Lévi-Strauss in wonderland: playing chess with unusual cats

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Lévi-Strauss begins this latest exploration of the mythologies of the Americas, now made available in English through Catherine Tihanyi’s meticulous translation, with a question that many have asked:

What is the use . . . of analyzing . . . a strategy that myths have repeated without renewal for dozens or perhaps even hundreds of millennia at a time when rational thought, when scientific method and techniques, have definitely supplanted them in explaining the world? Did myths not already lose the game a long time ago? [p. xii]

He answers it, saying that this “is not certain any more” (p. xii).

In societies without writing, positive knowledge fell well short of the power of imagination, and it was the task of myths to fill this gap. . . . With us, positive knowledge so greatly overflows our imaginative powers that our imagination, unable to apprehend the world that is revealed to it, has no alternative than to turn to myth again. In other words, between the scientist who through calculations gains access to a reality that is unimaginable and the public eager to know something of this reality . . . mythical thought . . . becomes . . . the only means for physicists to communicate with nonphysicists. [pp. xii–xiii]

He adds:

We are told that an electron pulsates seven million times per second . . . [,] can be at once wave and corpuscle, and exists simultaneously here and elsewhere; . . . that at the other end of the cosmic ladder, our universe has a diameter of ten billion light years. [p. xiii]

We also get galaxies moving at 600 kilometers per second pulled by “sets of bodies that have been given fabulous names such as Great Attractor or Great Wall” and similar matters of a “mythical character” (p. xiii). All this has the makings of myth.

“Myths,” therefore, are part of our creative imagination. They are the fruits of the creative impulse that tries to grasp and explain (or explain away) the state of affairs in which humankind finds itself. Since the human mind is evidently capable of very high levels of systematic thought, there is in fact much logical reasoning behind the myths that are conveyed from generation to generation. This is why Lévi-Strauss argued in the past that there were important similarities between the thinking processes of “savages” and our thoughts in their “uncultivated” state. He was right to draw our attention to the intriguing problem of how humankind has been able to make the unexpected leap from mythological thought to rational and productive thinking that characterizes our extraordinary adventure in the development of science. He has pursued this question all through his career. It is clear that the matter is still around us, especially as the various world religions begin to spawn more virulent forms of activities that turn on sacred myths, symbols, locations, and rituals. So we get Kosovo, Ayodhya, Jerusalem, and many others besides. Is there some logic behind their myths?

The creative originality of Lévi-Strauss in alerting us to the importance and complexity of the life of the imagination of “peoples without writing” can hardly be underestimated. His almost single-handed effort in paying careful attention to the structure of myths has resulted in a total change in the way in which the cultural life of “simple” peoples has been regarded by people from the metropolitan powers. He deserves full credit for destroying the very concept of “primitive peoples” and “primitive mentality” that had dogged anthropology from its inception. He was truly an explorer finding his way into a new realm: a new world of myth and the imagination. In this respect his work dealt with both the analysis of the content of the myths and the mental processes that were responsible for their creation. Again, because such mental processes had already been the subject of heated Freudian speculation, Lévi-Strauss’s writings acquired a significance far beyond the immediate realm of anthropological re-

search. Litterateurs, all kinds of Freudians, psychologists, historians, and philosophers felt compelled to come to terms with Lévi-Strauss’s radical views, expressed in evocative prose that was poetic but at the same time based within a rigorous academic discipline. The fact that most of these hangers-on knew little about the technicalities of kinship systems, the exigencies of the ecology in the jungles of Brazil, or the debates around dual organization and similar matters meant that Lévi-Strauss himself became a mythical figure.

The present publication is the last link in Lévi-Strauss’s great adventure that started with his well-known and still-controversial 1955 paper “The Structural Study of Myth” in the Journal of American Folklore. Those readers who have been able to follow the complex reasoning in the four volumes of Mythologiques will find that The Story of Lynx is very similar in the same vein. Its strengths and weaknesses are similar to the earlier work.

There is little doubt that Lévi-Strauss has been single-minded in his attempt to make sense of the immense corpus of myth from South and North America that he has examined. He claims that the analysis of their structure is like watching a game of chess without knowing the rules while simultaneously trying to figure out the logic behind the apparently confused actions on the board. He is often reduced to claiming that he hopes that he has left the field in a less unsatisfactory state than when he started.

Briefly, the problem Lévi-Strauss sets for himself is as follows. In dealing with the mythology of the peoples who occupy an area between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean on the Northwest Coast, he finds a highly complex ethnological picture with many different groups and dialects. The mythical material is also fragmented and unstable. As indicated in an earlier publication,

one is constantly at a loss to decide whether one is going from one variant to another of the same myth, or from one type of myth to another which one had at first assumed to be distinct. . . . Is it or is it not possible to elicit transformation rules and structure from a totality that can be identified and recognized, but which, in this case, seems to be unceasingly decomposed and recomposed by minuscule societies whose politically amorphous character and mutual permeability lead one to suppose that here the grand mythical themes possessed in common with South American cultures no longer exist, save in a fragmented state! [1987:61]

Needless to say, he is able to elicit a pair of opposites, Fog and Wind, and claim that traces of this pair also exist in South America. This then allows him to claim that there are fundamental structural homologies between the myths of North and South America. Careful attention to their details is intended to display the permutations and combinations of elements for which he claims to have identified similar forms. This, in turn, occasions the claim that South American dualism and the mythology of the wind and the fog in a specific area of North America are really one and the same problem. They can be traced to the same philosophical and ethical sources.

