

**WORKSHOP** led by Emily Lyle (who invites you all to an 'at home' on Sunday, 12 November, from 2:00–4 pm, at 69 Falcon Avenue, Morningside).

**Friday, 10 November 2017, 12:00-2:00 pm**

The theory being explored is that it is possible to reach a deeper understanding of the myths of each section of the Indo-European cultural world (as in the sections of Celtic and Old Norse mythology) through working with the Edinburgh ten-god model built up over several decades which is based on knowledge of the workings of tribal societies that have points in common with those found in the Indo-European historical records. Our mythology is not a 'religion of the book' but stems from a preliterate stage when individual and group thinking and biological memory were the only means of organising and storing cultural constructs. Categories were based on the human body and human kinship and spatial structures. Complex patterning was arrived at through correlative thinking, which provided a universe of thought where everything fitted together. The gods of mythology played key roles and could be regarded as being the head terms in the structure.

Although every human society had an innate need to build a universe, there was a variety of possibilities and so societies differed widely. The case of language is not totally dissimilar. All human societies had language but the languages differed. As the result of centuries of scholarship on language, we know of the existence of the Indo-European group of languages with a common origin. It can certainly be argued that the mythologies of these linguistic groups have a common origin too and there have been studies along these lines. They have not always carried conviction, and this is probably because they did not grasp the nettle of the total difference between an oral society in which the mythology must have originated and a literate one. To really enter into the possibilities, it is necessary to propose a model of how things were in that particular oral society, and the main features of such a model are listed below.

- (1) The society is distinctive in stressing **THREE**, taking as its basis a triple division of the human body into head, upper body and lower body. This is expressed in the Irish story of Lugaidd of the Red Stripes. It is not a matter of division into three equal parts; head and upper body form one half and lower body the other. The three parts are hierarchically ordered from head to foot.
- (2) The society uses **COLOURS** to distinguish its various components and the hierarchical triad is that of white, red and black. Since the 1960s it has been possible to employ a developmental model of colour use in societies, with the pair of white and black first, the triad of white, black and red second, and the fourfold set of white, black, red and a greenish-yellow third. The Indo-European pattern has a quarter system as well as the triad and uses these four colours, with greenish-yellow apparently being the female component set against the male triad. The four-colour set is found in Roman chariot-racing as well as in the Indo-Iranian castes.
- (3) These colours are related to **AGE-GRADING** in a society that had three age grades and four age classes consisting of young men (red), junior mature men (greenish-yellow), senior mature men (black) and old men (white). Age-grading has been found recently particularly strongly among the pastoralists of East Africa, as Kim McCone pointed out in his Indo-European study. The characteristics of the times of life were conceptualised as a set, which, in terms of the male triad, were apprehended by Georges Dumézil as (1) white, the sacred, (2) red, physical force, and (3) black, fertility and prosperity. In the later period for which there is more evidence, these characteristics were attached to priests, warriors, and cultivators and herders.
- (4) While the bulk of society could be conceived of in this way, it also had **KINGS**. Again, as with colour, this is a developmental marker and it indicates a focus on a centre. The overt focus is on the single king but there is also another king figure, the king of the dead. The king gains his authority in part from his descent, and ideally succeeds a grandfather in his patriline. That a man should not succeed his father as king is pronounced in the law of succession of Eochaid Feidlech.

- (5) As Robin Fox has pointed out, oral societies operated for immense periods of time with a revolving system of two or four generations. The kingship pattern noted above requires four generations and it is useful to see the society in terms of a FOUR-GENERATION CAPSULE. This length of time coincides with what Jan Assmann has described as the unit of communicative memory.
- (6) A component of the revolving system may be ALTERNATE GENERATIONS, where there is opposition to the adjacent generations and the alternate generations are seen as having common ground, i.e. the positive connection would be with the grandparents rather than the parents.
- (7) The alternation comes out strongly in the ALTERNATE SUCCESSION found in a pair of royal lines.
- (8) Part of the same scheme of succession is the stress on the QUEEN. A man becomes king through marriage with the princess who is the daughter of the previous king and queen. The Irish inaugural marriage seems to be a reflection of this practice.
- (9) Within the pantheon, there are sets of COSMIC AND SOCIAL GODS. The cosmic ones relate to the levels of the universe (heaven, lower sky, earth and sea, with earth as the primal goddess, and the social ones relate to the directions of horizontal space.
- (10) Important is the stress on ANCESTORS with the cosmic gods corresponding to the king's father, paternal grandfather and mother's brother and the apical ancestress. For fresh ideas on ancestors and gods in the Scandinavian context, see the work of Triin Laidoner.
- (11) Not all the dead are ancestors, for the king of the dead is the brother of the king and seems to enter this role through his SACRIFICE. This king can be identified as Baldr, Donn and Dylan (as well as Yama and Remus).
- (12) Although the scheme is claimed as Indo-European, it is not held to be exclusively so. Useful comparison can be made with the ten HEAVENLY STEMS in China.

In making cross-cultural comparisons, it is valuable, and perhaps essential, to see both the terms of the comparison in relation to the posited source. Without a foundation model to work with, comparisons often failed to carry conviction, since each of the terms of the comparison has been subject to diachronic change over millennia and is immersed in its own culture. The Old Norse pantheon has an interesting limit, close to the hypothesised number ten. Odin and Thor are central figures in different ways and, since the system revolves round kingship, it is of prime importance to place them within the Old Norse context in a way that enables comparison with other cultures. Odin is clearly an old god, one of the triad of males born to the first female to give birth, the giantess Bestla. In broad terms, therefore, he is a cosmic god, and not at the level of the social gods who normally provide the kings. Looking at the generation level after his, we find the most powerful god to be Thor. At this point, we can step back and perhaps see a need to re-define what it meant to be king. As Michael Witzel's book on world mythology makes clear, there is a hero who defeats monsters and makes the world safe for human habitation. This is the king-figure in the prehistoric context and he can be identified as Indra. Thor's giant-killing is the appropriate work of the king-figure. We seem to have a situation where aspects of royalty have been split between two figures. For purposes of comparison in relation to kingship, Thor is the more useful since he retains his position in the correct generation for a pantheon that shows evolution from the cosmic to the social; his position is comparable to that of Zeus and Lug.

We probably need three-dimensional models to allow us to see all the complexities clearly, and I hope to show part of a summer project by Jianqiang Chang of the Edinburgh College of Art which could make a useful beginning.