

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
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COMPARISON AND RECONSTRUCTION : LANGUAGE AND MYTHOLOGY

[excerpt]

II

MYTHOLOGY

§ 4.1 Comparative mythology

In addition to archaeology, anthropology and genetics, all of which have already delivered important results for our undertaking of reconstructing and understanding the earliest forms of humans, their behavior and their speech, I propose to add the study of the earliest forms of mythology¹ as well.

Although myth has been studied for a long time, and comparatively so, for more than a hundred years, such comparisons have not yet yielded a cogent system of relationships.²

However, all such interpretation are usually restricted to *one* myth, or variants of it. If similarities between myths in various cultures are noticed they

¹ This section is based on the results of my still unpublished book, *Origins*, much of it written --on renewed direct experience and contact with Japanese religion, myth and folklore-- in 1990, during a sabbatical at the Institute for Research in Humanities (*Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyujo*) of Kyoto University, and slightly expanded and revised later on, but not yet finalized. These results have been used (and tested!) in classes at Harvard 1990-2000, and in some public lectures (June 30, 1990 at Kyoto University, in March 1993 in a conference on mythology organized by Phyllis Granoff at McMaster University, and in Feb. 1998 in the century-old *Shop Club* at Harvard, where we "talk shop" about our own fields of study).

² There is a long list of interpretations of myth, from the antique and Renaissance stance (Vico) regarding them as allegorical or euhemeristic, from Max Müller's disguised nature myths to astral mythology, from ritual to Malinowski's social charter, from Freud's theories of repression to Jung's universal psychic archetypes, from myth as disguised history to Lévi-Strauss' binary, structural analysis supposedly reflecting the structure of the human mind.

are explained in various fashions, the two most current ones being those of diffusion and of archetypes.

Diffusion entails that the similarities in widely distributed myths are due to a gradual dispersion of such motifs from a known or reconstructed center.³ In most cases, however, we can no longer follow the trail of the diffusion of such myths or complexes of myths. Shamanism with its myth of the shaman's death, recomposition of the body, ascent to the heavens, etc., is spread over a wide area, from Siberia to Nepal and from Lapland to the Americas but we do not know how it spread and when, or whether it really was the predecessor of certain mythologies and religions now existing in Eurasia. The same holds for individual myths such as the Orpheus myth which is found in Greece, Japan, N. America, etc.⁴

The other currently common theory that aims at explaining such similarities is based on Jung's psychology. According to his and other's (such as Campbell's) explanation, certain motifs, or composite parts of them (archetypes) are *universally* human.

The image of the Mother/mother deity, the Goddess, is supposed to be one such archetype. Since such archetypes are generally human, they can appear in dreams, visions and myths, and are supposed to re-emerge even in areas where they have traditionally not been prominent, such as in certain European societies.⁵ However, if this were correct, we would expect that these motifs or archetypes would indeed turn up in *all* parts of the globe. This, however, is not the case.

§ 4.2 Laurasian Mythology

These types of explanations, and incidentally, all others proposed so far⁶ fail to address the central, unnoticed problem: the comparability of *whole*

³ Well attested cases are of course that of Judaeo-Christian or of Buddhist myths which have swept large parts of the globe well before the age of European discovery, travels and colonialization.

⁴ The spread of such myths has been studied especially by Stith Thompson and his school.

⁵ Conveniently forgetting about the pre-Protestant image and worship of Mary, mother of Christ, which is mythologically very complex: Mary as mother, immaculate virgin, ruler of the world, and as a sort of heavenly bride, -- all under the guise of a very important Christian saint.

⁶ See W. Doty, *Mythography* (1986).

systems of myths, or, to use a linguistic simile, the comparison of whole grammars, not just of a particular word, form, declension, conjugation or syntactical feature. It can indeed be noticed --though this has not been done so far-- that whole mythologies, such as the Vedic Indian or Japanese one, do not only have similar contents (individual myths with similar motifs/archetypes) but that these items are also arranged in similar fashion. In fact, a fairly large number of these mythologies exhibit a *common story line*.

However, the currently fashionable explanations in terms of general human universals cannot explain the extraordinary amount of similarities and congruities, whether they suppose binary structures of arrangement of mythological items (Lévi-Strauss), or psychic archetypes (Jung, Campbell), or of diffusion (Baumann, Stith Thompson). For, these congruities are found in large areas of the world, but they are *not found* on all continents nor are they *evenly distributed*.

