

## THE MYTHIC

*According to the Ethnological Work of Maurice Leenhardt*

We have learned by now not to see myth as simple entertainment or a babbling. Where the nineteenth-century eye could find only an out-of-date toy left behind by childish peoples or a cultural stage-set for leisured social circles, the human sciences have taught us to recognise an authentic expression of man: myth says with utmost seriousness something that is of essential importance. What is more, it is a way of living in the world, of orienting oneself in the midst of things, of seeking an answer in the quest for the self. We owe this alteration of perspective to a whole group of scholars: Cassirer, Van der Leeuw, Unger, Preuss; we owe it in a quite special way to Maurice Leenhardt and to the original work which his recent death left uncompleted.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the course of a long missionary career in New Caledonia, serving the Paris Society of Evangelical Missions (1902–26), Maurice Leenhardt became interested in the sciences of man, sociology and ethnology. Entrusted with a scientific mission by the National Ministry of Education, he made a research trip to Black Africa, followed, some years later, by a scientific inquiry in Oceania, at Nouméa (1947). Called to take Marcel Mauss' place at the *École des Hautes Études*, he was named to his chair in 1940. After a course in Oceanian languages was set up at the *École des Langues Orientales*, he was called to ensure its instruction (1945). Death (on January 26 last) prevented him from putting a final touch, as he was trying to do, to his scientific work, from making precise some points that seemed to him insufficiently clear and from dispelling some misunderstandings to which studies of this type lend themselves. Nevertheless his scholarly work as it stands is important and original. Scattered through several journals (*Revue philosophique*, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, *Revue d'Histoire et Philosophie religieuses*, *Anthropologie*, etc.) it is especially well-represented by some scientific publications of the Institute of Ethnology: *Notes d'Ethnologie néo-Calédonienne*, 1930, *Documents néo-calédoniens*, 1932, *Vocabulaire et Grammaire de la Langue de Houailou*, 1935, and by two works, which are more personal in nature, *Do Kamo* and *Arts d'Océanie*. This body of work, although uncompleted, to which must be added two important articles in *Histoire des Religions* (Quillet publishers), and *Histoire des Religions* (Bloud and Gay publishers, 1953), has contributed to the enrichment and renovation of a whole wide sector of the science of man. It is one of those works which sustain new pioneers and open horizons, because there was talent in Maurice Leenhardt for awakening interests and developing vocations.

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Like Lévy-Bruhl, to whom he often felt himself so close, Maurice Leenhardt had to make his way through pitfalls dug by the last century and its intellectual habits. When the subject of science is man himself, and when the scholar does not want to sacrifice any of his condition as a man, he must avoid the snares of language; and our language, which is so full of abstractions, begins by concealing what it is trying to show. Coming from another base than did Lévy-Bruhl, Maurice Leenhardt also had to engage in the same ceaseless struggle against language to save the experience of the 'primitive' from distorted transcription into our vocabulary of terms and notions. Man at the mythic stage sees a relation between stone and ancestor which we try to express by means of an identity: we say that for him the ancestor *is* the stone. But our verb 'to be', weakened by centuries of grammar and philosophy, absolutely lacks the living experience of the primitive who senses in the stone a mythic presence, a manifestation of the ancestor's own reality. Terms like identity, participation, consubstantiality are themselves only awkward approximations, dulled by conceptual extensions distorting the truth of the relationship. Myth, like music or poetry, requires us to be transported into the world where it has its being. It is there, for example, that the rock-ancestor identity, which is felt before it is conceived, allows its proper meaning to appear. Understanding of this order is not possible to a Western scholar unless, behind the Logos and its logical and spatial objections, something of the primitive *Mythos* survives in him. Maurice Leenhardt found this access to the mythical, not in books or theories, but in his daily experience as a missionary, hunting for a way to approach the men of Oceania and to communicate with them. That human sympathy, which enabled him to understand the primitive soul from within, gave his scientific work a very individual coloration, perhaps not so compatible with the conception of science cherished in the last century, but surely less foreign to the science of man which our own period seems to be trying to build.

In the opposite direction, Maurice Leenhardt had to protect his ethnological work against the cover-up words and the vague notions that lie in wait for the scholar off the beaten track of the natural sciences. He accordingly avoided, as much as possible, the term 'primitive', which forces on the mind an order of succession, accompanied by an order of evaluation, the 'primitive' usually being taken as anterior or inferior to the things we attribute to 'antique' or 'modern' man. The mentality imputed to the so-called primitives can be rediscovered in the heart of the Western mind;

inversely, the rational coexists with the mythic among less-developed peoples, to whom the term 'archaic' peoples is more appropriate.

Anxious to preserve the rights of clear language, Maurice Leenhardt rejected the overly-equivocal word 'mystic'. The Melanesian does not act under the influence of mysterious or determined forces. On the contrary, he has a clear view of the relations between the world and himself; he sees these relations through the myth as through a mirror. The fog or half-light of the mystic scarcely belong in a world where the mythic relation appears as an unveiling of the world, as a truth about being, revealing itself to man. The mythic is not a prelogical, as opposed to a logical, structure of the mind, but rather another reading of the world, a first coherence put upon things and an attitude that is complementary to logical behaviour.

