

SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA

252

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES
TO THE STUDY OF MYTH
Aleksandar Boskovic**

**Brasília
1999**

Anthropological approaches to the study of myth*

Aleksandar Boskovik
Departamento de Antropologia
Universidade de Brasília

Introduction

In this paper I intend to demonstrate the influence of William Robertson Smith's concept of myth and ritual to the anthropological study of myth. Smith was the first anthropologist to demonstrate clearly the relationship of myth and ritual — and in doing so he influenced generations of anthropologists. However, his influence was not always obvious or direct. For example, his concept of the primacy of ritual over myth was developed from the concept of religion as a social fact, which influenced Durkheim. It was through Durkheim that this concept made its way to subsequent scholarship. I will show the extent of some of Smith's ideas that were present in the works of some of the most prominent anthropologists (and, through their work, made their way into the philosophical theories of Cassirer and Langer). Paradoxically, myth figured much more prominently in the work of Edward Tylor (1877), but lost prominence in the subsequent anthropological literature. I believe that Smith was indirectly responsible for this decline in prominence.

William Robertson Smith is primarily associated with the 'Myth and Ritual school,'¹ and in this area his influence is still predominant in anthropology. In a

* Acknowledgment This is an abbreviated version of my M.A. thesis ("William Robertson Smith and the Anthropological Study of Myth"), defended at the Department of Anthropology, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA (USA) in 1993. It was presented at the **William Robertson Smith Congress** at King's College, Aberdeen, on April 8, 1994. The trip to this congress was helped by a grant from the University of St. Andrews Travel Fund. A much shorter (1/3 approximately) version of this paper was published as "William Robertson Smith and the anthropological study of myth" in: William Johnstone (ed.), *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment*, pp. 303-310, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1995. I am very grateful for all the comments and criticisms to various people, especially my Tulane advisor, Munro S. Edmonson and to my former professors from Belgrade, the late Dragoslav Srejovic, and Esad Cimic. I have greatly benefitted by being able to use the library of the Pittsburgh Union Theological Seminary while visiting my friends Milan Vukomanovic (now Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, Belgrade) and Svetlana Mojsilovic (now Center for the Development of Non-Profit Sector, Belgrade), and I am most grateful to them for their friendship and hospitality.

¹ A school of thought that stressed the primacy of ritual over myth, and that was particularly influential in the Classical studies in the first two or three decades of our century. Their influence in other fields (especially history of religions or comparative

relatively recent reference volume (*Dictionary of Comparative Religion*), myth is still referred to ‘as a kind of libretto to ritual action’ — although this is somewhat limited to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Israel, and the Hittites (Brandon 1970: 464).

My paper examines this influence, its origins and its prospects. The ‘Myth and Ritual school’ (or ritualist) approach still dominates anthropological research; this approach offers interesting insights, but also has its own limitations. I am primarily interested in the exploration of possibilities for overcoming these limitations, as well as looking into the ways that other anthropologists have been dealing with myth.

Since myths are an essential part of all human cultures, they were studied by anthropologists from the beginnings of the discipline (Tylor 1877). In most cases, anthropologists have been reluctant to devote their studies exclusively to myth (among notable exceptions are Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss), preferring to incorporate it within ‘customs’ or ‘beliefs’ of the peoples they have been studying.

A very important concept introduced by anthropologists in the study of myth is the concept of ritual, and it is this concept and the related studies of it that were fundamentally influenced by the work of William Robertson Smith (1846-1894). Although respected and studied,² Smith still lacks full recognition in the history of social and cultural anthropology.³ This is largely due to the lack of understanding of his influence on scholars such as Frazer (with the exception of studies by Jones 1984, Ackerman 1973 and 1991), Durkheim (1982), Malinowski (1979), and their followers. A notable exception is Mary Douglas, who wrote in *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966, p. 24; quoted by Sharpe 1986: 81): ‘Whereas Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore [*sic*]: Robertson Smith founded social anthropology.’⁴

religion and anthropology) was through the works of the Near Eastern scholar S. H. Hooke, but it mostly diminished (except in Scandinavia) after the 1950s.

I do not imply that Smith himself was part of this or any other ‘school.’ For an excellent summary of the theoretical concepts associated with myth and ritual, see Harrelson 1987 and a somewhat abbreviated version in Brandon 1970 (under ‘Scandinavian School’). Some admirable recent studies of the scholars (especially Frazer) and concepts associated with the ‘Myth and Ritual’ school include Ackerman 1973, 1976, 1991 and Segal 1980a.

² Especially Brown 1964, Beidelman 1974, and Bailey 1970. A brilliant critique of his views on religion is by Warburg 1989.

³ This is the case primarily in the American anthropological tradition. Actually, he is the only 19th century anthropologist that is very highly regarded among British social anthropologists (Sharpe 1986: 81). Except for Beidelman, all of the authors that have been just cited above are not anthropologists.

⁴ Sharpe immediately asserts that ‘Tylor, of course, did not found folklore.’ In all fairness to Tylor, he himself refers to the new discipline he is writing about as *ethnography* (1877, I: 1).

