

Cosmogonic Myths and the Mythologically Instructed Community

By

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Myths are stories which are believed to be true by the group of people who tell them. First and foremost among these stories are the cosmogonic myths or myths that tell of the origins or beginnings of the cosmos or the ordered universe. The actors in these stories are generally divine or supernatural beings. In a number of tales they may be portrayed as animals: like the eagle or Manaul in the Bisayan cosmogonic myth, for instance. But they are clearly possessed of superhuman powers. The second set of stories tell of the adventures of the national hero, whether highborn or of humble origin, who became the saviour of his people; freeing them from monsters as Baltog and Handiong did in the epic of the Bikol; delivering them from famine or other disasters or performing other noble and beneficent deeds like Baybayan in the *Olaging* of the Bukidnon or the heroes Sulayman and Indarapatra in the *Mythology of Mindanao* (Najeeb Saleeby, p. 1). The third class of true stories recounts how the medicine-men and sorcerers obtained their powers or how the association of shamans began. (Raffaele Pettazzoni, "The Truth of Myths," in *Essays on the History of Religions*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1954, pp. 11-12). Like the stories about Capetan Peto Tayagbong, the famous counsellor and wonder-worker among the early inhabitants of Cagayan de Oro (*Cagayan* 1987, Cagayan de Oro, 1987, p. 6).

Although all these stories may be designated as myths, still it is the first set, the cosmogonic myths, which are invested with special importance by historians of religion. And why? Because these myths tell of the beginnings of the world itself. They recount therefore the work of divine creative power. Philosophically speaking, they relate how "being" and

"reality" itself first came to be in our world. (Mircea Eliade, *The Quest*, pp. 76-77).

Cosmogonic Myth Further Described

The cosmogonic myth, according to Eliade, is

"a central myth which describes the beginnings of the world, that is, what happened before the world became as it is today. Thus, there is always a *primordial history* and this history has a beginning . . .

This beginning is always implied in the sequence of myths which recounts the fabulous events that took place after the creation or the coming into being of the universe, namely, the myths of the origin of plants, animals and men, or the origin of marriage, family and death, etc. Taken all together, these myths of origin constitute a fairly coherent history. They reveal how the cosmos was shaped and changed, and how man became mortal, sexually diversified, and compelled to work in order to live; they equally reveal what the supernatural beings and the mythical ancestors did, and how and why they abandoned the earth and disappeared . . ." (*The Quest*, 76-77).

Individual Mythology

Developmental psychologists tell us that a young child's frame of reference includes mythical elements. Before he acquires the abstract conceptual thinking characteristic of adults, the child's mind is primarily imagistic and syncretic. He assumes that the world about him is alive, that is magically responds to his wishes. Nor does he distinguish between objective and subjective reference. His parents are extensions of himself and possess great powers in the universe, all-knowing and omnipotent.

The child's world then may be characterized as animistic, egocentric and magical. Now this also characterizes the world of myth. This tells us of huge monsters breathing fire, rising out of the rocks of the earth, of young heroes scaling slippery cliffs of ice in order to free an imprisoned maiden guarded by giants with razor-sharp teeth, or large crabs that can fly, or serpents with three mouths, and the seductive women whose siren-songs lull the unwary to destruction. (*Ibid.*, p. 23)

The individual mythology of children which is so natural with them, for western educators is generally ignored, if not suppressed. They are given play only in fairybooks and in TV shows like Hawkman, Batman and Spiderman.

But there is very little effort on the part of the community to integrate individual mythology with collective ideals, aspirations and values

or the mythology of the adult community. And because individual mythology is not seriously related to, the child's consciousness is not enabled to relate to the world of his unconscious in a beneficent way.

Collective Mythology

In archaic society where myths are still taken seriously as charters of individual and collective life, besides the individual mythology there is an accepted collective mythology to which the individual is given access during his initiation. This collective mythology is the work of special individuals in the community noted for wisdom, courage and power, who have confronted the world of the imagination: the world of the spirits and the sacred, especially during their own initiatory experiences, as well as during their shamanic and other experiences. It is they who have shaped the ideals, the aspirations and the values of the community. Our Philippine myths as we have received them in our traditions, oral or written, as well as the myths of other peoples, are all examples of collective mythology.

