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Appreciating Melanesian Myths

Introduction

Most Melanesian tribal societies have a rich body of folklore, preserved and passed on from generation to generation by means of oral communication. Within each society's body of folklore are certain tales which may be classified as myths. These are tales which, even if told in an entertaining way, have a particular importance for the society. They convey the most fundamental understanding of the society's identity and an understanding also of how human beings are related to one another, to the world in which they live, and to the supernatural beings and forces considered essential to life and well-being. Because of this, the tales have a quality of "sacredness" about them, even when they do not actually include "divine" beings and are not associated with religious rituals.

In most traditional Melanesian cultures, the oral recital of myths is, or has been until recently, of consciously recognized importance in cultural life. There are, as well, a number of recorded cases in which traditional myths have become the vehicles for dealing with change. They have provided the framework for interpreting experiences of cultural contact and historical developments. Often the myths themselves have been changed in the process. Today, in many Melanesian societies, traditional myths are no longer passed on; they are becoming lost to the memory of even the older generation. But the ways of perceiving, thinking and feeling about life, embodied in these myths, continue to influence people's response to the forces and circumstances of their changing historical context.

In attempting to write about Melanesian myths, I am conscious, as an "outsider", of the biases against myth in my own cultural background. In the history of western thought, there has been a long tradition of emphasizing the superiority of "rational" over "mythical" ways of expression. Myth has often been discredited as a phenomenon of a "childish" stage of the human race. Or myth has been thought of as mere imaginative nonsense, a

false view of things. This is the way in which it is used most often in popular jargon.

In recent times there has been a renewed interest in myth as a human phenomenon. Myth-making occurs even in modern societies where it is not recognized as such. A scientific view of the world can itself be seen as a kind of "myth". Myth-making seems to be an expression of the human need to create a pattern out of the diverse, ambiguous and fleeting experiences of life, or of a desire to reach out beyond the limitations of our ordinary mundane existence. Understanding their myths, therefore, is one way of coming to an appreciation of a people's distinctive interpretation and world view response to life. For outsiders, such an understanding can open up human possibilities (including religious experience) other than those to which they have been culturally conditioned. By crossing over to another people's world through the medium of their myths, we can perhaps return with new insights to our own.

In this paper, I shall offer a brief analysis of some representative Melanesian myths drawn from a variety of cultural groups. In so doing, I will indicate some approaches that are useful for gaining insight into the significance and functions of these myths. Such analysis indicates that myths can be very complex cultural phenomena, and that, only by approaching them in a variety of ways, can one come to appreciate their significance.

The Nature and Functions of Myth

It is not easy to give a single, simple definition of myth, since in reality it takes on a variety of forms and qualities. Some things, however, can be said about myth in general:

A myth is a traditional story (more often a set of stories), considered by the people of a particular community to reveal the inner meaning of the universe as they perceive it and of human life as they live it. By means of the myth's symbols (e.g. characters, objects, actions) and the way these are related in the story, myth expresses central ideas and values which guide the community's life. It shows life as it *really* is. Because of these qualities, myth is in some way sacred, even though it may not be concerned with divine beings. Its main characters, however, be they humans or other creatures, usually have some supernatural qualities. Hence myth (as distinct from folktale or fable) has a deep seriousness about it, even though it may contain elements of humour or may seem merely strange or trite to an "outsider".

The events of the myth are usually presented as taking place in a time (and sometimes a location) "outside" ordinary human time and the human condition, as the community perceives and experiences it.

One way of coming to an understanding of myths, is in terms of their social and cultural functions. A clear and simple listing of the kinds of functions performed by myths is given by G. S. Kirk.[1] He arranges the functions of myths into four categories; narrative and entertaining; creative, world-establishing, validating: speculative, problem-solving and explanatory; and eschatological. Some myths may fulfil several or all of these functions at once. Kirk's categories can provide us with a good basis for looking at Melanesian mythology. The first category has to do with the fact that myths have a story form. As such, they function to "get the hearers in", to involve them in the realities which myths communicate. This is especially important in cultures which rely upon memory and oral traditions for communicating knowledge and values. The 'story' function will be seen clearly in the Melanesian myths presented here.

