

Mythology for Storytellers

Themes and Tales from Around the World



Josepha Sherman

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Josepha Sherman

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In memory of those who died in the World Trade Center tragedy, 9/11/01

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AN INTRODUCTION TO MYTHOLOGY

What is mythology? In this hectic modern world, where even Andy Warhol's brusque promise of fifteen minutes of fame seems to have been reduced to as long as it takes for a Web site to load, people often casually throw the word *myth* about and interchange it freely with *legend* without being aware of any deeper meaning. Someone might lightly say, "Santa Claus is just a myth," or casually remark that a pop singer or sports figure "is a legend in his own time."

But that is the shallowest possible use anyone can make of words that are rich with ancient significance and come from deep within the human psyche.

Perhaps that sounds a little too melodramatic. However, even the most modern of people can still feel the awe that comes from viewing the night sky, not the light-polluted, seemingly empty one of the modern cities, but a velvet-black sky blazing with lights. It is easy to imagine earlier people looking up at that light-studded sky and wondering. What are they, these strange, small fires? Why do they move across the sky? And what of the moon? Why does it change its shape regularly in a cycle that seems to match the pattern of a woman's flow of blood? Indeed, what of that? What of her belly swelling with child? What miracle puts a new life into the world? Where does it come from? Who are humans, really? And where is humanity going?

Yes, people can claim to know the answers to at least some of the great questions, or at least to know the surface answers, but there is a level deep within everyone that still wonders, still hungers fiercely for more than a dry, cold scientific definition or the somehow frightening admission, "No one knows why."

It is mythology that feeds that hunger and quells those fears.

Mythology has existed in some form in every human society that has left records of any sort. Myths turn up in the writings of ancient Greece, on the wall reliefs of ancient Egypt, and on the clay tablets of Mesopotamian Sumer. Long before the invention of writing, people were already leaving what are clearly mythic symbols on cave walls. These include, in addition to those familiar, realistically rendered animals, voluptuous women holding cornucopias—priestesses or fertility god-

desses?—and stag-headed men who may be either shamans or animal spirits. What they meant to the people who painted them, we don't know and probably will never know, but they do tell one fact: These human ancestors did indeed have a culture that included mythic belief.

But what exactly does that mean? Before anyone can propose to retell myths, those of our own culture or someone else's, the definitions must be sure.

The defining of terms is not as easy as it might seem. Mythologists and folklorists disagree about fact and theory as frequently as any other scholars. They have argued over the semantics of a word like *mythology* for over a hundred years. But it can be safely said at least that mythology is the study and interpretation of myth and the body of myths of a culture.

Since the variety of the world's mythology is so vast, it is difficult to make too many generalizations about it, though basic themes can be identified, and some are discussed below. But it can be stated without too much argument that the elements that define a genuine myth—as opposed to something as shallow as “painless injections are a myth”—are these:

A myth has a serious purpose, no matter how many humorous elements it may contain. It exists because humanity needed an explanation for one of the big questions, such as the creation of the world, how humanity and the animals came to be, or why there is death.

A myth also teaches the behavior proper to a culture and explains the meaning behind certain customs, such as the rituals to be found in every religion, as well as letting us see the adventures and interactions of gods and humans.

The last point is simply that a myth is usually of unknown origin.

Since humans are, regardless of their different cultures, members of the same species, with the same wants, needs, and wonderings, all myths are going to have certain themes in common. Categorizing with broad strokes, they fall into:

- *Cosmic or cosmological myths (also known as creation myths)*. The myths in this category tend to be the most important of all, since these are each culture's explanation of how and why the universe and world came to be.
- *Myths of birth and life*. Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Myths that fall into this category attempt to explain some of the greatest personal mysteries, those experiences that are common to all mortal beings, as well as trying to prove the greatest of human hopes, that this life is not the end.

- *Myths of sex and procreation.* Allied with the myths of the creation of living things are, understandably, myths concerning sex and procreation. Some of these, such as those featuring Coyote, the main trickster figure of the American Southwest, can be blatantly lewd, even downright obscene.
- *Myths of death.* We usually try to deny death in our society, but myths about both the creation of death and the need for death are also part of human existence. In some cultures, such as our own, death is looked on as something to be dreaded and denied for as long as possible. Other cultures, from Asia to the native cultures of North America, though equally reluctant to think about leaving the mortal world, are more accepting, or at least more understanding, about what cannot be avoided.
- *Myths of rebirth.* There is hope at the end of the final battle or the mortal death. After the ashes die, a new world and new gods will be born. This leads directly into the subject of resurrection myths.
- *Myths of the gods.* This category includes the myths that attempt to understand the divine, in whatever form or forms a culture finds right for so powerful a force, and try to explain seemingly unpredictable or unjust events.
- *Myths of the heroes.* The hero in mythology can often be better categorized as a culture hero, one who is important to a society as a codified image of that society's ideals. He or she is rarely powerful enough to be the creator of the world. But a culture hero may still possess great supernatural or even divine powers. Raven, the culture hero and trickster deity of the Pacific Northwest peoples, is the one who sets the sun and moon in the sky. Maui of the Polynesian myths pulls up islands from under the sea. And Cuchulain, the Ulster hero, transforms himself into an inhumanly fierce warrior in battle.

Legends, by contrast, are generally about historic figures or events and are on a much smaller scale than myths. They are, therefore, outside the scope of this book. Davy Crockett, for instance, though he can be seen as a culture hero, has a documented birth, life, and death. Most of the legend cycle centered about him may be larger than life, but it is hardly on the mythic scale.

By contrast, the traditional western hero, the stranger who rides into town on a white horse to save the people from evil, then rides away again into the sunset, is also an American culture hero. But, thanks to his standard appearance and actions, he is a mythic type.

Are myths *true*? It seems unlikely that many people nowadays would expect to meet a centaur, yet some people claim to have seen (and even photographed) Bigfoot or the yeti. It also seems improbable that anyone would expect to come in contact with the Greek god Zeus, yet when Vance Randolph was collecting folklore in the Appalachians, he met people who firmly believed that they might meet Jesus one day while walking in the mountains. While the idea that Elvis Presley still lives has become a joke with most people, some members of the Elvis cult do believe that he is not dead and that “the King will come again.”

