

Stories from Around the World

COVER
NOT FINAL

MYTHICAL TALES

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THE FIRST WORDS

A Quiché-Maya Tale from South America

Est, si inia. Atus ima estem fugiatur sedit faccumqui inis delique ipsam quis magnihio to enita et am, qui quiam nihita dolupta turecum, cor mo et quida. Eni tem est, sequibea tur re maximus nihil mo odismis vitam, acaseritatur sitiundanis a velisti busciisque maximus quitatum quae consequo tet, ea venis doluptat repudisimet quis et estium rero corpore molorat iundand itiorehendae mil inum sim sit alibust iorpora efereptur molorpo tempero rporati nihita asperfe rectota sstem estis aut im estibus

In the beginning, Tepeu, the shape-shifting Creator and Gukumatz, the feather-winged serpent, lived in the sky above a below that was nothing but emptiness and rolling dark water. Together, they had an idea.

"I am beautiful, and I wish to create something beautiful," said Gukumatz to Tepeu.

"I take many shapes, and I wish to create reflections of them all," said Tepeu to Gukumatz.



They knew what to do. It was easy, really. All they had to do was speak to the emptiness so that it would hear. So Tepeu and Gukumatz spoke and their words echoed all around.

"Let it be done! Let the emptiness be replaced by the Earth!"

SNAP! In that instant, Earth became a reality, emerging like a cloud forms out of water.

"Craggy mountains! Green plains! Deep valleys! Canyons! forests! Vegetation! fruits!"

Everything they could think of they said, and everything they said, was created.

Gukumatz shook their scaly feathers and said, "My friend, it was good that we agreed on this. This new place is magnificent!"

"My friend, we have only just begun!" replied Tepeu. "Now we have set things in motion, there is Time. This darkness above you is called Night – the first night before the Dawn of Creation. But night will fade. If we the Creators want to be part of our new world, we must make beings that move and think before the First Sun rises. They will live here and worship us with words like our own."



DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES

A tale from Ancient Greece

Greek myth is bursting with colourful gods and goddesses and their dramatic dealings with each other – contests, trickery, family feuds and lots more. But some of the most strange and fascinating stories are about what happens between gods and people. Dionysus – son of the mighty god Zeus but also half-human himself – is known as the god of wine, pleasure and inspiration.

This story is about one of his extremely creative ways of punishing humans who annoy him...



Long ago, a fast ship sped East, hot sunlight casting its shadow on the sparkling sea. The wind filled its sails and rows of wooden oars cut through the water, worked by strong sailors. On the ship's deck, twenty pirates smiled. The ship's hold was full of gold, jewels, fine delicacies, and something even better: a rich passenger who was going to make their fortunes!

That morning, a young man with diamond-bright eyes, rich purple robes and long dark hair, had waved and called from a clifftop:

“Sailors! Take me to the island of Naxos. I'll pay you well!”

The pirates agreed, and the young man had boarded the ship. But the pirates didn't just take goods, they were kidnappers too. The ship sailed straight past Naxos, and the captain cried, “You're our captive now! Your family will pay a ransom, or we'll sail east and sell you as a slave!”

The young man did not answer. He did not look worried either. He just stood there, eyes glittering, mouth curled up in a secret smile.



"Take him! Tie him up!" the captain ordered.

The crew obeyed. They grabbed the young man by the arms and legs, and uncurled a strong rope woven from strands of flax. The young man sat smiling as they tied his wrists together behind his back. Then, still smiling, he looked into their eyes, raised his hand and ran it through his hair. The ropes fell away as if they had never been there.

"Idiot!" said one of the pirates. "You've tied the wrong knot!" He re-tied the rope but that knot fell away too. In the gathering dark, the young man smiled. Sailors know all kinds of knots, and they tried them all, but each one came undone as soon as it was tied.

On deck, the Captain, along with the Helmsman – whose job it was to steer the ship – heard the pirates' cries and came running. Both saw the young man, surrounded by broken ropes, still smiling, skin glowing with an inner light.

But only the helmsman's eyes widened in terror as he whispered, "Captain, this is no man – I'm sure it is one of the mighty gods in disguise! We must not anger the gods. If it is Zeus, great god of the sky, he could crush us with his thunderbolt.

If it is Poseidon, great god of the sea, he could send waves and rocks to smash our ship to bits. Apollo could send bright sun to scorch us, and music to send us mad. Sail to shore now and release him!"

"Don't be ridiculous," sneered the Captain. "If ropes won't tie him, then lock him up. We proceed as planned."

The pirates obeyed. Soon all hands were back on deck, or seated at their oars, racing through the sea with the setting sun behind them, the only sounds their voices and the sloshing of the water.

