THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Empirical studies help constructing concepts and theories. Myth is not an exception. Scholars have theorised following the general frame of analysis they propounded and believed in. Many thinkers, especially during the past century or so, have attempted to postulate theories on myths. Thus, a number of theories on myths are available to us. Greek thinkers in the classical period developed three forms of account of myths – allegorical, rational and euhemerism.\(^1\) Allegorical theory was one of the earliest theories whose prominent allegorists were Theagenes, Heraclitus, Permenides and Plato and they viewed myths as depicting or concealing in poetic language a reality or events that could be envisaged behind the text.\(^2\) The rationalist theory was associated with Cicero, Lucretius and Xenophone and they tried to demonstrate that myths were meaningless and a creation of irrational and feeble minds.\(^3\) The third explanation of myth came from Euhemeros and his supporters in Greece who believed that myths were basically imaginative stories. The first account focuses on the functional aspect of myth while the latter two focuses on the nature of origin of myth. These three views of myths continued to influence the minds of scholars of the western world till the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth century, especially to Max Mueller, Andrew Lang, E.B. Tylor and Sir James Frazer.

Muller, an important early theorist, sought to explain previously unexplainable myths (Example - Cronos swallowing his children as they are born) through a theory of “solar” myth. Myths were born in explanations of weather and solar phenomenon
made increasingly anthropomorphic as humans made the explanations metaphoric over time. Thus, Cronos was a symbol of the sky devouring and then releasing the clouds. As time passed, people came to forget this as a poetic symbol and instead believed in an actual supernatural personage. Muller called this process the “disease of language”.4

Andrew Lang was Muller’s gentlemanly opponent. For Lang, myths were preserved traditions from early phases of human development. His idea of myth boiled down essentially to a collection of ‘outworn ideas’ – fossils of cultural evolution. Lang would trace themes in myths back actual social practices. H. Davidson compares succinctly the two scholars. “Thus while Muller explained the myth of Cronos devouring his children as evolving from a poetic description of sun devouring the clouds, Lang saw it simply as based on memories of a time when cannibalism was a common practice among savage tribes”.5

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1913)6 also studied contemporary ‘tribal’ people to theorise about past human behaviours. The modern undeveloped “savage” (now considered a pejorative, ethnocentric term) represented, he felt, the ancient childhood of all humankind; he theorized that a modern child thinks like a grown-up “savage,” and children learn first to understand themselves and so attribute familiar (human) motives behind other things in the world (a rabbit, or the wind, is to be engaged in conversation and reasoned with) – the process of making analogies. Further, Tylor felt that contemporary folk beliefs were ‘survivals’ of these ancient ‘child-like’ analyses of the world. These assumptions led Tylor to think that myths
followed comparable stages of development, the “rough” nature myths of contemporary tribal people engaging in “childlike” contemplation of the world were like the very earliest myths lost in ancient times.

An amplification of Mueller’s theory may be seen in *The Golden Bough* (1922) by Sir James Frazer. Frazer explains that in the primitive societies of Greece a custom was observed in which the divine king was sacrificed so that his power should not be weakened by age. The ritual of sacrificing a human victim was also apparently followed in several other civilizations, purportedly to rid society of all evils. Later on, the two rituals were combined into a symbolic form which eschewed actual human sacrifice. Hence the ‘divine king’ became the ‘divine scapegoat’. The life of the divine king was seen as an allegory of the progress of the earth and of humanity as paralleled by the progress of the seasons of the year, of sowing and harvesting, of winter and spring. In effect the year (or one turn-over of the seasons) itself was an allegory for periodic universal decay and rejuvenation. His theory was that humans had a common inheritance in a way of thinking, which they applied in ways specific to their local environment. In fact, his approach is called the ‘myth-ritual’ theory, which posit that myths evolved to explain previously existing religious rituals – the theory may still apply in certain cases, but its extreme form is now considered flawed.

