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Death Through Myth

Samantha Newmark

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I wrote this paper, Death Through Myth, for Comparative Cosmologies in Spring 2008. In it, I examine three creation myths: the Maya Popol Vuh, the Andean Huarochiri, and the Japanese Kojiki. Through a close reading of the text, I sought to understand each culture’s view on death, with particular emphasis on the soul and its connection to the body. It is my belief that through reading these texts, we as modern interpreters may begin to understand each culture’s concept of death, and perhaps even better understand our own. This paper, despite its esoteric focus, does have broader implications for the human understanding. Death is one of the great questions of the human condition, and these myths show that it has been so since the dawn of history, if not humanity itself. In reading the three disparate creation myths, I believe that I found some common threads of belief, and I definitely found similarities in the more specific concerns about death. Through reading these myths and others, perhaps we as modern, scientific observers, can begin to understand more the psychology which has driven thousands of generations of humans to question something that may well never be understood.

The question of what happens upon death is one that has plagued people seemingly since the dawn of time. Even today in our society of learning and science, we have no better idea of what happens to a person when the light leaves the eyes of their body than our distant ancestors did. In many creation stories, the writers sought to explain what happens after death, and the connection of a person’s body to their soul. Each culture treated death differently, though there are some interesting similarities in emphasis. Three such creation stories that deal with death are the Japanese myth Kojiki, the Andean Huarochiri, and the Maya Popol Vuh. It is my belief that these stories do not only discuss the burial practices of these cultures, but also give a broader look at their views on the body and soul, in both life and death.

I will begin my paper with a brief explanation of the relevant passages in each of the creation myths, describing burial practices, ceremonies, taboos and myths surrounding death. Next, I will try to show how these practices and stories have a greater relevance within the entirety of the myths themselves, and how the burial and death can relate to the overall views of the people as communicated in their myths. Finally, I will compare the passages regarding death and examine what their similarities and differences can tell us about the cultures whence they came.

The first myth I will examine is the Kojiki, a myth from Japan. In this myth, creation occurs through sexual creators, with Izanagi-Nō-Mikötō and...
Izanami-Nō-Mikotō creating most of the features of the world, and particularly the many islands of Japan. Death enters the scene when Izanami, the female deity, gives birth to a fire deity which makes it so that “her genitals were burned and she lay down sick… Thus at last, [Izanami], because she had borne the fire-deity, divinely passed away.”

After she dies, her divine consort is distraught and decides to bring her back from the underworld. When Izanagi meets his wife at the gate of Yōmī, the underworld, she says that she cannot return because she has consumed food in the underworld, much as in the Greek myth about Persephone. She tells him, however, that she “will go and discuss for a while with the gods of Yōmī my desire to return.” She admonishes that he not look upon her body. Izanagi grows impatient, however, and lights a fire. He sees her rotting, maggoty corpse and flees, horrified.

I believe that much can be gleaned from this short segment of text describing Izanagi’s trip to the underworld. First of all, there is a great emphasis on things that are taboo. Even though Izanami seems to love her husband as much as he loves her prior to this episode, once he has shamed her by looking upon her putrid corpse she sends out the hags of Yōmī to pursue him for his misstep. This emphasis on what is divinely sanctioned or not seems to pervade the rest of the narrative as well. For example, in the next chapter, Izanagi, having escaped his pursuers, says that he must purify himself because he emerged from “a most unpleasant land, a horrible, unclean land.” Even having not to do with death, the Japanese appeared meticulous with regard to things that were considered unclean. Later in the narrative, there is a description of one of the women building a partition hut for when she gives birth. It is described as being many yards long and without a door. She seals herself in it with clay. According to Philippi, this was because the birthing hut was considered to be a forbidden chamber and therefore could have no apertures.

Thus, obviously the Japanese obsession with what is taboo or unclean does not merely apply to death and the dead, but also with birth and other facets of life.

Philippi mentions in an additional note that the Japanese held a sunny view of the now, and thus they were “indifferent to anything as uncertain and morbid as the life after death.” I believe based on the episodes involving the underworld that the Japanese actually did have more of a concept of body and soul in relation to than Philippi and other scholars seem to give them credit for, however. While I have not had their extensive background of research on the Japanese, it seems as though this story, as in the case of most others, is simply trying to be heard. I think that many things regarding the Japanese view on how the body and the soul are linked can be found within the Kojiki.

