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MYTH AS SCIENCE FICTION, A REPLY TO DE HEUSCH

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Luc De Heusch's reaction to my article on the restudy of Griaule brought out some interesting points, that do deserve further attention and discussion. It also shows an intensity of emotional involvement on his part that does blur some relevant arguments. Knowing the deep loyalties involved around Griaule, both by his close collaborators (Dieterlen), his kinspeople (Calame-Griaule) and his disciples (such as De Heusch) and after reading Meillassoux's comment on French academic culture, such a reaction is to be expected. Still, a few a priori corrections are called for. De Heusch treats an academic discussion as a trial, with me claiming to be judge, jury and hangman. On the other hand he calls me 'Reverend', maybe trying to discredit me as an anthropologist. I am not a reverend, nor a theologian, but a professional anthropologist, trained as such. The whole judicial terminology is out of order. My aim in the restudy is and has been to open a discussion about a topic that too long has been closed: the ethnographic validity of the Griaule publications. I have waited sometime before doing so, because of the emotional tensions that would be generated. Still, science is a discourse, even when it is sensitive; I felt I could not remain silent till a less hurtful date. Throughout the article I expressed my respect for the pioneering contributions of Griaule. While criticizing him on ethnographic grounds, I think I did him more justice in the role he really excelled in (and wished to excel in): as an adventurer and above all as a writer. So, if Griaule's intellectual progeny finds my analysis uncomfortable, it may be because adventure has seeped out of the discipline and good writers are scarce. For the Heusch the literary style of *Dieu d'Eau* (DE) detracts from its ethnographic value. Though I concur with De Heusch in his critique of DE, I do think Griaule's style is more than a device; it is at the heart of his ethnographic endeavour. His aim was to write a story and so he did, very well. When the difference between his subsequent books (and of course *Le Renard Pale* (RP) is for a considerable part the work of Dieterlen) had to be explained, the notion of initiatory stages was created, which is not recognizable for the Dogon.

De Heusch's main argument hinges on the notion of hidden myth, and the possibility of an immanent cosmology. The Dogon are, also for De Heusch, 'exceptional', if only because their system of classification is 'so meticulous'. He compares this with Pierre Smith's description of Rwanda proscriptions, covering all aspects of social life. Many other similar examples could be given, with intricate classifications, tied in to a variety of social parameters; Victor Turner's and Mary Douglas' works are full of those. There are, however, some crucial differences between these systems and that as described by Griaule in DE and RP. First, the latter classifications do not, in fact, correspond with social parameters, and if correspondences are indicated, mainly in DE, they have no empirical foundation. Secondly, in their detailed and seamless coverage, the DE and RP classifications are still unmatched in ethnographic literature. Even within the field of symbolics they are an anomaly.

The issue of immanence is pertinent. Turner's analysis of hidden myth is important, and often relevant in Africa. But not for the Dogon material, as Griaule does not use anything other than myth itself as a primal source. He definitely does not start with a description and analysis of ritual, nor do ritual elements feature in his analysis or his production of the myth. In fact, if Griaule would have deducted the myths from the rituals, he would have wound up with a totally different - and in my view definitely non-cosmological - set of interpretations; this is just what I try to do in my analysis, as any anthropologist who interprets ritual. The bits and pieces Griaule (and Dieterlen) worked with are not the rituals, nor are they the 'notes, sketches or fragments' Turner mentions; on the contrary, the building blocks of Griaule's analysis were created during his interviews, tailor-made for him. The clearest example is the grand majority of the drawings which were produced for the occasion (and therefore later forgotten in their explanation by informants). So the absence of a storyline in the Griaule mythology indeed is a problem, and Griaule and Dieterlen should not only have noted the absence but recognized it as a major obstacle.

As for the importance of the symbolic dimension, I do not belittle its importance (nor its role in future anthropology). But I do claim that symbolic dimensions should be studied in relation to historical, political and sociological parameters, which in fact has been the mainstay of anthropology since long. This is exactly what Griaule did not do; for Griaule the myth served as the *explanans*, not

the *explanandum*. In Dieterlen's analysis of masks the same strategy surfaces (Dieterlen, 1989): the myths find expression in the details of the masquerade, without any sociological, ecological or political reference. In fact, De Heusch concurs on this, as he writes that 'myths are not the keystone in the Dogon social structure, as Griaule and Dieterlen have sometimes imprudently implied'. More often than 'sometimes'.

This, of course, bears on the concept of myth itself. Somehow de Heusch seems to have gained the impression that for me myths should be unchanging, time-honoured tales, fully authentic and untouched by foreign hands. Not at all so, as I did make clear in the article. I consider the search for an authentic myth as the quest for the Holy Grail: an unattainable goal leading into an unproductive pursuit. Myths do represent social changes, political influences, individual goals and sometimes reflect history, and I fully recognize - and relish - their creative and adaptive dimensions. The very first article I wrote on the Dogon treats this aspect (Van Beek 1981). The shoe is on the other foot, in fact. First of all, as with many oral traditions, the Dogon in their crucial notion of *tèm* (tradition, 'that what is found') imply just such an authentic, unchangeable base. Even in the case of evident adaptations, 'tradition' invokes authenticity and absence of change. This, as said, is no exception at all. However, Griaule and Dieterlen identify with this emic Dogon definition of myth and tradition, and implicitly as well as explicitly define the myths as authentic, fully and wholly Dogon, disregarding any influences from outside on the Dogon. In effect, if any similarities between, say, Dogon and Bambara are in evidence, they explain these by referring to a general old Sudanese culture, of which the Dogon are one of the more faithful representatives. So it is the French Dogon ethnography who is questing for the Holy Grail; if not, they would have easily recognized many influences from e.g. biblical sources. For me there is no 'true Dogon' myth or religion, and my opening agreement with tenets of heuristic anthropology should have been clear enough. Therefore, I stated the problem of ethnographic validity in terms of recognizability and I still think that is where it resides. Griaule's tales are unrecognizable for Dogon informants, even in Sanga. So, even if there are no 'true Dogon tales', some tales are definitely not Dogon.

