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Consider the role of sky myths in two different cultures

This essay will examine two sky myths from different cultures with a particular focus on solar and lunar myth and in particular, solar and lunar eclipses; one is the lunar eclipse myth of the Incas and the other is the solar eclipse myth found in the ancient Indian text, the Mahabharata. The essay will explore different definitions of myth and consider how the two sky myths in question conform to these as well as the functions of the myths and how they reflected the cultures they originated from. The essay will also explore to what extent the two myths are similar and how they are different.

To be able to fully examine the role of sky myths and understand their function, it is first important to define exactly what is understood by the idea of 'myth'. This is not a straightforward task; as Glenn Most states, 'Unpacking the self-contradictions contained in that single term has taxed the strength of generations of thinkers.'¹ There is no single definition of myth. In his 2011 paper, John Gentile explores many definitions of myth from academics who have a variety of backgrounds and perspectives; whilst it is clear that there are many ways to establish what myth is, the majority of these definitions share similarities². Taking all of these definitions into account, myths may be described as culturally significant stories or narratives that concern themselves with how humankind navigate the world they live in and their role in it. For example, myths have been used to explain everything from the changing of seasons to the creation of the world. Karen Armstrong defines mythology as 'an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us get beyond the chaotic flux of random events'³; this interpretation supports the argument that mythology was designed to allow humans to explain the unexplainable, where we came from and where we may be heading⁴.

Another similarity that is shared by these many definitions is that myth is often has a sacred quality. A common and historic theme in mythology is the existence of another, higher world occupied by deities. According to Armstrong, this has been called the 'perennial philosophy' as it has essentially informed humanity's mythology, ritual and societal organisation up until scientific modernity, and can still be found to influence more traditional cultures still today⁵. This 'other world' inhabited by gods is almost always thought to be above the Earth which is significant as it reveals that many cultures looked to the heavens for guidance and clarification. As a result, there is an abundance of myths about the sky. Nicholas Campion states that his 2012 book *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* explores how celestial myth provides insight and meaning, how the sky and its deities are organising principles in the social and political organisation and also in calendars⁶. It could be argued that this description could be applied as a definition of myth as well, particularly to the two myths examined here.

Ritual is heavily entwined with myth and it is worth considering what is meant by the term. Many dictionary definitions relate ritual to religious experience. For example, Dictionary.com defines ritual as 'an established or prescribed procedure for a religious or other rite'⁷. Similarly Merriam-Webster

¹ Glenn Most, 'From Logos to Mythos', in *From Myth to Reason: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. by Richard Buxton. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.44.

² John S. Gentile, 'Defining Myth: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Story Telling and Myth', *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 7 (2011) pp.86-88

³ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005) p.7

⁴ Armstrong, *History of Myth*, p.6

⁵ Armstrong, *History of Myth*, p.6

⁶ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) p.2

⁷ Dictionary.com, 'Ritual', Dictionary.com <<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ritual>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

defines ritual as 'of or relating to rites or a ritual, according to religious law'⁸. Jane Ellen Harrison, admired by some as one of the great turn of the century anthropologists, considered ritual to be a primitive way of negotiating with the fears of death and the gods, and believed that ritual stemmed from a common psychological and spiritual human impulse⁹. Harrison took the position that ritual preceded myth and that myth was a narrative that explained and made sacred ritualistic actions, and provides myth with a theology¹⁰. In Harrison's view, myth is ritual put into words; it emerged from the more primitive ritual to give a greater understanding of why rituals were conducted. More simply put by Townsend, 'myth is the mental part of ritual'¹¹. Unlike her contemporaries, she did not show contempt or disdain for these actions but praised primitive man for not bowing to the vastness of the universe and for participating communally in the gigantic forces of nature¹². This links back to the wider idea that myth aids humankind to make sense of the natural world, both terrestrial and extraterrestrial, which otherwise may seem too vast and perhaps too intimidating to comprehend.

A different view on the relationship between myth and ritual is one put forward by Ingvild Gilhus. Gilhus who argues that 'in religion, the consciousness of the believer is expressed through myth'¹³. She suggests that myths are in themselves rituals, and that in early Gnostic practises myths were told to bring about change to the listener on a psychological level; if this is the case, then myth is not an explanation for ritual or a primitive explanation of a natural event, but it in fact is a ritual in itself and is intended to induce an altered state of consciousness¹⁴. If we take this view on myth and ritual to be true then every time a myth is retold, we are reminded of our connection to the sacred and it could be argued that this allows the individual connect to something higher than themselves and gives them purpose. As Jung puts forward myth is something to be experienced and 'an experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations...At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness'¹⁵. Again this links to the idea of myth fulfilling humankind's need to connect to the world around them and to rationalise the seemingly chaotic events.

