The structural method of Claude Levi-Strauss

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The study of myths, as demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss, leads us to an understanding of complexities of the human mind, of the intellectual incisions of both individual and collective order, and of the correlations and confrontations of man with his environment. In its form, a myth is "surrealistic"; in content, it represents the materialist history of a people.

1. A myth is always a product of an individual in the beginning, but as soon as it is created, it undergoes a series of transformations due to further individual or collective reflections, or attempts at cultural mediations. Through this continuous process of generation of one structure into another, certain sections of the basic structure remain the same, others of the "probabilist" level are constantly altered through oral transmission. All individual works are potential myths, but it is their adoption by the people as a collective heritage, and, the realisation of the transformations on their probabilist contours that bestows on them the status and the dignity of myths. Since the myths of a culture are a product of incessant dialectical transformations, they represent extremely complex wholes of structures within a Structure. A myth is a combination of numerous residues of the past. In its diamond-like crystallisation, it is a challenge to the human intellect to decipher its contours which have undergone changes over the centuries, and are presented to us in their utmost precision. A myth is thus a mosaic of extremely fine pieces juxtaposed in correlations which defy all attempts of descriptive statements.

The structures of the various versions of a myth explain each other. The dialectical process in the creation of myths leads us from one myth to another. As such, the myths "talk" to each other. They communicate with each other in terms of their combinatory systems which have necessary correspondences. Since in their different versions we observe the evolution of one structure into another, the study of myths sheds light on the very nature of human mental structures which are responsible for all these mediations. Myths are the most dense depositories of cultural symbols; a proper comprehension of their significance requires a detailed analysis of their various aspects, which, as has been well demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss, cover such vast domains as botany, astronomy, zoology, ethnography, linguistics and anthropology. A thorough understanding of these branches of knowledge is imperative to comprehend what Lévi-Strauss calls the infrastructure of the myths.

It is with this infrastructure that the successive transformations of a myth are related. All modifications are operated upon outer contours. The inner core or the nuclear structure remains the same, the rest of the structure is in a perpetual state of disequilibrium. The understanding of the structuration of myths requires an insight into the nature of diachronic alterations. All transformations are conscious mediations and conscious reflections on the contradictions of life. To reflect upon these mediations, a social scientist follows the path of "knowledge", of becoming conscious of the material-object of his study. The role of the individual is that of the "thinking", "conscious" individual. It is the thinking, reasoning individual who reflects upon the Other object, the object-myth, the object-culture, the material object. As such, as argues Lévi-Strauss, the role of the reasoning individual before the myths is the same as that of the physical scientist before his material objects. Mythologiques, thus strictly speaking, is a conceptualisation of the things of the world, is of the order of intellect, of logic. There is no place for the ambiguities introduced due to a vague subject under the camouflage of human "liberty". The liberty of man is his intellectual faculty which can mediate and transform one material structure into another.

If this is the object of study, it is obvious that the method that is employed to analyse it cannot possibly be called descriptive or synchronic. It is certainly a diachronic reconstruction; most of the material it works on is oral, not recorded in the usual sense of

the term. This reconstruction is structural like André Martinet's linguistic reconstructions in his *Economie des changements phonétiques*, Berne, 1955. It does not deal with individual, disparate elements. It is not simply a question of analyzing the frozen, synchronic structures of the so-called 'cold societies'. These cold societies at a given time evolved from dynamic hot past and their structures evolved through numerous structural transformations. There is always a proto myth that undergoes structural changes in the prehistoric past. The various versions of the same myth demonstrate the complex interactions leading to further transformations and mutations. This method of Lévi-Strauss follows the outlines of diachronic phonology of André Martinet and not the synchronic phonology of Prague School advocated by Roman Jacobson as is generally assumed. It may be underscored here that Lévi-Strauss, Jacobson and Martinet were all together in New York after the second world war.

2. In his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Struass began from the southern hemisphere and progressively moved on to the northern. The infinite variations in the myths were taken as both a point of departure and as a co-reference. An extensive sum of information on geography, geology, magic, religion and art was utilised to decipher the various details. The texts of the myths were studied with as much care as it was possible, considering the differences in linguistic grouping and textual components. Lévi-Strauss, however, explains that the exact linguistic information was quite useful but not absolutely indispensable as the myths represent significant conceptual structures where the process of transformation on specific aspects of structures fills all possible gaps. The myths are like surrealistic images whose epithets are of an order different from that of ordinary language.

