

Great Mythologies of the World

Various Professors



Course Guidebook

PUBLISHED BY:

THE GREAT COURSES
Corporate Headquarters
4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500
Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299
Phone: 1-800-832-2412
Fax: 703-378-3819
www.thegreatcourses.com

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Professor Kathryn McClymond is Chair and Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, where she has taught since 1999. Professor McClymond graduated cum laude from Harvard University with a degree in History and Literature and later pursued her M.A. and Ph.D. in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her focus was on comparative ritual studies, with an emphasis on Hindu and Jewish traditions.

Professor McClymond has published widely on religion and ritual, focusing on sacrifice and violence. She also has been involved in collaborative research that emphasizes the importance of story and narrative in individual lives. Current projects include developing an oral history archive of the religious life stories of residents of Atlanta, Georgia, and an interdisciplinary program that encourages military personnel and veterans to integrate morally traumatic experiences into their own moral and ethical life stories.

Professor McClymond is the recipient of the Georgia State University College of Arts and Sciences Outstanding Teaching Award (2006) and the Georgia State University Distinguished Honors Professor Award (2002). In 2013, she was elected to the American Society for the Study of Religion. She also has been a member of the Board of Regents for the University of California.

Professor McClymond is the author of *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* and the forthcoming *Ritual Gone Wrong: What We Learn from Ritual Disruption*, as well as numerous academic articles. ■



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Professor Julius H. Bailey is a Professor of Religion at the University of Redlands. He received a B.A. in Religious Studies from Occidental College and an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research interests include African mythology, African American religious history, and new religious movements. He teaches courses on varied aspects of religion.

Professor Bailey's research focuses on the diverse experiences of the African diaspora. His first book is entitled *Around the Family Altar: Domesticity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865–1900*. This work examines the ideology of domesticity in the lives of African Americans in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and its distinctiveness in light of recent studies of 19th-century white Protestant and Catholic homes. The book traces the efforts of AME Church leaders and members to apply notions of domesticity to the challenges facing the denomination after the Civil War, such as regional tensions, the restoration of families after slavery, the licensing of female preachers, and the spiritual nurturing of children.

Professor Bailey's second book is *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the AME Church*. This work analyzes the ways in which various understandings of race, gender, and place influenced the framing of social issues for African Americans in the 19th century. Issues discussed include westward migration, the selection of the appropriate referent for the race, social Darwinism, the viability of emigration to Africa, and cultural and religious connections to African traditional religions.

Professor Bailey's research also looks at African American new religious movements. His work on this topic includes "'Cult' Knowledge: The Challenges of Studying New Religious Movements in America" (a chapter in *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back*) and "The Final Frontier: Secrecy, Identity, and the Media in the Rise and Fall of the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors," published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. The professor also has written an article on white supremacist movements, "Fearing Hate: Reexamining the Media Coverage of the Christian Identity Movement," which appeared in the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*.

Professor Bailey is currently at work on two books, a collection of international myths and a textbook on African American religious history. ■



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Professor Robert André LaFleur is Professor of History and Anthropology at Beloit College in Wisconsin, where he has taught since 1998. Having graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Carleton College, Professor LaFleur received his doctorate from The University of Chicago's John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought, where he combined work in three distinct fields: anthropology, history, and Chinese literature.

Professor LaFleur's current work combines historical research using Chinese, Japanese, and Korean sources with anthropological fieldwork on each of China's five sacred mountains. He is also doing research for an intellectual biography of Marcel Granet, a French scholar of China.

Professor LaFleur received the Charles S. Bassett Teaching Award from Colby College in 1998, as well as the James R. Underkoffler Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award from Beloit College in 2001 and 2011. He was also a finalist in 2010 for the Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award from the American Historical Association. He is the recipient of a Millicent C. McIntosh Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and has been a frequent visiting scholar with the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research in the Humanities and the East-West Center in Honolulu. In 2013, Professor LaFleur gave a month-long series of lectures and seminars at Beijing University. He spent 2014 on a research fellowship at the Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung (International Consortium for Research in the Humanities) in Erlangen, Germany.

Professor LaFleur is the lead author and editor of two textbooks: *China: A Global Studies Handbook* and a thoroughly revised and expanded version, *Asia in Focus: China*. He has published book chapters and articles about topics ranging from Chinese historiography, literature, and calendars to ethnicity and mythology. He also has presented dozens of research papers on topics ranging from China, Japan, and Korea to the history and anthropology of Oceania. ■



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Professor Grant L. Voth earned his bachelor of arts degree in Philosophy and Greek from Concordia Senior College in 1965. He received his master of arts degree in English Education from St. Thomas College in 1967 and his doctorate in English from Purdue University in 1971.

Professor Voth taught at Northern Illinois University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and Monterey Peninsula College. He is Professor Emeritus in English and Interdisciplinary Studies at Monterey Peninsula College, from which he retired in 2003. He was the Monterey Peninsula Students' Association Teacher of the Year and the recipient of the first Allen Griffin Award for Excellence in Teaching in Monterey County.

For several years, Professor Voth was a consultant for the National Endowment for the Humanities, reading proposals for interdisciplinary studies programs and advising colleges that wished to initiate such programs; he was also a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. He served as director of an American Institute for Foreign Study program for a consortium of California colleges in London, and he has led travel-study tours to England, Ireland, France, Greece, Turkey, and Egypt. For many years, he led a travel-study program to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Santa Cruz Shakespeare Festival, and he has been a lecturer at the Carmel Bach Festival in Carmel, California.

Professor Voth is the author of more than 30 articles and books on subjects ranging from Shakespeare to Edward Gibbon to modern American fiction, including the official study guides for 26 of the plays in the *BBC Television*

Shakespeare project in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He created a series of mediated courses in literature and interdisciplinary studies for the Bay Area Television Consortium and the Northern California Learning Consortium, one of which won a Special Merit Award from the Western Educational Society for Telecommunication. Professor Voth's other Great Courses include *A Day's Read*, *The History of World Literature*, *Myth in Human History*, and *The Skeptic's Guide to the Great Books*. ■

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**Great Mythologies of the World:
Ancient Europe**

Great Mythologies of the World: Ancient Europe

Scope:

Odysseus and the Sirens, Jason and the Argonauts, Romulus and Remus, Odin and Thor—the stories of these larger-than-life figures have circulated for thousands of years. These story cycles not only reflect the cultures of their origin, but they have also shaped subsequent literary, dramatic, and other artistic traditions, and they still have currency today. We call these stories the “great mythologies” because of their rich characters, engaging narratives, enduring motifs, and timeless themes.

In the first section of this course, we’ll look at some of the most influential and engaging ancient Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Norse myth traditions. We’ll begin with the Greeks, acknowledging the deep debt that Western art, literature, philosophy, and religion owe to Greek mythology. We look first at the Titans and the Olympic gods, the gods intimately associated with creation. Then, we turn to the most prominent goddesses, reflecting on the unique roles Greek goddesses played—and didn’t play—in Greek society. We’ll recall stories of the gods who had a direct impact on human daily life: Prometheus, Pandora, and Persephone. Finally, we’ll look at the heroes of Greek mythology—Herakles, Odysseus, and Jason—and ponder the highs and lows of the Greek hero.

Next, we’ll turn to Rome, which embraced much of Greek mythology yet generated an origins story of its own. A common mythological figure—the Great Mother—made her way to Rome in the form of Cybele, then transformed there, from the wild woman of Anatolia to the respectable savior of Rome. Finally, we’ll turn northward, to Celtic and Norse mythology. The Dagda, the good god of Celtic traditions, and his magical harp are emblematic of the courageous yet flawed heroes who established Ireland with the help of powerful objects and supernatural powers. The Celtic mythological characters and imagery persist in Irish culture to this day. The Norse traditions highlight the harsh conditions under which Norsemen and women labored, but they also include unexpected streaks of humor in the character of Loki and the misadventures of Thor. At the same time, we

feel the compassion in Odin, the father god, who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders while battling with wolves, riddling with giants, and sacrificing himself to obtain mystical insight.

Throughout this course, we'll also think about the significance of myth more broadly. What makes these stories such powerful cultural elements? What do they tell us about the cultures that gave birth to them? Why have they persisted for hundreds, even thousands of years? We'll see that myths reflect social structures, key historical moments and trends, and deeply held cultural values. They also have lives of their own, shape-shifting as they move from age to age and from culture to culture. Myths survive where political dynasties collapse because they speak intimately and effectively to the human experience. ■

The Titans in Greek Mythology

Lecture 1

In everyday conversation, people often use the word *myth* to suggest that a story is untrue, but in this course, we will use *myth* to refer to a story that has meaning or significance beyond the story itself. And as we explore the great myths of the world, we will see that they are much more than entertaining stories. These myths carried weight in their cultures by explaining the world and by investing everyday life with meaning. Today—thousands of years later—many of these myths still speak to universal human experience, containing kernels of truth that seem to transcend space and time.

The Greek Creation Story

- In the beginning, out of a gaping abyss, three primordial elements emerged: Gaia, the earth; Tartarus, a cave-like space under the earth; and Eros, sexual desire. Other beings came forth from these primordial elements, including Uranus, the sky. Gaia and Uranus mated, producing the first generation of gods, the Titans.
- The Titans were physically imposing and virtually immortal, but their father despised them. Uranus banished his offspring to Tartarus, an act that is often interpreted as Uranus trying to “un-birth” his own children. Kronos, one of Uranus’s sons and the leader of the Titans, hated his father for this banishment. With the help of his mother, Kronos attacked his father, cutting off Uranus’s genitalia.
- After Kronos defeated his father, he settled down with Rhea, who was both his sister and his wife. The couple had several children, including the first generation of Olympian gods. These were the most famous gods, the ones who would ultimately rule over the earth from Mount Olympus.
- According to the Greek poet Hesiod, the period of Kronos’s rule was the Golden Age, the time when the first race of humans was

created—a race that predated ours. Of this Golden Age, Hesiod wrote, “[Men] lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief. ... When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things. ... They dwelt in ease and peace.” Of course, this perfect age couldn’t last.

- Kronos worried that his children might do to him what he had done to his own father. In an effort to avoid this fate, Kronos decided to eat his children, swallowing them one by one as they were born. But when the youngest child, Zeus, was born, Rhea decided to trick Kronos. She switched the baby with a stone, which Kronos swallowed, and hid Zeus on the island of Crete until he grew up.
- When Zeus was grown, he returned home and forced Kronos to regurgitate his siblings. Then, Zeus was joined by the other Olympic gods in an attack against Kronos and the other Titans. The battle between the Titans and the Olympic gods lasted for 10 years, with Zeus the ultimate victor.
- After Zeus and the Olympians defeated the Titans, they forced the Titans underground, bound with chains in the same prison where Uranus had previously held them captive. Later, the Olympians also vanquished a race of giants that Gaia bore in an attempt to restore the Titans to power. From that point forward, the Olympian gods ruled, having displaced the Titans forever.
- How can we make sense of this myth? What kind of a worldview imagines fathers swallowing their children or banishing them to the bowels of the earth? And why tell stories about a “former” generation of gods, a step removed from the Olympians? We don’t have definitive answers to these questions, but we can draw at least two conclusions from these ancient stories.
 - First, the stories depict a world of violence and hardship. To live was to experience suffering, but the response to suffering was important. Second, the stories tell us that Greeks valued the skills and qualities that enabled them to triumph over violence, chaos, and aggression.

- In this light, the story of the Titans becomes a kind of cautionary tale for future generations: Even the mighty can fall, sometimes at the hands of their own kin. It takes not only strength but cunning and wisdom to survive.
- Some Greek thinkers drew direct connections between the Titans and humanity. Olympiodorus argued that humanity arose from the ashes of the burning Titan corpses after their defeat. Other writers implied that humanity was born out of the blood shed by the Titans in their war against Zeus. These perspectives suggest that humanity contains a Titanic element that is at war with other elements within us. They also seem to place the Greeks in an uncertain relationship with the powerful yet capricious gods who ruled their world.

Sources for Greek Mythology

- The flowering of Greek mythology occurred during the Archaic and Classical periods, from roughly 700 B.C.E. to 323 B.C.E., when Alexander the Great died. Greece embraced poetry, epics, and theater, all of which included a heavy dose of mythology.
 - From about 700 B.C.E. on, Greece adopted the Phoenician alphabet, subsequently developed its own alphabet, and began to keep written records. Around the same time, self-governing city-states began to establish themselves.
 - Throughout this critical period, the people of the Greek city-states experienced several long, violent conflicts, particularly between about 500 and 323 B.C.E. Here, we see similarities between the Greeks' experience and the myths they tell about the first generation of the gods.
- Probably the most famous author of Greek myths is Homer, who is generally credited with writing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, epic poems focused on the Trojan War and its aftermath. There is considerable debate about whether a real Homer ever existed or whether he might be a composite of several poets. For our purposes, we'll assume that Homer lived sometime in the 8th century B.C.E.

- Another important Greek author was Hesiod, who is usually dated to around 700 B.C.E. The two complete poems of Hesiod we have are the *Theogony*, which describes the origins and activities of the gods, and the *Works and Days*, which focuses on the human world, set against the theological backdrop of the *Theogony*.
- A group of later writings known as the *Orphic material* includes poems and hymns dating from the end of the 6th century B.C.E. through the 5th century C.E. Orphic material is traditionally attributed to a mythical poet named Orpheus, but scholars tend to believe that multiple authors wrote under this pseudonym.
 - Orphic material has a dark note to it or, at least, a note of strangeness. It probably grew out of an idiosyncratic religious community dedicated to the worship of Orpheus, a hero with superhuman musical talents who tried to rescue his wife from the underworld.
 - Orphic material often includes writings that are not found in Homer or Hesiod and sometimes presents different versions of stories told elsewhere.
- In addition to written sources, we also find references to Greek mythology on ancient artifacts and architecture. For example, images from Greek mythology are often found on vases, plates, bowls, and jewelry. Public buildings, such as temples, “told” the sacred stories of Greek culture on friezes, *metopes* (stone panels), and altars.

The Nature of Greek Myths

- The various sources we have on Greek mythology and history allow us to make several broad generalizations about the nature of Greek myth. First, Greek myth reflects the world in which it originated, and a key aspect of this world is that it was local.
 - We tend to think of ancient Greek culture as growing out of one homogenous nation, but that wasn’t the case. The ancient Greeks didn’t think of themselves as Greeks but as affiliated with a particular city-state, such as Athens or Sparta. Such



Public spaces, such as altars and temples, were the billboards of ancient Greece, offering recitations of key mythological moments and reminding people why religious practices had been instituted.

loyalties were so strong that city-states sometimes developed bitter rivalries with each other that occasionally erupted into war.

- Many of the myths now associated with important Greek gods and heroes probably originated as individual stories that were first created in specific cities and regions. Over time, as traders traveled, communities migrated, and various empires achieved conquests, individual tales and story clusters were shared and adapted.
- For example, many of the labors of Herakles are linked to specific places. It's probable that several of the Herakles stories originated as stories about local heroes, but as the Herakles oral tradition spread, it absorbed these local stories and replaced the local hero with Herakles. This phenomenon is common in oral traditions.

- In addition to reflecting local identity, Greek mythology was meant to be instructive. The Greek myths include basic stories about the natural world and man's relationship to it. For example, the Titans represented forces of nature—the wind, the sea, and storms—and the defeat of the Titans mythologized humanity's ability to harness these forces. Greek myth also taught geography; the *Odyssey*, for example, offers a tour of the known world through Odysseus's travels.
- Greek mythology set the stage for human endeavor. It explained, in story form, the world into which the ancient Greeks understood they had been born: a world with natural, social, moral, and cosmic components in conflict with one another.
 - But as we will see, it also speaks to modern audiences by issuing a kind of existential declaration: Human beings are not handed a blank slate. Instead, humanity steps into the second act of a play already in progress, with no scripts or clear stage directions. It's up to humans to negotiate the various plots already underway and to figure out how to proceed.
 - The various Greek mythological figures—gods, heroes, and mythical creatures—provide advice and limited assistance, but they do not control the outcome and, in any case, may or may not want to help. We'll also see that other cultures present alternative existential views. One benefit of learning about many great mythologies together is that they invite us to compare how different cultures have positioned humanity in the cosmos.
- Finally, myths provide guidance. Their explanations are never primarily informational; they are meant to be transformational. We are meant to change how we live in light of the myths of our culture. We think and act in certain ways based on how we are oriented to our fundamental life circumstances. Myth provides this orientation. It guides our choices by telling us where we belong in the cosmos and in society. Myths explain the nature of life and death, the nature of true love, even the nature of a well-lived life.

Suggested Reading

Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*.

Dowden and Livingstone, eds., *A Companion to Greek Mythology*.

Graf, *Greek Mythology*.

Hansen and Hansen. *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*.

Lefkowitz, *Greek Gods, Human Lives*.

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Trzaskoma, Smith, Brunet, and Palaima, *Anthology of Classical Myth*.

Wender, *Hesiod and Theognis*.

Woff, *A Pocket Dictionary of Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses*.

Woodard, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the relationship between Greek mythology and Greek history?
2. What does the creation mythology of ancient Greece suggest about how ancient Greeks saw their place in the world?

Complex Goddesses: Athena, Aphrodite, Hera

Lecture 2

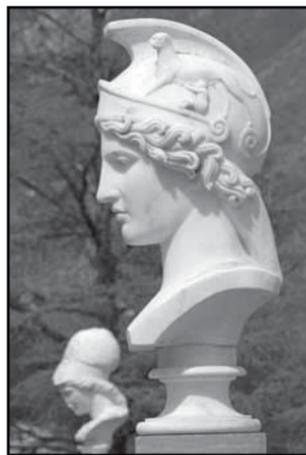
In the last lecture, we focused on the men of Greek mythology, the Titans and their descendants. In this lecture, we'll focus on Greek goddesses, particularly Aphrodite and Athena, because their personalities and their interactions with the gods and with humans are crucial to Greek mythology and the Greek understanding of human nature. As we'll see, these goddesses are complex characters, powerful yet morally flawed, and fulfilling many common stereotypes of women while still wielding great influence.

The Judgment of Paris

- The Judgment of Paris is one of the most famous stories in Greek mythology. It begins at a banquet hosted by Zeus in honor of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the future parents of Achilles. Zeus fails to invite Eris, the goddess of discord. Eris decides to attend anyway and brings with her a golden apple inscribed with the phrase “for the fairest one.” Eris tosses this apple into the crowd, knowing that the vanity of Greek goddesses will carry out her revenge.
- Immediately, three goddesses—Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—lay claim to the golden apple, each declaring that she is the fairest of all. The goddesses demand that Zeus decide which of them deserves the apple, but Zeus passes the choice on to Paris, a mortal prince of Troy.
- On the sly, each goddess tries to bribe Paris with a gift: Hera offers to make him ruler of Europe and Asia, and Athena offers him wisdom and skill in warfare. Aphrodite appeals to his baser instincts and offers him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Sparta. Paris is persuaded by this gift and declares Aphrodite the winner of the golden apple.

Athena

- Athena was known as the goddess of war, but she was associated more with the statecraft of war than with bloodlust and violence. Athena's chief concern was politics, and she was known for empowering leaders with the skills needed to negotiate effectively in politically difficult situations. Some scholars have said that she represents “ennobling war,” that is, righteous war waged to protect the family or the *polis*.
- Athena's mythological origins are interesting, and they provide some insight into her unique role in Greek mythology.
 - Zeus, Athena's father, is warned that a child of his will be born who is superior to him. To prevent that birth, Zeus swallows the child's mother, Metis, while she is pregnant.
 - Thus, when Athena is born, she emerges into the world from her father. In addition, she emerges fully grown and fully armed from Zeus's head—an unnatural birth and one that illustrates her close relationship to her father. Although she has political savvy and cunning, her abilities are put to Zeus's service, never used for her own advancement.
- Athena is also credited with establishing the original trial court in Athens to ensure justice in the case of Orestes's murder of his mother, Clytemnestra—an act of revenge for her murder of her husband, King Agamemnon. Orestes turns to Athena for aid in ending the cycle of vengeance in his family, and she establishes a court to hear his case. When the human judges become deadlocked,



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Athena empowers hero-warriors, such as Odysseus, not simply with strength and weapons but with intelligence and cunning.

Athena casts the deciding vote to acquit Orestes, arguing that defense of the family ultimately means upholding the father's will.

- As a goddess, Athena has little erotic appeal, although she is stereotypically vain about her looks. Unlike almost every other Greek goddess, she never takes a consort; thus, she is known as Athena Parthenos, or the “Virgin Athena.” The ancient Greeks would have understood the term *virgin* to refer to her independent status, which was highly valued socially and in certain ritual contexts.
- Because Athena is a virgin, she never gives birth, although certain myth variants give her children by other means. Instead of fulfilling a traditional mother's role, Athena serves as the patron goddess of Athens. She is usually depicted armed, helmeted, carrying a shield and a spear, and wearing an *aegis* (a fringed bib, probably made from an animal skin). The *aegis* may have served as a kind of protection for Athena and was a concrete sign of her role as a warrior.

Aphrodite

- Like many gods and goddesses, Aphrodite has a long, rich history, predating the Classical period (500–323 B.C.E.). Myths relating to Aphrodite draw from the “love goddess” traditions of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Some scholars believe that she has roots in the goddess referred to in the Bible as Ashtoreth, the main goddess of the Phoenicians. This goddess was associated with fertility and nature, but Aphrodite became associated with love, not just biological fertility.
- Hesiod presents the most colorful story of Aphrodite's birth. He states that she was born from the foam created when Kronos castrated his father, Uranus, and threw his genitals into the ocean. The name *Aphrodite*, literally meaning “arisen from foam,” reflects this myth.
- Like Athena, Aphrodite springs to life as a fully formed, beautiful young adult woman. Because of this and because she is the goddess of love, she is often portrayed in the nude. She is also characterized

as vain, self-centered, and willful. She constantly seeks praise and attention for her beauty, and although she is married to Hephaestus, she is also constantly involved in amorous relationships with a variety of other men.

- Most of the mythology about Aphrodite centers on the combination of her beauty, her vanity, and her love affairs. Her most well-known affair is with Adonis, a story detailed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
 - According to the myth, Aphrodite punished a mortal woman, Myrrha, for refusing to worship her by making Myrrha seduce her own father. When her father discovered that he had been sexually involved with his daughter, he almost killed her, but the gods took pity on her and transformed Myrrha into a myrrh tree. Adonis was born from the tree.
 - Aphrodite brought Adonis to Hades to be raised by the goddess Persephone. When Aphrodite returned to visit him, Adonis had grown into a gorgeous young man, and Aphrodite fell in love. She and Persephone then began to fight over the young man.
 - In an attempt to resolve the problem, Zeus decreed that Adonis would spend a third of the year with Persephone, a third with Aphrodite, and the remaining third with whomever he chose. Not surprisingly, Adonis chooses the beautiful Aphrodite.
 - The two begin their time together, but at a certain point, Aphrodite is forced to leave Adonis for a brief period. She warns Adonis not to hunt any animal that appears fearless, but he hunts a large wild boar. The boar turns on Adonis, castrating him. Aphrodite returns too late to save him, and Adonis dies from loss of blood. As a memorial, Aphrodite causes anemones to grow where his blood spilled.
- This myth displays two of Aphrodite's most important qualities: her beauty and her self-centeredness. In the stories linking her with Adonis, she directs all of her energy toward him, ignoring the fact that she is married to another god.

- In general, Greek mythology indicates that Aphrodite’s unfaithfulness causes numerous difficulties for others. This is clearest in the aftermath of the Judgment of Paris. After Aphrodite wins the golden apple, she fulfills her promise to Paris, who either seduces or abducts Helen of Sparta, thus sparking the most well-known war in Greek mythology.
- Over time, the character of Aphrodite evolved. By the late 5th century B.C.E., philosophers began to argue that there were actually two Aphrodites: a celestial Aphrodite, who is ethereal, serene, and beautiful but untouchable, and a common Aphrodite, whose vanity and sexual exploits leave a trail of ruin. The Neoplatonists argued that the celestial Aphrodite should be associated with spiritual love and the purifying virtues, while the common Aphrodite should be associated with physical love, which ties the soul to sensuality.

The Goddesses and Greek Culture

- Athena has a long history prior to the Greeks. Plato associated her with a minor Egyptian goddess named Neith, who was linked to war and the hunt. Aphrodite’s roots are less clear, although she, too, developed from religious traditions that preceded the Greeks.
 - When we think of such “prehistories,” it seems clear that the Greeks absorbed elements of the cultures around them, then tailored these elements to their own needs. In other words, the Greeks appropriated the cultures of both the communities that nurtured them and those they encountered through trade and military conquest. Athena and Aphrodite are classic examples of this dynamic.
 - We tend to think of myths as springing fully formed into specific cultures. But the Greeks drew heavily from their predecessors and neighbors, just as later cultures, especially the Romans, would draw from the Greeks. Because of this, it’s best to think of mythologies as living entities, always on the move as they pass from culture to culture.
- It’s tempting to think that Athena and Aphrodite and the variety of roles they play reflect the experiences of real women in Greek

society, but unfortunately, that is not the case. The Greeks, for all their advanced ideas, maintained limited roles for women. It's far more accurate to think of Athena and Aphrodite as contrasts to the real world that mortal Greek men and women inhabited.

- In fact, it's noteworthy that neither Athena nor Aphrodite ever plays any traditionally approved female roles. Athena never marries or takes a consort and never gives birth. Her responsibilities lie in the realms of war and justice. Aphrodite is the embodiment of sexuality. She is constantly seducing or being seduced, at the same time that she is married. These goddesses stand out at least in part because they don't live the lives of ordinary Greek women.
- Other goddesses, such as Hera, goddess of marriage and childbirth, may come closer to reflecting women's lives in ancient Greece, but even this picture isn't reassuring. Hera is married to Zeus and spends much of her time angry because of his public infidelity. Some scholars have suggested that such uncomfortable relationships between the goddesses and gods may reflect difficult dynamics between Greek men and women, especially among the leading families.
- Other scholars argue that the tensions played out between individual gods in the myths symbolize broad cultural dynamics. For example, Hera's difficult marriage to Zeus can be understood to reflect the difficult merging of pre-Hellenic culture and the conquering culture that eventually prompted the development of Classical Greece. In other words, Hera and Zeus don't represent human beings but entire cultural communities, clashing as they interact.
- However we interpret the stories of the Greek goddesses, it seems clear that any one-size-fits-all approach fails to capture their full breadth and complexity. In the end, we may have to be satisfied simply with the entertainment value and insights into Greek culture these stories provide.

Suggested Reading

Cyrino, *Aphrodite*.

Deacy, *Athena*.

Deacy and Villing, eds., *Athena in the Classical World*.

Larson, *Greek Heroine Cults*.

Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth*.

Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*.

Questions to Consider

1. What key characteristics distinguish Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera? What qualities do they share?
2. How might the study of Greek goddesses alter modern thinking about women's roles? What might be productive, and what might be problematic?

Gods and Humanity in Greek Thought

Lecture 3

Many people know the basic stories of Prometheus, Pandora, and Persephone, but most are less familiar with the complete versions of these stories, and most don't realize how closely they are tied to one another in Greek mythology. In addition, these stories raise troubling questions about the relationship between the gods and humanity that appear repeatedly in Greek mythology. These stories, more than any others, demonstrate the degree to which the fates of gods and men are intertwined in ancient Greek thought.

Prometheus

- Prometheus was one of the Titans, but in the great war between the Titans and the Olympic gods, he and his mother allied themselves with Zeus rather than with Kronos and the other Titans. As a result, Zeus did not cast Prometheus into the depths of the underworld with the other Titans when they were defeated.
- According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Prometheus later emerged on the scene at a sacrificial meal meant to celebrate the resolution of a conflict between humans and the gods. Prometheus brought two offerings from a slaughtered ox to that meal and devised a trick to fool Zeus, who was to receive the offerings.
 - One offering included the meat and entrails, covered in the skin and stomach of the ox. The other included the animal's bones, wrapped in the animal's fat. Prometheus allowed Zeus to choose which offering he wanted.
 - Hesiod tells us that Zeus knew what Prometheus was up to, but he behaved as if he were deceived and chose the bones covered in fat. His choice determined that from that time forward, humans would make offerings of bones and fat to the gods, saving the meat for their own consumption. Hesiod also tells us that at the same time, Zeus refused to allow humanity access to fire.

- Note that human beings are passive bystanders in this conflict—pawns in a battle of wits between Zeus and Prometheus. But as a result, humanity is left without a fundamental element of civilized life: fire.
- Prometheus refuses to let this situation stand. He steals fire and gives it to humanity. When Zeus discovers this act, he declares that Prometheus has spoiled life for human beings; they will be forced to use the fire that Prometheus brought to labor for their food and shelter.
- In Hesiod's account, Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a mountaintop. An eagle fed on Prometheus's liver each day, and the liver was regenerated each night. Prometheus was only saved from an eternity of this punishment by Herakles, albeit with the approval of Zeus, Herakles's father.
- The 5th-century-B.C.E. dramatist Aeschylus presents a different version of the Prometheus story in his play *Prometheus Bound*. There, Prometheus claims that Zeus intended to wipe out humanity, but Prometheus's efforts saved them from destruction. In addition, Prometheus lists all the gifts he has given humanity beyond the gift of fire, including reading and writing, mathematics, science, construction, shipbuilding, and the ability to read oracles to discern the will of the gods. In effect, Aeschylus's version presents Prometheus as a liberator, rather than the troublemaker portrayed by Hesiod.
- As we said, even though human beings are relatively passive in this story, the gods punish humanity, as well as Prometheus. They withdraw a measure of their support from normal mortals, and as a result, we are left to make our own way in the world. Thus, the story provides another etiology—an explanation of origins—for the rupture between the gods and humanity.
- In addition, the Prometheus story provides an etiology for animal sacrifice, the principal Greek religious act. Prometheus not only

gives fire to humans, but he also establishes animal sacrifice and determines exactly which elements humans will be required to give to the gods in sacrifice. From the Greek perspective, this is transformative.

- Sacrifice engaged humanity with the gods at a new level, in a sense forcing the gods to take humanity seriously. At the same time, the use of fire in sacrifice is a reminder that there is a rift between humanity and the gods.
 - Sacrifice also marks the physical differences between gods and humanity, highlighting our physical neediness and fragility.
 - Finally, sacrifice reminds the gods that humans have elevated themselves to some extent. As a result of Prometheus's gift, humans have technology and culture. Humans submit religiously to the gods, but they are no longer wholly dependent upon the gods to move forward.
- Despite that fact that Prometheus is credited with establishing sacrifice, he does not seem to have been the focus of a major cult in ancient Greece. But his relationship with non-Greek communities was, in some cases, quite significant. For example, the early church father Tertullian cast Prometheus as a kind of forerunner of Christ.
 - The story of Prometheus raises a theme that runs throughout Greek mythology: the tenuous relationship between humanity and the gods. In general, the Greek gods are not particularly concerned with human beings, but Prometheus seems to be the exception to this rule: He manipulates the nature of sacrifice to ensure that human beings get the good portions, and he brings fire to humanity, making high culture possible.

Pandora

- When Zeus punished Prometheus for giving fire to humanity, he also punished humanity by ordering Hephaestus to create Pandora, described as a “beautiful evil.” Hermes, messenger to the gods,

brought Pandora to Prometheus's brother Epimetheus to be his bride. Of course, as we know, Pandora brought a jar with her, known today as Pandora's box.



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- Although she had been warned not to open the jar, she did so anyway, thus releasing “evils, harsh pain, and troubling diseases” into the world. In another version of the story, Pandora releases all good spirits, but they fly away from earth to heaven, abandoning humanity. In every version, only one spirit remains, hope, which is caught under the lid of the jar.
- Pandora is presented in this story as the source of all mankind's suffering. In essence, Zeus created the institution of human marriage in giving Pandora to Epimetheus. And according to tradition, since Pandora's creation, men have had to choose between two imperfect options: either taking a woman into their lives and opening themselves to multiple risks or remaining single and childless.
- Most of the time Pandora's story ends after the opening of the jar, but in Greek tradition, Pandora and Epimetheus bear a daughter, Pyrrha, who is described as the first naturally born human woman. Pyrrha marries Deukalion, the natural-born son of Prometheus, and they are the only two humans to survive a great flood that comes upon the earth, riding it out in a boat and winding up on a mountaintop. They later repopulate the earth by casting stones over their shoulders—“the bones” of Mother Earth.
- We tend to associate Pandora with pain, suffering, and illness, but she also gives birth to the first naturally born human woman,

The story of Pandora, much like that of the biblical Eve, traces the source of all suffering in the world to women.

and it is because of this woman that humanity survives after the great flood. It seems only fair to give Pandora some credit for this positive contribution to our welfare, given the bad reputation she acquired for opening the jar.

Demeter and Persephone

- Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, a harvest goddess. Both Hermes and Apollo sought her hand in marriage, but her mother rejected them as unsuitable for her daughter. One day, when Persephone was alone in the fields, Hades emerged from the underworld and kidnapped Persephone.
 - When Demeter realized that her daughter was gone, she searched the earth for her. In some versions of the story, as she does this, she neglects her care for vegetation and nothing grows. In other versions, she commands the earth not to produce vegetation. Eventually, she discovers where Persephone has been taken, and she turns to Zeus for help. Zeus goes to Hades and demands that Persephone be released.
 - Hades agrees to release Persephone, but as she's leaving, he tricks her into eating four pomegranate seeds. For some reason, Persephone is required to spend one month each year in the underworld for each piece of food she has eaten while there. As a result, each year, she spends four months in the underworld. During those months, Demeter grieves, the vegetation on earth suffers, and we have winter.
- Clearly, this myth is another etiology, designed to explain why we experience the seasons and why vegetation flourishes at certain times of the year but not others. But there seems to be no logical reason that the act of eating four pomegranate seeds would require Persephone to spend four months in the underworld. The mythology itself simply states that the Fates had decreed that anyone who ate food in the underworld was required to stay there.
 - Several explanations for this puzzle have been offered. One is that vegetation is linked to eating, and because Persephone eats something in the underworld, the upper world loses the

ability to eat as a result. The issue here is one of balance: What happens in the underworld has repercussions aboveground.

- Some of the other interpretations are less obvious and probably tell us more about Greek culture. When Persephone eats, even if she has been tricked into it, she is accepting Hades's hospitality. In the ancient world, this is tantamount to agreeing to come under his protection. In the eyes of Greek society, Hades could make the case that Persephone changed from being a captive to being a guest when she accepted food from his table.
- It's also symbolic that Persephone eats from a pomegranate, which was associated with abundance, hospitality, and sexual fertility. One could interpret the mythological moment of Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds as a metaphor for submitting sexually to Hades. In that case, under the social mores of the ancient world, Hades had every right to assert some kind of relationship with her.
- A blunter interpretation is that Hades's act of sneaking seeds into Persephone's mouth is a straightforward metaphor for rape or, at least, seduction. Once Persephone had intercourse with Hades—voluntarily or not—she would no longer be a virgin and, thus, would no longer be sought after as a wife by other gods. In effect, Persephone was taken as a wife in a way that offends modern sensibilities but meets the ancient Greek mythological code.
- Because of her mythology, Persephone is understood as a vegetation goddess, as well as the goddess of the underworld. Most notably, Persephone was worshipped, along with her mother, in the Eleusinian Mysteries, an annual fall festival in Eleusis that dramatized Persephone's story in a three-phase ritual. The festival was focused on generating new life, both for vegetation and for initiates who participated in the Eleusinian mystery cult.

Suggested Reading

Agha-Jaffar, *Demeter and Persephone*.

Dougherty, *Prometheus*.

Erikson, "Legacies."

Kenaan, *Pandora's Senses*.

Ruffell, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*.

Questions to Consider

1. Zeus and Prometheus disagree strongly about whether humans should have fire or not; what might this mythological struggle reflect about the ancient Greeks' interests in fire?
2. The stories of Pandora and Persephone are explanatory stories; they explain how certain things (suffering and pain, the seasons) came into being. What do these explanatory stories imply about how the ancient Greeks understood the nature of the world around them?

Herakles and the Greek Hero

Lecture 4

Heroes are so important to Greek mythology that they have their own distinct creation story. According to some traditions, Zeus created humanity five times, with each successive creation being worse than the previous one. Zeus began with the Golden Age, followed by the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Age of the Heroes, and the Iron Age, the age in which human beings as we know them were created. The heroes, then, were created as man was about to come into the world in his most degraded form; they offer a hopeful alternative. Herakles, whom we will discuss in this lecture, is one of the most well-known Greek heroes.

Background on Herakles

- Herakles was born from an affair between Zeus and a mortal woman, Alcmene, which means that he is half-god and half-man. Hera, Zeus's wife, hated Herakles because he was a constant reminder of Zeus's infidelity, and she expends a great deal of energy to make his life miserable. However, because Herakles is protected by Athena, Hera is never quite able to defeat him. Ultimately, Herakles is given immortality and achieves the status of a god.
- At one point in his life, Herakles is thrown into madness by Hera and murders his own children. Once he



As a young man, Herakles was given the choice of leading an easy but unremarkable life or a hard but glorious life; as a hero, of course, he chose glory.

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comes to his senses, he asks the Oracle of Delphi for a way to atone for their deaths. The oracle, guided by Hera, instructs Herakles to serve King Eurystheus of Mycenae for ten years, fulfilling whatever task the king sets before him. Herakles is reluctant at first, knowing that any service he is asked to perform by Eurystheus will be both publicly humiliating and physically demanding and dangerous, but eventually, he agrees.

- King Eurystheus originally devises ten tasks for Herakles to perform, but he later refuses to accept Herakles's efforts in two of them. As a result, the king requires two more tasks; after completing the last task, Eurystheus releases Herakles, and the hero receives immortality.

The Twelve Labors

- No single literary source describes all of Herakles's labors, but they are depicted on the metopes of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, dated to around 450 B.C.E. Traditionally, the labors are said to have occurred as follows: slaying the Nemean lion; killing the Hydra; catching the Golden Hind of Artemis; catching the Erymanthian boar; cleaning the Augean stables in a single day; killing the Stymphalian birds; capturing the bull of Crete; stealing the mares of Diomedes; taking the girdle of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons; and stealing the cattle of Geryon the Giant. After the king rejects two of these tasks, Herakles steals the apples of Hesperides and kills Cerberus, the three-headed dog of the underworld.
- For his first task, Herakles is sent to slay the Nemean lion, which has been luring the young warriors of a town to its lair, then devouring them. The lion has golden fur that is impervious to arrows. In some versions of the story, Herakles manages to shoot an arrow into the lion's mouth; in other versions, he strangles the lion to death.
 - After killing the lion, Herakles skins the animal, but he can't remove the skin with an ordinary knife; Athena directs him to use the lion's own claw to remove the hide.
 - When Herakles returns to King Eurystheus with the Nemean lion's hide, the king begins to understand the hero's strength

and is terrified. Eurystheus forbids Herakles from ever coming into the city again; instead, he is ordered to present the evidence of his labors outside the city gates.

- The slaying of the lion is a classic hero myth, involving a seemingly impossible task and requiring the hero to demonstrate extraordinary abilities. In this case, Herakles demonstrates fearlessness, extraordinary strength, and cleverness, and he receives divine assistance from Athena. As we've seen, the gods and goddesses only selectively intervene in ordinary human affairs, but they seem to have a greater stake in the affairs of heroes.
- In the second labor, Herakles must kill a multi-headed Hydra, but whenever one of her heads is cut off, two more grow back. Herakles enlists his nephew's help, and together, they use a firebrand to cauterize the wounds caused just after a head is cut off, making it impossible for a new head to grow. Herakles then uses a golden sword given to him by Athena to cut off the critical head of the Hydra, and she dies. Again, Herakles demonstrates fearlessness, great strength, strategic thinking, and a key relationship with the gods.
- By the fifth labor, King Eurystheus has grown frustrated with Herakles's success; thus, he tries to humiliate the hero by sending him to clean the Augean stables. The stables hold more than 1,000 cattle and have not been cleaned in 30 years; Herakles is given only one day to clean all the stalls. To accomplish the task, Herakles reroutes the Alpheus and Peneus rivers, which carry away the accumulated dung. But King Eurystheus refuses to acknowledge Herakles's efforts in this task, arguing that the rivers did all the real work.
- The rest of the labors are much like the ones described so far: seemingly impossible tasks, designed to make Herakles fail on a public stage. But Herakles becomes increasingly impressive. In his last labor, he kills Cerberus and lays the dead beast at Eurystheus's

feet. The fact that Herakles has emerged unscathed from the underworld so terrifies the king that he offers to end the assignments if Herakles will take Cerberus back to the underworld. Thus, the labors of Herakles come to an end.

- It seems fitting that Herakles's labors end with a task in the underworld. The journey to the realm of the dead is a hallmark of heroes' lives, a metaphor for a kind of death of the self. In Herakles's case, a task in the realm of the dead serves as the final step toward atoning for the murders he has committed and securing his own immortality. Herakles walks through the land of the dead and is resurrected to lead a new life.
- After his twelve labors, Herakles joins Jason and the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece. In this journey, Hera drives Herakles mad once again, and he kills his best friend. Again, Herakles seeks atonement through servitude. When his wife hears that he has been philandering, she gives him a tunic that she has been told will excite his love for her. In reality, the tunic has been smeared with the blood of the Hydra, which burns Herakles's flesh. His mortal body is burned away, but he is left with an immortal form. Herakles is transformed and rises to Olympus as he dies, now an immortal god.

Herakles and Greek Culture

- It's perhaps surprising to realize that the Herakles hero figure is imperfect. He is known for being wild and unkempt and, in fact, became the patron of the Cynics, 6th-century-B.C.E. philosophers who encouraged retreat into a kind of precivilized wilderness.
 - Herakles is also known for having voracious appetites for sex, wine, and food, often leading to disastrous results.
 - However, the hero's indulgences are offset by acts of extreme self-denial. This seems to be the key to his importance in Greek culture. Although he is clearly a flawed man who does some appalling things, he always atones for his misdeeds—he sets his world in order and, in the process, sets the world in order for others.

- Herakles is also the only figure in Greek mythology to be worshipped as both a mortal hero and a god. In ancient Greece, mortal heroes received gifts in recognition of their achievements, while the gods received sacrifices. Herakles received both.
 - The ancient Greeks also celebrated Heracleia, an annual festival that commemorated Herakles's death and included athletic games, musical competitions, and ritual sacrifices. These activities reflected Herakles's mythology, including his elevation to the status of a god.
 - In addition, Herakles was known as a protector of the military. For example, the Thebans credited Herakles with helping win their war against the region of Phocis, and they made offerings to him as a result. Herakles was also worshipped as a protector of athletic events and is considered one of the mythological founders of the Olympic Games.

Herakles's Modern Appeal

- Why do the stories of Herakles continue to appeal to modern listeners? Scholars point to the fact that the twelve labors mythology follows a typical hero quest pattern in world mythology: The hero experiences some hardship or personal crisis that requires him to set out on a quest.
 - The idea of the hero's journey can be traced to the scholar Joseph Campbell, who argued that hero characters throughout world mythology follow similar paths in their quests, with similar stages in these paths. According to Campbell, the hero's quest is always more than a geographic journey, and it involves more than accomplishing an external task. In the process of pursuing a tangible goal, the hero experiences an inner transformation. At the end of the quest, when he returns home, the hero has not only successfully met the physical challenge, but he has changed as a person.
 - John M. Bell ties the quest element in myth to the Greek appreciation for *agonism*, or competition. The reward for the competition involved in a quest is the establishment or

revelation of one's true identity. Competition couched in the mythology of a quest acts as a crucible, purging the dross and crystalizing the hero's identity in his own mind and in the eyes of the world.

- The ancient Greek heroes, such as Herakles, are created for physical exertion, usually battle, with a moral dimension to their efforts. Not only are they physically strong, but they usually also have one divine parent, which makes them godlike in their abilities. As a result, heroes can often succeed where others have failed. In addition, they are, for the most part, morally upright, although they are not perfect. On balance, however, over their lifetimes, heroes' good deeds outweigh the bad.
- Being special, however, has its downside. Heroes don't fit easily into the normal mortal world. They are marginalized figures and are often on the move, traveling on quests to strange and dangerous places. The hero doesn't live a settled family life. Instead, he is constantly battling demons in his own mind or dealing with the consequences brought about by his own character and choices. All in all, the life of a hero is difficult, and that is precisely what makes him a great mythological character.

Suggested Reading

Blanshard, *Hercules: A Heroic Life*.

Bowden and Rawlings, *Herakles and Hercules*.

Burkert, "Oriental and Greek Mythology."

Hansen and Hansen, *Classical Mythology*.

Lawrence, *Moral Awareness in Greek Tragedy*.

Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*.

Stafford, *Herakles*.

Questions to Consider

1. What was the ancient Greek understanding of a hero? How was he similar to and different from a god?
2. What is our contemporary understanding of heroes? How are they similar to and different from the ancient Greek heroes? How do we honor them (in art, literature, popular culture, and so on)?

Odysseus, Master of Schemes

Lecture 5

Odysseus was a legendary king of ancient Ithaca, an island in the Ionian Sea. There is some disagreement in the stories about his parentage, but the rest of his life is described fairly consistently. He was married to Penelope, and together, they had a much-beloved son, Telemachus. Odysseus is hailed as a hero in the Trojan War but experiences a lengthy journey filled with hardship when he tries to return home. In this lecture, we'll look at Odysseus as the flawed Greek hero celebrated in Homer's *Odyssey* and other poems related to the Trojan War. We'll pay particular attention to the ways in which Odysseus's scheming and lies lead to heroic triumphs—and nearly kill him.

Opening of the *Odyssey*

- Homer begins the *Odyssey* when Odysseus is near the end of his journey. He has been held captive by the beautiful nymph Calypso for seven years, and despite being nearly shipwrecked by a storm sent by Poseidon, he finally makes it to another island, Phaeacia. His hosts offer him a ship to Ithaca, but they ask him to describe his journeys before he leaves. We get to “eavesdrop” on these stories.
- In the Homeric material, Odysseus's stories focus on the years after the Trojan War and his efforts to return home to Penelope and his son. These stories are perhaps the best-known ones about Odysseus because they are the most entertaining, including monsters, gods and goddesses, and the underworld.
- Early on, Odysseus and his soldiers are captured by the Cyclops Polyphemus. Ultimately, the men manage to escape because of Odysseus's clever thinking, but at the last minute, the hero's pride gets the better of him. As the men begin to sail away from the Cyclops's island, Odysseus can't resist bragging, and he shouts out his name to the giant. Polyphemus then tells his father, Poseidon,

that Odysseus has blinded him, and the god becomes determined to prevent Odysseus's return home.

- Over time, Odysseus's adventures become increasingly discouraging and dark. Eventually, like Herakles, he and his men travel to the underworld. The spirit of Odysseus's dead mother tells him that his wife is being pursued by suitors, who claim that Odysseus is dead and compete to take over his wife and home.
- Odysseus resumes his journey home, avoiding the dangerous Sirens and navigating between the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. But he continues to lose his soldiers and is ultimately trapped alone on an island as Calypso's prisoner. It is here that we meet him at the beginning of Homer's epic; at this point, Odysseus is not a confident war hero but a lonely wanderer, who wants nothing more than to return home.

Return to Ithaca

- After being released from Calypso's island and nearly drowned by Poseidon's storms, Odysseus is brought, naked and alone, to the Phaeacian shore. When he finishes telling his story to his Phaeacian hosts, they deliver him to Ithaca, but he does not return in triumph. As a precaution, Athena disguises Odysseus as a poor beggar so that no one will recognize him.
- Odysseus meets his wife without her recognizing him. Throughout the years of her husband's absence, Penelope has remained faithful, but she and her son have been invaded by princes desiring to take over Odysseus's kingdom and his wife. Penelope can no longer withstand the pressure to remarry.
- Penelope tells the disguised Odysseus that she has decided to hold a competition among the suitors to select her future husband. They will be required to string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe heads. Of course, Odysseus immediately decides to participate in the contest.

- On the day of the contest, none of the suitors can string the bow, but Odysseus does and sends an arrow flying through all twelve axe heads. Then, with the help of Telemachus, Athena, and others, he attacks and kills the suitors who have presumed to take over his household. He orders the servant women who plotted with Penelope's suitors to clean up their corpses, then hangs these women. Finally, he reveals himself to Penelope.



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Some scholars argue that Penelope notes the resemblance between the beggar she meets and her husband; thus, she devises the competition to draw him out.

The Appeal of Odysseus

- On a basic level, it's easy to understand why the stories of Odysseus have stood the test of time: They are incredibly entertaining. Odysseus battles with gods and monsters, is admired by men and desired by women, and stays faithful to his people and his family. He is the ultimate leading man and adventure hero.
- For the ancient Greeks, the story of Odysseus was part history and part hero worship. It put Greek history on a cosmic stage, suggesting that the gods cared enough about the Greeks to occasionally intervene in their lives.
- Note that Odysseus was not half-god, as Herakles was; whatever his parentage, he was a mortal. Therefore, as a hero, Odysseus set a standard against which all other men were meant to measure themselves—a high but attainable bar.
- On another level, the Odysseus stories give us insight into distinctive mythic themes, including the theme of identity, which the stories explore in distinctive ways.

- Unlike other Greek heroes, Odysseus changes his name and conceals or alters his identity several times throughout his adventures. And in a cruel twist of fate, the one time he proclaims his identity, as he and his men are escaping from Polyphemus, he endangers them all.
- The scholar John M. Bell argues that at this moment, the folktale about a man escaping a monster becomes a myth—the mythic hero, even at the risk of endangering his own life and those of his men, must assert his identity. The story takes on significance beyond the events it describes.
- Throughout Odysseus’s life, his identity is alternately concealed and revealed. This finally comes to an end when he returns home to reclaim his household and family.
- More than any other Greek mythic figure, Odysseus searches for a place and time where he can be publicly at peace with his full, true identity. This personal search may be the key element of the *Odyssey* that distinguishes it from other Greek myths.
- One by one, the sailors under his command fall away, ultimately leaving Odysseus alone and exposed. He finally returns home alone, disguised as a person at the very bottom of the social order. He has been humbled, stripped of companionship, and stripped of any meaningful identity. Only at that moment can he resume his rightful identity.
- Paradoxically, the grand epic is ultimately a deeply personal story of one man losing himself, then finding himself again.
- Odysseus’s journeys can also be read as metaphors for experiences in everyday life. True, most of us are not tempted by Sirens, but the Sirens represent temptations that we do face, temptations that initially seem attractive and that encourage us to turn away from a long, difficult path. Similarly, when Odysseus and his men travel to the “western edge of the world” or to speak with the dead, these

journeys are metaphors for the times that we feel far from home, separated from comforting friends and family.

- In the underworld, Odysseus learns that his mother has committed suicide and that his wife is being besieged by suitors who want to take over his throne and his family. At that moment, he is filled with a new sense of urgency about returning home. Joseph Campbell called these “belly of the whale” experiences.
- Campbell argues that we all have these moments, when we recognize that the old world we used to cling to is gone and that it is time to move forward toward a new world, whatever that might be.
- It’s important to note that when Odysseus was born, his maternal grandfather gave him his name, which means “the son of pain,” and declared that the boy would earn his name in full.
 - It’s true that Odysseus experiences physical pain, but in many ways, this is insignificant. The physical challenges he faces in the Trojan War and on the long journey home are fleeting, secondary to the lasting changes he undergoes.
 - We can think of Odysseus as a “son of pain” in the sense that his character as a man was forged out of pain. His true pain is reflected in his stories of the journey home, stories in which his own pride and attempts at shrewdness cost all of his men their lives and delay his own return.
 - Physical pain is nothing to a hero; true hero’s pain is the pain of facing the losses that others have experienced because of your failings. And Odysseus’s character as a mature man is born out of this pain. Homer hints at this by inviting listeners to eavesdrop on this mature man’s reflections on the past 20 years of his life.

A Hero's Transformation

- Homer structures the *Odyssey* so that it is the tale of the telling of a tale. The fact that Odysseus is reminiscing is as significant as the contents of the story. His is a story of personal transformation, and Campbell argues that it is, in particular, the story of a hero's transformation.
- According to Campbell, the hero's journey, or *monomyth*, includes three parts: First, the hero separates from his known world, either voluntarily or by force. Then, he encounters a previously unknown world and undergoes a kind of initiation, in which he is introduced to unimagined wonders and forces in the world. He survives this initiation but is transformed by it, and he subsequently returns to his former world a wiser man.
- In Campbell's thinking, Odysseus was the quintessential hero, forced against his will to take on a dreaded task, separated from loved ones for decades, matured and humbled by his experiences and his own flaws, and reborn when he washes up on the shore of Phaeacia, naked and alone. He has changed from a proud warrior into a thoughtful man.
- In the end, Odysseus seems to be both the mythological superman and everyman.
 - Initially, he comes across as the hero of a fantasy adventure, but as his story unfolds, he becomes much more relatable. Readers identify with his lifelong commitment to family and home, his struggle between desire and duty, and his acknowledgement that his strengths are, occasionally, also the cause of his undoing.
 - Odysseus's journey is our journey, and ultimately, his goal is always to return home. In this, he embodies what we like to think are basic human impulses, and he is rewarded as we would like to be. He returns home from his labors, welcomed into the loving arms of his family, scarred but a little wiser.

Suggested Reading

Ahi and Hanna, *The Odyssey Reformed*.

Bittlestone, *Odysseus Unbound*.

Connolly and Homer, *The Legend of Odysseus*.

Finley, *The World of Odysseus*.

Fowler and Fowler, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*.

Griffin, *Homer: The Odyssey*.

Hartog, *Memories of Odysseus*.

Montiglio, *From Villain to Hero*.

Questions to Consider

1. Odysseus's adventures are often thought of as metaphors for broader human experience. Can you extrapolate from his adventures to discern some lessons for human life in general?
2. How does Joseph Campbell's model of a hero's journey help us understand Odysseus's story? What elements of the story might this model obscure?

The Golden Fleece and the Hero's Return

Lecture 6

In the last two lectures, we discussed Greek heroes, larger-than-life men who take on superhuman tasks. In this lecture, we'll look at some different figures in Greek mythology, Jason and Medea. Jason is most well known for captaining the Argonauts and bringing home the Golden Fleece. It's tempting to think of Jason as just another Greek hero, yet he can also be viewed as a hero that could have been but never was. Medea, of course, is known for committing the most unnatural act imaginable, murdering her children, but we might also come to a different view of her, as well.

Launching the Quest

- The best-known version of Jason's story is told in the *Argonautica*, a 3rd-century-B.C.E. epic poem by Apollonius. This story opens with a warning to Pelias, king of Iolcus, that he will be "slain at the prompting of the man ... with but one sandal." The poem then announces that Jason, King Pelias's half-nephew, has arrived, wearing only one sandal.
- Before Jason was born, Pelias had stolen the throne of Iolcus from Jason's father. After becoming king, Pelias slaughtered virtually everyone in the family, but he imprisoned Jason's father. While in prison, Jason's father married Alcimede, who became pregnant with Jason. Pelias found out about the pregnancy and planned to murder Jason, but Alcimede tricked the king into believing that Jason had been stillborn. She then smuggled the child to Mount Pelion to be raised by the centaur Chiron.
- As a young man, Jason travels to Pelias's court to claim the throne. Along the way, he loses a sandal while helping an old woman cross a river; that old woman is the goddess Hera in disguise, and she sides with Jason against Pelias throughout the story. When Pelias sees that Jason is wearing only one sandal, he immediately

recognizes the threat. He declares that he will yield the throne if Jason presents him with the Golden Fleece.

- To retrieve the fleece, Jason must sail from Thessaly to Colchis, a far-off and exotic land to the ancient Greeks. He gathers a crew of the greatest warriors of his time to go with him in a ship called the *Argo*. These men, the Argonauts, are traditionally numbered at 50, and they include Herakles, Orpheus, and Laertes, the father of Odysseus.
- Once Jason and the Argonauts set off, they begin a series of wild adventures. First, they stop at the island of Lemnos, just off the west coast of modern-day Turkey. The women there had all murdered their husbands, and they take the Argonauts as their lovers. Together, the women of Lemnos and the Argonauts begat a new race of men, but eventually Herakles persuades Jason to leave the island.
- One of the most dramatic moments on the journey to Colchis involves the Argonauts' passage through the clashing rocks, huge cliffs that smashed together whenever any ship tries to pass between them. King Phineas, whom Jason had saved previously, instructs Jason on how to navigate the rocks safely, although the *Argo* is slightly damaged during the passage. Once the Argonauts pass through, the clashing rocks stay joined forever.

Adventures in Colchis

- All of these adventures, however entertaining, serve as a mere prelude to Jason's test when he finally reaches Colchis. For the ancient Greeks, this city was the easternmost site in the known world—the edge of the earth.
- When the Argonauts arrive in Colchis, King Aeëtes is antagonistic toward them because he believes the Golden Fleece belongs in Colchis; the fleece itself is guarded by a fearsome dragon. To get the fleece, the king requires Jason to yoke two fire-breathing bulls together and sow a field with dragons' teeth. This is when Medea enters the picture.

- Medea was King Aeëtes's daughter and a sorceress. In Apollonius's account, Hera persuades Aphrodite to make Medea fall in love with Jason so that she can protect him with her magical powers. In a dramatic moment, Eros, Aphrodite's son, shoots an arrow into Medea's heart, causing her to fall hopelessly in love with Jason.
- Once Medea becomes involved, the story takes on a different tone. Jason seems to become much less sympathetic and much less interesting. He gradually yields the limelight to Medea.
- Medea warns Jason that the dragons' teeth her father has ordered him to sow in the field will immediately emerge as full-grown warriors. If the fire-breathing bulls don't burn Jason to death, the armed warriors will slaughter him. But Medea provides a magic ointment that protects Jason from the bulls' fire, and she instructs him on how to handle the warriors. She then uses a spell to put the guard dragon to sleep, and Jason steals the Golden Fleece.

The Voyage Home

- At this point, Jason sails back to Greece, taking Medea with him and promising to marry her. Medea's younger brother seeks to prevent this, but he is murdered. Some versions claim that Medea dismembers her brother's body and scatters the parts, knowing that her father will stop to collect them to give his son a proper burial, and this will slow down his pursuit.
- Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts take a circuitous route home, including travels through modern-day Eurasia, along the western coast of Italy, across the Mediterranean, to northern Africa, and back across the Mediterranean toward home.
 - Along the way, the travelers encounter the Phaeacians, the same people who hosted Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. In the *Argonautica*, the Phaeacians threaten to turn Medea and Jason over to King Aeëtes's army unless Jason and Medea consummate their marriage.

- Jason and Medea wed, but Apollonius indicates that this isn't what they wanted, and their hesitation to get married doesn't bode well for their long-term relationship.
- Near the end of their voyage, the Argonauts approach the island of Crete, but Talos, a giant bronze man who is guarding the island, hurls boulders at the ship. Medea kills Talos, and once he is dead, the Argonauts land safely on Crete.
- Apollonius's account of the voyage of the Argonauts ends shortly after this event, somewhat disappointingly. We leave the voyagers on the island of Anaphe, not far from Jason's home but not quite there yet. Jason and his companions establish a festival honoring Apollo, but Apollonius never quite brings Jason home.
- The rest of Jason's story is known from several other sources. Once the Argonauts return to Greece, Medea settles down with Jason, but she continues to perform sorcery. To save Jason from King Pelias, who refuses to relinquish the throne when Jason returns, Medea plots to do away with the king. She tricks his daughters into killing him, but then she and Jason are forced to flee to Corinth to avoid being punished for Pelias's murder.

Medea and Jason

- In Euripides's drama *Medea*, we find the couple in Corinth, where Medea hopes finally to be married to Jason properly. Instead, Jason decides to marry Creusa, the daughter of King Creon of Corinth, which will be a politically advantageous match.
- Medea confronts Jason when he announces his engagement, reminding him of her loyalty and all that it has cost her. Jason argues that Aphrodite caused Medea to fall in love with him; thus, it is the goddess who is ultimately responsible for all the good that came his way. At this point, Medea is abandoned.
- Euripides's play provides the definitive version of Medea's outrage at being forsaken by Jason. First, she offers Jason's bride-

to-be a beautiful dress as a supposed wedding gift. The dress, however, is coated with poison on the inside, and as Jason's bride puts it on, she is burned to death. As she is dying, her father, King Creon, comes to her aid, but he is also burned to death as he tries to save his daughter.

- Next, Medea murders her own children, two sons fathered by Jason. In a dramatic speech, she declares that the suffering she will endure is worth it for the vengeance she will wreak on Jason. Jason discovers his children slaughtered and begs to be able to bury them, but Medea refuses to leave the bodies with him. As she leaves, she says, “And as for you, who did me all evil, I prophesy an evil doom.”
 - Euripides probably invented the storyline about Medea killing her own children; no such episode appears in any earlier version of Jason and Medea's story. Euripides takes Medea to a new level by having her commit the most unnatural act imaginable, murdering her own children for vengeance.
 - And here we come to the core of Medea's character as understood by Euripides: She cannot forgive being wronged, even when it leads her to murder her own sons. Ironically, this might be the element of the myth that makes it so poignant.

The Hero's Return

- In Greek mythology, once Jason betrays Medea, he is lost. The goddess Hera, who had protected Jason throughout his life, withdraws her support. Jason falls asleep in his beloved *Argo*, but the old ship has fallen into disrepair; it collapses on Jason as he sleeps and kills him. Thus, the would-be hero dies an ignominious death, completely alone; abandoned by friends, family, and the gods; surrounded only by the remnants of his former glory.
- It's important to remember that we've drawn on several ancient literary traditions to tell the complete story of Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts. The *Argonautica* ends with Jason nearing his homeland, clearly victorious, and inaugurating a festival celebration. The first

part of the story, then, plays on some common epic themes: the challenge to the hero, his travels across the seas, and the assistance he receives from faithful companions, key gods, and a woman who falls in love with him.

- The second part, however, takes a dramatic turn. Upon returning home, the hero's world falls apart, largely because of his own character flaws. We might argue that, as in the *Odyssey*, Jason's story shows that heroes are not made for the domestic sphere. At home, they must face the challenges of their family members—and these often prove much more difficult to handle than dragons and monsters.
- We've seen the Greeks deal with the problem of the hero's return with Herakles, Odysseus, and Jason. Their stories end differently, but all are troubling: Herakles sheds his human aspect and becomes fully divine, but only after his jealous wife burns him to death by mistake. Odysseus returns home humbled; he puts on his warrior persona one more time to reclaim his home and family, but we never see him take up a quiet domestic life. And Jason washes out as a landlubber; he loses everything and dies in the remains of the *Argo*. It seems that in Greek mythology, heroes have no place in the real world.

Suggested Reading

Acosta-Hughes, *Jason and the Argonauts*.

Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*.

Corti, *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*.

Hunter, *Jason and the Golden Fleece (The Argonautica)*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are Jason's strengths, his positive qualities? What are his negative qualities? What might these qualities tell us about the character traits that were valued in Greek culture?
2. Euripides introduces a fully developed storyline about Medea. What does Medea's character add to the story of Jason and the Argonauts?

Romulus, Remus, and Rome's Origins

Lecture 7

As we turn from Greece to Rome, our study of mythology becomes a bit more complicated. Much of Rome's mythology is tied up with Greek mythology. Many of Rome's great mythological characters and themes are imported directly from Greece. A few figures and storylines, however, are unique to Roman mythology. We begin in this lecture with one of the few truly Roman myths, the story of Rome's founding by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus.

Rome's Origin Story

- According to Roman mythology, King Numitor took the throne of Alba Longa, an ancient city in central Italy, when his father died. However, Numitor's brother, Amulius, forced Numitor from the throne and murdered Numitor's sons. Amulius even made Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, become a Vestal Virgin, assuming that this would prevent her from ever giving birth to a male heir in Numitor's line. But Mars, the god of war, either seduced or raped Rhea Silvia, and she became pregnant with his twin sons, Romulus and Remus.
- When Rhea delivers Romulus and Remus, King Amulius orders that the mother and twins be imprisoned. In one version of the story, Rhea is buried alive and the twins are left to die of exposure; in another version, Amulius orders that all three be drowned in the Tiber River.
- In every version, a servant who has been ordered to kill the twins defies the king's orders. Instead of murdering the infants, the servant leaves the twins in a basket beside the riverbank. The river itself takes the basket and guides the twins downstream to safety. The basket floats gently into the roots of a tree, where a she-wolf named Lupa comes upon the baby boys. Lupa suckles the twins, and a woodpecker, Picus, brings them food. The twins are then discovered by a shepherd and his wife, who take them home and raise them.

- Notice the contrast here between the world from which the boys originated and the world in which they grew up. Through their mother, Romulus and Remus were descendants of the most politically powerful family in the region—the product of the highest levels of civilization.
- By contrast, their father is Mars, the god of war but also the god of spring, nature, fertility, and the earth. The boys' childhood reflects this connection with nature; they are saved by animals and raised by shepherds. There's an interesting celebration of simplicity, earthly life, and nature in the boys' birth story.
- As might be expected, the boys do not grow up to be ordinary men. They emerge as leaders in their community and eventually lead a rebellion against Amulius. They kill him and reestablish Numitor as king, still unaware that he is their grandfather.
- At this point, Romulus and Remus strike out on their own, but trouble brews between them. Romulus decides to establish a new city on the Palatine Hill, the very place where Lupa cared for Romulus and Remus when they were babies. The Palatine Hill is also the centermost of the Seven Hills of Rome. Remus, however, wants to establish the city on the Aventine Hill, the southernmost of the Seven Hills.
- In one version of the story, the brothers decide to cast lots to determine which site to choose for their city, but they end up quarreling over whose site the lots indicate. The quarrel escalates, and ultimately, Romulus kills Remus. Romulus establishes his new city and names it Roma after himself.
- Romulus then takes specific steps to establish security for his city: He creates an army, including the first Roman legions; founds the city's government; and institutes an advisory council, the Patricians, also known as the Senate. Thus, Romulus is credited with establishing the form of government that marked ancient Rome.

Rape of the Sabine Women

- The city of Roma attracts single men, and the population expands quickly to occupy five of the seven hills. To provide brides for his city's male population, Romulus decides to kidnap women from the neighboring community of Sabinium.
- Romulus invites all the Sabine men and women to a great festival, where he gets the men drunk with wine. Romulus then kidnaps the daughters of the Sabine men, and they are quickly married to Roman men. Initially, the Sabine daughters are terrified, but once they realize that they will be properly married and cared for by devoted husbands, the Roman myth claims that they become happy with their situation.
- Of course, the Sabine men demand that their daughters be returned. Romulus refuses, and the Sabine men attack Rome, but Romulus receives help from the god Jupiter, and the Sabine army is defeated. At this point, the Sabine women, who are now firmly attached to their Roman husbands, beg for peace. Eventually peace is established, and Romulus and Tatius, the Sabine king, rule jointly, until Tatius is conveniently assassinated. At that point, Romulus becomes sole king of the region.
- Over time, Romulus becomes more dictatorial. He fails to consult the Senate when making important decisions and gradually alienates the city's leaders. In most versions of the story, Romulus then disappears in a windstorm shortly after having offered a public sacrifice. Rumors begin to circulate that the Senate had Romulus assassinated, but the senators bestow posthumous honors on Romulus and circulate stories that describe him ascending to heaven.

Origin Myth and Roman Culture

- Although the myth of Romulus and Remus was most likely fictional, it was told with great pride in ancient Rome. It seems likely that the myth itself mattered more to the Romans than the possibility of its historical truth. The myth captured the spirit of Rome: its sense of its own destiny, divine roots, political sophistication, and seemingly



The image of the she-wolf suckling the twins eventually became an iconic representation of Rome that had remarkable influence long after the empire had fallen.

invincible army. At its height, Rome had no need for historical truth in its myth; instead, its founding mythology conveyed the heart of Rome. This is a key facet of mythology, especially origins mythology: It conveys truth of a different order, truth about identity rather than about history.

- Modern scholars focus less on the historical accuracy of the Romulus and Remus story and more on what it tells us about ancient Roman cultural values. Clearly, the various versions of the story reflect Rome's long history of addressing political conflict with violence, intrigue, military battle, and political alliances. They also reflect the great pride Rome took in its military and its form of governance. Finally, the myths teach that individual Romans owed allegiance to Rome; a man's reputation was determined in large part by what he contributed to the Roman people, often in the form of military or public service.
- Modern scholars also argue that the story of Romulus and Remus developed much later than Rome itself as a way to explain the city's name. Many cultures develop stories after the fact to explain how

they came into existence and to justify their domination of other communities. The Romulus and Remus mythology offers a cosmic history of the city and Roman culture. In this mythic history, Rome sees itself as the pinnacle of the known world, militarily, politically, socially, and even geographically.

Mythic Elements in Romulus and Remus

- Several traditional mythic elements are present in the Romulus and Remus story, in particular, twin brothers. Brothers figure prominently in many origin mythologies, and often there is some form of competition or rivalry between them, which is intensified when the brothers are twins.
 - Some scholars have argued that the element of rivalry reflects real tensions between brothers in the ancient world, where older brothers often inherited power, prestige, and property that younger brothers did not. In the case of Romulus and Remus, it's significant that neither brother is the elder, which means that neither has an obvious right to overrule the other. In this view, the fight between Romulus and Remus for decision-making power reflects family dynamics in ancient cultures around the world.
 - Some scholars take a more psychological approach to the struggle between twin brothers. They argue that twins in mythology represent the dualistic nature of human beings. The struggles between Romulus and Remus symbolize our own internal conflicts, the fact that we are constantly at war with ourselves. Disturbingly, the myth also suggests that we can't escape this internal conflict; one side will ultimately triumph over the other.
- Rome's founding story also includes another element common in origin mythologies: a miracle. In some versions of the myth, Romulus and Remus are conceived miraculously—the sons of a god and a virgin. In addition, they are saved largely by the intervention of the Tiber River and the care of a she-wolf. This miracle motif is found in other myth traditions, most obviously in the biblical story

of Moses. In all these stories, events conspire to restore the young leader to his rightful place in the social world, and from that point, he takes on the leadership role that he was always meant to assume.

- Some versions of the Romulus and Remus myth also include heavenly events, meant to be read as signs confirming their importance. For example, the poet Antimachus is said to have observed a solar eclipse at the exact time that Romulus started to build Rome's walls. In addition, Romulus allegedly disappeared during a solar eclipse. We see similar heavenly signs in biblical mythology, such as the star marking the birthplace of Christ. In origins mythology, heavenly signs prove that someone is special.
- These mythic elements work together to highlight the significance of a story, elevating it from a mere story or record of history to cosmic status, with important implications for the listener. The Romulus and Remus myth invests Rome with special status, suggesting that its establishment and success occurred against tremendous odds and by the intervention of the gods. As a result, Rome deserves the power it wields over others.
- The Romulus and Remus myth is a story of origins rather than a creation story. Creation stories generally describe the creation of the universe and are enormous in scope. Origins stories, in contrast, describe the origins of specific places and peoples and are much narrower.
 - Interestingly, Rome doesn't have a distinct creation story. For all intents and purposes, the Romans simply adopted the Greek version of creation, but they didn't appropriate a Greek story to explain the origins of Rome itself.
 - The pride and joy of the Roman Empire was the city of Rome—its culture and the military, governmental, and social structures that it developed. The fact that Rome developed its own mythology to explain these structures signals what the Romans valued: Rome itself far outweighed the rest of the world in importance.

Suggested Reading

Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 1: *A History*.

Miles, *Livy*.

Warrior, *The History of Rome*.

Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome*.

———, *Remus*.

Questions to Consider

1. What elements of the Romulus and Remus story seem surprising as a cultural “origins” story? Take a moment to think what these elements might contribute to Rome’s portrayal of itself to conquered territories.
2. How are origins stories different from creation/cosmogony stories? How are they similar? What contemporary origins stories can you think of?

Roman Heroes and Traitors

Lecture 8

Aeneas is a minor figure in Greek mythology, but in Rome, his story was recorded in several texts, most prominently, Virgil's *Aeneid*. This creation is both a literary work comparable to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and a national story, linking Rome's founding to Aeneas. Books I–VI describe Aeneas's travels after the Trojan War. Books VII–XII describe the war he fought to settle the Trojan exiles in Latium, the region in central-western Italy where Rome was eventually founded. Scholars have noted that the style, structure, and some of the content of the *Aeneid* are reminiscent of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It's clear that Virgil was consciously trying to rival Homer with his own epic.

Opening of the *Aeneid*

- In Book I of the *Aeneid*, we learn that the goddess Juno (the Roman equivalent of Hera) has been attempting to keep the Trojans from their destiny: the founding of a great people in Latium. Fortunately, Neptune (the Roman Poseidon) thwarts Juno's attempts to destroy the remaining Trojans fleeing after their defeat by the Greeks, and eventually, Aeneas and his men are brought safely to the Libyan coast. Venus (the Roman Aphrodite) speaks on Aeneas's behalf, and her father, Jupiter (the Roman Zeus), reassures her that Aeneas will survive, and his descendants will rule.
- By the end of Book I, Aeneas has found his way to the city of Carthage and met its queen, Dido, who urges him to tell the story of his adventures. This sets the stage for the full tale of Aeneas and his men, which we hear in Book II.
- In Book II, Aeneas becomes the narrator, telling the story of the defeat of the Trojans and explaining why he is on a journey to Italy. Aeneas begins with the story of the Trojan Horse and the subsequent defeat of the Trojans by the Greeks.

- Thousands of Trojan warriors died, and Aeneas and his party survive only because of miraculous intervention. The ghost of Hector, a slaughtered Trojan prince, comes to Aeneas in a dream and warns him to escape just as the final battle with the Greeks is beginning. As a loyal soldier, Aeneas first pledges to continue the fight, but when he sees that victory is impossible, he flees with his son and his father.
- After leaving Troy, Aeneas tries to return to rescue his wife, not knowing at first that she has been killed. His wife's ghost then appears and tells him to leave Troy. She also tells him that he is destined to found a new city in the west.
- From the beginning, we have the hallmarks of a classic hero story. First, Aeneas is the son of a goddess, Venus. He is also portrayed as loyal and brave in the face of danger, only leaving the battle when he receives miraculous visions that force him to go. In addition, the ghosts that appear to him—Hector and Aeneas's wife—both hint that he has an important destiny to fulfill.
 - There are some differences, however, between Aeneas and the Greek heroes. The Greek heroes, such as Herakles and Odysseus, displayed superhuman physical abilities and a heightened level of ingenuity. Aeneas and other Roman heroes lack these special abilities.
 - The Romans seem to have been more interested in fully human heroes, men who could serve as role models for contemporary readers.
- When Aeneas finally leaves Troy, he carries his aged father on his back and leads a band of refugees. From this point forward, he is the leader of a refugee community, seeking a new home in a far-off land.

Travels in the Mediterranean

- Once Aeneas leaves Troy, he builds a fleet of ships and leads the Trojan survivors on journeys around the Mediterranean in search of their destined home. After a stop on Crete, the travelers journey

to Buthrotum, a city in modern-day Albania. There, Aeneas meets one of the sons of King Priam, the former king of Troy. This son prophesies that Aeneas will found a city in Italy and that his descendants will eventually rule the world.

