The Functions of Insects in Mythology

Ron Cherry

Mythology is a fascinating subject that has caught the interest of people from time immemorial. On a superficial level, myths provide colorful stories of interactions between gods, goddesses, people, and nature. Hercules battling monsters, Odysseus returning home, and the Thunderbird swooping down in American skies are examples of dramatic and better known myths. Although lesser known, insects also occur frequently in mythology in roles ranging from trivial to cosmology (Clausen 1954, Hogue 1987, Kritsky and Cherry 2000). It is little wonder that even today in our modern world, mythology is a fountain from which movies and television shows are frequently drawn. However, beyond providing colorful stories, myths also serve several useful functions.

One important function of myths is to explain some feature of life (Leach 1984, Bierlein 1994, Jay 1996). How did my people get fire? Why does a zebra have stripes? Why should I be good? Where will I go when I die? Questions such as these are the subject matter of mythology.

Many myths explain the origin, morphology, and behavior of different insects. The Tlingit indians of North America explain the origin of mosquitoes in a story of a blood-sucking, carnivorous giant who fed on humans. This giant is ultimately avenged after his gruesome death by returning to feed on humans in the form of blood-sucking mosquitoes (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984). Why bees, wasps, and hornets have stingers is explained in an Algonquin story of North America. According to this myth, the god Wakonda gave stingers to bees because the bees were industrious, but needed protection. However, because wasps and hornets claimed to be related to bees (true!), The Great Spirit benevolently endowed them with stinging weapons also (Clausen 1954). Ant behavior is explained in an African myth reminiscent of the everlasting punishments of Atlas, Prometheus, and Sisyphus of classical mythology. In the African myth, an everlasting punishment of carrying a burden is passed on to ants by trickery. Ergo, we see the result today in ants frequently carrying objects in their daily routine (Abrahams 1983).

Besides explaining different facets of insect biology, insect myths also help explain the world in which we live. Why is ancient pottery almost always found broken? The Navajos observed that beetles of the Rhipiphoridae wander among scattered heaps of broken pottery and carry tiny pots (vestigial wing covers) on their shoulders. They say that these insects are in league with a monster that breaks the pottery of the dead and that it is this beetle that smashes into small fragments the pottery that is found at ancient village sites (Clausen 1954). On a larger scale, a Cherokee myth tells of how a water beetle dove into a watery Lower World and brought back mud to make earth from which mountains and valleys were formed (Wilkinson 1998). And on a truly cosmic scale, the formation of our galaxy, the Milky Way, is explained in an insect myth of the Cochiti. According to this myth an *Eleodes* beetle (Fig. 1) was in charge of placing stars in the sky. Because of arrogance and carelessness, the stars were dropped, hence forming the Milky Way. So ashamed was the beetle at what he had done, that even today, the beetle hides his face in the dirt when approached. And it is true that *Eleodes* when approached will lower its head, raise its abdomen, and emit a disagreeable odor probably for defense (Clausen 1954). Here a simple insect myth explains not only insect behavior, but also the origin of our own galaxy.

Fig. 1. The origin of the avoidance behavior of the *Eleodes* beetle is explained in a Cochiti myth (Clausen 1954).

Another function of myths is to provide a basis for social cohesion (Bierlein 1994, Jay 1996). A shared mythology is a strong social tie. A particular people, for example, traditionally live by fishing. They have a myth that tells how, long ago, a supernatural being taught their ancestors how to catch fish. This story explains how they became fishermen, validates their traditional fishing customs, and gives them a sense of sharing in the existence of their ancestors through their way of life (Cavendish 1993). Myths also may provide social cohesion by justifying a social structure (Jay 1996) and being the basis of governments and national identity (Bierlein 1994).

Myths explaining the common origin of a people provide social cohesion to those people, and insects play important roles in many of these myths. According to Khoisan traditions, the first living thing on earth was the tiny praying mantis, and it was he who created the earliest beings, including humans (Willis 1993). One of the tribes of Sumatra claims to be descended from three brothers hatched from eggs laid by a butterfly, and in Madagascar and among the Naga tribes of Manipur some trace their ancestry to a butterfly (Leach 1984). Several insects occur in the Navajo "Story of Creation" also called the "Story of Emergence" (Locke 1976). This complex mythology is not only a basis of ceremonials, but also considered a history of the Navajos. Insects themes such as "Insect People," "White Locust," and "Grasshopper People" are an important part of this elaborate mythology explaining Navajo origins.

