Chapter 5

Myth and Identity

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Types of Myths and Their Usefulness to Modern Society

Studied alive, myth...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 submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. ...Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force. (Malinowski 19)

There are two kinds of myths: (1) those that aim at explaining the causes of natural phenomena or the nature of governing powers which can all be seen as tentative contributions to knowledge, and (2) heroic or romantic tales that evolve around some human law or custom (Lang 300ff). The second category of myths can be further divided into the sagas of primitive people, the *Märchen* (such as the tales collected by the Grimm Brothers) and the epic poetry and legends of the great civilized races such as the Greeks and the Romans. In this chapter I will restrict myself to a discussion of the second type of myth and its relevance for identity on two levels, namely, cultural and personal, as we are all in need of both a collective life lived in the social group and at the same time an inherent need to strive for personal truth.

Feinstein and Mayo underline the usefulness of myths for the identity of groups and individuals in modern society: "Rituals, like myths, address (1) our urge to comprehend our existence in a meaningful way, (2) our search for a marked pathway as we move from one stage of our lives to the next, (3) our need to establish secure and fulfilling relationships within a human community, and (4) our longing to know our part in the vast wonder of the cosmos" (41). Even though they do not constitute history in the sense of "having really taken place," myths represent "human truths," and as such they link all of us to primordial times. Myths (and the rituals associated with them) inform the human spirit on its journey into the world, but they are also an important way to understand our connection to other people at a time when the welfare of each culture depends on the attitudes and actions of others (Rosenberg xiii).

In this chapter the discussion will center on the archetypal hero myth. The myth of the Zulu hero, Usikulumi, will serve as an illustration of this myth.

Comparative Mythology: A Tool to Discover Universal Patterns (including African Exemplars) and Distinctive Traits in Myths

All authoritative research on myths has shown that the ideas, incidents and plots of the three classes of heroic or romantic tales show remarkable resemblances. Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) called these recurring ideas and themes *Elementarge-danken*, and the particular application of these themes by different ethnic groups, *Völkergedanken* (Campbell 9).

The primary aim of "universal" or "comparative mythology" is to focus on accordances and universal truths in the myths of different cultural groups, to search for *Elementargedanken*.[1] The search for universally applicable "patterns" marks the ritualistic, psychoanalytic, sociological and structuralist approaches to myth.[2] A quick glance at the most influential theories on myths confirms the underlying premise that myths from very distant parts of the world and from very different time zones have very obvious similarities which are variously explained. Müller saw myths as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages. To Durkheim they were the repositories of allegorical instruction to shape the individual to his group. Sigmund Freud viewed myths as the expression of subconscious wishes, fears and drives. Carl Jung (and his followers, such as Carl Kerenyi, Erich Neumann and Joseph Campbell) thought that myths were the expression of a universal collective unconscious, a group dream that springs from archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche. Mircea Eliade viewed myths as the essence of religion, conceived from a genuine religious experience; he thought that the sacred experience gives myths their structure and their utility. Because the ancient world contained many different religious ideas and forms, numerous similarities and connections exist from one culture to another.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss myths are abstract constructions. The structure of all human minds is identical and is revealed by the similar ways in which people solve their problems. Myths are identical products from identical minds, so myths from around the world possess a common structure. They reveal the conflict between opposing forces, and one can discover their meaning by focusing on their underlying structure. Lévi-Strauss constituted the logical structures he identified in myths as evidence for his argument that although different, the savage mind was hardly inferior to the technological rationality of the modern West.[3]

Some scholars doubt whether features of resemblance between indigenous African and ancient Greek and Romans myths exist. Puhvel tells us that similarities between Greek and Native American myths were already noticed in the seventeenth century, that the Orpheus myth in North America formed the subject of two books (3) and that, already in 1724, Bernard de Fontenelle pointed to notable similarities between Greek and Amerindian myths (11). However,

