Chapter Two
MYTHOLOGY

CHAPTER OUTLINE

THE NATURE OF MYTHS
   Worldview
   Stories of the Supernatural
      Myths
   The Nature of Oral Texts
      Genesis

UNDERSTANDING MYTHS
   Approaches to Analysis of Myths
      Searching for Myth Origins in the Nineteenth Century
      Fieldwork and Functional Analysis
      Structural Analysis
      Psychoanalytic Symbols in Myth
   Common Themes in Myths
      Origin Myths
      Apocalyptic Myths
      Trickster Myths
      Hero Myths

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY
BOX 2.1 GENESIS
BOX 2.2 THE GENDER-NEUTRAL CHRISTIAN BIBLE
BOX 2.3 THE GURURUMBA CREATION STORY
BOX 2.4 THE NAVAHO CREATION STORY: DINÉ BAHANÈ
BOX 2.5 THE RAVEN STEALS THE LIGHT
BOX 2.6 JOSEPH CAMPBELL

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The ways a society perceives and interprets its reality is known as its worldview. The worldview provides an understanding of how the world works; it forms the template for thought and behavior; and it provides a basic understanding of the origin and nature of humankind and its relationship to the world. People express their worldview in stories.

Myths are sacred stories that tell of the origin of the world and humankind, the existence and activities of gods and spirits, the origin of human traditions, and the nature of illness and death. They tell how to behave and how to distinguish good from evil. Myths are thought to recount
real, historical events that took place in the remote past. They provide the basis for religious be-
liefs and practices.

Myths can be both written and oral. Written forms tend to be very stable through time, and
changes that do occur are usually deliberate changes that are the consequences of translation or
scholarly discourse about the meaning of particular words and passages. Oral texts are recited,
and this recitation often has the characteristics of performance. One of the consequences of the
oral transmission of stories is that they are frequently unconsciously altered with each genera-
tion, which explains the existence of different versions of the same myth within a society.

There are many ways of interpreting myths. Functional analysis sees myths as forces that
help to maintain the society. Structural analysis focuses on the underlying structure of myths.
The psychoanalytic approach sees myths as symbolically expressing unconscious wishes.

Certain basic themes are common through the world. Origin myths provide answers to the
questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our relationship to the world? These stories
play an important role in laying out the culture’s worldview. One common element is the birth
metaphor, in which the world is born from a god or goddess or by creation out of chaos, dark-
ness, or the void.

Tricksters are part human, part animal. They are adventurers, seekers of sexual pleasures,
.lazy, dishonest, and impulsive. Yet tricksters are responsible for creating or bringing into the
world many elements, often as a by-product of some other activity. Hero myths are stories about
culture heroes who, through knowledge and mastery of certain skills, are able to bring about
marvelous results.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 2 the student should be able to:
  • Explain the concept of worldview and illustrate the idea by contrasting the worldviews of
    the Navaho and Euro-Americans.
  • Explain what makes a story a myth.
  • Describe the nature of oral myths and how such myths change over time.
  • Explain how the Navaho origin story reflects the Navaho worldview.
  • Identify and describe the different approaches to the study of myth.
  • Outline the common themes that are found in myths cross-culturally.

GLOSSARY

Apocalypse: Ultimate devastation or the end of the world. (p. 46)
Archetype: A main character of the collective unconscious. (p. 42)
Collective unconscious: Inborn elements of the unconscious that are manifested in dreams and
myths. (p. 42)
Folktale: A traditional story that is a part of the tradition of a society; not considered to be true. (p. 31)
Legend: A traditional story about past events that is considered to be true; usually contains an element of reality—a known character, event, or place. (p. 31)
Monomyth: A theme common to many myths that tells of the adventures of a culture hero. (p. 51)
Myth: A sacred story that provides the basis for religious beliefs and practices. (p. 31)
Social charter: A story that establishes the proper organization and rules of behavior of a society. (p. 36)
Trickster god: A god who gave humans important things or skills, often by accident or through trickery. (p. 48)
Trickster story: A story involving a trickster deity. (p. 48)
Urban legend: Contemporary story about people and events that never occurred, but are presented as real. (p. 31)
Worldview: The way in which a society perceives and interprets its reality. (p. 29)

