

# Universal Mythology: Stories That Circle The World

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This installation is about mythology and the commonalities that occur between cultures across the world. According to folklorist Alan Dundes, myths are sacred narratives that explain the evolution of the world and humanity. He defines the sacred narratives as “a story that serves to define the fundamental worldview of a culture by explaining aspects of the natural world, and delineating the psychological and social practices and ideals of a society.” Stories explain how and why the world works and I want to understand the connections in these distant mythologies by exploring their existence and theories that surround them.

This painting illustrates the connection between separate cultures through their polytheistic mythologies. It features twelve deities, each from a different mythology/religion. By including these gods, I have allowed for a diversified group of cultures while highlighting characters whose traits consistently appear in many mythologies. It has the Celtic supreme god, Dagda; the Norse trickster god, Loki; the Japanese moon god, Tsukuyomi; the Aztec sun god, Huitzilopochtli; the Incan nature goddess, Pachamama; the Egyptian water goddess, Tefnut; the Polynesian fire goddess, Mahuika; the Inuit hunting goddess, Arnakuagsak; the Greek fate goddesses, the Moirai: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos; the Yoruba love goddess, Oshun; the Chinese war god, Chiyou; and the Hindu death god, Yama.

The painting was made with acrylic paint on mirror. Connection is an important element in my art, and I incorporate this by using the mirror to bring the audience into the piece, allowing them to see their reflection within the parting of the clouds, whilst viewing the piece. By including the viewer, they become a part of the global connection that the artwork is meant to capture. The installation stresses the value on cross-cultural relationships. Although they are often not commonly known, these links are what ties the world together.

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Mythology refers to the collected stories of a group of people or the study of such stories. Myths are the stories people tell to explain nature, history and customs and feature in every culture. Alan Dundes, former folklorist at the University of California, Berkeley, said that myths are sacred narratives explaining how the world and humanity evolved, and defined the sacred narrative as, “a story that serves to define the fundamental world view of a culture by explaining aspects of the natural world and delineating the psychological and social practices and ideals of a society” (Grassie, 9). This universality of stories that explain how and why the world works is what first intrigued me in the subject of myth, mythology, and storytelling.

There are several theories as to why mythology exists as a global phenomenon. One theory claims that myths are distorted accounts of historical events that storytellers kept changing and exaggerating until the characters took on the status of gods (Honko). This theory is called *euhemerism*, after the mythologist Euhemerus, who lived around 320 BCE and said that Greek gods came from legends about people in the past (Oxford of World Religions). An example of this theory is the Greek myth of the god Aeolus, who controlled the north, south, east, and west winds. There is speculation that this myth evolved from the historical account of an ancient king who taught his people how to interpret the winds to aid in sailing (Bulfinch).

Another theory relates to allegory, the idea that a story can be interpreted to reveal hidden meanings. It claims that myths began as symbols for natural phenomena (Apollo as the sun, Poseidon as the sea), philosophical, and spiritual concepts (Athena as wisdom, Aphrodite as desire) (Honko). These theories are heavily based on personification. Ancient peoples worshipped natural phenomena such as water and fire, and eventually personified them as deities (Bulfinch).

Another theory aiming to contextualize myths is the myth-ritual theory, which suggests that myths arose to explain rituals (Graf). First suggested by William Robertson Smith, a nineteenth-century professor of divinity, the myth-ritual theory claims that people began performing rituals unrelated to myth, which later emerged due to the process of religious evolution. These peoples then created mythologies to explain the rituals, making the ritual commemorate events that occurred in the myth (Meletinsky). James George Frazer, a Scottish social anthropologist claimed that humans started with belief in magic rituals, then as they lost faith in magic, invented myths about gods, making the rituals religious instead of based in ideas of magic (Frazer). This theory suggests that man depended on natural law, and that he thought he could influence his life using this natural law: magic. When people discovered that magic does not work, they decided to rely on an invisible force in order to transfer the responsibility to this unknown figure and away from themselves. Frazer describes this gracefully, saying that “myth changes while custom remains constant; men continue to do what their fathers did before them, though the reasons on which their fathers acted have been long forgotten. The history of religion is a long attempt to reconcile old custom with new reason, to find a sound theory for an absurd practice” (Frazer, 477).

