ New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, 1997, 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's Anthropology', in: Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, ed., *Postcolonial African philosophy: A critical reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 103-140; Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, 1996, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Conclusion

It has been largely (but not exclusively)²³ due to the inspiration of Michael Witzel that comparative mythology has lost its earlier trappings of abstruse and irrelevant scholarship, is becoming an exciting crossroads of disciplines, and now boasts a thriving international scholarly association.²⁴ In such a seething intellectual context, it is only to be expected to have ideas diffusely circulating without strict emphasis on original and unique authorship. However, there is little point in systematically and academically studying mythology, if our own personal myths have to go unnoticed like the very air that we are breathing; or have to be over-protected by ignoring even very vocal alternatives. The Radcliffe Institute is to be congratulated for having helped us to bring these dilemmas into the open.

P.S. The predictable response to my argument is of course to demonstrate how it, in turn, is informed by personal myths of my own. No doubt it is, in line with a theoretical approach to myth which I developed in my Religion Compass article (2009; o.c.). The point is not the mixture of myth and scholarship – without such mixture the study of myth remains barren and superficial. The point is to compensate for myth's tendency to pose as absolute truth. Open debate; democratic, accountable and egalitarian forms of social engagement; and methodological empirical investigation,²⁵ are among the standard remedies against such a tendency.

Leiden, November 2010.

[return to Topicalities for October 2010: http://shikanda.net/topicalities/topicali.htm](http://shikanda.net/topicalities/topicali.htm)

²³ The International Association for Comparative Mythology, founded at the Beijing 2006 conference on comparative mythology, is presided by Michael Witzel and has a board of ten directors, including myself.

²⁴ It is for this reason that we as editors of van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010, *o.c.*, have dedicated that volume to Michael Witzel.

²⁵ Cf. Habermas, J., 1981, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, I. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung; II. Zur Kritik der Funktionalistischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp; Popper, K.R., 1959, *The logic of scientific discovery*, New York: Basic Books.