

MYTHOLOGY OFFERS GOOD ARGUMENTS FOR SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF MIGRATION

Interview with Mexican Mythologist Martín Cuitzeo Domínguez Núñez

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This year the Estonian Literary Museum organized the 13th Annual International Conference on Comparative Mythology in cooperation with the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies. At the end of the conference I had a chance to conduct an interview with Mexican mythologist Martín Cuitzeo Domínguez Núñez, who works at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Mexico City. He is an expert on the astronomical culture of the Paipai people. Also, Domínguez Núñez is one of the organizers of the next international conference on comparative mythology. In this interview he talks about Mexican myths, reveals some details about the forthcoming conference, and draws parallels with Estonian mythology.

Martín Cuitzeo Domínguez Núñez, how did you become interested in mythology as a young man?

There are many answers to this question. First of all, as a young child I liked myths, specifically Greek mythology, and on the other hand, I liked prehispanic mythology and legends from the colonial period. During my BA studies I started to study myths originating from different parts of the world, but also new stories from ancient Mexico. Finally, I focused on Mesoamerican and northern Mexican indigenous myths. Also I think that the Mexican context is very multicultural; here you can meet people with very different backgrounds. In Mexico, myth is a part of the daily life. You are at a party, and suddenly an old lady starts to tell you old stories. These events may be weddings or family reunions of my friends. At some point you are engaged in a conversation with an old woman or an old man and spontaneously they start talking about witches, fire balls in the air, and also about how to protect yourself from “nahuales”. These are human beings that have the ability to transform into animals. This cultural context probably explains why I became a mythologist.

Can you remember any myths from your childhood which have had an effect on shaping your personality?

My grandmother told me and my brother a short story about why little kids are not able to say bad words. This is a story of Child Jesus; when he said some bad words he became a pig for some days because God decided it was bad. After this punishment he became a child again. This story also explains why it was bad to eat pork – this was because of the transformation of Jesus into a pig. With this story, my grandmother warned me against behaving badly.

An Aztec myth of the origin of the sun is another story I remember. When I was a kid, as part of my primary school literature, I read a myth about how a god performed a sacrifice to become the sun. His name was Nanahuatzin. And another god, Tecuzitcatl, did the same. But there was too much light in the sky and the gods decided to throw rabbits into the face of the second god. And that is how we got the sun and the moon, and the latter has the face of a rabbit.

Every promising scientist has been inspired by some role models. Who are your major influencers in the academic world?

I think I have three main influencers. The first one is Algirdas Julien Greimas, a Lithuanian semiotician who also investigated Lithuanian folklore and mythology. He has most certainly been my major influencer. Greimas' methodology for analyzing narratives is one of the main tools I use to analyze myths. I like his concepts of surface elements and actants or functions in stories. Secondly, Spanish Professor Tomás Pollán, who specializes in the history of mythology. At his short courses taught at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City I have learnt about the concepts and theories about myths proposed by Levi Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Hans Blumenberg. Pollán has an interesting way of teaching mythology theory. He talks not only about the historical context of each author and the main points of their theories, but also about the intellectual context of each theory and their main influences. I would also like to mention Joseph Campbell. Today I am more critical of him, but his theory about the presence in all human cultures of the myth of the hero is quite persuasive. Additionally, I can say that two more Mexican mythologists have influenced me. They are Alfredo López Austin and Mario Arturo Galván Yáñez. Both have been my teachers. López Austin has developed a historical methodology to understand the Mesoamerican mythology and cosmology. He uses the concept of the existence of a hard core in the Pre-Columbian mythology. Galván Yáñez has developed the concept of mythical systems. A mythical system is a set of rules or related principles that organize and hierarchize different myths among themselves.



What is your main research subject today? Can you talk a little bit about it?

My main research today is astronomical culture among the Pa ipai people. I am investigating how social and historical changes in northern Mexico are related to what we think of the sky. This is the subject of my doctoral thesis, in which I apply the interdisciplinary approach that combines astronomy, anthropology, ethnography, and semiotics.

During your stay in Tartu you met Professor Peeter Torop. Did you talk about your research? Why is his feedback important to you?

Professor Peeter Torop, an international expert on the topic of cultural semiotics, belongs to one of the most important schools of semiotics in the world, the Tartu school. I showed him my work on cultural astronomy and mythology of the sky and he came up with some useful ideas. For example, he suggested that I classify and analyze semiotically the different sorts of astronomical-mythological images I have collected during my fieldwork with the Pa ipai people. I need to add that his feedback was important to me because my mythological research of the Pa ipai people has a semiotic component. I was looking for advice on methodology. Professor Torop introduced me to the sources on the topic of semiotic methodology which are difficult to find in Mexico.



Is there something very specific about Mexican myths to distinguish them from what we have in Europe?

