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BELIEFS: AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, AND RELIGION

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7. Myths as Sacred Stories

Chapter 7 audio can be accessed on [Soundcloud](#). Instructor resources are available on [Canvas Commons](#).

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Chapter 7 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Interpret the meaning behind sacred cultural stories.
- Demonstrate how myths establish and maintain moral values for a cultural group.
- Understand the role of myths in shaping the cultural and religious worldview of a group.

7.1 Types of Myths and Stories

While this course focuses on religion, witchcraft and magic, for a moment we will diverge and use the term **art**. Anthropologists define “art” as, “symbolic representations of thought, feeling and ideas.” Art is central to the foundation, establishment, and maintenance of all human societies. Human societies created visual and verbal arts before the invention of writing (which only occurred around 5,000 years ago). As a result, societies across time have used (and continue to use) art to give meaningful expression to almost every part of their culture. This includes ideas about religion, kinship, and ethnic identity. Therefore, the verbal arts: myths, stories, and folklore, became a form of cultural reinforcement – a way to enculturate the next generation into a religion and dispel morals and values central to cultural survival.

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and insults! As you know, the United States has historically been a society made up from people originating in many different lands, all with their unique set of myths and traditions. When they settled in the United States, they settled in cultural enclaves, which enabled them to preserve much of their culture and this included their verbal arts, myths and stories. However, this would begin to change during the 19th century as the industrial revolution triggered dramatic changes in the national culture and changed the way of life for most people. As young people moved away from home to work in factories and mills, they left their cultural enclaves and much of the folk myths and stories began to vanish without a trace. Alarmed at this Anthropologists began the work of attempting to write down these previously unwritten myths and stories. In so doing, Anthropologists coined the word **‘folklore’** – since these had been traditional oral traditions passed down from generation to generation.

7.2 What is a “myth”?

The word **myth** is derived from the Greek word: *mythos*, meaning speech or story. A myth is a *sacred story* that reflects and reinforces a community’s worldview. Myths explain the fundamentals of human existence, explain where everything we know comes from, why we are here, where we are going, and even our existential purpose. It’s important to understand that when the term “myth” is used, it is not to imply that the narrative is false, but rather to indicate that the narrative is sacred.

Myths provide the rationale for religious beliefs and practices and sets cultural standards for appropriate behavior. Myths often reflect a society’s values, from the concepts of gender (are women considered wise or foolish in a story? Are men considered brave or weak?). These values are the ideals that people should strive to emulate.

Traditional myths, as long as they are believed, are accepted and perpetuated in a

Malinowski wrote the following about myths,

“Myth fulfills...an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of [humanity]. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force.”

What Malinowski is saying is that we turn to our sacred stories as a moral compass for behavior. We reflect on the variety of stories that we tell to help shape our understanding of good behavior and bad behavior. Please note that not all myths are religious. There are a variety of sacred, cultural stories that we tell. For example, we like to say that George Washington chopped down his father’s cherry tree but that he was such an honest young man that he immediately confessed to his crime. It’s unlikely that this actually happened, but we tell the story because we like to steep our nation’s founding in the inherent value of genuine honesty.

Anthropologists like to study myths because they reveal a great deal about a culture. Myths provide insight into:

- Cultural practices
- Values and ethical codes
- Hierarchy of humans and animals
- Humanity’s relationship with the Gods
- Relationship between humans and nature

7.3 The Power of Story-Telling

American Anthropologist **Keith Basso** specifically examined a particular style of myth called

“Placemaking” whereby the story-telling connects their cultural stories to a physical location that can be visited. Basso explained

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each other in complex ways” (Basso 2010, 5).

Let’s pause for a moment here to recognize the universality of Basso’s claim. Human memory is not perfect. If you were asked to recall exactly what happened to you yesterday, you would likely be able to recall about 50% of what happened in your day. If you were asked to recall what happened to you 2 weeks ago, maybe you could only recall about 20% of the day. If you were asked to recall what happened to you five years ago, you would likely be able to recall less than 1% of your day with any kind of accuracy. Recall the last time that you had an argument with a loved one; it’s likely that you both recalled the conflict differently. So, what happens when the human mind cannot remember what “actually happened”? We fill in the gaps of our memory with imagination. Perhaps we remember ourselves as better than we actually were, and we remember our enemies as worse than they actually were.

Some research shows that couples in relationships tend to share similar memories but that, when they break up or divorce, they start to remember the same stories differently. So, in lieu of perfect memory we often defer to those around us to help us remember what has happened.

Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot similarly commented on human story-telling in the following way,

“Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus, they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct” (Trouillot 1995, 6).

