

# The Far East: History and Culture

The myths of the Far East and the Pacific Islands represent a number of different cultures and were recorded over a wide range of time. The earliest myths from India reflect the culture of the Indo-European peoples who invaded the country in about 1500 B.C. Later the Hindus adopted and adapted some of these myths, among them the creation myth and the myth of Rama.

Most of the Chinese myths were recorded during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.—220 A.D.). They are the earliest Chinese myths still in existence because in 213 B.C. the first emperor of China burned all books that were not about medicine, prophecy, or farming.

The Japanese crossed the Korea Strait into Japan during the early period of the Han dynasty. Much later, in the eighth century A.D., they recorded their myths. The epic *Kotan Utunnai* is a modern transcription of a myth of the aboriginal Ainu people, who were living in Japan when the Japanese arrived.

The Polynesian peoples migrated from Asia to Tahiti, and then from Tahiti to New Zealand, Hawaii, and other Pacific islands. The face of Polynesian mythology was determined, island by island, by the interaction between a particular group of Polynesian people and particular Christian missionaries, many of whom arrived during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Maori mythology shows little Western influence. However, many Hawaiian myths were changed or lost due to the missionaries' intervention in the native peoples' culture. The first collection of Polynesian (Maori) myths was published in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Both the Indian and the Chinese creation myths begin with an egg, involve creating the universe from the body of a divinity, and explain the creation of human beings. However, the Indian myth, which is Hindu, involves regeneration and the cyclical nature of time. It sets forth four ages of man. The Maori creation myth emphasizes the development from nonbeing to thought to creation. In this myth, the creation of the natural world reflects human nature, and New Zealand is created by a trickster-hero.

The Japanese and Hawaiian fertility myths are traditional in that they relate how a god or demigod saves the world from a great threat.

Each hero myth has its own special appeal. The Hindu *Ramayana* is one of the world's great epics. Not only is it a superb adventure story, but its emphasis on responsibility and righteous behavior make us think about our own values. In the Chinese myth, a virtuous young woman risks her life for the welfare of her community. Chi Li must use creative intelligence as well as courage, strength, and skill to conquer her adversary. The Ainu *Kotan Utunnai* is unusual in that its ancient, pristine quality gives it a primeval power.

Just as the Hindu religion accommodates a number of different religious views, it accepts a number of different creation myths. Vishnu, who was associated with the sun, and Rudra, who was associated with storms, existed as divinities before the Hindus gave Vishnu major importance and cast Rudra as the destructive side of Vishnu. The following myth was probably written down sometime between A.D. 300 and 500, and it contains a number of elements that are distinctively Hindu.

First, the idea of reincarnation is a Hindu concept. The Hindu creation myth reveals Vishnu in three forms: as Brahma, the creator of life on earth; as Vishnu, the preserver of life on earth; and as Shiva-Rudra, the destroyer of life on earth. The myth also explains how Vishnu often descends to earth and becomes reincarnated as a human hero to protect gods and mortals against the forces of evil beings (demons).

The duty of each person to live according to his or her dharma—a definite pattern of righteous behavior required by that person's position in society—is also a Hindu concept. Vishnu establishes dharma as a way of preserving civilization. Without it society disintegrates, war results, and civilization destroys itself.

Finally, the unending cycle of time and life is a Hindu concept. Creation is always *re-creation*, part of a cycle that has no beginning and no end. The universe progresses from birth to maturity to death to rebirth, over and over again. The four stages of life on earth progress from the ideal golden age to the dark age and back to the golden age, over and over again. Vishnu, in his three forms, directs the life cycle of the universe from creation to disintegration to dissolution to re-creation, over and over again.

Thus, in Hindu thought, a sense of unity and pattern remains at the foundation of all apparent differences. Vishnu creates, preserves, and destroys. His names change, and his roles change, but the great god remains the same. The golden age will

inevitably disintegrate into the dark age, which in turn will inevitably lead back to the golden age.

Like the four ages of the Greeks, the Hindu ages reveal the moral disintegration of society and show how people bring suffering upon themselves through their selfish and unjust treatment of one another. In each case, the ages become progressively worse. The last age is always a time of cruelty, pain, grief, and unnecessary death, and it is always the age in which the reader is living. Perhaps we are in such an age once again?