- Aeneas leaves Buthrotum and begins to sail west toward Sicily. Unfortunately, his ship is caught by Charybdis, the deadly whirlpool that Odysseus avoided. Fortunately, Aeneas's ship is not destroyed, but it is thrown off course. Aeneas and his men end up in the land of the Cyclops and come across a sailor who had been left behind by Odysseus (known as Ulysses in Roman mythology). Aeneas and his men take this sailor with them when they escape from the Cyclops Polyphemus.
 - Here, Virgil lifts a storyline straight out of the *Odyssey* and trumps it. Unlike Odysseus, Aeneas manages to survive an encounter with Charybdis without losing any men. He also manages to avoid being taken captive by Polyphemus and rescues a sailor left behind by Odysseus.
 - Thus, in one story unit, the Roman hero Aeneas outperforms the Greek hero Odysseus three times.
- At this point, we return to the banquet in Carthage, the setting for the opening of Book II. Remember that Aeneas is being hosted by Queen Dido of Carthage. At the banquet, Aeneas's mother, Venus, works her magic to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas. But Jupiter and Mercury intervene to stop Aeneas from settling into a comfortable marriage. Aeneas ultimately leaves Carthage, reminding himself that he must fulfill his destiny as prophesied.

Descent to the Underworld

- Once in Italy, Aeneas holds funeral ceremonies for his father, who died during the journey to Carthage. For a moment, Aeneas becomes unsure of his future, but the spirit of his dead father tells him to travel to the underworld. In the underworld, Aeneas visits the spirit of his dead father and sees a vision of Rome in all its glory.

- Here again, we see a hallmark of hero mythology. Greek and Roman heroes, like heroes in many other traditions, travel to the underworld and return safely to the land of the living. During their time in the underworld, they experience a personal transformation that directs their efforts after they reemerge in the upper world. In other words, they return to the upper world empowered, with a sense of purpose and single-minded devotion to the task before them.
- As we saw earlier, Joseph Campbell interpreted these underworld stories as metaphors for our own personal journeys to mature adulthood. After a visit to the underworld, the Greek and Roman heroes take ownership of their journeys in a way they had not done previously. Campbell argues that they act as role models for us in this capacity, modeling adults taking ownership of their families and public responsibilities.

The End of Aeneas's Story

- In Books VII–XII, Aeneas arrives in Latium. Initially, he tries to avoid war, but eventually, he allies with the Tuscans against a local king, Turnus. The poem ends with a climactic battle between the wounded Aeneas and Turnus. The king begs for his life, and Aeneas considers sparing him, but then he sees that Turnus is wearing the sword-belt of Pallas, a young warrior who was like a son to Aeneas. The belt reminds Aeneas that Turnus killed Pallas earlier in the battle. Enraged, Aeneas stabs Turnus, and the poem ends abruptly, left unfinished.
- This last scene is a clear reference to Achilles's slaughter of Hector in the *Iliad* as "payback" for Hector's killing of Achilles's friend Patroclus. Once again, Virgil not only alludes to the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans, but he creates an opportunity for the Trojans to balance the scales, to offset one Greek act with a later Trojan act.
- The *Aeneid* ends with this dramatic story, although we don't know if this is how Virgil intended the poem to end. We know the rest of Aeneas's mythology from the writings of the Roman historian Livy,

who tells us that Aeneas ruled for a time and was granted immortality by Jupiter and transformed into a god when he died.

- From the very beginning of the *Aeneid*, it's clear that Aeneas's importance is not just as a hero but as a historic ancestor of the Roman people.
 - According to the myth, Rome would not exist without Aeneas. It's safe to say that Virgil had a political agenda in mind as he crafted the *Aeneid*. The poem states explicitly that Aeneas is the patriarch of Roman civilization, and Virgil seems to be propping up Rome's contemporary ruler, Augustus, by linking him to the story of Aeneas. Eventually, Aeneas became so important that future leaders of Rome tried to trace their own genealogies back to him.
 - The *Aeneid* also implies that the gods themselves wanted Rome to be established. Except for Juno, all the Roman gods protect and guide Aeneas on his journey to Italy. This divine approval validates not only Rome's existence but also its military conquests and political dominance over other countries.
 - Finally, the *Aeneid* sets the standard for Roman heroes, who are, above all, national heroes. Aeneas is nothing in Roman mythology if he is not the founder of Rome. His life is spared at Troy and many times afterward for one purpose only: to establish Rome. The fact that Roman heroes were national figures reflects a broader cultural value: the secondary status of the individual in relationship to the country. In other words, Roman citizens were first and foremost servants of Rome.



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Virgil declared the *Aeneid* unfinished at his death in 19 B.C.E. and expressed a wish that the manuscript be burned.

The Traitor Tarpeia

- The most famous traitors in Roman history are probably Cassius and Brutus, who plotted to assassinate Julius Caesar. But before Caesar, the most well-known Roman traitor was Tarpeia, said to have lived in the 8th century B.C.E., during the founding of Rome.
- According to legend, Tarpeia was the daughter of Spurius Tarpeius, a military commander in charge of the Roman citadel during the war with the Sabines. At one point, Tarpeia was sent outside the walls of the citadel to fetch water from a nearby spring. She approached the Sabine army and offered to open the citadel gates for them in exchange for “what they wore on their left arms.” Tarpeia thought that she was negotiating for their gold bracelets. The soldiers eagerly agreed, but when she unlocked the gates, they threw their heavy shields at her—shields that they carried on their left arms. Tarpeia was crushed to death.
- Once her betrayal was discovered, Tarpeia’s body was treated with disgrace. It was thrown off a cliff on the southern side of the Capitoline Hill. Over time, this summit became known as Tarpeian Rock, and traitors and murderers would be executed there.
- Aeneas and Tarpeia are flip sides of the same coin. Together, they emphasize the importance of serving Rome, and they offer inspirational and cautionary tales that testify unequivocally to Rome’s values.

Suggested Reading

Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*.

Putnam, *The Humanness of Heroes*.

———, *Virgil’s Aeneid*.

Virgil, *The Aeneid*.

Williams, *Aeneas and the Roman Hero*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the general hallmarks of a Roman hero? What are the general characteristics of a Roman traitor? How universal are these characteristics, and what traits seem particular to ancient Roman culture?
2. The Tarpeian Rock serves as an ongoing reminder of Tarpeia's betrayal. How is it useful to tie historic examples of heroism and betrayal to specific geographic locations?

The Mother Goddess in Rome and Beyond

Lecture 9

On a sweltering day in 204 B.C.E., a barge sailed up the Tiber River, carrying a meteoric stone that the Romans viewed as the incarnation of Cybele, the Great Mother Goddess. Suddenly, the ship caught on a sandbar, and for a moment, it seemed as if the goddess wouldn't make it to Rome. But Claudia Quinta, a matriarch of the city, prayed to the Great Mother to release the ship. Miraculously, the barge pulled free, and Claudia herself towed it to shore. From this story, the Romans came to believe that the Great Mother Goddess had freely chosen to come to Rome and would save their city from defeat in the Second Punic War.

Origins in Anatolia

- Cybele's origins have been traced back to Anatolia, roughly the area in which modern-day Turkey is situated. The oldest known image of a proto-Cybele figure is a nude female figurine of baked clay dated to the 6th millennium B.C.E. The woman appears to be calmly giving birth while seated on a throne, resting her hands on armrests shaped like feline heads. This figure, known as the Seated Woman of Catalhöyük is viewed as a classic Neolithic fertility goddess.
- Evidence indicates that the Great Mother continued as an object of worship in Asia Minor throughout the next several centuries. For example, archaeologists have associated a large rock carving found in Asia Minor with ancient mother goddess worship.
 - A gigantic seated female figure is carved into the rock just north of Mount Sipylus in the Aegean region of Turkey. The sculpture, which begins roughly 100 meters up from the ground and rises 8 to 10 meters high, is dated to the first half of the 6th century B.C.E.
 - This particular rock shrine was still an object of worship for the Magnesians, an ancient Greek community, as late as the 2nd century C.E.

Cybele in Greece

- Around the 6th century B.C.E., the Greek colonies extended into western Anatolia, and the Greeks absorbed the Anatolian mother goddess into their own mythological tradition. From the early 5th century B.C.E., the mother goddess came to be known as Cybele the Mother. In this period, she continued to be associated with mountains and wild animals, as well as fertility.
- Cybele was a divisive figure in Greece. Although many Greeks adopted her worship, others rejected her. Over time, she became associated with city walls as part of her protector function, but this was, in some cases, driven by fear as much as by adoration.
 - For example, the Athenians dedicated a structure to Cybele, but only because they believed that she had sent a plague on the city.
 - In general, Cybele was seen as a foreign goddess and was usually linked with the lower classes or to initiates who practiced a kind of frenetic worship. In this period, she was commonly associated with music, wine, and various forms of debauchery.
- The mythology of Cybele had been somewhat unformed before her arrival in Greece, but once there, it became fully developed.
 - In Greek mythology, Cybele was linked to Attis, a young male figure with roots in the religion of Phrygia, located in western-central Anatolia. In the Phrygian religion, Attis appeared as Cybele's consort, as a priest, or as a related but subordinate deity.
 - In Greek mythology about Cybele and Attis, Attis was Cybele's grandson, but she fell in love with him. She pursued Attis, even



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In images, Cybele is almost always accompanied by lions, either standing guard beside her or pulling her in a chariot.

when he was promised to be married to another. Eventually, Cybele drove Attis mad, and he castrated himself. Attis's future father-in-law castrated himself in sympathy, and these acts supposedly gave rise to the community of eunuchs who served Cybele at her cultic sites.

Cybele in Rome

- According to historical records, during the Second Punic War, in the late 3rd century B.C.E., omens seemed to indicate that Rome was about to experience catastrophic military defeat at the hands of Carthage. Desperate for relief, the Roman senators consulted the Sibylline Oracle, who declared that Rome could defeat Carthage if the city offered worship to the Great Mother Goddess. Roman priests determined that this referred to the Great Mother of the Phrygians and sought permission to worship her from the king of Pergamum.
- According to legend, the Great Mother came to Rome in the form of a black meteoric stone, and the stories about her dramatic arrival bolstered her status as a goddess. In addition, soon after the stone was brought to the city, Rome defeated Hannibal, Carthage's military leader. This sealed Rome's faith in the goddess. A temple was built for the Great Mother on the Palatine Hill, and an annual festival, the Megalesia, was established in her honor.
- The story of Cybele's dramatic barge ride into Rome was also seen as a validation of the social structure of Rome, particularly the power and prestige of the prominent families. Cybele's willingness to be led to shore by Claudia Quinta seemed to suggest that she would cooperate with Rome's leading families, signaling that the Great Mother's power would favor Rome's aristocracy.
- More broadly, the mythology surrounding the Great Mother Goddess supported the hierarchical social structure of Roman society, which involved a complex system of patronage governing social, political, and financial relationships. The Great Mother's very arrival in Rome involved supplication and response, a hallmark

of patronage. In this way, she reinforced existing Roman tradition and justified the dominance of the noble families.

Cybele in Roman Mythology

- Cybele took on much greater importance in Rome than she had ever held in Greek mythology. She became an unequivocally positive figure associated with Roman victory and dominance, and several stories developed around her.
- One Roman writer said that Cybele was exposed as a baby by her father, King Maeon, but she survived and was raised by leopards and other wild animals. Note the parallels here with Romulus and Remus: As children, Cybele and the twins were left to die of exposure, but they survived and were raised by animals. This ultimately led to the birth and survival of Rome. It's as if nature herself conspired to save Cybele, Romulus, and Remus in order to establish Rome.
- According to Roman mythology, as a young woman, Cybele took Attis as her lover, and her father became furious when she became pregnant with Attis's child. In one story, King Maeon executed Attis for sleeping with his daughter, and Cybele roamed the countryside in despair. The gods punished King Maeon and the Phrygians by sending a drought. In response, the Phrygian people buried Attis properly.
- According to the Roman poet Catullus, Attis was a Greek man who sailed to Phrygia out of love for Cybele. In an ecstatic moment, he castrated himself. In another version of the story, Attis falls in love with a Naiad, a water nymph, leading him to break his vow of faithfulness to Cybele. When Cybele finds out, she kills the Naiad. Overwhelmed with grief, Attis castrates himself. These variations on the theme of castration probably served as a mythological explanation for the eunuch priests who came from Phrygia in service to Cybele.
- Over time, the Romans seem to have domesticated Cybele. In Roman images, the lions and hawks that accompanied her in Asia

Minor disappeared, and Cybele's sexual relationship with Attis was allegorized. The Roman version of the Great Mother is a sedate, solitary, pious goddess. Roman historians describe her as the mother goddess of ancient Troy and an ancestral goddess of the Roman people themselves.

- Cybele even appears in the *Aeneid*, where Virgil presents her not only as Trojan but as the mother of Jupiter, king of the gods. Cybele comes to the aid of the Trojans, providing them with a grove of sacred trees to build a fleet of ships, and she convinces Jupiter to make these ships indestructible. These enchanted ships make it possible for Aeneas and his men to escape from Troy, thereby protecting the ancestors of Rome.
- Over time, the Romans rewrote their more recent history, as well. They began to describe Cybele's initial arrival as a "return" to Rome, claiming that the city was her true culture of origin. The Romans portrayed themselves as Cybele's descendants, exiled from her for millennia but eventually restored to their rightful relationship with the goddess. Gradually, Cybele even became linked with the imperial order and family.
- Cybele's transformation over the centuries represents a common dynamic in world mythology. Like many other mythical figures, she has roots that extend back millennia in human history. But Cybele is a kind of shape-shifter, maintaining her core mother goddess identity but surviving and traveling by adapting in form and function to new cultural settings.
 - The key to this adaptation is a delicate balance between change and continuity. As we've seen, the mother goddess of ancient Anatolia was markedly different from the Roman Cybele. The Anatolian goddess was a wild woman, associated with mountains, lions, and birds of prey. The Roman Cybele, by contrast, was sophisticated, urbane, and polished.
 - However, there is a clear thread of continuity that connects the Anatolian, Greek, and Roman mother goddesses. All these

figures were associated with fertility and, less obviously, with protection.

Other Mother Goddesses

- The oldest fertility figure discovered, the Venus of Willendorf, was found in Austria and dates to 24,000 to 22,000 B.C.E. We don't have any surviving mythology associated with this artifact, but her seeming association with fertility suggests that mother goddess mythology dates back 25,000 years in human history. Similar mother goddesses have been found in ancient Egypt, in old Celtic Europe, in Native and Mesoamerican mythologies, in Pacific Island communities, and in South and East Asia.
- Although each goddess has distinct features reflecting her individual cultural origins, certain elements seem virtually universal. Carl Jung included a mother figure among his archetypes, arguing that mother imagery was part of the collective unconscious. Jung also noted that these figures often exhibit a dual nature: nurturing and sympathetic on the one hand, seductive and sometimes terrifying on the other.
- One exception to the near universality of the mother goddess can be found in communities dominated by the Abrahamic religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although these traditions feature strong women, such as Sarah, the Virgin Mary, and Fatima, they are clearly dominated by male gods.
 - Scholars have offered many explanations for this, noting in particular that the Abrahamic traditions intentionally suppressed pagan and polytheistic traditions that featured powerful female deities.
 - Recently in the modern West, small groups within these dominant patriarchal traditions have tried to correct this problem. Often, they point to feminine qualities and even metaphors used to describe the Abrahamic male god. Other groups are reviving cults focused on mother goddesses that were suppressed or driven underground centuries ago.

Suggested Reading

Bremmer, *The Legend of Cybele's Arrival in Rome*.

Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*.

Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*.

Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the figure of Cybele evolve over time? What changed as she moved from culture to culture and what remained the same?
2. What other historical mother goddess figures can you think of? Are you aware of contemporary mother goddesses?

The Dagda's Harp and Other Celtic Myths

Lecture 10

According to Irish mythology, a giant warrior known as the Dagda once led the army of the Tuatha Dé Danann, a race of beings named after the goddess Danu. The Tuatha Dé Danann entered into battle with the Fomorians, one-armed, one-legged gods from under the sea. During this battle, the Fomorians stole the Dagda's harp, but he and his army traced it to enemy territory. The Dagda then played a chord on the harp that reduced the Fomorians to tears, followed by a chord that caused them to laugh uncontrollably. He played a final chord that caused the Fomorians to fall asleep, and soon thereafter, the Tuatha Dé Danann triumphed over them, saving Ireland "from death and destruction."

Celtic Mythological History

- The Celts were not a unified people but a loose association of several tribal groups, connected by language and ethnic elements, spread across England and Ireland. The true Celtic period began about 800 to 700 B.C.E. By the 1st century C.E., with the expansion of Christianity, Celtic tradition was generally confined to Ireland.
- Much of Celtic mythology in Britain was destroyed or rewritten by the Romans when they colonized the British Isles and by Christianity when it became the dominant religious force in Europe. However, Irish mythology was better preserved. Specifically, ancient Christian monks, sent to missionize the Celts, preserved the Celtic myths.
- The stories we know are contained in several manuscripts that date back to the 12th through the 14th centuries but claim to describe events that occurred many centuries earlier. For example, The Book of the Dun Cow contains numerous myths, recorded on a vellum manuscript in the 1100s. The collection includes a history of a series of invasions of Ireland, genealogies and adventure stories about warrior heroes and kings, romances and tragedies, and legends about otherworldly beings.

- Ancient Irish mythology is dominated by stories about invasions, the most famous of which are said to have occurred after a great flood.
 - According to tradition, after the flood, Ireland was occupied by an ancient race of dark and powerful beings known as the Fomorians, who predated the gods. The Fomorians survived a number of invasions by other groups, always defeating their enemies, until the Tuatha Dé Danann arrived.
 - The Tuatha Dé Danann were a race of supernatural beings with magical abilities. Most scholars believe that the Tuatha Dé Danann were ancient kings and queens who were eventually elevated to godlike status. It's also possible that they are based on the gods worshipped by ancient Gaelic people before Christianity came to dominate as a religion. According to mythological history, the Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland “in dark clouds,” wielding magical powers.
 - Eventually, the Tuatha Dé Danann defeated the Fomorians and drove them into the sea, but the Tuatha Dé Danann were defeated by another group, the Milesians, who can be thought of as the first human beings. In the terms for peace with the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Milesians were given the right to live above the earth, while the Tuatha Dé Danann were restricted to life in the ground. As a result, the very land of Ireland is said to be inhabited by otherworldly beings.

Cú Chulainn

- The stories that grow out of this mythological history focus to a large extent on heroes, and among the best known of these heroes is Cú Chulainn. The mythology of this figure covers his entire lifetime, using every event as an opportunity to display his physical strength and character. He is the grandson of the king of Ulster and nephew of King Conor.
- As a child, Cú Chulainn learns that any man who takes up arms on a specific day will be destined for greatness as a warrior. Eagerly, Cú Chulainn takes hold of the greatest weapons available, ignoring

the second half of the prophecy: Whoever takes up arms on that day will become a famous warrior, but he will also die young. Cú Chulainn fulfills both of these prophecies.

- In addition to great strength and skill with weapons, Cú Chulainn is known for great moral character. In one story, *The Training of Cú Chulainn*, he saves a group of maidens from being taken as tribute by a wild band of Fomorians. In another story, in self-defense, he kills a ferocious guard dog that was stationed to protect a city, then volunteers to take its place until a new guard dog can be trained.
- Several stories highlight Cú Chulainn's honor. In one story, he competes in a contest, defeating two other men. However, the two other men, angry at their loss, challenge his victory. Cú Roí, the host of the event and a wizard, takes on a disguise and invites each competitor to chop off his head if they agree to allow him to do the same to them.
 - When the competitors cut off Cú Roí's head, he simply picks it up and walks away. When he returns and demands that they live up to the agreement, the competitors flee.
 - Cú Chulainn, by contrast, behaves honorably. He kneels down and bares his neck. Cú Roí spares his life, declaring him the champion.
- Cú Chulainn is a moral man, but he's not flawless, and he experiences personal loss. Irish mythology teaches that he killed his own son unwittingly, mistaking him for an intruder. Cú Chulainn is left in despair.
- Because of his immense physical strength, Cú Chulainn cannot be killed by sheer force, but his enemies eliminate him by taking advantage of his commitment to honor.
 - Like most heroes, Cú Chulainn lives with one *taboo*, one forbidden action: eating dog meat. But an old woman, prompted by Cú Chulainn's enemies, invites him to eat a meal

made with dog meat. Because the laws of Irish hospitality prevent Cú Chulainn from turning down the food, he eats it.

- This act weakens him, and he becomes vulnerable. He is then attacked by Lugaid, who fatally wounds him with a magical spear or sword, although it takes multiple wounds and decapitation to finally kill Cú Chulainn.

Lugh

- Cú Chulainn was in the Ulster family lineage, but other lineages in Irish history also have their own hero figures, including Lugh, the hero of the Fomorians.
 - According to one well-known story about Lugh, he came to Tara to try to join the army of the Tuatha Dé Danann, but the doorkeeper for the king of Tara would not allow him to do so unless he could demonstrate that he had a skill no other warrior possessed.
 - Lugh described his abilities as a swordsman, blacksmith, craftsman, poet, harpist, and strongman, but after each description, the doorkeeper declared that Tara already had another warrior who possessed that skill. Finally, Lugh asked if any man in the king's army could offer all those skills combined, and the doorkeeper let him in.
- Although Lugh's mother was from a royal Fomorian family, Lugh ultimately becomes the commander of the Tuatha Dé Danann army and leads these forces in battle against the Fomorians. He kills the Fomorian commander but spares another warrior's life on the condition that this warrior teaches the Tuatha Dé Danann the skills of plowing, sowing, and reaping. Thus, Lugh is credited with bringing agricultural skills to the ancient Irish.

Brigid

- Although not heroic in the strict sense, the figure known as Brigid provides a good example of how women figure in Irish mythology. Brigid was another member of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the daughter

of the Dagda himself, and the wife of Bres, the Fomorian who taught the Tuatha Dé Danann how to plant and reap.

- In a famous legend, Brigid is said to have invented *keening*, a combination of weeping and singing that accompanies mourning. Brigid first keened upon the death of her son Ruadán, who was killed while acting as a spy for the Fomorians. She is also said to be the goddess of all things high and lofty, including both high places and high arts, such as poetry, medicine, and skill in warfare.
- Like other female figures, Brigid's importance comes from her birth and marriage into a royal family, her magical abilities, and her association with high culture. And like other prominent Celtic women and goddesses, she was transformed into a saint when the Christian Church gained power in Ireland.

Nonhuman Characters in Celtic Mythology

- The Tuatha Dé Danann are said to have brought four magical items with them to Ireland from their travels in the northern isles: the Stone of Fal, the Spear of Lugh, the Dagda's magical cauldron, and the Sword of Nuada.
 - The Stone of Fal is a real stone, located on the Hill of Tara in east-central Ireland. It's also known as the Coronation Stone and was the site where all the kings of Ireland were crowned until 500 C.E. According to legend, when the rightful king of Ireland placed his foot on this stone, it would cry out with joy. This image of an animated stone reflects the feeling that the land of Ireland itself was invested in bringing rightful kings to power.
 - The second treasure of the Tuatha Dé Danann is the Spear of Lugh. According to one tradition, the tip of this spear had to be kept in a pail of water to keep it from spontaneously igniting into fire. In another tradition, the spear is described as alive and bloodthirsty.
 - The third treasure was the Dagda's magical cauldron, known as the Undry, or the Cauldron of Plenty. This cauldron would

provide food and drink to satisfy the hunger and thirst of a worthy person.

- Finally, the fourth treasure was the Sword of Light, said to have belonged to Nuada, king of the Tuatha Dé Danann before they came to Ireland. The Sword of Light glowed, and no man could defeat it.
- The interest in magic and superhuman powers is also reflected in the Irish mythological fascination with otherworldly beings, known as *sidhe*, “people of the mounds.” One popular explanation for the origins of these beings is that they are the descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann, living in the other world to which they were banished after the defeat by the Milesians centuries ago.
- A final important element in Irish mythology is the number 3, which appears repeatedly in the stories and is associated with several mythological characters, including Brigid. It seems that in ancient Irish thought, the number 3 was considered magical. Interestingly, when Christians came to Ireland, one of the doctrines they taught was the doctrine of the Trinity: God in the form of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is thought that one of the reasons Christianity was received in Ireland was because Irish mythology had embraced the power of the number 3 for centuries.



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The triple spiral appears on the oldest known Celtic stone carvings and is found at ancient burial sites.

Suggested Reading

Gantz, trans., *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*.

Macbain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*.

MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*.

Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*.

Questions to Consider

1. How is the landscape of Ireland tied in with Celtic mythology?
2. What key themes do you find running throughout the Celtic myths discussed in this lecture?

Norse Tales of Odin and Thor

Lecture 11

Norse mythology is often dark and brooding, reflecting the harsh living conditions of the ancient Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. It originated in the pre-Christian era and was transmitted by folktales, extended sagas in prose and poetic form, and runic inscriptions. It was a part of the culture of the Vikings, who brought it with them on their European invasions. This oral literature was written down sometime between the 11th and 14th centuries C.E. in a compilation known as *The Poetic Edda*. In this lecture, we'll focus on the two most well-known Norse gods, Odin and Thor.

Odin as All-Father and the Wanderer

- Odin was known as the Father God or the All-Father. The 13th-century writer Snorri Sturluson, arguably the most important source of Norse mythology for us today, wrote, "Odin is the highest and oldest of the gods. He rules all things, and no matter how mighty the other gods may be, they all serve him as children do their father." Because of his importance, stories of Odin run throughout Norse mythology.
- For example, one story tells of Odin's involvement in the building of a wall around Asgard, the city of the gods, to protect the city from the giants.
 - Odin made a deal with a giant known simply as the Stranger to build an indestructible wall that would guarantee the gods' safety. But the Stranger demanded that the gods pledge upfront to give him whatever he asked in return if he completed the wall down to the last stone in a single year. Odin agreed to this deal.
 - However, once the wall was begun, Odin demanded to know the cost. The Stranger declared, "The reward I will ask is the Sun, and the Moon, and the goddess Freya for my wife." This was a much higher price than the gods had planned to pay.

The Stranger was, in essence, asking for control over the earth and the heavens, in addition to Freya, a powerful goddess and Odin's wife.

- Odin asked Loki, a master of deception in Norse mythology, for help in dealing with the Stranger. Loki prevented the giant from placing the last stone in the wall on time, and when the Stranger came before the gods, Odin ordered him to leave without payment.
- All the other gods celebrated the fact that they had managed to get out of their deal with the Stranger, but Odin was saddened that a pledge had been broken. In his heart, he believed that Asgard, the city of the gods, was permanently weakened because it had been built with deception.
- Odin takes on several roles in Norse mythology, including that of a mystic, constantly searching for wisdom. This meditative side to Odin is not found in other father gods, such as Zeus. It's also different from the Abrahamic God, who is all-knowing and has no need to search for wisdom. At times, this mystical Odin takes on the persona of a poor wanderer. He walks among humans, wearing a cloak and a battered hat.
 - In one well-known wanderer episode, Odin travels to the Well of Wisdom, which is guarded by Mimir. On his journey, he seeks out Vafthrudner, the wisest of the giants, who tries to prevent Odin from going any further. The giant doesn't recognize Odin in his wanderer form; he challenges Odin to a test involving three riddles, which Odin passes. Odin then asks what Mimir will ask for in return for a drink from the Well of Wisdom. The giant declares, "He will ask for your right eye."
 - When Odin reaches the well, as the giant had predicted, Mimir demands a terrible price for a drink from the well, but Odin agrees. Mimir takes a great horn, fills it with water from the well, and gives it to Odin, who drinks. Immediately, Odin sees the future of both humanity and the gods. He sees sorrow and

pain and their causes. He also learns how humanity and the gods can bear the deep suffering to come and how they will be able to defeat the forces of evil in the last battle.

- Then Odin keeps his promise to pay the price of wisdom. He uses his right hand to pluck out his own right eye. He gave his eye to Mimir and simply drew the brim of his hat over his face. Mimir cast Odin's eye into the Well of Wisdom, where it sank. But from that day forward, a light shone from the eye up to the surface of the water, a sign to all that Odin had paid the full price for his wisdom.
- The theme of this story—that the search for wisdom comes at a high personal cost—is a common one in world mythology. In this case, the myth suggests that Odin sacrificed a lower form of sight—mere physical vision—to obtain a superior form of “seeing”: the internal insight that comes with true wisdom.
- Throughout the stories, Odin demonstrates a commitment to righteousness and justice, which of course reflects ancient Norse values. The world in which these stories evolved was led by warrior-kings, who ruled by military might and wielded immense power over the people under them. The figure of Odin, in his teaching and by his own example, highlights the fact that leaders should not take advantage of others; for the good of society, they must be concerned with justice, not simply with their own power.

Odin as a Shaman

- Odin also takes the form of a shaman figure, foretelling the future and inserting himself between his people and the cosmic world. In a famous story, Odin suspends his body for nine nights on Yggdrasill, the world tree. Yggdrasill is the axis for three worlds: the world of the gods, the world of men and giants, and the world of the dead. When Odin hangs himself on this tree, he literally suspends himself across these three worlds, physically stretching into all three of the known worlds.

- In the poem that describes this event, Odin describes his own hanging as a self-sacrifice. He declares, “I hung from that windswept tree; for nine long nights I hung there. I was pierced by a spear. I was an offering to Odin, an offering from myself to myself.”
- For centuries, scholars used this passage to compare Odin to Christ, who is also described as “hung from a tree” in reference to the crucifixion. But on closer examination, there are some key differences.
 - Odin’s death isn’t truly comparable to Jesus’s death because Odin isn’t atoning for anyone’s sins. Odin’s death is better understood as a shamanistic act designed to prompt a mystical experience.
 - Later in the poem, Odin describes a kind of mystical frenzy he experienced while hanging from the tree: “No one came to comfort me with bread, no one revived me with a drink from a horn. I gazed at the worlds below, I seized the runes, shrieking I seized them. Then I fell back.”
- The episode continues with Odin saying that his uncle taught him “nine powerful songs.” Rather than sacrificing himself on behalf of others, Odin thus claims that he gained wisdom for himself. Odin also claims that he learned 18 “charms,” or magic spells, by drinking mead from the cauldron Odrorir. Note the importance of the number 9 here, which typically represents completion or wholeness in world mythologies.
- Although Odin is powerful, he’s not invincible and, like most of the Norse gods, eventually dies. This death takes place during Ragnarök, the battle that ends the age of the gods. In this battle, Odin dies in combat with Fenrir, a mighty wolf and leader of the powers of evil. But Odin’s death is avenged by Vidar, one of his sons.
 - After Ragnarök, a new age begins, an age of humans, which was made possible in part because of Odin’s willingness to die in the final battle.

- Odin's last words are powerful ones. He declares: "We will give our lives and let our world be destroyed, but we will fight so that the evil powers die along with us." This line seems to capture Odin's personality in a nutshell. He is a warrior, but he is always driven by the desire to destroy evil. He is willing to give up his own life to overcome evil, and as the All-Father, he leads the other gods in this act, as well.

Thor

- Perhaps the most famous Norse god to modern audiences is Thor, the hammer-wielding god of sky and thunder. According to the mythology, Thor is the son of Odin and the earth goddess Fyorgyn and was married to Sif, a goddess with beautiful golden hair. Thor is second only to Odin in the Norse pantheon.
- While Odin was the god of war, Thor was the god of order. He's described as a fierce warrior, with red hair and a red beard. He uses his strength to keep the gods in line and to protect both gods and humans from the giants and other evil beings.
 - In one famous story, Thor is challenged by a giant king to wrestle his pet cat. Thor, insulted to be challenged to take on a mere pet, first tries to lift the cat with one hand. Surprisingly, the cat, whose back reaches high above Thor's head, easily keeps all four paws on the ground. Thor redoubles his efforts. Finally, using all of his strength, he is able to force the cat to lift one paw from the earth.
 - Thor is angered by this, but eventually, the giant king reveals that the cat is no ordinary pet. Instead, it is Jörmungand, the



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Some scholars have argued that at times, Thor was more important in Scandinavian culture than Odin.

serpent who sits coiled at the base of the cosmic tree in the realm of the dead. This contest between Jörmungand and Thor foreshadows the ultimate battle between their communities, the final battle of Ragnarök.

- Of course, Thor is known for wielding his hammer, named Mjøltnir. When the dwarf who forged the hammer presented it to Thor, he claimed that nothing could ever break it; that it could never be lost; and that if Thor needed to hide the hammer, it would become small enough to fit in his pocket.
- Like Odin, Thor dies at the battle of Ragnarök. In a famous poem called Völuspá, Thor's death is foretold. He comes face to face with Jörmungand again, but before Thor kills Jörmungand, the serpent manages to bite the god. Mjøltnir, however, survives this ultimate battle and, according to Norse mythology, is inherited by Thor's sons in the next age.

Suggested Reading

Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*.

Colum, *The Children of Odin*.

Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*.

Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*.

Lindow, *Norse Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. Many people find the figure of Loki difficult to pin down. What are his key qualities, and can you think of figures similar to him in other mythological traditions?
2. Norse mythology includes a great deal of humor and comic action. What does this suggest to you about the culture out of which it arose?

Hammers, Rings, and Other Norse Magic

Lecture 12

The story of the crafting of Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, by the dwarf craftsman Sindri captures the personalities of certain gods and dwarves and highlights the importance of special items in Norse mythology, carefully crafted items recognized as powerful or magical. Many of the Norse gods' possessions have names and stories behind them, as well as magical powers, and Norse mythology isn't alone in this. The Greeks, Romans, Celts, and others also told stories of powerful objects, usually associated with the gods or great heroes. In this lecture, we'll look at Thor's hammer and some of the other magical items of Norse mythology.

The Crafting of Mjolnir

- In ancient times, the dwarf craftsman Brokkr was tricked into making a bet with Loki, who had declared that that Brokkr's brother, the dwarf craftsman Sindri, could not forge anything more wondrous than items made by the dwarf sons of Ivaldi. These craftsmen had fashioned *Skidbladnir*, the swift ship belonging to the god Freyr, and Gungnir, the powerful spear of Odin. Brokkr wagered his own head that his brother Sindri could make items even more impressive than these. Loki accepted the bet, wagering his own head in return.
- When Brokkr told Sindri about the bet, Sindri became nervous, not sure that he could match the truly wondrous items made by the sons of Ivaldi.



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In Norse mythology, magical items, such as Thor's hammer, don't belong to ordinary people; they are the prized possessions of great kings, warriors, and heroes.

- At first, Sindri made a golden boar that could fly through the air. Brokkr was confident that the magic boar outshone the items made by the other dwarves, but because Sindri wasn't sure, he decided to make an additional item.
- Sindri then made a golden arm ring for Odin. Every ninth day, the ring would drip eight more golden arm rings. Sindri named this ring Draupnir, meaning “the dripper.” Again, Brokkr was confident that this item outshone the items made by the dwarf sons of Ivaldi, but Sindri decided to make one more thing.
- Finally, Sindri made the hammer Mjolnir, which had a shortened handle but could not be destroyed. This time, Sindri was satisfied with his work. The golden boar was given to Freyr; the hammer was given to Thor; and Draupnir, the arm ring, was given to Odin.
- The gods declared that Sindri had won the bet, and Brokkr turned to the trickster Loki, demanding his head. Loki leaned over, and Brokkr prepared his sword to strike, but then Loki surprised him. “I promised to yield my head,” Loki declared, “but I promised not one square inch of my neck. Take my head off if you can, but leave all of my neck.”
- Faced with this impossible requirement, Brokkr, of course, became enraged, and he turned to the gods for help. But Odin declared that Loki, even if he had been deceitful, had bested Brokkr in this bet. As a last resort, Brokkr asked to be able to sew Loki's lips together so that he could not lie or deceive with his words any longer. Odin granted this wish, and Brokkr sewed Loki's lips together, silencing him for a time.

Draupnir

- The story of Draupnir is an extended one in Norse mythology.
 - Odin wore Draupnir until his son Balder was killed, even though Balder was supposed to be invincible. According to one Norse tradition, Balder was vulnerable to only one living thing:

mistletoe. Loki fashioned a spear from a mistletoe branch and tricked Balder's blind brother into hurling it at his brother, killing Balder. As a mark of his grief, Odin placed Draupnir on Balder's funeral pyre, and it traveled with Balder to the realm of the dead.

- Odin sent the god Hermod, another one of his sons, to plead with Hel, the goddess of death, to release Balder and return him back to life. The goddess agreed, but only if every living creature on earth would mourn for Balder. Loki took the form of an old woman and refused to grieve. As a result, Balder was confined to the realm of the dead, but he gave the golden arm ring to Hermod as a token of love to return to Odin.
- In this story, Draupnir doesn't have any function other than as a physical memento of the love between Odin and Balder, a love that transcends death.
- Another story about Draupnir is told in the "Sayings of Skírmir," a poetic drama included in the *Poetic Edda*.
 - According to this story, one day, the god Freyr looked down into the realm of the giants and saw a beautiful girl, Gerd, the daughter of a giant. Freyr immediately fell in love, but he despaired because he believed he could never have the girl.
 - Freyr's servant, Skírmir, discovered why his master was so depressed and set out to win Gerd's heart for Freyr. He journeyed to the land of the giants and wooed her with rare gifts, including Draupnir, on Freyr's behalf. Unfortunately, Gerd refused the gifts, and eventually, Skírmir had to resort to threats to obtain the girl for his master.

Andvaranaut

- Norse mythology also includes a cycle of stories focused on another ring, Andvaranaut ("Andvari's gift"). In this case, however, the ring has great power. The stories focused on this ring are told in the *Volsunga Saga*, which dates to the late 13th century and describes the rise and fall of the Volsung clan.

- Near the beginning of the epic, the patriarch, Sigmund, is killed in battle, and his widow gives birth to his son, Sigurd. The widow is then remarried to King Alf, who sends Sigurd away to be raised by Regin, although Sigurd is aware of his true parentage.
- Regin is a greedy man, and he tries to use Sigurd to acquire wealth. Regin tells Sigurd his own family story in order to draw him in. Regin's father was a magician named Hreidmar, and he had two brothers, Ótr and Fafnir, both of whom were able to take on animal forms.
 - One day Loki killed Ótr, believing that he was an otter. When Ótr's father and brothers discovered the death, they demanded restitution from Loki: He must cover the entire otter pelt with gold so that not a single hair remained exposed.
 - To fulfill this demand, Loki needed gold. He caught Andvari, a dwarf who had accumulated great wealth with the help of a magical ring, known as Andvaranaut. The dwarf agreed to give up all his gold, but Loki took the ring, as well. As punishment, Andvari cursed the ring so that anyone who owned it would die.
 - When Loki was forced to give the ring to Ótr's family, it began to work its curse. Eventually, Fafnir became obsessed with the ring and murdered his father for it. He then transformed himself into a dragon to protect the ring and refused to share it with his other brother, Regin.
- Upon hearing this story, Sigurd agrees to kill the dragon and obtain the ring for Regin, but he learns that Regin plans to kill him in the process. After Sigurd kills the dragon, he retrieves the ring and beheads Regin.
- At this point, Sigurd is freed from his evil foster father, armed with his true father's restored sword, and entrusted with Andvari's ring. He sets forth as a grown man, a successful warrior, and the son of a king. He rescues Brunhild, a shieldmaiden, with whom he falls in

love. Brunhild pledges her love to Sigurd, but she prophesies that they will never marry.

- Sigurd then continues his travels and ends up at the court of King Gjuki and his wife, Grimhild, a sorceress. Grimhild finds out that Sigurd has Andvari's ring, and she wants it for herself. She also wants Sigurd to marry her daughter Gudrun and tricks him into doing so. Later, she tricks Brunhild into marrying one of her sons.
- Eventually, Brunhild discovers the deception, but at that point, it is too late for her to marry Sigurd. Various family members turn on one another. Sigurd is killed by one of his wife's brothers, and Brunhild, devastated by grief, builds a funeral pyre for Sigurd and kills herself in the flames. We are never told what happens to the ring.

Continuing Influences of Norse Mythology

- The Norse stories of the ring have fascinated audiences for thousands of years. Richard Wagner, for example, based his opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* on this story. In addition, much of the material from the Draupnir and Andvari myth traditions appears in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien.
- What makes Norse mythology so captivating today? Part of the answer is that it touches on basic human desires for wealth, love, power, sex, and contact with the magical and the transcendent.
 - Norse mythology originated in a harsh world, where local tribes fought for control of land and resources. Christianity arrived relatively late to these lands, securing a foothold in the 10th and 11th centuries. With Christianity's arrival, local practices and mythologies centered on Norse gods were prohibited.
 - The manuscripts that survive today may have been written to document lost local traditions. These manuscripts celebrate gods, heroes, and magical beings, who battle giants, dragons, and other dark forces. The details may differ, but stories of goodness struggling against evil, for hammers or rings that

can provide magical protection, still speak to audiences a millennium later.

- In ancient mythologies, personal items often become characters, and in some cases, they drive an entire storyline. There really is no Volsunga Saga without Andvari's ring. There's no Jason without his Golden Fleece or the Dagda without his harp. It's obvious that "things" with magical powers still fascinate us, despite the fact that we claim to live in a rational, empirical age. What kind of hold do rings and other magical things have on us?
 - The answer probably is that certain things become part of us; they reflect who we are and can be displayed to the world or shared with loved ones. The arm ring Draupnir dripped golden rings every nine days, but the stories about this magical ring don't focus on the gold. Instead, they focus on the ring as a deeply personal item, given from father to son and returned again.
 - This is part of the reason that certain cultures bury personal items with their dead—not for utility's sake, but because the items are intimately bound up with the individuals who used them. Mythmakers understood the power of such objects to connect us with the past.

Suggested Reading

Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*.

Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*.

Mortensen, *A Handbook of Norse Mythology*.

O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*.

Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*.

Questions to Consider

1. Norse mythology includes lots of mythical characters, such as giants, dwarves, and so on. What might the presence of these characters reflect about ancient Norse culture?
2. Riddles and test questions are commonplace in Norse mythology; what function do they serve in great mythologies?

**Great Mythologies of the World:
The Middle East and South Asia**

Great Mythologies of the World: The Middle East and South Asia

Scope:

The word *mythology* tends to evoke traditions in the Western canon, especially the Greek and Roman traditions. But cultural communities from all around the globe offer rich bodies of mythology. In this section of the course, we'll look at the great myths of ancient Babylon, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, the Persian Empire, and West and South Asia. As in the West, these mythologies infused literary, musical, theatrical, and visual art forms, and they reflected the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they were shaped. We'll also see, however, that non-Western mythological traditions display distinctive characteristics. These myth traditions rarely make a sharp distinction between the mundane world and the transcendent divine world—characters frequently navigate these worlds simultaneously, dealing with familiar, everyday problems, along with supernatural beings and elements. Also, the landscape—and making one's way through the landscape—often figures prominently in these traditions. Natural elements have power and significance; in many cases, they figure as characters in Middle Eastern and South Asian stories.

These mythologies also spend a great deal of time exploring the relationship between wilderness and civilization, between order and chaos, between the realms dominated by humans and those that elude human control. They ask such questions as: Who's civilized? Who's wild? And what do those designations mean in the grand scheme of things?

Finally, the great non-Western mythologies emphasize social roles, including those determined by gender. Of course, all the world's mythologies explore gender and power, but the non-Western story traditions play with the tensions created by gender and socially determined roles in a surprising variety of ways.

Although the ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and South Asian mythologies introduce many of us to new worlds, they also underscore

the common concerns humanity has shared over the millennia. Gilgamesh, king of the world's greatest city, learns about friendship and grieves for his own mortality. Ra feels unappreciated by the human beings he rules, and because of this feeling of neglect, he acts rashly, nearly wiping out the entire human race. Job asserts his righteousness repeatedly, only to discover that upright behavior is no bulwark against suffering. And Scheherazade shows us the power of good storytelling for the human psyche.

In this section of the course, we'll also note some common themes and motifs across the Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and South Asian traditions. We'll review several creation stories and discuss why many cultures pass on multiple stories about the origins of the world and humanity. We'll also talk about the common motifs of flood and fire, which feature repeatedly in stories about the beginning and end of the world. Finally, we'll examine the seemingly contradictory nature of myth itself. How do myths contribute to—in addition to reflecting—cultural settings? How are they universal? We'll see that the great mythologies are time-bound and timeless, rich in cultural detail and common human experience. ■

The World's Oldest Myth: Gilgamesh

Lecture 13

In this section of the course, we'll explore mythologies from ancient Mesopotamia, the Middle East, and South Asia. These myth traditions often have a different understanding of the nature of the divine than the myth traditions of the West; there's more fluidity between "normal" experience and the transcendent or divine world. In addition, ideas about nature in general and the land in particular are distinctive in these myths, and there is tension in the relationship between the wilderness and civilization. Finally, these myths place a heavy emphasis on social roles, including those determined by gender and by power. The Epic of Gilgamesh will serve as our introduction to this body of Mesopotamian, Middle Eastern, and South Asian mythology.

Background to Gilgamesh

- The ancient Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest story in the world, and interestingly, key elements of the myth seem to be grounded in history. The epic opens in Uruk, which was an important city in the ancient Near East, on the edge of the Euphrates River. At its height, Uruk probably had 50,000 to 80,000 residents.
- From ancient records, we also know that a king named Gilgamesh ruled Uruk in the 27th century B.C.E. However, it's probably best to understand the character of Gilgamesh in the epic as a kind of caricature of a powerful king—a stock narrative character—rather than as an actual historic figure.
- Further, the story refers to multiple gods, reflecting the fact that the ancient Mesopotamians were polytheists. The story captures the contemporary understanding of the gods as beings with supernatural powers who also exhibited some human idiosyncrasies and flaws.
- Throughout this course, we should keep a broad understanding of the word *myth* in mind, without making sharp distinctions among

myths, legends, religious narratives, folktales, and other story forms. For our purposes, a myth is a “meaning-making” story; it has significance beyond itself, providing a foundation to help listeners make sense of their own lives within their perceived cosmic and cultural contexts.

Summary of the Epic

- The opening of the Epic of Gilgamesh gives us a sense that this story will be told on a grand scale. Gilgamesh, the hero, is a half-man/half-god and a virtual dictator in Uruk. He has become drunk with power, taking advantage of his subjects however he sees fit.
- The people of Uruk ultimately reach their limit in dealing with Gilgamesh’s dominance. They cry out for help, and the gods respond by creating Enkidu to defeat Gilgamesh. Enkidu is a kind of primal man, and he remains wild until he is seduced by a temple prostitute, Shamhat, who tames him with six days and seven nights of love-making. Gradually, Enkidu becomes civilized, moving out of the wilderness and eventually arriving in Uruk—a warrior battling on behalf of oppressed humanity.
- In Uruk, Enkidu challenges Gilgamesh, and the two fight furiously, but Enkidu finally gives up. He declares that he will never be able to defeat Gilgamesh, and he praises the god-man’s strength. In an ironic twist, through battle, the two men become close friends, and they go off on a series of adventures together.
 - These adventures culminate in a joint battle with a creature known as the Bull of Heaven, sent by the angry goddess Ishtar to attack Uruk and kill Gilgamesh. Enkidu and Gilgamesh kill the Bull of Heaven, but the gods determine that the universe will be out of balance if they allow this murder to go unpunished.
 - Ultimately, Enkidu is marked for death. One of the most moving scenes in the epic describes Gilgamesh kneeling beside his comrade as Enkidu cries out against his fate, then comes to accept it, and finally, passes into death.

- From this point forward, the story focuses on Gilgamesh, who wanders in the wilderness, bemoaning the loss of his companion and gradually becoming fixated on his own mortality. He decides to seek out Utnapishtim, a legendary figure who has been granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh hopes that Utnapishtim can help him obtain immortality, as well.
 - Gilgamesh overcomes terrible dangers and obstacles in this quest. In seeking Utnapishtim, he meets the ale-wife (bartender) Siduri and tells her his sorrows. Siduri directs Gilgamesh to a ferryman, who ultimately brings Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim.
 - Utnapishtim encourages Gilgamesh to accept the fact that he will eventually die and to enjoy the life he has. Ultimately, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, having accepted his own mortality.

The World of Gilgamesh

- Five independent Sumerian poems, dated to about 2000 B.C.E., are the foundation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Although the story is based on the Sumerian poems, today, scholars mostly work from a later compilation based on these poems known as the Standard Babylonian or Standard Akkadian version, dated to between 1300 and 1000 B.C.E. This text was found in the ruins of an ancient library, carved into 12 clay tablets.
- The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in ancient Mesopotamia, specifically, the region centered on the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. This region was heavily dependent on the rivers for agricultural well-being, as well as for trade, economic development, political efforts, and military security. Because Mesopotamia sat at an important crossroads in the ancient Near East, it was the site of extended military conflict for millennia.
- Between 2500 and 2200 B.C.E., the Assyrian Empire took control over Sumerian city-states. During this time, Akkadian became the standard written and spoken language of the region, although Sumerian persisted as the standard religious language for a bit

longer. Part of this cultural shift also included the emergence of large urban city-states, such as Uruk.

- Uruk and other city-states were built on the wealth resulting from newly established urban areas, a jump in agricultural productivity, and new discoveries that facilitated metalworking. Powerful warrior-kings sought to control strategic locations and to conquer larger expanses of territory. As they took control of urban areas, they often inaugurated massive building projects. The story of Gilgamesh reflects this new urbanization.
- This rapid development, of course, had its downside. The urban and agricultural growth of the years between 3000 and 2400 B.C.E. was accompanied by sustained military conflict. As a result, life for most Mesopotamians was full of uncertainty, which is reflected in the epic. Uruk's ramparts may have been built of strong brick, but life in Uruk was dangerous, and no resident was safe around its ruler.

Themes of Gilgamesh

- From the beginning, the epic sets up an opposition between civilization and wilderness. The wealth and grandeur of Uruk are contrasted with the primitive actions of its violent and greedy ruler. Enkidu is also caught up in this opposition. He is created by the gods in the wild but then domesticated by a temple prostitute. Gilgamesh and Enkidu become the ultimate symbols of the clash between civilization and wilderness. When they become friends, we are invited to conclude that the two worlds they represent cannot exist without each other.



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The Epic of Gilgamesh opens with praise for the ruler but also describes him as a “wild bull”; indeed, no resident of Uruk is safe around Gilgamesh.

- As we've seen, Gilgamesh's story begins in Uruk, but he leaves the city for a time. When he returns, he has a different view of Uruk: Its strong foundation and brick walls are oppressive rather than impressive.
 - Gilgamesh's changed relationship with the city serves as a metaphor for individual experience. His story suggests that human experience involves a constant tension between the civilized and untamed aspects of our natures—a tension that yields both benefits and pain. As Gilgamesh matures, he experiences friendship, as well as loss.
 - He sees Uruk differently at the end of his journey than he did at the beginning. True satisfaction can't be found in the transitory, sensuous temptations of the city but from an experience of friendship and companionship. However, this experience also brings an awareness of loss and one's own limitations and mortality.
- The story of Gilgamesh ultimately offers a meditation on life, loss, and death. In the beginning, Gilgamesh is completely self-centered; he wreaks havoc at will and thinks only of momentary pleasure. However, he then meets Enkidu, and in the midst of battle, they become friends. With the death of his friend, Gilgamesh begins to meditate on his own mortality and accepts it only in the last lines of the epic. He returns to Uruk, and as he gazes on its sturdy brickwork, he seems to realize that the stones of Uruk will survive long after he has passed away and been forgotten. Immortality is not for flesh and blood.

Enduring Appeal of the Epic

- Why has the story of Gilgamesh endured for 4,000 years? Part of the answer is that it resonates with elements in some biblical stories, particularly the flood story.
 - In Tablet XI, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that his family, a few community members, and “all the animals of the field” survived a great rainstorm only because the god Ea instructed him to build a large boat. The storm lasted six days and seven nights,

and eventually, the boat was stranded on a mountaintop. After determining that the storm waters had abated, Utnapishtim offered sacrifices to the gods, and they promised never again to allow such destruction of human life. The god Enlil gave Utnapishtim and his wife immortality.

- Obviously, this sounds similar to the biblical flood story. Over the years, the story of the flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh has been used both to bolster the authority of the Bible and to challenge it. Some scholars argue that the Gilgamesh story is an independent source that corroborates the historicity of the biblical flood story. Others argue that the epic proves that the biblical story is based on an ancient Near Eastern myth. Either way, the Gilgamesh epic has fueled debates about the nature of biblical material.
- The story of Gilgamesh has also withstood the test of time because it offers great insight into the fundamentals of human nature. It focuses on themes that run throughout our lives: the need to tame our wild inner nature, the attraction and tensions between men and women, and the need for human friendship.
- The Gilgamesh epic reflects the technological, social, and political realities of its time, and as such, it offers insight into a specific human culture. But it lives on—like many of the other myths we will examine in this course—because it resonates with timeless concerns, as well: the potential dangers of highly developed urban centers; the human tendency to satisfy fleeting, primal desires; the human need for companionship; and the inevitability of death.

Suggested Reading

Dalley, ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia*.

George, ed., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

———, ed. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, vols. 1 and 2.

Heidel, “The Epic of Gilgamesh and Old Testament Parallels.”

Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*.

Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh among Us*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu change throughout the story?
2. The myth ponders the transience of this world and our own mortality. What myths from other cultures ask similar questions?

The Babylonian Creation Story

Lecture 14

In the last lecture, we discussed an ancient Babylonian hero story. In this lecture, we'll look at the ancient Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, which probably originated around 1100 B.C.E. Because of its focus on creation, the *Enuma Elish* is very different from the Epic of Gilgamesh. In fact, there are some clear parallels between the *Enuma Elish* and the creation story in the Bible. The name of this text comes from the first two words that begin the story, which mean "when on high." This opening tells us that the story is set in the heavens, among the gods. It describes the creation of the world by multiple gods as a result of their struggle for power.

Overview of the *Enuma Elish*

- The *Enuma Elish* opens with two primordial gods, Apsu, the god of fresh water, and Tiamat, the goddess of sea water. The opening presents a polytheistic worldview, in which only these two gods are considered primordial or preexistent; other gods are created as their offspring.
- As the story moves forward, the sons of Apsu and Tiamat begin to behave badly. Apsu decides to kill his sons, but Tiamat warns one of them, Ea, of Apsu's plans. Ea responds by using an incantation to put Apsu into a deep sleep; he murders his father and becomes the supreme god. He and his consort, Damkina, produce a son, Marduk, who becomes the central character in the myth.
- Although Tiamat didn't like the idea of Apsu killing their sons, she didn't necessarily want him murdered, and she decides to avenge his death. She creates 11 "monsters of the deep" to help her battle Ea and the other gods. She also takes a second husband, Kingu, one of Tiamat and Apsu's sons, and raises him to the status of supreme deity.

- The gods who had allied themselves with Ea become concerned about Tiamat establishing a new supreme deity and creating an army of monsters. But Marduk promises that if they make him their supreme deity, he will save them from Tiamat and her army. The gods agree, and Ea, Marduk's father, voluntarily surrenders leadership to him. Marduk challenges Tiamat to battle and kills her, cutting her body into two parts.
- Marduk creates the heavens from one half of Tiamat's dismembered body and the earth from the other half. He gives the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea dominion over the heavens, the air, and the water and creates the sun, moon, stars, and planets. He then takes control of time itself and establishes a calendar by setting the heavenly bodies in regular motion.
- Once he is victorious, Marduk forces the other gods to serve him as the supreme deity. He establishes his throne in Babylon. He kills Tiamat's offspring and her second husband, Kingu. From Kingu's body, he creates humanity:

The gods bound Kingu, holding him before Ea.

They imposed on him his guilt and severed his arteries.

Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.

Then Marduk imposed service on humanity and let free the gods.

- As the story comes to an end, Marduk is permanently established as supreme king and lord over all the gods, but he releases the gods from cultic service to him, reassigning worship and cultic responsibilities to humanity. In effect, Marduk is now the supreme god over a group of gods, all of whom dominate human beings.
- The final tablet of the Enuma Elish describes the gathering of all the gods in their council chamber after Marduk has finished the work of creation. The gods call out the 50 names of Marduk, which spell out the qualities that make him fit to be the supreme god. The



According to the *Enuma Elish*, the tears from the goddess Tiamat's eyes were the sources for the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

implication is clear: Humanity should praise and worship Marduk, just as the gods do.

History of the *Enuma Elish*

- Tablets containing the *Enuma Elish* were first discovered in the mid-19th century by Austen Henry Layard, an English archaeologist, in the ruins of a library in Nineveh. The text found on the fragments, which was written in an ancient Babylonian dialect, was first published in 1876 by George Smith, a British Assyriologist.
- The *Enuma Elish* is about 1,000 lines long, and it was written on seven numbered clay tablets, with an average of about 142 lines on each tablet. Most of Tablet V is missing, but we have virtually all of the rest of the story.
- The tablets found in Nineveh are dated to the 7th century B.C.E., roughly coinciding with the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the Babylonians. However, some scholars believe that the story goes back to the 16th or even 18th centuries B.C.E., while others think it's more recent, originating about 1100 B.C.E.

The Enuma Elish as a Creation Myth

- As a creation myth, the Enuma Elish explains where the material world came from, although its explanation is rather gruesome. The story claims that we humans currently live in half of the dismembered body of a defeated goddess. The sky is her other half, and the other basic elements of our universe—the sun, moon, and stars—are fashioned from her remains, as well.
- The Enuma Elish also presents a well-developed view of the nature and history of the gods. The myth tells us that there was a primordial age in which the gods fought openly with one another. It then presents a specific form of polytheism, *henotheism*, which is the worship of one supreme god among many gods. In this case, the Enuma Elish describes how Marduk used brute force to establish his place as the supreme deity.
- In addition, the Enuma Elish tells us something about the position of human beings in the world and in relationship to the gods. Corruptions in the text make it a bit difficult to determine exactly how humanity is created, but most scholars agree that Ea beheads Kingu at Marduk's request, and Kingu's blood is used to make human beings. Ea then imposes servitude on them.
 - Despite the fact that human beings are made with divine blood, they have no special status in the created world and no special relationship with the gods. They seem to have been created after the other gods complained to Marduk that they wanted shrines and worship. Marduk apparently created humanity to fulfill this need.
 - In other words, the Enuma Elish teaches that we are a kind of afterthought, subordinate to the gods, and our lot in life is to serve and worship them. This probably reflected the day-to-day experience of most ancient Babylonians.
- Evidence indicates that the Enuma Elish was recited publicly during Akitu, the Babylonian New Year festival. Each year, Babylonians

would have been reminded how the world came into being and how Marduk became the supreme deity.

- Stories recited within the context of an annual public ritual usually have a public message. Scholar Walter Burkert argues that stories told about the gods and their conflicts can often be understood to reflect existing conflicts between humans.
- In the period during which the *Enuma Elish* was composed, tribal communities battled for control of territories in Mesopotamia, and power was tenuous at best. As part of an effort to maintain some stability, the Babylonian king's power to rule was renewed ritually in an annual public ceremony. In a ritual ostensibly focused on Marduk, the king reminded the people that power was derived from brute strength, and like Marduk, the king was not afraid to wield that power.
- A New Year's festival also celebrates a new beginning in the calendar, and it would be appropriate to establish order in the calendar. By incorporating the creation myth into the New Year's celebration, people would be reminded of the chaos and danger that preceded this age. It might even suggest that such chaos continued to lurk on the edges of civilization, kept at bay by the New Year ritual.

Similarities and Differences with Genesis

- Almost as soon as it was discovered, the creation account presented in the *Enuma Elish* was explicitly compared with the Genesis story in the Bible. In this comparison, it's important to note that the *Enuma Elish* predates Genesis.
- There are some clear differences between the *Enuma Elish* and the biblical material. The God of Genesis is a single, all-powerful male god, who seemingly has no beginning or end. He creates the world alone, in an orderly, peaceful process. Humanity is created at the end of this process, and Genesis suggests that human beings are, in fact, the culmination of creation. The first man is given stewardship over the created world.

- In contrast, in the Enuma Elish, humanity is created from the corpse of a defeated deity. There is no “first” human; human beings as a group are collected to serve Marduk, much like slave labor. And human beings are servants, masters of virtually nothing.
- The discovery of the Enuma Elish was one of several key events in the 19th century that forced scholars to put the biblical myths into conversation with other cultures’ sacred texts. The initial hope of Christian theologians was that the Enuma Elish would repeat the story presented in Genesis, but obviously, it raised questions instead.
- The differences between the Enuma Elish and Genesis led scholars to wonder what kind of relationship, if any, there was between the two texts. Archaeological research and other textual finds suggested that trade and political changes in the ancient Near East led to cultural exchange, including the transmission of myths. Many scholars concluded that the Genesis story had roots in other ancient Near Eastern myths.
 - Clearly, there are some common elements in the two stories. In particular, both Genesis and the Enuma Elish describe creation as a multistep process. They both characterize “creation” as not merely the creation of substances in distinct form but also the establishment of some kind of order to replace chaos.
 - However, in Genesis, humanity is made in God’s image, which is not the case in the Enuma Elish. Further, the violence that characterizes the Enuma Elish is absent in the Genesis account. Finally, the Genesis story gives humanity dominion over the created world, while in the Enuma Elish, humans do not rule over nature.
- Keeping these differences in mind, it’s worth noting that Genesis 1 and the Enuma Elish seem to share a deep desire to portray the contemporary world as qualitatively distinct from the pre-creation past. Both accounts suggest that there was a time before the earth as we know it existed, and in that ancient time,

chaos prevailed. In both accounts, a supreme deity is responsible for the ordered world in which we live, and both teach ancient listeners to appreciate that order.

Suggested Reading

Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*.

Dalley, ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia*.

King, *Enuma Elish: The Seven Tablets of Creation*.

Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*.

Questions to Consider

1. The creation story described in the Enuma Elish is incredibly violent. What does this violence suggest about ancient Babylonian culture?
2. What is humanity's place in the cosmos as described in the Enuma Elish? Why would ancient Babylonians develop a myth that seems to find so little value in human life?

Chaos and Order in Egypt

Lecture 15

As in ancient Babylonia, ancient Egyptian culture developed rich mythologies reflecting its history and day-to-day concerns. But the world we find in Egyptian mythology is very different from the Babylonian world. Babylonians told stories of a violent primordial past that had produced a well-ordered present. In contrast, Egyptian mythology tends to emphasize perpetual violence and destruction; it describes an endless struggle to maintain order in the face of chaos. We'll begin our study of Egyptian mythology with one of Egypt's most well-known creation stories, originating in the city of Heliopolis in the Nile Delta region.

Egyptian Creation Myths

- According to one Egyptian creation myth, the god Atum, who is identified with Ra, arose as the divine creator. He first created Shu, the god of wind and air, and Shu's consort, Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. This couple in turn created Geb, the god of the earth, and Nut, the goddess of the heavens. Geb and Nut created Osiris and his consort, Isis, as well as the god Set and his consort, Nephthys. Together, these nine gods are known as the Ennead. The Ennead created the heavens and the earth, including the stars and other heavenly bodies.
- In a different creation myth tradition, the creator god in the form of Ra chose to create all living things. Some accounts suggest that he looked into space, and whatever he envisioned in his mind came into being. Humanity was created from his eyes, and Ra made himself the first human king on earth. He took on human form and ruled over mankind.
 - In this myth, the goddess Isis, who lived among humanity as a woman, decided that she wanted to live among the gods with power equal to Ra's. Using magical powers, she created a poisonous serpent that bit Ra. Isis told Ra that she could heal

him, but only if he told her his secret name, the name that gave Ra all his power.

- Fearing death, Ra agreed to let Isis learn his secret name. Further, he agreed to let that secret name leave his heart and enter into Isis's heart instead. At that moment, Ra disappeared from the realm of the gods, and Isis received his secret name, along with the power that went with it.
- A different myth tradition is found in a book known as the *Celestial Cow*. In this tradition, as Ra aged, human beings no longer paid him the respect that he felt he was due. Ra decided to punish human beings by sending his vengeful persona, the Eye of Ra, in the form of the goddess Hathor to destroy them.
 - Manifesting Ra's anger in the world, Hathor took the form of a lion and was referred to by the name of the war goddess, Sekhmet. In this form, Hathor began to kill the earth's entire population.
 - Once Ra saw the devastation that Hathor had caused, he regretted his decision, but at that point, he had to trick her to stop the slaughter. He got her drunk, and a small remnant of humanity was saved.
 - Ra then decided to leave the earth, but the remnant of humans followed him, begging him for forgiveness. They slaughtered his enemies to make up for their rebellious ways. Ra accepted that slaughter as an atoning sacrifice, but he also declared, "From this time forward I will dwell in heaven. I will no longer live upon the earth." After this declaration, Ra left the earth, ruling from the heavens, mostly in the form of the sun.

Political History in Mythology

- These and other creation myths centering on Ra emerged during the 13th through the 11th centuries B.C.E. and tell us a number of things about Egyptian life in that period. First, we can see that there were several strong cities in Egypt, each with distinct religious and

myth traditions. For example, Ra is a key figure in Heliopolis but not so important in Hermopolis and Memphis. The differences in the various gods' popularity reflect the strength of the independent cities' identities.

- In addition to reflecting distinct city identities, Egyptian mythology also reflects Egypt's political history. For our purposes, we can break this history down into a few broad periods.
 - The prehistoric or Predynastic period lasted from about 6000 B.C.E. until about 3100 B.C.E. During this period, Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt were constantly in conflict with each other. Some scholars have argued that Egyptian myths, such as the Heliopolis creation myth, originated in the Predynastic period, reflecting the ongoing political and military struggles for control of Upper and Lower Egypt.
 - Around 3100 B.C.E., Upper and Lower Egypt were united under King Menes, the first true pharaoh of Egypt. This unification ushered in the Dynastic phase in Egyptian history. By the beginning of this period, the Egyptians had a well-developed philosophy about life after death. Indeed, much of our knowledge of the mythology from the Dynastic period comes from artifacts created to accompany individuals in their journeys after death.

Multiple Creation Stories

- As we've seen, Egypt circulated multiple creation stories, as did many other cultures. Creating the universe is a big job, and in fact, the idea that one story can encompass all aspects of creation is actually fairly rare.
- In addition, scholars have noticed that different communities tend to develop slightly different creation stories. Specifically, most scholars note that later Egyptian creation stories are linked to earlier stories in an attempt to have one supreme deity trump a previous one. This strategy was probably used by cities with large worship centers, such as Heliopolis, Hermopolis, and Memphis, to assert their superiority.

- Further, some scholars argue that as time passes, different worldviews emerge, and these views are reflected in different myths. In Egypt, for example, the myths we're reviewing span 6,000 years and would be quite likely to change over time.

Myth and Time

- Egyptian mythology is also important to our broader discussion about myth because of its interesting view of time. Modern Western conceptions of time tend to be linear: We think of time as moving in one direction, from a beginning point to an end. Cultures influenced by the Abrahamic religions tend to conceive of time in teleological terms. That is, we generally think the world is improving and moving toward some culminating final purpose as we move forward in time. There's a sense of progress associated with the march of time.
- Ancient Egyptian notions of time were different. The ancient Egyptians divided world history into two distinct periods: the ancient or primordial past and the present.
 - The present time involves a series of repeating cycles, probably reflecting the annual agricultural and climate cycles. However, the Egyptians believed that in the ancient past, time was linear, and mythic events, such as creation, occurred in ancient linear time.
 - Mythic events were determinative—they established patterns that are repeated in the present. Thus, the creation myths do not just refer back to events in the past; they occur in a qualitatively different time in the history of the world. Stories set in this primordial time period have implications for the world in which we live today.
 - Whereas the past age involved new, unique events, the present age is cyclical and repetitive. Events that occur in the present age are not original; they echo mythic events. As the present age repeats these mythic events, however, they renew *maat*, an abstract notion representing the primordial order and

balance of the universe. In particular, present events that repeat the moment of creation—however that is described—reestablish the order of creation.

***Maat*: Balance, Order, and Truth**

- The word *maat* encompasses the concepts of balance, order, truth, justice, and morality. When it appears in creation stories, it refers to the foundational ordering of the world, including its social and moral order. As we've seen, Egyptian creation mythology begins with chaos, including social and moral chaos.

Most of the stories of the gods' activities are set in this primordial time, and the gods' primary task is to organize chaos into the ordered world in which human beings now live.

- At a certain point in Egyptian history, the principle *maat* became personified as a female goddess. We find images of Maat as a goddess in the middle of the Old Kingdom period (2500–2400 B.C.E.), and she remained a figure of significance as late as 710 B.C.E. in Memphis. Maat regulates the stars and the seasons and, in some cases, human and divine behavior in order to maintain order and balance. She is coupled with Thoth, the god charged with maintaining the entire universe.
- The principle of *maat* is also closely related to the pharaoh, his role on earth, and his role in the community. Ancient Egyptian myth presents the pharaoh as an incarnation of god or, at least, as the gods' representative on earth. As a result, the pharaoh is charged with the responsibility for maintaining order in this age. Because *maat* continually threatens to break down, human beings, under the



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The goddess Maat, together with the god Thoth, was responsible for equilibrium and balance in the universe.

direction of the pharaoh and the priests, must work constantly to keep disorder and chaos at bay.

Key Themes in Egyptian Creation Stories

- It can be easy to become overwhelmed with all the different versions of the Egyptian creation story, but when we step back, we can see that certain key themes appear repeatedly. First, Egyptian creation mythology always involves the creation of form out of formlessness and order out of chaos. Second, the Egyptian gods are always ultimately responsible for the creation of this orderliness, and they are the ones who sustain it. Finally, the created world is never completely safe from the threat of chaos.
- Not surprisingly, the Egyptian creation stories consistently place Egypt at the center of the created universe, and Egypt is the site for most of the gods' activities. This is almost always true in creation stories; no culture places itself on the sidelines of its own mythology.
- Another constant theme is the importance of the geographic environment. The harsh desert land and the powerful Nile River conspire to create an unpredictable, threatening environment, and we see echoes of this threat throughout Egyptian creation mythology. At the same time, we know that the ancient Egyptians developed sophisticated agricultural techniques. Still, they knew that the fertility of the land—and their own survival—was fragile, and this tension permeates their creation myths.
- On a larger scale, Egyptian mythology as a whole continues to explore key themes found in the creation stories: speculation about cosmic and human origins, the quest for order and balance in the midst of chaos, and guidance provided by the gods to humans in a threatening landscape.

Suggested Reading

Allen and Der Manuelian, eds., *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*.

Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*.

Johnston, ed., *Religions of the Ancient World*, vol. 18.

Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. How is the Egyptian mythology of creation different from the ancient Babylonian mythology? What might this tell us about the difference between the two cultures?
2. Egyptian culture included multiple creation stories. What do we learn from having many different stories?

Horus, Osiris, and Ra

Lecture 16

In the last lecture, we talked about Egyptian creation mythology. However, the Egyptians were also intrigued with stories about the gods themselves. Three gods in particular dominated Egyptian mythology—Osiris, Horus, and Ra—and they were also the gods most closely associated with ancient Egypt’s pharaohs. In this lecture, we’ll focus on these important figures. As we’ll see, these are complicated characters who evolved over time, built up in layers upon layers of stories.

Background on Osiris

- According to the mythology of the Ennead, Osiris was the great-grandson of Ra. He inherited the throne as king of Egypt when Ra receded from the earth, and he was quite active in human affairs. Osiris ruled justly, setting laws in place that led to a peaceful society, and taught the Egyptians agricultural techniques. His consort was Isis, who was also his sister.
- There isn’t much mythology about Osiris until he was murdered by his brother, Set. Isis, however, managed to restore Osiris to life and became pregnant with his son, Horus. According to the mythology, Horus eventually grew up and battled with Set to avenge his father’s murder.
- From the time of Osiris’s murder—even though he is resurrected thanks to the efforts of Isis—he never loses his association with death. He is, therefore, primarily known as the god of the underworld.

Sources for Osiris

- Stories about Osiris go back thousands of years. In some of the oldest texts, he is known as the Foremost of the Westerners, a reference to his role as ruler of the land of the dead, which was associated with the west. Osiris is also known as Wennefer, which

means “the one who continues in perfection,” referring to his life and power after death. He is a renewal and resurrection god.

- Osiris is referenced in the Pyramid Texts, magical spells inscribed on the interior walls of royal pyramids that date to the 24th century B.C.E. He is also found in the text from the Shabaka Stone, a carved basalt stela that dates from about 700 B.C.E. This stone is thought to record teachings that originated in the Temple of Ptah in Memphis and includes one section that begins with a reference to Osiris’s burial.
- Perhaps the greatest source of cult information about Osiris is found on the Ikhnofret Stela, dated to about 1900 B.C.E. The name *Ikhnofret* refers to a high official in the court of the pharaoh Senwosret III, who sent Ikhnofret to Abydos to restore a temple of Osiris and celebrate a festival there. The inscription on the stela describes a public five-day festival focused on Osiris.

Lord of the Dead

- In his role as lord of the dead, Osiris is involved in judging the souls of the dead to determine where they will reside in the afterlife. He is known as a merciful judge.
- In the Old Kingdom, kings actually had the potential to become Osiris in death. Like Osiris, they would be resurrected from the dead and live throughout eternity in the underworld. Beginning around 2000 B.C.E., this opportunity expanded so that eventually all Egyptians had the possibility of becoming Osiris in the afterworld if they paid for the necessary rituals and had lived a life marked by *maat*.
- Eventually, Osiris became associated more broadly with the death and resurrection of nature overall. He was seen as governing the annual cycles in which vegetation appeared to die and be reborn in the following season. Similarly, he became associated with the annual recession and flooding of the Nile, the source of all agricultural life.

- Images of Osiris usually portray him as a man with green skin because of his association with the Nile and the broader concept of rebirth. He is also shown with a pharaoh's beard, and his legs are often wrapped like mummy's legs, indicating his affiliation with death. He wears a crown, holds a crook or a staff, and carries a flail, which may symbolize fertility in the land.
- Osiris was so significant that non-Egyptian writers, such as the Greek historian Plutarch, recorded versions of his myths after the fall of Egyptian self-rule. Writing in the 1st century C.E., Plutarch also described the annual festival commemorating Osiris's death, noting that it was held on the same day that grain was to be planted. Osiris's death mimicked the burial of seed in the ground, and his resurrection was played out in the sprouting of new grain.
- Osiris was a beloved figure in ancient Egyptian mythology, portrayed as the prototype of a good king. More importantly, he is a sympathetic victim, betrayed and murdered by a close family member, rescued by his sister-consort, and avenged by his son. Yet at the end of the day, he's cast into the underworld, where he remains to judge the dead.

Horus

- In some ways, Horus is more complicated than Osiris because he takes on different forms. The earliest form of Horus is the patron god of Nekhen, the Predynastic royal residence of the kings of Upper Egypt. In this form, Horus is the first national god that we know of.
- Horus is also known as the sky god. In this form, he is associated with the sun and the moon. The sun was his right eye and the moon his left eye. According to the myth, when Horus battled Set, his left eye was gouged out. A new eye was created from part of the moon god, but it never shown quite as brightly as his right eye.
- In addition, Horus is known as Horus the Great or Horus the Elder when he is associated with war. This title refers to his triumph over

Set. According to the mythology, Horus and Set battled, not just because Set murdered Horus's father but also to determine who would control Egypt.

- Over time, Set became known as the god of storms, disorder, violence, the desert, and foreigners—all things that Egyptians feared. He is the embodiment of danger, which explains why he and Horus have an ongoing antagonistic relationship.



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Horus is usually represented as a falcon, and as such, he guides the sun and the moon across the sky.