And do not all people secretly believe in a golden age back there somewhere in the past? So did the Greeks and the Assyrians. The latter even left us a written complaint to the effect that nothing in modern times was as good as it was in the good old days. Even without more than a mention by Plato, there are those who want to believe in Atlantis, that long-ago, forever lost land of wonder.

Again, are myths true? To the extent that they answer the unanswerable, comfort our fears, and give us hope, yes, they are very true, indeed.

Myths are sometimes also true in the historical or legal sense as well. They can help settle quarrels—or help keep old hatreds alive. In the name of peace, clans in New Guinea quarreling over territory have resorted to long recitations of mythic names to prove which side is right without having to resort to violence.

But in areas with centuries-old quarrels, religious or ethnic, those ancient hatreds sometimes take on the character of myth themselves. Ask a Serbian, for instance, what the current conflict over Kosovo is about, and the answer will involve either racial hatreds dating to the Middle Ages or a simple, “It has always been so.” In Northern Ireland there is a by now infamous and quite mythic hatred between the Catholics and Protestants, and under that between the Irish and the English, that dates as well to the Middle Ages.

The effect of enmity on a truly mythic scale can be seen in cultures as large as nations or as small as tribal groups, or even in the sports rivalries of one team against another. It may seem facetious to compare baseball to political conflict, but the rivalry between, for instance, the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox has been in existence for nearly a century, long enough to have acquired its own mythic power.

Myths can also be used as political reinforcement. In ancient Babylon, for instance, yearly rituals linked the royal house with the deity Marduk and the rest of the pantheon. Rulers in Saxon England claimed descent from Woden and the other Teutonic gods. And Nazi Germany claimed their own warped versions of Teutonic nobility and “Aryan superiority,” even though they failed to understand that Teutons had no genetic rela-

tionship to the Aryan peoples of northern India. But then, myth does not need to be accurate if it is true—in this case to what a political cause wished it to be.

Whatever arguments may occur over the sociological, ethnic, and psychological meaning of myth—and those arguments are many and vociferous—the fact remains that all human cultures have been influenced, and remain influenced, by mythology on several levels.

Because myths so often contain divine elements—sometimes, as mentioned above, even centering about a deity—mythology has been called the first cousin, if not indeed the actual sibling, of religion. This fact should raise a warning flag for storytellers. Mythology is not a dead subject, safely stored away behind the glass of some scholarly museum till the storyteller comes to take it from its case. What may seem like no more than a tale of wild fantasy to a storyteller from one culture might be at the heart of another storyteller's living religion. Since myths are a basic part of the human experience and are so deeply linked with religious expression, a storyteller who wishes to work with mythology needs empathy as well as good scholarship.

At this point, a storyteller reading this may well want to know what sort of scholarship he or she needs, and why it would be needed at all. After all, is not knowing the stories themselves enough?

The simple answer is that, at the very least, it is common courtesy to read a myth, not in someone's literary or commercial retelling, but in a more culturally legitimate form. By that is meant not something impossibly dense and scholarly, but merely a myth collected in the field or recorded from a reputable source. Of course the stories can be retold; they are retold in this book. But a retelling should stay true to the original and not be deliberately and radically altered to make it into a "better" story.

However, before doing any sort of retelling, a wise storyteller should also be willing to delve a little more deeply into the culture to which the myth belongs. The myths of the Inuit are logically going to reflect the harsh environment in which they live, and as a result may not be as easily accessible to other, less northern cultures. The Inuit myth of Sedna is a prime example of this. In it, the young woman, Sedna, who is drowning in the frigid Arctic sea, tries to climb back into her father's boat. Terrified that she will capsize the boat, her father cuts off her fingers. Unable to hold on, Sedna sinks into the sea and dies as a human. Her severed fingers then turn into seals, while Sedna becomes a being of the sea.

Since this is a highly important myth to the Inuit, it would be very bad taste for a storyteller to give only a cursory reading to the story of Sedna. To ignore the power of this myth, or to misunderstand it and retell such

an important and—at least to us—dark a northern tale with a Polynesian slant or a Disneyesque happy ending, would be close to verbal vandalism.

Now that we have gathered the definitions, we have a chance to see what mythologists and folklorists have to say about mythology.

As with all scholarly studies of any subject, the standards for study and analysis have changed over the centuries. The actual study of mythology and folklore can be traced, at least in some form, back as far as third-millennium-B.C.E. Egypt, where the multitalented vizier-architect-scholar-priest Imhotep is said to have collected folk proverbs, and to the first-millennium-B.C.E. Near East, where Babylonian royal scholars made collections of earlier tales.

But in general, there does not seem to have been any formal study of mythology until the time of the Hellenistic Greeks, in about the fourth century B.C.E. Up to that era, myths seem to have been taken as fact by the majority of people to whom they belonged—although, of course, there are always skeptics to be found within any culture. Did, for instance, most of the pre-Hellenistic Greeks really believe in the details of their mythology, with its seemingly all-too-human deities? That is difficult to ascertain. Popular culture and folk belief can be very different from a formalized system of religion, and their details are not always recorded.

It was the Greek philosophers who first recognized a split between *mythos*, myth, and *logos*, reason. Plato and Aristotle, to name two of the most well-known today, raised the cause of reason above all else. They condemned myth as unable to portray reality, save in those rare instances of historical myth where *mythos* and *logos* chanced to overlap.

Greek scholars of antiquity were as willing as their modern counterparts to push facts and create histories to back up their theories. The Greek writer Palaiphatos, to take just one example, came up with his own interpretation of the myth of Zeus and Europa. In the myth, the maiden Europa—who gives us the name *Europe*—is carried off to Crete by the god Zeus, who has fallen for her and has taken the form of a bull to kidnap her. Palaiphatos claimed, unfortunately without any scholarly or physical evidence to back up his theory, that the myth must have been inspired by some historical abduction of a mainland woman, possibly by a Cretan named Tauros, or Bull.

Continuing into the Roman era, myths were no longer accepted as out-and-out fact, but rather as allegories to be studied for hidden meaning. This trend carried into the monotheistic Judeo-Christian cultures. The Christians in particular generally refused to accept polytheistic myths as portraying any truth at all, save when they were considered as allegories. The Greek concepts of *mythos* versus *logos* appear in the New

Testament, particularly in the prologue to the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is portrayed as the epitome of *logos*.

