



„Analiza i Egzystencja” 62 (2023), 121–133
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2023.62-06

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The Problem of the “Primeval Mind” and Symbolic Thinking in Early Anthropological-Philosophical Approaches

Keywords: symbol, image, symbolic thinking, primeval mind, development of thinking, “mythical thought,” “savage mind,” Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss

Słowa kluczowe: symbol, obraz, myślenie symboliczne, umysł pierwotny, rozwój myślenia, „myśl mityczna”, „myśl nieoswojona”, Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss

Abstract

The article examines the concept of the “primeval mind,” the “savage mind,” and “mythical thought” in the approaches of early (Tylor, Lévy-Bruhl) and later (Lévi-Strauss) anthropology with some philosophical approaches (Vico, Cassirer). The aim of the research is to demonstrate the common elements of these notions and to consider certain approaches from the point of view of contemporary research on the presence of the image in culture, indicating how much these early concepts help to understand the relationship between imaging and thinking, as well as its importance and impact on the “omnipresence of the image” in our culture.

Introduction

We can observe an interest in the relationship between symbolic and abstract thinking; these relationships can be viewed from the perspective of various academic disciplines and their specific approaches, for example:

“Paleoanthropologists have long sought to explain the origins of modernity and modern thinking. Debates about their origins usually include the terms ‘abstraction’ and ‘symbolic thinking,’ often proffered without clear or operational definitions” (Coolidge & Overmann, 2012). The problem of the origins of thinking is pivotal from the point of view of many disciplines. In many sub-branches of anthropology, this is sometimes seen as very distant in the development of the species—the beginnings of symbolic thinking are sometimes related to the interpretation of artifacts from 32,000 years ago; and nowadays (neuroanthropology) it is understood in connection with the evolution of the human brain, the “neurological substrate”—especially in the area of the intraparietal sulcus and the angular gyrus due to their role in numerosity and abstraction—which connects it with perceived objects, and hence also generating the ability for high-symbolic thinking (Coolidge & Overmann, 2012). There have been many previous attempts to portray the concurrency and interactions between socio-cultural and biological factors. Turner and Whitehead (2008) note “the feedback relationship between these two types of representation—the collective and the cortical—and which demonstrates that collective representations can have well-defined cortical representations” (Turner & Whitehead, 2008, p. 43), emphasizing the reciprocity of relationships and the profound influence of social factors: “Even our basic perceptions are colored profoundly by our social experience” (Turner & Whitehead, 2008, p. 44). The history of research into symbolic thinking is, however, of a different nature. It started first with noticing its specificity.

The “primeval mind” and “traditional culture” feature among the basic issues in anthropology. Nowadays, however, the first of these is rarely used—currently, mainly in reference to the history of anthropology, especially the evolutionist current, but also in relation to the central dispute of modern times, which concerns in general the possibility for anthropological cognition, representationism and the question of how we can even think about “getting to know the other” living in a different culture and the networks of meanings created within it. If the study of the diversity of cultures, the “interest in the Other” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2006), and “the theoretical approach to the ‘us-them’” relationship (Burszta, 1992) focused the attention of the developing anthropology, then along with the category of “primeval mind” (Burszta, 1992, p. 7) we are at the very center of this science and of the possibilities of knowledge which she believed

she was or was realizing, and of contemporary critics of them, which in science and philosophy eventually led to a "crisis of representationalism." A specific basis was also the diagnosed "crisis of tribalism in its pure form" (Burszta, 1992) and the questions of whether anthropology as a science is possible at all. Its foundations discussed nowadays are the classical empiricist theory, the positivist paradigm of the theory of cognition; and there was also support from evolutionist psychology and functionalism in sociology (Turner & Whitehead, 2008, p. 44). This foundation permeated anthropology from its origins to the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, this science has been accompanied by many decades of discussions over itself and its theoretical foundations, and their certain discreditation (Radomski, 2016). This criticized not only the status of its foundation, but also its contribution to political domination, ethnocentrism, and its entanglement in colonialism (Radomski, 2016), emphasizing that it is a discourse entangled in the context of one's own culture (Burszta, 1992, p. 9). However, its potential for commitment and emancipation is not denied. Nowadays, anthropology is still convinced that anthropological knowledge "allows us to better understand our world," enables discussion "in a long conversation about humanity," and bridges "mutual understanding and respect."¹ There are, however, many problems in this mission of anthropology: the already marked dispute over representationalism, but also others, such as the aging of experience and its meaning, the knowledge that flows from it for successive generations, a direct threat from the "Other," or the phenomenon of infotainment (Tokarska-Bakir, 2006). One can also admit that in the face of contemporary political events, war, refugees, and migrations, the problem with Otherness is already a pressing central problem.

