

Interrelations of Myths and Motifs: A Socio-Cultural Viewpoint

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Abstract:

Myths and motifs constitute the expressive and symbolic representation of the culture of a society. They are frequent in creative productions and relate to religion, philosophy, and society's environment and social forces. Though independent studies on motifs and myths exist, studies describing their interrelationship are hard to discover. Further, their trajectory and interrelations are hardly discussed in social sciences and even in Sociology. Taking this dearth of knowledge into account, the present article tries to elaborate on these two concepts, chalk out their interpretations by Sociologists, and establish their interrelations. The article is based on secondary literature established through the content analysis method. The result and discussion are organized into four parts i.e. conceptual elaborations of motifs and myths, the Sociological knowledge production on motifs and myths, the interrelationship between myths and motifs, and the concluding lines. The study ends with the concluding lines that myths and motifs are cultural and social resources whose study needs to be brought out into the ambit of social science discourses.

Keywords:

motifs; myths; symbols; patterns; culture

I. Introduction

Motifs and myths are integral parts of the culture of a society. They can be better understood as cultural resources (Brokerhof, 2006; Waller, 2003). While myths represent forms of traditional wisdom, motifs are generated through art, craft techniques, and meticulous workmanship. Motifs represent local identities (Chudhavipata, 2012; Nakhasathien et al., 2013) and have a myth associated with them. Myths symbolise the worldview upheld and projected by a culture. Myths express the popular conceptions and assumptions about the elements of nature and the universe, and the limits and workings of the natural and spiritual world. Myths are sedimented in popular ideas, and knowledge, and sustained through the perception and practice of the people of a community. Motifs, on the other hand, are an integral part of all art forms adding beauty and meaning to designs. Motifs are intimately related to the environmental, cultural, religious, philosophical, and socioeconomic forces that are part of society.

II. Review of Literature

Motifs are used to transform 'nothing' into 'something'; 'ordinary' into 'extraordinary,' and fill the blankness with substances and emptiness with meaningfulness (Kishore, et.al., 2013). Motifs have a significant role in designing (Sharma, 2016). Motifs cast emotional effects and symbolize a strong attachment to every culture. They are arranged in multiple instances to create the desired effect, such as repetition, rhythm, and gradation (Malik, 2018). Myths are

often taken for granted, believed, and carry with them people's faith memory, knowledge, and communication sustain myths. Myths make meaning for a community or culture where it survives (Mahanta, 2019). Myths also idealise behaviours. They encompass "ideas and beliefs that we inherit as part of our shared intellectual culture" (Loughlin, 2013). The work of Levi Strauss (1973), in which he re-examines the dismissive attitude of western cultures toward the myths (cultural narratives) of non-industrial societies and suggests the valuable purpose of myth in human culture and history, forms the foundation of a more modern structural approach to the anthropology of myth. Malinowski claims that myths directly express the subject matter and are charters that hold the convictions, the moral and behavioural principles of the agent which guards the procedures of rituals (Malinowski, 1948).

Standalone descriptions of motifs and myths adorn the literature of many disciplines including Cultural Studies, Literature, Art, Archaeology, Anthropology, and Sociology. The sociological archives fall short of the studies on the interrelations of motifs and myths.

Objectives: In attempting to discover the interrelations of motifs and myths, the authors of this paper have chalked out three objectives which are treated in due course in the article. These are:

- To give a conceptual elaboration of motifs, and myths.
- To explain motifs and myths from a socio-cultural angle through the knowledge produced by sociologists.
- To locate the interrelationship between motifs and myths.

III. Research Methods

The present article has taken recourse to content analysis tools to build up the entire write-up. Literature from Culture Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology are browsed and identified for the purpose.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Elaborations of Motifs

Motifs are decorative designs or patterns that have dominated creative productions throughout the centuries. They serve the decorative expression for creative products and capture human attention. Their use is rampant among painters, sculptors, playwrights, musicians, and textile designers. A motif is an element in the iconography of a particular subject or type of subject.

The term motif is derived from the Latin word *motivus* (movement or cause of movement). The term assumed various nuances in the French language. In French, it implied "reason for acting" and "the subject that dominates a work". Motif as a term was used first in music in 1703. Then it came into use in painting in 1824. Gradually it was adopted in other arts (Ray, 2010). Webster's definition of motif suggests that it is a single or repeated design or colour depicting animals, flowers, and trees which has a decorative manifestation. Sometimes the motifs manifest themselves in the form of blocks and squares and they may take a uniform size in a given piece of work or may take different sizes. Motifs are simple building blocks of complex networks, which were first proposed by Milo et al. (2002).

