

Alan Dundes. Sacred
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Theory of Myth. Berkeley;
Univ. of California Press,
1984.

The Role of Myth in Life

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Anthropologists have contributed to the study of myth by studying it in situ.

Through long months of observation and extended interaction with informants in the field, anthropologists began to discover that myths could not be properly understood without reference to the cultural context in which they exist. The shift in theoretical emphasis from that of armchair theorists such as James Frazer (1854-1941) and Andrew Lang (1844-1912) to that of twentieth-century ethnographic fieldworkers like Franz Boas (1858-1942) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) has greatly facilitated advances in the study of myth.

Franz Boas, in many ways the founder of the academic study of anthropology in the United States, had a lifelong interest in mythology. He felt that myth constituted a kind of autobiographical ethnography. Consequently, he made a point of not only collecting myths himself, particularly from the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, but also encouraging his many students at Columbia University to do likewise. Boas's monumental *Tsimshian Mythology* (Washington, D.C., 1916) exemplifies his approach to myth. Boas regarded myths as "cultural reflectors," and he used myths as sources from which he extrapolated ethnographic details about kinship terms, house types, hunting techniques, etc. In *Tsimshian Mythology*, after a brief description of the Tsimshian people (pp. 43-57), we find the myths (pp. 58-392). Then follows a detailed "Description of the Tsimshian, Based on Their Mythology" (pp. 393-564) in which everything from household furniture and utensils to shamanism is treated through data culled from all the myths. Boas next provides a "Comparative Study of Tsimshian Mythology" (pp. 565-871) in which he gives parallels from the myth repertoires of most of the other Pacific Northwest Indian tribes. After a brief conclusion (pp. 872-81), there is an appendix containing Nootka and Bellabella myths (pp. 883-935). Appendix 2 (pp. 936-58) consists of an impressive "Summary of Comparisons." Appendices of place names and glossaries are followed by a final "Index to References" (pp. 980-1037) that not only lists the books consulted but gives the titles of each myth contained in these books with the pages on which they may be found.

Needless to say, there have been few presentations of myths of the scope of *Tsimshian Mythology*. A later work by Boas, *Kwakwaka'wakw Culture as Reflected in Mythology* (New York, 1935), similarly gleaned an ethnographic account of the Kwakwaka'wakw from mythological texts. The only innovation was that Boas compared the images of the Tsimshian and the Kwakwaka'wakw based on their respective myths. Boas's literal approach was eventually challenged by several of his students. Ruth Benedict, *Zuni Mythology*, 2 vols. (New York, 1935); Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S.

Herskovits, Dahomean Narrative (Evanston, Ill., 1958); and Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature (Chicago, 1959) realized that there was more to myth than a literal reflection of ethnographic facts. Some events like Incest that occurred in myth texts did not correspond to everyday reality. But Boas at least drew attention to the value of recording full texts of myths, preferably in the native languages, and of trying to relate them to the culture as a whole.

Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the pioneers of what is called functionalism in anthropology. He helped stimulate a change from the nineteenth-century interest in the origin of myth to a more practical concern with how myth functions in a living society. He felt strongly that anthropologists should live among the people they study and not visit them occasionally through periodic sorties from the sanctuary of missionary quarters or nearby resort hotels, if such were available. This technique he termed participant observation. Malinowski was especially critical of literary students of myth, claiming that they based their theories and methods on mutilated bits of reality. Like Boas, Malinowski formulated his approach to myth from myth texts he collected himself in the field.

Malinowski's major consideration of myth was presented as a lecture delivered in honor of Sir James Frazer at the University of Liverpool in November 1925. It was published in 1926 under the title *Myth in Primitive Psychology* and was eventually reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, N.Y., 1954). The first portion of this important essay was published also in the *Journal of Psychology* in April 1926 and is reprinted in this volume. It does not include all of Malinowski's pronouncements on the nature of myth, e.g., "Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfills a function sui generis closely connected with the nature of tradition, and the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events" (*Magic, Science and Religion*, p. 146). However, it does articulate most of what Malinowski meant when he termed myth a "sociological charter" for belief. The reader may also wish to consult the chapter devoted to mythology in Malinowski's classic ethnographic document, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York, 1961), pp. 290-333 (first published in 1922).

