CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AS MYTH AND LEGEND

In common jargon, the stories of the deities and heroes are arbitrarily referred to as myths and legends. However, we can differentiate between the two types of stories and also between them and folk tales and fairy tales, although a story may shift between these different categories, or may contain elements from each of them.

Briefly, we can say that a myth gives a religious explanation for something: how the world or a particular custom began. A myth is a sacred story from the past. It may explain the origin of the universe and of life or it may express its cultures' moral values in human terms. Myths concern the powers that control the human world and the relationship between those powers and human beings. Although myths are religious in their origin and function, they may also be the earliest form of history, science or philosophy. There is usually no attempt to fix the myth into a coherent chronology related to the present day, though myths or a cycle of myths may have their own internal chronology. The story is timeless in that the events are symbolic rather than just the way it happened.

When we call a story a myth, it is not expressing an opinion about whether it is true or not. Christianity was assumed to be true and other religions false in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then the word ‘myth’ was closer to the popular use to mean an untrue religious story and it was only used for other people’s religion. As anthropologists and students of religion started viewing myths as an academic discipline, it soon came to
be recognized that certain Christian stories shared many of the features of myth and could be called myths.

A legend, on the other hand, is a story which is told as if it were a historical event, rather than as an explanation for something or a symbolical narrative. A legend is a story from the past about a subject that was, or is believed to have been, historical. Legends concern people, places and events. Usually, the subject is a saint, a king, a hero, a famous person or a war. A legend is always associated with a particular place and a particular time in history. The legend may or may not be an elaborated version of a historical event. Thus, examples of legends are the stories about Robin Hood, which are set in a definite period, the reign of Richard I of England (1189-99), or about King Arthur, which were perhaps originally based on the exploits of a Romano-Celtic prince who attempted to resist the expansion of the Anglo Saxons in what was to become England. The stories about Robin Hood and King Arthur have been elaborated and expanded on down the years.

**Myth as history**

Myth and history are generally opposed to each other in terms of their meaning and explanation. Those who believe in myths and legends feel that traditional narratives have better explanatory power than history. Much of factual history is replete with such assumptions. Some even suggest that there can be no real distinction between the discourses of myth and history, between fact and fiction. However postmodern historians wish to treat myth and history as disparate elements.
Modern notions of history and myth, indeed the very words themselves, have their origins in ancient Greece. Herodotus writing in the second half of the fifth century BC called his account of the wars between Europe and Asia “a public statement of his inquiry”. It was through inquiry, by asking or listening, that one learned about the past. The inquirer’s narrative was a “logos”, a word that can mean speech or account. A “mythos” was also a type of logos, a narrative with a definite shape and a beginning, a middle and an end. But myths almost always had some religious content, in that they were concerned, directly or indirectly, with forces beyond human control and the deities who exercised control over those forces. Myths were traditional stories, handed down from generation to generation, composed without resort to historia or inquiry. By nature, historia was far more likely than mythos, to refer to actual events that people had witnessed or had heard about directly from other people. No one knew who created the myths or exactly when they came into being. Mythical narratives describe a distant past about which no one living could have any direct knowledge.

If the myths preserve any factual information about the past, it is only in the form of place names, such as Athens and Sparta, as in Greek myths. But not all places mentioned in the myths can be discovered. For instance, no one yet has found the homes of the sun god, Olympus. And no living archaeologist has seen the lower world. It is possible that some personal names in the myths may also have belonged to living persons, but there are no historical documents or inscriptions against which they can be verified.
Despite their remoteness in time and their references to places which no one had ever seen as long as they believed in the existence of gods, they were not prepared to accept that myths, even when unrealistic, were without serious value. Thus myth in antiquity could not have the meaning that it has since acquired, of a narrative that is purely fictional or fanciful, as distinct from historiography.

Myths differ from fiction also because their plots cannot be significantly rewritten or altered. Like narratives obtained by inquiry or “historia”, their plots were known to many people in a wide geographical area. One could not substitute Oedipus for Achilles in the narrative of the *Iliad* any more than one could claim that the Persians were victorious over the Greek in the naval battle at Salamis in 480 BC because many people knew the stories (Lefkowitz 354). Writers of mythical narratives such as epics and dramas were free to give their own versions of the characters’ motives and to put words into their mouths. A poet could portray Oedipus as being aware of what he was doing when he killed his father and married his mother or being unaware as he wished in order to give the story a different emphasis (Lefkowitz 354). But however the tale was told, the poet had no choice but to make Oedipus commit both crimes because those were known “facts” of the myth.