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How would you describe the worldview of your own culture? Although the United States is made up of a diverse population, can we say that there is a shared American worldview? If so, what characterizes this worldview? How is this worldview reflected in American culture?
- How do American media (including television and films) reflect the American worldview?
- In what ways are important American civil documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, like myths? In what ways are they different?
- Stories about supernatural topics (e.g., ghosts, angels, prophesies) can be found in informal venues such as the tabloids. Would you consider these to be religious stories or myths? Why or why not?
- Humans have been called “storytelling animals”. What is the importance of storytelling both for individuals and societies?
- Why do you think common themes are found in myths in different cultures?
- How does human psychology affect the nature of myths and the way we tell and perceive them?
- What recent movies have you seen that are based on the hero’s journey? Can you identify the stages?

STUDENT PROJECTS

- While in many societies stories are told through story tellers, stories in American society are frequently told through movies and television. Pick a movie or television and show and explain how the show reflects the American worldview.
Chapter 2: Mythology

- Select a foreign film. What cultural differences can be seen between your own culture and the culture portrayed in the film?
- Pick a movie that tells the story of the monomyth. Describe how it fits the monomyth structure.
- Locate myths from two or more different cultures. Analyze each myth and show how they are similar to or differ from one another.

VIDEOS

*The Bible Under Fire.* Filmakers Library. 43 min.
Tells the story of the introduction of the Revised Standard Version of the Christian Bible in 1952, and the controversies that followed.

Updates the Judeo-Christian origin story by telling the story of Lilith. Uses a mix of narrative, collage and memoir.

The Hawaiian myth of the conflict between the goddess Pele and her sister Hi`iaka, as told through Hula dance and music.

Creation myths of the Aztecs and other Nahuatl-speaking people are told through animation that uses authentic pre-Columbian Aztec iconography.

Explores the significance of Koran to the life of Muslims.

The Mayan creation story told through animation that uses imagery from ancient Mayan ceramics.

*Voices of the Orishas.* University of California Extension. 1994, 37 min.
Filmed in Havana, the film shows a Santeria ritual in which the deities, or Orishas, are invoked. The ceremony recreates an important Yoruba myth.

WEB SITES

[pantheon.org/mythica.html](http://pantheon.org/mythica.html)  Encyclopedia Mythica is an encyclopedia of mythology, folklore, and legend.
www.moongadget.com/origins/myth.html Internet site devoted to the story of the hero’s journey as seen in movies.

www.sacred-texts.com An Internet text archive.


www.trinity.edu/org/tricksters/trixway Trickster’s Way, an online journal dedicated to trickster research.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


TEST QUESTIONS

Multiple Choice Questions

1. In every society there are particular ways in which people perceive and interpret their reality. This is what is meant by the concept of:
   a. supernatural      b. worldview
   c. culture       d. sacred
   Answer: b pages 29-30

2. The Navaho phrase to “walk in beauty” and the Euro-American phrase “Thou makest him to have dominion of the works of thy hands” point out major differences in:
   a. the supernatural     b. subsistence activities
   c. worldview       d. the sacred
   Answer: c page 31

3. An example of a supernatural element in the narrative of Snow White is:
   a. the queen's looking glass
   b. Snow White returning to life after death
   c. the queen eating the heart of Snow White to obtain her qualities of beauty
   d. all of the above
   Answer: d page 30-31

4. In the story of Snow White, the queen's looking glass is an example of:
   a. magic       b. divination
   c. witchcraft      d. a worldview
   Answer: b page 30

5. All of the following statements about the story of Snow White are correct except:
   a. many of the places and objects of the story are sacred
   b. the story conveys a moral lesson about the evils of envy and jealousy
   c. there are many supernatural elements in the story
   d. the story contains an example of ritual cannibalism
   Answer: a page 30-31

6. The Snow White story is an example of a:
   a. myth       b. folktale
   c. legend       d. urban legend
   Answer: b page 31

7. An example of a legend would be:
   a. the voyage of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower
   b. the story of Little Red Riding Hood
   c. the story of Noah and the ark
Instructor’s Manual for The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft

9. Ritual texts:
   a. are social charters that sets forth the organization of human relationships
   b. explain the origins of humans and the world
   c. often contain multiple versions of the same story
   d. all of the above
   Answer: d  pages 31, 37

10. Myths:
   a. are regarded as fact by those who accept this on faith
   b. include a great many sacred, supernatural elements
   c. take place in the past
   d. all of the above
   Answer: d page 31

