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Original Research Article

Hybrid Myths in Contemporary Politics: Mythological Analysis of Barak Obama Brand

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Abstract

Problem Statement: In globalization and post-colonialism literature, hybridity describes a process of composing elements from different cultures to reach a hybrid identity. This process is rooted in ancient mythology and dates back to Egypt and Mesopotamia. However, the confrontation between globalization and civilization has accelerated this process due to communication speed and information accumulation. In addition, myths continue to live in the contemporary world, and we can follow their trace in contemporary culture. Therefore, it is necessary for cultural studies to demythize contemporary myths.

Research Objective: Accordingly, we can claim that hybrid myth plays a significant role in contemporary socio-political sphere. The present study's objective was to analyze the mythological patterns in the present political sphere regarding one of the contemporary myths, brand of Barak Obama. This paper aimed to answer two questions: What semiological pattern under brand Obama makes it a hybrid myth? Which historical and political realities are distorted by this myth?

Research Method: The methodology of mythological analysis was derived from Roland Barthes's pattern of myth in the language system. Accordingly, the brand of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election campaign was analyzed based on Barthes's model.

Conclusion: The brand of Barak Obama is a hybrid myth constituted of various racial and cultural signs. From one hand, this hybrid sign deviates the history of slavery in the United States and on the other hand, by depicting America as a liberal country with a democratic government, this myth conceals global dissatisfactions with this country's belligerent policies.

Keywords: *Contemporary Myths, Hybrid Myths, Hybridity, Barak Obama brand, Diaspora, Political Branding.*

Introduction and Problem Statement

The reason, the origin and the function of the myth has always been considered a need. Accordingly, myth is constructed based on a need, and it continues to live as long as there is a need (Segal, 2010). Based on this fact, and along with theories of experts like Barthes (1980), as long as human-being needs myth, this linguistic structure continues to live, even as modern myths in

the contemporary world. According to Barthes (1980), myth is a depoliticized speech in this regard. Myth does not aim to deny reality but examines and reports it by purifying. Politics is the best arena of myth emersion and appearance. For instance, the image which is created from Stalin is not a historical or realistic character but an immortal existence that can be regarded as an obvious example of the depoliticizing process (Sattary, 1997).

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Therefore, mythologists must decipher myths, and that is why the bourgeoisie cannot tolerate their words (*ibid.*). Souvey (1966) interpreted myths as sins, guilt, or wretched phenomena and declared that myth is the manifestation of contrast between two images of one phenomenon before and after observing it scientifically. Thus, myth is the ruling sovereign in the political arena while authenticity criterion in politics is public subordination (Sauvey, 1966). As discussed, myth can mislead the middle class in the political arena; thus, the present study aims to demythize one of the political phenomena in the contemporary atmosphere. The brand of Barak Obama, which was launched in the 2008 presidential election, functioned as a myth. The main objective of this research is to analyze this brand and disclose its mythological layers. Accordingly, the central question of this study is that what semiological pattern under the Obama brand makes it a hybrid myth? Which realities in historical and political levels are distorted and deviated following the formation of this myth? Therefore, the hypothesis is that the Obama brand in the semiological level is a hybrid myth constituted from racial and cultural signs, which conceals many realities related to the history and politics of the United States. We can analyze the myth from various perspectives, including philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and semiology, among which the present study selected Roland Barthes's semiological model.

Literature Review

We can categorize the literature of this field to some parts, from general to specialized. The first category includes studies that generally approach myth in the contemporary era. The first texts in this category are Cassirer's philosophical works, Levi-Strauss's anthropological studies, Campbell's mythology, and Barthes's semiology.

During the next years, researchers deciphered contemporary myths following these classics. Xianglin (2010) examined the aesthetic consciousness in contemporary myths in a rhetoric analysis. Implying hybrid characters in European myths, Hutnyk (2005, 87-91) surveyed the hybrid characters in present scientific space. Sattary (1997) decoded two dominant myths in contemporary Iran and indicated that identity confusion has resulted in the formation of these myths. The presence of mythical heroes in toys and

computer games characters were examined by Dadvar and Moghadam (2009). Chidester (2009) analyzed the role of sports myths in America social reconstruction after 9.11.

The second category encompasses studies in the field of branding which especially concentrate on mythology. Witkowski (2016) studied the conditions under which the Remington brand had a mythical behavior. König, Wiedmann, Hennigs & Haase (2016) researched lux brands through Barthes's method and presented a mythological analysis of these brands (König, Wiedmann, Hennigs, Hennigs & Haase, 2016). The most significant difference between this paper and the present study is that the concentration of the first one is on the consumer brands, while the second one focuses on a political brand. Consequently, the first paper surveyed individual values, whereas the second one emphasizes collective attitude and its deviance by myth.

