



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.2. 2020 (Apr-June)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MYTHS AND ETHOS OF A CULTURE

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Article information

Received:02/06/2020

Accepted: 29/06/2020

Published online: 30/06/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.2.289](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.2.289)

ABSTRACT

The present research conjectures that myths construct the frame of mind, i.e. ethos, through which cultures navigate and interact with other and the world. This is demonstrated by illustrating myths from Naga tribes, inhabiting in the northeast region of India, and how such myths promulgate certain ethos of looking at the world. This in turn guides social actions generating beliefs that cultivate, prescribe, and install particular worldviews. This paper shed lights on how such worldviews, propagated by societies' myths, have bearings on the unconscious psyche of the human mind that subliminally directs the norms and attitude of people, societies, and cultures.

Keywords – Myths, Naga, Tribes, Outlook, Worldview

Introduction

The material constitution of our inhabited world appears to have forgotten the immaterial roots from which it had originated. The recent advancements in the field of natural sciences paint a picture of a well-ordered rational world, where all that need to be demystified to make the modern world tangible and knowable are debunked and laid to bare. Myths, in particular, seem to have been discredited and are no longer seen necessary or valuable. 'Lies' and 'false' are what these myths generally are reduced to in today's technical world of science. The mathematical certainty and practicality of the scientific advancements make myths archaic and irrational. One of the recurring problems with the study of cultural myths, in general, is its inability to provide additional interpretations other than the commonplace description about how myths constitute certain aspects of a given culture that situate and offer people, societies, or groups a sense of spatial and temporal historicity.

One of the common assumptions on which such attitudes are predicated is the linear view of human history, where societies traverse from primitive to traditional to modern society, with every stage representing a higher level of human advancements. Whether such outlooks are appropriate is a matter which philosophers, historians of science, and anthropologists have heatedly contested (Boas 2-6; Malinowski 65-67; Levi-Strauss 207). These deliberations presently occupy a centre stage in the various disciplines of social sciences, at the heart of which is the question on how we are to understand and make sense of this complex human world. However, if natural and social sciences' quest is to better understand the world, then so are 'myths' that function as a tool to closely inquire the manner in which we think and feel about our place and, thus, create the world around us.

Thus, this study humbly proposes an approach in an effort to illustrate how myths cultivate each society's particular worldview, i.e. ethos, that has a bearing on the manner in which each interacts and

encounters others. Ethos, for the purposes of this examination, can be defined as a characteristic spirit of a culture manifest in its attitude and worldview. This proposition attempts to contribute to the study of cultural myths by hypothesizing a novel insight that will perhaps exemplify the rich meaning and significance of myths and the manner in which they shape our view of us as well as others. Every society is predicated on some foundational myths without which societies, in general, can neither propagate nor flourish (*Myth to Live By* 17; *Jung on Mythology* 70). As some studies (Berk 67-68) suggest the role myths serve not only in the shaping of societies' cultural identities, but also in establishing as a basis for the realization of cultural heritage as well. The concept 'nation' or 'nationalism,' for instance, is based on some founding myths to consolidate territories and heighten sentiments of fellowship among groups—German, Japanese, Italian, Chinese, French, Korean, or Indian, etc. Also take, for instance, the myth of American Exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is qualitatively different from other nations. This idea, which is no different from the "British or Greek Exceptionalism," presumes that America's history, its political systems, and its values are exceptional and worthy of universal admiration; thus implying that they are destined and entitled to play a unique and positive role in the world.

Certainly, this study is not hinting that all myths are the same. Rather, irrespective of the versions, all myths generally entail an archetypal structure that tells the same stories in different ways (*The Archetypes* 181), or what is famously termed by Campbell (*The Hero's Myth* 11) as "monomyth." That is to say, all mythic stories are variations of a single meta-narrative that provides the common denominator for all great myths across cultures, regardless of their place and times of origins. Even though, for instance, separated by thousands of kilometres across two continents, the creation myth of Bushmen in Africa, where it chronicles of how the first man was led out of a hole, is remarkably similar with the creation myths of Anal, Maring, Moyon, Tarao tribes in Northeast India. Archetypal stories, such as these, inform us of why things are the way they are and how we encounter (i.e. by imitating or avoiding pitfalls) and interact with the world that awaits us. In such ways, myths play significant role in the manner in which societies encounter, interact, and construct their perception, identity, and place in the world.