The transformational process of myths is in-terminable. A myth is an open system. It is incessantly and constantly in evolution, for the simple reason that human intellect never stops to function. As such, the mythical discourse follows the norm of the Saussurian concept of langue. The mythical transformations are of the order of parole. During the process of transformations there are erosions and fragmentary drop-outs which condense mythemes into highly complex images. A myth is apprehended only in its "becoming", in its process of transmission where the probabilist aspects need to be isolated for a proper comprehension of the mythematic structures. The interrelationships of the different elements present different types of symmetries and a hierarchy of contradictions and their inversions. Such contradictions can be analysed following the theory of categories, as systems based on both the ensemble of terms and the ensemble of relations between these terms, argues Lévi-Strauss. It corresponds well with the notion of "morphism". These tools of epistemology can be fruitfully used in the analysis of the myths provided the material nature of the text-object is not obliterated.

3. Lévi-Strauss deals with the objections of the existentialist philosophy at length, which attempts to introduce individual "subjectivity" in the name of finding a proper place for man in the scheme of things. The scientific investigation of man and his environment cannot, however, be conducted at a subjective level. The Cartesian cogito is a thinking cogito. The relationship of man with his universe is purely intellective. The study of the structures of myths aims at understanding the semiological functioning of man's relation with his material products. In the overall perspective of the mythologique, the science of the study of myths, what is at stake is not the abstract questions of the destiny of man or the problematics of the origin of mankind, which is generally the manifest structure of many a myth, but the ethnographic, cultural, religious and the material world, which is a "real" world. All mythical reflections have a sound basis in human nature, which is again, an empirical reality.

The problem with existentialist philosophy, centred on the imaginary subject, believes Lévi-Strauss, is its ethnocentrism. The "effects" of the means of material production and their relationships are different in different geographical and cultural regions. The existentialist philosophy attempts to explain all humanity in terms of the conclusions drawn from an analytical study of a given cultural complex beginning with the Hellenic tradition. The

problematics does not centre around the place of man in this world, but of man as such. Each culture defines its man by its own infrastructure and superstructure. Everywhere, it is man whose consciousness leads to historical and cultural mediation. The myths represent the history of each ethnic man for the last thousands of years. The mythical transformations are due to intellectual interventions, and, the study of the myths is squarely placed in the context of these hierarchies of structural modulations, which gives us information on man, not expected by existentialist philosophy.

The myths as vehicles of cultural mediations are concrete objects while existentialist philosophy tends to deal with abstract objects, says Lévi-Strauss. In a myth, we attempt to hear the great anonymous voice of its people, submerged in its profound depths. The existentialist philosopher is face to face with himself, instead of confronting, the real world around him. He leaves aside the universe of variations of history and ethnology on which are based the so-called savage societies.

4. After philosophy, Lévi-Strauss follows his argument with reference to literature, art and music. In this context, a very interesting phenomenon has been the underlying patterns of systems which have undergone successive transformations, and, as such, are structurally very significant. Not every object can be submitted to that kind of analysis, nor can the structures be artificially created. Structures are natural phenomena which have a diachronic evolution, and whose disequilibrium is a resultant of a long drawn out process. Ignoring this fundamental characteristics of cultural structures, there have been, in recent times, some naive attempts at constructing artificial structures in literature, art, and even in music. These structures are, in no way, of the same qualitative order, which have been discovered and perpetuated over several centuries. They lack the fundamental inter-structural relationships. For example, the question of regional structures within a global structure cannot even be posited in this context. Structural analysis deals with already constituted structures, which have by definition, seen the ravages of history. The structures of myths and language belong to that category. They are natural structures with inbuilt characteristics of human praxis. They are as such different from the structures of physical sciences. The physical sciences deal with the symbols of things as such, but the human sciences deal with the symbols of things which have already attained the status of symbols.

