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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Folk and Oral Tales from Across the World

Course Code: ENG5EJ307 • Module 2 Notes

Unit 3: "Prometheus" – Beginnings: Creation Myths of the World (Ed. Penelope Farmer)

The Titan Prometheus and the Fire of Civilization

In classical Greek cosmogony, as preserved in Hesiod's *Theogony* and dramatized in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, the myth of Prometheus embodies the ultimate archetypal narrative of heroic rebellion and the birth of human consciousness. While the Olympian deities, led by the despotic Zeus, viewed mortal humanity as miserable, shivering beasts crawling in the mud, the Titan Prometheus took compassion upon mankind.

The Theft of Fire and the Gift of Epistemic Sovereignty

Prometheus boldly deceived Zeus: first, by orchestrating the sacrificial division of meat so humans retained the nourishing flesh while offering only the fat and bones to the gods; and second, by stealing sacred celestial fire from Mount Olympus, concealing the glowing ember inside a hollow stalk of fennel. Fire in the myth is not merely physical combustion; it symbolizes technology, agriculture, metallurgy, writing, medicine, and analytical reason. For this transgression, Zeus bound Prometheus to a frozen crag on Mount Caucasus, where an eagle tore at his regenerating liver daily. Prometheus stands as an eternal symbol of defiant intellectual courage, suffering torment so humanity might achieve self-determination against divine tyranny.

Unit 4: "The Damors" – Folktales of the Bhil Tribe

Bhil Indigenous Cosmogony and the Primordial Creation

The creation narratives of the Damor clan belonging to the ancient Bhil indigenous community of western and central India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh) reflect a profound, animist relationship with the natural cosmos. Preserved through oral songs sung by tribal bards (*Dhadhis*) to the rhythm of the wooden fiddle, the Damor creation myth recounts how the world emerged from primeval cosmic waters.

The Sacred Bow, Animals, and Ecological Kinship

In the Bhil cosmogony, the Supreme Creator (*Bhagwan* or *Baro Deva*) fashions human beings not as masters of creation, but as humble siblings to the wild beasts of the forest. The creation of the first Bhil is inextricably intertwined with the gift of the bamboo bow and arrow, not as an instrument of greedy slaughter, but as a sacred tool for modest subsistence and defense. The myth emphasizes that trees, rivers, and wild animals possess immortal souls (*Jiva*); to fell a tree or hunt without offering prayers to the forest spirit (*Vana Devi*) brings cosmic imbalance. The Damor narrative enshrines a primordial ecological ethic of restraint and reverence.

Unit 5: "Fuxi, Nuwa, and the Creation of Humanity" (Chinese Mythology)

The Serpent Deities and the Post-Deluge World

In ancient Chinese mythology, Fuxi and Nuwa are revered as the primordial twin deities and culture-bearers, depicted in ancient Han dynasty murals as possessing human torsos with intertwined serpentine dragon tails. Following a colossal cosmic flood that annihilated all living things, Nuwa walked across the silent, desolate earth, overwhelmed by profound loneliness.

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Nuwa Molding Humanity from Yellow Earth and Repairing Heaven

Sitting beside a yellow river, Nuwa began sculpting small human figures out of rich yellow clay, breathing life into them with her divine breath; these carefully crafted figures became the scholars and leaders. To populate the earth more rapidly, she dragged a vine through the mud and flicked drops of clay across the landscape, giving birth to the common working people. Later, when the water demon Gonggong broke the cosmic pillar of Buzhou Mountain, causing the heavens to collapse and torrential rains to drown the earth, Nuwa smelted five-colored stones to patch the weeping sky and used the legs of a giant celestial turtle to prop up the four corners of the world. Nuwa represents the supreme maternal archetype of compassion, artistic creation, and cosmological preservation.

Unit 6: "Sun Mother Wakes the World: An Australian Creation Story"

Aboriginal Dreamtime (Tjukurpa) and the Awakening of Earth

The creation story of the Sun Mother originates from the profound Aboriginal Australian cosmological concept of the **Dreamtime** (*The Dreaming* or *Tjukurpa*)—the primordial era when ancestral spirit beings traversed the unformed, slumbering earth, singing sacred songlines that brought mountains, rivers, animals, and moral law into existence.

The Golden Touch of Life

In this ancient myth, the Earth lay cold, dark, and motionless until the Great Father of All Spirits summoned the Sun Mother from her celestial slumber. Descending to the frozen earth, the Sun Mother walked across the land, and wherever her radiant golden footsteps touched the soil, the ice melted, green grass sprouted, flowers blossomed, and the sleeping animals awoke. She breathed warmth into deep caves, awakening bats, snakes, and lizards, and touched the waters, filling streams with shimmering fish. Before returning to the sky to shine as the daily sun, the Sun Mother commanded all creatures to live in peace, mutual respect, and sacred harmony with the land, establishing the eternal Aboriginal spiritual principle that humanity does not own the earth, but belongs to it.

