

The Story of How the World Began: An Anthropological Analysis of Creation Mythology
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By
Shauna Strnad
Anthropology Major and History Minor
The College at Brockport
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Thesis Director: Dr. Jennifer Ramsay, Assistant Professor, Anthropology

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Introduction

This paper addresses the theme of the creation myth in a selection of cultural groups. Cultures around the world have developed their own mythologies each with their own pantheon of gods, goddesses, and heroes. They also have been spreading throughout the world since the beginning of humankind. As such, each culture not only has a different *way* of explaining creation, but they each have different ideas as to *how* something was created, as well. Every mythology is either subtly or extremely different from other culture's mythology which is why creation mythology is such an interesting topic; no two mythologies are identical, yet there can almost always be found at least one similarity between myths.

The creation of the universe, the Earth, and humans, are three major subjects covered in nearly, if not all creation mythology. It is part of the human condition to want to explain occurrences of the past, why things are the way they are within a present context, and to explain how something was created. The focus of my research is the comparison of the similarities and the differences found within each creation myth of the specific cultures I have chosen. Also, the myths relevance to modern society will also be examined. It is possible that by studying each cultures mythology, information on the beliefs, the practices, and the overall ideologies of that culture can too be revealed.

The cultures discussed within this analysis are the Iroquois Nation, the Aztec, the Inca, the Norse, the Mesopotamian, the Yoruba, the Chinese, and the Maori. These cultures were chosen since they are spread throughout the world both geographically and chronologically, which provides a holistic look at creation mythology. Specifically these cultures were located in what would today be considered, the eight major geographical areas of the world which are as

follows: North America, Mesoamerica/Central America, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania.

The structure of this paper will begin with an explanation of terms pertinent to the research. Then the theoretical analysis will be discussed followed by the methodology that was utilized. Background information of each culture, a synopsis of each culture's creation mythology, and my analysis of the major themes found within the creation mythology will come next. The comparative analysis will also be described along with the diversity found between the eight chosen culture's creation myths. Finally creation mythology's relevance to modern society will be discussed.

Background - Terminology

To understand the premise of what is conveyed within this paper, there are some terms and definitions that must be clarified. The most important term that should be first understood is 'myth'. A myth is a story describing past events and it is usually a religious explanation for something. However, this explanation may not necessarily be based upon fact.¹ 'Mythology', on the other hand, has two definitions. It refers both to the collection of myths from a single culture, as well as the academic study of myths.

Although, this paper specifically analyses creation mythologies and a 'creation myth' is an explanation of how something came into being. This is sometimes intertwined with the term cosmogony which specifically describes the creation of the universe and the solar system.² Cosmogony and creation mythology differ because a creation myth can include the creation of humans, plants, animals, divine beings, and anything else that humans need to explain, whereas cosmogony does not.

Myth and mythology are sometimes confused with other similar terms as well. For example, a 'legend' is a story that is claimed to have historical origins within the context of its culture.³ This will sometimes declare lasting fame or importance to events and/or characters. This then leads to the fact that legends are often elaborated and expanded upon. The stories of King Arthur, for example, are legends since King Arthur did exist, but not all of the events attributed to him are entirely factual.

A 'folktale' is very much like a 'fairytale' since both are stories involving fanciful characters and fantastic forces. Both are also based upon superstition and are widely recognized within the culture, as being fictitious.⁴ The difference between a folktale and a fairytale stems from folktales being oral traditions while fairytales, although they could have originated as oral traditions, have become written stories that are usually intended for children.

Finally, a 'fable' is a short story that is used to teach a lesson. These usually involve animals or inanimate objects as the main characters and are widely recognized within the culture as being fictitious.⁵ Aesop's fables are some that are well known within the United States. One such fable is entitled The Dog and the Shadow. It is written as follows:

A dog, crossing a bridge over a stream with a piece of flesh in his mouth, saw his own shadow in the water and took it for that of another Dog, with a piece of meat double his own in size. He immediately let go of his own, and fiercely attacked the other Dog to get his larger piece from him. He thus lost both: that which he grasped at in the water, because it was a shadow; and his own, because the stream swept it away.⁶

The lesson to be learned from this particular fable is that one should never be greedy, because when you are greedy you end up losing everything. It is better to take what has been given to, offered to, or earned by you, than to gain nothing by trying to acquire more.

Theoretical Background

Edward Sapir is the anthropological theorist whose hypotheses I have applied to my research. One of his theories is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis; also called linguistic relativity. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis “posits a relationship between the categories of meaning found within a language and the mental categories speakers of that language use to describe and classify the world.”⁷

This means that words reflect the environment in which they are used, including both the natural environment as well as social environments. “Languages thus distinctively encode different ways of conceiving and perceiving the world and speakers of different languages occupy conceptually distinct universes.”⁸ Also included in this theory is the hypothesis that symbols are derived from the environment, which then drives social changes.

