The Functions of Living Mythology

Myths symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture. Every society preserves its myths, because the beliefs and worldview found within them are crucial to the survival of that culture. Myths usually originate in an ancient, oral tradition. Some explain origins, natural phenomena, and death; others describe the nature and function of divinities; while still others provide models of virtuous behavior by relating the adventures of heroes or the misfortunes of arrogant humans. Myths often include elements from legend and folklore. They depict humans as an integral part of a larger universe, and they impart a feeling of awe for all that is mysterious and marvelous in life.

Although most of the myths in traditional mythology were created by people who lived in societies that were much different than our own, they address fundamental questions that each thinking person continues to ask: Who am I? What is the nature of the universe in which I live? How do I relate to that universe? How much control do I have over my own life? What must I do in order to survive? How can I lead a satisfying life? How can I balance my own desires with my responsibilities to my family and my community? How can I reconcile myself to the inevitability of death? Therefore, myths are an important way to understand ourselves. Because they provide a variety of answers to these questions, they present us with new possibilities, and by considering these possibilities, we gain insight into our own attitudes and values. As well as those of our fellow travelers throughout the corridors of time.

Myths are also an important way to understand our connection to other people at a time when the welfare of each culture depends on the attitudes and actions of other cultures. The “answers” to these questions have produced a body of myths from diverse cultures that closely resemble each other in subject, although the treatment of each issue naturally varies from one society to another. Despite the unique perspective of each culture, their shared concerns tie human beings to one another across the globe and throughout history.

Moreover, their shared concerns performed this function in ancient times as well as in our own day. What has largely gone unnoticed is the mobility of oral, and even

written, literature in ancient times and the cultural influence that one ancient culture had on another. The great epics cry out to be told, and so they traveled the seaways with merchants, sailors, visitors, warriors, immigrants, scholars, and professional entertainers who were part historian and part storyteller. Particularly if they lived in a colony, in an empire, or near major trade routes, professionally trained bards knew and performed the literature of other cultures, as well as their own. This process not only preserved the greatest myths—the epics of any culture—but it made it possible for the most skilled of bards and poets to enhance their own renditions, both oral and written, of their own culture's epics by creatively adapting the appealing aspects of the epics from other cultures, such as particular relationships between pairs of characters, important themes, and artistic style.

All too often, centuries later, a culture has considered its myths, with pride, to be totally homegrown. Yet the warriors as well as the historians of ancient Greece and Rome were interested in the ethnology of foreign peoples, and they recorded what they learned, either firsthand or from other sources. Their surviving histories and essays reveal that the world's greatest epics reflect the cultural influence of peoples who preceded them by hundreds and even thousands of years. Moreover, archaeologists in the twentieth century have unearthed thousands of clay tablets and opened many tombs that help us understand ancient cross-cultural connections.

In part because human beings are all part of one family, and in part because of cross-cultural contacts, the following themes are common in world mythology: The first parents are often the gods of sky and earth. The creator-god usually fashions the first human beings from parts of the earth-perhaps clay, trees, rocks, or planes. The gods destroy at least one world of mortals by causing a great flood. In the world, as in nature, birth, maturity, and death are often followed by rebirth. Heroes are children of gods who have an unusual birth, possess extraordinary strength, kill monsters with the help of special weapons, embark on an arduous journey, descend into the Underworld as part of their tasks, and have an unusual death.

An inherent part of many myths is the belief in one or more divine powers who create life and control the direction of the universe. Throughout the world, these divinities, whether in human or in animal form, are anthropomorphic in that they think,

act, and speak like human beings. They differ primarily in their attitude toward mortals. Some gods, like those of Greece, Egypt, India, and North America, appreciate the merits of human beings, are sympathetic to them, and try to help them. Other gods, like those of Sumer, Babylonia, and northern Europe (the Norse gods), tend to be indifferent to the fate of human beings. Still others, like Sedna, from the Inuit people of North America, are unpredictable, and their people must take constant care so as not to offend them.