Myths as used by mythologists and anthropologists are “sacred narratives of traditional societies generally involving superhuman beings” (Heehs 2). The term is often extended to include other traditional stories such as legends and sagas. Since the time of the Greeks, *mythos* (the word as decisive, final pronouncement) has been contrasted to *logos* (the word whose validity as truth can be argued and demonstrated). Jurgen Habermass (Heehs 3) says that “enlightened thinking or logos
seeks to convince through the unforced force of the better argument while myth takes its stand on the authoritarian normativity of a tradition”. In the words of Barthes (Heehs 3), “Myth is another word for the doxa, a common, unexamined assumption rooted...in the prevailing political (or social) order”. In a general sense, myth includes most traditional narratives as well as some modern literature but also “texts” such as performance wrestling, advertising and so on. More generally, it consists of any set of related propositions whose “truth” is not demonstrated by the working of “logos”.

Historians believed that they were in a position to decide which “truth” was true and which was “myth”. But this is not possible in the postmodern age. The best, historians can do, is to try to attain a better historiographical balance between truth and myths. When historians exert themselves to produce a presentation of “truths” (not truth) that is credible and intelligible to a given audience, the result is what might be called “myth history” (Neil 4-8).

Historiography and myths have a symbiotic relationship. While historiography could acquire depth and dimension by assimilating some of the structures of myth, myths could acquire credibility by assimilating some of the details of historiography. The origins of mythical historiography can be traced back to the fourth century BC, to the dialogues in which Plato include a mythic narrative as a complement to theoretical discussion. These stories were told as if they were traditional. Other mythical historiographies were created to fill large gaps in the knowledge of the ancient people about their own past. No one knew who Homer was or indeed where he came from. Stories were told about his life and the lives of other poets, based on the only source materials available to ancient biographers which were the works of the poets
themselves. Another form of mythical historiography consists of what might be called celebrity letters. These epistles appear to have been written by famous figures, expressing their views on their own time and providing new details about their lives.

Mythical historiography was a form of entertainment comparable in many ways to the success enjoyed in more recent times by "historical fiction" which also describe imaginary events in the distant past. But there are some significant differences between the two genres. A distinguishing feature of historical fiction is itself - its authors make sure the readers are aware that the narrative they are reading was composed by them, in modern times, and that the stories they tell are largely fictional. They include references to actual events and provide accurate information about the conditions of life in the times that they describe.

Mythical historiography, by contrast, is presented always as if it were the real thing. Its authors usually prefer not to reveal that they are inventors of their narratives. Either they are anonymous or like Plato they attribute the story to someone else, preferably to a dead person or a foreigner who cannot be questioned and set in a remote or indefinite past like the authentic myths which it mimics. Composers of mythical historiographers often cite documents that are lost or cannot be easily traced as the primary source of their information. If they succeed in persuading audiences of the authenticity of the works that they have created, it is only because their narratives have been crafted carefully enough to avoid detection, but also because their audiences are too credulous and eager to believe what they are told.
From sources presumed to be about/from (past) history, the historian creates
generalizations assembled into a synthesis that is once again in the present called
*history*. The ambiguity of the word “history” is deliberate, for the written history is
supposed to deconstruct or portray past events, behaviors, thoughts and so on as they
once occurred. The presupposition grounding normal or traditional historical practice
is, therefore, that the historian’s work is an accurate representation of an actual past,
much as a map is to its terrain or a photograph (Berkhofer 140) to its subject. Thus the
historian’s written history acts as if it were a transparent medium between the past and
the reader’s mind. Contemporary literary theory contests the intellectual grounds of
the prevalent historical practice by refuting the actual reality that grounds the
authority of history itself. That the past is not the same thing as history creates the
methods as well as the methodology of historical practice. That the history produced
is not the same thing as the past itself, creates the crisis of that practice (Berkhofer
139).

Normal/traditional historians worry about “capturing” the past in its full complexity.
Even the historical sociologist Charles Tilly argues that historical practice cannot
analyze or connect all the experiences in past times, because “it is not humanly
possible to construct a coherent analysis of the history of all social relationships: the
object of study is too complex, diverse and big” (qtd. in Berkhofer 141). Many
contemporary scholars are under the impression that history is just another mode of
coding words and texts according to conventional presuppositions about representing
the past as history. They believe that most of what is presented as factuality is a
special coding of the historian’s synthetic expository texts, designed to conceal their
highly constructed basis. The story of the past cannot be read simply as a history of
progress or as decline of cycles or as catastrophes, as class conflict or even as change or continuity alone. According to Berkhofer, "Demystification frees the historian to tell many different kinds of 'stories' from various viewpoints, with many voices according to many principles of synthesis. By denying the traditional metanarrative presuppositions, the historian liberates the ways of coding the past as history as well as how it is represented" (Berkhofer 152).

