

Similar Yet Unique - An Exploration of Cosmologies Around the World

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ABSTRACT: Every culture has a distinct cosmology according to which social structures, beliefs and relations are ordered. Despite the concrete differences between communities, there are also evident similarities. The main commonalities I have recognized when writing this paper are connecting the physical and the metaphysical, something ordering and explaining the universe, something that provides meaning for existence and the socio-political utilization of spirituality. This similarity and uniqueness of diverse cultures proves that although every community is different, the similarities, both in themes and in the fact that every culture has a belief system, demonstrate that the various members of humanity are akin. This paper aims to provide a theoretical overview of the similarities and differences between cosmologies and discuss the importance of this in the modern world. To study these themes, five distinct cosmologies from around the world were chosen, namely the idea of Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, the Yekuana people in Mesoamerica, the principle of maat in Ancient Egypt as a sample for the diverse cultures in Africa, the cosmological beliefs of the Maya, and geo-cosmology in Bali.

KEYWORDS: Social sciences; Cultural studies; Cosmologies and belief systems; Social structures; Mythology.

■ Introduction

Every society comprises social structures, which can be defined as 'all social relations of person to person' and the 'differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role' which create an elaborate, dynamic system of relationships in a given society.¹ These structures are often based on cosmologies, also known as belief systems. These cosmologies essentially influence every aspect of life in society. Gender roles, city structures, language, understanding of medicine, and educational and career goals - are all shaped by the social structures of a culture, hence its belief system. A person's cultural upbringing defines how they live their life and see the world. What are the connections between different cosmologies, how do belief systems influence a community, and why is this important in the present? As anthropology is 'the study of what makes us human', a closer look at belief systems of the past, which influence a community's culture and way of interacting with the world, can aid in understanding and researching all aspects of the life of current humanity.² Furthermore, the role of anthropologists in international development in the adversity of global social and economic challenges is why studying the interactions between cultures, determined by their social structures and belief systems, both in the past and present, is vital in the future.³

Every culture has a cosmology, a set of beliefs, myths and practices, that defines their perception of reality and their thoughts on the organization and origin of the world and, consequently, determines how society is structured.⁴ These cosmologies are belief systems, including religions, and define how the universe is seen, the understanding of the origin of the universe, as well as an individual's role in that universe. How someone believes the world to function, and how singular actions play into the big picture, called reality, influences how life

is lived and how humanity interacts. Furthermore, the need to explain where humanity comes from often goes hand in hand with the demand for something to give life meaning.⁵ Thus, cosmologies and belief systems provide a community's purpose and structure, allowing it to foster social, spiritual, and economic stability. In the process of exploring these ideas, I have identified four main themes that unite the otherwise distinctly unique cosmologies: a concept, idea, or principle that orders and explains the universe and its origin; the attempt to connect the invisible with the visible through spirituality; a theory or concept on the meaning or goal of existence; the use of belief systems in a political or social context. These beliefs are common in the five cosmologies studied in this paper and are the basis for examining their differences and similarities. However, they are only examples illustrating a much more complex web of beliefs than can be examined in one article.

Since every aspect of society is influenced by these concepts and theories, both tangible and theoretical, it is essential to think about belief systems not only in the context of theology or anthropology. The significant impact culture and cultural beliefs have on daily life can be found throughout all disciplines and areas of life. Understanding these systems, and the social structures derived from them, can elevate how one interacts with their environment, fellow members of their and others' community, and even themselves. To holistically explore different cultures and their cosmologies, in an attempt to avoid bias as much as possible, I will approach my chosen case studies through the methodological lens of cultural relativity, which refers to the concept of not judging a culture to one's standard, utilizing the theoretical framework of cultural anthropology to approach cosmologies, belief systems, and social structures.