### *I. Essence of the Mythic*

On the evidence of classical mythology and the plastic commentaries on it which we have had from modern painters in search of picturesque or 'poetic' subjects, we have for a long time believed that myths were nothing but stories about gods, descents into Hell, heroic fights. Here, it was thought, was a crop of imaginary tales invented by poets, bare of anything serious or true, which our Western logic ought to look down upon as mere amusement or child's play.

But the work of ethnologists and sociologists, together with studies in 'depth psychology', have obliged us for a half-century now to revise this excessively simplified notion. They show us that myths are a language affected with seriousness, often with warmth or tenderness, corresponding to a certain picture of the world, which is perfectly valid although it obeys wholly different mental requirements than does the conduct of reason and of history. Lévy-Bruhl, in his *Primitive Mythology*, recalled the interest we moderns still take in mythic accounts, which often come down to us in the form of fairy-tales and legends, although we may have ceased to 'believe' in them. He attributed this interest to the sense of relaxed ease we feel when we plunge into this fairy-tale atmosphere where the connexions and tensions of logical relationships fade from our awareness. But the attraction exercised over us in this way by the mythical does not reduce itself to a simple mental recreation: it has deeper, positive reasons. Under the legend and the fairy-tale, there is the mythic, and the mythic includes an experience, a reaction to reality. When the 'primitive' recognises an ancestor looking at him out of the shark's or the lizard's eye, he is certainly

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making a reference to reality, but he interprets it mythically; he expresses by this connexion, which for us lacks foundation, the impression he feels, his affective reaction to 'things'. The myth is neither 'true' nor 'false'; it is born, beyond our logic's horizon, in that 'pang' which comes upon man in the midst of things. In the myth and by means of the mythic image, there is an externalisation of the inner stirring, the emotion of man as he meets the world, his receptivity to impulses coming from 'outside', the communality of substance which welds him to the totality of beings.

If the mythic is the language of a man who feels himself thoroughly at one with the world, part of the world, form amid the forms of the universe, it is also the first rupture in his being, the first flight above, which makes the real unreal, and detaches man from his environment, and so a source of all poetry and all culture. It is not impermeable to logic, as we shall see below. But rationality is not a first-level concern for archaic thought: it occupies only a secondary place, the essential thing being to place oneself in the current of the whole world's life. As rationality assumes greater importance, the interpretation which man gives to the world may be seen to pass through three successive stages: a *mythic* stage, to which we shall confine ourselves here, an *epic* stage, and an *historic* stage. The *mythic* stage changes into the *epic* outlook when man bases his conduct and his universe on the repetition of the *model* man, on the cult of the hero: the hero being an archetype after whose qualities and gestures those of his successors are drawn, and in whom human destiny is discovered. Men, drawing back before the audacity of being themselves, have asked for a justification of their existence from the hero. Hercules, Theseus, or Hector are 'supermen', who lend authority, by their exemplary value, to the ordinary careers of simple mortals; they are the heirs of virtues and actions which transmit greatness to the daily round of commonplace life. A feeling of being strengthened with this superhuman power was necessary in order to face history . . . As Ernst Junger has commented, the epic, 'dedicated to the spirit of the tombs', made 'the introduction to history' out of this pilgrimage to the hero's graves. The historic as such does not fully emerge until men stop turning to this exemplary past, in order to dare to act for themselves, to set themselves human objectives and to adopt human means for their attainment; but above all, when their rational emancipation has set them to seeking a direction in the unfolding of events, in a word, to caring about having a History.

But even in our world, dominated by logical and historical concerns, with our explanations ruled by the principle of causality, we remain

sensitive to another colouring of the universe, to that actual and emotional tone which fascinates or disturbs us. The mythic even in myths would remain a closed book to us if it did not awaken some sleeping potentialities within us, an affective and imaginary predisposition always ready to react by way of myths to the world's approaches. It is well to remember once and for all that the mythic, which is closely bound up with the sphere of sentiment and of emotion, shares the universality of the emotional life which renounces reflection, and takes refuge in silence or changes under the impartial eye of the observer. There is in us that vibration of our whole being which shows itself in convictions or in beliefs, in 'verities' which we declare to be true. The romantics' myth of Nature, the myth of progress, the myth that the world is absurd—every period declares 'its' truth in this way and is warmly attached to it. Our 'truth' of the moment is often only a myth that does not know that it is one, and, as M. Jourdain put it, we make myths every day without knowing it. The myth, deep within ourselves, illumines every reality giving it direction and value. The myth is accordingly surely a universal, or fundamental, *phenomenon* which, while keeping profound motives, inexpressible emotions and feelings hidden within the secret of the individual, reveals through surface gestures, forms and words, something of that internality which, without ever growing old, lives on in man's heart century after century.

