

The cultural myths of america



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A cultural myth is a traditional story that has a meaning attached to it. These myths have an effect in the way people lead their lives and even how they interact with each other. It is notable that myths have a role to play be it personally, or to the wider society. In as much as one may believe or doubt such myths, they still continue to exist in different ways, and are shaping destinies of many. Myths can be full of truth or falsehood and depend on the interpretation a person may prefer. Many societies and races in the world have diverse myths which may encourage or discourage certain patterns of behavior. Rituals and customs are explained in myths and their merits or demerits laid down for everyone to discern.

The Greek mythology (Detienne, 18) is most notable especially in the way they exhort ancestors to be like gods. Myths came before science and this makes it impossible to discredit them. Long time ago, people depended on myths to explain the mysteries of creation and they accepted them with a lot of zeal. Many other questions were answered including the origin of man and his eventual destiny after death. Evil is also brought under the scrutiny of myths and they expound its cause and reason for its existence. The rise of modern civilization can too be traced in myths ranging from agriculture to industry to settled life in cities.

The modern world has continued to embrace myths in one way or another. Modern technology has given rise to much development in mass media which in turn has enabled many myths from different parts of the world to be collected together for study. Books have been printed and availed to anybody with interest to read and either agree or disagree with the subject. From an individual to a community, some cultural myths seem worthy in the

sense that they encourage or uplift the spirit (Wessels, 92). Others may not necessarily be so and may seem unrealistic especially if they are prejudicial or implying immorality.

Happily Ever After; the American society as any other society has not been left behind in embracing myths. Many of them believe that happiness can be sought and achieved despite the hardship one may go through. Happiness is attributed to material possessions whereby those who do not have ample material wealth are considered unhappy. The ideology of possessions can be traced through ancient myths some of which are still followed today. Hard work is associated to prosperity and lack of it therefore leads to a lowly life.

Studies have shown that happiness is not related to material or money possessions (Veenhoven, 5). The old notion which led many people to acquire as much as they could has been proven false. Traditionalists believed that it is out of what you possess that gives you the feeling of happiness. People then would strive so much in order to have money so that they may live the rest of their lives happily. It did not matter the means or the extent to which this was sought as long as one could proudly claim he had money. Americans forgot that happiness is never permanent and mostly is derived from being comfortable with what one has, however little.

Obsession with possessions created greed in American people which can never be satisfied. Someone even came up with a term "National Happiness", a system that oversaw people overlook other important issues in order to acquire happiness. Ironically, this myth has wrought greed, selfishness and immorality in the Americans (Alesina & Tella, 3).

The Nuclear Family has been a basis upon which nations are built. The nuclear family is composed of a father, mother and their children. This family set up has been criticized for a very long time due to its lack of universality, essence and modernity (Chester, 111). Industrialization brought out the need to move away to work places and obviously the nuclear family was affected. When the heads of the family began moving to far away places in search of job, there remained a question as to whether those left should still be considered as a nuclear family.

The myth that every nuclear family should cater for itself has contributed negatively in its essence. Most Americans may prefer to be in such families in contrast that whole societies need to live together and cater for each other. Another aspect which makes the nuclear family fail is failure of it being universal. Since other societies in the world have extended families, the notion in Americans mind that only the nuclear family is perfect could be wrong. This is another cultural myth that has pulled back the Americans in their pursuits and has isolated them.

The western culture took the nuclear family as a symbol and went ahead to portray it in art and media. But statistics show that there has been a decline in the number of nuclear families in the America over the past few years. Divorces and remarriages are common and therefore the true definition of a nuclear family has eroded. This goes on to show that the ideal nuclear family that was projected was just another cultural myth which has no place in modern society. It becomes a myth in the sense that sometimes ago; departure from this family set up was seen as immoral and unhealthy by many Americans (Uzoka, 34).

Most Americans have shunned the extended family setup which encouraged communal responsibility, and have upheld nuclear families which promote individualism. The extended family comprises of the nuclear family and the relatives. This type of family is mostly concerned with building relationships which in turn play a role in the wide community. It is only when people begin to care for each other, the immediate community benefits as well as the whole country. It is therefore important that the Americans embrace extended family and break from their cultural myth of nuclear families.

Racial Stereotyping

There have always been contentious issues in regard to racial conflict existing between the whites and the blacks in America. The problem can be traced in the colonial times whereby black slavery was a norm. Blacks then were considered superstitious and primitive. Such a myth has seen them being oppressed for so many years that even now there exists a small percentage of whites who regard them so. They have also been associated with every negative aspect in society from crime, violence and laziness.