The new comparative approach proposed here has been developed over the past decade. The steps undertaken include first to look at the common (story line) features, then to take account of the whole extent and structure of the various local mythologies, and finally to reconstruct a coherent mythology for much of Eurasia, North Africa and the Americas. Its designation, *Laurasian Mythology*, is derived from the geographical term, Lauretania, in Canada, and that of Greater Asia.

This new approach and the steps taken are in fact similar to the well tested methods of historical linguistics.

First, a general reconstruction is made, based on a number of obvious similarities, of the complete mythological structure. This is characterized by a narrational scheme that encompasses, in succession, the ultimate of origins of the universe and the world, the subsequent generations of the gods, an age of semi-divine heroes, the emergence of humans, the origins of "royal" lineages. It frequently includes a violent end to our present world, sometimes with the hope for a new world emerging out of the ashes. Ultimately, the universe is seen as a living body, in analogy to the human one: it is born from primordial incest, grows, develops, comes of age, and has to undergo final decay and death.

In passing it might be mentioned that some of the mythological comparisons seem to overlap even with linguistics proper. For example, in the historically unconnected mythologies of old Japan (*Kojiki*) and earliest India (R̥gveda), the male deity who opens the primordial cave is described or even named in the same semantic terms (though linguistically unrelated), i.e., 'arm-

strong' (O.Japanese *Ta-jikara*, Vedic Skt. *tuvi-grābha*, *ugra-bāhu* [Indra]); in both mythologies the deities of fire are male, and those of water are female, etc.⁷

Secondly, once the main outline and geographical extent of Laurasian mythology have been established, we can proceed in several further ways:

(1) noting the "regional" (sub-)varieties, for example the Indo-European one or the Near Eastern myth-families,⁸

(2) exploring their historical development by setting up a family tree of such (sub-)groupings,⁹

(3) concentrating on individual mythologies and exploring in how far they represent the reconstructed Laurasian type, what they miss and what can be reconstructed by internal comparison; further, delineating the influence from the surrounding areas, and by contrast, purely local developments.

Such internal reconstruction will fill the gap between, say, the reconstructed Near Eastern branch and the individual local mythology, e.g. that of the Sumerians or Hurrites.

Third, even though this is a large scale project, possible only with the help of many specialists in the fields of individual cultures, the project cannot stop here. Instead, initial exploration, carried out over the past few years, has indicated that Laurasian mythology, though covering very large parts of the globe, is not the only one in existence, and that it is not isolated among the several other existing types.

§ 4.3 Gondwana mythologies

⁷ See Witzel, Vala and Iwato (forthc.) It must be stressed that Japanese myth (in its recorded form, of 712 CE, going back at least to first half of the first millennium CE) has no direct or indirect connections with (Vedic) India (1500-500 BCE) before the introduction of Buddhism around 500 CE. -- Many other incidental, isolated, unexpected details and (poetic) motifs could be adduced, such as that of the Vedic Indian fire god, *Mātari-śvan* 'growing inside the mother', and the archaic Japanese fire god *Ho-musubi* 'growing (as) fire (inside his mother)', who at his birth burned his mother Izanami so severely that she died. Or, there are such isolated motifs as that of the Vedic deity Uṣas exposing her breasts as greeting to her close friends (the poets), a feature also found in the unrelated the Siberian Amur region, etc.

⁸ Including their mutual interrelations, and mutual secondary influences upon each other.

⁹ Always keeping in mind that secondary influences may have changed the picture, as in the case of the close cultural interaction of preclassical Ancient Greece / Anatolia / Syria-Palestine.

The mythologies of the Australians and that of the Papuas, as well as that of most of sub-Saharan Africa, represent distinct types that are very different from the Laurasian one. It is significant that certain motifs are altogether missing in this *Gondwana* belt.¹⁰ Typical examples are the lack of creation myths that tell the origin of the world or of the lack of flood myths, or of details such as the lack of female witches.¹¹ One may also add details such as a literary phenomenon, the preference for improvised magical spells and the disregard of the power of "true", well-formulated, and secretly transmitted magical poetry, so typical of much of Laurasia.