### 1. *The Mythic is not in the Past*

'Once upon a time', 'in the beginning', 'then' . . . ; the folk-tale takes us into the past with its first words. The myth leads back to a remote, primordial past: to events, heroes, and gods who pre-exist everything that is. The opposition between the sun and the moon derives, according to the Melanesians, from an act of unfaithfulness. Customs and rites derive from precedents that institute and justify them. The festivals which consummate group life only repeat certain sanctified rituals. It is for the present generation to actualise these precedents or archetypes in order to validate at the same moment their acts of the present time. Nothing ever begins, nothing is ever new on this horizon where the foundation of the established order also indicates, simultaneously, its origin.

An optical illusion is involved here, however, and it has been kept up in us by developed mythologies. The Melanesian myths go in quite another direction. There is nothing further removed from the historian's scrutinising of the past than the 'primitive's' attitude with respect to the

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mythic happening. The mythic past cannot be dated, it is a past 'before time' or, better, outside of time. 'Long ago', 'one day', 'in the beginning', 'and then', all this customary vocabulary of the mythic, visibly trifles with historic time. Primordial actions are lost 'in the night of time', what happened 'once' (nobody knows when) goes on in a floating and many-layered time without temporal location. Myths of causality or origin-myths nevertheless seem to invoke, like the ancient cosmologies, some fixed periods and moments. But we must be careful in handling these elaborated 'accounts' from a later stage, where an effort at narration and explanation, on the way toward history, is foreshadowed. Maurice Leenhardt asks us to see a degeneration of the mythic in them, a rationalisation, the awakening of a still poorly emancipated historic awareness. The mythic, stripped of its power, of its perennality, is found in them relegated to 'the beginning'.

The mythic is *present*. First, it is present in the sense that the narrator, in his account, is transported and transports the listener into the time of the happening, 'in the centre', 'down there', 'far away'. He draws the audience of the story away, but only to make them set themselves at the desired distance. The mythic actualises everything it touches: it makes the narrator an actor in his 'story', the listener a witness, the world a present without past or future. The account is made one with what it tells: it is the event itself that is being told, and, in being told, is realised. Even in the fairy-tale, the expression 'once upon a time' does not bring the past as such into the case; it evokes it, in the magical sense of the term, it calls it into being.

The mythic is even more deeply present because the original event, by repetition, is once again 'presently' produced. 'Original' means not so much 'earlier' as 'permanent'. Primordial reality lies close to present reality. Constitutive and fundamental as well as institutive and founding, it is always there, ready to be incarnated. Inversely, it does not exist by itself: to protect its power, it must be reproduced each time. The myth, in its images and narrations, transmits an experience of the perennality of life, the return of known situations and of affective states sanctified by precedents. The old Canakas, in order to reconstitute the 'Lizard myth', express themselves in the present: they point out the hill where the lizard lives, 'waiting until the affectionate faithfulness of his loved ones returns'. Myth-time is a discontinuous time, a repeated 'now', not a duration, but an actualisation which proceeds by leaps from one 'now' to another 'now'. Van der Leeuw chose to speak of the 'eternalising' tendency of the

myth. It is better to content oneself, like Maurice Leenhardt, with the *perennial* character of mythic time. What we have here, in fact, is a time which has the continuity of life, and not in any sense a time which, lacking as it does any experience of death and any feeling of nothingness, could fit in with our ideas of finitude and of eternity. It is a present which sounds the affective depths of being, ignorant of the abstractions and negatives of our temporality; which awakens warmth, fear, or exaltation, and makes all nature sing in images and symbols derived from all the senses. By way of the myth, man identifies himself and his habitat with the totem, feels himself a contemporary of the totemic life and responsible for the carrying-on of existence. That is why the error *par excellence*, the major unfaithfulness, is sterility, which ruptures the chain of actualisations; or a breaking of the taboos which safeguard the correct transmission of life.

In this undifferentiated time, man may find himself in several times at once. The rock he sees *is—now*—the ancestor he sees no more; it is his ‘apparition’, the visible form at once hiding and revealing the invisible. The same act of awareness envelops the rock which, in its present form, remembers its old state, and the ancestor who, present in the rock, is always watching over the living. Mythic time is made up of these simultaneities, as the New Guinea myth of the man-bird shows: this man, who takes off his fungus-ridden skin to put on wings and become a bird, then slips once more into his diseased skin, moves on the affective and imaginative plane where the simultaneity of two ‘moments’ is translated into a rapid succession of images. By virtue of this mythic time, man feels united to all generations, to all the living: he feels himself in his grandparent as well as in his grandson, in the totemic lizard gliding across his path as well as in the ancestral tree where the past meditates on the present. Deprived of ontological ground, not knowing just ‘where’ his I is, the mythic man cannot distinguish what was from what will be and from what goes to make up the present. His temporality falls like petals into states, into ‘nows’ into which he is transported, unaware of contradictions.

