Incest in Greek Mythology: Psychological and Sociological Aspects Today

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the history of incest since ancient times, taking into focus the mythology of the Greeks. Incest in today's world is considered a taboo in most of the cultures of the world. I will study the Greek myths and folklores and analyse them to examine how the Greeks viewed ancestral relationships. I have chosen the mythological aspect rather than real, historical events for my study as myths expose the mind and character of people. They are the symbolic projections of people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. It may be true that myths are not factual, but then no great literature is. They both reflect profound realities.

Myths, Folk Tales, childhood stories, stories that our grandparents tell us as children, which had the alluring dreamlike state to them, are the ones which express the truth of life and living. Through the colourful characters of everyday people, kings and queens, demi-gods and gods and goddesses; these stories incorporate narratives, known as myths, been there since the beginning of human civilization; entertain and instruct the listeners. The whole discipline which studies these myths and narratives to understand culture, archetypes, thinking and acting patterns of the people since ages is known as Mythology. According to Joseph Campbell:

> ...mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth - penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words, beyond images, beyond the bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told. So this is the penultimate truth. It's important to live life with the experience, and therefore the knowledge, of its mystery and your own mystery. This gives life a new

radiance, a new harmony, a new splendour. Thinking in mythological terms helps to put you in accord with the inevitable of this vale of tears. You learn to recognize the positive values in what appear to be negative moments and aspects of your life.[1]

Mark Schorer in *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* says:

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.

Campbell often described mythology as having a fourfold function for human society.[2] Firstly he speaks of the Metaphysical Function, i.e. awakening a sense of awe before the mystery of being. According to Campbell, the absolute mysteries of life cannot be captured directly in words or images. Myths are "being statements" and the experience of this mystery can be had only through a participation in mythic rituals or the contemplation of mythic symbols that point beyond themselves. "Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of reason and coercion.... The first function of mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is."

The second function he tells is the Cosmological Function, i.e. explaining the shape of the universe. Myth also functions as a proto-science, bringing the observable (physical) world into accord with the metaphysical and psychological meanings rendered by the other functions of mythology. Campbell noticed that the modern dilemma between science and religion on matters of truth is actually between science of the ancient world and that of today.

Third is the Sociological Function. i.e. to validate and support the existing social order. Ancient societies had to conform to an existing social order if they were to survive at all. This is because they evolved under "pressure" from necessities much more intense than the ones encountered in our modern world. Mythology confirmed that order and enforced it by reflecting it into the stories themselves, often describing how the order arrived from divine intervention.

Last function he tells of is the Pedagogical Function, which means to guide the individual through the stages of life. As a person goes through life, many psychological challenges will be encountered. Myth may serve as a guide for successful passage through the stages of one's life. For example, most ancient cultures used rites of passage as a youth passed to the adult stage. Later on, a living mythology taught the same person to let go of material possessions and earthly plans as they prepared to die.

Hence, mythologies are very important and relevant to our world in quite realistic terms. They are not just stories to while away the time of children and adults alike. For one, they tell a lot about ancient people and their beliefs. Another, they teach a lot about human nature and

relationships. They help us to understand our present world. They connect us to the "tradition" as Eliot would say.[3]

Each culture has its own folklores, own myths. Indian, Persian, Chinese, British, Australian, Greek etc. have their own Gods and Goddesses, own miracles and morals. But the Myth of Creation and subsequent base meanings remain the same. How life came into being, why Gods are worshipped, what sacrifices are done in various forms depending on the culture, etc., all essentially remain the same. Campbell believed the religions of the world to be the various culturally influenced "masks" of the same fundamental, transcendent truths. All religions can bring one to an elevated awareness above and beyond a dualistic conception of reality, or idea of "pairs of opposites" such as being and non-being, or right and wrong. Indeed, he quotes from the *Rig-Veda* in the preface to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: "Truth is one; the sages speak of it by many names."

