

MYTHS, HASHISH, AND HINDU CULTURE

Interview with Michael Witzel

Interviewer Henri Zeigo

In June 2019, the Estonian Literary Museum in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies organized the 13th Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, under the heading “Mythology of Metamorphoses: Comparative & Theoretical Perspectives”. During the conference, I had a chance to interview Michael Witzel, who is a mythologist working at Harvard University. He is well known mainly for his contribution to the Sanskrit studies. Michael Witzel has authored books on Indian sacred texts and Indian history.

Michael Witzel, how did you become a mythologist as a young man?

As a child I grew up in West Germany. At that time, I was interested in reading ancient stories from Greek or Latin mythology. In basic school I also started to read old Germanic myths. I was interested in all kinds of ancient stories. That is why I later took to Sanskrit studies at university. I moved more in the direction of ancient religious texts which were full of mythology.

Who have been your major influencers in mythology?

It is difficult to say. I have followed several people over the decades, like Georges Dumézil or Mircea Eliade. I have read Claude Levi Strauss, but I do not like him, because his scheme is too abstract, too “bloodless”. From Indo-European mythology I like the work of Jaan Puhvel. He has written a very nice book for his American students, which covers all the Indo-European peoples – *Comparative Mythology*. Then, I read lots of Japanese mythology and Homer’s *Iliad*, of course, but I really cannot say which of them have been the most influential for me.

During the conference I tried to understand what a myth is, but when I was listening to all these presentations, I was not able to distinguish one concrete definition. Could a myth be defined at all?

It is very hard to do it. Probably you heard the same message at the 13th annual conference of comparative mythology at Tartu. But I tried to define it in my 2012 book. It sounds something like this: “non-secular narrative connected usually with the origins of humans, world and society as we have it”. The main point here is “non-secular”. To compare it with secular myths, for instance, we have American beliefs, Soviet beliefs, Korean and Nazi beliefs – these are all secular myths. These are related to the state, but they do not say anything about religion as such. I have been living in America for 33 years. There is plenty of secular mythology which children learn at school. For instance, George Washington could never tell a lie: once he cut down a cherry tree and after that told his father that was him who had done it. They are told these kinds of stories. Also, American exceptionalism – it means that America is a very different nation in the world. You can often hear a phrase “only in America”. Here in Europe you cannot imagine it, but in America it is very typical. It is a sort of brainwashing of children when they grow up. In this case myth can be a kind of lie. For example, telling your children that there are no classes in America and we are all equal is a lie. We have the famous saying that 1 percent of our population owns most of America. So, there are quite a number of secular myths. But of course, similar topics could be encountered in communism as well. All these stories have features of myth but without any relationship with the supernatural or non-secular.

But contrary to these stories, can myths yield knowledge?

Some people are of the opinion that myths collect traditional knowledge which cannot be transmitted in other ways. The experience of many generations is transmitted by the myth, be it about nature or humans, but it is not organized like a handbook. On the other hand, in my point of view, the collection of myths from the beginning of the world to its end can be organized. Take, for example, the Icelandic Edda or Judaeo-Christian Bible. Many nations organize their knowledge in a similar fashion in a linear way, from the beginning to the end. And in the middle of it you can organize everything else, adding local customs and lineages of kings. So what can we learn?

There is a nice painting by Paul Gauguin from the period he was in Tahiti. It is titled “Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?” It is typical for humans to ask such questions. It shows we try to learn from myth



*Michael Witzel delivering his paper at the mythology conference.
Photograph by Alar Madisson 2019.*

whatever is inherited. It gives you a certain position in life, makes you sustainable and spiritually richer.

Do you think that sometimes people invoke a myth without knowing that they do so?

Sure, because they do it automatically. I can give you one example. I was a 15-year-old boy. My grandmother was born in the 1880s. She said that during Christmas holidays, at around midnight on the holy night, we should not wash our clothes and hang them out to dry. She did not say why. Later I was told that, when we do it at that time, the great god Odin comes riding with his troops and destroys everything. It was a typical inherited understanding of the 1880s. A similar case is also found in India, only the main character is Shiva with his 500 demons. So my grandmother did not know the background, she just told me what she had heard. She could not have known the reason because by then Germany had already been under Christianity for a thousand years.