Anthropology, religion, and myth

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who wrote extensively about peoples and cultures that they had never seen, Smith was able to make several trips to the geographic area of his expertise. In the winter of 1878/79 he went to Cairo and Palestine. His relatively dark complexion, the fact that he wore native clothes, and his excellent command of Arabic enabled him to blend easily with people and make friends. He returned to the Middle East in 1880, and then traveled extensively throughout the Arabian peninsula all the way to Suez, spending two months at Jeddah and visiting Palestine, Syria, and Tunis (Smith 1912*b*). He again traveled to the Middle East in 1889 and 1890.

Details and observations from the 1880 trip were preserved in a series of 11 letters published between February and June 1880 in the daily newspaper *Scotsman*. In this ethnographic account Smith demonstrates his great knowledge of the countries that he travelled through and the customs of the people inhabiting them. Unfortunately, he was also a prisoner of the prejudices of his time, quite happy with his own Britishness (*ibid.*: 493, 500), and not particularly well disposed towards Islam (p. 511). In regard to the distribution of Christian books in the area, he noted that ‘in the interests of civilisation and of that progress which is seriously retarded by the current Moslem notion that their dry and barren literature is the most perfect that can be considered, it is heartily to be desired that a door should be opened to the circulation of Christian literature’ (pp. 566-567). This, among other things, because he believed that ‘[t]he Koran is the bullwark of all the prejudices and social backwardness in the East’ (p. 568).

Robertson Smith came to anthropology after the publication of Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871), and he shared an evolutionist perspective (Smith 1914: 2; Jones 1984: 50-51)⁵ with his fellow anthropologists. He firmly believed that Christianity (especially as exemplified in Scottish Presbyterianism) is the highest possible form of religion, although he did give credit to the ancient Semitic peoples (especially the Jews) for being essentially on the right track. Both the Arabs and the Jews, he felt, represented religious practices that Christian religion had to pass in the past, so it was very important to understand these religions (as well as other, ‘primitive’ ones, which could be successfully contrasted with them) in order to fully understand Christianity.

The ‘comparative method’ that he advocated was based on the concept of ‘survivals,’ made especially popular by Tylor (1832-1917). These ‘survivals’ were traits of the ancient beliefs and social customs that have been preserved in the

⁵ The following lines from *Lectures* provide a good example: ‘Savages, we know, are not only incapable of separating in thought between phenomenal and noumenal existence, but habitually ignore the distinctions, which to us seem obvious, between organic and inorganic nature, or within the former region between animals and plants’ (1914: 85-86).

contemporary societies, even though their original function and meaning were lost. The main problem with this method, as recently pointed out by Margit Warburg, was ‘that deciding whether something is a survival or not must be based on *a priori* suppositions of the direction and character of historical development. As a consequence the method easily leads to tautologies and/or becomes supported by prejudices’ (1989: 45).

In the article ‘Sacrifice’ for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Smith makes a distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘positive’ religions (1886: 132). The former ones (“nature religions of the civilized races of antiquity”) are defined as

[the] religions which had a predominantly joyous character, and in which the relations of man to the gods were not troubled by any habitual and oppressive sense of human guilt, because the divine standard of man’s duty corresponded broadly with the accepted standard of civil conduct, and therefore, though the god might be angry with his people for a time, or even irreconcilably wroth with individuals, the idea was hardly conceivable that the could be permanently alienated from the whole circle of his worshippers, — that is, from all who participated in a certain local (tribal or national) cult.

(Smith 1886: 134; see also Smith 1914: 285)

On the other hand, ‘positive’ religions are the ones of the inhabitants of the ancient Near East, or, as Smith put it, ‘Judaism, Christianity and Islam are positive religions’ because they ‘trace their origin to the teaching of the great religious innovators, who spoke as the organs of a divine revelation, and deliberately departed from the traditions of the past’ (1914: 1). Smith also saw these religions as ‘tribal or national’ (1892: 281), a concept which introduced a very important social component into the study of religion.

The god, it would appear, was frequently thought of as the physical progenitor or first father of his people.⁶ At any rate, the god and his worshippers formed a natural unity, which was also bound up with the land they occupied... The dissolution of the nation destroys the national religion, and dethrones the national deity. *The god can no more exist without his people than the nation without its god* [emphasis mine]. (Smith 1892: 281)⁷

⁶ On the concept of the deity as father (“progenitor and lord”), cf. Smith 1886: 135.

⁷ Cf. Smith 1912a: 463: ‘There is nothing surprising in the conception that the worshippers are sons of their god.’ On the ‘kinship between gods and men,’ also Smith 1914: 87-88. ‘Broadly speaking, the land of a god corresponds with the land of his worshippers; Canaan is Jehovah’s land as Israel is Jehovah’s people’, in the same way as ‘the land of Assyria (Asshur) has its name from the god Asshur’ (1914: 92). Smith also ventures in the attempts to explain the concept of the holy (1914: 91ff),

The supreme deity is associated with the concept of the ruler or king (1886: 133).⁸ The local god is in this perspective seen as a mediator between the people and the various aspects of their environment ('nature'), so the worshippers are in a permanent alliance with selected aspects of a natural life (1914: 124).

We are so accustomed to think of religion as a thing between individual men and God that we can hardly enter into the idea of a religion in which a whole nation in its national organisation appears as the religious unit, — in which we have to deal not with the faith and obedience of individual persons, but with the faith and obedience of a nation as expressed in the functions of national life.

