

NEWS IN BRIEF

THE THIRTEENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY: DISCUSSIONS AND THOUGHTS¹

The thirteenth annual international conference on comparative mythology, “Mythology of Metamorphoses: Comparative & Theoretical Perspectives”, was held in Tartu, Estonia, on 10–14 June 2019. It was organized by the Estonian Literary Museum, and supported by the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM), the Estonian Cultural Foundation, and the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies.

The conference hosted the largest number of participants within the whole history of such events of the IACM, that is, 48 papers (out of the 52 announced in the programme) were read by the scholars from 18 countries from all over the world.

The conference focused on: 1) metamorphoses and transitions in myth, including shapeshifting and transformation in ritual; thresholds, borders and boundaries in myths and worldviews, and 2) theoretical approaches to comparative mythology, i.e., theoretical and methodological approaches in the research, history of comparative mythology, digital mythology, and new mythologies.

It seems impossible to discuss all the interesting conference papers here, as only their abstracts consume about 55 pages (see: https://www.compmyth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IACM_Tartu_2019_program_abstracts.pdf). So I am forced to only mention the majority of the presentations – in order that the readers would just be aware of the themes discussed. In more detail, I would like to offer an insight into the most debatable issue raised in the presentation by Michael Witzel, the founder of the abovementioned association.

As usual, the work of the conference ran as one session, so everybody could listen to and take part in the discussion about each presentation – the fact which arouses a special feeling of community, belonging and collectivity in all conference participants. The papers were combined in sections on the thematic principle.

One of the important sections was held under the heading “Comparative and theoretical perspectives”. Here the following presentations were made. **Juri Berezkin** (St. Petersburg, Russia) in his talk “The folktale: Categories of motifs, patterns of the outspread of the motifs and history of Eurasia” came up with new maps based on the investigated material. The presenter showed that the cross-cultural transfer of the motifs creates an extremely complex picture of the distribution of thousands of motifs in hundreds of traditions. **Paolo Barbaro**

(Paris, France) spoke on the topic “The brain, the social group and history: Preliminary results of texts and statistics devised to discuss chances of pareidolia, converging evolution and randomness in asterisms and (mythological) narrative”, and presented his thoughts about the world mythology. **Marcin Lisiecki** (Toruń, Poland) tried to answer a philosophical question in his presentation under the heading “Does myth have to be old? Philosophical introduction to the theory of myth”, arguing that up until now we have no definite conception of what a myth is, how to study it, and whether it is important for contemporary culture. **Antti Tamm** (Tartu Observatory, Estonia) gave a special talk about cosmic mythology, presenting a brief overview of some of the heavenly misconceptions and their origin. **Dmitri Panchenko** (St. Petersburg, Russia) spoke about the relevance of celestial phenomena to classical mythology and also to contemporary mythological studies. **Kazuo Matsumura** (Tokyo, Japan) contemplated the three types of structure, represented by Propp, Chiasmus, and Lévi-Strauss, and stood out for the usage of the inverted (chiastic) structure technique in the studies of modern mythology researchers. **Arjan Sterken** (Groningen, Netherlands) in his paper “In-between Dēmētēr and Persephonē: Cognitive theory and the binary principle” aimed at examining the binary principle as it functions in structuralism and cognitive theory, using the example of the well-known Greek myth.

Michael Witzel’s (Cambridge, USA) paper “Is it racist to compare data?” was a reaction to the critique of his book, *The Origins of the World’s Mythologies* (2012) by the known (ex-)Indo-European mythologist-comparativist Bruce Lincoln (2013, 2018) and folklorist Tok Thompson (2013), who accused the author of racism. The book itself studies the myth and religion, focusing on the oldest available texts, narratives, supplemented by the archaeological, linguistic, and human population genetics. It received a number of favourable reviews.

