

# Myth and Psyche

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## Abstract:

One of the most influential schools of mythological interpretation has been the Analytical (or Depth) Psychology of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst. After his defection from the Psychoanalytic fraternity, Jung founded the Analytic Psychology school, in the year 1914. One of the objectives of this school was to approach the study of the human psyche through myths and archetypes. He developed a stronger and more inclusive approach to myths through his theory. In this present paper, an attempt will be made to explore his theory on myths.

**Keywords:** Unconscious, Archetype, Folklore.

## Introduction:

Jung's psychology is based on his own experience with human beings, normal, neurotic, and psychotic, it is not a kind of psychopathology, though it takes the empirical material of pathology into account, but his theories are in his own words – 'suggestions and attempts at the formulation of a new scientific experience with human beings' (Sharma 1990:236). Besides, *Tantrik* Symbolism and Yoga have enriched his understanding of the symbols of the collective unconscious.

He shares Freud's view that the conscious mind is only a fraction of the human psyche, the unconscious being by far the more extensive portion. According to Jung, the unconscious is not merely a cellar where man dumps his rubbish, but the source of consciousness and the creative and destructive spirit of mankind. To achieve equilibrium between the three levels of the psyche, viz., consciousness, personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious are required to achieve sanity, integration, wholeness, or salvation. In this connection, Jung states:

The notion of the unconscious is purely psychological for me, it is not a philosophical concept in the metaphysical meaning. The unconscious is a boundary psychological notion overlapping all those contents or mental processes which are not conscious; this means that they do not refer in a perceptible way to 'I' (cited in Błocian 2015:219)

In other words, that which lies below the personal unconscious is known as the 'Collective unconscious' or 'Racial unconscious.' The Racial or Collective unconscious is deeper, which according to Jung, is the common ground of humanity out of which each individual develops his personal conscious and unconscious life. It is transpersonal. As he says, 'The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual' (cited in Sharma 1990:247). In other words, it is inherited in the structure of the organism, including the native brain structures. It predisposes the individual to think and act in the way the human race has thought and acted through countless generations (*ibid.*:247). In a way, the whole concept in Jungian understanding in this context is the extension of Freudian concepts of *ontogeny* and *phylogeny* (Baral 1998:218). Accordingly, the 'collective conscious' or 'racial unconscious' is the repository of human experience that contains 'archetypes.'

## Jung and Myths:

Jung states that myth is an integral part of all religions, a supreme achievement of humankind because myths everywhere provide a means of attaining individual identity and personhood, for they can show the limits and the possibilities of human development. Regarding the concept of myths, Jung states:

myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes ... modern psychology treats the products of unconscious fantasy-activity as self-portraits of what is going on in the unconscious, or as statements of the unconscious psyche about itself' (cited in Dundes 1984:248-249).

Thus, according to Jung, myths are an internal process that reflects profound aspects of self, as well as the 'collective unconscious' from which it arises. In other words, a myth is not about the physical world or no more about gods; instead, it is about the mind because humans can only project onto the world those gods already in their minds. Mythical structures are those that appeared in the past analogous to dream structures, which may operate for the individual today (Doty 2000:201). Jung was so convinced of the reality of these recurrent images and symbols that he suggested that if all the world's traditions were suddenly destroyed, the whole of the mythology and the whole of the religion would start all over again with the next generation. Not, of course, in the same format and contours, but 'as the forms of energy.' Therefore, Jung maintains that 'myths and symbols can arise autochthonously in every corner of the earth and yet are identical because they are fashioned out of the same worldwide human unconscious, whose contents are infinitely less variable than are races and individuals' (*ibid.*: 199). Segal (1999:67) states that Jung likewise interprets 'the myth of the death and rebirth of a god as symbolic, but symbolic of a process taking place in

the mind, not in the world. That process is the return of the ego to the unconscious - a kind of temporary death of the ego - and its re-emergence or rebirth, from the unconscious.'

Jung developed a stronger and more inclusive approach to myths as a whole, by no means restricted to Greek and Latin mythology. In his lifetime, he was extraordinarily open to Eastern philosophical and religious thought, to archaic indigenous materials and Christian-heretical (Gnostic and alchemical) thought (*ibid.*:195). Nevertheless, he maintains that the greatest difficulty lies not in the fact that myths are encrypted symbolically but that the symbols used to convey their meanings do so both indirectly and worse, inadequately. However, he also admitted transcendent aspects of myth could not be proved or disproved:

Why, then, should we deprive ourselves of views that prove helpful in crises and give a meaning to our existence? And how do we know that such ideas are not true? Many people will agree with me if I stated flatly that such ideas are illusions. What they fail to realize is that this denial amounts to a 'belief' and is just as impossible to prove as a religious assertion. We are entirely free to choose our standpoint; it will, in any case be an arbitrary decision. There is, however, a strong empirical reason why we should hold beliefs that we know can never be proved. Man positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give meaning to his life and enable him to find a place in the universe (Segal 1998:96).