Myths and the Order of the "World"

The second category of functions is important for many Melanesian myths. These myths, as it were, "create" the world. They provide a view of what the world is *really* like and how one should behave while in it. They project a model for understanding its basic dimensions, its structures and qualities, and the relationships between the different elements of a people's experience.

Usually, this is presented in terms of the originating activities of certain mythical characters in a time before human time. Not many Melanesian societies have myths specifically about the origin of the world. Most, however, have stories about the origin of their "world", of their people, and of important characteristics of their natural environment and the socio-cultural aspects of their way of life, including animals, plants, geographical features, food habits, artifacts, marriage customs, religious rituals and relationships with other groups.

Here is one Tolai myth of origin which is representative of many Melanesian myths. It is one of a series of Tolai myths about the activities of two brothers, To Kabinana and To Purgo (sometimes named differently). These myths, describe how the brothers formed various aspects of the environment and of human and cultural life.[2]

> The old woman who had given birth to To Kabinana and To Purgo died. She shed her old skin and came to life again. When she asked To Purgo to light the fire so she could warm herself, he refused to obey her. He wet on it and put it out. Because of this the old woman died completely and we today die completely. If To Purgo had not wet on the fire and put it out, people would have been as plentiful as the pebbles on the beach.
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> Later To Kabinana said to To Purgo, "Let us go to different places". They separated and To Kabinana came here to Reimber, Malakuna, and places like that. To Purgo went to Viviran, Tamanairik

and into the gardening lands ... When they met again at Vunadidir, To Kabinana asked To Purgo where he had been. "Oh, I went to many places and I taught all the people their languages ... When I went to Vairiki I hung a water-bottle around my neck and now those people all have goitre in their necks and they speak in a different voice. When I went to Kerevat I made a hill and put stones on top of it".

To Kabinana scolded him, "You must put them on the ground, not on top of the hill. You are always making things difficult for our people. Listen to me. I'm always trying to help the people and I've taught them all to speak properly. The language they speak is the correct one for this area and is the pure one. You have made things difficult for them. I have even taught them to cook properly, and to use good food cooked in coconut sauce. They put this sauce made from the coconut milk on the fowls when they cook them".

To Purgo said, "I went to Taulil and there they only scrape one coconut to make the sauce for a large quantity of food. They mostly use water when they cook their food which they just peck at". "And what about the Baining people?" asked To Kabinana. "The Baining people? They have no fowls. They only eat pigs". "See! You have spoilt them. Poor things!" said To Kabinana.

Figures like To Kabinana and To Purgo appear in the mythic traditions of many Melanesian cultural groups. They are sometimes referred to as "culture heroes". "They 'make' or 'form' features of the world rather than 'create' the world as a totality and they teach human beings how to behave according to the social rules made by themselves".[3] In other words, they make the "world" inhabitable and create human beings—always a particular tribe or clan—to live in it.

One particular kind of culture hero common in the mythologies of tropical tuber cultivators is that sometimes called *dema* (a term used for them by the Marind-anim of West Papua). *Dema* may be humans or of some other species important to the group, or a combination of these, who possess supernatural powers. Often, it is their death or departure that gives rise to a natural or cultural feature, practice, institution, or even a human group. The cause of death or departure is usually attributed to some fault or stupid act committed either by them or by someone else. In cases where the *dema* are killed, sometimes at their own request, their creative, spiritual power is released. This power then becomes available to the killers and to all their descendants. A myth taken from the traditions of the Orokaiva people illustrates this. It narrates the activities of the *dema* figure, Totoima, who is part pig and part human. Some of the most celebrated stories of this figure deal with

his practice of killing men and eating them while wearing pig's tusks, and of killing and eating his children as soon as they were born ... All the stories about Totoima, however, have a similar ending: by some trick ... Totoima was killed in revenge for his iniquities ... Totoima's body was cut into the joints into which pigs ... were traditionally subdivided prior to being shared out between guests at a feast. Those who ate the joints

multiplied miraculously so that their descendants peopled practically the whole of the Northern District ...

