

Ancient Greeks Myths and Rituals

But come, let all the people build for me a great temple
and an altar beneath it, below the steep walls of the city
above Kallichoron, upon the rising hill.
And I myself with inaugurate my mysteries,
so that from now on you may perform them in all purity
and be reconciled to my heart.

Jules Cashford and Nicholas Richardson

These words belong to Demeter from the Homeric hymn to Demeter. In Greek mythology Demeter was a Goddess of grain and fertility; in this hymn she is invoked as the “bringer of seasons” and she is saying these words to Metaneira (Cashford and Richardson 5). The meaning of this passage is the following: Demeter’s daughter, Persephone, was carried away from her mother to Hades who wanted to marry her. Demeter has been wandering for nine days all around the world looking for her. After she found out the truth about her daughter’s abduction she turned herself into an old woman and left Olympus; she had been knocking about the world until she got to the house of Keleos where she became a nurse for his son. There she had to reveal herself, and tell Metaneira who she was. The words from the above mentioned passage are her confession.

Different myths, such as the one about Demeter, testify to the fact that ancient Greeks believed piously into the existence of gods and practiced various rituals to achieve blessing in all of their deeds and thoughts. Greek religion recognized fourteen different gods and goddesses the major of which were Zeus, Hera, Hades, Ares, Hermes, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Demeter, Athena, Hestia, Artemis, Dionysus, Apollo, and Hephaestus; also, there was a number of less important gods worshipped by ancient Greeks. Olympian gods were the most powerful ones; according to Greek beliefs, twelve gods resided at the top of Mount Olympus; Hades resided at the underworld and Dionysus on the island of Nysa. Greek religion

introduced different myths and rituals through festivals and sacrifices which were practiced to please the gods and to win their favor; myths and rituals served the function of preserving social order by unifying people and sustaining their connection with gods; the cult of worship was also common for ancient Greeks, who used to practice it to show their faith in gods.

Myths and ritual routine were strongly connected to each other in ancient Greece. Greeks organized the festivals several times a year and definite festivals were organized on a regular basis. Animal sacrifice was the most wide-spread form of worship to the gods; each of the gods was believed to be responsible for the welfare of people in their own specific aspect. There were gods and goddesses of fertility, harvest, marriage, earthquakes, light and sun, hunt, etc. Animal sacrifices were brought to those gods who, according to the myths, could help people get the desired. People resorted to sacrifices not only on the occasion of festivals but every time they needed a favor from the gods. This could include, for instance, sacrifices for public good, such as: asking for better harvest at the beginning of spring, for rains during the drought in summer as well as the ones that had personal significance: for luck in marriage, children, or health. Animals were slaughtered outside the temple at special altars and usually a great number of people witnessed the sacrifice. Those could be citizens of the whole town, who demanded public good or separate parties, which conducted the sacrifice for some personal good. The meat of the animal which was sacrificed was not usually eaten by those who witnessed the sacrifice. Most of the meat was sold at the market after carrying out the sacrifice. If the sacrifice was to be brought to the gods of the underworld, the whole animal was burned and the meat was not allowed to be eaten by human beings. Sacrifice was also an integral part of some of the civic festivals.

The festivals were held on major occasions, most of the time important for the whole state. Greeks even had special calendars, which specified the dates of such occasions, the names of participants, types of offerings which were supposed to be made, and the beneficiaries of the sacrifices. One of such festivals was Diipolia which was dedicated to Zeus. It was held on the 14th Scirophorion (this is approximately in June or July) in Athens and involved a sacrifice of an ox. Killing a laboring ox was rigidly forbidden and was considered to be a sin because this animal was a helper of man; however, it was allowed on the occasion of the festival as an exception. Since it was a sacrifice to Zeus – the most formidable god, who was also the protector of the city, the slaughter was believed to be justified. Other festivals included Chloia (it was a spring festival dedicated to Demeter held in Eleusis; Greeks sacrificed goats on this day), Cynophontis (dedicated to the son of Apollo who was killed by dogs; the festival involved sacrificing dogs in Argos), Thesmophoria (dedicated to Demeter; this festival was held in various parts of Greece in October; it involved sacrificing pigs, which granted people good harvest), etc. The rituals carried out on the days of the festivals show that myths play a significant part in them. Animals were sacrificed to honor the gods, which Greek people sacredly believed in and were afraid of. Myths about different gods convinced people that making sacrifices was necessary for the welfare of their town and the whole nation; these rituals show how strong faith of Greeks in their gods was, heated with thousands of legends and myths.

Myths and rituals also served definite social functions. One of their major functions was preserving social order. They constituted Greek culture and created a certain social bond between people. They were nourished and protected, by being passed through generations. Myths and rituals created a sense of group identity and

distinguished Greeks from other nationalities and nations; they allowed Greeks perceive their nation as a whole and possess something peculiar only for their culture. Myths gave people hope which could be then realized by means of the rituals; when something did not work out in their lives, they knew that it took a mere sacrifice to change it for the better; this made their spirit stronger and allowed them to feel more confident about the righteousness of their beliefs and values. Another function of myths and rituals was their ability to establish connection between gods and ordinary people. This connection depended on the rituals and sacrifices given how much people believed in it and how much they tried to preserve it. Involving supernatural agents into the lives of ordinary people, allowed creating definite rules and sanctions to follow; gods served as absolute authorities who could not be objected to.

The society itself perpetuated the myths about gods and invented the cult worship to make sure that the rituals will be sustained by future generations. Cult worship included worshipping to different objects, which symbolized gods and making sacrifices for them. Ancient Greeks worshipped a wooden sculpture of Athena in the Parthenon. The statue was covered with gold and ivory and was clothed in peplos, a real dress. Every four years the dress was changed during the festival dedicated to Athena. This cult worship was of a large scale, it gathered the whole city. In a smaller scale, the cult worship consisted in worshipping to different gods in different ways. For example, when praying to heavenly gods, the Greeks stood on their feet stretching their arms up to the sky, but when they wanted to pray Hades, who was the king of the underworld, they had to stand on their knees and to hit the earth as strong as they could for the prayer to be heard. Ancient Greeks believed in punishment by the gods in case they refused to praise them. This was

based on the myth about Meropis who was turned into an owl by Athena for her disrespect.

On the whole, Greek religion absorbed numerous myths and rituals the ancient Greeks believed in and sacredly observed. From the myths, the new generations found out about the gods their ancestors believed in and preserved the tradition of worshipping to these gods. Ancient Greeks believed that sacrificing animals for gods would bring them the desired, whether it was materialistic or not. The Greeks organized festivals to worship separate gods; these festivals were held in definite cities and on certain dates. Among the most important ones there were the festivals dedicated to Zeus, the protector of the city, Hera, the goddess of marriage, and Demeter, the goddess of harvest. The cult worship passed from one generation to another and consisted in worshipping to statues and other objects which, as they believed, would make the gods hear their prayers.

Work Cited

Cashford, Jules, and Nicholas Richardson. *The Homeric Hymns*. Penguin Classics, 2003.