Archetypes and Male Divinities: Crash Course World Mythology #15

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and hey, Thoth, can we talk man-to-man? Man-to-God? Man-to-Ibis-and-sometimes-Baboon?

Because today's episode is about mythological men and what unites them among different cultures. We've been talking about gods for months, but now we're going to look at them more theoretically and divide them into groups based on their archetypal functions in myth. Grab your Papyrus, Thoth, so you can take notes. I promise it won't be rote.

[Opening music]

We examined female divinity archetypes in the last two episodes, and mythologists have categorized male divinities into a similar set of archetypes. Across countless myths when male gods appear, it's usually in one of six forms. Fathers and/or sons, kings and judges, saviors and sages, shamans, tricksters, and the lords of destruction, and just if you got excited about finally figuring out the name of your new death metal band, I've got some bad news, it's already taken so, shocker.

So let's begin at the beginning with fathers and sons. We've talked about creation myths and divine families, so you already know that in a lot of cases a son overthrows his father to usurp his spot. This can get pretty bloody and, as is the case with Uranus and Cronus and Zeus, can even involve castration. One reason god-sons might be eager to topple their divine fathers is that these fathers are often aloof, especially in creation myths. It's common for all-Powerful father figures to live in the sky being all unapproachable for their children.

According to Scott Leonard and Michael McClur,m in patrifocal myths, all seek the father's love and approval; all long for even a glimpse of his face; and all live in terror of his wrath. You can just picture Apollo asking Zeus if he'll come outside to like kick the soccer ball around - "Come on dad, please?" Meanwhile, Zeus is just lightning-bolting things - he's busy working.

In other myths, sons become symbols of their fathers attributes or conduits for their father's knowledge and abilities. Take Odin and his sons Tyr and Balder. They epitomize their father's bravery and wisdom respectively. And Thor is a distillation of Odin's military and reproductive power.

We see something similar in a Korean myth about the heavenly ruler Hwaning. Before any people exist on Earth, Hwaning teaches his son Hwanung the secrets of the heavenly kingdom and allows him to descend to Earth to create a new society. The advice allows Hwanung to rule more effectively over the earth, and later he passes the same wisdom on to the first man, Dangun, so that he can recreate the heavenly order himself. Gods hate weeding, but they love order.

In Hwanung's transition from archetypal son to father, marked by passing on knowledge to humans, he also embodies another male archetype: god as king or judge. There's no clear reason why pantheons of gods would need to be organized like terrestrial governments but there are countless myths where gods are in human leadership roles.

For instance, sky gods, like Zeus, are often described as reigning like Kings and also partying like kings, if you ask Leticia, Roman goddess of festivity. Historically, myths featuring gods as kings have helped justify monarchical power on Earth. They create an equivalence between the terrestrial kings' ability to provide security and the gods' ability to do the same.

In some traditions male divinities also act as judges, often judges of human souls. In Egyptian myths, Osiris and 42 other gods test the souls of the dead to see if they were Maat Kheru, or true of voice. At times Osiris and Anubis are pictured weighing a soul in the form of a heart against a feather and Thoth would record the results. Nice work, pal.

No matter how well a human has learned from their father figure, sometimes things get out of hand. Mythology is brimming with stories of bailouts in the form of a savior god. This salvation can be a sacrifice like the Aztec myth of Nanahuatl who throws himself onto a fire to become the sun that will nourish humanity - more on that in our episode about dying gods.

More often though gods act as saviors by providing knowledge and guidance that humans need to thrive spiritually and survive actually. Usually these saviors don't die, but instead impart some important, often sacred knowledge that if followed leads to salvation. We can make a case for Prometheus, who gives people fire, as a kind of sage and maybe we can read the biblical story of Jesus as a combination of savior and sage. Just two great tastes that taste great together.

According to William Doty, "the shaman is a figure who can enter the world of spirits easily because of the powers granted to her or him by such beings." Often a shaman will travel to spiritual realms, journeying on a road that puts him in contact with supernatural forces that most people cannot see.

It can be tricky to see shamans as gods rather than human heroes because human shamans exists in many cultures, both historically and currently. It may be more helpful to think of some gods as having the skills or attributes of shamans, specifically the use of supernatural power to provide or find the answers to pressing questions. For example, the Celtic deity the Dagda has a magic cauldron from which he draws special items.

Messenger gods like Hermes sprint between the Earth, the Heavens and the Underworld. Hermes himself was the God of alchemists and magicians and, functionally similar to Hermes, is our good friend Thoth. Thoth was also a heavenly messenger, often credited with special if not mystical knowledge, about things like mathematics, astronomy, the alphabet and writing. That's why Thoth here is the patron god of Crash Course; not because his name is fun to say, but because he's awesome. High five, pal.