The first critical reviews by Lincoln and Thompson were initially left unanswered by Witzel, as the accusations were taken as groundless. Neither of the critics accepted the method of historical comparison (similar to that used in linguistics) applied to mythology, demonstrated their negative and sarcastic attitude to some existent linguistic theories (“less-than-scientific-accepted hypotheses, such as a “Dené-Caucasian” language family linking Basque and Navajo, and “Nostratic”, as Thompson wrote in 2013), as well as the very possibility of comparing “big data”, etc. As Lincoln wrote, “in recent years, I have come to favour what I call ‘weak comparisons’, i.e., inquiries that are more modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth, ... with the result that one’s conclusions prove more probative, reliable, and surprising”. But this worthy methodology does not exclude another scale of the data comparison (big data comparison) by other scholars.

The intention of M. Witzel's paper was not only to defend the fair name of the book and its author (because some parts of mentioned reviews were tendentious, seeking to establish a connection of the author with Nazi-time mythologists, some were even calling him and his book racist, some were simply libellous) but to make everybody fall into a muse about: "is comparing data racist"; is it "allowed" to compare (and by whom); how can one study anything without making a comparison; and is it possible to use emic or etic approaches while studying myths that are many thousands of years old?

Nataliya Yanchevskaya (Princeton, USA) continued the theme raised in the previous paper in her presentation "Probing the boundaries of comparative mythology: On method and matter". Her paper was a response to that very book, *Apples and Oranges*, by Bruce Lincoln (2018), where he again criticised Witzel, and that seems to dismiss the whole discipline altogether by suggesting the impossibility of "grand comparisons". The speaker surveyed various critiques of the comparative method, explored when they applied to comparative mythology and when not, and discussed the theoretical background and new approaches to comparative mythology.

A heated **discussion**, involving participants such as B. Oguibenine, Y. Kleiner, E. Chalandon, J. Kozák, L. Millne, J. Vassilkov, and others, was held on the last two papers and in general on the methodology in comparative mythology. The main ideas expressed during the discussion were the following: it is useless to argue with those who already have a different opinion, it is impossible to change it; scholars engaged in comparative mythology have to stick to their own approach, excluding any politics, ideological clichés, but use a common methodology, a common metalanguage; it would be useful to publish a book on the theory of comparative mythology, its aims and methods; comparative mythology does not evaluate myths and their bearers as good or bad, but explores the development of myths, their completeness, directions of dispersion, etc.; everybody has to work and do their best in their scientific field for the common cause.

The second thematic section of the conference was held under the heading "Mythology of metamorphoses". **Keiko Tazawa** (Tokyo, Japan) in her paper "Transforming goddesses in ancient Egypt" presented the results of her study into the interrelation of metamorphoses of some Egyptian goddesses and 'motherhood' in the Egyptian myths. **Lucie Vinšová** (Brno, Czech Republic) skilfully presented her paper "Seeing through the eyes of others: Perceptual and language aspects of shapeshifting in shamanic ritual practices of the selected South American tribes", that is, the communities inhabiting the mountainous and west-Amazonian regions in Colombia and Peru – Paez, Kogi, Yaminahua, and Shipibo-Konib. **Attila Mátéffy** (Bonn, Germany) used interdisciplinary

approach, that is, theories and methods of comparative mythology, ritual analysis, embodied cognition, prototype theory and ontology to present an analysis into the “Transformation and passage in a North Eurasian mythological and ritual tradition: Animism, shamanism, embodiment, and indigenous ontology”.

In the absence of the author, the paper titled “The call of the shaman’s drum” by **Ondřej Pivoda** (Brno, Czech Republic) was presented by Václav Blažek.