Since there is no single correct way to represent something signs are arbitrary. Within cultures there are rules about making signs and symbolic processes so that everyone can understand each other within that society. As such, the language of a culture develops uniquely as does the culture itself, based upon the group’s conceptualizations and declarations on signs and symbolic processes.

This theory is also one of the central concepts of cultural-relativism. Cultural-relativism describes how a specific social context will dictate the meaning of cultural norms and values.

Take the legality of prostitution for example. Americans frown upon prostitution and it is illegal within the United States. Yet other social groups, such as those in New South Wales, view it as a semi-acceptable if not fully acceptable, form of work.⁹ This is one way in which social context and the environment influences cultural norms and values.

Edward Sapir's theories apply to this paper since they examine the influence that the surrounding environment has upon a culture. Like language, the creation mythology of a culture is unique; however there are similarities which can be linked to other surrounding cultures as well as the surrounding environment. Creation mythology can also be influenced by any cultures that had previously inhabited the surrounding areas; much like other aspects of the culture can be influenced.

Methodology

My methodology involves an omnicomparitivist approach. This is a "...style of study that randomly selects isolated data from various populations across the globe."¹⁰ Due to my decision to utilize the creation mythologies from one culture per each current major geographical area of the world, this method becomes relevant.

As mentioned previously the current major geographical areas of the world are as follows: North America, Central America/Mesoamerica, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania. Since Antarctica is and has always been uninhabited by humans, no culture has been able to develop there. Scientists temporarily residing there for research purposes, in which they primarily work and do not raise families, does not qualify as establishing a separate culture. As such it was deemed by me as inapplicable to this research.

An advantage to this approach is the easy comparison of mythemes. A mytheme is the unchanging element that is the very basis of the myth. It is commonly found in other myths as well which makes it possible to link mythologies together. A mytheme can be easily linked to other more complicated comparisons, as well.

Another advantage of this methodology is the chance to concentrate on specific archetypes within the myths. An archetype is an “inherited unconscious idea [or] pattern of thought] that is present in every human mind.¹¹ For example, the bringing back of a loved one from the land of the deceased is one mythological archetype.¹²

A disadvantage of this methodology is that it is monomaniacal, which means that it confines thoughts to one specific idea or group of ideas.¹³ This is evident in my discussion of archetypes and mythemes. Although each of these are useful for determining connections between cultures, it can be argued that examining cultures using these methods will lead to connections that are not really there. It can also be argued that looking for archetypes and mythemes prevents the analyst from examining the culture through a holistic perspective, which is further discussed below.

This method is also universalizing, meaning that it manipulates potential findings to present results that are applicable in any and all cases.¹⁴ Much like other literature research, mythological research can be subjective at times. This often occurs because multiple meanings can be amassed from a single myth.

Some of the cultures used in my analysis, like the Mesopotamians, are no longer around today. As such it is impossible to ask anyone within that culture to explain the meaning behind a

specific myth. This leaves modern researchers to account for every possible meaning that is implied, which then leads to the subjective nature of mythology.

Discussion

Historical Background and Creation Myth of Cultural Groups Used for Analysis

Iroquois Nation

The Iroquois Nation is composed of six smaller groups of Native Americans; the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and the Tuscarora. These groups existed separately before the Iroquois Nation was developed. Although these groups existed as separate cultures originally, the end of the Iroquois Nation creation myth includes how these six groups joined together to form the collective nation.

The creation myth records the groups union as the members of the culture view it and believed it happened. This, however similar to historical records, lacks some specific details. The creation myth explains how five of the groups were the first to join together. What is left out of the myth is that the groups called themselves the Great Iroquois Nation. Years later when the Tuscarora joined, the name was changed to the Confederacy of the Six Nations.

The Iroquois Nation was initially located in modern-day New York State. In the seventeenth century, the Mohawk dominated northeastern New York, with the Oneida occupying the adjacent western land, and the Onondaga occupying the adjacent land west of the Oneida including the eastern coast of Lake Ontario. Directly west of the Onondaga's land and below Lake Ontario, was the Cayuga, which left the Seneca occupying western New York State approximately up to where Monroe, Livingston, and Steuben counties currently are located.

By the eighteenth century the Tuscarora were part of the Iroquois nation. At this time the land attributed to each group had shifted. Each group had expanded in both the east and west directions and the Seneca had expanded well into western New York State. The Tuscarora established their land in between the Oneida and Onondaga lands in central New York State. Later on, the government forced the relocation of these six groups at different times and to differing places. Within the United States, groups were moved to Wisconsin and Oklahoma, while some groups were moved outside the United States into Ontario and Quebec.