The creative individuals who first fashioned these myths were awake to the presence of the mystery in the world. They responded to the presence of the holy or the sacred not by means of logic and abstract concepts. Their reaction was more felt than reasoned. It was more spontaneous and intuitive rather than deliberate and logical. But it was creative. It transformed them from shallow and uncommitted men to become more profound and religious persons.

The universe in this religious state of consciousness is a living, intensely meaningful, yet at the same time a mysterious entity. And in these experiences there is at work what historians of religion call the mythic imagination which is based on the primary religious meaning which a person intuitively feels. As we mentioned earlier, this reaction to the presence of mystery is prelogical or preconceptual. It is more emotional than logical. But it is creative and transforming of the person who experiences it. (Larsen, *Doorway*, p. 31).

To make this primary religious meaning more intelligible, let us take some examples from our own mythic tradition.

I. Bisayan Cosmogonic Myth

The following is a foreshortened version of Pavon's account.

"Away back in the long ago there was only a vast immense sea formed by ocean. It so happened that a bloody struggle ensued between King Manaul and King Tubluck Laui.

After the struggle, Manaul was imprisoned. But he broke his chains and flew away into space seeking vengeance on Tubluck Laui. He was wearied with his flying and he saw no place on which to

alight. The earth and the sky offended by Manaul who declared himself their enemy, tried to push him away. The waves lashed at him; the rains fell from the skies; and the gods of the air, Canuay and Amiham, sent forth gales and winds. The conflict continued unresolved for years until finally, wearied by the strain, the contending parties sought to know each other's desires in token of reconciliation. Manaul begged for light and fireflies attended him; he asked for counsellors, and the birds were at his side. But in his gluttony, Manaul devoured some live chicks and, still unsated, he devoured some of the birds, large and small. In their turn, his bird counsellors devoured his fireflies. When the owls (his bird counsellors) passed by, he swore to them that they should be punished for having eaten his fireflies. Thus he made them stay awake all night, giving them double-sized eyes so they might see better and not eat his fireflies. Tubluck Laui, the king of the air angered by Manaul's eating some of the bird counsellors, vomitted lightnings, thunderbolts and whirlwinds. He appealed to King Captan of the Higuines, genius (perhaps ancestor) of the people of the sea (or sea spirits) to punish Manaul. Captan sent huge rocks and stones from the sky to crash Manaul. But he easily escaped unhurt. In this manner the earth had its beginning: for Manaul, finding support in these big stones, made them remain fixed forever. They became his dwelling, and he lived happily forever. These lands (i.e., the Bisayas) had their beginning from that time and are still here today. Thanks to the rage of Captan against Manaul, the world had its beginning." (*Pavon MSS 1838-1839*, Transcript No. 5-D, p. 3-4; cf. also Loarca, *Relacion*, p. 121).

The story is set in a period outside profane or historical time, that is, in primordial time. This is clear from the opening quote: "Away back in the long ago." For in those strong and powerful times, the gods were most active in the universe. Man had not yet come upon the scene. But the animals were there already. And they were powerful characters; and, as we shall soon see, they were the creators of the world. On the one hand we have Manaul ranged singlehanded, save for his fireflies and bird counsellors, against Tubluck Laui, supported by his lightnings, thunderbolts and whirlwinds, aided by his allies: the gods of the earth and the sky, the gods of the air, Amiham and Canauay, and Captan, the powerful sky-dwelling guardian of the spirits of the sea. The hero, Manaul, depicted as an eagle, broke his chains, threw defiance at both earth and sky, but was unscathed by the rain of rocks Captan let fall from on high. His creative power is shown in his very deft way of fixing the very rocks thrown at him to become his foothold on the open ocean. Thus he created our earth, the Bisayas.

Cosmogonic myths generally contain the theme of struggle or conflict as an essential element of its structure. Thus we see the struggle between Manama and Oggasi among the Manuvu or Bagobo and Magbabaya and Mangilala among the Bukidnon. This is true even in the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish* where Tiamat and Marduk struggled for dominance, ending in Marjuk's victory. So in struggle evident in the series

of encounters between Manaul and Tubluck Laui. But the conflict gives way to reconciliation and the creation of the world was the result.