The term motif is extremely complex and changing (Legallois and Koch, 2021) due to conceptual innovations and technological advancements. Cultural anthropologists and

folkloristics refer to a recurrent element in the popular traditions of a cultural community as motifs. Motifs can be applied to the field of literature – including oral literature, such as tales, visual and textile arts, and music.

Thompson in his book *The Folktale* (1946) proposes that a motif is the smallest element in a tale having the power to persist in tradition. Most motifs fall into three classes. First are the actors – gods, unusual animals, marvellous creatures like witches, ogres, or fairies, or even conventionalized human characters. Second come certain items in the background of the action – magic objects, unusual customs, strange beliefs, and the like. In the third place, they depict single incidents. The majority of the motifs carry with them the expression of single incidents and these comprise the great majority of motifs (Thompson 1946, 415–416).

In textile arts, motifs are used as decorative elements. They take different forms and themes. The themes can be broadly categorized into four types: geometrical, floral, abstract, and animal (Goswami and Yadav, 2020). Natural, abstract, and styled for any artwork are the other three. Usually, the motifs are gods and goddesses, animals like ducks' fish, peacocks; elephants, and floral & geometric patterns. Motifs are applied on the surface of the textile by painting, embroidery, or printing (Sangama and Rani, 2012). Each motif has an origin, evolution, and variety in shape and presentation. In design, a weaver, embroider, dyer or printer creates dreams of beauty using motifs familiar through culture, religion, environment, and history. Motifs result from the religion, customs, and social beliefs of a community (Veenu & Katare, 2016). Time, culture, philosophy, region, or any cluster of individuals have the potential to institutionalize or modify motifs over a period of time (Purwar, 2021).

Motifs represent five features (Daemmrich, 1985). They are:

- Frequency of recurrence
- Avoidability or unlikeliness of appearance
- Significance of contexts
- Coherence
- Symbolic correlation

Motifs may be understood as a “moveable stock device,” which have manifested themselves in various genres, times, and places (Würzbach, 2005). They have their interpretative value. A motif is a symbol, not a sign, therefore it denotes a meaning, continuing the idea that it is a symbol rather than a sign.

a. Motifs, Themes, and Symbols

Motifs and themes are often used interchangeably (Karris, 2009). Themes often overshadow motifs. In reality, motif, and theme are generally considered the two most common forms of narrative repetition. To quote François Jost (1988) “One critic may call motif what another designates as a theme.” But Morgan observes that they are distinct and explained over against the other. Morgan (2015) asserts that motifs have their unique identity, functions, and rhetorical force. They are narratives. Motifs narrate situations and ideas in a creative tradition. William Freedman's essay from 1971, “The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation,” indicate the specific aesthetic value of motifs in creative expressions. Abbott (2008) defines a motif as a discrete thing, the image that is repeated in a narrative. The theme, by contrast, is a more generalized or abstract concept that is suggested by, motifs. In simple language, motifs are normally concrete and manifested through, repeated objects, and expressions while themes are abstract expressing concepts, main ideas, and values.

Motifs and symbols are often used interchangeably. Both contain symbolic values. But there is a difference between motifs and symbols. A motif is differentiated from a symbol through its recurrent nature and its effect cumulative impression. Freedman (1971) says that a motif can be formed by a pattern of related expressions, such as “a family or associational cluster of literal or figurative references to a given class of concepts or objects, whether it be animals, machines, circles, music, or whatever.” A symbol can additionally be portrayed in a non-objective or non-representational style. People who use the symbol in a cultural sense, understand its meaning or implication regardless of how it is portrayed. Through symbols, ideas and meanings are represented. In a symbol, there is both concealment and revelation. Symbols facilitate communication by giving a common reference point for a variety of original disparate ideas. Symbols are universal, in the sense they transcend history.

b. Conceptual Elaborations of Myths

Mythologies or myths are the reservoirs of our memories and aspirations. They help us to have easy conformity and face no challenge of reality. They are heavily fossilised in every culture.

The term "myth" was used to describe both created and real stories and derives from an ancient Greek word that means "story" or "plot." A myth is a belief system. Myths frequently deal with supernatural creatures or powers of civilization. The world came into existence in its current shape according to creation or origin myths, which frequently identify "the cultural group presenting the narrative" as the original or "real" people (Myth, Murfin and Ray, 2003). Such sacred tales or narratives address the origins, purposes, and futures of a people and the things in their universe.