The "Primeval Mind"

The first approaches to the problem can be found in treating the activity of the mind in the cultures of tribal societies as "lower" or "childish." Some forms of this attitude have a long history in European thought and one can observe such reasoning, for example, in the approach of G. Vico. His thought is understood as a kind of anti-naturalistic turn of the eighteenth century,

¹ See European Association of Social Anthropologists [EASA] (2015).

in which the sources of new approaches are “triple”: the history of human nature is linked to universal history: “Thus our science becomes at the same time the history of ideas, customs and beliefs of the human race. It is a triple source of principles of the history of human nature, which are principles of universal history ...” (Vico, 1966, pp. 160–161 § 368). Human nature in some features, writes Vico, is shared with animal nature. We must know through the senses. “Enormous” is the scale of sensuality, rich in imagination, and just as great in the initial inability to reason. It is awakened by delight and admiration. The nature of the mind in these initial stages of humanity is similar to the nature of children—“[T]hings admired are assigned a substantial being” (Vico, 1966, p. 167). Primeval humans are therefore “like children of mankind.” They are ruled by imagination stimulated by sensual motives, combined with passions and directing the mind toward the material element. Thus, the features of the mind of primeval people are: sensuality, active imagination, emotionality, and curiosity that stimulates cognition. The beginning of individual life and the beginning of cultural development are similar. A story, a myth, and a fairy tale (*fabula*); the first stories refer to reality in a metaphorical, not mirror-like way. They are the imposition of the internal operations of the mind and the perception of reality external to it in a certain unity. Thus, the mind itself and reality are reflected in the formations of the mind. Imagination triggers the so-called fantastic universal (*fantastico universale*), which gives rise to images of surreal beings; the divine figure is like a fantastic universal, and this one resembles the gods: “There are amazingly many Jupiters, because every pagan nation had its own Jupiter” (Vico, 1966, p. 170).

Imagination, then, is the main driving force of the mind; and structures organize all its creations. This conception remains in nineteenth-century evolutionist interpretations. In ethnopsychological terms, ethnology searched for material to describe the universal laws of human thinking manifested in various cultures. However, quick efforts were made to draw attention to the qualitative distinctiveness of the psyche and mentality in so-called primeval cultures. Tylor and Frazer consider the imagination to be unbridled (freaks of the imagination; Tylor, 1896), rich but creating according to certain types. The effects of its operation, however, do not deserve to be believed because these effects are not based on the systematic observation of the processes of nature. They find fantastic causes in the attempts of their imagination to meet cognitive goals. So the original mind

is imperfect, gives fantastic causes of phenomena, trying to answer general questions. Tylor believed that the imagination was "playful, wild and rich" and that it influenced the creation of a "mythological mood of mind" in which there are some attempts to explain natural processes. The primeval human is a "simplistic philosopher" who projects their states of mind and life into the image of the all-living nature (animism) on the images of the external world. The very mythological mood of the mind is to some extent a relic, which persists, for example, in poetry by a certain inertia in the higher stages of cultural development. The *primal mind* is guided by imitative and contact magic. This kind of magic is based on false analogies in relations between objects. A human's imagination is ruled by fear and ignorance in the knots of "constantly changing phantasmagoria." The primal mind is then the "enchanted land of magic and myth." Its state is no longer directly available to us because we are no longer able to think like primeval humans.