It was his meat that miraculously caused these small families to multiply into tribes. Thus it was his strength, his *ivo*, entering the bodies of those who ate him, which really caused the tribes to multiply. The tribesmen became the inheritors of his *ivo* and it was from this that their power arose. Totoima was their ancestor in the sense that they had his *ivo* ... They are bound together by a primeval communion, the common eating of Totoima's body, from which all derive their *ivo*. The feast is thought to be the occasion *par excellence* at which the primeval communion is re-enacted.[4]

The Interplay of Myth and Ritual

"Re-enactment" is related to a further aspect of Kirk's second category of mythic functions, the creative or regenerative power of myth. Some myths in some societies, are regarded as being somehow efficacious in the renewal of the world and of society. This is particularly true of myths which have to do with the fertility and well-being of humans, animals and plants. The regenerative power of the mythical characters and events becomes present "sacramentally" through symbolic imitation or re-enactment in important rituals or on ceremonial occasions. Thus, certain masked dancers in a particular ritual may represent and actually identify with *dema* figures of the original time. During the ritual, the community passes, as it were, into the time in which the creative events occurred. Certain symbolic actions represent a re-enactment of these events, so that their power becomes operative in the present.

In the Orokaiva instance given above, the distribution of pig meat at important feasts "re-enacts" the original communal feasting on the slain body of Totoima and continues to release his power for the groups involved. Other myths reveal a similar interplay between myth and ritual. Behind some of the great pig-killing celebrations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, for example, lies a myth about the originating activities of two brothers, Mondo and Mundua. On certain occasions, Mondo, while wearing special ceremonial decorations alone in the bush, transforms himself into a pig. One day his brother, Mundua, discovers the secret that his brother is, in fact, a pig. Thereupon Mondo realizes that he must withgo his human form through death (in some versions he asks his brother to kill him). From his grave, a multitude of pigs emerge to populate the whole district. In the pig-killing ceremony, a special hut is erected on what is believed to be the token burial spot of Mondo's bones. The death of Mondo is "re-enacted" in the slaying of pigs and the sprinkling of their blood. As with the original event, this ritual slaying is believed to ensure the plentiful reproduction and health of the pig population and of humans and food crops as well.

Myths, then, in one sense are models *for* the world. They can act as "charters" for customs, beliefs, rights and institutions such as marriage practices, the differentiation of social roles, feasting, the negotiation of land boundaries, exchange systems, and patterns of warfare. In another sense, myths can be seen as models *of* the world. They embody sets of values, interests and judgments in relation to what is currently considered good and proper in the society. They arise out of a people's experience and communally established social patterns. But they lift these out of the merely mundane world through the power of imagination and give them a dimension of sacredness. In this way myths can function not only to record the existing order of things but also to validate and support it. Certain myths about the origins of particular groups, for example, can be used to support territorial claims.

Myth As Speculative and Explanatory

The third category of mythic functions has to do with the speculative, problem-solving or explanatory nature of some myths. They may perform this function alongside some of the other functions mentioned already. At the beginning of the Tolai myth of the two brothers quoted earlier, we find an explanation of the origin of human death. A similar explanation is found in many parts of Melanesia and elsewhere in the world. The process of the snake's shedding its old skin and seemingly beginning a new life cycle is transferred to human beings. Stories tell of a skin-shedding, life-renewing process on the part of human beings "in the beginning". This is somehow interrupted (in the Tolai story through depriving the old woman of warmth), and thus, death has its origin. The same myth gives an explanation for the different natural and cultural characteristics of neighbouring tribal groups and their environment.

In every culture, there is speculation about the mysteries, problems and contradictions that are experienced in life's process. Some of these speculations revolve around common human themes, others depend upon the environment, history and traditions of the group. Myth can be a means of expressing a response to these mysteries, of proposing a solution to these problems, or of resolving these contradictions or declaring them unresolvable.

Many Melanesian societies have myths which speculate about, for example, mysterious cosmic phenomena such as the cycle of the moon, about natural catastrophes, the life of sky beings, moon people and other spirits, the nature of life beyond death and the origin and meaning of sexual relations.

