



Communication via Myth Narratives: A Study in Relation to the Primordial Forms

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Abstract

Mythological narratives examine the advent of savage man against the odds mounted on him by the nature. In the course of time, they were defeated, and each such defeat, in the hands of nature, came to the acceptance of nature as either the divine agency or instruments of power. The earliest human beings endeavored to understand the nature and it became an object of knowledge and experience. The tale or story is told to be heard, the idea that reflects through the mind can pass through infinite prisms of communication. This paper focuses on how civilization go through three stages of development first is belief in magic, second is how magic leads to organized religion and third is how religion eventually leads to believe in the powers of science. According to Frazer, magic is basically based on two great branches of Sympathetic Magic- Homeopathic or Imitative magic and Contagious Magic or it may be called as Law of Contact. Magic is also composed of both positive precepts as well as negative precepts. Negative precepts are prohibitions or taboos and positive precepts are charms. In some cases of magic, spirits are involved and it was assumed that by prayers and by sacrifices people could win their favours. In this way we can say that magic is somewhat amalgamated with religion. Religion consists of two elements, a theoretical- a belief in powers higher than man, and a practical- an attempt to please them. Of these two elements, belief comes first, because unless and until we believe in the existence of supreme power we cannot make an attempt to please them. And it won't be called religion but only theology if the belief does not lead to practice. According to Edward Tylor the first and foremost idea of godhead was attained through the idea of spirit, which we can call as an animistic conception. Then from animism three different concepts of deities emerged- fetishism, totemism and worship of the dead.

When the primitive man was confronted with a situation of intellectual difficulties and couldn't find an exact answer to it, to dissolve the difficulty he invented a story to narrate the situation. The myth created out of such a process tends to be scientific, though a primitive science. We can say so because the function that these stories accomplish is to enlighten the folk regarding the nature of the objects which are around him. Not only this, it also helped to understand the causal relationship of the objects.

Keywords: *myth narratives, orality, magic, religion, animism, fetishism, totemism, ancestor worship, science*

Mythological narratives which have been developed since antiquity, present to us certain important facets of the growth and development of main stream literary discourse, human experience or certain typical historical and cultural events. In fact, it seems better to understand the mythological narratives by examining the advent of the earliest man against the odds mounted on him by the nature. The earliest human beings were more or less indisposed in that they thrived to raise a war against the extraordinary forces of nature. In the course of time, they were defeated, and each such defeat, in the hands of nature, came to the acceptance of nature as either the divine agency, or instruments of power. Power that is precisely incapable of being won over. In an effort to pacify themselves they proceeded to comprehend the nature. Consequently they started categorizing the nature as being mighty, divine, God, Goddess, spirit, mother, father, brother, son, daughter, enemy, etc. Each such categorization led to the advent of mythological narratives. The earliest human beings endeavored to understand the nature, consequently each of the above categories of nature became an object of knowledge and experience.

Such categorization brings us to the consideration of the fact that the human beings wish to perpetuate themselves through the forces of nature and a question always emerges in their minds with regard to their own impermanence. In fact, the hidden irony brought to the consideration of humanity as to how and why nature could be an object, of event of simultaneity, competence and correspondence. We can also understand that the aesthetics of myth narratives is an aesthetic of creation of one's own meanings in others. And thus it is categorized as a well defined in process of transformation and modification.

If the tale or story is told to be heard, then the idea that reflects through the mind can pass through infinite prisms of communication. Orality is a complex tradition that informs indigenous cultural nuances. Indigenous cultures are primarily oral and share common modes and means for production and preservation of important socio-religious customs and conventions. Far from being primitive fictions, myths not only represent our instinctive fictions and not only represent our instinctive understanding of collective communal themes and motifs that is archetypes but they also reflect contemporary reality profoundly. These archetypes have been well preserved through orality during the age of illiteracy. Therefore, they form the main corpus of cultural as well as literacy patterns in various human societies. Cultural identity generally associates with the myths. Nearly all the civilizations have their own mythologies.

Lewis Spence in his text *An Introduction to Mythology* outlines the principles of mythology with reference to comparative religion and folklore. According to him myth, legend, and folk-tale may be defined as traditional forms of narratives. He defined the term *Myth* as

“A myth is an account of the deeds of a god or supernatural beings, usually expressed in terms of primitive thought. It is an attempt to explain the relation

of man to the universe, and it has for those who recount have arisen to 'explain' the existence of some social organization, a custom, or the peculiarities of an environment (Spence 11).

He further explained other terms- *Legend* as "A story, generally of real places, often (though not necessarily) of real persons, handed down by 'tradition'" (12). *Folklore* "A primitive tale (a) of mythical origin; (b) of purely narrative or aesthetic value" (12).