Hitoshi Yamada (Sendai, Japan) discussed the human-canine interaction and transformation described in dog ancestor myths and focused on different worldviews found in the relevant narratives. **Štěpán Kuchlei** (Brno, Czech Republic) presented the paper “The dolphin and the dragon. Comparing Hindu and Buddhist aspects of a human/animal transformation: An example of metamorphosis in two Cambodian myths”. **Lyubov Liski** (Helsinki, Finland) spoke about Komi beliefs and practices concerning the regular monthly purification of the female body. **Marina Valentsova** (Moscow, Russia) overviewed in general and structuralized the possible metamorphoses and transformations presented in Slavic demonology. **Louise Milne** (Edinburgh, United Kingdom) spoke on the topic “Metamorphosis, myth, dreams & desire: The case of the waterwoman”. **Seán Martin** (Edinburgh, UK) went into ghostly



*Participants of the mythology conference at the Estonian Literary Museum.
Photograph by Alar Madisson 2019.*

transformations – supernatural shapeshifting in mediaeval English histories, suggesting methods of classification of these stories, and noting similarities between some of the mediaeval material and later literature works and folkloric sources.

The section under the heading “Mythology of metamorphoses in the modern art” contained two papers: one by **Joel Dietz** (Palo Alto, California, USA), who spoke about the burning man and meta-mythological language, and the other by **Sachie Kiyokawa** (Kobe, Japan) with the theme “To call upon the ancestors: The meaning of becoming part of myth in Black Panther”.

There were sections devoted to different geographical or ethnic areas of world mythologies.

In the section “Metamorphoses and transitions in the Indo-European mythology” **Signe Cohen** (Columbia, USA) presented the results of her study “Flesh to stone, stone to flesh: Lithic transformations in Indo-European myth”, dealing with Norse, Greek, and Celtic myths and Hindu texts. **Jan A. Kozák** (Prague, Czech Republic & Bergen, Norway) studied Norse mythology in his presentation “Body and cosmos: The logic of mythical transformations in old Norse religion”. **Joseph Harris** (Harvard, USA) & **Nataliya Yanchevskaya** (Princeton, USA) presented their paper “Sexual metamorphosis and ‘the binary’”, based on the Indo-European material, including Germanic and Scandinavian, Greek, Indic, and Slavic instances. **Yaroslav Vassilkov** (St. Petersburg, Russia) in his paper “Indian mythology of the cave in a comparative perspective” traced how the archaic myths connected with the cave, while developing in Vedic-Hindu tradition, were transformed into doctrinal and philosophical concepts. **Boris Oguibénine** (Strasbourg, France) in his presentation “Buddhist hell as sacrifice metamorphosed” examined and compared two mythographic accounts from a collection of Buddhist Sanskrit texts “Mahāvastu-Avadāna” (Mv.) and illustrated such doctrinal points as the fruit of actions.

Other interesting aspects of the Indo-European mythologies and in very attractive presentations were discussed in the papers of **Natālija Abrola** (Riga, Latvia) under the heading “Old Indian *aśvinī*, *Uṣas*, and Latvian *dieva dēli*: Potential parallels”; **Yuri Kleiner** (St. Petersburg, Russia) in “From the rage of gods to swearing (semantics of the old Germanic ‘inner world’)”; **Václav Blažek** (Brno, Czech Republic) in “Wolf or she-wolf as a foster in Indo-European mythological traditions and beyond”; and **Aldis Pūtelis** (Riga, Latvia) in “What if Grunau was right? An old-Prussian chronicle as a source for mythology research”.

In the section “Mythology of the Americas and East Asia” **Petra Vogler** (Ludwigsburg, Germany) spoke on the topic “Pwatakis and divination systems predominantly practised in the two major Cuban cults Santería (Regla de

Ochá) and Palo Monte (Las Reglas de Congo); **Martín Cuitzeo Domínguez Nuñez** (Mexico City, Mexico) spoke about the “Flour in the sky: A northwest Mexico pa’ipai myth about the origin of Milky Way”; **Michal Schwarz** (Brno, Czech Republic) discussed the topic “Reptiles, amphibians and their emotional polarity in East-Asian folktales”; **Yoko Naono** (Tokyo, Japan), examined the “Distribution and characteristics of the motif ‘the origin of people’s death’ in Japan”; **Koko Nango** (Kobe, Japan) spoke on the topic “San-Jin, hunter and Christianity: The overlapping image of the missionaries and imaginary people living in the mountain”; and **Jinghua Huang** (Kunming, China) discussed “Story and ritual: How to understand the Lahu’s creation myth in four villages?”