When the myth was dramatised in ritual, there was no doubt that the element of conflict was highlighted. And it gradually dawned upon the consciousness of the audience that conflict is of the essence of reality. But conflict besides its negative also has its positive side. For here it was creative.

The primary religious meaning of the myth must have been mediated through some kind of religious experience brought about by conflict. This could have come about through a participation of the mythmaker in a tribal war which, however, ended up in a reconciliation between the warring parties, and a deeper understanding effected between the parties. Or the conflict could have been inter personal rather than inter tribal. But the growth in human understanding through the experience of struggle was there.

The Bisayan and the Filipino, for that matter, is no stranger to conflict. His cosmogonic myth touches on this theme. But the conflict does not lead to ultimate destruction. Something good comes out of it. Thus, despite the pains and the wounds, the Bisayan can smile through it all. For in the end there is a freshness deep down things.

Perhaps this intuition of struggle as part of reality in our cosmogonic myth should buoy up our spirits in the midst of the many tries on the Left and the Right to destabilize our democratic system. With every putsch put down and every rebel or secessionist raid repelled, the top leadership becomes all the more inured to the ways of governance, and the people emerges stronger and matured in the ways of democracy.

This insight into the role of conflict in life and its positive result is part of the primary meaning delivered by the cosmogonic myth. And the dramatization of it made the audience participate in appropriating the meaning for collective and personal maturation.

And now let us make examples from our Bisayan myth of the First Man and Woman and from the Story of Ukinurot. Both are creation myths.

II. The First Bisayan Man and Woman

A beautiful bamboo grew on the spot where the god of the land breezes, Captan, and the goddess of the sea breezes, Maguayen, held their idyllic love.

"Captan professed his love for Maguayen on the shore one day. To show her prowess, Maguayen commanded her sea breezes to come and sweep Captan off his feet. But the god was deft and quick and

remained upright, which pleased Maguayen greatly, Captan in his turn, in order to impress his lady love all the more, made a show of his ability to command his land breezes also to sweep Maguayen off her feet. But she was the equal of Captan in alertness and agility. Seeing she could not be overcome by physical force, Captan excused his boasting and told her that he did what he did only to make her realize that all his powers he would lay at her feet in return for her affection. Touched by this loving homage, Maguayen extends her hand to her lover and accepts it with eagerness. Then the two embraced and dove into the sea to seal their love."

And the story-teller finishes his tale saying:

"It was at the very spot where Captan and Maguayen loved each other that a bamboo plant grew." (*Pavon Mss. 1838-1839*, Transcript No. 5-D, 5-8; Cf. also Loarca, *Relacion*, p. 121.)

Here we have a male god in love with a female goddess who in divinity and in power is his equal. The same egalitarian condition is also related about the first human couple.

What might be the primary meaning of the experience recorded here?

First of all, we must point out the motif of the hierogamy or marriage between the two divine beings: Captan and Maguayen. This marriage is the model for the first human marriage. For the beautiful bamboo which served as their common maternal womb grew on the very spot where the divine couple had consummated their love.

In terms of the history of religion, the bamboo may be considered the symbol of the centre. The centre is where the creation of man took place. The bird Manaul may be taken as the symbol of the creator whose peck at the stem (when a lizard suddenly appeared on it) gave them birth. The stem splits and the two fully formed adults issue forth. They look at each other, fall mutually in love and the man asks the woman to become his wife. She refuses because they are brother and sister (incest taboo). He suggests that they ask the opinion of the tunnies of the sea and the doves of the air. They all counsel marriage. But the woman will not accept the man until they asked the god Linog, the earth-shaker. He too advises them to marry. Only then does the woman agree. (*Ibid.*, p. 9-11).