Although belief systems are culturally specific and usually originate from a few distinct places, they have always been merged, changed, and adapted over time. Geographical location and the connections and communications between different regions have affected the development and change of cultures and cosmologies.⁶ These shifts can be attributed to various factors like migration and diaspora, and the simple need to adapt to changing times. Said migration, the movement of people away from their birth country, can be due to political conflict or war, environmental crisis, and seeking better work or educational opportunities. A natural consequence of migration is the formation of diaspora, which are groups of people scattered from their homeland but united by ethnicity, religion, culture, nationality, or a similar social connection, resulting in the merging of different cultures. Developing cultural groups and subgroups influences social interactions within and across communities.⁶ The fact that belief systems are continuously changing and merging is especially important when examining the importance of cosmologies in modern times. The way people who believe in different things have interacted in the past still influences today's society's cultural, political, and social landscapes. Examples of this are the conflicting ideologies between countries at war, prejudice against marginalized groups, and the role and expectations for, for example, women. Studying, analyzing and understanding cosmologies throughout history thus enables social scientists, politicians, diplomats, and the overall population to understand the roots of these complex issues and, consequently, more easily navigate the diverse world and global politics.

In this article I will explore five different cosmologies and how the four common denominators I have identified manifest in these distinct cultures and communities. To give a diverse overview of varying belief systems, I have chosen Norse mythology, the Yekuana people, Ancient Egypt, Mayan cosmology, and geo-cosmology in Bali as my case studies. These were selected as they are less known than many of the more common cosmologies, while still having sufficient information available for review in the hope of preventing subconscious reader bias. Moreover, these showcase strong connections between the common themes found throughout many different cosmologies, including but not exclusive to the belief in a principle or power guiding the structure and events of the universe, the belief in a structure and origin of the universe, and the political utilization of these beliefs, and thus act as examples for a framework that can be applied to cultures, cosmologies, and belief systems in general.

Yggdrasil in Norse Mythology:

The Old Norse mythological understanding of reality is arranged around the belief in a world tree that connects different realms and acts as the center of the universe, which has been utilized in storytelling throughout history.⁷ Norse cosmology's mysterious nature has been subject to many interpretations and picked up by the entertainment industry multiple times. This has led to a pronounced view of fictionalized Norse mythology influenced by popular movies, TV shows, and books. In this case study, my sources for the overview of the mythology will be the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda, or summaries based

on them, which are Old Norse poetry works written by various, mostly anonymous, authors. Further into the discussion, I will consult modern interpretations of said works. As most of the knowledge attained about Yggdrasil is based on myths and poetry and was developed over time, it is not concrete facts, but multiple narratives and beliefs collected over centuries. One should see the ideas found in these texts critically. The continuous development of these stories does, however, provide a unique and creative insight into both the historical beliefs of Norse cosmology and their interpretation and adaptation over time.

At the center of Old Norse mythology and cosmology is the world tree Yggdrasil, which symbolizes the center of the world and acts as the universe's nucleus that embodies and represents harmony and order and visualizes the connectedness of everything.⁷ Each part of the tree, usually interpreted as an ash, correlates to one of the three main planes of the universe, which can then be further divided into the supposed nine worlds. The canopy exemplifies the heavens, the trunk represents the earth, called Midgard, and the roots symbolize the underworld.⁸ To clarify, the 9 worlds are not part of the sacred tree itself, but rather are structured around it, with Yggdrasil linking the different realms.⁹ This can be equated with the word and concept of the 'axis mundi' that may describe the idea of a center of the universe that connects different realms or worlds. Like in other cultures, for example, the Yekuana or Ancient Egyptians, the idea of a center is part of a broader concept of how the world is organized. Yggdrasil also symbolizes order in the universe while simultaneously structuring it. As a representation of harmony, the world tree is said to determine the health of the universe.¹⁰ For example, in myths regarding the world's doom, Ragnarök, the first sign of the end is the shaking and even dying of the sacred ash.¹⁰ The idea of order and harmony through a specific principle, object or rules is found in different interpretations throughout various cosmologies worldwide. It is one of the main themes that unite diverse communities. It indicates that humans have a certain need for order and something that explains how and why everything is the way it is.

