

## Editor's Introduction

Mythology, or the study of myth, refers equally to the body of myths held by a particular culture (e.g., Egyptian mythology). Myths are stories laden with symbols that communicate fundamental truths in societies possessing strong oral-literature traditions; in some cases, the stories are later written down. Typically myths are concerned with extraordinary beings-deities, heroes, fantastic beasts-and primal events. They have a close relationship to religious belief and have been a rich source of inspiration for literature, drama, and art throughout the world.

Myths may include elements of other forms of oral literature, such as folktales and legends, but myths remain distinct in a couple of ways. For one, myths are understood to be essentially true stories by the people who originally created them and kept them alive. They are basically part of a religious tradition, and it is only when they are viewed from outside that tradition that they appear false or fanciful. (Hence, the other sense of *myth* as a story that is untrue.) Second, myths, particularly creation myths, take place in a time before time, that is, a primordial time when the first instances of all things emerge and come to inform the making of human knowledge, expression, and behavior. Myths are statements of first principles, and while they may sometimes appear illogical or irrational they establish the very intellectual and social order from which all meaning in a society derives. They are the basis of human thought, human speech, and human action.

Folktales and legends, in contrast, may derive from myths, but they take place within a more recognizable register of time and location. In these two forms, the world as such is already established in most cases, even if the heroes, trickster figures, and environments making them up tilt in the direction of the fantastic, the imaginary. Folktales and legends can impart moral lessons, or simply entertain. Myths, on the other hand, deal with the most fundamental questions, whether it be the origin of the universe, the imperative of death, the difference between the sexes, or the relationship between humans and animals. Myths are attempts to highlight those matters that humankind considers most important.

### EVOLVING UNDERSTANDINGS OF MYTH

The word *mythos* in ancient Greece meant “saying,” or “story.” However, after the fourth century BCE Greek historian Herodotus completed his landmark work on the Greco-Persian Wars, *The Histories*, the idea of historical fact as distinct from fiction, or “story,” began to take root. People began to view facts as having links to distinct witnesses who “spoke the truth” (*logos*); such observations and “histories” were passed down through writing and oral testimony. Meanwhile, *mythos* came to be more closely associated with anonymous tales from the distant past. Myths had the ring of both truth and imagination, of recognition and matters beyond the present world. The only “authors” of ancient myths seemed to be the gods themselves, who left their stories to their distant human descendants for the benefit of all.

While humans from all cultures maintained their bodies of myth over the millennia, in the modern era Western scholars began to speculate on the meaning or function of myth in human society. One of the first was the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, who published his *Scienza Nuova* (*New Science*) in 1725. Vico took issue with the prevailing Western view that myths were distortions of biblical stories. He saw myths, rather, as embodying humankind’s efforts to understand the world. As such, these stories were imaginative attempts to grapple with the nature of life and the universe. They were, moreover, part of the development of human society, as we emerged from earlier stages of life (when giants roamed the earth) and ultimately came to arrive at where we are now, holding a modern scientific understanding.

In the nineteenth century, the German linguist and folklorist Max Müller took a somewhat similar approach. Müller proposed that myths had a particular reason for being: they served to explain the origins of the world as we know it, but in symbolic form. Myths, in other words, were allegories for real phenomena. The classic Greek myth of Persephone, for example, involves the abduction of the young woman/goddess by Hades, king of the underworld. Hades allows her to return to the upper world for most of the year, but during winter she

must go back to Hades. The Greeks knew Persephone as the goddess of spring, life, and grain, as well as queen of the underworld, where she reigned over the dead for part of the year. Müller concluded, then, that Persephone's story symbolized the seasonal transition from spring/summer to fall/winter, and back again. It justified or "explained" the change in weather experienced by ordinary human beings.

