



**E. J. Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies***

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IN THIS IMPOSING volume, Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, attempts to revive the study of “Comparative Mythology,” a field that never quite succeeded in achieving academic respectability, notwithstanding its broad appeal to a middlebrow public. Employing an “entirely new” historical comparative method, he claims results more far-reaching and reliable than any of his predecessors (74). This method is not historical in any conventional sense, however, as it pays little attention to the contexts and temporal processes relevant to individual narratives, texts, and traditions. Rather, the historic side of Witzel’s research is concerned to situate the origin of the world’s myths (and the communities responsible for them) in the chronology of an extremely *longue durée*.<sup>1</sup>

Witzel begins by telling how even in his student days, he perceived “obvious similarities”<sup>2</sup> in the myths of India and Japan, an impression that grew stronger in 1990, when he spent a full year in Japan (vi–xi). Convinced that these could not be explained by diffusion (as others had previously attempted; most notably, YOSHIDA

1961; 1963; 1977; 1984; LITTLETON 1978; 1981; 1983; 1995), nor by appeal to universal structures of the human mind (since not all world mythologies shared them), Witzel felt the only option was to imagine a common origin connecting the two cultures (1–2, 8–16, 45–47).<sup>3</sup> This, however, would have to be set well beyond the temporal horizon that places India and Japan in different language families. Toward that end, he embarked on twenty years of reading, not only of the world’s mythologies, but also in linguistics, archeology, genetics, cave art, paleogeology, paleogeography and other fields that probe the deep prehistory of the human species.

In spite of these admirable efforts, Witzel’s knowledge of the data beyond India (and to a lesser extent, Japan) remains understandably spotty, since mastering the requisite materials, languages, and cultures would take more than a lifetime. Inevitably, anyone who attempts to work on so large a scale relies on secondary sources, among which one must thus choose wisely. In some areas, however, Witzel seems to have read little more than a book or two by his Harvard colleagues (for example, CARRASCO 1982 and SULLIVAN 1988), or to have relied on works written by poets, rather than ranking authorities (GRAVES 1955; COLUM 1937). Worse still, when treating the myths of non-literate societies, Witzel consistently ignores the more recent, more reliable, and less prejudicial work of British, American, and French anthropologists, in favor of dated German literature steeped in the *Kulturkreis* paradigm, which used a mix of racial, cultural, and geographic factors to categorize the world’s peoples in ways that naturalized, legitimated, and reinforced the privilege of Europe’s colonial powers.<sup>4</sup>

For his part, Witzel distinguishes two broad types of mythology, which he identifies with different geographic regions and prehistoric eras. The first type (which includes India and Japan, solving his initial problem) encompasses Europe, most of Asia, the Americas, and Polynesia in a group he terms “Laurasian.” Here, in Witzel’s view, a mythic system took shape before humans crossed the Bering Straits, circa 20,000 years BP. The defining feature of this system—indeed, that which made it a system—was that it organized a sequence of (potentially separable) themes and episodes into a coherent story line, beginning with creation from nothing and ending with cosmic destruction. In his reconstruction, the system included these elements.

Creation from nothing, chaos etc. Father Heaven/Mother earth created  
 Four (five) generations/ages: Heaven pushed up, sun released  
 Current gods defeat/kill predecessors; killing the dragon, use of sacred drink  
 Humans: somatic descendants of (sun) god; they (or a god) show hubris and are punished by a flood  
 Trickster deities bring culture; humans spread, (emergence of “nobles”)  
 Local history begins  
 Final destruction of the world  
 New heaven and earth emerge (183)

In contrast, Witzel places the rest of the world—sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, Melanesia, and parts of south Asia—in a second category that he construes as Laurasia’s “antipode” (339). This area he names “Gondwanaland,” a territory whose inhabitants did not assemble their myths in a unified story line. Showing little inter-

est in primordial creation or apocalyptic cataclysm, they detailed the emergence of ancestral beings, whose adventures and foundational acts they narrated episodically. According to Witzel's reconstruction, Gondwana mythology included the following:

In the beginning: heaven and earth (and the sea) already exist  
 A High God lives in heaven, or on earth, or ascends to heaven later  
 Series of lower gods, often children of High God, act as tricksters and culture heroes  
 Primordial people ended by some evil deed of son of High God (or by humans)  
 Humans are created from trees and clay (or rock); occasionally, descend directly from the gods/totem ancestors  
 Humans act haughtily or make a mistake; punishment by a great flood; humans reemerge in various ways  
 (An end to the world is missing) (323)

Although "Gondwana" myths can include some "Laurasian" themes (the flood, for instance, or the separation of heaven and earth), Witzel accounts for such overlap in one of two ways. Either it is the result of late diffusion from Laurasia to Gondwanaland (the kind of argument theorists of the *Kulturkreislehre* consistently made in such circumstances)<sup>6</sup> or the residue of a "Pan-Gaeon" stratum, which he dates 65,000 years BP, when *Homo sapiens* had not yet dispersed from Africa. What definitively and categorically differentiates the two systems is not specific narratives or their details:

The main feature, the story line approach, cannot and must not be abandoned; it is central to the theory.... Even a certain accumulation of circumstantial counterevidence does not suffice to bring down the theory: for example, if someone were to show that certain individual items (diver, flood myth) are in fact also found in sub-Saharan Africa or in Papua/Australia, I would not concede: the main pillar of the Laurasian theory, the story line arrangement, and myths of primordial creation and impending destruction, would still stand (283; see also 54, 101, 281, 321, and 329).

