

MYTHOLOGY

Tribal Myth

- Our knowledge is second-hand from travelers, missionaries, colonial administrators and from the field notes of anthropologists. Some tribal peoples have produced writers; we have to rely on what these authors choose to tell us.
- There are thousands of forgotten stories; mythical narratives generally travel easily from one group of people to another; they may change in the process as they are told and retold.
- Myths are made from a store of ideas and images generated in countless previous performances that exist in the memory of the narrator, and also in the memories of all those who not only hear, but participate in the performance.
- The participation of the "audience" in story telling typically takes the form of questions and comments, which stimulate both the **memory and the imagination** of the storyteller.

Tribal Myth 2

- Myths lack identifiable authors and exist in multiple versions. They can often be considered anonymous stories that seek to explain the origins of the world, including human society and culture. Roy Willis in *World Mythology* argues that myths in this cosmic sense appeared prominently in pre-scientific societies ranging from the simplest to the most sophisticated type of social organization.
- We find them in unstratified societies reliant on hunting and gathering, which of all human communities are the most intimately dependent on nature. Examples include hunter-gather peoples of North and South America, Southeast Asia, Australia and Africa, as well as Polar Inuit.
- On the other hand, some of the most complex mythologies stem from societies that have sufficiently freed themselves from dependence on their environment to develop a hierarchy which includes a privileged intellectual shamanism or priesthood. Examples include ancient India and Greece, China and Japan, the Dogon, Bambara and Yoruba peoples of West Africa, the Incas of South America and the Mayan and Aztec peoples of Central America, as well as the Celtic and Germanic peoples of northern Europe.

The Shaman

- Willis notes that a fertile ground for **myth making** is the type of small-scale society where people are more or less equal and where there is little occupational specialization or class structure. The nearest thing to a specialist is the **shaman, the expert in exploring invisible worlds above and below the human domain and in bringing back, for the benefit of all, knowledge and wisdom from these realms.**
- The shaman's work resembles that of the modern scientist based on the accumulation of experience gained first hand by experimentation, but also like that of the priest, concerned with the domain of the spirit.
- Yet the shaman also possesses a kind of **creative freedom** which is characteristic of neither scientist nor priest, but rather belongs to the artist. The world of myth originates in the scientific and religious artistry of the shaman; its most conspicuous aspect is that of *play*.
- **Creative play is the essence of myth-making. Although myth ceaselessly changes and develops, it somehow never loses touch with its roots in tribal shamanic experience.** Because this experience is about the interconnections between all aspects of life – visible and invisible, terrestrial and celestial, human, animal, vegetable and mineral – myth cannot be but all-embracing, cosmic in its range. Thus myth registers and conveys meaning in the deepest sense.
- **It is a meaning that plays with its hearer or reader rather than imposing itself.** This is the secret of its universal and continuing appeal.

Written Language

- We have very limited knowledge of the development of ancient stories and how they evolved and changed during the Neolithic period.
- We can only speculate on the gradual elaborations, modifications and development of stories over thousands of years. Good narrators develop a sense of what audiences want to hear at their deepest level of thought.
- **The literate civilizations of antiquity have bequeathed a legacy of more recent writings bearing witness to Neolithic oral mythology.** Pottery with inscriptions and scrolls came into existence after 3000 BCE. These written materials represent the end results of a long process of selection and ordering. Much of what we know of the history of mythology, religion and paganism stems from these sources. Written documents gradually emerged after the start of the ages of metals – bronze (around 3000 BCE and iron 1200 BCE).
- Fortunately scholars have accumulated many of these stories and their research makes it possible to enjoy and learn as a result.

Value of Primitive Mythologies

- Eliade indicates that all the great Mediterranean and Asiatic regions have mythologies, but it is better not to begin the study of mythology from the starting point of Greek or Egyptian or Roman mythology. Most of the Greek myths were recounted, and hence modified, adjusted, systematized, by Hesiod, by the rhapsodies and Homer. The mythological traditions of the Near East and of India have been sedulously reinterpreted and elaborated by their theologians and ritualists. This is not to say that other archaic works have not been rehandled by priests and bards.
- Nevertheless, he argues it is better to begin by studying myth in traditional and archaic societies. The myths of “primitives” still reflect a primordial condition and can help set a myth in its original sociological or religious context.
- Mircea Eliade. *Myth and Reality* (1963) Harper and Row

Value of Primitive Mythologies 2

- When the missionary and ethnologist C. Strehlow asked the Australian Arunta why they performed certain ceremonies, the answer always was: **“Because the ancestors so commanded it.”**
- The Kai of New Guinea refused to change their way of living and working and they explained: **“It was thus that the Nemu (the Mythical Ancestors) did, and thus we do likewise.”**
- Asked the reason for a particular detail in a ceremony, a Navaho chanter answered: “Because the Holy People did it that way in the first place.”
- Tibetan ritual: “As our ancestors in ancient times did—so we do now.”
- Hindu theologians and ritualists: “We must do what the gods did in the beginning” (*Satapatha Brahmana*, VII, 2, 1, 4).
- Hopefully our review of mythology will reflect this spirit.



