



## Common Elements in Creation Myths

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It is in the nature of humans to wonder about the unknown and search for answers. At the foundation of nearly every culture is a creation myth that explains how the wonders of the earth came to be. These myths have an immense influence on people's frame of reference. They influence the way people think about the world and their place in relation to their surroundings. Despite being separated by numerous geographical barriers many cultures have developed creation myths with the same basic elements.

Many creation myths begin with the theme of [birth](#). This may be because birth represent new life and the beginning of life on earth may have been imagined as being similar to the beginning of a child's life. This is closely related to the idea of a [mother and father](#) existing in the creation of the world. The mother and father are not always the figures which create life on earth. Sometimes the creation doesn't occur until [generations after](#) the first god came into being.

A [supreme being](#) appears in almost every myth. He or she is what triggers the train of events that create the world. Sometimes there are two beings, a passive and active creator.

Not all cultures imagine life starting on earth . Some believe that it originated either [above or below](#) where we live now. Still other myths claim the earth was once covered with water and the earth was brought to the surface. These are called [diver-myths](#).

According to some cultures [humans and animals](#) once lived together peacefully. However because of a sin caused by the humans they are split up. This [sin](#) is often brought on by darkness and is represented as fire. Other times the innocence of humans is [taken away by a god](#).

We continue to wonder. Even now, in the 21st century, we continue to make theories on how earth was created. They are our new creation myths. We base our ideas on scientific evidence. However the creation myths were based on what people saw - their observations.

# Birth

Birth played a very important role in creation myths. Sometimes it appeared in the shape of an egg and other times in that of a mother giving birth to children, but the element appears often.

In some versions of the [Japanese creation myth](#) the jumbled mass of elements at the beginning of time was in the shape of an egg. Later in the story birth also comes into play because Izanami gave birth to her children who became the sun and moon.

At the beginning of the [Greek myth](#) the bird, Nyx, laid an egg. From this egg comes the god of love, Eros. Then the shell pieces became Gaia and Uranus, the Earth and sky. Again the egg is very important.

The [Iroquois](#) Sky Woman fell from the floating island in the sky after being pushed by her husband. This all occurred because she was pregnant. If she had not known she was to give birth North America may not have been created. It was an essential part of the story.

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# Mother-Father

Myths from all over the world have a mother and father figure in them. The mother is usually the Earth and the father the sky. This pattern may be attributed to the fact that life emerges both from Mother Earth and from the womb of a mother (Long 37). People of ancient times were mystified by the creation of children and vegetation. Therefore they found links between mothers and Mother Earth. In calling the sky “Father” a sense of unity is created, as in the bonds of matrimony. Some myths have the mother and father figures represent different characteristics of nature, but the element is still present.

The [Greek creation myth](#) told of the goddess, Gaia, and the god, Uranus, who fell in love. Uranus was the sky and Gaia was the Earth. Together they had many children and grandchildren, who created the plants, animals, stars and springs. The unity of Gaia and Uranus created a sense that the universe was one.

Two gods, in the [Japanese creation myth](#), created Japan together. After exploring the island they were married and Izanami gave birth to three children, Amaterasu who became the sun, Tsukiyumi whom they made into the moon and Sosano-wo, their unruly son. Once again the theme of a mother and father appeared, though this time they were not the sun earth and sky.

The [Australian Aborigines](#) believed that the Sun Mother created all the animals, plants and bodies of water on earth upon the urging of the Father of All Spirits. These two divine beings did not actually have children. Only their names reflected the mother-father theme. However the Sun Mother was portrayed as one that gives life to the sleeping spirits. A human mother also gives life to a spirit.

# Genealogy

The first god to be born was not always the one to create the world. Often it was his or her children that decided to fill the world with life. The work the parent left undone was finished by the child.

According to the [Greek creation myth](#) the bird Nyx laid an egg, from which the god of love hatched. The halves of the shell then became the Earth and Sky. They brought numerous children into the world who eventually furnished their mother with plants, animals and physical features.

The children of the [Iroquois](#) Sky Woman created life on the land the animals had given her. Before Flint and Sapling were born she created the sun, moon and stars, but she left the Earth bare. After they grew to manhood they created wonders to fill the land and in the waters. It was a generation after the first god lived on Earth before Earth was completed.

The [Japanese](#) believed that in the beginning there was an ocean of mud. From this mud a green plant grew until it reached the clouds, where it was transformed into a god. Out of loneliness he started to create other gods. The last two beings he created were Izanagi and Izanami. They created the islands of Japan and filled them with life. It was also their children that became the sun and moon. They were not the first gods, but rather the last of the first god's creations.

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## Supreme Beings

Nearly all ancient creation myths included some kind of supreme being. This being was not always in a clear form, but it was almost always present. In Greek and Japanese mythology there were many gods and goddesses; the Iroquois myth told of a Sky Woman and her sons; Aborigines placed their faith in the Father of All Spirits; the Bushmen placed theirs in Kiang and Christians and Jews in God.

The supreme being used different methods to create the Earth. Some such as the God in the Bible and Torah merely ordered that his will be carried out and it was done. Others molded each creation by hand. Still more gods had a less powerful god to do the work for them. The supreme beings in creation myths came in many different forms and acted very differently, but they all shared in the creation of the world.