The ritual must be faithful, the narration without omissions, in order that the mythic model may become a presence and a power in the person of the officiating leader or narrator. The myth is not a single story but always a *typical* story: it has an exemplary value, which, however, is concrete and alive. The totem resides in the maternal uncle, waiting for the nephew to receive its lodgment. It is present in the New Caledonian gecko lizard which assumes the colour of the twig; ‘without any movement other

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than that of his open eyes, he seems to be the living being that has one body with the forest and indicates life in the inert mass of the world'. He inhabits space and sets it in place. He is time as the power of life, as the presence which gathers all the dispersed presences in the world together. He whom the myth proclaims to be the master of the crops and of genetic life is also a revelation that lights up the world, unconscious poetry mixed with every substance and lodged in every form.

### 2. *The Mythic is not to be confused with the Narrative*

Greek, Celtic, and German mythologies are collections of accounts. Besides the *Epic* or epic account and the *Logos* or logical discourse, the myth appears as a special kind of expression. It found its form in the 'fable', an account which was without chronological localisation and was of an exemplary character. Whether it be a story of the gods or a fable, the myth necessarily seems to imply a narration, written or oral.

But among archaic peoples, the myth projects far beyond the domain of narrative and even that of language. This is true, first, because 'word' in this case goes beyond oral formulations, but also because this 'word', even enlarged to the meaning in which these peoples understand it, does not come close to covering the whole extent of the mythic.

Among the Melanesians, the decision which the father reserves to himself before a marriage request is 'word'; likewise, the avenging action which enables a man to punish an outrage inflicted on his brother by a third person; likewise, the magical operation, and likewise, thought. 'Word' is what has force, what has the solidity of a rock, what manifests being and establishes its lasting existence: tradition is the 'lasting word', the Fame that comes down from gods and ancestors, the custom that cements society. More particularly important is the 'long-drawn-out word', otherwise the mythic account which is equivalent to the 'total life of the clan caught across the ages'. The chief's prestige is not attached to emblems or special honours, but to the fact that he is the guardian of this fundamental word: it is for him 'to recall . . . all the clan's traditions, alliances, and great hours, all the engagements, all its honour'. The chief is the word of the clan. And the word is the man: as in feudal society, it involves the whole person. The word is not a discourse, it is a force: from it issues the power to think, to act, to construct. Through it, man faces the world, exists, and knows.

Word is also what brings the world's answer back to him, what the mountain, the forest, the moon's reflection, the moving script of the sea



and the rustling of the leaves have to tell him. Even in our modern universe, as Jean Vogué comments, we still can feel 'the dramatic character of purple sunsets, and the serenity of the blue sky', and the poet, according to Martin Buber, still knows afresh, in the presence of the moon, 'the emotional image of the lunar fluid that flows through the body'. Here is a survival in us, as we stand before the world, of that primitive mythic where things still have the initiative, where animals and plants 'talk', where from everywhere the world's voices are heard, those calls that resound in man: diffuse presences from which come signals, orders, refusals. The mythic is that word which, from everywhere, calls men together and breaks up the darkness. It is neither allegory nor fiction, but forms and sounds, patterns and sayings which are also calls, apparitions, meanings: in short, a word.

This eternal dialogue between man and the world gives the myth as word an extreme importance and at the same time an extension which far exceeds the limits of its formulation. New Caledonian plastic art expressed this essential role in a striking way through the symbol of the protruded tongue. Whatever is most fleeting and vain in us, scattered in gossip and in official speeches, is there condensed into creative power. The Canaka carver chisels, on the door frame and on the ridge-pole of the huts, those faces of ancestors sticking out their tongues, which we might mistake for disrespectful masks. The tongue, which 'carries to the outside the traditional virtues, the manly decisions, and all the manifestations of life which the word bears in itself', becomes the symbol of wisdom, vigour, and plenitude. The word which no longer has this power is the formal word—we would say, the *logos*—in which there is a foreshadowing of abstract thought; and this, for the Oceanian, means an empty and powerless formula: for it comes out of the lips, not the deep feelings within.

The mythic, woven into this living and powerful word, clings to man. But its power is softened into an account which lacks warmth and weight, ready for mythology and literature: a decoration which the spirit has abandoned. The authentic myth keeps its vital pith in a world very different from our own, a world that has no equivalent for our verb 'to die', where our conception of life is too abstract to be grasped, but where everything that is important or affirmative, all that *is*, is alive, where there are no things, only beings participating in the same life-current—men, animals, plants or stones. The tree of life planted in the hole where the placenta is buried will live as long as the man does, and at his death, will wither. Inversely, man is hardly more than a momentary form of vegetable

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life. It is through this other, through this co-existence with the tree, through the yam, image of his life, in a word, through the lived and projected myth, that man grasps his existence and knows himself. He sees himself only in the reflection of his being that the world gives back to him; and his life which, by itself, is not justified, finds validity only in the myth, which ties it to universal life, to all the living. It is the secret word, inscribed in sexuality, pronounced over man by ancestors and gods, *fatum*, the Latins called it: 'what has been said' about him, and what involves his existence, his destiny. But it is a word that can remain unspoken, bound to the name that is never uttered, or it can simply be read in the silent work of the carver.