Many mythologies of the ancient world, such as those of Greece, India, and Persia, are a result of that fusion with gods retaining some of their original traits and character but now belonging to a single system. Figures such as Zeus and Indra are thunder gods who now interact with Demeter and Dionysus, whose ritual sacrifice and rebirth, bearing testament to his pre-Indo-European roots, were still enacted in classical Greece. But for the most part, the focus heavily shifted toward the masculine, with Zeus ascending the throne of the gods and Dionysus demoted to a mere demi-god. This demotion was very profound in the case of the Biblical imaginary where the female elements were marginalized to an extreme. Campbell believed that Eve and the snake that tempted her were once fertility gods worshiped in their own rights with the tree of knowledge being the Tree of Life. He also found significance in the biblical story of Cain and Abel, with Cain being a farmer whose agrarian offering is not accepted by God, while herder Abel's animal sacrifice is. In the lecture series of Mythos, Campbell speaks of the "Mysteries of Eleusis" in Ancient Greece, where Demeter's journey in the underworld was enacted for young men and women of the time. There he observed that wheat was presented as the ultimate mystery with wine being a symbol of Dionysus, much like in the Christian mysteries where bread and wine are considered to incarnate the body and blood of Jesus. Both religions carry the same "seeded earth" cosmology in different forms while retaining an image of the ever-dying, ever-resurrected God.

I have taken up the issue of incest in mythology, specifically Greek mythology. Incest is sexual intercourse between family members and close relatives. The term may apply to sexual activities between individuals of close "blood relationship", members of the same household, step relatives related by adoption or marriage, or members of the

same clan or lineage. The incest taboo is and has been one of the most common of all cultural taboos, both in current nations and many past societies. Most modern societies have laws regarding incest or social restrictions on closely consanguineous marriages. In countries where it is illegal, consensual adult incest is seen by some as a victimless crime.

In some societies, such as those of Ancient Egypt and others, brother–sister, father–daughter, and mother–son, cousin-cousin, aunt-nephew, uncle-niece, and other permutations of relations were practiced among royalty as a means of perpetuating the royal lineage. Some writers have described the marriage and relationship of Cain (the son of Adam and Eve) with his sister as incestuous. In addition, the Balinese and some Inuit tribes have altogether different beliefs about what constitutes illegal and immoral incest. However, parent-child and sibling-sibling unions are almost universally forbidden.

However, incest is still quite prevalent, though a taboo. Prevalence is difficult to generalize, but research has estimated 10–15% of the general population as having at least one such sexual contact, with less than 2% involving intercourse or attempted intercourse. Among women, research has yielded estimates as high as 20%. In Haryana, India, a large number of cases have been noticed that are incestual in nature.[4]

The English word incest is derived from the Latin *incestus*, which has a general meaning of "impure, unchaste". It was introduced into Middle English, both in the generic Latin sense (preserved throughout the Middle English period) and in the narrow modern sense. The derived adjective *incestuous* appears in the 16th century. Prior to the introduction of the Latin term, incest was known in Old English as *sibbleger* (from sibb 'kinship' + leger 'to lie') or *mǣġhǣmed* (from mǣġ 'kin, parent' + hǣmed 'sexual intercourse') but in time, both words fell out of use.

Some cultures allow incest marriages to various degrees. For instance, in ancient China, first cousins with the same surnames (i.e., those born to the father's brothers) were not permitted to marry, while those with different surnames (i.e., maternal cousins and paternal cousins born to the father's sisters) were. Several of the Egyptian Pharaohs married their siblings (for example, Tutankhamun married his half-sister). According to the Biblical Book of Genesis, the Patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah were half-siblings, both being children of Terah (Ge 20:12):

From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you

have taken, for she is a man's wife." Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this...

Bible offers many other instances as well. Genesis 19:30-36:

> Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose. The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father...

Leviticus 18:6-18:

> None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness...

The fable of *Oedipus*, with a theme of inadvertent incest between a mother and son, ends in disaster and shows ancient taboos against incest as Oedipus is punished for incestuous actions by blinding himself. In the "sequel" to Oedipus, *Antigone*, his four children are also punished for their parents having been incestuous. Incest appears in the commonly accepted version of the birth of Adonis, when his mother, Myrrha has sex with her father Cinyras during a festival, disguised as a prostitute. Incest is mentioned and condemned in Virgil's Aeneid Book VI: *hic thalamum invasit natae vetitosque hymenaeos*; "This one invaded a daughter's room and a forbidden sex act". It is generally accepted that sibling marriages were widespread among all classes in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period. Numerous papyri and the Roman census declarations attest to many husbands and wives being brother and sister, of the same father and mother. The most well-known of these relationships were in the royal family, the Ptolemies;

the famous Cleopatra VII was married to her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII. Her mother and father, Cleopatra V and Ptolemy XII, had also been brother and sister.