- Egyptian mythology describes a climactic battle between Horus and Set, in which the two struggled but were so equally matched that neither was victorious. Their battle ended only because the gods chose to side with Horus, ultimately causing Set's defeat.

Horus as Metaphor

- It may help us to understand the mythology of Horus if we remember that Egyptian mythology is intended to be understood symbolically, not literally.
 - According to Egyptian thought, the gods lived in a realm that was beyond human understanding, and their actions were unintelligible to humans. This was in part due to the fact that they had lived and acted in the mythic linear time period before our current age.
 - As a result, Egyptian mythology was viewed largely as a metaphor, and this is particularly true of Horus's mythology.
- For example, a text called the Contendings of Horus and Set (c. 1190–1070 B.C.E.) describes battles between the two brothers. In one struggle, Set loses a testicle. This loss can be understood as

a metaphor for the infertility of Upper Egypt, the desert region and the region with which Set is associated.

- Another set of stories is often interpreted as a metaphor for Lower Egypt's defeat of Upper Egypt. In the Chester-Beatty I Papyrus, Set attempts to seduce Horus and have sex with him. Most scholars interpret this as an attempt by Set to demonstrate his dominance over Horus. Horus, however, tricks Set, and the gods end up declaring Horus the victor.

Ra

- Some scholars link the rise of Ra to the breakdown of national unity that occurred at the end of the Old Kingdom (c. 2150 B.C.E.). By the time of the 3rd dynasty, which inaugurated the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs themselves were viewed as embodiments of Ra. A bit later, in the 5th dynasty (c. 2400 B.C.E.), Ra supplanted Horus as supreme deity; he became a state god, and the pharaohs described themselves as sons of Ra.
- Ra's importance is indicated by the fact that he replaced other deities in Egyptian creation myths. For example, Ra's followers claimed that Ra was the first god, that he was self-created, and that he was the progenitor of the gods that follow him. In addition, certain myths developed around Ra uniquely. For example, in the myth known as Ra and the Serpent, Ra speaks in the first person, describing how he created living creatures.
- Perhaps the most important myth involves Ra's nightly journeys. According to Egyptian mythology, Ra journeys each night through Duat, the land of the dead. During this nightly journey, he meets with Osiris, which guarantees the rising of the sun the next day. Ra also battles each night with Apep, the giant snake god, who represents chaos and sleeps just below the horizon. Each night Ra defeats Apep, guaranteeing the triumph of order over chaos in the coming day.

The End of Horus, Osiris, and Ra

- Over the centuries, the mythologies that developed around Horus, Osiris, and Ra linked each of these gods with the pharaohs. It's easy to see how the pharaohs benefitted from this association, but for the connection to persist for thousands of years, the Egyptian people as a whole had to buy into the idea that the pharaoh was a form of Horus, Osiris, or Ra. What made this idea plausible to the everyday Egyptian?
- Fundamentally, the myths of Osiris, Horus and Ra each spoke to basic concerns of everyday Egyptians.
 - Osiris's mythology addresses the question of what happens after death and points to a universe that rewards a moral life and punishes an unjust one.
 - Similarly, Horus's mythology speaks to the historical development of Egypt as a unified kingdom and serves as a reminder of the violence that can occur when kingdoms are divided.
 - Finally, Ra's mythology celebrates the sun, order, and more broadly, the importance of the natural and agricultural cycles in Egyptian life. Eventually, the pharaoh himself was conflated with the sun god Ra as the ultimate symbol of power.
- What finally undermined the Egyptian mythologies of Horus, Osiris, and Ra?
 - Egyptian civilization stood in the face of some of the greatest powers in the ancient Near East through the Hellenistic, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods, and the Egyptian god mythologies continued to flourish. However, when Christianity came to Egypt, it came with its own mythology of a single, universal god that could not coexist with Egyptian polytheism.
 - As a result, once Christians obtained political power within the Roman Empire in the 4th century C.E., they forbade worship at pagan temples in Egypt. Ra's cult died out quickly as Christianity spread; although the cult of Osiris died more slowly, it was finally abolished in the 6th century.

Suggested Reading

Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth from Egyptian and Classical Sources*, vol. 7.

Hart, *Egyptian Myths*.

Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*.

Redford, ed., *The Ancient Gods Speak*.

Questions to Consider

1. Osiris is often described as one of the earliest resurrection gods. What do his character and mythology tell us about Egyptian views of life and death?
2. Horus struggles repeatedly with Set. What are we to make of their ongoing conflict?
3. Ra is known as the sun god. What does his mythology tell us about the significance of the sun in Egyptian life?

Myths of the Pharaohs

Lecture 17

From roughly 3000 B.C.E., with the first unified kingdom, until 30 B.C.E., with Rome's first establishment of an Egyptian province, 330 pharaohs ruled Egypt. These kings were considered god on earth and played a pivotal role in Egyptian culture: They were charged with maintaining social, political, and cosmic order throughout the land. In this lecture, we'll look at some of the myths of the pharaohs, including stories of their birth, their life achievements, and their passage after death to the Field of Reeds. As we'll see, these myths tended to hammer home several themes: the pharaoh's divine lineage, his divine right to rule, and his responsibility to sustain order in the world.

The Westcar Papyrus

- One of the earliest known myths about the pharaohs is in the Westcar Papyrus, dated to the 17th century B.C.E. The text on the papyrus describes the birth of three kings, sons of a high priest to the god Ra.
 - According to the myth, Ra ordered several goddesses to help the high priest's wife, Reddjedet, through the births. Ra provided this aid because the three sons were destined to end the current royal lineage and become kings themselves.
 - The goddesses came to the household disguised as entertainers. When each son was born, the goddesses secretly prophesied that he would become a king of Egypt. This prophecy could not be known widely because the sons would be seen as a threat to the existing royal family.
 - The creator god gave each child the gift of strength, and the goddess Isis declared, "Let us work a miracle on behalf of these sons, so their father, the high priest, will know that we visited this household."

- They made crowns for each son and hid them in barley stored in the high priest's cellar. Later, members of the household heard music coming from the sacks of barley. Reddjetet and her husband rejoiced, taking the enchanted sacks as corroboration of the prophecy about their sons.
- After an argument with Reddjetet, a servant girl decided to betray the household by revealing the secret of the magic barley sacks to the king. But on her way to do so, she was devoured by a crocodile on the banks of the Nile River.
- The Westcar Papyrus cuts off here, but the implication is that the three young boys' lives were saved and they grew up to become kings of Egypt.
- This myth ties human kings to the gods and goddesses; it even teaches that the gods and goddesses selected the pharaohs of Egypt, protecting them from threats. Such birth narratives legitimated the rule of individual pharaohs and suggested that if someone tried to overthrow a pharaoh, nature and the Nile itself would rise up to protect the king.
- The myth also suggests that elements of the natural world will conspire to protect a king whom the gods and goddesses have selected. The crocodile represents destiny, rising out of the Nile to protect the future kings. The act of devouring the servant girl would have served as a cautionary tale against would-be traitors.
- At least one scholar, Verena Lepper, has also argued that this story may have grown out of historical events. Lepper claims that the figure of Reddjetet may have been inspired by the 4th-dynasty queen Khentkaus I. Other evidence challenges Lepper's argument, but the overall point—that mythology about rulers may have been inspired by changes in ruling households—seems worth considering.

“Superhero” Mythologies

- In addition to birth mythologies, the Egyptians recorded other myths designed to illustrate the pharaohs’ extraordinary abilities and their importance in Egyptian national life.
 - For example, several tombs spanning three centuries contain variations of the same basic myth: The king buried in the tomb is shown defeating a Libyan king. The foreign king is executed, his family is taken captive, and thousands of his animals are taken as booty.
 - Given that this scene is repeated in multiple tombs, the story probably doesn’t record actual history; instead, it’s better understood as a paradigmatic myth, arguing that one of an Egyptian pharaoh’s most important roles was to protect Egypt from foreigners.
- Beginning in the 19th century B.C.E. and continuing for more than four centuries, we find dozens of stories that describe Egyptian rulers defeating their enemies with remarkable displays of skill in warfare. These myths culminate in the 15th-century-B.C.E. stories about Amenhotep II, who is shown rowing a boat of 200 men by himself, guarding 300 captives singlehandedly, and so on.
- Although these stories are presented as history, it’s better to think of them as “superhero” mythologies. Ultimately, the stories were meant to underscore the security of the Egyptian people under the pharaoh’s rule. In the pharaoh, all the reasons that the Egyptian people could feel optimistic about their future were given concrete expression. The mythology surrounding him was meant to reassure the Egyptians that they could be confident about their place in the world.

The Pharaoh’s Journey after Death

- The Pyramid Texts are among the oldest texts in the world, dating to around 2400 B.C.E. They were found carved into the walls surrounding the antechamber and the sarcophagus chamber of King Unas’s tomb in a small pyramid dating to the Old Kingdom period. These texts include instructions to the deceased pharaoh

regarding what to do after death to make the journey to the underworld.

- The Pyramid Texts also include a series of refrains declaring that the pharaoh is not dead but alive and conflating the pharaoh with Osiris, the lord of the underworld and the judge of all dead souls.
- Finally, the Pyramid Texts include magical incantations meant to protect the pharaoh's body as he journeyed in the afterlife and to help him rise to the heavens. One of the most famous incantations refers to a well-known myth of the deceased pharaoh's journey in a boat guided by a celestial ferryman.
- Other texts pick up on themes and imagery associated with the pharaohs found in the Pyramid Texts. The Book of the Dead has its origins in spells dating back to 2000 B.C.E. that were designed to guide the deceased to the underworld. Among other illustrations in this text, we find a depiction of the ferryman to the underworld.
- The final destination for the pharaoh was Aaru, the "Field of Reeds" or the "Field of Offerings," an idealized version of the fertile Nile River banks. The Field of Reeds was located in the east, where the sun rose, and it offered flowing streams, verdant trees, and plentiful hunting and fishing. There was no illness or sorrow there, although the social hierarchy from this world was preserved in the afterlife.

Commoners' Myths

- Interestingly, a few myths developed about commoners, as well. One of the most famous is that of Imhotep, who lived in the 27th century B.C.E. Imhotep was chancellor to the pharaoh and a high priest to the sun god in Heliopolis. He also wrote a medical treatise and is the first known architect in history. He was so influential that he was elevated to the status of a deity after his death, and mythology about his life was developed to support the idea that he had, in fact, been divine all along.

- A handful of other commoners over the centuries received similar treatment, enjoying mythological stories of their origins and achievements to justify their elevation to divinity. For the most part, however, commoners remained in the social stations they occupied at birth, never daring to dream that they would experience either the earthly life or the afterlife existence enjoyed by the pharaohs.

Akhenaton and the Myth of the “Sole God”

- From time to time, certain pharaohs spread mythologies themselves. One of the most extreme examples occurred when King Amenhotep IV took the throne in the 14th century B.C.E. About five years into his reign, Amenhotep changed his name to Akhenaton, meaning “living spirit of Aton.” This was a reference to the god Aton, whom Akhenaton tried to elevate to the level of a single supreme god.
- Inscriptions and images created during Akhenaton’s reign minimize and sometimes completely exclude references to gods other than Aton. In fact, we know that this pharaoh ordered that the names of other gods be removed from public monuments and even some private tombs. Akhenaton also ordered that the name of Aton would no longer be represented by the hieroglyph of a sun but, instead, should be spelled out phonetically. In making this change, Akhenaton was trying to change the view of Aton as a sun god to an abstract, universal, all-encompassing presence.
- Under Akhenaton, the Great Hymn to Aton was composed, an extended poem that celebrates Aton as the single creator god. This tribute describes Aton’s deeds and qualities as the sole god who created all things: the earth, animals, vegetation, and people. He is also solely responsible for setting each man in his place and determining his lifespan.
- In celebrating this new version of the singular solar deity, Akhenaton seems to have suppressed mythology about Osiris, the netherworld, and life after death. The hymns, stelae, and temple decorations produced under Akhenaton’s rule do not include references to anything other than the present realm.



In the mythology he created of Aton as a singular god, the pharaoh Akhenaten replaced Osiris with himself as judge of the dead in the underworld.

- What doesn't change is the unique status of the pharaoh. The Great Hymn to Aton describes a son who is born from the god Aton's body. This "son," who is named as the pharaoh Akhenaten himself, has been given Aton's strength, and he upholds Aton's ways. He is charged with maintaining *maat* and is recognized as lord over Upper and Lower Egypt.
- The Great Hymn of Aton lays out a mythology that resonates with previous Egyptian creation mythology but makes Aton the sole creator. With this mythology, it seems that the pharaoh Akhenaten was attempting to make a fundamental change in the religious worldview of Egypt, elevating the sun god over other deities. Some scholars have argued that Akhenaten was trying to go even further: to establish monotheism.
- Akhenaten's changes failed to take hold, and after his death, the preeminence of Amun was swiftly reestablished under the rule of Akhenaten's son. But the mythology that Akhenaten left behind is important as an artifact of one man's attempt to change the worldview of an entire people.

Suggested Reading

Armour and Baker, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*.

Meeks, *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods*.

Oxford University Press, *The Oxford Essential Guide to Egyptian Mythology*.

Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*.

Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does Egyptian mythology tell us about the relationship between the pharaoh and the gods?
2. What are the key sources for myths about the pharaohs? How do they change over time?

The Book of Job

Lecture 18

It might seem strange to include the Book of Job in a course on great mythologies, but the story of Job addresses many of the most basic themes in mythology: humanity's place in the universe, the nature of the divine, and the meaning of individual human experience. The Book of Job sets up a situation in which the protagonist—and the reader along with him—is forced to ask: What is the nature of suffering? Why do good people suffer? What part do the gods play in suffering? And how do we humans make sense of suffering? Job has lasted for so many centuries precisely because it asks these fundamental questions, but it doesn't offer easy answers.

Satan's Challenge to God

- The story of Job begins with a strange scene: God is holding court in the heavens, and in the course of the scene, he points down to earth at the man called Job, calling him “blameless and upright.” Satan, however, is not impressed. Give that Job has every blessing, it's not surprising that he praises God.
- Satan then challenges God, daring him to take away all of Job's blessings and see how Job reacts. God takes the bait. He gives Satan the right to destroy everything Job has without touching Job himself. The scene then shifts back to earth, and we watch as Job loses almost everything.
- One by one, Job's servants come to his home, announcing one tragedy after another: the theft or destruction of his livestock, the slaying of his servants, and the deaths of his children. Each messenger ends his announcement with an eerie refrain: “I alone am escaped to tell thee.”
- Job grieves in traditional Israelite fashion, by tearing his garments and shaving his head, but he continues to worship and praise God. Instead of criticizing God, he says, “Naked I came from my

mother's womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21).

- After an indefinite period of time, we are taken back to the heavenly court, and we witness God boasting to Satan about Job's loyalty. In response, Satan dares God to "touch Job's bone and his flesh" (2:4-5). Once again, God accepts the dare, giving Satan permission to afflict Job in any way he chooses; the only requirement is that Satan must spare Job's life. Satan gives Job painful boils all over his body, but still, Job does not "sin with his lips"—he refuses to curse God.

Job's Questioning

- We then come to a major shift in the story. To signal this shift, the text changes from prose to an extended section of poetry. In the process, we are introduced to three new characters: Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Most of the rest of the story is an extended conversation among them.
- According to the text, Job's friends "sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him" (2:13). Finally Job speaks, and the tone of the story changes completely. Job can barely contain his outrage, not understanding why he has been subjected to all this suffering. He starts by declaring, "I wish I'd never been born," and for the next 35 chapters, he repeatedly asks the age-old question "Why me?"
- Job's friends try to convince him that the only possible reason God could allow such suffering is that Job must have sinned. But Job rejects their explanations. Again and again, he declares that he has lived a righteous life. Of course, we know this is true because both the narrator and God have said so.
- Finally in chapter 38, God himself begins to speak. But instead of answering Job's question, God pummels Job with questions of his own: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Can you send forth lightning? Can you make the Leviathan obey your command? Have you an arm like God?" Of course, the answer

is obvious: Job is nothing compared to God, the creator of the universe, lord of heaven and earth.

- Finally, in chapter 42, we get some relief. God’s thundering speech comes to an end, and Job responds meekly, thoroughly chastised and completely subdued. He acknowledges God’s almighty power and confesses his own ignorance. But this ignorance is a different kind of “not knowing” than he had expressed previously.
 - Early on in the book, Job had complained that he didn’t understand why God allowed these tragedies to happen to him, but at that point, Job was completely absorbed in his own experience. By chapter 42, however, the focus has shifted. Now Job confesses his essential ignorance as a human being: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me” (42:3).
 - Job realizes that he was ignorant not only about experiences in his own life but about the very nature of his life as a creature of God. As a human being, Job comes to realize that he has an inherently finite ability to understand the workings of the universe. He is moved to humility.

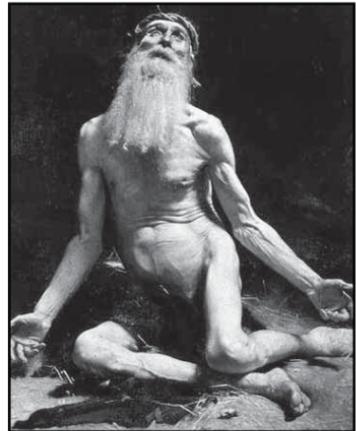
The World of Job

- The written version of the Book of Job found in the Bible dates to around the 6th century B.C.E. At that time, the Jews living in what is today part of Israel clashed repeatedly with Babylonian forces and suffered devastating military losses. At the climax of this conflict, their land was taken over by the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, including its Temple. And the Jewish people were either slaughtered or forced into exile in Babylon.
- The biblical text of the Book of Job was probably written for this community, a community that felt deserted by God.
 - The Jews believed that God had promised them all the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River in a covenant made centuries earlier, but suddenly, this “Promised Land” was gone. It seemed as if God had reneged on his promises.

- The character of Job stands in for this community; he experiences the despair and abandonment that many of these people felt at the time.
- It’s also important to note that the figure of Satan in the Book of Job is not the devil of the New Testament. Instead, we should think of Satan in this story as a public prosecutor; it’s his job to bring people’s shortcomings to God’s attention. In fact, the original Hebrew word that we commonly translate into the name Satan is *ha-satan*, which means “accuser” or “prosecutor.”

The Message of Job

- In his last sentences, Job describes his direct encounter with God. He cries out, “Now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6). The same Job who argued with his friends self-righteously about his innocence has done a complete turnaround. He has been humbled in his encounter with the divine.
- The real message of the Book of Job seems to be that God often fails to answer the direct questions put to him. Instead, he shifts the conversation entirely. In effect, God’s response to Job—and to the reader—is: “You’re not asking the right question. Spend time with me and you’ll see your situation in an entirely different light.”
- Many people have found this so-called answer to the problem of innocent suffering unsatisfactory. And in fact, many scholars think the epilogue to the book—in which Job’s fortunes are restored—was added later as an attempt to end the story on a happy note.



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Only a handful of people in the Bible are granted intimate contact with God, and like Job, these figures seldom get the answers they seek.

- However, it may be a mistake to interpret the blessings given at the end of the book as a reward for Job’s righteousness or for his extreme suffering. The book never challenges the idea that Job is righteous and never suggests that suffering will eventually be rewarded.
- Instead, the Book of Job suggests that righteousness is beside the point when it comes to suffering. In fact, the text seems to teach explicitly that suffering is not a punishment for sin; it is simply part of the human condition.
- The message of Job has nothing much to do with righteousness or suffering at all. God’s response to Job’s tirade is to pose his own question, which is basically: “Who do you think you are?” And we are meant to take this question seriously, to ask ourselves: “Who am I, really, in the grand scheme of things? What right do I have to expect happiness and contentment in my life? And what am I truly capable of understanding about my place in the cosmos?” The answers are humbling and a bit unnerving.

Mythology and the Question of Suffering

- The question of why bad things happen to good people is a common concern across human cultures. Theology answers these questions with doctrines, but mythology does so with stories.
- Mythologies centered on the question of suffering continue to be relevant today. Many of us have struggled to make sense of personal and public tragedies. The Book of Job goes right to the heart of this struggle, asking if we should understand moments of human suffering as a punishment for bad behavior, and the answer is a resounding no.
- As we’ve seen, the book doesn’t offer a clear alternative explanation. In fact, Job doesn’t offer closure of any kind. Instead, the book challenges the very act of asking questions. It pushes thoughtful readers to change their perspective on the question of suffering, drawing a line in the sand between two schools of thought.

- The first school (represented by Job’s friends) seeks an easy, straightforward explanation for suffering: that suffering is punishment for human sin. For centuries, this explanation has been accepted by many people.
- The second school (represented by Job’s character) rejects this explanation. In this approach, human suffering can’t be explained by sin; in fact, suffering isn’t even the focus of the conversation. Instead, God is the focus.
- The Book of Job forces us to look at the world from a different perspective and to frame our individual and communal experiences in a different way, just as mythology does. Mythology reframes our day-to-day existence, providing meaning where previously there was none. Job—and similar stories—resituate the human experience, pulling back from a close-up focused on the individual to a panoramic shot of the cosmos from the divine point of view. With this cosmic perspective in mind, the book challenges us to rethink how we imagine our place in the world and the questions we ask in life.

Suggested Reading

Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*.

Hooks, *Job*.

Kushner, *The Book of Job*.

Noegel and Wheeler, *Historical Dictionary of Prophets in Islam and Judaism*.

Questions to Consider

1. What answers—if any—does the Book of Job offer to someone who has experienced extreme suffering?
2. What do you think of the Satan figure in this story and of God’s wager with Satan? How are we to make sense of their wager?

The Great Indian Epics

Lecture 19

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* began as oral traditions, evolving between 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. These epics can be a bit hard to follow because they probably originated as hundreds of distinct local folktales and tribal histories. Over time, individual stories were absorbed into one large story tradition. It's helpful to think of each epic as having one dominant narrative, a kind of frame onto which hundreds of smaller stories have been grafted. These stories depict a world in which gods and humans interact with one another and in which hero-kings establish social order, one of the primary values of these texts.

The Story of the *Ramayana*

- In the *Ramayana*, Ram, who is born to be king of Ayodhya, faces a series of challenges. Ram's adventures provide the backdrop for an extended morality tale about the Hindu virtue of obedience to one's duty, or dharma. All the heroes and heroines of the story handle difficulties by following their socially prescribed roles. As a result, the epic is an entertaining way of modeling the behavior of ideal husbands, wives, brothers, kings, and friends.
- In the opening of the epic, Dasharatha, a king of Ayodhya, asks the gods for a son who can inherit his throne. The god Vishnu decides to be born as this son—Ram—so that he can battle the evil demon Ravana. Throughout the *Ramayana*, Ravana opposes Ram, and the main arc of the story involves Ram and Ravana's ongoing conflict with each other.
- As a young man, Ram wins the hand of the beautiful princess Sita. But just as his father is about to place him on the throne, one of the king's wives, the evil Kaikeyi, reminds the king that he had promised to grant her two favors whenever she desired. She now demands that her son, Bharata, be placed on the throne instead of

Ram and that the king send Ram into exile for 14 years. The events that follow are meant to be instructive to the reader.

- As a king, Dasharatha is bound by his word, even when it goes against his personal desires; thus, he keeps his promise to Kaikeyi. Ram also agrees to depart without argument or resistance. He submits to the will of his king and father with complete obedience.
- Ram's wife, Sita, and his brother Lakshmana then declare that they will follow Ram into exile. Like Ram, they are following their duties. Finally, Kaikeyi's son and Ram's half-brother, Bharata, who has been forced to become king during Ram's exile, refuses to sit on the throne. Instead, he places Ram's sandals on the throne and pledges to rule only as Ram's regent during the exile period.
- In all these cases, the heroes of the story follow their dharma—that is, their duty as prescribed by their social stations and family relationships. In doing so, they model appropriate behavior for the audience. Dharma at this human level is understood to be inherently connected to the balance and order of the universe, which makes following it all the more important.
- The rest of the story is dominated by a lengthy crisis in which the demon Ravana kidnaps Sita. To rescue her, Ram and his brother enlist the help of Hanuman, the general of an army of monkeys. Hanuman ultimately finds Sita and tells Ram where she is being held. While Ravana has Sita as his captive, he tries to seduce her, but she remains faithful to her husband. In the end, Ram engages in a fierce battle with Ravana and defeats him once and for all. By the end of the epic, Ram has been restored to his rightful place on the throne in Ayodhya.

Interpreting the Story

- According to classical Indian thought, there are four ages of existence.
 - The first age, the Satya Yuga, has passed. It was an age of perfection, in which humanity understood the true nature of the

universe, and dharma, the balance and order of the universe, was upheld perfectly.

- The Treta Yuga, the second age, was imperfect, and dharma existed imperfectly. In this stage, the god Vishnu took several forms, including the form of Ram, our epic hero. This is the age in which the *Ramayana* takes place.
- The third age is the Dvapara Yuga, during which purity continued to decline.
- Our current age is the fourth and final one, the Kali Yuga, in which there is great disorder and dharmic upheaval. It is an age of immorality.
- Even though it is believed to have grown out of oral tradition, the *Ramayana* is traditionally said to have been written by Valmiki, who is also considered the original creator of epic poetry in India. It was not written primarily as a religious poem, although as a heroic poem, it takes place in a specific religious setting.
 - The *Ramayana* is polytheistic, and it encourages worship of the gods with traditional sacrifice.
 - The poem doesn't discuss the familiar concepts of karma and reincarnation. Instead, it focuses largely on this world, specifically on socially required roles and responsibilities.
- The story of the *Ramayana* has often been read allegorically. In this interpretation, Ram is the god Vishnu and Sita represents the dedicated devotee, who resists attempts to be lured away. Her sexual purity, which is publicly proven after her rescue from Ravana, represents purity of devotion. Hanuman, the general of the monkey army, is also seen as a model of undivided loyalty.
- The *Ramayana*, then, is fundamentally a “role model” story: The protagonists model how we should behave on two levels. First, they

demonstrate how to live in accordance with one's responsibilities as determined by social status. Second, they offer allegorical representations of true devotion to the Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as Ram. Finally, the *Ramayana* offers a glimpse of a better age, an age of perfect harmony between rulers and their subjects.

The *Mahabharata*

- If the *Ramayana* is a window looking back on a better age, then the *Mahabharata* is a mirror reflecting the world of this age. The dominant storyline focuses on a set of brothers, the five sons of Pandu, also known as the Pandavas. These brothers must contend with a clan of 100 men known as the Kauravas (the Pandavas' cousins), who are determined to take over the Pandavas' kingdom.
- Whereas Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana are perfect role models, the Pandava brothers are decidedly imperfect. In fact, the entire story unfolds because of one brother's gambling problem.
 - That brother, Yudhisthira, agrees to play dice in a game prompted by the evil king Duryodhana, a Kaurava who is jealous of all that the Pandava brothers own.
 - Yudhisthira continues to gamble even though he loses repeatedly. One last throw of the dice sends his entire family into exile for 12 years. The rest of the story involves the Pandava brothers' attempts to reclaim their kingdom.
- This summary, of course, is an oversimplification. The *Mahabharata* is a complex, layered story, including thousands of short tales, as well as an epic-scale dominant narrative. Traditionally, the *Mahabharata* is said to have been dictated by the ancient sage Vyasa, who is also credited with writing down the Vedas, the most important sacred texts of Hinduism.
- Like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* features fascinating characters, including humans, gods, demons, spirits, talking animals, and other mythical creatures. It also introduces new

(or revised) characters in Indian mythology, such as Ganesh, the famous elephant-headed god.

- In addition, the *Mahabharata* offers one of the earliest presentations of Krishna as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Both Duryodhana and Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and the leading warrior for the clan, come to request Krishna's aid in the coming war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, but Krishna refuses to take sides.

- Instead, Krishna offers one side his personal advice and counsel in the upcoming war and the other side all his wealth, armies, horses, and chariots.

Arjuna chooses first, and he chooses to have Krishna's advice. Duryodhana is elated, because he will receive Krishna's armies and weapons. Arjuna, of course, has made the better choice.

- In our next lecture, we'll explore the *Bhagavad Gita*, a portion of the *Mahabharata* that is centered on the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna. For now, suffice it to say that Krishna is instrumental in ensuring the triumph of the Pandavas over the Kauravas. It is also clear that Krishna is a mighty god, one who can give practical aid and spiritual wisdom to his devotees.
- In many ways, the *Mahabharata* is more realistic than the *Ramayana*. Ram comes out of his trials virtually unchanged—the same god-man, the model warrior-king. In the *Mahabharata*, however, even though the Pandava brothers are victorious in the end, their victory has a price. Both sides behave dishonorably, and by the end of the war, thousands have been slaughtered. The characters in the *Mahabharata*, especially Krishna and Arjuna, are



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In the *Mahabharata*, the elephant-headed god Ganesh is presented as the “lord of letters,” the one who writes down the text of the story as it is dictated to him.

rich and complex. They are changed by the events they undergo, and we suspect that they will carry permanent scars into the future from their experiences.

Influences on Indian Culture

- It's common to think of India as a polytheistic culture, focused on home- and temple-based worship of multiple deities, but that wasn't always the case. Before the epic period, other religious traditions were popular, particularly sacrifice and rigorous meditative practices. These were elitist traditions, appealing to small segments of the population. With the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, a kind of populist devotionism began to spread.
 - By the time the final versions of these epics were complete, around 400 C.E., the private and communal devotional practices we now commonly associate with Indian religion were in full swing, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* played a significant part in that process.
 - They encouraged worship of the gods and taught audiences to depend on gods and goddesses to help with the difficulties of everyday life, as well as to achieve ultimate spiritual liberation.
- In addition, both epics have been invoked by Indian political and religious factions to support specific political and social agendas, and they are occasionally used as propaganda in conflicts between Muslims and Hindus in India.
- Finally, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have had a significant influence on Indian poetry and literature. They are like the King James Bible and Shakespeare in English literature; you simply can't have a complete understanding of Indian literature without knowing the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. As the ancient storyteller declares at the beginning of the *Ramayana*: "Poets have told it before, poets are telling it now, and other poets shall tell this history on earth in the future Fine words adorn it, with usages human and divine ... it is the delight of the learned."

Suggested Reading

Bose, ed., *The Ramayana Revisited*.

Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata*.

Narayan, *The Mahabharata*.

———, *The Ramayana*.

Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata*.

Questions to Consider

1. The *Ramayana* presents several “ideal” characters, especially Ram as the ideal warrior-king and son. What do these figures reveal to us about ancient Indian social roles and values?
2. The *Mahabharata* portrays an extended conflict between two clans, probably reflecting real historical conflicts between extended families for control of territory. What else does the *Mahabharata* suggest was valued in ancient Indian culture, besides land?

The *Bhagavad Gita*

Lecture 20

As we discussed in the last lecture, the Indian epic known as the *Mahabharata* focuses on two extended family clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who meet on the field of battle. The text known as the *Bhagavad Gita* appears in the sixth section of the *Mahabharata*, but most scholars believe it originated independently, probably around 200 B.C.E. The *Gita* records the moment just before the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas begins, capturing a brief moment of hesitation before the hero, Arjuna, leads his brothers and his army into war.

Storyline of the *Bhagavad Gita*

- At the beginning of the *Gita*, the blind king Dhritarashtra asks Sanjaya, a gifted seer, to describe the armies gathering on Kurukshetra, “the field of Kuru.” Dhritarashtra is the father of Duryodhana, one of the army’s leaders. Sanjaya has a special ability to see everything going on at all points on the battlefield. Virtually all of the rest of the *Gita* is Sanjaya’s account of the battle scene as described to Dhritarashtra.
- The beginning of the *Gita* is similar to the opening shot of a movie. We start far away from the action, on a distant mountaintop. As Sanjaya begins to describe what he sees, we zoom in on the armies gathering on the battlefield.
 - Sanjaya describes the qualities of each famous warrior present, his armor and weapons, and the sounds of the armies’ horns and drums. Then he zeroes in on Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, who have been forced to wage war to reclaim their rightful homeland.
 - Suddenly, everything and everyone else seems to disappear. Arjuna is in crisis, and the rest of the world fades away. The rest of the *Gita* describes Arjuna’s conversation with Krishna,

an incarnation of Vishnu who is acting as Arjuna's military aide and counselor.

- Arjuna is faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem. As a warrior, his dharma is to fight, but as he looks over the battlefield at the opposing army, he sees the faces of the Kauravas, who are his relatives, as well as his enemies. He's thrown into a moral crisis as he faces the prospect of slaughtering his own kinsmen.
- Arjuna turns to Krishna, his closest companion, chariot-driver, and second-in-command. Krishna is also a god incarnate, and Arjuna knows this, but at this point in the story, Arjuna hasn't seen Krishna's full glory and power. Thus, he consults Krishna as a trusted advisor. Krishna's answer to Arjuna's initial question about what to do leads to a conversation that forms the heart of the *Gita*.

Philosophical Teaching of the *Gita*

- Krishna's responses to Arjuna involve several crucial points. First, he focuses specifically on the act of killing, stating that nothing ever actually dies. Here, Krishna describes the true self, the *atman* ("soul"), which is believed to be eternal. The body, the part of us that dies, is different from one's true self. Krishna says, "Our bodies are known to end, but the embodied self is enduring, indestructible, and immeasurable."
- Krishna goes on to compare the body to a piece of clothing. He says, "As a man discards worn-out clothes to put on new and different ones, so the embodied self discards its worn-out bodies to take on new ones." Here, we have a clear statement of the concept of reincarnation. Although our bodies die, our true selves will live on and take on new bodies. For this reason, Arjuna should not be concerned with the death of his enemies' bodies.
- Arjuna claims that he refuses to act by refusing to take up arms against his kinsmen, but Krishna says that there is no such thing as inaction. The choice not to act is an action in itself, and there are

consequences to doing nothing, just as there are consequences to doing something.

- Krishna encourages Arjuna to act but not to be invested in the results of his action. This is a subtle point: Krishna is encouraging Arjuna to fight in the war, but at the same time, he cautions Arjuna not to become caught up in the results of that war.



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- The climax of the conversation occurs when Arjuna asks what the purpose of action is if not to obtain results. Krishna responds by telling Arjuna that he should perform his actions as a sacrifice to Lord Krishna himself, the lord of the universe. Then, in a dramatic moment, Krishna reveals himself in all his power and glory to Arjuna.
 - Arjuna describes what he sees as “fiery rays” and a “measureless presence.” Arjuna also calls Krishna “Vishnu” at this moment, suggesting that he is seeing the god when he is unfettered by a human incarnational form.
 - Arjuna prostrates himself before the fully manifest Vishnu and begs to see him in the human form that is not terrifying.
 - Arjuna’s glimpse of Krishna’s full manifestation as the lord of the cosmos causes him to declare his loyalty and promise devotion. After a bit more conversation, he rises and says, “I stand here, my doubt dispelled, ready to act on your words.” As the *Gita* comes to an end, we know that Arjuna is ready to lead his men into battle.

The stream of Hinduism that focuses on worship of the gods came into its own during the period of the *Gita* and other epics, with certain communities choosing to emphasize one supreme god over others.

Stories within the *Gita*

- As mentioned, the *Gita* is a moment in the larger story of the *Mahabharata*. Based on his conversation with Krishna, Arjuna fights the war and the Pandava brothers triumph. In addition, the *Gita* is a devotional story. By the end of the conversation, it's clear that Krishna is the supreme lord of the universe, and he deserves our full obedience and worship.
 - From this perspective, Arjuna represents the ultimate devotee. He asks for the ultimate favor: to see Krishna in his true form, and Krishna agrees. Krishna shows Arjuna galaxies without end, spinning in and out of existence. Arjuna sees trillions and trillions of souls trapped in *samsara*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The vision is overwhelming for Arjuna, and he begs Krishna to stop, which Krishna does.
 - Then, Krishna encourages Arjuna to surrender everything to him. This is the only effective way to bear the truth of the universe. This is what every true devotee should desire: intimate knowledge of the god's true nature. But this is received only when one completely surrenders all actions to Krishna.
- The *Gita* can also be read as a general guide for life that encourages us to fulfill our duty as dictated by our social status.
 - The Sanskrit word *varnashramadharma* refers to our duty (dharma) as dictated by our social class (*varna*) and life stage (*ashrama*). Notice that the *Gita* doesn't teach that we all have the same duty. Instead, it argues that we each have distinct responsibilities, based on gender, social roles, and stage in life.
 - Krishna teaches that we should act as dictated by our dharma; we are instructed to perform actions "intrinsic" to our own being. The *Gita* goes so far as to state that it is better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do another man's well.
 - This reflects a turning point in Hindu thought generally. Older Indian traditions had argued that believers had to perform elaborate sacrifices, live in monasteries, or train for years in

meditative practices in order to obtain spiritual liberation. But the *Gita* says that liberation can be found while fulfilling one's societal and familial responsibilities. The *Gita* calls this the path of *karmayoga*: the discipline (yoga) of action (karma).

- This last philosophical point is fleshed out in the greater epic of the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna embraces his duty as a warrior and leads his extended family into battle. Many men are killed, as he had feared, but the battle is won. The myth dramatizes the philosophical choice in graphic detail, making it concrete instead of abstract.

Spiritual Reading of the *Gita*

- The *Gita* was a special book to Mahatma Gandhi, who offered a spiritual reading of the text.
 - The opening passage of the *Gita* sets the scene in Kurukshetra, which is usually translated as “field of the Kurus.” Just after this word is the term *dharmakshetra*, usually translated as “sacred field.” But Gandhi read it more literally as the “field of dharma.”
 - In the last lecture, we defined *dharm*a as balance or order, but in the context of the *Gita*, it's better understood as one's moral, social, and sacred duty combined. Thus, when Gandhi read the phrase “field of duty,” he understood the field to be the realm of our responsibility according to our station and stage in life. And he argued that the story of the battle presented in the *Gita* should be read metaphorically, as well.
 - He explained that the battle referred to in the *Gita* doesn't occur on an actual physical battlefield but on a spiritual plain, the realm in which we work out our moral, ethical, social, and familial responsibilities each day. He further claimed that the battle itself is an internal struggle. We are at war within ourselves, fighting to determine which aspects of our natures will win. True victory comes from engaging in this battle and entrusting the results to Krishna.

- If we take a literal approach to the *Gita*, Arjuna must either fulfill his dharma as a warrior or he must withdraw from battle and fail his brothers and his teachers. If we take a spiritual approach, however, Arjuna does not literally take lives. Instead, he is a metaphor for the best aspect of our inner natures. Like Arjuna, we should seek to fulfill our dharma and to find ultimate liberation. His conflict is every well-intentioned person's conflict.
- Like Gandhi, other readers have also concluded that the *Gita* was never intended to be used to justify killing or war. Instead, the true field of battle is internal. Only when we conquer our own desires, our own impulses toward self-preservation and self-satisfaction, can we transform society with nonviolent action.
- As you recall, the *Gita* doesn't open with Arjuna and Krishna but with Sanjaya describing what he sees on the battlefield to Dhritarashtra, the blind king. At the end of the *Gita*, we return to Sanjaya, who swears to Dhritarashtra that he has accurately described the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna.
 - Throughout the story, Sanjaya talks to us as if he were talking to Dhritarashtra, who is blind. We, the ones listening to Sanjaya, are also blind but from a spiritual perspective.
 - We listen to Sanjaya's description of the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, and through Arjuna, we are permitted to see Krishna's self-revelation in all his power and glory. We blind kings are given a glimpse of the only thing worth seeing in this world: the Lord Krishna himself.

Suggested Reading

Chapple, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*.

Gandhi, *Bhagavad Gita: According to Gandhi*.

Hawley, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Walkthrough for Westerners*.

Miller, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Patton, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Theodor, *Exploring the Bhagavad Gitā*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is Arjuna's fundamental conflict at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*? What is the core of Krishna's response to Arjuna's dilemma?
2. The audience gets to "eavesdrop" on Arjuna and Krishna's conversation in the *Bhagavad Gita*. What are the lessons we're meant to take away from listening in?

Stories of the Buddha

Lecture 21

Throughout this course, we take a relatively broad view of mythology, one that embraces aspects of what might be more commonly thought of as legend, religion, theology, and even philosophy. This understanding of mythology is at its most expansive when we think about the mythology surrounding the Buddha. Remember that we are defining a *myth* as a meaning-making story, a narrative that provides an interpretive lens through which to understand human experience, the nature of the world, and the nature of the divine. As we'll see, the mythology of Buddhism does all these things in several distinctive ways.

Life of the Buddha

- Siddhartha Gautama was born into a wealthy Indian family sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C.E. He grew up as a prince in continual comfort, without any awareness of human suffering. But one day, when he was 29 years old, married, and a father, Siddhartha finally left the walls of his family's compound and rode through the streets of the city with his chariot-driver, Chandaka.
 - Siddhartha and Chandaka first came upon an old man. Siddhartha had never seen a body ravaged by old age, but Chandaka told him that what he was seeing was not unusual; all human beings experience aging.
 - Next, Siddhartha came upon a sick person, whose body was disfigured and weakened by disease. Again, Chandaka assured him that all human beings experience illness and pain at some time in their lives.
 - Third, Siddhartha passed a dead body. Because he had never witnessed death, the limitations of the mortal body had never occurred to him, and he was appalled by the sight of death. Chandaka told him that all human beings will die.

- Finally, Siddhartha saw an ascetic, a man dedicated to finding release from the suffering associated with aging, illness, and death through practices of self-denial, such as fasting and extended periods of meditation. Siddhartha committed himself to becoming an ascetic.



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- This story, known as the Four Sights, is the foundational story of Buddhism. There are some minor variations, but every version of the story ends with the sheltered prince relinquishing his comfortable lifestyle and dedicating himself to a life of extreme asceticism.
- The most well-known stories about the Buddha describe his emergence as a spiritual role model.**
- Siddhartha next mastered a variety of ascetic traditions, including meditation, yoga, and deprivation, but he was unable to find spiritual peace in any of these extreme practices. Finally, he came to believe that the best path to fulfillment was the Middle Way, a lifestyle of moderation that rejected both self-indulgence and extreme self-denial.
 - While pursuing this path, Siddhartha experienced the climactic spiritual moment in his life. Still seeking spiritual truth, he seated himself under a tree in Bodh Gaya, India, and vowed not to get up until he had achieved his goal. After meditating for 49 days, he experienced enlightenment.
 - According to the Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha's enlightenment began with a profound realization of our fundamental human condition, followed by discernment of the steps necessary to experience liberation. His understanding of the human condition is codified in the Four Noble Truths, which include an explanation

for suffering and a pathway toward enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths are as follows:

- The human condition is fundamentally one of suffering.
 - This suffering arises from our desires.
 - Suffering will come to an end when we cease to desire things.
 - There is a method to cease all desiring.
- Then Siddhartha outlined the method to cease desiring, known as the Eightfold Path. In brief, this method teaches the practices of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness, culminating in a practice of right concentration or right meditation. Observing the Eightfold Path leads to liberation.
 - Ultimate liberation is called *nirvana*, which is experienced as complete freedom from any sense of attachment to things, to other people, to this world, or to a sense of individual identity. Nirvana is the perfect realization of our true condition in the universe, and it is experienced as perfect bliss. The experience of nirvana makes someone an enlightened being. From the moment of his enlightenment, Siddhartha became known as the Buddha, a title meaning the “enlightened one” or the “awakened one.”

Characteristics of Buddhist Myth

- One key characteristic of Buddhist mythology is that it takes complicated or abstract ideas and principles and presents them in story form. The first set of stories focuses on the Buddha’s experience because he is the preeminent model of spiritual enlightenment. Subsequent stories in the tradition focus on the Buddha’s nature as a wise teacher. For example, Japanese Zen Buddhism has a story about a woman named Kisagotami, whose young son died.
 - Kisagotami carried the boy’s body around in her arms for days, wandering from house to house, sobbing and begging for help.

Eventually, she was directed to a wise man, the Buddha in disguise. The Buddha told her that he could revive her dead son, but only if she brought him mustard seeds from the house of a family that had never experienced any loss.

- Kisagotami began to scour the countryside for the mustard seeds, but she could not find a single household that had not experienced sadness or death. Eventually, she realized that her condition was not unique; all human life involves loss. At that moment, she experienced enlightenment.
- This story, of course, conveys one of the fundamental beliefs of Buddhism: All life involves suffering. But it also functions at the level of myth, telling us something about the Buddha as a teacher and about the nature of human existence in story form. In one simple episode, the story conveys Buddhist values, provides a brief character sketch of the Buddha, and passes on a philosophical point that has implications for the listener.
- The Buddha has the special ability to remember all of his past and future lifetimes, and countless stories describe him in these lifetimes, in both human and animal forms.
 - One collection of stories, known as the Jataka, or “birth” tales, describes the Buddha’s previous lives. These stories largely originated in India around the 4th century B.C.E. and read like Aesop’s fables, including talking animal characters and straightforward morality lessons.
 - Some of the Jataka tales are longer and a bit more complicated. Structurally, they often use the nesting technique we’ve seen in Hindu Indian literature, with the Buddha telling a story that may, in the end, be about himself.
 - Such stories work on a number of levels: They communicate Buddhist values, teach us about the Buddha, and show us the Buddha as a teacher, drawing on experiences from his different lifetimes to teach people in this age.

- Some Buddhist mythology pits Buddhism against other Indian religious traditions. For example, “The Story of the Goat Who Laughed and Wept” describes a goat who was about to be sacrificed in a traditional Brahman feast.
 - During the course of the story, the goat reveals that he had once been a Brahman and had sacrificed a goat. Because of that act, he had been reincarnated as a goat 499 times and had been sacrificed in each incarnation. In sharing his story, the goat is freed from reincarnation and saves those who planned to sacrifice him from the guilt of sacrifice.
 - This story and similar Jataka tales are meant to “correct” what Buddhism saw as faulty Hindu thought and practice, such as the violence of sacrifice.
- As mentioned earlier, Buddhism evolved in various forms at different times and in different places throughout South and East Asia. As a result, some Buddhist stories pit one stream of Buddhism against another.
 - For example, the story of Kisagotami presents the Buddha as someone who teaches indirectly, through each person’s life experience; in this, it presents a form of Buddhism available to everyday people. This approach reflects the priorities of Mahayana Buddhism, which positions itself as more inclusive than the monastic stream of Buddhism that emphasizes study of doctrinal texts over immediate experience.
 - In addition, because Buddhism spans multiple continents and centuries, there’s a great deal of variation in Buddhist mythology, reflecting local beliefs and practices that commingled with Buddhism as it moved from region to region.
 - The wide-ranging stories and images of the Buddha, from multiple geographic regions, time periods, and cultural communities, are a good reminder to us that mythological traditions evolve over time.

- The mythology of Buddhism isn't limited solely to stories of the Buddha. It also includes stories of other divine figures, all of whom contribute to the spread of Buddhist thought and practice. Perhaps the most well-known female deity in Buddhism is the goddess Tara, who appears in various forms in Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism and is known as the “mother of liberation,” a goddess of compassion and healing.
- Despite the differences among Buddhist mythologies in different regions around the world, certain themes persist: the presentation of the Buddha as the supreme spiritual role model and teacher; the acceptance of human suffering, reincarnation, and karma; and the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation.

Death of the Buddha

- As the supreme enlightened being, the Buddha was able to choose when he died, that is, when he left his physical body. According to tradition, he chose to do so at age 80. He ate a meal offered by a devotee and became ill. Before allowing his body to die, the Buddha asked if any of his followers had questions. When he was satisfied that there were no remaining questions, he left his body and entered Parinirvana—the supreme state of final nirvana, in which the enlightened person is free from all karmic ties and future rebirths.
- There are various interpretations of what actually happened at this meal, but the key from a Buddhist perspective is that the Buddha was in complete control of the moment of his death. Traditionally, Buddhism teaches that his final words were “All composite things are perishable. Strive for your own release with diligence.” We should strive to be released from the illusion that anything is permanent—even the sense that we ourselves are permanent.
- The Buddha's body was cremated, and various relics are said to be enshrined at several religious sites. However, the most important thing the Buddha left behind was the *sangha*, the community of followers that would transmit his teaching. There have been ups

and downs in the history of this community, and each stream of Buddhism understands the nature and significance of the sangha differently. The key for us is that all Buddhist communities, no matter how they define themselves, trace their roots back to that first myth, the story of a young prince, riding in a chariot 2,400 years ago, seeing sights he had never seen before.

Suggested Reading

Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha*.

Kohn, *The Awakened One*.

Martin, *The Hungry Tigress*.

Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order*.

Shaw, *The Jatakas*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the Four Sights and the Eightfold Path?
2. The Buddha often tells stories about his past lives, when he took the form of an animal. What does this communicate about how Buddhism views human life and its place in the world overall?

Persia's *Book of Kings*

Lecture 22

Imagine yourself living at a turning point in the life of the world as you know it: One age is ending and another is beginning; the world in which you grew up—its history, religion, government, social fabric, even its language—is fading away, and your grandchildren will never know this world. In the 11th century, a Persian poet known as Hakim Abu 'l-Qasim Ferdowsī Tusi tried to express this situation in his epic poem the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, better known as the Persian *Book of Kings*. This epic poem became the most famous work of Persian literature known to the world. Today, it is widely regarded as the national epic of the worldwide Persian-speaking community.

Background on Ferdowsī

- Ferdowsī was born into a landed aristocratic family near the city of Tus, located in what is now northeastern Iran. He wrote in Persian at a time when Arabic threatened to replace Persian as the preferred language of literature. Ferdowsī was a Muslim, and he knew Arabic, but he was first and foremost a native Iranian, with family ties to classical Persian culture. He took great pride in his local family identity and his Persian cultural heritage, and this is evident in the Persian he used to write the *Shāhnāmeḥ*.
- Ferdowsī began the *Book of Kings* in 977 C.E. Legend has it that he undertook the work at age 36 to raise money for his daughter's dowry. An apocryphal story states that Ferdowsī was hired at the rate of one gold coin per couplet.
- When he began the poem, the region where Ferdowsī lived (eastern Iran) was still under the control of a group that valued its Persian heritage. But by the time he completed the poem 33 years later, eastern Iran was under the control of the Ghaznavids, a powerful Muslim dynasty of Turkish origin that gradually took over a vast expanse of Central and West Asia.



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Ferdowsī, author of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, takes liberties with some legends of Iranian kings and heroes in order to celebrate Persian history and culture.

- The *Shāhnāmeḥ* should not be thought of as an accurate historical work. Although it includes references to historical kings and actual figures in Iranian history, it is also full of mythical creatures, and key characters often are endowed with magical powers. As a result, it's best to think of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* as an epic-length anthology of legends about the kings and heroes in Iranian history.
- The epic is divided into three main sections, describing a mythical age, a heroic age, and a historical age. Over the course of these three sections, Ferdowsī traces 50 generations of Persian kings, from the creation of the world up to the death of the last Sassanid ruler and the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century C.E. The mythical, heroic, and historical materials weave in and out of one another, creating an epic literary masterpiece.

Rostam of Sistān

- Much of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* concerns figures who are heroes rather than kings. In fact, the second section focuses on the age of heroes and recounts stories about men who are viewed as key figures in ancient Iranian history. One of these heroes is Rostam of Sistān.
- Rostam helps to establish the first king of the Keyānid dynasty on the throne of Iran, then serves that king's son and successor, Kay Kāus, who is a proud, impulsive, and foolish ruler. Tragically, Rostam's loyalty leads to the death of his son, Sohrāb. This son is born and raised in his mother's family, but when he becomes a young man, he learns that Rostam is his father, and he sets out to depose the king of Iran—Kay Kāus—with the goal of putting Rostam on the throne instead.
- A rival king, Afrasiyab, encourages Sohrāb to attack Kay Kāus, but he has his own plan. Afrasiyab understands that Rostam, as a loyal advisor, will fight on the battlefield to defend Kay Kāus. He hopes that Sohrāb will kill Rostam, conquering Iran and opening the way for Afrasiyab himself to take the throne of Iran.
- Afrasiyab sends a message to Kay Kāus designed to provoke him. As expected, the king responds in anger. Tensions escalate into war, and eventually, Rostam is forced to fight Sohrāb man-to-man. They are evenly matched, and Rostam defeats Sohrāb only by resorting to trickery. The poem says that Rostam drives a blade into his son's heart, not knowing whom he is killing.
- Once Sohrāb realizes that he is dying, he reveals himself to his father. Rostam then sends a messenger to the king, Kay Kāus, begging for a healing potion to save his son's life. Kay Kāus receives the message, but he refuses to send the healing potion, declaring that if he did, he would be nurturing his own enemy; as a result, Sohrāb dies. According to sources outside the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, Afrasiyab is eventually defeated and dies alone.

- Rostam is an intriguing figure—simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Because he comes from a family of advisors to kings, he is part of the royal world, but he himself is not a king and never will be. He is also distinct from other normal men, in part because he is descended from a *div* (“archdemon”). All these elements combine to mark him as an extraordinary being and a prototypical hero. Although he is not perfect, noble commitments determine his behavior, and he serves as a role model for the poem’s audience.

The Seven Labors of Rostam

- In another section of the epic, Rostam embarks on a series of famous adventures known as the Haft Khan, loosely translated as “seven feasts,” also known as the “seven labors.” These travels are prompted by the capture of Rostam’s king, Kay Kāus, after he launched an attack on Mazinderan, the land of the *divs*.
- In response, the king of Mazinderan called on the great White Demon to come to his aid, and the White Demon captured Kay Kāus. Rostam travels alone to rescue the king, accompanied only by his horse, Rakhsh, his faithful companion. As Rostam travels the road to rescue the king, he has seven adventures or ordeals. In the last of these ordeals, Rostam attacks and kills the White Demon, fulfilling his role as the protector of Kay Kāus.
- Throughout Rostam’s ordeals, his horse, Rakhsh, reveals a number of fantastic qualities, including the fact that he can talk and fight. These magical abilities mark Rakhsh as a concrete symbol of Rostam’s special status.

Rostam and Esfandiḡār

- The story of Rostam and Esfandiḡār is one of the most famous episodes in the poem. According to the legend, Esfandiḡār’s father, King Goshtasp, promised his son the throne if he could stop an invasion in a far-off province of the kingdom. Esfandiḡār succeeds and returns, expecting to be given the throne. However, the king is not eager to step down; thus, he sends his son off again, first to thwart a rebellion, then to capture the hero Rostam.

- King Goshtasp had been warned in a prophecy that Rostam will kill Esfandiyār, but Esfandiyār is completely unaware of this. Initially, Esfandiyār refuses to go, arguing that as far as he knows, Rostam has been a loyal servant to the king's household. But Goshtasp will not change his mind, and Esfandiyār, ever the obedient son, sets out to capture Rostam.
- When Esfandiyār reaches Rostam's home, he demands that Rostam surrender himself, and not surprisingly, Rostam refuses. This leads to a ferocious battle between the two warriors. Initially, Rostam is wounded, and he begs to leave the field of battle to tend his wounds.
- At this time, the mystical creature Simurgh gives Rostam counsel. Simurgh is a giant winged creature, usually depicted as a peacock with the head of a dog and a lion's claws. She tells Rostam that Esfandiyār can be defeated only by a weapon made from the wood of a special tree. Conveniently, this tree will also heal Rostam's wounds. Rostam is healed, and he then fashions a double-headed arrow from the tree. Before Rostam returns to the battlefield, though, there's one more twist.
 - Years previously, the prophet Zarathustra had declared that whoever killed Esfandiyār would be cursed for the remainder of his life, and after death, this person would be condemned to hell.
 - Simurgh warns Rostam about the fate that awaits the man who kills Esfandiyār. Rostam considers the curse, but he decides that the shame of surrendering in battle is too great; he will not give up.
- When Rostam returns to the battlefield, he shoots Esfandiyār through the eyes, and Esfandiyār falls to the ground, fatally wounded. As Esfandiyār dies, he declares that the ones who killed him were really Simurgh, who gave Rostam the fatal arrow, and his own father, King Goshtasp, who sent him into battle. Esfandiyār then breathes his last, having acquitted Rostam of his murder. Esfandiyār's honor is upheld, even in death.

- Bashuntan, Esfandiyār's brother, leads the army back to King Goshtasp. When Bashuntan comes into the presence of the king, he declares loudly for all to hear: "Neither the Simurgh, nor Rostam, nor Zal have made an end of Esfandiyār, but you alone, for you alone have caused him to perish." Goshtasp's betrayal of his own son is made public.

Summing Up the *Book of Kings*

- The stories of Rostam and Esfandiyār capture the spirit of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. It's a tradition that relates the history of a people, but it's also a poem about heroes, valor, and honor. In the epic, Ferdowsī sought to capture the rich culture that he knew in a form that would endure. In one passage he writes, "The houses that are the dwelling of today will sink beneath shower and sunshine to decay but storm and rain shall never mar the palace that I have built with my poetry."
- Because of its grand scope and classical Persian language, the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is considered a great literary work of ancient Persian culture, and it remains influential in Iran. In the foreword to one English translation, the Iranian-American author and scholar Azar Nafisi relates her father's feelings for the epic: He argued that Persian culture had no homeland in any geographic space; the *Shāhnāmeḥ* was the home for Persians.
- Ferdowsī eventually returned to Tus, his home city, for the last years of his life, and he died there. A millennium later, he's still remembered and celebrated for this work. But the most enduring memorial to him is the *Book of Kings* itself. It concludes:

I've reached the end of this great history
 And all the land will fill with talk of me.
 I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save
 My name and reputation from the grave,
 And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim,
 When I have gone, my praises and my fame.

Suggested Reading

Canby, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp*.

Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*.

Davis, trans., *Shahnameh*.

Questions to Consider

1. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* was written in part to celebrate Persian culture when it was being eclipsed by Arab culture. What elements of the epic reflect this goal?
2. Rostam is one of the central figures of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. How do his most significant experiences and adventures compare with those of key figures in other epic poems? What is distinctive about Rostam?

One Thousand and One Nights

Lecture 23

Long ago, in ancient Persia, there was a king known as Shahriyar who discovered that his wife was being unfaithful. He killed her and her lover and became convinced that all women were traitors. The king vowed to spend each night with a new virgin, whom he would execute the following morning. Finally, the daughter of Shahriyar's chief advisor, Scheherazade, volunteered to spend the night with the king, with a plan to bring the nightly executions to an end. So begins the collection of stories known as *One Thousand and One Nights*. This collection raises a new question for our study: Can an overwhelmingly secular text be viewed as mythology?

The Frame Story of Scheherazade

- The story of Scheherazade serves as the frame story for the entire *Arabian Nights* collection. After Scheherazade sleeps with the king, she asks Shahriyar if she might say goodbye to her sister before she is to be executed.
 - The king allows this, and her sister, as prearranged, asks Scheherazade to tell her a story. The king stays to listen and becomes enthralled with the story, but Scheherazade interrupts her narration before the story has finished, claiming that the sun is up and the night is over.
 - The king vows not to kill Scheherazade until he hears the rest of her story. On the following night, she completes the first story but starts another one, again being careful not to finish before sunrise. This strategy continues for 1,001 nights.
- The story about Scheherazade is not the only frame story in *One Thousand and One Nights*. In fact, several of the stories also provide frames for other stories. The anthology becomes somewhat complicated, with layer after layer of stories and nesting groups of stories within one another. In addition to Scheherazade's stories,

we're often presented with characters who, in turn, tell stories about other characters and so on.

- Because of this structure, there was no limit on the number of stories in the collection, and as a result, the number grew over time. The original anthology, dating to about the mid-8th century C.E., contained only about 300 stories. All of those stories have roots in Persian and ancient Indian oral traditions and folklore. Arab stories were gradually added between the 8th and 13th centuries C.E., and finally, folktales from Syria and Egypt were included.

The Adventures of Sindbad

- The adventures of Sindbad are quintessential examples of the *One Thousand and One Nights* stories. The elderly, rich Sindbad narrates his adventures in the first person to a young errand boy he meets who is resting on a bench, bemoaning how unfair the world is and how unjust it is that the rich live in comfort while he works hard. Sindbad attempts to instruct the young man in the form of seven distinct stories that all follow the same structure.
- Almost every adventure starts with the same opening:

[W]hen I returned to the city of Baghdad, and met my companions and my family and my friends, and was enjoying the utmost pleasure and happiness and ease, and had forgotten all that I had experienced, by reason of the abundance of my gains, and had become immersed in sport and mirth, and the society of friends and companions, leading the most delightful life, my wicked soul suggested to me to travel again to the countries of other people, and I felt a longing for associating with the different races of men, and for selling and gains.

- At the beginning of his first adventure, Sindbad leaves Baghdad and travels to Basra. He then sets sail, traveling as far away as India. It's clear that the stories of his seven adventures draw from other traditions. For example, in one story cycle, Sindbad is captured by a giant who traps sailors by day, returning at night to eat them.

Sindbad comes up with the idea of blinding the giant and escaping. It's clear that this adventure borrows from Odysseus's adventures with the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*.

- At the end of his first adventure, Sindbad is eventually returned to his hometown with all his wealth intact. He praises Allah and gives thanks for all the blessings he has received—until he's struck with wanderlust again. A pattern develops. Sindbad is happy for a time, but because his “wicked soul” encourages him to travel, he leaves Baghdad and sails off somewhere, usually in search of adventure and commerce. Some horrible calamity befalls him, but he is able to escape.
- There's a clear Muslim backdrop to all the Sindbad stories, which is most evident when Sindbad bemoans bad choices he has made in the past. In addition, the stories consistently value cleverness. In virtually every story, Sindbad demonstrates ingenuity when he gets into trouble, and his ingenuity usually saves the day.
- The Sindbad adventures almost all end with a refrain designed to remind us that we're listening to Scheherazade trying to save her own life. Almost every Sindbad story ends with the phrase “This, then, is the story of my voyage; and tomorrow, if it be the will of God (whose name be exalted!), you shall come back, and I will tell you the story of the next voyage.” The enticement to hear another story always works. The listener is reminded that Scheherazade is acting as a bard, and along with the king, the listener is left wanting more.
- The adventures of Sindbad, like other stories in the *One Thousand and One Nights* collection, are interesting beyond their entertainment value because they tell us something about the cultural customs and values of the ancient Middle East.
 - Sindbad praises Allah repeatedly for his good fortune; Allah is the one true god, and he is the source of all good things. Those who lead a godly life are rewarded, and those who do not quickly fall into ruin.

- The stories of Sindbad also make it clear that hospitality to strangers was important, and there was a certain code of honor required of travelers. Frequently, Sindbad is separated from his wealth when catastrophes strike, but honorable men keep it safe for him until he can return.
- Finally, Sindbad displays remarkable ingenuity and presence of mind in incredibly dangerous situations. He's the consummate operator of the ancient Middle East, fashioning armor and weapons out of nothing and figuring out how to escape danger when it seems impossible.
- Of course, the stories reveal negative cultural elements, too. Women are treated like property, and dark skin color is used as a code to signal that someone is foreign, untrustworthy, uncivilized, and often, stupid.

Repeating Motifs

- In addition to the well-known adventures of Sindbad and Aladdin, *One Thousand and One Nights* also includes themes or motifs that we see developed in later European fairytales.
 - For example, many scholars argue that threads of the Cinderella story can be found in several of the *Arabian Nights* tales that show a younger step-sibling treated badly by older step-siblings.
 - “The Second Shaykh’s Story,” “The Eldest Lady’s Tale,” and “Abdallah ibn Fadil and His Brothers” all describe a younger sibling harassed by two older brothers or sisters. Sometimes, there’s a happy ending, as in “Cinderella,” but in other stories, the good sibling doesn’t fare so well. One of the tales, “Judar and His Brethren,” ends with the younger brother being poisoned by his elder brothers.
- Another story, “The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again through a Dream,” also appears in many other cultures, and it includes a common folktale motif.

- According to the story, a wealthy man suddenly becomes destitute. In a dream, he is told to leave his hometown of Baghdad and travel to Cairo, where he will find treasure. Eagerly, he heads off, but he runs into numerous difficulties. He is left completely impoverished and must spend the night curled up beside a local mosque.
- He is attacked and nearly beaten to death by a gang of thugs until the police rescue him and bring him to the jail. Despondent, he tells his dream to the policeman at the jail. The policeman laughs at him, then describes his own dream, in which he saw a house in Baghdad with a fortune buried under a fountain in the courtyard.
- The poor man recognizes his own home in the policeman's description, goes back to Baghdad, and digs up the treasure buried in his own front courtyard.
- This story uses a *self-fulfilling dream* or *self-fulfilling prophecy*, a common storytelling technique in mythology. The protagonist is told that something will happen to him. This new awareness leads him to actions that he would not have performed otherwise and that lead to the fulfillment of the dream or prophecy.
- *One Thousand and One Nights* also includes stories with mythical, imaginary creatures. Aladdin, of course, conjures up the most famous Arabian mythical creature, the genie, or *jinni*. *Jinn* are common characters in Persian folktales, appearing in pre-Islamic Arabian literature. They are not inherently good or evil but magical and can use their powers to help or hurt humans.

***One Thousand and One Nights* as Myth**

- When Scheherazade finally runs out of stories to tell, she asks that her three children be brought to her and reminds the king that if she is killed, they will be left motherless. The king replies, “By Allah, O Scheherazade, I pardoned you long before the coming of these children, because I found you chaste, pure, ingenuous, and pious!

May Allah bless you and your father and your mother and your root and your branch! I take the Almighty as witness against me that I exempt you from anything that could harm you.”

- As mentioned earlier, *One Thousand and One Nights* should be understood as mythology, with the word *mythology* interpreted broadly.
 - The collection as a whole doesn't focus on the nature and activities of the gods as in Greek or Roman mythology, but it emerges from a different world than Greece or Rome—one that was charged with supernatural elements and activity.
 - It also explores fundamental questions about how men and women should act in the world, that is, what's expected of them socially and morally. For example, the overarching story about Scheherazade is an extended meditation on a king's rash behavior and the tools available to a vulnerable young woman to stop that behavior.
 - This body of mythology tells us about the nature of the world we occupy and provides us with a metaphorical map for navigating that world, whether we travel to the ends of the earth or live out our days at home.

Suggested Reading

Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*.

Mahdi and Heller-Roazen, eds., *The Arabian Nights*.

Marzolph, ed., *The Arabian Nights Reader*.

Marzolph, van Leeuwen, and Wassouf, eds., *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. 1.

Questions to Consider

1. The overarching storyline about Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights* reveals key elements of Persian culture. What are those elements?
2. The stories in the *One Thousand and One Nights* collection are not connected to one another, but certain themes and motifs run throughout most of the stories. What are those themes and motifs?

Tales of Flood and Fire

Lecture 24

As we come to the end of this section of the course on Middle Eastern and South Asian mythology, we will take a step back and look at some of the foundational stories and images that appear in world mythologies: myths involving flood and fire, creation and destruction. As we noted earlier, Middle Eastern and South Asian mythologies have a special connection with the earth, the natural world in which individuals work out who they are and how they're meant to behave. Stories of creation and destruction are the two bookends in great world mythologies, telling us where we come from, why we're here, and how everything will come to an end.

Utnapishtim and the Great Flood

- In an earlier lecture, we heard the story of Gilgamesh and met Utnapishtim, the survivor of a great flood. According to his story, in ancient times, the god Enlil becomes angry with human beings and convinces the rest of the gods to send a great flood upon the earth. Several gods, including the goddess Ishtar and the god Ea, agree, but they are sworn to secrecy.
- Ea, however, has reservations about destroying all of humanity; thus, he tells the plan to Utnapishtim. Ea commands Utnapishtim to destroy his own home and build a boat to save living creatures.
- Utnapishtim follows Ea's instructions, hiring skilled laborers and craftsmen to construct a vessel that can survive the impact of high waves and strong winds. He stocks the boat with all the necessary supplies to survive a flood and with silver and gold. Then he loads up his family, craftsmen of his village, and "all the beasts and animals of the field."
- Finally, the god Shamash declares that it is time to seal the boat. At this point, the story becomes very dramatic: A storm cloud forms,

and winds begin to buffet the boat. Utnapishtim, the last passenger, closes the entry to the boat and orders the boatman to seal the door. The boat begins to rise on the swelling flood waters; the sky turns black; and the earth itself cracks under the weight of the water pouring on top of it. The storm becomes so wild that even the gods become afraid and retreat to safety in their own part of heaven.

- The flood continues for six days, but on the seventh day, it begins to calm. After a day, Utnapishtim risks opening a window, but all he sees is water. Ultimately, Utnapishtim sends a dove out from the boat. The dove flies away but returns. Later, Utnapishtim sends out a swallow, but this bird also returns. Finally, he sends out a raven. This time, the bird does not return, signaling that it has found solid ground on which to perch.
- At this point, Utnapishtim orders that the boat doors be unsealed. When he steps on shore, his first act is to make a sacrifice to the gods. The gods smell the rising incense, and they come to Utnapishtim's sacrifice. When the goddess Ishtar arrives, she promises, "I shall remember these days and never forget them. All the gods may come to the sacrifice, except for Enlil, because he brought about this flood and destroyed my people."
- Enlil, of course, arrives at the sacrifice anyway, furious that his original plans were thwarted. But the gods confer and chastise Enlil. Then Enlil boards the boat, leading Utnapishtim and his wife on board with him. He blesses them and grants them immortality. From that time forward, Utnapishtim lives in a faraway place, where eventually Gilgamesh finds him and hears his story.
- This is a dramatic story, and many parts of it are familiar to anyone who knows the story in Genesis of Noah and the ark, including the boat, the rising waters, the birds, and the divine promise never again to send another great flood.
 - These shared elements don't just appear in the Gilgamesh and biblical traditions; many cultures have flood stories similar to this one.

- The dominant opinion among scholars today is that the Gilgamesh story is based on yet another story, the Epic of Atrahasis, a Mesopotamian epic that dates back to the 18th century B.C.E.

Zoroastrian Flood Stories

- The Bundahi, a 9th-century collection of Zoroastrian creation stories, tells a flood story of the “early days,” when the earth was full of evil beings.
 - According to the Bundahi, when the earth was full of evil beings, an angel known as Tistar came down to earth three times, in the form of a man, a horse, and a bull. Each time he came, he sent 10 days and nights of continual rain.
 - The first flood he caused drowned the evil creatures, but some of them went into hiding in holes in the earth. Then Tistar caused a second flood, making the river waters overflow and washing the venom from the evil beings from the land into the sea. Finally, by the end of the third flood, all the evil creatures had been purged from the land, and their venom had been washed into the sea.
- Another important flood story in Zoroastrianism involves a king named Yima, who ruled the earth for 900 years. During this time, there was no death or disease, and the population threatened to outgrow the earth. Finally, the supreme god, Ahura Mazda, warned Yima that a great destruction was coming in the form of snow and frost, and the subsequent melting of the snow would flood the earth. Yima was instructed to build a large enclosure in which to keep his family, some friends, specimens of living creatures and plants, and “red blazing fires” safe from the waters that would flood the earth.

Similarities and Differences in Flood Stories

- Flood stories often include distinctive features peculiar to their home traditions, but they also share some common elements.
 - In virtually every story, a good god—not an evil one—is responsible for sending the flood upon humanity, but he stops short of destroying the entire population. Although the

god or gods who send the flood are fully aware that most of humanity will be destroyed, they are also responsible for saving a remnant of human life. Often, one man is singled out to help with this effort.

- In addition, at the end of almost every story, the god or gods pledge never to send a flood to destroy the earth again.
- Flood stories also differ from one another in some intriguing ways, particularly the reason for the flood. In the biblical story, God sends a flood because he is angry with mankind’s wickedness, and the same is true of Allah in the Qur’an. In the Gilgamesh story, however, we’re told that one god simply became angry with humanity, although there’s no sense that mankind had become especially evil.
- In some traditions, a flood ushers in a qualitative change in the world—a change even more dramatic than the destruction of humanity. Egyptian mythology describes an end-times event in which the god Atum dissolves the world and returns to the primal waters of chaos. At that time, all other living beings will cease to exist, except Osiris, the god of death and resurrection. Osiris’s presence gives a glimmer of hope for the future.
- In general, flood stories “wipe the slate clean.” For whatever reason, the god or gods decide that the old world isn’t working right and needs a reboot. Rightly or wrongly, the god isn’t happy with the way things are going on earth, particularly with human beings, and the flood acts as a cosmic eraser. The “Noah” figure in each tradition makes it possible for humanity to continue after this catastrophic event.

Fire Mythology

- In addition to flood myths, the world’s great mythological traditions also include fire stories. For example, the book of Revelation describes a “fire come down from God out of heaven” that devours the nations; the devil, we’re told, is cast into a “lake of fire and brimstone.”

- We tend to associate fire with the end of the world, but fire is sometimes part of creation mythology. For example, South Asian mythology includes stories about Shiva. In one of his most common forms, he is portrayed dancing the universe into and out of existence, surrounded by a ring of fire.
- In most mythologies, however, fire is associated with end times. Zoroastrian mythology describes the end of the earth over a 3,000-year period during which good and evil will battle with each other. In the end, the forces of evil will launch a final attack on the world. During this attack, the sun and the moon will grow dark, and the world will become cold. Evil will rule over humanity.
 - Finally, a savior will be born from a virgin, and he will bring about a final judgment of the living and the dead. He will send



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In some forms, Shiva is known as Nataraja, the “Lord of the Dance”; he performs a dance in which the universe is created, sustained, and eventually destroyed.

the wicked to hell, where they will be purged by fire to remove their sinfulness.

- The “forces for good” will then cause all the metal in the mountains to melt, creating a molten river that flows across the face of the earth. All of humanity will be forced to wade through this molten metal. The wicked will be burned, but the righteous will feel as if they are walking through a river of warm milk.
- Finally, the savior and the supreme god, Ahura Mazda, will offer a fire sacrifice on behalf of all mankind. Righteous human beings will eat from this sacrifice and will become immortal as a result. Their bodies will be transformed, and evil will be completely cast out from the earth.
- South Asian and East Asian mythologies also include end-times stories involving fire. In one story from South Asian Buddhism, the Buddha predicts the end of the world in the Sermon of the Seven Suns. The lesson to be drawn from this sermon is that all is impermanent, including the earth itself. The sermon ends with this line: “Thus, monks, impermanent are the constituents of existence ... so much so, that this alone is enough to weary and disgust one with all constituent things and to release yourself from them.”
- In most of these stories, fire isn’t simply a destructive force; it also cleanses and purifies. In fact, it’s best to think about both flood and fire myths as more purifying than destructive. Both types of stories are, in fact, often renewal stories. Instead of ending the world, the fires and floods bring about a new phase that involves significant change from the world we now know. Fires and floods are transformative, altering the very foundation of the universe—not so that it ends, but so that it will continue in a new and better form.

Suggested Reading

Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, vol. 1.

Campbell and Moyers, *The Power of Myth*.

Dalley, ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia*.

Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*.

Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do flood and fire imagery commonly represent or signify in world mythologies?
2. End-times or destruction mythologies frequently culminate in a new creation; what common elements or motifs appear in great mythologies' new creations?

**Great Mythologies of the World:
Africa**

Great Mythologies of the World: Africa

Scope:

The captivating stories, unforgettable characters, and profound ideas of African mythology have long been overlooked or undervalued in the study of world literature. This section of the course provides an introduction to, and survey of, African mythology, exploring the great diversity of myth traditions across the continent that is humanity's home, as well as the core values and worldviews that unite them.