The myth traces and avows the existential bond of man with his environment, with his habitat, with his clan, and the principle of his conduct. Instead of seeking, as we do, for a logical and objective relation with the world, in order to know it, break it up and master it, the 'Primitive' trusts his myths, lets himself be guided by them and sees himself by way of them. It is useless, if we want to understand his reactions and his thought, to reconstruct his myths 'scientifically' or to tell them over again in romantic attitudinising. It is better to follow the poet in his 'fantasy', then, or to listen to the musician, ask of the painter, let oneself be inspired, as they are, by those 'worlds' in their freshness and brightness. It is better above all to lend an ear to this mythic, underlying our own reason and our knowing, which the work of Jung and his school have brought to light as one of the great realities of our mental life.

The mythic is the common source of morality and of religion, of nature and of society, of the aesthetic and of exchange. It connects the individual to his clan and invests him with his social role, with his dramatic part. Yam or fish, man finds his place in the world, his ontological status, through the myth. From it comes the very strong sense of dependence which he feels with regard to the life he has received as a heritage, and of responsibility towards it. The myth controls the exchange of women by marriage among clans, in such a way as to guarantee 'the conveyance of the totemic life'. In this mythic view of things, the central place quite naturally goes to the life-myth *par excellence*, the totemic myth. The totemic lizard fertilises the crops. The path he is to follow in descending the mountain is carefully cleared. He is surrounded with respect. It is a grave error to mention him lightly; to call someone by the name of his totem is to take a liberty that hits him in his most intimate being. The totem presides over sexuality and fertility. He follows the maternal line and gives it its priority; it is he

whom the young girl, when she marries, brings to her new clan: a holy deposit which nephews take on from their maternal uncles and over which respect for taboos, religious fervour, exercise their care.

And now we are far from the myth-account, from the 'stories of the gods', from that colour-drained, peripheral mythic which some take to be nothing but a superstructure of society or simple-heartedness. It is in totemism, mythic time and space, the ancestral scenery, the feast where the clan is exalted, that, outside himself, the 'primitive' abides, there that he lives, from there that he will set out to discover himself when the decline of the mythic world liberates the individual. Beyond this horizon, he loses his footing in a foreign world, a world of lonely mountains, of wild expanses where the gusts of anger blow, oceanic immensities out of which the white men come ashore, those phantoms who no longer have human faces. Where the myth has nothing more to tell him, there is nothing any more, except chaos, malediction and hostility.

### 3. *The Mythic and the Aesthetic*

Long before it took literary form or became the 'story of the gods', the heroic adventure, and the descent into Hell, the myth found its plastic expression. The Oceanian world offers a remarkable and doubtless unique example of societies where art, far from representing a secondary activity or a trimming for life, is at the very centre of existence. The aesthetic there is not, as with us, a limited sector of activity, a luxury that is marginal to essential concerns. It is itself the aspect under which the world presents itself to man, its human face, the form given to the myth. The world, where it is first encountered by way of sensations, emotions, feelings, beliefs, manifests itself as the life of forms, in an aesthetic participation. The carved prow of a boat, some ear-rings, a diadem, everything man seems to add to the world, translate into form that wholly mythic representation and that aesthetic manner of living which dominate Oceanian society.

The aesthetic is an assent to the world: a deep accord with the natural and social environment, with the seasonal rhythm, with the aspects and changes of things; a confiding abandon to the proposals of what is felt, to everything that 'affects' and moves men, whether individually or collectively. This aesthetic attitude with respect to the world inclines man to put into his gestures and his speech, into his whole being, that form or that liking for the flourish and for elegance which often takes on the validity of custom or even of morals. It has sometimes seemed astonishing to find among these men a harmoniousness, a nobility of attitude, a 'style

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of life' which is very far removed from the reputation for being savages which has quite thoughtlessly been given them. This aesthetic concern is shown not only in the colours, feathers, and painted designs with which the Oceanian loves to get himself up; not only in the decoration of huts, or in the arrangement of tiers and dances at the great feasts; but also in the actions of daily life and in personal behaviour. The meal where the yam, the ancestor's flesh, is consumed, takes place in silence, as becomes the celebration of a communion. The Dyaks of Borneo and the New Caledonians have been accused of crudity and grossness because the Dyak woman always walks several steps behind her husband, or because the Oceanian woman must cross four steps behind her husband if he is accompanied by other men. But to say this is to show ignorance of the fact that custom requires the Dyak to preserve his wife from snakes, scorpions and other dangers on the path, and also to forget the Oceanian woman's tact and subtlety, 'her art in intruding, bowing, standing up again, without bringing the least disturbance into the men's conversation while on the contrary having secretly charmed them'.

