Similarities and Differences in Creation Myths of Different Cultures

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Abstract

Myths are popularly those stories that are believed by many people but have no certainty of being true. Such stories are told throughout cultures to make people believe in practices, cultures, creation or god. The dictionary meaning of myth says that myth is “a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature” and “an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution.”. Through this paper I would like to analyse the creation myths of the cultures of Yoruba, Acoma, Hindu, Jainism, Choctaws and a few others and analysing the similarities and differences among them.

In most of the myths of all cultures, patriarchy is maintained, which is in the form of father figure being prevalent and giving life to all the animals, plants and humans. This is seen to be a re-iteration of the fact that man is the head of the family or the society. This also shows the belief among civilizations of men that women can’t govern themselves and always need a head in the family. For example in the Christian myth of creation, it was God who later came to be known as the Father who made the universe. He is known to have first created/given light due to the darkness, then the subsequent creation of plants and animals, day and night and all other necessities of life. After this, God created man (Adam) and from his rib, a woman (Eve) was created. It was God, the Father who instructed Adam and Eve to live in harmony and also
advised them against anything wrong. This particular myth shows patriarchy at two levels, one in the form of God and other in the form of Adam from whose body Eve was created. The creation of Eve is also anti-feminist as she was created from that rib of Adam that was of no use which again shows that Adam could live without Eve. Also she was created because Adam was lonely and needed company. In Yoruba (African) creation myth, there was only water on earth, seeing this the Gods decided to create and give life on earth. Olurun was the group of celestial Gods who conferred together and thought to create the world. Obatala went down to earth with a long golden chain, a rooster, a black cat, a snail’s shell filled with sand and a palm nut. He created land, animals and plants and from the soil he created mankind. This mankind was at first deformed and later he again created perfect humans. In this myth however we see no mention of the woman being created or the presence of a goddess who might have helped in the creation of earth. India being a multi-cultural country has many myths but according to the Hindu myth of creation, it was Brahma, one of the three Gods of the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who created earth and other living beings in it. This again shows patriarchy working within the Hindu myth as well. But many Native American tribes are matrilineal in nature as in the Cherokee tribe in which the Sky Woman creates corn, beans and other essential things from her own body thus becoming the mother of creation. In the creation myth of Acoma, a Pueblo tribe in the western New Mexico, one observes that two female twins were born underground and also taken care of by the Spirit who is supposedly a female. The Spirit was known as The Thinking Woman as also popularly known in the Laguna tribe; she is also known as the spider woman who spins the world into existence. Also these female twins were the first to have come into existence and they were themselves the ones who gave life to the animals as instructed by the Spirit, Tsichtinako. This shows that the Acoma tribe was
matrilineal as it was governed by the woman. But it is also significant to note that there was the presence of a higher authority, the father, Uch'tsiti who never spoke or showed up in the entire myth and yet he was present. His authority was above that of the Spirit but he always remained unseen and unheard. In the Greek mythology also, a matrilineal kind of creation can be seen as Goddess Eurynome came naked out of chaos and divided the water and the sky and gradually led to the creation of earth and the wind and also the serpent, Ophion with whom she mated and in the form of a dove laid an egg and gave it to the serpent to be hatched. As the serpent grew arrogant, he was banished by Eurynome who later made the Titanesses and Titans to control the planets, and finally she made the first man, Pelasgus. Later, it became patriarchal by the descent of Zeus on Olympus by defeating his father, Kronus.

The figure of a trickster is one of the very important figures in the creation myth, who generally created chaos in the life of both Gods and humans, because of which the first humans were punished or banished from the heavenly place as in the case of the Christian myth, where Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise as they disobeyed God by eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Also Eve was punished and cursed that she would have to bear the pain of giving birth to child and that she would have to be subordinate to Adam. This disobedience by Eve took place due to Satan, the evil deceiver who fell out of favour of God, got into the body of a snake which tempted her and led her to such an act of disobedience. The snake was punished to always slither on the ground without a backbone and to have enmity with man and woman. In the Acoma myth also the snake, Pishuni tempted one of the twin sisters, Nautsiti into having a child when both the sisters were having a discord. This led to Tsichtinako, the Spirit being angry and leaving them to “do as you fit”. They were now
deserted without any guiding hand for them. In the Navajo myth, another Native American tribe, the Navajo Coyote stole the daughter of Water Monster and caused a terrible flood. This trickster figure can be seen as the psyche of humans that is left unchecked. In Freudian terms the trickster can be seen as the 'Id', which is based on the pleasure seeking principle and knows no morality. Also it is worth observing that the snake is the trickster in many myths. Even in the Greek mythology, Ophion, the serpent became arrogant and due to this he was banished. His head was flattened and teeth broken and he was sent below the earth to live in darkness.