What Trouillot is saying is that we are not fictional characters who are living a life that is written by a singular author. Life does not have an inherent plot structure; the traditional plot structure that we use for storytelling was constructed by the human mind. Rather, we are all imagining our life story as if it is following a plot structure that does not inherently exist. For example: you are certainly the protagonist in your story although you are certainly the antagonist and at least one person’s story. We often tell ourselves things like, “If that person hadn’t broken my

7.4 Coyote

Among Native Americans, Coyote is a central figure of creation, sometimes seen as both creator and trickster, both malevolent and good. As a shape-shifter, Coyote, like man, is both foolish and wise and humans learn from his actions. [Flathead elder Joe Cullooyah](#) says, “Everything you need to know about life is in the coyote stories – if you just listen carefully.”



[Coyote](#) by Pat Gaines, Flickr 2010

The Salish-speaking people of Spokane, Washington have many coyote stories. Below is the story of Beaver Steals Fire, as told by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

“A long time ago, the only animals who had fire lived in the sky.

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steal fire. Beaver and the animals tried to sing, but they were not satisfied. Then they heard Coyote sing and all the animals began to dance and named Coyote the leader.

“Wren, Coyote’s friend, shot arrows into the sky world, creating a ladder. Wren climbed up the ladder and dropped a rope for the animals to climb up. Curlew, the guardian of fire, was at the river watching his fish traps and the animals followed him back to his camp, where the fire was kept.

“Beaver pretended he was dead, floating in the river, and Curlew grabbed him and wanted to skin him and dry his hide. Suddenly, Eagle landed on Curlew’s house and he ran outside to catch him. That is when Beaver stole the fire. Beaver took the fire and swam down the river, climbed back down the rope. That is how the animals brought fire to us.” (Southwick)

According to the Salish and Kootenai tribes, they explain that “Coyote and other animal-people taught the Salish about spirituality, subsistence, and social organization. These teachings were centered on a relationship with the land and all living creatures. There was no concept of land ownership; it was the land, water, and sun that owned the people” (S&K Technologies).

Embedded in the Salish oral traditions are references to the ‘long bitter cold’ which is a reference to the last Ice Age. Archaeologists have documented sites within the Salish aboriginal territory that correlate to their traditional stories and therefore reflect a continuous tribal occupancy reaching back to the time of the last Ice Age. For people without a writing system, oral tradition becomes a fundamental way of cultural transmission that provides both practical information and cultural continuity.

7.8 Placemaking Myths

Myths among some Apache groups are a unique type of storytelling that we call, “**placemaking.**” The Apache are a Native American group in the Southwest United States and, since the Apache people have lived in this part of the world for a long time, their origin stories, sacred myths, and histories literally happened in the land that surrounds them. This is unlike those Americans who believe in Biblical stories because the majority of Christianity happened in the Middle East. If you are a Christian, imagine how it would feel to be able to look outside your kitchen window and literally see the entrance to the Garden of Eden. Every time you saw this place you would remember the important Christian themes that are taught through that story: ideas about original sin, women’s role in humanity’s downfall, the desire to ultimately return to paradise. If you saw this place every single day, it’s possible that the story surrounding it would have even greater power in your life.

Many of the Apache stories literally happened in the physical environment within which they live today. The result is that they can tell sacred stories in times of crisis *and* they can look around their physical environment to remember their cultural values.

Placemaking stories:

- Recall history
- Build community
- Explore ethical questions
- Recall the Earth’s original and ever-changing appearance
- Remind the listeners that change is inevitable

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Something that stands out in Ketih Basso's research is the way that he amplifies the voices of the community that he is studying. Rather than exclusively summarizing their beliefs or stories, he records the stories verbatim for the reader to experience first-hand. Here is the place-making story titled, "Water Lies With Mud In Open Container" directly from Basso's book. Please take notes on the themes.

"They came to this country long ago, our ancestors did. They hadn't seen it before, they knew nothing about it. Everything was unfamiliar to them.

They were very poor, they had a few possessions and surviving was difficult for them. They were looking for a good place to settle, a safe place without enemies. They were searching. They were traveling all over, stop here and there, noticing everything, looking at the land. They knew nothing about it and didn't know what they would find.

None of these places had names then, none of them did, and as the people went about they thought about this. "How shall we speak about this land?" They said. "How shall we speak about where we have been and where we want to go?"

Now they are coming! They are walking upstream from down below now they are arriving here, looking all about them, noticing everything about this place. It looked to them as it looks to us now. We know that from its name – its name gives a picture of it, just as it was a long time ago.