For all Malinowski's contribution to the culturally relative study of myth in context, he shared with Boas a deep-seated antipathy to the idea that myth could be symbolic. Just as Boas favored a literal one-to-one "myth reflects culture" approach, Malinowski went so far as to say, "Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic but a direct expression of its subject matter." This literal anti-symbolic bias has continued to prevail among many anthropologists interested in myth. Malinowski was sufficiently exercised against what he considered to be the excesses of the psychoanalytic approach as to engage in a spirited debate with the fervent Freudian disciple in England, Ernest Jones, on the question of whether or not the Oedipus Complex was universal. Malinowski claimed that matrilineal societies (such as the one he studied in the Trobriand Islands) did not have an Oedipus Complex, but rather had an avuncular complex instead. In such matrilineal societies, he argued, it is the mother's brother, not the father, who possesses the wealth to be inherited and who disciplines his nephews. In rebuttal Ernest Jones

and Geza Róheim pointed out that a boy's uncle did not constitute a sexual rival for the affections of the boy's mother. That rival was the boy's father. In Malinowski's own published field data, one can find myths in which a boy slays a threatening monster who has a separate identity from the boy's maternal uncle. For a discussion of Oedipal myths collected by but not recognized by Malinowski, see John Ingham, "Malinowski: Epistemology and Oedipus," *Papers of the Kroeber Anthropological Society* 29 (1963), 1-14, or for more detail on this issue, see Melford E. Spiro, *Oedipus in the Trobriands* (Chicago, 1982). For a valuable overview of Malinowski's approach to myth as well as other genres of folklore, see William Bascom, "Malinowski's Contributions to the Study of Folklore," *Folklore* 94 (1983), 163-172.

By the examination of a typical Melanesian culture and by a survey of the opinions, traditions, and behaviour of these natives, I propose to show how deeply the sacred tradition, the myth, enters into human pursuits, and how strongly it controls their moral and social behaviour. In other words, the thesis of the present work is that an intimate connection exists between the word, the myths, the sacred tales of a tribe on the one hand and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities on the other.

In order to gain a background for our description of the Melanesian facts, I shall briefly summarize the present state of the science of mythology. Even a superficial survey of the literature would reveal that there is no monotony to complain of as regards the variety of opinions or the acrimony of polemics. To take only the recent up-to-date theories advanced in explanation of the nature of myth, legend, and fairy-tale, we should have to head the list, at least as regards output and self-assertion, by the so-called school of Nature-mythology which flourishes mainly in Germany. The writers of this school maintain that primitive man is highly interested in natural phenomena, and that his interest is predominantly of a theoretical, contemplative, and poetical character. In trying to express and interpret the phases of the moon, or the regular and yet changing path of the sun across the skies, primitive man constructs symbolic personified rhapsodies. To writers of this school every myth possesses as its kernel or ultimate reality some natural phenomenon or other, elaborately woven into a tale to an extent which sometimes almost masks and obliterates it. There is not much agreement among these students as to what type of natural phenomenon lies at the bottom of most mythological productions. There are extreme lunar mythologists so completely moonstruck with their idea that they will not admit that any other phenomenon could lend itself to a savage rhapsodic interpretation except that of earth's nocturnal

nal satellite. The Society for the Comparative Study of Myth founded in Berlin in 1906, and counting among its supporters such famous scholars as Ehrenreich, Siecke, Winckler, and many others, carried on their business under the sign of the moon. Others, like Frobenius for instance, regard the sun as the only subject around which primitive man has spun his symbolic tales. Then there is the school of meteorological interpreters who regard wind, weather, the colours of the skies as the essence of myth. To this belonged such well-known writers of the older generation as Max Müller and Kuhn. Some of these departmental mythologists fight fiercely for their heavenly body or principle, others have a more catholic taste and prepare to agree that primeval man has made his mythological brew from all the heavenly bodies taken together.