Puhvel is of the opinion that Oedipus-type tales are found only in a continuous band from Europe through the Middle East and South Asia into the Western Pacific, to the exclusion of other native mythologies (i.e., northern Asia, Africa, America, Australia) and that the "average hero legend" is based solely on European, Middle Eastern and South Asian exemplars (3). Bruce Lincoln shows (chap. 4–6) how scholarship on the subject of myth over the course of more than a century tended to privilege Aryan (or Indo-European) examples and discusses the matter of an "Indo-European" descent of language and myth in detail (211ff).[4] However, as I will illustrate below, the myth of Uzikulumi, the Zulu hero, shows a marked resemblance to quite a few classical Roman and Greek hero myths. The obvious similarities between Zulu traditional stories and those of other peoples led Callaway to give the following reason for assembling Zulu nursery tales: "It will, I think, help us to find unsuspected points of contact between the Zulus and other people. ...It will also give them a claim to be reckoned as an integral part of our common humanity, by showing that they have so many thoughts in common with other men, and have retained in their traditional tales so much that resembles the traditional tales of other people" (1). Bryant (670 ff) also noted many strong resemblances between the Grecian and Zulu "mysteries." Golsan found that a myth of the Venda people shows remarkable resemblance to the Oedipus myth (168 ff). The very fact that these similarities, even in detail, are found in such diverse cultures is very significant. It indicates underlying general psychological themes, which are true of humanity the world over, and they have become useful tools in the analysis of the psyche and in the search for identity, as I will demonstrate below.

A secondary dividend of the comparative method is the easy identification of traits that are specific to a particular myth. Such traits can reveal much about the culture of the ethnic groups from which the myth originated and are important for the establishment of their separate identities.[5]

The Archetypal Hero Myth

The archetype of the mythical hero has occupied the ritualist Fitzroy Richard Somerset (fourth Baron Raglan), the psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell, to name but a few. Raglan found that Robin Hood conforms to a type attested to in Oedipus, Theseus, Romulus, Herakles, Perseus, Jason, Bellerophon, Pelops, Asklepios, Dionysos, Apollo, Zeus, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Watu Gunung (Java), Nyikang (upper Nile), Sigurd-Siegfried, Lleu Llawgyffes (Wales) and Arthur, while Rank's dossier comprises Sargon (of Akkad), Moses, Karna (in the *Mahabharata*), Oedipus, Paris, Telephus, Perseus, Gilgamesh, Cyrus, Tristan, Romulus, Hercules, Jesus, Siegfried and Lohengrin. The pattern involves noble origin; unusual conception; the threat of infanticide, rescue and youthful exile, the exile often involving herding

of cattle or sheep; manifesting kingly bearing; return of the hero upon reaching maturity to claim his due; triumph over an obstructionist, such as battle with a three-headed monster during which the hero often proves invulnerable; the father or king's dread becoming justified; marriage to a highborn local; successful reign; but ultimate downfall, exile and mysterious end, often on a hill; disappearance of mortal remains; and a cenotaphic cult at holy sepulchers. Other themes that often occur involve a female who aids and protects the hero, a long journey, theft of an elixir, sacred marriage, and so forth. Puhvel notes that: "The hero is thus a formula-bound bundle of themes…" (Puhvel 16). Neither Raglan nor Rank includes Southern African heroes in their list, but as the tale of the Zulu hero Usikulumi will illustrate, this African hero shows remarkable correspondence to the archetypal hero.

The Zulu Myth of Usikulumi[6] and its Parallels

The name Usikulumi means "the one who talks." This is significant as it probably means that the hero is the one who speaks for everyone.

> Usikulumi's father, the king Uthlokohloko,[7] did not want to have sons for fear that they would depose him. Old women were appointed to kill the sons of the king. The most important theme is present: Usikulumi was of royal descent and there was the threat of infanticide. Usikulumi's mother gave presents to the old women and begged them not to kill him, but to take him to his maternal uncle. This they did. Usikulumi escapes (theme: the hero is saved, as often happens, by the intervention of his mother). He was respected and honored by the boys of his uncle's kraal (village) (theme: the kingly bearing). One day the officers of his father came by and said: "Who are you?" He did not tell them but they took him without doubting, saying: "This child is like our king." They took him to his father (theme: the young hero returns). The king was very angry, and Usikulumi was taken to a great forest (theme: the long journey). The forest was the home of a great, many-headed monster that ate men. Usikulumi was left on a great rock in the middle of the forest. The many-headed monster came out of the water (theme: the obstructionist), but did not kill the young man; it took him and gave him food. The monster also gave him a nation subject to him. He visited his uncle and was received with great joy. He eventually reached his father's kingdom; his father was grieved at his arrival and told his people to take their weapons and kill Usikulumi. He stood in an open space and said: "Hurl your spears at me to your utmost." He stood until the sun set, and they hurled their spears without having the power to kill him (theme: invulnerability). The monster had strengthened him so that he was invulnerable. Usikulumi kills all his father's people and departs with the spoils—he is now king of his own people (theme: father's dread is justified). Then follows the inevitable marriage. Usikulumi courts the daughters of Umzembeni ("Long-toe"). She was, however, a cannibal and had devoured all the men of her country. Her daughters were celebrities among the tribes on account of their beauty, but Umzembeni had even torn off one of her daughters' cheeks, boiled it and eaten it. It was bitter and that was why Umzembeni did not eat her daughters. When Usikulumi arrived, the girls dug a hole in the house and concealed him in it (theme: the hero is aided by a female). He had left his pack of dogs in a bed of reeds. When Umzembeni returned, she could smell human flesh, but