The argument over the roles of myth, reason, and history continued in Europe throughout the Middle Ages without any genuine study of mythology being added to the body of scholarship. By the time of the Age of Enlightenment, the period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the theory of mythology as allegory had fallen into disfavor. In fact, myths themselves had come to be looked upon as antique, even ridiculous, reminders of a savage age that had little possible bearing on the modern world.

The discovery of “primitive” peoples beyond “civilized” Europe did little to change this view. Now scholars looked to what they called the “childhood of man,” the world of the “noble savage”—the idealized primitive—for the origins of mythology, though they still saw little application of myths to their own times. To those more romantic-minded scholars, myth was simply itself, an inevitable expression of the human mind and, as such, as valuable as rationality.

It was the German scholar Christian Gottlob Heyne, active during the eighteenth century, who actually first coined the word *mythology*, from the Greek word *mythos*, which translates as “myth,” “story,” or even “story-telling.” By it he meant the formal study of the myths themselves.

By the nineteenth century, the view of mythology had changed again. Now the study of mythology had become a valid field of scholarship, even a science, at least in Europe and the United States. As more and more myths from around the world became available through fieldwork and translations, scholars began to realize just how complex and deep-rooted the elements of mythology were. They studied the most ancient mythic epics available to them, such as the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gita* of India, believing that these would reveal stronger indications of more archaic ways and beliefs. Scholars such as the German Karl Otfried Muller, taking for his example the Greek story of Persephone, tried to prove that the less complex the myth, the more likely it was to reflect a more primitive pastoral society as its origin, while the more complex myths must indicate a more urban, more modern origin. This theory hasn’t proved universally true.

This was not the only course that mythologists of the day were taking. As the study of linguistics led to the discovery of a basic Indo-European root for many of the world’s modern languages, so mythologists sought to find equally common roots for myths through linguistic hints; some believed that *all* myths could be traced back to prehistoric Indo-Europeans. There is no genuine evidence for or against this theory, either.

Charles Darwin's newly formed theory of evolution moved mythologists to hunt for evolution in myths as well. Sir James Frazer's most famous work is the multivolume study *The Golden Bough*, which, unlike much of his other work, is still very much in print—though usually only in an abridged one-volume edition. In it he attempts to trace, through exhaustive studies, the origins of many myths back to the ancient rituals of agricultural societies. There is, however, no real evidence to prove his theory that ritual came first, with myth invented to explain ritual. Folklorist Sir Andrew Lang, author of the multihued *Fairy Books* of popular fame, also attempted to trace myths back to their origins in his scholarly work *Myths, Ritual and Religion*.

The twentieth century—not surprisingly, given the rapidly changing views of the world in all aspects—brought with it yet another interpretation of mythology. Mythologists began paying more attention to the stories themselves, as well as to their content. An ever-strengthening link was postulated between myth and the human mind, particularly since the science of psychology and psychoanalysis was gaining importance, thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

Jung, who was fascinated by mythology as an expression of human need and the human psyche, focused on the myths' worldwide similarities, which he believed sprang from what he called the "collective unconscious," a shared series of memories buried within all human psyches. Jung also formed a related theory of archetypes. Archetypes are basic elements that crop up within every culture's tales and myths and resonate in our minds, such as the wise old man or the trickster. Archetypes are truly international, and they really do seem to be hardwired into all of us.

Indeed, even children who have not yet been exposed to myths make use of mythic archetypes in their stories. This author saw the result of a creative-writing test in upstate New York, in which the members of a third-grade class were told to create their own fantasy short stories. None of the children was aware of the world of mythology or even of fairy tales, though they had, of course, seen mythic concepts in television shows and movies. Despite the lack of knowledge of myths, each child, with only one exception, invented a story in which the child protagonist is given a magical tool by a wise old man or woman and goes off on a true hero's quest.

Nor are adults exempt from this need to rely on archetypal themes. We fit modern characters and situations into ancient archetypes: A president such as Eisenhower or Reagan has been looked upon, though usually not consciously, as a father, while Kennedy has been quite blatantly associated with an idealized King Arthur and the White House under his administration with an equally idealized Camelot—perhaps Albert Tennyson's prettier image rather than the more historic and less civilized fourth-century version.

Whether or not Jung's concept of the collective consciousness is correct, world mythology certainly does have certain broader themes that transcend all national or cultural barriers. There is an amazing persistence to these ideas. One of the most popular themes, mentioned above, is that of the unrelated yet similar myths of catastrophic floods—sometimes but not always supported by geological evidence—that appear in North America, Europe, Asia, and of course the Bible. Another is the fact that almost every culture includes a myth of the origin of fire that involves not its discovery but its theft. The best-known version, perhaps, is the Greek story of Prometheus, a demigod who stole fire from the gods on Mount Olympus to give to humanity because he pitied mortals. But there are also myths in which the fire stealer is Coyote or even a human hero.

There are also clear parallels that can be drawn between myths from separate cultures. For instance, there are strong similarities between the main theme of a creation myth from the Kalahari in Namibia and one from the Philippines. In both cases, the sky is so close to the ground that people must walk about bent over. In both cases, a woman impatient with this condition hits the sky, causing it to flee up into the heavens. Was there ever any actual contact between these two cultures? Possibly, since the people of the Kalahari may have come from Malaysia or the Philippines. But is there also a relationship to the ancient Egyptian myth of Nut, the sky goddess, being forced up and away from the arms of Geb, the earth god? There is a story with a vaguely similar theme from the Zuni of North America. Connections? Or are we once again delving into the human psyche and Carl Jung's collective unconscious? Unfortunately, when dealing with pre- or nonliterate people, or with scantily written records from the past, there can never be an easy answer.

Similarities aside, a good case can be made for claiming that each culture selects only those mythic images it needs. The Greek myths do tend to humanize their deities, while the ancient Indian myths seem, to Westerners at least, to be more abstract. Sumerian mythology shares ties with older traditions, including the shamanistic rituals of death and rebirth that appear in the Inanna or Ishtar myths: Hunting her slain lover, Dumuzi, or Tammuz, the goddess—the ancestor of the Greek Adonis—descends into the underworld, abandoning layers of herself as she goes, from her clothing to her jewelry to, at the last, her life. In some versions of the myth, she does recover her lover; in all versions, the goddess is reborn. This parallels the shamanistic rituals of many cultures, including those of Siberia, in which a shaman must undergo stages of symbolic death and rebirth.