The introductory lecture contextualizes the study of African mythology within the study of world mythology generally, describes some consistent features of African myths, and explains how the myths were shared and preserved. We'll then proceed to examine African creation stories, African religious cosmology, trickster figures, relations between African gods and humanity, culture heroes, morality tales, African ideas about death and the afterlife, and the recurrent theme of visits by African heroes to the underworld.

Understanding and appreciating the images and concepts found in African mythology requires an awareness of the religious cosmology and worldviews from which the myths emerged. Most African religious traditions have a central deity who sits atop a hierarchy of other spiritual figures and is usually seen as the supreme god who created the world and everything in it. As we'll see, the creation process is described in a fascinating variety of forms, but in most cases, the supreme god's regular involvement in the world ceases when the process of creation is complete. From that point on, other spiritual figures, who form a pantheon of lesser divinities, take over responsibility for the world's day-to-day affairs. Often, these colorful, lesser divinities have separate spheres of influence, focusing on particular aspects of nature or particular realms, such as the sky or the underworld.

We'll next consider African trickster figures, who frequently play significant roles in the creation of the world and humanity. In some cases, they act as intermediaries between the supreme god and humanity after creation. Tricksters are especially complex characters in African myth and, in many

ways, embody the unpredictability and imperfect nature of life as experienced by human beings. Relations between other African spiritual figures and humanity are also complicated, however; in many traditions, the creator god deliberately separates himself from humanity after establishing the world, and all efforts by humanity to resume close connections are rebuffed. In some cases, humanity is forced to take action on its own behalf against the will of the gods to ensure its own survival. Nevertheless, there are countless myths in which gods treat humanity benevolently, some involving successful marriages, happy romantic relations, or mere trysts between human beings and gods.

Many African myths feature culture heroes, and we'll examine several such figures, each of whom is credited with laying the foundations for a society, if not for human civilization. Some of these characters are described as part divine, some are human but purely mythical, and some appear to have been real historical figures, but all serve to explain how things in the world came to be as they are. African morality tales, we'll discover, play a different role, sometimes providing lessons in how a society expects its people to act and sometimes posing questions that allow listeners to consider and debate important moral issues.

Perhaps the highest expression of Africa's myth traditions appears in the continent's epics, two of which we will explore in detail: the ancient Soninke epic called the *Dausi* and the Bambara epic of Bakaridjan Kone. Although these wonderful tales come from the same region of West Africa, they are separated by centuries and offer very different insights into life and human nature. They are rich and multifaceted, dealing with virtue, vanity, courage, cowardice, mortality, and immortality.

The subject of death looms large in African myth, as in all myth traditions. Quite often, death is depicted as a creature or other separate being, and we will consider some of the many and varied accounts of its origins. Its connections in numerous myths to the animal world, to children, or to human sexuality are particularly intriguing. We will conclude by examining several stories in which heroic African figures encounter death as they visit the underworld, confronting their own fears and emerging, in differing ways, transformed. Their experiences are ultimately life-affirming, and in many respects, that is the nature of African mythology itself. ■

The Beauty of African Mythology

Lecture 25

A long time ago, a powerful god rose to prominence in the heavens. In spite of his great authority, he was known for his jealousy, and at times, he harshly punished mortals. His weapon was the thunderbolt, which he hurled at all who displeased him. Although this figure seems to resemble Zeus from Greek mythology, he is actually Shango, god of the Yoruba of West Africa. His story suggests that the people who believed in him thought deeply about the meaning of life and shared rich tales that reflected their experiences in the world. As we'll see in this section of the course, ancient African myths considered some of humanity's earliest thoughts about divinity, the world, and life itself.

The Story of Shango

- Before becoming a god, Shango is said to have been a fearsome king of the city-kingdom of Oyo, the most important of the early Yoruba states. Oyo was located in the southwestern part of present-day Nigeria and lasted from roughly 1200 to 1800 C.E.
- Shango was known as a warlike tyrant who carried a two-headed ax—the Yoruba symbol for a thunderbolt. He also had magical powers. When he spoke, smoke and fire billowed from his mouth. As king of Oyo, Shango expanded his empire by waging ruthless battles against the surrounding kingdoms.
 - After one of those battles, Shango became angry when two of his generals, Timi and Gbonka, received greater recognition than he did. Shango ordered Gbonka to attack Timi, and when Gbonka had captured him, Shango insisted that the two commanders (who were also close friends) duel to the death.
 - Gbonka won the duel, but he refused to follow Shango's order to kill Timi; thus, Shango made the two commanders duel once more. Gbonka won again, and this time, he cut off Timi's head

and threw it in anger into Shango's lap. Shango was enraged and decided to kill Gbonka.

- A pyre was constructed, and Gbonka was placed on top of it. With a mighty blast from his mouth, Shango set the wood ablaze. But to Shango's amazement, Gbonka walked out of the fire unharmed. Gbonka confronted Shango and demanded that he leave Oyo forever.
- Shango's shame and sorrow must have been great because he went to a forest and hanged himself. Two chains appeared from above to carry Shango to his new home in the sky.
- When people came to look for Shango, all they found was his double-headed ax on the ground. They concluded that he had left this world to live in the heavens, but they continued to fear him. Forever after, it has been said that Shango is watching and ready to strike anyone who behaves unjustly or otherwise displeases him.
- Shango may not seem like an especially sympathetic character, but he seems to have had a sense of shame, and in the end, he learned from his mistakes. After Gbonka's emergence from the fire, Shango realized that he couldn't control everything; he understood that there was a higher law that governed the earthly realm over which he reigned. His violent temperament was unsuited for life on earth, but he chose to withdraw to the heavens, where his anger could serve the higher cause of justice.

Oral Tradition in African Mythology

- The stories of Shango and other African myths were preserved for centuries through a vibrant oral tradition, and that tradition continues to this day. Unlike what we might imagine, this oral tradition was a complex and thoughtfully planned system—one that recognized the importance of myths as repositories of precious cultural beliefs and customs and was carefully designed to preserve them.



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Africa is humanity's home—the place where we all come from originally; thus, to explore ancient African myth is to consider some of humanity's earliest thoughts about life and the world around us.

- In many African societies, bright children who demonstrated a natural ability to remember large amounts of information were identified early in their education and were then trained to be the keepers of the stories and history of the village, tribe, or community. They were told those narratives repeatedly until they could recall and recite them with little or no effort. When these children became adults, they passed the narratives on to the next generation of children in the same way.
- It's important to note that accuracy in the retelling of a story was not always the most essential concern in this tradition. What mattered most was the story's relevance for the storyteller and the listeners. It was acceptable to modify the story or its message to suit the times and the needs and concerns of the audience. That's why we find so many different versions of African myths, even among the few that have been written down.
- Given that this African storytelling tradition depended on live performance, it should come as no surprise that how the story was told was as important as the content. The performance of myths was designed to be both engaging and memorable. Even today, many African stories are told in song, and the audience often participates in the telling through call-and-response exchanges with the storyteller.

- Structure is another distinctive feature of African myths. Many stories that emerge from Western cultures depict time as linear; thus, we tend to expect all stories to be told in that same way, from start to finish. In almost every African culture, however, time is viewed as cyclical. Rather than moving in a straight line, African myths may start in the middle, seem to end, circle back to the beginning, and then reach a conclusion.

The Trickster

- Another interesting quality of many African myths that can seem strange to Westerners is that they seem to accept and embrace the irrational, inexplicable, and even unfair aspects of life. Far from offering a straightforward explanation or a moral to help us understand the purpose of events, some myths seem designed to remind us that life doesn't always make sense and that we live at the mercy of the gods. No figure embodies this quality more than the beloved African trickster.
- As you may know from other myth traditions, tricksters are divine figures who act outside the accepted norms of behavior for gods and mortals, often quite selfishly and to the detriment of others. But in a strange if sometimes disturbing way, African tricksters often manage to reveal hidden truths.
- Eshu is a trickster god of the Yoruba, and a dangerous one because he is also the intermediary between human beings and Olorun, the supreme god of the Yoruba pantheon. One myth about Eshu involves two farmers who were best friends. Eshu created a disagreement between them that became so heated they ultimately appealed to the local king for justice. Eshu then appeared and gleefully confessed that he had caused all the trouble, saying, "Creating conflict is my greatest delight."
- At first, it's difficult to see anything good in Eshu's behavior, but if we look at him as the embodiment of the odd coincidences and twists of fate that we all experience, his actions can be seen as a kind of chiding commentary on human tendencies. He breaks

up old, unproductive habits to make way for innovation. As an archetype, Eshu is the inner guide—that part of ourselves that is capable of life-changing and life-sustaining insights.

African Myth and Religion

- In Western culture, we draw clear lines between what is sacred and what is secular. In many African traditions, however, the boundary line between the sacred and the secular is blurred. This blurring is especially noticeable in a trickster figure, such as Eshu, who is capable of influencing the lives of both humans and gods and of moving freely between the material and spiritual worlds. This ability plays an important role in the story of Obatala, the Yoruba god who created land and fashioned people from clay.
- Obatala decides to take a journey to see Shango, who was a friend of his and was still king of Oyo at the time. Eshu, however, causes trouble for Obatala on the journey, ultimately causing him to be arrested and thrown in prison.
 - While Obatala is in prison, Shango's kingdom suffers a great plague and drought. Shango is advised by an oracle that there is an innocent holy person in his prisons and that releasing this person will bring an end to Oyo's troubles.
 - Shango finds Obatala in prison and asks for his forgiveness. Because Obatala played a part in the creation of humanity, it has pained him to see the people of Oyo suffering; thus, he lifts the plague and restores the rains.
 - Eshu's behavior in this story is once again mysterious and certainly seems unhelpful. Note how the tricks he plays have severe consequences not only for the god Obatala but also for Shango and the people of Oyo. Eshu seems to have no malice toward anyone in particular, but his actions are felt in both the divine and mortal realms.
 - We can also see the blurring of the lines between the natural and the supernatural in the figure of Obatala. Obatala is a god,

but he is subject to constraints that seem distinctly mortal. He can be imprisoned and held incommunicado. In addition, Obatala is not omniscient; he faces many of the uncertainties confronted by ordinary humans.

Conflicted Deities

- It's also characteristic of African myths that such gods as Obatala have complex, sometimes paradoxical qualities. In this respect, African gods can be seen more like personifications of natural forces or familiar emotions than the benevolent shepherd of the human flock that we see in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- Ogun is another example of a conflicted deity. He is the Yoruba god of iron, the forge, and war. In one myth about Ogun, he clears the way for the gods to live on earth. The people then convince him to become their king, and he leads them to many victories against nearby communities.
 - During a break in one of these battles, however, Eshu appears and gives Ogun a gourd of palm wine. Ogun drinks all the wine and fights even more valiantly than before. But in his drunken state, he kills both the enemy's troops and his own. The story ends with the powerful image of Ogun standing alone among the carnage.
 - Here, we see Ogun as the convergence of opposing forces. He is a creator, making a way for the gods to come to earth, but he is also a destroyer who kills all the people he was entrusted to protect.
- The contradictions and malleability of African myths are often the gateway to a deeper underlying message to the stories. They help us to see beyond what is visible to the eye and to look more deeply into the world around us—and within ourselves—to discover ancient, sacred wisdom.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*.

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Lynch and Roberts, *African Mythology A to Z*.

Okpewho, *African Oral Literature*.

Parrinder, *African Mythology*.

Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

Questions to Consider

1. How might the tradition of passing myths on orally have shaped the African myths that we know today and their place in African culture?
2. How might a culture's myths be affected by incorporating the irrational, inexplicable, and sometimes unfair aspects of life, as many African myths do?

African Creation Stories

Lecture 26

Creation myths address some of the most fundamental questions that people have asked over the ages: Where did the heavens come from? What is the universe made of? Who created our world and why? The first peoples of Africa were undoubtedly the first humans to tell creation myths, and a great number of such myths have been handed down to us. Given the vastness of the African continent and the great diversity of its peoples, it's impossible to say anything about African creation myths that applies to all of them. In this lecture, however, we'll look at some of these stories in light of two broad categories: *ex nihilo* and chaos myths.

Ex Nihilo Myths

- *Ex nihilo* myths are those that begin “out of nothing,” but they don't actually start with nothing. Typically, they begin with a creator god, but for events to move forward, the creator god must create something besides himself.
- The questions inherent in *ex nihilo* creation stories have challenged storytellers, philosophers, and religious thinkers for millennia. Where did the supreme creator god come from? What existed before that god was created? Why did the god decide to create? How did the god create something out of nothing?
- Africa's ancient storytellers clearly wrestled with these and other dilemmas. The Bambara people, who live today in the upper Niger region of Mali, have an unusual system of cosmology and metaphysics that incorporates animistic beliefs.
 - As they see it, there was nothing but a void before creation. It was not a god or a big bang that brought the cosmos into existence but a sound—Yo. Yo not only called forth matter, but it also set in motion the process that gave shape and organization to reality, separating it into celestial objects, the earth, and its inhabitants, and ultimately, producing human

consciousness. Most directly, Yo called forth three creator gods, Faro, Pamba, and Teliko, and it was their acts that produced the world as we know it.

- For many of us raised in the West, the Bambara story of Yo may bring to mind the Bible's account of creation in the Book of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Clearly, though, the Bambara story takes a different course from that point onward. Yo does not "become flesh" and live among people as the Word has been interpreted to do in John. It simply initiates existence, although it seems to continue to pervade all that it created.

Chaos Myths

- Rather than starting *ex nihilo*, other creation myths start with something. In some myths, a god and "something else" exist at the start of the story; in other myths, the god and the something else begin as an undifferentiated mass. In either case, the something else is generally a chaotic mess that the god needs to organize.
- The creation story of Bumba, the supreme god of the Bushongo, is one of the most famous African myths and a prime example of a chaos myth. Its solution to the question of how a solitary god can create something out of nothing is interesting if a bit distasteful: Bumba vomits up the sun, the moon, the stars, specific animals, and human beings.
- With the act of vomiting, Bumba addresses two questions that underlie many creation myths: How can a spiritual being create material things, and how can a solitary god create life without sexual reproduction? The myth's answer is a simple biological one with which any listener could identify: Everything started inside Bumba, then came out.
- In Bumba's story, each of the animals he brought forth proceeded to create all the other creatures of its kind in the world. He vomited up a white heron that created all flying birds, a crocodile that created

other reptiles, and so on. The idea of creatures creating other creatures is unusual in world mythology.

- At this point in the story, we learn somewhat abruptly that Bumba's three sons finished the work of creation. There is no explanation, however, of how these sons came to be. When the sons' acts of creation were complete, harmony reigned in the world, except that the female figure of lightning brought trouble. Because she started fires across the earth, Bumba banished her to the sky.
 - As a result, humanity no longer had a ready source of fire. People could not cook their food, bake clay, or create effective tools.
 - Thus, Bumba taught people how to extract fire from trees, where it lived. He then went from village to village throughout the earth, encouraging people to celebrate and enjoy everything he had created.
- The Bumba story never provides an answer to the question of why Bumba began to create in the first place. The act of vomiting is typically an involuntary one, which raises the question of whether Bumba was in control of his act of creation, whether there was a higher power acting on him and forcing creation to occur, or whether the elements of nature were so bent on existing that they forced themselves out of Bumba's body.
- The Bumba story is unusual, but it's important to note that the Bible's account of creation is also a chaos story. Even though God is alone at the beginning of Genesis, there is something else with him: a formless void and a darkness that covered the "face of the deep." God's subsequent acts create order out of that chaos.

Dogon Chaos Myth

- The Dogon people, who live in central Mali, are neighbors to the Bambara. Their chaos myth provides an interesting answer to the question of how a solitary god could create the cosmos.
 - The Dogon creator god is Amma, and according to the story, the only things that existed at the beginning of time were Amma

and a lump of clay. Amma crafted the earth from the clay and hurled it into space. But the earth Amma fashioned was in the form of a woman, with whom Amma had intercourse.

- The result was life itself, in the form of twins who were called the Nummo. Amma also used the primordial clay to fashion the first two human beings, but they had no souls. It was up to the Nummo to complete Amma's work and to establish order in the chaos that remained following his creative acts.
- In the Dogon myth, Amma uses clay to initiate the creation process. In that sense, the Dogon story is much more clearly a chaos myth than is the story of Bumba. But notice that Amma is also a weaker figure than Bumba. He needs to rely on matter outside himself to create, rather than simply disgorging his creation. It's worth noting that in some versions of the Dogon creation myth, Amma is female.
- In chaos creation stories, the suggestion is that the something else that accompanies the divine came into existence at the same time as the creator. Taking this idea further, there is the potential implication that this material may have existed before the creator. Given this dynamic, in some African myths, the chaos creator is seen as less powerful than an *ex nihilo* creator.

The Land, Sun, Moon, and Stars

- In some creation myths, a division of responsibilities among gods explains why the world is separated into clearly defined realms, such as land, sea, and sky. The Yoruba of Nigeria, Benin, and northern Togo have such a creation story involving the god Obatala.
 - In the beginning, the universe contained only the gods, the sky, water, and marshland. Obatala, the son of the supreme god, Olorun, asked his father for permission to create land for living beings, and Olorun agreed.
 - On the advice of his older brother, Obatala gathered the items he needed to create land: a long gold chain, a snail shell full of sand, a white hen, and a palm nut. When he had finished creating

land, he built a house and settled down.

- Back in the sky, Obatala's father, Olorun, sent a chameleon to see how his son was faring. Obatala reported that all was well, but he complained that the world was too dark and cold. Olorun then fashioned the sun and placed it in the sky so that the earth would have light and warmth.



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Among the Yoruba, the chameleon is a creature known for its caution and for its powers of observation.

- The accounts of how the most familiar celestial objects came to be are some of the most charming of all African myths. The sun is often the symbol of the supreme god and is regularly characterized as masculine. Its cycle is symbolic of the cycle of life.
- In most mythologies throughout Africa, the creator made the sun, along with all the other heavenly bodies and the earth. In some, however, humans play a key role. In a story told among the San peoples of Botswana, Namibia, and southern Africa, the sky was dark at the beginning of time, and the sun had the form of a man, who kept the light to himself. When the man was sleeping, children threw him into the sky and shouted at him to transform himself fully into the sun and warm the whole earth.
- In a story told by the Lamba people of Zambia, a team of workers was responsible for dragging the sun across the sky from east to west. There, they handed it off to another team that pulled it back to the east, where it would appear the next morning. While the sun was headed back east, yet another group on its surface buffed and polished it. When it was time for dawn, they rekindled the sun's fires.
- The Ekoi of Nigeria trace the moon's origins to the generosity of Sheep, who helped the supreme god, Obassi, by giving him a

shining stone that enabled Obassi to see in the dark. Sheep asked Obassi to hang the stone high in the heavens, where he hoped it would brighten the night and make all creatures happy. Obassi did as Sheep suggested, but sometimes, he covers the moon to remind everyone of the importance of being generous.

- The stars, too, get their due in African myth. For example, in the tales of the Ewe of Benin, Ghana, and Togo, the stars are the children of the moon. Originally, both the sun and the moon had many offspring, but the moon proposed to the sun that they kill their children and eat them. This awful idea seems to have appealed to the sun, who served her children in a meal that she and the moon savored together. The moon, however, hid her children away to protect them. From then on, she lets them out only at night; as for the sun, she has no one left to keep her company.

Suggested Reading

Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death*.

Eliade, *Gods, Goddesses, and Myths of Creation*.

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Leach, *The Beginning*.

Leeming and Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Sproul, *Primal Myths*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do the African creation myths discussed in this lecture suggest about the worldviews of the people who told them?
2. How does the worldview of a society that tells an *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing,” creation myth differ from one that tells a chaos myth?

African Religious Cosmology

Lecture 27

To grasp the meaning of much of African mythology and place it in proper context, we need to understand the religious cosmology within which African myths developed and the perspectives on the world that shaped them. However, phenomenal diversity exists among African religions, even now that Christianity and Islam are firmly rooted on the continent. Further, as we have noted, Westerners may have difficulty making sense of African religious beliefs because African society tends to blur the secular and the sacred in ways that Western religions do not. Nevertheless, we can identify a number of attributes in African cosmology that can serve as guideposts in our explorations.

Creator Gods

- A single god occupies the highest position of authority in most traditional African systems of belief. Quite often, that god, who is typically male, is believed to have created the cosmos, including our world. After that initial act, however, the creator god usually withdraws from his creation, leaving it to lesser divine figures.
- Most creator gods are envisioned as omnipotent, but some are limited in their abilities and capable of making significant mistakes. In either case, African supreme gods are frequently held responsible for the disasters and other troubles that afflict the world.
- The variety of supreme creator gods across Africa is remarkable. The San people, who live mostly in Botswana, Namibia, and southeastern Angola, call the supreme creator god Cagn. This god can change shapes at will and created living things by inhabiting their forms. In some stories, he is eaten by an ogre and by ants, which means that he apparently cannot control everything; however, his body always reassembles itself.

- The god Jok is worshipped by the Acholi and Lango peoples of Uganda, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan. He is said to have created the heavens, the earth, and all of earth's inhabitants and to have given fire to humanity and taught people how to grow food.
 - Unlike many creator gods, Jok remains involved in the world, presiding over births and providing wet and dry seasons so that crops will grow and people can hunt for food.
 - Instead of interacting with the world directly, however, Jok has spirits or, perhaps, avatars that involve themselves in the lives of human beings and carry out his commands. Interestingly, these spirits are also named Jok. The Lango believe that when people die, their spirits merge with Jok.

- An example of a more fallible creator god is Ngewo, the supreme being of the Mende people of Sierra Leone. Like Jok, he is believed to have created the cosmos, but having done so, Ngewo went to live by himself in a cave. When he grew lonely, he ordered all the world's creatures to come in pairs and share the cave with him. Ngewo declared that he would give the creatures everything they needed, provided they followed one rule: They were not to touch Ngewo's food.
 - Eventually, all the creatures violated Ngewo's command, and he reluctantly sent them all away. Ngewo retreated to the sky; from there, he watched the animals and people roaming the world, forever searching for the food of the gods that had been forbidden to them.
 - This haunting story features a number of qualities that make it stand out among African myths. First, it shows us a creator god with limited abilities; specifically, Ngewo cannot control the behavior of the creatures he made. Moreover, he seems not to be all-knowing; he couldn't foresee that the creatures of the world would violate his commands. Finally, Ngewo suffers from human emotions, including loneliness and sorrow.

- It's important to note that human beings in the Ngewo story are treated in the same way as other creatures who misbehave. This reflects a significant aspect of the African religious outlook: the idea of harmony, which is essential to maintaining balance in the universe. People may have different abilities from those of many animals, but that does not make them superior; all god's creations are one.
- Although the supreme creator god in many African pantheons is male, female creator figures exist, as well. In parts of Nigeria, for example, human beings are said to have come from the divine son of Eka Abassi, the great mother goddess. The Yako people of eastern Nigeria say that humanity sprang from a virgin woman who fell from the sky.

Lesser Gods

- The pantheons of deities who serve the supreme creator god in African religions are no less colorful than the supreme gods themselves. In Uganda, the Baganda people have a sky god named Gulu and a female earth figure named Kitaka, as well as a god of thunder and lightning, Kiwanuka. Additional gods have responsibility for satisfying human wants or protecting people from calamities.
- As we've seen, the pantheon of the Yoruba people was presided over by the supreme god Olorun. According to some traditions, Olorun was both male and female, but he was also the father of Obatala and his brother, Orunmila, the god of divination. Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, and Eshu, the trickster, were also Yoruba gods. The pantheon also included many other gods and spirits, known as *orisas*.
- The Fon of Benin have an unusually complex pantheon that they call the Vodun, although the same term is also used to refer to the individual gods within the pantheon. The gods of the Vodun are divided into four sub-pantheons, one each for the sky, the earth, the sea, and thunder. The Vodun contains many lesser gods, as well, including gods who embody aspects of nature and certain abstract ideas.

Spirit Beings

- Spirits, too, play important roles in many religions of Africa. They inhabit everything and come in several varieties. Some serve as guards in the places where they dwell, such as bodies of water or mountains. There are also evil spirits, who cause trouble and pain, as well as spirits of the dead and spirits of ancestors. The latter are thought to provide protection and guidance to the living and, in some religions, are seen as part of the divine pantheon, even though they are not actually gods.
- In a separate category of spirit beings are the *jinn* or *elijinen*, who are seen as presences in the lives of peoples across North Africa and in such sub-Saharan countries as Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.
 - *Jinn* are said to be thinking beings that are not necessarily rooted in a particular place, thing, or creature but can change shapes, fly through the air, adopt human form, or turn themselves invisible at will. Some are believed to have reproduced with human beings, creating offspring that are half-human, half-spirit. Some *jinn* are good and some are evil.
 - Although *jinn* are often associated with the Islamic world, Arab belief in *jinn* as dangerous spirits of the desert dates to long before the time of Mohammed. Some scholars of the Middle East claim that *jinn* originated as early gods of the Sumerians or Akkadians (4000 B.C.E.). Continuing belief in *jinn* is reinforced by the fact that the Qur'an mentions them repeatedly, describing them as real, living beings.

The Afterlife

- According to many sub-Saharan religions, after death, the spirits of the departed migrate to the underworld, a region beneath the earth, although other African traditions envision spirits rising to the heavens. In many cases, the underworld is much like the world of the living, with the souls of the dead occupying homes in villages and doing the same daily tasks they did while alive. As in myths around the world, however, they are almost always unable to leave.

- For the Ambundu people of Angola, as well as for the Lunda, who live in Angola and neighboring countries, Kalunga is both the supreme god and the god of the dead. The underworld he rules resembles the land of the living superficially, but all is not as it seems. Even though Kalunga is wise and just as the supreme god, in his role as overseer of the underworld, he is not to be trusted.
- In some religions, the spirits of the departed are malevolent and bent on harming the living. The Tswana, who live in Botswana and South Africa, see the spirits of the dead, or *badimo*, as acting contrary to the supreme god's will and striving to make humanity distrust him. For other peoples, such as the Nuba and Dilling of Sudan, the spirits of the dead are helpful intermediaries between the gods and human beings.
- In many African cultures, ancestors occupy a curious place somewhere between life and death. Some view them as not dead at all but as enduring guides and defenders of people in the present. The Bambara people of Mali, for example, regularly seek the help of their ancestors, communicating with them through rituals.

Shamans

- Danger is a part of life everywhere, and the people of Africa have long lived with more than their share of threats from the natural world. Their religions seem to reflect those threats, which often take the form of frightening, supernatural monsters who feed on human beings or their livestock. Finding themselves menaced by monsters, surrounded by temperamental spirits, and at the mercy of sometimes unreliable gods, it's not surprising that many Africans seek help from experts in spiritual matters, specifically, shamans.
- It is the job of the shaman to communicate with the unseen spirit world and to intercede with gods and spirits on behalf of ordinary mortals. Shamans have a variety of tools at their disposal for these purposes, including rituals and concoctions to ward off dangerous spirits or enlist the help of good ones. Shamans can also heal the sick, inflict bad fortune on those who deserve it, and see the future.



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In many parts of Africa, disease is viewed as the product of dark forces, such as sorcery or witchcraft, and shamans have the ability to divine its sources.

- The rituals practiced by shamans are essential to their ability to access the spirit world and to obtain the power they need. Dance is a critical element of many of these rituals, enabling shamans to enter into a trancelike state in which they can communicate with spirits or derive power from them that allows the shamans to resolve problems in the earthly realm. In their travels in the spirit world, shamans are also believed to be able to reach the land of the dead when necessary.
- In the Ambundu story of the untrustworthy Kalunga, the god keeps the dead in the underworld so that he may eat them. Having discovered this, the shaman returns to the Ambundu people and urges them to return to normal life after the death of their queen. In this way, the shaman acts not only as a healer and intermediary but also as a kind of spiritual leader, playing a vital role in the emotional well-being of the people he serves.

Suggested Reading

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits*.

Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

Olupona, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think many African myths feature a supreme creator god who withdraws from humanity and lesser gods who are more involved in human concerns?
2. How does a belief in spirits shape African mythology?

Tricksters of Africa

Lecture 28

The trickster is one of the most important and recurrent figures in African mythology. Tricksters in African myth are unrepentant troublemakers who are skilled at deception, just as they are in other folkloric traditions around the world. Although they are unscrupulous, many African tricksters are humorous characters. They are capable of great shrewdness—and sheer idiocy. In some ways, they can be interpreted as representing basic human needs, drives, and weaknesses. Their frequent bad behavior gives us the pleasure of seeing taboos broken without having to take the risk of breaking them ourselves. Moreover, many trickster stories provide explanations for calamities and injustices. In all these ways, tricksters serve as an acknowledgment—and sometimes a celebration—of life’s vicissitudes.

Anansi: The Trickster Spider

- In African mythology, animal figures are often assigned the role of the trickster, perhaps to further distance humans from the forbidden behavior in which the tricksters engage. Probably the most well-known character in African myth is Mr. Spider, known as Anansi in West Africa. He is fabled for using his intellect to outwit much stronger creatures, including humans.
- One story that captures Anansi’s intelligence and buffoonery alike portrays him as the source of all of humanity’s wisdom. In this telling, no one can make a decision without consulting him. But because each piece of advice that Anansi gives reduces the total of his wisdom, he doesn’t hand it out lightly. Anansi grows quite offended, in fact, if people don’t show him the gratitude that he expects.
 - One day, Anansi decides to teach humanity a lesson by taking back all the wisdom he has distributed, which he collects in a giant pot. When the pot is full, Anansi decides to hang it high in a tree so that no one can steal it, but when he reaches the highest branch, the pot slips from his fingers and crashes to the ground, scattering bits of wisdom everywhere.

- Before Anansi can scramble down from the tree, hordes of people race to where the pot has fallen and begin grabbing all the wisdom they can. Those who arrive first are able to take a great deal of wisdom, while those who get there later end up with less. This is why some people are wiser than others.
- In this story, we see Anansi as a benevolent if stingy and ridiculous figure. If it were not for him, the world would have no wisdom at all, but his vanity ultimately defeats his efforts to keep the world's knowledge for himself.
- The myth captures the arbitrary nature of life with a gentle sense of humor. It's not that the gods planned such a distribution of wisdom or that those who are wise got that way by being virtuous or hardworking. The uneven distribution of wisdom is the result of the actions of an egotistical and clumsy god and the fact that the people who were closest to the scene of the accident got to it first.
- In another story about Anansi, the trickster's brains and vanity produce more troubling results. This story comes from the Krachi people, who live today primarily in the Volta region in eastern Ghana.
 - In this story, the supreme creator god Wulbari overhears Anansi boasting about how clever he is. Deciding to put Anansi in his place, Wulbari challenges Anansi to bring him something, but he refuses to tell Anansi what he wants. If Anansi is so smart, Wulbari reasons, he should be able to figure out what it is that the supreme god desires.
 - Anansi disguises himself and learns that Wulbari wants darkness, the moon, and the sun, which he then goes off and gathers in a sack. He returns to Wulbari's court and announces that he has everything the god wanted.
 - Anansi pulls darkness out of the sack, and the world goes black. Wulbari is amazed, and all the people and animals cry out in fear. Anansi then pulls out the moon, and its dim light calms

the creatures. Finally, in triumph, Anansi yanks out the sun. But many creatures are instantly blinded by the sun's bright rays.

- In this story, Anansi manages to bring Wulbari what he wanted, but he also brings blindness into the world, suggesting that his cleverness has its limits. It's also important to note that such tricksters as Anansi rarely express remorse or regret for their actions. Part of their strange appeal is that when they behave badly, they suffer no lasting consequences—even if the rest of us do.
- In one popular tale, Anansi makes a peculiar and ambitious request: He asks the Ashanti sky god, Nyame, for ownership of all myths. Nyame replies that before he will bequeath this gift to the trickster, Anansi must first bring to him three of the sky god's creations: a swarm of hornets, the great python snake, and the spotted leopard.
 - Anansi is able to fulfill Nyame's request by tricking the hornets, the snake, and the leopard in various ways. In some versions of the story, Anansi must also deliver a fairy to Nyame—an even more challenging quarry than a nest of hornets, a python, or a leopard. Again, Anansi tricks the fairy and delivers it to Nyame.
 - Nyame is so impressed with Anansi's prowess that he gives all of his stories to the trickster, and afterward, anyone who wants to tell one of these tales must pay homage to the spider.
 - The trickster's cunning is again on display in this story in his ability to trick one creature after another. Again, Anansi shows no remorse for his actions or any sympathy for the creatures he takes captive. Sharp wits rule the world, the story seems to say, and if you have them, all is within your grasp.

The Trickster as Divine Intermediary

- Some African tricksters, rather than inveigling only for themselves, play the role of intermediary between the supreme god and humankind, either by conveying messages or by carrying out the supreme god's wishes. As an example, the Yoruba trickster Eshu

appears also as Legba, an attendant of the supreme god of the Fon people of Benin.

- Legba's job is to inflict all the harm on humanity that the supreme god deems necessary. When Legba asks why he always has to do the dirty work and get all the blame, the high god, who lives on earth with humanity, tells him that the ruler of a kingdom ought to get credit for what goes right; it's the duty of his servants to take the blame for what goes wrong.
- Legba takes his revenge in one story by creeping into the village yam garden with the god's sandals on his feet and stealing all of the harvest. The next day, Legba tells the high god that the vegetable bed has been ransacked, but the thief should be easy to find because he has left his footprints behind.
- All the villagers are called out to compare their sandals to the tracks in the earth, but no match is found. Finally, Legba suggests that the high god might have been sleep-walking and should examine his own sandals. When he does so—just to prove his innocence—he discovers that his sandals are a perfect match for the footprints.
- When the high god realizes that Legba has tricked him, he leaves earth to live in the sky. But he instructs Legba to visit him in the sky each night to report on the doings of humankind.
- This tale captures the ingenuity of the African trickster, as well as the wry wit of African storytellers. Not only does Legba outsmart the supreme god, but he also humiliates him through false implication in a crime. In such stories, however, the higher gods generally get the last laugh, and this story is no exception.



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Another popular trickster in African mythology is the hare; stories about the hare were brought to the New World by enslaved Africans.

For all of his cunning, the triumphant Legba still must report to the sky god each evening.

Common Trickster Behaviors

- Getting out of a sticky situation is another common trickster theme—and it’s when they are cornered that tricksters can be most dangerous.
 - In one Zulu story, a trickster named Uthlakanyana is trapped by an ogre, but he manages to trick the ogre’s mother to climb into the pot while she is cooking him for a meal. Uthlakanyana then serves the mother in a stew to her son. In the end, Uthlakanyana taunts the ogre, revealing what he has just fed him, and must run for his life as the enraged ogre gives chase.
 - In this story, Uthlakanyana is not unlike the Greek hero and trickster Odysseus, who shouts taunts while escaping from the one-eyed Cyclops. In both stories, the taunting only leads to more trouble.
- Although ogres might deserve whatever tricksters do to them, trickster behavior toward other characters sometimes seems unjustifiable.
 - In one myth from the Bakongo people, the trickster Moni-Mambu comes upon a group of women harvesting peanuts. The women welcome Moni-Mambu, inviting him to eat a meal of peanut stew with their children. Moni-Mambu proceeds to eat the stew—and the children! The women are naturally horrified, but Moni-Mambu insists that he has been the perfect guest, doing precisely what his hosts said.
 - One can easily imagine such a story traumatizing young children, but it might also serve as a reminder about the importance of choosing one’s words carefully.
- Moni-Mambu appears in another story in which he is invited by a village chief to join a hunt and told to shoot anything that comes his way.

- Of course, Moni-Mambu ends up shooting some children, the chief's favorite wife, and some of his fellow hunters. The remaining hunters try to kill Moni-Mambu by drowning him, but he tricks another man to take his place.
- Again, this story delivers a lesson in precise communication and underscores the risks of trying to kill a trickster. If tricksters represent life's uncontrollable qualities, the lesson seems to be that they need to be respected because they can't be defeated.
- Although trickster myths may be full of humor, mischief, and misbehavior, tricksters are engaged in serious business. They teach important lessons, point out hypocrisies, and underscore the basis for societies—and they do so with shamelessness and wit that inspire in us a kind of helpless admiration.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, *African Myths of Origin*.

Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

———, *Trickster and Hero*.

Questions to Consider

1. What roles do animals play in African myths?
2. How do stories change when animals are the central characters?
3. Are lessons received differently if they are voiced by animals? Why or why not?
4. How would you describe the character of tricksters?

Africa's Gods and Humanity

Lecture 29

As in cultures around the world, the relationship between humanity and the gods in African mythology is complex. Every society must confront the same fundamental questions about life, and their understandings of god tend to govern the answers that appear in their stories. In some African myths, the creator god or spirits initially have a close relationship with humanity but later distance themselves from their creations. In other stories, the creator remains aloof or distant from the start. The way in which the sacred pervades everyday life in African cultures makes people's relationship with the divine especially immediate, intimate, and powerful, but as we'll see, that doesn't mean that the relationship is free of tension and conflict.

Supportive Creator Gods

- The Bambara people of Mali envision the creator god as consistently supportive of humanity. As you recall, they tell the story of the universe originating from a single sound, Yo. Yo brings forth the creator gods Pemba, Faro, and Teliko.
 - After making the earth, Pemba fashions himself a wife, Musokoroni. They get along well at first, and together, they create all the plants and animals. But then Musokoroni turns on Pemba. After planting him in the ground, she roams the world sowing discord.
 - After Musokoroni dies, Faro uproots Pemba and takes charge of restoring harmony to creation.
- As you recall, the Fon of Benin describe the universe as the creation of the androgynous god Mawu-Lisa. The special care and attention that Mawu-Lisa devotes to creating human beings suggests that they are, from the outset, of particular importance to the god and in the cosmos.

Remote Gods

- In a story told by the Tutsi of Rwanda, the creator god's involvement with people is somewhat more remote. Although he apparently creates the first man and woman, he initially provides them with no means of reproducing. Later, he gives them a "recipe" for generating the entire human race.
- Still more remote are the divine figures in a story told by the Kabyle people of Algeria. They have what's known as an *emergence myth*: a story of humanity emerging from beneath the earth.
 - In the beginning, there were only two people, a man and a woman, and they lived in Tlam, an underground world. When they made love, 50 boys and 50 girls were born to them. The two genders were raised apart, and when their parents thought they were ready, they sent the boys and girls upward toward the earth's surface.
 - The girls climbed out of a hole and began asking who had created the plants, earth, moon, and stars. They took to wandering the earth and, eventually, met the boys, who had emerged from a different hole. A bold girl approached one of the boys, and in short order, all discovered the pleasures of lovemaking. Their descendants are the human race.
 - No god appears in this story, but the world is alive with spirits: The plants, earth, moon, and stars are all thinking beings that are capable of responding to the girls' questions. Still, none of the elements of creation offers especially helpful answers; humanity is left to figure things out for itself.

Physical Separation of the Gods

- A recurring theme in African myth is the physical separation between the original creator god and humanity and how that separation came about. In some ways, the underlying idea isn't much different from the biblical story of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The many ways in which the tale is told, however, offer interesting insights into the thinking behind it.

- We previously examined a story from the Mende people of Sierra Leone, in which the creator god Ngewo banishes all creatures from his cave after they eat his food; Ngewo then goes to live in the sky. In a variant of that story, after creating the earth, Ngewo makes the first man and woman and promises to give them whatever they need to be happy.
 - Each day, the man and woman come to Ngewo, asking for things, and he grants their wishes. Soon, though, Ngewo grows tired of this routine; in the middle of night, he sneaks off to make a new home in the heavens, far from his nagging creations.
 - The next morning, the man and woman wake up and discover that Ngewo is missing. Eventually, they find him in the sky. Having been found out, Ngewo gives them each a bird, telling them that he will take the birds back if they mistreat each other.
 - In this story, the Mende god maintains his involvement in human affairs but remotely; he is “on call,” available to intervene if asked.
- In a story told by the Luba people, who live in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, human beings once lived with the creator god Kalumba, but because they constantly bickered, Kalumba banished them to earth. Suddenly, humans discovered what it was like to have to feed themselves, get sick, and die.
 - The humans consulted a soothsayer, who said that the sky was the only place to avoid such suffering. Thus, they began building a tower into the clouds. When they reached the heavens, the humans raised a commotion to let everyone left on earth know that their project had been a success. The noise angered Kalumba, who knocked down the tower.
 - We can’t miss the similarity between this tale and the story of the Tower of Babel. Here, though, it’s not human ambition that prompts people to build a tower to the sky, nor is that the reason that the god defeats humanity’s plan. People simply yearn for the comforts of heaven, and Kalumba finds them annoying.

- A number of African myths describe a physical link that once existed or was almost created between heaven and earth but was somehow severed or destroyed. The nature of the link and the reason for its destruction vary widely.
 - The Dinka of South Sudan tell a story of how Abuk, like Eve, disobeys the high god. She ignores the commandment to grow only what she and her husband, Garang, need to survive, sowing many seeds instead of one per day. To punish her, the high god severs the rope connecting heaven and earth. As a result, humans must now toil and suffer sickness and death.
 - In this tale, humanity's greed or, perhaps, its insistence on making its own decisions causes its parent to expel it from the comforts of its heavenly womb. The rope resembles an umbilical cord that the high god chooses to cut.
- Sometimes, the thread that connects humans to the world of the gods also allows a quasi-divine figure to serve in the role of mediator and messenger between the two, at least for a time. For example, in one story, the spider Anansi appeals to the sky god Nyame to solve various problems for people on earth.

Flood Myths

- Flood myths are common around the world, and many African societies, with the exception of those in desert areas, have them. In some stories, a flood is sent to mete out justice for human wickedness. In other stories, human disobedience causes the disaster. In still other tales, the flood is an unjust act by a spiteful god.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Bakongo people tell a story of how the supreme god,



In the story of Anansi and the sky god Nyame, the spider's intervention on behalf of humans seems well meant, but it also reveals the limits on his powers of knowledge and foresight, as well as those of Nyame.

Nzambi, destroys a small town with a flood because of its people's lack of hospitality. Only one family, who showed kindness to an old woman, is saved from the flood.

- Enkai, the supreme deity of the Maasai of Kenya, also uses a flood to punish humanity for its wrongdoing. After telling the only righteous man in the world to build an ark for his family and to load it with animals, Enkai unleashes a devastating deluge that wipes out everything on earth. After many days of constant rain, the skies clear, and the man sends out two birds—a dove and a vulture—to find dry land. Once the flood recedes, the man, his family, and the animals they've rescued must start over again.
 - The obvious similarities between this story and that of Noah's ark are surely not coincidental. It's likely that the story is an amalgamation of indigenous stories of the Maasai and the input of missionaries who worked in Kenya and may have written down some Maasai myths.
 - As Christianity spread, the flood story may have helped the missionaries to spread the gospel by making their ideas more approachable to the Maasai. It may also have been a way for the Maasai to preserve elements of their heritage within an otherwise Christian story.
- The Yoruba creation myth includes a flood caused not by human misbehavior but by conflict among the gods. When the god Obatala creates land by pouring sand upon the waters of the world, the water goddess, Olokun, becomes furious that another god is ruling a part of what had once been her domain. To make her displeasure known, she floods the capital of the Yoruba kingdom, destroying it utterly. The story serves to emphasize the importance of harmony.

The Gift of Fire

- As we all know, people have needs that must be met for life on earth to be tolerable. In some African myths, the gods and spirits seem to recognize that fact and take steps to ensure people's well-

being. In others, humanity must take matters into its own hands, even if it puts harmony with the gods at risk.

- In the mythology of the Anuak people of Sudan, human beings and animals are siblings, and the dog often acts as humankind's advocate and friend. One story credits him with giving fire to humans. In other Anuak stories, the dog repeatedly acts in people's interests; whether by design or default, he is a divinely sanctioned protector of humanity.
- In an Ekoi story, a boy steals fire from the god Obassi and is punished for his crime. Interestingly, in a fire story of the !Kung people of Namibia, a quasi-divine figure—a culture hero named #Gao!na—steals fire from one human being in order to give it to others.
- All of these myths express, in different ways, devotion to the gods and spirits, on the one hand, and a degree of insecurity about what humanity can expect from them, on the other. They demonstrate gratitude for the many gifts that humanity enjoys and concern for the importance of maintaining harmony with the divine. They also reveal fear that the gods may have only limited powers to help us or may not always be paying attention. From our earliest days, these thoughts have been at the heart of the human condition.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*.

Lynch and Roberts, *African Mythology A to Z*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think physical separation between the gods and humanity is such a common theme in African myth?
2. In what ways do African myths reveal the limits of the gods' powers?

Close Encounters with African Divinities

Lecture 30

Although the supreme creator god in African religions is usually remote from humanity, lesser divinities are often heavily involved in human affairs. In fact, a number of deities go so far as to wed or otherwise have close relations with mortals. In some cases, divine infatuation with humanity appears to be a lark; in other cases, close relationships between gods and mortals seem to be of much greater significance. But just as married and unmarried human beings have many types of relationships—ranging from shallow to deep, tender to abusive—the interactions between African gods and mortals express many different ideas about life and the divine.

Mregho and Ruwa

- The Chaga people of Tanzania tell a story of a tender and lovely girl named Mregho. All the men in her village were captivated by her, a fact that engendered hatred and jealousy among the rest of the village's girls.
 - One night, the girls hatched a plot to rid themselves of Mregho. They dug a hole and lured Mregho to it by announcing that they had created a new game. Each girl took a turn jumping into the hole and leading the others in song before jumping out again. When Mregho's turn came, she jumped into the hole and sang joyfully in her lovely voice. The other girls then rolled a large rock on top of the hole, trapping Mregho underneath.
 - In the following days, Mregho's family searched everywhere but could find no trace of her. Meanwhile, the other girls, who had hoped that Mregho would die quickly, could still hear her singing whenever they went near the large rock. One day, Mregho's younger sister, Mlyakicha, listened at the rock and recognized her sister's voice. She ran home to tell her parents, and Mregho was rescued, looking as beautiful as ever.

- Mregho explained that she had asked for help from the god Ruwa, and he had sent bees to make honey for her; she had thrived on the otherworldly sweetness of the honey.
- Ruwa is a Chaga god who was seen as a liberator and sustainer. It's clear why Mregho would seek his help, but why he responded is another matter. In this part of the story, Ruwa's intervention seems to be motivated solely by Mregho's beauty and gentle nature.
- As the story continues, Mregho became engaged to a young man named Kiwaro. Before they could marry, however, she had to be circumcised according to the elaborate process prescribed by Chaga custom.
 - While the process was underway, the rains failed, and the villagers began to starve. The village shaman concluded that Ruwa wanted Mregho to be sacrificed to him.
 - Mregho's parents sadly offered their daughter to the shaman. Mregho did not resist; instead, as she was led to the place of sacrifice, she sang a song of exultation. While she was singing, a violent thunderstorm began; the men who were going to sacrifice Mregho abandoned her and ran for cover.
 - When the storm clouds finally cleared, Mregho was nowhere to be found, but the crops had been rescued by the rain. The people gave thanks to Ruwa, and at first, everyone concluded that Mregho had gone to him. Later, though, it turned out that Mregho's grandmother had rescued the girl and hidden her in her hut. On reflection, everyone reasoned that Ruwa had found Mregho simply too beautiful to die.
- We might interpret this story as a mere folktale about a plucky young girl and her quick-thinking sister and grandmother rather than a story about the relationship between a girl and a god.
 - Consider, though, the devotion to Ruwa that the story teaches through Mregho's example and the miraculous details of her

survival. She doesn't just endure with the help of bees while she is buried; she emerges radiant. And when she sings to Ruwa on the way to being sacrificed, a storm appears to save her. These are not events that seem likely to occur without divine intervention.

- Thus, the story seems to suggest that Mregho's faith in Ruwa is well-placed and that the beauty and virtue she possesses are pleasing to the gods.

Miseke and Thunder

- The Nyarwanda people of Rwanda also tell a story of a god who arrives with a thunderclap to rescue a woman in distress. In their story, however, the god is initially a more intimidating figure, and his relations with both the woman and her daughter are more complicated.
 - In the story, a man named Kwisaba must go off to fight a war, but his wife falls ill while he is away. Afraid that she'll die, she cries out to anyone to save her, even the thunder in the heavens. Suddenly, the god Thunder appears before her. He rescues the woman but demands her daughter when the girl is born. Seeing no alternative, the woman agrees, and Thunder vanishes.
 - The woman gives birth to a daughter and names her Miseke. When Kwisaba returns from the war, his wife announces that he is a father, but Kwisaba is concerned when he learns about the agreement she has made with Thunder. He says that Miseke must never leave the house, or Thunder may carry her away.
- Already, we can see clear differences between Thunder's behavior and the actions attributed to Ruwa in the Chaga story. Far from merely answering the call of Kwisaba's wife, Thunder takes advantage of her situation to exact a promise from her. Indeed, it's left unclear in the story whether he takes advantage of her in another way, as well. The story also seems to raise questions about the woman's motives: Should we believe her when she tells Kwisaba that he is Miseke's father?

- Miseke's parents keep her inside the house as she matures, but one day, she develops a strange characteristic: Beads and jewelry begin to fall from her mouth whenever she laughs. Kwisaba concludes that this is Thunder's doing; in keeping with Nyarwanda custom, he is sending gifts to Miseke's parents in anticipation of taking the girl for his wife.
 - The parents redouble their efforts to protect Miseke, but inevitably, she slips out of the house to play with her friends. As the girls play, Thunder suddenly appears and demands to know which of them is Miseke. He then seizes Miseke, and the two disappear into the sky.
 - Once again, ambiguity surrounds the behavior of both the divine and mortal characters. Thunder seems to behave honorably in sending payment for Miseke to her parents, but his visit to the children frightens them. For her part, Miseke ventures outside despite her parents' warnings, and she does not weep or show fear when Thunder comes for her. Perhaps she welcomes Thunder's interest; if she is also Thunder's offspring and is part divine, she may feel drawn by her nature to the god.
- In the final part of the story, Thunder turns out to be a kind husband who makes Miseke happy.
 - When Miseke tells him that she misses her parents, Thunder allows her to visit them. He warns her, however, to keep to the main road on her journey.
 - Of course, Miseke's party strays from the main road and encounters an ogre. Ultimately, the ogre is killed and the traveling party finally reaches Miseke's old home, where there is much celebration. When Miseke bids goodbye to her parents, she and her traveling party rise into the sky.
- The interplay between the sacred and the profane is especially noteworthy in Miseke's story. Kwisaba and his wife have a hesitant, even fearful relationship with the divine figure Thunder, although he fulfills all his societal obligations to them and to

Miseke. Ultimately, the parents' fears seem to cost them a lasting relationship with Miseke and her husband.

- Miseke, in contrast, quite literally embraces the divine in the story. For the story's intended audience, the lesson may be that Miseke's decisions represent the right choices to make with respect to the divine. She honors the divine, yields to it, and remains loyal to it.

Relations with Tricksters

- Whatever divine benevolence and honor is demonstrated in the relationships between the gods and some mortals, it's undermined in other myths by the antics of African tricksters. Divine figures though they are, tricksters have relations with human beings that often violate social norms or show extreme dishonor.
- In his book *Trickster and Hero*, Harold Scheub recounts a story told in Ghana by the Asante and Akan peoples. The story, which involves the spider Anansi, explains the origins of jealousy: Anansi takes advantage of a man's misfortune to sleep with his wife. He then either orders or allows the resulting child to be killed.
- Tricksters have even more shocking interactions with humans in other African myths. In one tale told by the Fon people of Benin, the trickster Legba has sex with the dead bodies of three women, inflicts temporary impotence on all the men of a kingdom, sleeps with his own mother-in-law, and has sex with the king's daughter. Through his amoral treatment of people, Legba appears to offer a reminder that divine forces sometimes mock our human ideals and social norms without compassion.

Goddesses and Mortals

- Wanton behavior by African gods isn't the province of tricksters and male gods alone. In some Yoruba myths, the figure of Oduduwa is a female and the wife of Obatala, the son of Olorun; she is also the goddess of love. In one tale, she encounters a handsome hunter and lives with him, making love for several weeks. Eventually, she takes her leave of the hunter but promises to protect him.

- Another story offers an interesting blend of initiative on the part of a mortal man and a goddess. In this tale of the Ambundu people of Angola, the goddess Nambi falls in love with a figure named Kintu, but before the two can marry, Kintu is tested by Nambi's father, Gulu. After Kintu passes the tests, his union with Nambi establishes the royal family of Uganda. The tale conveys that Uganda's kings rule with the gods' approval.
- African mythology also contains stories of men who simply set their sights on winning the hand of a goddess. In one story of the Ambundu people of Angola, a young man named Kimanauze seeks to marry the daughter of the sun and the moon. With the help of a frog, he eventually wins her, but in the process, he loses everyone else in his household. Still, the young couple lives on and has children. Their marriage seems to demonstrate that human determination, if combined with enough patience and the right help from animal spirits, can allow us to rise above our earthly stations.

Suggested Reading

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

———, *Trickster and Hero*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do stories about relationships between individual gods and humans convey cultural values?
2. What's the point of introducing ambiguity into mythological stories? Do unanswered questions detract from the messages of myth?

Culture Heroes of African Myth

Lecture 31

One genre of myths focuses on the deeds of culture heroes—usually male figures who are said to have played key roles in the founding of societies or who otherwise distinguished themselves in their peoples' past. Although it's often impossible to know whether a particular culture hero ever existed, such stories offer tantalizing hints at how certain societies may have taken shape. And fact-based or not, they inevitably capture something essential about the characters of the societies that tell them. In this lecture, we'll explore a number of culture hero stories, ranging from those that are probably highly fictionalized to those that seem much more historically plausible.

The Mongo Story of Lonkundo

- In Central Africa, the Mongo people had an important cultural figure named Lonkundo. His father was Bokele, a leader who allegedly stole the sun so that his community could live in the light. Bokele taught his son to hunt and to build cunning traps for catching game.
 - One night, Lonkundo had a dream that he had captured the sun in one of his traps. In the morning, when he checked his traps, he found one that emitted a blinding light. But instead of the sun, inside was a stunning, luminous woman.
 - The woman begged to be released and promised Lonkundo great wealth if he let her go. Lonkundo was so taken with her beauty that he immediately asked her to marry him. The woman, who was named Ilankaka, accepted his proposal, and they were soon wed. They were happy together, and Lonkundo became a chief.
- Already, we can see that Lonkundo is an important figure in Mongo mythology. First, like his father, who captured the sun for his people, Lonkundo captures a shining figure, Ilankaka, thereby indicating that he is his father's rightful successor. In doing so,

he also demonstrates his skills as a hunter. Moreover, Lonkundo demonstrates character in turning down Ilankaka's offer of riches.

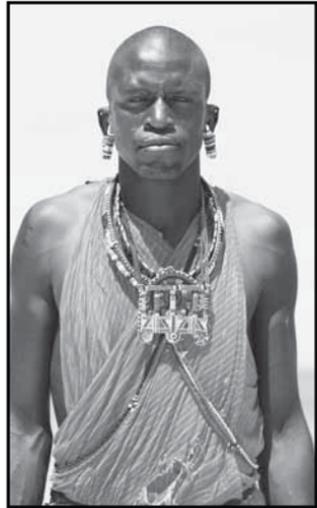
- In time, Ilankaka became pregnant and found herself with an appetite for only one kind of food: bush rats. Lonkundo goes to great lengths to satisfy her craving, but someone seems to be stealing the rats from the smokehouse. Lonkundo erects a net to catch the thief, who turns out to be the couple's child. With the precociousness of a future hero, the child is already fending for himself in the world.
- Fantastical as this story is, the details convey something of life in the heart of the tropical rainforest, including the Mongo's hunting methods, diet, and techniques for preserving meat. The fact that Lonkundo was a chief also tells us what values were important to the Mongo: They sought a principled leader and capable provider.

The Maasai Story of Le-eyo

- Another fantastical myth that reveals even more about the people who tell it is the Maasai story of Le-eyo. The Maasai of eastern Africa are known for their ability to cultivate and herd cattle, and their lives revolve around the herds. The Maasai have several myths about how cattle came to them and how they gained their skill in working with them. The story of Le-eyo is one of the most famous and includes an interesting perspective on another people of Kenya, the Dorobo.
 - In this story, Le-eyo hatches a plan to take a gift from the gods meant for a Dorobo man. Believing that Le-eyo is the Dorobo, Naiteru-kop, the messenger of the gods, gives him instructions for preparing an animal sacrifice. Most important, once the sacrifice is prepared, Le-eyo must go into his house and not look outside, no matter what he may hear.
 - Once the animal offering is prepared and Le-eyo is waiting inside his house, he hears an incredible roar. He cannot resist peeking outside, where he sees Enkai, the god of the sky. The god is using a leather strap to lower an enormous herd of cattle to the earth. But Enkai sees Le-eyo watching him, and

before he disappears, he chides Le-eyo: If only he'd done as instructed, the herd would have been many times larger.

- Le-eyo plays a traditional culture hero role in this story in that it's thanks to his quick thinking and initiative that the Maasai are herders today. He is not, however, an entirely praiseworthy figure; his disobedience costs the Maasai many cattle.
- The story of Le-eyo and the cattle also conveys valuable information about how the Maasai see themselves. They believe themselves to have been divinely ordained by Enkai to be great caretakers of cattle. In contrast, the Dorobo remain hunters and gatherers because the Dorobo man was not diligent about keeping his appointment with the sky god.



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The myth of Le-eyo clearly conveys the pride of the Maasai in their identity and way of life; it also contains subtle critiques of the Dorobo.

The Fon Story of Sogbo

- The Fon people of Benin tell a creation story that is surely disconnected from historical reality yet reflects the people's dependence on water for their daily survival. The Fon, like most African cultures, were pantheistic, with different gods having influence over different aspects of nature. The god Sogbo influenced the weather and, thus, could create or prevent a drought.
- Sogbo and his brother, Sagbata, were born to the goddess Mawu, the female half of the androgynous deity Mawu-Lisa, who created the universe. Mawu intended for her sons to rule the universe together, but Sagbata and Sogbo couldn't agree on anything.

Eventually, Mawu divided the world in two: Sagbata would leave the heavens to rule over the earth, taking his mother's wealth with him; Sogbo would stay in the heavens and have control over the skies. Sagbata packed up all his mother's treasures and prepared to go, but he realized that he would have to leave behind water and fire, or they would destroy everything else in his bag.

- Sogbo became Mawu's favorite among the gods, and he decided to show off his power by stopping the rain from falling to earth. As the drought dragged on, the people of earth begged Sagbata for help, but of course, he had left water behind in heaven. Finally, two sky gods came to visit Sagbata and urged him to offer Sogbo part of their mother's wealth in exchange for water. In the end, Sogbo accepted Sagbata's offer and restored the rain, the brothers became friends, and the drought never returned.
- Based in a part of West Africa that has been ravaged repeatedly by drought, the Fon would naturally be drawn to a story reassuring them that the gods had agreed to provide a regular supply of rain. Although none of the characters meets the strict definition of a culture hero, the ultimately earth-based figure of Sagbata serves as the Fon's advocate in their ongoing relations with the heavens.
- Another interesting detail of Fon culture that appears in this story is the role of women in society. Notice that the goddess Mawu plays a central leadership role. She can grant power to her sons or rescind it. She is also the source of wisdom, explaining to the brothers the importance of getting along to provide harmony in the universe. Although the Fon have a patriarchal society, historically, women have played an unusually prominent role in it; starting in the 1700s, women served in the Fon military and were known as fierce fighters.

The Kikuyu Story of Wanjiru

- A story told by the Kikuyu of Kenya also highlights the threat of drought for African peoples. In this story, after a long drought, the people of a village consulted a local wise man, who told them that

they needed to make a sacrifice to the gods to ensure the return of the rain. There was a particular young woman the gods wanted: Wanjiru.

- Wanjiru was brought to the center of the village, and the villagers began dancing around her. As they danced, Wanjiru sank slowly into the ground, and rain began to fall. But a certain young man was in love with Wanjiru and couldn't bear to see her go. He leapt onto the spot where she had disappeared, and he, too, was pulled underground. Once he was below the earth, he searched for Wanjiru and brought her back to the surface. The village rejoiced, and the couple was married.
- Although she is a main character in this story, Wanjiru, like many other female cultural figures in African mythology, is primarily acted upon rather than being proactive in her destiny. She is a key part of Kikuyu cultural history, but the patriarchal structure of the community still defines her role in the narrative in a gendered way. Nevertheless, her acquiescence in her own sacrifice is a heroic act that saves her community.

The Bushongo Story of Shamba Bolongongo

- Shamba Bolongongo, said to have been the 93rd ruler of the Bushongo people, is a culture hero who may be genuinely historical. He is believed to have ascended to his position around the year 1600 and is celebrated as a wise king who prevailed on various chiefdoms to put aside their differences and merge into a larger society. He is also lauded for many other things—and here is where history and mythology may merge.
- One tale has Shamba deciding in his youth to visit all areas of the kingdom to get a better sense of the people. His own mother tried to stop him, telling him that there was warfare everywhere and the journey was too dangerous, but Shamba wouldn't listen. He said that it was his duty to understand his subjects.
- After returning from his travels, Shamba trained the people in the art of working with various materials to make clothing. He gave

them the skills to cook food in the correct ways to prevent food poisoning and other illnesses. Shamba also taught the people new agricultural techniques, including how to grow tobacco and derive oil from palm trees.

- The Bushongo were constantly at war before Shamba became king, but he preferred peaceful resolutions whenever possible. He was also known for his mercy, and tales of his wisdom in dispensing justice call to mind stories of King Solomon from the Bible.
- Was there a real king named Shamba? This is not an abstract question for the Bushongo. Like many African societies, they view the ruling authority of their kings as linked to their ancestral lineage, dating back to the earliest rulers. If Shamba didn't really exist, the legitimacy of the current king could be questioned, and his authority to rule could be compromised.
- Perhaps Shamba never did exist or didn't do all that the Bushongo say he did. But the reverence of the Bushongo for the qualities he demonstrates in the stories about him—his intelligence, wise leadership, and love of justice and peace—says a great deal about what matters most to them as a people.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*.

Lynch and Roberts, *African Mythology A to Z*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the relationship between African myths and the cultural context that produced them?
2. Why is it so important for African societies to record the stories of cultural founders and figures?
3. What questions do the myths of culture heroes answer?
4. On what basis do you think some cultural figures are memorialized in myth and others are not?

The African Morality Tale

Lecture 32

Mythology about the creation of the world or the establishment of a society provide a people with an important sense of shared origins and beliefs. They do not, however, address the many ethical questions that arise in the course of daily life. Especially in nonliterate societies, stories that could be performed and adapted to special occasions played an essential role in maintaining a code of behavior and morals and in exploring the inevitable gray areas that lead to disputes. In many cases, morality tales provide no clear right or wrong answers. Instead, listeners are intended to seek answers in discussions with one another and in their own broader explorations of the nature of truth and virtue.

Morality Tales of the Hausa

- The Hausa, who live mostly in northwest Nigeria and southern Niger, tell a story about a poor boy who marries into a wealthy family. One day the newlyweds' parents argue, and the boy's father knocks out the eye of the girl's mother. The boy's mother-in-law demands that the boy put out one of his father's eyes. The tale presents listeners with a question to consider: Is the boy obligated to put out his father's eye?
- The Hausa (and other peoples) also tell longer morality tales that explore the nature and motives of the characters in greater depth. Such tales cultivate the sympathy of the audience for one individual or another and pose more complex questions.
 - In one tale, an old woman seems to show mercy to a poor blind man by taking him into her home and caring for him. All the blind man possesses is a chicken, but he offers to go out and earn some money for his keep, asking only that the old woman take good care of the hen while he is gone. As soon as the blind man leaves, the woman kills the chicken and prepares a meal for herself. Later, she tells the blind man that a jackal has taken the chicken.

- In the following days, the blind man is given a goat and a donkey, but the woman sells both and lies to the man about what happened to the animals. Then, the blind man meets a king, who gives him a maiden to marry. After the man returns home with the maiden, the old woman goes to a wealthy young man in town and takes his money in return for enticing the maiden to marry him instead.
- The maiden agrees to marry the young man, but this time, when the blind man comes home, the old woman's excuses for the disappearance of his gifts no longer satisfy him. Angry, he locks her in the house and has her beaten. He then sets the house on fire, leaving the old woman inside. He finally lets her out, only to call a barber to shave the old woman's head and attach a heavy stone to her neck that she must carry around for seven months. With that, it seems, the old woman has paid penance for failing to safeguard the blind man's possessions.
- Halfway through this tale, our sympathies lie with the blind man, but by the end of the story, we are a bit unsettled. Was the brutal punishment of the old woman necessary? Was it proportional to her crimes? Disturbing as it is, the story prompts listeners to question their own codes of conduct. Will they stick to their principles even when no one is looking? How should they respond to those who harm them?

A Story of the Soninke

- The Soninke people live on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert in Mauritania. They tell a story about another man who is wronged in a shameful way, but in this case, the man reacts with remarkable restraint.
- As the story goes, an honorable man named Wagana Sako lives in the city of Wagadu. An extremely jealous man, Wagana built a high wall around his palace, with no gate by which to enter. The only way to get in was by riding a strong horse that could leap over the wall, a feat that only Wagana's stallion could accomplish.

- One day, Wagana’s uncle Mamadi stole Wagana’s horse and mated it to a mare in his stable, later returning the stallion without Wagana’s knowledge. The mare gave birth to a frisky colt that turned out to be just as gifted as its sire.
- During this time, war had broken out across the land, and the men of Wagadu went off to fight. One night, the uncle secretly returned to Wagana’s home and leaped over the wall with his horse. Mamadi then went inside to see Wagana’s wife.
- That same night, the jealous Wagana also returned home. When he entered his house, he overheard his uncle telling his wife that the two of them are as afraid of Wagana as a mouse is of a cat. Because it was considered dishonorable for a Soninke to fight a man who claimed to be fearful, Wagana suppressed his jealousy and slipped away.
- Like the Hausa story of the blind man, this tale plays with our sympathies. We learn at the start that Wagana is a man of honor, but we’re also told that he’s jealous—not an especially honorable trait. We’re not inclined to admire his behavior or to feel great pity for Wagana if someone more confident and noble comes to challenge him.
- Yet our sympathies are not entirely with Mamadi either. He is Wagana’s uncle—not a person we would expect to try to take advantage of his nephew. And he doesn’t challenge Wagana directly; he trespasses on Wagana’s property and visits his wife while Wagana is away.
- Wagana’s restraint at the end comes as a surprise. As a jealous man, we would expect him to fly into a rage when he finds his uncle with his wife. Instead, he follows Soninke custom and leaves, maintaining his own honor when encountering someone who fears him. Even as it teaches Soninke custom, the story’s nuances make us consider the thinking behind the custom and how it applies to the tale’s ambiguous situation.

Morality Tale of the Limba

- The Limba people of Sierra Leone have an elaborate myth that, with each new development in the plot, asks the audience to consider the degree of gratitude that a wife is owed for her devotion to her husband.
- This story involves a chief who is unable to have children with his wife. A magician comes to stay with them and tells the chief that the couple can have a child, but no one will be allowed to see it except for the chief, his wife, and the servant who cooks their food.
- Without delay, the wife becomes pregnant and has a son. The young man grows up looking out of an attic window, wondering what the world outside is like. One day, his eyes meet those of a pretty girl, and for a moment, the boy forgets that nobody else is supposed to see him. The girl climbs up to the room on a ladder, and the two spend the night together. But when the servant comes into the room the next morning, she finds the boy dead, with the young girl sitting next to him in distress.
- The magician orders the villagers to build a large fire. He then asks the chief and his wife, in turn, to prove their love for their son by climbing into the fire, but neither is able to do so. The girl, however, leaps into the fire with the body of the boy she loves. Later, after the fire dies down, the magician takes the ashes back to the boy's room and creates a new man and a new woman.
- The boy's parents are overjoyed, but the newly created man says that he and his woman must now go to live in a far-off country. On their journey, they encounter a series of challenges; to answer each challenge, the man must acquire a new wife. The group finally enters a village and makes it their home.
- The newly arrived man becomes chief of the village and proceeds to have children with each of his wives. But when he dies, questions arise about his rightful heir. Each wife makes her claim, stating that

if it were not for her, the man would never have become chief. The story ends with the question left unresolved.

Identifying the “Better” Character

- One subgenre of African morality tales that is popular in West Africa asks the audience a slightly different kind of question: Which of two or more characters demonstrates greater intelligence, loyalty, or virtue?
- The Abron people, whose former kingdom was situated in what is today Côte d’Ivoire, have a myth about a young girl who wants to marry the man who is best at riddles. Ultimately, that man turns out to be a servant, but the girl then saves him by solving a riddle. The story ends with the question of whether the maiden or the servant is better at riddles.
- Another myth in this subgenre is told by the Vai, who live in northwestern Liberia and parts of Sierra Leone. In this tale, two friends, both named Kamo, make extreme sacrifices for each other. The story prompts us to consider our own definitions of friendship and how much we would be willing to sacrifice for those dear to us.
- A third story in this subgenre, told by the Ashanti people, also compares the behavior of friends but poses a slightly different question. In this story, the friends are a lion cub and a boy, who remain close as they grow to adulthood.
 - One day, a wealthy woman of the village sees the two playing together in the woods. Alarmed, she runs to tell a hunter, who kills the lion with a bow and arrow. When this news reaches the young man, he runs to the body of his friend, removes the arrow, and stabs himself. The wealthy woman, realizing what she has done, hangs herself.
 - This story ends with the question: Who was the most virtuous: the young man, the lion, or the repentant woman? How we define virtue, of course, plays an important role in determining how we view the characters in this memorable story—and our



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In the story of the boy and the lion cub, the cub compares the size of his paws to those of his mother to gauge when he will be big enough to kill her and avenge the death of his friend's mother.

definition may or may not match that of the Ashanti. Once again, the story's plot and closing question prompt the audience to explore its own beliefs and values.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, *African Myths of Origin*.

Frobenius and Fox, *African Genesis*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. What kinds of lessons are conveyed through morality tales?
2. Why do you think many of the tales end by posing questions to the audience?

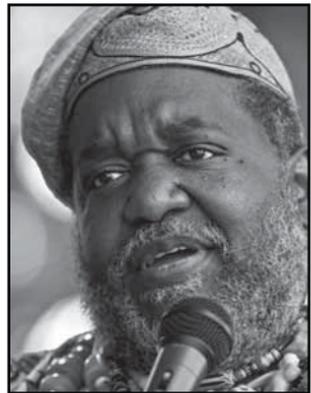
The *Dausi* and African Epics

Lecture 33

The epic looms large as a storytelling genre in world mythology and not only because its characters and tales are usually so memorable. Because of their customary length and level of detail, epics often provide a more comprehensive sense of the early cultures that spawned them than any other literary form, and many appear to incorporate genuine historical information. African mythology contains numerous captivating epics; in this lecture, we'll explore what is known of an ancient and powerful one: the *Dausi*.

African Epics

- Like other African myths, African epics emerged from an oral tradition and were only recorded in writing much later. Some were composed in verse; others in prose. In both cases, their performance is typically accompanied by songs that heighten the drama and move the story along.
- Performances of African epics are usually extended affairs, unfolding over several evenings. In most performances, there is a central narrator, although a second performer may periodically engage with the narrator.
- Many African epics bear a fundamental similarity to the famous epics of ancient Greece and Rome in that they recount the adventures of legendary or historical heroes over the course of an extended narrative.
- The central characters of African epics often embark on great quests,



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The narrator of an African epic may sing, use props, and move or dance while speaking to make the performance more compelling.

overcoming significant obstacles in pursuit of a goal; they generally return victorious, having been changed somehow in the process.

Background on the *Dausi*

- The *Dausi* is an epic of West Africa's Soninke people, who today live in Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, and other parts of West Africa. The epic is believed to have been composed in the 4th century C.E., but its events are set in a much earlier heroic age—according to some, around 500 B.C.E. The hub of the story, or those parts of it that we have, is Wagadu, the legendary city of the Fasa people, whom the Soninke claim as their ancestors.
- Note that the Soninke used the name *Wagadu* to refer to an empire that they are believed to have founded in roughly the period when the *Dausi* is supposed to have been composed, that is, in the 4th century C.E. That empire, however, was known to outsiders as Ghana, although it is different from today's nation of Ghana. In fact, the Wagadu Empire was located in the general area of modern Mauritania.
- Wagadu's empire flourished from approximately the 7th to the 13th centuries. At its peak, it extended into the Sahara Desert and controlled all the lands and peoples between the Senegal River and the upper Niger River. Trade in gold was the basis of its power. The *Dausi* is thought to have been performed widely by bards during most of imperial Wagadu's history. By about the 12th century, however, Muslim invaders and their culture appear to have shouldered it aside, and much of the original epic was lost.
- Whatever the *Dausi*'s true origins and however it may have changed over the centuries, the Wagadu in the epic is not just a city but something closer to a state of mind. In some places, it's depicted as a goddess, and in others, it takes on the character of a holy grail. Fundamentally, it seems to represent an ideal that the Fasa heroes strive to regain or preserve. The loss and rediscovery of Wagadu are the overarching theme of the epic.

Gassire's Lute

- According to the *Dausi*, Wagadu disappeared four times: “once through vanity, once through falsehood, once through greed, and once through dissension.” The story of Gassire's Lute tells of its first disappearance.
- At the outset of the story, we learn of a great king named Ngranamba who was forced to defend Wagadu constantly against relentless enemies.
 - Ngranamba's son, Gassire, was a brave warrior and a hero of Wagadu, but he secretly longed for his father's death so that he might become king of Wagadu.
 - Regardless of how heroic Gassire may appear to others, his inner thoughts are about himself. His brave fighting for Wagadu is motivated not by concern for the good of his people or by loyalty to his father but by a desire to supplant his father. He is the embodiment of vanity.
- One night, Gassire went to visit the oldest wise man in the city and asked him when he would become king of Wagadu. The old man told Gassire that others would inherit the sword and shield of Ngranamba, while Gassire would carry a lute that would cause the loss of Wagadu. He further said that partridges would confirm the truth about Gassire's destiny and that of Wagadu.
- Clearly not satisfied with the wise man's report, Gassire set off to prove him wrong. To demonstrate that he was a true warrior and a hero, he told the other Fasa warriors that he alone would fight their enemy, the Burdama. He defeated the enemy in the field singlehandedly, and the other Fasa warriors praised Gassire as the greatest of heroes.
- That night, Gassire wandered into the fields alone, pondering the wise man's words. Suddenly, he heard a partridge sing and discovered that he could understand the bird as if it were speaking. It sang of great exploits in battle and called the story that it

told the *Dausi*. The partridge said that all people and creatures must eventually pass away, but the *Dausi* and the brave deeds it celebrated would live on.

