

18. NARRATIVE AND LIFE (4/12)

19. NARRATIVE AND CONTROL (4/14)

20. FOLKTALE AND MYTH(4/21)

We are moving from narrative in general to kinds of narrative more often considered by anthropologists. Tales and myths. We by no means have a monopoly. Folklorists first among professionals. But also amateurs of all sorts have had a go at them, even more psychologists, literary critics, etc.

Great deal of energy expended on typology. How do we tell fairy tales from legends from myths etc? Much of the problem is that we are imposing categories from our culture on the world, words in English like myth and tale, expect all cultures to fit. Folklorists have expended great energy on typology. Some of it is useful. But we are largely going to ignore it in favor of other questions.

We will be most concerned with myth, but not drawing firm lines, if we can learn something interesting from analysis of something that gets labeled a tale or legend, then so be it.

Myth is a very complicated notion. And the study of myth far from dispassionate. Bound up in the romantic revival of 18th and 19th centuries; with discovery of sacred epics of Asia; with nationalist search for roots and essence of nation, folklore studies an important adjunct to nationalism. Very useful study by Von Hendy (in supplementary reading list).

Q. What do we mean by myth? (even if we are inconsistent)

Q. What about myth of silent majority, or myth that the so-and-sos are all like that? key feature is falsity.

-One kind of falsity, or at least difference: actions not same as mundane world today. Gods, talking animals, transformations, etc.

But complicated, because in many usages, it is false on one level and true on another.

Very often but not always, is oral, part of oral tradition.

-assumption that there is a body of such stories

-and that in some way fundamental for society

-Very ethnocentric, imposing our definitions and assumptions on other culture.

But does appear that many societies do have narratives about ancient times, beginning of world, when many things now differentiated were then still mixed, e.g. animals, spirits, and people

and in some way those narratives are more basic and fundamental than, e.g. a little tale about three little pigs

So we are probably safe at having a crack at analyzing those sorts of narratives, whether a particular one strikes us as a folktale or a myth

-How do we go about making sense of mythology? It turns out that we are coming in very late. Just about everyone you can think of has had a crack at it. Esp. in 19th and 20th centuries, myth became a prominent topic, and just like totemism, every theorist felt that his or her theory should explain it. (Von Hendy book is excellent on this.)

1. One very obvious tack is to insist either that myths are literally true, or else that they are true but confused or garbled, and we need to clear away the brush to show the truth. Literalist historical interpretation.

-Keep looking for Noah's ark stuck on a mountain. Figure out where and how Moses parted the seas. Explain the flood thru a great release of water from Black Sea. Trace Odysseus' voyage thru Aegean.

One version, euhemerists, said that true but distorted: Gods and heroes just ordinary humans, got magnified with telling. Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, feathered serpent, suggested was originally king or other leader.

May be true, but also way to explain discrepancies, mess in myths.

Sometimes motivated by religious belief or nationalism. Generations of archaeology to prove literal truth of Bible.

Can be useful. Narrative can preserve traces of past: Kuna talk of great shamans of past. description very similar to shamans in many Amazonian societies. Probably correct. Jan Vansina, careful studies of how to sift out truth.

But many dangers. Anthro on Pacific island, told political epic about heroes named Nof and Souf, turned out to be garbled version of US Civil War, as islanders had heard from some American.

Among Kuna, anthro told story of early Kuna, who dealt with French pirates in 17th century. Grandfather Fransoa. But definitely a recent creation. French tyranny almost identical to what Panamanian policemen did a few years before.

2. One very prominent school, identified with 19th century German who worked in England. Mueller: very prudish, upset by bad behavior in myths. Anti-Darwinist, believed in degeneration rather than evolutionary progress. Very impressed by philology, historical linguistics, very strong and impressive in 19th century.

So said original myths were observations of sun, moon, stars. Then was linguistic degeneration, the planets and stars became personified, became heroes and gods. So what was originally e.g. a non-narrative observation of eclipse became a myth about cannibal Titans.

Completely ridiculous, but had many believers. Also typical of much theorizing, imposing a set of axioms and preconceptions, forcing onto material.

3. 19th century evolutionists, said myths were survivals from past state of society, would give clues about path of human evolution.

Myths of Amazons or of distant past when women in charge, before men gained control, proof that had been matriarchal stage.

many varieties.

Among most influential, James Frazer, late 19th and early 20th.

Golden Bough, probably most widely read and influential anthropology book ever

Though total crap

Built up idea of past stage with divine kings, their periodic sacrifice tied with nature, regeneration, nature rituals

V romantic, tied in with ideas already circling among British romantics

Extremely influential. Impact on T. S. Eliot, Yeats, many others.

Still many believers, their idea of anthro.

“Lord of the Dance” In Cambridge, Christmas Revels.

Won't go over all schools.

Can see that start with grand theory, then pick and choose narratives and pieces of narratives to fit theory.

Recent influential interpreters like Campbell have own ideas, but methods much the same.

4. Foundational anthro method comes from Bronislaw Malinowski.

He had very straightforward, unromantic notion.

Said myth is not really about the past but about the present.

Said it is a charter, a text that justifies the present.

e.g. a myth about how our ancestors came out of a hole in the ground justifies our possession of land.