Despite the Sun being the most dominant object in the sky, there are more myths about the moon than any other celestial body and they make up some of the oldest myths¹⁶. In many cultures, there is an inherent link between the moon and the feminine, likely due to the mirroring of lunar cycles and menstrual cycles. As one would expect, this has led to women being central in many of the moon myths; this is true for the first of the two myths examined in this essay. The first originates from the Incan people, native to South America and whose empire spanned from the early 13th century up until the invasion of the Spanish in 1572. The Incas revered the moon as a

⁸ Merriam-Webster, 'Ritual', Merriam-Webster.com <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

⁹ Martha C. Carpentier, 'Jane Ellen Harrison and the Ritual Theory', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 8 (1994) p.11

¹⁰ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1903) pp.vii-viii

¹¹ Dabney W. Townsend Jr., 'Myth and Meaning', *The Centennial Review*, 16 (1972) p.193

¹² Carpentier, (1994) p.20

¹³ Ingvild Gilhus, 'Gnosticism: A Study in Liminal Symbolism', *Numen*, 31 (1984) p.106

¹⁴ Gilhus, 1984, p.110

¹⁵ Gerhard Adler (ed.), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 Part 1* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1980) para.315

¹⁶ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004) p.25

'goddess called Mama Quilla (this translates to 'Moon Mother'), the wife of the Sun God Inti¹⁷. She was important to the Incan people as she was responsible for calculating the passage time and so vital to their calendar; according to The Goddess Garden Spiritual Centre, Mama Quilla was also the defender of women, hence why she was the goddess of marriage and menstrual cycles¹⁸. The myth goes that the Incan people feared lunar eclipses as they believed an animal was attacking Mama Quilla (in some tellings the animal is a jaguar, but has also been a serpent), and if the animal succeeded in swallowing the goddess the people would be left in darkness and would not be able to measure the passage of time; to scare away the animal, the Incas would make as much noise as possible, throw spears at the sky and make wild gestures¹⁹.

This myth provides an interesting insight into Incan culture. Firstly, it gives an explanation as to why we experience lunar eclipses and to why the moon appears to be reddish colour during a total lunar eclipse; the reader can infer that the red colour is the blood of Mama Quilla as she is being attacked by the animal. The image of a blood-stained moon strengthens the link between the moon and the menstrual cycle, reinforcing Mama Quilla's role as a protector of women as well as governing the passage of time. Another significant observation that can be drawn from this myth is the Incan's belief in their link to the sun and the moon. Their name for the moon, Mama Quilla, clearly reveals that they consider the moon to be a kind of heavenly mother. Irene Silverblatt supports this idea and contends that 'the Incans claimed to be direct descendant of the Sun and Moon'²⁰.

The fear that the Incas showed at the lunar eclipse reflects their belief that eclipses, both solar and lunar, foreshadowed misfortune, which Krupp argues would be the destruction of the foundation of their world²¹. In this interview, Krupp goes on to say that because of the Inca's (and other traditional cultures) reliance on the lunar and solar cycles for survival, eclipses were more than just 'an astronomical inconvenience' for the people, it was a monumental break in the natural order and rhythm of things²². This assertion is also highlighted by Nicholas Campion in his book *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*; he argues that the overwhelming goal of astrology for the Incan people (and other Mesoamerican cultures) was to ensure their survival²³. Campion further supports this point by stating that the Incans practised astronomy 'chiefly to maintain the equilibrium of the seasonal cycle [and] preventing extremes of drought or flood'²⁴. Perhaps then the function of the myth of Mama Quilla could be said to be way to remind the Incas not only of their place in the cosmos but also that their actions and beliefs could have an affect on the heavenly deities, that their rituals help to order and influence something that seems far out of their control. This most likely would have been comforting for the Incans, believing that they could have some affect over their continued survival rather than being completely at the mercy of nature.

¹⁷ Victor Wolfgang von Hagen and John V. Murra, 'Inca Culture at the time of the conquest: Inca Religion', Encyclopaedia Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/pre-Columbian-civilizations/Inca-religion>> [accessed May 7, 2020]

¹⁸ The Goddess Garden, 'Incan Goddess Mama Quilla', The Goddess Garden Spiritual Retreat Centre <<https://thegoddessgarden.com/inca-goddess-mama-quilla/>> [accessed May 7, 2020]

¹⁹ The Goddess Garden [accessed May 7, 2020]

²⁰ Irene Silverblatt, 'Imperial Dilemmas, the Politics of Kinship, and Inca Reconstructions of History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988) p.88

²¹ E. Krupp in Calla Cofield, 'Eclipse Superstitions Are a Thing of the Past, and the Present', Space.com <<https://www.space.com/37727-eclipse-superstitions-then-and-now.html>> [accessed May 8, 2020]

²² Space.com [accessed May 8, 2020]

