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Myth, Memory, And Identity: Cosmology In Mara Oral Tradition

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Abstract
Mara folk narratives preserve not only stories of supernatural encounters but also myths that frame the people's understanding of the cosmos, humanity's origins, and cultural identity. This article examines the cosmological dimension of Mara oral tradition, focusing on creation myths, flood myths, and afterlife beliefs. Through narratives such as the orphan Thluapa, the origin of Pala Lake, and stories of journeys to the otherworld, the article shows how Mara myths are both explanatory and identity-forming. They provide memory, meaning, and moral direction for a community once defined by animist beliefs and oral storytelling.

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I. Introduction

Myths are the oldest form of storytelling. They answer questions about the origin of the world, the fate of the dead, and the forces that govern life. For the Mara, myths were not mere entertainment but the framework of existence. As Hamlet Hlychho notes, the Mara worldview "acknowledged the power of spirits in every corner of life" (2). Their myths reflect not only cosmological speculation but also cultural memory and communal identity.

The Mara, numbering around fifty thousand today, live primarily in the southernmost part of Mizoram and across the border in Myanmar's Chin State. Historically known to outsiders as "Lakher" or "Shendu," the Mara trace their migration from the Chin Hills during the seventeenth century (Parry 12; Ray 53). Traditionally, they practiced shifting cultivation, lived in fortified villages, and were once feared for headhunting raids, which, as Hamlet Hlychho notes, served both social and spiritual functions (10). Christianity, introduced by R. A. Lorrain in 1907, radically transformed their religious practices, yet their oral traditions still preserve animistic cosmologies that continue to shape cultural identity.

This article explores how Mara myths engage with cosmology and identity. By retelling key stories—the creation, the flood, the orphan Thluapa, and landscape myths—we see how memory and meaning intertwine, and how oral tradition carried forward the identity of a people negotiating with both nature and the supernatural.

Creation and the Cosmic Order

Though fragmentary, Mara oral tradition preserves traces of creation myths centered on Khazohpa, the supreme being. Recognized by early ethnographers as a high god concept, Khazohpa was credited with creating the world and receiving annual sacrifices of pigs (hrôpi bao) as acknowledgment of his power (Parry 350; Zohra 2).

Creation myths often set the stage for a world already filled with spirits. Unlike the monotheistic vision of an empty universe made orderly by a god, Mara myths imagine creation as coexistence—a crowded cosmos where deities, spirits, humans, and animals entered life together. This worldview reinforced the sense that humans were not alone but participants in a living, spirit-filled universe.

Central to Mara cosmology was Khazohpa, the high god, acknowledged even by missionaries as evidence of monotheistic insight. But the Mara did not distinguish gods from spirits in sharp categories. Malevolent beings such as the Lyurahripa haunted cliffs, rivers, and forests, while benevolent ones like Zo or Lasino offered protection (Parry 350; Hlychho 83). Spirit-mediums (lyhburpa) diagnosed illnesses by tracing them to spiritual displeasure, and sacrifices of pigs, fowls, and dogs were offered to restore harmony. Every

person was believed to carry two spirits—one good and one evil—making humans themselves contested sites of the cosmological struggle.

The Flood Myth

Like many cultures worldwide, the Mara preserved a flood myth that explains both destruction and renewal. According to oral accounts, a catastrophic deluge engulfed the land, sparing only a few who sought refuge on mountaintops or in trees. In some variants, a giant serpent or python is slain, its blood creating rivers and lakes.

The origin of Pala Lake is closely tied to this cycle of destruction. A colossal python that terrorized the people was eventually killed, its oozing blood filling the valley and forming the lake. Even today, locals report the water turning reddish at times, believed to be the python's blood rising again.

Such myths carry multiple layers of meaning. They account for natural geography, explain ecological change, and symbolize resilience. By rooting memory in landscape, the Mara made their environment sacred, each hill and lake a witness of mythic time.

Death, Afterlife, and the Myth of Thluapa

Myths also offered insight into death and the afterlife. The tale of Thluapa, an orphan boy, is central here. Neglected by humans, he found companionship with river spirits (Khasôh) who taught him the secret "Dance of the Dead" (Athihpa La). The dance was meant for guiding souls to the afterlife, but when Thluapa revealed it to mortals, he was punished with death.

This myth reveals a profound connection between myth, ritual, and death. The afterlife was not a distant abstraction but a journey requiring proper rites and secrecy. Knowledge of death belonged to the spirit world, and human transgression of that boundary invited destruction. The story also affirms identity through memory: Thluapa, the rejected orphan, becomes central to the community's mythic understanding of mortality.

Landscape Myths and Memory

Myths were not only about cosmic time but also about place. The Chyva Lih pool in the Beino River is remembered as the site of Nârâ and Kiathyu's fateful battle, marked by sword cuts and footprints (K mara 23). Hills, rivers, and caves are narrated as sites where spirits dwelled, lovers met, or ancestors took refuge.

By linking memory to landscape, Mara myths transformed geography into cultural identity. Every place was storied, and every story reaffirmed the Mara as a people living in dialogue with their land.

Myth and Identity Formation

For the Mara, myths served three key functions:

1. Explanatory – They explained origins of people, places, and natural events.
2. Moral – They embedded values, such as the dangers of transgression (Thluapa) or the necessity of sacrifice (flood myths).
3. Identity-forming – They preserved collective memory, tying people to landscape and shared ancestry.

As Parry observed, "the whole life [of the Mara] was overshadowed by spirits" (350). Myths encoded this worldview, but they also gave the Mara a sense of who they were—a people living at the intersection of natural and supernatural, past and present, memory and survival.

II. Conclusion

Mara myths are more than old stories. They are cultural maps of meaning, tracing how a community understood creation, destruction, death, and belonging. From the cosmic dance of Thluapa to the blood of the python that formed Pala Lake, these stories bind memory to identity.

In preserving them, we do not only archive folklore but also honor a worldview in which the world itself is storied, every river and hill alive with myth. For the Mara, myth was not a past but a living memory, sustaining identity in a spirit-filled cosmos.

For the Mara, myths were not only about explaining the cosmos but also about affirming identity. Even after the arrival of Christianity, old myths continued to be retold, sometimes reinterpreted through new lenses, but always carrying the memory of who the Mara were as a people. By sacralizing their landscape and embedding their history in myth, they ensured cultural continuity. Myth was, and remains, a vessel of Mara identity, carrying memory through generations, binding people to land, and weaving cosmology into culture.

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