And, as mentioned above in the summary of the Inuit myth of Sedna, though the basic elements of mythology may remain the same, the myths themselves will be influenced by a culture's environment. A corollary of this comment states that a culture can be defined by its chosen myths.

In one example, a British ambassador to New Zealand in the late nineteenth century knew the Maori language. But that wasn't enough knowledge to let him initiate peaceful negotiations. He needed to learn the Maori mythology as well before he could hope to understand the people and the references they made.

For those who may doubt that a culture can really be defined in such a way, one needs only to look at a familiar society as an example: the United States.

Which myths do Americans revere today? The overworked theme of "family values" is still held up as near to sacred by many Americans, to the point of becoming almost a mantra. But certain other mythic themes are no longer part of the national belief system. People now joke about the "Puritan work ethic," refuse to believe in the Horatio Alger character, and think that the idea of "work hard and you will be rewarded" is naive and unrealistic. Though Americans do still call Abraham Lincoln "Honest Abe" and tell children about George Washington and that cherry tree, the tendency is now to attempt to debunk such concepts and stories.

But who do Americans select as their chosen mythic figures? As a people, many Americans have come to cherish the archetype of the trickster, whether in the persona of Bugs Bunny or Bart Simpson, High John (the slave who continually tricked his master), or the politician who everyone knows is corrupt yet who can charm his way into reelection. Part of this love of the trickster may be due to the feeling of powerlessness that many people in today's society seem to have. Most people love trickster stories in which the little man wins over the big. One of the latest incarnations of the little-man-as-hero archetype is surely the cartoon figure Dilbert. And the main enemy of humanity is no longer seen as any one individual or as a satanic antagonist, but as the corporation or the bureaucracy.

Yet an element of mythic awe does remain in the United States. This is still a nation in which the media trumpets miraculous appearances of the Virgin Mary, where we hear stories of UFOs in which people claim to have been carried off by aliens (in much the same way in which people in the Middle Ages claimed to have been carried off to Faerie), and where newspapers run daily horoscopes. Americans think nothing of "taking the Lord's name in vain," just as people in the Middle Ages swore "God's blood," and today angels are mentioned in ordinary speech the way people in the Middle Ages casually mentioned saints' names.

This brings up another national characteristic: Americans tend to downplay supernatural might and turn powerful creatures into harmless ones. Angels have been popularized to the point of triteness. A being originally of great religious power has been downgraded to a cute image on a pin meant to be worn on a lapel as a so-called guardian angel.

Before angels became such common figures in popular imagery, it was the unicorn that was chosen by the public mind to become the heavily popularized mythic being. The unicorn gradually lost all its power as a medieval symbol of peril or a Christian symbol of utter purity, becoming instead an almost cuddly horned horse, or was crossed with the mythic Greek winged horse, Pegasus, to become a weird hybrid. The worst perversion of the mythic image was surely the unicorn with butterfly wings.

But American myths are not utterly sweet. Americans also tend to believe in the reality of mythically powerful conspiracies such as those created by the mysterious and all-knowing Illuminati or in government cover-ups. When one of the American heroes is assassinated, be it Martin Luther King Jr. or John F. Kennedy, people weave conspiracy stories about the crime, as if they need to be assured that a true hero could not be slain by some lone madman, but only by the mythic strength of an evil cabal. Americans have converted the archetypal wizard, with his stereotypical pointed hat and star-studded robe, into the technogeek, the Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, who is to be feared and even hated for using his powers to take too much control.

People fit—and sometimes force—modern stories or news items into archetypal patterns as well. Americans lack a genuine Robin Hood character, one with that “rob the rich to give to the poor” form of trickster altruism. But there is clearly still a need for a noble thief image in the national mythology, since Americans have tried to force such unlikely heroes as the nineteenth-century gunslinger and psychopath Billy the Kid into that mold. He is given an additional level of mythic grandeur by folk ballads that claim the “saintly Billy” was murdered, shot in the back by a “dirty little coward,” or those who claim he never did die. Jesse James and, in this century, gangsters like Al Capone have also been subjected to a similar mythmaking process. (This is not strictly an American process, by the way; Australia has comparable mythic criminals.)

Americans have secular mythological rituals, too. Anyone who has ever witnessed the fervor attached to the World Series or the Super Bowl can attest to that, as well as to the almost mythic passion surrounding many sporting events and sports heroes. This mythic aura extends to the animal world as well. When the great racehorse Man o' War died in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1947, he was given a full ritual burial. No less than the governor of Tennessee delivered the eulogy. When, decades later, Man o' War's coffin was moved to the Kentucky Horse Park, the “desecration” of the move was viewed by some people in Lexington with almost mythic horror. It may be noted that no one was horrified when the body of a jockey was moved at the same time.

Animals also feature in American entertainment and popular beliefs as mythic heroes. There is, for instance, Lassie, the wonder dog who

never failed to bring help to her (his, actually) master, or the wonder horses, like Roy Rogers' Trigger or Xena's Argo (named after Jason's ship, *Argo*), that seem to understand human speech and think human thoughts. These mythic animal heroes turn up in books, movies, and television.

Nor are horses and dogs the only mythic animals. The dolphin has been attached to mythology since the early days of Greece, usually in the role of a rescuer of drowning humans; there may even be some truth to the stories. But the dolphin has recently had additional layers of myth added to it. Nowadays, people tend to see it not as the genuine cetacean, but as something both greater and other than the animal. Whether in the persona of the superintelligent Flipper or as a member of the New Age gentle and intelligent pod, the dolphin has begun to be subjected to the same trivializing process that was worked on the images of angels and unicorns.

Americans also have our secular archetypal figures of death and rebirth in the codified images of Father Time and Baby New Year, as well as an archetype of national identity in the equally codified image of Uncle Sam and sacred images in our flag and the bald eagle. Anyone who has followed the near hysteria about flag burning knows how strong a symbol the United States flag has become. The eagle has been a mythic symbol of honor and pride since the Romans first used its image on their standards. It is not at all surprising that Benjamin Franklin was voted down during the Continental Congress when he suggested that the American bird should be a turkey!