L. Lévy-Bruhl's concept of the pre-logical mind rose to another level of consideration. His work developed in primeval societies (*société inférieure*, lit. "lower"; Lévy-Bruhl, 1992), and is guided by polysynthetic perception (through various sensory channels) and mystical participation, i.e., by perceiving "facts" as manifestations of the action of the spiritual continuum constituting the essence of reality. "Facts" in external processes "merely exist." They have no power to shake their beliefs about this spiritual wholeness. The prelogical mind connects data together in a certain associative whole; the rules for organizing data are so-called collective representations, passed on by the power of tradition from generation to generation, imposed on an individual, universally respected and strongly associated with the emotions of fear and adoration, and with the motoric sphere. Memory and emotions play a role of psychological importance in the formation of collective representations. There is no principle of contradiction in them. The power of the emotions evoked exceeds the logical value much later in the development of cognition. There is no division into the object and the subject of cognition yet ("Les primitifs voient avec les mêmes yeux que nous: ils ne perçoivent pas avec le même esprit"; Lévy-Bruhl, 1910, p. 38)—"Primevals see with the same eyes as us: they do not perceive with the same mind"). "Pre-logic" is "other logic."

Wundt's ideas sound similar—and within the framework of evolutionism. The myth-creating mind responds to the needs of humans to reduce the fear of the unknown world and tame it by giving it a specific shape and

name. Just as pointing out that myth is intended to (incorrectly) explain natural phenomena or (veiled) present distant historical events, psychological views of it as a tool for reducing anxiety and “taming” reality—all these sets of explanations were also criticized. Cassirer noted that the type of psychological explanations “appropriated” the area of myth, and its influence led to its being treated in the perspective of “objective cognitive nullity,” as if it were not an insight into reality external to the mind, but only an internal game, with a feeling of anxiety and fear against the unknown world. Psychological approaches to the myth, however, went beyond the horizon of “fearful mytho-genesis” and falsifying the image of the world, or extra-world escapism. There are far more complex approaches among them, which still renewing the question about the primeval mind in a new framework. Structuralism and psychoanalysis were considered to be trends contributing to a change in the contemporary perception of symbolic culture and myth (Wunenburger, 2005). What was discovered as the structures ordering the work of the imagination and its leading influence on the operation of the primeval mind, psychoanalysis discovers in a different perspective and also in the activity of the mind of the individual as demarcation features of the unconscious. The primeval mind is the unconscious mind. In this sense, it is not simply something biologically and culturally transcendent in terms of evolution, the ancient *archai* of the human being, but its still-active and determining evolutionary bio-cultural basis. Structuralism, on the other hand, having rejected the already discredited concept of the evolutionary stages of cultural development and mind, pointed to the specificity of the savage mind based on intellectual motives and binary oppositions in our thinking, trying to build a “mythological bridge” over the gap between opposites. Human thinking is always the same, but in the savage mind it faces specific objects: the contradictions of our existence and questions of an eschatological nature. Thus, both psychoanalysis and structuralism rejected the hypothesis of “earlier stages,” which would be “crossed” in the modern mind. In psychoanalytical terms, the unconscious is an evolutionary heritage; but it has not been deactivated by the level of developing abstract thinking and rules of logic, and in structuralist terms the “savage mind” (*la pensée sauvage*) is at the same time human thinking in general but confronted with particularly significant contradictions of human existence.

So gradually, instead of reflecting on the specificity and imperfection of the prelogical primeval mind, a long process of attempts to

characterize the specificity and demarcation features of symbolic/mythological thinking began. The depiction of "mythical thought" in Cassirer's philosophy was of great importance.

