A Semiotic Study of Myth and Mythology:
Exemplified by the Cult of "Khizir" of Asia Minor and "Ak Burkhan" of Altai

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Introduction

In the conclusion of the first chapter of his book "Theories of mythology"〔Csapo, 2005〕, having introduced and discussed the standard definition of the term "myth", Eric Csapo formulates his own definition according to which a myth is "[...] a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told such a way to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance; [...]"〔Csapo, 2005: 9〕. Csapo's definition, that holds a loose theoretical reference to the late Wittgenstein's "language games" and "family resemblance" – the two central concepts introduced in his *Philosophical Investigations* – and is aligned with Bruce Lincoln's ideological approach〔Lincoln, 1999〕, diverts the gaze from the phenomenon itself to the social environment in which the former is embedded.

This shift of emphasis from the allegedly observable 'contents' of the phenomena which are subsumed under the term "myth" to the social reception of them is, in the first place, an appropriate expression of, and accurate insight into, the fact that every attempt to conceive a precise "scientific" definition of the "myth" by excavating and cataloguing "essential constituents" of "myths" has always been and still is doomed to failure. But the very reasons and explanation he gives for this inevitability of failure and the necessity of a radical move from contents to reception, from essence to function, brings the author back to the ranks of those whom he criticises.

For the approach on which this paper is based, the said insight into the requirement of a reversal of the angle of vision has not only a completely different causal foundation, but also has further-reaching implications and consequences. These are articulated as the underlying part of the endeavour to provide a critical, but rather epigrammatic account of the established theories of "myth", while simultaneously laying a semeiotic theoretical / methodical base for its own reasoning about social phenomena that are

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labelled "myth" by the ruling western social science.

In the second stage, and on the thus established theoretical grounds, the paper deals on the one hand, with the Cult of "Khizir" (Hizir, Khidr) and comparable phenomena in contemporary Turkey and – not only – surrounding countries, and, on the other hand, with the figure of "Ak Burkhan" which marked the outburst of the "Ak-Jang" movement in Altai in the beginning of the 20th century. The two cases are also investigated diachronically in order to discuss and determine not only if they are singular appearances or deep-rooted recurrent social episodes, but also whether these two phenomena are in some manner linked. Furthermore, the argumentation and the analysis proceed self-referentially, calling into question the role of the social sciences and the scientist in the myth-making process.

Preliminaries to Myth, Mythology, Cult etc.

In my introductory move for the purpose of delineation of the terrain to which I intend to try to restrict my thoughts, I will – due to the given temporal and spatial limits – have to be largely cursory. To begin with, I assume that, in view of the context and the social settings in which, among others, my current deeds and words are embedded, it is not out of place to make clear that I hold the view that all science – if not indeed all specifically human doing – is nothing but linguistic performance. This circumstance is either evidently so in that the product of scientific activity is manifestly language as in the case of the so-called "humanities" or "social sciences"; or it is, as with the so-called physical and biological sciences, not immediately accessible and needs some sort of processing in order to become distinctly visible or perceptible. This processing would take the form of some sort of shifting of standpoint, or alternative reading, or re-translation, which would lay bare the linguistic nature of the scientific artefact.

The so-called empirical social sciences are, in contrast to "humanities" whose pride and joy consist in the link to a remote past, genuinely "modern" in that they not only pertain to and originate in the current age of the human civilisation, namely the civilisation of highly industrialised Western Societies, but also that they belong to those differential constituents of the transformation process from the feudalism of medieval Europe into the modern mode of social and economic organisation. To be specific, they belong along with the crusades of 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, Renaissance of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, reformation, enlightenment, colonialism, missionary activities, slave trade, industrial revolution and the colonialist-imperialist wars of the 17^{th}, 18^{th} and the following centuries to the indispensable factors and agents of the

transition from the “dark” age of “ignorant evil” to the modern age of “sophisticated freedom and equality” – if I may make use of this opportunity to take the liberty of embellishing my words with a pair of fashionable scientific mythologemes.

Social sciences are, as such, integral parts of the modern, capitalistic social formation and so they are both expression and implementations of the (waning) ascendancy and dominance of Western Civilisation. That they were born to serve to the new rulers of the world is, as a matter of fact, nothing extraordinary, since science is, and has always been, at the service and disposal of power, it is its distinctive mode of being and functioning. The peculiar quality however, was that the modern social sciences were not only born to serve, but that they were also born immediately in and out of this servitude. The original anthropologists were colonial masters, slave-merchants, Christian missionaries, officers of the colonial armies; the first generations of ethnologists or ethnographers were slave drivers, legionnaires, monks, mercenaries; the true prototypes of modern archaeologists were Popes, cardinals, noblemen, treasure hunters, gold diggers, adventure addicts etc..