I have tried to state fairly and plausibly this naturalistic interpretation of myths, but as a matter of fact this theory seems to me to be one of the most extravagant views ever advanced by an anthropologist or humanist—and that means a great deal. It has received an absolutely destructive criticism from the great psychologist Wundt, and appears absolutely untenable in the light of any of Sir James Frazer's writings. From my own study of living myths among savages I should say that primitive man has to a very limited extent the purely artistic or scientific interest in nature; there is but little room for symbolism in his ideas and tales; and myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force. Besides ignoring the cultural function of myth, this theory imputes to primitive man a number of imaginary interests and it confuses several clearly distinguishable types of story; the fairy tale, the legend, the saga, and the sacred tale or myth.

In strong contrast to this theory which makes myth naturalistic, symbolic, and imaginary, stands the theory which regards a sacred tale as a true historical record of the past. This view, recently supported by the so-called Historical School in Germany and America, and represented in England by Dr. Rivers, covers but part of the truth. There is no denying that history as well as natural environment must have left a profound imprint on all cultural achievements, hence also on myths. But to take all mythology as mere chronicle is as incorrect as to regard it as the primitive naturalist's musings. It also endows primitive man with a sort of scientific impulse and desire for knowledge. Although the savage has something of the antiquarian as well as of the naturalist in his composition, he is, above all, actively engaged in a number of practical pursuits, and has to struggle with various difficulties; all his interests are tuned up to this general pragmatic outlook.

Mythology, the sacred lore of the tribe, is, as we shall see, a powerful means of assisting primitive man, of allowing him to make the two ends of his cultural patrimony meet. We shall see, moreover, that the immense services to primitive culture performed by myth are done in connection with religious ritual, moral influence, and sociological principle. Now religion and morals draw only to a very limited extent upon an interest in science or in past history, and myth is thus based upon an entirely different mental attitude.

The close connection between religion and myth which has been overlooked by many students has been recognized by others. Psychologists like Wundt, sociologists like Durkheim, Hubert, and Mauss, anthropologists like Crawley, classical scholars like Miss Jane Harrison have all understood the intimate association between myth and ritual, have all understood the intimate association between myth and ritual, between sacred tradition and the norms of social structure. All of these writers have been to a greater or lesser extent influenced by the work of Sir James Frazer. In spite of the fact that the great British anthropologist as well as most of his followers have a clear vision of the sociological and ritual importance of myth, the facts which I shall present will allow us to clarify and formulate more precisely the main principles of a sociological theory of myth.

I might present an even more extensive survey of the opinions, divisions, and controversies of learned mythologists. The science of mythology has been the meeting-point of various scholarships: the classical humanist must decide for himself whether Zeus is the moon, or the sun, or a strictly historical personality; and whether his ox-eyed spouse is the morning star, or a cow, or a personification of the wind—the loquacity of wives being proverbial. Then all these questions have to be re-discussed upon the stage of mythology by the various tribes of archaeologists, Chaldean and Egyptian, Indian and Chinese, Peruvian and Mayan. The historian and the sociologist, the student of literature, and the Slavist discuss, each little crowd among themselves. Nor is mythology quite safe from logicians and psychologists, from the metaphysician and the epistemologist—to say nothing of such visitors as the theosophist, the modern astrologist, and the Christian Scientist. Finally we have the psychoanalyst who has come at last to teach us that the myth is a day-dream of the race and that we can only explain it by turning our back upon nature, history, and culture, and diving deep into the dark pools of the sub-conscious, where at the bottom there lie the usual paraphernalia and symbols of psychoanalytic exegesis. So that when at last the poor anthropologist and student of folk lore come to the feast, there are hardly any crumbs left for them!

If I have conveyed an impression of chaos and confusion, if I have inspired a sinking feeling towards the incredible mythological controversy with all the dust and din which it raises, I have achieved exactly what I wanted. For I shall invite my readers to step outside the closed study of the theorist into the open air of the anthropological field, and to follow me in my mental flight back to the years which I spent among a Melanesian tribe of New Guinea. There, paddling on the lagoon, watching the natives under the blazing sun at their garden-work, following them through the patches of jungle, and on the winding beaches and reefs, we shall learn about their life. And again, observing their ceremonies in the cool of the afternoon or in the shadows of the evening, sharing their meals round their fires, we shall be able to listen to their stories.