Now they are happy, "this looks like a good place," they are saying to each other. Now they are noticing the plants that live around here. "Some of these plants are unknown to us. Maybe they are good for something. Maybe they are useful as medicines. "Now they are saying, "this is a good place for hunting. Deer and turkey come here to eat and drink. We can wait for them here, hidden close by. "They are saying

Now their leader is thinking, “this place may help us survive. If we settle in this country we must be able to speak about this place and remember it clearly and well. We must give it a name.”

So they named it “Water Lies With Mud In Open Container. They made a picture of it with words. Now they could speak about it and remember it clearly in a well. Now they had a picture they could carry in their minds. You can see for yourself. It looks like its name.”

Placemaking stories are told in the present tense rather than the past tense. This is a unique element of placemaking stories and it creates a feeling of permanence when one reads, hears, or tells the stories. By telling the story in the present tense while literally standing upon the land where the event is believed to have happened, we feel like the lessons remain continuously relevant to modern lives.

This story reflects the idea that the ancestors are hugely important to the Apache. The belief that the ancestors are the ones who discovered fertile land, settled, and created a society for future generations. This community greatly values ancestors and elders and the story reinforces that value system.

Another common theme in place making stories emphasizes that the Earth provides. Although the Earth is always changing, the story reminds us that this land was fertile, full of water and animals, and that the landscape is essential part of this community’s survival.

7.7 Native American Creation Myths

Many Native American peoples share a belief that they emerged from the Earth.

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time to emerge into the world, Hopi met Maasaw, Caretaker and Creator of the Earth, and promised him they would help take care of the world as a trade-off for staying. The sacred story of Hopi origins includes a covenant that Hopi peoples will be stewards of the earth. After making this promise, Pueblo Indians began a sacred quest, under Maasaw's order, to find "center spaces" and settle, and populations marked their settlements with spiral insignia as they found them. This is in direct contrast to the Judeo-Christian creation myth (see below), in which mankind is given "dominion" over the earth and its lifeforms. Here we see humanity in control of nature instead of man living in balance with nature. If, as anthropologists, we are to examine these particular myths, one might look at these details and conclude that these groups of people recognize a kinship among all living things. They are given their role or purpose as caretaker of the world. They see their 'creator' as a being that is part of the natural world – not a being that is in a human form. Therefore, they do not see 'god' in themselves, but that humans are dwarfed by nature – nature being more powerful than humans. We are here to serve and be caretakers, not to dominate or control.

The idea of closeness among all living things led the Hopi and the Salish to show special respect to the animals they hunted in order to sustain their own lives. In addition, the corn cultivated by the Hopi is seen as a sacred element in their culture – given to them as a gift.

7.8 Judeo-Christian Creation Myth

Reflect on the Hopi creation myth and compare it to the familiar Judeo-Christian creation myth of Adam and Eve. God (the creator) creates man (in His own image). Therefore, man sees God as he sees himself (as a man). Women are created as helpers to Man. Man is assigned dominion and controller of nature. Woman (Eve) is foolish and listens to nature (i.e., the serpent). Then humans are punished and set to toil the earth. Work is seen as a punishment to man. What values do you see that differ between Native American creation myths and Judeo-Christian creation myths?

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ample, the ancient Egyptians believed that the world was at first simply dark chaos. Then, the “Island of Creation” emerged from the primordial waters and began creating life and gods (David 115). Other themes of creation myths include birth, hold beings that create things, and the idea of darkness turning into light or chaos turning into order (Stein and Stein 2017, 29-55).

7.9 Control Through Story-Telling

Anthropologist Keith Basso lived for a long time among the Apache of Cibecue, Arizona. During his time living with this community, he mapped 296 important cultural locations and worked to record information about their importance. Specifically, Basso discussed the way that this community connected storytelling to the land and to behavior. This particular community uses their culturally specific stories to help reinforce behavioral norms from generation to generation (Basso 2010). Basso describes storytelling in the following way, “For what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the Earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice (Basso 7).”

Here, Basso is explaining that our very logic is largely connected to our physical environments.

Comparatively, British Anthropologist **Mary Douglas** argued that human beings strive to control our environments and physical spaces in order to create a sense of the world that we prefer. So we, on the one hand are deeply influenced by our physical spaces and we also strive to reflect our cultural values upon our physical spaces. This is what Basso studied among the Apache.

Before we begin discussing Keith Basso’s work, We should pause and take a moment to highlight the microscopic sampling that he examined. Please note that the words that we now use to refer to native American groups do not necessarily

they are a diverse group like any other. Keith Basso specifically studied one group of Apache people who live in Cibecue, Arizona.

