

Mythology of a Hunters Society



Iris Kleinlugtenbelt
Minds In Nature

Artwork - Wihm89

What do stories have to do with bushcraft or practising primitive skills? Well, at some point, when diving into the knowledge of primitive techniques you will come across other elements of primitive living. The social structures between people, the way they divide tasks and responsibilities and of course the spiritual beliefs and practises of the different peoples of the world in different periods in history.

Along with the development of humankind, the discovery of working with tools and later fire and all other inventions, we also developed great awe for the world we live in. As our brain developed so did our consciousness. And with our brilliant mind came questions we still have until this day.

Where do we come from? What is the point of living? Is there meaning behind it all? Philosophers and also psychologists spend time thinking about this subject or help people to find a way to cope with this matter.

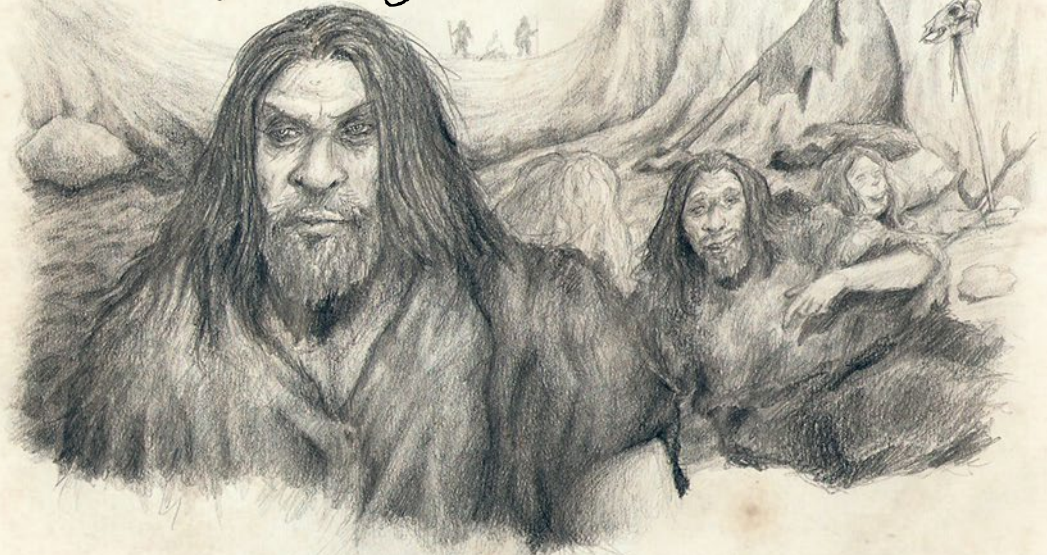
Mythology has always been an integrative part of the way humans lived. The way people view the world is expressed in how they treat other people, other living beings and in what they create. Objects are decorated with the most beautiful patterns. These are more than ornamentation. It often represents important relations between the owner and the world

they live in or it can express status or social coherence. If you would like to understand the world of our ancestors you cannot skip this important part of human experience. You can find inspiration in the decorations and objects found at archaeological sites. You might even want to develop your own way of expressing your link with the natural or spiritual world as you experience it.

Now what do we actually know about the way people looked at the world thousands of years ago? Fortunately there are several ways to travel back into time, so to speak, and have a guess at how their world looked. First, we have recent knowledge of tribes who have long been without contact with modern society. Anthropologists have done a lot of research on other cultures and their beliefs, rites and rituals. Secondly, we have artefacts from the past; objects that might have been used for some kind of rituals, and of course primitive artwork. Rock paintings are found across the world with a great amount of animals, scenes of hunting and different kind of symbols representing important elements such as the sun. Ancient burial scenes often leave a lot of information. How people attended the dead also gives information on how they viewed life. A third way of diving into this history is by analysing the myths and stories that are still around or have been noted at some point in history. Together these stories show remarkable similarities across the world.



Aspects of Myth



In the twentieth century, Joseph Campbell made his life work of collecting those myths from all over the world and he has gathered stories and legends from all different periods and different places. He has been greatly influenced by Jung's theory of the human mind. Myths are a collective dream or archetype that has four important functions for us humans.