Some anthropologists argue that human beings tend to define and order a good deal of their experience in terms of sets of

oppositions. Some common examples of these would be: life/death, male/female, good/evil, wild/domesticated, light/darkness, pure/impure, land/sea. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss,[5] the elements of a myth can be arranged into a kind of structure made up of a series of oppositions. As the story unfolds, it presents a series of attempts to "mediate" or resolve these oppositions. Thus, the speculative function of a myth may not always be as clearly expressed as in the example of the origin of death given above: It may be performed "below the surface", as it were, of the myth's actual story. In order to appreciate these deeper meanings of a myth, however, it is usually important to have some broader knowledge of the myth's cultural setting, including other myths and beliefs, rituals and institutions, and the important aspects of everyday life and survival which the group takes for granted.

This aspect of the speculative function of myth can be seen in a myth taken from the traditions of the Baktaman people:

> First there was a dog—he came down, went to the base of very large trees, bit off the roots, dug a hole under the tree; out of such holes he pulled the first man, many places ... The men were glad to be out of the ground, and they danced and sang. But these first Baktaman had not carried any taro with them; the dance made them hungry and they wanted and needed food. *Awarek* ... remained below ground in his hole, clutching the taro and would not release it. Neither dog nor man dared go down the hole to fetch the taro. Finally the swallow ... volunteered. He flew down into the hole, but was frightened and turned back. He tried again, but again turned back in fright. The third time, he managed to snatch a little bit of taro, he flew out of the hole and into the air, and he deposited small bits of taro high up on the white tree trunks, and on the white cliff faces of the mountain. The men fetched down the taro and made a big feast. Then grandfather cuscus *(Awarek)* came up out of its hole bringing plenty of taro with him. He lined up the people by clans, according to which hole they had come out of, and named them, making the clans of Yeni and Minkarin and Murukmur and all. Then he went down under the ground again.[6]

Awarek is the Baktaman's secret name for *kwemnok*, a large, long-furred, grey cuscus marsupial. It forages in the trees, eating leaves and fruit during the night, but sleeps all day in a burrow under the ground or in a hollow trunk. The secret name also means grandfather/ancestor. The swallow, which the Baktaman note as all black except for a white patch under its tail, tunnels its nests into the ground in steep hillsides. Taro is a tuber or root crop, very important in many Melanesian cultures as either the staple or a supplementary food item.

It is obvious that this myth performs some of the functions we have already considered. We could say that some of its elements are directly related to its story-telling function. There is strong sense both of lack and of expectation conveyed in the hungry people's attempt to obtain food. The fact that the swallow tries three times

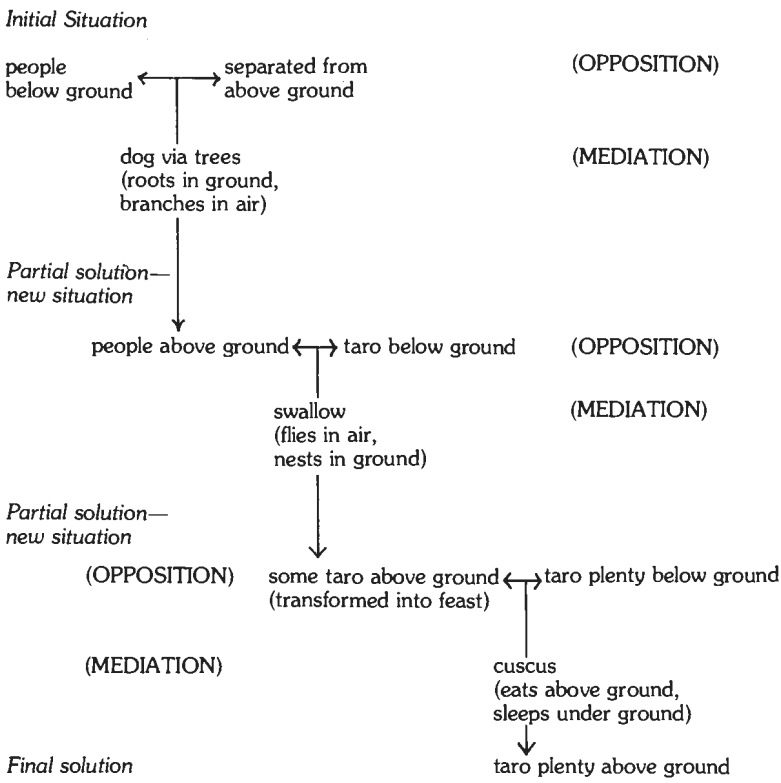
before it is successful in its task is also a typical story-telling device and adds to the suspense.