In Ancient Greece, Spartan King Leonidas I, hero of the legendary Battle of Thermopylae, was married to his niece Gorgo, daughter of his half-brother Cleomenes I. Greek law allowed marriage between a brother and sister if they had different mothers. For example, some accounts say that Elpinice was for a time married to her half-brother Cimon.

Incestuous unions were frowned upon and considered as *nefas* (against the laws of gods and man) in ancient Rome. In AD 295 incest was explicitly forbidden by an imperial edict, which divided the concept of incestus into two categories of unequal gravity: the *incestus iuris gentium*, which was applied to both Romans and non-Romans in the Empire, and the *incestus iuris civilis*, which concerned only Roman citizens. Therefore, for example, an Egyptian could marry an aunt, but a Roman could not. Despite the act of incest being unacceptable within the Roman Empire, Roman Emperor Caligula is rumoured to have had sexual relationships with all three of his sisters (Julia Livilla, Drusilla, and Agrippina the Younger). Emperor Claudius, after executing his previous wife, married his brother's daughter Agrippina the Younger, and changed the law to allow an otherwise illegal union. The law prohibiting marrying a sister's daughter remained. The taboo against incest in Ancient Rome is demonstrated by the fact that politicians would use charges of incest (often false charges) as insults and means of political disenfranchisement.

In Norse mythology there are themes of brother-sister marriage, a prominent example being between Njörðr and his unnamed sister (perhaps Nerthus), parents of Freyja and Freyr. Loki in turn also accuses Freyja and Freyr of having a sexual relationship.

During the Middle Ages, many European monarchs were related due to political marriages, sometimes resulting in distant cousins (and even first cousins) being married. This was especially true in the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Savoy and Bourbon royal houses. Incestuous marriages were also seen in the royal houses of ancient Japan and Korea, Inca Peru, Ancient Hawaii, and, at times, Central Africa, Mexico, and Thailand. Like the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the Inca rulers married their sisters. Huayna Capac, for instance, was the son of Topa Inca Yupanqui and the Inca's sister and wife.

Half-sibling marriages were found in ancient Japan such as the marriage of Emperor Bidatsu and his half-sister Empress Suiko. Japanese Prince Kinashi no Karu had sexual relationships with his full sister Princess Karu no Ōiratsume, although the action was regarded as foolish. In order to prevent the influence of the other families, a half-sister of Korean Goryeo Dynasty monarch Gwangjong became his wife in the 10th century. Her name

was Daemok. Brother-sister marriages were common during some Roman periods as some census records have shown.

It is clear from above that the incestual relationships are a fact of life, in the past as well as the present. The Greek Mythology is replete with incestuous relationships of Gods. The beginning is similar to other mythologies as children from the same parent mate in order to have progeny. According to the Creation Myth, the beginning was all chaos. Out of void appeared Erebus, the place where Death and Night dwells. Love was born, out of which appeared Light and Day. Gaea, the Earth appeared. Gaea gave birth to the heavens, Uranus. He is the Sky God and the first ruler. He became Gaea's mate, covering her on all sides. Hence, the first personalised incest relationship among Gods. They gave birth to three Cyclops (one-eyed monsters) named, Arges, Steropes and Brontes; three Hecatoncheires named Briareus (Aegaeon) who served as Zeus's bodyguard, Cottus and Gyges (Gyes) and twelve Titans (Elder Gods). They were: Cronus, Rhea, Oceanus, Tethys, Hyperion, Mnemosyne, Themis, Iapetus (whose sons were Prometheus, Epimetheus and Atlas), Coeus, Crius, Phoebe and Theia.[5]

Cronus and Rhea, siblings, married each other and had children, of whom Zeus was one. Oceanus and Tethys married; Hyperion and Theia; Coeus ad Phoebe were a couple in spite of being born from the same parents.

Cronus and Rhea gave birth to Hestia, Hades, Demeter, Poseidon, Hera and the youngest Zeus, who rebelled against his father. Zeus married his sister Hera. He had also slept with Demeter, resulting in the birth of Persephone. According to the followers of Orphism, Zeus had slept with Persephone as well in the form of a serpent. Zagreus was born out of this union.