A totem is an animal or natural object considered to be related by blood to a given family or clan and taken as its symbol (Guralnik 1982). Totems provide social cohesion to aboriginal groups. The term totem is derived from the native term *ototeman* of the Ojibwa "his sibling kin," Algonguian *nto' te - m*, "my kin," Cree *ototema*, "his kin," and so forth in other Algonquian dialects. In several of these dialects it refers to the animal associated with a clan or gens group, who is either regarded as the mythical ancestor of the group, or a protector and friend of the group (Leach 1984). Totemic identity is extremely important to the Australian aborigines (Cowan 1992), and the best examples of insect totems are found among these people. In Australian Aranda myths, a primal ancestor of the witchetty grub totemic group produced humans that metamorphosed back and forth between humans and witchetty grubs (Poignant 1967). Both bees and ants are totems as the Honey Ancestor and Honey Ant Ancestor (Fig. 2), respectively, in several Australian aboriginal clans (Caruana 1993) and the Wutnimmera or Green Cicada totem is found in the Urbunna tribe of southern Australia (Cowan 1992). These insect-based totems provide social cohesion by offering group identity and may even dictate social restrictions between members of different totems.

A third function of myths is to provide moral order (Campbell 1968, Bierlein 1994). Many mythologies have gods who behave in a way that their people are supposed to emulate. These are also numerous hero myths, which occur in most mythologies in which a human behaves particularly courageously or nobly. Sometimes these myths are based on real historical figures, but not always (Jay 1996). In addition, many animals including insects frequently occur in myths that show how one should lead a moral life, or to show the consequences of not doing so.

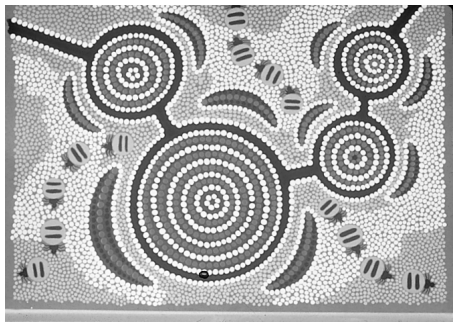

Fig. 2. An Australian aboriginal painting, "Going for honey ants." Ants are totems as the Honey Ant Ancestor among Australian aborigines (Caruana 1993).

In many myths, insects are used to show the outcome of inappropriate behavior. The arrogance of the *Eleodes* beetle, which resulted in shame as shown in the insect's behavior (Clausen 1954), was noted earlier. Another Native American myth tells the fate of two tribes of people who lived near each other. One tribe looked for food and conserved it wisely while the other tribe played and sang and danced all day. Eventually, the Great Spirit reacted by making the industrious tribe into bees and the lazy tribe into flies (Clausen 1954). Hence, bees fly from flower to flower eating honey while flies eat food that has been thrown out, apparently a justified fate for lazy people (Fig. 3). Interestingly, this latter myth is a good example of parallel mythology (Kritsky and Cherry 2000) because it also occurs in a very similar form among Australian aborigines. Although there are small variations between the myths, in the Australian myth an industrious tribe of people also turn into bees and a lazy tribe into flies (Reed 1965).

The fate of one's soul has also been explained through insect myths. Some Mexican cultures believed that souls were immortal, going to different places and

Fig. 3. Silver tetradrachm coin from Ephesus, Ionia, 387-295 BC. Ephesus was the center of worship of the goddess Artemis of whom the bee was a cult symbol (Fagerlie 1964). Bees frequently occur in insect myths as examples of moral virtue.

through different phases. For example, after death the souls of the aristocracy inhabited birds or higher animals, but plebeian souls entered into leeches and insects (Nicholson 1983). Analogously, Solomon islanders have a myth that in the afterworld, common and idle people become white ants' nests and serve as food for the more vigorous souls of influential men (Poignant 1967).