Another category includes studies that explore the myth and its influence on the political domain. Dubin (2012) represented the dominant mythical thought among the Russian populace about development and the country's approach in its political relations. Pointing to the social role of myths from the structuralism perspective, Fakouhi (2000) analyzed "Vay" as a political myth. Gunes (2013) studied the role of myths in mobilizing political forces in Kurdistan. The other category of studies examines the influence of myth in the political sphere but a historical context. Lassikova (2010) studied the woven patterns of feminine textures in the Safavid Dynasty regarding the myth of presenting fire by Hushang, the Dragon Slayer, to ancient Iran. He clarified the effect of this myth on Iranian diplomacy in using firearms during the Safavid governance period.

The last group includes studies that analyze Barak Obama Brand. Redmond (2010) investigated the Obama brand as a hybrid image in Liquid Celebrity space in the United States. The difference between that paper and the present study is in the context; this research examined this hybrid sign as a myth in the political diaspora with a semiological approach while Redmond concentrated on pop culture. Siedman and Park (2010) analyzed the role of visual design, including posters, stickers, and web pages, on Obama's success in the election campaign in 2008. Likewise, Hartnell (2012) explained the rhetoric effect of Obama in the field

of social justice on rebranding America. This research is similar to the present study based on the effect of brand Obama on altering the image of America, but the difference is in the mythological perspective of the present study and disclosing hidden realities under the myth. On the other hand, Hartnell emphasized brand America while we focus on Obama and consider the myth of America as a result of this brand. Among papers on the brand of Obama, no one had a mythological approach. The present study analyzes the brand of “Barak Obama” as a hybrid myth in the contemporary political sphere by concentrating especially on contemporary myths and hybridity in diaspora space.

Theoretical Foundations

• Myth

Muthos, in its meaning of “myth,” describes a story about gods and superhuman beings. A myth functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge (Bolle, 2005, 6359). In modern times, famous mythologists, anthropologists, and linguists have studied myth. Eliade considered cosmogony as being fundamental to myth (Eliade, 1963), while for Roland Barthes, myth is a part of a semiological system of communication, whereby an object is defined. It is a construct that attains significance through culture, and not due to the “nature” of things (Barthes, 1972). Levi-Straus analyzed myth from the structuralist point of view (Bolle, 2005), and Campbell studied myth’s psychological aspects versus metaphysical ones (Campbell, 1959). Regardless of our approach in defining the myth; the significant fact is that it influences on individual and collective behaviors (Bouchard, 2015).

• Hybridity

Hybridity is a fundamental concept in Homi Bhabha’s thought. He applies this concept to describe the emersion of the new cultural forms in a multicultural situation. In his eyes, fractures on the borders of adjacent cultures and subcultures make it possible for cultures to permeate in each other and form new cultures (Bhabha, 1994). He uses hybridity as an “in-between” phrase that refers to “third space.” In

Bhabha’s terms ‘hybridity is camouflage’ and, provocatively, he offers ‘hybridity as heresy’ (ibid.). Pointing to the dual process of migration and globalization, Papastergiadis

defines this phenomenon: hybridity appears as a convenient category at ‘the edge’ or contact point of the diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporic community meets the host in the scene of migration. He then illustrates a process of development starting from simulation and integration of migrators with the host society and resulting in a more complex phenomenon in present metropolitan societies (Papastergiadis, 2000). Hybridity is a term that has been transferred from biology to cultural policy, and according to various definitions, it can be interpreted as integration in the moment of cultural exchange (Gilroy, 1993, 33). At the turn of the millennium, theorists have defined hybridity as an expression for implying a vast range of social and cultural phenomena, including “mixing,” which has become a key concept within cultural criticism and post-colonial theory (Brah & Coombs, 2000). Table 1 represents various examples of hybridity in different areas.

Hybridity has provided artists and owners of cultural industries with considerable potentials of creativity and creation. However, it has caused concerns for cultural critics so that Homi Bhabha defines it as a disruptive and productive category. It is ‘how newness enters the world’ (Bhabha, 1994), and it is bound up with a ‘process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences’ (ibid.). Chow suggests that the popularized concepts of hybridity, diversity, and pluralism may be grouped with others such as heteroglossia, dialogism, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and notions of the postcolonial and cosmopolitan. According to her, all of these concepts serve to ‘obliterate’ questions of politics and inequality history, and thereby occlude ‘the colonialism legacy from the viewpoint of the colonized.’ The enormous seductiveness of the postmodern hybridity’s discourse lies in its invitation to join the power of global capitalism by relinquishing past injustices that accept the extant relations of power and where “the recitation of past injustices seems tedious and unnecessary” (Chow, 1998).

