In the myths from several sub-Saharan African groups and North American first nations, such animals are presented as being very wise, and an element of trickery or deceit is also often associated with this wisdom.

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Comparative Mythology

A Conference Report (Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM), Ravenstein, the Netherlands, August 19–21, 2008)

Wim van Binsbergen and Eric Venbrux

In August 2008, the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) held its Second Annual Conference at the Soeterbeeck Conference Centre (a former convent) near the small medieval town of Ravenstein. Here twenty-two scholars from five continents met during three days for intense discussions of current work on comparative mythology. The twenty-two papers to be presented and discussed were divided into four clusters: 1) the mythology of death and dying; 2) mythological continuities between Africa and other continents; 3) theoretical and methodological advances; and 4) work-in-progress. The papers will be summarized below, but let us first introduce the newly founded International Association for Comparative Mythology (legally incorporated in the State of Massachusetts, USA, in 2008).

The IACM's origin lies in the Harvard (Cambridge, MA, USA) Project on Comparative Myth, and the ensuing Harvard Round Table for Comparative Myth, which – under the inspiring initiative and leadership of Michael Witzel, one of the world's leading Vedic scholars – from the late 1990s onward organised an unbroken chain of interdisciplinary annual conferences attended by prominent scholars from all continents, belonging to such disciplines as comparative mythology, anthropology, comparative and historical linguistics, genetics, archaeology, intercultural philosophy, palaeoanthropology, Asian studies, African studies, crop sciences, ethnic studies, classics, etc. From the 2004 Round Table on, the Harvard Round Tables have paid consistent attention to Africa in world mythology. In 2005 the annual Round Table was held at Kyoto, Japan, in a joint venture with the Kyoto-based Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), and the 7th Conference on Ethnogenesis in South and Central Asia (ESCA); in this connection the Asian dimension of the Harvard Round Table was expanded to include Australia and Oceania. The next year's meeting (May 2006) was held in Beijing, People's Republic of China, under the ti-

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tle of "the Peking and Harvard University International Conference on Comparative Mythology." At this conference the collective decision was taken to establish an International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM). It was also at this conference that the convenors for the 2008 meeting received their mandate. The new association held its First Annual Meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, in August 2007, with up to 80 participating scholars, and 30 papers presented. Most Harvard Round Tables have produced internationally published proceedings. The proceedings of the 2007 First Annual Meeting are currently being prepared for publication by the convenor, Emily Lyle. In addition, there has been a substantial spin-off in the way of books and articles published in established peer-reviewed scholarly journals. To highlight and facilitate the specific focus on comparative mythology, a peer-reviewed journal, *Comparative Mythology*, was initiated at the First Annual Meeting; its preparation is now in full swing.

The 2008 Second Annual Conference is the logical continuation of this inspiring series of interdisciplinary and intercontinental exchanges, which are working in the frontline of the contemporary transformation of regional studies and traditional disciplines under the impact of globalisation and of an empowering, multicentred politics of knowledge production.

The conference was opened by the convenors: Wim van Binsbergen (African Studies Centre, Leiden, and Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam) and Eric Venbrux (Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen), both from the Netherlands. Next, Michael Witzel (Cambridge, MA), the Association's President, gave his Presidential address. Venbrux, van Binsbergen, and Witzel had formed the conference's organizing committee, responsible for fund-raising,[1] and for the delicate task of making an adequate selection (in terms of quality, thematic fit, and available slots for presentations and participants) from among the great many paper proposals that had come in via the conference website.[2]

In all other respects, that is, topical focus, structure and format, organisation and finance, and the subsequent publication of papers, the conference was the responsibility of just two convenors. The choice of the venue (a revamped convent, austere but saturated with an Early Modern dedication to scholarship), the provision of board and lodging, and the programming format, all ensured that conference participants would be in an intensive formal and especially informal contact throughout the duration of the conference, so that unofficial factual, methodological, and theoretical exchanges would greatly complement the specific formal programme of paper presentations. Every participant made a contribution to the scholarly exchange not only by her or his paper but also by an arrangement according to which each paper was subjected to one selected participant's detailed critical examination, before the meeting proceeded to the general discussion.[3]

As mentioned, this conference had four thematic sessions, whose details we will now present.