- Gassire returned to the wise man and told him about the song of the partridge. The wise man told Gassire again that his destiny was to be a bard rather than a king. He revealed that the *Dausi* was an ancient tale that had once been performed by the enemy of the Fasa. The wise man said that the Fasa had never sung the *Dausi* themselves but implied that Gassire could sing it. Yet he warned again that Wagadu would disappear as a result. Gassire—now hungry for immortality—replied, “Let the kingdom disappear, then!”
- Gassire had a carpenter craft a lute for him but was told that the lute wouldn’t sing until it developed a heart, which would happen if Gassire carried it into battle. Over the next seven days, the Fasa fought the Burdama again, and each day, Gassire brought both the lute and one of his sons into battle. Each day, Gassire’s son was killed, but still, the lute stayed silent. By the end of the seventh day, the people of Wagadu told Gassire to leave the city. “We too want fame,” they said, “but we choose life over fame when the cost of fame is death.”
- Gassire gathered his possessions and rode into the desert. That night, he woke to a strange sound: the voice of his lute, singing the *Dausi*. When the lute finished singing, King Nganamba died, and as the wise man had predicted, Wagadu disappeared. Gassire wept with both grief and joy: grief over the death of his sons and the disappearance of Wagadu but joy over the great battle song that would live on.
- In the end, Gassire is a tragic figure—a hero undone by vanity, whose character flaw costs him most of his sons, the respect of his fellow citizens, and the kingdom he fought for. Although his story doesn’t follow the typical arc of a hero’s quest, Gassire is transformed by his experiences and does achieve his goal; it’s just that his goal is problematic, and his transformation isn’t necessarily for the better.

The Reappearance of Wagadu

- The *Dausi* tells us that Wagadu disappeared for 7 years, was found briefly, and was lost again for 740 years. We next learn of an old king called Mama Dinga who makes a pronouncement that Wagadu will be found again when a great war drum called Tabele is beaten. Tabele, however, has been stolen by *djinn*, or spirits, who have tied it to the sky.
- One evening, Mama Dinga, who was blind, felt that he was close to death; he asked his servant to have his oldest son come to him around midnight so that he could put his affairs in order. But because the oldest son had mistreated him, the servant sought out the youngest son, Lagarre, instead. Lagarre disguised himself as his older brother and went to visit his father. This part of the story bears a striking resemblance to the story of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis.
- Thinking that he was speaking with his oldest son, Dinga gave Lagarre a series of instructions that would enable him to understand the language of the *djinn* and to speak with animals and birds. When he spoke to the oldest *djinn*, he would learn where to find the great war drum, and with it, he would be able to find the kingdom of Wagadu. Lagarre followed the instructions and discovered that he could indeed understand the animals and birds.
- The next morning, the deception of Lagarre was discovered, but Dinga declared that his oldest son could not become king because that title had already been bestowed on Lagarre. Instead, the son should become a shaman and learn how to make rain, which would give him authority and influence in the land.
- Lagarre went in search of the great drum and, using his ability to talk to animals, ultimately reached a buzzard named Koliko who helped him recover it. Following Koliko's instructions, Lagarre beat on Tabele, and the kingdom of Wagadu was revealed to him.
- Lagarre had a final task to accomplish to reestablish Wagadu as it used to be. Koliko told him that his grandfather had made a deal to

provide a snake named Bida with 10 young maidens each year. In exchange, Bida would cause the skies to rain gold on Wagadu three times a year. Koliko advised Lagarre to drive a harder bargain: just one young maiden per year in exchange for three showers of gold. Bida agreed to the new terms, and Wagadu became wealthy and strong once again.

- The restoration of Wagadu offers a peculiar resolution to the tale of Gassire's Lute. Lagarre is a sympathetic character, even though he deceives his father and cheats his brother out of his inheritance. Yet he's a more distant figure than Gassire, and once he has secured his father's crown, his efforts to restore Wagadu seem more like an elaborate ritual than the choices of a hero in search of a goal.
- It's important to note that the end of Lagarre's story is not the end of the *Dausi*. The epic indicates that Wagadu will be lost and found several more times. The end of Gassire's Lute leaves the audience with a stirring prediction: If Wagadu is found a fourth time, it will live with such power in men's minds that it will never disappear again.

Suggested Reading

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Frobenius and Fox, *African Genesis*.

Johnson and Hale, eds., *Oral Epics from Africa*.

Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the epic genre able to convey that other genres do not allow?
2. Why do you think the genre of the epic is so enduring?

The Epic of Bakaridjan Kone

Lecture 34

The epic of Bakaridjan Kone is much more recent than the *Dausi*, but it comes from almost the same part of Africa. It's said to have first been written down in the late 18th century, when the Bambara kingdom of Segu was at its peak. Segu was founded by the Bambara in the early 17th century and endured for 250 to 300 years. Much of its history was wracked by war and tensions with the peoples of the surrounding communities, who had all been converted to Islam. The kingdom of Segu alone stood against Muslim domination. Muslim influence was still strong in its society, however, as we'll see in Bakaridjan's story.

Background on the Tale of Bakaridjan Kone

- Like many great epics, the tale of Bakaridjan Kone contains a wealth of historical and cultural information, even if it's also filled with fanciful elements. It appears that Bakaridjan, the hero of the epic, was in fact a great hero of Segu. His king in the epic, Da Monzon, was a historical figure and is believed to have ruled Segu in its glory days.
- The Bambara had a warrior society with a strict code of chivalry, and that code is on full display in the epic.
- The spirit world is thoroughly interwoven with day-to-day life in Bakaridjan's story. *Djinn* observe and influence many of the events, and various characters consult wise men, or *morikes*, who can divine the future. Throughout the story, we encounter *djeli*, minstrel-historians of the kind who would have performed such tales as the epic of Bakaridjan itself.

Bakaridjan and Da Toma

- The tale of Bakaridjan opens with King Da Monzon sending a messenger to one of his subjects, a mother who has just given birth to a boy. The boy's father has abandoned his family to serve

the king; Da Monzon, evidently feeling a sense of responsibility, sends money to the mother and directs her to name her son Bakaridjan.

- The story then jumps years ahead, to a time when King Da Monzon is in middle age. He has become fearful that some outsider might challenge his sons and ascend to the throne. The king seeks the advice of his *morike*, who confirms Da Monzon's fears that a hero exists whose reputation will exceed those of all others. But the *morike* cannot say who the hero is; thus, he advises the king to subject each boy in the kingdom to a test. The only one who passes is Bakaridjan.
- The king invites the young man to his castle, telling Bakaridjan that he will be treated as one of his own sons. Da Monzon then calls his 12 sons together and plants the fear in them that Bakaridjan will rob them of their inheritance. The king's eldest son, Da Toma, vows to do away with Bakaridjan.
- One day, the king's sons and Bakaridjan go out to the fields to cut grass for the king's horses. Da Toma challenges Bakaridjan to a duel, but Bakaridjan declines.
 - Da Toma then orders his brothers to tie up Bakaridjan and beat him to death. The youngest brother refuses to participate, but all the others leap on Bakaridjan, pummel him mercilessly, and leave him for dead in the pasture.
 - When Bakaridjan eventually wakes up, he returns to the king's palace. The king, feigning concern, asks how he has gotten so bloodied and battered. Bakaridjan replies that he fell into a thorn bush. He receives the same beating from the brothers on two more consecutive days.
- On the fourth day, Bakaridjan visits a blacksmith in the city and asks him to craft a long blade. Blacksmiths, like *djeli* and *morikes*, had a special place in Bambara culture. They were believed to have mystical powers that imbued the weapons and tools they made.

- The next day, the king's sons and Bakaridjan return to the fields. Da Toma expects Bakaridjan to decline to fight, but this time, Bakaridjan accepts the challenge, on the condition that the victor may slay the vanquished. Of course, Bakaridjan overcomes Da Toma, draws his blade, and decapitates his foe. In the tradition of Bambara culture, Bakaridjan smears himself with Da Toma's blood.
- The other brothers run back to the palace in fear, and Bakaridjan returns there, too. Eventually, the youngest brother gives a full account of recent events to the court officials, effectively blaming his father for creating the circumstances that resulted in Da Toma's death. The officials agree that Bakaridjan cannot be blamed for the situation. Put on the spot, the king exonerates Bakaridjan but sends him back to his own village.

Bakaridjan and the Fula

- By the time Bakaridjan reaches his village, the story of his battle with the king's son has spread far and wide. He becomes the leader of a large group of youths who admire his skill and courage.
- One day, Fula warriors from Massina attack Segu and steal the city's livestock. Da Monzon sends his army out to pursue the Fula. Along with the king's army, the members of Bakaridjan's youth club also go off to chase the Fula. But Bakaridjan sleeps late that day and doesn't arrive at the king's palace until after the other men have already ridden off.
- Bakaridjan helps himself to the king's horse and some of his weapons, but as he rides off to join in attacking the Fula, he sees the king's army returning, defeated. Bakaridjan must then deal with the Fula on his own. He frees the livestock and tricks the Fula into killing one another. When he returns to Segu, he receives a hero's welcome. Even the king celebrates his victory, although he continues to see Bakaridjan as a threat.

Bakaridjan and Zan

- In a later incident, Bakaridjan and two other heroes, Madiniko and Bamana Diase, fall in love with a beautiful Fula woman named Aminata who lives in Segu. The king's two chief *djeli* subject the heroes to a test to determine which of the three is the greatest warrior and, therefore, worthy to marry Aminata. The test involves a famous hunter named Zan who has never lost a fight. The *djeli* decide that the warrior who is able to capture Zan's gun will wed Aminata.
- In preparation for the challenge, each of the heroes consults a different *morike*. Bakaridjan's *morike* tells him that it's impossible to kill Zan because the chief of the *djinn* protects him, but Bakaridjan can protect his own life through a ritualistic act of charity: giving three white kola nuts to a young, light-skinned boy.
 - A different *morike* tells Madiniko that he can save himself by giving three red kola nuts to a young, dark-skinned boy.
 - A third *morike* tells Bamana that he can save himself by cooking some goat's meat and feeding it to a young, black-skinned boy.
- The chief *djinn* learns of the competition among the heroes and what the *morikes* tell them. He gives Zan the power to transform his appearance. Of course, Zan then appears as a different boy to each of the three heroes and accepts their charity, preventing them from protecting themselves in the upcoming fights.
- The chief *djinn* also has Zan place three eggs near a termite mound. He directs Zan to check the eggs the next day, telling him that if the eggs remain intact, Zan will defeat the three heroes. But if even one shell of the eggs is damaged, then one of the heroes has the power to defeat Zan, and he should avoid them all. Zan does as the chief *djinn* advises and returns the next day to find bad news: One of the eggshells is broken.
- Zan immediately faces a dilemma. To fight the heroes means possible death, but if he doesn't fight, he will suffer the ultimate

humiliation for a Bambara warrior: to be seen as fearful. Thus, Zan prepares to fight.

- When the day of the battle comes, Bakaridjan rides out to face Zan first. Zan immediately tells Bakaridjan that it was he who appeared as the young, light-skinned boy and received Bakaridjan's charity, thereby undermining the hero's protection. For the first time in his life, Bakaridjan hesitates. Zan sees the fear in him and, following the code of the Bambara warrior, refuses to fight. In an amazing turn of events, Bakaridjan rides home in defeat.
- When Madiniko confronts Zan, he, too, learns that he has been duped and returns home defeated. Ultimately, it is the third hero, Bamana, who overcomes Zan and emerges as Segu's greatest warrior.

Bakaridjan and Simbalan

- Back in Segu, we find Bakaridjan living in shame. The king's *djeli*, however, remember Bakaridjan's past heroism and devise a plan to restore his confidence. He must steal cattle from the city of Samaniana and bring them back to the king as a gift. Because the requests of the *djeli* cannot be refused, Bakaridjan complies.
- As it happens, an unscrupulous man from Segu overhears Bakaridjan and the *djeli* talking and, hoping for a reward, warns King Bassi of Samaniana about their plans. King Bassi promptly locks up all of his cattle, preventing Bakaridjan and his warriors from stealing any of them. Having failed again, Bakaridjan heads home more humiliated than before.
- Bakaridjan's slave, Tchenbleni, then comes up with a plan to tell King Bassi that Bakaridjan has been killed in battle. King Bassi takes the bait and frees his cattle. Bakaridjan returns to Samaniana, but instead of merely stealing the cattle, he follows the code of Bambara chivalry and calls out King Bassi and his warriors. In the ensuing conflict, he cuts them down. He distributes the booty from his victory to the *djeli* and the populace of Segu.

- Bakaridjan's renewed popularity again worries King Da Monzon, who sends spies to monitor Bakaridjan's behavior. One day, when Bakaridjan is drinking with other heroes of the city, the spies hear him boast that he is stronger than Segu itself. The spies report this to the king, who declares Bakaridjan guilty of treason. Fearing that the people may side with Bakaridjan, the king hatches a plot to do away with him behind closed doors.
- The king invites Bakaridjan to a private feast, where he plans to have his warriors ambush the hero following the meal. But Bakaridjan's son, Simbalan, comes to his father's aid and forces the king to lead the two of them through the gauntlet of armed warriors to safety.
- As the story ends, Bakaridjan lives on, doing great deeds and bolstering his reputation. King Da Monzon still fears him and chafes at his renown, but we are told that he never tries to kill Bakaridjan again; he is too afraid that Simbalan will come after him if he does.

Suggested Reading

Courlander, *The Heart of the Ngoni*.

Johnson and Hale, eds., *Oral Epics from Africa*.

Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits*.

Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*.

Questions to Consider

1. How is the spirit world interwoven in daily life in the epic of Bakaridjan Kone?
2. What kind of information about a culture can we glean from its mythology?

Death and the Afterlife in African Myth

Lecture 35

African mythology, like the myths of all peoples, reflects a deep concern with death, raising questions that seem common to all humanity: Why do we have to die? Do we deserve death? Can we bring back our lost loved ones? In myths concerning death, some of African mythology's greatest wisdom and most striking imagery are on display. As in the Bible, many African myths incorporate a brief period after creation when human beings enjoyed immortality. Invariably, though, something occurs that destroys that idyllic situation—often, human disobedience. In this way, the stories seem to serve at least partly to underscore the importance of following divine instructions and adhering carefully to communal law.

Death Myth of the Efe

- The Efe people, who live in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, explain death with a story about the god Masupa and his children. Masupa is the supreme creator god, who always keeps himself hidden from view. He creates two sons and a daughter but cautions them that they must never attempt to see him. Of course, curiosity soon gets the better of his daughter, and one day, she sees her father's arm.
- Angered, Masupa abandons his children, leaving them with only the skills to make tools and weapons. His daughter's punishment is particularly harsh: She becomes her brothers' wife and is doomed to suffer the pains of childbirth. Her first child dies two days after she gives birth to it, and thus, death enters the world.
- Much of the poignancy of this story lies in the contrast between the daughter's simple desire to see her father and the tragic consequences of her act. But for that impulsive choice, the story suggests, people might enjoy eternal lives of comfort and joy. Through this story, we can see the Efe struggling to explain the seeming injustice of mortality.

Death Myth of the Anang

- In a story of the Anang people of Nigeria, Abassi, the supreme god, creates the first man and woman but then decides that they can't live on earth; he doesn't like the competition, he tells his wife, Atai. She defends the couple, however, and after much debate, Abassi agrees to allow them to stay on earth so long as they eat only the food he provides and never bear children. "I shall ring a bell," he says, "and they will come to me here in the sky to dine. Thus, they need never hunt or raise crops."
- Soon enough, the clever woman figures out that she can till the soil and grow her own food. What's more, the man prefers his wife's food to Abassi's, and he starts to help her in the field. Abassi rings the bell for the man and woman to come, but they choose to dine alone. Later, they have children.
- Abassi is furious, believing that the couple has forgotten him. But Atai tells him that humans will never be his equal. To make good on her promise, she introduces death into the world, which kills the couple and brings strife and discord to their offspring.
- In the Anang story, the creator god's anger at human disobedience seems somewhat more understandable than in the Efe story of Masupa. Here, the first people disregard the god's injunctions and decline his company. Death is once again a punishment, but in the Anang story, it serves a specific purpose: to ensure that humanity cannot compete with the gods.

Death Myth of the Fang

- For the Fang people of Gabon the supreme god, Nzame, has three aspects: god of the heavens, whose name is also Nzame; the male aspect of creation, called Mebere; and the female aspect of creation, known as Nkwa.
- In the Fang origin story, Nzame creates the universe, including the earth, but Mebere and Nkwa believe that the world needs a ruler. Nzame then convinces them to create a being in their own image to

rule the land. They name him Fam (“power”). But Fam arrogantly abandons his creators and is so cruel in his reign over the animals that Nzame is forced to call on thunder and lightning to lay the world to waste.

- The three aspects of Nzame set about restoring the earth’s flora and fauna, eventually creating a new man: Sekume, the original ancestor of the Fang. Though Nzame makes Sekume in his own image, his creation is mortal.
- When the gods make human beings explicitly in their own image, the stakes for human misbehavior seem to be raised. To take the form of the gods yet behave badly is asking for trouble. But it seems to be Fam’s abuse of the animals—also creations of Nzame—that brings down the god’s wrath. Death in this story seems at least partly intended to place humanity more on a par with other forms of life on earth.

Death Myth of the Mbuti

- In the mythology of the Mbuti people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the chief god, Tore, enlists the help of the moon to make the first man. Tore shapes a body out of clay and calls his creation Baatsi. He sets the man free in the woods, warning him never to eat the fruit of the *tahu* tree.
- Baatsi and his children heed this commandment, but one night, a pregnant woman convinces her husband to bring her some fruit from the tree. Unfortunately, the moon catches the man in the act and reports him to the chief god. Tore sends death as a punishment for humanity’s disobedience.
- Note that the woman’s impulse to disobey in this story is not the result of arrogance, curiosity, or the desire to have knowledge possessed only by the gods. She is simply pregnant and is driven by her cravings. And her husband doesn’t even eat the *tahu* fruit but merely picks it for his wife. None of that, however, saves humanity from the punishment of death.

- Interestingly, according to one story told by several peoples in central Africa, death came into the world when people did not eat the fruit of god's chosen tree. In this tale, the creator Jok gives the gift of immortality to the sun, moon, and stars when human beings don't respond quickly enough to his invitation to taste the fruit of the Tree of Life.

Death Myth of the Krachi

- The Krachi people of Togo tell a chilling story involving a cannibalistic giant named Owuo, in which death is explained by a clumsy mistake. When a famished young man asks Owuo for food, the giant offers him some in exchange for his labor. Later, when the young man wants to return home, the giant agrees to let him go as long as he sends another boy back to work in his place. The young man then sends his brother to the giant. As the story progresses, he also sends his sister to Owuo. But on a later visit, the young man realizes that the food Owuo has served him was his brother and sister.
- Ultimately, the people of the village kill the giant but then discover some medicine hidden in his hair. When they apply some of it to the body parts in the giant's house, his victims are restored to life. Amid the joy that follows, however, the young man accidentally spills a dose of the medicine on the dead giant's eye. The lid flies open at once, and it's said that from then on, every time the giant blinks, a person dies.
- There is no sign in this story that the young hero has any disrespect for the gods or disobeys any commands; he simply drops life-giving medicine in the wrong place. The story does, however, seem to reflect a horror of cannibalism; the fact that the young man partakes of human flesh—however unknowingly—may be seen as justifying divine retribution.

Death Brought on by Animals

- From some of these myths, we might get the idea that the gods would have eventually inflicted death on people no matter how we

behaved. In fact, there is a line of African myths in which mortality is imposed on human beings through the fault of animals.

- According to a myth of the Ama and Nyimang people of Sudan, at one time, when a person died, the supreme god Abradi would explain to the mourners that death is only temporary; if they simply set the body of the deceased aside overnight, their loved one would spring back to life the following day. But a rabbit convinced people to bury corpses, and when Abradi learned of this, he made death permanent.
- As the Luba of Zaire tell it, the creator god Kalumba wanted to spare humans the agonies of sickness and death. He posted a dog and a goat to stand guard along a certain path to stop death from reaching humanity, but the dog fell asleep and allowed death to pass.
- A popular subset of Africa's animal myths about death involves races between two animals that determine whether humanity will die or live forever. For example, in a tale told by the Igbo people of Nigeria, a dog and a sheep are sent to tell people how to live forever, but they both become distracted, and the sheep delivers the wrong message. The myth seems to test the harmony that is supposed to exist between humans and animals.



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In an Igbo myth, the god Chuku sends a dog to tell people how to revive a corpse, but the dog becomes distracted and fails to deliver the message.

Death, Children, and Women

- A disturbing but recurrent theme in African myth is the arrival of death in the world in connection with the killing of children. The children who die in these tales are typically innocents. Perhaps it's an expression of the extreme grief associated with the loss of a child that such a tragedy should be chosen to symbolize death's origin.

- In a story of the Baganda people of Uganda, Walumbe, the god of death, follows Kintu and his wife, Nambi, down to earth from the sky. Walumbe then kills their children and stays on earth.
- In a story told by the Lozi people of Zambia, the first man, Kamunu, brings death into the world when he kills animals, disobeying the orders of the supreme god Nyambe. When Kamunu continues to hunt, Nyambe takes away the thing he loves most, his son.
- In a number of myths, women are given the blame for bringing death into the world. Perhaps on some level, that's a response to the fact that it's from the womb—each human being's personal Eden—that we are expelled into this finite life. Some African myths even seem to go so far as to imply a relationship between female sexual desire and death. Paradoxically, life's yearning to perpetuate itself seems drawn to embrace death, the very thing it seeks to defy. Desire leads to disobedience, and once again, mortality is humanity's punishment.

Suggested Reading

Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death*.

Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*.

Parrinder, *African Mythology*.

Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. According to African myths, why were humans created?
2. What kinds of errors do humans commonly make in mythology, and what are the consequences?
3. According to African myths, why does death enter the world?

African Heroes in the Underworld

Lecture 36

In African mythology, as in myths around the world, it's not uncommon to find characters traveling to the land of the dead to face an ultimate challenge and experiencing a transformation as a result. In this lecture, we'll consider three African mythological characters who brave the land of the dead and how the experience affects them. We'll also look at where their visits to the underworld fit into their lives in this world, because we can understand the deeper meaning of those visits only by viewing them in the context of the greater journey that each character travels and the challenges that he or she faces along the way.

The Journey of Jeki la Njambe

- Jeki la Njambe is the hero of a myth told by the Duala people, who live on the coast of Cameroon and in its southern forests. Jeki's parents had been exiled from their village because his father, Njambe, had made human sacrifices in an attempt to absorb the power of his victims' spirits.
- Before Jeki was born, Njambe and his wife, Ngrijo, had a daughter, Engome. As a child, she had befriended a chimp, who also helped her parents find food. When Engome grew to maturity, the chimp took her. It seems the chimp was a spirit from the underworld, perhaps taking revenge on Njambe for the many spirits that he had sent there in the past.
- The loss of Engome was a terrible blow to her parents and created a rift between them. Njambe married other wives and left Ngrijo to herself, although he would share her bed on occasion. Eventually, Ngrijo became pregnant, but her pregnancy lasted for years, and her belly grew to an enormous size. It turned out that she was carrying a full-grown adult. When she finally gave birth, her "child" was Jeki la Njambe.

- Njambe disliked Jeki and subjected him to a series of seemingly impossible and increasingly dangerous tests, apparently trying to gauge the strength of his spiritual powers. Here, we sense the form of the hero's journey; each hurdle that Jeki clears leads to another, and each success gives us more evidence of his cleverness and inner strength. Throughout the tests, Jeki is aided by a talking amulet called Ngalo that he wears around his neck.
- Ultimately, Njambe tells Jeki to pick nuts from a palm tree that he knows is the home of a killer bird. Jeki uses his magic to pick the nuts and kill the bird, and when Njambe sees what Jeki has accomplished, he collapses.
- At this juncture, Njambe stops trying to kill Jeki, but Jeki's greatest test is just beginning. He learns of his lost sister, Engome, and decides that he must go to the land of spirits to rescue her. He follows long paths through the forest until he reaches a clearing, from which nine paths depart. He chooses one and soon finds himself at the gate of the spirit world.
- When Jeki enters the spirit world, his amulet, Ngalo, guides him to a hut where Engome lives. Inside, he finds a dozen nearly identical young girls. He uses magic to determine which one is Engome, and the two return to the land of the living.
- Jeki's journey to the land of spirits is his ultimate test, but interestingly, it involves none of the heroics of the earlier parts of the story. Instead, the tests are much more like those an ordinary human being would face: Jeki must choose the right path through the woods, and he must ignore a roomful of beautiful girls to rescue his sister. Jeki, who was superhuman and magical from birth, faces down mortality when he makes his own decisions and chooses love and duty over other temptations.

The Journey of Marwe

- The story of a young girl named Marwe is told in East Africa by the Chaga people. Marwe had very stern parents, and one day, afraid of

the punishment she would face for neglecting to guard the family's bean field, she threw herself into a pond.

- Marwe sank deep into the water; then, through the gloom, she saw a faint light coming from the window of a small hut. She knocked at the door, which was opened by a kindly old woman. The woman beckoned Marwe in and quickly made her feel at home.
- Marwe stayed with the old woman for a long time, worked for her, and grew to love her, but eventually, she became homesick. She asked the old woman whether she could leave, and the old woman said yes, but first, Marwe had to make a choice: hot or cold.
- The old woman didn't explain what she meant, but Marwe didn't hesitate: She chose cold. The woman then brought her a pot and told Marwe to reach into it. When the girl pulled her hand out, it was festooned with beautiful bracelets. Excitedly, she put her other arm into the pot, then her legs; soon, she was bejeweled from head to foot. The old woman also brought Marwe a lovely dress and told her that she would soon be married to a man named Sawoye. The old woman then sent Marwe back into the dark waters.
- Marwe rose to the surface and emerged from the pond. As she sat on the shore, people passed by and marveled at what they saw: a beautiful young woman, bedecked in valuable clothes and jewelry. Young men and even chiefs of nearby villages rushed to the pond to propose to the lovely maiden. Marwe refused all their offers, however, until a young man approached her who introduced himself as Sawoye.
- The other men in the crowd laughed, because Sawoye was terribly disfigured. But to their amazement, Marwe chose him over all the rest. The two were soon married, and Sawoye's disfigurement quickly disappeared. Marwe's jewelry allowed them to afford many cattle, and in spite of the jealousy of their neighbors, they remained happy together.

- In this story, we see a timid girl transformed through her journey to the underworld into a decisive young woman. Unlike Jeki la Njambe, Marwe casts herself into the underworld out of fear. To the extent that her visit there can be called a quest, it seems to begin as a journey of penitence—an atonement for her carelessness in guarding the bean field. But she proves herself to be a helpful to the old woman, and significantly, the old woman shows Marwe kindness that her parents seem to lack.
 - That kindness appears to be transformational. The old woman not only treats Marwe well, but she honors Marwe’s choices in a way that her parents, perhaps, did not. When Marwe says she want to go home, the old woman defies our expectations and readily grants her wish.
 - Further, the old woman offers the girl the mysterious options of hot or cold, and Marwe’s choice turns her into a wealthy young lady. The old woman seems to be testing whether Marwe has the maturity to make her own choices. Like Jeki, her act of choosing is a critical part of the transformation she undergoes. She makes her decision, and from that point forward, Marwe acts with self-confidence and makes her own way toward happiness. Facing death as a child, she learns how to live as an adult.

The Journey of Kwasi Benefo

- The Ashanti people of Ghana tell a story about Kwasi Benefo, a young man who travels to Asamondo, the Ashanti world of departed souls. Kwasi Benefo was the most prosperous man in his village, but he lost three wives and became overwhelmed with sorrow. He left all his possessions behind and wandered in the forest. Ultimately, he built a shelter and, in time, forgot about his former life.
- After several years of living in isolation, Kwasi Benefo began to roam again and eventually came to a village, where he met and married his fourth wife. However, this wife also died, and the loss broke Kwasi Benefo’s spirit. He left the village and returned to his homeland to die.

- This final loss leads to the turning point in the narrative. It is unclear what caused Kwasi Benefo to regain some hope, leave his isolation, and try to love once more, but even that resilience is rewarded only with another devastating blow. The death of his fourth wife is so disheartening that Kwasi Benefo ceases to value life. It is at this moment, it seems, that he becomes capable of accepting the message that he will receive in the underworld.



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In the Ashanti tradition, the period of Kwasi Benefo's life after the death of his fourth wife is often referred to as the "forest years"; he is bereft and unable to cope with the life he once knew.

- One night, unable to sleep, Kwasi Benefo decides to venture to the underworld, Asamando, to visit his wives. He makes his way through a dark forest until he reaches a river that he cannot cross. This nocturnal journey is rich with meaning. In Ashanti culture, forests are sometimes used as symbols of the unconscious, underscoring the fact that Kwasi Benefo is on both an outward and an inward journey.
- Unsure of what to do next, Kwasi Benefo sits by the river. Then, Amokeye, a woman who greets the souls of other women who have passed away, tells him that only the dead can cross the river. Kwasi Benefo replies that he will leave until he has seen his wives, even if it costs him his life. Amokeye, aware of the tremendous loss that he has suffered, stems the flow of the river, allowing Kwasi Benefo to cross. She warns him, however, that because he is still alive, he'll only be able to hear his wives' voices; they will be invisible to him.
- Kwasi Benefo crosses the river, comes to a village, and enters one of the houses. In the house, he hears the voices of his wives describing him as a kind and attentive husband and encouraging him to live his life to the fullest. He falls into a deep sleep, and

when he wakes, he finds himself back in the forest near his village. He returns to the village, builds a house, falls in love again, marries, and has sons and daughters.

- Kwasi Benefo's journey to the world of death enables him to embrace life once again. But it's not just the awareness of mortality that changes his outlook. He finds the peace he long sought through the compassion he experiences in the world beyond. Amokeye kindly grants him passage to approach the wives he misses so much, and they remember him fondly and urge him to marry again. They even offer him the prospect of being reunited with them in the future. Kwasi Benefo is, thus, released from his mental bonds and able to return to life without the burden of the past.

Suggested Reading

Belcher, ed., *African Myths of Origin*.

Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*.

Parrinder, *African Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why does the ultimate test of a mythological hero so often take place in the land of the dead?
2. What do you think is the most essential stage or step in the hero's journey? Why?

**Great Mythologies of the World:
Asia and the Pacific**

Great Mythologies of the World: Asia and the Pacific

Scope:

The mythologies of East Asia and the Pacific present a staggering array of cultural and historical themes, many of which are likely to surprise listeners more acquainted with the myths of Greece, Rome, and other Western traditions. The societies covered in this section of the course vary from those with thousands of years of written tradition, such as China, to coral atolls in the Pacific that endured for millennia without writing and were guided by oral traditions. Despite the differences between the Asian landmass and small islands in Oceania, a number of powerful themes weave their ways through the mythological traditions. This section of the course will explore the similarities and differences in the fascinating world of Asian and Pacific mythology.

We begin with three lectures about China, presenting a very different perspective on origin myths than readers familiar with European traditions might expect. These lectures also introduce certain key themes, such as the dominance of the written tradition and the concept of *mythistory*. These lectures relate the stories of mythical sage-kings who form the foundation for a millennia-long imperial tradition. They also tell the story of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maid, a myth that has become part of a wide-ranging literary and even festival tradition throughout East Asia.

From the solid landmass of China, the next two lectures move to the Korean Peninsula, where the traditions are influenced powerfully by a mountainous geography and the culture of the Siberian north. There, a distinctive kind of political mythology developed from a blend of Chinese literary and Siberian shamanistic influences. Korean mythology also highlights a number of international themes that integrate the histories and cultural traditions of both China and Japan—showing Korea to be a key pivot in the history of East Asia.

The next two lectures focus on Japan, and we see for the first time in this region an emphasis on the origins of the universe. This theme does not carry the same force in Chinese and Korean mythologies, which stress the origins of human culture. Two powerful culture creators dominate

this early tradition, and they form both the islands of Japan and the whole range of deities that occupy the heavens. Among them is a deity whose power persists to this day. Also included is a “bad boy” who embodies trickster elements in mythology and tests Japanese assumptions about purity and impurity.

After dealing with the written traditions of East Asian mythology, the lectures move into the Pacific Ocean societies of Polynesia (Hawaii down to New Zealand), as well as the islands and atolls of Micronesia, Melanesia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia. None of these societies has a long tradition of writing, and the dynamic that has led to our knowledge of their mythology is profoundly different from that found in China, Korea, and Japan. For the mythology of these societies, everything we know comes from the very forces that altered their traditional cultures. That we know more about Melanesian myth than Micronesia has much to do with the fact that early missionaries focused more on the former than the latter. The implications of this process are enormous for our understanding of Oceanic mythology.

In Hawaii, we will consider the forces of light and dark (Ku and Hina), as well as a festival (the Makahiki) that celebrates the powerful god Lono. We will also encounter one of the most perplexing moments in international history, when Captain James Cook was purportedly confused with the deity Lono. In Micronesia, we will meet a malevolent figure who tests assumptions about what a trickster might be. Moving on to Melanesia and the vast landmass of New Guinea, we explore how the study of anthropology has connected (and contrasted) with the missionaries, traders, and colonial governments in Oceania. In particular, we will look at an “origin myth” of anthropological study and its implications for our understanding of the region.

We then continue with Indonesia and the Philippines, where a new kind of trickster emerges, one that embodies the trick theme as powerfully as in any tradition in the world. We conclude with Tasmania and Australia and the diverse traditions within an enormous landmass. From the *songlines* of ancestral presences to a colonial “mythology” of its own, Australia both echoes and contrasts with the traditions that we have considered thus far.

Mythology all over the world is a linking of disparate ideas—already present in social and cultural life—that is then patched together by a storyteller in various kinds of innovation, creating something new and often profound. The dynamics of written and oral traditions, as well as the watery world of the Pacific, dominate these mythologies, and we will consider many of their dimensions in this section of our course. ■

Culture and Cosmos in Chinese Mythology

Lecture 37

In Chinese society and Pacific Rim mythology, culture and human relations come first. The myth that began all Chinese myths tells the story, not of how the world began but of a culture hero who transformed daily human life. Origin stories—which aim to explain how things came to exist—just aren’t as important in this branch of mythology. This lecture will examine the role (or non-role) of Chinese origin stories and culture-defining tales before turning to the blending of historical fact with mythological explanations.

Fu Xi

- Long, long ago, near the muddy, clay banks of the Yellow River, China’s foundational myths were established. As the story has it, humans lived in trees and didn’t know how to cook; the thinker Han Fei wrote, “The people ate fruits and melons, oysters and clams. Raw meat and rancid fat was foul and vile-smelling. Worse yet, it injured their stomachs, and many people became feverish and ill.”
- Then came Fu Xi. He coaxed the people out of their comfortable nests and into the complicated, sometimes dangerous world of nature. He taught them how to cook, read, write, and fend for themselves in the world below. Almost every other story in Chinese mythology flows from this point.
- Fu Xi is spoken of today as a “real” hero. In later myths, he eventually taught those early people how to fish, trap, record their thoughts, and do mathematical computations. The first humans would quickly leave the mythological storyboard, never to be heard from again, but Fu Xi has held people’s interest for millennia.

Pan Gu and the Cosmic Egg

- Pan Gu and the Cosmic Egg is a well-known myth that seems to answer all the big questions of standard origin myths. Pan Gu

lived and grew with heaven and earth, eventually growing the distance between them. When he was nearing death, Pan Gu's body transformed. According to the myth:

His breath became the wind and clouds; his voice became peals of thunder. His left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon. His four limbs and five extremities became the cardinal points and the five mountains. His blood and semen became water and rivers.

- Pan Gu's story is a quite satisfying origin tale. The only catch is that almost all scholars see distinctly Near Eastern themes in the myth, which should make us skeptical of its place in the Chinese mythological tradition.
- Furthermore, it is highly unusual for a tradition that has myths recorded in texts from periods as far back as 1000 B.C.E. to find its origin myth in a document written almost 13 centuries later, in about 300 C.E. It is almost as though Chinese scholars purposefully sought an origin myth.

Asian/Pacific Myths versus Western Myths

- The West has always had a peculiar fascination with the individual, and Asian and Pacific tales contrast quite mightily with it. The kinship networks in these myths take many forms—sometimes quite unfamiliar ones. Kinship in these tales is dense, nuanced, and more than occasionally, a bit strange.
- Another common theme in Asia/Pacific mythology is sacrifice, as exemplified by a story about a mother rabbit and her son who, on a cold, sunny winter day, make a snowman in the front yard of their cottage. Later, while the rabbits are napping inside, their cottage catches on fire. The snowman comes to life, rushes to the house, throws himself on the flames, and gives his life for his creators.
- A third overarching theme that connects the myths of this enormous region is water—ubiquitous water.

- Water figures in early Chinese mythology in a way that is in keeping with other great landed civilizations in Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.
- In Korea, we have snow-capped peaks and the frozen waters of Siberian mythology, as well as a jagged peninsular coastline that created pockets of commerce and intrigue.
- In Japan—a set of four major islands surrounded by the ocean—water figures so prominently that it makes the rivers and mountains of its landed neighbors seem paltry by comparison.
- Not surprisingly, this theme carries even more powerful force in Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and other Pacific islands, where the vast Pacific Ocean patterns every aspect of social, cultural, and economic life.
- Finally, by the time we reach Australia, both large landmass and island themes come back together in a way that is as unique as koalas and wallabies in the forests and the outback.
- If we keep in mind these three powerful themes—watery worlds, social networks, and sacrifice—matters as diverse as coaxing people from trees and sacrificing for the greater society will become as familiar as the waters lapping the shores of Pacific islands.

The Yellow River and Henan Province

- Almost everything significant in early Chinese mythology takes place in the fertile agricultural farmlands of the Yellow River valley—a place where water naturally plays a prominent role in any story. More specifically, much of the action in these Chinese myths takes place in Henan province, right in the center of what was known as Chinese territory in its early years.
- The Yellow River has often been called “China’s Sorrow” because its muddy waters have done far more than just provide transportation and needed irrigation to the fields. At various

points in Chinese history, the Yellow River has abruptly changed course, flooding vast farmlands and causing devastation for tens and even hundreds of thousands.

- Forming human culture in such a dangerous environment lies at the heart of Chinese mythology, and the narratives are filled with visions of cultural and even political formation that show a world of human institutions and technology being carved from the raw and inchoate material of nature.



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At various points in Chinese history, the Yellow River has flooded farmlands and caused devastation.

Geography and Myth

- The centrality of Henan province and the culture that was born there in Chinese stories reveal the importance of geography—both real and fictional—in Chinese mythology. There is an old saying in China that goes something like this: “Walk ten *li* and speech starts to get ‘fuzzy’; walk fifty *li* and it is hard to understand anything.” A *li* is half a kilometer or a third of a mile; thus, the saying portrays a world in which the familiar can become strange rather quickly.
- The farther you walk, the harder it is to understand what people are saying in a dialectally challenged world. Walk far enough, and the familiar world becomes unfamiliar. Things change as distances grow. We can call this idea *practical geography*.
- Nearness and farness also play out in Chinese sacred architecture. In early Chinese mythology, the idea of a central palace was a key feature of a properly organized world. The central palace was connected to a heavenly realm above by way of an invisible pillar. From that powerful pillar, the moral force of the heavens gushed down into the central palace.

- From there, we come to one of the most significant themes in Chinese history, mythology, and religion—the not-uncontroversial idea that territories governed by Chinese rulers were “all under heaven,” or *tianxia*. A resonant passage in the Confucian classic *Book of Documents* builds on this idea.

The [central] five hundred *li* constituted the Imperial Domain. ... Five hundred *li* beyond constituted the Domain of the Nobles. ... Five hundred *li* farther beyond formed the Peace-Securing Domain, where they cultivated the lessons of learning and moral duties. ...

Five hundred *li* more remote still formed the Domain of Restraint. The first three hundred were occupied by the tribes of the Yi barbarians; the other two hundred by criminals undergoing the greater banishment. [And] the most remote five hundred *li* constituted what is called the Wild Domain.

- Society has a sacred center—under heaven. The first few rings around the center are familiar, safe, and vibrant territory. Every 500 *li* outward becomes a little more distant, a little less tethered to the ideals of society. Far from the center, strange monsters and criminals reside. Proper humanity and human culture lie *under heaven*.
- This carries a quite simple yet problematic message. Virtue and culture are centered; those living beyond are not fully “one of us.” It is a theme that, despite its fanciful tones, would be repeated throughout Chinese history and in a good deal of its mythology.

Cosmogonic Questions

- The fact that Chinese mythology focused so intently on culture does not mean that Chinese thinkers did not ponder deep cosmogonic questions—how the world and the heavens came to be.
- One of the best examples comes from the *Songs of Chu*, a strange and fascinating collection of dreams, reflections, and chants often

attributed to a brilliant, lonely scholar named Qu Yuan in the 3rd century B.C.E. Most of its wide-ranging contents, however, are of unknown authorship.

- One of the sections dealing with origins is called “Questions of Heaven.” Several recent scholars have described it as the most important exploration of origins in Chinese mythology. “Questions of Heaven” describes how misty vapors emerged from a formless expanse under the alternating powers of darkness and light.
- The *Songs of Chu* contains many of the power themes in Chinese mythology, not to mention some key topics in early astronomy and physics. To be sure, it is not a “story” in the manner of the Pan Gu legend, but that is precisely the point in the world of Chinese thought.
- These “questions of heaven” ask how the truly important things in the Chinese mythological conception of the world—such as the ninefold heavens, eight pillars, and 12 houses of the calendar—came to be.

Myth, History, and Mythistory

- In dealing with the mythical traditions of highly literate cultural traditions, such as those of China, Japan, and Korea, we must think deeply about the relationship between myth and history. In one way or another, historical traditions wrestle with the question: What is mythical and what is historical?
- Think back to those Chinese stories of early humans in their nests. Initially, many of the tales spoke only of heroes or sages who helped the tree-dwellers. In time, however, a name was increasingly associated with one of those sages so that he came to be understood as one person. Fu Xi then became *mythistorical*—mostly mythical but with the specificity of a name that at least begins to sound as if it could be used in a history book.

- The societies of the Asia/Pacific region had their own special variety of mythistory, shaped by the great emphasis they placed on culture. And no society had a broader and more powerful influence on the mythology and mythistory of the region than China, where culture heroes embraced the work to be done for all under heaven.

Suggested Reading

Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*.

Mali, *Mythistory*.

Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, chapter 2, “Cosmogony.”

Questions to Consider

1. Given that Chinese culture apparently went without a cosmological creation myth for 13 centuries, what purpose do you think creation myths serve? What does the lack of a creation myth say about a society and how it thinks about itself and the world?
2. Can you think of ways in which imaginative geography operates in Western culture? One example could be the American conception of Manifest Destiny. Can you think of others in and beyond the United States?
3. *Mythistory* implies the merging of vague, mythical features with specific names, dates, and details. In addition to early Western examples of mythistory, such as Achilles or even John the Baptist, can you think of ways in which clearly real people in our own times have taken on almost mythical qualities?

Chinese Heroes, Kings, and Destroyers

Lecture 38

One way of looking at Chinese mythology is to realize that it tells tales of how things came to be, on one hand, without ever losing focus on how things ought to be, on the other hand. In this lecture, we will meet culture heroes who helped people to merge into ever-larger social groups. We will also examine a range of tales and images of faraway places to the north and west that differed so much from the Yellow River valley that they inspired both wonder and fear.

Utopia, Dystopia, and Heroes

- Chinese mythology has a strong utopian element: These myths usually engage what happened with some allusion to what *should* have happened. There is a dystopian thread at work in Chinese mythology, as well. Many tales explain just how badly things can go wrong if the people are not properly governed.
- The vast bulk of Chinese myths and early historical accounts center on the Yellow River valley, the seat of agricultural production in early Chinese society. In other words, most Chinese utopian visions have a distinctly temporal dimension: The best rulers lived long ago, in the Yellow River valley.
- Tales of distant lands often also served as a reminder to listeners that many people (and their rulers) lost the way of the early leaders and that they would do well to mend their flawed habits.
- Fu Xi appears again and again. He is the first in a line of eminent forces in Chinese mythical life that includes the agriculture god (Shennong) and the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi). These three figures, together with the goddess Nü Gua, move the mythical narrative from isolated life amidst vegetation to human society in an agricultural world.

“Do-Overs”

- It is not unusual in world mythology to find “do-overs” regarding the creation of humanity. This seems to be the case for the tree people who were coaxed down and civilized by Fu Xi.
- Still, perhaps the most often told story of human beings focuses on the work of another culture hero. In these tales, the goddess Nü Gua is said to have “... kneaded yellow earth and fashioned human beings.”
- The account continues by stressing that, running short on time, she drew her cord in a furrow and lifted it out of the mud to create even more human beings. There is a class element beneath this story, too: The yellow-earth humans would be the aristocrats; the furrow-mud humans would be the commoners.
- Fu Xi and Nü Gua combine to create the very image of the culture hero in China—precise, measured bearers of useful techniques and practices who bridge the gulf between humanity and divinity.

Shennong and Huangdi

- A few other important figures are also part of the narrative. One of the most significant is Shennong, a Chinese god of agriculture, who sacrificed himself to teach early humans how to transition from what we today call the Paleolithic to the new world of the Neolithic.
- In particular, Shennong gave over his own health to create a vast catalog of safe and dangerous foodstuffs, risking poisoning at every turn. One account has him racked with food-borne poisons up to 70 times in a single day.



The god Shennong channeled his public-spirited devotion for the good of the people; he has become the culture hero most closely associated with medical treatment.

- Another figure, Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, is accorded both wisdom and a large range of inventions. Although it seems as if he might be a historical figure, in fact, he, too, is one of the earliest of culture heroes.
- Huangdi predates actual historical Chinese emperors by tens of centuries, but it is no small irony that the Chinese characters in his name—*Huangdi*—would come in later times to mean the actual, ruling emperor.
- Huangdi brought the construction of shelters, techniques for domesticating animals, and the building of carts, boats, and wagons. Perhaps most significantly and most in keeping with the distinctive nature of the Chinese mythical tradition, he gave human beings the calendar, astronomy, a legal code, and even an early form of sport.

Repair

- Even in mythological accounts of the world, a great deal can go wrong, which means that we should never forget the importance of repair. Perhaps the most prominent repair tale in Chinese mythology—“Nü Gua Mends the Sky”—shows the craftsmanship of the goddess Nü Gua again. Here’s how the mythical story goes, as found in the classic text *Huainanzi*:

In distant antiquity the four poles holding up the heavens collapsed. The nine regions of the earth split asunder. Heaven was fragmented, and so, too, was the earth. Fierce fires broke out, and flood waters rushed over the land. The most deadly birds and beasts seized people and caused fear throughout humanity.

Then Nü Gua smelted the five-color stones, which she used to mend the azure sky. She took a giant sea turtle, severed its great feet, and used them to prop up the sky. She dammed the waters with reeds. The four poles held securely. The fierce birds and beasts died, and the people lived. And ever since that time, the heavens have held securely in place, above the earth and its people.

- There is far more discussion in the Chinese tradition of mending a cosmos already in existence than explaining how it came to be in the first place. Culture bearing and culture repair dominate the world of Chinese mythology.

Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great

- The tales of the three sage-kings—Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great—were so influential in the world of scholar-officials in Chinese history that their names figure in almost every bit of official historical writing over the millennia, not just mythological accounts.
- Yao, Shun, and Yu make up the Three Dynasties, a semi-historical period that took place after humans had come down from the trees, had been refashioned by Nü Gua, had been taught agricultural techniques, and had internalized those techniques for 1,000 years.
- Yao was the first great sage-king. It was Yao who, disappointed with his own sons, asked his assembled officials to scour the countryside for a model ruler to succeed him. When Yao’s minions found Shun, they knew they had their next ruler.
- Shun’s ability to do his best with a terribly difficult family situation convinced Yao to choose Shun as his heir. This story of kingly succession by finding the most talented person in the realm became one of the most powerful themes in all of Chinese political philosophy.
- At this point, a third figure enters the mythistorical fray. As one of the great histories of China notes, “If it had not been for Yu [the Great], we would all be fishes.” Floodwaters rose during the later years of Yao’s reign, and a young man named Yu was entrusted with controlling them.
- So hard was Yu’s work that he ate and slept with the laborers and passed by his family’s house only three times during the course of 13 years of work. He ignored the ties of kinship that are said to be the foundation of social life in China.

- The tradition has it that Yu the Great toiled so fiercely that his body was overcome with partial paralysis, resulting in a walk in which one leg had to be dragged behind the other in an awkward motion. Yu the Great worked so hard that he was quite literally hobbled by the demands of his labor.
- After Yao had passed on, Shun, who had watched Yu's labors, rewarded him with rule, passing over his own sons. Those sons served Yu, who then proceeded to establish the first Chinese dynastic order by bestowing on his own son hereditary succession to the throne. The new dynasty became known as the Xia state, and at least according to mythistory, it endured from 2100 to 1600 B.C.E. All rulers would rely on the system of hereditary succession in the future.

Good First Ruler, Bad Last Ruler

- The basic storyline behind the vast majority of Chinese historical accounts has been one of good first ruler, bad last ruler. In short, Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great are accompanied in Chinese mythology by two figures who are their opposites in almost every way. These figures are Jie and Zhou (Xin).
- Jie ruled at the end of the Xia dynasty that Yu the Great had founded. He destroyed that dynasty utterly with great parties. The people became exhausted and penniless. With great toil, the terrible work of Jie was undone, and that flawed ruler was overthrown. He was banished into exile.
- Like the Xia state before it, the Shang regime was brought down by a ruler who again undid all the good work of his predecessors—in this case, Zhou, or Xin. Zhou was degenerate in all of the “normal” profligate ways, but he also engaged in treachery and vindictive abuse. He, too, was overthrown, but he did not get by with banishment. His severed head was displayed as a cautionary tale for future generations.
- This cycle of good first rulers and bad last rulers led to a distinctive mythological and historical storyline. Great leaders found their

work undone in a few decades or centuries by rulers of such extraordinary obtuseness that only another shining presence could undo the damage and start a new dynasty on its way to glory.

Travel and Quest

- In Chinese mythology, faraway places sometimes were said to preserve the ways of Yao, Shun, and Yu, even though the historical peoples of the Yellow River valley had forgotten them. One place called Daqin, or Great Qin, was spoken of as a real place in several texts from the Han dynasty but was said to lie far off, in the hazy northwestern territories of China.
- It became clear that those who told Great Qin's story were sending a powerful message through their portrayals of a utopian realm unknown to people living in the Yellow River valley. There was no hereditary succession to the throne in Great Qin. The best person was chosen to lead, and poor rulers were supplanted. The realm was incredibly safe.
- This impossibly wonderful kingdom was, of course, a utopian construct built from the timbers of early Chinese mythology. It was very much a criticism of the accepted ruling ways of the familiar world back near the Yellow River.

Queen Mother of the West

- The mountainous territory of China also held the strange world of the Queen Mother of the West. She was exceedingly powerful, even holding the power to confer immortality. Like many figures in early Chinese mythology, stories about the Queen Mother of the West began as a loose collection of tales that, in time, took on a mythistorical form.
- The Queen Mother was exotic. At court, she sat on a dragon-tiger throne and was accompanied by a three-legged crow, a vapor-emitting toad, and a rabbit bearing sacred moss. In the heart of the northwestern mountains was her palace, which contained a cosmic pillar connecting the earth to the heavens above.

- The Queen Mother is a complex figure in Chinese mythology, and tales about her range from those of a wild deity to a cultured ruler who granted long life to certain visitors. In these tales—mostly from later traditions—she rules the faraway northwest, as did Yao, Shun, or Yu. The very distance separating her fabulous court from the Yellow River valley is part of the reason for her appeal.

Suggested Reading

Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion*.

Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China*.

Loewe, *Faith, Myth, and Reason in Han China*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the works of the early culture heroes blend together to create something bigger than any one of them might have accomplished? Are there examples of teamwork or, rather, a fusion of individual talents? How do such blending processes operate in other mythical traditions with which you are familiar?
2. What is the relationship between sage-kings, such as Yao, Shun, and Yu, and degenerate destroyers, such as Jie and Zhou? Destruction is sometimes described in various world tales as a conscious, evil attempt to ruin what others have created. The legends of Jie and Zhou seem to imply a different kind of destructive force. What are the similarities and differences?
3. Although much of Chinese mythology centers on the Yellow River valley and the traditional heart of Chinese civilization, we encountered in this lecture a fascination with territories far to the west. Why would myths about ways of life far from home have lasting appeal in a tradition that focuses much of its mythological energy on the world under heaven, in the center?

Peasant Folktales and Chinese Scholarship

Lecture 39

The sayings of peasants became the foundation for highly sophisticated and nuanced writing that shaped both Chinese mythology and literature in profound ways. But oral and written traditions affect stories differently. One myth—that of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden—has survived as a cultural linchpin. Another, that of Hou Jin, has faded, paradoxically because of being written down. In this lecture, we'll look at both of these myths, plus one that deals with *yin* and *yang*, and how they've fared over the centuries.

The Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden

- The first appearance of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden myth occurs in the *Classic of Songs*—an influential anthology from the 6th century B.C.E. that channeled rural songs and transformed them into a new kind of verse admired by highly skilled readers.
- Every myth in China has been changed by writing, by trying to make a lively tale into “literature” or a moral lesson. The academics got their hands on the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden tale, too, but the power of the characters is such that the myth still retains much from its origins.
- Here is the story in a nutshell:
 - There once was a Herdboy who had a special cow—golden and plump. One day, the cow startled the Herdboy by speaking to him: “You must ascend to heaven and marry the Weaving Maiden, the seventh daughter of the heavenly ruler.” With magical bovine help, the Herdboy did rise to the heavens, engaged in a bit of trickery, and convinced the Weaving Maiden to marry him.
 - The two lived happily for some time, but the Maiden was eventually called back to her weaving duties and the Herdboy



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The story of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden has been celebrated in the Double Seventh festival for more than 2,000 years.

to his flocks. They now work apart and are separated 364 days a year. They come together only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, when they cross the Silver River (the Milky Way) and link in constellation communion.

- The Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden are part of a tradition that taps into the rhythmic festivals that opened and closed every agricultural year in early China. They were far more than isolated lovers. They represented the very forces of life, love, continuity, and sacrifice in a complex world and do so to this day.
- In ancient farming communities, one of the most significant realities of everyday life was that men and women lived apart during the agricultural season—men in their huts near the fields and women back in the small clusters of sturdier houses.
- After the harvest celebrations, the men would come home. During the cold winter months near the frozen Yellow River and its tributaries, men sharpened their tools, did household repairs, and

reacquainted themselves with their wives, aunts, daughters, and nieces. It was as though human society became whole again.

- When the ground thawed and the rivers ran freely again, the men picked up their tools and, hoes in hand, headed off to the fields. But first, they would dance and celebrate. Those festivals are, at heart, patterns of social movement, not just words on a page.

Making the Calendar

- Those who live on and for the soil gain a sense of the rhythms of the year that frames their daily lives, as well as the life cycles—including marriage—that they experience as they grow older. These actions *make* the calendar. We don't follow the calendar; the calendar follows us. Everything we know about daily life flows from these patterned activities.
- As the scholar Marcel Granet states, "... the sense that the natural world and human society are closely bonded has been the basic element of all Chinese beliefs." Few tales show these rhythms better than that of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden, which is a continually renewed and refreshed product of those rhythms and taps into the vibrant life of human society flowing through nature.
- The timing of the festival of the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden has an exquisite "in-betweenness" in early Chinese life. It partakes of both the frenzied, amorous banter among youths in the spring festivals and the long-term married pairings that would take place in the autumn, after the harvest. As Granet terms it, the dancing farmers, as well as the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden myth, show "rural concord forged in rhythmic time." This is the very backbone of Chinese mythology.

"The System of the Heavens"

- The mythical and philosophical compendium *Huainanzi* contains a scene called "The System of the Heavens." In it, we see the journey from darkness to light and back to darkness.

- Remember that Chinese mythology is as much about movement as what we might call plot. What this text describes is the light-to-dark (and back again) foundation of all Chinese thought—mythical or otherwise:

The sun rises from Yang [Sunny] Valley and is bathed in Widespread Pond; when it reaches Leaning Mulberry, it is called bright dawn. When it passes Leaning Mulberry and begins its journey, it is called daybreak.

Reaching Winding Riverbank, it is called daylight. Arriving at Cengquan, it is called breakfast. When it comes to Mulberry Wilds, it is called lunch. When it reaches Pivot Sunshine, it is called angle center. Coming to Kunwu, the sun has reached perfect center. From there, it moves on to Mount Niaozi, and is called small return.

Eventually, it progresses to Sad Valley and is called dinner. When it reaches Nüji, it is called great return. From there, it passes Yuan Yu, high pestle, and Lanshi, low pestle. ... In time, it reaches Yu Yuan and is called yellow gloaming.

Finally coming to Meng Valley, it is called fixed dusk. All told, the sun passes over Nine Provinces and Seven Markers, half a million *li*.

- We have here the picture of a rising and eventually setting sun. It is the very picture of *yin* and *yang*, and this patterned rhythm rests at the heart of all Chinese mythology.
- Above all, *yin* and *yang* are about change, pattern, rhythm, and movement. Neither *yin* nor *yang* ever “is” anything. They are both in continual phases of *becoming*. They are ways of thinking, acting, and living. They are flowing, natural patterns. They are absolutely not opposed, dual, binary, or logical structures.

- Circular diagrams of *yin* and *yang* have one white curving side and one black curving side. In the midst of the white half of the circle is a small black dot; the black half of the circle contains a small white dot. Within even an efflorescence of dark, receding, receptive *yin* is a shiny ball of energetic *yang*. Within even the brightest, outgoing, pushy, and powerful *yang* is a dark circle of reflective *yin*. Like the Herdboy and the Weaving Maiden, *yin* and *yang* are always coming together and always moving apart in steady, rhythmic cadences.

Hou Ji

- Hou Ji, the Lord of Millet, appears among the iconic verses in the *Classic of Songs*. Unlike the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden, though, his story of passionate devotion to the people gives way to pompous tales of government service—something no spring festival farmer was likely to have chanted on the snow-melted hilltops.
- Here’s the story as we now have it:
 - Hou Ji was born of a mother who became pregnant when she stepped into the footprint of a deity. Worried that this was very unlucky, she left the baby to die, but it was protected by animals and birds in the wild. Noticing this, she returned to her maternal duties.
 - As a youngster, Hou Ji reveled in nature and delighted in planting, tilling, and spreading knowledge of farming amongst the people. He spoke of the various kinds of grains, and his carefully tended fields were the best around.
 - Eventually, Hou Ji would serve as a great minister of agriculture in the hazy mythistory of the Xia dynasty—the one that Yu the Great had founded.
- This is the kind of tale that the farmers likely did tell each other at festivals. And that is why Hou Ji was originally celebrated at hilltop festivals, where farmers danced, swayed, and swooned in, as Granet puts it, the forged cadences of rhythmic time.

- Yet Hou Ji has been merely an afterthought in just about every discussion of Chinese mythology for the last 2,000 years. The literati got right to work on him. They sought to make him a superstar—a culture hero akin to Fu Xi and Nü Gua.
- The rural stories that told of Hou Ji’s miraculous birth gave way to a civilizing genius who was connected to all the great feudal families. He was made into a great minister and celebrated by the men with the writing brushes.
- Chinese scholars sought to clean rural myths up and give them an aristocratic flair. But in brushing off the clumps of rustic originality, they created something that the farmers didn’t appreciate as deeply. As time went on, the farmers who drove the early process of Hou Ji’s mythological creation yawned at the aristocratic caricature.

Writing and Myth

- The writing process destroys the relationship among festivals, myths, beliefs, and natural rhythms. The anthropologist Jack Goody gets to this point in his book *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*.
- According to Goody, it is one thing for members of an oral culture to express a belief and another to organize it with writing and printing. The latter can take a fascinating germ of thought and transform it in myriad ways.
- For example, let’s say that a child has a ringing in her ears. One can imagine (as a playful example) a belief in early Chinese villages that “a ringing in the ear brings forth a bountiful year.” It has a little rhythm to it, and the experience of everyday life would reinforce it. Such a story would be easy to retell; this is one way such sayings take root.
- But today’s Chinese almanac reflects centuries of writing and classification. What an earlier oral culture might have treated as one symptom—ear ringing, in this case—and one saying, writing has transformed into 24 variables. The text breaks it down into the 12

traditional two-hour periods of the day and either the left or right ear. That is a level of detail that requires a chart; no traditional family could likely keep all of those details in memory.

- Writing changes everything, and it changed everything in what we know of Chinese mythology. The learned scholars took the bubbling, rhythmic, flowing world of rural gathering, linkages, and festivities and framed it in conceptual categories so complex that they withered the interest of all but a few other scholars.
- Writing freezes myths in time, putting them onto the page, where they live on but in distinctly changed fashion. Hou Ji was a victim of this process, and only the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden have managed to escape with at least a part of their original force.

Suggested Reading

Birrell, *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China*.

Granet, *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*.

———, *The Religion of the Chinese People*.

Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do patterns of cyclical change (*yin-yang*, the calendar, and even the agricultural patterns of a year) affect mythology in China? Can you see similar patterns in other mythological traditions?
2. We often think of writing as a way to preserve tradition. This lecture shows several ways in which writing can profoundly alter it. What are some of the ways that writing saves cultural traces? What are some of the ways that writing makes them almost unrecognizable?

Spirits and Syncretism in Korean Myth

Lecture 40

East Asia is a vast cultural area that has seen powerful movement of ideas among all regions. China, Korea, and Japan share significant cultural traits, and each has influenced the other in many ways. In particular, China's influence on Korea shows up everywhere, from the story of the founding of ancient Korean, or Choson, to the Korean version of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden myth. The religious traditions of each area also blend together in a melding called *syncretism*. Blending and cross-influence form part of the backbone of East Asian mythology.

Choson's Founding

- In the year 2333 B.C.E., as the tale has it, the ancient Korean state of Choson was founded. The mythical date itself bears a curious similarity to the reign of China's own first sage-king, Yao, which is said to have lasted from 2358 to 2258 B.C.E. Given the enormous cultural influence from China, this should not be surprising. It is as though truly significant mythological events in Chinese and Korean culture began in the 24th century B.C.E.
- But this myth tells of what happened even before that, starting with acts by the lord of heaven, Hwanin, and his son, Hwanung. Here's how the collection *Samguk Yusa*, or *Tales of Three Kingdoms*, tells the story:

In olden times, Hwanin's son, Hwanung, wished to descend from heaven and live in the world of human beings. Knowing his son's desire, Hwanin surveyed the three highest mountains and found Mount T'aebaek, and called the place the City of God. ...

At that time a bear and a tiger living in the same cave prayed to Holy Hwanung to transform them into human beings. [Hwanung] gave them a bundle of sacred mugworts and twenty cloves of garlic. He said, "If you eat these and avoid

the sunlight for one hundred days, then you will assume human form.”

Both animals ate the spices and avoided the sun. After twenty-one days, the bear became a woman, but the tiger, unable to observe the taboo, remained a tiger. So, unable to find a husband, the bear-woman prayed under the altar tree for a child.

Hwanung metamorphosed himself, lay with her, and begot a son called Tangun Wanggom.

- Then, in 2333 B.C.E., Tangun Wanggom created ancient Choson and became its king, setting the pattern for state-building mythology in Korea. Although this myth is not about the origins of the world, it is surely the cornerstone of all subsequent Korean political narrative.

Korea, Japan, and China

- Korea is a mountainous peninsula that is bordered by China to the north and west. Japan lies to the east and also played a significant role in Korea’s history. In many ways, the Korean Peninsula is the key linkage between the continental enormity of China and the distinctive archipelago of Japan.
- Although the mythology sometimes tells it otherwise in both lands, the connections between Korea and Japan were so profound that almost everything that we might regard as “East Asian civilization” was channeled between them. For example, many Japanese details of the famous Herdboy and Weaving Maiden myth were profoundly influenced by the Korean tradition, even though the myth originated in China.
- Only 20 percent of the land on the Korean Peninsula is suitable for cultivation, and that already alters some of the details of early Korean mythology. The early Koreans were a tribal people who relied on fishing, hunting, and eventually, agriculture on small pockets of cultivable land.



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The tales of Korean shamans evoke the landscape—its snowy mountains, river crossings, and curving valley descents.

- The early Koreans had hereditary tribal leaders whose “rule” was tied to a nature-based religion. They also believed that animals possessed spirits, and those animals figured prominently in many of their myths.

Shamanism in Korea

- Early Koreans interacted with the spirit world through spirit mediums, or shamans, who were the first transmitters of Korean myths. Shamanistic practices have always existed on the margins of society, and even the most influential and successful shamans and spirit mediums have always occupied a precarious position in village (and now city) life.
- In Korean culture, the shamans—who were mostly but not exclusively women—were seen as connected with the heavens themselves. One tradition has it that the shamans themselves are the mythical descendants of Hwanin, the heavenly king from whom Tangun, the first king of Choson, was descended.
- The enduring power of the shaman in Korea can be seen to this day in a ritual known as *kut*. The *kut* ritual is a complex combination of

ancestral veneration, sacrifices to gods, rhythmic movements, and prayer. Through dance, the *mu* (shaman) invites the deities to come closer and to take a role in human matters that they are said to disdain.

Chinese Influence on Korea

- Chinese culture was perceptible on the Korean Peninsula as early as the 10th century B.C.E. and arrived in the form of agricultural techniques, bronze implements, and later, iron—the very blend of mythical and practical tools used by great culture heroes in Chinese mythology. Chinese influence was overwhelmingly agrarian and scholarly.
- Scholars in Korea took the Chinese intellectual tradition very seriously—so seriously, in fact, that the scholarly language of Korea for two millennia (right up until the early 20th century) was classical Chinese. The splendid *hangul* writing system was developed in the 14th century and is still used in Korea today, but almost every serious Korean scholar ignored it until about a century ago.
- The Korean version of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden story clearly comes from China, as the two-character name of the festival is written in Chinese characters. The name means “Seventh Evening,” referring to the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, when the festival is celebrated. And those same two Chinese characters are the same ones used in Korea for the pre-harvest festival at which the myth is commemorated, a festival known as Chilseok. As in China, the work in the fields increases at this point in the late summer; thus, the festival needed to be as brief as it was wonderful.

Chinese Influence on Technology and Culture

- The origins of the world—cosmogony—were not as prominent in the thoughts of early Koreans as was the creation of the land, people, and culture. The myths of both China and Korea spend relatively little time on cosmogony. Rather, they delve deeply and with relish into the ways technological innovations and social institutions were shaped.

- The Chinese myths of culture heroes who taught about agricultural techniques and grains captured the imagination of early Korean state-builders. But theirs was not all passive learning from stories. Some of the lessons came with hurled spears and charging war chariots.
- Neither Korea nor Japan was even remotely a satellite state, moving in orbit with the great cultural (and often military) influence of China. The influence was deep—and especially so in Korea—but its thinkers and technologists adapted it (as well as the natural world all around them) to their own needs.
- Some indigenous traditions had little to do with China at all. Shamanistic and animistic forms of worship were closely tied to the north Asian forests. This is a northern forest tradition almost unthinkable to a Chinese scholar-official.
- Indeed, some more seriously Confucian scholars in Korea began to be embarrassed of these supposedly “unscholarly” traditions. It speaks to the power of shamanistic beliefs that those stodgy scholars were largely dismissed by the vast bulk of society. Most people proceeded with the time-honored rituals related to the cultures of the cool, northern Siberian forests.
- On the other hand, there is a real connection in all of East Asia between the heavens and earthly rulers. In Korea, this was represented by golden crowns and jewels worn by leaders. These adornments physically reflected the power of the heavens. They were elaborate and strange for any visitors who happened to make their way from the lush farmlands and refined courts of China or the elegant temples of Japan.

Syncretism

- A core East Asian approach to religion, known as *syncretism*, helps us understand how both scholarly texts and indigenous practices can be part of Korean mythology. The term *syncretism* reflects the blending and merging of cultural traditions. The East Asian version of the

phrase, which is the same in China, Korea, and Japan, is instructive: *sanjiao heyi*, which means “the three teachings merge into one.”

- What we think of as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism are experienced by people in blended forms that resist doctrinal barriers. They cohere—or were made to. But this blending does not occur in just those three Chinese religious traditions. The syncretic merging also applies to Buddhism, Shamanism, and Confucianism in Korea, as well as Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism in Japan.
- In each case, syncretism is at work. In each case, we have a Confucian religious and philosophical doctrine that emphasized hierarchy, family, and social regulations. We can’t understand East Asian mythology without it.
- On top of it, all East Asian countries saw the arrival of Buddhism, a religious system that focused on the fleeting nature of life on earth. Beyond both—Confucian strictness and Buddhist fluidity—was, in each society, an indigenous tradition that blended with Confucian and Buddhist thought.
 - In China, this was the Daoist tradition, which emphasized a way of going with the flow of life, like the rippling of water.
 - In Japan and Korea, the highly ritualized Shinto and shamanistic traditions each fused with Confucianism and Buddhism to create distinctive combinations particular to each culture. In order to create a more powerful form of rule (with golden crowns and vast bureaucracies), shamanistic kings adapted to a form of Confucian kingship borrowed from China.
 - This powerful syncretic combination was linked from that point on in Korean myth and history. But that merging of Confucian and shamanistic traditions was only the beginning. In time, the message of Buddhist compassion also became a part of every Korean king’s ruling ideology.

- These three Korean traditions—shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—have been interwoven for more than 1,500 years. More than occasionally, they have clashed. Yet they all blend into one and form a foundation of all East Asian mythology.

Suggested Reading

Hwang Pae-gang, *Korean Folk Myths and Legends*.

Lee, et al., eds., *Songs of Flying Dragons*.

———, *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. 1.

Mintz and Ha Tae-hung, trans., *Samguk Yusa*.

Questions to Consider

1. How has the geography of the Korean Peninsula influenced themes in Korean mythology?
2. How is the Korean version of the Herdboy and Weaving maiden tale different from the Chinese versions? How are they similar?

Korea's Warring Kingdoms and Flying Dragons

Lecture 41

Korean mythology emphasizes the growth of human culture and institutions. Though Korean mythology is light on origin stories, this lecture describes an important one from the fittingly named *Book of Beginnings*. From there, the lecture examines the roles of *yin*, *yang*, and five-phase symbolism in Korea and discusses several important tales that helped lay the foundation of the country's culture. Also appearing in this lecture are Yi Song-gye and Sejong, two important rulers who helped shape Korea's mythology, culture, and history.

The *Book of Beginnings*

- A text from the northern part of the peninsula describes the beginnings of Korean culture and society. Of unknown authorship, it is called the *Changsega*, or the *Book of Beginnings*, and it is filled with tales of cultural if not cosmogonic origin.
- In the *Book of Beginnings*, a figure named Mireuk plays the role of culture hero in a manner similar to heroes found in early Chinese mythology. He crafted the world, then created humans from the seedlings of five golden and five silver bugs.
- Mireuk then sought to protect his creative efforts against usurpation attempts by a deity named Seokga, who challenged Mireuk to three contests. First the pair attempted to throw their ropes across the East Sea. Seokga's silver rope broke, but Mireuk's golden one prevailed.
- From there, the two were compelled to make the Seongcheon River connect to all other rivers in the world. Seokga, in shamanistic fashion, summoned heavy rains, but it was not enough. The wily Mireuk called forth winter ice, which overflowed, froze, and in the end, connected all the rivers.

- The third contest was pivotal and did not involve water. A magnolia flower was placed between Mireuk and Seokga, and whichever deity the flower turned toward as they slept would be declared the winner. Seokga cheated and won. Mireuk cursed, creating, in his anger, most of the persistent problems in the world, including betrayal, disorder, and envy.



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Though he cheated, Seokga was the victor in the magnolia contest.

- Moreover, Mireuk was imprisoned by the illegitimate victor but then escaped by transforming himself into a musk deer. It was to no avail, however, because Seogka's priests hunted down and killed the deer. It would seem that Mireuk had ultimately failed, yet his creations—both the positive and the accursed—remained. Mireuk changed the world, even though he did not live to see it beyond his labors.

Yin, Yang, and the Five Phases

- Every East Asian civilization employs *yin* and *yang* as the foundation for a diverse array of doctrines and practices. In Korea, these powerful forces shape the ways that historical works are constructed. In these works, we hear the rising and falling narrative cadences adapted from Chinese history, in which powerful first rulers give way to the darkness of flawed leadership.
- But there are more dimensions at work—five more. And they give shape to even richer pictures of East Asian mythology. Beyond that, the “fives” are a particular tool of the academics, who were fond of classifying things into conceptual groups (then writing them down for others to memorize).
- A deep understanding of nature and culture depends on careful calculations of how *yin* and *yang* interact with five phases or agents

in (and beyond) the world. If *yin* and *yang* can be said both to power and reflect the unerring changes all around us, the five phases can be seen as a complex series of annotations that gave philosophers and religious thinkers ways of classifying and explaining the world in even greater detail.

- In Korea, this five-phase symbolism is often seen in mythical details. In one text, we might see it in descriptions of herbs used for medical treatments or the various structures of governmental bureaucracy. In another text, we might encounter a list of five holy sites or five precious gems.

The Kingdom of Hyokkose

- The 12th-century *Samguk Yusa—Tales of Three Kingdoms*—is by far the richest source of early legends in Korea, and we are both indebted to it and frustrated by it. The text contains gems of insight into Korean life and thought, yet it is the product of learned scholars writing many hundreds of years after the myths were first told.
- As we have seen in China, clearly mythical figures quickly give way in the key texts to hard-to-define figures who operate in a vague sort of mythistorical middle ground. In time, the stories speak of historically verifiable people, but the boundaries between clearly mythical and verifiably historical are not exact. The following is a summary of one of these “in-between” stories.
 - In ancient times, life on the Korean Peninsula was divided by clans, each of which claimed a divine ancestor. Over the years, the infighting and discord grew so great and threats from farther afield so intense that many family groupings sought a solution.
 - In hopes of coming together for a greater purpose, the people assembled. To the top of a high mountain they went and prayed for heaven to deliver them a shining leader. Heaven responded, and the people found a pair of eggs from which a male and a female child hatched.

- The people raised the miracle children and, in time, the pair became rulers of what would later become known as Silla—one of the peninsula’s Three Kingdoms (Koguryo in the north, Paekche in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast). The king, Hyokkose, ruled for 60 years.
- The tale of Hyokkose centers on the profound change that occurs when people begin to organize their lives around concepts that are greater than kinship relationships. It is, on the one hand, a story of a society moving from small fragments of family groupings to what would become, in time, one of the glorious states of Korea’s Three Kingdoms. On the other hand, it describes the kind of ruling figure required to pull people beyond their family boundaries and begin to see themselves as part of a larger social and political group.

Foreign Affairs

- Even as Korea’s internal political organization and culture took shape, it was subject to powerful influences from abroad. The *Samguk Yusa* tells that in the 36th year of the reign of King Naemul of Silla, a Japanese ruler sent a ship to Silla in an offer of alliance. The Silla king greeted the magnanimous gesture warmly. The king then sent his own son to Japan to reciprocate.
- Instead of honoring the diplomatic move, the Japanese held the son hostage. Naemul eventually dispatched a talented magistrate named Pak Che-sang to secure his release. Immediately, Pak set off for the seacoast, not even stopping to say goodbye to his family.
- Taking his time, Pak gained the Japanese king’s trust, then slowly got to know the Silla hostage—a once-young man, now almost 40 years old. In time, they went fishing together every day and routinely presented their catch to the king. One foggy morning, Pak at last told the prince that it was time to flee. The latter insisted that Pak go with him, but Pak told him that it was far too dangerous.
- Pak remained and was able to delay discovery of the escape long enough to ensure its success. The prince returned to Silla, while Pak

faced the wrath of the Japanese king. The rest of the story details the tortures that Pak endured before he died. The theme of heartless enemies here enters the tradition of Korean political mythology.

