

Methodological Problems in Studies of the Global Distribution of Myths

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Abstract

When joined with comparative linguistics and population genetics, studies of global distributions of myths can help in the reconstruction of ancient and prehistoric movements of peoples and ideas. But as in these other fields, significant methodological problems need to be resolved before this relatively new branch of comparative mythology can fully mature. This paper addresses these problems using case studies involving Eurasian, African, Australian and Oceanic, and New World myths. The studies illustrate problems introduced by hidden contamination from foreign and later sources in the early myths reported in stratified ancient texts and modern ethnographies; provide examples of rapid mutations in myths, which complicate attempts to reconstruct prehistoric conditions using either ancient or modern sources; illustrate dramatic convergences in myths in distant societies that make it difficult to distinguish cultural diffusion or transmission from parallel developments; and illustrate problems in the oral and textual sources underlying standard handbooks and computer databases of myths that may lead to massive under- or over-reporting of data from specific regions and to anachronistic groupings of superficially related myths, further complicating attempts to track long-range cultural linkages. The paper concludes by introducing a 'blind-scoring' checklist to maximize the legitimate help that comparative mythology can provide in reconstructing ancient movements of peoples and ideas, especially when backed by supporting linguistic and genetic evidence.