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MYTH AND REALITY

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I.

The Structure of Myths

FOR THE past fifty years at least, Western scholars have approached the study of myth from a viewpoint markedly different from, let us say, that of the nineteenth century. Unlike their predecessors, who treated myth in the usual meaning of the word, that is, as "fable," "invention," "fiction," they have accepted it as it was understood in the archaic societies, where, on the contrary, "myth" means a "true story" and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant. This new semantic value given the term "myth" makes its use in contemporary parlance somewhat equivocal. Today, that is, the word is employed both in the sense of "fiction" or "illusion" and in that familiar especially to ethnologists, sociologists, and historians of religions, the sense of "sacred tradition, primordial revelation, exemplary model."

The history of the different meanings given to the word "myth" in the antique and Christian worlds will be treated later (cf. Chaps. VIII and IX). Everyone knows that from the time of Xenophanes (*ca.* 565–470)—who was the first to criticize and reject the "mythological" expressions of the divinity employed by Homer and Hesiod—the Greeks steadily continued to empty *mythos* of all religious and metaphysical value. Contrasted both with *logos* and, later, with *historia,*

mythos came in the end to denote "what cannot really exist." On its side, Judaeo-Christianity put the stamp of "falsehood" and "illusion" on whatever was not justified or validated by the two Testaments.

It is not in this sense—the most usual one in contemporary parlance—that we understand "myth." More precisely, it is not the intellectual stage or the historical moment when myth became a "fiction" that interests us. Our study will deal primarily with those societies in which myth is—or was until very recently—"living," in the sense that it supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life. To understand the structure and function of myths in these traditional societies not only serves to clarify a stage in the history of human thought but also helps us to understand a category of our contemporaries.

To give only one example—that of the "cargo cults" of Oceania—it would be difficult to interpret this whole series of isolated activities without reference to their justification by myths. These prophetic and millennialist cults announce the imminence of a fabulous age of plenty and happiness. The natives will again be the masters in their islands, and they will no longer work, for the dead will return in magnificent ships laden with goods like the giant cargoes that the whites receive in their ports. It is for this reason that most of the "cargo cults" demand that, while all domestic animals and tools are to be destroyed, huge warehouses are to be built in which to store the goods brought by the dead. One movement prophesies Christ's arrival on a loaded freighter; another looks for the coming of "America." A new paradisal era will begin and the members of the cult will become immortal. Some cults also involve orgiastic acts, for the taboos and

customs sanctioned by tradition will lose their reason for existence and give place to absolute freedom. Now, all these actions and beliefs are explained by *the myth of the destruction of the World, followed by a new Creation and the establishment of the Golden Age.* (We shall return to this myth later.)

Similar phenomena occurred in the Congo when the country became independent in 1960. In some villages the inhabitants tore the roofs off their huts to give passage to the gold coins that their ancestors were to rain down. Elsewhere everything was allowed to go to rack and ruin except the roads to the cemetery, by which the ancestors would make their way to the village. Even the orgiastic excesses had a meaning, for, according to the myth, from the dawn of the New Age all women would belong to all men.

In all probability phenomena of this kind will become more and more uncommon. We may suppose that "mythical behavior" will disappear as a result of the former colonies' acquiring political independence. But what is to happen in a more or less distant future will not help us to understand what has just happened. What we most need is to grasp the meaning of these strange forms of behavior, to understand the cause and the justification for these excesses. For to understand them is to see them as human phenomena, phenomena of culture, creations of the human spirit, not as a pathological outbreak of instinctual behavior, bestiality, or sheer childishness. There is no other alternative. Either we do our utmost to deny, minimize, or forget these excesses, taking them as isolated examples of "savagery" that will vanish completely as soon as the tribes have been "civilized," or we make the necessary effort to understand the mythical ante-

cedents that explain and justify such excesses and give them a religious value. This latter approach is, we feel, the only one that even deserves consideration. It is only from a historico-religious viewpoint that these and similar forms of behavior can be seen as what they are—cultural phenomena—and lose their character of aberrant childishness or instinct run wild.

