World Cultures Day, 2010

“In the Beginning . . . Origin Stories and Social Identity”

Friday, March 26, 2010 9:00 am—12:30 pm

A half-day program designed for high school students and teachers

Since the earliest times one of the ways in which human societies have sought to define and identify themselves is by remembering and re-telling the story of their origins, and such stories often seek to enshrine characteristics on which the social group prides itself and by which it distinguishes itself from others. Thus, for example, the ancient story of "pious" Aeneas' arduous journey from Troy in search of a new settlement in Italy as well as the more modern story of the flight of the Pilgrim Fathers from the Old World in search of religious freedom and a simpler life in America are both equally telling in terms of what they reveal about both Romans' and Americans' self-identification. This half-day conference for high school students and their teachers will explore several origin stories from around the world, showing how what we believe about our beginnings is crucial to our present understanding of ourselves and of our difference from others.

Registration Information

- We understand that teachers must submit a request to their district for permission to attend a workshop well in advance of the program date—we hope that you will remember to request permission and Save the Date Now!
- The registration fee is $15 per student or teacher.
- Teachers, who wish to receive 3 hours of Professional Development Credit, add $20 to the registration fee.
- Registration form —p.3 of this flier. A copy of the program flier and registration form can also be found on our website: http://chss2.montclair.edu/instituteforthehumanities/.
- Registrations can be mailed via “snail mail,” or faxed to our office (973.655.7207), check or voucher mailed under separate cover. Our mailing address below.
- **REGISTRATION DEADLINE:** MARCH 19th

The Lectures

Teachers and students will be able to choose the lectures they would like to attend in each of the three sessions. **Selections should be made on the enclosed registration form—see page 3.**

Session I 9:30 am to 10:20 am

1. Parasites from the Body of Pan Gu: Chinese Mythology and the History of Human Origins

Chinese concepts of human origins are contained in timeless ideas of “Qi,” “Yin-Yang,” “heaven, earth and human beings,” and an “organismic” cosmos (gestalt cosmology). Beyond timeless origins the Chinese linked humanness and civilization with centrality and the contributions of culture heroes, archetypes, and sages through vast expanses of historical time.

   **Speaker:** J. Kenneth Olenik, Department of History, Montclair State University

2. The God of the Bible and the God of Battle

The story of creation in the Bible is well known but not always well understood. Ancient Babylon had a very different version centered on a god named Marduk who won a great battle. Yet the Bible comments on the Marduk, God of Battle theme in several places. Each version has an account of the Tower of Babel. The interpretation of creation had a great deal to do with
forming the identities of both the people of Israel and the Babylonians. During this session we will look at some of the similarities and differences in these two different creation stories.

*Speaker: Paul Leggett, Department of Classics and General Humanities, Montclair State University*

**Session II**  
10:30 am to 11:20 am

1. **Origin Myths and Native American Identity: Some Examples from North America and the Caribbean**

   All cultures have myths or stories that help define them and account for their existence. To varying degrees, origin myths, as they are called, relate to real historical events vs. imagined or fantastic stories. However myths are constructed they are of fundamental importance to people and they can change in response to the very real needs and circumstances of a group. I will compare origin myths of selected Native American groups from the Arctic, northeastern North America, and the Caribbean. An example from Caribbean archaeology will be presented to demonstrate how we can trace the evolution of myth.

   *Speaker: Peter E. Siegel, Department of Anthropology, Montclair State University*

2. **Competing Founding Myths of India and Pakistan: Social Roots and Political Implications**

   India and Pakistan, two nation-states that came into existence around the mid-twentieth century, have nearly mutually exclusive origin stories that interpret a singular set of events, namely the partition of the Indian subcontinent, in very different ways. This presentation will explore the social basis of these contrasting and resilient narratives as well as their political implications for the region and beyond.

   *Speaker: Neeraj Vedwan, Department of Anthropology, Montclair State University*

**Session III**  
11:30 am to 12:20 pm

1. **Mysterious Barricades and Thought Traps: Gabon's Mvet Epic Tale and Fang People's Identity**

   This presentation will look at the commemorative importance of the Mvet epic tale as a tool for self-identification for the Fang people of Gabon. This tale, which, by itself, represents a specific and entirely autonomous genre--a one-epic genre--within the Fang traditional repertoire as practiced in Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, features the epic battles between the immortal humans of Engong (who hold the secret to immortality and are led by Akoma Mba), and the mortal humans from Oku (who want to ravish this secret and are led by Zong Midzi). The Mvet epic, which is often told to village audiences over three nights by a special storyteller known in Fang as the "Mbom Mvet" (Mvet Player), represents the most powerful, but also the most unique tale, in Fang traditional repertoire. It purports, in fact, to be a tale about both the (supernatural and mystical) origin of the Fang people and the philosophical underpinnings of Fang cosmogony, which can be known only by the initiates who "know how to listen to the Mvet."

   *Speaker: Daniel Mengara, Department of French, Montclair State University*

2. **The Book of Invasions: The Origin Myth of Celtic Ireland**

   As the last bastion of the mysterious Celts, and one of the first nations to cleave to Christianity, Ireland possesses a creation myth that fuses these two disparate traditions in fascinating ways: the *Lebor Gabála*, or *The Book of Invasions*. The result of a monastic effort to both preserve the ancient Celtic culture and relate it to the pseudo-history of the Old Testament, this epic story relates the successive Celtic migrations to Ireland, and the wars fought to possess it. In this presentation, Dr. Gill discusses the unique combination of Celtic and Biblical myth that is the Irish *Book of Invasions*, and how it illuminates the Irish cultural identity.

   *Speaker: Glen Gill, Department of Classics & General Humanities, Montclair State University*

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