Myths may be classified as traditional stories that deal with nature, ancestors, heroes, and heroines or supernatural beings that serve as primordial types in a primitive view of the world. Myths appeal to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep and commonly felt emotions. These accounts relate the origin of humankind and a perception of the visible world; the character, attributes, and functions of the ancient gods; and stories concerning an individual, an event, or an institution. The systematic collection and study of myths is termed mythology. Mythological research into the earliest literary records of the ancient world is essential for understanding the religions and philosophies of these peoples. Equally important, the study of mythology enhances our appreciation for the art and literature of the classical and modern eras.

Why Were Myths Created?

It is no wonder that myths evolved in primitive cultures when people were faced with impersonal, inexplicable, and sometimes awesome and/or violent natural phenomena and the majesty of natural wonders such as the sun, the sky, the mountains, and the sea. In comparison with these wonders, humans felt dwarfed and diminished. As a result, they bestowed extraordinary human traits of power and personality to those phenomena that evoked human emotions most profoundly. The origin of the world, the miracle of birth, the finality of death, and the fear of the unknown compelled early humans to create deities who presided over the celestial sphere. In time, every aspect of nature itself, human nature, and human life was believed to have a controlling deity.

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These gods, goddesses, and cultural heroes and heroines, as well as their stories, served and continue to serve a multitude of purposes. Initially, myths of cosmogony illuminate the origin of humankind. Virtually every culture embraces a creation myth. Myths explain the beginnings of customs, traditions,
and beliefs of a given society and reinforce cultural norms and values, thereby depicting what that society regards as good or evil. Myths assist in defining human relationships with a deity or deities. Judeo-Christian-Islamic societies have established a supreme power, a father figure, whereas the Norse tradition restricts the power and purveyance of the gods. Finally, myths help to dispel the fear and uncertainty that is part of the human condition. Fear of the elements may be explained by the activities of the gods. Fear of failure is overcome by reliance on them. Fear of death is often explained as the passage or transition to another dimension or to another domain. Simply stated, myths are a symbolic representation reflecting the society that created them. Although unjustified and unjustifiable, myths take the raw edge off the surface of human existence and help humans to make sense of a random and threatening universe.

Universal Themes

The themes of great myths are universal, and they center on ancestors, deities, heroes, heroines, and nature. Mythic themes have evolved in every culture, are unique to each culture, and yet often bear striking similarities. Myths are seldom simple and never irresponsible. Esoteric meanings abound, and the proper study of myths requires a great store of abstruse geographical, historical, and anthropological knowledge. The stories underscore both the variety and continuity of human nature. One of the most intriguing characteristics of myths is the way in which they have been transmitted, adopted, and adapted by successive cultures. The abiding interest in mythology lies in its connection to human wants, needs, desires, strengths, and frailties. By their nature, myths reveal the interwoven pattern of circumstances that are beyond the control of the mortal and the immortal.

As we delve further into the world of myths, we enjoy the subtle and dramatic ways in which myths pervade societies, unveiling universal themes, moral direction and inspiration, and how particular myths mirror the society in which they were created and developed. Myths are decidedly human in origin, and they speak of fire and ice, wind and rain, selfishness, anger, jealousy, courage, love and hate, hope and despair. Ironically, it is the human ability to make myths, and the very need to do so, that ultimately sets humans apart from other inhabitants of the earth.

Myths may be drawn from any era and any geographical area. For this treatise, we examine components of Greek and Roman mythology, Norse and Teutonic (Germanic) mythology, Oriental mythology, and the commonalities among these and several other cultures.