> the girls denied that there was anyone. Usikulumi ran away with one of the daughters; they traveled day and night, hoping to escape Uzembeni. She pursued them and they climbed a high tree. She tried to chop down the tree, but was torn to pieces by the dogs. The tree grew again and Uzembeni came to life again until she was finally ground to powder. Usikulumi and the girl escaped and were received joyously by Usikulumi's people.

The legend of Usikulumi has many curious points in common with quite a few Grecian hero myths: Hecuba dreamed that she gave birth to a burning torch, which the seers interpreted as intimating that the child to be born would bring ruin on the city and land of Troy. The infant Paris was sent by Priam to be exposed to the elements on Mount Ida. He was found and adopted by a shepherd. His fatal affair with Helen led to the destruction of Troy.

The Delphic oracle warned Laïus that he would be slain by his own child. He ordered his son Oedipus to be left on the heights of Cithaeron. Again a shepherd played a part in the rescue of the child. He was raised in a royal environment and had the demeanor of a prince. He also killed his father (though unwittingly). Again a monster figured in the form of the sphinx, and Oedipus too became ruler over a nation.

Uranus feared his children, the Titans. Their mother, Gaea, encouraged the youngest, Cronos, to defeat his father, who in turn cursed his son and prophesied that a day would come when he, too, would be supplanted by his children. So Cronos swallowed every son of his that was born until his wife Rhea handed him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes. Her son, the young Jupiter, having been saved by his mother, was entrusted to the tender care of the Melian nymphs who bore him off to Mount Ida, where a goat acted as nurse. Cronos was attacked by his son, and after a short but terrible encounter he was signally defeated.

The Roman heroes Romulus and Remus also come to mind. Their uncle Amulius feared them and ordered that they be thrown into the Tiber. They, too, were put out to die, were rescued by the she-wolf, grew up as herdsmen, showed signs of leadership and returned to reclaim their grandfather's kingdom.

Myth and Cultural (Ethnic) Identity

The South Africa population consists of many diverse cultures. To illustrate this diversity we need mention only two such cultural groups: On the one hand there are those who consider themselves to be "Afrikaners," the descendants of European colonists, brought up and educated according to Western traditions, and on the other, indigenous black African peoples such as the Zulus or Tswanas with their culture rooted in Africa. These very disparate groups live and work side by side, attend the same sports events and occupy the same lecture rooms at our universities. I believe that mythology has an important role to play

as a catalyst in cementing structured coexistence in South Africa, while enhancing the very disparity that could so very easily lead to conflict.

Traditionally the student of European culture studied mythology because it forms such an important aspect of graphic arts and literature.[8] Without knowledge of mythology, thousands of allusions will be lost on the student of English literature.

But myths have much more to offer, and this is borne out by the fact that they have become an extremely popular field of study.[9] The socio-functionalists point out the interrelations between the social order and the myths and rituals that sustain it (Doty 132). Using Kluckhohn's theses as a starting point Doty concludes that "myths and rituals can be studied in terms of their functional ability to provide social solidarity, to transmit cultural values, to provide a firm standpoint in a threatening world, to reduce anxiety, to show relationships between cultural values and particular objects, to explicate origins, and so forth" (Doty 133). According to these socio-functionalists, myths and rituals provide the social cement that binds societies together; they signify culture, social structure and interaction (Doty 137).