The creation myth for this culture begins with deities inhabiting the Upper World while the Lower World consisted of water with swimming animals as the only living things there. When one goddess is kicked through a hole that opened into the Lower World some of the animals there rescue her from drowning by placing her upon Great Turtle's back. Muskrat said that the goddess needed a bed of Earth to live on so he, Beaver, and Otter all attempted diving to the bottom of the water, scooping up some earth, and bringing it to the surface.¹⁵

Beaver and Otter were unable to complete the task, but Muskrat's dead body floated to the surface with earth in his mouth and hands for the goddess. The goddess spread the earth around Great Turtle's shell making the shell larger and creating more earth to be spread around. This formed Great Island where the goddess built herself an earthen lodge and gave birth to a daughter whom was named Earth Woman.¹⁶

One day Earth Woman was gathering wild potatoes and because she was facing the east, the west wind blew into her body causing her to become pregnant with twin boys. Evil Twin wanted to be born before Good Twin so he sprung from his mother's side, killing her in the process. After her death, Good Twin created the sun from his mother's face and threw it into the

sky to shine upon Great Island each day. From the back of her head he made the moon and numerous stars to shine during nighttime. Also, from the earth that covered Earth Woman's body sprung three sisters; Squash vine from her head, corn plants from her chest, and bean plants from her arms and legs.¹⁷

As young men, Good Twin and Evil Twin wanted to make Great Island ready for humans. They decided that Good Twin would travel east and Evil Twin would travel west creating lakes, forests, plants, animals, rocks, and mountains. Evil Twin made massive predatory animals so Good Twin made them smaller so they would be safer for the humans. On the other hand, Good Twin made his animals fat so they would be good food for the humans, but Evil Twin made the animals smaller and thinner.¹⁸

Evil Twin suggested a foot-race to determine which of the brothers would get to rule Great Island. However, Good Twin dreamt that the foot-race would provide a chance for Evil Twin to try to kill him. Thus Good Twin thwarted the plan, killed his brother, and sent his body to the Land of Great Silence to await all the humans who would eventually die.¹⁹

When Good Twin creates the first man and woman he takes soil from the ground and molds it into shape. By blowing the breath of life into these molds First Man and First Woman are formed. First Man and First Woman loved each other so much that they bore six pairs of humans; a man and a woman per each pair. Described at the end of the myth is the cardinal direction that each pair traveled before settling down to form the smaller groups of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.²⁰

Aztec

The Aztec culture absorbed the dying Toltec culture in 1376 Common Era (CE). They had conformed the myths of the Toltec culture to better fit their own beliefs rather than creating their own mythology. Despite heavy influence after the absorption of the Toltecs, the Aztecs were also influenced by the Olmec, the Teotihuacan, the Monte Alban, and the Mayan cultures.²¹

The location of the Aztec culture is in Northern Central America; what would today be considered modern day Mexico City. Although when the Aztecs inhabited the area their capital city was called Tenochtitlan. The initial group of Aztecs decided to develop their capital in the location of Tenochtitlan after an eagle was seen eating a snake on top of a cactus. Within this culture that was seen as a sign that by establishing their capital there, the Aztecs would eventually take over a majority of Central America, much like how the eagle swallowed a majority of the snake.²²

The Aztec creation myth begins with the first world which is illuminated by the sun of earth. That world is destroyed and a second world, illuminated by the sun of air, is created. That world is too destroyed and replaced with a third world illuminated by the sun of fire. After that world is destroyed, a fourth world illuminated by the sun of water is created and destroyed until finally the world in which we currently live is created.²³

This final world is illuminated by the sun of four movements which combined the elements of the four previous suns; earth, air, fire, and water. It is created after a wealthy god offers to create the sun in hopes of the praises he will receive after doing such great a task. However, the task is so great that the other gods ask Nanautzin, who is a poor god covered in sores and very ugly, to help create the fifth sun.²⁴

After purifying themselves for four days, the wealthy god and Nanautzin were ready to sacrifice themselves in the ceremonial fire. Each god provided their offering before the flames and the wealthy god was told to jump into the fire first. He approached the fire four times and each time turned away, unable to jump in. On the other hand, Nanautzin gathered his courage, jumped into the fire, and was killed. The wealthy god, now feeling ashamed of his lack of courage, forced himself to jump into the fire. Although, since Nanautzin was the first to jump in and because he did so willingly, he is the god that is praised and honored for creating the fifth sun.²⁵

Next in the creation myth the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca looked down from the sky to the water below. They saw a goddess afloat eating everything within her sight so they transformed themselves into huge serpents and ripped the goddess apart. Her head and shoulders became the Earth while her lower body rose into the sky becoming the heavens. The other gods were furious at Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca for killing the goddess and decided that whatever humans would need, the Earth would provide. As such, the other gods formed trees, grass, and flowers from her hair and skin, they made caves, wells, and rivers from her eyes and mouth, and they made hills, valleys, and mountains from her nose and shoulders.²⁶