Brand as a Hybrid Myth from Roland Barthes’ Perspective

According to Barthes (1980), myth is a genre of speech. Everything can be a myth if a discourse transfers it. Myth is not determined and defined based on the subject of the message but by the method through which this message

Table 1. Hybridity in different spaces from science and technology to literature and pop culture. Source: Hutnyk, 2005, 87-91.

Case	Cultural Context	More Explanations	Pictures
Prosthesis	Science and Technology	Various prostheses from glasses to internet space, which is a global prosthesis, and a prosthesis called Oncomouse which is designed especially for cancer tests.	
Sinister linkage between fiction and armory science in destruction program for confrontation with Japan	Economy and Politics	Colonial conquest of the west has been continued in nuclear physics today as well as space explorations and armory programs, all of which have applied for imperialism objectives and result in stabilization of United States economic hegemony.	
Benetton Advertisement	Advertisement – Pop Culture	Benetton endeavors to diminish racial, cultural, religious, or political differences by putting them aside in advertisements called “United Colors of Benetton.”	
Alien Series Heroes	Series -Pop Culture	“Aliens” is the name of a series that was produced thematically, fearing from conquest on the world. An alien hero intends to live at the price of its host. According to Gibson, in encountering aliens, the difference between human races appears entirely inconspicuous.	

is indicated. From his viewpoint, everything can pass from a close and silent condition to obviousness so that society catches it. For Barthes, a photo is a type of speech as much as a newspaper article. On the other hand, brands constitute a considerable part of pop culture and can be created in a hybrid method. As can be observed in [table 1](#), an advertising campaign called “United Colors of Benetton” has been designed to transmit a humanitarian message based on conciliation among races, religions, and even political approaches. Thus, in the semiological level, the signifier of the sign is a hybrid of other signifiers. According to Barthes, these hybrid signs (constituted of signifier and signified), like any other semiological elements, in the condition of the mixture with a social meaning can become a myth and be counted as a hybrid myth ([Hutnyk, 2005](#)). Barthes admits that myth is message and message is not limited to speech but entails a wide variety from cinema and photography to sports reports and advertisement ([Barthes, 1980, 86](#)), and as it was discussed, a brand advertisement or the brand itself can be created in a hybrid method and become a myth.

Research Method

• Analyzing Myth Based on Roland Barthes’ Method

Semiologically speaking, a sign is constituted from three

elements; the signifier, the signified, and the sign, which is the association of signified in mind by encountering the signifier. In this sense, myth is a unique system constructed from a semiological continuum that has already existed: myth is a second-order semiological system i.e., the sign in the first system becomes a signifier in the next system. Mythical speech materials (language, photo, painting, poster, rituals etc.), although different at first glance, are reduced to mere signifier function as soon as being caught by myth. Myth considers them as primary materials, and their unity is due to their reduction to pure linguistic dignity. Encountering whether alphabetic or visual text, myth intends to observe just a collection of signs, a global sign, and the final term of the first semiological chain. The first term becomes a larger system which constructs it as precisely as the final term, and the first term is merely part of this larger system. All these occur somehow when the myth bypasses the formal system of primary significations. Barthes presents this lateral alteration as a table since he considers it necessary for imposing the myth and implies that upper and lower concepts in this model are entirely metaphorical ([Barthes, 1980, 92](#)). [Fig. 1](#) illustrates the Roland bathes’ model of the myth semiological system.

Barthes clarifies that we can concentrate on form,

or meaning, or both for deciphering the myth and, accordingly, examining the myth in three levels. In the first level, he focuses on the empty signifier where signification becomes literal again. Generally, myth producers, who commence their work with a concept and quest a form for its indication, encounter with myth in this method. In the second level, he concentrates on the full signifier in which we clearly distinguish the meaning and the form, and consequently, the distortion which the one imposes on the other. This signifier is constituted from signifier and signified (the sign) in the first level, and itself becomes a signifier for another signified. In this level, we decipher the signification of the myth. In the last level, focusing on mythical signifier as an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, we receive an ambiguous signification. At this level, we respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its dynamics, and to become a reader of myth. Barthes considers merely the third level as a dynamic focus, which consumes the myth based on the objectives of its construction (Barthes, 1980, 104). Thus, in this paper, the brand of Barak Obama in the 2008 election campaign, going to be examined based on Barthes' analytical method from myth and its underneath layers, will be explored.