An important fact to note is that, were it not for a tradition of viewing black negatively, they too are human and have all the abilities as white have. The cultural myths have engineered a trend that is difficult to deal with in modern society. Some instances where these myths have brought about are cases where people are discriminated according to their skin color. They are denied jobs and other government services just because of their skin color. A recent case during Hurricane Katrina where the government failed to act speedily is a case study for this. It attests to the fact that cultural myths still

have a place in the modern society; albeit the American society ought to shun this evil (Palmer, 75).

Americans have stereotyped many other races. The, Americans have stereotyped many other races and the most affected are the African-Americans. African -American simplification of individuals' behavior is the African-American Stereotyping. They came about into the American culture from the period of colonial settlement, specifically after the collapse of Slave Trade. The minstrel of the earlier blackface illustrates blacks as ignorant, superstitious as well as naïve in addition to been joyous which are the same characteristics which were associated with the slaves. Additionally the African-American have been stereotyped as a race which consists of people who are only good at sports. The act of stereotyping has got to its peak in the media through movies in addition to television. The media has contributed in passing negative information regarding the lifestyle of African-American to the young people. Certain shows aired on the T. V channels demonstrate the false personalities about the African Americans. To make the matters worse, there is a specific video game which has been developed whose main character is an African American who plays only the role of killing, robbing alongside having sexual relations with persons. This indicates an example through which the media has been involved in stereotyping. It is because of these cultural myths that have behaved in negative ways towards each other. They have refused to move away from such myths ignoring the fact that such cause hatred amongst each other.

Mark Twain analyses myths in a perfect way by showing in the characters the effect myths can have on people. The main themes of past, slavery,

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chivalry are expressed well in the book. Self-destruction and or preservation are another aspect that is brought about by the book.

Hank Morgan is a prisoner who has traveled back in time to the sixth century and is sentenced to death before Arthur's court because of his strange dress and appearance. Before the execution is carried out, he is able to buy his freedom by convincing the Arthur that he is a magician. He relies on knowledge that a sun eclipse will take place before he is executed and he convinces the King that he is the cause of it. Hank is given the highest title in the land and he does not fail to ridicule the people who fear him.

Morgan sooner learns about superstitions embraced by the natives and he capitalizes on his superior knowledge to outdo them. Through the magician Merlin, Hank is later discovered as a fake and people start to spread rumor about him. Using his wit he is able to outsmart Merlin again by "calling fire from above". Hank uses his influence to bring about industrialization to that country and also set up schools.

She becomes familiar with the territory he begins to understand the people and their way of life, which are still much in superstitions and myths, and even befriends a girl named Sandy. Hank outsmarts Merlin again in rebuilding a broken water fountain and thus retains power and respect. He convinces all present on his ability to summon the demons. Morgan has a way with the native's lives and together with the king he continues the hold of power.

Sandy gives birth to a baby with Hank and upon the child's illness he is lured to leave the country thus leaving a gap in the country's leadership. The King

and Lancelot fight over Guinevere's infidelity. The church provokes a revolt over Hank and the people start a war. The story ends with the present day where Hank is found dreaming about his lover, Sandy, almost a millennium later. It is argued by some people that the book is an attack on American's values which include materialism and technology. American sentimentalism about the past is also criticized (Twain & Thompson).

In conclusion myths, however good they might be still remain myths. In the modern society, we should be keen to understand the truths about life and work together towards a common goal. The real goal in our cultural diversity should be to see everybody gets food, clothing and shelter and that they can fit in every situation.

Twain in his book looks in the effect myths have on our culture and day to day life. The mythic Arthur is associated with the past in contrast with Hank who symbolizes the present. The church is also brought into perspective and is seen as an evil and an enemy which conspires with political figures to oppress people. Slavery as another social menace should also be done away with. Slavery was embraced by many people in the past since they saw in it a way to get cheap labor and monetary gain. It becomes a cultural myth that Americans now should abolish.

Magic is contrasted with reality in form of industrialization. People in the past relied on magic to achieve their needs but the book shows that such a myth can be done away with through use of technology. Industrialization should be a factor in civilization rather the magic of yesteryears. Many more achievements can be found by training people since human nature allows it.

Training determines the behavior of a society unlike when people rely on myths. They are then able to differentiate between what is right and wrong (Umland & Umland 25).

Besides stereotyping being hurtful, it is wrong as well. Even though the stereotype can be correct in some occasions; relentlessly putting an individual down on the basis of predetermined perceptions cannot assist in motivating one to succeed. Stereotyping only gears people to lead lifestyles of hatred and in some situations stereotypes victims live in fear.

It should be noted that all these myths have had a place in American society and some have tarnished its name. Americans should therefore move away from negative cultural myths, as discussed above, in order to continue as a nation. Above all, all other nations look towards America for guidance and support.