Finally at the end of the Aztec creation myth the creation of humans is described. This happens when Quetzalcoatl steals the bones of his deceased father from the land of the dead. When leaving the Land of the Dead he accidentally drops the bones which are pecked into tiny fragments by birds. Quetzalcoatl grinds up the bone fragments, adds some of his own blood, and thus creates both males and females.²⁷

Inca

There once was a rural village named Tiahuanaco which grew into an empire extending through much of Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina. The empire lasted from 1000 Before Common Era (BCE) until 1200 CE. When the empire fell and the people became disunited, the Aymara culture, located in Bolivia, took over much of the Tiahuanaco cultural aspects. Then during the late fourteenth century the Incan culture took over the entire area, and reunified it.²⁸

The Incan culture originated in Peru, South America. As their empire grew though, Incan cultural aspects began spreading throughout much of southwestern South America. The Incans maintained their residence primarily in Peru, but did travel throughout the empire to maintain control and order.

The original Tiahuanaco/Aymara creation myth begins when the god Viracocha emerges from the void and creates the Earth, heavens, animals, and giant humans. The giant humans anger Viracocha so he turns them into stone and destroys all life in a great flood. He then recedes the waters and recreates the sun, moon, stars, animals, plants, and all the other the features of the landscape.²⁹

This time when Viracocha creates humans, he decides to carve stone figurines. He carves men, women, children, and even women at varying stages of pregnancy. He painted on their physical features as well as their clothes and pushed all the figurines into the soil all over the world. After all the figurines had been placed in the soil he summons them to arise, thus creating the human race.³⁰

Variation from the Incans on their creation myth occurs toward the end of the myth after the creation of humans is described. At this point the god that represents the sun sends his son Manco Capac and his daughter Mama Ocllo Huaco to Lake Titicaca on Earth. He sends them in

order to teach the humans how to stop acting wild and instead act civilized. Manco Capac teaches the men about farming and forming weaponry, while Mama Ocllo Huaco teaches the women about sewing and weaving. They also tell the humans to try sinking a golden rod into the soil and the place in which the rod sinks in is where they should set up their sacred city of Cuzco.³¹

Norse

Norse is a broad term that encompasses cultural aspects from the Icelandic, Northern Germanic and Scandinavian cultures. The Norse are more commonly known in the modern world as the Vikings, however this term is inappropriate due to the nature of the term Viking which means to go raiding or pirating. In the Old Norse it literally means 'I am shopping.'³² Thus, the culture is more formerly, and properly, referred to as the Norse.

This culture was located in Northern Europe; mainly Scandinavia and Iceland, but also the British Isles. Occupation in Iceland began in the mid to late ninth century whereas Scandinavia was already occupied at this time.³³ As such the Norse mythology could be stated to have originated in Scandinavia, yet as Icelandic culture developed and the cultures of the British Isles came into contact more with those of Scandinavia, a unique culture and thus a unique mythology was formed. The creation myth for this culture is not written as a story, but rather as a conversation between the king of Sweden and the king of the gods, Odin.

The beginning of the universe is described as an open void called Ginnungagap. The first world that's created was Muspelheim, the destroyer's home, and it was a hot, bright, flaming world located in the southern part of Ginnungagap. The second world was Niflheim, the fog

home, located in northern Ginnungagap. Before there were humans there were gods and giants who lived in between these two worlds.³⁴

The very first of these beings was a frost giant named Ymir, who was born out of melted foamy venom. Also, melted from the same substance was Audhumla, a cow out of whose utters flowed four rivers of milk which fed Ymir. For three days Audhumla licked a salty block of ice until finally Buri emerged from within. Buri's three grandsons Odin, Vili, and Ve, were the first gods.³⁵

Odin, Vili, and Ve killed Ymir and so much blood flowed out of his corpse that all of the frost giants except for one male and one female, had drowned. The corpse of Ymir was then made into the Earth. His flesh molded the Earth, his blood became the salty sea, his big bones became the mountains, his small bones became the rocks, and his hair formed the forests. Earth was located in the middle of Ginnungagap. The shores of Earth became the giant's new home, Jotunheim, whereas inland was reserved for other beings and called Midgard, because it was the middle of the Earth.³⁶

One day while they were walking the shores of the salty sea, Odin, Vili, and Ve found an ash tree and an elm tree. The ash tree they decided to turned into the first man, Ask, whereas the elm tree was turned into the first woman, Embla. These two humans later gave birth to the entire race of humans. After creating the humans, Odin and his brother built the city of Asgard for the gods to live on and so he could look over the entire world.³⁷

The myth ends with a description of how the world will end during Ragnarok. Its approach will be signaled by the death of Odin's son Baldr, the most loved of all the gods. Then many of the gods, monsters, and all the humans will die as Earth sinks into the sea. As the Earth

comes up again fresh and new, Baldr will return and the gods that survived will take up their residence in Asgard. The only two humans that will survive Ragnarok are the man Lif (life) and the woman Lif Thrasir (desiring life). Lif and Lif Thrasir will then together make the next race of human beings.³⁸

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia was located in the Fertile Crescent where modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria, southern Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel are currently located. Also, the Mesopotamian area was composed of four different cultures; the Assyrians to the north, the Akkadians in the middle, the Sumerians to the south, and along the Mediterranean coast were located the Phoenicians. These cultures spanned from the fourth millennium until the end of the first millennium BCE.

