

## Believing in hunters and gatherers

John E. Pfeiffer

**Historical Atlas of World Mythology.**  
Vol.1, *The Way of the Animal Powers.*

By Joseph Campbell.

Alfred van der Marck Editions, San Francisco (distributed by Harper & Row): 1984. Pp.304. \$75. To be published in the UK on 30 June by Times Books, £35.

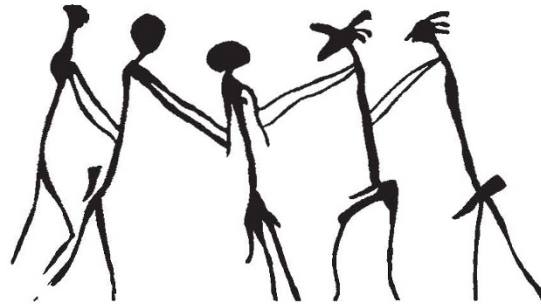
MYTHS are taken more seriously nowadays than was the case two world wars and a holocaust ago, when the distinction between primitive and civilized cultures seemed more clear-cut. No longer viewed as tall tales, as the superstitions of tribal and pre-tribal peoples in faraway places, myths are appreciated as highly structured belief systems serving chiefly to hold societies together. For more than half a century these systems have been the overriding concern of Joseph Campbell, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, with the past decade or so devoted to his major work: the compilation of a historical atlas of world mythology, which will appear in four volumes over the next two years.

Volume 1, *The Way of the Animal Powers*, deals with the origins of myth-making during hunter-gatherer times. It is far more than an atlas, if that implies a book consisting predominantly of maps. There are indeed plenty of maps, 50 to be precise, but they supplement an extensive text which makes up the bulk of the book and in which Campbell confronts the most formidable question of cultural evolution — of what possible value could myth be to the human animal, a minority species engaged to the hilt in competition with other predators for food and living space? After all, our ancestors endured for ages and managed to increase their numbers appreciably without the benefit of myth, at least as far as we can tell from the archaeological record.

Hominids, members of the human family, arose in Africa five or more million years ago, stayed there for at least three to four million years, and then spread to Europe and Asia and, most recently, to Australia and the New World. This process is illustrated in a series of informative maps, which also indicate glacial advances and retreats as well as progressive stages in the art of tool-making. The first signs of myth, the first hints that the human species was off on a new tack, date back 50,000 to 100,000 years, only yesterday on the evolutionary time scale. The notion that death is a beginning not an ending, that we live on invisibly in an afterlife, has been traced to the earliest known burials in western Europe, Neanderthals laid to rest on their sides as if asleep, and with mint-condition

tools and provisions for their journeys to another world.

An explosion of myth, what Campbell calls "the awakening of awe", came not long afterwards with the passing of the Neanderthals and the emergence of our kind of hominid, euphemistically known as doubly wise *Homo sapiens sapiens*.



Art of African hunter-gatherers, possibly depicting the ritual abduction of a girl (by animal-headed figures on the right, resisted by the figures on the left). The illustration is taken from A. R. Willcox's *The Rock Art of Africa*, a scholarly and well-illustrated book recently published by Croom Helm in Britain and Holmes & Meier in the United States. Prices are £45 and \$69.50, respectively.

Ceremony appeared as a major feature of prehistoric life, increasingly elaborate performances staged deep underground in the limestone caves of western Europe. Only the art remains, the backdrops — vestige figures representing the world's first "art movement" which culminated 20,000 to 10,000 years ago with superb animals, bison and mammoths and other big game, painted and engraved on cave walls. It is as if all we had from the times of Gothic cathedrals were stained-glass windows and graven gargoyle images.

According to Campbell, no single cause can explain the spectacular rise of myth. For one thing, there was crowding, individual against individual, with soaring population densities, and myth was embodied in ceremonies designed to create closer tribal ties. The related need to feed more people, to kill magnificent animals on a mass basis, resulted in an additional conflict of conscience "with a compensatory mythology . . . of a bonding covenant between the animal and human communities". Further factors contributing to "the creative explosion" included the landscape itself with its deep caverns "inspiring religious awe", the arrival of modern human beings, and the "visionary trance-seizures" of shamans who tapped unconscious forces in devising healing rites and initiations.

Campbell marshals ethnography as well as archaeology to support his analyses. He covers the world in describing the living folklore of present-day and recent hunter-gatherers, including the desert-dwelling Australian aborigines and Kalahari Bushmen, Eskimos, Tierra del Fuegians and Andamanese Islanders, forest peoples such as the Zaire pygmies and the recently discovered Tasaday of the Philippines — all complete with maps presenting geographical distributions of art styles and cults, and a unique index of myth motifs from "Aardvarks" to "Yucca fruits".

I only wish that in the process of bringing all of this information together, a prodigious task, Campbell had achieved a

sharper focus in organizing his book. All the basic findings and ideas are there, but so dispersed that their net impact is somewhat weakened. On the other hand, he has produced an outstanding survey of hunter-gatherer beliefs, and a much-needed reference work. We can look forward to his forthcoming volumes on the nature of

myths associated with agricultural societies, on the first civilizations, and on our own uncertain and increasingly complicated times. □

John Pfeiffer's most recent book is *The Creative Explosion: An Enquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (Harper & Row, 1982). He is currently completing a fourth edition of his textbook, *The Emergence of Man*.

## Nature of idealism

W.F. Bynum

**The Philosophical Naturalists: Themes in Early Nineteenth-Century British Biology.**

By Philip F. Rehbock.

University of Wisconsin Press: 1983.

Pp.281. \$30, £25.50.

UNTIL a decade or so ago, historians of science seemed often to assume that the view of nature which Darwin's *Origin of Species* challenged was deeply rooted in a lingering, cautious Paleyite emphasis on special creation, individual adaptation and the argument from design. Romantic biology and transcendental anatomy were looked upon as largely Continental concerns which at best only marginally influenced empirically-minded British naturalists.

More recently, however, research by scholars such as the late Dov Ospovat, Adrian Desmond and Janet Browne has demonstrated the inadequacy of that view. Far from being ignored, "philosophical biology" (as it might be called) was actively pursued by a number of leading British zoologists, botanists and anatomists. From the 1820s, many of the major themes of Continental biology were assimilated into British natural history: a continuing preoccupation with the "chain of being" and with an underlying unity of plan in plants and animals; concern with biological types rather than individual species; a willingness