7.10 Wisdom Through Story-Telling

During his fieldwork, Basso had many informants. He conducted both formal interviews and informal interviews. One of his primary informants was an older woman named Ruth who inspired the title of his book, “Wisdom Sits In Places.” Ask yourself how you define “wisdom” and consider that no two people define wisdom in the exact same way:

- Some believe that wisdom can be learned while others believe that wisdom is something that you are born with
- Some believe that wisdom only comes from life experience while others believe that wisdom can be gained through academia and/or reading
- Some believe that wisdom comes through age while others believe that children are, actually, the wisest of us all

Basso’s informant, Ruth, defined wisdom as akin to water and that placemaking stories are like wells of wisdom that you can draw from whenever you need it. According to Ruth, the well of wisdom comes from a lifetime of knowledge and training, is passed on from generation to generation, is attached to the physical space (or, literally, sits in places as the book title references), and strengthens the community by leading to safety and prosperity.

In response to Ruth’s definition, Basso writes that he knows he’ll never be able to fully understand Ruth’s explanation of the intricacies of her storytelling purely because he wasn’t raised in this culture’s specific logic. This is one of Basso’s greatest strengths in his ethnography.

Basso:

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- Notes that he will never be able to full grasp the people’s cultural **idioms**
- Does not assume that his idea of “common sense” will be applied by everyone; he knows that common sense is culturally specific

Good anthropologists recognize the limitations of their own culturally specific logic and make room for informants and other anthropologists to make corrections. If you don’t fully understand the culture that you are studying then you should recognize that and know that you are, actually, on the right track.

Exercise 7A

Did you know that some religious texts were altered throughout history to maintain colonial power? Listen to NPR’s story titled, [“Slave Bible From The 1800s Omitted Key Passages That Could Incite Rebellion”](#) to learn more.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What types of content were removed from this Bible? Which portions were left in? What does this tell you about the way that religious worldview was used to shape behavior in the colonies?
2. Have you seen something like this in your own life? How do people include or exclude religious excerpts in order to meet a political agenda today?

7.11 Myths In the Modern World

Bronislaw Malinowski wrote,“... we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human, and partly spiritual, by which [hu]man[ity] is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems...” (Malinowski 1944, 36)

Many myths and legends involve taking journeys. We call this the “**Hero Myth**” or “Hero’s Journey”. It involves a regular person leaving home, encountering something or someone who unlocks or teaches them a secret power, that “hero” fighting and triumphing over evil, and then returning home to be welcomed as the hero. Think of some of these and compare and contrast the central ideas with the Hopi Origin story. (Some examples are the legends from Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero of a Thousand Faces”, the Star Wars films, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, etc.)

As mentioned before, traditional myths, as long as they are believed, are accepted and perpetuated in a culture and then expressed a part of a peoples’ traditional worldview. But what if you don’t believe the myth to be factual? What if you don’t believe that a boy named Luke Skywalker who came from a planet called Tatooine really grew up to be a Jedi Knight to fight with the resistance, only to realize that his archenemy was really his father? What happens if you don’t believe that any of that *really happened*? Is it still a myth? Can it really still influence a culture? Are we still being enculturated by the stories that permeate our culture?

7.12 Myths and Jediism

In [2012, The Telegraph reported](#) that “172,632 people in England and Wales identify themselves as Jedi Knights making it the most popular faith in the ‘Other Religions’ category on the Census and the seventh most popular faith overall.” In fact, **Jediism** is now considered a new alter-

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such as “Jedi are mindful of the negative emotions which lead to the Dark Side” and “Jedi are guardians of peace and justice”. Adherents also follow “[21 maxims](#)”. One might argue that our modern fandom can be classified into other verbal art categories such as legends and tales (recognized as fiction for entertainment but having a moral or practical lesson). However, it may be argued that in Western society, with the rise of secularism, there is a gravitation toward the ideology of superheroes who take the place of traditional religious icons. While most fans understand that Star Wars, the Hunger Games and Marvel Superheroes were created for entertainment, there is an intense sociological need in Western society for moral touchstones. Figures that defy the odds, uphold morality, teach valuable lessons, and those that fight evil. As audiences, people in Western society do *believe in* what is being taught by the characters being portrayed on film. Films like those mentioned above spread ideas that value ideas like equality, independence, concepts of justice, bravery and idealism. Audiences believe in the characters because they believe in the ideas perpetuated on film. These films and stories then enculturate the next generation into believing in those same values. These are the foundation of common cultural values in Western society. These values then become the values that people in the U.S. believe they are willing to fight for. In many respects, the myths stated above become a sort of pseudo-sacred narrative. Go to any fandom site and you will see these stories and films dissected with religious fervor intense devotion to character and theme. There is an intense devotion to these larger themes that have replaced the religious themes of earlier generations. The characteristics of these types of myths are that the unknown is simplified and explained in terms of the known. The analysis of myths is an arduous one – and a profession all of its own! Myth-making and the perpetuation of myth are extremely significant parts of the human condition. Studying myths of a culture can give valuable clues to the way people perceive and think about their world.