These theories had major problems, including an ethnocentrism common to their times (and to ours, too often with fewer excuses). As well, they did not see that all modern features of culture are, indeed, contemporaneous, not survivals or living
fossils (fossils are indeed dead; but if something ‘breathes’, it’s alive and thus ‘contemporaneous’). Yet Muller advanced mythography by developing a philological and comparative approach, and Lang taught us the importance of making ethnographic comparisons to help us understand culture. Tylor has done good service in showing myths to share some fundamental processes and that such stories tell us more about folklore process than historical events. Frazer’s use in anthropology and mythography is doubtful because of his lack of critical rigor but his charming and extensive writing did expand the role of mythography in academia.\(^8\)

Franz Boas (1911) collected a large amount of information on myths, legends, tales, riddles, art, magic, song, dance, idioms, traditions, customs and ceremonies to explore and analyse the culture of the American tribes. He found that myths were, in part, culturally determined and, in part, determined by human imagination. He paid much attention to the underlying ‘ultimate significance’ of myths. Boas also objected to the theory that myths had arisen from a universal tendency to anthropomorphize nature.\(^9\)

Among many theorists there are some who related myth to metaphysics. To Cassirer, myth was not an explanation of primitive man’s thoughts and beliefs but an interpretation of his state of feeling. Cassirer in his \textit{An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture} (1944) states “the real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but feeling”.\(^10\) Following him it may be summarised that myth arises from certain feelings like fear of death. In either case,
this much should be clear, that pervasive and powerful yet more or less ineffable phenomena or their felt experience tended to become myths.

The interpretation of myth as an expression of feelings or the inner state of the people who participated in creation and perception of myth led to the psychological study of myth. A psychological approach to myth uses studies of the human mind to help explain as to why individuals produce certain recurrent patterns in myths out of group traditions. The psychoanalytical scholar Sigmund Freud declared that humans share many basic experiences (such as childhood maturation), so humanity has a shared tradition of dreaming. Myths have seemed to share the themes of dreaming and reflect processes of the unconscious mind, especially those processes related to the child’s development. This idea provides a universal method to approach the myths of all societies. Freud looked upon myth as projection of the unconscious which was the repository of sexual fantasies. According to Freud, myth was analogous to dreams. Dreams are the fulfilments of wishes that have been repressed and disguised. To protect sleep and relieve potential anxiety, the mind goes through a process of what is termed “dream-work,” which consists of three primary mental activities: “condensation” of elements; “displacement” of elements; and “representation” of transmission of elements into imagery or symbols, which are many, varied, and often sexual. Something similar to this process may be discerned in the origin and evolution of myths; it also provides insight into the mind and the methods of the creative artist, as Freud himself was well aware in his studies.11
Thus, Freud’s discovery of the significance of dream-symbols led him and his followers to analyse the similarity between dreams and myths. Symbols are many and varied and often sexual. Myths, therefore, in the Freudian interpretation, reflect people’s waking efforts to systematize the incoherent visions and impulses of their sleep world.\textsuperscript{12} Freud (like Tylor and others before Freud) believed contemporary people living a so-called ‘simple’ tribal life represent the kind of life led by our own ancient forbears; the folklore of contemporary “savages” was to be seen as a record of their psychology which could, in turn, be compared to the psychology of the neurotic.

Carl Jung explains his understanding of myth by putting forward the idea of the collective unconscious which he believed was a stratum of the unconscious that was deeper than the personal unconscious. This collective unconscious is a universal and specifically human phenomenon. Its contents are almost the same everywhere in all human societies and among all individuals. The common patterns among these are called archetypes. Myth and fairy tale are only the more well-known expressions of these archetypes as they express the deepest unconscious feelings of the human race.\textsuperscript{13}

Carl Jung’s psychological method also relied on relations between archetypal dream symbols and symbols found in legends and myths. Dream symbols, he said, are a common psychological inheritance. Jung wanted us to study myth to help guide our lives by helping us find parallel symbols in other myths and religions. This study would help us revive and strengthen contemporary religions to make them more
broadly meaningful by showing the parallels with other religions. Jung was willing to become part of religious life instead of a scientific observer of it. As Jung relied heavily on Indo-European culture and history in his formulations, so his theory loses strength as a universal explanation of myth.\textsuperscript{14}

From the two psychoanalysts of myth, Jung’s theory of myth as an expression of the collective unconscious seems in some way more acceptable than Freud’s dream and its resultant sexual desires because Jung’s proposition is based on a wider spectrum of basic elements of human nature as evidenced in age after age and culture after culture in human society.

