

Quest of Man

Mythology dates as far back as the beginning of civilization. Prehistoric findings from Africa, Asia or Europe give proof to human development prior to modern civilization millions of years ago. To understand the evolution of man, one must pay close attention to the discoveries of archeological objects. In fact, ancient historical objects give meaning and guidelines to the philosophical quest of man. Since wall carvings, paintings and sculptures tell a story of their way of living and also add insights to their belief system.

There are two very succinct connections human beings developed early: one was an intimate association with nature. Phenomena of wind, rain and sun were viewed, as living spirits, who used their powers at will. These unseen natural forces instilled great fear in many early peoples, who sought ways to appease them. The other connection was in the making of tools, frequently a fundamental pursuit to both, control of natural forces and to assure men of continuous livelihood.

Human beings are expressive creatures - even doing mundane, repetitive chores for basic survival can lead to creative outputs. As men and women worked, they often wove rhythmic chants into the pace of their tasks. These chants - prayers - songs - helped lessen the tedium of the work. They were often worded as appeals or requests to the spirits. As time passed, these spirits eventually were lifted into the place of gods and goddesses. Their physical make-up and characteristics began to resemble human beings, yet these gods possessed strength and intelligence far beyond the knowledge of man. Thus gods were immortal, their importance grew stronger and festive rituals became a community task to keep them happy. Man's survival depended upon the continuous good favor induced by the gods.

Mythology is defined as tales orally recited from one generation to the next. Their literature and art objects describe their myths and expresses a deeper sense of hopes and fears. Their rituals also include moral and religious practices that were usually performed in a sacred forum. Other phenomena emerged from the repetitive ritual act and became an imprinted, fixed memory, which sustained over time.

History shows that the birth of civilization and mythology virtually coincided with each other. Mesopotamia was one the first civilization to emerge from the fertile area of Southwest Asia, around 4000 BCE, and stretched its roots all the way to the Nile delta. Shortly thereafter, around 3500 BCE, the Egyptian civilization developed along the river Nile and expanded into Northeast Africa. And within the next thousand years, the rise of the Indian and Chinese civilizations grew in East Asia.

It is interesting to notice the compelling similarities each civilization shared. For example, they all established their roots along major river valleys. Rivers indicated a rich soil, plentiful food and economical prosperity. Regardless of man's evolution, geographic and climate changes had a tremendous influence over their habits and shaped their belief system.

Over time, Mesopotamia adapted to natural forces, mastered technology, and fostered their own belief system. Their villages grew in complexity and newly adapted rituals integrated into their daily chores. The economical growth shifted their attention from a rural/pastoral existence to an urban/commercial lifestyle that demanded for a social, economical and political reorganization. As they proceeded to restructure their social system, the hierarchy amongst gods changed as well.

The Epic of Gilgamesh became the first and foremost, notable tale describing a man's journey. His path led him to discover his associated fears, despair, hopes and dreams of immortality. After many centuries people still talked about a hero who ventured into the world to find meaning in life and bring an identity to his existence. Copyright © 2000 Marianne Zaugg. All rights reserved.