Greek Mythology

To people of Western cultures, the most familiar mythology outside of the Judeo-Christian culture is that of Greek and Roman mythology. The mythology of ancient Greece and Rome stemmed from the human desire to explain natural events and the origin of the universe. The myths chronicle Zeus and his brothers, Poseidon and Hades, who exacted control of the universe from their father, Cronus, and the Titans, a powerful race of giants. Cronus himself had wreaked control from his own parents, Uranus (heaven) and Gaea (earth). Great epics of war and peace and proud heroes and courageous heroines, who represented the basic cultural values of the Greek people, were recorded. Men and women alternately worshipped and feared a ménage of gods and goddesses who traditionally resided on Mount Olympus, attributing failure and defeat to the wrath of the gods and attributing success and victory to the grace of the gods.

Women offered great homage to Hera, the wife of Zeus and queen of the gods, whose name means “splendor of heaven.” Hera, the mother of some, but not all, of Zeus’s many offspring, was implored by
women who were about to give birth to numb the pain of labor and to favor them with healthy and beautiful infants. Because she had been betrayed by Zeus, Hera, who wore golden sandals and sat on a golden throne, deigned to destroy her husband and kill his consorts. Ironically, Hera was worshipped as the protector of marriage. Named Juno by the Romans, Hera is often depicted holding a peacock.

**Roman Mythology**

Much of Roman mythology had its roots in Greek mythology, although Jupiter and Mars were part of the Roman tradition long before the Romans interacted with and eventually conquered the Greeks. Subsequent to 725 BC, the Romans adopted many Greek deities, renaming them and making them their own. In both Greek and Roman mythology, realms of the universe are delineated. The Greeks and Romans saw the cosmos in terms of the skies, the earth, the seas, and the lower world. Jupiter (Zeus) ruled the skies from atop Mount Olympus, where he controlled the movement of the sun, the phases of the moon, and the changes of the seasons. When Jupiter, the fairest and wisest of all immortals, was outraged, he hurled lightning and thunderbolts down on the earth. Neptune (Poseidon), the second most powerful god, ruled the seas, and Pluto (Hades) ruled the lower world. Pluto, the god of wealth, drove a black chariot powered by six onyx-black horses and was guarded by Cerberus, the three-headed dog.

As we read these highly entertaining and often spiritually uplifting myths, we learn a great deal about human nature and of our debt to Greek and Roman cultures. Modern language is imbued with references to their extensive pantheon and the heroes and heroines of their civilizations. Consider, for starters, the names of the planets, the stars, and the galaxies. Even today, in our struggle to survive, Greek and Roman myths help people to better understand humanity's obedience to a higher power, the relationships of men and women to one another, the power of love and friendship, the horror of war and natural catastrophes, and the strength of parental devotion.

**Norse and Teutonic (Germanic) Mythology**

Germanic mythology refers to the myths of people who spoke Germanic dialects prior to their conversion to Christianity. These ancient Germanic people from the continent and of England were illiterate. Most of what we do know about the mythology and beliefs of that era comes from literary sources written in Scandinavia and then transcribed into the Old Norse language of Iceland from the 12th to 14th centuries. Two collections of verse, known as the Eddas, exist. The earliest, the Elder Edda or Poetic Edda, contains the earliest Norse mythology, whereas the Younger Edda or Prose Edda was written by Snorri Sturluson around 1220 AD. In the Prose Edda, Sturluson combined a variety of sources with three earlier poetic accounts of the origin of the world to create a wholly representative mythology.

In the Prose Edda version of the creation, all that originally existed was a void called Ginnungagap. To the north of the void was the icy region of Niflheim, and to the south of the void was the sunny region of Muspelheim. Warm breaths from Muspelheim melted the ice from Niflheim, and a stream of water flowed into the void, from which emerged the giant, Ymir, ancestor of the Frost Giants. Created from drops of the melting ice, Audhumbla, the cow, nourished Ymir and was nourished herself by licking salty frost- and ice-covered stones. The stones were formed into a man, Bori, who was destined to become the father of Odin, Vili, and Ve. The brothers slaughtered Ymir and created the earth from his flesh, the mountains from his bones, the sea from his blood, the clouds from his brains, and the heavens from his skull. The heavens, according to the Prose Edda, were balanced by four dwarfs—Austri,
Westri, Nordi, and Sudri—the directions on a compass. Sparks from the fireland, Muspelheim, became the stars of the sky. This newly created land, named Midgard, was to become the somber home of mortal humans. Even in Asgard, home of the gods, the atmosphere was grave and the only hope was to face disaster and fight the enemy bravely to earn a seat in Odin's castle, Valhalla. As with so many similar myths, Norse mythology reflected the attitude of the culture: In death there is victory, and true courage will not be defeated. Some of these mythic themes are represented in Richard Wagner's music–drama tetralogy, Der Ring des Nibelungen.