Another prodigious researcher in the field of mythology was the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer, who surveyed thousands of myths from all parts of the world for his book, *The Golden Bough* (1911-15). A central focus of the book was divine kingship, which Frazer understood, via the myths he studied, as legitimizing the belief that the health and welfare of society depended on the status of the king. This may seem an obvious point now, even if it comes in circular in form. Circularity, or self-reflection, is the essence of myth. In the case of the divine king, when he became too old or infirm to rule, he was typically ritually sacrificed in order to make way for a successor, thereby sustaining the body politic as a whole. Frazer, like Vico, also saw myth and magic from times long ago as giving way to formal, scripture-based religion and scientific practice in the modern era.

Around the same time, Sigmund Freud offered his view of mythology. For Freud, myths, like dreams, were the product of the human imagination. The themes and images making up myths, in fact, often paralleled those in dreams. On the basis of his psychological theories, Freud understood myths to reflect the deepest hopes, fears, desires, and conflicts of the human psyche. Every myth, he believed, was a symbolic echo of those deep-seated passions. The Greek myth of Oedipus, for example, is one in which the hero unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. In Freud's view, the story derives from the unconscious feelings that all young males have regarding their parents—what the psychoanalyst termed the Oedipus Complex.

Freud's student and collaborator Carl G. Jung took the interpretation of myth in an even more radical, yet influential, direction. Jung argued that myths draw their power from the fact they are rooted in the human "collective unconscious," a psychocultural repository of ancient "archetypes" (templates, of sorts) that have, over the centuries, steered human behavior and which con-

tinued to make us who we are. A myth, in this regard, is a "true story," as religion scholar Mircea Eliade put it, one that has been built up in various forms over time and establishes a model for behavior among its audience.

## MOTIF AND NARRATIVE

A different approach to the understanding of myth was taken by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, whose *Morphology of the Folktale* was published in 1928. Although looking primarily at Russian folktales, Propp's work applied equally to myths and other traditional stories. Propp identified a number of commonly recurring episodes, or motifs, that formed the basis of such stories. Although difficult to summarize, these motifs, or narrative units, consisted of such elements as the Introduction of the Hero, the Warning "Don't Go There" ("Go Here"), Departure from Home, the Hero's Quest, the Appearance of the Villain, the Victim Taken in by Deception, the Hero Acquires Magical Assistants, the Hero is Turned Back or Wounded, a False Hero Appears, and so on. While not every element appeared in every folktale, Propp found that they did tend to appear in the same order. For Propp, it was this linear pattern that seemed to be the key to appreciating mythology. The American folklorist Stith Thompson compiled a massive Motif-Index of Folk-Literature based on a similar approach.

Reacting to such formalist efforts, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss broke myths down not into narrative segments but into more fundamental components centered on symbols and meanings. For Lévi-Strauss, even the more irrational elements in myths expressed an underlying logic. He examined the myths of the indigenous peoples of North and South America in detail, and found that all of them had to do with working out contradictions in human experience. Such contradictions may entail emotionally laden questions such as the conflict between life and death, or they may relate to more abstract questions such as difference between the One and the Many. In any case, myths, according to Lévi-Strauss, are "good to think" in that they help one come to terms with these fundamental contradictions. Among other key contradictions ("binary oppositions") Lévi-Strauss looked at were youth vs. old age, wet season vs. dry season, male vs. female, human vs. animal, and culture vs. nature. For him, the arrangement, or sequence, of story elements was less important than the

underlying structures of meaning and their symbolic expression (and resolution).

More recently, scholars have begun to revisit the place of narrative and drama in myths. Though traditionally associated with ritual or other sacred activities, myths are modes of creative thought that have an integrity of their own. They represent cultural storehouses of meaning and value. They can awe an audience, and exhibit qualities of beauty and truth that critical analyses of myth often overlook. Every myth, after all, has something to say, and often it is something significant and is communicated dramatically, aesthetically. In the case of creation myths, in particular, one is dealing with the first and last formulation of things, the ultimate conditions of human beings and the world in which life exists. Myth brings out a continuity between primal events of an archaic past and the immediate here-and-now of lived experience.