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# Creation from Above or Below

Some creation myths imagined a world created from chaos or nothing at all. However a great many myths also illustrated a world that existed before there was life on earth. In this world, which was usually above or below earth, gods and/or people lived peacefully. It is from this imaginary world that some cultures believed our makers or the inhabitants of the earth originated.

The [Bushmen of Africa](#) believed that at one time animals and people lived together in a land beneath the surface of the earth where happiness reigned. As they lived together The Great Master and Lord of All Life, Kaang, planned a wondrous land above theirs. The first thing he created was a huge tree with branches stretching over the land. At the base of it he dug a hole and brought the people and animals into another world through it. Some of the animals in their rush to reach the wonders of the world found a way to climb up and out of tree. A tree played a similar role in the Native American Hopi myth.

At the base of the Hopi culture was a myth recalling past worlds, beneath ours, where people used to live. When life in these worlds became unbearable the Native Americans discovered upper worlds and to get to them they climbed a pine tree. This pattern continued until they reached the present surface which may or may not be just another step on the ladder. Despite being separated by miles of water the tree leading to the new world appears in both myths.

In both the [Japanese](#) and [Iroquois](#) myths the creator's home was in the land above the clouds. Two gods, Izanagi and Izanami, created the islands of Japan and the plants, rivers, brooks, animals and snow. Then they married and their descendants became the people of Japan. The Iroquois people believe that they and their surroundings were created by twin brothers, who were the children of a Sky Woman who fell from a hole in her home in the clouds.

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# The Relationship of Animals and Humans

Animals played key roles in many creation myths. They were viewed as equals by the humans. The myths told of “a time in which men and animals lived together...and no sexual, social or economic tensions are present” (Long 20). The roles of the animals in the myths may have reflected the feelings of the individual culture for animals.

The water animals in the Iroquois creation myth save the Sky Woman from falling into the ocean that covered the Earth. After saving the Woman the animals built an island for her to live on. Without their help the Sky Woman may have perished and the human race would never have existed. Iroquois Native Americans respected animals very much. They acknowledge how greatly they rely on animals to support their needs.

According to the African Bushmen all the creatures of the earth once lived in an underground world. In this place humans and animals lived together peacefully. They could understand each other and did not fear each other. Later all this changed, but at one time there was equality among animals and people. Similar to the Iroquois people, the Bushmen did not waste nature's gifts. They only hunted and gathered what was necessary to their survival. The Bushmen recognize animals as being more important than the Western world deemed them.

In these two myths the animals played an essential role. Without them the creation myths would lack a major element; the creation of land in the Iroquois myth and the creation of suffering in the Bushmen myth. Their role represented the necessity animals played in the lives of these groups of people.

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# An Instruction, a Sin and the Consequence

Many creation myths consisted of at least one of three elements; an order or instruction from the creator to the creations, a sin and a consequence which must be faced. The consequence is often what causes pain, hunger, disease and all the other evils that plague the earth.

In the [Greek myth](#), when Pandora was brought to Epimetheus she was given a box which Zeus orders her not to open. Not only did Zeus give her the box, but also curiosity, which became her temptation to sin. Overcome by the curiosity of her nature, Pandora took a peek inside the box and all of the troubles of the earth flew out of the box. For her sin the whole human race had to suffer. This was the consequence humans were forced to face for accepting Prometheus' gift of fire.

The African [Bushmen](#) were instructed not to build a fire. They disobeyed this command and for that sin their peaceful relationship with animals was destroyed.

The [Australian Aborigines](#) believed that the Sun Mother told the animals she had created to live together peacefully. Instead envy crept into their hearts and they began to quarrel. She returned to earth and in order to make them happy gave them the power to change their shape into what they wanted it to be for eternity. The result was an odd assortment of creatures. The Sun Mother decided to create two humans who would be superior to the animals. Because the animals disobeyed the Sun Mother's instruction their superiority was taken away.

[Genesis 2:4-3:24 of the Bible](#) tells the story of how suffering entered the world. God gave Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden to live in, with the order never to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. They disobeyed him and the price of this sin was banishment from the garden into the outside world with all its troubles.

# Diver-Myths

Scientific evidence has shown that at one point parts of the earth that are now dry were covered by water. Many myths allude to this fact by imagining a world once covered by water. Many myths, called diver-myths (Long 188), consisted of a being diving into the water that covers the world to retrieve some earth. The earth brought to the surface became the land we know today. Other stories had the mud brought to the surface in a different way, but many had the common element of some earth being brought to the surface of the water and growing until it became the Earth.

According to the [Iroquois Native Americans](#) water animals inhabited the Earth before there was land. When a Sky Woman fell from her home above they caught her and dove into the seas to bring up mud. This mud they spread onto the back of Big Turtle. There it began to grow until it became North America.

The [Japanese creation myth](#) painted a picture of a muddy ocean which covered the world at the beginning of time. A god and goddess, Izanagi and Izanami, became curious about what was beneath the ocean. Izanagi took his staff and threw it into the ocean. As he lifted it back up some lumps of earth fell off into the water. These became the islands of Japan. No being dove beneath the waters to find mud, but the element of earth being covered by water and a being bringing the earth up is there.

The creation myth of [Christians and Jews](#) does not tell of God diving into the water to bring up mud, but Genesis 1:2 says “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Therefore according to the Torah and Bible the Earth was once covered entirely by water.

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