

Origin Stories: Geography, Culture, and Belief

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At a very young age children become curious about themselves and their place in the world around them. The question, “Where did I come from?” may arise. As children mature, questions of origin signal the desire for a broader explanation of the world, a desire for a deeper understanding of something bigger than themselves to explain events that happen around them.

When young students are asked the question “Where does the sun go at night?” their answers might include: “The sun goes down into a ditch,” “Someone turns off the light,” “It goes to the other side of the world,” or “A cloud covers it up.” Children use the knowledge they have about the world to explain phenomenon they do not understand. Likewise, civilizations from the past tried to explain the changing of seasons, objects in the sky, and the facts of life and death through the natural environment in which they lived. Ancient Chinese, for example, believed that daylight was provided by one of ten sunbirds taking its turn across the sky, while Ancient Egyptians imagined that a giant beetle pushed the round sun across the heavens, rather like a scarab beetle rolling a ball of dung across the desert sand to its den.¹

There is a great variety of origin stories that provide explanations for earthly happenings. The cultural and religious themes evident in these stories can significantly enrich the social studies curriculum, giving elementary students an understanding of how culture and the environment influence the behavior of diverse peoples.

According to the national curriculum standards for social studies, human beings have systems of beliefs that are unique in some ways, and similar in others. The first theme, **1 CULTURE**, connects to ideas of how religion influences other parts of a culture, and how culture changes to accommodate different ideas and beliefs.² By looking at the world through multiple perspectives and exploring the influence of beliefs on human behavior, students can gain a better understanding of fellow human beings and relate better to people throughout the nation and the world.

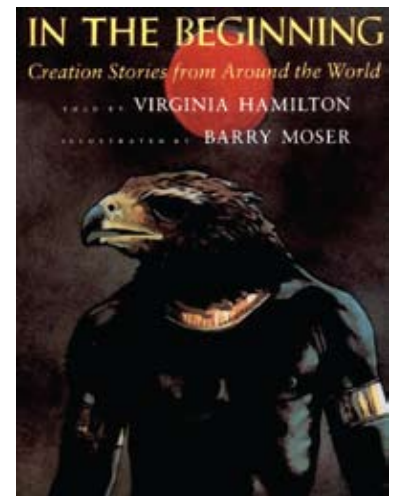
Origin stories form a cultural backdrop that can help us understand another society. Questions of beginnings occur in every

cultural group: Why am I here? Where do I come from? Who am I? Even today, these same questions are answered in part through stories handed from one generation to another. Origin stories give meaning to existence, define codes of morals, and bond societies together.³ Why did the people of the Yucatan make sacrifices to the rain god? Why do island people tell stories that feature winds and storms? Why are light and dark representative of good and evil? Origin stories can offer a window into how people live, how they relate to their environment, and what they believe about their place in the wider universe.

Recurring Motifs

There are many common themes that appear in various origin stories. Often, animals possess human qualities and serve as spiritual guides, such as Raven and Coyote in Native American stories. The universe arising out of water is another common motif, such as Nun (the ocean) in Egyptian stories. Natural elements such as the sky, earth, water, or sun are humanized, such as Sun Mother in an Australian creation story. Other common themes include: creation arising out of chaos, creation out of nothing, creation of humans and animals, a grand separation of mother and father gods, and dramatic encounters between deities.⁴

In most stories, the beginning of the world (or the universe) was dark, an exception being the story of Quat the Creator, solar god of the Banks Islands, who must discover night at the edge of creation and bring it back in order to finish making the world.⁵ Some cultures present cyclic creations which are destroyed after some period, then made again, as with the Hindu and the Maya. In stories from some cultures, the world



just spontaneously appeared or had always been there. In many origin stories, humans are created from clay or soil, such as in Maori and Hebrew accounts. To the Norse and some Native American tribes, trees became human beings. TABLE 1 provides an overview of natural elements and how they are viewed in several creation stories.

Landscape and Legend

III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS notes that geographic connections are integral for the study of human behavior. Every story must have a setting. Landscape is woven into the fabric of origin stories through place names or “sacred places.”⁶ Water and land are part of most origin stories.