Discussion and Conclusion

One of the most influential brands (images) in the contemporary political sphere is Brand of Barak Obama, president of the United States. Using political marketing by presidents is not unprecedented, but Obama, especially in the United States, had the most effective tactics (Seidman & Park, 2010). In this part, according to Barthes' semiological analysis model and based on the Obama brand in the 2008 election campaign, we decipher this myth.

Experts believe that converting the president to a brand requires three strategies: commoditizing the individual

and diplomacy apparatus, person marketing instead of platform-based marketing, and simulation of the president (Kotler, 1975). In the present study, person marketing and simulation of the president are analyzed. Person marketing relies on the individual and his/her characteristics as principal components of the brand. In the president simulation, we concentrate on the visual strategy, which converts his image in the audience's mind to the president. Therefore, analyzing president simulation, we examine two posters of his election campaign. Following that in-person marketing, the personal characteristics of this brand are discussed so that the hybridity of the sign in both fields is proved. In the next step, this hybrid sign is surveyed based on Barthes' mythological-semiological model for its mythical aspects to be discovered.

• Hybridity in Simulation of the President in Visual Design of the Campaign

The common aspect of all advertising posters in this campaign is a dark-skin candidate as an empty signifier who promises hope and change. Fig. 2 is a sample of numerous images that were created in this domain. However, the audience of the campaign were from various races and cultures, and the transmitted message had to address all of them. Hence, hybridity was the most effective strategy in designing this brand. Fig 3 and 4 are examples which clearly illustrate how Latin American migrants in America were addressed in this campaign.

Fig. 3 is a silkscreen poster designed by Ray Noland and illustrates the candidate floated in the light staring at the distance with sun rays behind. This poster is a hybrid of religious iconography derived from saints' illustrations and the candidate's face in the middle of the frame in the guise of South American peasants with the empty gaze of a rural man. The harmony of sun rays with rustic textures, the combination of yellow and brown tonalities,

Language	Signifier	Signified
	Sign	
Myth	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
	SIGN	

Fig. 1. Myth in Language System. Source: Barthes, 1980, 92.

and the slogan, I DREAM, which reminds American black champion, Martin Luther King, below the poster, strengthens the composition. Furthermore, Fig. 4 is a hybrid of modern candidate image with semiological layers of South American culture including blue tonalities in the face and red, yellow, brown and orange in the background, with corrugated frame reminiscent of Latin American revolutionaries' paintings and the text NUESTR A VOS, meaning our voice in Spanish, which addresses voters from Latin America. In the center of the poster, the candidate's face has occupied the whole frame and has a manful and steep gaze to distance. Sun rays in background and a slight frown on the forehead, indicating his strong determination, give revolutionary iconography to this poster. The contrast between blue and yellow and the closed frame around the image and orientation of the candidate's gaze out of the frame make his image more distinguished. Analysis of these posters indicates how hybridity in visual semiology has served the brand to communicate with the racial minority in the United States.

• **Hybridity in Person Marketing in Election Campaign**

In addition to these visual strategies, the fact utilized by advertising consultants of Obama smartly was his social status as a minority. Although this fact could

be a weakness at first glance, considering various racial minorities as the audience of the campaign altered it to the strength. This brand was a hybrid of semiological elements which are even observable in his characteristics. His name (Barak Hussein Obama) is constituted from English and Arabic names, racially he is a black-American hybrid, and religiously he was born from a Muslim mother and non-Muslim father. All these cultural, religious, and racial signifiers (Barak- Hussein- Obama- Muslim- non-Muslim- Black- American) beside each other created a hybrid signifier in linguistic level which can succeed in the diaspora space of the United States with the high ethnic, racial, lingual, and cultural multiplicity.

• **Hybrid Sign as a Myth**

The concentration of this paper is on the mythological level of this hybrid sign. Answering the first question of the research, we must assert that constituting signifiers of this sign, such as Muslim or black, address the minority population in the United States. Therefore, focusing on full signifier (in the mythological level), we comprehend that the position of this person as the presidential candidate highlights that everybody can achieve any social status in America due to his/her capabilities. This concept can be considered as the signifier in mythological level, which implies “respect

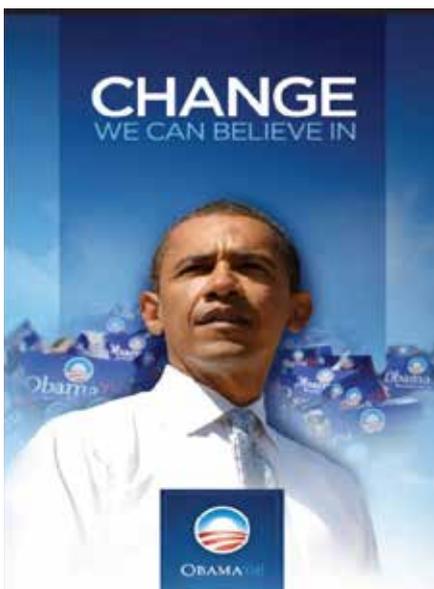


Fig 2. Obama for Change we can Believe in America (2008), A Case of Adverting Posters of Presidency Candidate. Source: Sideman & Park, 2010, 1.