These arrangements are, needless to say, loose approximations. The frontiers between the individual fields of study were boisterously porous, so that it was not unusual that, for example, the one and the same mercenary who was engaged in “ethnologic – ethnographic research” devoted himself in his free time simultaneously to “archaeological fieldwork”, digging in the tombs or rummaging about the relics of some ancient people in quest for truth and gold. It was not until the first generation of professionally trained social scientists emerged in the early 20th century that this state of affairs began to change.

It is not substantially different with mythology. Yet, seen in connection with and placed in the framework of the above outlined dichotomy, mythology differs from rest of the modern social sciences in that it is a borderline candidate. It is, on the one hand, undoubtedly one of the modern social sciences. At the latest from the middle of the 19th century it is entitled to be counted among the mature modern social sciences. On the other hand, it emanates a distinctive aura which brings it repeatedly back to the order of classical studies, i.e. to the humanities. What makes it a borderline case is that it has a stable link to a remote past. There has always been an ongoing narrative on and around mythology and myths in the written records of the past. Above all, by virtue of the textually well preserved and widespread Greco-Roman heroic age, myth and mythology have, from the peak of the renaissance movement on, gradually become

an integral component of the texture of the quotidian European social life.

However, until circa the middle of the 19th century what was meant by mythology was either the interpretation and elucidation of any kind of fictitious, imaginary, untrue popular narrative, a moral tale, parable, apologue, legend, saga, epic, folk tale etc.; it was, in other words, the symbolical meaning of a fable or the like. Or it was the myth itself, the mythical narrative, that was understood by mythology. This was practically and not surprisingly the same state of affairs relating to myth and mythology as it was at the time of Aristotle. After mythology had made its mark as the branch of knowledge which deals with myths, it became mandatory to identify and specify a subgroup of fables and declare them to be myths in contrast to legends, folk tales etc. This task is still to be accomplished satisfactorily, that is fulfilling the self-imposed expectations and needs of a modern social science.

The early representatives of comparative mythology, the first school of the scientific mythology, were, after those of anthropology – whose comparative quality is intrinsic – and comparative linguistics – which was the driving force of the entire field of modern social-scientific activities –, the third important agent in production of those ferocious fateful modern concepts of "race", "nation", "culture" and "civilization", which have thereafter functioned and still are functioning as the heavy machinery for the production of mental / immaterial goods in the modern western, westernized and western-ruled world. In the first quarter of the 20th century a new method in the treatment of myths and the comparable social phenomena joined the party. The idea was that social phenomena are to be seen and approached as parts of self-contained relational structures, the components of which have no innate absolute meaning but are allocated a relative meaning from the system by way of their coordinates, that is their distribution and oppositions to the other components in the whole body. Once again, but not surprisingly, it was the linguistics that acted as the locomotive of the this epoch-making movement.

Common Mythemes in the Cults of "Khizir" and "Ak Burkhan"

Bearing in mind that „myth", the subject matter of mythological research, is in the last analysis a conceptual artefact produced by social sciences within the binding framework of a given socio-historical constellation, I would like to emphatically ask the reader to assume that my utterances below are at all times immanently self-critical and self-referential.

I count myself among those who opine that the mythology of a given society[1] is to be seen and dealt with as a semiotic system, which I will try to do below in connection with two mythical circumstances which appear to display non-accidental parallelisms. In this attempt I will implicitly refer, amongst others, to Barth's theory of Myth and Mythology, according to which, in analogy with the linguistic sign, "In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern [...]: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it *is a second-order semiological system*." 〔Barthes, 1972: 114〕.

In this connection, I think that it is not out of place to point out that it has meanwhile become almost a commonplace among the present-day semioticians to act on the assumption that – not only myth, but – every "semiological chain" can become a part of another one. That is, every sign with its tridimensional structure as a whole and each one of the both components of a sign individually can be employed as one of the three dimensions of a new sign. The anatomy and the operating mode of this process could be compared with the nominalization process of natural languages. Although Barthes – and not only him, I guess – would to all appearances restrict this process to the transformation of the signified of an existing sign into the signifier of a new one, I would argue that there seems to be not much to be said against the supposition that the whole system of an existing sign or the individual parts[2] of it can act in a theoretically endless process of semiosis and re-semiosis as signifier.