Many items can be detected which are related to the way the myth functions to establish and charter the world and the people in it. The story relates, for example, the emergence of the first people from the ground, a fact that would validate their claim to that area of ground as their living space. It refers also to the establishment of clan identities, with links between groups consolidated through their descent from a common mythical ancestor. Further, it establishes the use of taro as the basic food resource, and of taro feasting as an institution for ensuring and augmenting the fertility/productivity of the taro crop. Various items in their geographical surroundings, such as limestone sink holes and the white markings on special trees and the cliff faces represent for them the mythical events.

With regard to the myth's speculative or problem-solving functions, we could say that the myth speculates in an imaginative way about how an original lack in the lives of the first Baktaman people was fulfilled. But there is a deeper concern within the myth, and this can only be uncovered by examining the myth in relation to other beliefs and practices.

Barth notes that the Baktaman have a particular way of thinking about space.[7] They think of it in a vertical way: below ground → above ground → sky. These distinctions correspond to ideas of purity and impurity or danger. Things below the ground, such as taro, are impure. This is a major problem for these root crop cultivators who rely on it as their basic source of food.

The Baktaman myth seeks to resolve this problem. The dog, as an agent from above the ground, brings human beings up into the realm of purity. But this means that they are separated from taro. The swallow then becomes a mediating figure, bringing some taro above ground. It can do this because it lives, as it were, in both realms. It flies in the pure realm of the air and nests in the impure realm below the ground, and this is symbolized in its combination of white and black colouring. But this is only a partial solution. The taro feasting and dancing bring the cuscus ancestor up from the ground with taro plenty. The cuscus can fulfil this mediating role only because it also participates in both realms: it eats in the trees and sleeps under ground. The mediating activity of the cuscus ancestor means that the harvesting of taro from below the ground can be approved. The process that the story conveys might be represented in a simple diagram as follows:



The analysis of this Baktaman myth shows clearly that myths can be very complex phenomena, that they can fulfil several kinds of functions at once. It also shows that the deeper meaning conveyed by myths, can become available to an outsider only if the myths are studied in relation to aspects of the "world" of the people for whom they are important.

Myth, Change and The Future

The fourth category of mythical functions Kirk describes as "eschatological". This would apply to myths that relate

> Narratives of the imaginary world of the dead: how gods or defunct mortals pass beneath the earth, what they see on their way, the geography of the underworld and the aspect of its rulers and subjects, the sufferings caused to the dead by neglect of their funerary rituals on earth, and so on.[8]

While some Melanesian myths do speculate about some of these

things, there is more preoccupation with the on-going cycle of life and death and the interrelationship between the living and the dead. Nor do we generally find in traditional Melanesian mythology, the projection of a kind of "end time" or "golden age" in which the present state of things will be reversed or radically transformed. This kind of mythical theme implies some fundamental dissatisfaction with the existing order. It tends to become important at times of intense social or cultural upheaval.

It is, however, a theme which has emerged in several Melanesian societies in recent times, with the experience of change and upheaval accompanying western colonization and the impact of western culture, beliefs and technology. Quite a number of myths, which contain a mixture of traditional motifs and items from contact with western culture, including biblical ideas, have developed. This development can be illustrated by an example from the southern Madang District recorded by Peter Lawrence.[9] A traditional myth common to many groups in the area relates the activities of two brother "culture heroes", similar to those in the Tolai myth given earlier. The brothers quarrel and separate, and on their subsequent journeying, form various aspects of the environment and distinctive cultural features. The idea conveyed, is that one brother produces better things than the other.