For the anthropologist—one and only among the many participants in the mythological contest—has the unique advantage of being able to step back behind the savage whenever he feels that his theories become involved and the flow of his argumentative eloquence runs dry. The anthropologist is not bound to the scanty remnants of culture, broken tablets, tarnished texts, or fragmentary inscriptions. He need not fill out immense gaps with voluminous but conjectural comments. The anthropologist has the myth-maker at his elbow. Not only can he take down as full a text as exists with all its variations, and control it over and over; he has also a host of authentic commentators to draw upon; still more he has the fulness of life itself from which the myth has been born. And as we shall see, in this live context there is as much to be learned about the myth as in the narrative itself.

Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read to-day in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage.

The limitation of the study of myth to the mere examination of texts has been fatal to a proper understanding of its nature. The forms of myth which come to us from classical antiquity and from the ancient sacred books of the East and other similar sources have come down to us without the context of living faith, without the possibility of obtaining comments from true believers, without the concomitant knowl-

edge of their social organization, their practised morals, and their popular custom, at least without the full information which the modern fieldworker can easily obtain. Moreover, there is no doubt that in their present literary form these tales have suffered a very considerable transformation at the hands of scribes, commentators, learned priests, and theologians. It is necessary to go back to primitive mythology in order to learn the secret of its life in the study of a myth which is still alive—before, nummified in priestly wisdom, it has been shrined in the indestructible but lifeless repository of dead religions. Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it 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 missions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfils 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 civilization; 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.

I shall try to prove all these contentions; and to make our analysis conclusive it will be necessary to give an account not merely of myth, but also of fairy tale, legend, and historical record.

Let us then float over in spirit to the shores of a Trobriand lagoon, and penetrate into the life of the natives—see them at work, see them at play, and listen to their stories. Late in November the wet weather is setting in. There is little to do in the gardens, the fishing season is in full swing as yet, overseas sailing looms ahead in the future, while the festive mood still lingers after the harvest dancing and feasting. Sociability is in the air, time lies on their hands, while bad weather keeps them often at home. Could we but step through the twilight of the approaching evening into one of their villages and sit at the fireside,

1. The Trobriand Islands are a coral archipelago lying to the northeast of New Guinea. The natives belong to the Papuo-Melanesian race, and in their physical appearance, mental equipment, and social organization they show a combination of the Oceanic characteristics mixed with some features of the more backward Papuan culture from the mainland of New Guinea.

For a full account of the Northern Massim, of which the Trobrianders form a section, compare the classical treatise of Professor C. G. Seligman, *Melanesians of British New Guinea* (Cambridge, 1910). This book shows also the relation of the Trobrianders to other races and cultures on and around New Guinea. A short account will also be found in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, by the present author (London, 1922).

where the flickering light draws more and more people as the evening falls and the conversation brightens, sooner or later a man would be asked to tell a story, for this is the season of *fairytale*s. If he is a good reciter, he will soon provoke laughter, rejoinders, and interruptions, and his tale will develop into a regular performance.

At this time of the year folk-tales of a special type called *kukwanebu* are habitually recited in the villages. There is a vague belief, not very seriously taken, that their recital has a beneficial influence on the new crops recently planted in the gardens. In order to produce this effect, a short ditty in which an allusion is made to some very fertile wild plants, the *kasiyena*, must always be recited at the end.

Every story is "owned" by a member of the community. Each story, though known by many, may be recited only by the "owner" who may, however, present it to someone else by teaching that person and authorizing him to retell it. But not all the "owners" know how to thrill and to raise a hearty laugh, which is one of the main ends of such stories. A good raconteur has to change his voice in the dialogue, chant the ditties with due temperament, gesticulate, and in general play to the gallery. Some of these tales are certainly "smoking-room" stories; of others I will give one or two examples.

Thus there is the maiden in distress and the heroic rescue. Two women go out in search of birds' eggs. One discovers a nest under a tree, the other warns her, "These are eggs of a snake, don't touch them." "Oh, no! They are eggs of a bird," she replies and carries them away. The mother snake comes back and finding the nest empty starts in search of the eggs. She enters the nearest village and sings a ditty,

I wend my way as I wriggle along,

The eggs of a bird it is licit to eat;

The eggs of a friend are forbidden to touch.