In contrast to the other exemplified cosmologies in this article, there is no evidence of physical structures having been built according to this visualization of the universe's organization. Consequently, one can assume that Yggdrasil is a purely metaphysical and metaphorical concept, deeply tied to Old Norse religion, myths, and symbolism, given its presence in narratives from the Vikings era and overall Norse mythological importance. Traces of the world tree Yggdrasil can additionally be found in Germanistic-Pagan literature. Various versions of a similar tree, connecting worlds as 'axis mundi', are evident in the cosmologies of other cultures of Central Europe and Asia as well as the Americas, for example, the Aal Luuk Mas, the Sacred Tree of the North-Eastern tradition in Yakutia, Russia, or the Maya world tree.¹¹ It can also be related to the Tree of Life, a common symbol found in many cultures, and the Tree of Knowledge, the tree in the Garden of Eden in religious texts from Abrahamic religions.⁸

Norse, but also religious or cosmological myths, rituals, and symbols in general, serve as a connection between the physical and metaphysical, the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual; as described in "Myth and Reality" by Mircea Eliade, they 'link the profane and sacred to maintain humanity's connection to the cosmic center and eternity.'¹² This quote analyses and describes the connection between the physical world, to which one has access, and the metaphysical, inaccessible world, as one example of how cosmologies seem to find a way to explain the things that cannot be seen or proven, and thus provide a synthesis of the origin, structure, and meaning of the universe as well as life.

The Yekuana and the Universe:

The Yekuana are South American indigenous people who live in the Amazonian rainforest and center their entire society structure around the belief that there are multiple sacred and safe centers of the universe in contrast to a hostile environment, based on their spiritual perception of the structure of the world which is reflected throughout their entire society.¹³ Each village is completely self-governed, self-contained and autonomous, with only cultural heritage and linguistics uniting the separate villages.¹³ A village is called an *atta*, which roughly means house, and is constructed as a replica of the Yekuana's perception of the cosmos.¹³ Wanadi, the creator of the world in Venezuelan mythology, built the first *atta* as his own house, replicating the invisible landscape of heaven, called *Kahuna*. The architectural elements of these roundhouses each represent a part of this invisible Heaven, with the house being the landscape, reflecting the organization of heaven, and the house being part of the physical and visible opposite to *Kahuna*, the landscape called *Nono* (which translates to Earth).¹⁴ Each *atta* represents the organization and structure of the world. It has a conical roof divided into two concentric circles and entrances aligned with the cardinal points.¹⁵ Right through the center of the roof stands a long post called *nunudu*, which connects the roof with the house floor and symbolically likewise connects the visible and the invisible world, to them known as *Kahuna* and *Nono*. This long post, described by the author Guss as an 'axis mundi', is the most distinctive indicator of the Yekuana belief that every village is a center of the universe.¹⁵ The pattern of two concentric circles is this culture's perception of what the world looks like. According to Yekuana mythology, the physical world comprises of the inner circle called *Dama* (heaven) and the outer one called *Nono* (earth). Thus, the house structure reflects both the images of Earth and Heaven simultaneously, along with transcending it and becoming a sacred inner circle and center surrounded by a hostile world.¹⁶

In addition to the beliefs encoded in the roundhouses, the gardens of the Yekuana are also a mirror image of the universe in a physical space.¹⁷ The gardens are similarly composed of two concentric circles with a symbolic center post and thus are an inverse of the *atta*.¹⁷ They figuratively create a safe, sacred space in the demonic nature outside of the house. The main difference between a house and a garden is who has access to which parts of the structure. The inner circle of the house is reserved for the men; women are only allowed entry when they serve them.¹⁵ In the gardens, however, this concept is inverted

and the women have complete claim over the inner circle.¹⁷ This duality is also reflected in various ceremonies leading up to and during the construction of the gardens and the house, in addition to daily rituals. These concepts are, however, not organized in these ways for the sole purpose of rendering the world inhabitable in a physical and spiritual sense but also to enable contact and communication with the supernatural.¹⁸ Through rituals, the Yekuana believe they can interact with the spirits and demons of the invisible world, essentially connecting the invisible with the visible, which is necessary for survival. Still, the necessary structures must be built in their environment for that to be possible.