Zeus had also lain with Maia, his Uncle Atlas's daughter. Hermes was their son. Zeus also had slept with Titanesse Mnemosyne, the result of which was the nine Muses. Also, he slept with Oceanus's daughter Eurynome which led to the birth of three Graces.

The Olympus Hades carried off his brother and sister Demeter's daughter Persephone to the Underworld and married her. The Titan Prometheus's son Deucalion married Epimetheus's daughter Pyrrha. Though they have the same bloodline, still such unions are accepted or even preferred in various cultures.

Aegisthus was an offspring of an incestuous relationship between Prince Thyestes (son of Pelops) and his daughter Pelopia. Thyestes sired Aegisthus of Pelopia in order to fulfil a prophecy given at Delphi which would allow him to avenge himself on his brother and rival Atreus. When Pelopia gave birth to Aegisthus, she was ashamed of what she had been forced into and abandoned the child in the woods. Later she killed herself. The fact that mortals are supposed to feel shame over such relationships shows that the Gods had different code of

conduct for themselves. Mortals are supposed to respect the ties of blood and not transgress the father-daughter or mother-son or brother-sister relationship. The ancient Greeks allowed the marriage of siblings if the mother was different.

Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud considered the sexual impulses of the son for this mother as natural and biological, hence giving validity to incest. In Psychoanalytic Theory[6], the term *Oedipus complex* denotes the emotions and ideas that the mind keeps in the unconscious, via dynamic repression, that concentrates upon a child's desire to sexually possess the parent of the opposite sex (e.g. males attracted to their mothers, whereas females are attracted to their fathers). Freud hoped to prove that his model was universally valid and thus turned to ancient mythology and contemporary ethnography for comparative material. Freud named his new theory the Oedipus complex after the famous Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. "I found in myself a constant love for my mother, and jealousy of my father. I now consider this to be a universal event in childhood," Freud said. Freud sought to anchor this pattern of development in the dynamics of the mind. Each stage is a progression into adult sexual maturity, characterized by a strong ego and the ability to delay gratification. He used the Oedipus conflict to point out how much he believed that people desire incest and must repress that desire. The Oedipus conflict was described as a state of psychosexual development and awareness. He also turned to anthropological studies of totemism and argued that totemism reflected a ritualized enactment of a tribal Oedipal conflict. Freud also believed that the Oedipus complex was bisexual, involving an attraction to both parents.

Opposed to Freud's theory, the Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck argued in 1891 that people have evolved a biological mechanism to avoid incest. According to Westermarck, people who grew up together would find each other unattractive.

The Westermarck effect, or reverse sexual imprinting, is a hypothetical psychological effect through which people who live in close domestic proximity during the first few years of their lives become desensitized to later sexual attraction. This phenomenon, one explanation for the incest taboo, was first hypothesized by Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck in his book *The History of Human Marriage* (1891). Observations interpreted as evidence for the Westermarck effect have since been made in many places and cultures, including in the Israeli kibbutz system, and the Chinese Shim-pua marriage customs, as well as in biological-related families.

In the case of the Israeli kibbutzim (collective farms), children were reared somewhat communally in peer groups, based on age, not biological relation. A study of the marriage patterns of these children later in life revealed that out of the nearly 3,000 marriages that

occurred across the kibbutz system, only fourteen were between children from the same peer group. Of those fourteen, none had been reared together during the first six years of life. This result suggests that the Westermarck effect operates during the period from birth to the age of six.

When proximity during this critical period does not occur — for example, where a brother and sister are brought up separately, never meeting one another — they may find one another highly sexually attractive when they meet as adults, according to the hypothesis of genetic sexual attraction. This supports the theory that the populations exhibiting the Westermarck effect became predominant because of the deleterious effects of inbreeding on those that didn't.

Freud argued that as children, members of the same family naturally lust for one another, making it necessary for societies to create incest taboos, but Westermarck argued the reverse, that the taboos themselves arise naturally as products of innate attitudes.

For the past few decades, as Freud's influence has waned in psychology, researchers have tended to side with Westermarck. Some evolutionary psychologists have proposed that we subconsciously estimate the relatedness of other people, using cues such as whether we've played together and spent lots of time together. If the relatedness is too high, the thought of sex with the other person triggers "incest avoidance" mechanisms, better known as disgust.