7.13 Power and Story-Telling

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ready understand, but Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that writing history is actually a form of making history. Haitian anthropologist **Michel-Rolph Trouillot** reminds readers of the important intersection between history and storytelling: only the most powerful get to write the history stories. As we already know, human life does not actually follow the structured and clear plot formulas that we assign to it, and, there is no one, unified understanding of any given event. So, who decides how we remember our history? In Trouillot's view, the historical erasure of the experiences of less powerful groups serves the function of shaping our global culture and global mentality in favor of the most powerful (Trouillot 1995).

Trouillot similarly argues that human beings can tell stories in a way that helps achieve our own political or cultural goals. Trouillot refers to the Battle of the Alamo as an example. As you may already know, from 1835-1836 colonists living in Texas rebelled simultaneously from the United States and from Mexico in an attempt to establish itself as its own country (the Republic of Texas). The Battle of the Alamo took place in February 1836 whereby a group of Texans tried to occupy the Alamo mission, but they were instead slaughtered by a Mexican general who was on a campaign to take the Mexican land back. This event was a defeat for the colonizers, but the story was used to recruit massive numbers of colonists into the army by using the phrase "Remember the Alamo!" This slogan was used as a powerful rallying cry that motivated more people to fight and, ultimately, fueled the defeat of Mexico in favor of the Republic of Texas (Trouillot 1995). This idea and the emotions it elicits are at the heart of Texan identity and help demonstrate the unique Texan view that Texas is a unique "nation" of its own that values independence above all else.

Trouillot's piece works through a variety of historical stories that are central to our national and global identities in order to illustrate how historical story-telling shapes our understanding of the world. In fact, Trouillot argues that writing history is, itself, a form of *making* history. In other words, the way that we recall our collective pasts can directly shape our belief systems in the present and future choices.

Egypt

Creation myths are central to cultures and religions because they explain the origin of the universe and how living things came to be. They also give the culture its worldview and help explain and give order and meaning to reality. There are several creation myths in ancient Egyptian cultures, but the three main myth established in the Old Kingdom (2575-2150 BCE) all centered around an island (or primordial mound) that emerged from the waters. At this point, called the “First Occurance,” light and land were created and the first god, in bird form, landed on the island. From here there are several different myths, depending on the geographic location of the peoples (David 1998, 115-117).

Heliopolis

This myth says that out of darkness and endless water (represented by the divine entity of Nun) emerged a mound of fertile land. This represents order emerging out of chaos, or light emerging out of the dark. The solar god Atum, known as the “All” and also as Re-



[Heliopolis \(Sun City\), Baalbek, Lebanon](#) by -Reji, Flickr 2009

deities called Shu (air), Tefnut (moisture), a female-male pair that could procreate and give rise to Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). Finally, Geb and Nut procreated to create Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys, which made the Ennead or “group of nine” gods. This myth is found in the Pyramid texts, one of the greatest sources of knowledge for ancient Egypt (Oakes & Gahlin 2015, 300-301).

Memphis

Re-Atum had a rival called Ptah, who was the supreme creator god at Memphis. At this location, Ptah was self-engendered and outranked Re-Atum and was credited with creating the world, the gods, their religious centers, food, drink, and basically anything needed to create and sustain life. This was a localized myth that did not gain popularity elsewhere (David 1998, 115-117).

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Hermopolitan

At the location of Hermopolis existed a cult center dedicated to the god Thoth, who is the god of wisdom. An ibis representing Thoth (or Thoth himself, in some accounts) placed an egg on the mound, which cracked and became the sun. Here there are eight main gods (known as the Ogdoad): Nin (primordial waters), Huh (eternity), Kuk (darkness), Amun (air) (all male and frog-headed) and the female serpent-headed goddesses Naunet, Hauhet, Kauket and Amaunet who created the world right after the First Occurrence. After these deities died, they took their place in the underworld and were responsible for making the Nile flow so that life could continue above (David 1998, 115-117; Oakes & Gahlin 2015, 300-301).

While there is much variation in creation myths in this ancient civilization, common themes include order from chaos, lightness from darkness, emergence of earth from primordial “nothingness,” creator beings in the form of gods (who are both human and animal in form), and the attribution of characteristics to each god or goddess (e.g., what each is responsible for creating or maintaining). This gives explanation for how life arose and also which deities to worship and rely upon.