Similar to the structure of the houses and gardens, all systems of life in Yekuana society, technical and social, are said to have a double manifestation, hence a tangible objective and an accompanying mirror image form, illustrating their perception of a dual reality.¹⁹ These invisible forms, called *akato*, are both independent and eternal as well as possess a share of supernatural power which has the potential of becoming fractious and disruptive.²⁰ Rituals and ceremonies are utilized to keep these powers and spirits in check and to divide and transcend the sacred and safe, for example, the *atta*, from the profane and toxic, in this case, the world surrounding it.²⁰ Every aspect of their society restates the dual nature of reality and indicates where the real power is located. The fact that an observable material manifestation of something may be an illusion masking a more powerful reality is the most centrally ciphered message of the culture and therefore, replicated in every symbolic system in which it is constructed.¹⁹ The *atta* results from interplay of two realities, an illusionary one and a material one. The center post *nunudu* is the direct link between the inner and outer, invisible and visible worlds. This duality is present in both spiritual beliefs and physical structures, and permeates every aspect of Yekuana society, showing how they try to connect the things they can see in their immediate surroundings and the things they cannot see, essentially their perception of the world based on their myths and beliefs, to make sense of the universe. Additionally, by reinforcing their ideals repeatedly and visibly, they can utilize their immediate environment to educate their youth about their culture.

Another example of this is the adornment and concept of the human body. Every human communicates with themselves and others by wearing and expressing the same structural configuration of symbols seen in houses and gardens.²¹ Thus, the values and beliefs of the Yekuana society are internalized through external dress and interior conceptualization. Every individual paraphrases the symbolic world of the tribe. Therefore, their person and body reflect the universe and its center, making humans themselves the core of the universe. The dual-concentric structure of the environment transformed by the Yekuana is reflected in dress and the perception of the body, with the heart symbolizing the center post and home of each person's *akato*, granting them access to the spiritual world and making them human.²²

To conclude, in Yekuana society, their perceptions of the organization of the universe are reflected in the house and garden structures, as structures themselves, in addition to their role in

the context of the outer world, the belief in a mirror world and the recurring importance of duality, and the human body representing a microcosm of the universe. Similarly, the temples in Ancient Egypt represent the early universe through a symbolic journey back in time. The recurring analogies to a center of the universe, including the house, garden, and body, prove parallels to the viewpoints of indigenous communities and indigenous civilizations in Bali, Mesoamerica and Egypt, and Norse mythology. The replication of the cosmos, for example, via physical structures, also enables communication with the spiritual world, which is necessary to calm destructive spirits for the community to live in peace, showcasing a direct connection between the physical and the spiritual. The symbolic expression of these beliefs is also an example of how the Yekuana use material culture to communicate and teach their fundamental beliefs and truths.

The Idea of Maat in Ancient Egypt:

Maat was the principle of order in Ancient Egypt that balanced the entire universe and explained the interconnectedness of time and space, along with astronomical observations that influenced the spiritual and social life of Ancient Egyptians. It gave them an achievable goal in life, explained the universe's beginning, and provided structure for the community. Since Africa is an incredibly diverse continent, I have chosen Ancient Egypt as a sample for the distinct cultures of the continent and approach the principle of maat in Ancient Egypt as a theory that can be applied to other African cultures in an analytical context.²³

The Ancient Egyptians believed that the world emerged from a cosmic sea of nothingness, which still surrounds it, with the sun parting the sky, illustrating the connection between time and space through maat, the principle of order and harmony. They imagined the sky as a continually turning dome with the sun moving as a fixed part.²⁴ This symbolically made the sun a mobile meridian that divided the sky into a right and west part visible by day, and a left and east part visible during the night.²⁴ Because of this idea, visualizations of which can be found in art and literature from Ancient Egypt, it has been concluded that their perception of direction depended on time. Because time was measured through rhythms of the sun and the stars and important locations were also based on certain astronomical constellations at a specific point in time, time and space became interconnected social concepts and constructs.²⁵ The correspondence between time and space is exemplified in the structure of Ancient Egyptian temples. Sacred sanctuaries inside the temple symbolize the first hill of the universe, surrounded by a sea of chaos. The floor gradually rises as one steps through the halls, further to the center. At the same time, the ceiling height decreases, making the temple not only a replica of the early Egyptian universe but also a metaphorical journey back in time.²⁶

In Egyptian cosmology, everything, from chaos to harmony, from beginning to end, is structured by the concept of order, called maat. Linguistically, the word can describe various ideas, concepts and values. First and foremost, the Egyptian principle of order informs the creation of the entire universe. It balances order and chaos, the earth and the surrounding nothingness.