Creation, Cosmic Architecture and Disasters

- Wikipedia indicates a creation myth is a symbolic narrative of a culture, tradition or people that describes their earliest beginnings, how the world they know began and how they came into it. They are commonly considered *cosmological myths*—that is, they describe the ordering of the cosmos from a state of chaos. They are also commonly considered sacred accounts and can be found in nearly all traditions.
- Charles Long, (1963) *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*, is credited with describing five basic types of stories.
 - Creation *ex nihilo* in which the creation is through thought, word, dream or bodily secretions of a divine being.
 - Earth diver creation in which a diver, usually a bird or amphibian sent by a creator, plunges into the seabed through a primordial ocean to bring up sand or mud which develops into a terrestrial world.
 - Emergence myths in which progenitors pass through a series of worlds and metamorphoses until reaching the present world.
 - Creation by the dismemberment of a primordial being.
 - Creation by the splitting or ordering of a primordial unity, such as the cracking of a cosmic egg or a bringing into form from chaos.

CREATION

- The riddle of how the world came to be is a central problem for all mythologies.
- Sometimes the beginning of all things is described as a **total emptiness or void, or alternatively, as a limitless expanse of water and undifferentiated waste clothed in darkness** – an idea common to mythical narratives of the Middle East, the Khoisan peoples of southern Africa and many traditions of North America and Southeast Asia.
- Despite the enormous diversity of cultures in North America, there are relatively few types of myths about the creation of the world. Most Native American peoples attribute the conception, if not the making, to a supreme deity of “**Great Spirit**.” The actual deities often include animal figures, i.e., the Spider in the West, an **Earth Diver** (often a lowly creature) that goes to the bottom of the primeval sea and retrieves mud.
- The **turtle** plays an important part in Cheyenne accounts. Maheo, “All Spirit,” created the Great Water together with water creatures and birds. The birds grew tired of flying and took turns to dive and look for land. They failed until the coot tried. When he returned, the coot dropped a little ball of mud from his beak into Maheo’s hand. As Maheo rolled the mud in his palms it expanded and soon there was so much only old Grandmother Turtle could carry it. On her back the mud continued to grow; in this way the first land was created.
- In Egyptian myth the primordial act of creation was the raising of a mound of land out of a watery abyss called Nun. The Benu bird was said to have flown over the waters of the Nun and came to rest on a rock from which its cry broke the primeval silence; this determined what was and what was not to be in the unfolding creation.





Creation 2

- The most widely distributed creation image depicts the primal universe in the form of an egg, containing the potentiality of everything within its all-enveloping shell.
- The usual pattern is for some sort of action to occur imitating a process of change and development.
- For the Dogon people of West Africa, a vibration set up by Amma, the creator god, burst the confines of the cosmic egg and liberated the opposed divinities of order and chaos.

Creation 3

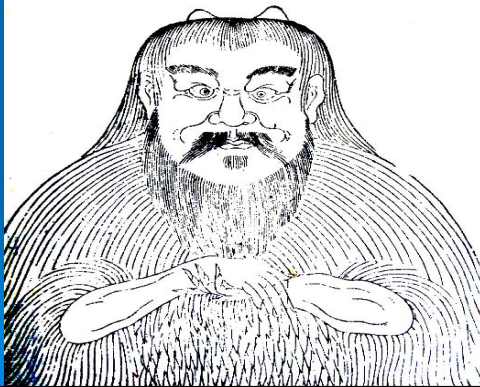
- Willis indicates in all mythologies that the initial meaning of creation is the appearance of separation and plurality in place of oneness and undifferentiation.
- In the Chinese cosmic egg story, when the divine ancestor Pan Gu had grown inside the shell for 18,000 years, the egg exploded into two parts, the light half forming the heavens, the dark half forming the earth.
- In the Maori creation myth, the world began when the two creature beings, Rangi the male sky and Papa the female earth, broke apart from their immobile embrace in the void and assumed their opposed and complimentary positions in the cosmos.
- The same theme is also found in some versions of the Greek creation story, in which the first gods to appear were Uranos, the male sky and Gaia, the female earth.