This journey lasts long, for the snake is traced from one village to the other and everywhere has to sing her ditty. Finally, entering the village of the two women, she sees the culprit roasting the eggs, coils around her, and enters her body. The victim is laid down helpless and ailing. But the hero is nigh; a man from a neighbouring village dreams of the dramatic situation, arrives on the spot, pulls out the snake, cuts it to pieces, and marries both women, thus carrying off a double prize for his prowess.

In another story we learn of a happy family, a father and two daughters, who sail from their home in the northern coral archipelagoes and run to the south-west till they come to the wild steep slopes of the rock island Gumasila. The father lies down on a platform and falls

asleep. An ogre comes out of the jungle, eats the father, captures and ravishes one of the daughters while the other succeeds in escaping. The sister from the woods supplies the captive one with a piece of lawyer-cane, and when the ogre lies down and falls asleep they cut him in half and escape.

A woman lives in the village of Okopukopu at the head of a creek with her five children. A monstrously big stingaree paddles up the creek, flops across the village, enters the hut, and to the tune of a ditty cuts off the woman's finger. One son tries to kill the monster and fails. Every day the same performance is repeated till on the fifth day the youngest son succeeds in killing the giant fish.

A louse and a butterfly embark on a bit of aviation, the louse as a passenger, the butterfly as aeroplane and pilot. In the middle of the performance while flying over-seas just between the beach of Wawela and the island of Kitava, the louse emits a loud shriek, the butterfly is shaken, and the louse falls off and is drowned.

A man whose mother-in-law is a cannibal is sufficiently careless to go away and leave her in charge of his three children. Naturally she tries to eat them; they escape in time, however, climb a palm, and keep her (through a somewhat lengthy story) at bay, until the father arrives and kills her. There is another story about a visit to the Sun, another about an ogre devastating gardens, another about a woman who was so greedy that she stole all food at funeral distributions, and many similar ones.

In this place, however, we are not so much concentrating our attention on the text of narratives, as on their sociological reference. The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience mean as much to the natives as the text; and the sociologist should take his cue from the native. The performance again has to be placed in its proper time-setting: the hour of the day and the season with the background of the sprouting gardens awaiting future work and slightly influenced by the magic of the fairy tales. We must also bear in mind the sociological context of private ownership, the social function and the cultural rôle of amusing fiction. All these elements are equally relevant: all must be studied as well as the text. The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality.

I pass now to another class of stories. These have no special season, there is no stereotyped way of telling them, and the recital has not the character of a performance, nor has it any magical effect. And yet these tales are more important than the foregoing class; for they are believed to be true and the information which they contain is both more valuable and more relevant than that of the *kukwanebu*. When a party goes on a distant visit or sails on an expedition, the younger members, keenly interested in the landscape, in new communities, in new people, and perhaps even new customs, will express their wonder and make enquiries. The older and more experienced will supply them with information and comment, and this always takes the form of a concrete narrative. An old man will perhaps tell his own experiences about fights and expeditions, about famous magic and extraordinary economic achievements. With this he may mix the reminiscences of his father, hearsay tales and legends, which have passed through many generations. Thus memories of great droughts and devastating famines are conserved for many years, together with the descriptions of the hardships, struggles and crimes of the exasperated population.

A number of stories about sailors driven out of their course and landing among cannibals and hostile tribes are remembered, some of them set to song, others formed into historic legends. A famous subject for song and story is the charm, skill, and performance of famous dancers. There are tales about distant volcanic islands; about hot springs in which once a party of unwary bathers were boiled to death; about mysterious countries inhabited by entirely different men or women; about strange adventures which have happened to sailors in distant seas; monstrous fish and octopi, jumping rocks and disguised sorcerers. Stories again are told, some recent, some ancient, about seers and visitors to the land of the dead, enumerating their most famous and significant exploits. There are also stories associated with natural phenomena: a petrified canoe, a man changed into a rock, and a red patch on the coral rock left by a party who ate too much betel nut.