Insects also occur in myths as "enforcers" or punishments to guarantee virtuous

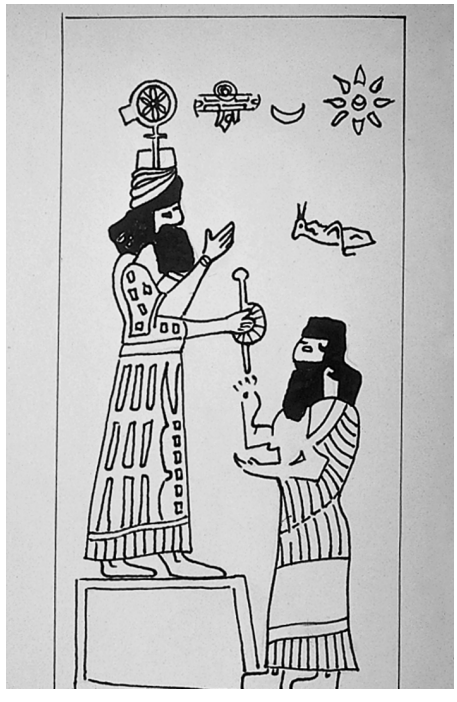

Fig. 4. Enamel plate from Qal at Sharquat, Iraq, representing an Assyrian noble in a locust prayer before the god Ashur. Drawing from Cloudsley-Thompson (1976). Locusts and other pest insects frequently occur in myths as punishments for immoral behavior.

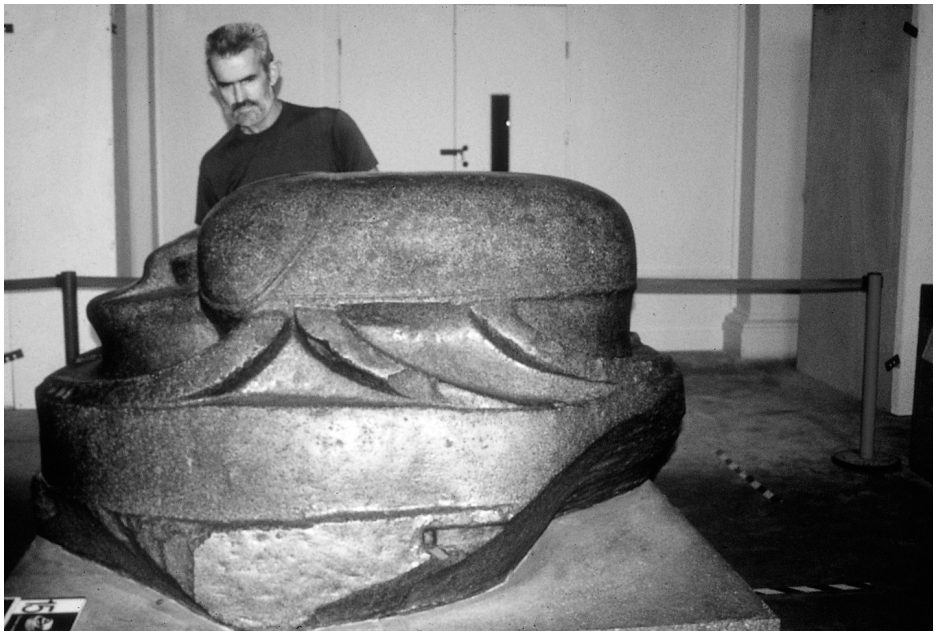

Fig. 5. Sacred scarab at the British Museum in London. The colossal scarab is made from granite and dates from the Ptolemaic period (about 200 BC) The sacred scarab was a symbol of rebirth (Cherry 1985, Kritsky 1991).

behavior. In the Bible, of the 10 plagues that were sent by God to Pharaoh's Egypt at the instigation of Moses and Aaron, three were insect plagues, namely lice, flies, and locusts (Smith et al. 1973) (Fig. 4). According to Danish legend the flea was sent to pester mankind as a punishment for laziness (Leach 1984). An interesting insect myth with moral overtones is also found in Native American mythology. The Montagnais of eastern Canada believed that the overlord of fish, particularly salmon and cod, was Big Biter (*Tabanus affinis* Kirby). This fly appeared whenever fish were being taken from the water and hovered over the fisherman to see how his subjects were being treated. Occasionally, Big Biter would bite the fisherman to remind him that the fish were protected by the fly and to warn him against wastefulness (Speck 1935). And, the most extreme examples of insects used to punish occur in different hells in Chinese mythology. A sixth hell is ruled by Pien cheng who punishes those guilty of sacrilege. Among the various punishments meted out to sinners there is being devoured by locusts. A ninth hell is ruled by Tu-shi who punishes incendiaries and obscene painters. This hell is divided into 16 smaller hells where punishments are administered, such as being devoured by wasps, ants, scorpions, and serpents (Mercatante 1966).