Mythological/Mythical Thinking

Cassirer's approach to "mythical thought" (Cassirer, 1977) is set in a different, neo-Kantian background for the activity of symbolic forms. Myth is one of the pure symbolic forms mediating between the mind and the world—"it lives in a world of pure forms that are considered completely objective" (Cassirer, 1977, p. 35). Mythical thought is a flywheel in the process of the development of human consciousness. It is obvious to Cassirer that the stage that follows is an ethical thought in which the foundation of spirituality is not so much a simple *bios*, but *ethos*, moral awareness. Thinking in myth is specific; it has some distinctive features: (1) associating occurs according to the principle of temporal contact (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*); (2) it also occurs according to spatial contact (*juxta hoc ergo propter hoc*); (3) it considers parts as equal to the whole (*pars pro toto*); (4) it freely determines the causes of phenomena; (5) what is spiritual is understood as material substance; (6) the function of intuition dominates in cognition; (7) myth is closely related to magic. In its reflection on myth, philosophy should "try to grasp, in concreto, the particular way in which, within each scope, what is sensual becomes a carrier of meaning" (Cassirer, 2004, p. 53).

So what is the value of mythological thinking? Is it only inscribed in the history of culture as some chronological—or even coexisting with—abstract thinking?

From a different philosophical and anthropological perspective, Lévi-Strauss adds value to the savage mind as to the thinking of modern humans. A myth is the result of an intellectual impulse, i.e., an attempt to find an answer to the question of how contradictions relate to each other, and not a vague creation derived from "cloudy feelings," and even tries to organize and find expression for them (Lévi-Strauss, 2000). So it is also the result of the mind's operation of juxtaposing contradictions and connecting them. It is a logical tool that operates on the extremely difficult problems of existence. Humankind therefore "has always thought well," and the myth itself is "for thought." It enables the articulation and

naming of “unformulated states” (Lévi-Strauss, 2000). Magical thinking is not a start, a beginning, a sketch, he writes, but a related, parallel system that deals with phenomena other than science (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 26).

Although it rarely goes to the realities at the level to which the objects of interest of modern science belong, the intellectual procedures and methods of observation that occur on both these levels are comparable. In both of these cases, the subject of thought is the entire world, at least as a set of means for meeting needs. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 8)

But the pragmatic goals are not overriding: “But here is the point that its first goal is not a practical goal. It meets intellectual requirements prior to or alternative to meeting needs” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 19).

He calls magical thinking (in reference to the works of M. Mauss and H. Hubert) “gigantic variations on the principle of causality” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 21). Lévi-Strauss even suggests that magical (etiological) thinking should be considered as an expression of unconscious understanding of the truth about causation as the principle of the world. “It seems, then, that man started with the most difficult things” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 23), i.e., the principles of organizing the whole of reality, and then narrows down its field of research.

Naming and understanding are related to needs. Lévi-Strauss also emphasizes the savage mind’s perceived taste for “objective understanding of the states” of the outside world and “intense attention” directed at its own environment. These are the least appreciated qualities of the “savage mind.” He tries to show (quoting H. C. Conklin) a high degree of integration with the environment and an extremely rich knowledge of plants and animals— “[T]here are two separate ways of scientific cognition, both of course being a function of two strategic levels on which nature can be attacked by scientific cognition. One corresponds to the level of perception and imagination, the other is more distant from this level ...” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 28). Magical thinking and myth use intellectual *bricolage*: that is, explanations and connections that they have in their availability. The *bricoleur* talks about himself and life by choosing what is around, and what he has with him (Lévi-Strauss, 1962a, p. 37). Mythical thought moves and shifts its elements in search of meaning.

Although Lévi-Strauss wrote that he hated traveling and travelers and that one can devote “six months of travel, privation, and sickening physical

weariness merely in order to record an unpublished myth, a new marriage rule, or complete list of names of clans names" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962b, p. 17), he was one of those researchers who recognized a value in the savage mind. Myth is also thinking that is interested in the outside world, based on observation and the search for the causes of phenomena, generalizing thinking and looking for order and meaning.

