

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF MYTH IN THE RELIGION SYSTEM (IN PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURE STUDY)

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Abstract

The Indonesian people are rich in myths as a cultural heritage of the ancestors. Myth is typically form of message which basically contains elements of belief or faith (religion). Myth belongs to the community and grows in a society who believes the existence of myth through symbolic meaning underneath. The study of myth can be traced back through various aspects, including: the insight of the myth, the symbolic meaning behind the myth, and the model of mythical analysis. There are three views of society upon myth, namely acceptance, denial, and the middle path (tolerance). Based on semiotic view of modern culture, myth is not a kind of narrative form, however myth is a phenomenon of everyday life, and has certain functions. The symbolic meaning of myth can be analysed through a linguistic-structural approach. In the study of language and culture, myths are seen as semiotic systems. Myth as a basic phenomenon of mankind's culture in where lies kinds of religious systems underneath as part of culture used as an object of the interdisciplinary studies by implementing ethical and EMIC approach.

Keywords: symbolic meanings, myth, religious systems, cultural studies

Introduction

In everyday life, we often hear the term myth. Even in the past, the parents often advised or prohibited their children by using myths. Nowadays, we clearly are able

to notice the existence of myth in the community, even almost in all aspects of life, including in the religious system is associated with the myth. Throughout the region, myth is not only possessed by certain community, yet the other communities or other ethnics can also possess myth as well.

Myth itself is a word, speech, story of the ancestors (God) in which can be asserted as a story or collection of elements of the story considered as a disclosure. Myth symbolizes certain aspects implicitly that has an insight on mankind existence and trans-human. In a broader sense, myth means a statement, a story of the origin of the world, a story of nature, and of the events we face (Roibin, 2007).

Myth means the story of a certain nation about God and ancient heroes containing interpretation, for examples, the origins of the universe, human beings, and nations that contains profound meanings and revealed in such a supernatural way. Myth belongs to the community and grows in a society who believes its existence (KBBI, 1993: 660-661).

According to Suparwa (2009: 83), the term '*ancient*' in the sense of myth indicating that myth is an event or story happened in past. In accordance, many people assume that

myth is ancient. Myth is not suitable to be applied nowadays. The problem is not on myth's presence in the past (*ancient*), but the values are merely correlate to the extrinsic values expressed in the myth are often relevant to the development life of humankind or dynamic and growing community.

Some of these mythical meanings characterize myth as a metaphysical narrative, it means that the text must be interpreted on two levels. *First*, it is the birth stage referring to the action of mythical agents or called the practical level of myth. *Second*, the inner level which refers to the questions of human existence and the cosmos. For example: the myth on the origin of human, the elements of nature, and the myth of reincarnation.

Noth (2006: 383) distinguishes between myth as fictitious discourse and logos as rational discourse. During the enlightenment and positivism era, myth was even contrasted with reality. Mystifying equals to fiction. In its development myth turns into antonym of both reality and science.

Even though based on opinions judging that myth is fictitious, but for the people who believe and obey the truth of myth proves that several myths have been believed to be able to organize the society to have cultural and meaningful senses and be useful in life. The life of the community that brings benefits to members of society and the environment inadvertently or deliberately follows the values contained in the myth.

In our society everyday life, myth has certain functions. (a) Myth functions as an awakening process of supernatural powers. (b) Myth gives belief or recent faith, for the myth represents the existed events, contains suggestions, and the recent

anticipation. (c) Myth has an epistemological and ontological realm on a certain reality (Francis, 2006: 45).

The study of myth can be traced through various aspects, namely the view of the myth, the symbolic meaning behind the myth, and the model of mythical analysis.

Views upon Myth

Myth is a basic phenomenon on mankind's culture. Based on the semiotic view of modern culture in which limits the myth not as a narrative form, but as a phenomenon of everyday life. In mythical view as a secondary semiotic system, myth is a semiotic system built on the principle of connotation. The myth consists of connotative meaning embedded in the level of deviation of meaning. Thus, myth is really created and developed among the users' community and those who believe in the truth. For the people who believe in the truth, the existence of the myth is undeniable (North, 2006: 383).

Myth belongs to an anonymous society; it means that myth cannot be traced to whom first created it so that the myth as communal property of the local community. Myth develops in society and is verbally. Thus, myth develops verbally or as a folklore.

The content of myth concerns matters relating to belief or religious systems, heroic systems, or heroism. Myth is shown as something that is very close to the beliefs of local people and heroism and nature are certainly worth to be trusted and made as an example. In accordance to this trait, myth is often trusted or believed by society and made as a guidance in the sense of a lifelong rule that governs the lives of individuals and societies where they grow and develop.

Myth as a cultural product associated with the issue of belief or faith, is also associated with the religious system. This is in accordance with the idea of universal cultural elements (Kuncoroningrat, 2015). There are seven elements of universal culture, namely religious systems (beliefs, values and worldviews, religious communication, and religious ceremonies), social citizenship organization or social organization (kinship, association, state system and unity system of life), knowledge systems (vegetation and wildlife, time, space, numbers, interrelated behaviour, and health or human body), language systems (oral and written), arts, livelihood systems or economic systems, and living or technological equipment systems.