Value of "primitive mythologies"

All the great Mediterranean and Asiatic religions have mythologies. But it is better not to begin the study of myth from the starting point of, say, Greek or Egyptian or Indian mythology. Most of the Greek myths were recounted, and hence modified, adjusted, systematized, by Hesiod and Homer, by the rhapsodes and the mythographers. The mythological traditions of the Near East and of India have been sedulously reinterpreted and elaborated by their theologians and ritualists. This is not to say, of course, that (1) these Great Mythologies have lost their "mythical substance" and are only "literatures" or that (2) the mythological traditions of archaic societies were not rehandled by priests and bards. Just like the Great Mythologies that were finally transmitted as written texts, the "primitive" mythologies, discovered by the earliest travelers, missionaries, and ethnographers in the "oral" stage, have a "history." In other words, they have been transformed and enriched in the course of the ages under the influence of higher cultures or through the creative genius of exceptionally gifted individuals.

Nevertheless, it is better to begin by studying myth in traditional and archaic societies, reserving for later consideration the mythologies of people who have played an important

role in history. The reason is that, despite modifications in the course of time, the myths of "primitives" still reflect a primordial condition. Then, too, in "primitive" societies myths are still living, still establish and justify all human conduct and activity. The role and function of these myths can still (or could until very recently) be minutely observed and described by ethnologists. In the case of each myth, as of each ritual, it has been possible to question the natives and to learn, at least partially, the significance that they accord to it. Obviously, these "living documents," recorded in the course of investigations conducted on the spot, do not solve all our difficulties. But they have the not inconsiderable advantage of helping us to pose the problem in the right way, that is, to set myth in its original socioreligious context.

Attempt at a definition of myth

It would be hard to find a definition of myth that would be acceptable to all scholars and at the same time intelligible to nonspecialists. Then, too, is it even possible to find *one* definition that will cover all the types and functions of myths in all traditional and archaic societies? Myth is an extremely complex cultural reality, which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints.

Speaking for myself, the definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species

of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginnings." Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the "supernaturalness") of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the "supernatural") into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being.

We shall later have occasion to enlarge upon and refine these few preliminary indications, but at this point it is necessary to emphasize a fact that we consider essential: the myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a "true history," because it always deals with *realities*. The cosmogonic myth is "true" because the existence of the World is there to prove it; the myth of the origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it, and so on.

Because myth relates the *gesta* of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities. When the missionary and ethnologist C. Strehlow asked the Australian Arunta why they performed certain ceremonies, the answer was always: "Because the ancestors so commanded it."[1] The

[1] C. Strehlow, *Die Aranda-und-Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*, vol. III, p. i; cf. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La mythologie primitive* (Paris, 1935), p. 123. See also T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne University Press, 1947), p. 6.

Kai of New Guinea refused to change their way of living and working, and they explained: "It was thus that the Nemu (the Mythical Ancestors) did, and we do likewise."[2] Asked the reason for a particular detail in a ceremony, a Navaho chanter answered: "Because the Holy People did it that way in the first place."[3] We find exactly the same justification in the prayer that accompanies a primitive Tibetan ritual: "As it has been handed down from the beginning of earth's creation, so must we sacrifice. . . . As our ancestors in ancient times did—so do we now."[4] The same justification is alleged by the Hindu theologians and ritualists. "We must do what the gods did in the beginning" (*Satapatha Brāhmana,* VII, 2, 1, 4). "Thus the gods did; thus men do" (*Taittiriya Brāhmana,* I, 5, 9, 4).[5]

As we have shown elsewhere,[6] even the profane behavior and activities of man have their models in the deeds of the Supernatural Beings. Among the Navahos "women are required to sit with their legs under them and to one side, men with their legs crossed in front of them, because it is said that in the beginning Changing Woman and the Monster Slayer sat in these positions."[7] According to the mythical traditions

[2] C. Keysser, quoted by Richard Thurnwald, *Die Eingeborenen Australiens und der Südseeinseln* (=Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch, 8, Tübingen, 1927), p. 28.