Jung agreed with Freud that the logic of myths and the logic of dreams display great similarity, but differed on the points of Freud's insistence upon the primitive nature of these logics. He asserts:

The first attempts at myth-making can, of course, be observed in children, whose games of make-believe often contain historical echoes. But one must certainly put a large question mark after the [Freudian] assertion that myths spring from the 'infantile' psychic life of the race ... the myth-making and myth-inhabiting man was a grown-up reality and not a four-year child. The myth is certainly not an infantile phantasm, but one of the most important requisites of primitive life (Jung 1967:24-25).

According to Jung, the dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the psyche, opening into that cosmic night which was the psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness and which will remain in the psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness extends (Doty 2000:198-199). The dreamer shares with other dreamers, with mythmakers, and with artists a universally experienced world of images and symbols, and Jung, therefore, suggests that dreams and myths reveal the structure of the human psyche or soul (*ibid.*:199). Some of the symbols in dreams stem from the so-called collective unconscious that is, the part of the psyche that retains and transmits the general psychological inheritance of humanity. These symbols are so ancient and unfamiliar to modern man that he cannot directly understand or assimilate them (Jung 1964:107). Elsewhere, he maintains that in many dreams and poetic works, 'there are numberless interconnections to which one can find parallels only in mythological associations of ideas' (Doty 2000:197).

Furthermore, Jung's theory of myths is closely associated with his concept of archetypes. Of the archetypes, he states:

Psychic existence can be recognised only by the presence of *contents capable of consciousness*. We can, therefore, speak of an unconscious only in so far as we are able to demonstrate its contents. The contents of the personal unconscious are chiefly *feeling-toned* complexes, as they are called; they constitute the personal and private side of psychic life. The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as *archetypes* (Jung 1969:4).

In other words, the concept of the archetype is derived from the repeated observation that, for instance, 'the myths and fairy tales of world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere. We meet these same motifs in the fantasies, dreams, deliria, and delusions of individuals living today. These typical images and associations are what I call archetypal ideas' (Baral 1988:222). Lionel Corbett (1996:15) technically refers to the archetype as 'a fundamentally organizing principle' a template or blueprint, as an a priori pattern maker – in short, what religions refer to as spirit.

Moreover, the archetypes exist *a priori*, man does not invent them but simply inherits or receives them. They are indeed an instinctive trend, as marked as the impulse of birds to build nests, or ants to form organised colonies (Jung 1964:69). According to Jung, 'these archetypes, whose innermost nature is inaccessible to experience are the precipitate of the psychic functioning of the whole ancestral line; the accumulated experiences of organic life in general, a million times repeated and condensed into types' (Read 1979:2460). Jung cautions that an archetype, which is a purely unconscious process is fundamentally unknowable and lies beyond the pale of total explanation: 'even the best translation is no more than a lucky transposition into another figurative language' and 'the content expressed by an archetype resembles a comparison between two things' (Meletinsky 2000:46).

The archetypes cannot be logically understood, they are dominants of the collective unconscious. In them, the age-old experience of mankind is crystallized. They represent the wisdom of ages. They do not consist of inherited ideas but of inherited pre-dispositions to reaction. They are to borrow from Kant<sup>1</sup> - the noumena of the image, which intuition perceives and in perceiving creates. They are to be found in all religions, in all esoteric doctrines, mythologies, legends, fables, sagas, but they can also occur even when their mythological character is not recognized (Sharma 1990:249-250).

However, the archetypal image as a symbol is knowable and subject to the various processes of analytical exploration. He identified, for example, such mythic archetypes as the 'great mother,' 'the child,' 'the wise old man,' etc., - that they probably are ubiquitous and argued that these and many others are aspects of the collective unconscious influencing every individual psyche, regardless of gender, culture or personal history maybe even universal (Dundes 1984:2). The primordial images in fact, constitute the core of archetypes. The real nature of the archetype is not capable of being conscious that it is transcendent. It corresponds almost to a Gestalt in the broad conative sense of the word. It represents our timeless knowledge. Jung insists that mythmakers start with the archetypes, for example, the archetype of the hero. The archetype does not symbolise something else in turn but is itself symbolised. In other words, in all society myth makers are inventing only venues for the manifestation of already mythic material. The figure Odysseus, for example, gets either invented or appropriated to serve as a

Greek expression of heroism. For Jung, heroism like divinity constitutes so superhuman, a status that humans could not consciously have invented the idea (Segal 1999:76).