After going through many myths and their bizarre but (in the hands of this most resourceful author) apparently logical transformations, Lévi-Strauss returns to his major unifying theme. This is the philosophy of dualism in American mythology. He has highly interesting observations on the concept of twins (as aspect of dualism) in North America as well as among the Aztec and the Inca. He argues that the Amerindian idea of twins and duality is opened-end
ded. The two elements are not equally balanced. This involves an inviting open-mindedness that is most clearly demonstrated by the famous case of Montezuma’s welcoming Cortés with all the regalia of gods. He sees a similar attitude in the case of Huayna Capac, the last Inca, when Capac’s 20,000 armed men were paralyzed in the face of 160 Spaniards. In an interesting chapter on Montaigne, he compares the rigid and uncompromising mentality of the Europeans who made the first contacts with the Amerindians with the striking openness of spirit toward the Other shown by the natives they encountered. He has no difficulty in showing the degree to which the Europeans had their minds closed to the Indians. He seems to think that this is a reflection of the “closed” character of dualism in European thought, where, in folklore, twins are “equal” in nature and therefore balanced but are nonetheless closed to each other. Amerindians, on the other hand, have a more open attitude, which Lévi-Strauss analyzes in detail to show how this allows them to assimilate elements of French folktales when contact takes place in Canada.

The book ends with a lively commentary on Maybury-Lewis and other ethnographers of South American societies concerning the oft-disputed concept of dualism. In his answer to much criticism, he notes:

Contrary [to what is imagined], I do not see in dual organization a universal phenomenon resulting from the binary nature of human thought. I only note that certain peoples, occupying an immense though bounded geographical area, have chosen to explain the world on the model of dualism in perpetual disequilibrium . . . a dualism that is expressed coherently at times in mythology, at times in social organization, and at times both at once. [p. 239]

What are we to make of this closely argued and erudite treatise on very obscure, detailed materials, handled with the dazzling dexterity of a juggler? The tantalizing “canonical formula” of warped logic is much in play. In passages where Lévi-Strauss allows himself to become accessible (which is not always the case), the thought is lucid and compelling. He deals with issues of great import with a balanced judgment. On the other hand, serious weaknesses persist. The material is, by his own admission, slippery. The so-called codes selected are evidently limitless in number. The selection of “axes” “owe much to the analyst’s subjectivity,” and thus “they have an impressionistic character” (p. 186).

Lévi-Strauss says as much with disarming candor:

From the beginning of Mythologiques . . . I was aware—more so than anyone else—of the very loose meaning I gave to certain terms: symmetry, inversion, equivalence, homology, isomorphism. . . . In a domain so new . . . I proceeded through

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trials and errors. . . . Some oppositions, even real ones, do not always have the form I gave them; others perhaps do not exist. But I will deem myself satisfied . . . [if] I have been right in a significant number of cases. [p. 186]

Another major problem arises from the recounting of many myths from related but diverse peoples who have not been properly described for the reader. It is not simply a matter of exotic names—Ntlakapamux and Utamgamux, as he is willing to allow—but the reduplication of fantastic stories, one after the other, with claims of underlying structures that are not fully convincing. Some of the patterns seem far-fetched. There is an inevitable fluidity to the many stories presented. The reader is obliged to reserve judgment so often that the line of argument becomes obscured.

Lurking behind these disturbing matters are also questions of definitions. What qualifies as “myth”? Are all stories “myths”? Do they have to be sacred legends? Do they have to be recognized as “important”? On what basis are they selected for analysis? Where do we draw the lines between “myth,” “epic poetry,” “legend,” “folktales,” and, most important, “history”? Does it matter, or are some texts, such as highly valued “sacred” myths, associated with important “rituals,” more apt to demonstrate the structure of thought patterns of the culture concerned? Such questions have been carefully raised by Detienne (1983, 1996).

Lévi-Strauss also admits that the more he becomes enmeshed in wider comparisons, the less meaningful the results turn out to be. In these wider comparisons he does not hesitate to roam from the Nez-Percé to ancient Rome, from the Tupinamba to Japan. The narrower the focus, the more effective and meaningful the analysis. What is clearly needed is the grounding of these myths in fuller ethnography. Given the scope of these investigations, such a task would be an immense undertaking. On the other hand, the results of such focused investigations have been very striking. Shulman (1980) on Tamil temple myths in South India and Doniger (O’Flaherty 1973) on Shiva have been able to provide much fuller ethnographic contexts that have allowed the myths to be related in a much more profound fashion to the major human preoccupations of the people concerned. With all the brilliance of the author, it cannot be said that one penetrates very far into the mentality of the people about whom he is writing. One gets the satisfaction of solving some syllogisms or seeing some homologies, but this remains on the surface.

Such carping reservations aside, one cannot but admire the immense labor, sharp perspicacity, and profound sense of obligation that have motivated this remarkable project. It is nothing less than the attempt to resuscitate the mythology and culture of entire peoples whose lives were altered once and for all after 1492. It is especially fitting that Lévi-Strauss’s own generosity of spirit and fertility of thought should be recognized at a time when the mournful event of “the invasion of the New World, the destruction of its peoples and its values” (1987: xvii) has just been celebrated. One can only sympathize with what Lévi-Strauss calls his “act of contribution and devotion” (p. xvii).

references cited

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