Inspired to a certain extent by the idea of "second-order semiological system" of Roland Barthes I tend to think of "myth" as a semiotic phenomenon which seems to originate in a radical rupture of the assignments of the signifiers and signifieds of a given semiotic system and reassignment of the signifieds of it as signifiers to another semiotic set. For the time being I want to call this phenomenon for the sake of economizing pars pro toto 'relocation' – which is supposed to represent an entire process marked with an initial "dislocation" and a "relocation" in the final phase. What I provisionally call 'relocation', that is the process of rupture and reassignment of semiotic constituents

1 whereas society here is to be understood as a continuum composed of relations of living organisms. That is, it is not an aggregate of living organisms but a complex network of relations.

2 whereby the contentious issue of the number of the constituents of a sign is of no fundamental importance to me. I rather tend to share the position which was articulated – among others – by Tarasti: "In response, I should first like to state, echoing Juri Lotman, that the whole dispute over whether the structure of the sign is binary or ternary is outdated, since what is essential is not the inner organization of the sign but its functioning as a part of the semiosphere, a continuum of signs". (Tarasti, 1994: xiv)

across the semiosphere, can occur in relation to the time axis of the social occurrence in two different manners, so that I mean to be able to discern two types of relocation: a synchronic one – whereby the dislocated signifieds of a semiotic set is reassigned to the signifieds of a contemporary semiotic subset as signifiers; and a diachronic one which consists in the reassignment of the unhitched signifieds to the signifieds of a semiotic subset from a somehow remote space-time as signifiers. The two incidents which are depicted below rather perfunctorily are to be seen two examples of the second mode of semiotic relocation.

The first mythical circumstance is an apparently everlasting mythical narrative situated within a fairly wide geographical area. It concerns a figure who is called most often "Hızır" but sometimes also "Hıdır" in Turkish. The figure is one of the most venerated supernatural beings that appear in a broad connected geographical zone from the Balkan Peninsula to India, which, at the same time, accounts for the profusion of the different names of the figure. To name but a few, we have in the Arabic speaking sub-space of the zone quite a few variations: *Al-K(h)idr*, *Al-K(h)adr*, *Al-Khadir*, *Al-K(h)edr*, or *Al-K(h)idr* etc.. The Hebrew-speaking inhabitants of the area call him *Hudr*, the Persian-speaking people name him *Kisir*, the Kurdish-speakers name him *Xizir*, (which is not significantly different from Turkish-speakers - "x" is pronounced as a deep guttural fricative), and in India he is entitled *Khajah Khizir*. The characteristic features of *Khizir* also fluctuate: depending on the prevailing traits of the respective socio-historical period and space, he has been associated with almost all the religions of the whole area – which, as it is well known, is the origin of all the major religions of human civilization –, so that he has not only many names but also numerous faces.

Yet there seems to be an unchanging nucleus in this multitude of different manifestations: the supernatural holy person is, firstly, a man, secondly, he is an old man and as a rule he has a long white beard, and thirdly, he has that particular idiosyncrasy of an ancient Greek god, namely the ability to pop up in the nick of time and rescue a living organism, ideally a human individual or a group of them, from a markedly difficult situation. What is primarily relevant for my reasoning in the huge spectrum of variants of Khizir is the one that is prevalent in the particular area of Asia Minor and above all among the Alaouites. The Khizir of the Alaouites, over and above sharing the said basal characteristics with the others, typically appears on the back of a horse.

The second mythical circumstance is a peculiar incident that took place in April of 1904 in Gorny Altai. A 12 year-old girl (Chugul-Sarok-Chandyk) and her stepfather Chot

Chelpan, a shepherd, met an old man on horseback while they were herding sheep on a mountain pasture. The old man was dressed in white and his horse was also white. The actual peculiarity consists not in the event itself – for such paranormal experiences with apparitions of strange beings has always been a commonplace with human individuals – but in what happened following this patently harmless occurrence. Within the space of merely a few weeks a new faith burst virtually out of this story. Thousands of people began to gather in Tereng valley and began to dedicate themselves to religious observances which had apparently nothing in common with the traditional religious praxis of the region. I will, however, leave this fascinating part of the story – which had dramatic repercussions lasting until the present time – almost entirely untouched. What is first and foremost of interest for me in the particular context of my current text is the rather unremarkable part of the whole: the initial apparition of the old man with a long white beard on the back of a white horse.