²³ Campion, 2012 p.68

²⁴ Campion, 2012, p.65

An interesting exploration of myth and ritual in Incan culture by Brian Bauer looks into how myths and ritual reenactments promote and perpetuate the so-called divine nature of the elite in society²⁵. He theorises that origin myths in ancient stratified societies such as the Inca functioned to support the privilege of the ruling class and that ritual continually reestablished their ancestral links to the gods²⁶. This supports Silverblatt's notion that the Incans believed they were descended from the sun and the moon, who were revered as deities. Bauer also examines the link between agriculture and myth and ritual. Corn was especially important to the Incans for their survival and they had elaborate rituals to ensure the harvest would be fruitful, in which the ruling Incan would have had the most important role as he alone, as Bauer contends, had the power to harness nature's reproductive powers for the society²⁷. If the jaguar had succeeded in its attack on Mama Quilla, Incans would not have been able to keep track of seasons and cultivate corn, so again this links back to the idea that this myth prioritises survival and may have provided some reassurance that they could in some way aid their celestial ancestors to ensure their continued protection.

The Mahabharata is an ancient Hindu text and takes the form of an epic poem; it is composed of almost 100,000 stanzas and is the longest epic poem ever written²⁸. Within the text, there is a story about how the demon Rahu swallows the sun (in some tellings, Rahu is a demigod). The gods, or devas as they are referred to, enlist the help of demons to produce the nectar of immortality by churning the cosmic ocean and in the process of this, the sun and the moon were created. In exchange, the gods promised the demons share of the nectar but once the task is done the god Vishnu changes himself into a goddess, enchants the demons and steals their portion of the nectar²⁹. Rahu manages to sneak a sip of the nectar but the sun and moon catch him, and alert the gods. Vishnu cuts off Rahu's head but, as Rahu is immortal after drinking the nectar, he doesn't die; angry at the sun and the moon for whistleblowing, he chases them through the sky. Every now and then, Rahu manages to catch the sun or moon but since he has no body, the sun or moon is released through the dislocated neck³⁰. This myth explains not only the creation of the sun and moon, but also why we experience solar and lunar eclipses.

There is some debate as to whether a story told in the form of an epic can be classed as myth. An epic is a long narrative poem and the term can refer to both written and oral forms. Debalina Roychowdhury argues that epic predominantly focuses on courage and heroism, whereas myth extends to all aspects of life and death³¹. In other words, an epic falls under the umbrella of myth and is just one strand of myth due to its narrow focus. Narayan Joshi goes further and puts forward an argument that this story, and others of the Mahabharata, may not be a myth at all. The Mahabharata as a whole has a special place in the hearts of the Hindu society and the stories it contains have been retold countless times. When considering what a myth can be defined as, it is not often that one equates myth with fact but Joshi proposes that almost all Indian people believe the tales in the Mahabharata to be a part of their ancient history³². Joshi examines the thoughts of

²⁵ Brian S. Bauer, 'Legitimization of the State in Incan Myth and Ritual', *American Anthropologist*, 98 (1996) p.327

²⁶ Bauer, p.333

²⁷ Bauer, p.331

²⁸ James G. Lotchefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Hinduism, Volume 1* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2002) p.399

²⁹ Calla Cofield, 'Eclipse Superstitions Are a Thing of the Past, and the Present', Space.com <<https://www.space.com/37727-eclipse-superstitions-then-and-now.html>> [accessed May 8, 2020]

³⁰ Space.com [accessed May 8, 2020]

³¹ Debalina Roychowdhury, *Into the Myths: A Realistic Approach towards Mythology and Epic* (India: Partridge Publishing, 2019) p.6

³² Narayan Joshi, 'Mahabharata: History or Myth?', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 98 (2010) p.47

many different scholars, including native and 'alien' scholars, and concludes that the Mahabharata is not all mythology³³.

Similarly to the Incan myth, this story of Rahu shows reverence for the sun and moon. Based solely on this myth though, it seems that the sun and moon do not play as big a part in the lives of the ancient Indians as they did in Incan culture. One reason for this could be that ordinary people are removed from this story; unlike the Incan myth in which the people appear to take notice and directly intervene on the moon's 'attack', this epic poem does not mention humankind at all. This significant difference highlights the varied ways in which cultures have relationships with the sun and moon. Another major difference between the two myths is that in Hindu culture, the moon is considered a masculine influence; this is in complete contrast with the Incan Mama Quilla myth and its apparent feminine imagery. Whereas the Incan Mama Quilla represented women, marriage and menstrual cycles, the Hindu Chandra symbolised impermanence, rebirth and decay³⁴. However, although Hindus revere the moon as the god Chandra, Dr Howard Teich maintains that the moon was originally a female deity but was often depicted as male in sculpture and other art due to the patriarchal dominance in Hindu culture³⁵. This examination of gender is an interesting one as it could be argued that a culture's myths reflects its' values as Debalina Roychowdhury argues³⁶. However this cannot be assumed to be true. Hinduwebsite.com in contrast puts forward that 'a woman is not inferior simply because she is a woman, nor is a man superior because he is a man...both are equal because they are the embodiment of the divine'³⁷. Impermanence is one similar theme both the myths share and it can be inferred that this is due to the changing phases of the moon.