Osiris Myth

There is some debate as to whether Osiris was in fact a god, or just a very powerful king (which parallels the Christian versus non-Christian view of Jesus). Osiris was an actual human king, who is credited with bringing civilization to a very ancient Egypt. Similar to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, Osiris was murdered by his jealous brother Seth, who dismembered him and scattered his body parts throughout the land. Osiris’ sister/wife, Isis, searched and gathered his body and then magically conceived a son with Osiris’ body. This son was Horus.

Horus vowed vengeance on his murderous uncle through battle. Eventually the

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“Evil One” and was exiled (David 1998, 103-104).

This myth had a lasting effect on religion in Egypt. It provides the basis for mummification, with the belief that people (starting with royalty and then later spreading to everyone) could be resurrected after death and given eternal life. The possibility of obtaining eternal life would depend upon having lived a virtuous life, since after death a person would be judged by Maat, who would weigh their heart next to a feather (conducted by jackal-headed Anubis). If their heart was free of sin it would be lighter than a feather, granting them eternal life. If it was heavier, they would be fed to the crocodile/monster Ammit (David 1998, 103-104).

The similarities to later Christian mythology are apparent: the idea of a king becoming a god (Jesus); the slaying of one virtuous brother by a jealous one (Cain and Abel); the idea that the god suffered a painful death but also achieved resurrection and eternal afterlife (Jesus); the idea of resurrection being achievable by following that god (Christians following Jesus); and the idea of successfully entering an eternal resting place based on how a person lived their life, according to the god’s teachings.

7.15 Armenian Origin Myth

Myth and symbols representing ethnic origin and territory of the community are used as foundations for the creation and preservation of national identity. These myths and symbols consist of notions that are considered fundamental truths in society. They include perceptions of a homeland, common lineage and ancestry, a sacred language, and national heroes. These symbols create the notion of a collective identity for the individuals within the community, which are then utilized by the state and intellectuals for the construction of national belonging (Smith 1991). Myths of a deep ethnic origin are vital for a resilient and profound sense of belonging to the nation. “The reasons for the durability and strength of national identities can be understood only by exploring the collective beliefs and senti-

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2004, 3 – 4).The Armenian genesis myth of “Hayk Nahapet”(Hayk the Patriarch), as told by fifth-century Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi, created a multifaceted sense of ethnic belonging and supported the construction and restructuring of Armenian society. The story reflects Bruce Lincoln’s description of the four levels of social construction and cohesion through narrative. The primordial level of unity in the narrative is in the descent of Hayk from Noah, who was also the ancestor of Hayk’s adversary Bel. According to the myth, the descendants of Noah, which included the human race and the giants, were engaged in intense conflict. This chaos allowed the Titan Bel to authenticate his power over the land and the people. When Hayk refused to submit to Bel, the Titan garnered his army against the hero. This marks what Lincoln (1989) considers to be the initial episode of rivalry. Hayk defeats Bel in battle and establishes his rule over the land of Ararat. According to Movses Khorenatsi, the hero and his descendants spread across the land of Hayk, establishing their definitive rule and naming Armenian provinces and landscapes after themselves. The historian states, “Now our country is called Hayk’ after the name of our ancestor Hayk” (Khorenatsi 1978, 88).



Hayk Nahapet by Madlen Avetyan

The second episode of rivalry, common in myths, is represented by Hayk's descendant Aram's battle with the Medes and the Assyrians, which allowed him to expand the borders of Armenia. Khorenatsi describes Aram as industrious and

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ers from Aram's name.

The enduring social division of Armenians from their neighbors takes place with the death of Ara Geghetsik (Ara the Beautiful). Ara is Aram's son, whose rule over his father's lands occurs a few years before the death of Assyrian king Ninos. During his rule, Ninos's wife, queen Semiramis, becomes infatuated with Ara's beauty. Upon her husband's death, Semiramis continuously proposes to Ara, who denies her advances. Semiramis becomes increasingly enraged by the rejection. Resentment eventually motivates Semiramis to command her army to Armenia, however, she carefully instructs her soldiers not to kill Ara with the hope that he will satisfy her desires. To her dismay, Ara dies in battle, Semiramis attempts to revive him through sorcery and magic but fails to achieve this task.