Myths as Edifice of Societies

Myths are a close way of looking at how we think and feel about our place in the world. They, in some sense, imply sacredness rendering life experiences and their missives meaningful guide to action and social norms (*Myth and Reality* 18-31). It is an exploration of the way we use our myths and stories to understand and give meaning to the world around us. To a certain extent, whether the stories myths tell are true are of secondary magnitude than the meaning they convey to the listeners or frame of mind they promulgate. Myths are the lenses through which we see and interpret the world around us. We unravel the messages, awaiting our conscious effort to decipher, of the natural world to render our existence meaningful. It is as though, in the words of C. S. Lewis, a door, leading to another world besides the one we live in, really do exist at the back of the wardrobe. Now, it simply is a matter of finding that door. Likewise, myths inform us, through their sacred tales, the appropriate actions and deeds necessary for cultures to live well by explaining the world and man's experience. They provide answers to perennial questions that serve as a map for each generation.

Metaphors, therefore, become an essential medium for conveying such eternal cultural truths; truths that require intimate understanding of one's cultural contexts through which to translate the wisdom of the natural world (Neumann 383-387; *The Archetypes* 81). Metaphors, which can be understood as mythical language, echo the universal concerns of mankind throughout history (Neumann 5): from birth, death, afterlife, to the origins of man and the world; and from good and evil to the nature of man himself (*The Power of Myth* 11). In the words of J. R. R. Tolkien, "I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear (xix)." And so it must, myths ultimately are based on some conceivable traditions having some factual origins serving some profound purpose for cultures to emulate and propagate certain attitudes or worldviews through which to comprehend the world. The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Greek or the Celtic mythologies, for instance, form the basis of early history their respective societies, as well as determine, to some degree, the structures of each.

From such standpoint, it is conceivable to perhaps grasp the meaning behind the Norse mythology or stories in the Upanishads or the parables in the Bible from a metaphorical sense, rather than a literal sense for they express a certain attitude or an outlook through which to view and comprehend the world they encounter that, in turn, formulate the identity and the worldview of each particular culture. These myths usually assume reality to be inherently random and too complex to be rationally grasped by a single method of observation. As such, they are inclined to rely deeply on metaphorical stories and parables to provide a glimpse of that indiscriminant complexity. In this sense, stories about the mythic realities, invisible to human senses, and their connection to the ordinary, everyday experiences of people, places, and events are more real and genuine than the accounts of actual, observable facts; or what Otto (7-8) terms as "numinous." That is, mythical stories which no language can directly express the profound meanings to intense human experiences.

It is essential to go beyond thinking of myths in terms of fixed and unvarying beliefs about the unseen realities standing outside of the human experiences. There is the erroneous tendency to customarily reduce the term "belief" to an unvarying affirmation of certain values and mores, derived and sanctioned by some authoritative source, a particular group unequivocally adhere to. In actuality, however, most beliefs are not only developed and transformed over time, but are also held unconsciously which occasionally rises up to the surface of the consciousness when we encounter certain intense experiences. Consequently, these experiences continue to shape and remake the contours of people's beliefs.

Myths cultivate beliefs that subsequently guide actions in the visible world apparent to human senses and experiences. In addition, a specific outlook is ensconced prescribing and directing cultures' mentality and attitude toward the world and others. This is achieved by re-enacting; or, what Eliade (*The Myth of Eternal Return* 34-35) terms as an act of "eternal return," meaning re-actualization of the mythical age. The belief systems, which myths cultivate, are like maps directing peoples' attention toward life's encounters with hardships and struggles that invariably comprise the generally accepted human experiences. Myths more than anything else give lucid insights into the ethos of each culture and how each sees itself and others. We can assess this hypothesis by examining some tribal myths from Northeast India.