11. Myths differ from folktales in that:
   a. myths are recounted in ritual and folktales are not
   b. myths reflect the worldview and folktales do not
   c. myths with the supernatural and folktales do not
   d. all of the above
   Answer: a pages 31-32

12. Which of the following is correct about oral texts?
   a. The recitation of oral texts is often a performance.
   b. The story may change with each telling.
   c. Different versions of the same story may exist in different places.
   d. all of the above
   Answer: d page 32-33

13. Which of the following is true about the myth of Genesis?
   a. there are two separate versions of creation told
   b. the stories reflect a patriarchal worldview
   c. the text acts as a social charter
   d. all of the above
   Answer: d page 36
14. The evolutionary school in the nineteenth century associated myths with:
   a. the “primitive period”  
   b. the transition to modern times  
   c. full modernity  
   d. the future  
   Answer: a  page 39

15. Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski are representative of proponents of the:
   a. structural analysis of myth  
   b. psychological analysis of myth  
   c. functional analysis of myth  
   d. evolutionary analysis of myth  
   Answer: c  pages 40

16. The analysis of myth in terms of binary opposites is an example of:
   a. functional analysis  
   b. structural analysis  
   c. psychoanalytic analysis  
   d. evolutionary analysis  
   Answer: b  pages 40-41

17. Freud described myths as:
   a. neuroses  
   b. shared dreams  
   c. psychoanalysis  
   d. psychological conflict  
   Answer: b  page 41

18. A proposed relationship between early childhood experiences and adult projection systems like myths is characteristic of which analytic approach?
   a. functional analysis  
   b. structural analysis  
   c. psychoanalytic analysis  
   d. evolutionary analysis  
   Answer: c  page 42

19. Jung believed that humans share inborn elements of the unconscious that are manifested in myths. He called this the:
   a. collective unconscious  
   b. innate symbolism  
   c. unconscious unified  
   d. symbolic ancestry  
   Answer: a  page 42

20. Archetypes are:
   a. myths about the end of the world  
   b. myths about a journey to the underworld  
   c. a main character of the collective unconscious  
   d. a main character in a hero story  
   Answer: c  page 42

21. The Navaho story Diné Bahanè is an example of a(n):
   a. origin story  
   b. apocalyptic story  
   c. trickster myth  
   d. hero myth  
   Answer: a  page 44
22. The Navaho Creation Story takes place:
   a. in a special garden similar to the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden
   b. in the realm of the gods in the sky
   c. in a series of layers that exist underneath the present world
   d. in another reality
   Answer: c pages 45-46

23. In the Navaho Creation Story, the Holy People appeared and explained that they wanted to create people:
   a. with the power of insects
   b. with supernatural powers
   c. who were giants
   d. with hands and feet like the Holy People
   Answer: d pages 45-46

24. In the Navaho Creation Story, First Man and First Woman were created from:
   a. dust        b. ears of corn
   c. insects       d. nothingness
   Answer: b pages 45-46

25. In the Navaho Creation Story, First Man and First Woman were created by the:
   a. Holy People
   b. Air-Spirit People
   c. People Who Live in Upright Houses
   d. sacred twins
   Answer: a pages 45-46

26. In the Navaho Creation Story, life was given to the first humans by the:
   a. Wind       b. Sun
   c. Mountains      d. Animal People
   Answer: a pages 45-46

27. An apocalypse is:
   a. the catastrophic destruction of the world
   b. the origin of the world through birth
   c. a god who gave is known for trickery and deceit
   d. a type of hero myth
   Answer: a page 46

28. The Book of Revelations in the New Testament is an example of a(n):
   a. trickster story        b. hero myth
   c. apocalyptic myth       d. origin story
   Answer: c page 47

26
Chapter 2: Mythology

29. A god who gave humans important things by accident or through deception is known as a(n):
   a. trickster       b. hero
   c. deceit god      d. creator god
   Answer: a page 48

30. The story “Raven Steals the Light” is an example of a:
   a. flood story      b. hero story
   c. trickster story   d. war story
   Answer: c pages 49-51

31. The story “Raven Steals the Light” tells us about the origin of the:
   a. earth        b. sun and moon
   c. people       d. salmon
   Answer: b pages 49-51