Where an oral myth has been told to, and written down by, an outsider, the authenticity of the myth can be clouded by the teller's distortions or the outsider's biases. The myths from the Middle East, Greece, and Rome, and, to some extent, China and Japan have retained their authenticity because they were written down by people within the culture for their own use. In other cultures, like: those of India and China, the myths of earlier peoples were transcribed by people who intentionally imposed their own values on them, and it is sometimes possible to discern the original form of the myth.

However, in most cultures, like those of the Americas, Africa, and Ireland, the myths were part of an oral tradition that, of necessity, was communicated by the historian, through an interpreter, to a missionary or an anthropologist. Therefore, the authenticity of these myths depends on the motivation and the objectivity of three different parties. In some cultures, the historian was not permitted to reveal sacred material to an outsider (even the uninitiated in his own society). In other cultures, consciously or unconsciously, the outsiders were uncomfortable with pagan beliefs and values, and they intentionally or inadvertently changed what they heard so that it conformed with their own attitudes and values.

THE PURPOSE OF MYTHS

Myths were originally created as entertaining stories with a serious purpose. Their broad appeal has enabled them to survive for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. A myth's serious purpose is either to explain the nature of the universe (creation and fertility myths) or to instruct members of the community in the attitudes and behavior necessary to function successfully in that particular culture (hero

myths and epics). The various myths we will read together permit the reader to enter the world of a different culture and to see that world in a way that conveys the mystery of the universe and the fragility of human life.

A particular culture may be interested in the creation of the entire universe, beginning with divine beings who separate earth and sky. Many cultures start with the beginning of the universe-a chaotic, formless mass that a god separates, as do Bumba in the Boshongo and Bakuba myth from Africa and P'an Ku in the myth from China. In other cultures, like the Babylonian, the Greek, the Maori from New Zealand, the Toltec/ Aztec from Mexico, and the Maya from Guatemala, the universe begins with a group of two or more gods, who multiply so that each can have his or her particular role in the universal scheme. In still other cultures, a creator-god, like Wanadi in the Yekuhana myth from Venezuela or Viracocha in the Tiahuanaco/Aymara myth from Peru, brings life to earth in the form of plants, animals, and human beings.

In contrast, some cultures are interested in myths that explain the origin of their own people and enhance their nationalistic spirit. For example, the Navajo people depict their journey upward through four worlds into a fifth world. Similarly, the Irish Celts are concerned with the settling of Ireland, and the Yoruba people explain the creation of *Ife*, their sacred city-state.

The myths of other cultures explain the continued existence of evil in the universe. Myths like Wanadi from the Yekuhana people of Venezuela, Esfandyar from Persia, "Quetzalcoarl" from Toltec/Azcec people of Mexico, and "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" from the Iroquois/Huron people of the United States and Canada depict a universe in which a good divinity and an evil divinity wage constant war on earth for the human soul.

According to many myths, human beings are not perfect creatures even though a god created them. In many cultures, the creator-god must fashion and destroy, usually through a flood, a succession of races. This theme is found worldwide, from the Hindu myths of India to the myths of the Maya of Central America and the Yoruba myths of Africa. One of the most elaborate flood myths comes from Sumer and Babylonia.

All cultures explain how human beings acquired particular foods and the agricultural tools chat permitted them to become civilized. Some myths, like the Hittite myth of Telepinu, the Japanese myth of Amaterasu, and the African myth from Dahomey, involve gods who have been insulted and must be appeased for fertility to be restored. The Telepinu myth includes powerful metaphorical incantations designed to enlist the god's aid. The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone is a masterpiece of psychological complexity.

The myths of other cultures involve a divine figure who teaches agricultural skills to human beings. Viracocha introduces the Aymara/Tiahuanaco people to a more complex and civilized way of life, just as Wanadi does for the Yekuhana people and Quetzalcoatl does for the Toltec people. Other myths, like the Chinese myth of Chi Li, show a heroic figure rescuing humanity by killing a monster that has destroyed the fertility of the land. Similarly, in the Hawaiian myth, Maui tames the sun so that his people will have more light in which to pursue the activities that are necessary for their survival. The myths of many people involve trickster twins, such as Lodge-Boy and Thrown-Away from the Crow people in the United States, who kill monsters and so make the world safe for their people.