The first aspect of myth is awaking a great awe for life itself. Life eats life. There is a predator and a prey. It is either to eat or being eaten. And if not being eaten then eventually death still arrives. This is an event of 'horror' that is inevitable and it could scare the hell out of you. Myths help you to reconcile with it. The second function of myth is to explain the world and universe as it is. Why does the sun come and goes every day? Myths provide you with a route map of the universe. It gives you a 'why'. Where does thunder come from? It is because Thor the god of thunder, batters the clouds with a hammer. Or Ukko in Finland, Perun in the Slavic region. The third function of myth is to give tribes a social structure. Both commandments and taboos make a social

system work. Everyone has place within the tribe and certain tasks and responsibilities. The fourth function is the most personal function. Myths have to guide you through life, from childhood to adult and eventually to the great gateway of death. This last function of myth is a pedagogical and psychosocial aspect of myth.

In our modern society we lost the second and third function of myth. Science has taken over the explanation of what the universe looks like. It is quite silly to have a flat earth belief when evidence is clear it is round. Our parliaments have controlled the third function of maintaining a social structure. There are still groups of people who have their own structure either legally or illegal under the governmental law. Mostly we refer to them as a sect or cult. These groups tend to have a strong belief on the second function as well. Contrary to science they have an alternative way of looking at the universe. But most people are left with the first and fourth aspect. The awe for life itself and the phases that every individual has to cross, from child to adult until you have to leave this precious life.

A Hunters Mythology

The first myths of mankind were affirmative. They were positive towards the world in all its aspects. Both life and death were accepted as part of the total universe. Both the wonders of life as well as the horrors of life had to be accepted as 'good' or at least as part of the deal. Thus creating rites that are both strong but brutal as well. When life and death are so intertwined, rituals involving forms of sacrifices are not uncommon. Take notion that death was more prominent with many risks especially for young children to die of all kinds of diseases.

In hunters society there is an emphasis on the individual. It is of huge importance for a tribe to have strong and vital hunters. They are the ones that



bring the most nutritious valuable resources. Meat and fish are of great importance for the survival of everyone. In rituals personal strength is tested and young boys must overcome fear and often painful ceremonies to become a man.

But hunting must be done in the proper way. Hunting is not against the will of nature. A major theme is the animal as a willing victim, giving its flesh to feed the people. But there are some rules to pay attention to! Why would an animal give his life to humans to be eaten? The legend of the buffalo is a story that explains why.



The Legend of the Buffalo Dance

From Joseph Campbell, masks of god, primitive mythology, the animal master, legend collected c. 1870

The lives of the Blackfoot Indians of Montana were bound up entirely of the coming and going of buffalo herds. One of the best hunting methods was to lure them over a cliff. So once upon a time the hunters could not induce the animals to fall of the cliff and the people were starving. One early morning a young woman went to get water and saw a herd of buffalo feeding on the prairie right at the edge of the cliff. If only you would jump into the corral she said, I will marry one of you. She was not seriously considering it to happen. So she was in great surprise seeing the animals jumping and falling of the cliff. When a big bull approached her, she became terrified. Come he said, and he took her with him. No she cried, trying to escape. But you said you would marry one. And see your corral is filled. So he took her along. When the people had finished preparing the meat they missed the young woman. Her father was destined to get her back. He travelled

until he came to a buffalo wallow, a drinking place. He saw a beautiful magpie bird. Help me handsome bird, fly about and look for my daughter. The bird flew directly to the herd telling the woman her father was at the wallow.

The bull woke and said to his wife to get him some water. The woman took a horn from his head and went to the water place. "father, why did you come, you will surely be killed." "I came to take my daughter home". Not now she said, they will pursue and kill us. Let us wait until he sleeps again, I will try to slip away. She returned to the bull, with the horn full of water. He drank some. "Ha" he said, there is a person close by. The bull drank some more, got up and bellowed. Up stood all the bulls and rushed in all directions. They found the man at the wallow and trampled him and hooked him with their horns. My poor father the young woman cried.

"Aha" said the bull, you are mourning for your father. Perhaps you now see how it is for us. We have seen our mothers, sisters and relatives hurled over the rocks and slaughtered by your people. But I shall pity you. If you can bring your father back to life again you and him may go back to your people. The woman called the magpie, help me now, please find me a piece of my father in the mud. The magpie looked in every hole and tore up the mud and finally found a piece of bone and returned to the woman.

