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Corina Daba-Buzoianu and Cristina Cîrță-Buzoianu

Myths Beyond and Throughout History: A Study on Traditional and Modern Myths

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate in what terms we may discuss about modern myths, considering the fact that researchers have defined myths as ancient tales, stories that happened in a primordial era and that were transmitted through social communication processes. Our analysis shows that myths are a matter of thinking and communicating that helps humans to understand and accept the world with all its duality and complexity. Also, we consider that myths change over time according to the social, political and historical conditions and therefore, they have a certain historicity that should be understood with the help of mentalities and beliefs that dominate a society.

Keywords: image, archetype, traditional myths, modern myths

Discussing the matter of myths beyond and throughout history means analysing whether there are modern myths as we know there were traditional ones. A study on myths must consider the duality of their structure, as they are defined by researchers as stories that resume archetypical themes, affix exemplary models in order to give significance to people’s actions and contend with their fears and dreams. Generally, myths are considered to be stories of Gods or of humans becoming Gods, in which we see humans overcoming their profane condition. Moreover, as Mircea Eliade points, myth is the story of coming into being, of a beginning during which supernatural beings created the universe. Also, myth expresses an exemplary model of all human activities as it chronicles an event occurring in illo tempore, a hallmark of all of life’s moments (Mircea Eliade, 1977: 5-6). Reality is the repetition of moments, of primordial motifs through which the meaning of things is established. While myths give explanations for origins and events, they also resolve a problem: the conscious return of man towards a role model which becomes known and understood due to the way in which the social culture relates to it. Therefore myths are milestones of thought, answers communities would give to fundamental themes.

Throughout time, myth was seen by researchers like James George Frazer (James George Frazer, 1921) as a mistaken attempt to explain human and natural phenomena. For Frazer, myth is the product of a savage world with no reason or meaning, although his approach ignores the spiritual dimension of the ancient world and its capacity to give meaning to the world. Then, due to the new breath within the field of anthropology - the history of religions as well as to the psychoanalytical studies, myth was considered the answer to the awareness of a certain position of man in the cosmos, which implies a particular metaphysical position. Myths and symbols pick up the archetypal themes, and establish new exemplary models in order to give meaning to man’s actions and in order to reply to man’s fears and dreams. These are not arbitrary creations of the psyche, as they respond to a need and fulfill a function: revealing the most secret ways of being, thus expressing a primordial model, a fundamental theme which dominates the unconscious. Also, some researchers approach myths from the perspective of the sacred, revealing the metaphysical condition of the world beyond and others mark the size

1 This may be the reason why Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in 1930 that “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matter as an Englishman of the 20th century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1993: 56).
truths, just like myths. So, myths are not exclusively connected to a God’s life, as we used to think, instead they are connected to a variety of desires and feelings. In this respect, Marc Augé’s (Marc Augé, 1999: 85) work on myths departs from the way in which the modern world is imagined and constructed. According to Augé, our world becomes increasingly fictionalized. What was before mythic now becomes fiction as the modern discourse is less religious, as Augé puts it, “in the name of progress, the ideal of modernity tends to relegate the entire corpus of religious affiliations to the axis of fiction by a movement analogous to the one which ordained the confrontation between religions” (Marc Augé, 1999: 85). Moreover, just a quick overview of the advertising messages and images may confirm the presence of representations and desirable states for the individual, which are in fact not very different from what we call the utopia of traditional myths. In that sense the myth of the happy family, of ravishing beauty, of the saviour-leader or of the earthly paradise are no more realistic than fertility given by seashells and oysters, touch healing or Noah’s survival during the flood. The difference is merely in the shape in which these new myths reach the individual and the way in which they are propagated. If in the past myths were stories about what happened during primordial times, today myths take a part of the respective events and promise the individuals that they can take part in them by using certain products, services or by choosing certain leaders.

Doubtlessly, the diversity and complexity of myths present in different cultures and religions impose a historical perspective on myth. They seem to be an answer that is historically and socially determined, a cultural product through which people resolve an archetypical theme. Practically, the myths of creation, of the rescuing hero or of fertility are stories through which people in a certain space succeeded to solve the mysteries of creation and birth, to surpass their condition and to pass through the barrier of death. Furthermore, studies (Monique Segre, 2000) reveal that myths appear and disappear and we can speak of ritual behaviours gaining new meanings and of the possibility for today’s societies to create modern myths.

As pointed above, myths refer to an unhistorical theme, but are not anchored in the primordial dimension as they become in time. The contemporary society dominated by secularization and consumerism seems to intentionally refuse to accept that it can be surrounded by myths and mythical thinking and communication. Nevertheless, the tendency to value more and more the practical matters and less the symbolic representations does not imply that myths do not exist nowadays. Let’s do not forget that myths use a part of reality, human’s desires and hopes to reveal a better world. They accompany people in a new dimension, promising ideals. And products, services and politicians use these myths in order to get to the unconscious desires of humans. Therefore, from the perspective of our work, we may say that myths are stories, but not necessarily narrative ones, that are always true and that keep generating new meaning and that throughout time face new forms and structures.

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6 “In modern myths, heroes are no longer anti gods, but men holding the power of destruction. Myth gathers facts and re-arranges them, reveals by hiding and has the role of legitimizing a situation, making it acceptable to a vast social entity” (C. Rivière, 1991, apud Monique Segre 2000: 13).