At whatever stage of his life a person finds himself or herself, or whatever his or her profession, he or she is limited because of the very fact that he or she is an individual. Through his or her genes he or she belongs to his or her cultural group and derives his or her total being (language, thoughts, etc.) from the society as a whole. Traditions and ceremonies give meaning to the individual's present situation, in terms that do not refer to him or her by name but that apply to him or her in impersonal terms. His or her place within society is established, a society that does not perish like the individual. "By an enlargement of the vision to embrace this super-individual, each discovers himself enhanced, enriched, supported, and magnified" (Campbell 383). People who ostracize themselves from society deny themselves the right of "being" in the full sense of the word. Symbols, rites and traditions which are all part of a nation's mythology, celebrate humankind's oneness with the individual group and with humanity as a whole.

Very few young black South Africans know much about their own cultural heritage. The ethos of the black South African student has become one of foreign derivation. These young people have been reared on MacDonald's, American sitcoms and pop music and know precious little about the mythological stories their grandparents used to hear around the fireplace (cf. the discussion of globalization and Americanization by Segers, this volume). Certainly the colonizer is partly to blame for the lack of cultural knowledge and pride among the indigenous peoples of South Africa. Cohen explains the phenomenon as follows:

> Culture becomes politicised when people recognise that ignorance of their culture among others acts to their detriment; that they experience the marginalisation of their culture and their relative powerlessness with respect to the marginalisers. With ignorance of a culture goes the denial of its integrity. Continuous denigration seems to drive people into cultural retreat, where they either make their tradition a covert matter, or appear to desert it in large measure. Western intellectual tradition created its own version of the culture of the colonised which it imposes upon them, and then denigrated, thereby justifying the West's own domination of the colonised as an essentially civilising mission. In so doing they have deprived them of their collective identity. (Cohen 199)[10]

The vibrant rituals and ceremonies of the forefathers, which promoted cooperation and a stronger sense of community have disintegrated and can be seen as part of a general cultural decay.

This lack of interest in cultural heritage has also infiltrated the university curriculum. In a recent paper Dr. Thosago of the University of the North (South Africa) deplores the non-existence of folklore as a recognizable academic discipline in South Africa. According to him folklore has an indispensable usefulness to culture. Classical or ancient culture, which has become very popular in universities throughout the world, should include African culture. Classical studies can no longer afford to maintain privileged values. Comparison and analysis of the cultural treasures of ancient societies will lead to a much more valuable gain: the understanding of human thought across different cultures (Doty 23). The teaching of mythology at the university level centered for many years on a discussion and analysis of myth within its own historical and cultural framework. As fascinating as ancient myths are, they seem totally irrelevant to young people living in South Africa in the twenty-first century. The time has come for South Africans to start telling each other their stories. The myth of the Zulu hero Usikulumi amply illustrates the rich material for comparison between African and ancient European myths. Ancient culture and folklore can and should be utilized at the school and university level to reinforce cultural identity, to cultivate a better understanding among students belonging to different cultural groups and to foster a new appreciation for the cultural heritage of the "other."

The hero myth of Usikulumi demonstrates that the Zulu mind has much in common with the Western mind and that the mythology of the Zulus is as valid and worthy of research as the myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The distinctive elements are equally significant and a valuable source of information about Zulu culture. The traditional importance of cattle as indicator of social status is attested to: A young boy, at the bottom of the social ladder, spends his days in the veld looking after the cattle, and the standing of the grown men is determined by the number of cattle they possess. Great value is attached to family relations. We saw that Usikulumi was not sent to just any neighboring king, but to his maternal uncle. The symbolism of the bed of reeds as the source

from which society sprung, and the place and image of birth, rebirth and regeneration, is unique in the mythologies of the world. The spear is identified as the traditional weapon. A woman's beauty increases her value since her future husband will have to deliver many head of cattle to her family as "lobola."

Myths are an important source of cultural knowledge, and if such knowledge is shared, it can lead to a greater understanding and tolerance among the peoples of a country.

Individual Experience in a Universal Perspective

An Initiation Ritual

Many influential mythologists have equated the hero myth with an initiation process. Dumézil (126 ff.) suggests that the hero's combat with a many-headed monster is the transformation into myth of an archaic initiation ritual. This initiation does not always belong to the "heroic" type. In Christian mythology St George fights and kills the dragon heroically; other saints achieve the same result without fighting (like Usikulumi).

Freud's (initial) follower, Otto Rank, explains the characteristics of the traditional hero in terms of infantile hostility, childhood fantasies and rebellion against one's father. He identifies the hero with the personal ego that rebels against the domination of the father. These myths fulfill an important role in facilitating the process of terminating childhood dependence and entering into adult life. Through the ordeal that a boy is subjected to before his initiation, he experiences a divine "something," which is the voice of his own true nature whereby he is released from childish dependence on the authority of the parents.