Traditional historians regard this demystification as the "end of normal history" because it implies that historical discourse refers to nothing outside itself. Traditional history orders the past for the sake of authority and therefore power over its audience. Such power is asserted through the voice and viewpoint of the historiographer. It is the "other histories" (Jenkins, Rethinking History 147) that are subverted by the authorial power of traditional historians in the name of reality. This legitimating authority of history is eliminated by opening historiography/history construction to greater possibilities of storytelling and interpretation by the postmodernist historiographers.

The various challenges to traditional philosophies of historiography from narratologists, post colonialists, feminists, linguists and philosophers are all part of what we have defined here as "postmodernism" and they have provoked a variety of responses from both philosophizing historians and philosophers of historiographers. The demise of 'grand' universalizing narratives has resulted in an increase of stories inspired by the numerous and varied special-interest groups which have attempted to reclaim their own place and shares in a past from which they had been excluded. Let
us now look at some legends, especially the legends about the creation/origin of the world which have parallel themes in different cultures.

**Myth as legend - common themes/parallels in different legends**

Human societies all over of the world have stories of how the world originated. They are different in detail but have similarities in basic themes. Most of the stories have their beginnings in earth which came out of water. Some stories speak of how gods, people, plants and animals came out of the earth. Some stories speak of how a living creature like a crab dives into the sea and comes up with a piece of earth from which the universe is created. Such myths are common across many ancient civilizations like the American Indians and aboriginal Australians. The aboriginal Australians also speak of a time called “the time of dreaming” before creation.

Many mythical stories speak of the division of a cosmic egg into two. The Chinese speak of a giant whose limbs form the world. The mention of a dismembered giant is also found in the Germanic (or Norse) stories of creation. The Norse version starts with a vast emptiness, a characteristic that is found in most creation accounts. The Bible (Hebrews) speaks of a vast emptiness with darkness. Greek stories speak of Chaos which means a gaping emptiness. A boundless ocean is the scene for creation stories in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Some societies are formed when many tribal groups are unified into a single civilization. When each of these groups brings their own gods, there can be dramatic encounters between contending deities. This could be at times sexual, murderous or
even cannibalistic. It is after these encounters that human beings appear in the story. Such accounts are seen in the creation stories of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. Japanese accounts speak of the gods without even specifically spelling out the arrival of mankind. Several creation stories coexist in the multifaceted mind of India. For Hebrews, it is the work of God: pure and straight to the point.

Egypt has several creation stories which speak of gods competing against each other. One of the common ones speaks of the primeval ocean, “Nun”, from which Amen rises. By taking the name “Re”, he merges two rival gods. He produces a divine son and daughter through masturbation, described in the temple texts. The two children breed a race of gods and the tears of Amen-Re become mankind. The creator is soon made to retire to the heavens by man’s behaviour and he reigns in the heavens as the sun. Though it sounds simple as far as creation stories go, Egyptian mythology soon becomes extremely complex.

Mesopotamian creation story is found on clay tables located in Ashurbanipal’s library. This story is called “Enuma elish” (named after the first two words of the story, meaning ‘When on high’). Even though the tablets are written in 7th century BC, the origin of the stories is believed to be in 1500 BC when Babylon was the major city of the region. The story has two main characters (watery beings), one male and the other female. The male character is Apsu (sweet water) and the female character is Tiamat (salt water). A wide variety of sea monsters are created through their union. In the chaos that ensues, the female creator Tiamat tries to gain control. Her descendents however, unite against her and chooses Marduk, the god of Babylon to lead them in
battle. He goes into battle armed with a hurricane and riding a tempest drawn by four fiery steeds. Marduk kills both Tiamat and her evil accomplice Kingu.

Marduk then splits the corpse of Tiamat into two and creates heaven and earth from both the parts. An abode for the gods (his colleagues) is created in the heavens. Soon, he creates the first man from the blood of Kingu to serve the gods. Rivers, plants and animals are then created.