This myth developed in a variety of ways to express and interpret experiences of contact with western culture. In one version, as the two brothers prepare to separate, one makes a small canoe while the other builds either a large canoe or a ship with a steel hull. The latter creates and takes with him both Melanesian people and their kinds of goods, and European people and their kinds of goods. He puts some Melanesian people ashore in each of the villages along the way, and gives them a choice of the goods he carries. Invariably they choose the traditional kinds. He puts the European people ashore in another country, giving them everything left in his vessel, and teaching them the ways to obtain new supplies.[10] This version of the myth not only explains why the incoming Europeans have superior cultural goods and apparent easy access to them, it also gives a rationale for sharing these goods with Melanesians, namely, the bond of brotherhood created through descent from a common ancestor.

Another version of the myth has a heavy overlay of biblical ideas. The main story goes as follows:

> In the beginning, God ... created Heaven and earth. On the earth, he brought into being all flora and fauna, and eventually made Adam and Eve. He gave them control over everthing on the earth and laid out Paradise ... for them to live in. He completed their happiness by creating and giving them cargo: tinned meat, steel tools, rice in bags, tobacco in tins, and matches, but not cotton clothing. For a time they were content but eventually offended God by having sexual intercourse. God in his

anger threw them out of Paradise to wander in the bush. He took the cargo away from them and decreed that they should spend the rest of their days existing on the barest necessities ...

This situation continued until the time of Noah, who was a 'good' man, obeyed God, and brought up his sons to do likewise. Other human beings were still sunk in 'depravity' so that God decided to destroy them in the Great Flood ... (The story continues according to the biblical account.) When the Flood subsided, Noah and his family went ashore. God instructed them to repopulate the earth and gave them back the cargo as a pledge of his renewed goodwill towards mankind.

Everything would have been satisfactory again had Noah's three sons all obeyed God as he had done. Shem and Japheth continued to respect God and Noah, and so continued to receive supplies of cargo. In due course, they became the ancestors of the white races, which profited by their good sense. But Ham was stupid: he witnessed his father's nakedness. God was again very angry. He took the cargo away from Ham and sent him to New Guinea, where he became the ancestor of the natives, who were forced to make do with the inferior local material culture ...

It was assumed that the friendliness of the missionaries was evidence that, whatever other Europeans might feel and do, they at least remembered and would honour their ties of brotherhood with the natives as common descendants of Noah.[11]

The processes recorded in the development of this myth reveal that myths have a certain flexibility in the face of change, especially where they depend upon oral transmission. They can be reinterpreted to integrate new experiences, or provide the framework for interpreting these experiences. It seems that this has often been the case, naturally enough, in the early stages of accepting Christian beliefs and practices, especially when these were introduced side by side with other elements of western culture. The Orokaiva people (whose Totoima myth we have already considered) were exposed simultaneously to social, economic and political changes brought about by the colonial government, and to the missionary activities of the Anglican Church.

The Totoima myth provided a framework for interpreting some of these new experiences. Jesus Christ, for example, came to be identified as a new *dema* figure, a powerful source of *ivo*. Certain Christian practices were seen as a means of access to the fruits of this *ivo*, namely, the kind of wealth and power which Europeans obviously enjoyed in comparison with the local people. The Christian communion ritual was seen as a means whereby Jesus Christ, who was killed by his own people and left a representation of his slain body to be shared out as food, became the spiritual ancestor of those who participate. In the common eating of this food, they are imbued with his *ivo* and can enjoy its fruits.[12]

Conclusion

This paper presents a brief survey of the rich world of Melanesian mythology. Four categories, as suggested by G. S. Kirk, have provided the framework for viewing the many functions of myth in Melanesian society. Thus, one can come to appreciate the complexity and significance of myth in the lives of people. Myths convey truths and establish connections through their entertaining story form. Myths order and 'charter' a society's world; they also have a creative and regenerative function when related to ritual contexts. Myths can serve as a means of speculation about puzzling or difficult aspects of life; they explain beginnings, relationships and patterns of existence. Finally some myths grapple with the on-going cycle of life and death, or project an ideal future in the face of acute social upheaval. The last named function illustrates the flexibility of myths in the face of cultural and historical change—a process which is continuous and deserving of sympathetic and scholarly attention. It is hoped that this preliminary survey of myth in Melanesia will induce the reader to delve more deeply into the rich resources of Melanesian mythology.