First were the Sumerians who had their principle cities to the south. “Their dominance spanned the years 2900-2350 BCE, the latter date marks the establishment of Accadian rule over the federation of city states called Sumer and Accad (sometimes known as ‘Akkad’) ... ‘Babylonia’ became the name of Southern Mesopotamia around 1800 BCE just as Assyria became the name of northern Babylonia about two centuries earlier.”³⁹ The creation myth that I analyzed is Babylonian, but was reshaped from the original Sumerian myths.

Originally, as described in this creation myth, the universe consisted of only water with mist above it. The water was a mixture of the sweet waters, ruled by Father Apsu, and the salt waters, which were ruled by Mother Tiamat, while existing in the mist above them was their son Mummu. As the waters mixed together they formed the gods Anshar and Kishnar who were the parents of Anu, the god of the heavens. Anu was the father of Ea, the god of the Earth, who was one of the wisest and the most magically skilled of all the gods.⁴⁰

These younger gods, Anshar, Kishnar, Anu, and Ea, were rowdy and disturbed Mother Tiamat with their incessant noise. Father Apsu and Mummu agreed that the younger gods should all be killed for this, but Ea placed a protective magic circle around the younger gods and placed sleeping spells on both Father Apsu and Mummu so that they were powerless. The younger gods then killed Father Apsu and tied up Mummu. After this occurred, Ea took residence upon the sweet waters with his wife Damkina who then gave birth to their son Marduk. Ea was so proud of his son that he made Marduk a double-god by giving him four eyes, four ears, a mouth of blazing fire, and ten halos on his head.⁴¹

Next, Anu created the four cardinal winds, further disturbing Mother Tiamat's waters while causing the other gods suffering in the windstorms as well. The other gods asked Mother Tiamat to help them make plans against Ea, so she created monster serpents with long fangs and venom, dragons with halos, and other monsters until there were eleven in all; the viper, the dragon, the sphinx, the great lion, the mad-dog, the scorpion-man, the dragonfly, the centaur, and three storm demons. Mother Tiamat gave another god named Kingu, supreme power and chose him as the leader of the rebellion against Ea.⁴²

When Anshar discovered this he told Ea and Anu to kill Kingu, but both were too scared so Anshar next asked Marduk. Marduk claimed that since Mother Tiamat was only a female he could easily defeat her. As such he wanted to be declared supreme ruler after he had defeated her. The other gods agreed to this so he gathered up his weapons and sent the winds to stir up Mother Tiamat's waters. When Kingu and his forces saw Marduk they ran away terrified. Marduk then challenged Mother Tiamat to single combat and killed her. He placed half of her body to become the sky and the other half became the Earth, her saliva was turned into the clouds, her skull became the mountains, and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers began flowing from

her eyes. Marduk then turned Mother Tiamat's eleven monsters into statues as reminders not to rebel against him.⁴³

On Earth the temple of Babylon was built for the gods to live in when they wanted to come down from the heavens. As such, servants were necessary to serve the gods when they wished to reside in the temple; these servants were humans. Marduk killed Kingu and collected his blood and bones to create the humans before placing them on Earth in Babylon.⁴⁴

Yoruba

The Yoruba culture began in 300 BCE as a small group located north of the Niger River. Today it is composed of over ten million people that reside in separate city-states. A majority of the current Yoruba population tend to more readily identify with their separate city-state than with the Yoruba culture as a whole. They are located in Western Africa including the southwest corner of Nigeria and part of Benin. However, the countries of Togo, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast each currently have small populations of the Yoruba people as well.