In the session on the mythology of death and dying (which reflects the research programme currently being pursued at Nijmegen by the convenor Eric Venbrux) six papers were presented on respectively moon myths in Australia, myths concerning the avoidance of dying in West Africa, Eurasian myths of travels to the netherworld, Zoroastrian death myths, the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia situated in Germanic mythologies of death, and a sociological approach to death myths with special attention to Calvinism.[4]

1 Financial contributions towards this conference have been made by the following institutions: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA; the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences (KNAW); the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the African Studies Centre, Leiden University, the Netherlands; the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands; the Research School NISCO, Faculty of Social Sciences, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, the Netherlands; *Quest – An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*; the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the Sormani Fund, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Cambridge, MA, USA.

2 This website (http://www.iacm.bravehost.com) was specifically established for the 2nd Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology; open to the general public until the publication of the "Proceedings," it contains all draft papers as presented at the conference, and all conference circulars.

3 In addition to the conference participants, the convenors were pleased to welcome the specialist in West Java ethnography, Dr. Wessing, formerly of Leiden, as a special discussant of Mr. Djunatan's paper.

4 Eric Venbrux (Nijmegen): "Death and Regeneration. The Moon in Aboriginal Australian Myths of Death"; Walter van Beek (Tilburg): "How to Avoid Dying. The Battle against Death in African Mythologies"; Boris Oguibénine (Strassburg) and Nataliya Yanchevskaya (Cambridge, MA): "A Journey to the Netherworld. Reconstructing Features of Indo-European Mythology and Funeral Rituals from Baltic, Slavic, and Buddhist Parallels"; Victoria Kryukova (St. Petersburg): "Death and Defilement in Zoroastrianism"; Joseph Harris (Cambridge, MA): "The Rök Stone's Mythology of Death"; Hans J. Mol (Canberra): "Calvin in Myth".

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This session was followed by a business meeting of the Board of Directors (i.e., the Executive) of the IACM. A major decision taken in this connection was to extend the membership of this Board to Dr. Bukola A. Oyeniyi from Nigeria, which would give the Association a formal footing in the African continent and would stimulate the pursuit of comparative mythology by African scholars and institutions. This new appointment complements the representation of Europe, North America, and Asia on the Board of Directors, and implies the need for further work towards the formal inclusion of scholars from South America, Australia, and Oceania.

The next session likewise comprised six papers. It was devoted to mythological continuities between Africa and other continents – probably an all-time first in the history of comparative mythology and a topical choice which reflects the research programme currently pursued at Leiden and Rotterdam by the convenor, Wim van Binsbergen. African-Eurasian continuities were examined with regard to myths about the appearance of the first humans; the nature and functions of political myths in West Africa during the last few centuries; the examination of specific detailed parallels between African and Eurasian mythologies as seen from the perspective of the Nkoya people of Zambia; Witzel's revision of his Laurasian/Gondwana distinction as applied to flood myths; an etymological discussion of the case for identity between ancient Greek Hephaestus and ancient Egyptian Ptaḥ; and the relevance of Japanese mythology for comparative Eurasian mythology in general.[5]

Five papers were presented at the session on theoretical and methodological advances. These addressed the cosmological theory of myth; neurobiology and the origins of myth and religion; postmodernism and the comparative method with special application to comparative mythology; the extent to which myth presents a challenge to philosophy; and parallels between Greek and Sanskrit epics with special attention to the fire-associated gods Hephaestus and Agni.[6]

A final paper session dealt with ongoing research in the context of PhD and MA projects on such diverse topics as the mythological worldview of a contemplative site in West Java, Indonesia; Blumenberg's recent philosophy of myth as applied to irony in Homer; the Tibetan epic of Gesar of Ling, and Indo-Slavic mythological parallels.[7]

The conference concluded with a general discussion, prospects for the 2009 annual conference, and a consideration of options for the publication of the conference papers. The convenors have decided to aim at a two-stage publication process: first, lightly edited "Proceedings" containing the full set of papers (proposed date of publication is August 2009) to be followed by the publication of one or two carefully selected sets of papers, revised under extensive editorial feedback, as special issue of a peer-reviewed journal, or in an edited volume with an established university press.

This Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) has demonstrated that the field of comparative mythology is rapidly and convincingly shedding its reputation as an over-specialised antiquarian scholarship to become (in close collaboration with a wide range of auxiliary fields from genetics to linguistics, ethnography, archaeology, statistics, and classics) an exciting, rapidly expanding domain of theoretical and methodological reflection, and an ever widening window on humankind's remoter cultural history. Here – in addition to the unmistakable strength of this field among scholars from Europe (including Eastern Europe!) and North America – new growth points can be discerned around death as a mythical domain, and around the understanding of Africa's place in the wider cultural history of humankind as a whole.

5 Yuri Berezkin (St. Petersburg): "The Emergence of the First People from the Underworld. Another Cosmogonic Myth of Possible African Origin"; Bukola A. Oyeniyi (Lagos): "Myths, Indigenous Culture, and Traditions as Tools in Reconstructing Contested Histories. The Ife-Modakeke Example"; Wim van Binsbergen (Leiden/Rotterdam): "The Continuity of African and Eurasian Mythologies. As Seen from the Perspective of the Nkoya People of Zambia, South Central Africa"; Michael Witzel (Cambridge, MA): Pan-Gaean Flood Myths. Gondwana Myths – and Beyond"; Václav Blažek (Brno/Pilzen): "Hēphaistos vs. Ptaḥ"; Kazuo Matsumura (Tokyo): "Can Japanese Mythology Contribute to the Comparative Eurasian Mythology?"

6 Emily Lyle (Edinburgh): "The Cosmological Theory of Myth"; Steve Farmer (independent scholar, CA): "Reinventing Comparative Mythology as a Rigorous Science. Neurobiology and the Origins of Myth and Religion"; Robert A. Segal (Aberdeen): "Postmodernism and the Comparative Method"; Willem Dupré (Nijmegen): "Myth. A Challenge to Philosophy"; Nicholas J. Allen (Oxford): "Hephaestus and Agni. Gods and Men on the Battlefield in Greek and Sanskrit Epic."

7 Stephanus Djunatan (Bandung): "Sunda, the Account of Affirmative Life. Mythological Worldview of the Contemplative Site of Nagara Padang, West Java, Indonesia"; Nadia Sels (Ghent): "Blumenberg, Homer, and the Function of Irony in Mythological Narratives"; Karel Jan van den Heuvel Reinders (Nijmegen): "Travels to Heaven and Hell of Gesar of Ling"; and Nataliya Yanchevskaya (Cambridge, MA): "Indo-Slavic Mythological Parallels."

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These developments inspire a sense of gratification and achievement, even though there is a need for increased involvement of scholars from other continents, and even though the theoretical debates during this conference made clear the fact that we are still far removed from the emergence of a mainstream disciplinary consensus.