With all these varying theories and thousands of myths, there are still a great many thoughts based on ancient myth that point toward a commonality. In an attempt to capture the universality of myth, I began to narrow down a list of all world religions and mythologies to those that are polytheistic. I did this because polytheistic mythologies and religions are so common they are uncountable, and surround the world, while monotheistic religions and mythologies can be counted. Then, I chose a few from each continent that seemed to be the major mythologies in their area.

From North and South America there are the Inuit, Aztec, and Incan mythologies. Inuit mythology is vast, while the pantheon is far less complex than other polytheistic mythologies. Inuit myths are used partially to convey and preserve the ideas of the people and they are often accompanied by songs and dances. The legends are short and dramatic tales that aim to explain the ways of the world. The legends reinforce the relationship the people have with nature and continue to be created and changed by the Inuit storytellers (Houston). Aztec mythology is complex and diverse, with a pantheon that holds more than two hundred gods and goddesses. These deities are divided into three groups: the heaven and sky deities; the rain, fertility, and agriculture deities; and the war and sacrifice deities (Maestri). Incan mythology is more centered around one or two core concepts. Incan myths are largely centered around worship of the sun. Sun worship was closely tied to ancestral respect and reverence. Many of the legends focused on the origin of the Inca people. Their mythology glorified their culture and reinforced the idea that they were superior people destined to rule others (Inca Mythology).

From Europe and Africa there are the Norse, Greek, Egyptian and Yoruba mythologies. Norse mythology has complex lore filled with many legends and poems. Norse mythology, also known as Germanic mythology, was not only myth but religion. It was practiced by the Vikings in Scandinavian countries (Norse Mythology). Celtic mythology is one of the deepest and most mesmerizing European mythologies because of the adventure, romance, and magic involved. Although the Celts did not write down their legends, the mythology survived the Roman takeover due to Medieval Irish and Welsh monks that recorded the myths (Celtic Mythology). Greek mythology holds one of the most well-known, westernized pantheons in today's society. The religious myths of the Greek mythology are concerned with gods and heroes in more serious scenarios or are connected with ritual. The myths were seen as embodying divine and eternal truths, while the legends were believed to be historical events that actually took place (Pollard). Egyptian mythology informed every aspect of life in ancient Egypt. The themes of Egyptian myths were spread through trade. The main ideas of Egyptian mythology involve eternal life after death, benevolent deities, and reincarnation (Mark). Yoruba mythology is built on a solid thesis, their theory of creation. This hypothesis is believed strongly by the believers whose goal is to achieve transcendence (Abimbola). Unlike many western religions, Yoruba mythology says that good and evil come from the same source (Yoruba Religion).

From Asian and Oceania there are the Hindu, Chinese, Japanese, and Polynesian mythologies. The Hindu religion is widespread, with over one billion adherents worldwide, and is accepting and celebratory of the multicultural, pluralistic nature of their traditions. It is a Hindu view that truth or reality cannot be encased in a one form, but comes from many places. Hinduism is shaped by five main elements: doctrine, practice, society, story, and devotion (Doniger). Chinese mythology is far less popular, and is generally concerned with moral issues and informing people about its culture and values. It is believed to be, in some ways, rooted in actual historical events. Chinese myths are thought to have originated in the twelfth century BCE and there are long standing ties between Chinese mythology and Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Chinese Mythology). Japanese mythology has much heavier political undertones than most other religions. Most of the surviving Japanese myths are recorded in two books that aim to strengthen the authority of the ruling class through the telling of its origins. Yin and Yang are a major part of Japanese mythology, they concern the balance that is believed to exist in the universe (Matsumo). Polynesian mythology places heavy emphasis instead on nature and the ocean environment. The mythology dictates that all creatures in the world hold a sacred,

supernatural power, that is both good and evil. This power is protected by the complicated rules the mythology was created around (Polynesian Mythology).