We have here a variety of tales which might be subdivided into *historical accounts* directly witnessed by the narrator, or at least vouched for by someone within living memory; *legends*, in which the continuity of testimony is broken, but which fall within the range of things ordinarily experienced by the tribesmen; and *hearsay tales* about distant countries and ancient happenings of a time which falls outside the range of present-day culture. To the natives, however, all these classes imperceptibly shade into each other; they are designated by the same name, *libwogwo*; they are all regarded as true; they are not recited as

a performance, nor told for amusement at a special season. Their subject-matter also shows a substantial unity. They all refer to subjects intensely stimulating to the natives; they all are connected with activities such as economic pursuits, warfare, adventure, success in dancing and in ceremonial exchange. Moreover, since they record singularly great achievements in all such pursuits they redound to the credit of some individual and his descendants or of a whole community; and hence they are kept alive by the ambition of those whose ancestry they glorify. The stories told in explanation of peculiarities of features of the landscape frequently have a sociological context, that is they enumerate those clan or family performed the deed. When this is not the case, they are isolated fragmentary comments upon some natural feature, clinging to it as an obvious survival.

In all this it is once more clear that we can neither fully grasp the meaning of the text, nor the sociological nature of the story, nor the natives' attitude towards it and interest in it, if we study the narrative on paper. These tales live in the memory of man, in the way in which they are told, and even more in the complex interest which keeps them alive, which makes the narrator recite with pride or regret, which makes the listener follow eagerly, wistfully, with hopes and ambitions roused. Thus the essence of a *legend* even more than that of a *fairy tale* is not to be found in a mere perusal of the story, but in the combined study of the narrative and its context in the social and cultural life of the natives.

But it is only when we pass to the third and most important class of tales, the *sacred tales* or *myths*, and contrast them with the legends, that the nature of all three classes comes into relief. This third class is called by the natives *lilu*, and I want to emphasize that I am reproducing *prima facie* the natives' own classification and nomenclature, and limiting myself to a few comments on its accuracy. The third class of stories stands very much apart from the other two. If the first are told for amusement, the second to make a serious statement and satisfy social ambition, the third are regarded, not merely as true, but as venerable and sacred, and they play a highly important cultural part. The *folk-tale* as we know is a seasonal performance and an act of sociality. The *legend*, provoked by contact with unusual reality, opens up past historical vistas. The *myth* comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity. Take for instance the annual feast of the return of the dead. Elaborate arrangements are made for it, especially an enormous display of food. When this feast approaches, tales are told of how death began to chastise man, and how the power of eternal rejuvena-

tion was lost. It is told why the spirits have to leave the village and do not remain at the fireside, finally why they return once in a year. Again at certain seasons in preparation for an overseas expedition, canoes are overhauled and new ones built to the accompaniment of a special magic. In this there are mythical allusions in the spells, and even the sacred acts contain elements which are only comprehensible when the story of the flying canoe, its ritual and its magic are told. In connection with ceremonial trading, the rules, the magic, even the geographical routes are associated with corresponding mythology. There is no important magic, no ceremony, no ritual without belief, and the belief is spun out into accounts of concrete precedent. The union is very intimate, for myth is not only looked upon as a commentary of additional information, but it is a warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected. On the other hand the rituals, ceremonies, customs, and social organizations contain at times direct references to myth and they are regarded as the results of mythical event. The cultural fact is a monument in which the myth is embodied; while the myth is believed to be the real cause which has brought about the moral rule, the social grouping, the rite, or the custom. Thus these stories form an integral part of culture. Their existence and influence not merely transcend the act of telling the narrative, not only do they draw their substance from life and its interests—they govern and control many cultural features, they form the dogmatic backbone of primitive civilization.

This is perhaps the most important point of the thesis which I am urging: I maintain that there exists a special class of stories, regarded as sacred, embodied in ritual, morals, and social organization, and which form an integral and active part of primitive culture. These stories live not by idle interest, not as fictitious, or even as true narratives, but are to the natives a statement of a primal, 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.

In order to make the point at issue quite clear, let us once more compare our conclusions with the current views of modern anthropology, not in order idly to criticize other opinions, but so that we may link our results to the present state of knowledge, give due acknowledgment for what we have received, and state where we have to differ clearly and precisely.