[3] Clyde Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," *Harvard Theological Review,* vol. 35 (1942), p. 66. Cf. *ibid.* for other examples.

[4] Matthias Hermanns, *The Indo-Tibetans* (Bombay, 1954), pp. 66 ff.

[5] See M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, 1954), pp. 21 ff.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 27 f.

[7] Clyde Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, quoting W. W. Hill, *The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navaho Indians* (New Haven, 1938), p. 179.

of an Australian tribe, the Karadjeri, all their customs, and indeed all their behavior, were established in the "Dream Time" by two Supernatural Beings, the Bagadjimbiri (for example, the way to cook a certain cereal or to hunt an animal with a stick, the particular position to be taken when urinating, and so on).[8]

There is no need to add further examples. As we showed in *The Myth of the Eternal Return,* and as will become still clearer later, the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities—diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom. This idea is of no little importance for understanding the man of archaic and traditional societies, and we shall return to it later.

"True stories" and "false stories"

We may add that in societies where myth is still alive the natives carefully distinguish myths—"true stories"—from fables or tales, which they call "false stories." The Pawnee "differentiate 'true stories' from 'false stories,' and include among the 'true' stories in the first place all those which deal with the beginnings of the world; in these the actors are divine beings, supernatural, heavenly, or astral. Next come those tales which relate the marvellous adventures of the national hero, a youth of humble birth who became the saviour of his people, freeing them from monsters, delivering them from famine and other disasters, and performing other noble and

[8] Cf. M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1960), pp. 191 ff.

beneficent deeds. Last come the stories which have to do with the world of the medicine-men and explain how such-and-such a sorcerer got his superhuman powers, how such-and-such an association of shamans originated, and so on. The 'false' stories are those which tell of the far from edifying adventures and exploits of Coyote, the prairie-wolf. Thus in the 'true' stories we have to deal with the holy and the supernatural, while the 'false' ones on the other hand are of profane content, for Coyote is extremely popular in this and other North American mythologies in the character of a trickster, deceiver, sleight-of-hand expert and accomplished rogue."[9]

Similarly, the Cherokee distinguish between sacred myths (cosmogony, creation of the stars, origin of death) and profane stories, which explain, for example, certain anatomical or physiological peculiarities of animals. The same distinction is found in Africa. The Herero consider the stories that relate the beginnings of the different groups of the tribe "true" because they report facts that *really* took place, while the more or less humorous tales have no foundation. As for the natives of Togo, they look on their origin myths as "absolutely real."[10]

This is why myths cannot be related without regard to circumstances. Among many tribes they are not recited before women or children, that is, before the uninitiated. Usually the old teachers communicate the myths to the neophytes during their period of isolation in the bush, and this forms part of their initiation. R. Piddington says of the Karadjeri:

[9] R. Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden, 1954), pp. 11–12. Cf. also Werner Müller, *Die Religionen der Waldlandindianer Nordamerikas* (Berlin, 1956), p. 42.

[10] R. Pettazzoni, *op. cit.,* p. 13.

"the sacred myths that women may not know are concerned principally with the cosmogony and especially with the institution of the initiation ceremonies."[11]

Whereas "false stories" can be told anywhere and at any time, myths must not be recited except *during a period of sacred time* (usually in autum or winter, and only at night).[12] This custom has survived even among peoples who have passed beyond the archaic stage of culture. Among the Turco-Mongols and the Tibetans the epic songs of the Gesar cycle can be recited only at night and in winter. "The recitation is assimilated to a powerful charm. It helps to obtain all sorts of advantages, particularly success in hunting and war. . . . Before the recitation begins, a space is prepared by being powdered with roasted barley flour. The audience sit around it. The bard recites the epic for several days. They say that in former times the hoofprints of Gesar's horse appeared in the prepared space. Hence the recitation brought the real presence of the hero."[13]

What myths reveal

This distinction made by natives between "true stories" and "false stories" is significant. Both categories of narratives present "histories," that is, relate a series of events that took place in a distant and fabulous past. Although the actors in myths are usually Gods and Supernatural Beings, while those in tales are heroes or miraculous animals, all the actors share the

[11] R. Piddington, quoted by L. Lévy-Bruhl, p. 115. On initiation ceremonies, cf. Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth* (New York, 1958).