Often, geographically distant cultures and mythologies share a deity or myth. Although these connections are not always exact, deities share the same functions and have other similarities. Stith Thompson, an American scholar of folklore, wrote a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, medieval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends. He titled this book the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, and within it is a complete list of the types of deities in mythology. The most frequently appearing deities seemed to be these (Thompson).

<u>Deity</u>	<u>Brief Description</u>
Supreme God	The Supreme God is much like the Creator God in polytheistic mythologies. The Supreme God also usually has superior wisdom and authority over the other Gods and hold dominion over the sky. In Celtic mythology, the Supreme God is a man called Dagda. Dagda is a father figure, a protector of his people, and is equipped with a hammer and a cup.
Trickster God	The Trickster God often crosses and breaks physical and societal rules in the form of tricks and thievery. For example, Norse mythology features a trickster god called Loki. He is a cunning prankster that has the ability to shapeshift.
Moon God	The Moon god is often a female deity, most likely because of the connection between the cycles of the moon and a woman's menstrual cycle. An example of a Moon God is in Japanese mythology, the lunar deity Tsukiyomi. This God is male, unlike the female norm, and holds some control over the ocean through his sway of the tides.
Light/Sun God	The Light of Sun God represents the sun and its power and strength. This deity often controls the rising and setting of the sun. An example of a Sun God is the Aztec deity, Huitzilopochtli. He is one of two principal deities for the mythology and is one of the Aztec deities that received sacrifices.
Nature God	The Nature God is in charge of the forces of nature, for example the seasons and the animals. The Nature God is often depicted like Mother Earth, caring and kind. For example, Inca mythology depicts a nature deity called Pachamama. She is a dragoness fertility goddess that presides over planting and harvesting.
Water God	The Water God is most common in cultures that depend on a river, lake, or other water source necessary for life. The Water God is depicted as part of the water and is associated with dragons. The mythology of Egypt features a water goddess named Tefnut. She is a woman with the head of a lion and is also associated with the moon and sun.
Fire God	The Fire God is in control of the element of fire, stopping and starting them, and also controls volcanoes. This God is frequently associated with hearth, home and family. An example of a fire deity is in Polynesian mythology, Mahuika.

	Mahuika is a fire goddess with fingernails made of fire, associated with caves, who holds the ability to create forest fires.
Hunting God	The Hunting God is associated with hunting animals and the skills and equipment involved in hunting. For example, Inuit mythology features a hunting goddess named Arnakuagsak. She is one of their primary deities and is regarded as such for her important role in providing the animals that the Inuit people need to hunt and eat to survive.
Fate God	The Fate God is often a personification of time itself and controls the fate of everyone. The God of Fate sometimes also controls when people die. Greek mythology features the Moirai, the goddesses of fate. They are three sisters, one that spins the thread, Clotho, one that measures the thread, Lachesis, and one that cuts the thread, Atropos. They are said to decide the fate of each human.
Love God	The Love God is associated with sexual love, lust, sexuality, and beauty. This God also sometimes controls who people fall in love with or their beauty. For example, Yoruba mythology depicts a love goddess named Oshun. She is described as vain, jealous, and spiteful, but is also a protector, savior, and nurturer of humanity.
War God	The War God is associated with war, combat, or bloodshed. In monotheistic mythologies, they are sometimes depicted as leading battles in order to spread the beliefs of their mythology. An example of a War God can be seen in Chinese mythology. One out of the three founding fathers of China is said to be Chiyu, a God of War with a bronze head of a bull, four eyes, and six arms, each holding a weapon.
Death God	The Death God is often part of the underworld, or the afterlife for bad people. The God of Death sometimes also controls the timing of death or helps people move onto death, like a grim reaper. Hinduism features a death deity who goes by the name of Yama. He was the first man to die and lives in the underworld, carried around by a buffalo and protected by two four-eyed dogs.