But the aesthetic, the expression of myth, is also a protection which makes man secure against the pressure of his environment. In the disorder and confusion of the primitive world, it is a first order put upon things. The Oceanians 'grasp the form of things before analysing things, and they have a sufficient acquaintance with them in this way . . . Their thought is already ordered according to the aesthetic mode, long before it achieves ordering according to the logical mode.' It is perhaps not pointless to recall here that the Greek word *kosmos* and the Latin *mundus* have this aesthetic value, conjointly with their sense of 'order', of 'universe'. The first order attributed to the world was an aesthetic coherence, that arrangement which man first looked for in the aspect of things. The aesthetic slipped the screen of forms between man and things; it was a veil thrown over what was hidden in the depths and over the original chaos of which all causal myths make so much, before the *founding* and the *forming* set and ordered all things. In the shelter of this protective arranging, the 'primitive' organised his life and his society, limited but always secured by sounds, colours, and forms, by all that 'graining' which unceasingly confirmed to him the presences and the certainties by which he lived.

The world blossoms into living forms. Man himself is one of these. He is a being in a performance, he is a role, a kind of crowd-actor, on the world's scene. His gestures and his words obey tradition, express the myth, 'represent' ancestors and gods. Any personal whimsy, by breaking the

established aesthetic, would be gravely incorrect, involving outrage on the ancestors' honour and on the bases of society. Not ornamental or arbitrary in any way, these forms are an expression, a mythic language: the bodily array, the beautiful Maori or Guinea canoes, the tall statues on Easter Island, belong to that lexicon of forms through which the Oceanians deciphered the world's meaning. Nature, with a very sure sense of taste, is called in to join the artist in the joy of aesthetic creation: the sun gives their shine to mother-of-pearl and jade; the wind makes the feathers shake and spreads their vivid colours on the breeze; the ocean furnishes foam for the slender canoes and their chiselled prows. Working from instinct and with startling sensitivity, man brought the complicity of light and the hours into his play-acting, in order to enter into communion with the world. Songs and dances, head-dresses and ear-rings, among these people who had neither literature nor philosophy, make up the figurative vocabulary which for them took the place of ideas and of wisdom.

This symbolic activity where the symbol participates in what it represents, and joins the invisible to the visible, will develop, with the progress of logic, towards a more conscious symbolism. We can decipher without difficulty that language in which white is the colour of death, red of life, where the bird suggests the fluidity of the mythic to the imagination. When the myth has lost its force, the symbol will dry away into allegory or formalism. Allegory invaded classical mythology. Mythic images, reduced to their formal value, became themes and sayings for secularised speculation.

## II. Regression of the Mythic

### 1. 'Birth' of the Gods

Maurice Leenhardt, in Chapter XII of *Do Kamo*, traced the process of decomposition of the myth. Nothing is more instructive as a means for understanding the specific traits of the archaic mentality compared to the mentality of advanced peoples. The myth begins to decline when the distance widens between man and the world, when things begin to separate from one another and to be situated at distinct levels.

Mythic perspective is disturbed when art, for example, evolves the third dimension. For the vision of the world which corresponds to the mythic stage spreads everything out in two dimensions. 'The myth', Maurice Leenhardt writes in *Arts de l'Océanie*, 'has no depth; it does its whole unfolding on one level.' We observe the Guinea sculptor chiselling the prow of the canoe as a crocodile with bird's feathers and a human

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countenance. Then a being appears in whom his mythic vision finds an intelligible expression. In this way is shown 'a first discovery and taking possession of space', a sort of bodying-forth and individualisation of the object. At the same stroke the depth of space and the temporality of time are found presented. Rationality insinuates itself into the mythic mentality.

Man finds himself cut off from his environment little by little and acquires awareness of his own person. He begins to allot himself a residence in space, to measure the duration of his life, to take possession of his body. It would be impossible, certainly, to try to date these changes or to fix their causes. One can only note some steps in this penetration of the *logos* into the 'primitive' mental universe.

The myths of developed peoples have made us think that 'stories of the gods' or the deeds of heroes were indissolubly bound to myths. But that imagery which comes to us from Hesiod and Ovid only brings dead myths into the picture and can only furnish doubtful evidence. Work like that of Maurice Leenhardt does us the service of freeing us from that kind of premature conclusion. The idea of a god is not primitive; it requires an idea of the person to be evolved beforehand, and we must await a rather advanced degree of rationalisation for the person to emerge from the confusion in which it is at first submerged. The gods are only heirs: their 'stories' were shaped starting from mythic expressions formed around totems and other beings in whom the power of life declared itself. A certain hardening around the idea of power, a labour of intellection and of explanation precedes the hatching out of the divine into individual gods.