In keeping with the complexities of Hinduism, the creation stories of India range from accounts of dismembered giants and mythical eggs. At the same time they also express doubts about the possibility of knowledge on these matters. One of the most ancient stories speaks of Purusha, a primal man sacrificed by the gods. The universe is created from this act of sacrifice. The sky, earth, sun and moon are created from his head, feet, eye and mind respectively. The four casts of Hindu society also come from his body. The fat that drips from his body during the sacrifice is the source for the creation of birds and animals.

The god Brahma features in a creation story that comes later in history. He goes through a lengthy process for the creation of the universe. He creates the waters through his thought alone. He deposits his seed in the waters which grows into a golden egg. Brahma himself is born in the egg. He splits the egg into two parts after an year, again through his thought alone. The two halves become heaven and earth.

Indian philosophy also provides a less literal response to the creation mystery. A hymn in the Rig Veda speculates about different cosmic forces which could have helped in the creation of the universe. This account in the Rig Veda concludes with a
passage of most sophisticated scepticism which says: "But, after all, who knows, and who can say whence it all came, and how creation happened."

In comparison to all the other accounts, the Hebrew version comes across as the most simple and confident due to monotheism. The Old Testament begins with a very simple and confident statement: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Creation account is mentioned in the first chapter of Genesis which is believed to have been written by Jewish priests in 5th century B.C. They give the impression of looking around them to see what needed creating and then fashioning their account. The Sabbath by then would have been already sanctified as a day of rest and so they needed to fit this into their creation account. The result is very practical, from the first moment when everything is void and dark, yet also awash with water. On day 1, light is separated from darkness and day from night. On day 2, the sky is created by creating space among the encircling waters. On day 3, the material beneath the sky is divided into earth and sea and vegetation is created. On day 4, attention again returns to the vault of heaven and sun, moon and stars are created. On day 5, fishes and birds are created. On day 6, land animals of all kinds and man in God’s image to supervise the creatures are created.

With all the tasks completed, god rests on the seventh day and sanctified it. The only one flaw that can be pointed here is the god’s world sounds perfect. But how can we explain the imperfections like disease, guilt, violence, sexual shame and death? The answer is provided in the second chapter of Genesis. The Garden of Eden was perfect but Eve tempted Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. The forbidden fruit gives them an awareness of good and bad leading to sexual shame. By disobeying god, Adam and
Eve enter into the real world. What happens in the real world is their own fault and cannot attribute to God.

The most striking Chinese creation story is that of P'an Ku. Hatched from a cosmic egg, half the shell above him is the sky and half below him is the earth. By growing taller continuously for 18,000 years he pushes them apart till they reach their respective places in the universe. After this monumental effort, he breaks into pieces. His limbs, blood, breath and voice are transformed into mountains, rivers, wind and voice respectively. His two eyes become the sun and the moon. The parasites on his body become mankind.

The Greeks gain an attachment to many different gods during their movement to the modern Greece as a group of Indo-European tribes. This resulted in a highly complex creation story with each deity fighting for a role in the overall picture. Eventually, Zeus, the ruler of the sky emerges as the chief of gods. He could be the original god that the Greeks brought with them. However, in the creation account written by Hesiod in 800 BC, Zeus arrives late. The Greek account of creation too begins with the vast emptiness called Chaos. From Chaos emerges Gaea, the earth. Gaea gives birth to Uranus who is the sky. Gaea and Uranus provide the world (earth and sky) with a population. Gaea first produces the Titans who are heroic figures of both sexes. But her next offsprings are unsatisfactory. They are the Cyclops with one eye in the middle of their foreheads and have a profusion of heads and arms. Uranus is appalled and shuts them up in the depths of the earth. Offended by this action, Gaea persuades her youngest Titan, Cronus to attack his father. Uranus is attacked by Cronus in his sleep. Cronus cuts of the genitals of his father and throws them into the sea. He frees
his brothers and sisters from the depths of the earth and together they all populate the world. The males of this clan are characterized by an inability to get along with other males. This is evident from the fact that Cronus eats all the six children he had with his sister Rhea, as soon as they were born. Again, maternal instincts of Rhea come to play and she wraps a stone in swaddling clothes to save her youngest son. Cronus eats the stone and Rhea sends her youngest son to foster parents. He grows up to become Zeus who finally overthrows his father and defeats all the other Titans in a war. He then presides over the relatively calm world from Mount Olympus where he settles.