5. Lévi-Strauss believes that the so-called original text of a myth does not exist. By the time a narrative attains the status of a myth, it is already a "translation" or an interpretative mediation of the original event. Either its earlier version is found in the adjoining culture, or in another myth, whose transformation it represents. What an analyst deals with is necessarily a "deformed" version. However, the study of myths is concerned primarily with these deformations, for each of these transformations is a resultant of a dialectical juxtaposition of another transformation, and, their essence lies in the irreducible fact of this translation "by" and "for" this opposition. From this point of view, a myth is not situated in a given language or a given culture, but from the point of view of its articulation, in another language, and in another culture. A myth, as such, is never of the language, it is a perspective of another language. Lévi-Strauss believes that the substance of a myth is neither in its style, nor in the manner of its narration, nor in its syntax, but in its "history".

This is why the comparison of myth with music is most relevant. A myth is translatable into another melody, which preserves a rapport of homology with it. It can be transcribed in different tones. It can be converted from major to minor, and, vice versa. It can act on the parameters which transform its rhythm, its resonance, and, its emotive charge. In music, it is always a question of "conversions" or transformations on the same theme. All the same, if it is possible to translate one melody into another, one music into another, one can never, as in the case of myths, translate music into something other than itself.

There is a striking parallel between mythical recitation and musical composition, argues Lévi-Strauss. He says that there are four types of objects for the study of structures, the mathematical "being", natural languages, musical works, and myths.

The mathematical entities consist of structures of absolutely pure state. They entertain a rapport of correlation and opposition with the elements of languages, or following Saussure, they have two aspects of sound and significance, which are the products of their very interaction.

In music, the structure, in a way, adheres to sound, and, not to its significance. In mythology, it is just the opposite. The mythical structure derives its being from its significance.

The mathematical entities are independent of both sound and significance, of both expression and content. A natural language represents a union of these two aspects. The musical structures depend more on sound, and the mythical structures are based primarily on their patterns of significance.

Music and myths are thus sub-products of a translation of a given earlier structure, operated upon language. There can be no music without an underlying language. Music is a language without significance, a pure form of language. The significance of the form of music is provided by the audience. The transformations in myths carry parameters of semantic structures without necessarily carrying with them the precise linguistic articulations.

More than their rapport with language, the correspondence between music and myth is in the manner of their composition. The recitation of music depends upon alliterations and repetitions, upon the linear sequence, as well as the re-introduction of the same elements after certain intervals. The narration of a myth is supported by language, by intonation, and by several other gestures. In music, the significance is completely outside its sound, and hence depends largely on the "effect" it has on the auditor.

The successive transformations of the myths present their structures as boxes within boxes as a series of interconnected structures. These modulations are due to the semiological control of the dialectics of semantic categories which reorganise the ensembles of significance. In music, the two principal means of composition are (a) the confrontation of one structure with another, and, (b) their maintenance by transforming their significant support, or what is called their development. The musical language detaches itself progressively from its distinctive character in a way that the latest structures are always employed as a means of their support. It is across the variations of sub-structures that the traditional music maintains its individual character. A structure is accessible by means of its homomorphism. A work of music is a system of sounds which is capable of introducing significance in the spirit of the auditor.

One can say that the musical communication and the linguistic communication presuppose the union of sound and significance, but the nature of relationship in both of these cases is not the same. Within a society, there is no dialogue about the myth, all discussion is excluded. The dialectics of comprehension is carried on through transformations. The same is true of music. These transformations develop images, symbols or intense structures, as in music, which overwhelm their audience by their density. They envelop the spirit of the one who participates in these images or melodies. Their very forms or their expressive articulations are their significance. In each case, it is an affair of cultural participation. Since it is primarily an affair of one structure leading to another, there can be no comprehension of either music or myth without a previous conscious contact with the earlier structures. Different transformations must be correlated for their proper understanding.

