

how do
myths affect
people in
society?

FREDDIE KUHNT
NAGOMI MOYE

A. Introduction

1. What are myths?

B. Paper

1. How did myths develop?
2. What are the functions of myths?
3. How did myths affect people in society?

C. Conclusion

1. What impact has the lack of myths in our society on people?
2. Could a revival of mythology solve some of the problems in our society today?

INTRODUCTION

The word 'myth' originates in the Greek word 'mythos' meaning word or story.

According to the definition in "The World Book Dictionary" a myth is a "legend or story, usually attempting to account for something in nature," moreover myths are called "invented," and "imaginary" (Barnhard, 1364). However lots of people believe that myths are more than only entertaining inventions. You even hear them speak of a treasure of myths.

Scientists today think the development of myths in human society started during the Neandertal-period. In the graves of that time the earliest evidence for something like mythological thinking is found: weapons and remains of animal sacrifices. These gifts can only be explained by a belief of Neandertal people in life after death; why else would dead people need weapons or animals? J. Campbell tries to explore the thoughts of those early men in his book "Tower of Myth." The Neandertal men suddenly see the person they have known quite long lying motionless on the ground, not breathing and conclude that something must have gone from that person, something that makes the difference between life and death. Already having developed their thinking skills and thirst for explanation, they ask the question that laid the basic stone for mythology as well as religion, science, and philosophy: "Where is that something gone now?" The fact, that this something is invisible makes them believe it had gone to an invisible plane that exists beyond their visible life. And, in fact, the basic theme of all mythology is the existence of an invisible plane supporting the visible one , men live in.

The shamans of early cultures are considered to be the actual "mythmakers." Psychologists today think shamans were people that

experienced an overwhelming psychological or schizophrenic collapse in their childhood or early youth that turned them totally inward. During this process their unconsciousness opened up and they became intuitively aware of a divine presence through the visions they had. These visions were influenced by the archetypes of unconsciousness, or elementary ideas. These archetypes are the same in everybody's mind all over the world and according to Jung biologically grounded. This fact explains why very similar myths are found in every culture of the world. They only differ in the several metaphors the shamans used in their stories to express their experiences, because these depend on the cultural background the mythmakers lived in. So, an Indian creation myth seems very different from a Celtic one at first sight, but if you go deeper, you meet the same elementary ideas in both. It is very obvious that shamans preferred to use simple questions, such as "Who made the world?" as topics for their myths.

Now, that it is clear how myths were created, we ask ourselves why they were made. What were their functions in society? They must have been important since they survived until the present time.

There are four kinds of myths: cosmic myths, theistic myths, hero myths, and place and object myths. All four of them basically have the same main function—they give the human society an identity in the chaotic universe, an importance people need. Thus they integrate societies in the world around, moreover they integrate individuals in society through rituals that are created by

myths. The main purpose of a ritual is to link the individual to a larger morphological structure than that of its own physical bodies. They give people the feeling to belong somewhere. Quite known are rituals of initiation, exercised by native tribes in Africa or Australia, the Jewish circumcision, or marriage.

Expressing the social ethos myths educate and show people the correct way of living, the way they are expected to go in their culture. Myths give men tips how to satisfy their physical, mental, and spiritual needs, and concerning the latter how to read signs in life.

Myths are the ancestors of religion and science, history and philosophy. Explaining natural phenomena and simultaneously informing about historical events, never neglecting the main idea, the existence of a divine, invisible plane, myths contain all four areas.

Myths are also regarded as the homeland of art, music and poetry. Using metaphors from ancient myths, artists can express an otherwise inexplicable essence awakening feelings in people, that have been sleeping deep down inside their souls. Still today, poets use myths to express problems of today's life.

Suffering heroes, like Prometheus in the Greek mythology, who was chained to a mountain and tortured by a vulture everyday (It tore out his liver

because he had given the fire to men.) could easily be used to reconcile people to hardship and keep folk calm in tough times.

CONCLUSION

Having these functions myths were essential to preserve and solidify every society and had a great importance.

Today myths have lost their importance in the industrial countries for the most part. Of course, we like reading those old tales, but our lives are not influenced by myths anymore. Does that have any impact on the character of our society?

We have schools, where we are properly educated, politicians create wonderful laws to control their countries, we have a very high living standard and can enjoy fun activities, we reach for power, a good career and money. We have a marvelous life without myths. Only one fact shows that something is missing. The history of the Western countries is characterized by a steady widening separation of the individual from society. This leads to severe problems and could even be fatal for our society. An example for the deficiency of rituals, for instance, are youth gangs. Growing-ups need a ceremony to show them they belong to their society, if none is provided-like in our country-they create their own rituals. They establish gangs and absolve tests of courage breaking into shops or stealing cars. Another example is the

rising rate of singles. People are too self-centered to dedicate their lives to another person or their society; they only want to achieve their egoistic aims. The fact, however, is that we can only survive in a large community because we all depend on each other. A further separation of individuals from their society means death for all of us. So should we perhaps look back and try to find solutions for that big problem in those old and dusty stories and their close relatives religion, art, music and poetry?

In conclusion, we have decided that myths are an important issue in our society today. Therefore, our society should revive myths in order to solve some of its problems.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnhart, C. L. "The World Book Dictionary." Chicago: Doubleday & Co, Inc, 1971.

Beals, R. L., H. Hoijer and A. R. Bede. "An Introduction to Anthropology." New York: Macmillan Publ. Co, Inc, 1977.

Blarnires, Steve. "The Irish Celtic Magical Tradition." San Francisco: Thorsons, 1964.

Burland, C. A. "Beyond Science." New York: Grosset & Durlap, Inc, 1972.

Campbell, J. "The Power of Myth." New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Eshleman, J. R. and B. G. Cashion. "Sociology—an Introduction." Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1983.

Leeming, David Adams. "The World of Myth." New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Zimmerman, J. E. "Dictionary of Classical Mythology." New York: Harper & Row, 1964.