The parallelisms are rather unequivocal. The Khizir of Anatolian Alaouites rides a horse which is assigned a color that is either “boz” or “kır”. Both the Turkish adjectives have similar core meanings . The adjective “kır” is defined as “a color consisting in white mixed with a small amount of black”. The adjective “boz” has, according to the sanctioned Turkish dictionaries, an uncommonly broad band of meaning. It could signify “light earth-brown, ash-colored, ash-grey, grey, silvery”. Leaning on my own linguistic experience as a speaker of Turkish language, I dare say that the semantic range of earth-brown, brown is, if at all demonstrable, rather marginal. On the grounds of my unmediated observations I would say that “boz” not unlike “kır” primarily means “ash-gray, gray, ashen, pallid, pale, whitish” etc.. The white horse that was ridden by the old white bearded man appeared to the shepherd and his daughter could not have been significantly whiter than the “boz” or “kır” horse of Khizir of Asia Minor.

Conclusion

Leaving out the further elaboration, I want to try to come to a conclusion – which, I fear, will appear quite hasty and premature, but I have already gone beyond the stipulated scope. What I basically want to indicate is that I think that both narratives, having the basic structure of the visitation from a divine and supernatural old man in extremis, are manifestations of the same mythologem. The common underlying mythemes are: providential interposition, aged man, horse, the color white and timelessness, which, in addition, forcefully implies an eternal recurrence. This affinity could be explained in different ways. By postulating an almost precise correspondence or analogy between the evolution of the human individual and human civilisation, and

so identifying the mythologemes and myths as common universal phenomena of the collective unconscious of the species of homo sapiens, Freudian psychoanalysis offers itself up for this purpose.

A further candidate would definitely be the – again perspicuously universalistic – theory of kinship and mythical systems of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his anthropological theory myth – and comparable phenomena – is given a pivotal standing as one of the two universal modes of scientific thought[3]. Myths, superstitions and the like are thus key- phenomena to the true conditions of human experience[4]. Myths and symbols of primitive man have to be seen as core constituents of a knowledge that is in any case "the most fundamental form of knowledge, and the only one that we all have in common; [...][5] 〔Lévi-Strauss, 1961: 127〕. Lévi-Strauss postulates that the myths as the whole ensemble of people's customs form into a not unlimited number of systems "and that human societies, like individual human beings (at play, in their dreams, or in moments of delirium), never create absolutely: all they can do is to choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas which it should be possible to reconstitute." 〔Lévi-Strauss, 1961: 160〕

The approach offered by the theory of structural anthropology is doubtlessly apt to sufficiently account for the parallelism or, better still structural identicalness of the two mythical instances. It is probably not out of place here to point out that apropos of the given context the viewpoint offered by the Freudian psychoanalysis is indeed not qualitatively dissimilar to what Lévi-Strauss in the final analysis says.

Still, reiterating my assertion at the beginning – that all specifically human doing is above all of linguistic nature –, and without intending to imply that I am adapting an opposed position to the aforementioned, I would claim that the emergence of the one and the same mythologem could also be attributable to the language common to both Asia Minor and Altai. Apart from the fact that the horse is, and has always been, one of

3 These are certainly not a function of different stages of the human mind but rather of two strategic levels at which nature is accessible to scientific enquiry: one roughly adapted to that of perception and the imagination: the other at a remove from it. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 15)

4 We should do better to accept the true conditions of our human experience and realize that it is not within our power to emancipate ourselves completely from either its structure or its natural rhythms. (Lévi-Strauss, 1961: 126)

5 […] knowledge in the scientific sense is merely the sharpened edge of this other knowledge. More penetrating it may be, because its edge has been sharpened on the hard stone of fact, but this penetration has been acquired at the price of a great loss of substance; and it is only efficacious in so far as it can penetrate far enough for the whole bulk of the instrument to follow the sharpened point. (Lévi-Strauss, 1961: 127)

the central motifs in the texture of daily social life of Turkish- and Mongolian-speaking communities, the very mytheme of "boz at", the ashen horse, is well documented in the oldest known examples of Turkic writings. I want to quote a sentence as an example: "*ikinti Işbara yamtar boz atı γ binip tägdi. Ol at anda ölti.*" The translation of the entire passage, which still weighs heavily on the minds of Turcologists, is not of interest here; what is clear is the noun phrase "*boz atıγ*", the whitish/ashen horse.

At the risk of exposing the whole text to the perils of misinterpretation I want to end my words with a Nitetzsche citation, which, I think, expresses the importance and central role of the factor of language in contexts comparable with that in which I have tried to embed my line of argumentation: "The wondrous family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is accounted for easily enough. Precisely where there is kinship of languages, it is ineluctable, owing to the common philosophy of grammar – I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by the same grammatical functions – that everything is prepared and present from the outset for an identical development and sequencing of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages (where the concept of the subject is least developed) look differently "into the world," [...]." (Nietzsche, 1954: 584[6]).

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6 Translation is mine.

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