

THE TEACHERS' CORNER:
USING CREATION MYTHS

In the earliest times on earth, there were no animals in the sea. People did not need blubber for their fires, because newly drifted snow would burn...In those days there was no ice on the sea. This is a distant memory of the time when the first people lived on earth... Both men and animals lived on earth, but there was no difference between them. Men could become animals and animals could become men, and they all spoke the same language.

--Netsilik Eskimos

In the beginning Pundjel decided to make man out of clay. With his big knife he cut three large sheets of bark. On one of these he placed a quantity of clay and worked it into a proper consistency with his knife. When the clay was soft, he carried a portion of one of the other pieces of bark and he commenced to form the clay into a man...

--Australian Aborigines

In the beginning there were no men on earth. The people lived in the sky with Akonge and they were happy. But there was a woman named Nbookamu who bothered everybody. One day Akongo put the woman in a basket with her son and her daughter, some cassava, maize, and sugarcane and lowered the basket down to the earth. The family planted a garden on earth and the garden flourished through their care.

--West African creation story

What can stories like these teach? How can teachers use creation stories in the classroom?

Anthropology is the study of the origin and nature of human beings. What better place to begin than with various people's search into basic origins as expressed through creation stories handed down from time immemorial.

Creation stories, obtainable in any school or university library, reflect the values, fears, and hopes of a people, but they also reveal day to day culture. A teacher can present a creation story as a kind of 'artifact' from which students derive information about a people's environment, economy, and society as well as the more deeply held values, hopes and fears. A class can be divided into several groups, each working on a single creation story, trying to draw as much information as possible about the culture, and at the end trying to identify which specific culture the story comes from.

After students have read and discussed several creation stories, they should be able to list characteristics which these stories have in common. For example, creation stories provide answers to similar questions: where did we come from? who or what created us? of what substance are we made? what is our relationship to other animals? These are questions basic to man, but also basic to anthropology itself.