Fig 3. Ray Noland, The Dream, The hybrid of candidate image with elements of rural life in Latin America and religious iconography through sun rays in background. source: Sideman & Park, 2010, 18.

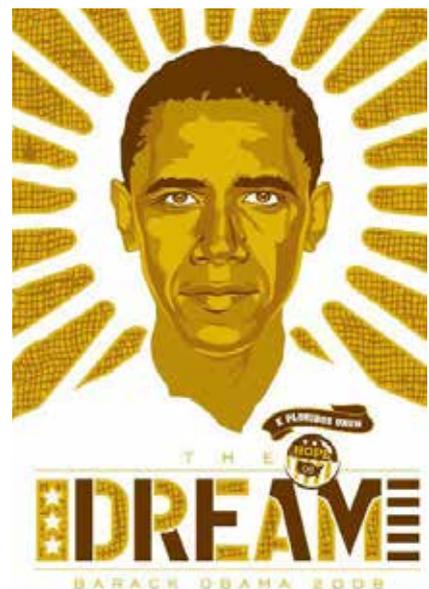


Fig 4. Rafael López, Nuestra Voz (2008), The hybrid of presidency candidate with revolutionary elements of South America. Source: Sideman & Park, 2010.

to freedom and individual abilities in this country,” as signified. The signifier and signified in this level result in the myth “America, the origin of freedom and respect to individual capabilities.” Fig. 5 demonstrates the mythological analysis of the research in Barthes’ model. According to Barthes, myth does not conceal the reality but distorts and deviates it. Therefore, the second question of the research comes to mind: What aspects of reality are distorted through highlighting this myth? The statistics of BBC census in 2007 among 26000 people in 25 countries indicate that three out of four people disagreed with America’s policies toward Iraq, Guantanamo, Iran, North Korea, and Global Warming (McGirt, 2008). In this condition, the Obama brand functioned as a hybrid myth and created a new image of America in the Bourgeoisie’s mind; an entirely democratic government in which a citizen from the minority can achieve the highest social status. The Obama image created in 2008 and launched to the world as president of the United States, functions as a myth which distorts the reality of dissatisfaction among 75 percent of people with America’s policies and illustrates this country as the land of equal opportunities with a liberal government. The other fact in Barthes’s eyes is the eternal companionship of myth and history, and what brand Obama accomplished properly is to conceal the history of slavery and black exploitation in America. Theorists believe that hybridity functions as a cultural phenomenon in the present time to unify cultural variety, ignore differences, and even neglect colonialism. However, others appreciate it due to its potentials of creativity for the cultural industry. However, according

to the bourgeois myth’s deceptive logic, we can consider hybridity as a bourgeois myth and find lots of these cases in the contemporary political sphere. In this paper, the Barak Obama brand in the 2008 election campaign was analyzed as one of these myths, and its mythological levels were distinguished. The present study aims to demythize a hybrid myth; therefore, it is significant from two perspectives: 1. Mythologically reading one of the contemporary cultural-political products, the brand of Barak Obama, and 2. examining the phenomenon of hybridity through semiological analysis of this myth. Mythological reading of this brand indicates that both the aforementioned approaches to hybridity can be authentic. On one hand, the combination of signifiers, whether in visual signs in the design of posters and advertisements or individual characteristics, proves how hybridity serves as a productive element and creative factor to address the variety of audience and result in the success of the campaign. On the other hand, regarding the second question of the research about the distortion of reality by myth, we observe how hybrid myth functions in distorting slavery history in America, conceals belligerent policies of the United States and ignores the colonial perspective of the West. This reading of the myth proves the hypothesis of the research.

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Language	signifier: Black (minority) Presidency Candidate	signified: racial, religious and cultural minorities can achieve the highest status in America	
Myth	SIGNIFIER: the possibility of individual growth regardless of ethnicity and race in America		SIGNIFIED: respect to freedom and individual abilities in this culture

Fig. 5. Mythological Analysis of Research Body in Barthes’ Model. Source: Authors.

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