(Smith 1902: 20)

This social concept of religion predates Durkheim and, in fact, Durkheim (1982: xv-xvi, 311, 371 ff; cf. also Beidelman 1974: 58, 1987) was quite clear in giving Smith the credit that he deserves.

Like the great majority of his contemporaries (with the notable exception of Müller and his followers), Smith believed that the best way to study religion was to examine its most primitive form. In the case of the Semitic peoples, this form was preserved in the life and customs of the Bedouin pastoralists, an argument that he already made in his book *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885). His emphasis on the social components of religion led him to postulate that it is the *action* that matters, much more than the *belief*. The ritual, therefore, must come before the myth.

In all the antique religions, mythology takes the place of dogma; that is, the sacred lore of priests and people, so far as it does not consist of mere rules for the performance of religious acts, assumes the form of stories about gods; and these stories afford the only explanation that is offered of the precepts of religion and the prescribed rules of ritual (...) This being so, it follows that mythology ought not to take the prominent place that is too often assigned to it in the scientific study of ancient faiths. So far as the myths consist of explanation of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the

making the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. Like many other aspects of his work, this distinction came into the anthropology *via* Durkheim.

⁸ This closely corresponds to information that has been gained from subsequent research into the extensive written records of the ancient Near Eastern cities, since it seems that all of them had a principal deity, who was paired with a consort (Pritchard 1991: 68). The ancient Greek texts, beginning with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, indicate the same pattern.

discretion of the worshipper. (...) As a rule the myth is no explanation of the origin of the ritual to any one who does not believe it to be a narrative of real occurrences, and the boldest mythologist will not believe that. But if it not be true, the myth itself requires to be explained, and every principle of philosophy and common sense demand that the explanation be sought, not in arbitrary allegorical categories, but in the actual facts of ritual or religious custom to which the myth attaches. The conclusion is, that in the study of ancient religions we must begin, not with myth, but with ritual and traditional usage.

(Smith 1914: 17-18, *passim*)

Smith believed that ritual should be considered before myth not only in order of importance (unlike the majority of the studies of his time), but that ritual literally preceded myth in time (Beidelman 1974: 64). Actions come first, human attempts to explain and rationalize them afterwards.⁹ This passage can also be understood as a reaction against the generalizations on the lines of the idea of the ‘primitive science’ of the ‘savages,’ as expressed by Lang (1884, 1887, 1911). Smith obviously believed that too much attention in the works of his time was being devoted to the beliefs and ‘stories about gods,’ at the expense of the rituals. Rituals should form the basis of any serious scholarship on ‘primitive religion,’ since they are essentially social in character, and since they reaffirm places and roles of average human beings within their communities (ethnic groups or tribes). What these individuals *believed* (or did not believe) *in* was a matter of their personal choice. What they were *performing* or *participating in* was not.

In the commentary to the third edition of the *Lectures*, Stanley A. Cook noted that myths ‘are specifically of *personal* interest, but, in general, they appeal differently to the different types of mind in normal mixed communities’ (Smith 1969: 502). The notion of the ‘personal interest’ is very important here, considering Smith’s emphasis on the social components in all religions. Naturally, since the ‘positive religions’ are much more elaborate and ‘advanced,’ this social component becomes more prominent in them. Myths might have been more important to the less civilized cultures, but in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they play a secondary role, more as a remnant and a reminder of the less civilized stages through which even these religions had to pass.

In his commentary Cook distinguished between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ myths (Smith 1969: 500-503). The ‘primary’ ones are connected with the system of beliefs and the specific worldview, and they are primarily associated with the ritual action. On the other hand, ‘secondary’ ones are less important in terms of their value. ‘They are based upon misunderstandings (e.g. of images, words, names); they are explanations of explanations, the key to an old tradition having been lost’ (Smith

⁹ A similar view was expressed in the early 1940s by Susanne K. Langer (1971: 126 ff), who noted that ‘[i]t is not at all impossible that *ritual*, solemn and significant, antedates the evolution of language’ (1971: 128). Cassirer also believed (following the predominant anthropological theories of his time) that ritual comes before myth (Cassirer 1922, Krois 1987: 85-99).

1969: 501). It is possible for these myths to get ‘purified’ and reworked into the ‘pleasing tales,’ but in all cases these myths are very remote from the concepts associated with them in ‘primitive’ cultures. While he accepts the concept of the greater importance of ritual action, Cook also noted ‘the risk of going into another extreme and making the distinction between myth and ritual too absolute’.

Although Smith’s theory received high praise by some of the leading scholars at the beginning of the 20th century (see Reinach 1911: 437-438), it stood in sharp contrast to the view about the complexity of the material that myths consisted of (Lang 1884, 1911). Andrew Lang has already profoundly influenced the study of myth with his notion that myths should be studied as some kind of a ‘primitive science.’ The idea of the essential difference between different cultures was the fatal blow to the comparative study of myths. There is a degree of similarity necessary for any comparison, and Lang showed that this degree is not present in, for example, ancient Greek culture and Australian Aboriginal culture.