Life Out of Death

- In many traditions, creation is brought about by sacrificial death.
- The cosmic giant Pan Gu gives up his life to bring the world into being. In the darkness of a primordial egg, Pan Gu, said to be the first living thing and said to be the offspring of Yin and Yang, the two vital forces in the universe, grew for 18,000 years until the egg split open. The light and clear parts of the egg floated up to create the heavens and the heavy and opaque parts sank to form the earth. Pan Gu stood up. To prevent the fluid earth and the sky from coming together again, he grew taller, forcing the ground and the heavens apart by ten feet a day.
- After another 18,000 years, the earth and the sky solidified in their present positions and Pan Gu wearily laid down to rest. He died and his breath became wind and cloud, his voice thunder, his left eye the sun, his right eye the moon, and his hair and whiskers the stars in the sky. The other parts of his body became the elements that make up the earth, including mountains, rivers, plants, trees, metals, gems and rocks. His sweat was transformed into the rain and dew.
- In other Pan Gu versions many opposites in nature, male and female, wet and dry and light and dark were formed in the egg. While Pan Gu grew he also created the first humans. Pan Gu died from the effort of creation and from his body all the natural features of the earth arose. In later versions the alternation of the night and day is explained by the opening and shutting of Pan Gu's eyes.



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Life Out of Death 2

- In Saharan Africa the world was originally made from the numerous segments of the sacrificed cosmic serpent Minia, god's first creation – an event remembered in animal sacrifice in the region to this day. Her head is the sky and her tail is the waters that lie beneath the earth.
- In Norse mythology the three creator gods slaughter the bisexual primeval giant Ymir, forming the earth from his flesh, the sea from his blood, the mountains from his bones, the trees from his hair and the sky or vault of heavens from his skull.

Cyclical Worlds

- Some mythologies formalize the struggle between creative order and destructive chaos in terms of a **perpetual cycle of creation** and destruction, by which worlds are unendingly brought into existence, destroyed and remade.
- In North America the myth-making imagination of the Hopi people portrays a **series of worlds, the first of which is destroyed by fire, the second by freezing, the third by flood; we are now in the fourth world which is also due to come to an end soon.**
- A similar mythology is that of the Aztecs of Central America, who tell of the successive creation and destruction of four worlds or "Suns" previous to the present universe. These earlier worlds and their inhabitants had been created, then destroyed by the catastrophic action of various deity figures. The present world is the fifth sun and the Aztecs saw themselves as the **"People of the Sun" whose divine duty it is to wage cosmic war in order to provide the sun with his *tlaxcaltiztli* ("nourishment")**. Without it the sun would disappear in the heavens. Thus, the welfare and the very survival of the universe depends upon the offerings of blood and hearts to the sun.





Cyclical Worlds 2

- Graeco-Roman tradition describes five successive ages, each associated with a different race of men. It begins with the **Golden Age** when human beings enjoyed eternal youth and freedom from toil, and concludes with the present era, **the Age of Iron**, which is destined to end in humanity's self-destruction.
- The most philosophically elaborate creation cyclical mythology is perhaps that of Hindu India. The great god Vishnu, resting on the coils of the cosmic serpent Ananta in the waters of chaos, emits a lotus from his navel, which opens to reveal the creator god Brahma. From Brahma's meditation the world is created, lasting an immense amount of time before dissolving back into chaos, from which a new universe eventually emerges in exactly the same way. Each of four successive eras within a world cycle is inferior to the previous one.
- In Hindu religious text, the Puranas, Vishnu is described as having the divine color of water-filled clouds, four-armed, holding a lotus, mace, conch and chakra (wheel). The blue color indicates his all pervasive nature, blue being the color of the infinite space and the infinite ocean. A crown should adorn his head to symbolize his supreme authority. He rests on Ananta: the immortal and infinite snake. The conch shell or *Shanka*, named "Panchajanya," represents his power to create and maintain the universe. The chakra (wheel) symbolizes the purified spiritualized mind. The mace or *Gada* symbolizes his divine power as the source of all spiritual, mental and physical strength. It also symbolizes the power to destroy materialistic or demonic tendencies. The lotus flower represents spiritual liberation, divine perfection, purity and the unfolding of spiritual consciousness within the individual.