Silla

- The Three Kingdoms of Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla struggled for control for several centuries before Silla, in the mid-7th century, got its finances, its military, and its administration in order and overwhelmed the other two.
- For centuries, Silla had adhered to the traditional animistic cults of its ancestors, even as the other kingdoms had embraced Confucianism and Buddhism. When they ruled the peninsula, though, the Silla merged all three, establishing a syncretic foundation for medieval Korean rule.
- By the 10th century, however, Silla's hold had weakened; peasant uprisings swept the country, and Wang Kon, the son of a merchant, seized control. The new state, called Koryo, became the basis of what we today in the West call Korea.
- In the 13th century, the Mongols arrived. Mongol rule in East Asia was as brief—historically speaking—as it was brutal. By the middle of the 14th century, it had all but collapsed in China and Korea. It was a time of great political confusion across East Asia.
- From that power vacuum emerged a general named Yi Song-gye. Yi was sent to attack Chinese forces to the north but realized that it was an impossible task. Instead, he turned southward and attacked his own leaders, seizing control of the Korean peninsula for himself.

Yi Song-gye's Regime

- The regime Yi Song-gye founded in 1392 lasted until 1910—a total of more than 500 years, almost twice as long as any of the dynasties of imperial China. Yi quickly established tributary relations with the new, dominant power of China and “received” from it the ancient name of Choson for his new kingdom.

- Paying tribute to China, Yi's Korean state of Choson quite proudly spoke of itself as a junior state to the senior China. At other times, Korean scholars described the relationship between an elder and a younger brother. For the next five centuries, the Yi dynasty remained in close contact with China and demonstrated unwavering loyalty to it.
- Yi Song-gye was a capable military leader and swept the state clean of his rivals. Moreover, he was a statesman of unusual ability. He redistributed land to his supporters and started to restructure government.
- By the time he abdicated in 1398, the new regime had a solid foundation, and it was perfected under his son. Effective rule continued with the third king, T'aejong, who ruled from 1400 to 1418, and in turn, under the latter's son Sejong.

Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven

- One of the most fascinating books in the entire Korean tradition is *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven*. The work is generally attributed to King Sejong and was compiled by a team of scholars at his court in the mid-15th century.
- It tells the tale of six dragons who are the ancestors of the new dynasty. As such, the tale echoes themes all of the way back to Tangun Wanggom. It is a story of dynastic "re-founding."
- The early cantos connect the political and military actions of the dynastic founder Yi Song-gye and his ancestral heritage with dragons, heaven, and Chinese sage-kings of early times. By the third canto, Yi Song-gye's feats are specifically equated with the founding of the ancient Chinese state of Zhou 25 centuries earlier.
- The text takes pains to show the talents and virtue of the great founder, even before he began to make a wider name for himself. Many years later, as his glorious and foundational rule comes to a close, the people look back at the whole of his accomplishments.

- *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven* is an elaborate argument for political regeneration, kingly virtue, and the passage to power of a talented new group of leaders. It is political mythology and served to justify the reshaping of an early-modern state under an ancient name.

Suggested Reading

Hwang Pae-gang, *Korean Folk Myths and Legends*.

Lee, et al., eds., *Songs of Flying Dragons*.

———, *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol. 1.

Mintz and Ha Tae-hung, trans., *Samguk Yusa*.

Questions to Consider

1. The battle between Mireuk and Seogka is explained as a contest, and the stakes are high. What are some of the ways in which contests in other societies pit talented mythological figures against one another, and what are the consequences?
2. The *Songs of Flying Dragons* is part of a complex political mythology in early-modern Korea. How does political mythology figure in other societies, even down to the present?

Japanese Tales of Purity and Defilement

Lecture 42

Unlike the mythologies of China and Korea, which abound with images of rivers, ice, and snow, the mythology of Japan is steeped in ocean brine. The islands of Japan differ markedly from the nation's East Asian peers, and the watery world of the Pacific gives its history, religious traditions, and mythology distinctive shapes. In particular, the myth involving Izanagi, Izanami, and Susa-no-wo serves as both an origin story, telling of the birth of islands, and a jarring look at purity and defilement.

Izanagi and Izanami

- The most famous of Japanese origin myths tells of the creative efforts of a pair of deities. Their work creates everything from the islands themselves to further generations of spiritual presences known as *kami*.
- This is where the account given in the *Kojiki*, or “Record of Ancient Matters,” begins. It is a work of myth and history compiled in the early 8th century and is the oldest and still one of the best sources that exists for Japanese mythology.
- Izanagi and Izanami, the two deities, are linchpins of all the tales that follow. Izanagi and Izanami were entrusted by the spirits of heaven (*kami* from earlier mythical generations) with the task of “making firm the drifting land and fashioning it into final form.”
- To help them in their labors, the heavenly spirits gave them a magnificent jeweled spear. Off they went to a place called the Floating Bridge of Heaven. On that bridge, Izanagi and Izanami dipped the spear into the brine below. Vigorously, they churned together the waters beneath them.
- As they lifted the spear from the sea, droplets fell, creating the island of Onogoro (which means “coming into being of its own

accord”). They climbed down from the bridge and went to live on the island they had created.

- There, Izanagi and Izanami became deeply attached to each other and eventually wished to consummate their union in a way that went far beyond the heavenly work of the jeweled spear. Echoing several traditions in East Asia and Oceania, they built a pillar from the earth to the sky. Following a loosely defined ritual, each circled the pillar in opposite directions.
- When they faced each other, Izanami greeted her beloved Izanagi, who was surprised that she had spoken first. Despite what he perceived to be an impropriety, they mated. The fruits of their union were two less-than-developed children.
- Izanagi and Izanami sent the ill-formed children to sea on a small boat, not to be heard from again. They then turned to the heavenly spirits for guidance. The answer came back with certainty: The reason that the children had been deformed was that Izanami had spoken first during the ritual. The two were encouraged to proceed again in a kind of deific “do-over.”
- Once more around the pillar they circled, and Izanagi greeted Izanami. The results were abundant: They produced the eight islands of the Japanese archipelago. But later, while giving birth to a deity associated with fire, Izanami died. In a fit of rage, Izanagi killed this newborn deity, which itself resulted in the birth of many more deities.
- This is where the creative process ends (for the most part) and the endless tales of conflict, purity, and defilement among the assorted deities begin. From here, the story becomes less about joint labors and more about internecine conflict.

After Izanami’s Death

- Izanagi wailed and mourned the death of his beloved Izanami, taken from him during the birth of the fire child. Seeing no other

way to tamp down his mournful ardor, he set out to find her in the penumbral world of the dead, called Yomi.

- At first, Izanagi perceived the underworld as not unlike his own world above—just a bit darker. But in time, the unmitigated blackness sapped his energy and his resolve; he craved the vibrant world aboveground.
- Nonetheless, he persevered, finding Izanami amidst the various shades of darkness. He asked her to accompany him back to the world of the living. Disgusted, she spat food and told Izanagi that she had already partaken of the cuisine of the dead. Now, she was one of “them.”
- In Japan, in mythical times and today, consumption of foodstuffs and identity remain powerful cultural markers. Even everyday meals are marked by elaborate etiquette and time-honored rituals. In light of those traditions, it is not hard to see that, having eaten of the food of the dead, Izanami was already forever tainted.
- Izanagi, however, did not immediately grasp this point. He was disappointed by her answer and coaxed her to reconsider. At length, Izanami agreed to return to the upper world with him but insisted that she needed to rest before the journey. She implored him not to disturb her and—in no uncertain terms—absolutely not to enter her bedchamber under any circumstances.
- Izanagi waited, patiently at first, then fitfully. Finally, in keeping with a long line of mythical tales about curiosity and impatience, Izanagi decided to enter the room.
- Gathering his flowing, thick, black hair, he set the ends alight to make a torch to show his way. There, in the sudden brightness, lay Izanami, whom he had loved in a way that only deities can understand. She did not look like she did in those days above soil, though. Her visage was horridly pocked, and her body was a crawling infestation of maggots, worms, and insects.

- Izanagi shrieked and ran. Izanami, for her part, was ashamed and furious. She gave chase, but Izanagi eventually ducked through the entrance to Yomi, rolled back the boulder that secured it, and listened as Izanami spoke angrily from behind the now-closed barrier.
- Izanami insisted that he return and that if he left her, she would kill 1,000 people every day. Izanagi, now safe, deific, and fully alive in the world above, refused to go back, countering that he would arrange for the births of 1,000 people to match her daily death toll—then top it with 500 more.

Purity and Danger

- Japanese mythology is not for the squeamish and, as many parents and teachers have known throughout the centuries, even more difficult to introduce to the young than many Western myths. One way to think about this is through the lens of “purity and danger,” as anthropologist Mary Douglas has noted. In the land of the dead, purity—good intentions and bereavement—are no match for danger—what Douglas calls the “anti-social” and “polluting” elements of death and defilement.
- Although it is problematic to take direct lessons from mythology—myths are almost always far more complex than stories with clear morals—we would do well to consider again the significance of cleanliness and purification in Japanese life.
- Even in the home, it is unthinkable in Japan to wear one’s outside shoes beyond the entrance hallway. Slippers abound for the purpose of changing from “polluted” outside footwear to clean indoor



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In Japan, people use slippers to avoid bringing “polluted” outside footwear into the home, underlining the significance of cleanliness in Japanese life.

varieties. Many homes even have slippers outside the bathrooms, so that the indoor footwear will not be tainted by proximity to the toilet.

- Such purification etiquette is so common that it is intermeshed with every aspect of Japanese society. This makes it all the more striking that Japanese mythology should deal in such graphic detail with issues of purity and impurity. Far from avoiding images of pollution and defilement, the myths embrace them with a gusto that is starkly different from what we see in China or Korea or even Greece or Rome. It seems clear that these themes represent something fundamental to Japanese culture.

Izanagi's Purification

- After his trip to the land of the dead, Izanagi was utterly defiled. He needed to strip down and cleanse himself from head to toe. All the acts he performed had implications for the world that would follow.
- Almost everything culture creators do carries consequences for the future. Izanagi's major bathing was no exception: It spawned many deities. The most significant deities emerged when Izanagi washed his face.
 - From his left eye emerged Amaterasu, the sun goddess.
 - From his right eye came Tsukuyomi, the moon god.
 - From his nose came Susa-no-wo-no-mikoto, the god of storms and seas.
- Amaterasu, the sun goddess, is the single most important deity in all of Japanese mythology. It can be argued that she is also the most important figure in Japanese history. Tsukuyomi, the moon god, co-ruled the universe with his sister in the early days, though a later altercation with a food goddess was enough to have him expelled from the top tier. Susa-no-wo-no-mikoto was given charge of the seas, but unlike his siblings, he did not take up his duties. This caused evil spirits to flourish and calamities to occur.

- Exasperated, Izanagi asked why Susa-no-wo would not rule his realm. “I want to go to the land of my mother,” he answered. He regarded Izanami as his mother, even though he had emerged from Izanagi’s nostrils.
- Izanagi was furious and immediately ordered Susa-no-wo to go there—to the land of Yomi—expelling him from the world of the living. Susa-no-wo, ostensibly intending to show his *makoto* (sincerity), challenged the sun goddess to an offspring-producing contest.
- The two competed, biting jewels and pendants to bits and spitting them into deity offspring, such as Lady Mist, Lady Consecrated Isle, and Lady Seething Torrent—all deities who would look after seaside shrines. Susa-no-wo claimed to have won, but the decision was somewhat in dispute because he had engendered the supposedly winning progeny (including one called Little Lad of Heaven) from Amaterasu’s own necklace.

Susa-no-wo’s Defilement

- As the *Kojiki* states, Susa-no-wo was “drunk with victory.” In this state, he broke down the ridges of the gods’ sacred rice paddies. He then entered the sacred Hall of the First Fruits, a place where the most important observances of the agricultural cycle took place. He squatted down and defecated in the corner, then committed more defilements.
- Amaterasu could take it no more and went into hiding. The world grew dark, cold, and fretful. Not only was humankind unable to see even the most basic forms of existence all about them, but the deities themselves found it difficult to claw their way about the heavens.
- The *kami* of unbridled joy, Ame-no-Uzume, set to work to coax Amaterasu out of hiding. Dancing naked, she made the other gods clap with delight. Amaterasu peeked outside. A great ray of light followed, marking the dawn of a new era.

- The minor gods pulled the prime god from the shadows, and the world was whole again. They also had the good sense to seal her hiding place, negating the possibility that this kind of world-shaking conduct would happen again. Susa-no-wo was punished and expelled from heaven but later given a reprieve.
- Susa-no-wo plays a significant role with his antics, and they show many of the lines between proper conduct and impropriety. Purity is so significant in Japanese life to this day that Susa-no-wo's very impurity (on numerous occasions) compels listeners to think about the relationship of the two.

Suggested Reading

Heldt, *The Kojiki*.

Packard, *Sons of Heaven*.

Questions to Consider

1. Izanagi and Izanami gave birth to the islands of Japan and, eventually, to the deities in the world above. How was that heavenly world organized? How was conflict resolved, and what does that suggest about the Japanese worldview?
2. Susa-no-wo is often described as a “bad boy” among the gods. In what ways does he contravene social and ritual conventions? Which actions cross the line for his fellow deities, and how do they punish him? What do you think his misbehavior represents?

Gods, Rice, and the Japanese State

Lecture 43

It is worth spending time to understand the society and the state in which Japanese myths developed. Japan's mythology is closely intertwined with both. Rice—the country's staple crop—has an origin myth of its own. Japanese emperors are said to have a direct tie with Amaterasu, the sun goddess. A long and complex myth explains how rule passed from the heavens to human emperors. Even Emperor Akihito, Japan's current emperor, underwent an ascension ceremony with its roots in mythology, showing the intertwining of myth and the state.

Early Japan

- The Japan that emerged slowly into the Common Era was essentially a tribal society, very much like that of early Korea. It was divided into a great number of family groups called *uji*, each under a hereditary chief and worshipping its own god, commonly thought of as its ancestor.
- Japan's first unified political system, the Yamato state, is thought to have been established by roughly 500 B.C.E. It was made up of an elaborate network of great clans and self-consciously focused on creating a Chinese-style state.
- Once the “sun-line” was established, the effect on subsequent history was distinctive. Even powerful clans that might have taken power for themselves, such as the Soga clan that would vie for power in the late 6th century, instead focused on marriage politics and securing connections to the sun-fueled imperial line with their daughters. In time, their grandsons, too, would be emperors.
- The growing strength and institutional complexity of the Yamato state were, in part, the result of continuing contacts with the continent, particularly, at this time, Korea. Among the many elements of continental civilization that came to Japan by way of

Korea was Buddhism. In all likelihood, it drifted to Japan over a rather long period of time, but its official introduction is dated to 552, when the Korean state of Paekche—one of the Three Kingdoms—presented a Buddhist image and scriptures to the Yamato court.

- The new religion was opposed by conservative groups but was embraced by the Soga *uji*, which gained enormous influence at court in the 6th and 7th centuries. They reinvigorated the emperorship and tied it closely to Buddhist ritual and ceremony. From that point on, Buddhism was established in Japanese court life. In the syncretic blending of traditions, Confucian thought, Buddhist thought, and Japan's indigenous Shinto traditions—the ones we have been studying in our myths—merged together over the centuries.

Okuninushi

- The tales from the *Kojiki* move almost imperceptibly from a full-blown mythological world in the heavens down to the actions of deities and culture heroes on earth. It's important to understand that transition in order to see how the heavens and Japan's rulers are linked.
- Ironically enough, Susa-no-wo, the very deity who caused the great heavenly row that temporarily deprived the world of light, figures in the *Kojiki's* transition to the land below. He left the heavens and went down to make his place in a territory called the Land of Billowing Clouds. Once out of the heavens, Susa-no-wo became something of a culture hero himself. He killed a fearsome dragon that had devoured seven of a family's eight daughters. In the dragon's tail, he found a great broadsword, which he presented to Amaterasu, his sister, the sun goddess.
- In the meantime, an enormous group of 80 brothers made their cantankerous way across the land. Each thought to marry the same young woman, Princess Yagami. The only time that they worked well together was when they brought harm to others. They were even cruel to their own family; they made another brother,

Okuninushi, serve as their porter, and he lagged behind, carrying their bags for them.

- The brothers came across a poor little white hare—the Hare of Inaba—that had been stripped of all its fur (the result of a close encounter with a sea beast). The hare was weeping. The brothers, feigning compassion, tricked the hare into further pain. But Okuninushi came along and helped the hare, teaching it how to heal.
- The hare spoke in thanks to Okuninushi and told him that he would be the one to win the princess, not any of his 79 brothers. Sure enough, the princess rejected all the brothers, saying that she would only marry the little brother who had once borne the luggage and cared for a suffering animal.
- The spurned brothers' new task was to kill Okuninushi, and they succeeded—twice. In keeping with a worldwide mythological theme, Okuninushi had to endure multiple deaths in order to complete his quest. In this case, it was his divine mother who brought him back to life, then told him to flee from his brothers.
- Okuninushi left and, in time, found himself at the household of Susa-no-wo—still a deity of formidable skills. Susa-no-wo's daughter was at home that day, and Okuninushi, in spite of the opportunity he had to marry Princess Yagami, fell into love with her. Lady Bold, as she was called, was herself quite taken with Okuninushi. They pledged themselves to each other, and Lady Bold ran to tell her father the news.
- Susa-no-wo proceeded to try to kill Okuninushi with snakes, centipedes, wasps, and fire, but Okuninushi escaped each time. Finally, Okuninushi took matters into his own hands. As Susa-no-wo slept, he carefully tied the great deity's hair to the rafters. By the time Susa-no-wo woke and untangled himself, the couple was far away. Susa-no-wo called after them, telling Okuninushi to sweep his brothers into the rivers.

- Okuninushi followed Susa-no-wo's advice, swept his brothers into the rivers, and established a new kind of leadership under the heavenly realm. It would still take some time before earthly rule was established, but Okuninushi led the way.

The Origins of Rice

- Slowly, the myths in the *Kojiki* begin to emphasize affairs “under heaven.” Even these more earthly themes, however, are often connected to the realm above. One such theme is the growing of that all-important crop rice, which according to the *Kojiki*, is made possible by one of the most formidable acts of the sun goddess to benefit the earth.
- Amaterasu sent down to earth one of her talented grandsons to plant rice. His name, Ninigi-no-mikoto, can be translated as “Ruling Rice Ears of Heaven.” Amaterasu herself gave Ninigi-no-mikoto rice grains that she had taken from the fields of heaven. From these, Ninigi-no-mikoto was able to transform a barren earth of scattered lands into a patterned, flowing, cultured land of rice.
- The story continues as Ninigi-no-mikoto marries a beautiful mortal woman whose name translates as “Lady Downward Shining.” Two sturdy sons followed and—in keeping with the island imagery of Japanese mythology—one focused on the sea and the other on the land. A power struggle eventually ensued, with the land brother, Hoori-no-mikoto, overcoming the sea brother, Hoderi-no-mikoto.
- Hoori's wife, the daughter of a sea deity, announced that she was pregnant. A new chapter was about to begin, but not before one more twist took place. “No matter what you do,” she told Hoori, “please do not look upon me while I give birth. I must give birth in my original form. Don't look.”
- Hoori went up to the birthing hut and peeked in. There, he saw an enormous sea beast with slithering, twisting arms. Panicking, he fled. His wife was humiliated and left for the sea, leaving her child behind.

- The child survived with a special wet nurse who cared for him. He grew into a sturdy young man, eventually married his maternal aunt, and had four sons with her. The youngest of them became Emperor Jimmu—the first emperor of Japan.

Rice in Japan

- Rice affected everyone from farmer to aristocrat (or, in later eras, the learned, sword-wielding samurai). It was sustenance. It was even a powerful form of currency in Japan right up until a few hundred years ago. Samurai were paid in rice allotments, and even great estates were measured by their rice yields. Rice was far more than a mere foodstuff in Japanese mythology and history.



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Rice has long been a staple in Japanese culture and cuisine.

- Farmers and aristocrats took part in something called the Grain Petitioning Festival, described in a passage from a work called the *Engishiki*. The festival spoke to the relationship between heaven above, earth below, and rice, the vital grain that—at least in the mythological world—sustained all life.
- In the capital, the festival involved days of celebration and amusements. Among the rice fields of the provinces, such extended leisure was a practical impossibility, but the intensity of the celebrations was nonetheless anticipated throughout the entire year.
- The event that launched each celebration was the first planting ritual. The emperor would ceremonially plant a row of rice seedlings, while the various court ministers would plant to his right and left. By this act, the emperor connected himself to Amaterasu's rice-planting son, Ninigi-no-mikoto, and through him, to Amaterasu herself.

The Imperial Line and Amaterasu

- Japan's first emperor, Jimmu, grasped the reins of power from the age of the gods and rode his chariot of rulership to imperial greatness—an unbroken line of emperors from 660 B.C.E. to the present. At least, that's what this political mythology claims. In fact, there would be no written records to speak of for at least 1,000 years after the supposed time of Emperor Jimmu.
- A string of 125 emperors is said to have ruled Japan in unbroken succession since the hazy mythistorical days of Jimmu through well-documented historical eras and up to the present day. Every one of them is also said to be a descendant of Amaterasu and a successor of Emperor Jimmu.
- Amaterasu and every emperor are connected—and in a rather baffling and closely guarded way.
 - Among the numerous rituals incumbent upon any emperor to perform, one has always been so hidden and secretive that it is performed only once per reign—and almost no one is allowed to watch. It is called *mitama shizume*, which translates as “rejuvenation of the soul.” It is where Japanese mythology, history, and political life meet.
 - It is said that the emperor lies on a sacred bed that has been placed, in turn, on a sacred seat. A court lady, sometimes two, is responsible for receiving the emperor's (mortal) soul—which is believed to depart temporarily from his body—in order to renew it on the eve of his emperorship. He reappears, rejuvenated, at dawn, ready for his new place in the unbroken line of rulers.
- Upon the death of the Showa emperor (Hirohito, who reigned from 1926 to 1989), ritual specialists at the imperial court began almost two years of preparation for the investiture of Hirohito's son, Akihito, the next emperor. In early November of 1990, the Heisei emperor, Akihito, went to the sacred enclosure and was rejuvenated. Myth, ritual, and the power of the sun goddess persist to this day in Japan.

Suggested Reading

Levy, trans., *The Ten Thousand Leaves*.

McCullough, *Tales of Ise*.

Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the heavenly deities in Japanese mythology start to influence the world below, or what would come to be known as the islands of Japan? How do you interpret this aspect of Japanese myth?
2. As we have seen, the myths of early Japan still have influence in modern Japanese politics. Can you think of ways in which early myths of other societies still influence politics today?

Nature Gods and Tricksters of Polynesia

Lecture 44

Polynesia is a vast concept—so vast that it tests our ability to conceive of it as a single element. Yet the mythological themes that connect the islands of Polynesia are almost palpable. Throughout this massive territory, consistent tales are told in similar ways, from the Big Island of Hawaii down to the cold southern reaches of New Zealand. Instead of skipping around Polynesia, this lecture uses Hawaii as a center of focus. But many of the tales—especially the Maui cycle with which the lecture finishes—are told throughout Polynesia.

Ku and Hina

- Among the most supreme mythological figures in Hawaii are the male-female combination of Ku and Hina. Similar to *yin* and *yang* in the East Asian traditions, one is never all-powerful; the two always blend into each other. Ku is often spoken of as rising, upright; Hina as leaning, facing down. Ku is associated with the rising sun and Hina with its setting. The morning belongs to Ku, and the afternoon to Hina.
- Ku was seen as the foundation of agricultural life, which even in the Hawaiian Islands was central to all existence. The same is true for Hina and the sea. For an island people, the sea figured in countless plans to feed the population. Together, Ku and Hina influence all human sustenance.
- Ku and Hina also oversee many subordinate gods, known as Ku gods. Despite their name, these gods share elements of both Ku and Hina. Some Ku gods look over the domain specifically associated with Hina—fishing and the seas. One of the most famous of them was Ku-ula-kai, the “Ku of Sea Abundance.”
 - Ku-ula-kai lived ostensibly as an ordinary human in East Maui and, under the human name of Kuula, had the power of beckoning fish, large and small. When the chief of a fishing

village called on Kuula and his brother to bring forth more fish, Kuula built an elaborate fish pond.

- A jealous chief, who was capable of growing into a 300-foot eel, surreptitiously slipped into the pond and ate his fill, but in attempting to leave, he found that he could no longer fit through the pond's exit or entrance. Drama ensued when Kuula caught the intruder using delectable roasted coconut meat on a hook, killed him with a rock, and gutted him.
- The dead eel chief's cronies sought revenge. In a series of dramatic tricks and escapes, Kuula set in motion a series of natural disasters that subdued them all.
- In relation to human life and sustenance, this myth centers on vital supplies of fish needed for sustaining life in the islands. Because the story assumes a world beyond the actions of mere humans, though, it also speaks to the larger cosmological theme of Ku gods that explain the details of life on earth.

Lono

- The great god Lono is the power of the seas, as well as of clouds and storms. Lono clearly overlaps Ku and Hina with his role in the seas, but they are not at odds in the myths. Rather, it is as though the older gods function on a different plane than the younger, vibrant force of Lono.
- According to many myths, Lono was responsible for the great Makahiki festival every autumn. Here's the story behind it:
 - Lono sent two of his brothers to earth, where they were to find him a wife. They found the lovely maiden Ka-iki-lani. Down to the islands came Lono on a rainbow, and the maiden became a goddess and his wife.
 - They lived happily together and engaged in surfing off the island shores. But a chief of earth beckoned the goddess with

a love song. Lono heard the song and, in his rage, took out his fury on Ka-iki-lani.

- Before she died at her husband hands, Ka-iki-lani professed her innocence and her abiding love for him. Despondent, Lono realized too late his violent folly. In his pain, he resolved to create a great competition, the Makahiki games, in honor of her. From island to island he would go, wrestling all comers.
- Eventually, Lono decided to leave. The people heaped his great canoe with supplies, and he sailed off alone, leaving with the promise to return but not by canoe. Rather, he would “bring” them (the image is ambiguous) an abundant island full of trees, teeming with coconuts and swarming with pigs and chickens.
- Above all, Lono was recognized by the calendar—a good way of cementing a mythological personage in the rhythms of yearly life. As the god of fertility (from lush fields to families full of children), Lono was celebrated in the Makahiki festival, which involved offerings, competitions, and prayers to him. The festival completed one year and looked with anticipation to another.
- In the winter of 1778–1779, the English explorer Captain James Cook came upon the Makahiki festival. According to one line of thinking, the celebrating Hawaiians saw him as the embodiment of Lono come to shore. This is the basic germ of a complex and sophisticated argument made by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.
 - But another anthropologist, Gananath Obeyesekere, assailed Sahlins for getting it all wrong. From Obeyesekere’s point of view, the Hawaiians could not have been so benighted as to think that the mortal Captain Cook was a god; to suggest such a thing smacked of colonialism.
 - Eventually, Captain Cook, his crew, and the accompanying ships under his command set sail to explore more of the north Pacific. The great ships sailed into the distance and were not

supposed to be seen again, at least not until the next Makahiki festival. But a foremast broke, and the vessels came back.

- Whether the Hawaiians saw Cook as Lono or just a naval commander, his return was distinctly unwelcome. The British sailors had tested the patience of the Hawaiians already, and no one was happy about seeing them again. Tempers simmered, then flared openly. Cook himself made several unwise decisions, including directly confronting the king on February 14, 1779. What happened next is absolutely clear in only one respect: Captain Cook was killed.

Maui the Trickster

- The demigod Maui is one of the most popular characters in all of Polynesian mythology, and he can be found in tales from Hawaii to New Zealand. Maui is often linked to trickster figures around the world. The trickster, a common character in mythology, often combines extraordinary abilities with mischief, immense curiosity, hubris, a cruel streak in some cases, and an utter lack of predictability.
- Maui faced several challenges. He knew that humans needed fire, and only the mud hens had it. One day, the hens were roasting bananas when Maui tracked them down. At length, he caught the smallest of the mud hens, but it refused to divulge the source of the embers. The hen tricked Maui, in turn, with false answers, ranging from taro stalks to various kinds of leaves. At last, the mud hen relented and told him the true source of fire. In this way, Maui garnered fire for all of humanity.
- Maui's next challenge was to address the fact that the sun raced so quickly through the sky that the days were not long enough to finish planting, cultivating, and carrying out other tasks. Maui enlisted the help of his blind grandmother and was able to lasso the sun as it began to come up in the sky. The sun, constrained for the first time, was frightened and agreed to a compromise. The days would be long in summer and shorter in winter.

- Another challenge for Maui was that heaven and earth were too close together, and the sky pressed down on the earth. Realizing this, Maui sought to fortify himself to solve the problem by asking a woman for a drink from her gourd. In this way, he gained the strength to widen the space between heaven and earth. Standing on a peak, he pushed the sky powerfully upward. In the low valleys, the space was enormous, and even though the clouds still hang low over the mountains, they usually do not touch.
- According to his mythology, Maui also brought up the Hawaiian Islands themselves. One version has it that Maui sought to hook the great fish Luehu. This stupendous act would bring the islands together into one large landmass. Maui caught the great fish and engaged in a fierce battle to bring it (and the lands) in. As he struggled, he was distracted. The great fish escaped the hook, leaving the islands of Niihau and Kauai far from Maui and Hawaii. This was Maui's first failure. Although he had pulled them up out of the sea, the islands would always be separated, requiring dangerous journey by canoe to pass among them.

Maui and the Great Eel

- Possibly the most famous of all Maui stories recounts his battle with the great eel. The eel had a very lovely wife who was not a little frustrated by the lack of ardor on the part of her husband.
- Maui's mother encouraged him to pursue the frustrated wife's advances. This can be interpreted in various ways, but most scholars see it as continuous with feats that would make the world a safer place—it was, indeed, a way to counter the power of the big eel.



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One of Maui's most challenging battles was against the great eel, which ended with the world being a safer place thanks to the eel's death.

- The beautiful wife made her advances and was delighted that Maui responded in kind. They lived together for several blissful years as husband and wife—a situation that, although common in Oceanic myths, never seems to last.
- Ultimately, immense battles took place. Finally, Maui succeeded in literally gutting the great eel, and it seemed that he would be a happy and comfortable demigod for a long time to come. The world was a safer and, arguably, better place for his tricky exploits.

Maui and Death

- Maui was troubled that people died and that death was forever. But in order to bring forth a kind of immortality, he would have to deal with death's cause: the ancestral presence of an old goddess named Hine-nui-te-po. Maui knew that he had to kill the old ancestress so that people would live forever.
- His companions on the enterprise were birds of various kinds, and all flew along with Maui as he moved closer to Hine-nui-te-po's fortress. Before proceeding further, Maui spoke to the assembled birds with great seriousness, explaining that he would enter Hine-nui-te-po's body and destroy her from the inside. He warned the birds that this would look silly, but they could not laugh.
- Entering through Hine-nui-te-po's vagina, Maui began his strange form of inner journey. The entry was indeed humorous, even ludicrous, and the birds were surprised by how funny it all looked. As Maui made his way in, they held back their levity, but finally, a little bird named Tiwakawaka could no longer contain itself and chirped a loud note of cheer.
- The old woman woke up, noticed that something was amiss, and bit Maui to bits with her razor-sharp teeth. Within moments, Maui was dead, along with any hopes that human beings would live forever. Henceforth, people would age, die, and return to the soil—and birds have been twittering uncontrollably ever since.

Suggested Reading

Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology*.

Sahlins, *Islands of History*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the ways in which light and dark—Ku and Hina—function in Hawaiian mythology? Do you see any differences between them and the concepts of yin and yang?
2. What conditions had to be met for even the possibility that Captain Cook might be thought to be the god Lono? Can you think of other events in history in which mythology and reality collided in similar ways?

Creation and Misbehavior in Micronesia

Lecture 45

Micronesia—like Polynesia to its east and Melanesia to the south—is a challenging territory to describe, yet its myths have a delightful and distinctive character. Split up into countless tiny islands, its mythological and cultural traditions took different shapes from those in much larger territories, such as China, Korea, and Japan. This lecture describes unique Micronesian origin stories, the impact of colonialism on Micronesian myth, and a trickster who stands out for being more villainous than his counterparts in previous lectures.

The Cosmic Spider

- From the tiny island of Nauru in the Gilbert group of islands comes an origin tale that is at least as interesting as China's Pan Gu and the Cosmic Egg. According to the legend, there was only an ancient sea at the beginning of time, as well as a cosmic spider that floated in the vast spaces above. One day, the spider found a mussel and sought to get inside of it. Using magic and force, the spider determined that it was hollow, pried open its valves, and made his way in.
- It was dark, and the spider couldn't see anything. Yet inside the mussel was an entire world. In this world, the sun and moon had not yet come into being. In time, the spider came upon a snail and nurtured it in hopes that it could help his cause. Much like the Polynesian trickster Maui, the snail was able to raise the sky.
- In the newly created space, the spider set the moon, and a bit of light shone into the mussel world. In that more powerful light, the spider saw a large worm and asked if it could lift the roof even higher. The worm toiled, and the sweat from its labors created a vast sea. But the effort was a success—the worm had lifted the sky high into the heavens. Exhausted, the powerful worm collapsed and died—sacrificed in the creation.

- The spider placed the sun high in the new heavens, and the lower shell became the earth. Thus, our world was established.
- Although there is a great deal of variation in Micronesian myths, we do find many common patterns and characters in these stories. And the common features are striking. For example, different versions of the story of the cosmic spider and the mussel world can be found across Micronesia, and it appears in different forms in Polynesia and Indonesia, as well.

The Recording Problem

- Unlike with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese myths, where we need to rely on the versions of ancient stories recorded by scholars in Chinese, the people who preserved Micronesian myths had a different perspective. Lurking in the background of East Asian mythologies has been the specter of colonialism; even the highly literate and powerful East Asian territories have been occupied at various points.
- From the volcanic islands of Hawaii down to the rocky inclines of New Zealand and over to the scattered islands of Micronesia, Westerners have been a part of the history of Oceanic mythology. Every word we hear about the ancient tales of the Polynesians, Micronesians, Melanesians, and Indonesians (not to mention Australians) was written down in Western languages.
- The recorders were missionaries, anthropologists, and occasionally traders and colonial officials. Unlike China, Korea, and Japan, none of these societies had written languages, and the mythology was made up of a constantly regenerating oral tradition. The implications of this are profound.
- Peoples with fascinating myths but no written traditions were at the mercy of those who could write. Thus, all of these nonliterate societies had their living, vibrant myths written down (and sometimes profoundly altered) by those with the power of writing in their brushes, pens, and typewriters.

- Add to that challenge the fact that even well-meaning missionaries often saw traces of biblical themes in the native myths, and the process becomes even more complicated. Even with the best of intentions, the people doing the recording had their own perspectives and agendas.
- Anthropology is not immune to these issues. For better or worse, early anthropologists did their research at the pleasure (or, at least, the tolerance) of colonial officials, who protected them with bureaucratic and even military force. They lived among missionaries who often knew the local languages better than they did and had, in any case, been there for much longer.
- This is all a troubling part of the tales, but it won't go away. Colonialism is part of the story of mythology.

More Origin Stories

- One set of Micronesian myths focuses on deities crafting human beings out of earthly materials. In the Pelew Islands, two gods shaped the first humans from soil. In the Gilbert group, one story goes that a god set fire to a tree, and the ashes became people. Another tale from the Gilbert group describes the cosmic spider turning stones into humankind.
- All of this variation can be confusing at times. That is the nature of mythology, even under the best of circumstances. In the case of Micronesia, though, it also gives a picture of how fragmented even a single myth can become over the large distances between islands—and even with regard to something as significant as how human beings came to be.
- Yet we can also find remarkable consistency in certain aspects of Micronesian mythology. For example, throughout the Micronesian islands, the first people were originally thought to be immortal.
- One story from the Caroline Islands tells us that, in early times, people would not die forever. Rather, like the moon, they would

rise again. In the same manner as the moon's rising and setting, people would alternate between "life" and "death." But an evil spirit (undefined in the myth) did not agree and decreed that death would be permanent.

- Throughout the Micronesian islands, the stories about how human beings became mortal are as diverse as they are distinctive. In some, people are given "faulty breath." In others, some creature accidentally drops the precious water of continuing immortality. In still others, a vessel containing that precious water is overturned by malevolent figures.

Luk and Olofat

- Although the sky god Luk was the highest deity of all in Micronesian mythology, his constant annoyance was his strange son, Olofat. In many tales, Olofat was the product of Luk and a mortal woman. In a theme that resembles one of the sun goddess tales in Japan, Luk went down to earth to seek the mortal woman who would become Olofat's mother. Luk's goddess-wife followed him, seeking to prevent the affair, but she was foiled by the mortal woman's own mother, who happened to be an octopus.
- Echoing a trickster theme across world mythology, Olofat's birth was unusual. In one version, his mother pulled on the threads of a coconut leaf that had been tied onto a kind of ponytail of her hair. Out came Olofat from her head, and the world was never the same.
- The sky deity Luk was powerful and good in almost every respect. As we saw with the sun goddess in Japan, however, great long-term power does not always take care of the misery that can be created by a bad boy—and Olofat was surely that. Olofat was a precocious lad, and Luk was wary of him from the start. In one version of his birth story, Olofat ran about as soon as he was born, wiping the blood that remained on him onto palm trees as he darted about, which is why they have a reddish tint.

- Luk warned Olofat's mother that the boy should never drink from a small hole in a coconut. Yet one day, Olofat did just that, and through the hole, he spied his father in the skies; he began pestering Luk that he wanted to visit.

Olofat's Climb

- Luk turned Olofat down. Rebuffed in his multiple requests, the enterprising youth stacked coconut shells all of the way to the sky. But things did not go well on high. Olofat sought to join some children in the first of several levels of the sky land. When the children wanted nothing to do with him, Olofat made their once harmless playthings, a group of scorpion fish, grow spines. These pierced the boys' fingers, making them bleed and cry.
- Rising to the second level of the sky, where he found children playing with harmless sharks, Olofat was again shunned. Channeling his spite, he gave the sharks great teeth, which they used to bite the children. From that moment, sharks would always have teeth.
- On the third level, Olofat again was ignored, and this time, he caused stingrays to have stingers. At the fourth level of the heavens, Olofat found construction work underway—by order of his father—on a spirit house. It was to be a gathering place for festivals of the rainy season. Olofat was again disruptive. One quarrel led to another, and the deities, fed up by Olofat's hijinks, determined to do away with him for good.
- They put Olofat in a large fish basket and sank him deep into the sea. Then they went back to their great house. When the basket came back up, it was filled with fish, and Olofat was sitting, laughing, in



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According to one Micronesian myth, before Olofat, sharks did not have teeth and were safe to play with.

an adjacent canoe. Olofat told two workers who were supposed to unload the basket that he would help them.

- Olofat proceeded to toss the men all of the very biggest fish, one by one. What they could not know was that he had secretly removed all of the meat from those fish, even though they appeared to be big and ready for cooking.
- When the catch was brought to Luk, he learned that the attempt to kill Olofat had not succeeded. But the workmen told Luk that his son had taken only the smallest fish and given them the rest for a feast in honor of the deities, perhaps as a goodwill gesture.
- A happy Luk ordered the fish to be prepared, and the sky dignitaries assembled. The story goes that when Olofat returned to the heavens, he was still shunned by the other gods; no one wanted anything to do with him. Protesting his exclusion, he sat apart and refused any of the prepared fish. Instead, he began to eat the supposedly small fish that he had kept for himself.
- Olofat's meal was seemingly endless. When the sky dignitaries looked at their own dishes, they now saw that there were just empty fish skins. Looking angrily (and jealously) at Olofat, they had to content themselves with fruit. The assembled gods thought to kill Olofat with the help of the thunder god, but Olofat countered them adeptly.
- They battled for a long time, but eventually, Luk realized that, for all his sky power, he could not erase the bad boy or even expel him from on high. In the end, he concluded that, because Olofat would not die, he should become the deity of evil and deceitful people.

Suggested Reading

Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology*.

Grimble, *Tungaru Traditions*.

Lessa, *Tales from Ulithi Atoll*.

Questions to Consider

1. Many of Olofat's tricks have a malevolent quality. What are some of the circumstances recounted in the myths that contributed to his actions? What does a malevolent deity suggest about the way Micronesians looked at life?
2. Early missionaries in Micronesia did not document the mythological tradition as assiduously as did later ones (and missionaries in other areas, such as Melanesia). What are the consequences of this for our understanding of Micronesian mythology and culture?

Melanesian Myths of Life and Cannibalism

Lecture 46

Melanesia is made up of the large landmass of New Guinea, as well as clusters of islands ranging from the Admiralty Islands and New Caledonia down to Fiji. Although it appears that the origins of the world did not much interest early Melanesians, they seem passionate about how that early world came to look like today's. This lecture touches on some of the most prominent themes in the rich mythological corpus, particularly focusing on tales of how the Melanesian world was adjusted, as well as the role of anthropology in interpreting these myths.

Qat, Day, and Night

- In one tale from the Bank Islands, the Melanesian culture hero Qat sought to bring the rhythms of day and night to his people. As it was, life was oppressive because the sun always beat down on the land with great intensity. Qat's brothers complained of how unpleasant it all was and begged him to do something about it.
- Qat had heard that way off in the Torres Islands, there was night. He traveled there and exchanged a pig for night. Moreover, a person there helped Qat to train for this new experience—he blackened his eyebrows, taught him how to sleep, and instructed him on the details of making the dawn.
- Back home, Qat had his brothers make beds of coconut fronds, after which he initiated the slow descent of the sun. The brothers were alarmed and cried out to him that the sun was crawling away.
- Qat calmed them, saying that this was the beginning of the nighttime. He then taught them about sleeping. Finally, Qat cut the night with red obsidian so that light would come each day—but always followed by rest-giving darkness.

Qat and Creation

- Qat is featured in another of Melanesia’s fascinating human creation tales. In it, he cut wood from a tough, sinewy, twisting dracaena tree and carved it into six statue-like figures—three male and three female. He hid them for three days, then brought them back out. Dancing before them, Qat beat a drum and coaxed them into their own dance movements, eventually bringing them fully to life.
- But Qat had a malicious and jealous neighbor named Marawa who was not at all pleased to see the joy in Qat’s household. Marawa was determined to create his own people.
- Marawa found a different kind of wood, carved images, and beat a drum, just as Qat had done. His figures came to life. But then things changed. Marawa dug a pit and dumped in the dancing statue-beings, leaving them for seven days. When he dug the figures up again, they were not only dead but also decomposed. Marawa had brought death to the world.
- In Japan, Hawaii, and Micronesia, death comes about because a powerful being declares it to be so. In this myth, however, death is a result of carelessness, at best (a theme in other myths throughout Oceania), or active malice, at worst.

Bronislaw Malinowski

- In 1922, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski published his seminal ethnography, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Malinowski wrote it by living in the Trobriand Islands for four years, rather than simply interviewing islanders in port cities. Anthropology would never be the same after it was published, nor would the study of mythology.
- For decades, *Argonauts* was the gold standard for everyone serious about what native peoples thought and felt. So sturdy was its rigorous structure that anyone writing about culture, society, mythology, and religion sought to emulate it.

- Forty-five years after this seminal work was published, a different, posthumous publication shook anthropology to its foundations. Malinowski's widow published his diaries from those years in the Trobriand Islands, and they hardly resembled his previous work.
- Anthropologists did not know whether to laugh or despair at the alternately titillating and enraged passages in the journal, which Malinowski had entitled—and surely meant to be—*A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. One moment he hankers for the warmth of native embrace; the next, he rages with anger at slights from his neighbors.
- Ever since the diary was published, anthropologists have pondered whether they can ever study other societies without being involved on some level with the very story they are telling (or the myths they are analyzing). This turn toward *reflexivity*—a sense of looking inward while studying others—has been a healthy if disconcerting outcome of the diary's publication.

The Kula Ring

- There was an ancient practice of gift exchange (so it is told) that goes on to this day among the islands off of Papua New Guinea. In this ritual, people stand in a circle and pass ceremonial armbands in one direction while intricate necklaces move in the other.
- In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski described the exchanges of gifts, ritual, decorum, and status surrounding the practice, which he called the Kula Ring. Malinowski had set out to study economic practices among the Trobriand Islanders.
- Malinowski discovered that the process worked as follows: Influential men passed shells, armbands, and necklaces among their peers from other islands. These exchanges were not random. Indeed, they were based on extensive relationships that they and their peers had developed all over the islands.

- In order to participate in the rituals, the men built canoes, stocked them with goods, and went on journeys of exchange. Each receiver accepted a significant gift, but that gift, in turn, compelled him to move on and become a great giver himself.
- The fact that islanders were compelled to take long voyages to other islands means that more than just armbands and necklaces would circulate. So, too, would ideas—often in the form of mythical tales.

To-Kabinana and To-Karvuvu

- Not all social interaction turns out in the positive. One of the most popular features of Melanesian mythology is the brother pair of To-Kabinana and To-Karvuvu. As in many other tales, sibling rivalry makes for legendary social dynamics.
- According to one tale, the two brothers were walking in the fields one day when To-Kabinana said to To-Karvuvu, “Go and check on our mother.” In an odd example of follow-through, To-Karvuvu heated the oven, killed his mother, and roasted her. Returning, To-Kabinana asked if To-Karvuvu had taken good care of their only living parent. “I have roasted her in the oven,” he replied.
- Shocked, To-Kabinana shouted, “Who said to do that? I asked you to check on her.” His brother replied, “Oh, I thought you said to kill her—sorry.” To-Kabinana called his brother a fool and said, “And now our descendants will cook and eat the flesh of humans.” The last line intrigues, but the story ends there.
- In another story of the To brothers, more evil comes to the world from this relational foolishness. One day, To-Kabinana carved an



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To-Kabinana created a large fish to drive smaller ones to shore for humans to catch, but To-Karvuvu ineptly created a shark that would eat both smaller fish and humans.

elaborate fish out of wood and let it float on the ocean. He then made it alive, and the great fish drove smaller fish near shore so that they could be caught. The result was plentiful fish for all.

- Seeing this, To-Karvuvu sought to imitate his brother. He carved a fish and placed it in the water, but it resembled far too closely a great shark; coming to life, To-Karvuvu's creation ate up all the other fish. "You are really a stupid fellow," said his brother. "Now all of our descendants will suffer, since the shark will eat the other fish and errant humans, as well."
- It is not malice at work here. Rather, it is a peculiar kind of dense stupidity on the part of To-Karvuvu. To-Kabinana seems constantly to work for the benefit of humankind. To-Karvuvu seeks to emulate his brother's deeds but fails in even basic understanding of them. The nature of things people experience today is the combined product of the brothers' wisdom and foolishness.

Cannibals

- A tale about cannibals comes from the Sulka tribe on the eastern end of New Britain. Once there was a cannibal and his wife who had eaten scores of people from neighboring villages. This so alarmed the village folk that they stocked their canoes and set out to sea, seeking a safer place to live.
- A woman named Tamu was about to give birth and asked to delay the voyage, but her kinfolk and fellow villagers left anyway. Worse yet, when Tamu desperately pursued them, they beat her back with oars until she gave up and went back to live alone in the deserted village.
- In time, Tamu gave birth to a son. When he had grown somewhat, she would leave him in their home while she tended the all-important garden. One day, she gave him a dracaena plant with which to play. Before long, the plant turned into a boy, and Tamu's son suddenly had a companion. He hid him away and fed him. In time, Tamu came to know the secret and was delighted to have two sons.

- Tamu feared that the cannibals would come and take them, but the boys told her not to fear, that they would take care of any cannibals. They practiced their martial skills and set up slippery barricades around the house.
- As they gained confidence in their skills, Tamu’s sons taunted the cannibals. The cannibals came, slipped on the barricades, fell down, and were killed by the boys. The boys then signaled that the village was safe, and the people returned. The brothers, angered by the ill treatment of their pregnant mother years before, threatened to kill their fellow villagers; in time, they relented, and the society was made whole again.

The Place of Cannibalism

- Westerners seized with a peculiar fascination on the idea that the islands were filled with cannibals. The problem is that cannibalism as we have come to understand it around the world is almost always the ritual consumption of tiny bits of a defeated enemy, not a regular means of nourishment. Such a practice is hardly minor, but it is very different from what is usually conveyed by tales of South Seas cannibalism.
- The images that many early travelers promoted of islanders gnawing away on human thigh bones say more about Western colonial fears than they do about the nature of Oceanic societies. But similar kinds of fears show up in all sorts of Melanesian tales about cannibals. This doesn’t make the Westerners “right” in any serious way. Rather, it speaks to the rumbling fear of the unknown shared by the islanders themselves.
- How, then, can we interpret tales of cannibalism? The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once said (paraphrased in translation to English), “Food is good to think with.” His point was a quite profound statement about the nature of mythology—whether about food or other topics: The story is only part—often a small part—of what is going on in any myth. Myth itself is a way of formulating, experimenting with, and articulating many things

beyond the storyline itself. Could it be that cannibals are good to think with?

- Cannibals might well be a way of discussing not only the unknown forces in the next village but also the way we might treat others in a crisis. It could be that myth is much more like a sonata—we hear it note by note, but it also appears to us as a total experience. Lévi-Strauss thought this way and devoted his life’s work to explaining it.

Suggested Reading

Carrier, ed., *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*.

Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology*, vol. IX of *The Mythology of All Races in Thirteen Volumes*.

Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

———, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*.

Questions to Consider

1. Can anthropology have its own origin myth? If so, how does it work? What kinds of origins does it describe?
2. The To brothers seem consistently to be at odds. How does the sibling dynamic contribute to their actions? Many cultures have sibling myths that explain how the world came to be the way it is. Why do you think that is?

Origins in Indonesia and the Philippines

Lecture 47

In a geographical sense, Indonesia and the Philippines present issues that have more in common with other parts of Asia than the rest of Oceania. These archipelagos include large islands and differ so markedly from Micronesia, for example, as to present an almost completely different environment for the development of cultures and myths—and different these myths are, especially in their focus on animals. This lecture discusses Indonesian and Philippine tricksters; origin myths regarding how humans, animals, fire, and light came to be; and the work of anthropologists in the area.

Human Origin Stories

- One of the most widely circulated myths from Indonesia into the Philippines is the belief that mankind came to be from the center of an egg. The story goes that a bird laid two eggs—one by the mouth of a river and another at its source. From one was born (or hatched) a man and from the other, a woman.
- Bathing at the mouth of the river one day, the man saw a hair that looked remarkably like his own. He determined that someone like him lived upstream; thus, he made his way for many miles along the banks. There, he found a woman, and the two united to populate the islands.
- Another version of the egg myth is found in Borneo, where a great serpent swimming in the primal sea forged and spread a great earthen landmass. After this, a deity came down and discovered seven mud-covered eggs. Picking out two of the eggs, he found a man and a woman inside, both without vivifying air in their bodies. Hurrying to the upper world, he brought back the breath that would give them life.
 - While the serpent was gone, properly asking the heavenly authorities for immortal breath, a degenerate deity blew into the mouths of the man and woman, giving them a faulty kind of breath.

- By the time the special breath arrived, those egg-born beings were already “alive.” Now, however, they and subsequent generations would experience death. Here again, a beautiful possibility was marred by a degenerate being.
- A third egg story, also from Borneo, again mentions two eggs, and in them were found a human pairing. Together, those two made seven sons and seven daughters, all without life. Up to the skies went the husband, imploring his wife to stay quiet in his absence and not to open the curtains, no matter what. Yet she looked out, and the winds came in, giving merely mortal life to all the children. From then on, human beings would die.
- The common features of these myths offer an interesting example of how mythology “works” in its variant forms. They are not so much a set of different stories as overlapping sets of themes that can be configured in various ways and manipulated for dramatic effect by capable storytellers.

Animals, Light, and the Sky

- One of the distinctive traits of Indonesian mythology is that a large number of tales describe animals and their origins. In Borneo, it was said that a series of armless and legless monsters fell from the sky and split into various pieces that became pigs, chickens, and dogs.
- Another story, also from Borneo, has it that the creatures of both the sky (birds) and sea (fish) came from the twigs of a wonder tree. The world’s poisonous animals and reptiles, however, came from the same fearsome deity who breathed both life and death into the earliest humans.
- In the Philippines, there is a detailed story of animal origins that begins with a sky maiden who was cut in two; her parents each kept a half. The father let his half decay, but the mother came down from the sky and took the decayed segments and scattered them about. From her body parts came a large array of animals.

- Once humans and animals occupied the earth, light remained a problem. In many stories from this region, the moon was generated from that same armless and legless monster who engendered the farm animals and dogs. A few other tales tell of the sky maiden becoming the moon. In others, the sun and moon were always just where they have been on any day of human existence.
- In the Indonesian stories, the heavens and the earth were too closely jammed together, and it was difficult for beings to operate under such a low sky-roof. Invoking the gods, the people called upon one of them—who had, up until then, always remained seated—to stand up and lift the sky high above, with arms and shoulders extended.
- A version from the Philippines has it that people often bumped their heads, making them so angry that they threw rocks at the sky. This so irritated the gods that they grudgingly pushed it up to its current position.
- It is almost as though—on one level or another—many Asia-Pacific peoples tended to think of the world as a kind of shell that needed to be pried open. One last push (or pull), and the world was ready for action.

Fire

- In many Indonesian myths, fire is fetched by dutiful animals, who although diligent, have a number of problems in bearing the embers through rain, sea, and deluge.
- One tale describes a terrible flood, after which only two people survived—a brother and a sister who had climbed to a high mountain.
 - Terribly cold, the man sent his dog and a somewhat domesticated deer to a distant island to fetch fire. They swam there, garnered the fire, and started back.
 - But the continuing deluge put out the flames, exasperating the man. Again, the dog and the deer went to the island and

swam back. The deer's flame again was extinguished, but the dog arrived with his embers intact. The man built a fire that warmed the brother-sister pair.

- Another story tells us that fire was available to the first humans, but they clumsily allowed it to be extinguished.
 - Because they did not know how to bring it back, they sent one of their peers to the sky. The deities above said they would give it to him but that he must cover his eyes. They did not mind giving humans fire, they noted, but still did not want humans to know how it was created.
 - This particularly capable young man had eyes in his armpits, though, and as he watched the gods use flint, he came to understand how fire could be made and eventually taught the people of the earth.

Indonesian Tricksters

- Indonesian myths also feature a variety of tricksters who have parallels in such characters as Polynesia's Mai and Micronesia's Olofat. Instead of a humanlike demigod, many Indonesian trickster tales center on a mouse-deer—a tiny and delicate hooved animal known in Indonesia as a *kantjil*.



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The mouse-deer, or *kantjil*, is a common trickster character in Indonesian myths.

- In one *kantjil* tale from Java, the *kantjil* was resting quietly one day when he sensed a tiger approaching.
 - First, the *kantjil* tricked the tiger into eating excrement by saying it was the king's food.
 - Second, he tricked the tiger into battling a poisonous snake by telling him that the snake was the king's girdle.

- Third, he tricked the tiger into losing his tongue by telling him bamboo shoots would play beautiful music if his tongue was between them when the wind blew.
- Finally, he tricked the tiger by telling him a wasps' nest was the king's drum; the tiger tried it and was overcome by wasps.
- These four story elements often appeared together, but there are variants all over Indonesia and the Philippines involving the *kantjil* and giants, as well as crocodiles and elephants. Here, the trickster is no culture hero and has none of the menace of Micronesia's Olofat. He's just a clever survivor who entertains and, perhaps, serves as a role model.
- Mouse-deer tales are most prevalent in the southern and western areas of Indonesia, especially Java, Borneo, and Sumatra. But they are almost unknown in the more northern areas of the Indonesian archipelago and hardly ever seen further afield in the Philippines. There, tricksters tend to come in a paunchy and less nimble guise, as either apes or tortoises.
 - In one such tale, an ape is said to have befriended a heron, and they engaged in delousing one another. The heron went first, picking off the ape's lice. The ape pretended to return the favor but, instead, cruelly plucked off all the heron's feathers.
 - This was not the end, however. The ape met another heron, and this one was determined to punish the ape for plucking the first heron. The new heron tricked the ape into boarding a boat and sailing out to sea with him. Then, the heron pecked a hole in the boat and flew away. The trickster heron had fooled the trickster ape.
 - Certainly, tricksters serve to showcase the value of a nimble mind. But they are not impervious to the machinations of others, and they struggle, at least occasionally, with bad timing and bad luck.

The Rosaldos

- In the late 1960s, a young couple—Michelle and Renato Rosaldo—began a two-year field study of a group of headhunters known as the Ilongot people. They worked closely with their Ilongot hosts, listening, asking questions, and beginning to speak the language. They learned to place in a larger social and cultural context the nearly defunct traditions of headhunting that had fueled a dangerous and misunderstood society for centuries.
- One excerpt from Michelle Rosaldo’s *Knowledge and Passion* addresses the emotional roots of headhunting among the Ilongot. Cultural context can mean the difference between love and war, and it provides us with a cautionary tale about mythological traditions far from our own experiences. Rosaldo wrote: “[One day] I returned from a long hike to learn that [Ilongot] children playing a tape of modern music in our house had discovered a lovely female voice that sang—my friends reported as if they understood the words—in passionate tones, of death and love.”
- On the tape, the children had heard the voice of a young woman whose cadences shook them to the core: Joan Baez, singing a song about a soldier going off to war. At first, Michelle Rosaldo thought that there was something almost universal about the notes, the *tremolo*, and that it might be bound to love and loss all over the world.
- But then, she was confronted with the reactions of her Ilongot friends. They interpreted the song differently. Rosaldo was startled to find, even after several years living in a society of headhunters, that a song of peace in one cultural setting could stir hearts in a very different society to anger and thoughts of headhunting.
- Although the example is dramatic, it reminds us that mythology is not just about story or the moral. Mythology is a way of thinking. If we consider Joan Baez’s music as akin to mythology, we should never assume that cultural themes simply translate easily from society to society. But we should always be aware that our own

cultural assumptions have borders and that studying mythology always requires knowledge not only of how *they* think but of how *we* think, as well.

Suggested Reading

Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597–1972*.

Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology*, vol. IX of *The Mythology of All Races in Thirteen Volumes*.

Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion*.

Swain and Trompf, *The Religions of Oceania*.

Questions to Consider

1. The *kantjil* is often described as a trickster. If Olofat and Maui are also called by that label, how can we interpret their similarities and differences, and what do they suggest about the role of the trickster in mythology?
2. How might a song that sounds peaceful to a Western anthropologist be interpreted as warlike in a different setting? What are the implications of these interpretive differences?

Aboriginal and Colonial Myths of Australia

Lecture 48

The flora and fauna of Australia are unlike almost any other in the world. In turn, Australian mythology is distinctive—from aboriginal tales to even those of the colonial occupiers many centuries later. Although Australia’s mythology shares some attributes with that of greater Oceania, Australia also has many mythological themes that would baffle anyone from Hawaii, New Guinea, Micronesia, or Indonesia. This lecture explores those themes, then closes by discussing disturbing but inevitable colonial mythologies.

Aboriginal Culture

- Australian aboriginal culture is said to be the oldest continuous culture on our planet. Several groups made up Australian society at the time of Western contact in the 16th or early 17th century. The first of these might be considered a northern aboriginal group. In the large region it occupied, there were social systems and languages that echoed many of those in New Guinea. A second cultural grouping could be seen in the southern parts of the continent.
- On the island of Tasmania, another strain of cultures developed. Every indigenous Tasmanian language has been lost, and the last person of purely Tasmanian descent died in the late 19th or early 20th century. Indeed, European colonialism had a devastating impact on this earliest of cultures.
- The sorry colonial story of violence, disease, occupation, and the forced relocation of indigenous Tasmanians into relocation centers has buried a way of life—and a mythology—that could have taught us a great deal about human culture in remote environments.
- Thankfully, we do have archaeology, and we can learn a good deal about the location of settlements on the island and the ways that

small social groups built their shelters. Not much remains of the mythical tradition, but there is a little.

Tasmanian Terms

- A researcher named Ernest Ailred Worms was able to piece together a glimpse of the mythology of what was arguably the oldest society on earth. He published his work in an article entitled “Tasmanian Mythological Terms.”
- Consider, for example, the term *Twilight Man*. This intriguing concept actually refers to the beginning of time and seems to play on concepts of light and dark that are common throughout Oceania. Another term, *Revered Spirit*, gives a sense of the phantom and ghostly qualities of departed spirits, a theme that can be found throughout Australia.
- Finally, among roughly 24 terms that can still be extracted is *maian Ginja*, or “the Killer.” This supernatural being is closely associated with the dead, and similar terms can be found throughout western Australia. Although these words give us just brief glimpses into the world of Tasmanian mythology, there are possible parallels in narratives in southeastern, northern, and western Australia.

Aranda Origins

- The origin myth of the Aranda people, an aboriginal Australian group, begins in a time when the earth was a flat, desolate plain. The land lay in continual semidarkness. There were no plants or animals, and only half-alive beings were scattered across the territory. The earth knew neither life nor death.
- Below the surface, however, lay fully formed but slumbering super-beings. Over time, these super-beings woke from their sleep and came up through the soil. The places where they emerged were immediately charged with sacred power and a vibrant life force.
- Some of these super-beings came out in the form of emus, kangaroos, or lizards. Others were men and women. But here is the

key: The super-beings who were in the form of humans could take on animal (or even plant) characteristics, and the animals could act and think like humans.

- These beings were the Totemic Ancestors, and they began to wander the earth, giving it its distinctive landscape. The once-flat land soon became marked with features that were charged with supernatural meaning. A few of these super-beings began to craft human beings, as well. Other super-beings became the teachers of these earliest humans, showing them how to gather food, make fire, and cook their meals.



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One of the animal forms taken by the Totemic Ancestors was the emu.

- When this profound myth time (sometimes called Dream Time) had led to the creation of a world much like we know today, the super-beings felt enormously weary. Some of them returned to their underground lairs. Others wove their way across the earth until, utterly exhausted, they became trees, rocks, or other objects on the landscape.
- These above-earth sites—the traces of the ancestors—came to be revered by those early humans as spiritual centers and holy sites. Furthermore, the winding routes taken by the Dream Time super-beings are part of a complex idea called *songlines*. Many aboriginal people tell of the way in which everything from brief trips to many-day journeys can be made by tracing the patterned movements of the ancestors along the songlines.
- The Totemic Ancestors also left a kind of identification that human beings would have with the animals whose appearance they took on during the Dream Time. Social groups of humans identified with these animals in some respects but also formed their own marriage

rules and initiation rites around the general idea of who their particular ancestors were.

The Euro-Child

- One story brings some of this complicated material to life. This particular tale tells of a figure who came up out of the soil, interacted with various super-beings and new humans, and then returned to the soil from which he first emerged.
- Somewhat problematically, the character is called a *Euro-child*. The term evidently refers to Europeans, which suggests that the character was developed only after Europeans first arrived in Australia. It seems likely that the Euro character was grafted onto the story, replacing what originally was an ancestor in the form of an emu, a kangaroo, a lizard, or a snake.
- As the story continues, the Euro-child rose out of the ground. He was found by a woman of the lizard clan, who gave him milk to drink, and he grew ever larger. When the Euro-child reached an appropriate age and weight, he ran off and began a series of journeys. In time, the super-being (now a Euro-man) met up with a cluster of iguana women (think of totemic clan identification). He battled them, killed them, and ate them.
- Down the road, he met a man of the wren totem and killed him, too. Later, he arrived at the camp of some rain women. They offered him food, but—frustrated that they would not give in to his sexual demands—he threw the food away, whereupon the rain women killed him. The Euro-man then returned to the ground to sleep again.

The Sky Maiden

- The following aboriginal tale is told in both New Guinea and closely neighboring Queensland. In it, a man who had married a sky maiden and had a son by her became angry with both of them and scolded them.

- His wife and son took wing and flew up to heaven. The man, distraught, wished to make amends and enlisted the help of a bird. The bird flew to the sky country, where the sky mother told it that only if her husband came up to the sky country would they be united again. Only then would she descend back to earth.
- But how could the husband get to the sky? Taking a powerful bow and 100 arrows, he shot one into the sky, where it stuck. The marksman then took a second arrow and shot it directly into the end of the first, where it, too, stuck. He shot arrow after arrow this way, and in the end, his 100 arrows formed a chain that reached the earth. Then, a great banyan root wove its way around the arrow chain, stabilized it, and gave it strength.
- The man and the bird climbed the roots to the sky country. The wife agreed to descend but insisted that the man and bird go first. They started down, but halfway there, the wife took a hatchet and cut the roots, sending the man and bird tumbling to earth while she climbed back to the heavens with her son.

Colonial Myth

- To those of us who have grown accustomed to thinking of missionaries, traders, settlers, and anthropologists patiently taking down native traditions, it may come as a surprise to hear a myth from the colonial occupiers about themselves.
- The Australian song “Waltzing Matilda” shows an Australia that is as fascinating in its postcolonial juncture as it is troubling. As with all riveting mythology, there are terms that sound strange to listeners. Here, in the first two verses, is a collection of unfamiliar words that stem from both aboriginal and English sources:

Once a jolly swagman camped by a *billabong*
 Under the shade of a *coolibah* tree,
 And he sang as he watched and waited till his *billy* boiled:
 “Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”

Down came a *jumbuck* to drink at the *billabong*.
 Up got the *swaggie* and grabbed him with glee.
 And he sang as he stowed that *jumbuck* in his *tucker-bag*:
 “You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

- A translation of the song into American English might read something like this: Resting by a water hole (*billabong*, an aboriginal term), an itinerant trapper (*swaggie*) catches a potentially tasty treat (the *jumbuck*, or sheep) and stuffs it into his bag. It’s clear that the line *You’ll come a-Waltzing Matilda with me* has the message: “I’ll capture you, and it is out of your control.” So far, the song seems to convey what we might imagine life in Australia to be back in the 19th century.

- But then a new element appears. The song continues:

Up rode the *squatter*, mounted on his thoroughbred.
 Down came the troopers, one, two, and three.
 “Whose is that *jumbuck* you’ve got in your tucker bag?
 You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

- The man who claims possession of the land—the *squatter*—sees the ruckus and, with armed help, implies that the *swaggie* is in trouble. Suddenly, we have a world of fledgling outback capitalism backed up with force in the vast territories of Australia.
- But this is mythology, at least of a sort, and it is the *swaggie* who gets a kind of last laugh. With his actions, he enters into the land of myth and legend:

Up got the *swaggie* and jumped into the *billabong*.
 “You’ll never catch me alive,” said he.
 And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that *billabong*:
 “You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

- *And his ghost may be heard* brings the tale of food, force, and presence in the afterlife into full mythical (if colonial) form.

Haunting the *billabong* (on the *squatter's* land) completes the mythic circle.

- As with many other tales, the meaning of “Waltzing Matilda” is obscure, and in fact, several versions of it exist. But as with other myths, its power is not so much in the details as in the way it lets us think through complex processes—such as the struggle for ascendancy in a rough environment.
- The thought of colonialists horning in on Australia’s ancient narrative is undeniably disturbing. It was all but inevitable, though—an outgrowth of two cultures both at odds and learning from each other at the same time. That, in human history, is a very old story.

Suggested Reading

Chatwin, *The Songlines*.

Eliade, *Australian Religions*.

LaFleur, “Bricolage,” on *Round and Square* (www.robert-lafleur.blogspot.com).

Questions to Consider

1. Aboriginal mythology seems especially interested in humanity’s relationship with the sky, including its separation from the earth and the challenge of ascending to it. What do you think is the meaning of this theme?
2. Can colonists have their own myths? How is “Waltzing Matilda” similar to, and different from, many of the tales we have considered in this section of the course?
3. *Bricolage* is a term used to describe the ways in which scattered elements can be patched together to create something new from older elements. How does myth patch together various cultural themes and make them into a new story?

**Great Mythologies of the World:
The Americas**

Great Mythologies of the World: The Americas

Scope:

This section of the course offers a survey of Native American myths and stories, recounting some of them and illustrating the kinds of work they performed for their peoples. The lectures are organized by ecological or geographical region. One deals with the Arctic and northern forest regions, one with the agriculturalists of the eastern woodlands, one with the peoples of the Southeast, one with those of the Plains, one with the Northwest fishermen, one with the hunters of the Southwest, and one with the Pueblo. One lecture is devoted to the most ubiquitous figure in Native American myths, the trickster. The last three lectures in this section of the course offer snapshots of the myths of the Maya and Aztecs from Mesoamerica and the Inca of the Andes region of South America. Each lecture focuses on the types of myth that characterize these nations and the values manifest in them.

In the introductory lecture, we begin with some maize myths from various cultures. We then look at the myths of the water goddess Sedna and one in which Raven makes the world, in order to illustrate the roles of the shaman and culture hero in Inuit stories. Then, a cycle of myths about Nanabushu, the Ojibwa culture hero and trickster, illustrates the vision quest and the relationship between humans and animals in the mythic age. We will see how in a culture always threatened by hunger, the Ojibwa reconciled themselves to the killing of animals, despite the fact that they are our brothers and sisters.

The lecture on the eastern forest dwellers uses a Huron creation myth and a series of stories about the making of the Iroquois Federation to show that these peoples saw the world and human nature as a mix of good and evil and to illustrate their efforts to suppress or co-opt the evil while bringing forth the good. We will briefly consider the condolence ritual of the Iroquois for the part it plays in this effort.

The myths of the Southeastern mound-builders illustrate a series of Native American values: sun worship and the sacred fire, the three-tiered cosmos and the nature of the creatures who inhabit the lowest tier, the vision quest,

culture heroes, and sweat lodges. The Creek emergence-migration myth incorporates all these values.

The buffalo's special relation to the Plains peoples is illustrated by the Arikara myth of the buffalo people. Medicine bundles are highlighted in the lecture and in the Lakota story of White Buffalo Woman. We also look at a Crow myth, in which Coyote makes the world, and a Blackfoot one, in which he introduces death. A Lakota story, "Double-Face Tricks the Girl," shows how important interdependence is for family and clan and what happens when it is set aside. The trickster, these people believed, was at the heart of everything; thus, there is much that is haphazard in the world, making vigilance, hard work, and taking care of one another essential.

A Wishram myth illustrates the Northwest people's understanding of the close relations between humans and animals and the importance of the vision quest. A Nez Percé myth about Coyote visiting the land of the dead shows how death comes into the world. Then, two extended examples from the Clackamas Chinook—"Awl and Her Son's Son" and "Seal and Her Brother"—give psychologically complex scenes from the intimate domestic life of these Native Americans. They also give us a chance to learn something about how to read Native American stories.

The next lecture takes an extended look at the grand Navajo emergence creation myth. At its heart is the Navajo value of *hózhó*, a combination of beauty, balance, and harmony. The translator of the myth argues that sexual conflict is the central metaphor in it for losing *hózhó* and sexual harmony, the central metaphor for achieving it. Because the middle of the myth also has a cycle of Coyote stories, we will get a preview of our upcoming lecture on tricksters.

Zuni and Hopi emergence myths are used in the next lecture to illustrate how these peoples understood the growth and achievement of maturity by humankind. We then explore the Hopi migration myth to understand some Hopi values: the need for hard work and an austere life; the necessity of showing gratitude to the gods (by offering them prayer sticks); the constant threat from *powakas*, or witches; and the commitment to a communal—vis-à-vis an individual—way of life. We also take a brief look at the kachinas.

An Okanagan Coyote myth introduces the trickster in the next lecture. He is then defined, particularly in his surprising dual role of trickster and culture hero, and we review examples of these roles in past lectures involving Raven's nephew, Nanbushu, Coyote, Iktomi the Spider, and Masauwu. All of them do things for personal reasons, without calculating the consequences for those who live in the world. We will discuss their close association with animals, as well their status as loners, both socially and ethically. We then review a Haido story about Raven stealing the sun to see how a trickster can function as a culture hero. We conclude by considering several explanations for the kind of work trickster myths do for Native Americans.

The lecture on the Maya focuses on the *Popol Vuh*, the “American Bible.” In it, the attempted creation of humans is interrupted by an adventure story of twin boys who kill terrestrial monsters and battle the lords of the dead. Then, the creation of humans is completed. Along the way, we will note some of the many levels of meaning in this sweeping myth cycle.

It has been said that the history of the conquest of Mexico is the enactment of the myth of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. Thus, in the lecture on Aztec myths, we will look at the mythic careers of these two gods, from the creation to the Spanish Conquest, showing the competing values the two divine beings represent in Aztec culture.

Finally, we will see in Inca myths how other cultures' gods and stories can be co-opted and incorporated into a new one. As the Incas emerged as the dominant people in what became the greatest empire in the pre-Columbian Americas, they took over other people's creation and origin myths and fitted them into their own master narrative, in which they had been created (or at least selected) by the gods to rule over subject peoples and bring civilization to them. Here, we see a political use of myths—as justification for dominance over other people.

We end by reminding ourselves of the many ways in which myths were used by Native Americans, some of the values carried by them, and the way they still speak to us. ■

Nature in Native American Myth

Lecture 49

Native American mythology comprises a vast collection of stories told by hundreds of peoples spread across North, Central, and South America over thousands of years. Because these diverse peoples occupied different environmental niches, they developed distinctive cultures, each of which told stories in its own way. For example, the myths of the Hopi, who were based in the American Southwest, were very different from those of the Huron, who lived along the St. Lawrence River. At the same time, however, the stories fulfill the purpose of all myths: They address fundamental questions about how humans came into being, the nature of the world, the purpose of ritual and ceremony, and our relationship to a higher power.

Animism and the Sacredness of Nature

- Certain themes and values are found in all Native American mythology. One theme is the concept of the sacredness of nature. Native American traditions are characterized by *animism*, which means that everything is permeated by spiritual beings or spirits—everything is alive and sacred. The purpose of shamans in Native American culture is to maintain a connection with the spirit world on behalf of people.
- In his book *Coyote Was Going There*, Jarold Ramsey notes that animistic piety was more than a respect for the sacredness of the natural world; it was a matter of survival. To express the reverential view of the Native Americans, Ramsey quotes a line from a William Stafford poem, “The Well Rising”: “I place my feet with care in such a world.”

Cherokee Maize Myth

- The Cherokee, a people who settled mainly in the American Southeast, tell a story about how humans came to cultivate their most significant food: maize.

- When the world was still new, a hunter and his wife lived with their son. The father's name was Kana'ti ("Lucky Hunter"); the mother was named Selu ("Corn"). Every day, Kana'ti came home with game, and every day, Selu washed the blood from the game in a river near their house. Their son went down to play by the river each day and reported to his parents that a boy came out of the river and played with him. Kana'ti and Selu suspected that this boy from the river was no ordinary boy. But they had no way of knowing that he would change their lives—and the lives of all humanity—forever.
- One day, the river boy became curious about why Kana'ti was so successful at bringing home game every day, and he convinced the couple's son to follow Kana'ti into the woods. The two boys saw Kana'ti lift a huge rock, and out of a cave came a large buck, which Kana'ti shot with an arrow. A day or two later, the boys tried it themselves, but all the game in the world came rushing out and scattered into the woods.
- Kana'ti observed that until that time, there had always been plenty to eat, but from that point on, animals would be dispersed in the woods and would need to be hunted down. In the future, survival would be more difficult for everyone.
- There was no game that day for Selu to prepare. The boys were still hungry, however, and asked for something to eat. Selu said that she would go to the



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In the Cherokee story, maize is a kind of compensation for the scarcity of game animals; when animal food becomes difficult to find, the need for maize becomes urgent.

storeroom to get some corn and beans. When she was there, she rubbed her stomach until her basket was half full of corn, and she rubbed her armpits to fill it up the rest of the way with beans. The boys decided that she must be a witch and plotted to kill her.