The concept of the subordination of myth to ritual was already challenged in the articles for the another monument of scholarship, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (Fallaise 1924). In the same project, Hartley Burr Alexander (1924: 752) noted that ‘the meaning does not stop with the notion of act, it is also the attitude.’ The attitude is influenced by the belief, which is in its turn influenced by the faculty, etc. The explanation of ritual action is extremely complex, and if we attempt to understand myths primarily as something subordinate to rituals, we will not get very far. The implications of Smith’s views for the study of totemism was criticized by Cook (1902), and his theory has been completely rejected by the disciples of Durkheim, especially Mauss. It is no wonder that Smith’s view of myth and ritual did not exercise great influence in the history of religions, sociology of religion, and related disciplines.¹⁰ Anthropology, however, was a completely different story.

Anthropological approaches to the study of myth

William Robertson Smith was the first anthropologist who tried to define the relationship between myth and ritual. As I have already shown above, he clearly gave the preference to ritual. This influenced anthropologists after him to the effect that they were primarily looking at the *social* (sociological) aspects of the cultures and societies that they were studying. The myths were considered important primarily because they could tell something about the social organization, kinship, customs, etc.

The importance of myths was clearly recognized from the beginnings of anthropology as a scientific discipline in the late 1880s. Chapters on ‘beliefs’ and ‘rituals’ became a standard in all major ethnographies. A view of the founder of the American anthropology, Franz Boas (1858-1942), was that the native peoples’ customs and rituals were rapidly disappearing in light of huge technological advances and enormous colonial expansion. This was leading to the permanent disappearance

¹⁰ With the exception of the British and Scandinavian ‘myth and ritualists’ (cf. Harrelson 1987).

of something that Boas saw as the legacy of the whole world. One way to preserve this legacy was to go to the field and record Native American narratives — as many as possible.

Of course, now we know that the Native American societies were constantly changing and adapting under new circumstances, not disappearing, but the misconception of Boas and his followers led to the production of some excellent collections of narratives. In fact, no period can match the amount of ethnographic data gathered on the Native American cultures in the two decades at the beginning of our century. *Tsimshian Mythology* stands as perhaps the finest example of scholarship from this period.

In this magnificent volume, Boas attempted to present a summary of the customs and society of Tsimshian Indians from the British Columbia. This account was based on the stories collected by a native Tsimshian, Henry W. Tate. Boas also attempted to make a distinction between myths and tales (1916: 31), but without much success, since for the Tsimshians, there was no difference — at least none that the outside observer could be aware of. In the end, he settled for a compromise, describing the subject of this volume ‘a series of tales all of which are considered by the Tsimshian as myths’ (1916: 595).

The issue of distinguishing between myths and ‘ordinary’ or ‘folk’ tales has puzzled anthropologists since Andrew Lang. The problem was clearly recognized by the functionalists, beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942).

His fieldwork resulted in a monograph devoted to the Trobriand islanders, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, (Malinowski 1979). Parts of this monograph deal with the myths and rituals connected with the Kula. Malinowski believed that myths represent a ‘pragmatic charter,’ a set of rules or codes of conduct, that enable the social functions of the culture to flourish. ‘The *myth* comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity’ (1926: 28). Like Boas before him, Malinowski sought to distinguish between three types of tales that he encountered in the Trobriand Islands. Unlike fairy tales and legends, which are told ‘for amusement’ and as ‘a social statement’ intended to ‘satisfy social ambition’, myth is ‘a reality lived’ (1926: 18), ‘not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality’ (1926: 19).

This, of course, stood in sharp contrast to the words of Smith, since for Malinowski, myths offer justification for belief. They are again intimately associated with rituals (on mythology of the Kula, see Malinowski 1979: 196-198, 256 ff), but in an inverted order of importance. Even if rituals do come first, myths are necessary in order to comprehend their meaning and true function. If rituals form a reenactment of the events that are considered to have happened in another reality,¹¹ myths are necessary in order to place individuals (and the society or the culture itself) within that reality.

In the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski distinguished between several classes of myths (1979: 268-270). The *ancient myths* describe events that occurred when the earth was being inhabited from the underworlds, and they are related to the origin of the first human beings, clans, and villages, as well as the

¹¹ Which is, nevertheless, as real as the one that we live in.

relationship between this world and any future world. The *culture myths* relate to ogres and cannibals, as well as to the human beings that institute certain customs and ceremonies. They relate to the events when human beings already inhabit the earth, and when the social customs are already established. Stories about the Trobriand culture hero, Tudawa, were also included within this class. Finally, the third class consists of *myths in which only ordinary human beings appear*. These human beings do have extraordinary powers (magic, which is, for Malinowski, closely related to religion), and these stories describe the origins of witchcraft, love potions, flying canoes (1979: 275-279), as well as some Kula myths.

Of course, many myths fall within two or even all three of these categories (1979: 269), and the distinctions between them are not always clear. The main force that lies behind the life of the Trobrianders is inertia of the customs (1979: 288). Since the Trobrianders pay so much attention to the customs, Malinowski concluded that ‘the past is more important than the present’. Stories from the past also possess an element of universality (everybody knows them and everybody talks about them), and this contributes to the normative function of myths.