At the end of his comment, de Heusch mentions the complicated character of Dogon rituals, and tries to reduce my remarks on them to some ethnographic simplicities. This is not relevant: I nowhere underestimated the complexities of, say, the mask rituals; the bush - village distinction, though highly relevant, does not exhaust the polysemy of the *dama* at all. But, again, that polysemy cannot be honoured in an article, especially not in a discussion article; it has to be the subject of a monograph, as Douglas rightly insisted.

De Heusch accuses me of doing away with a great body of ethnographic material, in order to make sense in a chaos of contradiction. No, my informants did away with the myths, and when acquainted with the Griaule myths, pointed out the contradictions in them, explaining them away as constructions (or simply 'lies'). Not only informants from Tireli, but also informants from Sanga, and among them also informants who have worked and were still working with Dieterlen. The latter ones were particularly keen in pointing out the contradictions in the data. In explaining away the texts, they referred to the creative abilities of the individuals who had instructed or translated for Griaule at the time. Anyway, De Heusch here wants to eat his cake and have it: on the one hand he defends both the DE and RP texts, while on the other hand he dismisses DE as an 'enigma', possibly a black-smith version. The latter suggestion, though interesting, cannot be validated. Ogotemelli was not a blacksmith, while there are blacksmiths among the RP informant-circle. Moreover, the specific blacksmiths traditions that can be traced, have no bearing on creation, just on migration histories and on technical and ritual knowledge¹. So, De Heusch makes a similar distinction as I do, e.g. dismisses one text as 'enigmatic, problematic and trouble some' in order to save another one.

How indigenous are the new inventions of Griaule's informants, De Heusch's next question, is a crucial one. Delving into the almost famous dung beetles De Heusch suggests that Griaule's informants followed the parameters of their own classificatory system. In a way, that is evident indeed. Their referral to certain animals and specific colours are definitely Dogon: they used the Dogon terms at their disposal. However, the point is that this did not stem - nor needed to stem - from a 'classificatory mania' at all. The other Dogon, when confronted with this classification, simply roared with laughter - which is all the more convincing in such a polite society. Though the people who had told Griaule this were old, thus commanding respect, this was too much, this was fully ridiculous. So as far as it is Dogon, it is a Dogon joke.

In his next sections De Heusch, without stating as much, investigates what can be saved from the

ethnography. He agrees that Griaule erred in presenting a breachless system and goes into some ethnographic detail. On the whole I only have problems with his analysis when he mixes sources. One example: *Lèbè* is important in the Hogon complex, but the identification of *Lèbè* as a first ancestor is neither needed for explanation nor recognized as such by the informants (not even by the Sanga-ones!). *Lèbè* is much more than an underworld counterpart of Ama - I never said that - he is a supernatural being in his own right. And the ecological relevance of the *buoro* ritual is important in its symbolism, and quite straightforward. It is when cosmology is brought in that the problem starts. The same holds for *Nommo*, also an important Dogon deity. Even more than *Lèbè* he is drawn by Griaule into a grandiose, non-Dogon scheme, in which christian elements gradually emerge. That Dogon elements (menstruation, twins) continue to figure is just as evident, and does not at all detract from the *bricolage* aspect the myths. Of course, the informants used Dogon elements in their constructions. But the informants were not the only ones introducing foreign aspects. Griaule in his analysis removed the data even further from their socio-cultural milieu. And when re-analysing the myths also De Heusch takes the Griaule myths from their social and ecological context. When he invokes the Brahmanic model in order to explain the Griaule tales, one is clearly out of Africa. De Heusch's interpretation of *Nommo's* blood in comparison with Christ's blood is in effect a nice piece of theology, but it brings us way out of Dogon country, beyond Dogon recognition. Also the etymology he cites of *yuguru* (serpent) and *yurugu* (fox) is not recognized at all by the informants, not even by Dieterlen's informants.

Finally, the question of genius. First, enough time elapsed between 1931 and 1954 to allow for creative integration of new elements, Christian or other. Then, the reworking of models - in RP disguised as levels of knowledge - is a common human way of thinking, in fact the basis of structuralism! Half fictional (or pseudo-empirical) creations such as DE and RP are not beyond human reach. For instance many science-fiction or fantasy writers have performed similar and even more elaborate tales of the past and the future: Tolkien's work, from the hobbits to *Silmarillion*, or Heinlein's 'Future-History' bear all the Griaule characteristics: a progressive unfolding of an ever more grandiose scheme, a widening of the creative horizon, use of more remote additional sources and a gradual integration of previously unconnected players. In the best sense of the word, DE and RP are science-fiction and stand among the great pseudo-empiric fictions of the world. Not beyond human reach, not beyond the reach of the Dogon or Griaule. These 'paroles étonnantes' (a nice French translation for science-fiction by the way) should indeed not be rejected, I am adamant on that in the article. They are works of intercultural art and should be read as such.

NOTES

1. In the discussion with Mary Douglas in *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (2) a confusion of the names of (Meyer) Fortes and (Daryll) Forde resulted in some misunderstanding. The discussant (and friend) of Dieterlen was Fortes, who by the way always has been critical to Griaule's mythopoetic Dogon interpretations.
2. De Heusch's challenge to name an example of structural comparison of unconnected myths, is easy to meet: Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Cinderella/Ashboy myths can serve (Lévi-Strauss, 1958).

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