And some of these stories have later on become fairy tales with a background in mythology. These are transmitted unconsciously and sometimes quite accurately. Recently I read an introduction to the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, which says that they received lots of stories from an old widow. When she was telling a story, she often had to stop and move back to the beginning to tell it correctly. This shows that we tend to follow stories very accurately (as our children always demand of us).

It seems that people in America and in the rest of the world are more interested in Marvel comics heroes and movies like “The Game of Thrones” than classical fairy tales. Do myths play an important role in modern works as well?

It is a comeback, so to speak. I can mention Joseph Campbell, who taught at a New York college and made several TV episodes about myths. He talked very nicely, smoothly, and intelligently. He introduced myths in an American way, talking about the great hero, Lone Ranger, who rides into a town, fixes all evil, and leaves. I still heard about these things on the American Forces radio when I was a student in Germany. Every afternoon we could hear from that radio station: “The Lone Ranger rides again”. Through his American “monomyth” Joseph Campbell has influenced film makers like George Lucas. Most of the “Star Wars” is based on this kind of mythology. These kinds of films are very popular. When a new version comes out, they earn millions.

A more recent movie is “Thor”, which is based on Germanic mythology. And, as you mentioned, “The Game of Thrones”. I have seen it only once, when I stayed at a hotel. I did not find it interesting. This was not straightforward mythology, but it is rather surreal history of medieval times. But more important is the film titled “The Lord of the Rings”, based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien. This is mythology featuring an imaginary world, evil kingdom, demons, wizards – this is reinvented British mythology influenced by Germanic and Celtic myths. This is the most mythological film that we have had recently.

What are your current projects?

It is not mythology, because I have some older projects that I have taken up. These have been lying on my shelf for twenty years. For example, the history of Kashmir. To my horror, when I put the 14 chapters together last summer, it was some 2000 pages. So I am currently busy with that.

Also I organized a conference in Nepal this January, which focused on Hindu ritual culture. We have some texts which are 3000 years old and handbooks which are approximately 2500 years old, but which have survived in Nepal in a unique form. I would like to compile a book about that particular fire ritual, because it has some interesting local developments that you cannot find anywhere else, only in one region in Nepal. We have shot lots of films and made recordings since 1975, and later on also videos. This is an enormous amount of material. I would like to put it into a book and maybe it might become a new film. So there are many other projects going on.

This means lots of travelling to Nepal and India, does it not?

I have lived and worked in Nepal for five years and there is still need to meet with people and ask for more information. Unfortunately, many of them are dead by now. What they told me is just in my notebook. But there are many nice people who would like to help me with this task.

This is another project and it is partly related to mythology of course. Nepalese mythology is still alive. I will give you an example. The Chinese built a ring road around Kathmandu in 1975 just to ease the traffic. At that time, we were told a story about how some Chinese engineers came across a small temple and they just wanted to remove it. But the Nepalis were protesting against it. Finally, at a conference, the king of Nepal, Indira Gandhi, and Mao Zedong, decided to move the temple just a little bit.

There is another case of a recent invention of mythology in Nepal, also from 1973–1974. In short, Nepal then had free access to hashish; there were big boards in the streets, reading “Government-licensed hashish shop”. Thousands of American hippies using drugs were the concern of the US government, so they secretly paid Nepal to ban hashish. At that time the 2000-room government building (Singha Durbar) was burnt down over a weekend by the opposition party of the congress. This was never acknowledged by the government. Instead, a few months later the fire was said to have been caused by the great God Shiva, who lives on a high mountain nearby: like many yogis, he likes to smoke his hashish pipe in the evening, and, angry about the banning of hashish, he dropped some ashes from his pipe, and – up went the Singha Durbar... It burned down within a week’s time.

You have lived in many continents, but have you ever been to Estonia before?

No, I have not been here before. Once I visited a conference in Saint Petersburg and I have visited some countries in Eastern Europe but I have never been to the Baltic states. So I am happy to witness how well you have managed since Estonia regained its independence in 1990.