Another great name in primitive religious science is that of Sir James George Frazer, the world famous author of *The Golden Bough*. His mythological studies relate chiefly to vegetation and the deities connected therewith. Further he has drawn vague similarities from different cultures. The *Golden Bough* explores society's relationship with its natural environment, and how cycles of nature are reflected in human tradition and ceremony.

Frazer mainly discussed about the priesthood of the sanctuary of Goddess Diana. Each priest of Diana who guards the forest is known as the king of the woods. He held the position until someone else challenged and killed him in a duel, after breaking a branch from a tree- Golden Bough of the Wood. It has numerous parallels in ancient and barbarian priesthood. Frazer has answered the question that why the priest was also called the king of the Woods. The union of priestly duties along with royal title was common in ancient times. In India also kings were considered in many cases not just as priests, that is, a middle man between worshippers and god, but as themselves gods.

They were believed to possess some magical powers and they were able to bestow those magical powers and blessing upon their subjects and worshippers which are generally supposed to be beyond the reach of mortals. Therefore, kings were often expected to bring rain and sunshine in due season, to make the crops grow, and so on. So we can say that this is one way in which the idea of man-god is formed. But this concept of authority is often related with domination in which they just employed magic to hold the office at that time.

This paper focuses on how civilizations go through three stages of development- belief in magic, which leads to organized religion, and which eventually leads to believe in the powers of science. According to Frazer, magic is basically based on two great branches of Sympathetic Magic. First is Homeopathic or Imitative magic: the idea that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause. In this magician infers that by imitating he can produce any effect he desires. Second is Contagious Magic or it may be called as Law of Contact: the idea that things or persons which have once been in contact can for ever after have an influence on each other.

Frazer had put further light on homeopathic magic that it is composed of both positive precepts as well as negative precepts. Negative precepts are prohibitions, they will tell you not merely what to do, but also what to leave undone. The positive precepts are taken as charms whereas negative precepts are taken as taboos. Positive magic or

sorcery says, “Do this in order that so and so may happen” (Frazer 22). Negative magic or taboo says, “Do not do this, lest so and so should happen” (22). The motive of positive magic is to generate a favourable event; the aim of negative magic or taboo is to avoid an unfavourable one.

Magic, according to Frazer, exists among the ignorant and superstitious classes of modern Europe and among the lowest savage surviving in the remotest corners of the world. Two types of magic can be classified- public magic and private magic. Private magic refers to those magical rites which are practiced for the benefits or the injury of individuals whereas magical incantations and rites practiced for the benefit of the whole community referred as public magic. The magician who performs these magical rites readily acquires the rank and authority of a chief or king. The sorcery practiced for the benefit of the whole community affected the constitution of savage society. It placed the control of affairs in the hands of the most able man. It means that the savage society was ruled by the council of elders and not by the whole body of adults male. In this way, there was a rise of monarchy and it appears to be an essential condition for the transition of mankind from savagery.

In some cases of magic, spirits were involved and it was assumed that by prayers and by sacrifices they could win their favours. In this way we can say that magic is somewhat amalgamated with religion. The magician had a strong belief that by uttering spells and by performing proper ceremonies he could draw desired results, unless his spells were crushed by the charms of some another magician. In this way magic is related to religion. Religion consists of two elements, a theoretical- a belief in powers higher than man, and a practical- an attempt to please them. On these two elements, belief comes first, because unless and until we believe in the existence of supreme power we cannot make an attempt to please them. And it won't be called religion but only theology if the belief does not lead to practice. Emile Durkheim in his classic text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* define religion in this way:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – belief and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them (Durkheim 34).

Although the aim of ritual is to please the deity who delights in charity and mercy, he will be pleased by worshippers, neither by their prostrating in front of him nor by filling his temples with costly offerings, but being pure and merciful and charitable towards another men and animals. Therefore, it can be said that all religious practices should not be confined only to ritual rather should be followed in spirit.

If religion involves belief in superhuman beings who possess superhuman powers and rule the world, and attempt to win their favours by worshipping them. This notion reflects that the course of nature is somewhat flexible. We can persuade the divine beings for our benefits. But this flexibility does not prevail in the principles of magic as well as science both of which had a strong opinion that the course of nature is very rigid in its function. “In magic, indeed the assumption is only implicit, but in science,

it is completely explicit” (46). Though at an earlier stage magic is found to combine with religion, and even there was a time when man trusted to magic alone for the fulfillment of his needs. So, in this way, we can surmise that magic is older than religion in the history of mankind. Human being tried his best to bend the nature according to his wishes by magical spells and enchantments but when he failed in that, he started worshipping the mighty being in the form of prayers and sacrifices.