For example, it seems as though the Japanese believed that even after

1 Donald L. Philippi, trans. _Kojiki._ (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968), 57 ll. 18 and 22
2 Philippi 62 l 3.
3 Philippi 68 l 1.
4 Philippi 146 l. 16.
5 Philippi 146 footnote 18
6 Philippi 401
death, the body and the soul are linked. First of all, Izanami (and presumably her soul, or whatever the Japanese saw as making her who she was) became tied to the underworld through a corporeal act, that of eating. This is the first piece of evidence I see that supports the idea that the Japanese may have thought that the dead traveled bodily to Yōmī, or at least that their gods did. Also supporting this idea is the way in which Izanagi sees Izanami’s body. It seems as though Izanami’s soul has gone to bargain with the lords of Yōmī while her body has remained in the dark with her husband. Thus, he is able to see her putrescent corpse before she returns to speak to him. So, it seems that while both Izanami’s body and soul were present in the underworld, they were no longer necessarily attached as they once had been. Perhaps from this it could be extrapolated that the Japanese believed that once a person’s body was disposed of, the soul came free from it, but was still connected in some way. This would help to explain why seeing a corpse was taboo, because if the soul were not somehow still tied to the body it would not matter what happened to the body after death. Since they are still connected, seeing the body can still shame the person who was once connected to it. Obviously, there is much about Japanese burial and the afterlife ensconced within just a few short chapters of the narrative.

Similarly, much can be learned about the Inca beliefs regarding death and the joining of the body and the soul from their creation myth, the Huarochiri. Chapters 27 and 28 of this narrative talk about how death used to exist, and what burial practices contemporary with the writing were. It describes how in the past, peoples’ souls would leave their bodies for five days, but would then return. Because of this, the population skyrocketed and there were many problems because of overcrowding. This harsh immortality ended when one man was a day late and his wife threw a corn cob at him in anger. “Since that time, not a single dead person has ever come back,” the narrative relates. After that, an elaborate ritual evolved which incorporated into it the old superstitions. Involved in it were several times at which the dead were fed, and a vigil was held in case the spirit did return after five days. The participants would work to ensure that the spirit did not return to take them as well, and they would seek to appease the huaca which caused the person’s death.

These tales do fit into the larger narrative, though they seem to break from it to describe unrelated customs. One major way in which they fit in is the dichotomy between what was and what is, and that between Christianity and the older pagan religion. One other example of such a story told relating the past to the present is in Chapter 7. This chapter explains why a particular group of people worship Chuqui Suso. It explains how she appeared to them at a feast time in old days after they finished clearing out the canals. Now, because of Christian influence, a woman dresses as Chuqui Suso on major Christian holidays to remember her coming in the old days.

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8 Salomon 130-131
In a similar way, the ceremonies of feeding the dead are rationalized for the newly Christian world. The less-than-devoutly Christian natives compared the Day of the Dead to their own more wide-spread celebrations for the dead, and decided that rather than rebelling, they should “go to church. Let us feed our own dead.”\(^9\) In this way, they are blending the old and the new, and incorporating their own rites into those of Christianity. This amalgamation of cultures seemed very prevalent throughout the Huarochiri.

As in the Kojiki, much can be gleaned about the beliefs of the Inca people from this story. In this myth too, special attention seems to be paid to the relation of the mind and body. The Inca waited until the corpse began to rot before disposing of it, because they apparently believed that the flies gathering around the corpse held the soul of the deceased. As it says in the text, “At Yaru Tini, as the sun was rising, the dead spirit would arrive. In the old times, two or three big flies… would light on the garment she brought.”\(^10\) Salomon notes that the point of this scene was that the body must be left out long enough for it to begin to rot and breed worms in order that it may release the soul in the form of flies.\(^11\)

Another major point that is made by the chapter regarding the burial ceremony is that the body is still tied to the soul in some way after the departure of the flies. This is shown in how much the mourners cared for the body, and the care that they took to feed it. In the footnotes it is noted that the Andeans believed that when their ancestors were buried in proper Christian graveyards, they would starve from lack of food and attention they would receive if they had been enclosed in caves in the Andean manner.\(^12\) Apparently, the initial feeding of the dead was repeated on All Saints Day, when an elaborate feast was prepared for the dead, because “It’s likely that the dead do eat.”\(^13\)

The Andeans also seemed to believe that the dead could influence the lives of the living. This is indicated when the woman throws a pebble out after an elaborate dance, telling the spirit, “You go back now. It’s not time for us to die yet.”\(^14\) Because they have to say this, I believe that they thought that the spirits could come back to bring the living to join them in death. This idea is also supported by the fact that they sometimes believed mummies to be huacas. Based on the Huarochiri, the modern reader can deduce how the Andeans viewed their dead, and what their burial practices were.

