American Floods: Crash Course World Mythology #18

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today it's everybody back in the pool! Or river, or storm drain overflow from divine rainstorms.

That's right, it's our final flood episode, and we're heading west to the Americas. Surf's up, Thoth!

[Opening music]

We've already talked about floods from the Ancient Near East, at the point between Europe, Africa, and Asia, and last week we covered the floods of China in East Asia. But it turns out that essentially anywhere there's a civilization, there's a story of that civilization being destroyed by water.

One myth from the Inca empire should sound familiar at this point. Viracocha was the supreme god of the Incas, and considered the father of the other gods and creator of the world. Viracocha eventually became tired of the race of giants he'd created to populate the earth. He thought they were lazy and bad-tempered, and they always forgot his birthday. So, I bet you can get how he decided to get rid of those forgetful behemoths. That's right, a flood.

Viracocha's flood rose up even higher than the Andes Mountains, high enough to drown the giants and, in some versions, all of humanity along with them. A single lucky couple survived by floating in a box. The box drifted to Tiahuanaco. When it came to rest, Viracocha made a new people with the surviving couple. As a reminder of the flood, we have Lake Titicaca, and Lake Poopó, although the latter disappeared in 2016 as a result of climate change and humans diverting its waters for mining. So, it's not just Viracocha who can destroy life in the Andes.

No review of New World myths would be complete without a quick visit to the Popul Vuh. It's one of our best sources for understanding the world of the Mayans before the arrival of Europeans. You might remember from our creation myths episode that in Mesoamerica, the deities went through a number of attempts at birthing the world before getting it right.

In the creation story, I recounted the animals that were created couldn't talk. No helpful dragons like Yu the engineer had in China. So the gods started over. And as it turns out, the creator once messed up humans, too.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In the beginning, the creator made humans out of wood. These wooden people could do a lot of things we can - walk, talk, have children, build houses (let's not think too hard about out of what), but they were dry and yellow and their faces had no expression because they had no minds, nor souls, nor hearts. They beat their dogs and they burned the bottoms of their cooking pots. They had forgotten how they were made, and couldn't remember any of the names of God. So he said, "These men will not do either. I must destroy them also." And, really, can you blame him? Dog beaters, unbelievable.

So the creator sent - you guessed it - a great flood, knocking down the houses of the wooden men. The wooden men tried to escape, but the animals they had starved and beaten and cooking pots they had burned and the trees whose branches they had chopped off all turned against them and wouldn't help them. Only a few of them escaped from their flood, and it is said that their descendants are the monkeys. And this is why you should never let a monkey cook. No offense, Thoth.

After reflecting, the creator said, "It is time. I need men on the earth who will know my names, who will obey me and love me, that will nourish and sustain me."

So he made a man out of cornmeal, and used nine kinds of liquor to give strength to his new creations. He made four men and four women, and they were very happy. The creator was scared that these new creations might be too powerful, though. So the creator blew a mist over their eyes and clouded their vision. But the people were still thankful. When the sun came up and the puma and the jaguar roared, the men and the women danced with joy because they were alive. And possibly drunk.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

The Popul Vuh creation myth gives us insight into the troubling nature of creation and humanity. As in many of the other myths we've seen, there's something not quite right about mankind at first. The gods always want a big watery do-over.

This myth differs from those we saw in the Mediterranean world in a few ways. First off, Viracocha didn't find any human beings sinless enough to spare. Also, apparently only humans are victims of this flood. That's a little bit weird since those humans are made of wood, which usually floats. Wouldn't fire work better? I probably would have gone with fire. Wait, am I a vengeful god?

Perhaps the reason the creator couldn't find a worthy survivor is that those wooden people were just a bad idea to begin with. This failed creation was the fault of the creator himself, not "misbehaving humans." There's something humble about this myth. The god messes up, owns up, and tries again. You know that old pithy saying, "If at first you don't succeed, wash the entire race of people away in a divine deluge and try again."

Our last flood story is an Aztec tale from Oaxaca in Mexico and probably predates Columbus. In this myth, a god called The Old One tells one chosen man to abandon his chores because the world is gonna be destroyed.

The Old One tells the man to plant a cedar tree, because - as we all know, gods don't garden - and to find himself a carpenter who can make a canoe. The man does as he's told and miraculously a giant cedar tree grows in a single night, and the man finds a carpenter to build a canoe. The carpenter does fine work by the way, just not so fine that he gets to survive what's about to go down.

You know what happens next, the rain comes and the earth is destroyed, but the canoe floats on top of the waters and the man and his family are spared. The rain stops, the earth dries up, and the man comes out of his canoe, and catches some fish to eat. But then The Old One tells the man that he must not make a fire. Soon, The Old One smells something from the earth. He comes down, and he finds the man cooking the fish on a fire, the nerve!

The Old One says, "Who gave you permission to catch fish? And you were told not to make fire, yet you are doing it. I told you not to make fire, you fool. Now you will have to serve as an example for the new people," and The Old One hits him over the head. "Because you did not listen, I am going to change you into a howler monkey."

In another version of this myth, the man survives with a dog, and the dog is the one that cooks for him. Eventually, he discovers that the dog is actually a woman, and they marry, and then they create a new race of humans - because mythology.

No matter which version we're talking about though, we have to wonder why the man who survived was chosen. I mean yeah, he can plant a cedar seed, but there must have been better options?

These myths are fascinating for a number of reasons, on a number of fronts. Notice the monkey transformation theme...coincidence? Maybe not. Even though the Mayan Empire and the Aztec Empire didn't exist at the same time, they were pretty close geographically, and probably shared some stories. They also probably both hung out with monkeys.

When we compare these flood storied to the ones in Gilgamesh or the Bible, there are interesting similarities and differences. After all, The Old One picks out a special individual to be the sole survivor of his water reset button, but Noah and Utnapishtim were chosen because of their unfailing loyalty and faith.

The survivor of The Old One's flood, in pretty much every version, is characterized by disobedience. It makes one wonder about each culture's respective evaluation of loyalty versus independence, and whether that Aztec survivor was meant as a disobedient role model, or a fish cooking cautionary tale.

No matter where they come from though, flood myths seem to be mainly about punishing humanity for transgression. That's usually wickedness, but sometimes, as in Yu the Engineer story, it's the poor management of the state by the king. These stories tell people that when bad things like floods happen, they happen because, well, we deserve them.

They also remind us that humanity is imperfect, but the gods who created us are as well. Again and again, the gods in these stories feel like they've made a mistake in creating mankind and they wanna just start over. No matter how hard they try, humans just kinda keep screwing up. Even when a god tries to get it right, and want to start from scratch, they can't. Or maybe, we can't. Because after all, I guess we're only human.

Thanks for watching, we'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching, and really, deep down, aren't we all nine kinds of liquor?