The two systems are thus distinguished by the overarching story line that organizes other episodes inside its account of cosmic beginning and end, creating what Witzel refers to as "our first novel" (see the title to chapter 3: "Creation Myths: the Laurasian Story Line, Our First Novel"). It is this that "Lurasians" (putatively) have and "Gondwanalanders" (putatively) lack, much as *Naturvölker* were said to have no myths of creation by theorists of the *Kulturkreislehre*, since speculative thought of this sort was restricted to *Hochkulturen*.<sup>7</sup> In similar fashion, Witzel contrasts—and implicitly ranks—two kinds of people, those who theorize, systematize, and think big vs. those who do not: Laurasia vs. Gondwanaland; north vs. south; high cultures vs. low; us vs. them.<sup>8</sup> It is a familiar and a troubling construct.

Let me make clear that I do not take Witzel himself to be racist. Rather, I believe he has written a seriously flawed book whose conclusions carry racist implications. However unintentional this may be, his uncritical reliance on tainted scholarship of the *Kulturkreislehre* facilitated this result, as did the methods he employed. For

when one organizes complex and variegated phenomena into large categories set in binary opposition, the contrast one draws is always discriminatory. And when one seeks to “reconstruct” a deep past, the paucity of direct evidence provides a relatively blank screen onto which one is free to project all manner of fantasies, prejudices, and delusions.

Correcting Witzel’s errors begins with the recognition that it is impossible to survey all the world’s myths, as most of the stories actually told have gone unrecorded. At best, one can survey what has been published, but then one must ask how these came to be collected, organized, and committed to writing. Sometimes textualization came at a moment when literacy was just beginning to gain traction and was accomplished by a group’s own intellectuals, who selected among the many narratives in oral circulation and assembled these in a more ambitious, more comprehensive metanarrative that often (but not always) deployed creation as an opening device and apocalypse for closure. Such processes can be observed as late as the nineteenth century, when Elias Lönnrott confected the *Kalevala* in much the same way Snorri Sturluson produced the *Edda*, Hesiod put together the *Theogony*, and unnamed others produced the *Popol Vuh*, *Kojiki*, and Hebrew Bible. The “story line approach” that Witzel considers the defining characteristic of “Laurasia” is not, in fact, present in the vast majority of myths recounted in Europe, Asia, Oceania, the Americas, or anywhere else in the world. Rather, it is the way an extremely small number of textualizers shaped a handful of works that subsequently acquired canonic status.

Similarly, what Witzel makes characteristic of “Gondwana” is the style of textualization employed by visiting scholars (including also missionaries and colonial authorities who function as such) when they collect, translate, and publish stories told by the “others” they engage in their professional capacity. Conceivably, such people might regard individual stories as parts of a coherent whole, whose nature is taken for granted by locals and normally left tacit. Knowledgeable nonnative scholars could surely identify unifying themes, render these explicit, and supply connective tissue as necessary, including an introduction and conclusion. In doing so, they would fabricate a coherent metanarrative of the sort produced by indigenous textualizers. Normally, however, an ethic of fidelity to the oral nature of the materials they gather obliges them to reproduce individual narratives much as they heard them, while confining their own interpretive or amplifying remarks to separate sections of their publications (introduction, footnotes, commentary, and so on). Exogenous textualizers thus produce books resembling anthologies of collectively-authored short stories, rather than novels: “Mythology of the Maori,” “Nuer Myths,” and the like.

If one takes the claims embedded in such titles too seriously, while mischaracterizing the extraordinary syntheses of Hesiod, Snorri, & Co. in parallel fashion (“Greek Myth,” “Norse Mythology,” and so on), it is easy to develop a theory whereby different *cultural* styles find expression in two distinctive forms of mythic narration. Alternatively, one might recognize that different *scholarly* styles produce two distinctive kinds of texts, one that integrates its content via a frame story, the other via an author’s introduction. The contrast is not between “Laurasian” and “Gondwana” mythologies, but between indigenous and exogenous agents, processes, and products of textualization. At a few points, Witzel entertains something like that

idea (see pages 98–103), although he rejects it quickly and continues to theorize in terms of deep prehistory, waves of migration, patterns of diffusion, and contrasts between the styles of thought/narration he associates with two huge aggregates of the world's population. Some may find that attractive, but it strikes me as ill-founded, ill-conceived, unconvincing, and deeply disturbing in its implications.

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#### NOTES

1. Describing this method, Witzel states: “The historical comparative approach is not one of old-fashioned Romanticism looking for and speculating on distant *ur*-situations, but it is the cladistic procedure also used by genetics, human anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and philological manuscript research” (46). Regrettably, Witzel misleads himself and his reader in drawing this overstated contrast. Rather than rejecting the Romantic option in favor of reliable science (as he no doubt sincerely believes), he operates largely within the former, however much he decks it out with superficial trappings of the latter.