- Selu told them that when she was dead, they should clear a plot of land in front of the house, then drag her body seven times around the plot and seven times across it. Wherever her blood fell, she said, corn would spring up. By morning, there was a field of ripe corn in front of the house.

Native American Cosmogony

- Although such stories as that explaining the origin of maize are abundant in Native American myths, there are far fewer cosmogonic tales—those that tell the story of creation and explore the nature of deities.
- In the Native American cosmogony, typically, there is a Great Spirit, who made the world, and a host of second-tier powers, such as the sun, wind, rain, stars, and animal spirits. The Great Spirit is revered, but it is usually too remote to have a distinct personality, unlike Zeus or the Babylonian Marduk.
- The second-tier powers arrange the world, and they are usually the ones who create humans. The Great Spirit may reign over creation, but the particular features of the world are designed by lesser powers and human heroes—and even by tricksters, a fascinating category of characters that we will explore later.
- There are two kinds of Native American creation stories. The first type, known as the *earth-diver myth*, starts with a primordial sea into which various creatures dive to bring up bits of mud, forming the earth. In the *emergence myth*, a number of worlds are stacked on top of one another beneath the surface of the earth. In this type of story, creatures living in the bottom world climb through all the upper worlds, becoming more humanlike as they ascend from one world to the next and finally emerging into the world we inhabit.

Penobscot Maize Myth

- Like the Cherokee, the Penobscot, who settled in Maine, also had a maize myth. In the Penobscot myth, First Mother and First Father (second-tier powers) lived on earth with their family, which was growing so large that game was becoming scarce. Everyone was hungry all the time.
- First Mother told her husband that the only solution was to kill her, then have their sons drag her corpse over a cleared patch of earth until her flesh had been completely torn from her bones. Then, they should bury her bones in the center of the clearing and go away for seven months. When they returned, there would be an answer to the food shortage.
- When the family returned seven months later, the ground was covered with maize. Following the mother's instructions, the family kept some back for seed, so that she could be renewed every year. As in the Cherokee story, maize was a kind of compensation for the scarcity of game animals.

Migration from Siberia

- Native Americans had to invent agriculture for themselves. The first humans entered the North America continent somewhere between 12,000 and 60,000 years ago. They came from Siberia across the Bering Strait to Alaska during the last ice age, when so much water was trapped in ice that a land bridge was exposed between the two continents.
- These people from Siberia were nomadic hunters who may have followed game to reach North America. They most likely traveled in family groups or clans, not as part of a mass migration. Such agriculture as they had was rudimentary—not much beyond gathering wild plants. Once in North America, they traveled south, mostly on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, and spread out from there. For millions of years, animals and plants had had the entire continent to themselves; thus, there were ample food supplies.

- By about 10,000 years ago, the nomadic hunters had moved from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains eastward across the Great Plains all the way to the Atlantic seaboard. There's a possibility that the peoples who settled the American Southeast and Southwest had actually migrated farther south, then reversed direction. The Cherokee, for example, may have come back north from Mexico.

Diversity of Mythology and Culture

- What we know about these migration patterns is still largely conjectural, based on language affinities, cultural influences, and archaeological finds. Whatever the details of these vast migrations, Native Americans wound up in environmentally very different places, and their cultures developed as they adapted.
- The Eskimos, or Inuit, stayed in the Arctic regions. North of the Great Lakes, forest tribes lived as hunters, tracking caribou, deer, and small animals. In the northeast part of the United States and the southeast of Canada, various peoples settled in semi-permanent villages based on agriculture, which they may have learned from peoples south of them. When the Europeans arrived, these peoples maintained apple orchards and cultivated pumpkins, beans, and squash in addition to maize.
- To the south, the Cherokee, Natchez, and Creek had an advanced agriculture, which they seem to have learned from peoples south of them. In the central Plains, people lived in earth houses over the winter. In summer, they lived in tepees, which they could readily disassemble while following the buffalo herds.
- In the Pacific Northwest, people lived on fish, seal, and sea lion. They still collected berries, nuts, and small plants, but they never developed agriculture. In what is now Utah and Colorado, there was a highly developed agricultural economy, which was devastated in the 12th and 13th centuries by drought. That same drought hit the Plains peoples, who began raiding the settled villages and drove their inhabitants onto fortified pueblos on top of defensible

mesas. The mesa dwellers were quite possibly from Mesoamerica; although they spoke a variety of languages, they created a common culture and a sophisticated body of myth.

- When the Europeans arrived, there was a wide range of cultures among Native Americans—and a corresponding diversity of myth.

A Fossilized Paw Print

- Native American mythology explained to people who they were, how they came to be, and how they should live in the world and interact with one another. And because these myths survived so long in the oral tradition, there are many versions of each story. There are no definitive text versions.
- The text versions we have are those that happened to be collected and recorded by salvage anthropologists. However, we know that if five ethnographers record the same story from five separate speakers in five different situations, we will have five different versions of the story.
- When Paul G. Zolbrod published his version of *Diné bahane'*, the Navajo creation story, he reminded his readers that what he was presenting was one telling of a great story. What's more, it was a version that was printed, not recounted. Zolbrod observed that it was like a fossilized paw print of a prehistoric creature—giving us an idea of the nature of the animal but nothing of the animal itself.

Suggested Reading

Burland, Nicholson, and Osborne, *Mythology of the Americas*, “North American Indian Mythology.”

Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*.

Questions to Consider

1. Kroeber says that the release of game animals from the cave is a fall story in that the good old days of easy hunting are gone forever. But other Native Americans have the same story in which someone hoards all the animals that then need to be freed by a culture hero. What kind of values would that version of the myth have?
2. What do we miss when we read a myth as opposed to hearing it performed or recited? Is it like the difference between reading a play and seeing it? Or, in the case of Native American myths, is the difference greater or, at least, different? How so?

Inuit and Northern Forest Mythology

Lecture 50

In this lecture, we will examine the myths of Native American peoples located north of the Great Lakes in North America, specifically those of the Inuit and Ojibwa. We'll also look at two of the most significant characters in Native American myth: the shaman and the culture hero. As most of us know, a shaman is someone who demonstrates, usually around the time of puberty, a susceptibility to trances, in which his or her spirit leaves the body and is said to make contact with spirits of nature or ancestor spirits. A culture hero is a mythological figure who must finish shaping and completing the earth after its initial creation to make it ready for human life.

Inuit Shamans

- *Inuit* means “the people.” The term *Eskimos* has been used to describe the Inuit, but that is actually a pejorative name given them by other tribes; *Eskimos* means “those who eat their food raw.” Today, the Inuit extend across the Arctic regions—in Alaska, Greenland, northern Canada, and Siberia.
- For the Inuit, food and basic survival against animals and the elements were major concerns. They had no pantheon of gods and goddesses and no formal religion. Their only religious gatherings were impromptu séances inspired by the *angakok*, or shaman.
- A shaman is someone who is believed to be capable of leaving his body and making contact with spirits of nature or ancestors. He also can visit—in spirit—the land of the dead. Most shamans are male, although there are women shamans, as well.
- An Inuit shaman would signal with a drum when he was being contacted or taken over by spirits, and people would gather to watch him fall into a trance, listening for what he said when entirely possessed. Afterward, when he had returned to his own body, he

would chant or tell the people what he had learned. In this way, the Inuit kept in contact with the spirit world.

Inuit Earth Mother

- One of most powerful nature spirits that the Inuit shamans contacted was the old woman who lived under the sea. In some regions, she was called Sedna. It's been said that Sedna may be the closest the Inuit had to a real deity. She's a kind of earth mother—or, in this case, a sea mother. She is sometimes also the queen of the dead.
- Sedna was betrothed to a beautiful young man who was, in fact, a seabird in disguise. When her father came to visit Sedna at her husband's village, he found her deeply unhappy; he killed her husband and took Sedna in his kayak back out to sea.
- But when the other seabirds discovered that her husband had been killed, they flew after the father and daughter, and their great wings whipped the waves into a huge storm. The father was terrified, but he thought that if he sacrificed his daughter to them, they would allow him to escape. He threw Sedna overboard.
- But Sedna swam back to the kayak and grabbed the edge of it with her fingers. By now, her father was crazed with fear, and as the seabirds flew closer, he cut off Sedna's fingers. As the fingers fell into the water, they became whales, seals, and walruses.
- Sedna survived, but in revenge, she arranged for her dogs to eat her father's hands and feet while he was asleep. In the chaos that ensued, a massive earthquake opened the ground beneath them, and father and daughter tumbled down into the underworld. There, Sedna became the ruler of the living and the dead from the bottom of the sea.
- Without fingers, Sedna was unable to comb her hair, which sometimes got tangled; when that happened, she grew angry and held her sea creatures back from humans. To placate her, the shaman had to go into a trance to visit her. If he was successful, the people would again find sea creatures to kill and eat.

An Inuit Myth of Raven

- Another significant character in Native American myths is the culture hero.
 - Most Native American myths are not about the beginnings of creation but about what happens next: how humans acquired knowledge, skills, and tools; how plants could be used for medicines; how to make pottery and grow maize; and the proper rites and ceremonies to honor the gods.



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The Sedna story probably reflects something of the dangerous environment in which the Inuit lived; because their chief deity had been savagely mistreated, she could be hostile and needed frequent appeasement.

- The culture heroes may be deities themselves or semi-divine deputies of the gods. Sometimes, they are humans who have acquired special powers from the gods and nature. Often, they make trips to the sky or to the underworld to gather knowledge.
- A culture hero for the Inuit is called Raven, a figure that can shift between being a human and a bird. After he meets a man who had emerged from the pod of a beach pea plant, Raven creates a woman for the man. Raven also provides the man berries to eat, then makes animals out of clay. Raven works with his hands as a man to make the figures, then changes back to a bird to wave his wings over them until they come to life.
- By now, three more men have emerged from the same beach pea plant, and Raven takes them off in different directions, teaching all of them and making wives for them, as well. At this point, people have multiplied so fast on earth that Raven is afraid they will consume all the animals; thus, he creates a giant reindeer to kill and eat some of the humans. As further ecological protection,

Raven takes the sun out of the sky so that people must live in complete darkness.

- Raven's brother impregnates Raven's wife, and Raven Boy is born. As a small child, Raven Boy begs to be allowed to play with the sun, which Raven keeps in his house. Raven eventually allows Raven Boy to play with it, and using the techniques of the trickster, Raven Boy steals the sun and returns it to the sky.

An Ojibwa Myth of Nanabushu

- The Ojibwa, hunters of the northern forests who lived south of the Inuit, recount a story that offers some valuable insights into the complex relationship between humans and animals. The Ojibwa span from Michigan to Montana and from Quebec to Saskatchewan. This story concerns their culture hero, Nanabushu.
- Nanabushu is also a trickster, and there are as many stories about him in that role as there are about him as culture hero. The two roles—trickster and culture hero—often coincide in Native American myths.
- Nanabushu is born as part of a set of twins or triplets; his mother had been impregnated by the wind. Early on, Nanabushu turns himself into a rabbit and steals fire by dancing so close to the fire that he lights his own fur, then runs blazing home, like a comet—demonstrating some of his trickster skills. In this way, he gives fire to his people.
- When he discovers that his brothers had killed their mother, Nanabushu sets out to avenge her. As his younger brother is dying, he tells Nanabushu that by killing him, Nanabushu has brought death into the world.
- Nanabushu spends one winter traveling with a wolf pack and makes friends with another wolf, who is killed by enemies. Again, Nanabushu sets out to avenge the death. He is told not to shoot directly at the enemy leader but at his shadow. Nanabushu, however, in typical trickster fashion, forgets the instruction and shoots his first arrow directly at the creature—only wounding him.

- Nanabushu is at last successful at killing the enemy leader, and the leader's people respond by flooding the entire earth. When the water finally stops rising, Nanabushu rescues a few animals and has them dive for pieces of the old earth under the water. All die in the attempt, but a muskrat makes it back up with a bit of earth before he dies. Nanabushu brings the animals back to life, then uses the bit of the muskrat's mud to create a new earth.
- Nanabushu's story is a fairly standard earth-diver creation myth.
 - Variations of this tale are found all over North America, except for Arizona and New Mexico. Here, it is not the story of the first creation but a reboot after a universal flood.
 - The unlikelihood of even imagining such a universal flood, let alone actually experiencing it, in the middle of a large continent such as North America suggests that this story came originally from an Asian coastal area. It must have spread westward from there to Siberia and come across the Bering Strait with the first continental immigrants.

Gifts of the Culture Hero

- Having created a new earth, Nanabushu then does more culture hero work. He names all the animals, birds, and fish. He decides the length of time for the moon cycle, and he tames the winds to make them serviceable to humans. When he's finished, he goes hunting.
- Christopher Vecsey, in his book *Imagine Ourselves Richly*, notes how pervasive death is in the Nanabushu cycle. However, every death brings a benefit to the people who will inherit the planet.
- What the Nanabushu myth tells us, says Vecsey, is that the Ojibwa thought of death as necessary for the continuation of life. The Ojibwa, after all, were a people who lived by hunting, and a hunting culture must believe that the death of animals is necessary for the continued life of people. That, observes Vecsey, is the point of this myth. When Nanabushu kills the enemy leader, he's not only avenging the death of his friend but also asserting the right of

hunters to kill what they need, to take from the animal kingdom enough to guarantee the continuation of life.

- The old bond with animals has been changed. It will never be as close again as it once was before Nanabushu. Although animals and humans still have a covenant, now humans have the upper hand, which they absolutely had to have to survive the long, cold winters in the sub-Arctic. And death—here, specifically, the death of animals—is acknowledged as a prerequisite of human life.

Suggested Reading

Jones, *Ojibwa Texts*.

Rosenberg, *World Mythology*.

Van Over, *Sun Songs*.

Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it tell us about the Inuit culture that their principal deity should be Sedna?
2. Native American myths give different answers to the question of how and why death is introduced to life on earth. What is the Ojibwa explanation in this cycle of myths? What basic understanding of life does this explanation embody, according to Christopher Vecsey?

Tales and Rituals of the Iroquois League

Lecture 51

In this lecture, we'll study the myths of the Native Americans living in the region from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River and from north of the Great Lakes to the northern borders of Kentucky and North Carolina. These forest dwellers may have been descendants of the peoples known as the Mound Builders, who lived south of them on the Mississippi River—based on the fact that the two groups share a variety of myths. We will focus on the Iroquois, who lived in New York and Quebec and were involved in the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Forest Dwellers

- The northeastern forest dwellers were the first native peoples Europeans encountered on the shores of New England. These Native Americans had a mixed economy at the time; they fished and hunted, but they also cultivated maize, beans, and squash—the “three sisters” of North American agriculture.
- Typically, these forest dwellers lived in longhouses, made of a row of saplings bent into arches. The longhouse was divided into family apartments, each with its own fire and smoke hole. A typical longhouse might be 100 feet long, and a village might have three or four of them. Although 68 languages were spoken in the region of the forest dwellers, the main one was Iroquoian.
- The Iroquois Confederacy—a union of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk—was formed in the 16th century, nominally as a



Northeastern Native Americans typically lived in longhouses inside a stockade set in their fields.

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protection against neighboring tribes. Its ultimate goal, however, was to stop member peoples from fighting among themselves and to unite them by creating common ceremonies and rituals. Their splendidly ambitious but impossible dream was to bring all the nations of North America into the confederation.

Deganawida the Peacemaker

- The stories about the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy deal with the historical past rather than a mythic one. Still, the characters in these myths are as “mythical” as Nanabushu, and they play the same roles as culture heroes. The outline of the myth recounted here was originally compiled by Christopher Vecsey in his book *Imagine Ourselves Richly*.
- Two twins of magical birth were constantly struggling with each other. The good twin put the world in order, established principles for humans to follow, and set peoples in their allotted places. But over time, there were disagreements, and the individual nations went their separate ways, descending into the horrors of constant warfare, infanticide, and cannibalism.
- Into this Hobbesian world, a culture hero was born to a virgin living among the Huron. Because the boy, named Deganawida, had no father, he was despised by his fellow villagers, and he left home, taking a canoe across Lake Ontario.
- As he traveled, Deganawida told the warring nations that they had forgotten the Creator’s ways and that he had been sent to establish a great peace. In his wanderings, Deganawida met Hiawatha. Hiawatha had tried unsuccessfully to reason with Tadadaho, an Onondaga chief and a cruel tyrant. Deganawida and Hiawatha then joined forces.
- By this point, several peoples had been won over to Deganawida’s vision, and they ventured to meet with Tadadaho—singing a peace hymn as they approached him. They won Tadadaho over and offered him the title of main chief of the new league, with the

Onondaga as the leading people. The Iroquois Confederacy was about to become a reality.

- Deganawida's great peace had arrived, at least for these five nations. Deganawida then mysteriously disappeared. Like Moses in the Old Testament, he was destined not to reach the Promised Land himself. Deganawida refused to be made one of the 50 chiefs of the new Iroquois Confederacy, leaving a legacy of peace and bearing the simple title "Peacemaker."

An Allegory for the Iroquois Confederacy

- One episode in this long and complex myth is a marvelous allegory for the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy and the meaning of its alliance.
- One day, Deganawida came to the house of a cannibal. He climbed up to the smoke hole on the roof of the house and peered inside, seeing human flesh stacked up. The cannibal came back with water and put it in a pot. When the cannibal looked in the pot, he saw in it the reflection of a face. (We're not sure at this point whether the face he saw in the pot was his own or that of Deganawida.) At that moment, it occurred to the cannibal that he was betraying the goodness in that face by eating human flesh. He picked up the pot, carried it to the river, and dumped its contents in a hole near an uprooted tree.
- Karl Kroeber reprints this story in his book *Artistry in Native American Myths*. He notes that the detail of the vessel's contents being dumped in a hole made by an uprooted tree would have reminded the Iroquois of the creation myth, in which a woman falls through a hole in the sky made by an uprooted tree.
- Kroeber also observes that when the cannibal sees the face in the pot, he thinks it is his own, but it is more likely Deganawida's. He is seeing the face of the peacemaker and spiritual leader, the very antithesis of a cannibal. His perception is valid insofar as it allows him to see a potential in himself that hasn't yet been realized. The cannibal recognizes himself as a man, not a monster.

- Christopher Vecsey interprets the fable by noting that the Iroquois believed that every human being has two aspects, and everyone is capable of both good and evil. That may be why so many creation stories feature a set of twins, one good and one evil.
- The entire Iroquois Confederacy myth illustrates the idea that human nature is potentially good, but the goodness must be separated out of the evil. The myth involves incorporating one's adversary. The good twin does not undo or destroy what his brother has made; he merely modifies it, making it into something better—something good. In the confederacy myth itself, the Onondaga chief Tadadaho is a monstrous tyrant. But once his better nature has been brought out, he becomes head chief of the Iroquois Confederacy and is incorporated into the new order.

Iroquois Condolence Ritual

- A key goal of the Iroquois Confederacy was to expand kinship groups so that everyone in all five nations could see the others as family. The five nations were divided into two *moieties*, or groups. Women had to choose husbands “across the fire,” that is, from the other moiety—thereby integrating the two sides.
- When a chief died, the condolence ritual was performed, which ended with men dancing with women from the other moiety. The point is that we are all kin to each other, and each of us is touched by someone else's loss and sorrow.
- Before Deganawida arrived with his message of the great peace, death not only meant the loss of a loved one, but it also threatened the entire social fabric because grieving individuals dropped out of community life, plotted revenge, or considered suicide. The condolence ritual was designed to prevent an event of death from disrupting the bonds that held the nations together.
- The ritual began with a roll call of the founders, whose names were carried by all successive chiefs. The moieties were then seated on opposite sides of the fire. The moiety that had lost a chief welcomed

the other one, and the visiting moiety comforted the grieving one. After words of comfort, the council fire was kindled and a hymn of condolence sung.

- The entire ritual was designed to bring mourners back from profound grief into participation in life—exactly what the reception in the church basement after burial at the cemetery accomplishes in modern Christian funerals. Death must be driven out of the community—disarmed so that people can go on with their lives. Such a ritual also forestalls a fixation on death. Many Native American myths prescribe the proper length and nature of mourning for someone who has died.
- In *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature*, John Bierhorst calls the condolence ritual one of the great pieces of Native American literature, and he asserts that its purpose was to defeat the cult of death.

A State, Not a Cosmos

- The Iroquois Confederacy was not a Native American United Nations. Its ambitions were impossibly lofty, aiming at the inclusion of all North American peoples. What's more, despite its strong efforts to preserve peace among its members, the confederacy remained conventionally warlike against other peoples, especially those who resisted incorporation.
- Treatment of the neighboring Huron is a case in point. The Huron refused to join the Iroquois Confederacy, in part because by the time they were invited, half their people were living in a Jesuit compound and were at least nominally Roman Catholic. The delegation sent to the Iroquois to report the refusal was ambushed by the Iroquois, and the end result was the virtual elimination of the Huron. Other traditional enemies of the Iroquois were treated in similar fashion.
- Still, if we consider the Iroquois Confederacy only in terms of its own internal relationships, the union had some remarkable aspects:

- The myth of the Iroquois Confederacy is entirely about this world, about a civil society based on universal principles, natural law, and divine approval.
- Before the Iroquois Confederacy, a death always created a cycle of mourning or revenge. With the advent of the confederacy, society itself becomes the agent for comforting mourners and cleansing the mind of thoughts of despair or revenge.
- Finally, the myth is about Iroquois national life—about a state rather than a cosmos. It is grounded in human nature and human problems, and its goal is the transformation of both individuals and communities.

Suggested Reading

Bierhorst, *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature*.

Kroeber, *Artistry in Native American Myths*.

Van Over, *Sun Songs*.

Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly*.

Questions to Consider

1. Quite a few Native American peoples have stories about divine twins, one of whom is good, and the other, evil. Together, they shape the world. In quite a few of these stories, as in the Huron version, the good twin winds up killing the evil one, who then goes to or even creates the land of the dead—or the afterlife. What does such a story tell us about the ways in which the people who told it saw the world?
2. In some versions of the Deganawida story, Hiawatha is the cannibal who gets rescued by seeing his face in the water in the cooking pot. Given the roles he plays later in the story, what additional meanings would be generated if he had, in fact, sunk to the level of cannibalism before going on to help found the confederacy?

Southeast Amerindian Origin Stories

Lecture 52

Native Americans of the U.S. Southeast were a multicultural group, including Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Natchez, Seminole, and others. Five major languages were spoken in the region, plus a few unusual dialects. In fact, the peoples who lived there developed a sign language to enable them to communicate. The region has a long history of settlement by Native Americans; a people called the Mound Builders flourished there from about 1400 B.C.E. to about 1450 C.E. In this lecture, we will study the myths and stories associated with the Southeast peoples and examine their ceremonial life, as evidenced by the busk ritual and the sweat lodge.

Creek Emergence and Migration Myths

- According to their own creation story, the Creek arrived in the Southeast via a long migration. The story begins with an emergence myth somewhere out west, at a place they called the “foundation of all things” or the “backbone of the earth,” which is usually taken to mean the Rocky Mountains.
- Emergence myths begin with creatures who are either fully human or at some pre-human stage of development, living in a cave or chamber deep within the earth. They are instructed in crafts, skills, ceremonies, and customs by a semi-divine helper or culture hero who leads them into the upper world, where they then begin their migration to their present home.
- An emergence myth of the Creek notes that the ground opened, and the people came out. A great fog settled right after the emergence, making it impossible for the people to see one another. They huddled in small groups and remained together after the fog lifted; that is how the clans were formed.
- The migration part of the Creek myth is more detailed than the emergence myth. As usual, there are many versions of it.

- One version describes how the people decided to head east, toward the sun. On the way, they crossed a slimy river, a bloody river, and a mountain that was spewing fire. They also learned many skills, including how to formulate medicines, ford rivers, craft canoes, and invent the ball game they would play in their new homeland. They also learned how to build mounds with chambers inside to be used for fasting and purification.
- The migration ended when the people reached the ocean and could go no farther. They then attacked a nearby town. People already living there when the Creek arrived said that it was clear that the Creek were very warlike; thus, it seemed best to befriend them. That was the beginning of the Creek Confederacy.
- In the Southeast, there was a blending of myths, stories, and traditions that all eventually came to be called Creek. When the Creek arrived in the region, there were already other cultures in place, such as the Yuchi and the Hitchiti. Many of these peoples were subdued or otherwise absorbed into the Creek Confederacy.
- When Europeans arrived, all the peoples of the Southeast were ravaged by diseases to which they had no resistance, and they lost much of their agricultural and hunting territory. When the Europeans started their westward movement, they compressed the remaining populations and pushed them westward, as well. Groups and cultures became so mixed that it became almost impossible to sort out or distinguish the individual components. They all became simply Creek.

The Busk Ceremony

- What eventually emerged from this blending of various peoples, traditions, myths, and ceremonies—through the Creek Confederacy and because of historical circumstances—was a continuity of worldviews and rituals throughout the Southeast.
- One of the foremost ceremonies that held many of these groups together was an annual festival called the *busk*. Its Creek name was

poskita, which means “to fast.” The *poskita* was the Creek New Year’s celebration, or festival of the green corn. This celebration may have been a Yuchi festival to begin with, but when the Muskogee arrived, they adopted (and adapted) it.

- According to the Yuchi creation story, a drop of blood from the sun—which for them was female—fell to earth and became the first human and the ancestor of the Yuchi. While the baby was still in the sky world, he was taken to the rainbow and taught the ceremonies that can protect people from evil and honor the dwellers in the sky. The Yuchi ancestor brought these ceremonies to earth, along with knowledge of medicinal plants. The most significant of the ceremonies was the busk.
- The Yuchi had two particular features in their busk ceremony. The first was ritual bloodletting, in which males were scratched on the legs and chest, allowing blood to drop onto the busk ground. This act symbolized the original creation. The second feature was the feather dance performed by the men, in which they leaped over a pile of earth, symbolizing the sun’s journey over the busk ground.

Retrieving the Cosmos from Chaos

- The busk was a cleansing ceremony, a festival of purgation, purification, and new beginnings. The Creek busk was called the green corn ceremony because it was held when the new crop was ready. In the days before the festival actually started, old clothes, used pots, and other worn items from the past year were gathered up, thrown into a pile, and burned.
- The people fasted and used medicines that induced vomiting to cleanse their bodies. They took sweat baths, washed themselves, and refrained from all sexual contact. An amnesty was declared, and all people who had been banished in the previous year were invited home. All crimes were absolved except for certain kinds of murder.
- On the fourth day of the festival, all old fires were put out, and logs were placed in the village fire pit in the shape of a cross, pointing at

the four cardinal directions. In the center, the new fire was lit, and priests then carried the fire to rekindle fires in every house. The new corn was brought in and offered to the new fire. The last days of the festival were spent feasting and dancing.

- Bill Grantham, in his book *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*, observes that the days before the busk were a deliberate unraveling of creation—a return to the primeval chaos. The universe is reset back to the state of nothingness before creation. It then restarts with the lighting of the new fire.
- The new fire, Grantham notes, is like a theophany, an eruption of the creative powers. The offering is not made simply to the fire but to the power that placed this shelf of earth below the sky and above the eternal sea. In the festival, Grantham affirms, the cosmos is retrieved from chaos.

The Sweat Lodge

- A key part of the purification for the busk took place in the sweat lodge. In the sweat lodge, there were various ways of producing the heat, but the most common was to pour water on red-hot rocks in a closed space, then to endure the heat as long as possible. Almost always, the sweat bath was followed by a plunge into cold water, which closed the pores and washed away toxins brought to the surface of the skin.
- Christopher Vecsey, in his book *Imagine Ourselves Richly*, describes a visit to a sweat lodge of Phillip Deere in 1983. On a 160-acre plot in Oklahoma, Deere, who was a teacher, spiritual counselor, and Native American leader, re-created a Creek village, complete with a ball field, roundhouse, and two sweat lodges near a pond.
- Vecsey finds profound meaning in the Creek experience in the sweat lodge. As he points out in his book, on the one hand, the purpose of the sweat lodge was (and is) to cleanse, purify, heal, and revitalize; on the other hand, it also brings one into contact with the

divine powers. Its purpose was to correct one's relationship to the Creator and Mother Earth.

- The shape of most sweat lodges was that of a small mound—a miniature version of those made by the Mound Builders or the ones the Creek say they built on their migration. Phillip Deere's sweat lodge was, in fact, a cave set in a hillside so that the hill itself provided the mound shape.
- In everyday use, the sweat lodge served as a cure and preventative measure for ailments. Warriors also took sweats before going into battle, as did hunters before the hunt, and Creek healers prepared their apprentices for instruction with fasts and sweat baths. People returning from journeys or from battle took sweat baths before reentering their homes.
- In order to enter Deere's sweat lodge, Vecsey notes, one had to undress and crawl on hands and knees into the mound. Inside the lodge, 10 men sat with knees drawn up, backs against the mud wall. And then Deere told a story:
 - When people first came out of the earth, they had no language, no way of talking to one another. All they could do was to make cries of need.
 - Babies are born the same way, and they cry until their mothers offer them the breast—just as at our emergence, Mother Earth heard our cries and took care of us.
 - The sweat lodge reminds us of that relationship by returning us to the womb from which we came. And after the sweat comes the plunge into the water, just as Creek infants were taken to the water and washed before they were suckled for the first time.
- Vecsey concludes his chapter on Deere's sweat lodge with the observation that the typical Creek town was laid out in such a way that Native Americans could be at home—not just in the town but

in the universe. Like the busk ground with its sacred fire, Deere's land was sacred territory in the middle of ordinary life. The busk ceremony offered the Creek message that all can be forgiven and made pure. Humans and the cosmos can be one.

Suggested Reading

Grantham, *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*.

Lankford, ed., *Native American Legends*.

Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly*.

Questions to Consider

1. Historians argue that a mythical account of a migration, such as those examined in this lecture, tells us more about the way a people live at the time of the telling than about the past. What aspects of Choctaw or Creek life are accounted for in their migration stories?
2. How do the emergence creation myth, the sweat lodge, and the burial mound all fit together and support one another in mythic terms? How does the symbol of the mound link them all together?

Mythology of the Plains Peoples

Lecture 53

In this lecture, we'll study the myths and legends of the Native Americans of the Great Plains, including the Cheyenne, Arikara, Lakota, Sioux, Crow, and Gros Ventre. We'll examine myths associated with the buffalo, medicine bundle, pipe, the origins of life (and death), and the trickster archetype. The lecture will conclude with an analysis of the Sioux legend of Double-Face, an allegory for how the Native Americans subordinate self-interest and individualism to a spirit of cooperation that allows the group to survive.

Importance of the Buffalo

- Before the introduction of the horse into North America, the Plains peoples had a mixed economy, depending on agriculture as much as hunting. But the introduction of the horse—and, later, the rifle—led many to abandon agriculture and become almost entirely dependent on the buffalo.
- Once the transition had been made to a hunting economy, the buffalo became a rich subject for myth. The buffalo was the very stuff of life: It provided food, skins for clothing and shelter, bones and horns for tools, and sinews for thread and string.
- Stories about the buffalo recount how, in the mythic age when the earth was new, culture heroes had



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Myths about the buffalo postdate the time when this animal became the source of some Native American economies and cultures, but the stories place the coming of the buffalo back in the earliest days, when things came to be the way they are.

brought the gift of the buffalo, taught the people how to hunt it, and devised ceremonies to ensure that the buffalo would continue to give themselves to the hunters.

Arikara Buffalo Myth

- According to the Arikara, located in South Dakota, shortly after the world was created, a village of buffalo existed, inhabited by creatures who were much like large humans with horns on their heads. These creatures hunted and ate humans.
- The buffalo people possessed a sacred bundle of relics called the “knot in the tree,” which they used in hunting and killing humans. After a young man managed to escape the slaughter, he was approached by the beautiful horned Buffalo Woman, dressed in white leather. She told him that she could help him become the hero who would change the buffalo people into real animals. She helped him sneak into the chief’s tepee that night, where he watched the ceremony involving the knot-in-the-tree bundle.
- The next morning, Buffalo Woman showed the young man how to make a bow and arrow. When the buffalo people struck the knot in the tree, he should rush out, grab the bow and arrow, and start shooting. It worked, and each time one of the buffalo people was struck by an arrow, it became a real buffalo. Afterward, Buffalo Woman married the young man, and they became ancestors of the Arikara people. Thus, the Arikara have always been on good terms with the buffalo—after all, they are related.

The Medicine Bundle

- The medicine bundle was a collection of sacred relics, handed down from ancestors or brought by culture heroes. It protected and brought good fortune. For Native Americans, the word *medicine* meant everything mysterious, spiritual, or holy. The shaman was a *medicine man* because he dealt with spiritual phenomena on a daily basis.
- A story connected with a medicine bundle is that of White Buffalo Woman of the Lakota, part of the Sioux nation in what is now

South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska. In a time of famine, when the buffalo had disappeared, two young hunters were sent out to look for the animals. They saw coming toward them a beautiful young woman with long black hair, wearing white buckskin and carrying a bundle. Because she was not really walking but floating just above the ground, they knew that she was *waka*, or holy.

- White Buffalo Woman taught the people to make a sacred altar and, opening her medicine bundle, showed them a pipe. She showed them how to hold and fill the pipe and described the ceremonies involved with lighting it. She explained that this was the fire without end, the flame to be passed from generation to generation.
- Then, the famine ended. That pipe would still be part of one of the most sacred bundles of the Lakota, having been passed down from generation to generation ever since.

Earth-Diving Myths

- Creation stories of Plains peoples are mostly related to the earth-diver myth. The Crow, based in Wyoming and Montana, tell the story of Coyote, a second-tier creator or culture hero.
 - Coyote lives alone in the world—which is really a vast sea—until he meets two ducks. The ducks dive down in the water, and one brings up a piece of mud. Coyote blows on until it dries and spreads.
 - Coyote plants grass, trees, and food plants and fashions rivers, hills, and springs. He makes people and animals out of mud. Coyote gives people tools, fire, tepees, and the bow and arrow, and he divides people into different language groups.
- In a number of Plains earth-diver stories, the making of our earth takes place after a flood. In a story of the Gros Ventre people from Wyoming, when an initial creation does not turn out well, it must be repeated—this time, by earth-diving.

The Origin of Death

- An interesting sidebar on creation stories of the Plains comes from the Blackfoot, who lived in what is now Alberta, Canada, and Montana.
- Here, the old man is a second-tier creator. After a long and sometimes comic series of trial-and-error experiments, he finally creates a world with people in it. He takes a woman from this creation to a river, and they watch it flow past. The woman asks whether people will be like this, too, endlessly flowing. The old man says that they should decide this by throwing a buffalo chip into the water. If it floats, people will die for four days, then come to life again. If it sinks, they will die.
- The woman does the same experiment—but with a stone, which sinks. She says that may be just as well, because if people must die, they will always have compassion for one another. When the woman's child dies, she asks the old man to repeal the law of death, but he refuses: A law is a law, and all people will die once and for all.

The Trickster Archetype

- Although the Plains peoples believed in a Great Spirit who was responsible for creation, that spirit was too remote and abstract to have a personality or a cult following. The active figures in Native American spiritual life were culture heroes and nature powers: sun, moon, morning star, evening star, wind, thunder, and the spirits of animals and underwater creatures.
- Julian Rice, in his book *Before the Great Spirit: The Many Faces of Sioux Spirituality*, notes that for most Plains peoples, the Great Spirit was too distant to direct the world in any particular direction. In fact, the trickster had more to do with making the world the way it is.
- The Native Americans saw the world in many ways as haphazard and unpredictable, even random. In such a world, there was no providence or even poetic justice. Therefore, humans must be disciplined and observant, because it is up to them to survive and succeed in an

imperfect creation. The Great Spirit may have intended everything to be perfect, but the trickster interferes in every corner of it.

- The trickster, although not actively evil, is thoughtless, impulsive, and self-serving. His contributions to creation—especially given that he is so often a culture hero—mean that humans must compensate and adjust for the trickster’s actions. For Native Americans, humans are always operating in a not-quite-friendly environment. And to live in such a world, humans must subordinate self-interest and individualism to a spirit of cooperation that allows the group to survive.

“Double-Face Tricks the Girl”

- Consider the Sioux story “Double-Face Tricks the Girl.” The story is about a young woman, beautiful, virtuous, and kind—and, therefore, desired by every marriageable male. But she’s uninterested in any of them. One day, a handsome stranger appears from another clan. She responds to him warmly and, surprisingly, agrees to elope with him that very night.
- When the stranger shows up that night, he has a blanket pulled over his head. The young woman has brought food, moccasins for the journey, and her pet beaver. She and her prospective husband make great speed until they reach a lake. Because she can’t swim, he tells her to get on his back and he will carry her across the lake. But during the crossing, his blanket slips, and she sees that he has another face on the back of his head. He’s the dreaded Double-Face.
- Although no one is quite sure what a Double-Face is, it seems clear that it refers to someone with a hidden agenda, more than one set of values, who may not always be what he seems.
- Now, the girl is in Double-Face’s power. When they reach his tepee, she grabs her pet beaver and tries to escape. But when she gets back to the lake, she still can’t swim. She sits down to weep, but her pet beaver cuts down trees, toppling them in the water to make a bridge for her, on which they cross over to the other side.

- They've just made it to the other shore when Double-Face appears. He starts across the bridge, but the beaver begins to tear it down, and it collapses. Double-Face falls in the water and drowns. The girl picks up her beaver and runs the rest of the way home. Her parents are happy to see her and eventually agree to another marriage for her. The beaver, we're told, becomes the most honored resident of the village.
- Double-Face shares many characteristics with the trickster. Both are motivated by self-interest, not concern for others in the community. Tricksters are amusing, sometimes charming, but they're also powerful beings who can cause harm. Humans, as Rice explains, must spend a great deal of time cleaning up after both tricksters and Double-Faces.

Suggested Reading

Deloria, *Dakota Texts*.

Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends*.

Ramsey, *Reading the Fire*.

Rice, *Before the Great Spirit*.

———, *Ella Deloria's "The Buffalo People."*

Questions to Consider

1. One of the most touching accounts of how death comes into the world is that of the Blackfoot story of the old man and the woman standing by the river. The story conveys a sense that a properly "human" life must be limited by death, but there is also the idea that somehow death makes us better husbands, wives, parents, and friends. How exactly does that work, and how does it resonate with your own experience?
2. Describe the world as the Lakota saw it with Iktomi the Spider involved in every aspect of it. What would it have been like if a trickster's actions were not woven into every thread of our lives? Would there be anything lost in such a world?

Amerindian Tales from the Northwest

Lecture 54

Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest depended on the sea and rivers for much of their food, supplemented by caribou and deer, along with roots, berries, and mushrooms. Their resources were so plentiful that they never bothered with agriculture. Skilled woodworkers, they lived in large villages in houses constructed of cedar planks. These Native Americans had a highly complex governing system and created an economic hierarchy that ranged from the very wealthy down to slaves taken from other clans in warfare. In this lecture, we'll explore several of their most illustrative myths.

Totems and the Spirit World

- Native American religion in the Pacific Northwest, like the religion of most Native Americans, was animistic. The entire world was filled with spirits and powers, which could appear either as human or as some nonhuman agent, usually an animal. An individual tried to create as many bonds as possible with the spirit world because such bonds imparted additional skill or knowledge. Those who accumulated a great number of spirit bonds could become heroes.
- In the mythic age, people believed, animals and humans were even more alike than they are now, and all creatures could change their shapes at will. Many clans were formed by animals who had removed their animal skins to reveal a human form underneath, and those humans became the clans' ancestors. Most clans claimed some special relationship with one animal, and totem poles announced this special relationship.
- Transformations between human and animal show up in a large number of Bear Woman stories, which recount the tale of a young woman who wanders away from her own country and winds up in a bears' den under the impression that she's in a human household.

She loses her sense of time so that when she is rescued, she has already given birth to several animal cubs.

- In a Haida version of the story, from islands off the coast of British Columbia and Alaska, a young woman marries a bear prince and has two cubs, who later remove their bear clothing and become great human hunters for a time, then go back to the bear world.

Coyote and the Origins of Death

- The trickster most closely associated with the Northwest is Raven, but Coyote figures in a number of stories, including one in which, as both trickster and culture hero, he brings death into the world.
- This story comes from the Nez Percé people, who lived mainly on the Columbia River Plateau in eastern Washington and Oregon. Their Coyote story belongs to a widespread genre sometimes called the “Orpheus story,” because of its parallels with the classical Greek story of Orpheus, who tries—unsuccessfully—to rescue his wife from Hades.
- In this Nez Percé version, which occurs during the mythic age, Coyote’s wife dies. Coyote is devastated and spends his days mourning her. Then one day, the death spirit comes to Coyote and offers to take him to where his wife has gone. Coyote leaps at the chance, but the death spirit says that he will need to be disciplined and precise—and do exactly what the spirit tells him to do.
- Along the way, the death spirit points out animals and food, but Coyote cannot see them. Eventually, they come to a great lodge, and the death spirit tells Coyote to sit down next to his wife, whom he cannot see. As it gets dark, Coyote observes that the lodge is full of



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The trickster archetype is found among the animal stories of the Northwest, including those featuring the popular trickster figure Coyote.

fires, and he can finally see his wife beside him. He also sees many of his friends who have died, and he spends a joyous night with them. As the dawn comes, everything begins to fade until Coyote is sitting alone again. This happens for several days and nights.

- Coyote is told that he can take his wife back with him, but once again, he must do exactly as told. To return home, he must cross five mountains. On the way, he can talk to his wife, but he cannot touch her until they come down from the fifth mountain.
- The two set off, and Coyote is amazed and delighted when his wife grows a little more visible each day. Each night they camp by a fire, and Coyote is careful to stay on his own side. On the last night, by now, Coyote's wife looks like a living person. Overwhelmed by happiness, he rushes to embrace her. But just as he is touching her, she disappears. The death spirit returns to say that, because of Coyote, death without return will be the lot of all humans.

“Awl and Her Son's Son”

- Native American stories run the literature gamut—from sweeping, sophisticated creation stories to simple domestic tales about everyday life. The Northwest peoples seem to have favored these domestic tales.
- One tale, called “Awl and Her Son's Son,” is from the Clackamas Chinook, who lived on the Clackamas River in Oregon. In the story, a man lives alone and spends all his time hunting. One day, he stays home to patch his moccasins and breaks his awl—a pointed spike used for poking holes in leather. He flings it under his bed, groaning that he wishes it would become a person.
- A few days later, when he returns from hunting, he finds a fire lit, the house cleaned, and small footprints on the floor. With each day that passes, his mysterious visitor does a bit more work in the house, and the hunter becomes increasingly curious. One day, he only pretends to leave home in the morning; he sneaks back and climbs on the roof, where he can peer down through the smoke hole.

- Inside, he sees a woman, saying to herself that her son's son has gone for the day. The hunter climbs down and asks her who she is. She says that she is the answer to what was in his heart when he wished that the awl would become a real person. She calls him her son's son, making her his grandmother.
- One day, a maiden appears, dressed in her best clothes and carrying her valuables. But on her way to the hunter's house, she passes a blackberry patch and stops to pick some berries—the private preserve of the grandmother. The old woman stabs the maiden and buries her. The maiden who was killed has four sisters, each of whom duplicates the experience of the first.
- But the fifth maiden accidentally breaks the leg of the Meadowlark Woman, a creature who can slip back and forth from bird to woman and who turns out to be the gift of a spirit power for the fifth sister. When the girl stops to heal the leg, the Meadowlark Woman tells her what has happened to her sisters. She offers to accompany the maiden to prevent it from happening again. Then, they find the bodies of the older sisters and bury them.

“Seal and Her Brother”

- “Seal and Her Brother,” one of the most famous of all Native American stories, also comes from the Clackamas Chinook.
- Seal is a woman who lives with her younger brother and her young daughter. One day, a woman comes into the house as the younger brother's wife. The young daughter, noticing the new wife urinating, says she goes “like a man.” Her mother quiets her because she is speaking about Seal's brother's wife.
- However, the little girl keeps noticing that there's something different—something not quite right—about the new wife; again and again, she is told to keep quiet. When the little girl feels something drip on her face one night, she takes a light and discovers that her uncle's neck has been severed. The girl runs to her mother, weeping and saying over and over, “I told you, and you wouldn't listen.”

- This story raises a number of questions. But we need to remember that these stories were heard, not read, and there may have been a good deal of meaning relayed in the expressive gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions that accompanied the words. What's more, states of mind are seldom or never given in Native American stories. We hear what people say and do but not how they feel or think or their motivations. The nature of these stories is very open-ended in a way that seems quite modern.
- One interesting theory is that the story is about a *berdache*, a Native American male who dressed as a woman and took a woman's role. These people were accepted by their fellow villagers on the basis that they had been guided to behave in this way by their spirit powers.
- In his reading of "Seal and Her Brother," anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes sees the central figure as the little girl, whose perceptions are ignored to everyone's loss.
 - He notes that the story warns us about the need for mediation between social norms, on the one hand, and our awareness of a particular situation, on the other. Seal is all propriety; she is so polite and correct that she ignores what is happening right in front of her.
 - The little girl finds herself caught between her own awareness, which no one seems to trust, and adult stock responses, which do not answer to her experience. The point is that sometimes one must let social decorum go in order to see what is really happening. The story is also a cautionary tale about the failure to listen to someone who is paying close attention.
- In many Native American stories, much detail is left out, which we must supply for ourselves. As we have seen, this technique allows us spaces in a story into which we can fit—and find—ourselves.

Suggested Reading

Jacobs, *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature*.

———, *The People Are Coming Soon*.

Ramsey, *Reading the Fire*.

Questions to Consider

1. Is it possible for us to reconstruct how the original listeners would have responded to the Wishram story of the boy abandoned by his village and taken up by the sea maiden? With whom would they have identified? What values are promoted by the tale? How do we respond to it? Is it coherent or is it designed to promote discussion of ethical questions?
2. With “Awl and Her Son’s Son” and “Seal and Her Brother,” we move into a genre of Native American stories we might call *parlor tales* or *domestic fiction*. There are quite a few of these tales among the Northwest peoples. Because they take place in the mythic age, they are not strictly realistic or naturalistic. But if we can see the fantastic elements in the stories as metaphors, how modern are they? How much of the life they describe is similar to our own? Is there a value for us in such stories apart from what we can learn from them about Native Americans?

The Navajo Emergence Myth

Lecture 55

In Native American lore, creation myths generally take one of two forms: earth-diver myths and emergence myths. In the earth-diver myth, an animal or bird dives to the bottom of the primal sea to bring up a bit of mud, from which the earth is created. In the emergence myth, people emerge into this world by ascending from a lower state upward to full humanity. The emergence myth occurs most often in the myths of the Southwest peoples. In this lecture, we'll consider the Navajo emergence myth—the richest and most complex story of its kind. The main emphasis of the story is on the people's long, slow ascent into the Fifth World.

The Navajo and the “Story of the People”

- Because of its clear parallels with the process of birth, the emergence myth is considered by some mythographers to be the oldest of creation myths, dating back to the Neolithic or even the Paleolithic Age. The gradual development of creatures from their subhuman beginnings to their emergence as full humans corresponds to the period of gestation, and the emergence itself is a miraculous birth.
- The Navajo were latecomers to the American Southwest. Their language is related to that of peoples in Canada and Alaska, and they most likely migrated from those regions, arriving in the Southwest at least by 1541, when the Spaniards arrived. Although the Navajo may have originated as nomadic hunters, the name by which we know them comes from a Spanish phrase that means “Apaches of the cultivated fields.” Thus, by the time the Europeans arrived, the Navajo had acquired agriculture from their Pueblo neighbors, who also influenced their religion, myths, and rituals.
- The Navajo emergence story we will follow in this lecture was collected and published by Paul G. Zolbrod in the book *Diné bahane’: The Navajo Creation Story*. *Diné* in Navajo means “the people”; thus, a literal translation of the title is “Story of the People.”

Diné bahane'

- *Diné bahane'* begins with insect-like creatures, called “air-spirit people,” living in a chamber deep underground. Their underground world is oriented by the four cardinal directions, each with its own color: white for east, blue for south, yellow for west, and black for north. Each direction has its own chief. This First World is red.
- The four chiefs expel the air-spirit people, who soar up until they hit against the hard shell of the sky. But a member of another race of beings, the swallow people, shows the trapped creatures a slit in the sky, and they are led to the Second World, which is entirely blue.
- The air-spirit people are eventually expelled by the swallow people. A deity, White Wind, leads the air-spirit people through a slit in the sky into a yellow world, the Third World. The same sequence of events happens, and once again, the air-spirit people are forced to fly up to the hard shell of the sky. Another divine being, Red Wind, leads them through a slit into the Fourth World.
- The Fourth World is the largest one by far. The air-spirit people are helped by two gods who teach them to become more godlike and to reproduce. Later, the holy people create a First Man and a First Woman from two ears of corn. First Man and First Woman are not yet human beings, however; they are second-tier deities sent by the creator gods to finish the work of creation and prepare the world for humans.

The Coyote Cycle

- One day, the sky comes down and touches the earth, and when it retreats, there stand Coyote and Badger—divine figures created by heaven. Coyote will create many problems for the humans who will come later. He never behaves or subordinates his own impulses for the good of the group. What’s more, he is a divine creature, which means that he’s smart and powerful and cannot be killed. Coyote almost always replaces order with disorder and confusion. He is the Navajo trickster, making life on earth more difficult.

- The Navajo creation myth breaks off from its story of the emergence of humans to insert a cycle of Coyote stories, which take up about a seventh of the entire book. That cycle ends at almost the exact middle of the *Diné bahane'*. This makes good literary sense, because the trickster is always rooted in the middle of everything.

- The Coyote cycle in the Navajo creation myth is a complex one in which Coyote wins a maiden by killing a monster for her and allowing her to kill him four times. Each time, of course, he puts himself back together and comes back for more. He seduces the maiden and, in the process, shares with her some of his power. When Coyote disappears for a time, the woman uses that power to turn herself into a bear. She winds up killing 11 of her brothers; then she is killed by the 12th brother, who turns her into a real bear.



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The maiden who marries Coyote was once so perfect that suitors built houses near hers in order to court her, but thanks to Coyote, she ends up wiping out her family and becoming a bear.

- As Zolbrod notes in his book, here we see Coyote indulge himself, behave impulsively, make a mockery of the male-female relationship, practice witchcraft, and teach sorcery to a woman he seduces and tricks into marrying him. That's a good summary of one aspect of the trickster's character.

Into the Fifth World

- After the Coyote cycle, the emergence myth continues with a quarrel between First Man and First Woman. Ultimately, First Woman says that men are unnecessary to women. First Man goes off to tell men that women think they can get by without them, and he takes all the men across a river. Men and women live apart, on opposite banks of the river, for four years.

- After four years, both sides are willing to lay down their grievances, and the men send across the river to bring the women and children to their side. But in the river crossing, two small girls disappear, seized by a water monster. A delegation, into which Coyote insinuates himself, goes to rescue the girls. But while they are all busy with the rescue, Coyote steals two of the water monster's babies.
- The next day, there is a great flood, but everyone is saved by two holy people who create a reed large enough to hold all the people and animals inside. Everyone climbs up into the Fifth World—today's world. However, when the people migrate to look for places to settle permanently, some of the women start giving birth to monsters. We are told that they are the result of sexual problems during the four-year separation of the genders.

Hózhó

- The goal of Navajo life was *hózhó*, a word that combines the concepts of beauty, balance, and harmony. Once these are lost, individual and community life becomes sick and must be cured. The curing ceremonies of the Navajo, involving shamans, sand paintings, dances, and chants, were designed to restore *hózhó*.
- David Leeming, in the *Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, observes that the most significant Navajo ritual, the Blessing Way, incorporated a version of the creation story as a way of restoring harmony with the spirits. He notes that when the creation story was sung at such a ceremony, it was a way of returning to the origins so that a new start could be made.
- Although *hózhó* seems to have been achieved in the Fourth World, it gets lost repeatedly in the Fifth World, thanks to problems between men and women. Now, the world is full of monsters. Monsters kill so many that eventually there are only six beings left: First Man and First Woman, an old man and his wife, and their two children, a boy and a girl.

- The group takes the only action available: asking the holy people for help. The holy people take a turquoise figure and a white shell figure and reenact the creation of First Man and First Woman. The figures come to life as Changing Woman and White Shell Woman; both become pregnant by the sun. Both bear sons, who will grow up to be the monster slayers. When the boys become aware of their destinies, they seek out their father, the sun, for help and guidance.

Changing Woman

- A large portion of the *Diné bahane* ' is devoted to battles against the monsters. There is never much doubt as to who will win, however, because the boys are heroes with divine parents who have been especially trained and armed for this task. The monsters don't have much of a chance against them.
- In the end, the earth is cleared of monsters. Once their work is done, the boys go to live in a mountain cave near the junction of two rivers. On their way to their new home, the monster slayers are given a vision of the future of the lands inhabited by the Navajo: Their numbers will increase; they will learn how to plant, reap, and manage livestock; and they will observe the rituals and ceremonies that will maintain harmony and order in the world.
- Changing Woman became the most revered deity of the Navajo. She is something like our Mother Nature, a goddess of the changing year. Old, bent, and gray in winter, each spring, she becomes again a beautiful maiden. Changing Woman is also a food provider, bringing rain and assuring food crops for her children. And she is the spirit of some of the Navajo curing chants, which are designed to help regain strength after an illness, injury, or loss, thus maintaining *hózhó* for the individual and the community.
- When Changing Woman leaves the community, she says that people will never see her in her bodily form again, but she will still be with them, especially in the form of "female rain," the kind of rain that falls gently. ("Male rain" has lightning, thunder, and wind.)

- Zolbrod calls the final section of his *Diné bahane* “The Gathering of the Clans.” This part of the work is where myth intersects with history; it accounts for the formation of the Navajo people, the *Diné*, as a distinct nation. Zolbrod suggests that this account of various clans and people and their relationships to one another may mythically remember some ancient history of the people and the ways in which it was organized. The book closes by stating that the existence of the people was now secure, and they continue to flourish in the Fifth World to this very day.

Suggested Reading

Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling*.

Reichard, *Navajo Religion*.

Zolbrod, *Diné bahane*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why should there be an extensive cycle of Coyote (trickster) stories in the middle of a creation account? Is this merely relief or contrast, or is there some good reason for what otherwise seems a digression? Its importance is suggested by the illustration on the cover of Zolbrod’s *Navajo Creation Story*, which shows Coyote stealing the water monster’s water babies.
2. Account for the presence of the many monsters that show up in the world. Where do they come from? Who is responsible for them? In a metaphoric way, what do they tell us about Navajo life? How are they related to the concept of *hózhó*?

Stories of the Pueblo

Lecture 56

Sharing the North American Southwest with the Navajo and Apache were the people collectively known as the Pueblo. Although not a single cultural or linguistic group, these various peoples forged common traditions and ways of life. The Pueblo included the prehistoric cliff dwellers known as the Anasazi, as well as those peoples who later built villages on high, rocky tablelands called *mesas*—the Acoma, Laguna, Hopi, and Zuni, among others. In this lecture, we'll focus on the creation story of the Hopi, which is rich in detail and recounts a vast and prolonged migration.

Spider Grandmother

- The Hopi, whose name means “peaceful people,” are a Pueblo people who have lived in the North American Southwest since prehistoric times. In the days before the coming of the Europeans, Hopi villages were scattered from the plains of Texas to the deserts of Nevada and south as far as northern Mexico. Their towns consisted of a single large complex with several multistoried houses arranged around a courtyard. Beneath the courtyards were underground chambers known as *kivas*, which were used by religious societies for ceremonies, meditation, and discussion.
- In the Hopi creation story, the sun spirit, Tawa, gathers together the elements of endless space and puts his own substance in it.



One figure associated with the Hopi is Kokopelli, the hunch-backed flute player; he is actually much older than the Hopi, dating back to the time of the Anasazi.

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He creates insect-like creatures and places them deep in the earth. However, Tawa is disappointed with his creative efforts; thus, he sends Spider Grandmother to help.

- Spider Grandmother is a culture hero who can take the form of either a woman or a spider. As a woman, she is a kindly grandmother figure with a certain tolerance for human frailty. As a spider, she is associated with virtues of the earth. During the Hopi migrations, she shows up repeatedly—often with her grandsons—to save people or to help a virtuous man or woman achieve some difficult task. Spider Grandmother is a conscience for the Hopi people, reminding them of their purpose in life.
- Spider Grandmother leads the insect-like creatures into the next world; as they move upward, Tawa changes them so that they are like dogs, coyotes, and bears. Then, Spider Grandmother leads them to the Third World, where the creatures lose their tails, fur, and webbed fingers in a kind of evolution.
- The Third World is brighter than the lower two, and the creatures build villages and plant corn. Spider Grandmother teaches them to make blankets, clothing, and pots for storing food and water. Spider Grandmother also reminds them that they must grow morally and intellectually as they progress physically.

People of the Blue Corn

- One day, a messenger arrives from Masauwu, a trickster, who offers the creatures fire. Now, suddenly, there are *powakas*, or bad sorcerers, in their midst. Tawa sends down Spider Grandmother once more. She says that all people of good heart—or “one-hearted” people—should leave immediately. (*Powakas* are called “two hearts.”) Spider Grandmother tells the people that they must learn to distinguish between good and evil. The *powakas* must be left behind in the Third World, and when the people reach the Fourth World, they must become fully human.

- After a hard climb, the people make it to the Fourth World, and a mockingbird sorts people out as they emerge from the slit, or *sipapu*, into separate groups: the Hopi, Navajo, Apache, Paiute, Zuni, and so on. Later additions to the story include the Sioux and even white people. Before the different peoples go their own way, they hold a great feast.
- Various kinds of corn are laid out for each group to take with them when they start their migrations. When they find a place where their corn will grow, they will know that they have arrived home. The Navajos, Ute, and Apache get the longest ears, leaving only the short blue ones for the Hopi. That is how the Hopi became the people of the blue corn.
- Before the Hopi depart, Grandmother Spider covers up the *sipapu* with water, so they will never find it again. Then, she tells the Hopi that they have a long time of wandering before them. They will build many villages and grow their crops, but they will also move on, leaving marks on the rocks to let others know that they have been there. She reminds them that they are living in the land of Masauwu, which means they will always be in the presence of death. Spider Grandmother tells them to put a small *sipapu* in the floor of each kiva to remind themselves of where they came from.

A Search for Harmony

- The story of the migration of the Hopi is a long and complex one, with many twists, turns, and setbacks. Over and over again, one clan settles in a location where they can grow their short blue corn and build their villages. But because they have brought evil with them from the Third World in the person of the *powaka*, the harmony of the place is undermined, and they must move on.
- There is archaeological evidence for a vast pattern of migrations, with clans on the move constantly, their routes crisscrossing each other. Sometimes, a village lasted for many years, and sometimes, only for a few, despite the effort that had gone into creating and planting the fields and building the towns. There were many

reasons for all this movement. Some of it probably had to do with a long drought at the end of the 13th century, which drove many peoples to the south.

- According to Harold Courlander in his book *Hopi Voices*, in the stories the Hopi tell about themselves, the cause of the migration is always the “flight from evil” and the search for harmony. Another theme of the migration stories is the need for hard work in a harsh environment. The Hopi knew from their choice of the small blue corn that theirs would always be a life of severity and challenge. But they also believed that there were crucial virtues associated with such a life. Hard work would prevent the kind of moral deterioration that came with easy living.

Kachinas

- Part of the meaning of life that the Hopi strove to keep in mind was the pervasiveness of death. Death was not a punishment for the Hopi; it was more like a condition of life. Although the Hopi did, in fact, believe in a life after death, they also believed that death nourishes life itself. That part of their story is expressed in the kachinas, who were both rain deities and the spirits of the departed ancestors.
- In one of their own stories, the Hopi discover the kachinas when they notice strange beings moving around the foot of the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona.
 - They send a young warrior with prayer sticks to the mountain. There, he discovers a *sipapu* that leads to a kiva. From inside it, a voice invites him to enter. A frightening figure appears, saying that he is a kachina.
 - The young warrior gives him prayer sticks, which please him, and then they sit to talk—which is what one does in a kiva. They come to an agreement that if the people pray to the kachinas and offer them prayer sticks, the kachinas will form rain clouds on top of the mountains.

- For half of each year, the kachinas live in the underworld beneath the San Francisco Peaks. They no longer appear in bodily form, but they are given temporary bodies by masked dancers in the rites and ceremonies honoring them.
- At the winter solstice, the kachinas leave their underground homes and move to the mesas, where they occupy the bodies of the elders and dancers. When they arrive, they bring the rains. The Hopi knew when they were coming because the kachinas formed rain clouds on the top of the mountains, then came marching down the slopes to join the annual ceremonies. The kachinas remain, in spirit, until July. Just before the summer solstice, they return to the mountains, carrying messages from the living to their dead ancestors.
- Edwin Bernbaum, in his book *Sacred Mountains of the World*, gives firsthand accounts of the dancers who wear the elaborate masks of the kachina. Each dancer admits to being taken over in some way by the kachina when the mask is put on and feels it to be a part of some power greater than himself. He becomes someone else.
- In one way, the kachina aspect of the Hopi story ties together an awareness of death, a belief that life continues after death, a belief that death contributes to ongoing life, and the comfort of being able to communicate with ancestors who have died.

An Optimistic Vision

- For the Hopi, as for most Native Americans, everything was related; the universe was a *gestalt*. Perhaps because of the challenges in their environment, the Hopi were, like virtually all Native Americans, intensely aware of the fact that individualism had to be set aside for the life-giving security of the community. The evil sorcerers, *powakas*, were always rampant individualists who saw life in private, subjective ways.
- But the Hopi vision was also an optimistic one. For them, all of us, whatever clan we belong to, emerged together from the same *sipapu*. And if, as it happened, a *powaka* came with us, we are all

called on by Grandmother Spider to work together to combat the evil we accidentally brought with us. We have on our side the sun spirit himself, who felt compassion for us when we were living like beasts in a grimy underworld and sent Grandmother Spider and her grandsons to help us.

- Also on our side are our ancestors, who come down from the mountains every year to communicate with us, to bring us the rains, and to help ensure that our hard-working and simple lives are lived in harmony with one another, with all of nature, and with the powers that lie beyond.

Suggested Reading

Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World*.

Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*.

Thury and Devinney, *Introduction to Mythology*.

Questions to Consider

1. Like the Navajo emergence myth, the Hopi one carries a large burden of moral and ethical meaning. If you were to do a character sketch of a perfect Hopi, based on the values that emerge from their emergence and migration myth, what would he or she be like? Why for such a character would the cardinal sins of the Hopi—adultery and gambling—be so tempting?
2. Mythographers have noted that Hopi stories emphasize a value that was held by all Native Americans: the suppression of the individual on behalf of the community or corporate rather than individual welfare. But the Hopi myths, they also note, seem to emphasize these values even more strongly than do those of other peoples. Does that seem an accurate assessment to you? And if it does, what is there about Hopi stories that brings these values so strongly to the fore?

Native American Tricksters

Lecture 57

Tricksters are the most popular characters in Native American myths. Of course, tricksters are not exclusive to North American tales. Readers encounter tricksters in such characters as Till Eulenspiegel from German folktales, Reynard the fox from European fables, or even Mr. Toad of Toad Hall from *The Wind in the Willows*. The trickster also appears in myths throughout the world: Loki in Norse tales, Hermes in Greek myths, Anansi in West Africa, Susanoo in Japan, and Maui in Hawaii. For Native Americans, the trickster can take the form of Rabbit, Coyote, Iktomi the Spider, Raven, Blue Jay, or Mink. Whatever shape he takes, however, the trickster is always an intriguing—and ambiguous—character.

Culture Hero and Rogue

- In their book *American Indian Trickster Tales*, Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz note: “Of all the characters in myths and legends told around the world through the centuries ... it’s the Trickster who provides the real spark in the action ... ever scheming, never remorseful.”
- What is most striking about the trickster in Native American myths is that he is also a culture hero—a semi-divine being who helped complete creation and established the skills, institutions, and traditions that enable a people to survive. The trickster also possesses special powers—or strong medicine. He steals fire and gives it to the people; he tames the sun into its 24-hour circuit; he creates rivers and streams and stocks them with fish; and he kills monsters. And all of this is managed by a rogue and a fool.
- French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss calls the trickster a *bricoleur*—that is, a fix-it person or tinkerer, who takes whatever materials are available and patches them together in whatever ways strike him in the moment. His motives are always personal and his plans ad hoc. Sometimes, humans benefit from what he does,

and sometimes, they are harmed. The trickster's stories can be humorous, but much that he does has serious consequences.

Lord of In-Between

- Native Americans believed that animals were much like humans, with minds and wills. The gap between humans and animals was not a large one; this is why, in many Native American stories, characters can readily transform from human to animal and back again. What's more, most trickster tales occur in the mythic past, at a time when there was even less difference between animals and humans than there is now. The trickster was like a mediator between animal and human, fitting easily into either role and moving back and forth between them.
- In his article about tricksters titled "The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero," Michael P. Carroll observes that trickster animals are loners, the opposite of gregarious. The trickster is never really a part of a community; he is always an outsider, living beyond the bounds of the laws and structures that bind others.
- Lewis Hyde, in his book *Trickster Makes This World*, maintains: "All tricksters are 'on the road.' They are lords of in-between. ... He is the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither."
- Although the trickster lives outside the community physically, he also exists outside the moral and ethical boundaries that define a culture. He defies every rule, breaks every taboo, and challenges every custom and revered tradition. But still—in spite of all this—he's sacred, semi-divine, and a culture hero, and Native Americans recounted his tales with obvious relish.

Raven Steals the Sun

- Although many trickster stories were told just for fun, others negotiated the problematic combination of trickster and culture hero. A famous trickster tale about how Raven steals the sun comes

from the Haida, who lived on islands off the coast of British Columbia and Alaska.

- In the mythic age, Raven blundered around the earth in total darkness. All the light in the world was held by a man who lived in a house by a river with his daughter. Eventually, Raven stumbled upon the house, and he decided to try to steal the light.



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For agricultural peoples, ravens can be nuisances, but the Inuit and the fisherfolk of the Northwest could appreciate the bird's intelligence, seeming sense of humor, and its look of wisdom.

- Raven saw that, every day, the daughter went to the river for water. He waited for her there and changed himself into a tiny hemlock needle, floating in the waterproof basket she filled with water. The daughter swallowed the needle while drinking water and inexplicably found herself pregnant. Because it was completely dark inside the house, the father was not aware of his daughter's pregnancy until there was suddenly a baby in the house—his grandchild.
- The baby, we're told, was kind of odd-looking, with a long nose that looked like a beak and the occasional feather here and there. Nevertheless, the grandfather grew fond of the child and indulged him in every way—except that the baby was not allowed to play with a series of nested boxes in which the light was kept. But once the baby found out that he could not play with the boxes, he cried all day—his voice sounding like something between a child's cry and a raven's call.
- The light was in the innermost of the nested boxes. After putting up with the child's complaints, the grandfather finally consented to let

him play with the outermost box, and then, gradually, the smaller boxes. When there were only a few small boxes left, a strange radiance began to permeate the house. Then, the grandfather took a shining ball from the smallest box and tossed it to his grandson. At once, the baby changed into Raven and flew out, holding in his beak the brilliant sun.

Halfway between Nature and Culture

- As Claude Lévi-Strauss argued, the trickster serves as a mediator, occupying a place between two poles—making him necessarily an ambiguous character. He operates by holding together two extremes or mutually incompatible positions.
- The trickster always stands halfway between culture and nature. He can play a role in the society of the village—as father, husband, chief, or medicine man—but then he can revert to his animal nature, functioning in a natural environment. Because he can switch back and forth between human and animal forms, the trickster always has two entirely different kinds of behavior available. Even today, humans do not always find it compatible to live simultaneously in society and in nature.
- Insofar as the trickster is partly childlike, he can mediate between the way we were as children and the way we are as adults. We can measure how far we have come by watching children and telling trickster tales.

Reaffirming Societal Norms

- The trickster also serves as a mediator between the demands of the community and the demands of the self. Virtually all Native American cultures were group-oriented; their ethical and behavioral rules always favored the group over the individual. The individual's impulses had to be suppressed for the good of the clan. When Native Americans listened to trickster tales, they could see that the trickster's irresponsibility and selfishness usually got him into trouble. What's more, his subsequent humiliation and embarrassment reaffirmed the rules by which they lived.

- At the same time, however, the trickster stories give the listeners a temporary respite from rules and restrictions—if only a vicarious one. For a time, before the punishment is inflicted on Coyote, Rabbit, or Raven, the listeners feel what it must be like to do exactly what we want. The trickster tale is a temporary release from our normal duties and selves.
- Consider what Sigmund Freud observed in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Civilization, he notes, always demands the curtailment of our primitive and infantile energies. We learn to curb our drives and desires to make it possible for us to live together. Freud was thinking primarily of sexual energy, but sex can be a metaphor for everything we want to have and do.
- The trickster can mediate between our infantile impulses and the restraints civilization imposes on us because he's both childlike in his pursuit of his own pleasure and a culture hero—a creator of culture and civilization. It's another way in which trickster stories allowed Native Americans to have their cake and eat it, too.

At the Center of an Imperfect World

- Trickster stories also serve to remind listeners that the world is not perfect. Sometimes, the trickster gets punished for his misdeeds, but sometimes he does not. Trickster stories are not always morality tales. Sometimes, the trickster outwits the giant or monster, giving us hope that the weak can overcome the strong, but it doesn't always happen that way. In other tales, the giant kills the trickster—because that's the way the world works.
- Because the trickster was at the heart of everything, the world was often imperfect, illogical, and unfair. As Jarold Ramsey notes in his book *Reading the Fire*, the trickster taught and gave people a great deal, but he did not know how to finish things properly. Much of what he did was foolish, and he was selfish, vain, and boastful.

- Native Americans always knew that the trickster was out there, on the road somewhere, getting away with something, being humiliated, or even getting killed, while always partly defining—and actually creating—the world in which they lived.

Suggested Reading

Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*.

Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth.”

Ramsey, *Coyote Was Going There*.

Questions to Consider

1. It has been suggested that the function of the trickster is to shake things up, to blur boundaries, as a way of making us rethink our usual categories and rules and keeping us from becoming too complacent. That isn't why he does what he does, but it is perhaps one of the consequences of who he is. Do any of the trickster stories we've been through in these lectures seem to force a rethinking that turns out to be good for everyone? Or can you think of any trickster stories of your own that do this?
2. Coyote is a brilliant choice for a trickster. Gather what you know about coyotes or look them up somewhere to learn more about these remarkable animals, then make a list of all of the talents of the animal that carry over to the trickster.

The Maya and the *Popol Vuh*

Lecture 58

One of the most remarkable civilizations in Mesoamerica was that of the Maya, who reached a particularly high level of achievement between about 300 and 900 in what is now southern Mexico and Central America. The Maya are of special interest because they left us one of the most complete myth cycles in the Americas in a work called the *Popol Vuh*.

Olmec and Later Civilizations

- Unlike the buffalo hunters of the Great Plains or the Pueblo dwellers of the U.S. Southwest, the three great cultures of Mesoamerica and South America—Maya, Aztec, and Inca—were city-based, built impressive monumental architecture, practiced agriculture, and possessed tremendous wealth.
- The peoples who lived in Mesoamerica were likely descendants of migrants from Siberia who came across the Bering Strait during the last ice age and settled North America. These hunter-gatherers reached Mexico and Central America about 10,000 years ago. As the climate warmed around 7000 B.C.E., these peoples began domesticating and cultivating plants and created agriculture. The primary plant was maize, but they also grew chili peppers and squash.
- By about 1500 to 1200 B.C.E., the first large-scale civilization appeared in the jungles of Mexico's southern Gulf Coast: the Olmec. Subsequent civilizations adopted parts of the Olmec tradition; thus, there is a surprising continuity of culture and religion. These peoples also shared myths, using the same or similar motifs, themes, and characters.

The *Popol Vuh*

- After the conquest of Mexico in 1521, the Spaniards moved into Guatemala, and in 1524, the city of Quiché in the southern highlands fell to the conquistadors. Many of the records kept by the Maya

were lost or destroyed. But by the 1530s, Spanish missionaries were learning the Quiché language and teaching the Latin alphabet to Mayan scribes. Somewhere between 1554 and 1558, Mayan scribes wrote the *Popol Vuh*, meaning “council book.”

- Although this text has been lost, before it disappeared, it was copied by a Dominican priest, Francisco Jiménez, in the early 18th century. The book survived in a monastery library, then in a university library, until it was discovered by two scholars. Today, it has been translated into more than 30 languages.
- In translations, the *Popol Vuh* is usually divided into four or five parts. The first part deals with creation; the next two parts recount the adventures of a pair of twins—culture heroes—who rid the world of demons and monsters, then take on the powers of the underworld and the kingdom of the dead. In the final sections, humans witness the first dawn in history, and the chronicle of the Quiché people is recounted.

The Creation

- The creation account at the beginning of the *Popol Vuh* opens with an empty sky and a still sea. The gods start a dialogue about bringing the earth out of the water. First, they think of what they want; then, they say it. Suddenly, there are lands floating like a platform on the primal sea. Now, the gods want creatures who will worship them. Their first attempt to create humans produces animals. The gods then make creatures out of mud and wood, but these, too, are unsuccessful.
- The next two parts of the *Popol Vuh* concern the exploits of the trickster twins, two of the great culture heroes of the Maya. The twins’ first exploit is the defeat of a fabulously arrogant creature named Seven Macaw, who claims to be the creator and the source of all light—who asserts, in fact, to be both the sun and the moon. Because this bragging annoys the real creator gods, the twins set out to do something about it.

- Dennis Tedlock, an authority on the *Popol Vuh*, observes that the audience for this episode would have understood it in specific ways.
 - The original council book, from which the *Popol Vuh* is drawn, was also a star book. Seven Macaw became, after death, the seven stars of what we call the Big Dipper. In mid-July, his constellation is descending in the sky when night begins, and this descent marks the beginning of the hurricane season. Seven Macaw's fall out of the tree—or, in star terms, his descent toward the horizon—marked the coming of the great flood.
 - By mid-October, Seven Macaw is back up in the sky by morning (up in his tree), which means that the hurricane season is over.

The Hero Twins

- The story of the hero twins' birth begins with two brothers who spend their time playing ball on a court that happens to be the roof of the underworld—a place called Xibalba. The noise of it annoys the lords of the underworld, and they invite the men down to play a game with them on their court. This begins the most famous part of the book, whose episodes appear in all manner of Mayan art.
- In Xibalba, the men are put to a series of tests, which they fail, and the lord of the underworld puts them both to death. However, Blood Moon, the maiden daughter of the lord of the underworld, becomes miraculously pregnant. (We are led to understand that, in some way, both men are the father.) Blood Moon escapes to the upper world and gives birth to the hero twins.
- As the boys grow up, they come to understand their destiny and, in time, become adept at the ball game. Again, this annoys the lords of Xibalba, and the twins are summoned for a game down under. A succession of harrowing tests culminates with a night in a dark house full of shrieking giant bats with knives for claws and teeth. One of the twins is beheaded, but the head ends up on the ball court, where the underworld lords demand to play their game with it. The other twin manages to substitute a squash for

his brother's missing head; meanwhile, the beheaded twin's head is restored, and the squash is put into play—with some comic consequences.