Mankind has come on the earth by this time though it is not clear how. Mankind is definitely there because Prometheus, a liberal Titan, gives them the gift of fire. Most Greeks don't consider these first men as direct ancestors. There are conflicting stories about how the present race of human beings originated. One such story speaks of how Zeus sends a flood to drown all mankind. Two human beings escape in the dark and they are told by the oracle at Delphi to throw behind them the bones of their first ancestor. From each of these stones a human being is created. The ancestor is believed to be Rhea, the earth.

Not surprisingly, the Japanese story of creation, compiled and written by the orders of the royal family early in the 8th century AD attempts to link the royals directly to the gods. It appears that these gods have a long lasting and complex existence before we reach the emperor. The story of creation begins with a floating amorphous mass, not unlike the slippery substance of an egg, but in its movement more like a jelly fish. Eight generations of brother-and-sister gods issued from this reed-like object. Standing on the Floating Bridge of Heaven, Izanagi (The Male Who Invites) and
Izanami (The Female Who Invites), the eighth pair of Japanese gods, stir the brine of the sea with a lance. At this, the liquid begins to curdle and form an island. Thereupon, the two gods come down on to it and there they build a central pillar. Further on, they come together, in a delightful passage of divine innocence to try and create more islands and gods. Their initial products such as a child who cannot stand at the age of three, an island composed of foam and so on turn out to be flawed, the reason being that the woman spoke first during their sexual encounter. With due formality established, they create many gods, including those of the eight islands of Japan.

Soon the gods proliferate to as many as eight million. They indulge in many dramatic adventures, including establishing life's basic patterns such as day and night, and summer and winter. Eventually, the Sun Goddess sends Ninigi, her grandson, to exercise his sway over the Central Land of Reed Plains, namely Japan. The goddess grants Ninigi three treasures as symbols of his rule—a jewelled necklace (benevolence), a mirror (purity) and a sword (courage). His great grandson Jimmu-Tenno figures in the Japanese legend as the first emperor. To this day, the necklace, mirror and sword continue as Japan's imperial symbols and are preserved in an inner sanctuary of Shinto shrines.

The main northern story of creation is probably shared by the Germanic tribes—a distinct group of the Indo-European family—who gradually move south through Europe from the Baltic shores. Even so, the Germanic legends are eventually recorded and preserved in Scandinavia in the stories of the Norse gods. In the beginning there is nothingness, which gradually fills with water, then freezes and finally melts partly.
Ymir, a giant in human form, emerges from drops of melting water. From his armpit, a man and a woman, both giants, appear. Much unlike Ymir, these giants are capable of producing others by more conventional means. Meanwhile a cow licks the melting ice and reveals another giant, from whom the god Odin (or Wotan) descends. Odin and his brothers slay the aged Ymir. And of his flesh they make the earth; of his skull, the heavens; of his blood, the sea; of his bones, the mountains and of his hair, the trees. Odin as well as the other gods needs a place to dwell in. Odin builds a place for himself, linking it to earth by the bridge of the rainbow. Odin arranges for the maggots in Ymir's corpse, who by now have assumed stunted human shapes, to remain in what is now his body beneath the surface of the earth. While on earth, Odin and his colleagues breathe life into two tree trunks, turning them into Ask and Embla, the first man and woman.

Numerous myths, especially creation myths, have gained the stature of legends with some historical facts, dates, events and even places or regions attributed to them. This is true even among Indian legends. Importantly, almost all such legends were created in the interests of religions, castes, communities or ideologies. Many legends find their place even in textbooks as though they were history. A critical examination of the Parasurama legend relating to the origin of Kerala could help us to understand some basic facts concerning the geography of ancient Kerala. According to this legend, the land of Kerala was a gift from the Arabian Sea to Parasurama, one of the ten avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The legend has it that Parasurama threw his *parasu* (axe) across the sea from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari (or from Kanyakunari to Gokarnam as per another version), and water receded up to the spot where it fell. The tract of territory so thrown up is said to have constituted the land of
Kerala, otherwise called Bhargavakshetram or Parasuramakshetram. Himself a mythological hero, there is very little historical or factual basis for the Parasurama tradition. The legend seems to have been concocted at a certain stage by vested interests with the intent of popularising the theory of brahmin predominance and, in the process, subverting the history of other cultures. Kalidasa’s *Raghuvarsha* (Chapter IV Verse 53) and the Tiruvalangadu plates of the Rajendra Chola (1012-1044) reference the legend of Parasurama’s creation of Kerala from the sea. It was handed down from generation to generation, before finally being enshrined in *Keralolpathi*, the Malayalam work of doubtful historical value compiled sometime in the 18th or 19th century.