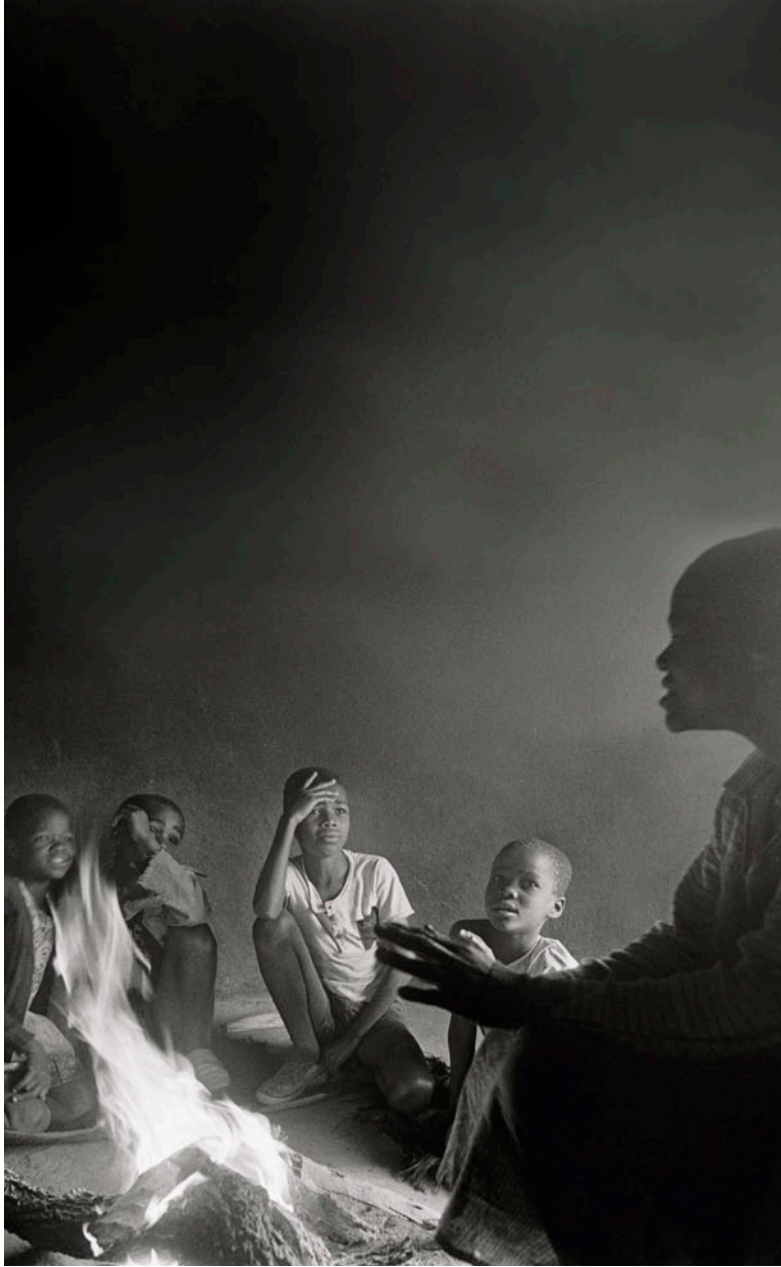


BIG HISTORY PROJECT

ORIGIN STORIES

INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown



The Universe and human origins

Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the Universe began and how humans came into being. Scholars, namely anthropologists and ethnologists, call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.” (In comic-book lingo there is a specialized meaning for “origin stories.” They are accounts that relate how superheroes got their superpowers.)

Some origin stories are based on real people and events, while others are based on more imaginative accounts. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols that convey profound truths, but not necessarily in a literal sense. In the United States many people tell stories about Santa Claus. But everyone, except young children, knows that he is a symbol of love and generosity, not a person who actually exists. Many cultures tell stories that seem strange to outsiders but have deep meaning to group members.

When people in a culture become literate, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records, to when people told them aloud. This is called “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist, since people — from group to group and generation to generation — may change them slightly as they retell them. I have chosen to summarize, in writing, six origin stories from a wide number of places and eras — feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

The seventh story I have written myself. It is a short version of big history, told as a modern origin story. This one is based on scientific evidence and comes from the human community throughout planet Earth.

Origin stories comparison chart

Use this chart to highlight the differences — and any similarities — between the origin stories you read:

	Australian Aboriginal	Chinese	Greek	Iroquois	Judeo-Christian	Mayan	Modern Scientific
Source of the world							
Originator of the world							
How Earth formed							
Age of Earth							
First life forms							
How humans formed							
Relationship between humans & animals/plants							

Image credits

An illustration of Zeus crowned by Victory

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An illustration of the Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving

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Detail of God from *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo Buonarroti

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Planetary nebula NGC6210, in Hercules constellation

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Telling stories by the fire

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