Oriental Mythology

The myths of India, China, and Japan are highly complex and sophisticated. They differ from Greek, Roman, and Germanic mythologies in that, rather than venerating anthropomorphic deities, the structures of these deities are usually polymorphic, intricately combining human and animal forms. The gods and goddesses of the Hindus take extraordinary human forms with numerous heads, eyes, and arms. During early times, deities in Chinese and Japanese myths were more animistic, but these myths were supplanted by mythologies derived from the three great religions: Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, with Buddhism having been brought to China from India in 300 BC. Shinto, the religion indigenous to Japan, borrowed much from Chinese mythology, resulting in a tradition that paralleled that of the Buddhist pantheon. Notably in Asian cultures, two or more religions may be observed simultaneously because they are less eschatological but more ethical or philosophical in emphasis, showing people how to live rather than what will happen to them on their demise. We may deduce, then, that oriental myths not only explain the origin of the universe but also deal with distinctive aspects and commonly held cultural values of each civilization.

During ancient times, throughout history, and even today, the family is considered to be a critical part of oriental society and culture. Honor and obedience to one's parents is related to ancestor worship. During the Han period in China, emperors set up shrines for their ancestors because they believed that spirits could bring blessings to them and to their families. In general, oriental myths connect the actions of deities and other supernatural beings to the everyday actions of men, women, and the natural world around them. Individual gods protected the family, the home, and the country and represented the sun, the moon, and the planets. Myths describe how the islands of Japan were created and deliberately located by the gods in the very center of the world. The two main books of the Shinto religion are the Kojiki and the Nihon-gi. The Nihon-gi explains how all of the emperors of Japan are directly descended from the Sun Goddess. Today, the rising sun is symbolized in the Japanese national flag.

Commonalities

What the disparate mythologies from all over the world have in common is their heartfelt desire to explain the origin of humankind and to validate its existence. We are searching to satisfy the very human need to explain our relationship with the powerful and mysterious forces that drive the universe. Throughout the world, myths reflect those themes that deal with nature, supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes and heroines. In Africa, where myths have been preserved mainly through the oral tradition, the natural elements are immortalized through myths. Many versions of creation stories abound. The Dinka of Sudan believe that the first man and woman were made from clay and put into a tiny covered pot, where they grew to full height. Australian Aboriginal mythology deems that their community and culture were created during dreamtime, "the time before time" when spirited creatures came from the sky, the sea, and the underground to generate mountains, valleys, plants, and animals. We are familiar with the Great Spirit myth of North American Indians and the import that Native Americans reserve for...
their ancestors. The Aztec people of South America were polytheistic and offered sacrifices to appease their gods. Huitzilopochtli, the great protector of the Aztecs, was portrayed in the form of an eagle, and it was he who deemed where the great pyramid would be built as “the heart of their city and the core of their vision of the universe.” From Ireland comes a myth about Cu Chulainn, a hero who could change form to oppose evil forces. A Polynesian myth from the islands of the Kanaka Māori people centers on Maui, who brought the gift of fire to his people. In ancient Egypt, from pharaohs to peasants, each individual had a god or goddess corresponding to his or her place in society.

As we can perceive, during every era and in every geographical area, myths have evolved as nearly sacred literature devoid of theology. Each myth is unique to a culture, particularly to its beliefs and values. Myths are, in themselves, monuments reflecting the precariousness of human existence.

Further Readings


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