Then, strange things started to happen...



First, the night air filled with the sound of flutes and drums, a tune so lively that each and every pirate stopped what they were doing and began to smile and tap their feet. Where was it coming from? They looked around: dark red liquid oozed up between the polished wooden planks of the ship's deck. It smelled so sweet it made their mouths water. Wine! Then they looked up and saw something even stranger.

"The mast! Something is growing out of it!" the pirates cried as one. It was. As the sweet smell stole across the ship, grape vines sprang out of the dead wood of the main mast, tangling with the white sail. Ripe bunches of grapes, black, green and red, fell onto the deck. At the same time, green tendrils of ivy curled around the ships' oars, locking them in place.

"Helmsman, you were right! Take the ship to the nearest land and release the prisoner." But the ship would not move. Oars locked, mast overrun with garlands of grapevines and flowers, the ship stood as still as if it had run aground.

ROAR!

Everyone gasped as the door they had locked behind the young man burst open and a huge lion leapt out onto the deck, dark flowing mane and glittering eyes fixed on the ship's crew.

The lion roared again: a huge shaggy bear appeared at the other end of the deck, jaws snapping and paws swiping. Another roar: ghostly lynxes and tigers poured out of the lion's mouth and settled at its feet, teeth bared. Reptiles helter-skeltered down the ivy-choked mast.

The crew screamed with fear, but there was nowhere to run. So, one by one they jumped overboard, into the darkening sea – and as they did so, each of them began to change shape.



DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES

Arms, feet and legs melted away, brown skin turned shiny and grey, faces elongated into bottle-nosed shapes – they were becoming dolphins!
Soon, the moonlight reflected off their shining grey backs as they leapt in and out of the water in confusion, their human voices changing forever to a sea-language of whistles and clicks.

On the top deck, a lion's roar changed into the sly laughter of a young man with long flowing hair and purple robes, his glittering eyes watching the pirates – now diving dolphins – who would never be able to kidnap anyone ever again.

The helmsman was the only one left on the ship. Shaking with fear, he looked up at the young man, who he knew was not a young man at all.

“Wh—who are you? Please don’t turn me into anything!” he begged.

The young man smiled and beckoned.

“Do not be afraid. You have pleased me: you knew me when nobody else did. I am not Zeus, or Poseidon, or Apollo – I am Dionysus, god of the dance, god of vines and festivities. When I speak, all the beautiful things that grow, listen. Take me back to Naxos. Now!”

The helmsman turned the ship and did as he was told, leaving the dolphins behind.





THE GOLDEN CHAIN

A Yoruba Tale from Nigeria

Est, si inia. Atus ima estem fugiatur sedit facumqui inis deliquit ipsam quis magnifici to entia et an qui quiam nihita dolupta turecum, cor mo et quia. Eni tem est, sequibeat iur re maximus nihil mo odissim vitam, acerseritatur sitiundanis a velisti busciisique maximus quiatum quae consequo ter, ea venis doluptat repudisimet quis et estium rero corpore molorat iundand iorehendae mil inum sim sit alibust iorpora eferreptur molorpo tempore rporati nihita asperfe rectota ssitem estis aut im estibus milibus et

In the beginning, the Orisha were the only beings in the universe. Their ruler was Olorun, god of the sky-realm. Down below, the Orisha Olokun ruled over a world where there was nothing but water. Life was bright and busy in the sky-realm so nobody bothered to look down – nobody except Obatala, who loved to explore. One day, he had an idea.

“Olokun’s watery world looks so boring. Someone should make it more interesting... and that person should be me! I will go to the sky-palace and ask Olorun for permission to go down and see what I can see.”

From his throne of clouds and precious stones, Olorun heard Obatala’s request, and gave his answer. “Very well, you may go down to Olokun’s realm, but getting there will not be easy. You must seek the assistance of my son Orunmilla, who has the power to see the future. Go to his residence and ask him what you need to complete this task.”

When Obatala arrived at Orunmilla’s hut, he was sitting outside the door, before a sacred tray carved with faces, figures and strange shapes. On a mat by his side lay sixteen cowrie shells in four small piles.

“Obatala: I have been expecting you. Come, sit, and I will reveal the answer to your question.”

Obatala sat on the opposite side of the sacred tray, and Orunmilla picked up each pile of cowrie shells and cast them onto the tray. He peered at each pile, and through the pattern they made on the tray, he calculated meanings in ways only he could understand. Then, he looked straight at Obatala. “Here is what you must do. Go and gather gold – all the gold in the sky-realm should be enough – and fashion it into a chain with a hook at one end, long enough to reach from our land here, down to the water below. But beware! There might not be enough.”