It will be best to quote a condensed and authoritative statement, and I shall choose for this purpose the definition and analysis given in

Notes and Queries on Anthropology, by the late Miss C. S. Burne and Professor J. L. Myres. Under the heading "Stories, Sayings, and Songs," we are informed that "this section includes many intellectual efforts of peoples . . ." which "represent the earliest attempts to exercise reason, imagination, and memory." With some apprehension we ask where is left the emotion, the interest, and ambition, the social rôle of all the stories, and the deep connection with cultural values of the more serious ones? After a brief classification of stories in the usual manner we read about the sacred tales: "Myths are stories which, however marvellous and improbable to us, are nevertheless related in all good faith, because they are intended, or believed by the teller, to explain by means of something concrete and intelligible an abstract idea or such vague and difficult conceptions as Creation, Death, distinctions of race or animal species, the different occupations of men and women; the origins of rites and customs, or striking natural objects or prehistoric monuments; the meaning of the names of persons or places. Such stories are sometimes described as *aetiological*, because their purpose is to explain why something exists or happens."²

Here we have in a nutshell all that modern science at its best has to say upon the subject. Would our Melanesians agree, however, with this opinion? Certainly not. They do not want to "explain," to make "intelligible" anything which happens in their myths—above all not an abstract idea. Of that there can be found to my knowledge no instance either in Melanesia or in any other savage community. The few abstract ideas which the natives possess carry their concrete content farly in the very word which expresses them. When being is described by verbs to lie, to sit, to stand, when cause and effect are expressed by words signifying foundation and the past standing upon it, when various concrete nouns tend towards the meaning of space, the word and the relation to concrete reality make the abstract idea sufficiently "intelligible." Nor would a Trobriander or any other native agree with the view that "Creation, Death, distinctions of race or animal species, the different occupations of men and women" are "vague and difficult conceptions." Nothing is more familiar to the native than the different occupations of the male and female sex; there is nothing to be explained about it. But though familiar, such differences are at times irksome, unpleasant, or at least limiting, and there is the need to justify them, to vouch for their antiquity and reality, in short to buttress their validity. Death, alas, is not vague, or abstract, or difficult to grasp for any human being. It is only too hauntingly real, too concrete, too easy to compre-

2. Quoted from *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, pp. 210 and 211.

hend for anyone who has an experience affecting his near relatives or a personal foreboding. If it were vague or unreal, man would have no desire so much as to mention it; but the idea of death is fraught with horror, with a desire to remove its threat, with the vague hope that it may be not explained, but rather explained away, made unreal, and actually denied. Myth, warranting the belief in immortality, in eternal youth, in a life beyond the grave, is not an intellectual reaction upon a puzzle, but an explicit act of faith born from the innermost instinctive and emotional reaction to the most formidable and haunting idea. Nor are the stories about "the origins of rites and customs" told in mere explanation of them. They never explain in any sense of the word; they always state a precedent which constitutes an ideal and a warrant for its continuance, and sometimes practical directions for the procedure.

We have, therefore, to disagree on every point with this excellent though concise statement of present-day mythological opinion. This definition would create an imaginary, nonexistent class of narrative, the aetiological myth, corresponding to a nonexistent desire to explain, leading a futile existence as an "intellectual effort", and remaining outside native culture and social organization with their pragmatic interests. The whole treatment appears to us faulty, because myths are treated as mere stories; because they are regarded as a primitive intellectual arm-chair occupation; because they are torn out of their life-context; studied from what they look like on paper, and not from what they do in life. Thus it is impossible either to see clearly the nature of myth or to reach a satisfactory classification of folk-tales. In fact we would also have to disagree with the definition of legend and of fairy tale given subsequently by the writers in *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*.

But above all, this point of view would be fatal to efficient field-work, for it would make the observer satisfied with the mere writing down of narratives. The intellectual nature of a story is exhausted with its text, but the functional, cultural, and pragmatic aspect of any native tale is manifested as much in its enactment, embodiment, and contextual relations as in the text. It is easier to write down the story than to observe the diffuse, complex ways in which it enters into life, or to study its function by the observation of the vast social and cultural realities into which it enters. And this is the reason why we have so many texts and why we know so little about the very nature of myth.