The Sun is said to be the life giver and is worshipped in most of the cultures. If scientifically seen, then every planet in the universe revolves around the sun which is the centre. Earth is the only planet that is at an appropriate distance from it, thus making life possible here while other planets are either too near or too far to the sun which makes the survival of life impossible on other planets. Carl Jung said that the sun rightly represents almighty god, because he is certainly our source of energy and life. So in many ways, Sun was rightfully worshipped as God in many cultures and was given a lot of importance. In the Egyptian culture, sun is worshipped as Ra who is believed to have created the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut, who are said to be the parents of the earth and sky. Man was born from the tears of Ra, and as man was created in his image and is made from his flesh, the earth was created to provide care and to help mankind in his existence. In India, Sun is worshipped under the names of Aditya, Surya, Ravi by singing the Gayatri mantra to obtain enlightenment and knowledge. Also it believed that the sun was born from a cosmic egg and around it everything was attracted and rose towards it. This sun is supposedly Brahma. In Africa, the Malazoi king
is worshipped as the creator and believed to be sun’s representative on Earth. The dominant
deity of the Cherokee tribe is the sun goddess and not god. Again here, a matrilineal
arrangement can be seen empowering the women.

The world is believed to have been created by the word of God in many cultures as in the case
of Christianity, in which the “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and
the Word was God”. During creation, these were the first words said by God, “Let there be
light” and there was light. Qur’an was the word said to Mohammad by god and thus the birth of
the Islam religion took place. In the hindu religion, the word ‘Om’ is the vibrational sound of the
cosmic machine of creation and destruction without any language. These words have been
taken into study as these words of the Gods led to the creation of their own cultures and thus
their myths as well.

It can be observed that the animals were mostly created much before the humans. Thus the
importance of their existence was possibly much more to that of humans. In the Hindu myth,
Lord Brahma turned himself into a boar to find the germ in the soil. Also in Yoruba creation
myth, Obatala already had the rooster and the cat with him, which shows that animals were
already present and in fact helped in the creation on the earth. But in the Christian myth, man
was created before animals and the authority to control the latter was given to the former. Also
the names of these animals were given to them by Adam himself. Animals can also be seen as
the trickster figures in most of the myths. This possibly shows the discord prevailing between
the animals and humans. But it is also ironic that many animals overtime gained the place of
God and started being worshipped. For example, in the hindu culture where the cow is
worshipped and revered like a mother, the life giver and in North America, the wolf is
worshipped due its destructive nature and also because it is a killer and dangerous thus making it a warrior. In the Greek myth, Zeus seduced Leda in the form of a swan and thus led to the creation of an altogether new civilization and also the destruction of the city of Troy.

Twins were rarely shown in creation myths with a few exceptions, for example in the Acoma creation myth, the twins, Nautsiti and Iatiku were created at the beginning who in the beginning lived in harmony but later separated due to the discord and the feeling of un-satisfaction between them. This particularly shows the differences between humans and also about the human nature of the need to have everything and yet remain un-satisfied. Another possible interpretation can be that twins showed the two opposing natures of the same human. Also, twins were thought to be bad omen in the African tribe of Igbo. These children were mostly kept in pots and dumped in the Evil Forest where they were left to die. This can be seen as a complete contrast between the two cultures while other cultures don’t speak much about twins almost as if they could never exist.

In the Jain creation myth, there is no creation myth as such. According to the Jain tradition, the universe had no beginning, and had always been there and would also continue to exist infinitely that way. They question the creation myths as they say that God could not have created anything without raw material. Also, they question the fact as to how could god create both good and evil at the same time. One thing that the Jains believe is the presence of hell and heaven where people go after death if they do evil or good respectively which is a common belief among almost all the cultures. The Jain creation myth is somewhat similar to that of the Big Bang Theory, which is the currently accepted theory of creation, according to which the universe began by expanding from an infinitesimal volume with extremely high
density and temperature. The universe was initially significantly smaller than even a pore on our skin. With the big bang, the fabric of space itself began expanding like the surface of an inflating balloon – matter simply rode along the stretching space like dust on the balloon’s surface. The big bang was not like an explosion of matter in otherwise empty space; rather, space itself began with the big bang and carried matter with it as it expanded. Physicists think that even time began with the big bang. Today, almost every scientist believes in the big bang model. The evidence is overwhelming enough that in 1951, the Catholic Church officially pronounced the big bang model to be in accordance with the Bible.

To conclude in the words of Van Over, one of the leading "creation myth" researchers, "the surprising and perplexing fact is that the basic themes for (creation) myths in widely different geographical areas are strikingly similar." Many scholars have been puzzled over the similarities of the basic storylines of the myths including Claude Levi-Strauss who, after years of studying myths, says there is an "astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions (of the world)" and that "throughout (creation) myths resemble one another to an extraordinary degree." But it can also be observed there are some differences among these myths, whether small or large.

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