Another important archetypal role for male gods is the trickster. This one is so fun that we're going to be devoting a few episodes to it in the future. We've already seen tricksters like Eshu, who you may remember from our episode on Orishas, and of course our old friend Loki, who you may remember from him being the worst.

Trickster gods remind us that life's can be chaotic, and not just the creation from the void kind of chaotic. There's plenty of mischief that we're going to talk about. You're going to have to wait. Our last archetype of male divinity is the Lord of Destruction, or Lord of the Underworld.

We've met this type before: Hades, Osiris looking at y'all's. Often they have dogs or dog-headed gods as helpers, like Cerberus and Anubis. And sometimes lords of the underworld are connected with greed: Pluto gives us the word plutocrat: someone who derives their power from their wealth, possibly because kings of the underworld never give up a soul once they get one. Another possible explanation for the strange connection between death and abundance is that some of these gods are linked with seasonal renewal and thus fertility. And it's not surprising that many gods of battle are archetypically male.

A good example of a battle god who combines many masculine

divine attributes is Perune, the chief Slavic deity. He sometimes pictured as a huge man with a silver face, a golden moustache and who wields an enormous club, a battle ax, a bow and arrow and thunderbolts; basically, you name it, he is going to stab someone with it.

And then there's Balor, the Celtic war god of the Fomorians. His single eye has a lid so heavy that it required servants to hoist it open, which is probably a good thing because anyone who fell under Balor of the Stout blow's gaze was crushed in an instant. Talk about a death stare.

So as you've probably figured out, there's a lot of overlap among these archetypes. A male god can be a king and a sage and a father and a warrior, all at the same time. Or he can fulfill different roles in different stories. A great example of this is the god Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. The Bhagavad-Gita is the sixth book in the Indian epic poem the Mahabharata.

In the West, it's probably the most well known section of the poem. It tells the story of the Prince Arjuna and his charioteer, who happens to be Krishna, deciding what to do on the battlefield of Kuruksetra.

Thought Bubble's is going to help us out.

In the middle of battle, Prince Arjuna is torn between his duty as a warrior and family loyalty. He has family on the opposite side, so he might harm them if he fulfilled his warrior Dharma. He's deciding whether to be a warrior or renounce his role as a Kshatriya: a member of the Hindu military caste.

He says to Krishna, "Krishna, I see my kinsmen gathered here, wanting war. My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh, the magic bow slips from my hand, my skin burns, I cannot stand still, my mind reels. I see omens of chaos, Krishna; I see no good in killing my kinsmen in battle."

Krishna acts as a sage; he answers Arjuna's question then gives him the secret to living a good life, achieving immortality, and even becoming a sage himself. He says, "You must learn to endure fleeting things - they come and go! When these cannot torment a man, when suffering and joy are equal for him and he has courage, he is fit for immortality."

Then Arjuna asks to see Krishna in his true form. He is duly terrified and amazed. He says, "You are the gods of wind, death, fire and water; the moon; the lord of life; the great ancestor. You are father of the world of animate and inanimate things, its venerable teacher, most worthy of worship. I bow to you."

Arjuna realizes he must fulfill his destiny to be a warrior. Krishna, by embodying various archetypes, helps Arjuna to become the best and most destructive version of himself.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So it's interesting that even while Krishna is ultimately encouraging Arjuna to rejoin the battle, he's also offering a way to achieve peace and salvation within the religious tradition of Hinduism. Krishna even provides more than one path, inspiring Arjuna to follow his dharma, practice the disciplines of Yoga and worship Krishna himself, a devotion called Bhakti.

When Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna, he is both creator and lord of destruction, glorious and terrible to behold. He represents the multiplicity and complexity of divinity, common in Indian religious texts and myths. He is lord and father, but also provides comfort like a friend or a lover. And he's a sage too when he provides a path to salvation. So really Krishna's pretty much the full God package.

The fact that Krishna occupies almost every archetype we've talked about helps illustrate what's useful about identifying archetypes in the first place. Knowing about these categories allows us to see patterns in stories and even whole traditions. Realizing that father figures take different forms in different cultures, or often take the same form, helps us ground the connections between myth, culture, and our beliefs about everyday life and what it means to be a dude.

Thanks for watching we'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching, and don't worry. You're going to find a name for your metal band. It's out there. Probably in an episode about Egyptian Mythology.