

Review: *The Rabbit on the Face of the Moon* by Alfredo López Austin

The symbolic nature of myth in Mesoamerican culture is exemplified in all of López Austin's writings collected in *The Rabbit on the Face of the Moon*. His articles on the foundations of myth in Central and South America focus on the development of myth from an oral tradition to a written tradition, most often comprising the substance of the sacred texts of the various Mesoamerican cultures. He moves on to discuss the use of myth to explain the questions surrounding man's origin and place in society. López Austin examines the verbal import of myth in culture, from the use of incantation in myth to the development of sayings as a result of the proliferation of myth. His colorful retelling of the myths of chocolate, the eagle, eclipses, our first parents, and opossums illustrate the literary beauty of myth. Tales of the Antichrist show the use of myth in Christian literature. And finally, López Austin brings his philosophies on myth together to describe the more practical aspects of myth in Mesoamerican society through names, right hand/left hand dichotomies, and dualism's place in classifying civilizations. It is all of these elements that make up the broad category of myth and each element contributes to the overall understanding and importance of myth in Mesoamerican culture. López Austin uses several different examples of myth to explore the building blocks of Mesoamerican society. He cites specific myths as foundations for various rituals and religious beliefs of different cultures and uses the parallels between myths to unite the Mesoamerican people under one cultural umbrella.

López Austin describes myth as an oral tradition that morphs into the sacred written tradition of Mesoamerican cultures. The epic of Gilgamesh, which told the story of a primordial flood common in myth literature, for example, originated in writing in the twenty-fifth century BCE and was written on clay tablets. There is no way to know how long the myth lived before it was written down. López Austin notes that the city wherein the myth of Gilgamesh was set was founded three hundred years prior so it is possible that the myth was centuries old before it was written. Flood myths were among the earliest legends to be both told and written. It is easy to see why they became so prevalent in the early sacred writings of the Mesoamerican people. They all revolve around a rebirth of civilization after a great flood. They represent a second chance for humanity which becomes central in many religions not just in Mesoamerica. Myth, in this instance, plays a very important role in the formation of structured religion itself.

Following along the lines of the early structure of religion, López Austin explores the myth of the first parents of Mesoamericans. Much like the Adam and Eve story, the tale of Oxomoco and Cipactonal describes the birth of humanity from these two godlike creatures. According to López Austin, Christians were very unnerved by this myth because of its unsettling parallel with the Biblical Adam and Eve story. Oxomoco, like Eve, had been altered because of a "sin." López Austin does note, however, that Oxomoco and Cipactonal were very different from Adam and Eve due to their elevated godlike status. Adam and Eve were decidedly human. Oxomoco and Cipactonal were also portrayed as old and driven by an extreme work ethic. López Austin states that the Christian Adam and Eve were punished with work as a result of their sin and death was a final freedom from their human toiling. Oxomoco and Cipactonal, on the other hand, were driven by work, and defined by their ability to work. They even worked in the afterlife. Work was a sign of their being. López Austin uses this myth to note the similarities with Western myth as well as to explain the foundation of Mesoamerican work culture. Farming, spinning, weaving – these are all important features of Mesoamerican society. There is a respect for the elderly and a connection with the earth that stems directly from the myth of Oxomoco and Cipactonal.

López Austin seamlessly connects this idea of a global identification of origin with the use of myth in understanding the connection of the Mesoamerican people specifically as a homogeneous

cultural unit on a foundational level. He states that “Religious unity in Mesoamerica is, of course, a part and a consequence of historical-cultural unity” (Austin, 1996, p. 34). He calls this belief the Mesoamerican “cosmovision” (Austin, 1996, p. 35). He credits the religious similarities as directly creating a type of national identity through the cross-cultural interactions during religious ceremonies. This homogeny suffered at the hands of colonialism when the native Mesoamericans were less able to interact especially in a religious type setting. The myths of the Mesoamericans’ first parents, however, still live in similar versions amongst many of the Latin American natives.

The use of incantations to secretly perpetuate myth is an important aspect to qualify with respect to López Austin’s structure of myth. He asserts that incantations were used in medicinal ways as therapeutic, while at the same time remaining blurred to those not in the know. López Austin states that the “magician-doctors” who use these incantations believe that the myths behind their words lend authority to their way of healing. Keeping the myths used in incantations beneath a veil of mystery adds to the illusion of supremacy of the practitioner by aiding in the impression that the practitioner knows something the patient or bystanders do not.

Like the use of myth in incantations, myth builds the foundation for many of the sayings well known in Mesoamerican culture. The authority that comes with a longstanding myth can advance the acceptance or occurrence of the saying throughout the culture. López Austin uses the myth of the solar paradigm which originated sayings such as “a woman who was being married ‘had found her sun’” and “that a reign without glory was a day with weak sunlight” (Austin, 1996, p. 41). The myth of the pages of Quetzalcoatl led to the saying “the pages were sent” referring to someone who was sent on an errand and did not complete his task. López Austin stresses the importance of sayings in Mesoamerican culture as a bonding agent between people. Everyone knows these sayings and therefore the myth aids in the unification of the culture.

López Austin’s retelling of the myths of the Antichrist in Christian literature, the chocolate problem in Mesoamerican culture, the amazing power of eclipses, and the significance of the opossum to the Mesoamerican peoples further exemplify the foundational power of myth. The entire Christian religion is affected by the threat of the Antichrist which shows up in several passages of the Bible. López Austin relates the Mesoamerican myth of Anton Kristo to that of the Christian Antichrist. Kristo was a bad god who torments the Mesoamerican people and cannot be killed. His characteristics are similar to the sneaky, perpetually imbibed Roman gods as well as the shady Christian Antichrist. He sneaks into the party, gets drunk and is eventually tied to the world’s pillars, never to die. There is an impending doom surrounding Kristo that parallels the Christian beliefs. The problem of chocolate for Mesoamericans is an interesting one for López Austin. He argues the good and bad properties of chocolate and the eternal struggle of the Mesoamerican people with the “amazing fruit.” The power of eclipses in the lives of Mesoamerican women produces several myths. López Austin discusses the belief in the power of eclipses to physically alter the unborn child of a pregnant women who witnesses them. The opossum provides a large source of mythical material for the Mesoamerican culture. The opossum represents the essence of thievery for these people as well as denotes a very important symbol for Mesoamericans, the helix. The myths surrounding the opossum are endless. There are stories of the opossum representing the god Quetzalcoatl, stealing fire to take to the Virgin Mary to keep her warm in the stable at Jesus’ birth, to actually naming Jesus at his birth. López Austin uses opossum myths in several of his articles regarding different aspects of the importance of myth throughout the culture.

López Austin’s description of myth as a general category, as well as specific myths associated with many different facets of Mesoamerican society, creates a history based on storytelling. López Austin’s version of this history reflects a real history colored by tradition. The tradition of myth in Mesoamerican culture serves as the basis for religion and daily life. López Austin cites the birth of some myth from the daily life of Mesoamericans as well as a way to cope with daily life. Myth in this culture has become a way to explain the unexplainable and unify a people under a common history. López

Austin does his job by presenting a layered account of myth that does reinforce the idea of myth as a foundational element and building block of traditional Mesoamerican society.

## Bibliography

Austin, A. L. (1996). *The Rabbit on the Face of the Moon*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