- The boys then finish off the contest with the dark lords by allowing themselves to be killed. But five days later, the boys are back to life. They arrive in the underworld disguised as entertainers whose show climaxes when the one twin kills the other, then brings him back to life. The lords are amazed and demand that the trick be played again, this time with the lords as victims. In the finale, the boys kill some of the lords—but don't bring them back to life.
- What's clear in this story is that the Mayan culture heroes have won a victory over death. However, the victory may mean even more. It's been suggested that the council book that is the source of the *Popol Vuh* functioned as a kind of Mayan version of the Egyptian Book of the Dead—a guide to getting through the pitfalls of the journey to the afterlife.

The First Sunrise

- The *Popol Vuh* continues with the story of the creation of humans. The gods create four men, who turn out to be a little too perfect. The newly created men are able to see all the way to infinity; that is, they can see as far as the gods can. The gods are concerned, and they cloud the vision of their new creatures. The metaphor used is that humans are given the ability to see in the same way that we now see in a mirror that's clouded by fog. This introduces a suitable distance between gods and humans.
- The gods go on to create four wives for the four men, and human history begins at that point. Everything is now ready—except for the creation of the sun and moon. The characters who fill these places in the new creation are the twin boys.
- Then, the story changes from one about the gods to one about humans—specifically, about the Quiché up to 1550, around the

time the *Popol Vuh* was written. The book details migrations, interactions with other peoples, wars fought, and one interesting account of how the Quiché came to practice human sacrifice.

- According to the *Popol Vuh*, the Quiché originally make offerings to their tribal gods in the form of bark, flowers, and blood from their own bodies. At one point, Tohil, the god of fire, tells the Quiché that they should supplement their own blood with that of animals. Eventually, however, the Quiché start to capture other people and cut them open—a practice approved by Tohil. The god then tells the Quiché that in exchange for fire, he will demand their hearts in sacrifice.
- The practice of human sacrifice in Mesoamerica predated the Maya, however. In their book *The Flayed God*, Roberta and Peter Markman note that archeological evidence puts the practice at around 6000 B.C.E. The Markmans suggest that the practice seemed plausible and even “natural” to agricultural people: They saw death as the cause of life given that it must precede regeneration in the cyclical process through which the earth produced the food that nourished humanity. The sacrifice of blood and life was an effort to ensure that the process continued.

A “Seeing Instrument”

- For the Maya, the *Popol Vuh* was a kind of “everything” book, filled with astronomy and notations on the transit of Venus and calendar lore. It contains a 360-day solar year, with five nameless days tacked on at the end, interlocking with a 260-day sacred calendar—like a larger and a smaller wheel that mesh in such a way that a complete cycle of all possible combinations happens once every 52 years.
- The book gives directions on when to plant and harvest, based on signs in the stars. The scribes of the *Popol Vuh* tell us that the great kings of the people knew when there would be war, strife, famine, and death.

- As Dennis Tedlock notes in his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, the gods had dimmed the sight of the first four humans so they could only see what was obvious and nearby. But the ruling lords had in their possession a “seeing instrument” that allowed them to see both far into the past and into the future. That instrument was the *Popol Vuh*.

Suggested Reading

Markman and Markman, *The Flayed God*.

Phillips, *The Complete Illustrated History: Aztec and Maya*.

Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*.

Questions to Consider

1. In the *Popol Vuh*, when the gods succeed in creating the humans they were trying for, they discover that they can see too far—as far as the gods themselves. To maintain the distance between gods and humans, the gods fog up their creations’ eyesight. The episode has reminded people of what Yahweh says in Genesis when he throws Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden: that they have become like God in knowing good and evil. Is there a real similarity here, or are the differences so profound as to make the parallel purely coincidental?
2. What does it tell us about the way the Mayans saw the world that in their story, it takes four tries to get humans to turn out the way the gods want? How many possible ways can you think of that we could understand that? And given the other Mayan myths we’ve looked at, which of them seems most likely?

Aztec Myth Meets Hernán Cortés

Lecture 59

Like the Navajo in the U.S. Southwest, the Aztec were latecomers to the Valley of Mexico, incorporating such cities as Tula—or Tollan—into their domain. Tollan was the city of the Toltec, who flourished from the 10th to the 12th centuries. When the Aztec arrived from the north, beginning in the 12th century, they embraced Toltec culture as a way of connecting to the god Quetzalcoatl. In this lecture, we'll focus on the gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, both key figures in the Aztec creation story. The conflict between them runs all the way through Aztec myth and tells us much about the Aztec themselves and their eventual fate.

Five Suns

- The Aztec believed that there were four worlds before this one. The first was made by Tezcatlipoca, who became the world's first sun. Each age in the Aztec creation was called a Sun; this first one was known as Jaguar Sun and lasted 676 years. It ended when Quetzalcoatl got angry at the vision of Tezcatlipoca high in the sky and knocked him down into the sea at the edge of the earth. Tezcatlipoca then rose up out of the sea and, in an apparent fit of rage, became a giant jaguar and hunted down and killed all the giants he himself had created.
- The next age was the Wind Sun, for which Quetzalcoatl made the sun. The inhabitants of this world were more like we are today. That age, which lasted for 364 years, ended when Tezcatlipoca took revenge on Quetzalcoatl by sending a great hurricane that took the sun out of the sky and blew the people off the earth.
- The third creation in the Aztec myth was managed by Tlaloc, the rain god. Known as the Rain Sun or the Fire Sun, this world lasted 312 years, until Quetzalcoatl once again destroyed it—this time with a rain of fire. The sun was once again swept from the sky while the earth burned.

- Then, the goddess of streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans created a new sun, Water Sun, which lasted 676 years. This time, the goddess herself ended the age by releasing the waters from above the sky and creating a great flood. The flood lasted 52 years, at the end of which even the mountains had been washed away. Once again, there was only a vast, still sea.
- Thus, for the fifth time, creation had to be started all over again. This time, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca worked together. They killed a great monster in the primal sea and tore her in half. From the two parts, they fashioned the sky and the earth. Even in her changed state, the Aztec monster was still ravenously hungry—especially for blood. In order to guarantee her blessings, the gods promised her a steady diet of sacrifice. If this, the Fifth World, is destroyed, that is truly the end.

The Need for Sacrifice

- The details of the rest of the creation story show how fragile the cosmos seemed to the Aztec—and, hence, the need for sacrifice (especially for hearts and blood) to keep it nourished.
- Quetzalcoatl goes to the underworld to recover bones left from previous creations in order to create human beings. He gets them from the lord of the dead, then brings them to the Earth Mother, who grinds them into powder. Next, Quetzalcoatl inseminates them with his own blood. This story also accounts for the coming of death into the world.
- The creation of the sun and moon happened at the ancient city of Teotihuacán—a place so grand even in ruins that the Aztec considered it sacred. In the myth, the gods all gather there to decide which of them will become the new sun. One haughty and arrogant god volunteers, but the others encourage a humble and deformed god, who accepts the charge.
- The other gods prepare two sacrificial pyres. After four days of penance, the two candidates present themselves on the Pyramid



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Human sacrifices were made at the Great Pyramid at Tenochtitlan as a way of providing nourishment for the cosmos.

of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacán. Both leap into the flames. Then, the gods wait to see where they will rise. The sky slowly reddens, and the sun rises in the east. Just behind him comes the moon, almost as fiercely hot and bright. Worrying that the world will be too bright and hot, one of the gods throws a rabbit into the face of the moon, dimming it. That is the origin of the seated rabbit that the Mesoamericans saw in the face of the full moon.

- Although the sun and moon are now in the sky, neither of them moves. Thus, the gods decide that they must sacrifice themselves to feed the sun's desperate thirst and help it move. Quetzalcoatl cuts out the hearts of the other gods one by one and offers them to the sun, which then begins to move. The message is clear: Just as the gods had to sacrifice themselves to get the cosmos going, so must humans supply hearts and blood to ensure that the fifth sun will continue to rise each morning in the east, making all of life possible.

Toltec Divine Right to Rule

- The Toltec, who had built Tollan, were the heroes of the Aztec. They had built a great city, they had been fierce fighters, and they had ruled, according to their own myths, by a divine mandate. According to Toltec myth, Quetzalcoatl had been the only god ever to be incarnated as a human being, and in that incarnation, he had come to rule Tollan as a priest-king, overseeing an age of cultural grandeur. Indeed, the ruler in Tollan was called Tolpitzin-Quetzalcoatl.
- The Aztec married their ruling-class men to women from the ruling house of the Toltec. The Toltec rulers were descended from Quetzalcoatl and, therefore, had a divine right to rule; by marrying into the line, the Aztec sought to acquire some of that right for themselves.

Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca

- Tollan had fallen by the time the Aztec arrived; the explanation for how that happened involved Quetzalcoatl's arch enemy, Tezcatlipoca, the god of night, jaguars, the north, and war. In the story, Tezcatlipoca came to Tollan and destroyed Quetzalcoatl's power.
- In one of the best-known versions of the story, Tezcatlipoca tempts Tolpitzin-Quetzalcoatl into drinking pulque, the Aztec alcoholic beverage. Until then, the priest-king had lived a life of extreme austerity. But the pulque makes him drunk; his inhibitions and self-discipline disappear; and he winds up inviting his sister to share his pulque—and, before morning, his bed. He wakes up the next morning knowing that his reign and the golden age of Tollan are over.
- Tolpitzin-Quetzalcoatl lies in a stone casket for four days, then he and his retinue march toward the eastern sea. He orders a funeral pyre built and, dressed in his feathered robes, throws himself onto it and is instantly consumed. Flocks of birds rise from the pyre, carrying his heart, which becomes the Morning Star, whose task it is to clear the sky of the powers of darkness and night to make way for the dawn.

- This action immediately generates a dark twin, because in Aztec thought, everything is doubled. The dark twin becomes the Evening Star, who tries each night to defeat the sun by overwhelming it with the powers of night and thrusting it into the underworld. Each night, the sun must fight its way through to the east so that it can rise in the morning. To do this, the sun needs a daily supply of hearts and blood.

Reenactment of a Myth

- In another version of the Tollan myth, Tolpitzin-Quetzalcoatl makes his way to the sea and sails off to the east. In that story, he promises to return and restore the glory of his priest-king reign. The date of his expected return was known by its name in the Aztec calendar, and by the sheerest of luck, the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived at Tenochtitlán on the precise date of the expected return.
- Montezuma II, the Aztec ruler, knew the calendar and the prophecies surrounding it; Thus, instead of greeting Cortés with force, he welcomed him with a grand speech, thinking that he was the returning Quetzalcoatl. That turned out to be a pivotal moment in Mesoamerican history. After two years of intermittent fighting and negotiation, the Aztec Empire ceased to exist.
- C. A. Burland and Werner Forman, in their book *Feathered Serpent and Smoking Mirror*, maintain that, at least in mythic terms, the destiny of the Aztec was written in the fall of Tollan, when Tezcatlipoca ousted Tolpitzin-Quetzalcoatl. Tezcatlipoca offered war to the Aztec, the means by which their strength grew and the means for capturing the human sacrifices needed to appease the gods. The gift of sacrifice depended on reciprocal relations. If the people failed to make the proper sacrifices, Tezcatlipoca would no longer help them win their victories, the sun would stop moving, and time would cease.
- Montezuma II ruled by divine right, and that right came in part from the Toltec, whose priest-king had been an incarnation of Quetzalcoatl. Montezuma also knew that One Reed, the year beginning a new 52-year cycle, was the year when the prophecies said that Quetzalcoatl

would return. When Cortés showed up on that auspicious day, Montezuma and his priests and scholars knew that the world would either be renewed or it would end. And if it were renewed, perhaps it would be the beginning of the reign of Quetzalcoatl.

- As Burland and Forman demonstrate, the history of the conquest of Mexico is, very largely, a reenactment of the myth of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca.

Suggested Reading

Brundage, *The Fifth Sun*.

Burland and Forman, *Feathered Serpent and Smoking Mirror*.

Hunt, *Gods and Myths of the Aztecs*.

Townsend, *The Aztecs*.

Questions to Consider

1. If in the myth of the conception of Huitzilopochtli we assume that his sister is the moon and his 400 brothers are stars, then they would have reasons beyond the shame of their mother to want to kill both him and her, because he is an aspect of the sun (or a son of the Sun). Read this story astronomically. What does it explain?
2. How do the Aztec stories of gods bleeding themselves to make humans or sacrificing themselves to make the sun and moon move help to explain their practice of human sacrifice? What cosmic or psychological principles are involved? How does the story of the earth and sky being made of the torn-up body of a monster—so that the earth constantly demands blood—reinforce those principles?

Inca Myth as Imperial Mandate

Lecture 60

At the time of the Spanish conquest in 1532, the Inca had the largest empire in the Americas. The empire encompassed 6 million people and extended along the western edge of South America, from southern Colombia through Ecuador and Peru into southern Chile, and east across parts of Bolivia and northwestern Argentina. The empire integrated many peoples and languages, all held together from the Inca capital city of Cuzco. Unlike the other American cultures we've studied, the Inca used myth to justify their empire. In this lecture, we will trace their story. And in conclusion, we will examine similarities in the many stories recounted in our exploration of the Americas.

The Inca and Roman Empires

- The Inca Empire was in some ways comparable to the Roman Empire: It had been achieved through military conquest; it was efficiently administered; and it was, to some extent, tolerant of the religions and practices of the peoples it conquered—as long as those people paid their tribute and worshipped the Inca sun god alongside their own.
- Another striking similarity with the Romans was the way in which the Inca created their mythology. As the Romans occupied lands, they consolidated the stories of the conquered peoples into what became the great Roman story. The Inca did much the same with the stories of the peoples they assimilated into their empire. The Inca adapted their myths and wove them together into the story of how the Inca had been chosen by the gods to rule.
- One significant difference between the two cultures, however, is that the Inca had no Virgil—no great author to write the grand epic. In fact, the Inca had no writing at all. They communicated their stories with a device called the *quipu*, a bundle of knotted strings, which was also used in mathematics. Therefore, the Inca stories we

know were recorded by Spanish chroniclers or by native scribes who had been trained by the Spanish to read and write.

- Historians and mythographers are cognizant of the distortions or errors that can accompany such second-hand transmission. Everyone who works with this body of material must read between the lines to separate native from imported material and to discover which parts of a story come from earlier traditions and which were reinterpretations or additions of the Inca.
- As Gary Urton observes in his book *Inca Myths*, the myths of the Inca legitimized their rule and validated the way they organized society. In Inca myth, mythographers distinguish two kinds of stories: myths belonging to conquered peoples with unique origins and Inca myths in which peoples share a common past and are working toward a collective future—one in which the Inca were divinely ordained to rule. The common element in these two kinds of myth is Lake Titicaca in the Andes Mountains, between modern-day Peru and Bolivia. It is there that the cosmos and the ancestors of all human beings were created.

Viracocha the Creator

- In the myth of the Qulla, a people northeast of Lake Titicaca who were absorbed by the Inca, the creator god Viracocha first appears near Lake Titicaca and creates both giants and animals. Viracocha sets down rules for these creatures, but when these rules are ignored, Viracocha turns the giants into stone and sends a flood to destroy everything. Then, he starts again, this time making people out of clay and giving each one its own customs, costumes, and foods. When he finishes, he disappears into the sea.
- In another version of the story, Viracocha is identified as a passing traveler, one who heals the sick and gives sight to the blind. When the people threaten to stone him, he sinks to his knees and raises his hands—and, suddenly, fire falls from the sky. This story has some obvious parallels with stories from other religions. In particular, there is something Christ-like about the Viracocha figure in this version.

- In another Qulla story, Viracocha is something of a trickster. He falls in love with a beautiful woman and changes himself into a bird. He pierces a fruit with his beak and inserts a seed into the fruit. When the woman eats the fruit, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy. Of course, she is still a virgin.



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- John Bierhorst, who recounts this story in his book *The Mythology of South America*, notes that there are so many analogues of this story in South America that it must be authentic. But he also observes that the story was probably influenced by a medieval European legend of Jesus.

According to one account, the giants that Viracocha turned to stone after the first creation can still be seen at a site called Tiahuanaco.

Myth as Justification for Power

- Using the Qulla body of myth, we can determine that there was a fully developed mythological tradition in the Andes highlands before the Inca came to power. According to Gary Urton, we can generalize that there was a preexisting belief that all humans had been created at Lake Titicaca by a creator most commonly called Viracocha. Each people, however, identified a specific location as the place of origin. It was this body of myth that the Inca absorbed, adapted, and co-opted into their own stories as a way of validating their right to create and rule an empire.
- At one time, the Inca were no more civilized and sophisticated than any other peoples in the area. In fact, they stood in awe of some of the achievements of the past in the same way the Aztec had when they arrived at the Valley of Mexico. Therefore, as the Inca rose to power, it was crucial for them to claim some right or mandate that

gave them supremacy over all the conquered nations. They used their mythology to accomplish this.

- According to the Inca master narrative, on an island in the middle of Lake Titicaca, the sun adopted the Inca as his children and gave them a sacred mission. The sun maintained that because the rest of the peoples were living in barbarism, he was sending the Inca to bring peace, plenty, and civilization.
 - He sent the Inca north to a cave near Cuzco, from which brothers and sisters emerged, wearing rich garments covered with gold and carrying corn seeds, slings, and household utensils. One brother, Manco Capac, also carried a golden rod that would sink into the ground in the precise spot the sun had chosen for them. Manco Capac had a son with one of his sisters, founding the Inca dynasty.
 - The sun had instructions for the founders of the Inca. He told them that he had made them rulers over all races, all of which would benefit from their instruction, good works, and competent administration. Then, the pair took on the work of civilizing the barbarians. Because the Inca were so helpful and gentle—the story goes—they were worshipped as “children of the sun.”
 - In many of versions of the story, it is clear that the Inca felt a sense of superiority over other peoples. The peoples they encounter, including the ruler of Cuzco, at once see that the Inca are gifted with great powers and profound compassion, and the peoples happily submit to Manco Capac and the rest of his family. There is no need for war because those destined to become subject peoples know right away that the Inca rule will be beneficent.

A Darker “Children of the Sun” Myth

- A darker version of this tale also exists, and according to John Bierhorst, this one reveals the cynicism and manipulation that lay beneath the legends about gentle and beneficent kings and contented subjects.

- This version notes that the brothers and sisters who emerged from the cave near the Valley of Cuzco tricked the locals into accepting them as children of the sun. First, they spread rumors that the sun was about to send one of his children as a ruler. They fashioned a dazzling suit of gold for Manco Capac and had him emerge from a cave on top of the mountain overlooking Cuzco. In the sunrise, he looked like a god.
- The common people were awed and overwhelmed, and Manco Capac came down the mountain as lord of Cuzco. Bierhorst thinks that this is the version the Inca themselves believed. The other versions were simply propaganda put out for public consumption.
- Gary Urton, however, has reservations about this version of the story and questions its source. There is a possibility that the source was the Christians, for whom the myths of the pagans were works of the devil, designed to deceive people. It may also have been a story from people within the empire who wanted to call into question the legitimacy of Inca rule, or it could have been an authentic story from the Inca themselves.

Myth—A Way of Understanding the World

- Kay Almere Read and Jason J. Gonzalez, in their book *Mesoamerican Mythology*, assert that myths are true because they describe, either literally or metaphorically, the way people actually think about the world. According to these authors, myths accomplish the following tasks:
 - They describe the tangible world.
 - They explain that world in human terms that make sense to people telling the stories.
 - They interpret the world in humanly meaningful ways, offering justification and guides for action in the world.
 - By causing real action, myths act on the world in ways that sometimes confirm the way people believe it to be and

sometimes force people to create new mythic models. The new models, in turn, stimulate new myths and new action.

- The Inca myths accomplish the goals described by Read and Gonzalez, as do all the other American myths we've studied. All the myths we have explored were true for the people who told them. And many of them still hold truths for us, even though we live in cultures and societies far removed from those of the people who created the myths. Myths are the human way of understanding the world in which we live—and explaining to us how we must live.

Suggested Reading

Bierhorst, *The Mythology of South America*.

Salles-Reese, *From Viracocha to the Virgin of Copacabana*.

Urton, *Inca Myths*.

Questions to Consider

1. There are many stone sacred places called *huacas*, sites of devotion and pilgrimage, in the Inca stories. But there are also massive statues of humans left behind by earlier peoples. How did the Inca myths account for these? What makes them sacred?
2. The story of Viracocha and the maiden is the first one we have had in which the trickster is not merely a culture hero but the creator—ineffective at wooing, badly dressed, seducing young women, then going on the lam. Is this a uniquely Andes idea, or can you think of other myths in which a god is both the creator and the butt of jokes? Does such treatment make the god seem absurd or merely closer to us humans?

Mythological Figures

Greek Tradition

Achilles: Great Spartan warrior of the Trojan War.

Adonis: Consort of Aphrodite.

Aeëtes: King of Colchis and father of Medea.

Agamemnon: King of Mycenae and father of Orestes.

Alcimedea: Mother of Jason.

Alcmene: Mortal mother of Herakles.

Aphrodite: Goddess of love; wife of Hephaestus, although she had amorous relationships with many other men.

Apollo: Widely revered god; second only to Zeus.

Athena: Goddess of war, particularly the statecraft of war; daughter of Zeus and Metis. She was the patron of Athens and was credited with establishing the first trial court there.

Ares: God of war; lover of Aphrodite.

Calypso: Beautiful nymph who held Odysseus captive on her island.

Cerberus: Three-headed dog of the underworld.

Charybdis: Deadly whirlpool encountered by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*.

Circe: Sorceress who turned men into swine in the *Odyssey*.

Clytemnestra: Mother of Orestes.

Demeter: Harvest goddess.

Deukalion: Son of Prometheus. Deukalion and his wife, Pyrrha, repopulated the earth after a great flood.

Dionysus: Son of Zeus; a nature god.

Epimetheus: Brother of Prometheus and husband of Pandora.

Erikhthonios: Child of Gaia and Hephaestus.

Eris: Goddess of discord; her attendance at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis sparked the story of the Judgment of Paris.

Eros: Son of Aphrodite and god of love.

Eurystheus: King of Mycenae; assigned the twelve labors to Herakles.

Gaia: Goddess of the earth and mother of the Titans.

Hades: God of the underworld.

Hephaestus: Craftsman god and husband of Aphrodite.

Hera: Goddess of marriage and childbirth; wife of Zeus.

Herakles: Son of Zeus and Alcmene; half-god/half-man. He performed the twelve labors and was a great hero to the Greeks.

Hermes: Messenger to the gods.

Iphigenia: Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

Jason: Greek hero who captained the Argonauts and brought home the Golden Fleece.

Kronos: Son of Uranus and leader of the Titans.

Laertes: Father of Odysseus.

Medea: Daughter of King Aeëtes and a sorceress; wife of Jason. When she believed she had been betrayed by Jason, she murdered their two sons.

Medusa: One of the monsters known as gorgons; her hair was made of snakes.

Menelaus: Spartan king.

Metis: Mother of Athena.

Odysseus: Legendary king of Ithaca; hero of the *Odyssey*.

Olympians: Second generation of gods.

Orestes: Mortal who murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, for her infidelity to his father, Agamemnon.

Orpheus: Hero with superhuman musical talents.

Pandora: Created by Hephaestus. The first human bride, Pandora allowed evil to escape into the world.

Paris: Mortal prince of Troy; his seduction or abduction of Helen of Troy sparked the Trojan War.

Pelias: King of Iolcus; sent Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece.

Penelope: Faithful wife of Odysseus.

Persephone: Daughter of Zeus and Demeter; a vegetation goddess and goddess of the underworld.

Polyphemus: Cyclops who captured Odysseus and his men and, later, Jason and his men.

Poseidon: God of the sea.

Prometheus: One of the Titans; stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity; established sacrifice to the gods.

Pyrrha: Daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora; the first naturally born human woman. Pyrrha and her husband, Deukalion, repopulated the earth after a great flood.

Rhea: Sister and wife of Kronos; mother of the first generation of Olympian gods.

Scylla: Monster encountered by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*.

Sirens: Mermaid-like creatures in the *Odyssey* who took the forms of beautiful women and lured sailors to their deaths.

Telemachus: Son of Odysseus and Penelope.

Titans: First generation of gods; produced by the union of Gaia, the earth, and Uranus, the sky. Represented forces of nature, such as the wind, the sea, and storms.

Uranus: Father of the Titans.

Zeus: Youngest child of Kronos; chief Greek god.

Roman Tradition

Aeneas: Son of Venus and a Trojan warrior; he led defeated refugees after the Trojan War to Latium, the region where Rome was eventually founded.

Amulius: Numitor's brother; usurper of the throne of Alba Longa.

Attis: Greek man who became Cybele's consort. Various stories offer explanations for why he castrated himself.

Claudia Quinta: Matriarch of Rome; she towed the barge carrying the Great Mother Goddess to the shores of the Tiber River.

Cybele: Great Mother Goddess; associated with fertility and protection. She transformed over the centuries from a wild woman associated with mountains and animals in Anatolian and Greek mythology to a sedate, solitary, pious goddess in Roman mythology.

Dido: Queen of Carthage; she hoped to marry Aeneas and committed suicide when he left her.

Hector: Slaughtered Trojan prince.

Juno: Roman equivalent of Hera; goddess of marriage and childbirth.

Jupiter: Roman equivalent of Zeus; chief god.

Lupa: She-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus.

Maeon: King of Phrygia and Cybele's father.

Mars: God of war, spring, nature, fertility, and the earth.

Mercury: Roman equivalent of Hermes.

Naiad: A water nymph.

Neptune: Roman equivalent of Poseidon; god of the sea.

Numitor: Ruler of Alba Longa; grandfather of Romulus and Remus.

Picus: Woodpecker who brought food to Romulus and Remus.

Priam: King of Troy.

Rhea Silvia: Numitor's daughter; mother of Romulus and Remus.

Romulus and Remus: Twin sons of Mars and founders of Rome.

Scipio Nasica: Patriarch of Rome.

Tarpeia: Famous female traitor; out of greed, she opened the gates of a Roman citadel, allowing the enemy Sabines to enter.

Tatius: Sabine king; ruled jointly with Romulus until his assassination.

Ulysses: Roman name for Odysseus.

Venus: Roman equivalent of Aphrodite; goddess of love.

Celtic Tradition

Brigid: Daughter of the Dagda; goddess of all things high and lofty.

Cú Chulainn: Great warrior and hero of the Ulster family lineage.

Cú Roí: A wizard.

Dagda: A giant warrior and leader of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Fomorians: Army of one-armed, one-legged gods from the sea.

Lugaid: Slayer of Cú Chulainn.

Lugh: Hero of the Tuatha Dé Danann; credited with bringing agricultural skills to the ancient Irish.

Milesians: First human beings.

Ruadán: Son of Brigid.

sidhe: “People of the mounds”; otherworldly beings of Irish mythology.

Tuatha Dé Danann: “People of the goddess Danu”; a race of supernatural beings with magical abilities.

Norse Tradition

Balder: Son of Odin.

Brokk: Dwarf craftsman.

Brunhild: Shieldmaiden and beloved of Sigurd.

Draupnir: Golden arm ring.

Fenrir: Mighty wolf; leader of the powers of evil.

Freja: Goddess associated with love, fertility, beauty, and magic.

Freyr: God of peace, fertility, rain, and sunshine; associated with kingship and fair weather.

Fyorgyn: Earth goddess and mother of Thor.

Geirrod and Agnar: Brothers tested by Odin.

Gerd: Daughter of a giant.

Gjuki: King of Burgundy.

Gram: Sigurd’s sword.

Grimhild: Wife of King Gjuki; a sorceress.

Gudrun: Daughter of Grimhild.

Gungnir: Odin's spear.

Hel: Goddess of death.

Hermod: Son of Odin.

Jörmungand: Serpent in the realm of the dead.

Loki: Master of deception but often consulted by Odin when the gods were in trouble.

Mimir: Guardian of the Well of Wisdom.

Mjølfnir: Thor's hammer.

Odrorir: Cauldron containing the mead of wisdom and poetry.

Rán: Sea giantess.

Sif: Wife of Thor.

Sigmund: Patriarch of the Volsung clan.

Sigurd: Son of Sigmund.

Sindri: Dwarf craftsman.

Skidbladnir: Freyr's ship.

Skírnir: Servant of Freyr.

sons of Ivaldi: Dwarf craftsmen.

Thor: God of sky and thunder; son of Odin.

Vafthrudner: Wisest of the giants.

Valkyrie: Female character who determined who will die or live in battle.

Vidar: Son of Odin.

Yggdrasill: World tree. Yggdrasill was the axis of three worlds: the world of the gods, the world of men and giants, and the world of the dead.

Mesopotamian Tradition

Apsu: God of fresh water in the Enuma Elish.

Bull of Heaven: Creature sent by Ishtar to kill Gilgamesh.

Damkina: Consort of Ea.

Ea: Son of Apsu and Tiamat; supreme god in the Enuma Elish before he surrenders leadership to his son Marduk.

Enkidu: A primal man; created by the gods to defeat Gilgamesh. He ultimately becomes Gilgamesh's close comrade.

Enlil: God of the atmosphere in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh: Hero of the Epic of Gilgamesh. A half-man/half-god and ruler of Uruk. Over the course of the epic, he learns that true satisfaction in life can't be found in the temptations of the city but only from an experience of friendship. This experience also brings an awareness of his own mortality.

Humbaba: Monster defeated by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Kingu: Second husband of Tiamat.

Marduk: Storm god. In the Enuma Elish, he defeats the army of Tiamat and becomes the supreme god.

Shamash: God of the sun.

Shamhat: Temple prostitute who seduces and tames Enkidu.

Siduri: Ale-wife (bartender) who advises Gilgamesh to put aside his fears of mortality and enjoy life.

Tiamat: Goddess of sea water in the Enuma Elish.

Utnapishtim: Survivor of a great flood who was granted immortality by the gods.

Egyptian Tradition

Ammit: Devourer goddess.

Apep: Giant snake god, representing chaos.

Aton: Sun god whom the pharaoh Akhenaton attempted to elevate to the level of a single supreme god.

Atum: Identified with Ra; divine creator.

Banebdjedet: Ram god.

Geb: God of the earth.

Hathor: The cow goddess; associated with motherhood and fertility.

Horus: First-born son of Isis and Osiris. Horus was a sky god and was also associated with war. He ruled for a time as supreme deity but was later supplanted by Ra.

Imhotep: Chancellor to the pharaoh and high priest to the sun god. Although Imhotep was a commoner, he was so influential that mythology developed about his life.

Isis: Osiris's consort and sister.

Maat: Goddess of order, truth, and balance.

Nefertum: Weeping boy whose tears became the creatures of earth.

Nephthys: Consort of Set.

Nut: Goddess of the heavens.

Osiris: Great-grandson of Ra; son of Geb and Nut. He inherited the throne as king of Egypt when Ra receded from the earth. He was later murdered by his brother Set, restored to life by Isis, and became god of the underworld.

Ptah: Master builder, architect, and in some traditions, the creator deity.

Ra: God of the sun and creator god. His mythology celebrates order and the importance of the natural and agricultural cycles in Egyptian life. Eventually, the pharaoh was conflated with Ra as the ultimate symbol of power.

Reddjedet: Wife of a high priest of Ra who gave birth to three future kings of Egypt.

Sekhmet: War goddess and consort of Ptah.

Set: Brother of Osiris; god of storms, disorder, violence, the desert, and foreigners.

Shu: God of wind and air.

Sobek: Crocodile god.

Tefnut: Shu's consort; goddess of moisture.

Thoth: God charged with maintaining the universe.

Typhon: Brother of Osiris.

Biblical Tradition

Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu: Friends of Job who try to convince him that his sinfulness is the cause of his suffering.

God: Creator and supreme deity of Judaism and Christianity.

Job: A “blameless and upright” man who becomes the focus of a wager between God and Satan.

Noah: Hero who saves a remnant of mankind and living creatures in the biblical flood story.

Satan: An archangel of God; in the Book of Job, Satan serves as a kind of prosecutor.

Indian Tradition

Agni: God of fire.

Arjuna: Leading warrior of the Pandava clan. Arjuna is reluctant to fulfill his dharma as a warrior because it will mean killing his kinsmen, but his conversation with Krishna throughout the *Bhagavad Gita* convinces him that he should perform his duty as a sacrifice to Krishna.

Bharata: Son of Kaikeyi; half-brother of Ram.

Brahma: Creator god.

Brahmastra: Bow and arrow crafted by Brahma; used as a weapon by Ram.

Dasharatha: King of Ayodhya and father of Ram.

Devadatta: Kalki's horse.

Dhritarashtra: Blind king and father of Duryodhana, leader of the Kaurava army.

Draupadi: Joint wife of the Pandava brothers.

Duryodhana: Evil king of the Kauravas.

Ganesh: Elephant-headed Hindu god.

Hanuman: General of an army of monkeys.

Kaikeyi: Evil wife of Dasharatha. She demands that her son be placed on the throne of Ayodhya instead of Ram and sends Ram into exile for 14 years.

Kali: Evil god who rules over the present degenerate age.

Kalki: God of righteousness and order.

Kauravas: Clan determined to take over the kingdom of the Pandavas.

King Janaka: Father of the princess Sita.

Krishna: Eighth incarnation of Vishnu; in the *Bhagavad Gita*, he acts as Arjuna's chariot driver, military aide, and counselor.

Lakshmana: Ram's brother.

Pandavas: Five sons of Pandu, who engage in an epic battle with their cousins, the Kauravas.

Parvati: Mother of Ganesh.

Rakshasi Tataka: Demoness battled by Ram and Lakshmana.

Ram: Model warrior-king of the *Ramayana*; he is an avatar of the god Vishnu, embodying righteousness.

Ravana: Demon who battles with Ram.

Sanjaya: Seer who describes the events in the *Bhagavad Gita* to Dhritarashtra.

Savitri: Model of a devoted and pure wife. In the *Mahabharata*, she persuades Yama, the god of death, to restore her dead husband to life.

Shiva: One of the main Hindu deities. In one common form, he is known as Nataraja (“Lord of the Dance”) and is portrayed as dancing the universe into and out of existence, surrounded by a ring of fire.

Sita: Wife of Ram.

Vishnu: Primary Hindu deity; lord of the cosmos. In one incarnation, he is born as Ram.

Yudhisthira: Pandava brother whose gambling problem causes his family to be sent into exile for 12 years.

Buddhist Tradition

Amitabha: Enlightened being who is said to help others gain enlightenment when they worship him and speak his name out loud.

Avalokiteshvara: Well-known and preeminent enlightened being.

Chandaka: Siddhartha’s chariot driver.

Kisagotami: Woman whose son died but was taught by the Buddha that all human life involves loss.

Maitreya: The next form of the Buddha expected to come to this age.

Sakka: Enlightened being featured in the “Rabbit in the Moon” story.

Siddhartha Gautama: Wealthy prince who became the Buddha—the “enlightened one.”

Tara: Female Buddhist deity; known as the “mother of liberation” and a goddess of compassion and healing.

Yasodhara: Wife of Siddhartha.

Persian Tradition

Afrasiyab: Rival to Kay Kāus who encourages Sohrāb to attack the king.

Aladdin: A poor boy in *One Thousand and One Nights* who finds a magic lamp containing a genie.

Ali: Protagonist of the story “Ali the Cairene and the Haunted House in Baghdad.” He encounters *jinn* who restore the good fortune he had lost.

Bashuntan: Esfandiyār’s brother

div: Archdemon in the *Shāhnāme*.

Esfandiyār: Son of Goshtasp and crown prince of Persia. An almost invincible warrior who may represent Zoroastrianism in the *Shāhnāme*.

Goshtasp: King of Persia; father of Esfandiyār, who sends him into battle with Rostam.

jinni: Genie; the *jinn* in Persian folktales are not inherently good or evil but magical.

Kay Kāus: Proud, impulsive, and foolish ruler of the Keyānid dynasty of Iran.

Rakhsh: Rostam's horse and faithful companion; he possesses a number of fantastic qualities, including the abilities to talk and to fight.

Rostam of Sistān: A hero and central figure of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*; loyal advisor to the king of Iran, Kay Kāus.

Scheherazade: Daughter of King Shahriyar's chief advisor. Her plan to tell stories ends the nightly execution of virgins in the *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Shahriyar: Ancient Persian king who became convinced that all women were traitors after he discovered his wife's infidelity. He vowed to spend each night with a new virgin, whom he would execute the following morning. His story acts as the frame for the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Simurgh: Giant winged creature, usually depicted as a peacock with the head of a dog and a lion's claws.

Sindbad: An elderly, rich sailor who narrates seven of his own adventures in *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Sohrāb: Son of Rostam.

Zoroastrian Tradition

Ahura Mazda: Supreme god of Zoroastrianism.

Tistar: An angel who causes three floods in Zoroastrian mythology, purging evil creatures from the earth.

Yima: King who ruled the earth for 900 years. He was warned of a great flood by Ahura Mazda and instructed to build an enclosure to save his family, plants and animals, and fire.

African Traditions

Abassi: Creator god of the Anang people (Nigeria).

Abradi: Supreme god of the Ama and Nyimang people (Sudan).

Abuk: First woman in the creation myth of the Dinka (South Sudan). Like Eve, she disobeys the high god, bringing suffering to humanity.

Aido-Hwedo: Cosmic serpent in the tradition of the Fon people (Benin).

‘Aisha Qandisha: Female Moroccan *jnun* (*jinn*). She seduces attractive young men, who may be rendered impotent by her or lose interest in real women until she is exorcised.

Aiwei Longar: Culture hero of the Bor people (Sudan).

Aja: Forest goddess of the Yoruba people (West Africa).

Aminata: Beautiful woman of Segou who appears in the Bakaridjan epic of the Bambara people.

Amma: Creator god of the Dogon people (central Mali); he crafted the earth in the form of a woman.

Anansi: Mr. Spider; a trickster character who is especially popular among the Ashanti people (Ghana).

Atai: Wife of Abassi, creator god of the Anang people (Nigeria). When her husband’s creations disregard his injunctions, she introduces death into the world.

Baatsi: According to the tradition of the Mbuti people (Democratic Republic of the Congo), the first man; created by Tore.

Bakaridjan: Hero of an epic of the Bambara kingdom of Segou. He is targeted for death by King Da Monzon but demonstrates fortitude and bravery in the face of mounting challenges.

Bamana Diase: Hero of Segou who appears in the Bakaridjan epic of the Bambara people.

Bumba: Supreme god of the Bushongo, the ruling group of the Bakuba, a Bantu-speaking people. Bumba vomited up the sun, moon, stars, lightning, human beings, and some of the creatures of earth; he also taught human beings to extract fire from trees, where it lived.

Cagn: Supreme creator of god of the San people (southern Africa). Also known by the names Dxui and Hishe, Cagn can change shapes at will and created living things by inhabiting their forms.

Chuku: Creator god of the Igbo people (Nigeria).

Da Monzon: Historical king of Segou; his mistrust of Bakaridjan leads to much of the action in the epic of the Bambara people.

Da Toma: Eldest son of King Da Monzon and enemy of Bakaridjan in the epic of the Bambara people.

Dikithi: Giant trickster of the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Africa.

Eka Abassi: Great mother goddess worshipped in parts of Nigeria.

Enkai: Supreme sky god of the Maasai people (East Africa). He uses a flood to punish humanity for wrongdoing.

Eshu: Trickster god of the Yoruba people (West Africa); he also serves as the intermediary between humans and Olorun, the supreme god of the Yoruba pantheon.

Etim 'Ne: According to the Ekoi people (Nigeria), the first man.

Fam: A being created by Nzame, supreme god of the Fang people (Gabon). He was created to be the leader of the world, but he abandons his creators and is cruel in his reign over animals; the result is that death is brought to the world.

Faro: A water spirit of the Bambara people (Mali) who creates the seven heavens, each of which fertilizes a corresponding part of the earth with rain.

≠Gao!na: A culture hero of the !Kung people (Namibia). He steals fire from one human being in order to give it to others.

Garang: First man in the creation myth of the Dinka (South Sudan).

Gassire: A character from the *Dausi*; he longed for his father's death so that he could become king but became a bard instead. His vanity caused the first disappearance of the empire of Wagadu.

Gulu: Sky god of the Baganda people (Uganda).

Hai-uri: In the tradition of the Khoikhoi people (southern Africa), a partly invisible man-eater.

Ifa: Yoruba god of divination.

Imana: Creator god of the Banyarwanda, Hutu, and Tutsi peoples (Burundi and Rwanda).

Jeki la Njambe: Hero who journeys to the underworld to find his sister, Engeme, in a story of the Duala people (coastal Cameroon).

Jok: Recognized by the Acholi and Lango peoples (Uganda) and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan; creator of the heavens, the earth, and all of earth's inhabitants.

Juok: Creator god of the Anuak people (Sudan).

Kadimba: Trickster hare of the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Africa.

Kaggen: Creator god of the San people (southern Africa).

|Kai |Kini: In the mythology of the !Kung people (Namibia), |Kai |Kini is the only man on earth who has fire.

Kalumba: Creator god of the Luba people (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Kalunga: Supreme god and god of the dead of the Ambundu and Lunda peoples (Angola). As a supreme god, he is wise and just, but as god of the underworld, he is not to be trusted.

Kamo: The name of two characters in a myth about friendship told by the Vai people (northwestern Liberia and parts of Sierra Leone).

Kamunu: According to the tradition of the Lozi people (Zambia), the first man.

Kibuka: God of war of the Baganda people (Uganda).

Kitaka: Female earth figure of the Baganda people (Uganda).

Kiwanuka: God of thunder and lightning of the Baganda people (Uganda).

Kwasi Benefo: In a myth of the Ashanti people (Ghana), a hero who journeys to the underworld after the deaths of his four wives. His experience in the world of death enables him to embrace life once again.

Lagarre: In the *Dausi*, he recovers the drum Tabele and restores the empire of Wagadu.

Le-eyo: Culture hero of the Maasai (East Africa); because of him, the Maasai became cattle herders.

Legba: A manifestation of Eshu and an attendant of the supreme god of the Fon people (Benin). His job is to inflict all the harm on humanity that the supreme god deems necessary.

Lonkundo: Culture hero of the Mongo people (Central Africa); said to be the son of Bokele, a leader who stole the sun for his community. Lonkundo found the luminous woman Ilankaka in one of his traps and married her.

Madiniko: Hero of Segou who appears in the Bakaridjan epic of the Bambara people.

Mama Dinga: In the *Dausi*, the father of Lagarre.

Marwe: In the tradition of the Chaga people (Tanzania), a young girl who journeys to the underworld, where she finds kindness and is able to return to earth as a decisive young woman.

Masupa: Creator god of the Efe people (Democratic Republic of the Congo); he punishes his daughter by bringing death into the world.

Mawu-Lisa: Androgynous creator god of the Fon people (Benin).

Mebege: In the tradition of the Fang people (Gabon), the god Mebege worked with a spider, Dibobia, to create the earth.

Mekidech: A dwarf trickster with seven brothers; known among the Kabyle, a Berber people of Algeria.

Moni-Mambu: Trickster of the Bakongo people (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Mukasa: Deity who provides food, cattle, and children to the Baganda people (Uganda).

Mukunga M'bura: Monster feared by the Kikuyu people (Kenya); it lives in the water and emerges at night to feed on herders' cattle.

Musisi: Deity who provides help in natural disasters to the Baganda people (Uganda).

Musokoroni: Wife of Pemba, creator of the earth, in the mythology of the Bambara people (Mali).

Naiteru-kop: Messenger of the gods of the Maasai (East Africa).

Nambi: In the tradition of the Baganda people (Uganda), daughter of the sky god. She falls in love with and marries a mortal, Kintu.

Nana-Buluku: Supreme god of the Fon people (Benin); gave birth to Mawu-Lisa.

Ngalo: Amulet worn by Jeki la Njambe that assists him in navigating the spirit world.

Nganamba: In the *Dausi*, a great king of Wagadu and father of Gassire.

Ngewo: Supreme being of the Mende people (Sierra Leone); a fallible creator god who experiences human emotions.

Ngrijo: Mother of Jeki la Njambe.

Njambe: Father of Jeki la Njambe.

Nummo: Twins that resulted from the union of Amma, creator god of the Dogon people, and the earth, which Amma had created in the form of a woman.

Nyambe: Supreme god of the Lozi people (Zambia).

Nyame: Ashanti sky god.

Nzambi (or Nzambi-Mpungu): Supreme god of the Bakongo (or Kongo) people (Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola). In one

myth, he destroyed a small town with a flood because of its people's lack of hospitality.

Nzame: Supreme god of the Fang people (Gabon). He has three aspects: the god of the heavens, also named Nzame; the male aspect of creation, Mebere; and the female aspect of creation, Nkwa.

Obassi: Supreme god of the Ekoi people (Nigeria).

Obatala: Son of Olorun; he created land and fashioned people from clay. Also known as the King of the White Cloth for the white garment he wore.

Obba: Wife of the Yoruba god Shango; spirit of the Obba River.

Oduduwa: God and first ruler of the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. In some myths, Oduduwa is female and is the wife of Obatala; she is also the goddess of love.

Ogun: Yoruba god of iron, the forge, and war.

Olokun: Goddess of the Yoruba people (West Africa) and ruler of the waters and marshes.

Olorun: Supreme god of the Yoruba people (West Africa) and ruler of the sky.

Olu-Igbo: God of the bush and jungle of the Yoruba people (West Africa).

Orunmila: Son of Olorun; god of divination of the Yoruba people (West Africa).

Oshun: Wife of the Yoruba god Shango; spirit of the Oshun River.

Owu: Cannibalistic giant in a myth of the Krachi people (Togo).

Oya: Wife of the Yoruba god Shango; spirit of the Niger River.

Pemba: Creator of the earth for the Bambara people (Mali).

Ruwa: God of the Chaga people (Tanzania) who is seen as a liberator and sustainer; he is also identified with the sun.

Sagbata: God of the earth in the mythology of the Fon people (Benin).

Sekume: Second being created by the supreme god Nzame; the original ancestor of the Fang people (Gabon).

Shamba Bolongongo: Culture hero of the Bushongo people (Democratic Republic of the Congo). He may have been a genuine historical figure who became the ruler of the Bushongo around 1600.

Shango: God of thunder and lightning of the Yoruba people (West Africa); before becoming a god, Shango was the king of Oyo.

Simbalan: Son of Bakaridjan, hero of the epic of the Bambara people. At the end of the epic, Simbalan rescues his father from King Da Monzon.

Sogbo: God of the heavens in the mythology of the Fon people (Benin).

Teliko: An air spirit of the Bambara people (Mali) who creates the twin ancestors of the human race.

Tikdoshe: In Zulu belief, a dwarf who fights and kills human beings.

Tore: Chief god of the Mbuti people (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Uthlakanyana: Zulu trickster.

Wagana Soko: A character from the *Dausi*; he is a jealous man but maintains his honor when his uncle, Mamadi, visits his wife.

Walumbe: God of death of the Baganda people (Uganda).

Wulbari: Supreme god of the Krachi people (eastern Ghana).

Yansan: Wind goddess of the Yoruba people (West Africa).

Yo: In the belief of the Bambara people (Mali), the sound that brought the cosmos into existence. Yo also called forth three creator gods: Faro, Pemba, and Teliko.

Zan: A famous hunter against whom Bakaridjan is tested in one part of the epic of the Bambara people.

Asian and Pacific Traditions

Amaterasu: Japanese sun goddess; emerged from Izanagi's left eye.

Cosmic Spider: In Micronesian origin myth, established the world from inside a great mussel.

Euro-child: In Australian myth, he rose from the ground and went on violent journeys that created a winding line of sacred movement.

Fu Xi: Heroic figure in Chinese myth; coaxed early humans down from trees and taught them about the world.

Gyeonwu and Jiknyeo: Korean versions of the Herdboy and Weaving Maiden, respectively.

Herdboy and Weaving Maiden: Celestial pair whose annual reunion is cause for celebration in China.

Hoderi-no-mikoto and Hoori-no-mikoto: Two brothers—a fisherman and hunter, respectively—who feuded for power in Japanese myth; grandsons of Amaterasu.

Hou Ji: Ancient Chinese agricultural figure; his influence was lessened by meddling scholars.

Huangdi: The Yellow Emperor; in Chinese tradition, he brought humans domestication of animals, transportation methods, the calendar, astronomy, and a legal code.

Hwanin: Lord of heaven in the Korean creation myth; father of Hwanung.

Hwanung: In the Korean creation myth, he lay with bear-woman and fathered Tangun Wanggom.

Hyokkose: Virtuous king of Silla in Korean myth; ascended to heaven upon his death but crashed back to earth.

Izanagi and Izanami: “He Who Beckons” and “She Who Beckons,” respectively, in Japanese myth; linchpins of many subsequent Japanese tales.

Jie and Zhou: Degenerate leaders who flustered the work of the Chinese sage-kings.

Kantjil: Mouse-deer trickster in Indonesian tales who fools tiger repeatedly.

Ku and Hina: Hawaiian counterpart deities; Ku is associated with the sea, and Hina, with agriculture. They influence human sustenance.

Lono: Hawaiian god; he is the power of the seas, clouds, and storms. He jealously but mistakenly killed his wife, Ka-iki-lani, then established the Makahiki games in her honor.

Luk/Lukelong: Sky god; most powerful deity in Micronesian mythology.

Maiian Ginja: Australian supernatural being associated with the dead.

Marawa: Melanesian figure who brought death to the world.

Maui: Powerful trickster demigod in Polynesian mythology. He helped humans in many ways but eventually died while trying to overcome the goddess who caused death in the world, Hine-nui-te-po.

Mireuk: In Korean myth, creator of humanity; he later lost to the usurper deity Seokga in a contest.

Ninigi-no-mikoto: Sent by Amaterasu to provide the Japanese people with rice.

Nü Gua: Creator goddess; fashioned human beings from mud and yellow earth in a Chinese tale.

Okuninushi: Japanese figure. He won the heart of Princess Yagami by caring for the Hare of Inaba and toiling for his brothers; he later eloped with Susa-no-wo's daughter and swept his brothers into the sea.

Olofat: Micronesian trickster deity; more malevolent than typical tricksters.

Pak Che-sang: Korean envoy who rescued King Naemul's son from Japan.

Pan Gu: In Chinese myth, he grew the full distance between heaven and earth; upon his death, his body parts became different parts of the world.

Qat: Melanesian culture hero who brought nighttime to his people; also featured in a creation tale.

Revered Spirit: Australian term; gives a sense of the phantom and ghostly qualities of departed spirits.

Sejong: Korean king to whom *Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven* is generally attributed.

Shennong: God of agriculture in Chinese myth.

Susa-no-wo: Japanese culture hero and god of storm and seas; emerged from Izanagi's nose.

Tangun Wanggom: Founded Choson (ancient Korea) in that state's creation myth.

To-Kabinana and To-Karvuvu: Melanesian brother pair. The former brings good things to the world; the latter tries to do the same but botches things horribly.

Totemic Ancestors: Australian super-beings who emerged from the ground and formed the earth as we know it through their wanderings.

Tsukuyomi: Japanese moon god; emerged from Izanagi's right eye.

Twilight Man: Australian concept referring to the beginning of time.

Wyungare: Spectacularly gifted Australian hunter; he threw a spear to the heavens and used it to drag himself and his family to safety.

Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great: Sage-kings in Chinese history and myth; they make up the Three Dynasties.

Yi Song-gye: General who seized control of the Korean Peninsula; his regime lasted more than 500 years.

North American Traditions

Awonawilona: The All-Father of the Zuni, who contains everything within himself and generated Earth Mother and Sky Father, who then shaped the world.

Bear Woman: Figure who appears frequently in the stories of Northwest Native Americans. In one version told by the Haida (from the islands off the coast of British Columbia and Alaska), her name is Rhpisunt.

Buffalo Woman: Figure in a myth of the Arikara who shows a young man how to transform the buffalo people into real animals.

Chahta and Chikasa: Twin brothers in an emergence myth of the Choctaw.

Changing Woman: Figure sent to the Navajo in answer to the prayers of First Man and First Woman for deliverance from monsters who are killing the people. She became the most revered deity of the Navajo.

Coyote: A second-tier creator, culture hero, and trickster in the myths of several Native American peoples, including the Crow, the Navajo, the Hopi, and others.

Deganawida: Culture hero of the Iroquois. He was sent to establish peace among warring nations and was instrumental in the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Double-Face: Figure in a myth of the Dakota. Double-Face seems to represent someone with a hidden agenda or more than one set of values—a person who may not be what he or she seems.

Hiawatha: Figure associated with the Iroquois Confederacy. In some stories, he becomes a cannibal who is rescued by Deganawida.

Iktomi: Spider trickster of the Sioux.

kachinas: For the Hopi, rain deities and the spirits of their departed ancestors.

Kana'ti (“Lucky Hunter”): Mythical hunter of the Cherokee people.

Kokopelli: Hunch-backed flute player; he is a fertility god who dates back to the time of the Anasazi.

Masauwu: In the Hopi creation myth, Masauwu is a trickster, as well as ruler of the upper world, god of the dead, and owner of fire.

Master of Breath: Great spirit of the Tukegees.

Meadowlark Woman: A spirit power who appears in the myth “Awl and Her Son’s Son,” a tale of the Clackamas Chinook.

Nanabushu (also known as Nanabush or Nanabozho): Culture hero and trickster of the Ojibwa. He brings both fire and death to the people of earth. In some stories, he also manages to re-create earth after a great flood.

powakas: In Hopi mythology, bad sorcerers (people of “two hearts”) who make medicine to injure those they envy or dislike.

Rabbit: Trickster figure popular in the Southeast and some parts of the Northeast.

Raven: Culture hero of the Inuit, as well as a trickster in many stories from the American Northwest. He has the ability to transform himself from a bird into a man.

Sedna: An old woman who lived under the sea; a powerful nature spirit of the Inuit. She is also sometimes queen of the dead.

Selu (“Corn”): Wife of Kana’ti, mythical hunter of the Cherokee people. She is one version of the Corn Mother, who is killed but from whose body comes the maize that feeds the people.

Spider Grandmother: A culture hero of the Hopi. As a woman, she is a grandmotherly figure—good, kind, and just. As a spider, she lives in the earth and is associated with its virtues.

Spider Woman: Figure who helps the monster slayers find their father, the sun, in the creation myth of the Navajo.

Tadadaho: In the stories of the Iroquois Confederacy, Tadadaho is an Onandaga chief who was also a monster and a tyrant. He is won over, however, by Deganawida’s vision of peace and becomes the leader of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Tarenyawagon: Good twin in the foundation myth of the Iroquois. He modifies his evil brother’s creations, puts the world in order, establishes principles for humans to follow, and sets peoples in their allotted places.

Tewa: Sun spirit in the Hopi story of creation.

White Buffalo Woman: Figure in a myth of the Lakota; she taught the Lakota ceremonies associated with the pipe in her medicine bundle.

White Shell Woman: Figure sent to the Navajo in answer to the prayers of First Man and First Woman for deliverance from monsters who were killing the people.

South American Traditions

Ayar Cachi: A brother of Manco Capac in the creation myth of the Inca.

Blood Moon: In the *Popol Vuh*, the maiden daughter of the lord of the underworld; she gives birth to the culture hero twins of the myth.

Coatlicue: Aztec Mother Earth and mother of Huitzilopochtli.

Huitzilopochtli: Tribal god of the Aztecs; he was also a god of war and was associated with the sun.

Manco Capac: In the creation myth of the Inca, one of the adopted children of the sun. He had a son with one of his sisters and, thus, founded the Inca dynasty.

Mecitili: Ancestral goddess of the Aztecs; the modern state of Mexico still carries her name.

Ometeotl: Later creator god of the Aztecs.

Quetzalcoatl: One of the oldest gods in Mesoamerica, he is found in virtually every culture in the region. His name means “Plumed Serpent.”

Seven Macaw: Character in the *Popol Vuh*; he annoys the true creator gods by claiming to be the creator and source of all light.

Tezcatlipoca (“Smoking Mirror”): Aztec god of the north, the color black, and the night sky. He is the arch enemy of Quetzalcoatl.

Tláloc: Rain god of the Aztecs.

Tohil: God of fire in the *Popol Vuh*.

Viracocha: Creator god of the Kollas.

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Granet, Marcel. *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*. Translated by E. D. Edwards. New York: Gordon Press, 1975. A classic treatment of early Chinese songs and the cultural patterns of festivals and the calendar by one of the most interesting thinkers in the Chinese studies tradition.

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profound analysis that is as innovative as it is perplexing for readers who think of themselves as “objective” interpreters of culture.

Grimble, Arthur Francis. *Tungaru Traditions: Writings on the Atoll Culture of the Gilbert Islands*. Edited by H. E. Maude. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. A thorough analysis of Micronesian mythology and anthropology. Provides a useful background for the lecture on Micronesian mythology.

Heldt, Gustav. *The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. An up-to-date and innovative translation of the ancient Japanese classic. Heldt gives a lively interpretation of Japanese mythology. Many readers will be grateful for the English translations of proper names, but these can sometimes be confusing in their own right.

Hwang Pae-Gang. *Korean Myths and Folk Legends*. Translated by Han Young-Hie Han and Se-Chung Kim. Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Company, 2006. A wide-ranging and useful combination of legends from Korean history that expand on themes discussed in this section of the course.

Kim So-Un. *The Story Bag: A Collection of Korean Folk Tales*. Translated by Setsu Higashi. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1955. A diverse collection of Korean stories that blend items from the mythological tradition with more modern folktales.

LaFleur, Robert. “Bricolage.” *Round and Square*. www.robert-lafleur.blogspot.com. A clear explanation of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s idea of *bricolage* that takes the reader through the basic concepts and explains how they change in time.

Lee, Peter H. *Songs of Flying Dragons*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975. A fine translation of one of the great works of Korean literature. Lee guides readers through the political mythology of the Choson period and shows how the text invokes Chinese mythological traditions, even as it gives shape to a sophisticated early-modern Korean political system.

Lee, Peter H., William de Bary, Yongho Cho'oe, and Hugh H. W. Kang, eds. *Sources of Korean Tradition*. Volume 1: *From Early Times to the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. The most thorough treatment in English of Korean source materials for mythology and history.

Lessa, William A. *Tales from Ulithi Atoll: A Comparative Study in Oceanic Folklore*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Books, 1961. The gold standard in Micronesian mythology. Although this book is not hard to find, it probably requires interlibrary loan. It is a thorough treatment of Micronesian cultural themes.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*. New York: Schocken Books, 1978. Claude Lévi-Strauss's thought figures prominently in this section of the course. This book is the best English-language overview of his thought and is the place to begin if you wish to understand his approach to mythology.

———. *The Raw and the Cooked*. Volume 1: *Introduction to a Science Mythology*. Translated by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper and Row, 1969. The first of four enormous volumes dealing with the mythology of South and North America, this book engages world mythical themes and presents a more general approach to how Lévi-Strauss analyzes mythology.

———. *The Savage Mind*. Translated from French (Anonymous). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966. One of the most fascinating works in the history of Western thought, the English title is a disastrous attempt that would be better translated as *Untamed Thought* or *Wild Thinking* (or something that hints at the ways in which a wide array of things in the world can be made into patterns that shape our lives).

———. *Structural Anthropology*. Volume 2. Translated by Monique Layton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Several chapters walk readers through the stages of reading mythology “structurally.”

Levy, Ian Hideo, trans. *The Ten Thousand Leaves: A Translation of the Manyoshu, Japan's Premier Collection of Classical Poetry*. Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1987. A useful translation of a vital Japanese poetic classic that shows the ways in which Japanese mythology merged with many strands of political, social, and economic themes throughout early Japanese history.

Levy, Robert I. *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973. An ethnographically rich account of social life that frames the lectures on Oceania.

Lewis, Mark Edward. *The Construction of Space in Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006. One of the most interesting contemporary scholars of China analyzes the ways in which spatial patterns were organized in early China (and by thinkers in later eras).

———. *The Flood Myths of Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006. A comprehensive account of flood myths generally and the tales of Yu the Great in particular.

———. *Writing and Authority in Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999. A thorough analysis of the dynamics behind the re-creation of rural myths as a scholarly discourse.

Loewe, Michael. *Faith, Myth and Reason in Han China*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2005. A comprehensive account of cosmological themes in early Chinese thought.

Mackenzie, Donald A. *Myths from Melanesia and Indonesia*. London: The Gresham Publishing Company, n.d. Although not easy to find outside of major research libraries, this book shows some of the overarching themes that unite disparate areas of the Pacific.

Major, John S. *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993. A translation of the heart of one of the major sources of early Chinese mythology.

Mali, Joseph. *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. This comprehensive treatment of mythistory presents a systematic study of how mythology and history cohere (and clash).

Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1984. The iconic ethnography that drew a figurative line in the sand and separated the amateurs from the professionals in anthropological research.

———. *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. Translated by Norbert Guterman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989. Published 45 years after *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, this diary shook the field of cultural anthropology to its foundations and forced anthropologists to reconsider their assumptions about “scientific” inquiry or “objectivity.”

McCullough, Helen Craig. *Tales of Ise: Lyrical Episodes from Tenth-Century Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968. A wonderful translation of one of the most startling and innovative books in the Japanese tradition. Part myth, part travelogue, and part poetic compendium, the *Tales of Ise* provides a window onto “myth as life” in Japanese culture.

Mead, Margaret. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1928. One of the most influential works in the history of anthropology, this book introduced many readers to the watery worlds of Oceania.

Mintz, Grafton K., and Ha Tae-Hung, trans. *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*. N.p.: Silk Pagoda, 2006. A translation of one of the most important books in the Korean historical and mythological tradition. It is the central source for almost all accounts of Korean mythology.

Morris, Ivan. *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1975. A wonderful collection of portraits of

Japanese heroes in a “key” that is very different (“tragic heroes”) from many Western expectations of heroic tales.

Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai. *The Manyōshū: The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai Translation of One Thousand Poems with the Texts in Romaji*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965. One of the greatest works of Japanese literature, the *Manyōshū* collects an enormous array of poems that tap deeply into the Japanese mythological tradition.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. A superb work of anthropological and historical analysis, this book shows how a grain can shape a national ethos.

Packard, Jerrold M. *Sons of Heaven: A Portrait of the Japanese Monarchy*. New York: Collier Books, 1987. A solid treatment of the Japanese imperial line.

Pukui, Mary Kawena, trans. ‘*Ōlelo No’eau: Hawaiian Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Special Publication No. 71. Honolulu, HI: Bishop Museum Press, 1983. Although not easy to find outside of research libraries, this source highlights an enormous array of themes dealing with Ku, Hina, the god Lono, and others. A wonderful resource.

Rappaport, Roy A. *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984. An exquisite ecological analysis of the ritual life behind the Melanesian tales recounted in this section of the course.

Rosaldo, Michelle. *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. A nuanced ethnographic account of language and social life among headhunters in the Philippines.

Sahlins, Marshall. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor, MI:

University of Michigan Press, 1981. Marshall Sahlins's first analysis of Captain James Cook in Hawaii in the late 18th century.

———. *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. A passionate response to one of the great debates in the history of anthropology.

———. *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. One of the most sophisticated analyses of history, culture, time, and change ever presented.

Schafer, Edward H. *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars*. N.p.: Floating World Editions, 2005. A detailed and beautifully written study of Chinese approaches to constellations, the calendar, and the sky.

Stein, Rolf A. *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*. Translated by Phyllis Brooks. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. A profoundly innovative analysis of the ways in which larger natural and cultural patterns are often compressed to make them powerful symbols that function more generally in history and culture.

Swain, Tony, and Garry Trompf. *The Religions of Oceania*. New York: Routledge, 1995. A good overview of myth and religion in Oceania. The authors balance the many island spheres, giving each proper attention in their survey.

Waley, Arthur, trans. *The Book of Songs*. Edited with additional translations by Joseph R. Allen. New York: Grove Press, 1996. A translation of one of the most significant sources in the Chinese literary tradition.

Worms, E. A. "Tasmanian Mythological Terms." *Anthropos*, Bd. 55, H. 1/2 (1960): 1–16. A splendid though brief analysis of an all-but-lost mythological tradition.

The Americas

Bernbaum, Edwin. *Sacred Mountains of the World*. Sierra Club Books, 1990. A richly illustrated account of sacred mountains, including the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, home of the Hopi kachinas.

Bierhorst, John, ed. *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974. An anthology with good introductory material on four works that the editor asserts can stand up to the most rigorous literary analysis. One of them is the Iroquois condolence ritual.

———. *The Mythology of South America*. Oxford University Press, 2002. The book treats myths from all over the continent, not just the high Andes, but it ends up there. Several of the myths summarized in Lecture 60 were taken from this collection.

Brundage, Burr Cartwright. *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 1979. A fine book that helpfully unravels the complex Aztec pantheon, discussing the major stories and showing their impact on Aztec life and behavior.

Burland, C. A., and Werner Forman. *Feathered Serpent and Smoking Mirror*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975. Reads the Aztec story in terms of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca—a reading partly borrowed for the lecture on the Aztecs in this section of the course.

Burland, Cottie, Irene Nicholson, and Harold Osborne. *Mythology of the Americas*. Hamlyn Publishing, 1970. This is a good—and lavishly illustrated—introduction to all of the Native Americans, North, Central, and South. Burland's taxonomy of North American nations by ecological/geographical regions is the organization used in the North American part of these lectures. The “Knot in the Tree” story of the Dakota is from this book, as is the Arikara earth-diver creation account. The Osborne section of the book, dealing with South America, provided some of the details on Inca culture and history.

Carroll, Michael P. "The Trickster as Selfish-Buffer and Culture Hero." *Ethos* 12.2 (Summer 1984): 105–131. An interesting article on why certain animals make good tricksters and how Freud can help us understand how tricksters can also be culture heroes.

Courlander, Harold. *The Fourth World of the Hopis*. University of New Mexico Press, 1971. Encompasses the Hopi emergence-migration cycle up to the break-up of Oraibi in the early 20th century; gathered from Hopi storytellers on their mesas from 1968 to 1970. Most of the summary of the migration myth used in the North American section of the course is from Courlander.

———. *Hopi Voices: Recollection, Traditions, and Narratives of the Hopi Indians*. University of New Mexico Press, 1982. More transcriptions of Hopi stories, gathered from 1968 to 1981.

Debo, Angie. *The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1941. A history of the Creek, with stress on the period from the coming of the Europeans to the present.

Deloria, Ella. *Dakota Texts. Publications of the American Ethnological Society*. Vol. 14. Edited by Franz Boas. G. E. Stechert, 1932. Deloria was a Lakota native speaker who studied with Franz Boas at Columbia University. Because she was fluent in two languages, she was able to listen to stories told by the Lakota, rewrite them from memory, and translate them into English. Julian Rice (see below) believes that there is much artistry in her retelling.

Erdoes, Richard, and Alfonso Ortiz. *American Indian Myths and Legends*. Pantheon Books, 1984. More than 500 pages of good stories, arranged topically and with brief commentaries. The Penobscot Corn Mother myth is in this book, as are the Cheyenne story of the old woman of the spring, the Lakota story of White Buffalo Woman, and the Crow Coyote earth-diver creation myth.

———. *American Trickster Tales*. Penguin, 1998. A collection of many trickster stories from many cultures.

Ethridge, Robbie. *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World*. University of North Carolina Press, 2003. As the title indicates, a history of the Creek people and the way the world looks to them.

Gatschet, Albert S. *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians*. D. G. Brinton, 1884. A collection of Creek migration myths gathered by the author himself. This book provided part of the material on the Creek migration myth in the American section of this course.

Grantham, Bill. *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*. University Press of Florida, 2002. An anthology of Creek (and other Southeastern) myths, preceded by a useful introduction. Many of the stories referred to in the lecture on the Native Americans of the Southeast are in this collection.

Hunt, Norman Bancroft. *Gods and Myths of the Aztecs*. Smithmark, 1996. An insightful and illustrated introduction to the Aztecs, placing them as the culmination of a series of brilliant civilizations in Mexico.

Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. A brilliant account of tricksters from all over the world, arguing that in the long view, their mischief is good for our cultures and ourselves. The Coyote and Kingfisher story is from this source.

Jacobs, Melville. *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales*. University of Chicago Press, 1959. Literary analysis of a large number of tales, including “Awl and Her Son’s Son.”

———. *The People Are Coming Soon: Analyses of Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales*. University of Washington Press, 1960. As the title suggests, this is a collection of stories with some serious and detailed literary analysis. It includes “Seal and Her Brother.”

Jones, William. *Ojibwa Texts*. Edited by Truman Michelson. Leyden E. J. Brill, 1917–1919. Ojibwa texts collected by Jones on site from 1903 to 1905. It contains a large Nanabushu cycle, from which the details used in this section of the course were taken.

Kroeber, Karl. *Artistry in Native American Myths*. University of Nebraska Press, 1998. A collection of myths arranged topically, each topic followed by thoughtful analysis. John Arthur Gibson's retelling of the Deganawida (Tekanwita) and the cannibal story is in this book.

———. *Native American Storytelling: A Reader of Myths and Legends*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. A good collection of myths and commentary. The maize myth of Kana'ti and Selu is in this book, as are the Gros Ventre flood/earth-diver creation story and the Navajo myth of the origin of the mountain chant.

Lankford, George E., ed. *Native American Legends: Southeastern Legends: Tales from the Natchez, Caddo, Biloxi, Chickasaw, and Other Nations*. August House, 1987. A topically arranged gathering of myths and legends with a good commentary. The Choctaw alligator vision quest story is from here, as are the Natchez myths of Rabbit and the figure made of pitch and the polluted sacred fire.

Leeming, David. *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*. Oxford University Press, 2005. A wealth of materials on world myths arranged in encyclopedic fashion for easy exploration. See especially his entries on the Navajo creation myth and related topics.

Leonard, Scott, and Michael McClure. *Myth and Knowing: An Introduction to World Mythology*. A nice collection of world myths, along with some good and still accessible theory and interpretation.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *Structural Anthropology*. Doubleday, 1967. Lévi-Strauss is one of the important figures in the modern study of myth. He has his critics, but scholars usually cannot ignore him; if they disagree with him, they must argue their way past him. He is interested in myths not as individual stories but for what they tell us about the human mind.

Markman, Roberta H., and Peter T. Markman. *The Flayed God: The Mythology of Mesoamerica*. Harper, 1992. A collection of myths and mythic

images from pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America, with good contextualizing commentary. The myths are richly illustrated with artworks.

Phillips, Charles. *The Complete Illustrated History: Aztec and Maya*. Metrobooks, 2008. A visually glorious book; it includes large sections on Mayan and Aztec myth.

Radin, Paul. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956. A complete Winnebago trickster cycle plus commentary. This work is still controversial, but it is seminal for myth study in the 20th century. The myth of the trickster and the laxative plant discussed in this section of the course is from this cycle.

Ramsey, Jerold. *Coyote Was Going There*. A collection of trickster tales with excellent literary analysis.

———. *Reading the Fire: The Traditional Literatures of America*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983. A book of fine and sensitive literary readings of Native American stories. The Blackfoot story of the old man and the woman by the river and how death comes into the world is included, as are the Nez Percé Orphic story of Coyote in the land of the dead and the Wasco story of the boy with the elk guardian spirit.

Read, Kay Almere, and Jason J. Gonzalez. *Mesoamerican Mythology*. Oxford University Press, 2000. A good general introduction to the subject. Introductory chapters on myth and history are followed by encyclopedia-style entries on major figures and myths, which are also pursued into their survival in the modern world in Mesoamerica.

Reichard, Gladys S. *Navajo Religion*. 2nd ed. Princeton University Press, 1974. An in-depth look at the way the Navajo saw the world and related to it and its cosmic powers. The account of the Navajo trickster Coyote was taken largely from this book.

Rice, Julian. *Before the Great Spirit: The Many Faces of Sioux Spirituality*. University of New Mexico Press, 1998. As the title suggests, this book has more to do with religion than with myth. But Rice spends a good deal of time

on the Sioux trickster Iktomi the Spider, arguing that the Sioux awareness of the centrality of the trickster to everything led them to expect trouble from the spirit world and from themselves.

———. *Ella Deloria's "The Buffalo People."* University of New Mexico Press, 1994. This is a tribute to Deloria, who collected many Lakota stories, and a close reading of quite a few of them to illustrate her artistry in the telling. Rice does a fine reading of the Lakota "Double-Face Tricks the Girl."

Rosenberg, Donna. *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*. 3rd ed. NTC Publishing, 1999. A collection of myths with good introductory material and study questions. The Inuit Sedna myth is retold in this book, as is the Haida story of how Raven steals the light.

Salles-Reese, Verónica. *From Viracocha to the Virgin of Copacabana: Representation of the Sacred at Lake Titicaca*. University of Texas Press, 1997. A history of the famous Andean lake, featuring all the peoples for whom it has been sacred. Her summaries of Kolla and Inca narrative cycles was used in Lecture 60.

Swanton, John R. *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians*. *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 88*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929. A collection of myths gathered by the author himself. The Hitchiti trickster tale of Rabbit, the farmer, and the pig is from this collection.

Taube, Karl A. *Aztec and Maya Myths*. British Museum and the University of Texas Press, 1993. Taube uses material from pre-Columbian art to explicate features of the myths. An interpretation of part of the *Popol Vuh* done in this manner made its way into the American section of this course.

Tedlock, Dennis. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*. Simon and Schuster, 1985. What has come to be considered the standard translation of the "council book," along with extensive commentary and notes by a leading scholar. Most of the background information on the epic used in this section of the course came from Tedlock.

Thury, Eva M., and Margaret K. Deviney. *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths*. Oxford University Press, 2005. A fine collection of myths with accompanying analytical essays. The Zuni emergence myth was taken from this book, along with the story about Raven stealing the light.

Townsend, Richard F. *The Aztecs*. 3rd ed. Thames and Hudson, 2009. A good introduction to many aspects of the Aztec world and life. His detailed account of the four creations, or Suns, is the one used in this section of the course.

Urton, Gary. *Inca Myths*. British Museum Press and University of Texas Press, 1999. Traces the way the myths of the people of the Andes all came to be part of the Inca Empire myth. It asks a number of good questions about the relationship between them. Urton is quoted several times in the last lecture in this course.

Van Over, Raymond. *Sun Songs: Creation Myths from around the World*. Mentor, 1980. A collection of creation stories arranged by continent. Brief introductory material for each section. The Inuit Raven creation myth and the Huron earth-diver creation myth are in this book.

Vecsey, Christopher. *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians*. Crossroad, 1988. Interpretations of four great Native American myths, including the Ojibwa Nanabushu, the Iroquois Federation founding myth, and the Creek emergence-migration story. Details from all of these found their way into the lectures on North American myths.

Wheeler-Voegelin, Erminie, and Remedios W. Moore. "The Emergence Myth in Native North America." *Studies in Folklore in Honor of Distinguished Professor Stith Thompson*. Edited by W. Edson Richmond. Indiana University Press, 1957. As the title indicates, a survey of emergence myths and the extent to which they are linked with migration myths.

Zolbrod, Paul G. *Diné bahanè: The Navajo Creation Story*. University of New Mexico Press, 1984. The complete text of one version of the Navajo emergence myth. It includes an extensive introduction and an abundance of helpful notes.