Humans often bestow specific places on the landscape with qualities of good or evil. Early American communal societies, such as the Mormons, were searching for a “Garden of Eden” or “utopia,” where a society could be erected that would reflect the perfection of the landscape. On the other hand, topography that suggested abhorrent characteristics to American settlers were named after the devil: Devil’s Backbone, Devil’s Tower, Devil’s Throat, and Devil’s Kitchen.⁷

Some anthropologists have concluded that stories of origin are inseparable from their locations.⁸ Students could make connections between origin stories and geography, as well as investigate why specific places are mentioned in some stories. What aspects of a story relate to the geography of the land? What aspects of a story reflect the culture of the people telling the story? Why do you think this story was created? Does it serve a purpose beyond entertainment?

Winds and Clouds

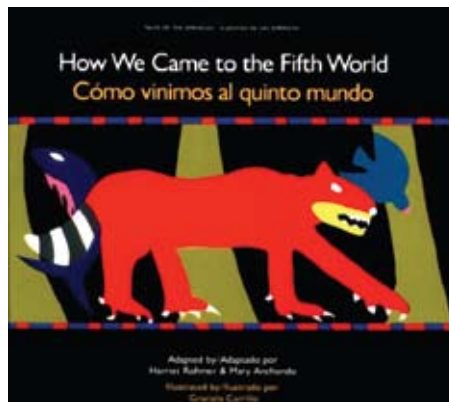
One example of myth arising from environment is “The Children of Rangi and Papi” from the Maori tribes in New Zealand, which contains descriptions of an angry god who sent “Fierce Squalls, Whirlwinds, Dense Clouds, Massive Clouds, Dark Clouds, Gloomy Thick Clouds, Fiery Clouds, Clouds Which Preceded Hurricanes, Clouds of Fiery Black, Clouds Reflecting Glowing Red Light, Clouds Wildly Drifting from All Quarters and Wildly Bursting, Clouds of Thunderstorms, and Clouds Hurriedly Flying.”⁹ Since New Zealand is surrounded by the Pacific Island and buffeted by strong winds, it’s logical that aboriginal stories would include these elements of nature.

Have children imagine being in a severe storm and illustrate through words and pictures the feelings they might have. Lead into a discussion of ocean currents, winds, and climate. New Zealand also has volcanoes and natural hot springs. Have the students use descriptive vocabulary to provide imagery similar to that in “The Children of Rangi and Papi.”

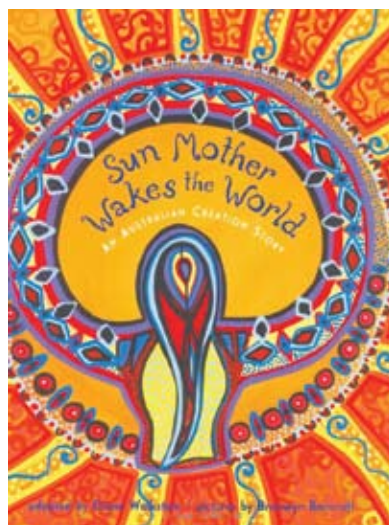
Precious Water

The book *How We Came to the Fifth World*, written in both Spanish and English, retells the Aztec creation story in which

“the four historical ages” were destroyed by the elements of water, air, fire, and earth.¹⁰ The Aztecs believed that the fifth world (our current one) is also doomed to destruction unless evil can be banished. The Aztecs represented the end of each “world” on their great stone calendars, which were based on the solar year and linked to agricultural cycles.



Share with students the significance of fresh water to the Yucatan, where there are no rivers above ground. The peninsula is a porous limestone shelf that drains all the rainwater from the surface, and cenotes (sinkholes) are the only source of sweet, fresh water. Demonstrate the effect of rain (which is slightly acidic even if unpolluted) on limestone by placing drops of lemon juice (which is also acidic) on a piece of chalk and observing the erosion.



An Island Continent

The Aborigines of Australia believe that the world is still being created. In an adaptation of the origin myth, *Sun Mother Wakes the World: An Australian Creation Story*, Sun Mother comes to the Earth and wakes the animal spirits in various caves.¹¹ At first, the animals are frightened when Sun Mother leaves, but eventually

realize that she returns every morning. When the animals began to quarrel, Sun Mother lets each kind to choose a special feature to keep as its own: Kangaroo chooses a pouch, Emu chooses long legs, and Platypus chooses everything—which humorously accounts for its odd physique. Later in the story, Sun Mother gives birth to a son (Moon) and daughter (Morning Star), which in time give birth to the first woman and man.