The 'Naga,' a tribal group, inhabiting the northeast region of India across the states of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal, and Nagaland and extend into western region of Myanmar is a highly fragmented group. This group is exceedingly splintered with fifty plus tribes (or sub-tribes) with each having its own myths of origins to distinguish from others. Each created its distinctive mythologies by situating its origins to animate as well as inanimate beings of both earthly and celestial spheres signifying, what Campbell (*Myth to Live By* 17) termed as, the evolutionary nature of myths in the history of the human race.

The significance of establishing mythical stories, by each tribe, lies in instituting some essential values under the umbrella of a common ancestor through narratives that traverse to the events of dispersal of various tribes from their point of origin. For a peripatetic community, such as the Naga tribes, these mythical stories of origins are indispensable prerequisites necessitated by the very nature of the community that is on the move because of their practice of shifting cultivation (i.e. slash and burn agriculture). Practices such as these are termed, by Scott (179-187), as "escape agriculture," due to its ability to adapt to harsh mountain terrains, its tendency to grow swiftly requiring little direct attention to cultivate, and its ease of harvesting. The need, therefore, to situate a hub for their origin is crucial so as to ensconce their identity relative to other similar tribes and in so doing also locate themselves within the existing hierarchy of the group. These myths of origin have been especially popular with peripatetic people or people on the move, be it the Nagas in Northeast India, the Zomia across the South-East Asian Massif, or the Rajputs in North India. However, these peripatetic communities, usually occupying the peripheral zones, are gradually integrated into the mainstream society (Stein 9-21; Xaxa 3-15).

Likewise, with each tribe wishing to establish and separate itself from the rest with zero-sum ethos about besting the other (economically, politically, and/or otherwise), a sense of deeper sense of brotherhood and fraternity among the many tribes failed to flourish. This is evident by the frequent inter-tribal tension and conflict among the various Naga tribes even to this day. Such divisiveness and disjointed nature of these tribes

can be better understood by investigating into their myths that encourage a certain ethos directing manners of encountering and dealing with other and the world.

The following is a myth from the Ao tribe (Mills 215; Smith 49) accounting its separation from other Naga tribes. As the story goes, the Ao's after a prolonged stay at their land of origin, known as *Chungliyimti*, felt the need to acquire additional land due to its growth in population. And so the Ao's left their land of origin and set off westward. In their journey, they crossed the Dikhu river by constructing a cane bridge. The myth suggests that Ao's were the pioneers to arrive at the other side of the river bank. Soon after they traversed onto the other side of the river bank, they deliberately dismantled the cane bridge so to inhibit and cease other tribes from crossing over to the other side. Thus, as the myth goes, those who traversed the Dikhu river were known as 'Ao,' meaning 'those who went away.' Other tribes such as Sema and Lotha refer to Ao as 'those gone ahead (*Cholimi*)' and 'those who proceeded (*Chuwomi*),' respectively. While other tribes, such as Sangtam, Chang, Phom, and Konyak, whose journey were brought to a halt came to be known as '*Merir*' in Ao, meaning 'those left behind.' For instance, Angami tribe is called '*Tsungumi*,' meaning '*left behind*' (Hutton 214).'

This myth illustrating how the Ao's went ahead, or advanced into newer land and pastures, has made a profound impression in the psyche of the tribes. Such myths of how tribes venture alone in quest for a greener pasture and so accrue the benefits for themselves are acutely instilled in tribes' mentality for no tribe prefers to be left behind. And this has coloured interactions among the Naga tribes resulting in intense tribal animosity and suspicion. In fact, it is through this lens that tribes navigate and negotiate with each other as they encounter one another in their quest to gain a lead or advance politically, socially, economically, or otherwise. Consequently, the term "advanced" and its antonym "backward" has become not only part and parcel of everyday vocabulary, but also an ethos in Nagaland, where inter-tribe relations and interactions are conducted to maintaining the existing hierarchy among tribes (such as Ao, Angami, etc.) who are more "advanced" relative to other tribes (Sangtam, Zeliang, Konyak, etc.) in the state.

