Introduction

In this short volume I am not trying to say anything I have not said before. I am going back to a number of articles because, especially with my repeated recording of the Bagre, there is a problem which has brought me up against many discussions of 'myth', oral 'literature' and their relation to other aspects of social life. The whole discussion had become incrusted with a mystical quality which my own observations did little to confirm. Since I spent such a large part of my career in recording, transcribing and translating the various versions of LoDagaa 'myth' or recitation (together with my friend from the area, Kum Gandah), it seemed worthwhile trying to bring together some of these general observations.

The subject of myth and ritual has been of fundamental interest to anthropologists (and others) from the very beginning. They were supposed to have formed part of the characteristics of 'primitive society', like animism (the worship of nature) and euhemerism (the worship of the dead). As such they are features of 'other cultures', outside the bounds of 'modern' rationality, obeying another system of logic, or indeed being 'pre-logical', 'irrational' in our terms. I have wanted to adopt a more cognitive approach, partly because of my interest in communication, especially in orality and literacy, than is possible in the usual 'functional' and 'structural' (or post-structural) approaches to such activities. But there are others too. In this I recognize the logic, as Evans-Pritchard did for the Azande, of looking at the societies more from the actor's point of view, and considering such forms not as a fixed, formulaic product but as reflecting man's creativity, as a language-using animal in face of the world, not free from tradition but not bound down by it.

I do not wish to claim to be the only one to adopt a different approach. There are indeed a number of writers who have focussed on poetics and linguistics and have taken stock of variants, though I do not think that this approach has yet had much of an impact, not on the nature of 'primitive mentalities'. Others have stressed the social context of narrative and the dialogical relations between narrator and audience, the evidence for which was relatively thin in earlier days before the audio recorder. It is this that can bring out variants which occur not only within a 'structure' but which vary in some unpredictable ways. In this sense they are creative.

The analysis of myth and ritual had been one of the major themes of anthropology, going back to Frazer and *The Golden Bough*,[1] to Malinowski in his writings on the Trobriands,[2] to Radcliffe-Brown in the study of the Andamans,[3] and above all to Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work on totemism and in *The Savage Mind* and *Mythologiques*.[4] For these and many writers (less so with Malinowski), the analysis of these behavioural forms has been a major touchstone of anthropological thought, but they have also characterized the 'primitive mind' – for example, in the work of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, on mytheopoeic thinking. I argue along the lines of Malinowski, who attempted to show that in fishing expeditions the Trobriands distinguished between the technical and the ritual, between those operations that required the participation of transcendental powers and those that did not (although presumably all could benefit from whatever source). 'Rational' and non-rational action were both present among the 'primitives' as with us.

Nevertheless, the subjects of this study are by no means unambiguous, whether myth or ritual (or even 'orality'). Many have different views about what they are. Some have seen 'myth' as consisting of a specific recital, as in the case of the Bagre of the LoDagaa. In this usage the term refers to a particular recitation of a long account of the beginning of things (myth 1). As our work shows, there can be surprising variants over time and speaker, even down to features of the basic outlook, which is highly significant for the study of mythologies – never so fixed as a single version suggests. Here the importance of the

[1] Frazer 1890. [2] Malinowski 1922. [3] Radcliffe-Brown 1952.
[4] Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966, 1969.

portable audio recorder comes into the picture because it enables you to register (and to write down and compare) innumerable recitations and to analyse the variants. This problem is complicated. Yes, all variations are made within a 'common frame'. But what is this? When I first recorded the Bagre I was convinced (because the LoDagaa told me) that the recitations were 'one' (*boyen*), the same. So they were for LoDagaa. All were recited in the same ritual situation. But even the initial invocation, learnt 'by heart', varied, and the recitations themselves differed not only in detail but in entire outlook, in worldview. Are these still within 'a common frame'? I would argue, no. Others may disagree. But changes in a recitation can be very radical, in a generative way, leading to something 'other'. You do not go back to the discipline of a written text but proceed in a chain-like way; the last version is always the starting point. To see this process as nothing more than transformations within a frame seems to me to underestimate their extent, or else to comprehend it all within a 'boy meets girl' formula, as I believe Propp does with folktales,[5] thus failing to recognize the creativity of oral cultures. Variations in oral recitations may be recognized by anthropologists, though dominant models would want to restrict these to 'variations within a frame', whereas my argument is that one can never know where these variations might lead until one records and examines them, even if they are in the hands of a ritual specialist, a shaman or even a remembrancer. In any case, one always has to ask what is the purpose of remembering exactly, of denying creativity, which is an ability that comes 'naturally' with the use of words, to language-using minds?