A fourth important function of myths is to control natural forces (Jay 1996). Once you have gods, you can influence them by making sacrifices, offering prayers, or performing rituals. Two of the more interesting examples of insects being used in myths to influence natural forces are found in Indian and Australian mythology. In India, the Dravidians practiced conciliatory control. The custom was to catch a locust, decorate it, reverence it, and let it go, which in turn would cause the swarm to depart (Leach 1984). And to Australian aborigines, native bees were important providers of honey. Once the nest was found, the "sugar bag" was eagerly devoured—wax, honey, pupae, dead bees, ants, and all. The stick that was used to pry the sugar bag from the tree was thrown into a fire. This simple act allowed the spirits of the bees to return to the heavens where they stayed until Mayra, the wind of spring, breathed life into the flowers again. Then the bees returned to earth thus providing more honey for mankind (Reed 1965).

The preceding insect myths clearly show that mythology is more than just entertaining stories. A beetle creates a galaxy by mistake (Clausen 1954). Wasps and ants devour sinners (Mercatante 1966). A sacred scarab (Fig. 5) holds the promise of life after death (Cherry 1985, Kritsky 1991). Myths such as these provide explanations for origins of our physical world, provide social cohesion and moral order, and allow people to try to influence nature. Myths, including many insect myths, thus function to help solve some of the most fundamental questions of our human existence.

Acknowledgments

I thank my wife Susan Gould who prompted me to travel, which opened my eyes to mythology around the world.

References Cited

Abrahams, R. D. 1983. African folktales. Pantheon, New York.

Bierlein J. F. 1994. Parallel myths. Ballentine, New York.

Campbell, J. 1968. Creative mythology - the masks of god. Penguin, New York.

Caruana, W. 1993. Aboriginal art. Thames and Hudson. New York.

Cavendish, R. 1993. Mythology - an illustrated encyclopedia. Barnes and Noble, New York.

Cherry, R. 1985. Sacred scarabs of ancient Egypt. Bull. Entomol. Soc. Am. 31:14-16.

Clausen, L. W. 1954. Insect fact and folklore. MacMillan, New York.

Cloudsley-Thompson, Jr. 1976. Insects and history. St. Martins, New York.

Cowan, J. G. 1992. The elements of the aborigine tradition. Element, Rockport, MA.

Erdoes, R., and A. Ortiz. 1984. American Indian myths and legends. Pantheon, New York.

Fagerlie, J. 1964. Monies of antiquity. Nat. Hist. 73: 20-26.

Guralnik, D. 1982. Webster's New World dictionary. Simon and Schuster, New York.

Hogue, C. L. 1987. Cultural entomology. Annu. Rev. Entomol. 32: 181-199.

Jay, R. 1996. Mythology. NTC, Chicago, IL.

Kritsky, G. 1991. Beetle gods of ancient Egypt. Am. Entomol. 37: 85-89.

Kritsky, G., and R. Cherry. 2000. Insect mythology. Writers Club Press, New York.

Leach, M. 1984. Funk and Wagnalls standard dictionary of folklore, mythology, and legend. Harper, San Francisco, CA.

Locke, R. F. 1976. The book of the Navajo. Mankind, Los Angeles, CA.

Mercatante, A. S. 1996. Good and evil in myth and legend. Barnes and Noble, New York.

Nicholson, I. 1983. Mexican and Central American mythology. Hamlyn, London.

Poignant, R. 1967. Oceanic mythology. Paul Hamlyn Limited. London.

Reed, A. W. 1965. Aboriginal fables. Reed Books, Frenchs Forest, Australia.

Smith, R., T. Mittler, and C. Smith. 1973. History of entomology. Annual Review, Palo Alto, CA.

Speck, F. G. 1935. Naskapi: the savage hunters of the Labrador Peninsula. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Wilkinson, P. 1998. Illustrated dictionary of mythology. DK Publishing, New York.

Willis, R. 1993. Mythology - an illustrated guide. Barnes and Noble, New York.

Ron Cherry is with the University of Florida (IFAS) at the Everglades Research and Education Center, 3200 E. Palm Beach Road, Belle Glade, FL 33430. His research interests are insect pests of rice, sugarcane, and turf. He also has a passion for mythology and has published several papers on insect mythology. Recently Gene Kritsky and he published the book "Insect Mythology" (see *References Cited*). This is the first book dedicated specifically to showing the important roles insects have played in mythology.