Yes, a nation clearly can be defined by its myths. And just as clearly, we in the United States still do need our myths and mythmaking, and will take whatever forms of mythology we can get.

In fact, whether people realize it or not, mythology is very much and very obviously around everyone. People take for granted the names used for the days of the week. At least in English-speaking countries, those names are derived from Teutonic deities, such as Wednesday for Woden's Day and Thursday for Thor's Day, or from objects of mythic significance, such as Sunday for Sun's Day and Monday for Moon's Day. The names of the months are a mix of Latin numbering and mythology. October's name means "eighth month," for instance, while May's name comes from Maia, a Roman goddess of springtime, and July honors the deified Julius Caesar.

The penchant for giving heavenly objects mythological names persists into the space age. For instance, the planets are mostly named for Roman deities: Mercury for the god of messengers (and thieves), Venus for the goddess of love, Mars for the god of war, Jupiter for the king of the

gods, Saturn for the god of the underworld, Neptune for the god of the seas, Uranus for the god of the sky, and Pluto for another underworld divinity. Only Earth itself doesn't fit the Roman pattern. Instead, it is named (at least in English-speaking countries) after the Saxon goddess of the earth. With the use of the telescope in the seventeenth century, astronomers made new discoveries, such as the moons of Mars and Jupiter, and decided to continue the trend of naming them after mythological characters. Jupiter's moons include Ganymede, the god's cup-bearer, while Mars, fittingly enough, has moons named for the war god's companions, Phobos and Deimos, Panic and Fear. The discovery of other celestial objects, such as Saturn's moons, had to wait for more modern technology, but they, too, fit the mythological pattern of names: Saturn's largest moon is Titan, the name of an ancient giant.

Mythological themes are evident in the visual arts, too, far too evident to be listed in any detail here. They can be found in works as widely diverse as Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Aphrodite*, the imagery carved on cathedral walls, the ritual sand paintings of the Navajo, and the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dalí.

Many playwrights and musicians have used mythology in their works as well. The Greeks were probably the first, or at least the first for whom there is record, with playwrights such as Euripides and Aeschylus retelling their myths in plays meant not as religious rituals but as entertainment. The Sun King, Louis XIV, frequently held grand performances and masquerades inspired by Greek and Roman mythology, often with himself costumed literally as the sun or the king of the gods. From the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, composers frequently made use of mythology. The late-nineteenth-century Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, to name one example, wrote nine operas with mythological themes, such as *Snegourichka*, which includes the pagan Russian celebration of spring's rebirth. The nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner wrote many of his operas about mythological themes, from the Holy Grail in *Parsifal* to his epic reworking of German mythology in his Ring cycle. Twentieth-century composer Richard Strauss reworked Greek mythology in his shattering opera *Elektra* and in his fantastic *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (The woman without a shadow).

Authors who have been influenced by mythological themes are far too numerous to name here. They range from mystic poet William Blake, with his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, to stream-of-consciousness writer James Joyce and his *Ulysses*, from poet W. B. Yeats and the Irish and British writers of the so-called Celtic Twilight to fantasy great J. R. R. Tolkien and his masterpiece trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as the literally hundreds of fantasy and science fiction writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the world of graphic novels, which are basically comic

books for adults, Neil Gaiman has used a great deal of mythology in his Sandman series, from the Greek god of death, Thanatos, turned into the god of dreams by Gaiman, to a personified Death as a friendly young woman.

Popular mythologist Joseph Campbell has raised a good deal of controversy among mythologists and folklorists, who tend to either strongly agree or strongly disagree with his theories of connected world mythic themes—or, rather, with the way that he connected the themes. But though scholars may agree or disagree, no one can deny that he did succeed in introducing a whole new generation in the United States and Europe to the mythological underpinnings of mind and society that they already subconsciously knew were there but had never really examined.

One of Campbell's most famous students was filmmaker George Lucas. Lucas added a new layer to mythological themes with his *Star Wars* movies and his fantasy movie, *Willow*, all of which are heavily inspired by archetypes. And most recently, television shows such as *Xena* and *Hercules* deliberately played wild and loose with mythologies of all cultures and times.

Those shows, as well as the genre of science fiction and fantasy novels, raise a question often asked by modern audiences. Is this a new mythology? Can new myths really be created? Here is a subject that has been debated at length among folklorists and mythologists without anyone coming to any clear agreement. This folklorist believes that there are no such things as new myths, merely old myths in new clothing. Just as every culture picks the myths it requires, so every generation dresses the myths to suit its needs.

Here are some cases in point. The most blatant place to start when dealing with “modern” mythology is with the original *Star Wars* movie and its archetypes. The main figure of the first three movies is Luke Skywalker, the mythic hero raised in ignorance of his true worth. Although Luke lacks the “baby in the bulrushes” mythic motif of Moses and Sargon of Akkad, among others, he does share elements with them as well as with the comic book hero Superman. Luke also shares a mythic element with Sigurd/Siegfried of Teutonic myth and Aragorn of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in that he possesses but has to learn to use the sword of his father.

In this, Luke is guided by another archetypal figure, Obi-Wan Kenobi, the wise old man, who can also be a warrior when the occasion calls for it. Obi-Wan shares his characteristics as sage with many earlier mythic figures, including Merlin of Britain, Vainamoinen of Finnish lore, and the wizard Gandalf, again from *Lord of the Rings*. In the second movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke encounters another version of the wise old man archetype: Yoda, teacher of the Jedi.

Luke is helped on his quest—which is another mythic theme, of course, the quest of the hero—by Han Solo, who combines the archetypes of trickster and rogue in the spirit of Robin Hood, and Chewbacca the Wookiee, who plays the part of the (secondary) hero's companion. Darth Vader, of course, is almost too easy to identify: He is literally the dark lord, the adversary, throughout the first *Star Wars* movie at least, with a tie-in to Lucifer, the fallen angel. George Lucas brings in many other blatant archetype images, such as that of son fighting father and of the sinner redeemed.

