

Cultural influences on myths: legend of the menehune people



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Introduction

Myths, being narratives about early history (Barker, 2014, p. 4) explains social occurrences which involves supernatural events. When it comes to myths, people can be very opinionated when deciding if the myth is true or not. Some people believe it because it is a tale they have been told while growing up or simply because it sounds fantastical, other people choose not to believe it until there is proof of whatever it is they have been told. It has become the responsibility of social scientists, namely Archaeologists and Anthropologists to uncover the truth about these myths. One of the most infamous myths in Hawaii involves the Menehune people and the structures that are believed to have been built by them.

The legend of the Menehune people takes different versions in Martha Warren Beckwith's book, *Hawaiian Mythology* (1940, pp. 227-37). According to Brien Foerster (2000, pp. 15-20) the term Menehune is just a tale which was altered and confused with the factual accounts of the Manahune, the first settlers of the island who were lower in social status compared to the Tahitians. The Menehune people however are believed to have been small figured beings with a height of 15 to 90 centimetres that lived on Kauai before the Polynesian settlers and lived in caves and valleys (Mugner, 2013). Just as any other myth, the legend of the Menehune differs when it comes to the physical description of the Menehune, according to Eberhart (2002, p. 326) they were well dressed, well-built and hairy beings, compared to Mailly (1998) the Menehune had straight long hair that covered their undressed bodies. This is just minor differences between sources on the Menehune people. What many of the sources do agree on is that these beings enjoyed <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-influences-on-myths-legend-of-the-menehune-people/>

bananas, fish and starch. Even though they were playful beings who liked playing games, diving, dancing, making music and singing, they were good at heart as they were known for shooting magical arrows at people who were infuriated, stirring up emotions of love instead. What makes the legend of the Menehune famous is that they were believed to have been exceptional craftsmen, extremely strong, fast and nocturnal (Eberhart, 2002, p. 236). The Menehune have allegedly constructed houses, fishponds, ditches, roads and temples all in one night and if by chance these structures were not complete by sunrise, they would desert the structure. The most famous structures said to have been built by the Menehune is the Alekoko Fishpond, Kikiaolo Ditches, Necker Island Structures, Pa o ka Menehune breakwater and the Ulupo heiau (Foerster, 2000, pp. 15-20) (Paul, 2007). Even though the pond is no longer in use today for fishing, instead it is a wetland for threatened birds. Archaeologists estimate the pond to be over a thousand years old (Foster, 2008, p. 193). the Kikiaolo ditches were built using the same stone used in the Alekoko pond, the ditches lead water to other ponds for irrigation (Foster, 2008, p. 203). Necker Island has to be the most spoken about archaeological site in Hawaii, compared to the other two islands which surround Necker that could have supported a permanent population, the conditions on Necker Island suggest that a permanent population could not be sustained but there is proof of activity on the island (Kirch, 1997, pp. 94-98).

There has always been conflict between science and culture, science being a field whereby something can be proved or disproved, culture on the other hand is something that has been embedded in us, and culture is a way of

life. Just like any other myth, the Menehune myth is believed by some and not by others. There is not much scientific evidence to prove that the Menehune did exist besides the archaeological sites that are said to have been built by the Menehune, but archaeologists are not one hundred percent certain about this. Individuals that are in favour of this myth usually have biases for this notion, culturally it might be that this was a tale that they have grown up with being told which have led them to believe that that the Menehune did in actual fact exist. Others might believe it for the sake of believing it; this can also be considered as a social factor which contributes to the bias. For those that do not believe the myth, they base their opinion on lack of evidence most of the time. It's no lie that how we perceive the world is namely based on our social and cultural biases (Boundless, 2014) to make something more favourable in the world we live in but this can be seen as a problem in some scientific fields such as archaeology and anthropology, because the world today is not the same as it was a hundred years ago, even fifty years ago, there is a major difference in how history is viewed. Scientific theories are in place to prove or disprove a notion and if a researcher is bias towards a specific notion, it is reflected in their work which in turn doesn't provide the desired outcome. In context of the Menehune myth, researchers ultimate goal is to find out if they did or still do exist, they would do this by listening to the local population and their narratives about the Menehune, This can be seen as bias because locals tell researchers what they have heard and what they have been told as part of folklore, this affects how researchers conduct their investigation.

It would be incorrect to say that scientific theories are based on what people believe in, but looking at it logically, what people believe in form the basis of scientific theories, which then form a broader picture to conduct scientific research to prove or disprove the theory, so in essence, science is not a worthless way of looking at the world, but one must consider how people view the world culturally. The world is viewed in many ways, science is just an added way of looking at the world, and the only difference is that science has authenticated justification. This is accomplished through repetitive testing, observation and investigations. Science answers unsolved mysteries, prevents the present generation from making past mistakes to create a better future and most importantly provides a better understanding of humanity. Science might not solve all our problems but it most definitely is a start. The one quality that any person needs to have when evaluating a scientific theory, is that they need to be open minded because science has endless possibilities.

Conclusion

Judging from the above mentioned, it is easy to see that science plays a valuable role in society today, it does not only uncover the truth but new discoveries are made using science. One must not forget however that social and cultural biases also play an important role in society and when it comes to issues regarding myths of any kind, there will always be two sides to the story, the truth that hasn't been uncovered yet and the tales that have been told over the many centuries and the Menehune myth is far from the truth,

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