Others see myth too as a 'mythology' (myth 2), which includes ideas about man and the supernatural emanating from a plurality of sources and is essentially put together by an individual, usually an outsider. For a structuralist like Lévi-Strauss, it is the whole body of mythology that constitutes a unity for analysis, one which is constructed from multiple sources; I refer to this as mythology, the mythology of the Nambikwara or of the LoDagaa which, as I have indicated, may be more complex and variable than the idea of the 'ethnographic present' suggests, for this notion depends upon the acceptance of an unchanging past.

[5] Propp 1968.

Lévi-Strauss himself goes further and calls into question the status of the myth (2) of discrete societies, though this refers not primarily to a recitation but to a transcendental view of the world. The mythology of the Nambikwara forms part of the mythology of their neighbours and vice versa in an endless series of transformations that have, for him, 'no initial starting point'. A 'transformation' implies a common 'form', but that must be in the eye of the observer, not with the 'actor' frame of reference. So the 'mythology of the Nambikwara' would be an 'illusionary entity'. However, it did constitute an entity of sorts as it was collected from a specific group. And, as I have remarked, it is something very different from myth (1),[6] an actual recitation like the *Iliad*. Lévi-Strauss has shifted somewhat over time from the analysis of a particular myth in its social or transcendental context to cross-continental transformation.[7] Variations obviously occur, but they are always within a framework, the existence of which I dispute as such 'structures' are an illusory entity.

It has been pointed out to me that 'myth' may vary on a continental scale, African in contrast to South American, with which Lévi-Strauss is dealing. That is certainly a possibility, but I would stress the difference here between myth and mythology as well as remarking that folktales and 'myths' have crossed from continent to continent, the Ananse tales in the first instance and the Muslim and Christian story in the second. There are points of contact between the two and there are some quasi-universal (European-derived) concepts and explanations which he himself has tried to refine, e.g. with regard to totems. There are of course dangers in commenting on the concept of totemism from an Africanist standpoint, but there are also some conceptual advantages and in any case the task is necessary if one regards anthropology as a general field, as our forefathers did – at the same time recognizing the role of 'local knowledge'.

Other people refer to a specific story, in one of its versions or in all, as a myth (myth 3). An example of this usage is the story of Oedipus, to which there is clearly more than one approach. The first analyses a written version about a specific character, as it appears in, say, a Greek text (or possibly from a plurality, as Robert Graves does). A second

[6] Stephen Hugh-Jones personal correspondence.
[7] I am indebted for this observation to Stephen Hugh-Jones.

is to do as Jacobs does, look at the way a particular story has developed over the ages, which is the basis for her study *On Matricide*.[8] Then there is the more cultural (in a different sense) approach of Dumézil to Indo-European myth,[9] an area into which Lévi-Strauss also moves in his *Mythologiques*, considering all versions from one 'culture area' as being in some sense variants one of another. But this enquiry is also based on the 'structural approach' to myth (myth 2) as understood by Lévi-Strauss. What Jacobs takes from him is the understanding that myths reveal the 'underlying "universal" unconscious structures', that is, those of 'underlying "rules" or "laws"';[10] a study of a body of myths will show universal structures. However, the understanding of matricide as a quasi-universal feature is questionable, both for myth and for 'reality'. Taken literally, the practice seems a quite distinct development, related to intergenerational tensions within the family. As such, it will appear in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies; indeed, in some relevant respects these resemble each other. The inheritance of 'male' goods and the succession to 'male' office may pass through women, but goes to men in both cases; indeed, most studies of matrilineal societies, for example by the anthropologists of the 1930s who were students of Malinowski (that is, Richards and Fortes), showed they were characterized by male authority. However, as the Bagre myth brings out so well at a more explicit level, in most societies (including, of course, bilateral ones) authority and responsibility at a domestic level are normally divided between male and female; both parents experience the wrath of their children, and in one version the child shoots the mother with an arrow. The binary approach of Lévi-Strauss, which would see these relationships as alternatives, is inappropriate; the 'family' ties of children with both father and mother exist in all types of society, though these may vary in intensity.

Jacobs, however, prefers a structuralist approach that emphasizes the 'hierarchical dualism' and the 'unconscious' element in myth and that leads her to draw attention to the non-appearance but importance of Metis in the Oresteian story. Although Athena says quite early in *Eumenides*, 'no mother gave me birth', Jacobs posits Metis as Athena's mother, a woman who has been raped (and swallowed)

[8] Jacobs 2007. [9] Dumézil 1990 [1940]. [10] Jacobs 2007: 17.

by Zeus. If the introduction of the unconscious can allow one this degree of ingenuity in the analysis of myth, where does it stop?

