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### **Difference Between History and Myth**



When an anthropologist uses the word history he refers to stories about the past that seems to him more or less probable, when he uses the word myth he is talking about what seems to him to be improbable or impossible. Now open a dictionary, it will tell you that a history is (the study of/a record of) past events considered together, especially events of a particular period, country or subject. A myth on the other hand is an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining in a literary way the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts.

The use of the word that the dictionary prescribes and how the anthropologists actually uses it is quite different. And myth and history are in important respects different in character than anthropologists use them. To stress this: “a story may be true yet mythical in character, and a story may be false and yet historical in character”<sup>1</sup>. Some characteristics of myths:

“It is not concerned so much with a succession of events as with the moral significance of situations, and is hence often allegorical or symbolical in form. It is not encapsulated, as history is, but is a re-enactment fusing present and past. It tends to be timeless, placed in thought beyond, or above, historical time; and where it is firmly placed in historical time, it is also nevertheless, timeless in that it could have happened at any time. Ten the very improbabilities, even absurdities, in many myths are not to be taken, as in an historical record, literally and hence as naivety and credulity, but are of the essence of myth which, just because the events lie outside human experience, demand an acts of will and of imagination. Then, myth differs from history in that it is regarded differently by the people to whose culture both belong. They do not regard historical happenings and mythical happenings as happenings of the same order.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropology and History, Evans Pritchard, 53

<sup>2</sup> Anthropology and History, Evans Pritchard, 53

“Myth, deprives the object of which it speaks of all History”<sup>3</sup>, according to Barthes. He actually states that myths would not possess any historic value, and therefore is not worthwhile to research if one is searching for factual information. But is this true? Don't most of the myths have a core of truth which makes research worthwhile? To look deeper into the difference between history and myth in the anthropologic field and the importance of studying myths to obtain factual information (history) we can focus on a division of opinion on the matter whether anthropology can be regarded as a natural science or as one of the humanities. This because this division is at its sharpest when the relations between anthropology and history are being discussed.

I will first explain the above mentioned difference between anthropology as a natural science and anthropology as part of the humanities. After this we will look at the Ilahitan people as described in *Social complexity in the making – a case study among the Arapesh of New Guinea* by Donald Tuzin.

### **Value of history to anthropology**

A functional theory of society is nothing new. Human societies are natural systems in which all the parts are interdependent, each serving in a complex of necessary relations to maintain the whole. The aim of social anthropology is to reduce all social life to laws or general statements about the nature of society which allow prediction.

What is new is the statement that a society can be understood satisfactorily without reference to its past. This because a natural system can be described in terms of natural law without recourse of history. In sake of clarity, we must distinguish two different senses of history:

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes , 1972

1. “In a literate society, history is a part of the conscious tradition of a people and is operative in their social life. It is the collective representation of events as distinct from events themselves. This is what social anthropologists calls myth. The functionalist anthropologist regards history (usually a mixture of facts and fancy) in this sense as highly relevant to a study of the culture of which it forms part .”<sup>4</sup>
2. “On the other hand they have totally rejected the reconstruction from circumstantial evidences of the history of primitive peoples for whose past documents and monuments are totally, or almost totally lacking.”<sup>5</sup>

This last contrasts strong with how the eighteenth-century moral philosophers presented their conception of social systems and sociological laws. They believed that: “by using inductive methods it would be possible to explain the societies studied in terms of general principles or laws in the same way as physical phenomena had been explained by physicists.”<sup>6</sup> These natural laws could be derived by studying the human nature. Because of the fact that these laws applied over whole mankind, man always advanced along certain lines through set stages of development. These stages could be reconstructed by what later became known as the comparative method. The basis for this method was the belief that: “sociocultural systems observable in the present bear differential degrees of resemblance to extinct cultures”<sup>7</sup>. The difference however is that they: “presented this in the form of a natural history of human societies, and the enduring passion of their Victorian successors was seeking for origins from which every institution has developed through the working of laws of progress”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Social anthropology: past and present, 21

<sup>5</sup> Social anthropology: past and present, 21

<sup>6</sup> Social anthropology: past and present, 14

<sup>7</sup> Nineteen century social evolutionism, Kelly Chakov, <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/evol.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Social Anthropology: past and present, 19

The modern functionalist anthropologist denying the importance of the history of a society to a functional study of it is strange. Firstly because they claim that they make a natural history of human societies, all human societies. But because of the general bias against history they ignore information provided about historical societies that they could use in their comparative case-studies. Societies that they (should) regard of as in their work field.

But the most important reason why they should not neglect the importance of history is because the comprehensive and detailed professional field studies of modern anthropology are products of the functional orientation which insists on the interrelatedness of things. But without historical knowledge of institutions studied in the field, so without knowledge of where things came from in the past you can never understand the society studied. Especially not because “anthropologists are now studying communities which, if still fairly simple in structure, are enclosed in, and form part of, great historical societies, such as Irish and Indian rural communities, Bedouin Arab tribes, or ethnic minorities in America and other parts of the world. They can no longer ignore history, making a virtue out of necessity, but must explicitly reject it or admit its relevance. As anthropologists turn their attention more to complex civilized communities the issue will become more acute, and the direction of theoretical development in the subject will largely depend on its outcome.”<sup>9</sup>

So to summarize, you can roughly divide anthropologists into two groups, one group that believes that history is irrelevant to the study of societies because of the general rules and patterns which can be found by studying a society in present time, and on the other hand you have the group which believe history and myth explaining history are important and even essential because they explain why things are as they are and they are able to tell us in which direction societies will develop in the future, they form part of a people's traditional being and

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<sup>9</sup> Social Anthropology: past and present, 21-22

last but not least they are important because, except for the direct observation as an ethnographer, anthropologists have to rely a great deal on secondary information, secondary information that history and myth can provide.

### **History and myth of the Ilahitan people**

Before Tuzin tells the story of Nambweapa'w, the Ilahitan creation myth, he writes the following:

“It was told to me on my very first day of field work, many years ago, by a group of villagers who declared that if my object was to understand their ways, then this is a story I must know; for this is where they came from, this is what they *are*. It is a tale of mystery, enchantment, and historically prophecy. And although I previously warned myths cannot be taken as historically true, there are truths other than historical. This story is embedded in history but also transcends that history and is truthful of the Ilahita in its own fashion. As an 8-year-old girl of my acquaintance once replied when I asked if she knew what a “myth” was, ‘A myth is a story that is false on the outside, and true on the inside.’ So it is with Nambweapa'w.”<sup>10</sup>

See how this fits into the things I wrote before about myths? Also with other information Tuzin got from villagers they often told about mythical concepts as mother and father sago. Stories which included important (historical) information.

Difference between history and myth is pretty clear when you read both definitions of them. In reality they are often intertwined. Seemingly historical information being partially mythical

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Tuzin, *Social complexity in the making*, 2001, 62

and vice versa. Both concepts, history and myth, are of great importance when one does anthropological research. One needs information to compare his own findings with, one needs to know where things came from to actually understand why they are there and what purpose they fulfill, one needs to understand local myths if one wants to understand how people are thinking and why they are acting as they are.

In a '*Social complexity in the making*', Tuzin makes a strict distinction between what he sees as historical and what he sees as myth (see quotation above), even though I am not always so sure this distinction is as clear cut as Tuzin sometimes presents it. . In that sentence the difference between history and myth is important for the book.

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