

Maui – Polynesian God

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Without the Trickster, none of us would be here, and we should give a deep bow in his honor as he is the one who has created all that is. Trickster is one of the more well-known gods in every hierarchy and, as noted in the publication description of Lewis Hyde's work, *Trickster Makes This World*:

The classical trickster figures are most at home on the road or at the twilight edge of town. They are the consummate boundary-crossers, slipping through keyholes, breaching walls, subverting defense systems. Always out to satisfy their inordinate appetites, lying, cheating, and stealing, tricksters are a great bother to have around, but paradoxically they are also indispensable heroes of culture. (Lewis Hyde Publications)

In every system of mythology – be it Greek, Roman, Native American or any other system – there is a god known for his trickster traits with mischievous inclinations and a hearty appetite. In Polynesia, that god is Maui. To gain a better understanding of Maui through comparison, I will discuss the three mythological beings about whom I have the most understanding: Loki, Sun Wu-Kung (the Monkey King) and Kokopelli.

Loki

In the Norse pantheon, Loki is one of the main deities and is connected with magic. He is the fire god and trickster, although he is known by some to be more demonic than godly. A shapeshifter, Loki can be a horse, a fly, a falcon or other animals, as well as a male or female human being. He was born of two giants and, although he is regarded as one of the gods he is more often their enemy. Although Loki is married, he has a mistress, Angrboda, and together they have produced three monstrous, evil daughters.

Although heroic, Loki is cunning and malevolent and grows increasingly objectionable, eventually causing the death of the god of light, Balder. As punishment, Loki is chained to three boulders: one each under his shoulders, his loins and his knees. The gods placed a poisonous snake above his head so that the venom drips on Loki's head. His wife, Sigyn, serves him by catching the venom in a bowl. When the bowl is at capacity, she must leave to empty it and the poison falls unimpeded upon Loki's face. In pain, he twists and causes earthquakes. (Loki, 2001)

Loki is

...known for bringing about chaos and discord, but by challenging the gods, he also brings about change. Without Loki's influence, the gods may become complacent, so Loki does actually serve a worthwhile purpose... (Loki Profile, 2010)

Sun Wu-Kung – the Monkey King

In the Chinese hierarchy, the trickster is Sun Wu-Kung, or Monkey King. He may also be called Handsome Monkey King, Xing Zhe (Traveling Monk), and Pi Ma-Wen, although this last name is an insult and when it is used, it enrages him. Sun Wu-Kung is one of the main players in the tale about the Tang Monk Tripitaka who journeys to Western Heaven to retrieve the Holy Scriptures from Buddha and bring them back to China.

Like Loki, Sun Wu-Kung is associated with chaos. He was hatched from a stone egg that was impregnated by the sky. On a remote island of monkeys, he named himself king and stayed there until he decided he wanted to leave to learn to be immortal, following an elderly traveler. After traveling amongst humans, he found a Taoist priest who agreed to be his teacher. He

traveled through the lands of humans, and finally he found a mountain where a Taoist priest took him on as a student. Sun Wu-Kung excelled at martial arts, magic, shapeshifting and cloud dancing, which was a skill that allowed him to leap thousands of miles with one jump. However, because he was so mischievous, his master eventually expelled him for showing off.

Upon returning to his island, the Monkey King killed all the monsters who had been residing there and began to view himself as equally as powerful as the gods. He soon turned his eyes towards heaven, believing himself as powerful as the gods and demanded the Jade Emperor recognize him as such. When he realized that the name, Pi Ma-Wen, that the Jade Emperor had given him was actually an insult, Sun Wu-Kung became enraged, disrupting heaven. He stole and ate festival peaches that granted immortality as well as immortality pills prepared by Lao Tsu then returned back to his island.

Thus began a battle between gods and monkeys. The gods continually tried to kill the Monkey King but his power was too strong. He was eventually placed in Lao Tsu's cauldron to be exterminated, but this action made him stronger and he jumped out to cause havoc once again. Finally, the Jade Emperor petitioned Buddha for assistance and Buddha enrolled Sun Wu-Kung in a contest. When the Monkey King lost, he was trapped under a mountain and tormented for 500 years.

When he was finally released, the Monkey King was assigned to be the bodyguard for a Tang Monk Tripitaka on his journey to receive the scriptures. Tripitaka was a highly virtuous man whose flesh granted immortality to monsters, which created a dangerous journey due to the constant demonic attacks. However, Sun Wu-Kung was formidable because of his vast

knowledge and ability to transform himself 72 different ways. He was able to shapeshift into anything from a flea to a giant and take on the shape of any creature he has seen. Only gods with very keen vision could see through his disguises. Sun Wu-Kung also possessed this excellent vision so he could see monsters in disguise up to 10,000 miles away during the day.