According to Edward Tylor the first and foremost idea of godhead was attained through the idea of spirit, which we can call as an animistic conception. “Man first attained the idea of spirit by reflection on experiences such as sleep, dreams, hallucinations, breath, and death, and by degrees extended this conception of soul or ghost until he peopled all nature with spirits, from among which one supreme being was finally raised above all”(102). First of all, animistic theory prevailed among early man that was the idea of spirits, then they started categorizing every form of nature as god and among them one supreme god emerged. Then from animism three different concepts of deities emerged– fetishism, totemism and worship of the dead.

A fetish is like a spirit who gets attached to a human being out of either its own desire which may be one of its own requirements (for example food, shelter, etc.) or because of certain compulsive spell on it. It serves as a good luck for the person or the family who has it and in return needs something which it thinks it deserves whether in form of respect or sacrifice, feasting, and the like. Moreover, this spirit is behaved according to its effects on the family who owns it, like- if it brings good luck it is treated well and if bad luck, treated accordingly. But it is different from the guarding deity in so far as it can be bought and sold. For instance, the spirit Aerial in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. It carries out all the commands given by Prospero like creating tempest.

Frazer and Durkheim both said that totemism is a religious system and a way of forming social groups. As a religious system in primitive societies, people had a strong desire to link them with animal, plant or some inanimate object. And their concern is to multiply their totem objects and killing and destruction of these are strictly tabooed. Moreover, in order to cherish and multiply the totem objects people start performing rites and ceremonies. And their celebrating one type of totem object is identified as a particular group who associate themselves with that totem. In this way totemism as a way of forming social groups comes into existence in which objects divide the groups into smaller units.

In primitive time, evolution of gods from ancestor- worship was not that popular. As father takes care of his son in his childhood, it is responsibility of his son to take care of his father even after his death. He should fulfill all the needs of his soul as he has fulfilled when he was alive. A.C. Lyall in his book *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* has explained ancestor worship by giving an example:-

His human personality becomes misty, his origin grows mysterious, his career takes a legendary hue his birth and death were supernatural; in the next generation the names of the elder gods get introduced into the story, and so the marvelous tradition

works itself into a myth until nothing but a personal incarnation can account for such a series of prodigies. The man was an avatar of Vishnu or Siva; his supreme apotheosis is now complete, and the Brahmins feel warranted in providing for him a niche in the orthodox pantheon (Lyall 22).

“Mythology is the savage’s science, his manner of explaining the universe in which he lives and moves” (21), says Lewis Spence. When the primitive man was confronted with a situation of intellectual difficulties and couldn’t find an exact answer to it, to dissolve the difficulty he invented a story to narrate the situation. The myth created out of such a process tends to be scientific, though a primitive science. We can say so because the function that these stories accomplish is to enlighten the folk regarding the nature of the objects which are around him. Not only this, it also helped to understand the causal relationship of the objects. We see this working in the Greek-myth of Echo and Narcissus where Echo becomes so thin that only its voice is left to be heard in the caverns, etc. According to this myth it is Echo who imitates our voices spoken at some lonely place like cave, etc. We see some correspondence between this myth of Echo and the science behind echo based on cause and effect functioning in the same direction and that is to enlighten us.

As G.S. Kirk said, in *Myth Its Meaning And Function In Ancient And Other Cultures*,

Myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal or non-urban cultures, which makes them one of main objects of anthropological interest... but also because of men’s endearing insistence or carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into a supposedly scientific age (Kirk 2).

In fact, the myth is a function of understanding on the part of the object as the subject’s configuration is so difficult by the virtue of being immutable. There are certain other characteristics which may be mentioned, for example the man in an effort to overcome the nature does so much harm that the total effect is of constant repentance. In other words, having done wrong that may be worth of repenting, yet it constitutes one of the important aspects of myth narratives. Sometimes it is also possible to understand the mythological stories becoming the vehicles of expression of the evil in the humanity itself. Simultaneously, when it comes to nature, the man tries to imitate, emulate, and emphasize the hidden, unseen and also invisible aspects of nature.

Conclusion

The major role which myth narratives had been playing that it shapes human experience and reality. In addition to this, myths are always used to represent the reality in a form of symbolism. A symbol is a visible aspect that suggests something invisible. In the primitive society the domain of magic and religion satisfy the human needs in addition to this ancient people have a great knowledge based on their experience and reason which helps them to carry out their day to day activities and thereby maintain the society. Broadly speaking, the myth narratives are objects of

knowledge in which they conceive, constitute, construct, improvise, reconstruct, organize, refashion the very self of the human beings. Consequently the facts are proven over the time span spread across many thousands years.

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