

The Solidifying Power of Myth in Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

SHEN Bo

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Cassirer argues that humans are animals of symbols, and these symbolic forms encompass not only the science of rational logic but also non-logical elements such as mythology and primitive religions. Previous research on Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms has primarily focused on philosophical connotations, philosophical thoughts, cultural philosophy, and other aspects, yielding abundant results. By examining mythology within the context of symbolic forms, we discover a force within it, namely, the solidifying power. This solidifying power demands that mythology maintain fixed and established forms during its emergence and development, thereby distinguishing it from other symbolic forms. By exploring the development trends and manifestations of the solidifying power in mythology, we can gain a clearer understanding of the path of human intellectual development from childhood to maturity, thus answering the historical question of human essence.

Keywords: Cassirer, philosophy of symbolic forms, mythology, solidifying power

Western philosophy, inspired by the Delphic oracle's maxim "Know thyself," has continuously engaged the minds of Western scholars in pondering the nature of humanity. In seeking answers to the path of human cognition, it has traversed various stages such as natural philosophy, metaphysics, theology, natural science, and the theory of biological evolution, each playing a dominant role in addressing the question "What is man?" and shaping the direction of this quest. Modern Western philosophy, from Descartes to Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," critiqued human rationality and knowledge, with the true knowledge being seen as belonging solely to natural science and human cultural philosophy requiring scientific logic for its study. At that time, Cohen (1935) even declared that "mathematics has an indisputable significance for the spiritual sciences" (p. 189). Early in his career, Cassirer belonged to the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism. In his monumental work *Problems of Knowledge in Modern Philosophy and Science*, published at the beginning of the 20th century, he aligned with his contemporaries in their approach to the theory of knowledge. Subsequently, Cassirer's philosophical thought underwent a transformation. He gradually realized that it was inadequate and inappropriate to study cultural science through an epistemology based on the logic of natural science. "The entire plan of epistemology must be expanded" (Cassirer, 1935, p. 69). In his philosophy of symbolic forms, Cassirer proposed that, beyond scientific knowledge, there must exist other forms in the development of human intellect. These other forms, which he termed symbolic forms, including mythology and religion, language, art, and history, are "functional

SHEN Bo, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China, Postal Code 510 420. Research Focus: Comparative Mythology.

equivalents" of scientific knowledge, all representing the inner self and the external world of humanity. Through the development of these symbolic forms, humanity constructs a self-idealized world, and understanding these forms holds the key to unlocking the question "What is man?" Cassirer redefined humans as symbolic animals rather than rational animals. Thus, humans live in a world of symbolic forms.

Myth, as viewed by Cassirer, is a symbolic form that manifests human intellect. "Though unlike intellectual symbols, it stands on an equal footing with them as a product of the human spirit" (Cassirer, 1935, pp. 78-80). The logical concepts and principles of myth are vastly different from those of science. Scientific cognition and logical essence are characterized by abstraction and generalization, elevating the diverse forms and differences of humanity to universal laws. Similarly, myth and primitive religion possess the ability to elevate diverse phenomena to universal rules. "Myth, though seemingly irrational, is not merely a collection of primitive superstitions and fantasies; rather, it possesses a 'formal concept' and 'structural concept'" (Cassirer, 2003, p. 128). Observing the emergence and evolution of myth, from non-existence to existence, from obscurity to prominence, and from lowliness to highness, it seems to embody a force. This paper summarizes this force as the force of solidification. The force of solidification refers to the power inherent in myth, as a symbolic form, to maintain its fixed and established form during its genesis and development. It strives to preserve tradition, emphasizes inheritance, and deliberately avoids change and creativity. Manifesting mostly as stagnation and rigid adherence to tradition, the force of solidification disallows significant alterations. It is this force of solidification that gives myth its unique form and characteristics distinct from other human symbolic forms. The force of solidification in myth is primarily embodied in the unity of mythical thinking, the fixed nature of mythical rituals, and the specificity of mythical language. By identifying the force of solidification in myth, we can trace the unique appearance and form of myth itself. Through the distinct faces of myth at various stages of its development, we can glimpse the evolution of human intellect and explore the human spiritual world.

The Unity of Mythical Thinking

Myth and primitive religion are among the most conservative and traditional forms of symbolic expression. Attempting to comprehend the logic of the mythical world through our rational and logical thinking would inevitably lead to frustration. The logic inherent in myths is in no way connected to rational logic; in fact, it is completely opposed to it. In rational logic, the concept of time is sequential: "past-present-future." We stand at the present moment, looking back at the past and forward to the future, with elements from both constantly shifting and alternating. In mythical thinking, however, there is no concept of time as we understand it; we can say that myths are atemporal, with the past, present, and future manifesting as a unity of time.