Armenian ethnologist **Aram Petrosyan** has argued that the story of the Armenian primordial ancestor closely parallels the Indo-European "basic myth", which involves the thunder god defeating his adversary, the serpent. Petrosyan argues that the site of the battle between Hayk and Bel, which is in the south of historic Armenia, located between the Taurus and Zagros mountains, is a derivative of the origin myth. Taurus, symbolizing the bull that is the zoomorphic symbol of the thunder god, broke Zagros's horns with his stroke, creating the mountains of Masius and Masis with the horns, and the Zab River and Lake Van with his blood. Additionally, the description of Hayk corresponds with the constellation of Orion, who was a giant hunter, also known as a "dog strangler." These features of the myths illustrate that Hayk was likely the chief god of the pagan Armenian pantheon. The ethnogonic creation myth of Hayk has cosmogonic character. Petrosyan (2002) states that cosmogenic creation myths arise at the dawn of time. They take place in the center of the cosmos that is represented by the site of a victory over the monster, who is characterized by the initial sacrifice. This framework is adapted for ethnogonic myths where the geographic landscape and the tribe become the celestial model, while the lands of foreign tribes that are unknown are populated by monsters. Hayk establishes his rule over the land of Ararat, which becomes the sacred land for his descendants and the Armenian people. He slays the Titan Bel, symbolizing the monster of the foreign land, es-

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mogenic creation myth. Hayk, Aram and their descendants are the epicized figures of Armenian gods, representing Theogony; the geographic landscape features and settlements are named after Hayk and his descendants, representing cosmogony; Armenian ethnonyms stem from the central hero, Hayk, and his second incarnation, Aram, representing ethnogony; the descendants of Hayk are for-bearers of aristocratic houses, representing dynastic saga; and finally, Hayk’s family reflects the Armenian family pantheon and patriarchy, representing sociogony (Petrosyan 2002, 2009). In this myth, Hayk represents the beginning of time, with the divine line ending in the death of Ara Geghetsik, who represents the last divine patriarch. The death of Ara also represents what Mircea Eliade has referred to as the end of the sacred time and the origin of the profane era.

Bruce Lincoln argues that in times of social disorder, the lineages (in this case the ethnos) invoke the primordial ancestor through “allusions, gestures and narratives” (1989, 20). This process restructures society through sentiments of internal affinity and external estrangement. The story of Hayk and his descendants has been part of this process among Armenians for centuries. It has given a sense of alterity for the Armenian people, especially when faced with the threat of annihilation or assimilation into more powerful ruling cultures.

7.16 Haiti’s Makandal and National Liberation

All nations hinge their modern identity and value systems upon origin stories and these origin stories focus on historical heroes. Americans, for example, tell the story of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and – due to his inherently honest nature – immediately confessing his sin to his father. This story reflects the American ideal that the US was built upon honesty and integrity. The people of Haiti have their own stories that serve the same function. One such story is the story of Makandal, and it is tied, directly, to both the origin of Haitian

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that “combining black and white religion together” would generate the greatest power.

Using symbolic anthropology, we can unveil national ideologies by examining the story of Makandal. Consider the following:

- Makandal was African born which reflects the people’s strong connection to their African heritage.
- Makandal lost an arm during his time working on a plantation which reflects his empathy with the suffering of his fellow citizens and his resilience in the face of enormous brutality. Both of these are central Haitian values.
- It was believed that Makandal performed powerful magic that allowed him to turn himself into a mosquito. Mosquito-borne diseases played a role in defeating the French during the Haitian Revolution.

Anthropologists examine the stories that people tell in order to better understand their worldview, value systems, and sense of self. Here, we read the story of Makandal told by anthropologist Wade Davis,

“It happened on a plantation near Limbé in the year 1740. At first even the man himself did not notice the iron rollers of the cane press flush crimson with his own blood. By the time the child’s scream alerted the driver to slice the leather traces connecting the horse to the shaft of the mill, the arm was crushed to the shoulder and the blood mixed freely with the sweet sap of the cane. Pain was not new to the slave, and what he felt now was numbed by the rage of an intolerable impotence. His free hand flailed at the press and with all the force of a sinuous body pulled back reversing the rollers withdrawing fragments of his mangled arm. Delirium took him, leading him back on a hallucinatory passage to the land of his birth to the kingdoms of Fula and Mandingo, To the great cities of Guinea, the fortresses in vast markets that drew traders from an entire continent and beyond, the temples that made a mockery of the paltry buildings in which the French worshipped their God. He never noticed the rope tourniquet placed around his shoulder to stem the

through the hollow of his gut until what left his lips was no longer his. It was the rattle call of crystallized hatred, a cry of vengeance, not for himself, but for an entire people stolen from Africa and dragged in chains to the Americas to work on land stolen from the Indians.