According to Eliade, the ordeals that heroes undergo suggest passage to the beyond, the perilous descent into hell. When such journeys are undertaken by living beings they always form part of an initiation. The hero has a quest: he pursues immortality or some other reward (*Birth* 125). But initiation also implies an existential experience, that is, the experience of ritual death and the revelation of the sacred. This makes the experience metacultural and transhistorical, and the same initiatory patterns continue to be active in culturally heterogeneous societies (*Birth* 131).

An Imaginative Experience

When initiatory patterns have lost their ritual reality, they become literary motifs. According to Eliade, "This is to say that they now deliver their spiritual message on a different plane of human experience, by addressing themselves directly to the imagination" (*Birth* 126).

Paul Saint Yves and Jan de Vries have shown that the ordeals and adventures of the heroes and heroines in folktales (and some fairy tales) are almost

always translatable into initiatory terms. Eliade explains these initiatory scenarios as expressions of a psychodrama that answers a deep need in a human being. On the level of her or his imaginative life the reader confronts the ordeals on her or his way to the "other world," while hearing or reading the tales, or even when dreaming (*Birth* 126). The Greeks already knew the power of myths to arouse feelings, to give pleasure, to offer consolation for the difficulties experienced in the present by stirring memory of past adventures (Doty 56).

Nowadays initiatory themes remain alive chiefly in the unconscious, as is confirmed by the initiatory symbolism in works of art. The massive positive public reception of these works proves that modern humankind is still capable of being affected by initiatory scenarios or messages. Reading provides distraction and escape and constitutes one of the characteristic traits of modern humanity. "Modern man satisfies his religious needs by reading books that contain mythological figures camouflaged as contemporary characters and offer initiatory scenarios in the guise of everyday happenings" (Eliade, *Birth* 135). We see ourselves reflected in heroic myths. The presence of initiatory themes in the dreams and imagination of modern humankind proves our unconscious desire to share in the ordeals that regenerate the hero and to identify with the hero. Heroes possess not only our strengths but also our weaknesses. They are not perfect beings, and that is why we can identify with them, learn from their mistakes and feel compassion for them. Heroes make vital choices, and through their ordeal they become wiser, more sensitive beings.

A Spiritual Journey

The hero myth, with the initiation process it implies, is also symbolic of the psychological process every human experiences during her or his lifetime.[11] Eliade relates the hero myth to the symbolism of the center (*Myth* 17). The center is the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality, and all the other symbols of absolute reality are also situated at a center. The road leading to the center is a difficult road, that is, pilgrimage to sacred places, danger-ridden voyages and other experiences of the mythical hero. The hero is in search of his rightful place, in search of his true identity, just as Usikulumi was in search of his role as king and ruler of his people. The hero is seeking the road to the self, to the "center" of his being.

> The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to the divinity. Attaining the center is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective. (Eliade, *Myth* 18)

According to Jung the process of individuation, which constitutes the ultimate goal of human life, only comes through a series of ordeals of an initiatory type

(Eliade, *Rites* 135). Human life implies crises, ordeals, suffering, loss, a sense of total failure, and the only hope in such circumstances is that of a *rebirth*, a *total regeneration*. Such a purely spiritual birth is found in a deeply felt, genuine, religious conversion. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again"; and when Nicodemus asked Jesus how a man can be reborn when he is old, Jesus answered: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3–5, *New Revised Standard Version*).

In the absence of any deeply religious experience, religion has become "unconscious." It lies buried in the deepest strata of the individual's being. People only become themselves, born into a new, regenerated life, after they have coped with desperately difficult situations. The initiatory scenario functions only on the vital and psychological plane (Eliade, *Birth* 127). By enduring traumas the individual sheds his childlike, unrefined state and is reshaped into a new, more mature being—he receives a new identity and plays a new role. The scarring of the body (e.g., tattooing, blackening of teeth or circumcision), which is part of aboriginal initiation, represents a deeper mark upon the psyche.