While Laurasian mythology can be described as being highly interested in origins, especially the origins of the universe and the succession of the various generations of the gods and that of four subsequent ages, the mythologies of Africa and Australia, New Guinea generally do not take notice of this question and generally confine themselves to describe the emergence of humankind in an already existing world.

Obviously, the Gondwana mythologies must be investigated carefully and their types, structure and development must be established, -- if the latter is visible at all in these cultures that do not have a long term written record. This problem is similar to that faced by long range comparison that must work with languages that have only recently been recorded (see above). The very geographical isolation of some mythologies may help, though, as is the case in those of Australia and highland New Guinea.

We must study the relationship with and mutual influence, if any, of the Gondwana mythologies and Laurasian mythology. In the case of West and East Africa, for example, certain northern (Sahel, north African) influences have long been established by Africanists. In the present context they can be seen to have overlaid the older Gondwana patterns. Even then, all Afro-Australian mythologies are genuinely different both from each other, and from the Laurasian type.

§ 4.4. First myths

¹⁰ The name is again taken from geography, where it includes, however, not only Africa and Australia but also India, Madagascar and South America.

¹¹ Cf. for Europe and N. Asia, Carlo Ginzburg (1991).

The implications of the project do not stop here. Even initial exploration has brought out the surprising fact that certain individual motifs and myths occur across all the four types, the Sub-Saharan African, Laurasian, Papuan, and the Australian one. While this might speak for the Jung-Thompson proposal, the facts receive a new interpretation in the light of the Laurasian theory. As briefly described above, Laurasian myth is characterized by a coherent story-line, and so are *some* of the Afro-Australian ones, albeit that the initial sections (creation, origin of the gods, the four ages) are ordinarily missing.

More importantly, what is significant about the few newly emerging, truly universal motifs is not just their world-wide spread, it is the fact that these universals also occur, but are *isolated*, in Laurasian myth. They often go against its grain, and are 'superfluous' variants of topics treated comprehensively and systematically in Laurasian myth.

Frequently, these variants are not part of the "official" local story line but occur as isolated myths, generally in form of folk tales or *märchen*. For example, the origin of humans from trees or from tree trunks is not at all normal nor common in Laurasian myth. Yet, it occurs in Icelandic and Japanese myth: in Iceland as a minor part of the main story line (*Ask/Embla* 'ash/elm'), but in Japan only as folk tale (*Kaguyahime*) which is not part of the 'official' mythology in the Kojiki/Nihonshoki. The motif is otherwise found in Austronesian Taiwan, in those parts of Central Africa not influenced by Laurasian traits, and commonly in the isolated Australia which has been cut off from Asia for at least some 6000 years, while initial Australian immigration is put at c. 40,000 B.C. What we have here are fragmentary *remnants* of a tradition that *precedes* the individual four types of mythology briefly described above.

It thus appears that Laurasian mythology may be an offshoot of the older Gondwana type, underlying the Sub-Saharan African and Papua/Australian mythologies. Based on these three or four types, the earlier version of a *Pan-Gaeon* type might be reconstructed.

In short, Laurasian mythology is the *first novel*, and the Pan-Gaeon motifs are the *oldest tales* of humankind. At least, they are the oldest ones that actually can be discovered, barring any new insight about Neanderthal speech and ritual.

And this is their fascination. The Laurasian (and Gondwana) project will take us back beyond all written literature, and beyond most cultural data encapsulated in individual languages or reconstructed for the various language families. It will enable us to take a glimpse of the human condition as

experienced by our most distant ancestors, both before and after they moved out of Africa.

The new theory clearly is worth being tested by a larger group of specialists of various cultures, literatures, languages and religions. Such close cooperation will, at any rate, lead to many new insights, whether the initial theory of a mono-local origin of all human myths and the 3-4 subdivisions proposed here can be maintained or not.

As such, Laurasian and Gondwana Comparative Mythology forms a fourth approach in our endeavor,¹² next to that of language comparison, genetic study and archaeology.

¹² In passing, I mention that there are other fields that I have explored in this conjunction, such as gestures, preference for certain musical scales or rhythms, choice and combination of colors, all of which represent regional features that are in need of detailed comparative study in conjunction with language and myth.