Some evidence backed up the idea. People do express disgust at the thought of sex with a close family member. And a study of married couples in Taiwan found that couples who had grown up together in the same families were less attracted to one another and had fewer offspring than other married couples. But a number of face-morphing experiments were also conducted, which proved Westermarck effect wrong and Freud may have been partially right when he said we were all repressing incestuous urges.

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss[7] developed a general argument for the universality of the incest taboo in human societies. His argument begins with the claim that the incest taboo is in effect a prohibition against endogamy, and the effect is to encourage exogamy. Through exogamy, otherwise unrelated households or lineages will form relationships through marriage, thus strengthening social solidarity. That is, Lévi-Strauss views marriage as an exchange of women between two social groups. This theory is based in part on Marcel Mauss's theory of *The Gift*, which argued that exchange in primitive societies consists not so much in economic transactions as in reciprocal gifts, that these reciprocal gifts have a far more important function than in our own, and that this primitive form of exchange is not merely nor essentially of an economic nature but is what he aptly calls 'a total social fact', that is, an event which has a

significance that is at once social and religious, magic and economic, utilitarian and sentimental, jural and moral.

It is also based on Lévi-Strauss's analysis of data on different kinship systems and marriage practices documented by anthropologists and historians. Lévi-Strauss called attention specifically to data collected by Margaret Mead during her research among the Arapesh. When she asked if a man ever sleeps with his sister, Arapesh replied "No we don't sleep with our sisters. We give our sisters to other men, and other men give us their sisters." Mead pressed the question repeatedly, asking what would happen if a brother and sister did have sex with one another. Lévi-Strauss quotes the Arapesh response:

> What, you would like to marry your sister? What is the matter with you anyway? Don't you want a brother-in-law? Don't you realize that if you marry another man's sister and another man marries your sister, you will have at least two brothers-in-law, while if you marry your own sister you will have none? With whom will you hunt, with whom will you garden, who will you visit?

Incest has been viewed from many perspectives: Psychological, scientific, biological and sociological. Each has offered explanations on why it happens. One thing everyone seems to agree on that incest is immoral and is seen as disgusting. One strong reason to avoid marrying one's kin is to avoid bad genes. Rare mutations can cause severe birth defects and the probability of acquiring the bad genes increases manifold by mating with blood relatives. In the 17th century, Charles II of Spain, the last of the Spanish Habsburgs – known for their inbreeding – was infertile and could not properly chew his food due to a congenital overbite.

Hence, the incest presented in Greek Mythology can be seen as, firstly the need to increase population; secondly, the mental projections of people who find people looking similar to themselves attractive and hence, the sexual pull for them.

END NOTES

1. *The Power of Myth. Episode 1: The Hero's Adventure (first broadcast June 21, 1988 on PBS)* "The Power of Myth" is based on the interviews between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers that became a famous television series. It deals with the universality and evolution of myths in the history of the human race and the place of myths in modern society. Campbell blends accounts of his own upbringing and experience with stories from many cultures and civilizations to present the reader with his most compelling thesis that modern society is going through a transition from the old mythologies and traditions to a new way of thinking where a global mythology will emerge.

2. These appear at the end of his work *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, as well as various lectures.

3. See T.S. Eliot's essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*.

4. Haryana has quite high rates of incest, forced and wilfully. The reasons presented are shockingly low number of women as per men in the state (860 women per 1000 men). Also, the men consider incest as their "virasat". A wife can be shared by father-in-law. Brother-in-law etc. Moreover, less interaction with the outer world in rural communities have more cases of incest.

5. To know about the Creation Myth in detail, see *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton 77-94.

6. Psychoanalytic theory refers to the definition of personality organization and the dynamics of personality development that underlie and guide the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic psychotherapy, called psychoanalysis, a clinical method for treating psychopathology. First laid out by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, psychoanalytic theory has undergone many refinements since his work. Psychoanalytic theory came to full prominence in the last third of the twentieth century as part of the flow of critical discourse regarding psychological treatments after the 1960s, long after Freud's death in 1939.

7. For detailed study, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* revised edition, translated from the French by James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. Boston: Beacon Press. 1969.

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