M is undoubtedly correct, *within limits*. Many narratives about past are also about present.

I see this with Kuna: they say this land is ours, no one else's, because God gave it to us, literally, at the beginning of time. A mythological charter for holding their land.

We can see this charter in all sorts of narratives that we call history rather than myth.

Another virtue of M's approach: it's much closer to the actual texts, narratives

But M oversimplified (something he did a lot)

He never took on all Trobriand myths, just a few he could show as charters

Hard to see what many myths are charters for

Even when relationship to present is obvious, it may not be simple justification

Kuna have myths about early leaders, shows how necessary chiefs are. But those leaders went bad. They use their example to urge people to watch their chiefs like hawks, not to let them get away with anything.

Very often myth is about problematic things, conflicts, contradictions
Chewing on something that ultimately indigestible, wrestling with irresolvable problem

So we can follow M in seeing myth as very often being about the present as well as the past, look for implications

But look to more complex connections

And more than M or any of the other theorists, look closely at the actual narratives, texts

Show some respect to them and their creators.

Finally, unlike many theorists, try to relate narratives to the particular cultures that created them, even if, as folklorists insist, they are variants of narratives found all over world.

Vladimir Propp and the analysis of tale form

Propp, a folklorist, wrestled with the problem of classifying folk narratives

Q. of how to tell one kind of narrative from another, related q. of what all different kinds of events that take place in stories

As Propp noted, such classification of themes and motifs and types can get very messy
Vast multiplication of motifs and themes. Endlessly dividing and subdividing. If one theme is "tests", then can have tests of cleverness, tests of prowess, tests of etc. Then tests of prowess can be divided into tests consisting of tasks, tests consisting of quests, etc.

Another problem is that one tale may include several motifs or themes.

Such classifications can be useful in rough and ready way. Folklorists like Dundes very good at recognizing a tale as one variant of a story found all over the world.

But the classifications are inconsistent and unwieldy.

They are also imposed from outside. Cookie-cutter kind of typologizing. Don't get inside any tales.

By trying to take on whole world, they don't help that much in analyzing any particular corpus of tales

Propp's approach was to start with a given corpus of tales

And then see if can break it down into a number of elements---in his case was actions by key character. he called them functions.

If begin with the initial situation at start of story, a number of different ones are possible. But P said they are all variants on a basic situation---a lack, a threat, some difficulty that must be resolved.

Then more specific actions are treated as sub-types. A villain causes harm or injury to a member of family can consist of: abduction; pillaging crops; plundering; injury; disappearance; a murder, etc. etc. All are variants on villainy.

Propp shows that his classification can successfully analyze any tale in the corpus, reduce it to a formula.

It would have been even more convincing if he had randomly divided the tales into two groups, based the typology on one half, and then tested it to see if it worked on the other half.

Propp's analysis works whenever a body of narratives closely follows a basic pattern: it is highly predictable and stereotyped, or "formulaic."

It has the advantage of getting inside the genre better than classifications imposed from outside, and of being testable.

It also holds out the hope that it may approximate the knowledge of the people who actually perform the tales: in theory, one could write a new tale and see whether it was accepted. If someone says that's not our kind of story, then failure. But if they say, well, I never heard that one, but it sounds like a good story, then success.

The article by Colby is a more recent attempt to try to refine and systematize Propp's method. Developed on the analogy of a grammar for generating sentences. This is a grammar for generating narratives.

The basic approach widely applicable. Not just to folktales but other stereotyped genres: television and films and detective novels and romance novels, etc.

You all will do a similar kind of analysis to some genre you pick.

In our reading from Mattingly about occupational therapists, she emphasizes flexibility in the way OT professionals impose narrative on life, but it seemed to me that there were really just a few basic stories they were using, and that one can analyze them as Propp does. Can also work for written material, so long as it is highly formulaic.

Propp was not the only one to wrestle with this problem.

Two folklorists, Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord, looked at Greek Homeric poetry and at performances of oral epics in the Balkans.

Insight was to suggest that one might understand the Iliad and Odyssey by seeing them as having been performed orally like the Balkan epics. The written versions we have, assumed to be first-generation written, according to P and L, show the imprint of their oral form.

This aspect of the problem is of lesser concern to us today. It generated lots of controversy.

What is of more interest is that P and L showed that both genres were highly formulaic, and that one could see the formulas as part of their composition and performance.

On micro level, there were stereotyped verbal formulas that performers used. Found over and over in Homeric poems. In extreme cases can be seen as fillers, way to take space while performer thinks what to say next.

We can see in African American and Pentecostalist preaching: frequent exclamations of "Thank you, Jesus!" Also part of the rhythm developed by performer.

On macro level, P and L identified stereotyped story elements, actions that occurred in many different tales. Very like Propp's function.

Balkan epics are performed extempore: not memorized, and stand up and start performing the poetry. Are also to do so in part because of formulaic elements.

So if singing about certain hero, can plug in element about conference of heroes, or pursuit, or killing, or whatever.

So whatever the controversies such work has generated, we can see convergence of methods for not only accounting for corpus of tales but also for how they are generated and performed. (A.B.Lord 1960, *The Singer of Tales*; John Miles Foley, 1988, *The Theory of Oral Composition*)

Although the method is about form, structure, it can also lead on to questions of meaning and import.