

Original Paper

Myth Theory and Structuralism
—A Study of Lévi- Strauss’s mythological Research from *Myth*
and Meaning

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Abstract

Myth as a cultural phenomenon, reflects a period of human civilization development and change track. Under the influence of Marxist theory and psychoanalysis in his early years, Lévi-Strauss believed that the study of myth not only extended space as the main line and supplemented the early history which emphasized the dimension of time, but also explored the significance of “naturalizing man” in cultural studies. This paper discusses Lévi- Strauss’s views on the relationship between myth and science, myth and history, myth and music, as well as structuralism in his book myth and meaning, and discusses his understanding of self and existence in the study of myth.

Keywords

Myth, Science, History, Structuralism

1. Levi-strauss and Structuralism

In the 1960s and 1970s, structuralism began to rise in the French cultural circle, which also set off a violent academic thought wave in the field of ethnology and anthropology, and Levi Strauss, who was at the center of the wave, became an important figure in the academic circle at that time. His mythological research first relies on his views on culture and nation and his structuralism. In addition to being influenced by the two major fields of art and philosophy that he had been exposed to from childhood to youth, his theories mainly came from the in-depth study of geology, psychoanalysis and Marxist theory. He believed that in looking at things in the outside world, in order to achieve the greatest approximation of reality, we must first abandon the experience, do not accept the external world as we present it, and give only a conditional trust in immediate understanding and knowledge.

Under the profound influence of philosophy, Marxism and linguistics, his structuralism thought gradually took shape. Although his structuralism thought was controversial when it was first published, he attracted a large number of followers with his clear explanation of structuralism theory, relying on his rigorous analytical logic and careful research framework. Structuralism immediately became the mainstream theory of ethnological anthropology after World War II. According to his own interpretation of structuralism: "We simply wish to extract from the rich variety of empirical facts that observation and description can never fully encompass, constants that occur repeatedly at different times."

In *Myth and Meaning*, he wrote in similarly plain language: "Structuralism is not profound, but its purpose is to search for the invariable, or to trace out the invariable elements of a multitude of things that are apparently ambiguous." Structuralism has also been tested and perfected in the course of his mythological research, which has become the ideological basis of his mythological research. What he is trying to explore is a new direction, in the world of symbols governed by law, to break down myths and to resolve the functions behind the various elements in mythological stories, so as to simplify them into a few simple types, in order to reveal the deep structure of human consciousness hidden behind myths.

2. Myth and Science

The relationship between myth and science has always been the first problem to be solved in the study of mythology. To clarify the relationship between the two, so that scientists in the 17th and 18th centuries hope that the so-called scientific thinking is bound to be clearly differentiated from the "theory of ghosts and gods" reflected in myths, is an important proposition for academic research. "Science can exist only if we do away with the world of the senses, which we can see, smell, taste, and perceive; For the world of perception is a world of illusion, while the world of reality is a world of mathematical character, which can only be grasped by the understanding, and which is in no way compatible with the false evidence provided by the senses."

According to Levi-Strauss, modern science is more and more integrated into scientific explanations than the theories and ideas of the 17th and 18th centuries, rather than moving away from and separating them. In "Primitive Classification", Durkheim believes that primitive culture comes from classification, and the primitive classification system is an important source of the formation of primitive ways of thinking, and this classification system must be in line with the current situation at that time, must be determined by the material composition and the relationship between man and nature at that time, and this should be the basic category of our thinking when determining the source of experience. The formation of myths has the truth of its existence, and contains elements that can be demonstrated for current research, and should be gradually integrated into the scientific category. Myth and science are not on the divide between the lower and the higher, but should cross the divide and play different roles in understanding the world. In his books *The Totem System* and *The Wild Mind*, he tried to reveal exactly such a view, that these primitive humans, often thought by scholars to be completely subject to the physiological need to resist hunger, and to survive in a very harsh natural environment, were actually capable of deep thinking about

human existence. The wild mind uses events to create structure or meaning, whereas science uses structures - hypotheses and theories - to create and apply the results of events. If we try to grasp the wild thinking, we should put it in the environment of its survival and reproduction, and analyze the procedures and laws it conforms to.

As for the distinction between primitive and modern human minds, he argues that although human communities are culturally different, their minds should be the same. In different living environments, different communities form different mental properties, and if they live in the modern civilized world, they can also create ways of life and social rules in harmony with them. Cultural differences should not be eliminated, but are precious. We are now under a cultural threat.