Additionally, any one of his hairs could also be transformed. With a few of his hairs, Sun Wu-Kung could create an army of his clones.

In addition to his martial art skills, cloud dancing and shapeshifting, he also had a magic weapon that he had won from the Dragon Kings of the ocean. This tool, the Compliant Rod, was reported to weigh more than 13,000 pounds. Interestingly, it was the shape and size of a toothpick and he wore it behind his ear until he was called into battle. At that time, the staff grew and could even clone itself at his command.

The thing I love most about Sun Wu-Kung is this one fact: he does not meditate very well because he cannot sit still, therefore I personally relate to him. (Sun Wu-Kong, 1998)

Kokopelli

The trickster god in many Native American traditions (including the Hopi, Taos, and Acoma Pueblo peoples) is Kokopelli and he is known as the god of fertility. A prankster, healer and story teller, Kokopelli dates back over 3,000 years ago, when the first petroglyphs were carved. His true origin is unknown, but this flute-playing lover is a sacred figure in many traditions. One legend states that he traveled from village to village and would bring about the change of winter to spring. His presence would melt the snow and bring the rains for an abundant

harvest. Kokopelli was also known as the source of human conception because when he showed up, playing his flute, all the villagers danced and sang throughout the night. When everyone awoke in the morning, all the maidens would be pregnant. No matter what tradition is observed, Kokopelli is always known as the source of music-making, dancing and spreading joy.

Kokopelli is represented all around the southwest in petroglyphs. His back is humped which some legends say is actually a sack of seeds. Other traditions present his back as a wide arch. Upon his head, he usually wears a crown with an even number of elements. There has been some discussion regarding this crown:

“In Pueblo culture, the festive crest represents the paired antennae of the katydid (grasshopper), with which he is sometimes associated. When being represented in the "Spirit World", he appears with feathers on his head. In other depictions, the crest on his head represents rays of light.” (Kokopelli, 2008)

Another unique feature of Kokopelli is his unusually long and erect penis which symbolizes the fertile seeds of human reproduction. Over the years, his image has been “cleaned up” with his phallus depicted less frequently in the images. It is believed that this is due to the influence of the Catholic’s work to Christianize the Native Americans.

Because Kokopelli’s nature was so loving, charitable and vital, he has earned a very prominent position in Native American mysticism. His good-natured, carefree way of being brought out the "good" in everyone and because of his irresistible charisma, he has been reinvented for thousands of years. Kokopelli’s legends have him in the role of “magician, storyteller, teacher, healer, trickster, trader or god of the harvest.” (Kokopelli, 2008)

Maui

We now turn to Maui who was a hero in Polynesian mythology. He and his mother decided the days were too short to accomplish anything and Maui believed that if the Sun moved more slowly across the sky, the day would be longer and there would be more time to accomplish that which needed to get done. Maui decided to make a rope that would not be burned by the Sun by using the hair of his wife, Hina. He lassoed the Sun at daybreak and then beat it into submission. This resulted in the Sun slowing its crossing of the sky which prolonged the daylight hours. (Maui Sun, 2001-2010)

Maui was a powerful trickster who is best known for the creation of the Pacific islands. He fashioned a magic fishing hook, threw it into the water and pulled up the ocean floor to create the islands now inhabited by the Polynesians. The son of a god and a mortal woman, Maui performed many deeds to improve life for the humans. He also possessed magical powers and, although small, he was profoundly strong and a beloved hero. (Myth Encyclopedia - Maui, 2010)

Other legends speak of him collecting his grandmother's fingernails to use to gather fire and bring it to the earth. Another tells of the time he challenged the Earthquake God to release the earth from the fear of earthquakes. (Maui and the Earthquake God, 2008) In other legends, he is known to have helped the gods in the creation of man. (Maui the Polynesian)

Conclusion

As can be seen, the tricksters have similarities that carry across several different systems. They each possess magic and bring joy and life to humanity. Each of them is a traveler in his

own right, generally following his appetite and shifting from shape to shape. They are frequently associated with chaos and fire, as well as the seed of creation of humanity. It is they who are responsible for the birth of mankind and the lands which they inhabit. There is also a mischievous element that is a prevailing theme throughout their tales.

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