Joseph Campbell was also one of the psychoanalytical theorists of myth and he reduces Jung’s theory of archetypes to a single archetype, the hero, who is “the perfect microcosmic mirror of the macrocosm”.\textsuperscript{15} He explains that this hero is “the man who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms”. In the course of his life the hero may attain the status of a demi-god who sets an example to every human being to whom that particular myth has become familiar. Such an aura is created around his life, or to return to our discussion of ritual, the mythologized version of his life becomes so strictly and inviolably ritualized, that questioning any particular incident or instance in the complex shape of the myth becomes taboo to society.\textsuperscript{16} It is understood from the above that Campbell seems to arrive at an understanding of myth through both Jung and Freud and consequently provided a wider base for the consideration of the
history of a myth in its initial stages as well as during the transmission in subsequent ages. His comprehensive approach allows us to look at myth in a more flexible way.

Functionalism is an anthropological theory which studies how myths actually function for people and societies, and it may also shed light on how they originate. Although functionalism came to prominence as a school of sociological theory in the 1950s, its origin can be traced to the earlier generation of writers working in the field of anthropology in earlier decades of twentieth century. This included notably the British-based anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown.

Functionalists seek to describe the different parts of a society and their relationship through the organic analogy. The organic analogy compared the different parts of a society to the organs of a living organism (Herbert Spencer, 1860). The organism was able to live, reproduce and function through the organized system of its several parts and organs. Like a biological organism, a society was able to maintain its essential processes through the way that the different parts interacted together. Institutions such as religion, kinship and the economy were the organs and individuals were the cells in this social organism. Functionalist analyses examine the social significance of phenomena, that is, the function they serve a particular society in maintaining the whole.\footnote{17} A central methodological precept of these writers was that the actions of individuals are not to be explained by the immediate meanings they have for actors. They are to be explained by the functions they serve for the wider social group. On this argument, individual meaning cannot be understood
independently of a wider system of collective practices and beliefs within which it is embedded. These collective practices, in turn, are to be explained by the functions they serve for the system of social life as a whole. Different elements of social life depend on each other and fulfil functions that contribute to the maintenance of social order and its reproduction over time.\textsuperscript{18}

Malinowski (1926), on the basis of his experience among Trobriand Islanders, suggested that myths are neither explanations of natural phenomena nor poetry as pointed out by evolutionists and the scholars of the classical Greco-Roman period. Instead, myths are, in Malinowski’s opinion, validations of the social order. The myths, forming the ‘charter’, validate prevailing traditions and, thereby, strengthen them.\textsuperscript{19}

Again in one of his essay, Malinowski (1984) captures the essence of myth in functionalist terms. In perhaps one of the best-known passages of Malinowski, he underscores the indispensable function of myth. He writes:

Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.\textsuperscript{20}
Continuing with the pragmatic character of myth, he writes further that “the myth comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity”.\footnote{21}

Malinowski's choice of words like “charter” and “warrant” not only highlight the orientation of his theory, but also provide the key to the understanding of his functionalist theory of myth. The highlight of Malinowski's account of myths in primitive societies is the pragmatic role they play in integrating and stabilizing societies by charting their behaviour at all levels. To render it critically, myths embody and reveal the ethos of a society. Religiously they provide miracles, and socially and morally they proffer precedents and sanction respectively.

In the latter part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, scholars like Mircea Eliade and Levi-Strauss have offered new insights into the study of myths. Mircea Eliade, an eminent historian of religion, has written about religion and myths quite extensively. He emphasizes the sacredness associated with myths in his \textit{Myth and Reality} (1963). He writes,

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in Primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings”. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment of reality. . . Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to \textit{be}. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. . . . In
short, myths describes the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the “supernatural”) into the World.\textsuperscript{22}

It is inferred from his above definition that Eliade established the idea that myth describes some manifestation of divine will, power and direction in human life. It is an accounting of the nature of the universe and particularly a revelation of the sacred presence of divine commands in the created order.

