

Section 2 – Moving Inland

Folk Memory: the beginning of mythology

Stories are hugely powerful, and this was just as true before the written or pictorial record began. Factual oral narratives can preserve histories and genealogies accurately, and mythical narratives can develop organically to serve changing social purposes.

Recent research shows that an oral tradition concerning a huge earthquake caused by the Cascades Fault off the north-west coast of America existed for three hundred years without being written down. The details described in it have been confirmed by geologists.¹ That means that no one who experienced the event was still alive, nor their children, nor their grandchildren, when the tradition was written down. In fact, twelve generations separate the event and the record.² Our reliance on the written word should not prevent us recognising the power and durability of oral traditions.

As a performance artist, a story-teller must captivate her listeners and respond to their mood. That requires improvisation, changes in emphasis, asides and appeals to the audience, and so on. When these tales are re-told, the improvisations that best pleased the audience will be retained. In story-telling there is an evolutionary process, driven by on-the-fly improvisation and by the performer's selection and retention of the most effective elements. As stories passed through generations of story-tellers these improvisations accumulated and when wandering groups encountered one another their collections of stories would have merged. As groups separated and travelled apart, the contact between them became less and less until they became isolated from each other. Within each group the oral traditions continued to evolve, but diverged, each reflecting the different accumulated experiences of the tellers.³

Later, in the settled period, many stories from different original sources would exist in parallel. Stories would sometimes blend so that each had many contributing sources. This process is called syncretism, and it is one of the most important concepts to grasp in mythology.

¹ <http://walrus.wr.usgs.gov/tsunami/NAlegends.html> retrieved 26/07/2014.

² Similar links between oral traditions and datable seismic events have been found and documented elsewhere: see King, D.N and Goff, J.R. *Benefiting from differences in knowledge, practice and belief: Maori oral traditions and natural hazards science*. 2010. (<http://www.nat-hazards-earth-syst-sci.net/10/1927/2010/nhess-10-1927-2010.pdf> retrieved 26/07/2014.)

³ This is a parallel to the biological process of speciation, and points to the evolutionary nature of human culture.

In effect, every myth is syncretised from many sources and two stories that sound as if they are different may contain the same, distant germ of an original truth.

No one version is wrong nor is any one right: they are just different. Once, somewhere, someone told a story and ever since it has been evolving like a living thing. There is no definitive version of the story until it is recorded in some permanent way. The recording has to wait until the means to do it is invented, by which time the story might have been circulating and syncretising for tens of thousands of years.

Modern anthropologists go to great lengths to avoid introducing their own voices when transcribing oral traditions, but in ancient times this level of accuracy was of no concern whatsoever. The stories were seen as allegories and their importance was in how well they supported the principles of the dominant culture. Transcribers from different cultures wrote down the same oral tradition in different ways, each emphasising the aspects they felt were important. Myths reflect and promote the views and opinions of the story-tellers and, very importantly, of the scribes who eventually, possibly thousands of years later, wrote them down.

Myths are important; they are useful because they help us to understand the issues that most concerned the people who invented them. As well as this, though they may never be relied upon as literally true, they are a form of collective cultural memory which may contain allegorical or metaphorical truths and references to real events. The study of myths helps us to contextualise archaeological evidence and better understand the cultures that preceded ours.