Harding gives a slightly altered perspective on the theory of the sacred center (281 ff.):

> If psychological energy is allowed to flow outwards it creates in the outer world, while if it is checked in its outward flowing and turned back towards the center it creates within the individual. The creations produced by the outflowing of energy comprise all of a person's outer activities, work, family, etc. while the inner creation, produced by the inflowing of the energy, is the psychic child which corresponds to Jung's concept of individuality. In the moon religions the inner psychic child, is believed to be immortal because he is beyond the conditioning of this world and exists in a realm different from the external or visible universe. A person who can release his mind from the conditionings of time and place and shift his center away from himself to a more disinterested focal point, is symbolized in the religions of the moon as giving birth to the immortal child or savior.

Harding elaborates on another symbol related to the hero, that of the tree and its fruit (283 ff.) The Babylonian Moon God, Sinn (the young crescent moon), the hero who overcomes his father's enemy, is the fruit of the sacred moon tree. The participant who drinks the juice of the fruit receives the same divine gifts he or she possessed. Dionysus' followers drank the fruit of the vine, which was symbolic of his blood. The wine of the sacrament also represents Christ's blood. Only when the tree of life is fully developed can it produce fruit and bestow immortality through its essence. So, too, the initiates who ate of the Roses of Isis were released from their mortal state.

The drinking of the sacred substance was believed to put the worshipper in touch with the "self," an aspect of the psyche that possesses immutable qualities but which is not the worshipper's personal ego. It is non-personal, partaking of

the qualities of the divine self or Atman. It is this non-personal, non-ego, "self" which Jung (of whom Harding is a disciple) calls the "individuality" (Harding 245 ff). The concept takes in more than the conscious side of the psyche and is never fully conscious but remains a potentiality within the human being. Through inner experiences the individuality is progressively delimited. The experiences bring the lost values of the psyche to consciousness, and the human being then becomes more complete. This is a similar experience to the "second birth" in ancient religions that occurred after participation in the various stages of the mystery initiations. "For when a man or woman submits to the laws or principles of his own being and gives up the personal orientation of the ego he gradually defines the limits of his own nature and the individuality crystallizes within him" (246). This exploration of one's own capacities and finding of one's own boundaries occurs during the initiation in the seclusion of a temple or other secluded place where the emotional experience is not hampered by any considerations which must be taken into account in a personal relationship.

Even non-religious people feel the desire for a spiritual transformation, a transmutation, which in other cultures constitutes the very goal of initiation (Eliade, *Rites* 136). This is an indication of humankind's longing to find a positive meaning to death, to accept death as a transition rite to a higher mode of being.

Who then is the hero of the twenty-first century? What is his or her quest? The mystery that needs to be deciphered no longer lies in the animal monster, but in humankind themselves. In order to transcend the human condition and become a protégé of a supernatural being, the individual has to undergo a specialized initiation (Eliade, *Birth* 128). For the Christian, this means a rebirth and new life in the image of God.

Heroes test the limits of human experience. They stand alone and represent the individual's struggle while their behavior initially may seem anti-social.[12] After the ordeal they return and establish a new order or reaffirm the old. "The history of the ways the heroic is defined will be as well the history of the definition of selfhood: active or passive, conquering or receptive, critical toward or accepting of traditional models, and so on…" (Doty 64). The hero's strength of character is as important as his or her great deeds (Rosenberg xii).

Some heroes are allowed to obtain fame for themselves, but the hero myth mostly evolves around the choice between personal achievement or safety and the hero's duty towards his or her fellow human beings (Rosenberg xviii). The war that the hero wages is not always a physical battle. The hero often celebrates a personal, psychological triumph while losing against his physical enemy.

The Modern-day Hero

A society has its own deceased or living heroes: people who personify the ideals and values of their society.[13] Chaka Zulu and Nelson Mandela may well qualify as modern-day heroes who have acquired mythical attributes; that is, they are considered to be so important that they are mythicized (Doty 39). These heroes obtain immortality through their deeds and serve as models for their followers, just as the mythological heroes of Greece or Rome.

The martyrs were the archetypal heroes of the early Christians. They had a quest, suffered hardship; their souls were invulnerable to torture; they became protégés of their supernatural being, Christ, and a cult often originated at their burial place.[14]

Former president Mandela's story has become a reflection of the era of struggle against apartheid. Doty notes that, "The dominant myths of an era reflect its views of behavioral or psychosocial maturity or health, and undergird its models of heroes and heroines" (Doty 64). Not all myths reflect a positive or healthy view of society. The story of the Afrikaner's coming to South Africa as colonizer and attaining political supremacy led a certain radical right-wing group to see themselves as "God's chosen people" to the exclusion of other cultural groups. They have, from their own perspective, acquired a certain identity within South African society as a whole, based on their mythical heritage and tradition.