A recent influence on myth studies has been Claude Levi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist who has argued that if meaning is to be found in mythology, it cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined.\textsuperscript{23} Lévi-Strauss is an anthropologist associated with the structural approach to culture. A structuralist approaches a cultural system by assuming that much human behaviour is determined by communication, and communication has underlying patterns. Levi-Strauss in \textit{The Savage Mind} (1966), \textsuperscript{24} sees myth as a mode of communication like language or music. In music it is not the sounds themselves that are important but their structure, that is, relationship of sounds to other sounds. In myth it is the narrative that takes the part of the sounds of music, and the structure of the narrative can be perceived at various levels and in different codes. From this it follows that no one version of a myth is the “right” one; all versions are valid, for myth, like society, is a living organism in which all the parts contribute to the existence of the whole. As in an orchestral score certain voices or instruments play some sounds, while the whole score is the sum of the individual parts, so in a myth the different, partial versions
combine to reveal its total structure, including the relationship of the different parts to each other and to the whole. Levi-Strauss’ method is therefore rigorously analytical, breaking down each myth into its component parts. Underlying his analytical approach are basic assumptions, of which the most important is that all human behaviour is based on certain unchanging patterns, whose structure is the same in all ages and in all societies. Second, he assumes that society has a consistent structure and therefore a functional unity in which every component plays a meaningful part. As part of the working of this social machine, myths are derived ultimately from the structure of the mind. And the basic structure of the mind, as of myths it creates, is binary; that is, the mind is constantly dealing with pairs of contradictions or opposites. It is the function of myth to mediate between these opposing extremes – raw/cooked, life/death, hunter/hunted, nature/culture, and so on. “Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution”. 25 Myth, then, is a mode by which society communicates and through which it finds a resolution between conflicting opposites. The logical structure of a myth provides a means by which the human mind can reconcile, avoid unpleasant contradictions and thus, through mediations, reconcile conflicts that would be intolerable if unreconciled. Levi-Strauss would maintain that all versions of a myth are equally authentic for exploring the myth’s structure. It is understood from Levi-Strauss that myths in all cultures of the world have similar function that of meditating contradictions but he seems to be lacking in enough justification as myths of different cultures may not have the same functions. But it should be accepted that Levi-Strauss’ structural analysis of myth is basically a means toward
establishing a rational system for understanding and organizing the study of mythology like many other theories of myths discussed above.

Having studied all theoretical approaches related to myth, it is found that the functionalist approach to the study of myth propounded in particular by Bronislaw Malinowski seems to have much relevance for interpreting Galo myths selected in this study. Malinowski’s analysis treats myth as ‘charter’ and not only validate prevailing traditions but also strengthen them. More importantly, this approach examines the social significance of the phenomena i.e. the functions of phenomena, serve in a particular society. In conformity with the tenets of functionalism, the Galo myths may be considered as the storehouse of Galo beliefs and practices which have been practised continuously generations after generations. Equally, these myths have validated the collective practices of the tribe which contribute to the maintenance of social order and social life. Without these myths, the Galo would have lost its identity as a unique and separate tribe and its diverse cultural as well as traditional practices and beliefs would have no basis since all different societies or tribes of the world are known to have their own distinct cultural and traditional identifications as a separate tribe or society. In fact, Galo tribe set great value on their myths as all their practices, rituals, values and lifestyles have been evolved from these myths and these myths epitomize their worldview and way of life. Moreover, these myths are the lens through which they see the world and judge what is true and false. So it shapes their view of virtue and truth. It tells them what they can accept as factually true and what they must consider false. In addition, all their practices, rituals and worldviews not only provide information for their quest of self-fulfilment but also
their search for inter-clan communal harmony and common origin which thereby help them strengthen their identity as a unique tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The functionalist approach has been applied to the selected *Galo* myths and resultant practices and rituals to find out its continuity as well as changes, if any, in the contemporary *Galo* society.

**Notes and References:**


2. Ibid, pp. 269-270.