Long before the gods are clothed in a personality, it is around the life-cults, the passionate agitations, gifts and offerings into which affectivity has cast the deep intimacy of man with the world, that the myths, attuned in an aesthetic way, were formed, to regulate, in their turn, social discipline and the conduct of life. The myth pre-exists the gods, and it is in this totemic sphere that the root of mythic creation must be sought. According to Maurice Leenhardt's decisive observation, the legends of the gods and the totemic myths are often intermingled without being confused: the behaviour of archaic man proves that he always distinguishes what depends on the totem from what depends on the gods. He displays an uneasy, respectful interest with respect to totemic reality. He venerates the maternal ancestors, 'bearers of the power of life'. He strongly feels his dependence and his debt toward that life which emanates from the totem, and which the taboos envelop with sacredness. The totemic element has a strong affective tinge: piety, faithfulness, affection come from that

direction; man feels himself bound to it by a relation of communion, and the offering to the totem must be presented with pure hands. Condition for life's perpetuation, the totemic cult confers an extreme importance on woman and on the feminine element, which is surrounded by the extraordinary prestige granted to the sacred principle of life. From this come the heavy responsibilities that fall on the husband, for example, in a case where the wife dies on the point of becoming a mother, even if this death, from our point of view, is only due to natural causes. An ethical value attaches to everything that is totemic; a sort of social and moral aesthetic arises from this mythic of life, and gives those who, like the people of Dobu and of the 'Grande Terre', have kept the religious patrimony intact, an astonishing poise, a seriousness combined with ease; on the other hand, among the Trobrianders, mythic regression has brought with it the erosion of social discipline, and libertinism.

The gods took birth in a different mental region. There was once a state of things in which the god, the dead man, the aged, and even the man without rivals, remained undifferentiated. In the Houailou language, the same word *bao* designated them without distinction. Death is a passage to a new mode of existence. The same respectful idea enfolds the old man and the ancestor, the deceased and the soil to which his 'virtues' are communicated. The earth where the ancestors are dissolved, the trees in which they survive, the winds that carry their voices, the rocks where they are watching, everything that commands strength and dignity, constitutes the divine, that divine which is scattered through the world, that invisible within the visible.

Much later the corpse will be separated from the habitat, set apart as corpse and singularised. Apart from the habitat, there will be a grave and a cemetery. The dead one will cease to be a *bao*-god in order to become a *bao*-corpse. He grows in dignity, they honour him as deceased. The world is cut up into levels of differing value, into stages. The supraterrrestrial is freed from the limitations of the earthly world, at the very moment when space and time are delimited into isolated places and instants. The notion of power is emancipated from fervour and from life. The cult of deified ancestors takes precedence over the totemic taboos and observations, the masculine line over the maternal strain. The rationalisation which fixes this long maturation removes the ancestral female from the myth of life, to set her up as the goddess of fertility. The male ancestor, exalted through hero and chief, grows in power, and becomes a god. A function is assigned to him in some region of the cosmos: he is the force of the solar rays the

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sun-god, the power of lightning, the thunder-god, the majesty of the sea, the ocean-god. Deluded in his will to power, by the desire to prolong himself and make himself big, the chief has sumptuous tombs and pyramids constructed for himself, and will mark his superiority by the quantity and cost of his offerings, by counting up the sacrifices, the bloody hecatombs which flatter his pride and assure him a vantage point with an eye to life beyond the earth. He will seek, while living, to elevate himself to divinity, to get the gods and the world into his power.

The gods will cash, little by little, the content of reality and of glory which the myths carried in themselves. They will betoken that 'other' reality, that supernatural essence, broken free of the common and day-to-day reality of simple mortals. They will be of another world, and reflective thought, 'theology', will take them in hand to define their place of being and their role. But, on the social level, grave consequences emanate from this transformation—first of all, a rupture of the equilibrium between, on the one hand, the myth oriented toward the veneration and safeguarding of life, and, on the other hand, the idea of power which exalts strength, quantity, mastery; between fervour and majesty; between the maternal-feminine and the political masculine element. The religious history of humanity is, in large part, the struggle between these two spirits and these two lineages, an antagonism intermingled with exchanges and compromises.

The drawing-back of the mythic before rationality is often accompanied by a degradation of which man himself pays the price. The ground lost by the myth is not always won by reason and freedom. All too often, magic and its formalism invade it. When the iron is defective, the African smith blames the sorcery of a woman who passed while it was being cast. This magical pre-judgment disobligees him from seeking the natural cause, a mistake in its preparation, and robs him of the desire to make corrections, a first condition of any progress. Magical rigidity brings with it stagnation or regression, and such peoples as are called primitive because their behaviour has congealed into magical mechanisms, would be better classed among the retarded, if not the degenerated. The offering falls into formalism, the sacrifice into the bloody massacres where the gods are constrained by the very quantity of the victims. Where, without the mythic horizon, men 'fervently believed . . . that the order of the world depended on the norms of their conduct', all was stiffened into a blind *fatum*, into a destiny pronounced for all eternity, in which people rested, to rid themselves of all risk and all initiative.