When we talk about Mexican myths, we talk about different kinds of myths – the ones of pre-Hispanic times and the ones after the conquest. In the latter case we have a combination of indigenous and Catholic beliefs. On the other hand, pre-Hispanic mythology was quite different from European myths because of the cosmovision and cultural background. It used lots of local elements. They talked about jaguars, ancient reptiles, crocodiles that lived namely in Mexico. Also Mexican mythology has some gods that do not exist in European cosmology. For example, Quetzalcoatl, which is a feathered snake and was related to the wind. Also Tláloc – the god of rain, which is depicted with goggle eyes and teeth and fangs. The idea of death and myths thereof were also different than the European perspective. In Aztec and Mayan cosmology, but also in other pre-Hispanic cultures, such as Mixtec, death was part of the daily life. The Maya and the Aztecs believed that it was needed to cross a river – the River Chignahuapan – with the help of a dog, to travel to the kingdom of the dead. In that kingdom lived Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the Dead. Today in rural Mexico, but also in the cities, myths about the dead are part of the daily life. People believe that on November 1 and 2 the souls of the dead return to

the earth. They elaborate complex “ofrendas” with a local flower named cem-paxochitl (Mexican marigold). Also they leave bread and tortillas for the dead.

Today many Mexicans live in the United States. Do you think that due to the growing migration Mexican myths can transfer to the USA and thereby become a part of American mythology?

This is probably happening already. I know that there are hundreds and thousands of indigenous people who have migrated from Mexico to the United States. The children of these people speak both English and their indigenous language, and I am sure that they have their own stories. These stories could be incorporated into North-American mythology and folklore. I can give a specific example: my mother is a follower of a Mexican religion named Espiritualismo Trinitario Mariano. It is a combination of Catholic, spiritual, and indigenous beliefs. Today, this religion has some temples in the United States. So, this is an example of how religious thoughts and mythology of one country can be incorporated into another.

The 21st century features abundant high technology, and thanks to technical and computer sciences we can measure objects and make accurate mathematical predictions of how something works. Why should we be interested in studying myths nowadays? It does not seem practical enough in terms of staying alive in our society.

Yes, I think that myths are important in contemporary societies. Let me tell you something. In Latin America we perceive myths differently, because they constitute a part of our daily life. At the same time myths are mixed with technology. It is imperative to understand life in other ways, to make sense of society. Myths could enrich our understanding of others and help us make our experience of the others more meaningful. In my opinion, if American people read more Latin-American myths, they would be more open to migration. It is the same in Europe. If Europeans read about the mythology of other cultures, namely African and Middle-Eastern cultures, they would probably be more open to migration and interaction with people from other cultures.

It seems to me that young people unconsciously explore myths – how else can we explain that there are so many fans who adore “Game of Thrones” or the Marvel comics heroes. What is your opinion? Are youngsters able to grasp myths by watching these movies?

Here we are dealing with a kind of social phenomenon that some philosophers have described in the past. Take, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, who makes

a distinction between identification and identity. Identification is a kind of trend here; it consists in a superficial link with an ideology or a way of life. Identity is something deeper, it is linked with personal and collective experiences, with social memory. What happens now when modern people watch these movies is a mark of identification, not identity. However, I guess that when young people try to search the roots and genesis of these movies and when they read the myths behind the scene, they can turn the identification process into identity.

The 14th international conference of comparative mythology is held in Mexico next year and you are one of the organizers. Could you tell me something about it?

Yes, the conference will be held in the second week of June in Mexico City. We have planned to have a conference both in Spanish and English, because most Mexican people do not speak English. That is why we need interpreters. The main topic of the conference is migration in myths and the mythology of death. Why this kind of choice? Migration is a crucial topic in politics and I hope that mythology could provide some relevant arguments to the ongoing debate. And death – well, it is one of the central elements in Mexican myths. It is a good opportunity to share our rich mythology with other researchers and to have a dialogue with them.

On the other hand, in our contemporary world inequality, war, poverty, and violence have provoked massive migrations from the third-world countries to Europe and the United States. Migration is not something new in human history and mythology can help us realize how different cultures have understood migration. For example, for a long time there was a belief in Aztec culture that their people were created in a place of seven caves, named Chicomoztoc. They started their migration from this mythical place to Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire. This migration took many generations to be completed.

Death is also a contemporary issue and it is, to a certain extent, related to some of the causes of migration: violence and war. In many third-world countries death, and especially violent death, is part of the daily life; sometimes this is why many families decide to move to other parts of the world. Also death, independently of our country of origin, is our final destiny as human beings. The modern way of life does not permit us to think too much about it. Mythology can help us understand and think about death in other ways. For example, among the Aztec and Scandinavian cultures the way you die determines the place to which you go after death. Nowadays people do not think about it, but to think about how we die makes us think of how we live.

I know that this is your first visit to Estonia. During these few days, have you learnt something about our mythology, or maybe even found something in common with Mexican mythology?

Recently Mare Kõiva mentioned that you (in Estonia) have myths about old trees. When listening to her lecture, I remembered that in Mexico we have also stories of trees. Aztecs believed that five enormous trees separate the earth from the sky. They believed that thousands of years ago the world was created from the body of a female crocodile named Cipactli. After hundreds of years of loneliness Cipactli felt sad and started crying, and her tears flooded the world. The gods decided to separate the world from the water again and they transformed the body of Cipactli into five trees. Four of them were located in each corner of the universe and one was located at the centre. That is the story about trees and the origin of the world.

I can also detect some similarities in astronomical knowledge, the origins of which lie in folk songs. You can find the same in our songs. There exist indigenous songs that talk about the stars and constellations.

What is more, I can see some parallel developments in folklore studies. When we were introduced to your recording techniques in the early 20th century, I realized that our students collected similar information about Mexican folk tales. They went to the countryside and recorded everything they heard from the villagers. The stories are mostly about farming. I think this is also common to our nations.

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