32. The monomyth is a narrative involving:
   a. the creation
   b. an explanation of illness and death
   c. a culture hero
   d. none of the above
   Answer: c page 51

33. The stories of Star Wars and Harry Potter most closely resemble:
   a. monomyths      b. creation stories
   c. trickster stories   d. apocalyptic stories
   Answer: a pages 52-53

True/False Questions

34. The Navaho worldview suggests an exploitation of natural resources by human society.
   Answer: F page 29-30

35. The Navaho phrase “to walk in beauty” refers to the accumulation of material goods.
   Answer: F page 30

36. The story of Snow White is not a religious story because it does not involve the sacred supernatural and is not the basis of ritual.
   Answer: T pages 30-31

37. The story of crocodiles living in the sewers of New York is an example of a myth.
   Answer: F page 31
38. To say that something is a myth means that it is not true.
   Answer: F    page 31

39. Religious texts often change through time because they are often transmitted orally or subject to new translations.
   Answer: T    page 32-33

40. In Islam, God spoke to Mohammad in Arabic, and Arabic is used in ritual today.
   Answer: T    page 33

41. There are two creation stories in Genesis. In one man and woman are created together; in the other man was created first and woman was created later out of man’s rib.
   Answer: T    pages 34-36

42. *The Golden Bough* is an example of an origin story.
   Answer: F    page 39

43. Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed the structure of myths and pointed out that humans tend to categorize the world in terms of binary opposites.
   Answer: T    page 40

44. Émile Durkheim used a psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of myth and focused on the impact of myth on social structure.
   Answer: F    pages 41-42

45. Proponents of the psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of myth see such stories as the Oedipus story as manifestations of the collective unconscious.
   Answer: T    pages 42-43

46. An example of an archetype is the hero.
   Answer: T    pages 42-43

47. In the Bunhongo Creation Story, Bumba vomits up the world. This is an example of the emergence myth.
   Answer: F    page 43

49. In the Navaho Creation Story, the first humans were created by the two Holy People.
   Answer: F    pages 44-47

   Answer: T    page 47

50. In the Haida story “The Raven Steals the Light,” the Raven is an example of a trickster.
   Answer: T    pages 48-51
Chapter 2: Mythology

Essay Questions

51. What are the implications of the Navaho and the Euro-American worldviews with response to conservation? (pages 29-30)

52. Although the story of Snow White contains many supernatural elements and contains a moral lesson, it is not considered to be a religious story. Why? (pages 30-31)

53. What are the essential differences between Genesis and the Navaho Creation Story? (pages 33-36, 44-46)

54. What are some of the consequences of the oral transmission of myth compared with the written transmission of myth? (pages 32-33)

55. Discuss the Gururumba Creation Story from a structuralist point of view. (pages 40-42)

56. What was Sigmund Freud’s approach to the study of myth? (pages 41-42)

57. In what ways are trickster deities also creator deities? (page 47)

58. Give several examples of the monomyth seen in contemporary motion pictures. (pages 47-48)
Chapter 2

Mythology
The Nature of Myths:

- Myths are religious narratives or stories that provide the framework for religious beliefs and practices
  - Tell of the origins and history of the world and creation of human beings
  - Prescribe the rules of proper conduct
  - Articulate the ethical and moral principals of society
  - Exist as texts or oral narratives in nonliterate societies
The Nature of Myths: Worldview

• The way in which societies perceive and interpret their reality is their **worldview**
  – Provides an understanding of how their world works
  – Forms the template for thought and behavior
  – Provides a basic understanding of the origin and nature of humankind and their relationship to the world around them

• Comparison of Navaho and Judeo-Christian cultures to understand differing worldviews
The Nature of Myths: Stories of the Supernatural

• People describe their world and express their worldview in stories and other creative expressions

• **Folktales**: Stories that are meant to entertain and contain supernatural elements and typically a moral

• **Legends**: Seen by members of the culture as representing events that have actually taken place, although they are often embellished

• **Urban Legends**: Stories that are recounted as having really happened, primarily on the Internet or in tabloids
The Nature of Myths: Stories of the Supernatural

• **MYTHS:** Sacred stories that tell:
  - Of the origin of the world and humankind
  - Of the existence and activities of gods and spirits
  - Of the creation of order in the universe
  - Of the nature of illness and death
  - How to behave
  - How to distinguish good from evil
The Nature of Myths: The Nature of Oral Texts