## 2. *Mythic and Logic*

The mythic does not exclude the rational, it does not precede it in time, it does not entirely disappear before its advance. It co-exists with it, and is complementary to it. The Melanesian, without abandoning any of the *no*, of the 'word' which proceeds by affective ways and derives from the myth, recognises another realm open to a certain rationality: it is that of the *sa*, of fabrication, of *technique*, where calculation and measurement enter. A logic presides, for example, over the sewing of fibre skirts, in which recourse is had to a wooden measuring stick in order to obtain fibres of equal length. This bit of stick is the object around which the idea of measure and of adjustment is formed. One might be tempted to couple this important piece of evidence with Rudolph Kassner's remark about the Greek world, where the revolution of the mind was accomplished, as he sees it, around the idea of measure, the core of all rational thought. It is a rather abbreviated logic among the Canakas, who still lack the logical materials and the considered experience which would be needed to elevate them, like the Greek world, to the idea of law and of cause; but logic it is all the same, which will gain in firmness as the native is developed. It is thus by the *intelligence of the hands* that the ascent by way of abstraction begins which will lift man to the very summits of conceptual activity.

But this is a groping progression, which a formal shell threatens to enclose at every moment. As long as the technician feels himself inspired by the original word, by revelation, he keeps the dignity and freshness of his work. But when technique is no longer understood as a gift from ancestors and gods, zeal and talent are muddled and the work degenerates. An attempt is still made to keep the form of the act and the phrase that had efficacy. But what remains is nothing but incantations and magic formulas, a technique without soul or an empty vocabulary, and nothing survives of the force that kept social organisation in balance, of the heart that used to be put into cultivating one's country. The feeling of essential intimacy is lost.

In societies where, with the advent of the Logos, nature has come out of her darkness, the myth has been driven back into the shadows. It has become suspect or it has gone underground. But even so it has not disappeared. It subsists, it subsists in the depths and continues to enliven many of the forms of our culture or to externalise many a movement of the soul. It inspires poet, novelist, and orator. It is at the bottom of certain collective sentiments which to us seem as 'natural', as 'demonstrated' as possible: national feeling, class consciousness, the republican ideal, etc. . . .

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It sometimes assumes the face of science and the diction of reason: it is called the idea of progress, theory of evolution, or materialism. It explains the impassioned tonality which make certain 'verities' vibrate inside us, which ought to remain serene and indifferent to contradiction. The myth is what we can never 'see' in ourselves, the secret spring of our vision of the world, of our devotion, of our dearest notions. Whoever calls men to deeds of sacrifice, addresses himself, beyond all that is demonstrable and reasoned, to psychic dispositions and inner movements which can involve the individual and are of the same essence as those that take mythic form among archaic peoples.

Along the line where Lévy-Bruhl had advanced, Maurice Leenhardt completed his thinking and, on some points, went beyond him, with the freedom that direct observation could give him. Method is inseparable here from the objectives it was able to attain. Daily contact with men is the best introduction to the study of the human sciences. In any case, it is this concrete experience and this truly human comprehension that renovate our manner of understanding man in archaic civilisations and, indirectly, by comparison, permit us better to grasp certain traits of the most advanced human societies. A whole part of the human inheritance, a whole structure, as yet not well elucidated, of human reality, is thus placed within our reach; and lastly, we see more clearly into ourselves. Primitive societies are more than a geographical curiosity or a contrast to set off our own high state of culture. What we discover in them is that there may be something of the primitive and the original in the man who has always existed and who we, too, are. In breaking pathways towards this primitivity and these original things, Maurice Leenhardt wrote his name into the line of contemporary thinking, which taken together, appears as a return to the sources. Some, going back beyond the earliest philosophic speculations, ask Greek tragedy or the epic to return to us those human problems, those anxieties, those audacities, that torment of the human being as he faces the things that philosophy has rather fled from than answered. Others dig into philosophy to its very foundations, in order to find solid ground, a last basis, the root of essential questions. Tired of going along from cause to cause without ever finding the end of the chain, never surfeited by explanations which level things rather than throw light upon them, our century is turning by preference towards what is source and foundation, towards what never grows old and cannot be surmounted; and the mythic to which Maurice Leenhardt consecrated much of his research and his writing, is dominated by precisely this concern about the

*archeus*, on which everything already stands and rests, where causes are found in advance in the *raison d'être* of things. The images of fairy-tales, of fantastic narratives, of mythological figures may well seem to us to bear the marks of simplicity. But under their sometimes childish form they translate an interrogation which belongs to all the centuries, since it is man who raises these questions, man in his totality as a being at once organic, psychic, and spiritual, and he raises them in the very fact that he exists and that his life casts him into the midst of the world. At least, the mythic mentality, as Maurice Leenhardt unveiled it to us, corresponds to an attitude which is open, with respect to the world: for Oceanian man, as for ancient man, it is the universe itself that speaks of the beginnings and declares its permanence in the ephemeral, just as does the dawn of each new day, in the shrill dialogue between the real and the unreal.