In the beginning the universe was made up of sky, water, and wild marshland. Olokun ruled the waters and marshlands whereas Olorun, who was the most powerful god, ruled the sky, but it was Obatala who wanted to create solid land and living creatures. Orunmila, Obatala's oldest brother, told him to get a gold chain that would reach from the sky to the water, also fill a snail's shell with sand, and then to carry the shell, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut in a bag as he descended down the gold chain. The chain did not reach all the way to the water though so Obatala had to pour the sand onto the marshes and quickly release the hen who scratched at the sand, spreading it to create solid land.⁴⁵

Obatala jumped off the chain, onto the solid land and named where he had landed to be the city of Ife. There he placed the palm nut in the ground and instantly grew a palm nut tree that provided food when the nuts would fall. Obatala also built himself a house and kept the cat as a companion, but it was perpetual twilight on Earth so he asked Olorun to put the sun in the sky creating night and day. Although after months of living on the land alone Obatala wanted more companionship than just the cat. So he decided to create humans by forming perfect looking figurines out of wet clay and allowing them to dry. Obatala made a large number of figurines and became very thirsty so he drinks the palm wine he had been fermenting. This causes him to become drunk so when he next tried to mold more clay figurines, they turn out to be deformed. Olorun breathes life into the figurines and thus the human race was formed.⁴⁶

After another few months Obatala become bored ruling Ife so he climbed the chain back to live in the sky with the other gods. He divided his time between living in the sky with the gods and living on Earth with the humans. The goddess Olokun was angry at Obatala for taking up so much of her territory; the waters and marshlands. As such, when Obatala went back to live in the sky, she sent massive waves crashing into and flooding the land, killing much of the human population. The humans that had survived made sacrifices and sent prayers for help until Orunmila stopped the waves and receded the floodwaters. The end of the myth declares this as restoring peace to the universe and the myth is then concluded.⁴⁷

Chinese

The Chinese culture I referred to here is an ancient Chinese culture. “The available myths unfortunately don’t date further back in time than the Chou dynasty (c. 1027-221 BCE) and even there the myths are not as many in number as those from the later Han dynasty (206 BCE-220

CE).”⁴⁸ Thus, the myths used for this analysis had originated sometime between 1027 BCE to 220 CE. Unfortunately, it is difficult to more definitively date these creation myths since the documents I utilized did not more readily specify when the myths were recorded.

This culture was located in China just as its modern descendants remain to be. Three separate creation myths can be attributed to the Chinese creation mythology. They are the P’an Ku myth which was the first to be developed. Then there is the Yin and Yang myth and finally the Nu Kua myth. The major difference between these three myths is the story of how humans were created.

To make the Chinese creation myths as fluid as possible I will first summarize the P’an Ku myth, since it was developed first. Also because it includes a description of how the universe began. Then I will summarize the Yin and Yang myth which similarly describes the beginning of the universe and the creation of Earth. Finally, a summary of the Nu Kua myth which only describes the creation of humans.

In the P’an Ku myth, the universe was a dark chaotic mass contained inside an egg. Out of that sprung the god P’an Ku, the first living being, who ripped apart the egg allowing Yang to rise bright and light as the heavens and allowing Yin to fall dark and heavy as the Earth. He next spent the following 18,000 years pushing the heavens away from the Earth until he thought the distance between them was sufficient, to which point he laid down upon the earth and died.⁴⁹

P’an Ku’s corpse then became the features of the landscape. His head became the mountains of the east, his feet the mountains of the west, his right arm the mountains of the north, his left arm the mountains of the south, and lastly his torso formed the center mountains. Each of these mountains was meant to hold up the heavens. The hair from P’an Ku’s head

became the stars and other planets, while his left eye became the sun and his right eye, the moon. His body hair turned into the trees, plants, and flowers. His breath formed the clouds and wind, his voice the lightning and thunder, and his bodily fluids became the rain and dew. Finally, the mites on his skin became the fish, animals, and people with black hair.⁵⁰

In the Yin and Yang myth the chaos that was the universe gave birth to two gods that separated and formed the heavens and the Earth. These two gods were Yin and Yang. Yang gathered everything bright, light, and male and rose to create the rounded heavens. On the other hand, Yin gathered everything that was dark, heavy, and female to become the square Earth. Then, Yang's hot breath formed the sun and Yin's cold breath formed the moon. This creation myth ends with the humans being created from a pure vapor whereas the dense and cloudy vapor created the insects.⁵¹

Finally, in the Nu Kua myth Mother Goddess uses wet clay from the Yellow River to mold humans by hand. All humans she provided with the breath of life, but some were infused with the essence Yin and others the essence of Yang. Molding the humans in this manner took a long time so in order to make them faster she found a length of rope to twirl in the wet clay quickly. The clay droplets that flung off the rope created the poor and ugly class of humans, versus the rich and beautiful class that were molded by Mother Goddess' hands.