Much like the common deities, there are many common myths. These commonalities can range from a similar moral to a story to nearly exact repetitions, down to very similar names of characters or lines spoken. Through the study of comparative mythology, many of these similarities have been uncovered and recorded. The flood myth can be seen in mythologies around the world. This myth tells of a flood that leaves one or a small group of survivors. The Babylonian Gilgamesh and the Hebrew Bible both tell of a global flood that wipes out humanity, and one man saves Earth's species on a boat. The single survivor is seen in Hindu, Greek, Norse, and Aztec mythology (Dimmit). The Sacrifice myth is a story about a divine character whose death is an important part of reality. This myth is more common in farming and agriculture based culture. One female myth from Seram, Indonesia, tells about a miraculously born little girl who gets killed. Her corpse then grows the crops that provide stability for their society. In Chinese, Indonesian, and Norse mythology, there is a myth of a giant that has to be killed for the world to be created (Eliade).

Many mythologies feature a god who dies and often comes back to life later (Campbell). The Egyptian god Osiris and the Mesopotamian god Tammuz are both examples of dying gods. The Greek story of Adonis has been compared to that of Osiris, although Adonis is mortal. Also, the Greek god Dionysos has a story of death and rebirth (Frazer). Polytheistic myths of resurrected gods have also been compared to the Christian story of Jesus of Nazareth. Many mythologies mention a place that sits at the center of the world and acts as a place to contact different levels of the universe. Many myths talk about a giant tree or pillar that connects heaven, earth, and the underworld. Vedic Indian, Chinese, and Germanic mythologies have a myth about a cosmic tree that stretches to heaven and hell. Many cultures have a myth of creation where younger, more civilized gods conquer older gods that represent chaos. In Hindu mythology, the younger vedas (gods) battle the older asuras (demons). In Greek mythology, the Olympian gods defeat the Titans. In Celtic mythology, the gods of life struggle against the ancient gods of darkness, the Fomorians. These myths are especially frequent in Indo-European mythologies (Squire).

Cultures internationally believe in some supreme being who has no human contact. Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer, and philosopher, calls it a *deus otiosus*, or idle god (Eliade). This is defined as any god that does not interact with humans. A highly common myth is that of the idle god creating the world then retreating into the heavens after creating the world. In Baluba mythology, there is a myth that tells of a supreme god that abandons earth, leaving man to search (Leslau). Herero mythology tells of a sky god that left the Earth with lesser divinities. Many mythologies feature myths that explain the origins of the people and their culture, rituals, and identities. Often customs are justified in societies by the belief that gods or mythical heroes established them. In one Australian mythology, fabled brothers established all of the customs (Eliade).

One of the most interesting aspects of the universality of mythology is the repetitiveness of its core aspects. The deities and common myths central to each religion or mythology appear frequently around the world. There are many reasons for this consistency. Mythologies often have their own specific deities and legends that pertain to their situation in time and place. However, mythologies and religions also have a tendency to share major deities. For example, the sun and moon deities can be seen in nearly every mythology or religion, even in multiple mythologies on each continent, from Aztec to Zoroastrian. This repetition is significant because it uncovers just how truly and deeply the world is connected, even when it is from across the globe.

The global connection holds importance because of the implications it holds. This relationship can be traced to many sources: trade, war, art, the usual culprits for the spread of anything in ancient times. Trade spread ideas through word of mouth, war through the conquest of people, and art through the ideas conveyed in painting, theatre, and pottery. This accounts for the similar story structure that Joseph Campbell notes in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He calls this theory the monomyths and explains that hero myths share a common plot composition. This and other similar similarities show how small the earth really is and how interconnected even the farthest apart cultures are. This connection is apparent in today's world, even more so than in ancient times. With the emergence of social media, stories spread with unimaginable speed, creating challenges, memes, and trends that are taken in as quickly as they were created across the globe.

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