Mythmaking and the telling of stories are ubiquitous cultural traditions. Folklore, urban legends, and myths all offer significant insights on how people see and conceptualise the world. There are intriguing links between the themes, plots, images, and characters, as well as between "the kinds of phenomena they try to explain and the kinds of issues they tackle," "which were discovered when comparing myths from various civilizations ("Myth" 284).

Myths are a dominant discourse in Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Folklore Studies and Philology, Marketing, Advertising, Fashion, and Philosophy. Myths are usually narratives that give an account of something of the past. In this context, it becomes pertinent here to quote Cassirer (1853) who said that myths are next to the members of a society and hide in darkness (Baklanov, et.al.2018). They represent social beings and their consciousness and play a significant part in formatting our perception (Bubandt,2014).

The term “myth” originates from the Greek word mythos. Its Latin correlate is mythus. It represents a traditional tale or story, legend, or piece of folklore in justification of some social or natural phenomena. It basically upholds a belief. It sometimes is against reality or the truth carrying fictitious ideas and explanations (Oxford English Dictionary,2019). Myths often are the language of description. They are the foundational part of a culture and fashion human behaviour.

A myth is a narrative and often messages morality. They are transmitted to the new generation through moral stories often told by the elders. Myths transmit and sustain the culture, ideologies, and practices of a society set from long back. They are powerful and exercise social control and create knowledge of the past (Degenaar,2007). Myths depict the historicity of people, their origin, religious practices, culture, tradition, or ancestors. They are

the narratives about gods, demigods, and legendary warriors, as well as the common people which can be in anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, or in elemental form. They point to the incidences of the time before we existed, and how things around us were created. Thus, myths symbolise the core values of a particular culture rather than imparting factual knowledge.

The use of myth is rampant in literature, Sociology, and Anthropology. This led Vickery (1966) to suggest that myth-making analysis requires an interdisciplinary examination to make the meanings of myth more explicit. In English literature, the pervasive use of myths is traceable in the works of T.S. Elliot. The word myth has, however, generally been used casually as a sociological term. The "myth" of masculinity (Pleck 1981), the "myth" of self-esteem (Hewitt 1998), or the "myth" of the motherly role are frequent terms used by sociologists (Douglas & Michaels 2006).

Human beings have always been mythmakers. Man is a meaning-seeking creature. Myths thus often lack rationality but have a strong acceptance in a society being deeply embedded in the belief system of the people. All mythology speaks of a world that exists outside but alongside our world and in some sense supports it. However, it needs to be understood that myths always do not exist in a profane setting and as such, they cannot be concretized. They exist as utopian ideas often expressed through symbols some of which are imaginary and some of which exist in a profane setting. The symbols represent figural context as it is a part of everyday life. Society describes itself through legends and myths.

Myths are simple stories. Due to its prominence in a particular subject, such as Classical Studies or the ethnography and anthropology of contemporary India, myth comes into emphasis. There are a very large number of academics who focus on mythology from a particular time or country, or as a phenomenon in the comparative study; they are just dispersed rather than grouped under a single disciplinary subject (Frog, 2018). The ideological and evaluative viewpoints that are deeply ingrained in the word myth continue to be mostly hidden. The challenge that myth poses to the humanities is to cultivate a reflexive awareness of the word and concept, both to improve it as an analytical tool and to acknowledge the ways in which the worldview we have received has limited and shaped our thinking. To quote Ernst Cassirer myth is defined by the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is believed as only that which is endowed with objective actuality can be believed (Cassirer 1955–1957).

Myths are different from fantasy. They have their social implications. Although myths are never universal and are always myths of a culture, religion, community, or group. The social feature of myth distinguishes it from fantasy or delusion (Doty 2000, pp. 37–39). From this point on, two further characteristics of myth begin to emerge: (a) myth is a category of story; and (b) myth is a category of thinking model.

There are four main theories of myth. These theories include the psychological myth theory in addition to the rational myth theory, functional myth theory, and structural myth theory. According to the rational myth theory, myths were developed to explain natural forces and events. The functional myth theory suggests that various types of myths were developed to serve as means of societal control. The structural myth theories are founded upon the variations noted in the human mind and human nature. The psychological myth theory contends that myths are founded on human emotion (Joseph 1996: 19).