Maori

The final culture I examined is the Maori culture which are the descendants of an Asian group of people that first moved to Tahiti. From Tahiti the Asian group split with half of the group travelling Southwest to New Zealand and the other half travelling to Hawaii. Later, there

were smaller groups that moved to other Pacific islands. The Maori culture made up the group that travelled to New Zealand and this occurred after 1000 CE.⁵²

The Maori creation myth begins with complete emptiness. Out of that came Father Rangi who created night and day by throwing the moon and the sun into the sky to light the universe. Together, he and Mother Papa created land and had many children who lived in the dark space between their parents. Their children lived in complete darkness since Father Rangi and Mother Papa loved each other so much that they clung to each other fiercely.⁵³

Their six sons gathered to discuss what to do in order to have more space and some light. Five of the sons decided to push their parents apart to give themselves more space to live, but the sixth son did not want to take part in their separation. Each of the five sons took turns trying to separate their parents, but it was not until the fifth son, Tane, tried that they had actually succeeded. Tane pushed Father Rangi up which severed the tendons that connected him and Mother Papa. Father Rangi thus became the sky whereas Mother Papa, since she was pushed down, became the Earth.⁵⁴

The next section of the myth describes how Tane created humans. He created the first woman out of red clay mixed with the blood of his parent's tendons after their separation. He blew the breath of life into her and named her Hine Ahu One (the Earth Maiden). He loved the Earth Maiden very much so together they gave birth to a daughter named Titama (the Dawn-Maiden). Tane fell in love with the Dawn Maiden as well and their children were the first men and women of the human race. However, after finding out that Tane was her father, the Dawn-Maiden moved alone to the Underworld to live in shame of her incest and made her children stay

living upon the Earth. On her way to the Underworld she also formed a path for the humans to take when they died so they could join her once again.⁵⁵

At the end of the myth the creation of the island of New Zealand is described. This occurs when the trickster god Maui, tricked his brothers to take him fishing so far out that they could no longer see the land. His brothers refused to allow him to use any of their equipment so Maui had to use a magic fish hook that he made from his grandmother's jawbone, in secret. He uses blood from his nose as bait on the hook and throws it into the ocean. The hook grabs ahold of the island of New Zealand, which is already filled with people living upon it, and Maui pulls the island up from the ocean floor.⁵⁶

Comparative Analysis of Cultures Analyzed

There are two themes regarding the beginning of the universe, which are repeated in six out of the eight myths that I analyzed. The first theme is the universe beginning with sky or the heavens, and water. This theme is found in the Iroquois Nation myth, the Mesopotamian myth, and the Yoruba myth. The second theme is the universe beginning as a void, which occurs for the Inca, the Norse, and the Maori cultures.

The Chinese P'an Ku myth could be argued to fall under the void theme, but since the egg is so specifically described within the myth, I have separated it into its own category. The Aztec myth is the only other one whose creation myth does not fall under either of the themes previously mentioned. This is because the Aztec deities and Earth are described as being already in existence when the myth begins.

Similarly, I have separated the creation of the Earth into two themes. The first is creation by a god or goddess forming solid land. This is described in the Iroquois Nation, the Inca, and the Yoruba creation myths. The second theme is the creation of Earth from the corpse of a god or goddess. This occurs in the Aztec, the Norse, the Mesopotamian, and the Maori creation myths.

The Chinese myths are again different from these others. This time it is because in the Yin and Yang myth, the essence of Yin is the embodiment of everything dark, heavy, and female and it is that which becomes the Earth. Conversely the essence of Yang, which embodies everything bright, lightweight, and male, becomes the sky and heavens.

The creation of humans is difficult to separate into common themes because some of the myths describe only how the first man and woman were created. Other myths describe how the entire human race originated and in a few cases both individual humans as well as the human race, are described within the same myth.

The Aztec myth and the Mesopotamian myth explain that the human race was made from the blood of a living god and the bones of a dead god. The Iroquois Nation, the Inca, the Yoruba, and the Chinese Nu Kua myth explain that the human race was formed from the breath of life and geologic features, such as rock, soil, and clay. In the Norse myth, an Ash tree was used to make the first man and an Elm tree was used to make the first woman, and from that pair the human race was born.

The Maori myth explains how the first woman was made from clay and the blood of two gods. The god that created this first woman then had a daughter with her. That same god mated with his demigod daughter and their offspring was the human race. The last two ways humans were created are found in the remaining two Chinese myths. As mentioned previously, in the Yin

and Yang myth the human race is formed from a pure vapor. However, in the P'an Ku myth the human race is formed from the mites crawling on the corpse of a god.

Diversity in Creation Myth of Cultures Analyzed

Before starting to research this topic, I had anticipated there to be many differences between each culture's creation mythology, since the cultures are spread out not only across the world, but also throughout different time periods. After completing my research however, I found that many of the differences are in minor details. For example, what geological material was used to create humans or what body part of a corpse was used to create the mountains. That being said, there are some *major* differences between these creation mythologies.

First off, the Chinese culture is the only one that has three separate creation myths, one of which is entirely devoted to the explanation of the creation of humans. Similarly, the Aztec myth is the only one in which the world is created and then simultaneously destroyed multiple times before the world in which we currently live is created.