“I will do so,” Obatala agreed and turned to leave.

“Wait! You will also need these four items to accomplish your task once you arrive.”

Orunmilla filled a snail shell full of sand, and placed it into Obatala’s hands, along with a white hen, a palm nut and a black cat. Obatala placed them carefully into a bag, and then left Orunmilla’s hut in search of all the gold in the sky.

THE GOLDEN CHAIN

Obatala asked so nicely that everyone gave him all the gold they had. Soon he had a heavy pile of coins, jewellery and golden nuggets. The goldsmith, in her forge, hammered out the gold into hundreds of shining links, with a hook at one end, just as Orunmilla had instructed.

At the edge of the sky, Obatala hung the chain, and let it fall until the end was invisible. Then, with the bag safely by his side, he began to climb down from the sky to the rolling water far below.

Down, until the sky was a tiny speck above him.

Down, until he could feel the wet air all around him.

Down he climbed until there was no more chain left to climb down. But his feet touched air, not water!

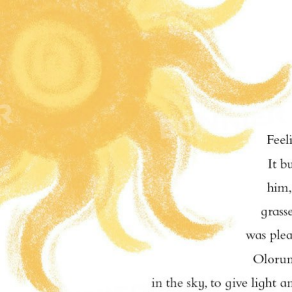
“Orunmilla! You were right, the chain is too short! If I let go, I will fall!” he shouted upward, as loud as he could. At first there was silence - but then, in the distance, he heard Orunmilla’s voice.

“Take the snail shell and pour the sand down onto the water. Then drop the hen after it.”

Holding tightly to the chain with one hand, Obatala did as he was told with the other. The sand poured and poured, until there was a huge pile floating on the face of the water. The hen had not far to flap down onto the top of the pile, and it immediately started pecking and spreading it this way and that. Obatala’s eyes widened in wonder - wherever the sand, pecked by the hen, landed, earth spread itself out over the water and solidified. Where small piles drifted, mountains appeared, with valleys in between. Single grains of sand became boulders and rocky outcrops and cliffs.

“Now that’s something to look at!” Obatala said and let go of the chain. Where he landed, brand new dust rose and settled. And with the black cat for company, he walked on the new land for the first time.





THE GOLDEN CHAIN

Feeling tired he sat down and the palm nut fell out of the bag. It burrowed into the ground and a palm tree sprang up above him, dropping seeds which grew into other trees, and then grasses and eventually all the vegetation in the world. Obatala was pleased with what he saw.

Olorun was pleased too: as a gift, he created the sun and hung it in the sky, to give light and warmth to the new land.

“Now that’s even better!” Obatala marvelled, looking around at plants and trees growing all around. “I will call this beautiful land Ile-Ife, and it will be my home.”

For a long time, Obatala and the black cat walked across the land, exploring the new mountains and forests, until they came to a lake. Standing in the clay mud on the lake’s edge, Obatala caught a glimpse of his reflection in the still water. It gave him yet another idea.

“Ile-Ife would be even better if I had more company. I’ll make some people!” he exclaimed. He took handfuls of the clay and began to mould them into figures who looked just like him, setting them to dry in the hot sun by a palm tree. The tree dripped sweet, strong sap. Whenever he got hungry and thirsty, Obatala drank the liquid and continued his work. He had made many, many figures before he noticed the palm sap had made his hands behave differently. Not all the figures looked like him anymore – they were all shapes and sizes! But still, he was happy with his creations, and called up to Olorun.

“I have made these figures from the clay of Ile-Ife. Please, bring them to life, so that they can enjoy this land as I have. I will be their protector!”

From up above in the sky-realm, Olorun agreed. He blew life-giving breath down into the figures. One by one, the first people of Ife opened their eyes, marvelled at the land they lived on, and worshipped Obatala, whose hands had created them.



PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE

A tale from Croatia

Have you ever wondered why so many things in the world exist in cycles – like the seasons, or day and night? You're not alone. People have wondered the same thing for thousands of years and have imagined battles between mighty gods who represent opposing natural forces to try and understand. One of the best is the story of Perun and Veles: their ongoing god-feud is so famous across the Slavic world that in Croatia (and Bulgaria, and Bosnia) mountains are named after them!

The great Oak Tree of Life connected everything in the universe. Its broad leaves and wide branches supported Parv, the heavens and home to the gods. Its trunk grew up straight and true from Yav, the earth, where lush green hills and rushing rivers fed all the living creatures. And its roots – they pushed down beneath the earth to Nav, the underworld. At the very top of the tree perched the god Perun, in the shape of a golden eagle. From there he ruled over the sky, and the other gods, with the power of thunder and fire.



PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE

And by the deepest root, in the dark world of Nav, lived the god Veles, who ruled the earth, so the flowing water and the cows, sheep, goats and other livestock.

Every day Veles looked up to the light, far away at the top of the tree and at Perun watching over everything. And every day, as the red sun rose over the Tree of Life, casting dancing shadows, Veles' face twisted into a frown of jealousy.

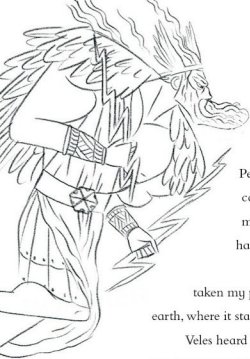
"Why should I stay down here in the dark and the wet and the cold? I want light! I want sun! I want to look down from the top, not up from the bottom!" he declared.

Then and there, he decided to do something about it. He grabbed hold of the longest root with strong, pale hands and began to climb up the Tree of Life in the form of an old man, his long silver-grey hair and beard streaming out behind him. He soon reached Yav and breathed in the sweet smell of growing grass, while the voices of his subjects, people and animals, filled the air. Veles didn't stop – he climbed further up, branch by branch, until he reached Parv, Perun's kingdom. Now at the very top of the tree, Veles looked across the whole world.

The view was magnificent! But he knew where his home was, so he turned to climb back down again. But he caught sight of something even more magnificent than the view. There, spread across the heavens, was an enormous herd of cattle of every shape and colour - the biggest herd in the world! His face twisted with anger.

"By rights those cattle are mine – Perun rules the skies and mountains, not the earth and water, and things that live and die. I'll take them back with me!" And he did.

PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE



Perun had been looking the other way, but when he saw that his cattle were gone, he was so furious that he changed into a mighty, muscled warrior holding a magic axe. He didn't need to ask who had stolen the cattle: he already knew.

"Veles, you thief and underground mischief-maker! You have taken my property!" he roared, and sent a thunderbolt crashing down to the earth, where it started a forest fire.

Veles heard Perun's roar and saw the fire. He stopped watching the herd grazing on a quiet green hillside, and changed into his most fearsome shape: a snake, broad as a tree trunk and long as a river. With huge fangs dripping poison, Veles slithered lightning-quick back up into the tree, coiling around it like a spring, to wait for Perun.

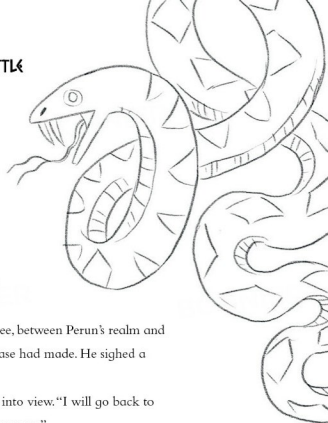
CRASH! Another thunderbolt echoed across the sky as lightning seared a crack in the ground.

"Show yourself, Veles!" thundered Perun.

CRASH! Perun found the cattle and sent them flying back to the heavens on another thunderbolt.

Meanwhile, Veles, coiled around the Tree of Life, climbed higher and higher. Perun was so busy throwing thunderbolts he didn't notice Veles coiled around the clouds, beneath his foot. Veles opened his poisonous fangs and bit...

PERUN'S STOLEN CATTLE



"AARRRGHH! I'll get you, Veles!"

Perun shouted in pain and fury as he searched for Veles, wielding his axe.

Its magic blade reflected the sun, which scorched too bright over the land. Perun's thunderbolts started fires everywhere. Crops withered and died. Rivers dried up. But Perun could not catch Veles.

From his hiding place in the branches of the tree, between Perun's realm and his own, Veles looked down, and saw the mess the chase had made. He sighed a great sigh.

"Perun, it's over – you win," he said, emerging into view. "I will go back to Nav, and you can keep your stupid cattle. For now, anyway."

Thunderbolts stopped mid strike. The axe-wielding warrior Perun transformed back into his golden eagle form and settled back at the top of the Tree.

"Good. Get back down there where you belong."

So, Veles took his old man form again, and climbed back down the Tree of Life. As he did, rain fell. Green shoots pushed up through scorched earth, and rivers flowed. As Veles' foot touched the earth, night fell again – it had been day too long. And, as he continued his journey down to Nav, his home in the underworld, leaves fell, the ground grew cold and frosty, and winter settled over the forests and fields of Yav.

But winter never lasts: each year, Veles looks up to Perun at the top of the great Oak Tree of Life, and each year he decides to climb. And the cycle begins again...

