

How feasible is it to establish cross-cultural influence and the adaptation of myths between cultures? Investigate one or two case studies to consider this question.

Thesis

It is highly difficult to establish the idea of cross-cultural influence and adaptive myths between cultures; there are multiple arguments to be made about the similarities or differences between individual mythologies because of independent/isolate development, or diffusion that has arisen from historical contact, with the latter acting as support for both the arguments of influence and adaptation through a further level of contact, like colonisation. Subsequently, the aim for this essay is to evaluate two convincing case studies that may prove which is more substantial through the existence of 'comparative mythology'.

The Foundation of Comparative Mythology

The study of comparative mythology finds its origin in the 18th and 19th century, through multiple books published around the same time and concept seeking to attempt understanding as to why many societies or cultures tend to share the creation myths, motifs or character archetypes within their mythologies, as well as god roles or realms. The 'aim' that scholars began to have was finding evidence of a 'protomythology', a mythology that all of the similarities branch, or descend, from.

One of these books that became central to the foundational beginning of the theory was '*The Origin of All Religious Worship*' by Charles Dupuis,¹ published as fragments in 'Journal des Savants' as early as 1777² that became one of his most famous works, and provides some evidence that may be a focus for protomythology.

He begins by first establishing the general idea of God³ in man's eyes before offering any examples of specific myth patterns through referencing Pliny's deduction of the term 'God', being used to combine 'The World' and 'Heaven' to describe an eternal creation being; "the World is... the maker and the work." In writing this work, Dupuis clearly displays that the idea of a being purely based upon all creation, and the existence of everything that ever will be. This is, arguably, one of the most common and centrally themed adaptive myths for cross-cultural mythology, in both monotheism and polytheism as a whole.

¹ (Dupuis)

² Ibid 17.

³ Ibid. 15.

However, the doubt in the possibility of proving cross-cultural influence stems from the patterns of mythological stories that are presented all throughout the world, i.e. how cultures have the same features within their myths, but for different deities or beings, despite having no possible contact at the time.

Case Study 1; Limits of Comparative Mythology

With this in mind, the universality of cultures having ideas of creation myth(s) that gives them a framework for creating belief systems and religion that fill the void of explanation over personal existence can mean a shared conceptual origin and, crucially, for the purpose of comparative mythology, evidence for a protomythology; but, in this universality of believing that there are beings that control everything that has and will exist in the future, alongside the almost guaranteed attempt by a culture to explain their existence gives ground for an opposing argument that all people who believe is reflective of a more convincing argument that they used their evolving, or evolved, intelligence and higher cognitive human thinking to evaluate their purpose or reason for existence. The incidentally combative, push-and-pull nature of evidential points continues to highlight the difficulty of establishing cross-cultural influence.

In light of creation myth potentially being one of the first ideas to be established within a culture or religion, Dupuis' idea in being inspired by Pliny the Elder's personal view on a universal origin to religion, may lead as a point to use creation myths as a test to possibly prove him right whilst evaluating how influence is a likely argument. The two strongest candidates for this are the creation myths of Enuma Elish and Genesis.

Enuma Elish⁴ is the ancient epic creation myth of Babylonia, and a story about how the world as they knew it was created through the conflict and violence of the elder gods, Apsu (underground water) and Tiamat, (sea) and loud younger gods in their polytheistic beliefs. After they wage war on the younger gods because of their loudness, the god Ea uses a spell to comatose Apsu and murders him. Ea and his wife live upon his body, and Marduk, the god chief, is born to them. Tiamat attempts to take revenge, only to be killed by Marduk and having her body torn in two to create the earth and heaven. Its creator was an unknown poet at an unknown time, but theorised to be around the 14th century BCE.

The creation myth of Genesis is a Biblical creation story found in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, and refers to the monotheistic God creating "the

⁴ (Murtoff)

heavens and the earth” from the deep, or void. Genesis is theorised to have been written after the Enuma Elish, around ~1100 BCE.

The two creation myths share multiple similarities in their foundations that support the argument of influence through the use of thematics; the use of describing the world as primarily water based with the elder gods, Apsu and Tiamat, being associated with fresh and saltwater, and in the Bible the darkness is also described as “the deep”. Chaos is then brought to order by Marduk and God. Marduk uses Tiamat’s body to create the earth and heavens, and God does the same by separating the light/dark and water/land - these shared conceptual themes also lean towards a shared framework too, transmitted across cultures.