The heroic myths and epics of a society teach its members the appropriate attitudes, behavior, and values of that culture. These myths are of particular interest and value to us. Not only are they exciting adventure stories, but in these myths we see ourselves, drawn larger and grander than we are, yet with our human weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Heroes/Heroines are the models of human behavior for their society. They earn lasting fame-the only kind of immortality possible for human beings-by performing great deeds that help their community, and they inspire others to emulate them. Heroes/Heroines are forced by circumstance to make critical choices where they must balance one set of values against competing values. They achieve heroic stature in part from their accomplishments and in part because they emerge from their trials as more sensitive and thoughtful human beings.

Yet heroes are not the same throughout the world. Achilles, Gilgamesh, Heracles, Jason, the young Beowulf, Sigurd the Volsung, the hero of *Kotan Utunnai*,

and Bakaridjan Kone, for example, come from cultures where individuals may earn fame in a variety of ways. This permits them to express their individuality. In contrast, Rama must always remember and follow *dharma*, the particular form of proper and righteous behavior that the Hindu culture expects of a person in his, her, or their political, economic, and social position. Esfandyar must remain true to the principles of his religion, Zoroastrianism. Aeneas must always act in a way that is compatible with his god-given destiny. Arthur must keep the knights of the Round Table in harmony with one another and with him for the good of Britain, and in his old age, Beowulf. as the war-king of the Geats, must protect his people by fighting a dragon that is destroying his country.

In spite of their extraordinary abilities, no hero is perfect. Yet their human weaknesses are often as instructive as their heroic qualities. Their imperfections allow ordinary people to identify with them and to like them, for everyone has similar psychological needs and conflicts.

Many of the greatest heroes cannot accept mortality. Gilgamesh so fears death that he undertakes a long and perilous journey in search of the secret of immortality. Ultimately, he learns to be satisfied with the immortality that comes from enduring accomplishments. Achilles much choose between death with honor and a long, undistinguished life. When he feels deprived of honor on the battlefield, he chooses life, and only the unforeseen ramifications of that choice cause him to change his mind. Hector and Beowulf are forced to choose heroic deaths because they cannot live with the stain of cowardice.

Unlike most heroes, Heracles knows that he will become immortal after he has accomplished his labors. His primary concern is to avoid the labors because he refuses to be controlled by a cowardly king. In contrast, the immortality of lasting fame is so important to Gassire that he will do anything to achieve it, even if it destroys his people. Bakaridjan Kone must confront his loss of fame and decide what he is willing to do in order to regain it. Jason is so impressed with his fame that he feels entitled to act as he wishes, with no serious thought about the consequences.

The hero myths examine the relationship between the individual's desires and their responsibilities to society. Often the choice is crucial but uncomplicated: whether

or not to risk death to save the community. The hero who chooses to risk death acquires honor and lasting fame; the hero who chooses safety is denied both. Esfandyar, Heracles, Beowulf. and Chi Li make the world a safer place by killing many monsters. The hero of *Kotan Uttunnai* helps his people by fighting valiantly against the enemy.

In the major epics, the issue is the same, but the circumstances are infinitely more complex. When a leader places his or her own desires before the needs of the community, both the community and the individual suffer. Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over a slave girl because public honor is the key to self-esteem. Similarly, Lancelot and Guinevere place their love above their loyalty to King Arthur, thereby destroying the Round Table and putting Britain into the hands of power-hungry local rulers. Aeneas places the needs of his community above his personal desires but loses his own humanity. Similarly, Rama places the needs of his community above his love for Sita, causing great personal tragedy for both of them. On the other hand, Gassire earns fame by placing his personal desires before the needs of his community, and Jason loses fame for the same reason. Bakaridjan Kone's community supports his heroism even though it is at the expense of an innocent community.

THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

A knowledge of the basic difference between Mother Earth-centered matriarchal religions and the Father Sky-centered patriarchal religions is crucial to an understanding of the symbolic content of many myths. The political, economic, social, and religious foundation of the matriarchal society was the agricultural year. The importance of agriculture fostered a cyclical view of life, emphasizing the progression of all living matter from birth to maturity to death to rebirth. Even in lands where the climate remained relatively stable from one season to the next, people could see the connection between the development of their own lives and the development of life among plants and animals.

In the matriarchal society, the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess personified Mother Earth and was the supreme deity. She functioned in three related forms. As Goddess of the Underworld, she controlled the three-stage cycle of life: the period of

birth and childhood; the fertile period of maturity and reproduction; and the sterile period of old age, with its decline and death.

As Goddess of the Earth, she controlled the three-stage cycle of the seasons: spring—the period of birth or rebirth, and budding growth; summer—the fertile period of blossoming and harvest; and winter—the sterile period of decay, barrenness, and death or dormancy.

As Goddess of the Sky, she was the great Moon Goddess, who appeared in her three-stage cycle of phases: as the new and waxing moon—the period of birth or rebirth, and growth; as the full moon—the period of maturity; and as the waning moon—the period of decline and death or dormancy.

Consequently, the Great Goddess was the source of all human life and the source of all food. To survive, societies needed to produce children and to produce food. They knew how dependent they were upon the blessings of the Great Goddess, and they worshipped her properly so they would receive those blessings.

The queen embodied the spirit the Great Goddess, and she wielded great political, economic, social, and religious power. Other women were considered daughters of the Great Goddess. Thus, all women in the matriarchal society were highly valued, and many of them held important positions. Women were the heads of their families, and inheritance passed from a mother to her daughters, with the youngest daughter being most important because, presumably, she would be the last to die and thus would continue the family line the longest. Children were reared by their mother and her brother, while the father lived in the home of his mother and helped rear his sister's children. The children's primary moral obligations were to their mother and their siblings.

When the male's role in procreation became understood and valued, the queen took a husband, called the sacred king, for one year. At first, he was her brother or her son, bur later he was a youth who symbolized her son. Many youths competed for the great honor of being sacred king. They had to win many contests involving physical strength and the skillful use of the bow. Heracles' tasks against the Nemean lion, the Cretan bull, the Erymanthian boar, and Artemis's deer represent typical contests.

Odysseus's participation in an archery contest where the winner will marry Penelope is an echo of this tradition.

Each spring, when the seeds of the new crops were sown, the past year's sacred king would be sacrificed as part of a major religious ceremony. The priestesses of the Mother Goddess would eat his flesh in order to acquire his powers of fertility, and the fields and farm animals would be sprinkled with his blood so they too would become fertile. Then, in a religious ceremony, the queen would take a new sacred king for the coming year.

The sacred king gradually gained more power. He increased the length of his reign to eight years by choosing a substitute, or surrogate, sacred king to die in his place. At the end of each year, the real king would retire from public view into a burial chamber or cave for one to three days, while the surrogate sacred king reigned in his place. The priestesses of the Great Goddess would sacrifice the surrogate king in a sacred ceremony and use his flesh and blood to ensure the fertility of the community. Then the real king would resume his duties for the coming year.

When Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's marriage proposal, he related the ways that she has destroyed previous mates. Ishtar retaliates by causing the death of Enkidu, who functions as Gilgamesh's surrogate, Demeter in Greek culture and Amaterasu in Japanese culture arc examples of the Great Goddess. Moreover, vestiges of the pre-Hellenic matriarchal culture remain in the Greek myths of Jason, Medea, Heracles, Achilles, and Paris.

By 2400 B.C., aggressive tribes worshipping a supreme male god who was a father-figure or a successful warrior had begun to invade many matriarchal communities. They brought with them a new social and political order in which males dominated. Kings gained enough power to change the old social system to one in which kings ruled by heredity and animals were sacrificed to win the favor of the gods.