• Oral texts are frequently very long and complex
• Texts are recited – recitation is a performance
• Stories are frequently unconsciously altered with each generation, which may result in different versions of the same myth existing within a society
• Myths may change to account for new circumstances or events
The Nature of Myths: Written Texts

- In literate societies, written texts may form the basis of scholarly discourse and analysis as well as ritual.
- Written myths are more stable through time.
- **GENESIS:** Example of a written text that has origins in oral narratives.
- **Social Charter:** Explains the proper organization of human relationships.
Understanding Myths:

• Myths exist in all human societies
• They have been collected and analyzed by countless anthropologists, folklorists, and other scholars
• While myths vary significantly, common themes occur that have become focus of scholarly study
Understanding Myths: Approaches to Analysis of Myths

• Of the different ways of analyzing religious narratives, many are based on the different theological approaches to the study of religion
Understanding Myths: Approaches to Analysis of Myths

• SEARCHING FOR MYTH ORIGINS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:
  – Proposed progression from magic to religion to science
  – Myths were seen as belonging to the “primitive” period, with sacred myths being replaced by secular folktales until dying out in “civilized” societies
  – James George Frazer

• The twentieth century and the connection myths have to cultures and rituals
Understanding Myths: Approaches to Analysis of Myths

• **FIELDWORK AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS:** Emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation as well as on consensus and function as opposed to cultural change
  
  – Franz Boas
  – Ruth Benedict
  – Bronislaw Malinowski

• **Criticism:** Focuses only on benefits, not on institutions or practices that may be oppressive or exploitative. Also focuses on consensus building, not, for example, the potential conflict caused by competing versions of a myth
Understanding Myths: Approaches to Analysis of Myths

• **STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS:** Focuses on the underlying structure of the myth. For religious narratives, focus lies on the structure not the content
  – Claude Lévi-Strauss

• **Criticism:** Very sterile approach to the study of religious narrative and that it is ultimately dehumanizing. Can also be very complicated, leaving mythical analysis only to those who are well versed in this approach
Understanding Myths: Approaches to Analysis of Myths

• **PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMBOLS IN MYTH:** This approach to the analysis of myths interprets them as being symbolic and see this symbolism as being rooted in human psychology
  
  – **Sigmund Freud:** Proposed a relationship between early experiences and adult projection systems such as myth
  
  – **Carl Jung:** Believed that humans as a group share a collective unconscious, or inborn elements of the unconscious that are manifested in dreams and myths. The main characters of these dreams and myths are termed **archetypes** (for example, Oedipus, the Phoenix, and the Hero).
Understanding Myths: Common Themes in Myths

• Underlying the diversity of narratives found cross-culturally are some common elements and themes

• **ORIGIN MYTHS:** Answer some of the most basic questions that humans have. Origin stories address the most basic questions of identity, both personal and communal
  – A common element in origin stories is the birth metaphor
  – Because of the process of diffusion, certain cultural areas share narrative elements in common
  – Emergence myth and interpretations
Understanding Myths: Common Themes in Myths

• **APOCALYPTIC MYTHS**: Myths that tell of the catastrophic destruction of the world, an apocalypse
  – Take many forms, such as by flood (Noah’s Ark)
  – Some involve prediction of future events (Revelations)
Understanding Myths: Common Themes in Myths

• **TRICKSTER MYTHS:** Myths dealing with lesser things such as providing explanations of why things are the way they are or how people should and should not behave

• **Trickster Stories:** The **trickster** is often part human, part animal
  – For example: the Raven from the Northwest Coast of North America, Coyote from the American Plains, and Spider from West Africa
Understanding Myths:
Trickster Characteristics

- Adventurers
- Gluttons
- Searchers of sexual pleasures
- Lazy and easily bored
- Dishonest
- Impulsive, yet they are responsible for creating or bringing into the world many elements such as the sun or fire, but this usually occurs inadvertently as a by-product of some other activity
Understanding Myths: Common Themes in Myths

• **HERO MYTHS:** According to Joseph Campbell, while there are countless stories involving heroes throughout the world, they all follow the same basic story line, the monomyth
  - “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man”
  - Phases of a hero’s journey: departure, initiation, and the return
  - Frequently found in origin stories