

23. HYENAS AND DEMON BRIDES (5/03)

Myth analysis is something that can't be learned in the abstract.

Essential to work thru texts, to practice doing it

We have two examples, from Beidelman and Hymes, gives us some hints as to how to read myths

Hyenas and witchcraft

Q. In the story of hyena and rabbit, what kinds of information does Beidelman give us from outside the story itself that helps us understand it?

Kaguru ideas about the two animals.

Kaguru ideas about witchcraft, association of hyena with witchcraft

The organization of society, specifically matrilineal kin groups. Not only why hyena is so much more culpable, but also why rabbit may be crafty and selfish too, because death of senior woman of lineage breaks it up, releases rabbit from authority

Hard to see how one could adequately analyze the tale without this information not found in the text itself.

In effect, the synecdoche of myth is turned back into metaphor by showing that characters in story have counterparts in daily life. B makes sense of events and characters in story in part by reading them against those counterparts.

Shows how something can be quite different from daily life and yet have a lot to say about daily life.

The woman who pees like a man

Hymes considers a myth from the Northwest Coast

Much less info from society than with Beidelman

Q. What does Hymes use instead of that info to find structure and meaning in the text?

Why does he reject the previous analysis by Jacobs?

First and most important, close attention to the actual language of the text.

Nothing in words to support Jacob's inference about horror of homosexuals etc.

Hymes' emphasis on wording suggests one of great problem with myth analysis, namely that so many of the texts we have are poor, can't get at words as H does

H is a professional linguist, tape recording texts, then transcribing and translating them with great care and detail

But many myth texts collected in much more mechanical, perfunctory way:

Someone doing brief fieldwork sits down with informant and translator, asks to tell tales.

Collects myths not only because expected, because long history of interest in myths--- also that one of the easier things to collect in field. Doesn't take much initiative or care on part of researcher.

Then, in process of collecting, the informant has to tell the story very slowly, while the translator converts it from one language to another and collector writes it down.

Dragged-out process. Can imagine that often informant gets bored or doesn't want to prolong session, so tells somewhat truncated version, leaves details, even whole episodes out.

Then have to think about translator. Often member of group with a little schooling, in many cases speaks only basic version of the contact language. So translation can be simplified or even distorted.

So version of myths that collected in this way are seldom optimum, and often really crude or garbled or mistranslated. In cases I have examined where I know the story or know the language, I can see how much cruder the published version is than the one I heard among the people themselves.

Even more, this method of collecting, even when done with great care and text tape-recorded, still divorces the text utterly from its use and context. Doesn't tell us when performed, by who, for what reasons, how completely, etc. etc. Is in totally unnatural situation, dictating story.

So myth analysis may require recording, transcribing, and translating yourself.

Q. So what does Hymes get out of story thru close reading? That girl not culpable. That not foregrounding theme of homosexuality, etc.

Q. Beside close reading of text, what other method does Hymes use? Comparison within the corpus of myths, finds others that similar in many ways but with significant difference. Thus finds several stories where are questions of following moral dictates and following common sense. Shows that this one is story of someone, seal, who so concerned with propriety that she doesn't sufficiently heed common sense.

Hymes is inspired by L-S, but his results not really that close to kind of thing that L-S does. Often the case: scholars inspired by method but change it around, make new versions. I don't know of anyone who did exactly the same as L-S himself.

Hymes analysis persuasive but not necessarily the complete story. Beidelman might ask about ideas in culture about seals. Dundes might point out similarity with Asian LRRH variants in which identity is revealed by bodily processes. This might be significant theme. Might have to consider more thoroughly the fact the crucial indicator is pissing. I also wonder about how mythology in this society might be about marriage. Many myths about marrying animals or stars or deities---may have something to say about marriage in their society.

Also, might wonder if monster spouse might represent certain kind of danger. Kuna have story about man who turns up, says he has been away from society as migrant laborer, marries woman in family. Eventually turns out he is a cannibal monster, has been killing and cutting up his brother-in-law, bringing meat back to serve family. Is a metaphor about the dangers of outside world, outsiders who want to harm and exploit Kuna. Also

about sexual dangers those outsiders present, want to take Indian women. So with Hymes' example, might be particular kind of danger.