Since Smith, anthropologists and ethnologists put the emphasis on the ritual action itself. This emphasis was mostly taken for granted, and myths and rituals were studied together, without any attempt to clarify their relationship. One of the first anthropologists that attempted to clarify this relationship was Clyde Kluckhohn (1905-1960).

In his 1939 article ‘Myths and Rituals: A General Theory,’¹² Kluckhohn elaborated on the ‘connection between rite and myth,’ clearly recognized by the psychoanalysts like Reik and Freud, who ‘verbally agreed to Robertson Smith’s proposition that mythology was mainly a description of ritual’ (1942: 45-46). This reference to psychoanalytical interpretations is not an accident, since Kluckhohn was very interested in various psychological explanations (1942: 50-52), which he believed to have been neglected in prior anthropological research. He also pointed at the difficulties of making a clear distinction between myths, legends, and fairy tales (1942: 46-47) — unlike Malinowski before him.¹³ He did consider a definition of myth as a ‘sacred tale’ (p. 47),¹⁴ but found it unsatisfactory because of the lack of association with ritual.¹⁵ And, while there are cultures that associate myths and rituals

¹² Several years before this article, an interesting (although very brief) discussion on the value of ‘Myth and Ritual’ approach was published in the September and November 1936 issues of *Man*. On the one side was the greatest anthropological proponent of this approach, A. M. Hocart. On the other side was the famous Classical scholar H. J. Rose. Rose’s expertise in a specific area (ancient Greece) outweighed Hocart’s general argumentation.

¹³ A clear impossibility of making this kind of distinction was demonstrated by Kirk (1974: 31-37) on the material from Greece.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, there is at least one place in the text (1942: 59) where he does use this definition himself.

¹⁵ In this article, Kluckhohn uses words *ritual*, *rite*, and *ceremony* interchangeably.

(Kluckhohn gave an example of the Christian Mass), there are clearly others (and here he drew on his extensive fieldwork experience among Navajos and Pueblos) that do not. As a matter of fact, ‘the whole question of the primacy of ceremonial or mythology is as meaningless as all the questions of “the hen or the egg” form’ (1942: 54).

The truly important thing is the recognition of the ‘intricate interdependence of myth (which is one form of ideology) with ritual and many other forms of behavior’. Here Kluckhohn gave full credit to Malinowski (1926), although he in fact went much further by pointing at the potential absurdity of another ‘hen or egg’ type problem. Together with Boas and Benedict, Kluckhohn opposed any grand generalizations or ‘simplistic statements.’ There is no practical way to establish the primacy of one or the other, but one can only look at the ‘general tendency’ within specific culture. This tendency will depend on a number of specific cultural traits, as well as on the individual responses to these traits (1942: 70). In the end, Kluckhohn remained close to the psychology-influenced theories, since he concludes that ‘[m]yths and rituals equally facilitate the adjustment of the individual to his society’ (p. 74). They have ‘a common psychological basis’ (p. 78), and in a sense they are ‘supra-individual.’ They are both ‘cultural products, part of the social heredity of a society’ (p. 79).

The idea of both myth and ritual as cultural products was further developed by Sir Edmund Leach (1910-1989).

Like Smith’s, Leach’s discussion of myth and ritual is rather brief, confined to less than seven pages of the Introduction. Unlike most of his famous predecessors, Leach did not attempt to define ritual, and from his perspective any particular definition (except one as broad as ‘a system of symbolic communication’ [cf. Aijmer 1987: 7]) is irrelevant. What is relevant is the very specific context he provides for any situation where rituals are observed. In this approach, Leach attempted to reconcile divergent views represented by Durkheim, Mauss, and Malinowski before him. The solution, in his opinion, was a view of a *ritual* as something related to *technique* just as *sacred* is related to *profane*. They ‘do not denote types of action but aspects of almost any kind of action.’ Ritual ‘is a symbolic statement which ‘says’ something about the individuals involved in the action’ (1970: 13).

‘Myth, in my terminology, is the counterpart of ritual; myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same’ (*ibid.*). In this sense, Leach consciously stepped away from what he regarded to be ‘the classical doctrine in English social anthropology’ which, according to him, claimed

that myth and ritual are conceptually separate entities which perpetuate one another through functional interdependence — the rite is a dramatisation of the myth, the myth is the sanction or charter for the rite (...) As I see it, myth regarded as a statement in words ‘says’ the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action. To ask questions about the content of belief which are not contained in the content of ritual is nonsense. (1970: 13-14)

This presents a radical break with the functionalism, and an important step towards the structural interpretations of myth. For Leach, myths are only ‘one way of

describing certain types of human behavior' (p. 14). Furthermore, 'ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as forms of symbolic statement about the social order'. This is possible because rituals in their cultural contexts are always patterns of symbols, and they have the same structure as the other pattern of symbols, consisting of the phrases and technical terms that the anthropologist devises in order to interpret them (1970: 15).

This structure is 'the system of socially approved 'proper' relations between individuals and groups'. Although this system is not always practically recognized, 'if anarchy is to be avoided,' members of the society must be reminded of the underlying structure that provides the frame for all of their social activities. 'Ritual performances have this function for the participating group as a whole; they momentarily make explicit what is otherwise a fiction' (p. 16).