Students of myth today can appreciate these human constructions not merely for their functions or effects but for the simple fact that they are works of passion and imagination. While myths may be understood as modes of “primitive” thinking, students and scholars have discovered that a solid understanding of myth can help one

better appreciate contemporary modes of thought. After all, in every walk of life today, one continues to encounter stories, symbols, themes, and meanings that were not created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but rather draw on cultural precedents, that is, on *ways* of thinking and understanding that still have relevance.

—Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD

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# AFRICA

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# OVERVIEWS



## ◆ Ancient African Literature

Ancient Africa was home to thousands of different ethnicities, each with their own language and traditions. Most of the literature that developed in ancient Africa was of the oral tradition, and not written. This oral literature was represented through poetry, folklore, proverbs, and religious songs and myths. Some of the world's earliest written literature evolved among the ancient Egyptians and Nubians during the third millennium BCE.

### BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Outside of the ancient Egyptian civilization, very little is known about the literature of ancient Africa, as much of it was not recorded, but transmitted orally. The little that was recorded consisted of early papyrus documents, stored at libraries. However, these texts were mostly destroyed by invading cultures, such as the Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans, who disseminated their own early literature and stories. Many early texts, such as those in West Africa, were religious in nature, reflecting both the advent of Islam and Christianity. In fact, religion—and much later, colonialism—played a very influential role in the development of literature on the African continent. In many instances, religions such as Islam intermixed with the indigenous traditions of ancient Africa's peoples, helping to blur or wipe out any native literary conventions.

## ANCIENT KUSH

One of the oldest-known civilizations in Africa was Kush (or Cush), otherwise known as Nubia. Around 6000 BCE, the Nubians, a seminomadic people, began settling in the upper Nile Valley in present-day Sudan, roughly 1,500 years before the Egyptians. During the fourth millennium BCE, either separately or in conjunction with the Egyptians—with whom the Nubians shared much of their culture—they developed a system of hieroglyphics, which they used to record their literature. Scholars today believe that some of the literature earlier attributed to the Egyptians originated instead with the Nubians. Many also credit the Nubians for developing the first-known script.

Inscriptions written in Egyptian hieroglyphs provide valuable historical information about the 25th Dynasty of Ancient Egypt (ca. 746-653 BCE), when most of Egypt was under the control of the kings of Kush (Nubia), and other periods. One such inscription was written by the Nubian military leader Piankhi (ca. 747-716 BCE) on a temple in the city of Napata, and details his Egyptian conquests, including a battle that took place on the Nile.

Piankhi's brother, Shabaka, an Egyptian pharaoh, wrote another inscription in 701 BCE on black basalt. Known as the Memphite Theology, or Shabaka Text, it details a history of the Egyptian deities, beginning with Ptah, a creator god of the city of Memphis. The text actually dates much earlier in the Nubian civilization, between 4000 and 3500 BCE, in fact; Shabaka wrote that he was copying from a "worm-eaten papyrus," which he at-



tributed to his ancestors. Another key inscription was written by Piankhi's son, Taharqa (Tirhakah, or king of Ethiopia, in the Bible), who ruled Egypt as pharaoh from approximately 690 to 664 BCE. His text details a temple he had built for his mother and told of her journey to visit it.

During the seventh century BCE, the Nubians were pushed southward by the invading Assyrians. There they established a new capital at Meroë and went on to develop two Meriotic scripts: hieroglyphics and demotic, or "cursive," writing. The scripts were used until the fourth or fifth century CE, primarily for record keeping



*Diorite Viracocha Inca sculpture from Amarucancha archeological site, Cusco. Photo by Stephen Burchell, via Wikimedia Commons.*

break of smallpox weakened the Inca to the point that a small force led by Francisco Pizarro, armed with muskets and horses, was able to conquer much of the empire in short order. By 1572 the last Inca city fell to the Spaniards and within another fifty years the vast majority of the Inca people had died from diseases brought to the New World by the foreign conquerors.

