

or not to risk death to save the community. The hero who chooses to risk death acquires honor and lasting fame; the hero who chooses safety is denied both. Esfandiyar, Heracles, Beowulf, and Chi Li make the world a safer place by killing many monsters. The hero of *Kotan Uttunnai* helps his people by fighting valiantly against the enemy.

In the major epics, the issue is the same, but the circumstances are infinitely more complex. When a leader places his or her own desires before the needs of the community, both the community and the individual suffer. Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over a slave girl because public honor is the key to self-esteem. Similarly, Lancelot and Guinevere place their love above their loyalty to King Arthur, thereby destroying the Round Table and putting Britain into the hands of power-hungry local rulers. Aeneas places the needs of his community above his personal desires but loses his own humanity. Similarly, Rama places the needs of his community above his love for Sita, causing great personal tragedy for both of them. On the other hand, Gassire earns fame by placing his personal desires before the needs of his community, and Jason loses fame for the same reason. Bakaridjan Kone's community supports his heroism even though it is at the expense of an innocent community.

THE MATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

A knowledge of the basic difference between Mother Earth-centered matriarchal religions and the Father Sky-centered patriarchal religions is crucial to an understanding of the symbolic content of many myths. The political, economic, social, and religious foundation of the matriarchal society was the agricultural year. The importance of agriculture fostered a cyclical view of life, emphasizing the progression of all living matter from birth to maturity to death to rebirth. Even in lands where the climate remained relatively stable from one season to the next, people could see the connection between the development of their own lives and the development of life among plants and animals.

In the matriarchal society, the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess personified Mother Earth and was the supreme deity. She functioned in three related forms. As Goddess of the Underworld, she controlled the three-stage cycle of life: the period of

birth and childhood; the fertile period of maturity and reproduction; and the sterile period of old age, with its decline and death.

As Goddess of the Earth, she controlled the three-stage cycle of the seasons: spring—the period of birth or rebirth, and budding growth; summer—the fertile period of blossoming and harvest; and winter—the sterile period of decay, barrenness, and death or dormancy.

As Goddess of the Sky, she was the great Moon Goddess, who appeared in her three-stage cycle of phases: as the new and waxing moon—the period of birth or rebirth, and growth; as the full moon—the period of maturity; and as the waning moon—the period of decline and death or dormancy.

Consequently, the Great Goddess was the source of all human life and the source of all food. To survive, societies needed to produce children and to produce food. They knew how dependent they were upon the blessings of the Great Goddess, and they worshipped her properly so they would receive those blessings.

The queen embodied the spirit the Great Goddess, and she wielded great political, economic, social, and religious power. Other women were considered daughters of the Great Goddess. Thus, all women in the matriarchal society were highly valued, and many of them held important positions. Women were the heads of their families, and inheritance passed from a mother to her daughters, with the youngest daughter being most important because, presumably, she would be the last to die and thus would continue the family line the longest. Children were reared by their mother and her brother, while the father lived in the home of his mother and helped rear his sister's children. The children's primary moral obligations were to their mother and their siblings.

When the male's role in procreation became understood and valued, the queen took a husband, called the sacred king, for one year. At first, he was her brother or her son, but later he was a youth who symbolized her son. Many youths competed for the great honor of being sacred king. They had to win many contests involving physical strength and the skillful use of the bow. Heracles' tasks against the Nemean lion, the Cretan bull, the Erymanthian boar, and Artemis's deer represent typical contests.

Odysseus's participation in an archery contest where the winner will marry Penelope is an echo of this tradition.

Each spring, when the seeds of the new crops were sown, the past year's sacred king would be sacrificed as part of a major religious ceremony. The priestesses of the Mother Goddess would eat his flesh in order to acquire his powers of fertility, and the fields and farm animals would be sprinkled with his blood so they too would become fertile. Then, in a religious ceremony, the queen would take a new sacred king for the coming year.

The sacred king gradually gained more power. He increased the length of his reign to eight years by choosing a substitute, or surrogate, sacred king to die in his place. At the end of each year, the real king would retire from public view into a burial chamber or cave for one to three days, while the surrogate sacred king reigned in his place. The priestesses of the Great Goddess would sacrifice the surrogate king in a sacred ceremony and use his flesh and blood to ensure the fertility of the community. Then the real king would resume his duties for the coming year.

When Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's marriage proposal, he related the ways that she has destroyed previous mates. Ishtar retaliates by causing the death of Enkidu, who functions as Gilgamesh's surrogate, Demeter in Greek culture and Amaterasu in Japanese culture are examples of the Great Goddess. Moreover, vestiges of the pre-Hellenic matriarchal culture remain in the Greek myths of Jason, Medea, Heracles, Achilles, and Paris.

By 2400 B.C., aggressive tribes worshipping a supreme male god who was a father-figure or a successful warrior had begun to invade many matriarchal communities. They brought with them a new social and political order in which males dominated. Kings gained enough power to change the old social system to one in which kings ruled by heredity and animals were sacrificed to win the favor of the gods.

Some cultures depict a world view in which one generation of gods replaces another, the newer gods being more civilized and capable than the earlier ones. For example, Zeus conquers Cronus in Greek mythology, and Marduk conquers Tiamat in Babylonian mythology. The battle between one family of gods and another often reflects the political and religious conflict between the indigenous people, who were

farmers and worshipped the Great Goddess or the Mother Goddess, and a warlike invading people, who worshipped male sky gods. Zeus's conquest of Cronus and the Titans reflects the political conquest of one people by another, and his liaisons with many Mother Goddesses in addition to Hera, his wife, represent a compromise in which the invader's religion was united with each local religion. Similar changes are reflected in Babylonian mythology, where a religion in which Marduk is the principal god incorporates the older gods.

ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON MYTHS

Because myths are symbols of human experience, they can be analyzed in a variety of ways, depending upon the perspective of the scholar. Years ago, many scholars viewed myths as symbols of the external environment. Those who created myths were thought to have observed nature and interpreted the behavior of human beings in a parallel manner. For example, heroes were considered symbols of the sun. They wielded swords that symbolized the sun's rays against monsters that symbolized clouds and night, the enemies of the sun. Each hero story was thus a symbol of the conflict between day and night and, by extension, between good and evil.

In the twentieth century, the symbolic interpretation of myths moved from the external environment to the internal environment of the unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud and his followers view myths as the expression of the individual's unconscious wishes, fears, and drives. For example, Otto Rank explains the characteristics of the traditional hero in terms of infantile hostility, childhood fantasies, and rebellion against one's father.

Carl Jung and his followers, among them Carl Kerenyi, Erich Neumann, and, more broadly, Joseph Campbell, view myths as the expression of a universal, collective unconscious. In their theory, innate psychological characteristics, common to all human beings, determine how people throughout the world and throughout history experience and respond to the process of living. The contents of the collective unconscious are divided into archetypes—such as the mother, the child, the hero, the trickster, and the giant—but these are simply image frameworks. A particular individual's life experiences determine in what particular shape and form the archetypal