The archetypes are a little less obvious, at least at first sight, when another modern icon is considered: the science fiction television and movie series *Star Trek*. But the mythic types really are there. After all, the classic USS *Enterprise*, the ship from the original series, going off to explore “strange new worlds” and seeking out “strange new civilizations,” is clearly a modern descendent of the ancient ships of mythic exploration, such as the Greek Jason's *Argo* or the nameless vessel of the Welsh Maedun, who wandered amid magical islands.

The *Enterprise's* captain, James T. Kirk, definitely has his mythic qualities as well. In his willingness to solve a problem not by force or cold reason but by trickery, he is a composite of trickster and rogue, like Jason and Han Solo. He also has the trickster's lustiness. Mr. Spock, the half-human, half-Vulcan first officer, plays two mythic roles. He is both the hero ignorant of his true worth, man of two planets and two species that he is, and the hero's companion and sage. Dr. Leonard McCoy, the acerbic ship's surgeon, plays the mythic role of the wise old man in his own gadfly way. The *Enterprise's* engineer, Montgomery “Scotty” Scott, who can work wonders with machines, is a modern counterpart of the earlier wonder-working smiths out of mythology, such as the English Weland Smith and the Greek Hephaestus. A deliberate use of Roman mythology went into the naming of the Vulcans and their separatist cousins the Romulans, the latter with their twin worlds of Romulus and Remus. And a case can be made for the Klingons, at least those in the original *Star Trek* series, being modern variants on mythic ogres.

There are certainly a good many other myths in modern dress. Bugs Bunny, mentioned before as a clear archetype trickster figure, is, though his creators didn't realize it, the direct descendent of Hare and Rabbit of West African peoples and native cultures of the Southeastern United States.

It should be evident by this point that none of these images, modern though they may seem, is part of any truly new myth. Even Darth Vader, for all his high-tech protective mask and flowing black robes, is, as already mentioned, merely an ancient archetype in new—if impressive—clothing. And by now, any storyteller must agree that mythology truly

knows no boundaries of time or space. All people hold their myths as a link with the human past. What new clothing will mythology be wearing in the future? That depends on culture and how it changes. There will still be questions to be answered. And where science or reasoning fails, there is mythology to fill the gap.

The stories in this book are not restricted to any one region or any one era. How could they be? Mythology really does belong to everyone.

1

THE CREATION


There are as many versions of the story of creation as there are human cultures. Details of the creation vary, of course, according to what aspects each culture finds most important. In some accounts, the world is created from nothing by the will or word of a deity, as in our familiar biblical account, as well as in myths from Egypt, Greece, and Mesoamerica. After the creation, the deity (or deities) may remain the central figure of religious life, as in Judeo-Christian beliefs, or withdraw from humanity, as in the Greek myths.

A related category of cosmic myth is the creation by birth, the world-parent myth. Here two divine parents give birth to the world or to divine or semidivine offspring. Sometimes, as occurs in Greek and Babylonian mythology, the children are forced, for the sake of their own survival or the survival of the newly formed world, to turn against their parents, even to kill them. In a variant form, as in Egyptian and Polynesian myths, the children push their parents, who are sky and earth, apart to make space for humanity.

Another category of creation myth involves the potent mythic symbol: the cosmic ocean. This mythic type, particularly common to Asia and North America, involves a magical being, a bird or an animal, that helps the creator by diving into the ocean and bringing up earth from under the primal waters. In some cases the diver is seen as a subordinate rival to the creator, or even an evil being. In all examples, though, the earth that is recovered from under the waters then expands into the world.

Still another form of cosmic myth involves divine death or sacrifice. In Babylonian myth, for example, the slain Tiamat's body—she who is a quite literal example of a monster mother—becomes the earth.

Some creation myths reflect the environment surrounding a specific culture. Sumer, lying as it did between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq, depended on irrigation yet was in constant danger from flooding. Therefore, it is not unexpected to find that water and its control are major elements in Sumerian creation myths. It is the primal sea that is the source of gods and earth. There can be no surprise, then, that the earliest written version of the archetypal flood myth that survives comes from Sumer.



Every culture, not at all unexpectedly, has a myth concerning the creation of humans and animals—indeed, of all living things. The method of creation, though, varies widely. Sometimes, as in the familiar biblical story, humanity comes as much from the will or the word of a creator as from anything physical such as dust. Other myths, such as that of the Babylonians, do hold stronger elements of the physical, telling of humanity sculpted from clay, blood, or other such substances.

Another form of mythological birth is a symbolic one. In myths of this sort, they may tell of the emergence of humanity from a specific sacred tree or rock. Or humanity may emerge from under the earth or from the lower worlds, as in Navajo myths, literally and symbolically from a narrow opening in the earth.

So, for that matter, can gods emerge. The ruler of the Greek pantheon, Zeus, was hidden as a baby in a narrow cave, a cleft in the rocks, in Crete, to protect him from his murderous father, Cronos, who had already eaten his other children. Zeus' emergence from the cave was clearly a second, symbolic birth; the cave is still revered as a sacred site of fertility.

The rituals of some human cultures echo this symbolism. In Cornwall, until fairly recently, it was considered good fortune to crawl through a natural hole in a rock. And in various initiation customs in shamanistic societies, a budding shaman is ritually "buried" in a cave and must find his way, his "rebirth," out of that cave.

Eggs, too, can be symbolic of birth, as well as of fertility and even rebirth. African and Chinese myths tell that humanity emerged from the inner to the outer layers of the world egg.

A Polynesian variant shows how the basic template of a myth may be sculpted by local environment, since the world egg is, in this case, replaced by a coconut.

THE BEGINNING OF CREATION

A Myth from Ancient Babylon

Several familiar world themes appear in this myth. The concept of the primal sea is one of the most common, turning up in the myths of cultures as far apart as ancient Egypt, pre-Christian Finland, and the Pacific Northwest of North America. Since our planet is, after all, at least two-thirds covered by water, it's not difficult to see why so many cultures would have the primal sea concept.

The theme of a divine father wanting to kill his divine offspring also appears in early Greek mythology. See the Greek myth "Theogony" later in this chapter, which takes the theme much further. The fight against a deadly mother figure appears in Aztec mythology as well. The psychological underpinnings of these myths are intriguing, but beyond the scope of this book.