—*KP Dawes*

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## ◆ **Pre-Columbian Caribbean Peoples**

The islands of the West Indies form a Y, with the tail extending from South America. One arm curves northwest through the Greater Antilles toward the Yucatán Peninsula and the other through the Bahamas toward Florida. The islands extend for almost 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers). The four largest islands, Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, make up the Greater Antilles. Above the Greater Antilles are more than seven hundred small islands and cays known as the Bahamas group. East of Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles extend in an arc that runs southeast from the Virgin Islands on the north to Grenada off the coast of South America on the south. None of the islands are far apart, and most are within sight of one another. Native canoeists could have paddled between any of them in calm weather.

Although the origin of the people of the West Indies is uncertain, some authorities say three groups—the Ciboney, Arawak, and Carib—came from South America beginning in the 1300s. Other scholars believe the migration to the islands took place much earlier. According to these scholars, the Casimoiroid Indians came to western Cuba from the Yucatán Peninsula about 4000 BCE, and the Ortoiroid came from South America about 2000 BCE. The Ortoiroid were displaced by the Saladoir (200 BCE to 600 CE), who also came from South America and were the forebears of the Tainos encountered by



Christopher Columbus in 1492. A third group, the Island Carib, came from South America sometime after the arrival of the Saladoir and inhabited the islands from Guadeloupe south. These scholars believe that the Arawak did not migrate to the islands but remained on the continent.

The Taino, who inhabited the area from western Cuba through Puerto Rico, had not advanced beyond the Ceramic Age by the time of Columbus. The Taino of Hispaniola were more numerous and advanced, but all Taino had similar cultural traits. Taino homes were clustered around a center plaza where both men and women participated in ceremonies, dances, and ball games. Although the Taino recognized hereditary provincial chiefs and subchiefs in local areas, only the village headmen had power. Each headman ruled his own village and organized the numerous festivals and games held in each village. Religion played an important role in Taino life. They believed that good and evil spirits inhabited humans and natural objects. Shamans used special powers to try to control the spirits, and individuals attempted to capture them in icons or statues called *zenis*. Burial was an essential part of their religion. Because of the climate, the Taino wore few if any clothes and lived in simple shelters. They practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. After burning off a field, they gathered the nutrients released into piles about knee high and three to six feet (one to two meters) across in which the women planted cuttings with a sharp stick. The most important crops were the bitter cassava and yams. In addition to the cultivated crops, the Taino diet included fruits, fish, small animals, birds, insects, and snakes.

The Island Carib society was male-dominated. The government was decentralized; each village was independent, but one war chief was elected for each island. Their homes were grouped around a house where all the men lived. Women could not enter the central house and were excluded from the activities performed there. The men were expert boat builders and handlers and traded with neighboring islands. They hunted, fished, and waged war. Women did all the other work. The division of labor was more rigid than among the other Indians. The Island Caribs were fierce fighters and always won their battles with other natives. They raided villages and took women for wives. They practiced ceremonial cannibalism on their war victims, but human flesh was not a part of the regular diet. Only the Island Carib survived after the Spanish settled the West Indies.

The Ciboney were in western Hispaniola and Cuba when Columbus arrived but became extinct a century after European contact. They lived in caves, offshore islets, and swamp hammocks. The Ciboney were hunter-gatherers, but the Cuba group used shells and the Hispaniola group used stones in forming tools. Another group that lived in western Cuba at the time of Columbus's arrival was the Guanahatabey. They lived in mobile bands and lacked the pottery or agriculture of their neighbors. They were not advanced and were not numerous.