The Norse myth is written as a conversation instead of as a narrative story. One character, a human, asks questions to the king and wisest of the gods, so that he may better understand how the world came to be. This is also the only myth to describe how the current world will end and then later be recreated. Moreover, the Yoruba myth and the Chinese Nu Kua myth explain the difference between how attractive humans were created versus how ugly humans were created.

The Yoruba myth and the Incan myth both describe a great flood that wipes out the land and all life upon it temporarily, before another god recedes the floodwaters and restores the solid,

dry land. Through additional research it was determined that the Mesopotamian culture has a great flood story, but it's not part of their creation myth. Instead is a part of a great hero myth that is entitled the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁵⁷

Function of myth in modern society

It may be hard to understand at first, but mythology still has function in modern society. To begin with, early science was dependent upon myths and theoretical speculation. Classical texts would often influence any empirical discoveries that were made. For example, the tusk of a narwhal was originally assumed to be the horn of a unicorn. Olesen states that “the confrontation of theory and experience, instead of destroying either one, created an interdependence...” between mythology and science.⁵⁸

Another function of myth in modern society is the effort to revert back to an ancestral way of writing and thinking. Although a majority of the myths discussed were first presented orally, there is a certain stylistic structure to the way the story is conveyed. The context that a myth will be told or read in, the rhythm and pace of the myth, and the vocabulary within it are just some of what makes each myth unique. Descendants within the culture as well as those that study mythologies today try to recapture this stylistic structure and with that some of the history of the culture itself.

Mythology also, provides an alternative to evolutionary theories. This is because myths take place in what is called the time of origins, in which a complex sequence of events is described, but not definitively dated. As Claval describes, in historical time duration is important since it is the foundation of evolution, but with the time of origins, succession was the only significant feature.⁵⁹

In addition, not in any of the creation mythologies that have been used for this analysis, are humans described as ever having to change forms or evolve. However, it too could be argued that the transition of the two trees into humans, as described in the Norse myth, as well as the transition from clay figurines to humans, as described in the Yoruba myth, the Chinese Nu Kua myth, and the Maori myth, are representations of the evolution of the human species. The problem with this theory is that the clay figurines were not living beings and the trees were originally plants, not animals.

It is also sometimes common for people to follow the lessons and concepts provided in myths rather than believing in scientific facts and first-hand experiences. For example, modern society is split between those that are religious and those that follow the evidence provided by science. These are not the only ways of viewing the world, since there are indeed people whom are both scientific and religious. However, generally speaking a person is more inclined towards either science or religion.

Finally, there is entertainment. Especially within the United States and China, myths function as a form of entertainment that is available for the entire population. Myths can be read as academic sources, as fictional stories, they can be integrated into television shows, and they have even been made into cinematic films. Since the year 2000, there have been at least ten Hollywood movies that were based upon Greco-Roman myths alone. Some of these are *Clash of the Titans*, *Wrath of the Titans*, *Immortals*, and *Hercules*, which had actually been made prior to the twenty-first century.

Out of the eight cultures utilized for this analysis, only two cultures have had their myths transformed into cinematic films; the Chinese and the Norse. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

and *The Emperor and the White Snake* are two movies that have been based on Chinese mythology. The movie *Thor*, recently released in 2011, utilized many aspects of Norse mythology as well.

Conclusions

Therefore, even though not all creation mythologies are the same, there can be found at least one similarity with at least one other creation mythology. Creation mythologies describe how the universe began, how the world in which we currently are living was created, and finally how humans were created. These three overlying themes are found in every creation myth no matter the culture's geographic location or chronological period of existence.

Throughout this analysis it has become evident that the differences found within creation mythologies are likely due to differences in the environment. For example, since China is located in a very mountainous region of the world, the Chinese creation mythology includes a lot of focus on how the mountains came to be placed where they are and why they were placed there. Similarly, the Maori culture is an island culture that engages in fishing. As such their creation mythology includes particular focus as to how their island of New Zealand was formed as well as the importance of fishing and fishing equipment.

Finally, mythology is still relevant in the modern world. It has been used as academic literature, entertainment, and for scientific purposes. It also help anthropologists and other researchers better understand the cultures in which they are studying. This is because a mythology utilizes a specific way of conveying information that is unique not only to the culture, but also to the mythology itself, depending on what genre of myth is being explained.

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⁶ (Townsend 1993)

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⁹ (Disorderly Houses Amendment Act No 53 1995) (Crofts 2012) (100 Countries and Their Prostitution Policies 2011)

¹⁰ (Witzel 2012)

¹¹ (Jung 1990, 43)

¹² (Witzel 2012)

¹³ (Witzel 2012)

¹⁴ (LLC 2013)

¹⁵ (Rosenburg 1999)

¹⁶ (Rosenburg 1999)

¹⁷ (Rosenburg 1999)

¹⁸ (Rosenburg 1999)

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²² (Hirst 2013)

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58 (Olesen 2011, 131)
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