Explain the term *indigenous* to students and share more information about the indigenous people and animals of Australia. Have students look at a map of Australia and identify the different landforms across the continent. How has the terrain determined the location of cities? It may be fun to create a play dough map of the Australian terrain.

The Baobab Tree

From the Yoruba religion in the Niger River Delta comes the story *The Origin of Life on Earth: An African Creation Myth*.¹² Olorun (the main deity) sent an agent (an orisha) named Obatala to make Earth and the first people. All life was in the sky until Obatala carried sand and spread it on the water below to make the Earth. Obatala later fashioned human bodies from soil, but it was Olorun's breath that washed into the bodies and nudged them to life. Unfortunately, when Obatala drank too much palm wine, he made poorly shaped figures with twisted legs, missing body parts, and eyes covered over, which accounts for the handicaps that humans must endure.

The baobab tree (distributed throughout Africa) figures prominently in this story: Obatala made the soil on Earth rich with "baobab powder." Another orisha with powers to see in the future used a powder made of baobab roots in his divining tray. All of the orishas lived near a mythical baobab tree and used things that came from it or its surrounds.

After reading the story, have students seek further information about the Baobab tree. Where does it grow? What does it need to grow? What resources does the baobab tree provide to people? Do baobab trees grow on other continents? Students could search for other stories that feature the baobab tree.

Studying Religions and Science

Just as all cultures have attempted to explain origins, our scientific society has provided explanations for the beginnings of the universe and its current characteristics. Scientific theories have evolved from Ptolemy's theory (second century C.E.) that the Earth was the center of the universe to Copernicus' theory (1514 C.E.) that the planets revolve around a small star, our sun.

On one level, the explanations provided through the scientific method appear to clash with more traditional explanations. For example, Hebrew Scriptures (which are studied by Christians in the form of "The Old Testament" and by Muslims as well) ascribe seven days for creation, whereas modern science estimates that the formation of the Earth and life on it took billions of years.¹³ On another level, however, the two narratives can co-exist. Religious scholar J. F. Bierlein, for example, has described how myths and religious texts give meaning to our experiences and our world. "Science tells us how things happen; myth (and religion) tell us why they happen."¹⁴

An NCSS Position Statement on teaching about religion states,

Omitting study about religions gives students the impression that religions have not been, and are not now, part of the human experience. Religions have influenced the behavior of both individuals and nations, and have inspired some of the world's most beautiful art, architecture, literature, and music. History, our own nation's religious pluralism, and contemporary world events are testimony that religion has been and continues to be an important culture influence.¹⁵

Many states and school districts are issuing mandates that would require including the topic of religion in the curriculum.¹⁶ This may not be a bad thing. Understanding the role religion has played in cultures is indeed vital to understanding those cultures as well as historical events. It is important, however, that teachers understand the difference between teaching about religion and religious indoctrination. If stories are shared from a religious text, they should not be used to promote religious belief or nonbelief, but to better understand a society or culture.

Creative Writing

I spoke with a sixth grade teacher at a local elementary school about the use of origin stories in the curriculum. She explained how her students learned about stories of origin and made connections with other aspects of culture. This teacher encouraged students to create their own stories to explore cultural elements. She wrote these goals for the lesson: "Students will demonstrate an understanding (e.g., speak, draw, write, sing, create) of the complexity of culture by exploring cultural elements (e.g., beliefs, customs/traditions, languages, skills, literature, the arts) of diverse groups and explaining how culture serves to define present day groups and may result in unique perspectives."

The teacher shared a few of the stories that the students wrote. One story was called "Why the Sun Shines in the Morning and the Moon at Night" and tells the story of two beautiful sisters (Sulantia and Luna) who vied for the affections of a king. The story involves elements of jealousy, rage, and threats of wrongdoing (common elements of culture for a sixth grader). Good wins over evil in this story:

You will shine bright,
And everyone will
Know you as Sun
Great and powerful
And you will cast all light
From you for always
For you are true
And did no wrong
You will shine as brightly
As you do inside

But she
Who has done
So wrongly to you
Will show only in your shadow
Alone in the dark

The stars will leave you be
But Luna will be with the stars
Who shine much more brightly
And she will be known as Moon
And she will reflect off of you
And know she has done wrong

Conclusion

“Myth was and still is the basis of morality, governments, and national identity.”¹⁶ Myth is a shared heritage of ancestral memories and a thread that holds past, present, and future together. Speculation about how the world came into being appears to be a basic element of all human cultures.