In mythical time, there exists an absolute past that can explain everything that happens in the present and will happen in the future. As Leibniz stated, the present in myths is laden with the past and gestates the future. Everything that has been created in the past, including sacred rituals, sacrifices, primitive institutions, social principles, customs, behavioral constraints, etc., is sacred and immutable. Sanctity does not depend on the attributes, qualities, or content of established things but rather on their sacred process of creation in the past, that is, on their original founding in the past. "History does not explain the present but merely selects among its present components, granting some the privilege of possessing a past" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1997, p. 263). Delineating all these past elements within a specific scope is akin to drawing a boundary between the sacred and

the secular. The boundary drawn here, with the past as its axis, places everything from the past in the depths of history. These elements are not only sanctified but also imbued with mythical and religious coloration. From this perspective, in mythical thinking, the existence of the present and its constituents can only be understood and explained by revealing the mythical era behind them. In mythical thinking, people cannot comprehend the existence of institutions, customs, or constraints, nor can they explain the reasons for the existence of all established things. Only by transferring them to the circle of past time can they obtain satisfactory answers. The past does not require questioning nor can it be questioned; it is the cause of all things and the origin of everything, embodying its sanctity and uniqueness.

The sanctity of myths ultimately stems from the sanctity of their origin, which is the past. In myths, any questioning of the past is not allowed, and the existence and constituents of the past must be strictly adhered to. For example, in totemic tribes, the totem cannot be altered in any way, even slightly; any change would be considered blasphemy or sacrilege, and those who challenge the sacredness of the past would face punishment from the gods and social exile. In mythical thinking, it seems as if there exists a barrier that strictly separates the existing present from the sacred past and assigns different characteristics to each. The past is characterized by its sacred inviolability, while the present can only submit to everything that is sacred in the past.

The unity of time also fosters a profound sense of life and a tenacious denial of death among primitives, shaping a mythical mindset that emphasizes the continuity of life. The concept of death is absent from primitive thinking; whereas philosophy aims to explain the immortality of the soul, mythology strives to justify the reality of death. Primitives do not believe in death; they believe in the existence of the soul. The human soul can exist both within and outside the body, transforming into animals, plants, or talismans. After death, the soul persists and dwells in other living beings, achieving rebirth in various forms.

In Egyptian mythology, the soul of the deceased, on its journey to the land of the dead, must not only possess abundant material wealth but also magical items. This requires the soul to be able to name its own identity, the guardians of the afterlife, as well as the boat, sails, and rudder on the bed. Consequently, the deceased's body undergoes intricate procedures to remain intact. These long-standing social customs, rigidly established and strictly adhered to, are solely intended to await the soul's return to the body, thereby achieving the continuity of life and ensuring its indestructibility.

The unity of mythology manifests not only in the concept of time but also in the unity of parts and wholes. Primitives lacked the logic and concepts distinguishing between wholes and parts, species and categories. In their understanding, a part represented the full attributes and nature of the whole, fulfilling all the roles of the whole. Parts were equivalent to wholes, and the whole, along with all its mythical or substantial essence, entered into the part. In mythical thinking, a person's hair, teeth, and even their name represented their entirety, embodying their full strength. Possessing a strand of an enemy's hair and burning it could cause illness or even death to the enemy. Knowing a god's name was equivalent to wielding the god's full power, enabling one to command the god. If a person died, their name would no longer be mentioned by others, and those sharing the same name would change it to avoid the deceased's soul harming them.

It is the integration of mythical thinking that led primitive societies to strictly adhere to various social customs and behavioral constraints, tolerating no minor deviations. In the case of intentional or unintentional

violations, according to the most solemn traditions of their respective groups, individuals would face catastrophic punishment, while the entire clan would immediately shun and avoid them.

The Immobilization of Mythological Rituals

Mythology represents the emotional expression and concretization of human minds in their childhood-like understanding of life phenomena. In her book "The Law-Giver Star," scholar Jane Ellen Harrison of the Myth-Ritual School delves into the relationship between ritual and mythology, asserting that ritual serves as the foundation of mythology, while mythology provides an interpretation of ritual. Over the course of time, the ontogenetic sequence of mythology and ritual has become blurred, yet it is undeniable that they were once intertwined in primitive times. The intricate tapestry of mythological rituals emerges as one of the manifestations of mythology's immobilizing force, enabling the tracing of elements closest to the original myths within rituals.

In Plato's renowned passage from "Cratylus," he illustrates how in Rome, fixed rituals produced a standardized formula, strictly adhered to when invoking deities in sacrifices. These formulas were punctuated by phrases like "either-or" and "or-else," and any unintentional deviation from the correct formula or mispronunciation of a deity's name would render the entire sacrifice ineffective or even invite more severe consequences (Plato, 2022, p. 400). Primitive people offered prayers to specific deities for each sacrificial ritual: Flonda for felling, Colincunda for cutting, and Adulonda for burning leaves. The act of felling trees required a ritual, and this activity was further divided into separate, individual tasks. Anyone wishing for their labor to proceed smoothly and yield results must appeal to the deity in charge of that domain, seeking the deity's consent and protection. During the ritual, the deity's name must be pronounced correctly, and every step of the sacred sacrificial ceremony must be executed flawlessly, as any deviation could provoke the deity's wrath, leading not only to the failure of one's wishes but also to danger.