Going over the story and reconstructing it imaginatively will help us glimpse something of its primary meaning. For behind this myth was a religious experience. Perhaps it was the sight of a beautiful bamboo tree swaying in the wind that evoked it. Or perhaps it was the frustration of a young Bisayan bachelor when he found how hard it was to win the hand of a highborn lady he was in love with, despite his good looks and undoubted credentials of nobility and wealth. No matter what the occasion, there was a religious experience in back of the myth. Its primary meaning

was prelogical and preconceptual. But it must have impressed the myth-maker and touched him to the core. Faced with the difficulty of his suit for his love (Alzina tells us how really hard it was, cf. *Historia de las Yslas Bisayas*, I, 4, p. 259 f.) and seeing the little slender bamboo - in his very highly emotional state verging on despair, something clicked in the soul of the myth-maker by some spiritual alchemy and the story was created, making the two gods who married, the model of human marriage. It had taken the power of a creator to create them fullgrown in the bamboo stem, and it also required the same creative power to release them. There is a solution to the young man's almost desperate plight. But the solution is beyond human power. It required divine intervention.

III. The Story of Ukinurot

"The people lived in the heavens and there were yet no human beings on earth. However on the earth was glistening water and fresh green plants and trees. Ukinurot, a hunter in heaven, was fed-up with the never-changing diet of meat, the brown and bare landscape and the warm clothing made of bird's feathers.

While hunting one day, a large bird swam into his ken. He aimed his bow and arrow at it and shot. The arrow passed clean through the bird's body and landed on the ground, a distance away, and was deeply embedded in the ground. As he pulled it, a good amount of soil came up with the arrow, leaving a large hole on the ground. Ukinurot peered through the hole and saw below him shining water and green earth. He summoned his companions, men and women, and all were pleased with what they saw.

Then they decided to go down. They plucked the bird's feathers and twined a rope with them. Then one by one they climbed down. A rather fat woman could not go through the opening.

Ukinurot was the last to descend. As soon as he touched earth, the rope snapped. So they could no longer return. The fat woman who remained in heaven every night lights up the stars to remind the people below whence they originally came. The hole through which they descended now shines as the moon," (Oriental Misamis, 1967).

Comments:

Again behind this myth was a religious experience with a primary meaning. We can only imaginatively reconstruct the scenes so as to glimpse at its meaning.

I am inclined to think that the occasion when the mythmaker had an encounter with the holy was during a curing session. Ordinarily, a shaman or mananambal presides over the seance, during which she goes into ecstasy and ascends the heavens in search of the straying soul of the sick.

Perhaps the seance also took place under the light of the full moon. Perhaps, too, the fact that according to the myth the earthlings originated from above, may be the reason why the healer must repair to the heavens in order to effect a cure. The very lights of the sky at night constantly remind humans of their heavenly home. The hole through which they passed down by means of the rope fashioned from bird feathers might also be taken as part of the centre; and the rope itself, as the *axis mundi* or hinge of the world, through which communication between above and below could take place. Except that this has snapped.

The egalitarian theme is once again evident. The first people on earth came down from the sky as adults, fully formed, comprising of men and women. They are equal with one another because in the sublunary world they share the benefits and bane coming from above. They must undergo initiation, become familiar with the lore and wisdom of their ancestors, fall sick and submit to curing and finally succumb to death. They all share the inability to return bodily to heaven. Except for the shaman in his trance who can return in spirit thither in search of the soul. Equally, too, the heavenly lights remind them whence they came. And the hope of a return thither is never lost. The Bukidnon tell us that the sarimbar will be sent by Magbabaya again, and the Sabanun, that the buklog platform will bring people to heaven when Asog wills it.

The Need for a Mythologically Instructed Community

What is the relation between our desire to understand the meaning of our cosmogonic myths and our folk beliefs?

The answer should be found in our more underlying aim to produce among our students and the community in Cagayan, a "mythologically instructed community." (Larsen, *Doorway*, p. 23 & 26).

A mythologically instructed community does not downgrade science and technology. Nor does it despise reason, logic, the use of abstract thinking, nor physics and mathematics. It appreciates the usefulness and necessity of clear, disciplined and deductive thinking. But it also proclaims that the method and tools of science and abstract thinking are limited; that they must be supplemented and complemented by the products of the imagination and feeling, so that our youth are always in contact with the sources of humanity found in individual and collective mythology.