Stories of origin will be discussed among groups and between individuals young and old for ages to come. It is one of the greatest stories of life. Who we are and how we came to be are elements wrapped up in our very being. We find many variations in these stories of origin, but it turns out that we humans are more alike than different, and there is not one dull story in the collection. Linking culturally based origin stories to other conversations about culture and society can create a learning environment for deeper understanding of ourselves and others. 🌐

Notes

1. Steve Zeitlin, *The Four Corners of the Sky: Creation Stories and Cosmologies from Around the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000): 4.
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), page 49.
3. J. F. Bierlein, *Parallel Myths* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994): 5-6.
4. Terri J. Andrews, “Share in the Light,” *World & I* 13, no. 7 (1998): 196-203.
5. Virginia Hamilton, *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1998): 9-13.

6. Richard V. Francaviglia, *Believing in Place: Spiritual Geography of the Great Basin* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2003): 15.
7. Francaviglia, 75.
8. Francaviglia, 13.
9. Zeitlin, 16-17.
10. Harriet Rohmer and Mary Anchondo, *How We Came to the Fifth World: A Creation Story from Ancient Mexico* (San Francisco, CA: Children’s Book Press, 1998).
11. Diane Wolkstein, *Sun Mother Wakes the World: An Australian Creation Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
12. David A. Anderson, *The Origin of Life on Earth: An African Creation Myth* (Mt. Airy, MD: Sights Productions, 1991).
13. Ewa Wasilewska, “The Universe’s Watery Birth,” *World & I* 9, no. 2 (1994): 234-241.
14. Bierlein, 315.
15. National Council for the Social Studies, “Study About Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum,” (rev. 1998), www.socialstudies.org/positions; See also “Intelligent Design,” (2007).
16. Council on Islamic Education and First Amendment Center, *Teaching About Religion* (Fountain Valley, CA: CIE, 2000). See also “A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2008), www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/teachersguide.PDF.

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Table 1. Elements of Aboriginal Stories of Origin

Culture/Location	Title of Main Deity	Beginning of Earth	Creation of Humans	Cultural/Geographic Connections
Yoruba of Nigeria	Olorun	Life in the sky, water and marsh beneath	A divine agent made humans from earth, but Olorun breathed in life	Tropical forest good for farming fruits and vegetables; annual festival honors god of thunder
Australia	Sun Mother	Sun, asleep in sky, awakes	Children of the moon and morning star	Land, much of it desert, is the core of spirituality
Banks Islands, Melanesia	Quat the Creator	Bright light and no darkness before creation	Quat forms wooden puppets from tree	A variety of spirits inhabit forests, mountains, and swamps on the islands
Blackfoot, Native American	Old Man the Creator (Naapi)	Always existed; he created as he traveled	Diety forms a mother and child from clay	Nomadic/buffalo hunting on the savanna
China	Phan-Ku	Universe in the shape of an egg	Goddess Nuwa makes humans from mud	Dragon is controller of all water; much agriculture depends on rivers
Egypt	Ra (Re) the Creator	Only churning water, then sun god Ra emerged	Tears from Ra’s second eye	Nile River is the source of agriculture and life
Iceland	Odin, Vili, and Ve	Empty space between two realms: fire and light; snow and ice	Man from ash tree and woman from elm (Odin breathed life, Vili gave them wit and feelings, Ve brought hearing and sight)	Island is of volcanic origin; much of it covered by glaciers
Maori of New Zealand	Rangi (sky) Papi (Earth)	Sky lay upon the earth, darkness	From clay	Separation of mother and father causes storms and winds; an island people
Quiche’ Maya of Guatemala	Two creators: Maker (Huracan) and Feathered Serpent (Gugumatz)	Darkness and the sea	Mud, wood, and finally corn	Maize (corn) cornerstone of the Maya diet; annual hurricane (from “Huracan”) season