Kudurru of Babylonian king Melishishu II shows emblems of the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea. Above them are the crescent of the moon god, the star of Ishtar, and the sun of Shamash. At the bottom are a snake and scorpion of the underworld. (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)

This is the author's free rendering of various translations of what is customarily known by archaeologists as "the epic of creation" cycle. While the earliest relatively complete versions date to the Old Babylonian era, circa 1900-1800 B.C.E., there is incomplete evidence hinting that other versions may be even earlier.

When the sky above had no name, when the earth below had no name, there was Apsu the first, the begetter of all, and there was Tiamat, maker, bearer of all. They mixed their waters together in the primal sea.

There was not yet made pasture or reed, marsh or solid land. They had not yet let gods be manifest.

But gods were born within them. Lahmu and Lahamu they were, their names pronounced as they were fully formed. Then Anshar and Kishar were born as well, surpassing the eldest two. Anshar made his son, Anu, from himself, like himself. And Anu was greater than his begetter, greater than the eldest four.

So it was that more and more gods came into being, and played together in the primal sea. Their noise grew, and the waves that they made while playing disturbed the primal peace.

At last Apsu made complaint to Tiamat. "Their ways are grievous to me. By day I have no rest. By night I have no sleep. I shall destroy them so that we may know peace."

Tiamat was enraged. "Shall we end what we have formed? Their actions may be noisome, but we should bear it with goodwill. I will not strike against them."

Apsu was not content. He summoned forth his minister, Mummu, and plotted. "How can we best be rid of the noisy lot?"

Mummu counseled, "Put an end to this here and now. By day you should know rest, by night you should know sleep."

Apsu was delighted. They plotted evil, he and Mummu against the gods, Apsu's children.

He did not know that Ea, son of Anshar and cleverest of the young gods, Ea who knew everything, was listening to this deadly plot that Apsu brewed. Ea in his turn fashioned a plan to save the gods. He made an artful master spell, recited it, and brought it restfully upon the waters. Ea's spell drenched Apsu and Mummu with deepest sleep. Ea bound Mummu as his captive. Then Ea slew Apsu, slew his deadly grandsire.

Now Ea ruled supreme in Apsu's place, taking on the radiance of royalty. He and Damkina, his wife, dwelled together in quiet splendor. And together they begot a son and called him Marduk. Marduk was a splendid son from birth, a fine and fiery hero god in every way.

But all the while, Tiamat raged in her heart. The waves were troubled as she thought of Apsu's death, and heard from those children still loyal to her what Ea had done. He had slain her mate. He had taken on the radiance of royalty. She would not have dominion torn from her grasp!

So Tiamat gave birth not to gods but to monsters, an army born of hate. Among them were the horned serpent, the rabid dog, the seething dragon, the hate-filled demon, the raging being half bull and half man, and the loathsome being half man and half fish. Through the veins of each snake in that army ran venom, not blood, and in the eyes of each dragon flashed deadly fire.

"Whoever sees them shall collapse from fear," Tiamat proclaimed. "Wherever they attack, they shall not retreat."

Not satisfied yet, Tiamat then raised up one of her offspring, he who is known only as Qingu. Not one description of him is there. But Tiamat was pleased with her creation, so pleased that she took him as her new mate and gave him the army's leadership.

When news of this most terrible of armies reached Ea, he sat stunned in silence for a time. Then, knowing he must have counsel at once, he hurried to his father, Anshar. But Anshar, looking out at the terror threatening them all, cried out in anger, "It was you who slew Apsu, it is you who enraged Tiamat, and it is you who must declare war against her army!"

Ea defended himself against his father's wrath, using soothing speech, calming words. "O my father, remember in your heart that I made a wise plan. I slew Apsu before he could slay us all. But when I slew him, who could have foreseen what is happening now?"

Anshar's wrath was calmed. "Go forth against Tiamat. Subdue her by your magic spell."

So Ea set out against Tiamat. But soon he hurried back to Anshar.

"My father, her strength is too great. My spells cannot counter it. My army cannot stand against her monsters. My father, send another against her before she destroys us all."

Anshar, raging, called upon his firstborn, Anu. "Stalwart son, valiant son, take a stand before Tiamat. Soothe her. Calm her rage. Stop her hatred."

When he heard his father's words, Anu set off to confront Tiamat and soothe her rage. But soon he hurried back to Anshar.

"My father, I cannot counter her hatred. Her strength is greater now, terrifying in its force. There is no hope of soothing her, none of calming her rage. I pray you, send another after her, before she destroys us all."

Anshar called forth all the gods. But they all sat tight-lipped in silence. Anshar, seeing them all helpless with fear, cried out, "Is there none among you to come forward?"

"There is one," Ea said. He summoned forth his own mighty firstborn, his champion, his brave son, Marduk.

Marduk bowed to Anshar. "My grandfather, let me go, let me win your heart's desire."

Seeing the fierce young strength of Marduk, Anshar's heart was lightened. "Go forth, my grandson. Trample the neck of Tiamat. Bring her to rest with your sacred spells. Go, quickly, with your chariot of storm. Let it not veer from its course!"

Marduk straightened proudly. "My lord grandfather, if indeed I am to be your champion, if I am to stop Tiamat and save the lives of all here, then let me be supreme among the gods."

It was agreed. The gods set out for Marduk a royal dais, and he took his place on it as sovereign. The gods proclaimed, "You are our champion. We bestow on you kingship of all there is. May your truth be without flaw; may your weapon never miss its mark. Now go cut off the life of Tiamat and let the winds bear away her blood!"

So Marduk raised up Deluge, his spear, and mounted his chariot, terrible Storm Demon. The four steeds who drew that chariot were Slaughterer, Overwhelmer, Soaring, and Merciless, and their teeth were bared in battle fury. Marduk drove them forward. He drove them to where Tiamat loomed like a terrible wave over her army. She cast a spell of falsehood at him, saying, "The gods rise up against you. They claim to have raised you up, but they are not at your side when you have the greatest need of aid."

For a moment Marduk faltered, overwhelmed by the force of Tiamat's spell. Then he shouted at her, "Deceiver! You pretend to warn, while you plan attack. You mean to murder Anshar and all the gods. Come within range and let us duel!"