Die Notwendigkeit des Kontingenten

Paradoxien der Informationsverarbeitung in den divinatorischen Kulturen

Alberto Cevolini

I

Es ist eines der Grundprobleme sozialer Systeme, das Chaos der Realität in etwas Informatives umzuwandeln, das zur Bestimmung einer Ordnung als Wirklichkeit des Systems beitragen kann. Dieser Übergang vom Realen zum Wirklichen kann sich nicht auf die Gewinnung von Informationen direkt aus der Umwelt und ihre Übertragung ins System stützen. Soziale ebenso wie psychische bzw. organische Systeme sind operativ geschlossen und das schließt unbedingt aus, dass es zwischen System und Umwelt auf der Ebene der bloßen Operationen einen unmittelbaren Kontakt gibt (vgl. Luhmann 1997: 92). Weder kann das System außerhalb seiner Grenzen operieren, noch kann die Umwelt am Erzeugen systemeigener Operationen mitwirken. Aber das, was auf den ersten Blick als eine Schwäche erscheint, erweist sich hingegen als ein unentbehrliches Erfordernis für die Reproduktion von basalen Operationen innerhalb des Systems. Die Geschlossenheit zwingt in der Tat jede einzelne Operation, sich ins Netzwerk anderer Operationen desselben Systems einzufügen, auf welche sie zugleich zurückgreifen und vorgreifen kann, so dass dieselbe Operation bei ihrer Umsetzung zur rekursiven Wiederherstellung weiterer Operationen derselben Art beiträgt (Luhmann 2005b: 36). Genau diese Rekursivität ermöglicht dem System, auf die Umweltstörungen nicht willkürlich zu reagieren und eine eigene Autonomie zu erreichen (Varela 2006: 261). Der ganze Erfolg der Systemtheorie hängt vor allem von ihrer Fähigkeit ab, zu erklären, wie das Entstehen solcher Autonomie möglich ist und worauf es ankommt.

Wir gehen davon aus, dass im Allgemeinen kein System, so komplex es auch sein mag, es anstreben kann, eine interne Varietät zu erreichen, die der Varietät der externen Umwelt entspricht;[1] die einzige Lösung ist, bestimmte Umweltverbindungen von Daten bzw. Ereignissen anzuerkennen und sie in Form von Sinnschemata bzw. Reaktionsmustern zu verdichten, die dann zur Verfügung gehalten werden, um jedes Mal wieder aktualisiert werden zu können, wenn sich das System denselben Verbindungen bzw. Konfigurationen gegenübersieht. Das ist nur dann möglich, wenn das System Generalisierungen leisten kann, indem es aus seinen Fremdreferenzen heraus Redundanzen abstrahiert, die immer wieder verwendbar sind, so dass das System sich mit der Varietät der konkreten Umstände jeweils auseinandersetzen kann.[2] Es geht mit anderen Worten darum, Ordnung durch Geräusch (*order from noise*) zu erzeugen,[3] nämlich aufgrund einer mitlaufenden Koordination von Fremd- und Selbstreferenz systeminterne Sinneinheiten entstehen zu lassen, für die keine Entsprechungen in der externen Umwelt zu finden sind. Generalisierungsformen dieser Art kommen bereits bei den Induktionsschlüssen zustande,[4] zum Beispiel im Fall der bedingten Reflexe, bei denen das System die erfahrene Mitwirkung zweier verschiedener Faktoren abstrahiert, wobei der eine ein unbedingter Reflex ist, während der andere zum Zeichen wird. Diese Zeichenhaftigkeit bezeichnet allerdings keine Eigenschaft der Umwelt, sondern lediglich die Fähigkeit eines bestimmten Umweltzustandes, die Selbstreferenz des Systems mit der Folge zu aktivieren, dass die Erinnerung zur Erwartung wird. Beim Geräusch der Schritte eines Labortechnikers fängt also der Hund an zu speicheln (Pavlov 2006 [1927]). Die Schlussfolgerung wird in diesem Sinne zu einem Sicherheitsäquivalent: Man geht von einer Umweltunsicherheit, in die das System wegen der operativen Schließung nicht eingreifen kann, zu einer selbsterzeugten Unsicherheit über, die in vielfältiger Weise behandelt und bearbeitet werden kann (vgl. von Foerster 1981). Oder anders gesagt:

1 In der ersten Kybernetik sprach man von "requisite variety". Vgl. Ashby (1994 [1956]: 123 f., §§ 11/16 und 11/17).

2 Heinz von Foerster et al. (1968: 34 f.) sprechen von "symbolic representation". Vgl. auch Luhmann (2004: 168 f.; 2005b: 43), wo man von "Abstraktion der Bezeichnung" redet.

3 Siehe u. a. Atlan (1985), Varela (1985) und von Foerster (1966).

4 "The principle of inductive inference is essentially a principle of generalization" (von Foerster 1969: 27).

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