Jung identifies the archetype of the spirit, whose meaning is usually hidden by the chaos of everyday life with the 'old wise man,' who can take various forms such as a wise seer, a shaman, or Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and so on. In his later publications, Jung adds a new element to the theory of archetypes – 'the Karmic factor.' The Indian term Karma refers to a certain aspect of the doctrine of metempsychosis, namely, the influence exerted on a subsequent existence by what has happened in the previous. Jung regards this Karma as indispensable for a deeper understanding of the archetype (Sharma 1990:250).

### The Child Archetype:

Jung's remarkable essay on myth is *The Psychology of the Child Archetype* (1949) where he uses the 'child archetype' as an excellent example to set forth his overall theory of myth. Jung contends that the figure of the child in mythology symbolises not, as for Freud, the actual child but the archetypal child. As he says, 'one of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is a potential future ... it is therefore not surprising that so many of the mythological saviours are child gods' (Jung and Kerényi 2002:98-99). The archetype of the 'child god' is extremely widespread and intimately bound up with all the other mythological aspects of the child motif (Dundes 1984:251). Jung even alludes to the still living 'Christ-child' who in the legend of Saint Christopher also has the typical feature of being 'smaller than small and bigger than big' (*ibid.*). The mythic child is less human than divine, and while remaining literally a child, the child symbolises the lifelong process of psychological maturation (Segal 1999:84). The child symbolises the process of development in its broader sense, including the individuation, union, and integration of consciousness and the unconscious. The child is therefore indeed the father of the man.

In folklore, the child motif appears in the guise of the *dwarf* or the *elf* as personifications of the hidden forces of nature (Dundes 1984:251). In dreams, it often appears as the dreamer's son or daughter or as a boy, youth, or young girl. Occasionally, it seems to be of exotic origin, Indian or Chinese, with dusky skin or appearing more cosmically surrounded by stars or with a starry coronet; or as the king's son or the witch's child with daemonic attributes and at the special occasion as 'the treasure hard to attain' motif (*ibid.*:253). Furthermore, Jung maintains that the child motif is exceptionally variable and assumes all manner of shapes, such as the jewel, the pearl, the flower, the chalice, the golden egg, the quaternity, the golden ball, and so on, that can be interchanged with these and similar images almost without limit (*ibid.*). Moreover, the link between the birth and infancy of the gods or culture heroes with primordial matter is expressed, according to Jung and his collaborator Kerényi, by the images of water, an archetypal symbol of chaos, of the primordial condition of undifferentiated matter, the sun or of the primordial cosmic egg, which blurs the dividing line between man and the world, the subject and the object (Meletinsky 2000:47).

According to Jung, myths serve many functions, but the prime function of myth is psychological, i.e., to reveal the unconscious and to enable humans to experience it because myths not only provide information about the unconscious but also act as an entree to it. Moreover, the telling of myths 'causes these processes to come alive again and be recollected, thereby re-establishing the connection between conscious, and unconscious' (Segal 1999:77). Furthermore, the lives of characters in myth become models to be emulated: 'for instance, how a man should behave is given by an archetype. That is why primitives tell the stories they do ... our ancestors have done so and so, and so shall you. Or such and such a hero has done so and so, and this is your model' (*ibid.*:79). The subject matter of myth, therefore, is not literal but symbolic: not the external world but the human mind; they originate and function to satisfy the psychological need for contact with the unconscious (*ibid.*:67).

### Conclusion:

Since, however, the archetype is always an image belonging to the whole human race and not merely to the individual, it can be stated that the child archetype represents the preconscious childhood aspect of the collective psyche. An archetype is a motif found not merely within one myth but within many myths. In other words, any myth ordinarily contains multiple archetypes, though one archetype is often dominant. Moreover, the plot of myth is not only the manifestation of one archetype but also the development of them and their interaction. Furthermore, since men have not yet ceased to make statements about the child-god, we may perhaps extend the individual analogy to the life of mankind and say in conclusion that humanity too, probably always comes into conflict with its childhood conditions, that is, with its original unconscious and instinctive state and the danger of the kind of conflict which induces the vision of the 'child' actually exists.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant first developed the notion of the noumenon as part of his transcendental idealism, suggesting that while we know the noumenal world to exist because human sensibility is merely receptive, it is not itself sensible and must therefore remain otherwise unknowable to us. In Kantian philosophy, the unknowable noumenon is often identified with or associated with the unknowable 'thing-in-itself' (in Kant's German, *Ding an sich*).

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