4.2 Sociological Knowledge Production on Motifs

Direct deals on motifs in sociological research are rare. But Berger (1963) has made a side reference to the motifs when he uses motifs for sociological thinking and consciousness building. To him, motifs are themes. "Debunking," "unrespectable," "relativization," and "cosmopolitanism" are the four themes that mark the types of motif analyses (Berger, 1963). The debunking motif is embedded in sociological consciousness while unrespectable motifs are deviations from the adhered values of society (Psathas & Schutz, 2004). The relativization motif helps out to discover alternative ways of looking at the world and the cosmopolitan motifs become the bi-products of the cross-fertilization of cultures and ideas.

The term motifs though not directly used, are often used as patterns in sociological writings. If motifs are termed as patterns, in sociological terms they come under the category of a proto-concept, which Robert K. Merton defined as "an early, rudimentary, particularised, and essentially unexplained thought (Merton, 1984:267)." In the same vein, Ball (2009, 1:20) elaborates motifs as patterns in which specific features appear repeatedly, even if they are not identical or symmetrical. Sociologists Kroeber and Parsons (1958) made reference to patterns that later on were termed motifs. They advocated that sociology having its focus on culture needs to take into consideration the understanding of patterns of values and ideas which often express themselves through motifs.

Patterns as the prelude to motifs and often describe the meaning of motifs are used in the sociological theorizing on culture, structure, and social systems. The notion of pattern plays a central role in Clifford Geertz's definition of a culture where he describes the culture in terms of patterns historically transmitted, patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, and a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms (Geertz, 1973, 89). Paul Lazarsfeld (1975) and Cole (2020) note pattern occupies a dominant place in Talcott Parsons and R.K. Merton's writings.

Thus, direct sociological knowledge production on motifs is scanty. But motifs that primarily refer to patterns are being used extensively in the writings and in the attempts for knowledge production in social anthropology, sociology of social structure, system, and cultural sociology. Later on, motifs studies have entrenched into the arena of Sociology through studies on literature, art, craft, and handlooms. But till date they are negligible.

Sociological knowledge production on Myths

By looking at linguistic components and their relationships to one another, Levi Strauss claims that myth enables Anthropology to comprehend the underlying structure of civilization. According to Levi Strauss, the current use of the term "myth" dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when science first emerged as a field of logical inquiry distinct from the chaotic daily world in which common sense is constructed from our impressions of reality. He continues to write myths sustain history and history has replaced myths. History and myths stand on a continuum.

Invoking anthropology, linguistics, and psychology, Claude Levi-Strauss argued that the significance of myths resided not in their content but rather in the patterns of relationships they reveal. People can resolve difficulties in life by reconciling its extremes (such as life and death, agriculture, and war) with the help of myths. According to Levi-Strauss, myth patterns are the result of human brain processes rather than racial memory.

Malinowski declined to consider myths as imaginary. Myths are distinctive, fascinating, and sometimes frightening. These myths are prone to distortion and modification since they are passed down from generation to generation. To quote the ideas of C. Kluckhohn (1942) myths and rituals together give systematic protection against supernatural perils, threats to one's physical health and environment, anti-social tensions, and the pressure of a powerful society.

On the basis of the structuralist approach of myths that Claude Levi-Strauss devised, Pierre Bourdieu created a sociological analysis of patterns of power and dominance. Pierre Bourdieu talks about the social, historical, and practical implications of myths.

Few sociologists have taken on the problem of researching myth's mechanisms. In 1912, Durkheim started to formulate a sociological concept of myth. However, anthropologists' vigorous pursuit of it may have led to its abandonment as a sociologist's attempt to draw boundaries. The work of Barthes (1972), in which he employs the story of myth creation to explain the sense-making of everyday lives and experiences, may serve as a starting point for current sociologists looking to study a sociological construct of myth. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) define a narrative self that depends on its self-reflexive yet socially integrated tale for temporal structure and continuity, despite the fact that they do not use the term myth.

Myths are dependent on the interpretations people make. The social role of a myth, including who adopts it, when, and why, is also a part of its meaning (Smith, 2002). People simultaneously and iteratively co-create while deciphering the significance of myths. In other words, myths are not isolated from larger sociocultural and political contexts; they frequently reflect specific facets of these contexts.

Myths have a powerful rooting in societies. They can open a door to a better understanding of social development. Myths in circulation, especially those that continue to be spread even after being "debunked," may continue to serve social purposes (Degenaar, 2007). According to Brown, social formation, the practice of forming groups based on modes of production, is dialectically tied to myth-making, the practice of inventing stories (Brown, 2016). Myths encourage shared belief, which promotes social cohesion, identity development, and a sense of community around particular actions. According to Durkheim, all myths, even the ones we consider to be the most irrational, have been believed. Men have relied on them to guide their behaviour, believing in them just as deeply as they do their own sensations (Durkheim, 1912).