Unit 7: "Spider and the Palm-Nut Tree" (West African / Ashanti Folktales)

Anansi the Spider: The Master Trickster

In West African (specifically Ashanti and Akan) folklore, **Anansi** (Kweku Anansi) is the legendary spider trickster who possesses unmatched cunning, wit, and linguistic dexterity. While physically small, fragile, and vulnerable to larger predators, Anansi survives and triumphs by using his intellect (*Nyansa*) to outwit leopards, snakes, and greedy kings.

The Moral of Ecological Reverence and Humility

In "Spider and the Palm-Nut Tree," Anansi's insatiable greed and impatience lead him into conflict with the spirits of nature. Desiring the rich, golden oil of palm nuts, Anansi attempts to bypass the traditional customs of gratitude and communal sharing. The tale functions as an educational fable warning against environmental exploitation: the forest spirits teach Anansi that nature's bounty is a gift that requires reciprocity, patience, and ethical stewardship. The story illustrates how African oral traditions use animal tricksters to impart enduring social ethics and ecological wisdom.

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Unit 8: "The Seven Clans" (Khasi Legends: Around the Hearth)

The Matrilineal Cosmogony of the Khasi People

The Khasi indigenous community of Meghalaya, in Northeast India, possesses one of the world's most enduring and sophisticated matrilineal societies. In "The Seven Clans" (*Ki Hynniew Trep*), recorded in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's celebrated collection *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, the myth recounts humanity's divine origin and the severance of the primordial bond between heaven and earth.

The Divine Golden Tree on Lum Sohpetbneng

According to Khasi legend, sixteen celestial families originally dwelt in the heavenly realm. On the sacred peak of Lum Sohpetbneng (the "Navel of Heaven"), there stood an enormous divine golden tree (*Ka Jingkieng Ksiar*) that served as a living ladder connecting heaven and earth. Daily, the sixteen clans would descend to earth to cultivate lush gardens and return to heaven by evening. However, the Seven Clans (*Ki Hynniew Trep*) chose to remain permanently on earth to care for the terrestrial world, while the Nine Clans stayed in heaven. A demonic monster subsequently severed the golden tree, closing the direct physical corridor to the divine. The myth teaches the Khasi people their sacred duty: to live righteously through *Kamai ia ka Hok* (earning righteousness through honest labor) and to preserve the sacred matrilineal kinship lineages that hold human society together.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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Complementing Propp's formal structuralism, the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type Index provides a massive comparative classification system, proving that folktale motifs—such as the stolen fire, the creation from primordial clay, the animal bridegroom, and the treacherous partner—circulate across vast geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. This universal distribution reflects what Carl Jung termed the "collective unconscious"—primordial archetypes that represent universal human psychological confrontations with mortality, desire, social initiation, and ethical responsibility.

2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

As theorized by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy*, primary oral cultures possess a distinct cognitive psychology: oral thought is additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant, conservative, and intensely situational. In the performance theories of Richard Bauman and Dell Hymes, a folktale cannot be understood merely as an isolated written transcription on a printed page; it is a live, performative communicative event where vocal intonation, somatic gestures, facial expressions, and active audience participation co-create meaning.

Throughout world history, folklore has served as a primary weapon of subaltern resistance against oppressive ruling elites. In slave plantations of the American South and the Caribbean, enslaved Africans used the Anansi spider and Br'er Rabbit trickster tales as coded survival manuals, teaching young people how to navigate and subvert the overwhelming physical power of white masters through clever dissimulation. Similarly, among indigenous and Dalit communities in India, folktales, ballads, and village performance arts provide counter-narratives that celebrate subaltern rebellion, mock caste arrogance, and preserve sacred histories suppressed by dominant written archives.

3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

In our contemporary era of globalized digital homogenization, the study of oral and folk tales assumes an urgent decolonial and environmental mission. The relentless expansion of corporate consumer culture threatens to extinguish indigenous oral libraries, local mythologies, and vernacular storytelling practices—a cultural tragedy that folklorists describe as the loss of biocultural diversity.

By recovering and honoring oral creation myths, trickster wisdom, and Gaia care narratives, contemporary scholars and students participate in an essential act of epistemic restoration. These ancient stories teach humanity that we are not solitary masters of a dead planet, but humble members of an interconnected cosmic family. Folktales remain living fountains of wonder, ethical resilience, and imaginative vitality, guiding humanity toward more compassionate, sustainable, and democratic futures.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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