Babylonia was also in contact with Israel alongside being connected by major trade routes, like the Fertile Crescent corridors, so as a result the argument of influence is extremely likely with merchants travelling into each region and bringing the knowledge of their respective homes with them. Israel was ruled at times by Mesopotamian empires like the Akkadian Empire, or, the Babylonian Exile in ~586 BCE, when Judah was conquered by Babylon and inhabitants continued living there for around 50 years and would have significantly increased the level of cultural contact with the Babylonian religion, written traditions, literature just like the Enuma Elish and scribal education as a few of many examples of contact.

Reliability of Comparative Mythology

Another important consideration in the evaluation of feasibility of influence and/or adaptation is the reliability of comparative mythology as a method of analysis - whilst it’s useful in identifying the similarities between the multitude of myths, it can easily lead to overgeneralisation where parallels are mistaken for transmission of myths.

An instance of this would be any given shared motif of a myth, like creation from chaos or divine punishment are just as likely to develop independently to each society that shares the parallel because of their experiences that also happen to be shared, instead of contact between cultures.

Additionally, much of the evidence used in comparative mythology relies on surviving texts and literature, when many of these would have existed in an oral form which makes it increasingly hard to determine where the true origins lie, or a clear line of influence.

Case Study 2; Plausible Cross-Cultural Influence - Flood Myths

Flood myths are found in many cultures, mainly because floods and their unpredictability were a very real and recurring threat to the early civilisations that began by building them right by rivers for easy water access, and an argument could be made for cultures creating their independent flood myths because of the same natural disasters, and flooding experiences. This argument mainly attempts to present convincing evidence that cultures do not need cross-cultural contact to create similar myths, nor do they prove a level of adaptation because of historical contact either.

The Epic of Gilgamesh and Noah's Ark are used as main examples for this argument because of their extreme similarities.

Gilgamesh is the earliest well-known literary Mesopotamian hero works written on cuneiform tablets around ~2000 –1501 BCE and based upon earlier oral traditions around the historical Gilgamesh that lived around ~3000 BCE and the timing suggests he ruled as King of Uruk after the Flood. He searched for Utnapishtim, who survived the Babylonian Flood to learn how to escape death and was granted immortality, and he recounts how he was instructed to build a boat for the purpose of preserving life, and provides one of the earlier recorded flood narratives.

Noah's Ark was another biblical story in the Book of Genesis, and God was angered by humanity fighting each other, being described as morally corrupt and violent, and in being hateful they turned away from him. Noah is spoken to by God and chosen due to his righteousness. He is tasked to build an Ark with 2 of each animal while God sends a flood to cleanse the earth to start anew. He sends a dove to signal the end of the flood by finding land after 40 days and nights of rain, and the dove represents new beginnings and, potentially, renewal.

Both of these accounts present the flood myth as being a form of divine-given punishment for the wrongdoing by human wrongdoing, particularly in the case of disobedience and corruption.

Yet, the structure of both myths is strong and the narrative similarities help to suggest the possibility of cross-cultural influence. The Book of Genesis is predated entirely by the Mesopotamian tale, and consequently, makes it feasible that elements of the flood myth(s) were transported across cultures through trade, migration, conquests; the Babylonian Exile is a good example of this.

These two myths demonstrate clearly how mythology can be reshaped and reflect the perception of local cultural beliefs and values whilst also retaining the main core narrative structure(s).

Conclusion

To conclude, establishing cross-cultural influence and the adaptation of myths between cultures is a highly complex question to answer definitively, but it is absolutely plausible in many cases. Through the exploration of comparative mythology and case studies, the similarities between myths may stem either from independent development, or from diffused historical contact.

The study of the limitations of comparative mythology analyses the comparison of creation myths like the Enuma Elish and Genesis highlights how shared thematic structures - chaos transgressing into order - may suggest cultural transmission like using the example of the Babylonian Exile.

The flood narratives found in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Noah's Ark present striking parallels in both the structure and purpose for existing, and reinforces the argument for adaptation through contact, and yet also allows for the possibility of independently thought origin from personal environment experience, and in this case this would be the floods they would be familiar with.

Therefore, while explicit proof of cross-cultural influence remains hard because of the limitations from a lack of historical evidence, the recurring structural similarities alongside known historical interactions strongly support the feasibility of mythological transmission and adaptation.

Ultimately, myths should really be understood primarily as dynamic narratives that are shaped by shared human concerns across the globe due to converging behavioural patterns (building close to rivers for water) and also by the cultural exchanges that occur because of foreign cultural contact through trade or immigration over time.

Works Cited