6. In its condensed form, a myth appears at two distinct modalities. At times, it is explicit as in its narration, and is explained in terms of its internal organisations. At others, a myth is manifested in the form of fragmentary notes, in its implicit form, such as in a ritual. A myth is a combination of both the narrative as such and the ritual. Some social scientists separate the two and study them as different entities. However, one explains the other. The existence of the mode of mythology leads us to believe that it resembles most the sacred music, the symbol and the image. The structure of the mythical narration is not only interrelated with that of ritual but most often depends on it. This ritualistic aspect of the myth is non-verbal. Its articulation is of a different order. It is integrated in the psyche and the intellect of a culture in a way different from the simple narrative which is a sort of a

support that helps decipher the "frozen" images. The ritual is like the pure music which exists outside language. The structure of the ritual is studied like the structure of the instrumental music which gets occasional support from vocal music for its continuation, so is the role of the narrative in a myth.

This elaboration is produced at two levels: by the progressive decomposition of the syntagm, and by the crisscrossing of the paradigm. The one corresponds to an axis which can be called "metonymic". It substitutes for each totality the parts that it separates, and treats each of these in turn as relative totalities of a subordinate order, where is exercised the same work of decomposition. Thus, behind each pair of primary oppositions, emerge secondary oppositions, and, behind them, tertiary, and so on, until the entire oppositional operation is complete.

The other axis, which is properly speaking that of the myth, is "metaphoric". It subsumes the individualities under a paradigm. It extends or contracts the concrete given facts, helping them cross the fragmentary discontinuities, which separate the empirical order from the symbolic order, and finally, from the imaginary and the schematic order.

The constant reference in the ritual to non-verbal expressions, to gestures and symbols, renders the task of understanding quite difficult, for the ritualistic thought progresses on the perpendicular axes, and as such, the distance between their "origin" and the actual realisation is extended with each new structuration.

It needs to be emphasized here that all forms of natural art correspond to this aspect of mythical structuration. It is always a structural complexity of the simple narrative, or the parts which are easily accessible to the synchronic reference which are impregnated in the cultural memory at a subconscious level. In this context, there is also the question of the archetype images of a given culture, and, the images which have a rather fluid nature, or are in the process of acquiring the status of cultural significations across various diachronic evolutions. The history of the transformations of the ritualistic, symbolic aspect of the myth as such is much more complicated, and as Lévi-Strauss has rightly pointed out, in structural analysis we deal not only with "primary" oppositions, and "secondary" oppositions, but behind each pair, there is a set of "tertiary" oppositions, and so on. The structural analysis is a continuous process.

The investigation of myths is an open-end investigation. There is the overall global structure of the langue of the myth that ensures its consistency and continuity, but the incessant transformations due to the dialectics at the level of parole lead an investigator in all possible directions. As Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated with brilliant detours, each reference to an animal, plant, planet, custom, mask, human behaviour, leads the mythologist in search of all possible physical, concrete and enthnographic information which is essential for establishing proper correlations amongst different elements of the myth. Also, since parts of the myth appear only in fragmentary notes, their cohesive relations of the past having been frozen, this vast ethnographic information of botany, zoology, astronomy, and religious practices helps fill the gaps. The comprehension of myths requires the skill of diachronic reconstructions of the highest order, for it is not a question of assembling together all sorts of information, but it is an affair of putting together all the jigsaw pieces in their proper setting. As such, mythologique is historiography par excellence. It aims at reintegrating man in his nature, the man who is lost, in terms of Rousseau, in the disorganised inequality of our culture, of our society.

7. Finally, in the Indian context, I would like to refer to a very incisive analysis of the evolution of the Janam Sakhis around the life of Guru Nanak (1469-1538). There are mainly four texts which record the various myths and legends associated with the life of the founder of Sikhism. All of them were written at least a hundred years after the Guru's demise. During this long period, the narratives were preserved, evolved, interpreted in the oral tradition. In these four texts there are narratives which are short anecdotes, others more elaborate, still others with several interpolations. In each case, there is an overall discourse that determines the delineative and the interpretative function of a

specific anecdote. W. H. McLeod in his *Early Sikh Tradition*, Oxford, 1980, has presented an extremely analytical and incisive interpretation of every step of the development and integration of each discursive formation. With a brilliant postmodern dialectical incision he has demonstrated how a given legend evolved from a proto anecdote, and how in the successive stages of its development, it was administered a number of interpolations and interventions.