—Robert D. Talbott

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## ◆ Amazonia

Amazonia consists of an equatorial and subequatorial region of more than 2 million square miles (5.5 million square kilometers) along the Amazon River and its tributaries. The area contains the largest equatorial and tropical rain forests in the world. Until recently, it was mistakenly believed that the region could not accommodate significant or dense human population because its nutrients are concentrated primarily in the air rather than the soil. However, extensive archaeological data show evidence of longtime human habitation in the region.

Stone tools, cave paintings, and other evidence indicate that the region was consistently inhabited beginning nearly eleven thousand years ago, at the very end of the Pleistocene period. These inhabitants were pre-Amerindian hunter-gatherers. The people of the Early Amazonia period lived along the rivers, some also occupying upland areas. They survived by gathering seeds, palms, and tuberous roots; picking nuts and fruits; fishing; and hunting small aquatic and land animals along with birds and water fowl. They used plants for medicinal and hallucinogenic purposes. Their paintings included fantasized formulaic designs and included zoomorphic and human figures.



Quetzalcóatl as depicted in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

peace and prosperity. This continues for many years until the arrival of Tezcatlipoca, a god of war and destruction. Tezcatlipoca tricks Quetzalcóatl and drives him from the city, ending the blessed period of an idealized Tollán and initiating a period of warfare and sacrifice.

Quetzalcóatl, exiled from his own city, goes on a long journey to the sea, promising to return one day and to re-establish the paradise that Tollán offered.

Tollán was a real Toltec city during the tenth century, and its peaceful ruler, Topiltzin, assumed the name

# SELECTED SOURCES AND AUTHORS



## ◆ Aztec Sources

The primary written sources for many Aztec myths are two postconquest documents that an enlightened Spanish priest, Bernardino de Sahagún (ca. 1500-1590), commissioned. The decades-long research project gathered information about native beliefs and customs, resulting in the *Codex Florentine* and the *Codex Chimalpopoca*. Other works on preconquest Aztec life that survived Spanish book-burnings—intended to wipe out native idolatry—provide additional details about the numerous deities and fragmentary accounts of Aztec myths.

## ◆ Incan Sources

There are no Incan written sources that survive. However, Spaniard Juan de Betanzos recorded a number of myths and legends of the Incan people in addition to compiling the Incan account of their conquest by the Spanish. While this is, to be sure, better than nothing, one should be aware that this is not the same as having a firsthand account of Incan myths in a native language, as we have for some other civilizations in Mesoamerican and South America.

## ◆ Mayan Sources

The major Mayan source, *Popol Vuh*, was originally an oral story but eventually came to be written down in an

indigenous language, K'iche, one of the languages of the Mayan people. Likely written between 1554 and 1558, *Popol Vuh* contains a history of the Mayans—including their creation, their myths, and a list of kings. The original K'iche text was written using Spanish letters during the early Colonial era. It was discovered in the early eighteenth century by a Spanish priest, Francisco Jiménez, who copied out the original and translated it into Spanish; the original was subsequently lost. In the centuries since then different iterations of the story have been uncovered. Parts of it, for example, were found carved into stucco on Mayan buildings, possibly as early as 300 BCE.

One of the most famous episodes in the *Popol Vuh* is that of the heroes Hunahpú and Xbalanqué. These twin brothers struggled to avenge their murdered father and warred with the gods of the Underworld. Although they faced many great obstacles, the brothers were eventually successful and defeated their enemies. After their deaths, they became the moon and sun. Their deaths also allowed for the rise of Mayan civilization, or the birth of the contemporary era.

The *Popol Vuh* is one of the rare surviving records of Mesoamerican mythology from before the Spanish conquistadors irrevocably changed the cultural landscape of the Americas. These records let modern readers understand the history and cultural complexity of these regions in the period before they were conquered and colonized.

## OVERVIEWS



### ◆ Native American Ethnophilosophy and Worldview

Despite the diversity among indigenous American cultures—their environments, beliefs, and adaptations—the underlying philosophy of these cultures is a respect for the natural world and their place within it.