The second type of study involves the analysis of a complete 'mythology', as Lévi-Strauss has advocated. There is an obvious problem here if we accept the results of our study of the Bagre since versions vary so much in a fundamental fashion. How is one to choose? Structural analysis along the lines of Lévi-Strauss is difficult because one can never know the entire universe of discourse, the dimensions of future and past myth. On the other hand, one can more easily carry out a study of past (written down, textualized) myths because writing produces a boundary to what we are examining; there is no such boundary to the Bagre as an oral performance because it is constantly being recited differently, so that, when it is written, one is always looking at an arbitrary sample. But if this is so of the Bagre, it must also have been true of the Greek case; what we have is only an arbitrary selection that has at one time been written down, leaving a plethora of potential versions 'in the air', which have been presented but not recorded. Listening to a recording can also produce a variety of written outcomes, as we can see from the Braimah recordings and as I know only too well from poring over the Bagre recordings for days on end with my friend Kum (the originals are deposited in St John's College library, Cambridge). It is essential to take into account the context in which written versions of 'oral' myth have been produced.

With reference to myth 3, one can select Oedipus rather than Prometheus as the key myth, as Jacobs does, but the selection is one's own, depending on one's particular social environment three thousand years later when Antiquity has given way to feudalism and then to 'capitalism'. One is no longer analysing a purely Greek myth but one that has been stripped down, shorn of its time-specific components and presented in its reduced state to be quasi-universal. So she undertakes an examination of Greek myths (supposedly oral) as treated in a written tradition and she comments on 'the cultural reception of myth in the present' rather than what the original may have meant to its audience. Myth is being used to theorize a supposedly underlying cultural law that is related to the symbolic in a post-Lacanian sense, the aim being to classify 'underlying "universal" unconscious structures'. Symbolic here is 'the order of meaning to which all human

beings are subjected if they are to become part of the social world'.[11] The symbolic is structured 'through a hierarchical dualism'. But what are these underlying structures? In her case Jacobs wants to do more than analyse; she wants to change the order of things, so that the recognition of matricide is an attempt to rediscover a new (feminist) order. In other words, myth itself records the desiderata, what one wants, not simply what is.

I believe this form of cryptologic analysis to be mistaken. I cannot agree that myths are a mystery to the reciter who understands them only unconsciously, that they represent 'a code' and disregard 'the thinking subject completely',[12] but they reveal 'universal mental formulations'.[13] This position leads this particular writer to talk of myth as 'a form of delirium',[14] 'cultural delirium', and as equivalent to the dream, to a 'cultural dream'. But myth is not peculiar in this way simply because it is oral. It does not shed a particular light on the unconscious, like individual dreams; it must rather be compared to other forms of 'literature', to the conscious act of creation and imaginative productions – albeit of a 'traditional' kind. Believers in myth are not more 'delirious' than those who think that man's loss of heavenly grace was due to biting an apple, or that the world was created 'magically' in seven days.

Thirdly, we return to the study of a particular recitation (myth 1), where once again we have to face the question of a plurality of versions. We can call this the study of 'contemporary myth' since it is what is being recited now in relation to a current situation, not a resurrection of an earlier tale, as with Oedipus, nor of a nebulous totality. The 'contemporary myth' must clearly be interpreted in relation to the society from which it comes. One cannot envisage any other solution for an analysis of the Bagre. However, looking back to a written 'myth' presents different problems, especially where the elements are said to persist over time, as with Oedipus (that is, a particular story rather than a particular recitation). There may be some such persisting element in the Bagre, such as the conflict between parent and child, that encapsulates wider aspects of intergenerational relations and that represents some more permanent facets of

[11] Jacobs 2007: 18. [12] Jacobs 2007: 16. [13] Jacobs 2007: 17.
[14] Jacobs 2007: 19.

the human situation. This may well be the case with the story of Oedipus; it certainly was so for Freud, but it may not be universal in that form, as Malinowksi claimed to show. For the Oedipal situation is intergenerational, and yet hierarchical and sibling relationships differ significantly in matrilineal societies, for example. In any case one is not applying a 'structural' approach to myth because one is taking only one version of one element in the Greek mythology rather than reading that element in a wider context,[15] as Lévi-Strauss proposed. That is what we do when we select a tale from a written corpus and decide this to be a foundational element. It may embody a continuing aspect of some part of human life, as with the Oedipus story, but that we cannot know until time has passed and we see what endures. However, in the case of Oedipus we might equally regard the story not as myth but as an aspect of history (partially oral, in fact) and comparable, in a general way, to Prince Harry taking the crown from the brow of his dying father. That story too has few supernatural elements and encapsulates a general situation.