In 1955, the article 'The Structural Study of Myth' by Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) announced the coming of structuralism to the anthropological study of myth. In this extraordinary article, the French professor argued that we should proceed directly from the apparent contradictions that myths pose (1963: 208). Approximately at the same time as Leach, but more clearly and much more explicitly, Lévi-Strauss recognized myths as communication. In fact, he recognized a clear connection between myths and language (since myths are expressed through language). Along the lines of the great Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as Trubetzkoy, Jakobson and Hjelmslev,¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss recognized another system of signs that could be interpreted in a similar way as language. Since myth, just like language, is made of constitutive units, these units 'presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels — namely, phonemes, morphemes, and sememes — but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and a more complex order' (1963: 210-211). He called these units *mythemes*. It is only through the analysis of the relations of different *mythemes* (whose structure remains in the unconscious) that we can understand the meaning of a myth. Understood in this way, one can say that myth, using Saussurean terminology, should serve as a kind of an allochronic device, bridging the gap between the synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Lévi-Strauss began teaching Amerindian 'mythology' in 1952/53, and in an outline of his first course, he presented three ways of analyzing a myth: 'in terms of the reversible or irreversible character of the sequences present in it,' in terms of 'the tests of *commutability*,' and, finally, 'the myth, considered as a *thought ritual*, is submitted to a direction which is in some way natural and emerges from the analysis of ritual considered as an *acted myth*. This third method provides a valuable verification of the results obtained by the other two' (1987: 200-201).

His view of the relationship between myth and ritual is a little bit more elaborated in his lectures for 1954/55. Unlike his predecessors (especially Leach), Lévi-Strauss pointed at the fact that in many cases (he was still working primarily with the Amerindian material, mostly Pueblo and Pawnee) there is no proof of the interrelationship between myth and ritual.

¹⁶ For the practical as well as theoretical aspects of their works, I refer to Nöth 1990. See also chapter on myth (almost exclusively dedicated to the structuralist aspects of study) in this volume (1990: 374-377).

There is no myth underlying the ritual as a whole, and when foundation myths exist, they generally bear on details of the ritual which appear secondary or supernumerary. However, if myth and ritual do not mirror each other, they often reciprocally complete each other, and it is only by comparing them that one can formulate hypotheses on the nature of certain intellectual strategies typical of the culture under consideration.

(Lévi-Strauss 1987: 204)

In a way, this brings us full circle in the consideration of the relationship between myth and ritual. For Lévi-Strauss (as for Smith, but for entirely different reasons), this relationship is not a matter of great importance. Lévi-Strauss believes that we should start from myth in order to find the deeply-embedded structures of thinking (which will enable us to explain and understand different types of behavior). Theoretically, any myth can be reenacted just by being spoken (narrated or written down). As far as the meaning of the myths and their interpretation is concerned, rituals are irrelevant.

Concluding remarks

In a century after Smith, anthropologists have begun to approach myth from different angles. The connection between myth and ritual and the primacy of one or another has lost its importance (and structuralists deserve credit for that). Smith deserves credit for stressing the social role and function of religion and rituals, but he underestimated the importance of myth. True, this underestimation should be regarded in the context of his own time and the barriers that he was crossing. This underestimation was dominating the anthropological research until the work of Lévi-Strauss.

The relationship between myth and ritual remains a matter of dispute. Many scholars still assume that one should be studied with (or at least in relation to) the other.

Obviously, if one asks someone while that person is performing some ritual why he or she is doing it, one will get the answer ‘because I believe in this and that.’ This line of questioning, while providing a secure link between myth and ritual, leads to conclusions that are essentially tautological and uninformative. People usually dress more in the colder weather, but this has nothing to do with whether they *believe* that they should dress more or not. Too many activities (even repetitive ones, like political and other public rituals) are grounded in the social and psychological aspects of societies, not in myths or beliefs.

The main importance of the structuralist approach is that it shifted the focus of the methodology of dealing (that is to say, transcribing, telling, reenacting, writing, remembering, etc.) with myths to language. Myths are stories (narratives) and should be regarded as such. Of course, just as all myths are stories, all stories are not myths.

According to Cohen (1969: 349), ‘the fact that myths are narratives *is* of primary importance.’ The same author sees this as the institution of the relationship between the present and the past. This relationship is essentially a static and one-sided one. Whenever it is necessary (or simply convenient), the past is being recalled. The argument here is somewhat different from the one presented by Eliade, who believed that the past is constantly being reenacted in the present — with numerous alterations, but with the basic structure remaining the same. However, Cohen’s argument is based on the experience of the ‘classical’ Western tradition. An analysis based on another type of tradition, like, for example, the one from Mesoamerica (for example, Boskovic 1989) will produce different results, with instances both of the past being ‘anchored’ in the future and the future in the present.

In order to achieve any understanding of the myths of a specific culture or society, it is necessary to take the ‘linguistic’ or ‘narrative turn,’ to regard myths primarily as narratives, culture-specific of course, and to employ all the elements of the analysis of narratives to the analysis of myths. This type of approach has been discussed and criticized in a recent article by the Swedish anthropologist Göran Aijmer, who regards myth as a ‘ritual transported into the verbal sphere of life, where it may further develop into fiction and drama.’ Therefore, ‘if we wish to understand myth and what myth is about (...) we must treat myth as ritual’ (1987: 21-22). The words of Leach are well echoed in the last sentence of this article: ‘The nature of myth is the nature of ritual, and the nature of ritual is that of the cultural exploration of possible worlds’ (1987: 22). So despite this admirable attempt to reinstate the myth and ritual connection, we are again left with something as vague as ‘the cultural exploration of possible worlds.’