Some cultures depict a world view in which one generation of gods replaces another, the newer gods being more civilized and capable than the earlier ones. For example, Zeus conquers Cronus in Greek mythology, and Marduk conquers Tiamat in Babylonian mythology. The battle between one family of gods and another often reflects the political and religious conflict between the indigenous people, who were

farmers and worshipped the Great Goddess or the Mother Goddess, and a warlike invading people, who worshipped male sky gods. Zeus's conquest of Cronus and the Titans reflects the political conquest of one people by another, and his liaisons with many Mother Goddesses in addition to Hera, his wife, represent a compromise in which the invader's religion was united with each local religion. Similar changes are reflected in Babylonian mythology, where a religion in which Marduk is the principal god incorporates the older gods.

ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON MYTHS

Because myths are symbols of human experience, they can be analyzed in a variety of ways, depending upon the perspective of the scholar. Years ago, many scholars viewed myths as symbols of the external environment. Those who created myths were thought to have observed nature and interpreted the behavior of human beings in a parallel manner. For example, heroes were considered symbols of the sun. They wielded swords that symbolized the sun's rays against monsters that symbolized clouds and night, the enemies of the sun. Each hero story was thus a symbol of the conflict between day and night and, by extension, between good and evil.

In the twentieth century, the symbolic interpretation of myths moved from the external environment to the internal environment of the unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud and his followers view myths as the expression of the individual's unconscious wishes, fears, and drives. For example, Otto Rank explains the characteristics of the traditional hero in terms of infantile hostility, childhood fantasies, and rebellion against one’s father.

Carl Jung and his followers, among them Carl Kerenyi, Erich Neumann, and, more broadly, Joseph Campbell, view myths as the expression of a universal, collective unconscious. In their theory, innate psychological characteristics, common to all human beings, determine how people throughout the world and throughout history experience and respond to the process of living. The contents of the collective unconscious are divided into archetypes—such as the mother, the child, the hero, the trickster, and the giant—but these are simply image frameworks. A particular individual's life experiences determine in what particular shape and form the archetypal

images will be expressed. Thus, the fact that myths from around the world contain many similar themes reflects the existence of a common collective unconscious. The fact that they differ in their treatment of these themes reflects the influence of each culture's particular physical, social, economic, and political environment on the archetypes.

Scholars in this century have interpreted myths in other ways as well. Mircea Eliade, a historian of religions, views myths as the essence of religion, conceived from a genuine religious experience. It is the sacred experience that gives myths their structure and their utility. The ancient world contained a multitude of coexisting religious ideas and forms: different types of monotheism and polytheism (both female-dominated and male-dominated), nature worship, and ancestor worship. Consequently, numerous similarities and connections exist from one culture to another. This is evident from the study of various aspects of the religious experience, such as the nature of divinities, creation myths, sacrifices, rituals, death, and paradise.

The anthropologist Paul Radin views myths from an economic perspective. The individual's actual struggle for survival in the face of economic uncertainty, caused by an insufficient food supply and poor technology, creates fears that life will be unhappy and short. Religious leaders manipulate these fears for their own material benefit, often in concert with the political leaders of the community.

The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss views myths as abstract constructions rather than narrative tales or symbols of experience. The structure of all human minds is identical and is revealed by the similar ways people solve their problems. Myths are identical products from identical minds, so myths from around the world possess a common structure. They reveal the conflict between opposing forces-such as life and death or nature and culture. To discover the meaning of a particular myth, one must focus on its underlying structure rather than its narrative content or any symbolic meaning. This structure invariably reveals tensions in social relations or economic problems. The analysis of myths proves that human beings, no matter how primitive their technology, are not mentally inferior. Their myths demonstrate that they possess the intellectual capacity to understand the world in which they live.

Part of the fascination of mythology involves viewing it from a variety of perspectives simultaneously. Each discipline offers a valuable contribution, increasing our appreciation of the whole. It does not matter as much, for our purposes, which approach to the study of myth you choose or believe to be the “correct” one, as much as it does that we approach all of these myths, and the cultures from which they emerged, with respect, curiosity, and an openness to what we can learn from them about how we are both the same AND different from one another and that we can find a shared place of emergence in the mythic origins of our species.