One obvious similarity between the two myths is the theme of eclipses, so it is important to consider why eclipses were, and still are, such a compelling celestial event. As previously discussed, an eclipse for the Inca people was a fearful experience as they believed that their moon goddess was under attack, without whom they could not track the seasons and would result in no planting or harvesting corn. Corn was extremely vital for the Incans survival. In a similar fashion, an eclipse in Hindu culture represented a negative influence from the planets and was regarded as a temporary anomaly in the order of the world³⁸. Linking this back to the myth of Rahu, the sun and moon themselves are overshadowed with fear and the darkness of Rahu when they are swallowed by him; it is likely because of this that eclipses may be associated with demonic possession³⁹. Whereas the Incan myth of Mama Quilla highlights their fear of not being able to grow food to survive, this Hindu myth reflects the deep-rooted need to compare good versus evil. There appears to be an inherent need to believe that good will always win in the end; as Hinduwebsite explains:

*Just as darkness cannot withstand light, the demons cannot withstand the power of gods.
However just as darkness can temporarily overshadow light and prevail against it, gods*

³³ Joshi, 2010, p.58

³⁴ Hinduwebsite.com, 'Symbolism of the Moon in Hinduism', Hinduwebsite <<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/symbolism/symbols/moon.asp>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

³⁵ Howard Teich, 'Chandra: the Lunar Deity', SolarLunar, <<http://solarlunar.com/chandra-moon-god/>> [accessed May 10, 2020]

³⁶ Roychowdhury, 2019, p.1

³⁷ Hinduwebsite.com, 'Hinduism and Gender Equality', Hinduwebsite <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_gender.asp#ref01> [accessed May 11, 2020]

³⁸ Hinduwebsite.com, 'Symbolism of Eclipse (Grahamam) in Hinduism', Hinduwebsite <<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/symbolism/symbols/ecclipse.asp>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

³⁹ Hinduwebsite.com, 'Symbolism of Eclipse (Grahamam) in Hinduism', Hinduwebsite <<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/symbolism/symbols/ecclipse.asp>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

*may suffer a temporary defeat in the hands of demons due to fate and the overshadowing effect of the planetary deities.*⁴⁰

Similarly to the Incan myth, the prevailing message from this myth is hope and offers the comforting message that even though evil may sometimes temporarily defeat good, good will always win in the end.

After examining the myth of Mama Quilla and the myth of the demon Rahu, it seems there are some clear similarities and differences. They both of course focus on the fear of eclipses but their fears are directed at different things. The Incans physical survival depended on the moon for tracking harvest and planting seasons, and so believing an eclipse would destroy the moon goddess could ultimately lead to society wide starvation. The Hindu belief was not as specific as this; eclipses were symbolic of impending evil, a time of inauspiciousness and suffering. A large difference is the perceived gender of the moon in the myths. The Incan Mama Quilla was the goddess of women, marriage and menstrual cycles and is something more recognisable to those in the West, in contrast to the Hindu Chandra who was imagined as male and represented impermanence and decay. Although they seem very opposing, overall it seems that the function of these two myths is similar. Both myths allow humankind to make sense of what would have seemed a chaotic and vast world and offered reassurance that they had some semblance of control over their lives which were governed heavily by the forces of nature.

In terms of a definition of myth, it may be defined by the function just discussed in that is a narrative or story that provides insight or meaning. Often definitions of myth are linked to the sacred or the divine (which is the case in the two myths examined) and this may be because many myths are associated with the sky, and in turn the heavens are the home of gods. Townsend sums up myth as 'at once especially significant and obviously fictitious'⁴¹. This seems like a fitting definition as whilst myth is for the most part untrue, or partially fictional, it is of the utmost importance to the cultures that believe in them. Townsend goes on to say that myth and belief in the divine 'does not solve the problem of the suffering of man but he makes that suffering bearable by assuring man that it is just in his suffering that he is god-like'⁴². This idea appears throughout the examination of the two myths; myth is comforting to humans because it assures them their suffering is temporary and a part of life, and that even gods can experience adversity, just like Chandra being devoured by Rahu. Myth helped ancient, and modern, cultures to explain both the everyday and the extraordinary.

⁴⁰ Hinduwebsite.com, 'Symbolism of Eclipse (Grahamam) in Hinduism', Hinduwebsite <<https://www.hinduwebsite.com/symbolism/symbols/ecclipse.asp>> [accessed May 11, 2020]

⁴¹ Townsend, 1972, p.201

⁴² Townsend, 1972, p.201

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