Tiamat shrieked her rage and charged. She and Marduk closed in single combat, casting spell after spell. Marduk hurled the storm wind at her, and she opened her mouth wide to swallow it and him—but the raging wind held her helpless. Marduk drew his bow and shot. The arrow tore through Tiamat's belly, through her heart, through her body. She fell dead, and Marduk took his stand on the carcass, scattering her forces on all sides. Qingu he took prisoner, binding him as a traitor to the gods.

The battle was over. Marduk tore Tiamat's body in two, letting the wind cast away her blood. He flung one-half of the body into the air, where it became the dome of heaven. The other half, left lying, became the earth with all its mounts and valleys. Now Marduk set places in the heaven for the gods, and set the stars in their places as well. He used the stars to mark off years and months, weeks and days.

But Marduk was not yet finished with his work. The foam from the primal sea became billowing clouds in the sky. The winds he raised condensed water from the clouds to rain down on the earth.

Now it was time to deal with Qingu the traitor. The gods slew him, and from his blood Marduk made humanity.

But the doings of humanity is another tale.

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ANCIENT CREATION

A Myth from Ancient Assyria

This is also the author's free rendering of translations of the Assyrian creation myth and is here to show a variation in a region. While the Assyrian version isn't as complete a "story" as in the Babylonian creation myth, mostly because of scanty textual material (i.e., clay tables break), there is the additional element of the creation being incomplete without humanity.

*I*t was the four gods of the elements who created the earth and the heavens. It was the Annunaki, the sky gods led by Anu, their head god; Enlil, of earth; Shamash, the god of the sun; and Ea, god of water. They created earth and heaven, yet when they looked over their new creation, there was surely something missing.

It was humanity that the new world lacked, humanity to till the fields and celebrate the festivals. So it was that the first humans were created. They were named Ulligarra, which means "abundance," and Zalgarra, which means "plenty." Aruru, "lady of the gods," kept their destinies safe. The humans lived and thrived. And the new world was now complete.

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ATUM THE CREATOR

A Myth from Ancient Egypt

This is the basic, primal Egyptian creation myth in which Atum is the father and mother of creation in one. In the hieroglyphic texts there is apparently some variance as to whether this is a case of creation by will or by literally sexual means.

*F*irst there was nothing but the primal chaos, the great bubbling, churning turmoil of water that was to be called Nun. It was out of this chaos that all that is came into being, but the creation did not arise unaided.

From time to time the roiling chaos of Nun receded ever so slightly, drawing back from the first hilltop. On this hilltop, out of Nun, came Atum, great self-created primal god of sun and life, Atum, whose name implies “all”: all that was to be. Neither and both male and female, Atum was alone. Yet there were to be more gods, engendered from Atum by Atum. From this primal one came a male god, Shu, air, and a female god, Tefnut, water. To these two creations, these two children of one parent, Atum assigned the roles of establishing order out of chaos. Shu gave the world the principles of life, while Tefnut gave it the principles of order.



Atum, the primal god of sun and life, was not content to rule alone. He created the air god Shu, who is pictured here separating the sky from the earth to establish order and give the world the principles of life. Detail from coffin of Nespawershepi, chief scribe of the Temple of Amun, twenty-first dynasty, c. 984 B.C.E. (Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York)

Yet while they worked on these tasks, Shu and Tefnut were lost amid the seething, foggy chaos of Nun. Their parent sought them but found nothing. So Atum removed his single eye, the *udjat*, and sent it out to find his lost children. They were found, and returned with the *udjat*. Setting it back in his head, Atum wept the first tears ever known, tears of joy.

And where these tears of joy struck earth, humankind grew.

But there was no world yet for them. Shu and Tefnut became the parents of two children, Geb, a male god, the earth, and Nut, a female god, the sky. Geb and Nut, in turn, created Osiris and Isis, Hathor and Set, who were to rule over humanity and all the ways of the world. And now humanity had a place on which to live and thrive.

Atum's work was done. He retreated from the new creation, content.

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PTAH CREATES THE WORLD

A Myth Variant from Memphis, Ancient Egypt

This myth was chosen to show how a basic myth can be altered to fit a local region's patron deity. The same process occurs in folklore, such as a Russian tale of a peasant outwitting a royal court. In its earliest forms there is a generic tsar; in the later versions the generic figure has been replaced by a specific ruler, Peter the Great. The same process occurs in modern urban folklore, in which a generic movie star in the original urban tale is replaced by a specific actor by later tellers.

The ancient Egyptians tended to be highly adaptable about conflicting religious beliefs. Each *nome*, or district, had its own patron deities, who were added into the Egyptian pantheon, merging elements with already existing deities. There would have been nothing unusual in Memphis, which was the capital of Egypt until about 1700 B.C.E., having its own version of the creation myth, featuring its own patron god.

*P*tah the great god came forth from the primal waters, seeking a place to rest his foot. He was no longer young, the primal one, and he wished that place to rest his foot. So the god brought land up from out of

the water and came ashore at the place, which he named Memphis, meaning that this was land.

Now there was land and sea, but no order. Ptah willed there to be other deities, other gods beneath him, and the earliest of deities save Ptah himself came into being. This was what the god willed; this was what he created through his words. And so Ptah, content, withdrew to let the others do the work of creating plants and beasts and humans.

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COLORED CLAYS

A Myth of the Shilluk of Sudan

The concept of humanity being molded out of clay is a common image in world mythology, turning up everywhere from Africa to the Near East to Asia and North America. See, for instance, the two Chinese tales of Nü Wa creating humanity, later in this chapter. The idea that the different races come from different colors of clay appears in other myths as well. See, for example, the “Two Creators” myth from New Guinea, later in this chapter.

We also have the concept of humanity being molded from clay or earth in our Western sayings, such as “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Juok the creator wandered the earth, creating all humanity in the colors that seemed right. In the land of the north, he found a pure white clay that pleased him. Out of it he shaped the ancestors of all the white races.

Then Juok wandered south, to the land of Egypt. The deep red of the mud of the Nile pleased him. Out of it he shaped the ancestors of all the red races.

At last he came to the land of the Shilluks. There he found black earth that pleased him. Out of it he shaped the ancestors of all the black races.

Now, the way that Juok created life from clay was this:

As he held a lump of clay, Juok thought and then said, “I will make man out of this.”