François Makandal should have died, but the Mandingue slave was no ordinary man. Even before the accident he was a leader among the slaves of the Northern District around Limbé. By day, they had watched him enjoy the cruelties of the overseers within difference, his blood shot eyes casting scorn at the whips of not a cord, or the stretched and dried penis of a bull. By night he had calmed the people with his eloquence, spinning tales of Guinea that had emboldened even the most spirited of men. When he spoke, people considered it an honor to sit by his side and as he slept the women vied for the chance to share his bed, for his dreams for revelations that allowed him and those by him to see into the future. But it was the fearless way he endured the accident in the mill that confirmed what the people had always suspected. Only the whites could fail to note that Makandal was immortal, an envoy of the gods who would never be vanquished.

The accident freed Makandal to wander. No longer fit to work in the fields, he was made a herder and sent out each day break to drive the cattle into their mountain pastures. No one knew what he did during the long hours away from the plantation. Some said he discovered the magic and plants, foraging for leaves that mimicked the herbs he had known in Africa. Others said he sought out the old masters who dwelled in caves, whose footsteps caused the earth to tremble. Only Makandal in his wanderings was not alone, for the mountains around Limbé were one of the refuges of the thousands of Africans who had fled the plantations, runaway slaves with a price on their heads known to the French as maroons.” (Davis 189-190)

Makandal’s maroon community grew with more and more influence. He led a campaign that poisoned thousands of white slave owners until he was allegedly captured and executed. However, no one in the colony witnessed his execution and many believed that he was never actually killed (the poisoning continued long

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Spirit Worship, Islam, Christianity, Occultism, and the plants and herbs the Taíno's native land into a new and more powerful religion; the only religion that could move people to begin the world's first, and most effective slave rebellion (Mintz 2010, 91).

7.17 Folktales

Folktales are stories considered to be fictional. They tend to exist outside of time and space and usually begin by indicating this feature. Many stories begin with, "There once was..." or "A long time ago..." An important feature of folktales is that they contain moral lessons but are presented as entertainment for the reader. The characters are purposefully created to warn of dangers for the hero. Many of these characters tend to be anthropomorphic animals, illustrating the supernatural elements of folktales even though the stories are not sacred. Folktales exist in multiple versions and no text is the correct one. However, they all tend to have very specific features present in most versions. One important feature is the poorly developed two-dimensional characters that represent opposites. In the story of *Red Riding Hood* these characters are Little Red Riding Hood, representing innocence, goodness and kindness, who is contrasted with the big bad wolf, representing evil, manipulation and cunningness.

Another important feature in folktales is the simple and repetitive actions within the storyline. Often times in Indo-European folktales these actions tend to occur in threes. This is especially the case in American folklore, as observed by folklorist Alan Dundes (Dundes 1980). We can see this occurring in some of our well-known folklore such as *The Three Little Pigs* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. In both these stories there is simple repetitive action that occurs three times. In *The Three Little Pigs* the wolf huffs and puffs and destroys the first house made of straw, then huffs and puffs and destroys the house made of sticks, then huffs and puffs but fails to destroy the house built from bricks. In *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* Goldilocks begins by tasting the food from the first and largest bowl, then

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The narratives of folktales reflect the worldview of various real-life relationships. One only needs to look at Disney stories to observe this process. The stories in Disney are designed to construct gender and gender roles. Of course, the construction of gender norms has changed in Disney over time and a comparison of the older stories with the more recent ones demonstrates the significant differences. Older Disney stories tend to have princesses who are docile, abused, persecuted, patient, obedient and quiet. Newer Disney princesses are often brave, at times rebellious, and independent. This reflects the shift in American culture's worldview surrounding gender norms.

7.18 Conclusions on Myth

It is hypothesized that humans employ myths (and other verbal arts) as an approach to confront the specific problems that face us. Native Americans refer to myths and stories as 'medicine' – intended to teach us, comfort us, console us, and guide us. How else can we explain the human need to re-read a sacred text on a weekly basis, or watch the Star Wars marathon for the millionth time?

Myths serve to enculturate us and they serve a basic tenet of instructing us on the code of conduct that would enable our survival. They provide a foundation for our worldview and remind us of our purpose.

The hero myth is such a common theme in the most beloved books and movies of our society because it also serves the function to provide hope to all us everyday people. In reality, we do not have superpowers or magic, but if an ordinary person can overcome obstacles and become the hero of the story, then maybe we can overcome the hurdles in our lives and become the heroes of our own stories.

Exercise 7B: Journal Reflection

Write down a sacred story that you were told as a child. What values are reflected in this story? How did this story shape your worldview? Do you tell this story to children now? Why or why not?

Exercise 7C: Study Guide

Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms **in your own words**:

- Art
- Folklore
- Myth
- Hero Myth
- Placemaking
- Jediism
- Wisdom
- Idioms

- Mary Douglas
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot
- Armen Petrosyan

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