In Egyptian mythology, the goddess Isis embodies the thousand-named deity. When performing sacrifices to her, priests must strictly adhere to every traditional ritual step from the past, as even the slightest deviation in a syllable or any change in rhythm or meter could nullify the efficacy of the sacrifice.

In the realm of mythological rituals, humans find themselves living in a world dedicated to the worship of deities, a world governed solely by affirmative requirements and negative taboos. These immobilized and sacred traditions weigh heavily on individuals, making it difficult to breathe. Paradoxically, primitive humans, who were presumably free from logical constraints and lived unfettered lives, appear to have been under greater pressure than people in our modern society. They existed within a rigid framework of sacrifices, prohibitions, ceremonies, and precepts, constantly at risk of crossing the "high-voltage line."

The Specificity of Mythological Language

In "New Science," Vico illuminates three epochs: the Age of Gods, the Age of Heroes, and the Age of Men, each accompanied by a corresponding type of language: hieroglyphics, symbolic language, and human language. During the Age of Gods, primitives, driven by fear, amazement, unfamiliarity, and curiosity, experienced an indescribable excitement towards the external world, a passion that burned within them like a fire, ultimately finding expression through language. "In their use of language, most cultures we refer to as primitive are meticulous: they do not speak indiscriminately, regardless of the occasion or topic. Words are confined to

specific, determined contexts, and beyond these, people are cautious and reserved in their speech” (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 2012, p. 73). Mythological language is a silent language, where words and objects are naturally interconnected, each word representing a physical object. Separation of language and object would cause confusion in the primitives’ minds, as they were unable to accept the abstraction or conceptualization of language. “If certain perfect mime arts, silent films, or comic strips can convey meaning without words, then myths can affect us in the same way” (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 2012, p. 130). Their thinking, where language is equivalent to objects, permeated their entire social life. “For primitives, nature and society are not only closely interconnected but also form an indivisible whole. The primitive world is not a silent and lifeless void but a world that can listen and understand” (Cassirer, 2012, p. 115). Casting a spell on someone’s shadow would soon cause illness or death to that person; an unusually prolonged drought required various rituals by shamans to pray for rain, silent appeals to nature. To cure a patient’s illness, the witch doctor’s spells, the incantations muttered under their breath, and the vine branches used to strike the patient all seemed to communicate with the disease, commanding it to retreat. Different objects and rituals imply different languages; the rituals for praying for rain differ from those used for curing illnesses, and these must be adhered to without arbitrary changes.

Mythological languages encompass numerous taboos concerning vocabulary. Kyrgyz women, for instance, face many linguistic taboos and are forbidden from uttering the names of their husband’s maternal elders. If one of these elders is named “Shepherd,” she cannot use the word “sheep” but must instead find a suitable substitute and assign a new meaning to represent “sheep.” “Since there are no rules governing the formation of these substitutes, and given the abundance of languages, a woman cannot use a substitute already employed by others and must seek out a new one. Hence, compiling a dictionary of ‘women’s language’ is impossible” (James George Frazer, 2006, p. 244). Similarly, coastal Dayak people have many restrictions on the vocabulary used to refer to males. For example, if a man’s father-in-law is named “Kalara,” his son-in-law cannot use the common name for a horse, “Kawalo,” but must instead say “ride.” There are also many taboos surrounding the names of deceased individuals. If someone named “Kara” (meaning fire) passes away, the word “Kara” cannot be used again, and the tribe must choose a new word to represent “fire.” Similarly, if someone named Waa (meaning crow) dies, no one can refer to a crow as “Waa” and must instead call it “Narapat.” Due to these naming taboos, primitive tribes constantly update their languages, and once certain words are discarded, they can never be used again.

Conclusion

In the development of human culture, besides science, which is a “latecomer,” there are other symbolic forms, including mythology and religion, language, art, history, and more. Among them, mythology possesses a potent force of solidification, demonstrating a tendency to adhere to tradition and avoid change. By exploring the solidifying force within mythology, we can better observe and understand symbolic forms, thereby addressing the diachronic question of “what is human?” Philosophy has always inquired into this ancient topic of “what is human,” and modern philosophy will not cease to seek the “treasure trove” of answers to this question. Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms takes a different path, arguing that the development of human culture should seek laws and principles from these symbolic forms. “Symbols are human symbols, carrying human content and history, as well as human intellect, thinking, consciousness, and self-awareness” (Lin weisheng, 2018, pp.

151-156). Only by doing so can we highlight what is unique about humans and pave the way to culture. Humans should not be regarded merely as rational animals, but rather as symbolic animals.

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