The Popol Vuh too has many hints of how the Maya viewed the afterlife and the dead. Of course, a lot of the action takes place in Xibalba, the land of the dead. The section I wish to focus on, however, is that in which Blood Moon is impregnated. While the scenes in Xibalba are quite vivid and reveal that the Maya believed that the world of the dead and the world of the living are extremely close to each other, the scene with Blood Moon has more to say about the way in which the body

\(^9\) Salomon 130 l. 364  
\(^10\) Salomon 130-131 l. 367  
\(^11\) Salomon 131, footnote 703  
\(^12\) Salomon 130 footnote 699  
\(^13\) Salomon 131 l. 371  
\(^14\) Salomon 131 l. 369
and the soul are connected, and has much that resonates with the narrative as a whole. In this scene, Blood Moon, the daughter of one of the lords of Xibalba, is impregnated by the head of One Hunahpu, and through him his brother Seven Hunahpu. After spitting on her hand and therefore impregnating her, One Hunahpu explains to Blood Moon that the son is like the father in essence, and is his continuation after the father dies.\footnote{Dennis Tedlock, trans. \textit{Popol Vuh}. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 99}

This scene echoes one of the major themes of the narrative as a whole. Succession and how it is achieved is a huge part of the \textit{Popol Vuh}. Throughout the narrative, there are many scenes in which the deeds of the sons mirror those of the father(s). In many of those parallel scenes, the sons achieve where the fathers failed. One example of this is when the Hero Twins are taken down to Xibalba to face the Lords of Death in the ball game. Their fathers faced the same situation, but failed so dismally that they never even got to the ball game. The Hero Twins, however, succeed, and eventually manage to defeat the Lords of Xibalba forever. In this, they are the mirror of their fathers, but they have learned from their fathers’ mistakes, and go on. This seems to have been the natural progression for the Maya; that each generation would echo the last, but also learn from it and be a brighter mirror compared to the past. This theme is continued even further when the first people go on pilgrimage to follow in the footsteps of their creators.

In my view, the key to this scene is what One Hunahpu tells Blood Moon about succession. He says, “The son is like his saliva, his spittle, in his being… The father does not disappear, but goes on being fulfilled. Neither dimmed nor destroyed is the face of a lord, a warrior, craftsman, orator.”\footnote{Tedlock 99} This speech gives invaluable clues to what the Maya thought about death and rebirth. This statement seems to indicate some sort of reincarnation belief among the Maya. I do not know that it is exactly like our modern conceptions of reincarnation, but it definitely had a great impact on Maya beliefs. This speech shows that the Maya thought that traits and strengths were passed down from father to son. Thus, the son of a great king would be a great king himself. This is a motif that was much played on later in the Spanish Conquest, when the Maya believed that one of their great lords would be reincarnated in order that he might save them from the Conquistadors and their equally harsh offspring.

I believe that this passage also shows that the Maya did not place much importance on the body. One Hunahpu says that “it’s just the flesh that makes his face look good. And when he dies, people get frightened by his bones.”\footnote{Tedlock 99} This seems to indicate that the Maya believed that it was the life that made someone important, not the bones which were the framework on which the life was placed. The bones themselves were perhaps seen as a horrific thing, not something to be venerated as the Inca did. Though the dialogue and action between Blood Moon and One and Seven Hunahpu are short, they reveal...
much about what the Maya thought regarding death and the body and soul.

Despite the fact that these three stories were from different societies at different places and times, they do hold some common threads. For example, all of the stories allude to how the people at the time regarded the body. For the Japanese, the body was a revolting and, more importantly, an unclean thing to judge from the *Kojiki*. To them, there was nothing worse than looking upon a maggoty corpse, and the shame that would bring to both the deceased and the person viewing them. The Maya as well did not appear to venerate the body, based on the *Popol Vuh*. If anything, they feared the bones and perhaps their similarity to the Xibalban lords’ bodies. On the other hand, the Inca revered the bodies of their deceased, bringing them lavish feasts and sometimes worshipping them as *huacas*.

