

Long, Long Ago

Arundhuti Dasgupta and Utkarsh Patel recount obscure creation myths from around the world, many echoing each other



THE GREEK WORD MYTHOS ORIGINALLY meant ‘word’ or ‘story’. But time wrought new meaning into it, limiting both its reach and scope. As Herodotus (Greek, 4c BCE) established the concept of historical fact, ‘mythos’ was debunked. It came to stand for fiction, or that which was not (entirely) true, a matter of conjecture that had been handed down anonymously, standing apart from ‘logos’, which came to us from an authorised source.

Over time mythos was further disenfranchised. History, science, philosophy, literature and other formal disciplines separated themselves from the jumble of ideas that gave the word its power and meaning. Even so, even with its frontiers breached, mythos/myth/mythology has held its own. Preserved as sacred stories, they are often seen as markers for civilisational identity and early human thought.

Myths reveal humankind’s perennial quest for meaning. They bind us in a web of common themes and anxieties, revealing the imprint of a shared intangible inheritance of big ideas. Nothing illustrates this more effectively than myths about the creation of the universe and that of mankind. How the universe came to be is a puzzle that every civilisation has struggled to solve.

Into the light, out of darkness

The Zuni, a Native American tribe, believe the world began in darkness. All beings lived in the dark, were made of slime and had webbed feet, hands and horns and tails. The Zuni imagination recalls an original being called Áwonawílona, who contained the world within him. He began the act of creation by projecting his inner thoughts onto the outside world and, as he did that, manifested himself as a mist-filled space and a self-realising image, the sun.

As is usually the case with myths, there are many versions of the same story. According to one, once Áwonawilona had produced light, he drew all the creatures that had been hitherto buried in the inky blackness of the universe out into the light and then, through other gods that he created or himself, shaped their mouths, feet, hands and minds.

The story is accompanied by several humorous twists and turns and reveals a god that created humankind through trial

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Izanagi and Izanami
C. 1900 CE
Nishikawa Sukenobu

right
**Maori wood carving of
Rangi and Papa**



and error, not through preordained design. For instance, having conferred slit mouths, eyes and nose upon the shapeless mass of the creatures, the gods realised they had forgotten to provide any excretory mechanism. This brought humanity to the brink of extinction as people gorged on the corn that the sun god had provided and then lay writhing in pain as their stomachs bloated and threatened to burst. The gods then had to drill the appropriate orifices so that people could expel their waste.

In many early creation myths, creator gods bring the world into being, not through design, but through trial and error. This stands apart from the synchronised dance of creation that structures the creation narrative in Vedic, Greek, Egyptian cultures as also in Judaism and Christianity.

The San hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari

in Africa have a creator being called Dxui, the first spirit of creation. Dxui could change form and at night he turned into a man and during the day, when the sun rose, a flower. Some days Dxui was a fruit tree full of thorns. On one such day, a woman appeared and tried to take the fruit. But the tree died and disappeared and the woman died of grief too. Dxui then became a fly, then water, then another flower, then a bird and then one who ate the bird. The spirit kept changing its form until it died and became a lizard, the oldest creature of all.

In these myths, creation is a process that draws upon the latent energy of the universe. The world lies hidden, coiled within a dark abyss and gradually draws itself out to its full size and shape, prodded by an unseen hand or through its own energies. At times, creation is a series of evolutionary steps brought about by a spirit or an animal.

The chaos within

Nordic myths see the earth as a circle of land surrounded by the ocean. And in the beginning was the great abyss, the Ginnungagap that contained a bundle of energies within its fold. The vast layers of ice sparked a fire within and gave birth to Ymir, the androgynous giant from whose body came animals, man and woman.

Indian, Greek and Chinese myths have popular variants of this theme. The Nasadiya Sukta (Rig Veda) explains this in great detail, digging into the concept of nothingness that gave rise to everything thereafter. The Egyptians have a similar myth. In their creation stories Nun was the dark watery abyss that existed before the gods. It contained all the potential forms of all living beings and the spirit of the creator gods. And from Nun came the sea, the trees, the mountains, men and

animals and all else.

The Balinese creation myth says that in the beginning there was nothing. The world serpent, Antaboga, meditated the world into existence and the first creation was the world turtle, Bedawang.

Bedawang spread over the abyss or a wide mass of nothingness, and on it lay two coiled snakes and a black stone that covered a cave underneath. The cave is ruled by Batara Kala and the goddess Setasuyara. Kala created light and mother earth and the rest followed.

Another unusual Southeast Asian creation myth comes from the Iban, a branch of the Dayak tribe in Borneo. They believe that the world began with two spirits, Ara and Irik, in the form of birds floating over a boundless mass of water. The birds swooped down on the water and collected two eggs from its deepest recesses. Ara used one to make the sky and Irik converted the other into the earth. However, the earth was too big and could not hold the sky and the creator spirits had to hammer it into shape, which is why we have mountains, craters, rivers and streams. Having created the world, the birds decided to create humankind, shaping them from the soil of the earth and bringing them to life with their bird cries.

The cosmic egg

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The Dogon, an African tribe, believe that before the universe came into being, it existed as a thought in the mind of Amma, the supreme creator that was in the form of an egg

that held the seed of the cosmos. It vibrated seven times, then burst open to reveal a Nommo creator spirit. This fell to earth and was followed by a female twin and then came about four more such pairs that made the sky and earth, the ocean and mountains, and people and animals that live in its midst.