There is another input to this discussion that I have dealt with elsewhere at some length but now do so in a more limited way, and that is the effects of the advent of literacy on communication of this kind. This forms the subject of Chapters 8 and 9, where I have been concerned with the problem of narration, which some have seen as marking earlier (oral) cultures and some as an aspect of human discourse more generally. I have been less impressed in oral societies with the aspect of narrative, both imaginative and personal, at least in the sense of a sequential account of one's own and another's life experience, activities which seem to me promoted by the written word. In oral cultures, the occasions for the latter are limited and I have experienced imaginative storytelling largely for children, certainly as a distraction, not primarily relevant to 'real life' (although it may of course have some underlying 'truth'). Myth is very different, for that usually has a strongly religious and even explanatory role; it is not recited 'raw' round a campfire but to adults in a special ritual context.

One possibility with folktales, as my interlocutor reminds me, is the varying kind of interpretation as between children and adults.

[15] Jacobs 2007: 16.

Certainly, a literal (child's) understanding of the story about one's loss of immortality to the moon is different from an adult's, but I believe we can confidently conclude that in Europe, Africa and so many other parts the primary audience is infantile. Hugh-Jones sees a problem in the folktale–myth distinction for South America because the same story appears in different contexts and that is a feature we have to bear in mind elsewhere.[16]

If you are not looking at a particular 'myth', or even at a specific collection, you can be in all sorts of difficulty. Many stories about the gods, or of a supernatural character, vary among themselves (through the process of invention, forgetting and the production of variants that I have demonstrated to exist among the LoDagaa). To aggregate these different versions together may be very difficult; in the various versions of the Bagre, stories referring to the beginning of things may reflect not a single vision of the world but conflicting ones, depending on the individual in charge. Each version has to be looked at separately, even within one culture, the so-called worldview being more differentiated than most anthropologists with their vision of a single-stranded 'ethnographic present' can contemplate.

In these chapters I have tried to pull together my observations in a number of earlier essays, modified as occasion demands, on the subject of the myth and ritual, and on oral 'literary' activity and how that was affected by the written mode. I begin with an early essay defining traditional concepts of religion and ritual, which is not directly connected with 'literature' but attempts to look at the problem of setting aside a special category of ritual activity. It examines some classical statements of the question and offers some kind of reconciliation. The subsequent chapters are centred upon types of oral 'literature' (or rather standardized oral forms) and their transition to the written, because it is in this process that I see the original question of 'myth' as lying, the place it occupied in ancient Greece.

In a much earlier paper, Watt and I wrote of the Greek version of the myths in an early literate society as stories of the men of old (*mythos*) as distinct from the more modern *istoria*, characteristic of a written culture in which you could look back in a different way.[17] Myths then referred to tales in which one could no longer believe,

[16] Hugh-Jones personal correspondence. [17] Goody 2009.

that were no longer accepted as in tune with a contemporary outlook, especially as regards the immorality of the gods. In going back to these stories, one is talking of tales of olden times, which have no particular status as regards today except, as I have remarked, that some of them deal with aspects of social life that persist over a variety of cultural contexts. But to think about this in terms of a continuing unconscious, as the collective unconscious, is mistaken; they cannot be treated like the products of an individual unconscious for there is no window and no glimpse of the unconscious through error in the way Freud has remarkably shown in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, there can be no collective psychopathology, no mass slips of the tongue, not really much general vision through individual dreams (though some). In any case, how does one see that collective unconscious being transmitted down the ages? Only in the way that Lévi-Strauss sees other aspects of 'l'esprit human' as being reproduced, by a species of cultural parthenogenesis. At this level nothing (or everything) works.

However, following on the extensive work on the Bagre of the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, which I carried out in cooperation with my colleague over a period of many years, I was impressed not by the continuity over time of long recitations covering the transcendental world, but rather by their ability to change, not so much in accordance with the social structure generally (however defined) but with a more free-floating use of the creative imagination. This is to modify both the 'functional' and the 'structural' analysis of myth (at least in one main version, as with *Asdiwal*). Of course, the variation takes place within a context, but it is one much wider than would be suggested by these approaches and looks towards the composition of written literature rather than the hide-bound recitation of the same entity believed to exist by those who have recorded only one version; this is then seen in the context of a static 'primitive mentality'. On the contrary, they show signs of considering the problems connected with the supernatural in a manner not so very different from ours, the contribution of God as compared with that of 'the beings of the world', of what can be seen as 'evolution' as against 'creationism', in a simpler, less reflexive fashion than developed in later written, philosophical discourse but more or less present embryonically. These are competing accounts, held contemporarily rather than sequentially,