Among the elements of culture, there are elements of culture that correlates to myth, for example the religious system as part of the cultural element is an integrated system of belief in the shape of religious behaviour. Similarly, the language system deals with verbal myth (spoken). However, nonverbal myth is associated with living equipment systems (objects) that are believed containing truth values.

There are three views of society on belief upon the myth. *First*, a community who still believes in the existence of the myth. This community firmly believes upon the myth and it is implemented and used to manage all aspects of life. In addition, myth is taught from generation to generation (trans-generation). In this society, myth has been existing and developing up to the present time.

The second, groups of people who do not believe on the existence of myth. Myth is regarded as superstitions (*khurafat*) or fictive that have no basis of truth. Myth is

irrational and does not correlate to facts. According to the view of Islam, myth is categorised as apolytheism, and polytheism lead into apostate. Islam believes and glorifies the truth derived from the Qur'an, Al-Hadith, and Al-Sunnah. Allah (SWT) says (in Sura 2: 147). *Al-haqqumirrobbika fa laatakuunannaminal-mumtarriin*. It means: *The truth is from your God then do not you ever belong to the doubters*. In *Islamic Media Salafiyah*, *Ahlusunnahwalljamaah* explains that Islam has a valid and accurate standard in assessing a point of view and an opinion. As Imam Syafii said: *"Everyone who speaks according to the Qur'an and Al-Sunnah, it is a requirement that must be followed (<https://almanhaj.or.id.>)"*

Third, the middle way group, the group that does not believe nor reject the myth. This group is not apriori to the people who believe in myth as a cultural product.

The Symbolic Meaning of Myth

According Suparwa (2009: 83), the insight meaning listed in the sense of myth should be interpreted and acknowledged. Myth does not have straightforward meaning. In general myth expresses the figurative meaning which is expressed subtly with a language made in such a way as to inspire people to try to have an insightful analysis and to seek the meaning behind the myth.

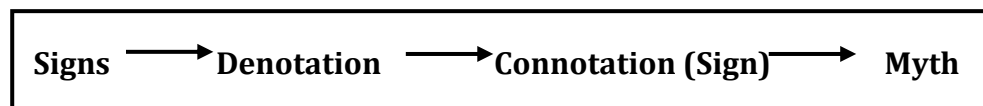
Defining the meaning of myth cannot be stopped within a decade or at a certain situation and condition, but it needs continuous defining the meaning of myth. Defining the meaning of myth always needs deepening thought, because the more insightful analysis on its meaning will make more interesting and more valuable. Myth does not stop or die at a certain time. The myth will

be valuable in every stage of time and its value will be increasingly understood and useful whenever the interpreter understands the myth is increasingly knowledgeable. This such interpreter will be able to associate and review upon mythical values in accordance to time being.

Noth (2006: 381) explains myth as a narrative metaphorical text and characterizes metaphysical myth as a narrative. To find the meaning of the text, it should be interpreted. Defining the meaning of the myth is one element of the sign like the idea of Saussure. In addition, a sign has a signified meaning and also has

an assignifier. Markers are forms or *mediums* which is picked up by a mark, such as sounds, images, or other notes. Meanwhile, markers are concepts and meanings. Furthermore, markers are produced through the selection process and the combination of signs according to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. The syntagmatic axis is composed of a combination of linear signs, whereas the paradigmatic axis points to the signs field.

According to defining the meaning of myth, Christomy and Yuwono (2004: 95) describe the level of signs and meaning as follows:



Denotation is the defining on descriptive and literal meaning and being understood by the majority of society. On the other hand, the defining the meaning of the connotation is a meaning created by connecting the markers with a broader cultural aspect, such as beliefs, attitudes, framework, ideologies of a particular formation. As a cultural work product, myth has a broad meaning in the aspects of people's lives.

Based on above mentioned explanations, myth and ritual are identical. It means that if both are viewed from the point of view of language studies and the meaning, there is a systemic relationship. There are two types of myths based on the way they are delivered, they are verbal and nonverbal myths.

1) Verbal Myth

Spoken myth is also called the verbal myth, it means a myth that is delivered in the form of language

(spoken). The verbal myth is a belief or ritual custom in order to provide some kind of wisdom, advice, suggestion, and prohibitions or taboos. Since verbal myth is also a basic phenomenon of the mankind's culture, its fundamental relevance is connected and applied by society

2) Nonverbal Myth

Nonverbal myth is a myth in the form of an object and is believed to be true. This nonverbal myth is associated with a sacred object or heritage. Some groups of people still believe in the existence of the mythical nonverbal (body).

Myth is a story or a collection of elements of the story that is considered as a trustworthy disclosure for some people. Hence, the myth implicitly symbolizes certain aspects which lies deep alongside with human existence. Myth is anonymous in the sense that we cannot trace the creator of it, so that the myth is a communal

property of local communities. This kind of myth develops like an oral or folklore.

