What truths, if any, do myths convey?

Based on a literature survey for his entry on 'Myth' in *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Michael P. Carroll identifies three characteristics common to anthropological usage of the term. Myth is a story, one which concerns the socially sacralized, and which is initially set in a past qualitatively different from the present age. Myths have often been orally transmitted at some stage and since mythology is a term used to refer to the corpus of myths within a given cultural tradition, religions can be accurately said to have extensive component parts of mythology. The essay proceeds by describing a spectrum of theoretical assessments of myth in anthropology which ascribe to it differing degrees of truth, starting with an appraisal of myth as mythopoeic expression conveying few truths at all, and reaching myth evaluated as psychoanalytical riddle conveying universal truths.

Early intellectualist constructions of how myth originated ironically have at times a myth-like quality themselves. Max Müller reconstructed a creation story behind the first Indo-European myths which he posited resulted from obsolete metaphorical terms for celestial phenomena becoming confused condensation points for accreted narratives. Edward B. Tylor assumed that primitive man's animistic beliefs enabled him to explain the world in terms of spirits permeating the natural world and myths were

narratives imagined by "the lower races"[1] and featuring these spirits. By personalising the world, myths made possible an analogical leap which transposed human caprice onto the elements, epic struggles onto cyclical changes. James Frazer claimed that the story of the Tower of Babel was intended to be taken literally and served as an explanation of why there existed a multiplicity of languages. This Just-So explanation for myth as explanatory story tends to overlook the symbolic significance and social dimension of myth.

Ernst Cassirer advanced the view that myth neither provided an explanation nor required one as it constituted an expression of the mythopoeic response of the mind to the world. The perception of the world in mythopoeic terms is set up in opposition to the perception of the world as a reality *sui generis* in the work of Cassirer – the latter being the approach of science and philosophy. Percy S. Cohen, in his survey of theories of myth, comments that the strength of Cassirer's theory lies in its treatment of myth as representative of a symbolic mode of structuring the world[2]. Within this theoretical frame, myth can be informative of the processes of the mind that are being projected onto experience.

Theoretical approaches to myth include a number which regard it as working to

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[1] Michael P. Carroll, 'Myth', *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson, Melvin Ember (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), p.828
[2] Percy S. Cohen, 'Theories of Myth', *Man* (1969), p.340

strengthen the social structure. The classical scholar Walter Burkert argues that the motifs

and narrative structure within a myth must resonate and concur with the "program of

action"[3] familiar to those hearing the myth in order for it to be successfully transmitted

and thus sustained. In this view, the home truths of myth are conservative in the sense of

Lewis Henry Morgan's understanding of kinship terminologies and W. Robertson Smith's

treatment of "survivals". Similarly, Franz Boas posited that myths reflect the truths of

social structure and Bronislaw Malinowski's position on myth saw it functioning as a

"sacred charter"[4] which strengthens social stability by legitimising existing claims to

status and power. Prior to his acceptance of a modified structuralism, Edmund Leach was

also a proponent of the theoretical position that myth serves to confer its spell of

legitimacy upon the established order. He saw in myth – as in ritual – symbolic, cryptic

assertions about social structure[5]. Finally, within this group, the truths conveyed by myth

for Durkheim are similarly the verbal corollaries of ritual actions, but they also function

to provide an oppositional group identity and supply shared means of categorising the

world. Examples of this within the Trobriand Islanders' *The myth of the flying canoe of*

Kudayuri as related by Malinowski would be the element of the dog taking on an

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[3] Carroll (1996), p.830
[4] ibidem
[5] Cohen (1969), p.345

emblematic importance to represent the Lukuba clan[6], whilst the younger brother

Toweyre'i's attendance to the funeral arrangements of the brother he murdered[7] as well as

the assiduous descriptions of canoe building[8] would seem to set out schemata for

established behaviour.

In the case of Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, the social strengthening aspect

of myth comes about via a dialectical progression in which the narrative encompasses

thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and thereby "since the purpose of myth is to provide a

logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction"[9], resolving a conflict in the

assumptions upon which the social structure rests. Lévi-Strauss conceived of myths as

highly structured semiotic lattices which provide the mind with patterns of psychological

association which enable one to think through abstract philosophical questions. In his

extensive study of myth, an underlying assumption is that it must be possible to

demonstrate the universality of the processes of articulate thought[10]. Here, then is a

considerable claim for the level of truth derivable from a study of myth. Criticisms of

Lévi-Strauss' approach are varied, but Mary Douglas speaks to a central concern when

she writes, "Does he really mean that he can chop a myth into semantic units, put them

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[6] Bronislaw Malinowski, *The ethnography of Malinowski: The Trobriand Islands 1915-18*, ed. Michael W. Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979), p.235
[7] ibid., p.235
[8] ib., p.234
[9] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson, Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, (London: Basic Books Inc., 1963), p.229
[10] K.O.L. Burridge, 'Lévi-Strauss and Myth', *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1967), p.100

through a machine, and get out at the other end an underlying pattern which is not precisely the one he used for selecting his units?[11]"

Finally, in theoretical terms the approaches which arguably ascribe the greatest status to the truths conveyed by myth are psychoanalytic and originally Jungian theories of myth. Jung treats myth as an irreducible mental property – a symbolic substratum shared by members of a given cultural group and to a lesser degree by all of humanity. Myth thus conveys the true universal form of the collective unconscious only in so far as it exhibits recurring motifs across the variety of local forms. By condensation, displacement and splitting, the dream-work of the unconscious reorganises the material of waking reality into a coded form. In Freudian psychoanalysis, myth would be seen to represent a type of dream-work – albeit with greater interposition from the conscious mind than in dreams – which manifests the anxieties of its society. Cohen notes how these preoccupations are typically characterised as universal ones such as, "the dangers, horrors and attractions of incest; infantile sexual curiosity … the processes of physical and psychological incorporation and expulsion; the fear of abandonment … rivalry between parent and child, and between siblings"[12], but also points out that the psychoanalytic approach provides considerable latitude for interpretation and does not really address the

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[11] Mary Douglas, 'The Meaning of Myth with special reference to 'La Geste d'Asdiwal'', *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1967), p.50
[12] Cohen (1969), p.341

social significance of shared myths. How would one account for instance – as Lévi-Strauss details – for the seeming preoccupation in both the Skeena / Naas versions of the story of Asdiwal / Asi-hwil [13], with issues of matrilocality, infidelity and homesickness using a psychoanalytical approach alone?

In conclusion, anthropological approaches to myth range from those regarding it as merely narrative to those which would elevate it as enshrining the truths and contradictions upon which a society is founded. Perhaps the most striking aspect of myth in the eyes of Malinowski and mediated by Cohen is what the use of myth – to circumscribe discourse and restore authoritative finality – conveys to us about the contingent nature of truth:

> The rules which govern everyday life are always, in some respects and to some extent, in doubt: real history, real patterns of migration and settlement, real claims to property and power, always involve inconsistencies and irreconcilable demands: myths, in recounting the events of an invented or partly-invented past, resolve these inconsistencies and affirm one set of claims against another.[14]

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[13] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Story of Asdiwal', *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1967), pp.1-47
[14] Cohen (1969), p.344

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