If our youth is to be genuinely inculturated, that is, if they are to be oriented in life and be guided in a manner truly consonant with our cultural traditions, they must come to terms with our myths, especially with our cosmogonic myths. In order to bring this about, a number of steps are necessary. First, our cosmogonic myths must be collected. Some Philippine scholars have already collected some of our myths of origins,

like Professor F. Landa Jocano, Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel or Dr. Sister Delia Coronel, ICM and Dr. Damiana Eugenio. But the students themselves must go through the experience of collecting as many cosmogonic myths they can lay their hands on. Second, using the principles of comparative religions, competent teachers should explain the meaning of the myths as this can be derived from a deep study and analysis of them. But this is not enough. The third step required is to supplement the first two. The teacher should, by the use of vivid imagination, try to recapture the original setting and feeling of the myth. He should reconstruct the milieu of the story as vividly as he can; himself taking the role of the creator or the various *dramatis personae*; and he should get the students to act out the scenes. The myths should be dramatized: the darkness, the primeval waters, the animals should be impersonated in order that the primary meaning of the myth may be captured. The teacher should help bring about in the students a shift of view from the logic of normal secular sphere to that of a theatrical or play sphere, where things and characters are accepted for that they are experienced as being – and the logic is that of make-believe – as if. (Larsen, *Doorway*, p. 31, quoting Campbell).

The myths of building the cosmos were recounted during the ritual for building a house or during the rite for the installation of a king or priest or shaman. In fact the Maori creation myth was used for the rite of implanting seed in the barren womb, that is, during marriage, as well as in the rite for giving inspiration to a poet or in giving solace to the grieving or the aged, as well as in ceremonies where there is question of bringing forth a new and better condition or situation, like for instance, in the ritual to save an otherwise bad harvest.

In the re-enactment of the myths, masks and costumes should be employed in order to bring back the atmosphere and ambience of the original times; sounds and movements should also accompany the visual aids so that something of the age-old rituals is captured. Only those who want to enter into the play are capable of achieving what the Indians refer to as the *anyamanas* or other mind, a more ancient term for our modern altered state of consciousness which is the necessary condition for myth to work its magic. (Larsen, *Doorway*, p. 32, quoting Campbell again).

By some such devices, the audience, particularly the young, will be able to share in the deep spirituality enshrined in our culture. This hopefully will make them more human, for the ancient myths and rites were significant milestones in our people's pilgrim's progress from irrationality and inhumanity to spirituality and humaneness.

This process of re-immersion of our youth into the ancient myths and rituals of our race is very necessary today. For our education is modelled after that of the west which believes with Jean Piaget that a child's developmental progress is gauged by his shedding off his animistic, imagistic and syncretistic thinking in favor of abstract conceptual thought. The goal of education is to "develop the fully operational thinking of the educated

adult in our society, possessed of flexible and reversible abstract categories, an objective sense of self, of time and space and causality." (Larsen, *Doorway*, p. 23). In such a society which has shed off its myths, abstract categorical thinking is fostered, but the primary mythical type of thinking is neglected. With the result that "much like those unfortunate children who, neglected by their parents, are locked away in a darkened room out of sight, the mythic imagination seems to stay 'autistic,' remaining in a primitive, self-preoccupied state. And because the mythic imagination is thus unrelated to, it lacks the capacity to relate intelligently to consciousness. It only emerges when consciousness is taking time off, in fantasy and dreams."

Thanks to both Freud and Jung, the processes of the mythic imagination have been accepted as part and parcel of human growth. Although Freud considered their reappearance in adult life as regressive and pathological, Jung considered them to be both natural and instinctive, and although an archaic mode of the psyche, is neither infantile nor pathological. (*Ibid.*, p. 23-24).

CONCLUSION

Over the past twenty years there has been a systematic rape of our traditional virtues and values. This rape was perpetrated in order to keep the deposed tyrant and his minions in power.

It is about time that we rehabilitate our traditional values through the use of our museums. Our country to recover must root its consciousness again on the traditional values enshrined in our myths and folk beliefs: respect for the human person, love of truth, reverence for the sacred, confidence and trust in God, courage and dignity. □

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