

BOOK REVIEWS

MEANING OF MYTH

Les Mythes chez les Selk'nam et les Yamana de la Terre de Feu

By Mireille Guyot. (Université de Paris Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, No. 75.) Pp. 220. (Institut d'Ethnologie: Paris, 1968.) 50 francs.

THE Selk'nam and the Yamana of Tierra del Fuego offer in dramatic effect a continental parallel to the inhabitants of Easter Island, as representatives of peoples at the furthest extremity of human migration. Their ultimate isolation gives a special value, historical and theoretical, to their civilization; and the moral impact of their situation is grievously intensified by the irreparable circumstance that they are now practically extinct. Our knowledge of them derives mainly from the researches carried out in the early nineteen-twenties by Martin Gusinde, who presented his findings in German publications which are not readily accessible everywhere. The present work, by a Swiss anthropologist in the service of the Société des Américanistes de Paris, comprises translations into French of the 50 Selk'nam and 61 Yamana myths recorded by Gusinde, accompanied by commentaries and a new classification of content and theme. The volume is most efficiently supplied with maps, illustrations, bibliography and indexes.

This useful enterprise is well prepared for by the current revival of interest, on the part of social anthropologists, in the analysis of myth, a movement most prominently inspired and exemplified by the impressive extent of Lévi-Strauss's recent volumes, *Mythologiques*, on South American mythology. (Only the third in his series, *L'Origine des Manières de Table*, resorts to the same material, however, and then only briefly alludes to one myth.) The situation is of methodological importance, also, in that although they are contiguous the Selk'nam and the Yamana are physically, linguistically and economically distinct; the former are hunters of land game, the latter subsist on marine life. There is sufficient evidence on modes of livelihood and other matters to permit a comprehension of the myths in local terms and to make analysis possible. It is only to be regretted, because there is no telling what narrative detail may not prove crucial to an interpretation, that it has been found necessary to reproduce the myths in abridged form.

Mlle Guyot sees both collections of myths as falling into two main classes, one dealing with order and the other with disorder. Myths in the former class have to do with the origin of men and of animals, the destruction of monsters, the fabrication of weapons, the introduction of fire, the sharing out of territories, and so on; the latter class deals with the power of shamans, rivalry, dissimulation, cannibalism and deception. Taken together, the thirteen "schemes" thus distinguished can be assorted into five "groups" comprising topics from both classes, with certain residual schemes concerned with animals and fire. The author attempts to relate the topics which constitute each group by means of "transformations" calling upon oppositions like life/death, sickness/initiation, and organized by such relations and operations as symmetry and inversion. It is suggested that the Selk'nam have a better articulated conception of time and space than have the Yamana. There is an interesting section

on the function of laughter, in both myth and social life, which resorts again to a dyadic analysis, this time in terms of noise and silence and the significance of the ambiguous. The study concludes by outlining the close relationship between the myths of the Selk'nam and the Yamana, though there are said to be differences of philosophical cast: the former appear as virile and realistic, preoccupied with struggle, whereas the latter are found to be less brutal and more poetic.

The exactitude and objectivity of Mlle Guyot's method of analysis might be argued, but her translations and her painstaking investigation have undeniably made a valuable contribution to the study of myth. They also render a moving tribute to the wretched and desperate human beings whose vanished world of meaning these enigmatic tales commemorate.

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OLDENBURG'S CORRESPONDENCE

The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg

Vol. 4, 1667-1668. Edited and translated by A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall. Pp. xxv+601+4 plates. (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1967.) 119s.

THE excellence of the first three volumes of this great enterprise of the Halls has been made clear already by previous reviewers, and its continued value and success might be taken for granted.

We should not, however, let volume 4 find its way onto the shelves without saying something more about it, even if we do no more than underline the fact that there is always something new to be discovered about the community of which Oldenburg made himself the hub. To the historian of science who frets at the neglect of regions such as late 19th century technology or the unread manuscripts of Arabic alchemy, the meticulous editing of the correspondence of a man who lived in a period which seems overwritten, who was neither experimentalist nor theorist, might seem a misdirection of talent. This would be to misunderstand the purpose of the project. It is not as if the Halls were capable only of multiplying minutiae. Each has shown, elsewhere, an ability to take a wide view of wide movements in science. The very fact that they find it necessary to divide their energy between general works of interpretation and this specialist record of the Oldenburg correspondence should suggest to us that there is a balance in the exercise of scholarly talent which it is possible to maintain and ought to be sought.

It is easy enough to accept that Oldenburg's correspondence could be a key to the origins of science as we know it, but when we do in fact turn the key we find that he knew, and his contemporaries knew, a science in many ways different from what the myth-makers of science would have us believe was 17th century science. It is often said that each generation rewrites history for itself. This is only true when new material is used. Much of what is still said about the origins of science in the 17th century in new textbooks is merely paraphrase of the old, based on too little source material. A modern rewriting of the history of the science of the 17th century must come from the enlargement of detailed knowledge of the people directly involved. When we look at the Halls' work in this light, we can see dimly beyond it the new works by other authors which will be greatly in its debt.

This volume covers a period of great activity the detail of which needs careful re-examination. The many reports of blood transfusions, for example, make it clear that where subjects survived, no effective transfer took place. Clarke's remarks on the microscopy of the testis, Beale's touching praise of the new optical aid for his failing vision, Wren's description of a new building for