[12] See examples in R. Pettazzoni, *op. cit.*, p. 14, n. 15.

[13] R. A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris, 1959), pp. 318–319.

common trait that they do not belong to the everyday world. Nevertheless, the natives have felt that the two kinds of "stories" are basically different. For everything that the myths relate *concerns them directly,* while the tales and fables refer to events that, even when they have caused changes in the World (cf. the anatomical or physiological peculiarities of certain animals), have not altered the human condition as such.[14]

Myths, that is, narrate not only the origin of the World, of animals, of plants, and of man, but also all the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today—mortal, sexed, organized in a society, obliged to work in order to live, and working in accordance with certain rules. If the World *exists,* if man *exists,* it is because Supernatural Beings exercised creative powers in the "beginning." But after the cosmogony and the creation of man other events occurred, and man *as he is today* is the direct result of those mythical events, *he is constituted by those events.* He is mortal because something happened *in illo tempore.* If that thing had not happened, man would not be mortal—he would have gone on existing indefinitely, like rocks; or he might have changed his skin periodically like snakes, and hence would have been able to renew his life, that is, begin it over again indefinitely. But the myth of the origin of death narrates what happened *in illo tempore,* and, in telling the incident, explains *why* man is mortal.

[14] Of course, what is considered a "true story" in one tribe can become a "false story" in a neighboring tribe. "Demythicization" is a process that is already documented in the archaic stages of culture. What is important is the fact that "primitives" are always aware of the difference between myths ("true stories") and tales or legends ("false stories"). Cf. Appendix I ("Myths and Fairy Tales").

Similarly, a certain tribe live by fishing—because in mythical times a Supernatural Being taught their ancestors to catch and cook fish. The myth tells the story of the first fishery, and, in so doing, at once reveals a superhuman act, teaches men how to perform it, and, finally, explains why this particular tribe must procure their food in this way.

It would be easy to multiply examples. But those already given show why, for archaic man, myth is a matter of primary importance, while tales and fables are not. Myth teaches him the primordial "stories" that have constituted him existentially; and everything connected with his existence and his legitimate mode of existence in the Cosmos concerns him directly.

We shall presently see what consequences this peculiar conception had for the behavior of archaic man. We may note that, just as modern man considers himself to be constituted by History, the man of the archaic societies declares that he is the result of a certain number of mythical events. Neither regards himself as "given," "made" once and for all, as, for example, a tool is made once and for all. A modern man might reason as follows: I am what I am today because a certain number of things have happened to me, but those things were possible only because agriculture was discovered some eight to nine thousand years ago and because urban civilizations developed in the ancient Near East, because Alexander the Great conquered Asia and Augustus founded the Roman Empire, because Galileo and Newton revolutionized the conception of the universe, thus opening the way to scientific discoveries and laying the groundwork for the rise of industrial civilization, because the French Revolution occurred and the ideas of freedom, democracy, and social

justice shook the Western world to its foundations after the Napoleonic wars—and so on.

Similarly, a "primitive" could say: I am what I am today because a series of events occurred before I existed. But he would at once have to add: events that took place *in mythical times* and therefore make up a *sacred history* because the actors in the drama are not men but Supernatural Beings. In addition, while a modern man, though regarding himself as the result of the course of Universal History, does not feel obliged to know the whole of it, the man of the archaic societies is not only obliged to remember mythical history but also to *re-enact* a large part of it periodically. It is here that we find the greatest difference between the man of the archaic societies and modern man: the irreversibility of events, which is the characteristic trait of History for the latter, is not a fact to the former.

Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in 1453 and the Bastille fell on July 14, 1789. Those events are irreversible. To be sure, July 14th having become the national holiday of the French Republic, the taking of the Bastille is commemorated annually, but the historical event itself is not re-enacted.[15] For the man of the archaic societies, on the contrary, what happened *ab origine* can be repeated by the power of rites. For him, then, the essential thing is to know the myths. It is essential not only because the myths provide him with an explanation of the World and his own mode of being in the World, but above all because, by recollecting the myths, by re-enacting them, he is able to repeat what the Gods, the Heroes, or the Ancestors did *ab origine*. To know the myths

[15] Cf. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 30 ff.

is to learn the secret of the origin of things. In other words, one learns not only how things came into existence but also where to find them and how to make them reappear when they disappear.

What "knowing the myths" means

Australian totemic myths usually consist in a rather monotonous narrative of peregrinations by mythical ancestors or totemic animals. They tell how, in the "Dream Time" (*alcheringa*)—that is, in mythical time—these Supernatural Beings made their appearance on earth and set out on long journeys, stopping now and again to change the landscape or to produce certain animals and plants, and finally vanished underground. But knowledge of these myths is essential for the life of the Australians. The myths teach them how to repeat the creative acts of the Supernatural Beings, and hence how to ensure the multiplication of such-and-such an animal or plant.

These myths are told to the neophytes during their initiation. Or rather, they are "performed," that is, re-enacted. "When the youths go through the various initiation ceremonies, [their instructors] perform a series of ceremonies before them; these, though carried out exactly like those of the cult proper —except for certain characteristic particulars—do not aim at the multiplication and growth of the totem in question but are simply intended to show those who are to be raised, or have just been raised, to the rank of men the way to perform these cult rituals."[16]

We see, then, that the "story" narrated by the myth con-

[16] C. Strehlow, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 1–2; L. Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 123. On puberty initiations in Australia, cf. *Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 4 ff.

stitutes a "knowledge" which is esoteric, not only because it is secret and is handed on during the course of an initiation but also because the "knowledge" is accompanied by a magico-religious power. For knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will. Erland Nordenskiöld has reported some particularly suggestive examples from the Cuna Indians. According to their beliefs, the lucky hunter is the one who knows the origin of the game. And if certain animals can be tamed, it is because the magicians know the secret of their creation. Similarly, you can hold red-hot iron or grasp a poisonous snake if you know the origin of fire and snakes. Nordenskiöld writes that "in one Cuna village, Tientiki, there is a fourteen-year-old boy who can step into fire unharmed simply because he knows the charm of the creation of fire. Perez often saw people grasp red-hot iron and others tame snakes."[17]

This is a quite widespread belief, not connected with any particular type of culture. In Timor, for example, when a rice field sprouts, someone who knows the mythical traditions concerning rice goes to the spot. "He spends the night there in the plantation hut, reciting the legends that explain how man came to possess rice [origin myth]. . . . Those who do this are not priests."[18] Reciting its origin myth compels the rice to come up as fine and vigorous and thick as it was when *it appeared for the first time*. The officiant does not remind it of how it was created in order to "instruct" it, to teach it

[17] E. Nordenskiöld, "Faiseurs de miracles et voyants chez les Indiens Cuna," *Revista del Instituto de Etnologia* (Tucumán), vol. II (1932), p. 464; Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

[18] A. C. Kruyt, quoted by Lévy-Bruhl, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

how it should behave. He *magically compels it to go back to the beginning,* that is, to repeat its exemplary creation.

The *Kalevala* relates that the old Väinämöinen cut himself badly while building a boat. Then "he began to weave charms in the manner of all magic healers. He chanted the birth of the cause of his wound, but he could not remember the words that told of the beginning of iron, those very words which might heal the gap ripped open by the blue steel blade." Finally, after seeking the help of other magicians, Väinämöinen cried: "I now remember the origin of iron! and he began the tale as follows: Air is the first of mothers. Water is the eldest of brothers, fire the second and iron the youngest of the three. Ukko, the great Creator, separated earth from water and drew soil into marine lands, but iron was yet unborn. Then he rubbed his palms together upon his left knee. Thus were born three nature maidens to be the mothers of iron."[19] It should be noted that, in this example, the myth of the origin of iron forms part of the cosmogonic myth and, in a sense, continues it. This is an extremely important and specific characteristic of origin myths, and we shall study it in the next chapter.