Myths are stories (*traditional tales*) that shares many narrative features with other types of stories (Todorov 1981: 48-53). Myth as a story is always recorded in a certain way, as a narrative, and therefore edited in a certain way. This process of ‘editing’ is of great importance, since it also means ‘translating’ myths in another mode (medium or language). It cannot be avoided, but we should always bear in mind this intermediary function that the anthropologist/ethnographer performs.

A relatively recent attempt on the lines of the ‘narrative turn’ has been made by Greg Urban (1991). In this book, Urban claims that anthropologists, if they want ‘to understand culture,’ should ‘understand the properties of discourse that make it attractive’ (1991: 102)¹⁷. Urban sees myth as a form of oral discourse. On the semantic level, it is not always clear how and in what way specific myths are different from other forms of discourse. Although he does present several examples of formal analyses in the best formalist/structuralist tradition, I do not find his insistence on binary oppositions very persuasive. Although his book is about ‘native South American myths and rituals,’ he makes no attempt to define ritual, or its specific place within the discourse(s) that he analyzes. There is a possibility that the very act of speaking (when the final result is a myth) is in itself considered as a form of ritual, but Urban does not elaborate on this. In fact, and I would like to end with this note, the ‘Myths and Rituals’ from the title of his book seems to be itself a form of ritual, an

¹⁷ Urban defines discourses as ‘the means by which the past is kept alive in the present, by means of which a culture is maintained’ (1991: 17).

anthropological one, with the purpose of establishing the connection with the past and the theories that have dominated anthropology a hundred years ago.

Postscript (April 1999)

It seems that myths are again becoming predominant in our world – both within the discipline and outside of it. The origin myths play an important part in current conflicts (ex-Yugoslavia, for example), displaying how far the power of a belief can go. Similarly, we have an interesting example of the myth of the “chosen people” in the way in which the US administration perceives its role and function in contemporary world. Devoid of promises for the better life, more and more people feel obliged to obey their local leaders, investing in them an almost divine power. Myths people live by are at the same time myths people die for.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

EB	Encyclopædia Britannica (superscript denotes the edition).
ER	Encyclopedia of Religion (Eliade 1987).
ERE	Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics (James A. Hastings, ed., Edinburgh, 1908-1926).

Ackerman, Robert

- 1973 Frazer on Myth and Ritual. *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Philadelphia) 34: 115-134.
- 1976 The Fortunes of Cambridge: Myth and Ritual in Anglo-American Criticism. *Social Science Information* (Paris) 15(6): 919-928.
- 1991 *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists*. Theorists of Myth, 2. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Aijmer, Göran

- 1987 The Cultural Nature of Ritual and Myth. In: Göran Aijmer (ed.), *Symbolic Textures: Studies in Cultural Meaning*, pp. 1-22. Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Alexander, H. B.

- 1924 Worship (Primitive). *ERE* 12: 752-757.

Beidelman, T. O.

- 1974 *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1987 Smith, W. Robertson. *ER* 13: 366-367.

Black, John Sutherland, and George Chrystal

- 1912a *The Life of William Robertson Smith*. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- 1912b (editors) *Lectures & Essays of William Robertson Smith*. London: Adam and Charles Black.

Boas, Franz

- 1916 Tsimshian Mythology, by Franz Boas, based on texts recorded by Henry W. Tate. In: *Thirty-first Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1909-1910*, pp. 29-1037. Washington: Government Printing Office.

Boskovic, Aleksandar

- 1989 The Meaning of Maya Myths. *Anthropos* (St. Augustin) 84: 203-212.

Brandon, S. G. F.

- 1970 (general editor) *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Cassirer, Ernst

- 1922 *Der Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*. Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, 1. Hamburg.

- 1953 [1925] *Language and Myth*. Trans. by Susanne K. Langer. New York: Dover Publications.
- Cohen, Percy S.**
1969 Theories of Myth. *Man* (London) N. s. 4(3): 337-353.
- Cook, Stanley A.**
1902 Israel and Totemism. *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 14: 413-448.
- Durkheim, Émile** [Emil Dirkem]
1982 [1912] *Elementarni oblici religijskog zivota*. Totemistički sistem u Australiji. Translated by Aljosa Mimica. Biblioteka Karijatide. Beograd: Prosveta.
- Fallaize, E. N.**
1924 Prayer (Introductory and Primitive). *ERE* 10: 154-158.
- Harrelson, Walter**
1987 Myth and Ritual School. *ER* 10: 282-285.
- Hocart, A. M.**
1936 Myth and Ritual. *Man* 36: 230.
- Jones, Robert Alun**
1984 Robertson Smith and James Frazer on Religion: Two Traditions in British Social Anthropology. In: George W. Stocking, Jr. (ed.), *Functionalism Historicized: Essays on British Social Anthropology*, pp. 31-58. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kirk, G. S.**
1970 *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
1974 *The Nature of Greek Myths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Kluckhohn, Clyde**
1942 Myths and Rituals: A General Theory. *Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge, Mass.) 35(1): 45-79.
- Lang, Andrew**
1884 Mythology. *EB⁹* 17: 135-158.
1885 *Custom and Myth*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1887 *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*. 2 Vols. London: Longman's, Green, and Co.
1901 *Magic and Religion*. London: Longman's, Green and Co.
1911 Mythology. *EB¹¹* 19: 128-144.
- Langer, Susanne K.**
1971 [1942] *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Leach, Edmund R.**
1970[1954] *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London School of Economics Monographs in Social Anthropology, No. 44. London: The Athlone Press, University of London.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude**
1963[1958] The Structural Study of Myth. In: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 206-231. Trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books.
1978 *Myth and Meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
1987[1984] *Anthropology and Myth*. Lectures 1951-1982. Trans. by Roy Willis.

Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Malinowski, Bronislaw [Bronislav Malinowski]

1926 *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.

1979 [1922] *Argonauti zapadnog Pacifika*. Biblioteka XX vek. Trans. by Drinka Gojkovic and Jasmina Lukic. Beograd: BIGZ.

Müller, [Friedrich] Max

1909 [1856] *Comparative Mythology*. Edited, with additional notes and an introductory preface on solar mythology, by A. Smythe Palmer, D.D. London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd.

Nöth, Winfried

1990 *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Pritchard, James B. (ed.)

1991 *The Harper Concise Atlas of the Bible*. New York: Harper and Collins.

Reinach, Salomon

1911 The Growth of Mythological Study. *Quarterly Review* 215: 423-441.

Rose, H. J.

1936 Myth and Ritual. *Man* 36: 267.

Segal, Robert A.

1980a The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19: 173-185.

1980b In Defense of Mythology: The History of Modern Theories of Myth. *Annals of Scholarship* 1: 3-49.

Sharpe, Eric J.

1986 *Comparative Religion: A History*. Second edition. La Salle (Ill.): Open Court.

Smith, William Robertson

1886 Sacrifice. *EB*⁹ 21: 132-138.

1892 [1881] *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*. A Course of Lectures on Biblical Criticism. London: Adam and Charles Black.

1902 [1882] *The Prophets of Israel and their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century B. C.* With Introduction and additional notes by The Rev. T. K. Cheyne, M.A., D.D. London: Adam and Charles Black.

1912a [1880] Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament. In: Black and Chrystal 1912b: 455-483.

1912b [1880] A Journey in the Hejâz. In: Black and Chrystal 1912b: 484-597.

1914 [1894] *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. First series, The Fundamental Institutions. New edition, revised throughout by the author. London: Adam and Charles Black.

1969 [1927] *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. The Fundamental Institutions. Third edition, with an Introduction and additional notes by Stanley A. Cook, Litt.D. Prolegomenon by James Muilenberg. The Library of Biblical Studies. New York: KTAV Publishing House.

Todorov, Tzvetan

1981 [1968] *Introduction to Poetics*. Translated by Richard Howard. Theory and History of Literature, Volume 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Tylor, Edward B.

1877 [1871] *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. 2 Vols. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Urban, Greg

1991 *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture: Native South American Myths and Rituals*. Texas Linguistics Series. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Warburg, Margit

1989 William Robertson Smith and the Study of Religion. *Religion* (Cambridge) 19: 41-61.

SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA
Últimos títulos publicados

243. RAMOS, Alcida Rita. Uma Crítica da Desrazão Indigenista. 1998.
244. BRIONES, Claudia. (Meta) Cultura del Estado-Nación y Estado de la (Meta) Cultura: Repensando las Identidades Indígenas y Antropológicas en Tiempos de Post-estatalidad. 1998.
245. TRAJANO FILHO, Wilson. Jitu Ten: A Investigação Científica na Guiné-Bissau. 1998.
246. BAINES, Stephen Grant. Imagens de Liderança Indígena e o Programa Waimiri-Atroari: Índios e Usinas Hidrelétricas na Amazônia. 1999.
247. RAMOS, Alcida Rita. Cutting Through State and Class: Sources and Strategies of Self-Representation in Latin America. 1999.
248. RIBEIRO, Gustavo Lins. Tecnotopia versus Tecnofobia. O Mal-Estar no Século XXI. 1999.
249. CARVALHO, José Jorge de. Um Espaço Público Encantado. Pluralidade Religiosa e Modernidade em Brasília. 1999.
250. CARDOSO DE OLIVEIRA, Luís R. Dois Pequenos Ensaios Sobre Cultura, Política e Demandas de Reconhecimento no Quebec. 1999.
251. GUBER, Rosana & VISACOVSKY, Sergio E. Imágenes etnográficas de la nación. La antropología social argentina de los tempranos años setenta. 1999.
252. BOSKOVIK, Aleksandar. Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Myth. 1999.

A lista completa dos títulos publicados pela Série Antropologia pode ser solicitada pelos interessados à Secretaria do:

Departamento de Antropologia
Instituto de Ciências Sociais
Universidade de Brasília
70910-900 – Brasília, DF

Fone: (061) 348-2368
Fone/Fax: (061) 273-3264