The most popular myth of creation among the Chinese is about how the world was created by a primordial deity called Pan Gu, the offspring of Yin and Yang. Pan Gu was born inside the darkness of an egg created by these two primordial forces and grew for 18,000 years before the egg split open. The light and golden parts of the egg made the skies, heaven and the sun while the heavy parts made the earth. Pan Gu stood up to keep the sky and earth apart, and grew every day until the two worlds separated by a considerable distance and solidified in their respective moulds. It took him 18,000 years of standing between sky and earth to create the world we live in today, after which he lay down wearily and died. From his body and breath came the mountains and oceans and air and thunder.

In many myths, the world is created as the progeny of a primordial mother and father, of earth and sky, or air and water, or two opposing forces. And unless they are kept apart, there is a chance that the world can dissolve back into chaos.

The Maori creation myth states that the world's parents emerge out of Po, unformed matter—Rangi, the male sky, and Papa, the female earth. The two were locked in a static sexual embrace, creating an inert space between them where their offspring were trapped.

Rangi and Papa had six sons, each of whom represented an element of nature: forests, winds and storms, fishes and reptiles, food

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that grows without cultivation, cultivated food and humans. The children longed for air and light but, trapped between their parents, had no recourse to either. All came up with ways to separate their parents, toying with everything from killing them to flooding them out. Finally, Tane, the son who was the god of forests and trees, suggested pulling them apart, and putting his head against his mother and feet against his father, he separated the two.

This did not go down well with his brothers, especially the one in charge of winds and storms, who unleashed his fury upon the world. He trashed the forest, rumbled the oceans and left everything in a shambles. Fishes fled from the forest where they once lived into the oceans and reptiles made their way towards land. Tane was gradually controlled and defeated. And he went on to find himself a mate and produce a diversity of offspring to populate the world. At the same time he also drove his brothers away and exploited their riches to sustain life on earth.

In some myths among Oceanic aboriginal tribes, separation between earth and sky is caused by a woman who lifts her pestle so high while grinding grain that it strikes the sky, causing the sky to recede into the background. In most cases an antagonistic motive is attributed to the agents of separation. In the Babylonian and Maori versions of this myth, actual warfare takes place as a result of the separation.

In another Chinese myth of creation, the creator is a goddess who comes into being after the separation of sky and earth. Nu Gua (NuWa) had the body of a snake, a human head and the virtue of a divine being. She came to live on earth after light flooded the darkness out but soon grew lonely. One day she saw her

reflection in a pool of water and had an idea. She began scooping up the mud around her and shaping them into beings like her. And as she moulded them into tiny beings and put them down, life surged into them and created a world full of people. She soon realised that to populate the world, she needed far more energy than she had. And so she dipped a vine into the watery earth and flicked it so that drops of mud fell far and near and became people.

Earth, clay and creation

In many cultures, the earth is the creator god and material for further creation. The universe comes into play because an animal deity, an earth diver, digs in and extracts form and life out of its watery slime. This basic structure of the earth-diver myth has been modified in Central Europe in myths that relate the story of the primordial waters to denote God and the Devil. In these versions of the earth-diver myth, the Devil appears as God's companion in the creation of the world.

The Devil becomes the diver sent by God to bring earth from the bottom of the waters and the relationship between God and the Devil moves from companionship to antagonism; they become adversaries, though they remain co-creators of the world.

According to the Iroquois Native American tribe, water animals inhabited the earth before there was land and the first human ancestor is a woman who fell from the sky people, Ataensic.

Long before the world was created there was an island, floating in the sky, upon which the Sky People lived. They lived quietly and happily. No one ever died or was born or experienced sadness. However, one day one of the Sky Women realised she was going to give

birth to twins. She told her husband, who flew into a rage. In the centre of the island there was a tree which gave light to the entire island since the sun hadn't been created yet. He tore up this tree, creating a huge hole in the middle of the island. The woman peered into the hole curiously. Far below she could see the waters that covered the earth. At that moment her husband pushed her. She fell through the hole, tumbling towards the waters below.

Water animals already existed on the earth, so far below the floating island two birds saw the Sky Woman fall. Determined to help the woman they dived into the water to get mud from the bottom of the seas. One after another the animals tried and failed. Finally, Little Toad tried and when he reappeared his mouth was full of mud. The animals took it and spread it on the back of Big Turtle. The mud began to grow and grow and grow until it became the size of North America. Then the woman stepped onto the land. She sprinkled dust into the air and created stars. Then she created the moon and sun.

The Sky Woman gave birth to twin sons. She named one Sapling. He grew to be kind and gentle. She named the other Flint and his heart was as cold as his name. They grew quickly and began filling the earth with their creations. Sapling created what is good but Flint destroyed much of Sapling's work and created all that is bad. The two battle it out over every creation until good wins but evil still makes its presence felt through a volcanic eruption or a landslide.

Born from drifting land

In Japanese creation myths, the primal couple is Izanagi and his sister-wife Izanami. They were commanded by the spirits that created



Nun lifting the sun god into the beginning of time
C. 1050 BCE

them to create the world and so they stood on the floating bridge of heaven and stirred the brine below with a jewelled spear. As they lifted the spear, drops of brine solidified into an island called Onogoro. The couple came down to the island and set up a pillar around which the two walked, Izanagi from the left and his sister from the right and when they met, they came together to create children.

Their firstborn was deformed and had to be consigned to the waters. The original ancestral spirits decided that it was the woman's fault as she had spoken first during sexual intercourse. (In some versions, the couple had to reverse their order of walking around the pillar with the man moving in from the right instead.) So the next time around, Izanagi speaks first or takes the initiative and thus are born a series of gods and goddesses who create the world. ■