The idea that a remedy does not act unless its origin is known is extremely widespread. To quote Erland Nordenskiöld again: "Every magical chant must be preceded by an incantation telling the origin of the remedy used, otherwise it does not act. . . . For the remedy or the healing chant to have its effect, it is necessary to know the origin of the plant, the manner in which the first woman gave birth to it."[20]

[19] Aili Kolehmainen Johnson, *Kalevala. A Prose translation from the Finnish* (Hancock, Mich., 1950), pp. 53 ff.

[20] E. Nordenskiöld, "La conception de l'âme chez les Indiens Cuna de l'Isthme de Panama," *Journal des Américanistes,* N.S., vol. 24 (1932), pp. 5–30, 14.

In the Na-khi ritual chants published by J. F. Rock it is expressly stated: "If one does not relate . . . the origin of the medicine, to slander it is not proper."[21] Or: "Unless its origin is related one should not speak about it."[22]

We shall see in the following chapter that, as in the Väinämöinen myth given above, the origin of remedies is closely connected with the history of the origin of the World. It should be noted, however, that this is only part of a general conception, which may be formulated as follows: *A rite cannot be performed unless its "origin" is known, that is, the myth that tells how it was performed for the first time.* During the funeral service the Na-khi shaman chants:

"Now we will escort the deceased and again experience bitterness;
We will again dance and suppress the demons.
If it is not told whence the dance originated
One must not speak about it.
Unless one know the origin of the dance
One cannot dance."[23]

This is curiously reminiscent of what the Uitoto told Preuss: "Those are the words (myths) of our father, his very words. Thanks to those words we dance, and there would be no dance if he had not given them to us."[24]

In most cases it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, one must *recite* it; this, in a sense, is a proclamation of one's

[21] J. F. Rock, *The Na-Khi Nâga Cult and related ceremonies* (Rome, 1952), vol. II, p. 474.

[22] *Ibid.,* vol. II, p. 487.

[23] J. F. Rock, *Zhi-mä funeral ceremony of the Na-Khi* (Vienna Mödling, 1955), p. 87.

[24] K. T. Preuss, *Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto,* vols. I–II (Göttingen, 1921–23), p. 625.

knowledge, *displays* it. But this is not all. He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place. The mythical time of origins is a "strong" time because it was transfigured by the active, creative presence of the Supernatural Beings. By reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort becomes "contemporary" with the events described, one is in the presence of the Gods or Heroes. As a summary formula we might say that by "living" the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a "sacred" Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable. This function of myth, which we have emphasized in our *Myth of the Eternal Return* (especially pp. 35 ff.), will appear more clearly in the course of the following analyses.

Structure and function of myths

These few preliminary remarks are enough to indicate certain characteristic qualities of myth. In general it can be said that myth, as experienced by archaic societies, (1) constitutes the History of the acts of the Supernaturals; (2) that this History is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of the Supernaturals); (3) that myth is always related to a "creation," it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts; (4) that by knowing the myth one knows the "origin" of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will; this is not an "external," "abstract"

knowledge but a knowledge that one "experiences" ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it is the justification; (5) that in one way or another one "lives" the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted.

"Living" a myth, then, implies a genuinely "religious" experience, since it differs from the ordinary experience of everyday life. The "religiousness" of this experience is due to the fact that one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, one again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals' presence. What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, one becomes their contemporary. This also implies that one is no longer living in chronological time, but in the primordial Time, the Time when the event *first took place*. This is why we can use the term the "strong time" of myth; it is the prodigious, "sacred" time when something *new, strong,* and *significant* was manifested. To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernaturals and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths. In short, myths reveal that the World, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary.

I cannot conclude this chapter better than by quoting the classic passages in which Bronislav Malinowski undertook to show the nature and function of myth in primitive societies.

"Studied alive, myth . . . is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilisation; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. . . . These stories . . . are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications as to how to perform them."[25]

[25] B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926; reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion* [New York, 1955], pp. 101, 108).