Another interesting example of South African origin is Danie Theron. He was a hero of the South African War who crawled through enemy lines to bring a message from General de Wet to the beleaguered General Piet Cronje. He later died when seven British scouts surprised him but not before he killed three of the enemy and wounded four. Danie Theron became an icon for the Afrikaner-nationalist, an inspiration for the republican ideal. In February 2003 his remains were secretly removed from his grave at Eikenhof, where he had been buried next to his young wife. It is presumed that a far-right group is responsible for the removal. In a recent newspaper article, Pretorius wonders if Theron will remain the exclusive hero of the Afrikaner, or whether, now that the struggle for an Afrikaner republic is a thing of the past, a shift of focus will perhaps take place, and that Theron might become an inclusive icon with which all cultural groups who have been part of the broader struggle history, can identify.

Conclusion

As I have stated in the introduction to this chapter, every human being leads his or her life on two levels: in an ethnic or cultural group and at the same time on a personal level. On both these levels humankind has a need of a mythology,

rites and initiation, which lies at the core of human existence and is a *sine qua non* for the development of social and individual identity.

Our modern societies can be described as "desacralized," devoid of knowledge of their cultural heritage and suffering from a poverty of rituals. The stories of our forefathers are no longer heard, and we have lost our sense of belonging.[15] The people of a country or region can be compared to grains of sand, and the cultural groups within that country, to building blocks. Myths are the mortar that joins the individual grains into separate, solid units, which can be used to build a strong nation. It seems that the lack of "mortar" has led to the disintegration of the "blocks," that is, the cultural groups, each with their own identity.

Psychologically speaking, individuals are in need of rites of passage to help them through life's crises. In Christian churches throughout the world baptism, the Eucharist and confirmation are the fundamental rites of passage intended to aid the believer in his or her spiritual journey towards self-identity. But in many churches these sacraments are mostly performed in a group and the sense of self-identity, the inner life of the person is not always on a par with the status accorded by the congregation. Psychologists the world over recognize the importance of meaningful rites in helping the psyche to regain its equilibrium,[16] and perhaps the time has come to give myth its proper place and to reestablish meaningful rites in our social and personal lives.

Notes

1. Puhvel used the following quotation from Sir William Jones as a central thought on the very first page of his book: "When features of resemblance, too strong to have been accidental, are observable in different systems of polytheism, without fancy or prejudice to color them and improve their likeness, we can scarce help believing, that some connection has immemorially subsisted between the several nations, who have adopted them." (v)
2. It is also widely accepted today that proof of the authenticity of myth—that is, the proof by which it is known as the genuine aboriginal product of a primitive folk—is obtained by "the test of recurrence."
3. On the validity of the myths of so-called primitive societies see also Lincoln (210), Rosenberg (xxi).
4. This view is shared by the well-known mythologists Dumézil, Wikander and de Vries.
5. Segers (this volume) also stresses the usefulness of comparative research in cultural studies in his chapter.
6. I have used Callaway's version of this story (41 ff).
7. Uthlokohloko means the "chief of chiefs."
8. "Mythology is the handmaid of literature." (Bulfinch v).
9. See Doty (xiii ff) for the vast number of publications, CD-ROMs, exhibits, programs and Internet sites.
10. The recent spate of deaths among young boys in initiation schools in South Africa illustrate clearly what can happen when tradition becomes a covert matter.

11. "Concern with the psychology of primitives, with folklore, mythology, and the comparative history of religions opens the eyes to the wide horizons of the human psyche and in addition it gives that indispensable aid we so urgently need for the understanding of unconscious processes." (Jung quoted in Harding ix)
12. Rites of passage always involve isolation, reversion to a raw state, combat and testing (Kirk 19).
13. It is therefore preferable to consider the intervention of suprahuman entities as one of the components of myths rather than deities (Doty 74).
14. St. Jerome's remains at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore were the cause of many miracles.
15. In chapter 1 (this volume) Burger stresses that identity is constructed through narrating because it provides an historic awareness.
16. Bani Shorter, a psychoanalyst, for example, describes the rites of passage five of her patients had to undergo in order to shed their "old self" and regain their identity.

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