In the universe of the Mythologiques there is a constant reference to birds, animals, stars. The animate and inanimate worlds merge in a newly constituted universe where human and non-human lose all their preconceived distinctions. In the universe of the Janam Sakhis, McLeod analyses the dialectics of anthropology and cosmology that constitutes a metaphysical universe that never loses contact with historical interpolations. In this historiography of the discourse of Guru Nanak, McLeod delineates the contours of the evolution of the narratives with incessant conceptual interactions in the domain of the world within and the world without. Within the universe of this discourse, in the domain of the imaginaire and the empirical, the sacred and the profane, we witness historical and theological creativity of the highest order. The following diagram shows McLeod's method in operation.

I do not know whether Mcleod was inspired by the researches of Le?vi-Strauss but it is certain that in the reconstructive, diachronic methodology, there is a striking resemblance. In any case, by the seventies, the French structuralist movement had crossed the channel and the intellectual universe all over had undergone a decisive transformation. The predominant structural framework had replaced the simple chronological or even synchronic, metonymic descriptions. All discursive formations were being studied with a constant going back and forth in the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic or the metonymic and the metaphoric order. The emphasis was on the study of the *becoming of the structures* which were always uneven, with more or less functional load in one or the aspect of their combinatory systems. Lévi-Straussian structuralism never believed in ready made structures.
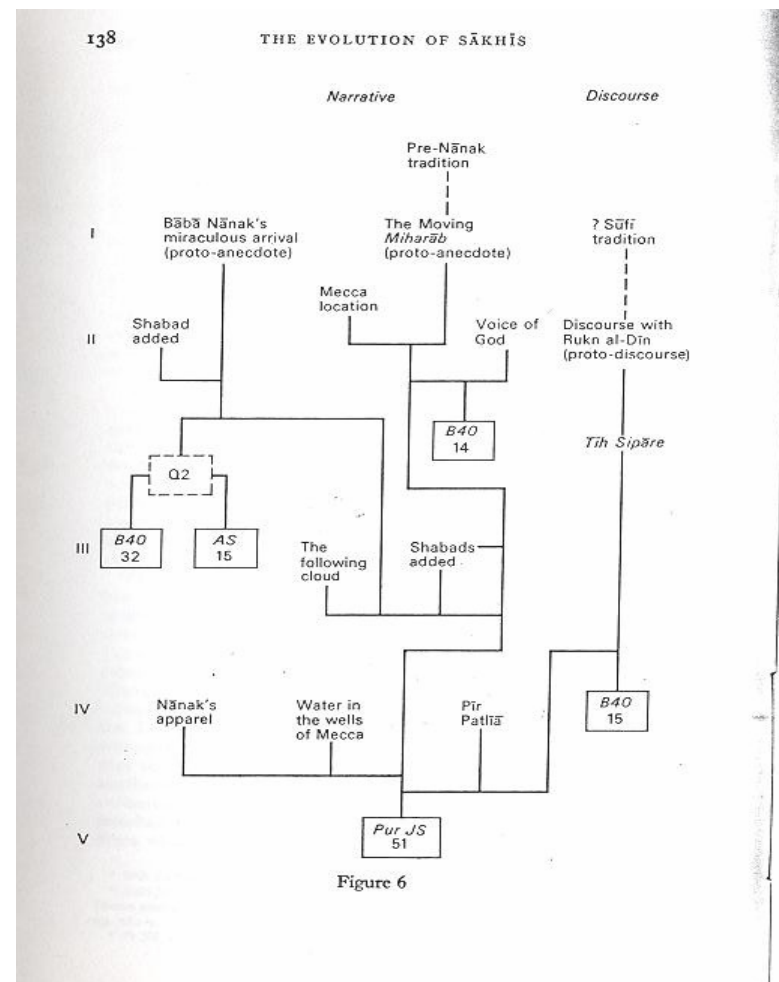

Figure 6

Post Script

This paper was sent to Professor McLeod. Here is his e-mail.
Feb 14, 2009.
Dear Harjeet,

Your paper arrived this week and it came as a tremendous surprise. You had prepared me to some extant by your earlier message but the paper really floored me. Early Sikh Tradition is my favourite work but I never imagined that it would receive the attention which you have given to it. I am still recovering. Thank you very very much for your treatment of it.

Best wishes, Hew.