2. This phrase echoes through the book (for example, see pages 18, 50, 53, 75) and should not be left unexamined. Its goal is to obscure agency (and the possibility of error) by inverting the relations of subject and object, making it seem that these “similarities” are present in the data themselves and force themselves on the reader, rather than being a perception readers construct on the basis of their prior knowledge and expectations (which may well be misleading).

3. See the book under review, pages 1–2, 8–16, and 45–47. At least three other possibilities go unconsidered: (1) the resemblances result from polygenesis and are sufficiently broad and general as to constitute clichés of a sort that demand little explanation; (2) the resemblances are mirages experienced by scholars who overvalue their significance vis-à-vis the differences that divide the myths and cultures in question; (3) the myths in question frame similar responses to similar phenomena (natural and/or social).

4. Scholars who worked within this paradigm identified with many disciplines (*Ethnologie*, *Anthropologie*, *Volkskunde*, *Völkerkunde*, *Rassenkunde*, and *Rassenwissenschaft*), but shared a large number of assumptions no longer intellectually or morally tenable. More important than differences in disciplinary orientation was the distinction between Germans and Austrians, the latter of whom tended to be missionaries and whose racism could be softer (condescension, rather than contempt). Equally important is the difference between works written prior to 1920, whose subtexts justified colonial expansion and domination, and those written after 1930, which were strongly inflected by Nazi ideology. Works of the 1920s either continued the former trend or anticipated the later, and sometimes both. Witzel relies on a great many works written by scholars of this sort, not just for data, but for many important lines of interpretation. Those he cites directly include Adolf Bastian, Hermann Baumann, Fritz Bornemann, Erich Brauer, Ernst Dammann, Otto Dempwolf, Hans Findeisen, Leo Frobenius, Martin Gusinde, Beatrix Heintze, Hermann Hohegger, Adolf Jensen, Karl Jettmar, Walter Lehmann, Roberto Lehmann-Nitsche, Johannes Maringer, Hans Nevermann, Alois Pache, Heinz Reschke, Hans Schärer, Paul Schebesta, Wilhelm Schmidt, August Schmitz, Carl Leonhard Schultze-Jena, Wilhelm Staudacher, Paul Wirz, and Josef Dominik Wölfel. There is now a large critical literature on scholarship of this sort, including GOTHSCHE (1983); MARX (1988); FISCHER (1990); LINIMAYR (1994); JACOBET et al. (1994); HAUSCHILD ed. (1995); STRECK ed. (2000); and EVANS (2010).

5. The names Witzel assigns these regions and peoples were introduced by pioneering geologists who first worked out theories of continental drift. “Gondwanaland” is the coinage of SUESS (1885), and “Laurasia” of STAUB (1928).

6. For an example, see STAUDACHER (1942), a work that deeply influenced Witzel's views. Having shown the broad attestation of myths in which Father Heaven and Mother Earth have to be forcibly separated in order to open up the space in which human life could

develop, Staudaucher defended the dignity of the “cultural and racial community” he considered responsible for the development of such a narrative. Following lines developed by earlier *Kulturkreise* theoreticians (Leo Frobenius, Hermann Baumann, Fritz Graebner, and Wilhelm Mühlmann), he posited multiple lines of diffusion whereby this sophisticated story reached the *Naturvölker* of sub-Saharan Africa, Polynesia, Australia, and the Americas.

7. Rather incredibly, Witzel cites one testimony of this sort as a confirmatory antecedent of his own position. On page 316, he writes:

Central African mythology is characterized as *not interested in creation myths*. This feature has been stated by scholars who could not yet know of the present theory. In the summary of his book, Baumann formulates in general and rather stark terms:

[These myths] are indeed much less colorful... They lack the speculation of nature philosophy of the Polynesians and some Amerindians, the close intertwining of human fate with the astral word [sic] as found with the Amerindians, and the grotesque fantasy of the Eskimos. The center of African myth is occupied by a creation principle that in most cases is identical with the High God, and the First Man, who has been begat, formed or brought forth by him. How this first man came to earth, how he lived and what he experienced is the topic of almost all African mythology. Next to this, the myths are almost insignificant of the emergence of heaven and earth, of the stars, and of supernatural beings that occupy a large portion of the mythology of other continents” (emphasis and ellipsis in the original).

The passage cited is taken from BAUMANN (1936, 1), a work written by a learned scholar and committed Nazi, whose research in Africa was meant to justify German colonization of inferior peoples. He is, moreover, one of the authors on whom Witzel relied most heavily, with more than a hundred citations; on his life and work, see BRAUN (1995).

8. Given Witzel’s repeated swipes at scholarship he dismisses as “fashionable,” one is tempted to add another register to the system of oppositions: scholars who still value “grand theory” and “master narratives” vs. “trendy postmoderns.”

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Bruce Lincoln  
*University of Chicago*