

From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology, Volume 2.
By Claude Levi-Strauss.

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Reviewed by Eddie Bullard.

The fascination that myths hold for their believers can hardly surpass the interest that the study of myth holds for scholars. From ancient times till the present, questions concerning what myth is and what it does have puzzled many thinkers. The ancient Greek Euhemeris explained myths as disguised history. The nineteenth century saw the solar mythologists explaining myths as metaphoric descriptions of natural phenomena, while Tylor and Frazer theorized that myths were the expressions of the pre-scientific thought of savages. In this century Jung argues that archetypes within the human psyche give rise to myths. Today we are in the midst of a new assault on the subject, led by the structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss.

In From Honey to Ashes Levi-Strauss studies myth from the perspective of structure, which is an approach pioneered by him. Such a study begins with the theory that all human thought can be reduced to a fundamental pattern of opposition and mediation. That is, every proposition has its opposite, and sometimes a third proposition can be formulated that incorporates the opposing two in such a way that they are reconciled. Among all men, civilized or primitive, this same pattern operates. There is no difference between the thought quality of primitive men and civilized men, but there are different vehicles. Instead of using abstract propositions, primitive men practice a "science of the concrete" in which physical objects serve as propositions. An abstract opposition such as life and death may be symbolized as the raising of crops as opposed to the hunting of animals, respectively. Then the idea of food, which is life to the eater but death to the eaten, may serve as a mediator. Out of groups of opposing pairs and mediating objects, ideas are linked together into mythical narratives. Furthermore, the linkage is not random and purposeless. In a case where the idea is held that men originally were born out of the earth, and yet at the same time it is perceived that men are born from women, the contradiction of belief by perception is solved in myth. Such a solution occurs on a higher linguistic level than the simple words of the myth. Much of what is found in myths in fact seems absurd. However, on the level of relationships between ideas, a pattern emerges that serves as a subconscious tool for overcoming the contradiction. The true meaning of myths lies in a structure of relationships, and it is this structure and its operation as a mental tool that concerns Levi-Strauss.

Such a sweeping theory demands evidence that is convincing both in quality and quantity. Levi-Strauss is attempting to provide this evidence in his four-volume Introduction to a Science of Mythology, of which From Honey to Ashes is his second volume. In the Foreword he states that this book does not contain a theoretical argument in favor of his structural method. Rather, the book is an attempt to demonstrate the workability of that method

by studying a group of myths, showing how they relate structurally, and revealing a consistent pattern of meaning that runs through the mythical material.

The entire book is a study of a myth-system based on one fundamental opposition and found among the myths of South American Indians. In The Raw and the Cooked (the first volume of the series), Levi-Strauss finds a complex system associated with uncooked as against cooked items. The qualities of being raw and cooked correspond to abstract ideas of nature and culture, since only the man with the technology and social standards of culture will cook. In From Honey to Ashes, Levi-Strauss spreads beyond the raw-cooked opposition into a related, though broader, opposition. This is the opposition between honey and tobacco, two substances of great significance in the lives of the Indians as well as in their myths. Honey incorporates such qualities as wetness and sweetness, tobacco such qualities as dryness and pungency. Beyond these obvious qualities, it seems that in South America honey is not always sweet, but in fact different species of insects produce honey with qualities that include sweet, bitter, and intoxicating. Tobacco too carries a complex variety of qualities. We find these substances with their diverse and often overlapping qualities at work as symbols in a system of relationships, wherein lies the true significance of honey and tobacco myths.

For the Indians honey is a scarce, hard-to-gather substance. This fact aside, the belief exists that in the past there was an abundance of honey, and for that matter of all things; but due to human error the order of the world was changed and material goods became scarce. Honey possesses the quality of seductiveness, and in this way honey was instrumental in destroying the golden age. A complex of myths deals with a girl who craves honey, and in her greed she violates social values by failing to defer consumption. As a result she is changed into an animal, and thus reverts back to nature. Another complex of myths deals with honey being given in plentitude by supernatural beings and then lost through a careless human act. Game is lost as well. Finally the myths tell of culture itself being lost, a situation in which men cannot distinguish between food and excrement. This course of reverting from culture back into a state of nature is partially reversed by tobacco. The effects of tobacco are similar to the effects of honey, but tobacco that is burnt is tobacco that is cooked, and to excess. Culture is restored since cooking is a cultural act. Tobacco myths concern man's ability to influence and communicate with the spirit world, and by properly dealing with the supernatural, man is able to acquire the materials he needs for survival. The effects of the tobacco myths, then, is to partially redress the balance that is lost in the honey myths.

Ultimately Levi-Strauss demonstrates an interrelation of the myths with the social standards of Indian life, with environmental characteristics, and with kinship patterns. Thus From Honey to Ashes constitutes a two-levelled effort at integration. On one level there is the linking of the elements of diverse myths, here mainly under the nature-culture opposition. Determining which myths are relevant to the study is a matter of finding which myths contribute

to a mediation of the opposition. With this structural method a meaning appears among myths that seem disparate to other methods. On the second level there is the possibility of linking the pattern of ideas found in the myths with the social life of the Indians. The oral folklore can thus be correlated with the values, customs, and ideational patterns that lie external to the narratives. Perhaps we might add a third level, which is germane to the entire fabric of Levi-Strauss's theory: The thought of these Indians is complex and integrated, using concrete objects instead of abstract symbols but handling these concrete objects in a rigorous fashion nonetheless.

From Honey to Ashes is a difficult book. To say that it falls in the midst of Levi-Strauss's works is an apt description, since the book presupposes that the reader is familiar with the study conducted in The Raw and the Cooked, aware of the principles used in the structural study of myth, and acquainted with the nature of structuralism in general. Trying to understand the summary of The Raw and the Cooked presented in this volume, without the benefit of having read the earlier book, is self-punishment. Even some of the terminology used in From Honey to Ashes is explained only in The Raw and the Cooked. In its own right From Honey to Ashes is difficult to follow -- well written, yes; but the goals and the thread of the argument are often lost in the volume of detailed analysis of myths that he presents. There is a whole literature of criticism aimed at Levi-Strauss's methods. Some call his work a literary rather than a scientific effort, and often his associations appear arbitrary. In effect he says "whatever is, is right," since he pulls whatever meaning out of a mythical element that he needs to complete his pattern. In the same vein he says "whatever I say is right," since he has determined the master plan which the myths are manipulated to confirm. Meanwhile the reader simply follows along and accepts. Of course the intent of this volume is to provide evidence for a wider argument, and not to be self-supporting in terms of method and theory. As such, the novice should avoid it unless he is already acquainted with Structural Anthropology, The Savage Mind, and The Raw and the Cooked. The initiated may use From Honey to Ashes to continue their research into this ongoing and much-debated theory. So far as index and bibliography go, the volume is excellent.