The section “Mythology of the Middle East” was represented by the paper of **Leila Abdi** (Shiraz, Iran), “The influence of vegetal and martyr gods on the construction of “Hussein”: A comparison of Tammuz and Syavash”, and that by **Vladimir Sazonov** (Tartu, Estonia), “The role of beer in Sumero-Akkadian and Hittite mythologies: Some comparative notes”.

Among the world mythologies a special section was devoted to Slavic and Finno-Ugric mythology. Here the paper by **Yulia A. Krasheninnikova** (Syktyvkar, Russia), “Mythological contexts in the ritual dialogues of the Russian wedding ceremony”, a co-authored paper by **Elena Boganeva** (Minsk, Belarus), **Mare Kõiva**, and **Andres Kuperjanov** (Tartu, Estonia), “Myths related to trees”, discussing Slavic (from Russian to South Slavic area) and Baltic-Finnic (from Finnish to Livonian area) traditions, and by **Reet Hiimäe** (Tartu, Estonia), “Mapping the trajectories of the plague spirit: A case study of handling collective fear” were listened to.

The section “Mythology of Mongolia and Africa” was made up of the papers by **Maria Magdolna Tatár** (Oslo, Norway), “A holy mountain in the desert Gobi, Mongolia: Hunting ground and holy place”, and by **John M. Saul** (Paris, France), “Eland and stork, and the origin of humanity’s oldest beliefs”, based on the mythology of the bushmen of southern Africa and the Hadza of northern Tanzania.

The section of transformation, mythology, and modernity consisted of the papers, conceiving the contemporary facts and events from the point of view of old mythological concepts and archetypes. **Anneli Mihkelev** (Tallinn, Estonia) examined the constantly topical biblical myths in contemporary culture; **Indrek Ojam** (Tartu, Estonia) discussed the topic “Using myth for the sake of literary realism: The case of Mati Unt”; **Alexandra Yatsyk** (Warsaw, Poland) addressed Polish identity-making as constructing a new national myth grounded in the martyrological narrative on the Polish suffering and messianism in her paper “Necropolitical mythmaking and nationalism: The case of Poland”; **Urmis Sutrop** (Tartu, Estonia) analysed the metamorphosis in Snow White fairy tales

(the less known tales with transformations of the heroine or other characters into a bird, a plant, ashes, a trickle of water, and back into a human). The presentation by **Siarhei Anoshka** (Warsaw, Poland), “Metamorphosis of the founding myth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (mormons): The prophet Joseph Smith and revelation”, reminded more of the promotional materials of the Mormon Church.

The proceedings finished with a general discussion. On the last day of the conference a guided bus tour to northern Estonia was organized.

The conferences organized under the aegis of the IACM are very useful and mind-expanding. Though most of the scholars study their specific traditions or themes, and naturally tend to know more about that limited sphere, the scholarly activities have immanent quality to persistently widen the horizons of the spheres of interest. Moreover, sometimes it occurs that accidentally, unexpectedly heard information could lead to new ideas, guesses, surmises, which would not emerge from the inside of the studied local theme. For example, when studying Slavic mythology, we know perfectly well a widely-spread belief about a stork that ‘brings children’ (the newborns) to the parents (it can also be a crow in Czech tradition, and some other birds). It was treated in the sense of getting souls by a stork from the *irey*, that is, ‘another’ world. Interesting parallels of these Slavic beliefs sounded in the paper of John M. Saul about the oldest beliefs of bushmen “on stars in the region of Scorpio, situated at the opposite ‘end’ of the Milky Way from the stars of Eland”, from where “souls might be carried up the Milky Way by cranes, herons or storks and then returned as newborns”. That could mean that the motif of ‘bringing souls’ on the Earth is very archaic. Many more things that we do not yet know (or sometimes did not know) could play a crucial role in our further investigations.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the organizing committee of the thirteenth IACM conference in Tartu for the wonderful organization, as well as all the participant scholars for their highly useful and interesting presentations.

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Notes

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