She placed this piece on the ground covered it with her robe and sang. Removing the robe she saw her father's body lying there. She covered it again and continued singing. Removing the robe for the

second time her father was breathing and stood up. The buffalo were amazed. "We have seen strange things today", the bull husband said. The people's holy power is strong. Before you and your father go we shall teach you our dance and song. You must remember them for this will be the magical means by which the buffalo that are killed by man will be restored to life again just as the man who was killed by the buffalo was revived. "Teach this dance and song, wear a bull's head and a bull's robe when performing this dance. The father and daughter returned to the camp. The man told what happened and the chiefs selected a number of young man, who were taught the dance and song of the bulls.



*Early American settlers called bison "bufello" due to the similar appearance between the two animals, and the name "buffalo" stuck for the American variety. But it's incorrect. The American bison (*Bison bison*) lives only in North America, while the main buffalo species reside in Africa and Asia.*

Animal Master

The bull husband in this story represents the animal master, or animal archetype. He represents all the buffalo as a species. He is the soul of the buffalo and men relate to him in ceremony. Thus creating mutual understanding and wellbeing of both animal and man.

Many tribes have forms of totemism. In totemistic myths, people are strongly related to animals, often having semi animal ancestors. Members of the clan can be prohibited in killing or eating certain animals. Animals are considered as great teachers and co-descendants of the totem ancestor. The theme of the "animal master" as we see in this myth is a broader aspect including animal guardians or totems.

This relation between the animal world and that of humans provides for a philosophy on how the universe work. It shows how living beings are related to each other and why. It also gives social structure, for rites and for whom to perform, like the dance to ensure a successful hunt.

The Power Of Life

There are some questions on the female role in primitive myths and society. In the early planters mythology we have quite certain knowledge of the goddess as both life bringer and lifetaker resulting in cruel rites of human sacrifices.

There have been found small statues of naked women from Palaeolithic periods associated with mammoth hunters with uncertainty of the meaning of these female figures. The most simple explanation is the female as protector of the hearth and patroness of the hunt. Women are the bringers of life and thus important and therefore respected or even feared. This admiration of the female power might go back to the very first human societies. The idea has risen that in former periods human society was matriarchal. It is however not proven that there actually were periods of female leadership and these statues are probably just admirations of the life force only women have, leading to no conclusion about society and leadership.

It is the woman who has this power over life, it is her who carries a child. It is also the woman who brings back her father. She is the gatherer and collects back these body parts. We see this theme in the dance of the buffalo but it is also present in other myths. After Osiris, an Egyptian god is being killed by his brother Seth, it is Isis, their sister who gathers the pieces and brings him back to life. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, a renowned psychoanalyst and writer describes the story of 'La Loba' the wolf woman or 'La Huesera' the bone woman from the deserts and mountains of Mexico. She collects bones of animals, especially wolves and sings them back to life. The more myths you hear the more connections you will see.

More Than Bedtime Stories

Now what to think of all this? For most people, legends and myths are just fairy tales and bedtime stories. After the period of enlightenment and secularisation we lost most of our spirituality. Whereas myths provide you with a greater perspective and a way to relate to the world, most religious beliefs have become trapped in the area of truth of historical events. And science gave us another view of the universe. We travelled to space, and unravelled the structure of DNA and are left empty in our 'belief'.

But having lost all connection to this 'unseen' world we still have to face the world and cope with the fact that we all will die someday. We still walk our path through life trying to find our 'destination' and way of living. And fortunately we can make our individual decisions. Our freedom is huge; we can choose what to do, what to learn, whom to marriage and where to live; if you are born in a western country at least. Living within a primitive tribe in prehistoric times it is impossible to say 'I don't like this'. But on the other hand, you would not have knowledge of other possibilities because there were none.

At this present time, one out of ten people are on antidepressive drugs. Could there be a relation with this lack of spiritual connection? Being able to relate to stories as powerful messages about this complex world could be of great importance. Not in the sense of things that really happened, like a history book.

Singing the dead back to life is ridiculous in matters of reality. But how to hunt, with respect for the soul of the species, seeing them as part of our circle is not a very strange thought. It gives a perspective on the world with hints how to live our lives.

So stumbling from one event to another, making wrong decisions, losing loved ones but also to achieve goals, to celebrate our successes to rejoice in the birth of a new family member. Everything is covered in myths and stories with great variety over time and places.

To read these stories as lively as we can dream our dreams and to listen beyond the words might give us a sense of understanding our own ancestors and the way they saw their world.

Further reading

In this article I have just discussed only a small and brief glimpse of mythology. It is needless to say that this subject is so large many books have been written about it. I recommend The works of Joseph Campbell for further reading if interested in mythology.

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