3. Myth, History and Music

At the beginning of the last century, there was a debate between ethnology and history. History has a solid foundation in the academic circle because of its long history. However, with the continuous development of ethnology, it has become the urgent task for many aspiring scholars to consider the research scope and connection between ethnology and history. According to Levi-Strauss, history is a complement to ethnology, and what the former does in time is what the latter does in space. Within this limit, history is fully worthy of respect, but beyond this limit, history will violate the basic principles of the scientific spirit. In the study of history, the understanding of history should also be developed in the proposition of the completeness of knowledge in order to find that the self and the other are not opposites, but should be unified, just as history and myth should be closely related.

Similarly, regarding the relationship between history and myth, he takes “myth becomes history” as the theme in the book, and reveals a concise clue through the compilation of myths of primitive peoples such as Guacuto people -- the opposition between “myth” and “history” that we have constructed before is by no means a clear-cut state. They are connected through the intermediate level between them. He believes that myth is a static thing, and scholars have found that the same elements that appear in myth again and again are mixed, so that they exist in a closed system, with connection points hidden in the deep structure under the surface separation.

As a child who was influenced by art, music and other arts, Levi Strauss has a unique understanding of music. Just as he looks at an oil painting, when most people see the beauty of the scenery or the beauty of the figures displayed in the oil painting, he sees the ingenious combination of lines and the exquisite combination of painting techniques. Like the homogeneity emphasized by Levi-Strauss in his study of symbolic systems, from a logical point of view, they are expressions of meaning, belonging to different symbolic systems, but they are indispensable elements for understanding our world.

4. Existence and Structuralism

Levi- Strauss's views on nature and culture are very clear, he always stressed that nature is absolute existence, is the boundary of culture. He believes that contact with nature is the only certain and constant experience for human beings, the source of security and a system of interpretation of things, and the ability to determine the truth of our perceptions of the world around us. He believed that nature was the source of all values, and that man was not a measure of all things, but an element of nature.

Compared with the functionalist theory, his structuralist thought is more "essential" in the study of human culture and more in-depth in the study of human thinking. In the study of mythology, Levi Strauss extracted the deep logic of mythological thinking from the two aspects of the logic of perceptual quality and the logic of form, emphasizing that nature and culture are not separate fields, and should transition from nature to culture to explain the characteristics of human thinking. Compared with Durkheim and Moss, who emphasized the study of social facts, he thought that we should look for the origin of symbolism. He argues that the wholeness of the "complete social fact" emphasized by Moss does not depend on the accumulation of elements, but on the fact that each such element belongs to a symbolic system, which is the source of existence and the guarantee of wholeness. Thus, he puts it this way: "The fundamental phenomena of mental life, that is, those which determine it and define its general form, lie at the level of the unconscious mind, for the unconscious may be the intermediate term between self and others."

Needless to say, Levi-Strauss was not a proponent of existentialism. His emphasis on existence (social fact) and absolute existence (nature) is an indispensable medium in our scientific research. At a time when the intellectual world is emphasizing the return of the subject, he believes that the concept of the subject is not suitable to be put forward alone, if everyone builds an epistemology for the subject according to their own self, then the world will be chaotic. Structuralism is ultimately just a path of scientific research. Here he does not mean to hinder the emergence of other theories, but merely to emphasize that we are always present in a constructed arena of limitations, and that we must not forget these limitations, otherwise we will fall under the illusion of empiricism.

The structuralism theory created by Levi-Strauss provides a scientific and rigorous analysis method for ethnological anthropology. Especially in the study of mythology, structuralism advocated to explore the hidden links between myths, which is a beneficial exploration to uncover the mystery of human culture. He emphasized that the exploration of the complementarity between individual psychological phenomena and social structure is an important direction for the development of ethnological anthropology. In particular, the analysis of mythological structure and the exploration of mythological system in this book further make mythological research scientific and orderly.

5. Conclusion

Myth as a cultural phenomenon, reflects a period of human civilization development and change track. Under the influence of Marxist theory and psychoanalysis in his early years, Lévi-Strauss believed that the study of myth not only extended space as the main line and supplemented the early history which emphasized the dimension of time, but also explored the significance of “naturalizing man” in cultural studies. This paper discusses Lévi- Strauss’s views on the relationship between myth and science, myth and history, myth and music, as well as structuralism in his book myth and meaning, and discusses his understanding of self and existence in the study of myth.

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