While the three had different views on the body, all of the cultures seemed to have the idea that the body and the soul are two distinct entities, as common thought seems to be today. Again, the three differ in their treatment of the separation between body and soul, but it is interesting that three such diverse cultures saw that divide as such distinct entity. It seems as though in Japan, the soul became more detached from the body upon death, but that they were still connected enough that dishonor incurred upon the body would transfer to the soul. Similarly, the Inca believed that the soul left the body in the form of a fly, but was still connected enough to merit fêting. The Maya seemed to have more of a divide upon death, where some aspect of the parent would be transferred to the child, yet the soul was obviously still connected to the body when One Hunahpu spoke to Blood Moon. Despite the subtle differences, all of the cultures appeared to believe that in some way the soul was no longer completely bound to the body on death, but still maintained ties.

Another similarity between the three portrayals of death is that all seem to tie death into a cycle, making it a necessary part of life and cyclic time. Perhaps the least obvious of the three in this regard is the *Kojiki*. I believe however, that it is no exception. I think it is no mistake that one of the world’s givers of life dies while giving birth to a particularly volatile element. In this way, life and death are inextricably bound together. Also, when Izanagi attempts to break the cycle and bring Izanami back from the dead, even she ends up turning on him, and he is chased violently from Yömī. In the *Huarochiri*, there are strong ties to cyclic time. Death is obviously part of the cycle of life, because when it was not, the people “lived in great suffering, miserably gathering their food.”\(^{18}\) After the cycle was corrected, death was even more incorporated into cyclic time, with yearly celebrations held in honor of the dead. Even after the arrival of the Christians, the cyclic time remained, with the feasts for the dead merely moved into Christian sacred time. In the *Popol Vuh*, death is tied to the cycle of life with reincarnation and inheritance at the fore. A person’s line can only continue if both they are dead and they have offspring. Thus, the Hunahpu

\(^{18}\) Salomon 129 l 361.
brothers needed to fix the cycle by posthumously impregnating Blood Moon. But, just as they could not pass on their traits without children, they could also not bequeath their talents, and perhaps knowledge, without having died. In all of these stories, it is very obvious that death was intimately tied to many cycles, and was a natural part of life, not necessarily an end.

An interesting aspect to examine in these stories is how they compare to modern cosmology. The modern scientific theory of the birth of the universe makes no mention of death, but perhaps some ideas on the modern perspective can be gleaned as they could be through the relatively small passages in the other creation myths I have examined. There is less emphasis placed on humans in our cosmology, so perhaps it is not surprising that no attention is paid to the journeys and travails of individual souls. The emphasis is instead on the Universe, for which there are speculations regarding death. One of the major ideas about the death of the Universe is that it will continue to expand into infinity, until it is so massive that it becomes an unbearably cold netherworld. The other hypothesis seems no more cheery, with the Universe eventually reaching a critical size that causes it to collapse back on itself and perhaps rejuvenate in an endless cycle of collapses, Big Bangs, and expansions.19

So what does this say about our own society and life-view? Because we do believe that there will be something that occurs, we believe in the cyclic nature of time as much as the ancients did. While the first hypothesis could be said to have time stretching ad infinitum in both directions with no beginning or end, the fact is there was a point of concentrated nothingness, where nothing could live and there was chaos, and there will be an eternity of widespread nothingness, where nothing can live and there is a chaos of non-being. Another thing that the modern cosmology can tell us is that we believe that death itself is beyond science. Our cosmology is built on logic, science, and hard evidence. Like the matter that goes into a black hole, however, death is so unknowable and beyond our measuring that we can only make guesses that are not backed up by any numbers or universal truths. In essence, as with the ancient people, we can only try to make sense of our world in the best way we know how, and live and die according to those models.

What happens upon death, and how the body and soul are related are questions that have plagued mankind since humans’ first steps, and they remain unanswered even today. In most cosmologies there is evidence of the culture’s struggle to understand death and how it can relate to life. Much can be deduced from these accounts, both about the different societies’ views on death and on life overall. Some themes seem to pervade many diverse cultures, such as the fact that there indeed is a division between the body and the soul, and that death fits in with the cyclic nature of life and time overall. Even after all of this searching, we have not found a definitive answer to these major questions, and maybe we never will. Perhaps, however, it is ultimately

comforting that, in a succession similar to that of the Maya, as humans we are still asking the same fundamental questions about the nature of life and the Universe. Perhaps nothing truly is lost with death.