Myth as a unit of language that can be analysed linguistically (based on language elements). The study can reveal the elements of the form and elements of content or meaning contained in the myth. From a language point of view, myth can be in the form verbal language (spoken) and nonverbal (object). From the point of view of meaning, myth has symbolic meanings. Myth is defined through interpretation. The symbolic meanings of the myth, among others, expresses the meaning of belief (theology), the meaning of culture, the meaning of education, and which are related to aspects of human life. This meaning is determined by the interpreter or the user of the sign system.

In the phenomena of life, verbal myth is a spoken myth. The verbal myth is a customary belief or ritual in order to provide some kind of wisdom, advice, suggestion, and prohibitions or taboos. In addition, the kinds of nonverbal myth can be in the form of objects, heirlooms, or sacred objects which are believed to be true.

Functionally, the myth is still believed by some people nowadays, myth evolves according to the development of society and its supporting culture. Moreover, myth in local customary ritual ceremonies has become elements and treasures of national culture.

Because myth is the basic phenomenon of mankind's culture, its fundamental relevance alongside with various human science has made myth as an object of interdisciplinary research and studies. The symbolic meaning of the myth in the religious system can be studied with ethical and emic approaches. This current descriptive study combines what

the community has claimed to be the owner of culture, then interpreted to produce the symbolic meaning of the myth.

Myth Analysis Model

Rafiek (2010: 73) explains that Levi-Strauss seeks to analyse myth with linguistic models. Myth is analysed by sorting them into two axes. Syntagmatic axis is the order of elements (story) horizontally and paradigmatic shaft in the form of a collection relationsof vertical element. In this way, it will be acknowledged the conditions which might allow the production and transformation of the myth. Strauss argues that all versions of myth are related to the culture of the mythical owner.

To examine the meaning of the myth, Levi-Strauss asserts that linguistic system is awakened from the relationships among the elements that could form the opposition (*the binary opposition*) that can be used as the basis for interpretation. Accordingly, inside the mythical correlation units, there lies an isolated structure, yet it is unified to the relationship which is combined and used to unveil the truth behind the myth.

Regularity in myth is often called as structure. Therefore, in analysing the myths, we are sought to find the structure. In order to find the structure of the myth, it is suggested by using linguistic model as the understanding of socio-cultural phenomenon. The basic assumption is that linguistics is regarded as a system, regardless of historical evolution, and in that system contains convincing relations. Another reason strengthening Strauss's linguistic model is that it sees social-cultural phenomena as a sign system and

symbols that can be transformed into linguistics.

Starting from the linguistic system, Strauss uses the principle of association or analogue that myth has a structure similar to linguistic symptoms. If linguistics is used to convey messages, so do myth. Myth contains a variety of new messages that can be understood if we already know the structure and meaning of the various elements existing in the myth. Linguistic influences are also seen in the notion of culture as a structural system especially developed by Levi-Strauss. This seen in its use of binary *opposition* (*opposition binary*) in the analysis of cultural aspects such as relationship and myth. In the study of myth, Strauss seeks to discover the universal principles manifested concretely into different cultures. In the analysis of myth, the human mind does not experience such constraints in concrete reality in which it purely reflects the principles of universal thinking (Christomy and Yuwono, 2004: 18).

In his main idea, Halliday (1978: 112) says that language as a social process is inseparable from a set of meanings or texts. He adds that meanings are produced and reproduced on the basis of certain social conditions. The meaning relates to the subject and the concrete object is indecipherable, except on the basis of a set of relations to the social structure, is also manifested through relationships with roles and behaviours. Accordingly, Halliday categorizes the function of language into three, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions.

Based on that, an understanding of the values contained in human works (including myth and religious systems) also are not apart from the symbolic concept. The meaning of a

certain work is described implicitly in the symbols. The symbolic meaning is related to the background of sociocultural and religion which becomes the foundation of the creation of the work concerned and understood by the community of its supporters. These symbols relate to the nature of human life in this case the user of the symbols. The analytical model as described before, can be applied to discover the symbolic meaning of myth.

Levi-Strauss developed a structural (systemic) method of mythical analysis that becomes a paradigm for semiotics of texts, particularly semiotics of narratives. For the survey and application, this mythical method of analysis has been done by Greimas (Noth, 2006).

Conclusion

Myth as a cultural product is universal and one of its existence becomes the basis of belief in the religious system of human life and for those who believe it. The meaning of myth can be studied through the symbolic meaning behind it. Myth is not only a narrative form, but it is as a phenomenon in the life of mankind that is still believed its existence for the time being.

Myth is a basic phenomenon of human culture. Its fundamental relevance to the various sciences including religious systems, language systems, and living tools (objects) as part of culture can be the object of interdisciplinary studies.

Specifically, myth becomes a special object of semiotic text because myth becomes interpreted object as semiotic phenomena of culture in human life. Myth becomes the object of study can be viewed as a metaphorical

narrative, science, and belief (religious system).

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