Around the world and throughout history, indigenous peoples have developed belief systems that shape their lifestyles to their natural environment in order to enhance their survival within it. Such has been the case among the indigenous peoples of North America.

#### DEFINITIONS

The ethnophilosophy, or worldview, of any culture is a description of how that culture explains the structure and workings of the world in which it lives. It is based on experience, observation, and intellectual inquiry. In many cultures, this worldview is relatively distinct from other aspects of its ideology. One of these other aspects that is especially important is religion, which might be defined as a group's or individual's sense of relationship with that world and "the sacred." Often rooted in emotion and symbolic meanings, religion is made up of a set of beliefs and behaviors that offer a moral guide to the world—and to the wider cosmos. Myths serve as a link between philosophy and religion.

The distinction between worldview and religious influence, however, is much less clear-cut in North American native cultures. This blending has been both a

strength and a weakness for the indigenous American peoples since Europeans first came to their lands. The extent to which these closely tied phenomena shape the daily lives and activities of indigenous peoples has been unrecognized or disregarded by the dominant, immigrant culture.

#### RECURRENT THEMES

As cultures and individuals, most North American natives consider their lives to be constant expressions of their abiding respect for the natural world and their place within it. Although there are many different belief systems and rituals among these groups, there are several recurrent themes that appear across the spectrum of differences. These are (1) the acceptance of visions and dreams as legitimate realities, (2) brotherhood with particular plants or animals, (3) the necessity for maintaining balance in all aspects of life, and (4) the sanctity of the circle as a central symbol. These motifs appear repeatedly in art and decoration, music, dance, and many rituals. Reverent, constant attention to these themes is an integral experience of Native American daily life.

In many Native American cultures, dreams and visions are welcomed, even sought, as sources of wisdom. There are rituals to prepare seekers for a vision experience. Spending a period of time in a sweat lodge is often part of the preparation. Fasting and solitude are also common practices. In some cultures, the use of hallucinogens facilitates the vision experience. Sometimes, though, these experiences are spontaneous. Whatever in-



# SELECTED SOURCES AND AUTHORS



## ◆ Alexandrian Library

**Date:** ca. 300 BCE-before 700 CE

**Locale:** Alexandria, Egypt

**Related civilizations:** Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt

**Significance:** The Library of Alexandria included the greatest collection of Greek literature in the ancient world and cemented Alexandria as the cultural capital of the Mediterranean throughout the Hellenistic period.

Much is in doubt about the Alexandrian library: its founder (Ptolemy I Soter or his son, Ptolemy II Philadelphus); its location (somewhere in the Royal Quarter); its relationship to the Alexandrian museum; the size, nature, and organization of its holdings; and its ultimate fate. The Peripatetic philosopher Demetrius Phalereus may have been “founding librarian,” with Aristotle’s library as his model. Subsequent librarians included Zenodotus of Ephesus, Aristophanes of Byzantium, and Aristarchus of Samothrace; all three produced editions of Homer and other poets, demonstrating the library’s crucial role in categorizing and preserving Greek literature for future generations. As a result, much of our knowledge about ancient Greece is filtered through an Alexandrian lens.

Ancient anecdotes highlight dubious collecting methods. Every ship unloading at Alexandria was supposed to be searched, its books seized and copied, and the copies given to the original owners. Other Hellenis-

tic rulers followed the Ptolemies’ example in founding libraries, especially the Attalids in Pergamum.

The library may have burned when Julius Caesar set fire to the Egyptian fleet in 48 BCE, but the library continued to exist during the Roman period. The bishop of Alexandria led an attack on the Serapeum (temple to Sarapis) in 391 CE and presumably destroyed the annex library that had been built there. ‘Amr ibn al-’Āṣ, Arab conqueror of Egypt in 642 CE, is said to have con-



19th century drawing depicting the Great Library of Alexandria. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]