The next illustration is from another Naga tribe, Zeliangrong. The Zeliangrong's myth of origins recounts their dispersion from *Makhel*, believed to be the first indigenous home of the Nagas, in search for a better land for settlement. After a long, arduous journey that included sojourn in various sites, they reached a new site, which they named *Makuilongdi*. This new site was congenial and within a short period, they were self-sufficient, were seldom sick, and, as the myth goes, deaths were infrequent. It is said that people of *makuilongdi* lived in abundance, they never had shortage of food, and did not toil for anything; even hunters and fishermen never return empty-handed (Pamei 4-15).

This myth gives a lucid insight into the general temperament and ethos of the Zeliangrong tribe. As the myth intimates, given their habituation to the abundance blessed by the fertile soil and fecund milieu, the Zeliangrong people did not labour hard as everything was there for their taking and as they so wished or desired. Such myths of their land and the subsequent blessings of their environment have coloured their mental attitude toward life and the world, in general. As a result, it cultivated an ethos among the Zeliangrong a proclivity of entitlement, where they need not toil, but rather believe that their needs will be fulfilled or brought to them. It is generally known among the Naga tribes that such outlook (i.e. the way Zeliangrong sees itself and others) has made the Zeliangrong relatively lackadaisical in their pursuit for a cause or an objective.

Stories illustrating how myths direct and colour attitudes of a given culture are neither limited to the ones mentioned above nor to tribes alone; rather aforesaid were specified as cases or exemplars to reveal the underlying factors constituting groups' cultural beliefs and worldviews. Take, for example, the epic of Mahabharata and Ramayana. These epics are largely poetic or mythical stories concentrating on the powers of the gods. In a literal sense, that is all that there is to them. Yet, from a metaphorical sense, from which myths are reasoned to be understood, these epics are in fact stories written to offer a social guide for prudent actions: ethical ideals and moral principles for people to abide by. From this standpoint, the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana reveal to us their ethos they aspire to convey to those who believe their message and so structure their lives accordingly. These great Indian epical myths promulgate particular ethos of the mind and ways of looking at things for the Hindus that enable them to arrange their everyday lives in accordance with those noble

ethical codes and moral virtues as implied in the epics. And this, in turn, insinuates certain beliefs and ethos that colour the way Hindus, in particular, and Indians, in general, see themselves and others.

Likewise, the Greek mythologies such as the epic of Troy clearly left a lasting impression upon the modern western societies (Greeks, in particular) and their ethos as well. A phrase or an image based on recognizable myths of Homer speaks volumes for those who absorb these epics. Thus, the expression, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts," conjures an immediate allusion to Odysseus, one of the protagonists in the Homeric epic of Troy, who tricked the Trojans into admitting Greek armies, hidden in wooden horses, into their city unaware of his stratagem. Such myths have gone on to colour the wary, cautious manner in which the Greek's view, understand, and interact with outsiders and the world, i.e. their ethos.

Evident from the above mentioned illustrations, we can perhaps substantiate this study's hypothesis that suggests myths as lenses that not only colour but also constructs the ethos through which cultures navigate and cast a particular frame of mind, through which to view themselves and others. Since myths tell why things are the way they are, they serve as guides for social actions generating beliefs that cultivate and prescribe particular worldviews, depending on the myths a given culture holds with certitude. Even as human societies modernize, myths continue to ensconce their bearing on the unconscious psyche of the human mind that subliminally prescribes and drives cultural ethos.

Conclusion

Myths are commonly taken to be fictitious folklores or fables that communicate, at best, some moral lessons, and, at worst, a misconstruction of reality. Most people in general do tend to be dismissive of myths by encapsulating them as something incapable of conveying any meaningful truths about cultures. Some may even dismiss myths as "itihahas" or "that which has been" (Thapar 17). Yet, we can ascertain from this research that myths specify particular ethos that establishes, prescribes, and directs cultures' outlook toward others and the world. As demonstrate in this research, myths create cultural ethos through interact with the world—such as the relations among the various Naga tribes. Myths are the medium through which the world is understood and through which cultures organize their view of themselves and others.

The implication is that myths are more than a simple explanation of man's experiences in the natural world; rather they are crucial in the formation of cultural ethos, i.e. how they see the world. This conjecture affords scholars of mythology, cultural studies, and literature a productive ground from which to conduct further in-depth, investigate, and explorative studies into the manner in which myths construct people's mentality and attitude.

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