The image of the "primeval mind" can be brought out in many conceptions of philosophical, anthropological, and psychological thought. The name for this image is not the same everywhere. Behind the specificity of the operation of thinking in symbolic culture there are many terms: the primary mind, magical attitude, "prelogical thinking," "mythical/mythological thought," "symbolic thinking," and even in some way referred to in a different horizon, the "savage mind," "myth-logic." These point to some different primeval mind working in a different way from the modern one or some other pole of mind or the same mind, but operating on different objects. Symbolic culture in traditional (tribal) societies is different from the contemporary one of industrial, post-industrial and now, digital society. The difference studied by anthropologists was recognized as resulting, inter alia, from a different mind operation or from an altered mind pole or from different objects of thought.

Common Features in the Concepts of Mythical Thought

It can be seen that the demarcation features of the mental process reflected in all these concepts can be grouped according to some similarities. This process operates on images, combining them into groups of spatial or temporal coexistence; the *pars pro toto principle* works, and the principle of identity does not function; there are coexisting contradictions (Lévi -Strauss) (the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*, Wierciński, 1994).

Many of these features are characterized negatively. This negativity is treated as the absence of certain rules of formal logic (Nowicka, 2007). These semantems are characterized by the ability to stimulate emotions and even worship attitude and motoric activity; they strongly affect the systems of understanding and action. This is always linked to the relation of an individual's activity with socially shaped meanings (Holl, 2018, p. 3).

Is this thinking? Can these operations be considered the cognitive process of association and inference operating on symbols, images, and judgments? The neurobiological approach, which recognizes the archaic lineage of images and their relationship with feelings, as well as the influence of perceptual images, establishes an even stronger relationship between images and the very process of thinking as a movement, a sequence of transformations of perceptual representations and the result of the activity of unconscious memory searching operations. Even when it comes to the currently designated main aspects of thinking, the dynamic and motoric aspect, as related to processuality and goal orientation, are certainly noticeable in mythical thinking, while the operational aspect is definitely different from the abstract one. “Symbolic thinking” is understood as operations on symbols and signs aimed at a communicative and cognitive goal; what thought operates is translations of affective-emotional experiences. It seems that many types of thinking, if not all thinking, must be based on the manipulation of symbols. Coolidge and Overmann noticed this contiguity of abstract and symbolic thinking:

Abstraction is generally considered the act or process of deciding that something has a general quality or characteristic apart from its concrete realities or specific properties. Common definitions of symbolic thinking (symbolization) are similar: something used for or regarded as representing something else, where the symbol can be arbitrary (possess no qualities of the represented object). In this regard, symbolization can be viewed as a more concretized category of abstraction, because abstraction is more often considered in the context of mental representations without external or physical referent, though there is certainly some kind of internal concept or referent. (Coolidge & Overmann, 2012, p. 204)

Symbolic thinking is, however, earlier; and the operations themselves between these types of thinking vary greatly.

The Anthropology of Image and Iconosphere—Recapitulation

We are participating in a new type of culture that produces new forms of work and communication, and even the time and space of work-related practices. This creates a new field for anthropological research—discussion

communities, and relationships between online and offline reality, as well as large data collections of texts, photos, and videos. It is becoming possible to perceive polyphony and dialogicality; there are also very individualized forms of records of experiences and of reaching the majority of the world’s population, “access to what is more intimate and personal” (Miller, 2018).

With its early questions about the activity of the primeval mind, anthropology for a long time could have been based on the permanence and very slow changes in research and formulated conclusions about traditional cultures, the territory of which began to “shrink” over time; now, however, it is faced with the problem of rapid change as such, a “flood of novelty” within its own culture. One of the seemingly obvious conclusions is the domination of images in the space of communication; even the phenomenon of “viral” images on the one hand, and ideas on the other hand, quickly create patterns of normativity. The problem of mythological thinking allows us to better understand why images are becoming the most important carriers in the space of cyberculture, presenting a certain continuity of imaging, “image-active thought activities” (Kwiatkowska, 2013, p. 174; named after H. Bredekamp) and pictorial practices and their significance in the connection of an individual’s activity and socio-cultural spaces.

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Citation

Błocian, I. (2023). The problem of the “primeval mind” and symbolic thinking in early anthropological-philosophical approaches. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, 62 (2), 121–133. DOI: 10.18276/aie.2023.62-06.