However, a myth is more than just a text—or "discourse," in structuralist parlance. It is an all-encompassing linguistic action of a community or people (Maranda 1972: 13). An activity in the verbal medium that incorporates several, if not all, speech act categories is referred to as a myth. According to the Manchester School of Anthropology, myths serve a community's needs by solving (social) problems (e.g., Gluckman, 1966). Levi-Strauss (1973), in contrast, contends that myths force the audience to acknowledge the insoluble nature of a situation, leading to the resignation and acceptance of one's lot. The mythical knowledge is often contained in the form of symbols. A myth's contents might define a universe in which both actual people and fictional characters have a place, realising an "immaterial" enclosure (Van der Leeuw, 1977). Therefore, it is clear that myths play a significant role in social and cultural heritage. The individual acquires these myths through his family and community.

The interpretation of myths is shrouded with challenges and defenses. The enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Montesquieu have treated myths as hoaxes and superstitions (Vico, 1976). With the exponential growth of the scientific spirit, myths encountered a big challenge. Scientific temper led to the death of the myths (Segal, 2015). The lack of evidence to facilitate verifiability, predictability, and objectivity categorises the myths as unreal and highly contested in the scientific realm. However, Sociologists like Kuhn (1970) establish that myth-busting is a natural operation of knowledge-generating fields.

However, it goes uncontested that myths serve myriad functions in society. They connect the past, present, and future. Without them, the past, present, and future would seem chaotic, according to Kimball Young. With them, the world acquires new significance and shape. They establish our social and cultural reality as steady, dependable, and bearable. Myths bring synchronization between people, society, and their environment. Myths create a world that exists outside, but alongside the world, we live in. They often become the repository of past knowledge and the cultural heritage of a community. They have their socializing role and serve as informal instruments of social control. They ensure social solidarity in society. According to C. Kluckhohn, "Myths and rituals together give systematic protection against supernatural perils, threats to one's physical health and environment, anti-social tensions, and the pressure of a powerful society."

A myth cannot be approached in a purely profane setting. It is only comprehensible in a figural context as it is a part of everyday life. Society describes itself through legends and myths.

The common misconception is that myth is reduced to fable, legend, harmless fiction, and a utopian vision. Often a myth may result in malicious, harmful manipulation that deceives and alienates and can result in the most profound abuses, of which there are numerous examples in both ancient and modern history. Social myths are often ill-defined. From a sociological point of view, myth is essentially suggested to be viewed as a sort of collective representation (sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful), as a carrier of a message—that is, of values, beliefs, aspirations, aims, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes. Myths are based on beliefs and values that have normative weight. The axis of myth might once again lean toward good or toward evil (Bouchard, 2017).

4.3 Myths and Motifs: Establishing the Interrelationship

Myths and motifs are intricately related. Motifs often carry myths. Myths express themselves through motifs. Motifs are cultural creatives that project myths to gain popular acceptance and appeal. Human beings have always architected myths. Motifs are backed by myths handed down over the ages together. Myths in textiles are no doubt speculative. Myths change the meaning of the cultural context and they supply the symbolic meaning to the motifs used. Thus, while motifs are the styles, myths are the symbols having their root in the mythologies, culture, beliefs, and practices of the people. Motifs thus depicting the myths sustain culture.

Clifford Geertz advises us to switch from looking for explanations to looking for meaning in his thick description approach. In order to find meaning and develop the researcher's sensitivity to other people's points of view, he underlined the value of using one's own native perspective.

Sustenance of the myth on the motifs requires not only the skill and knowledge of the craftsman but the fascination based on an understanding of the motifs through the knowledge of the myths ingrained in them by the spectator or prospective buyer. The spectator's familiarity with the spiritual and material cultures of the community helps them understand the significance of the myths behind the motifs.

V. Conclusion

The entire analysis of the existing literature clearly spells out that the interpretation of motifs and myths is not very frequent in social science literature. Motifs are more discussed in terms of culture expressed through literature, art, and architecture. A few proximate conceptual analyses of motifs are drawn from Sociology, Anthropology, and Culture studies. So also, are the myths. But myth interpretations are a little higher in social science discourses. There is a strong interrelationship between myths and motifs. It is high time for social sciences to adopt semiotics to understand and interpret the motifs and establish a deep interrelation between the motifs and myths which is missing till date in Sociology.

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