²⁷ In African ontology the world is made up of five elements: gods, spirits, men, plants/animals, and phenomenon, along with a spiritual force, in this case, maat, that ensures that the elements are balanced and maintained and similar ideas and concepts are exhibited in cosmologies in other parts of the continent.²⁸ Humans are supposed to uphold the balance between harmony (maat) and disharmony (isfet). However, the principle maat, not only structures metaphysical or spiritual concepts, but also integrates the sacred with the mundane, similar to how the world tree Yggdrasil and other cosmological beliefs try to explain the universe by connecting the divine with the earthly. Denise Martin interprets this as 'Maat as manifestation.'²⁹ The philosophical idea of maat is applied to every aspect of life and living, from building over creating to speech and language. It thus influences the society and culture at its core. One example is the Pyramids of Giza, which are physical structures aligned with certain stars, which explains their precise accuracy with the north-south axis.³⁰ A similar faith is reflected in the Mayan beliefs in an invisible cosmic web of the universe that creates, makes up, and organizes the universe.³¹ Furthermore, maat was the Egyptians' moral and ethical principle of life. To reach the Afterlife, one needed to embody the harmonic values maat stands for in social, cultural, and personal domains.³²

Another interpretation of the word maat is the goddess Ma'at, the goddess of 'truth, justice, balance, and most importantly – order,' the visual representation and deification of the order and harmony of the universe.³³ According to Egyptian mythology, she was extremely important in achieving the Afterlife, as she weighed the hearts of the deceased to determine their moral worth. Thus, her image in the final Hall of Judgment, variations of which have been found in various artifacts and architecture from the time, presumably influenced the daily life of Ancient Egyptians to follow the principle of maat.³³

In conclusion, maat is the principle governing everything in the Ancient Egyptian worldview and cosmology, with similar ideas exemplified in other African countries, the goddess Ma'at being one interpretation and representation of the central philosophical idea. The belief that some invisible power organizes the universe is evident in many cultures worldwide, such as the world tree and representation of order Yggdrasil in Norse mythology and the Mayan Holy Calendar, as well as village structures in Bali. As Denise Martin so impeccably writes: 'Because maat connects all, creation is inherently multidimensional.'³⁴

The Holy Calendar Tzolkin of the Maya:

The Mayan worldview is defined by the belief in a cosmic web, named Tzolkin, that everything in the universe is made of and ordered by. The pattern is described with 13 numbers and 20 symbols that make up and outline the entirety of existence, from the life of an individual human to the grand, invisible makings of the universe.³⁵ Tzolkin essentially is the structure and matter of the world, as well as the reason why people's lives are the way they are.³⁶

In Mayan society, two main calendars are used to describe and explain daily life and broader contexts across time and space.³⁷ The first one was called Haab, which resembled the

annual solar/lunar one commonly used today. The other, which was presumably the more important one, was Tzolkin. Tzolkin was the 'holy calendar,' which was not created by measuring the more frequent solar or lunar cycles, but by observing astronomical constellations and their movements in the sky. Spiritually and metaphorically the Haab connects humans with the earth and Tzolkin with the universe.³⁷

Tzolkin, however, simultaneously represented the pattern of the universe's cosmic web, which was structured with thirteen numbers and twenty symbols, as well as the energy that was existence, the so-called 'pulse of the universe.'³⁸ This pulse indicates the belief that time was part of the originally time-free and space-free reality of the web of the universe, also known as the dream world. Similar concepts of dreaming or dreamtime, the idea of a timeless period of creation and connection from where life came, can be found in other indigenous communities, one being the Dreaming in Australian Aboriginal culture, to name just one example of this indigenous belief.³⁹ Magda Wimmer visualized the idea of time in the Maya culture as a spiral with no beginning or end.⁴⁰ The pattern described with said 13 numbers and 20 symbols shows the unique conception of time in Maya cosmology, the combination of cyclical and linear time. While a sequence of time may seem linear, meaning there is a beginning and an end, the pattern will be repeated sooner or later.⁴¹ This connection between how humanity perceives time and what time is can be linked to the theme of how cosmologies try to make sense of the cosmos and an individual's role in it by linking the temporal, in this case, linear time, to a timeless cosmic order.⁴²

Many important Mayan cultural, spiritual, and political centers were aligned with certain astronomical phenomena and solar cycles, or natural orientations like mountains, and structured according to certain perceptions of the universe, which the government utilized to strengthen legitimacy and reinforce their power. Additionally, these structures had symbolic significance in a religious and social context, and a practical appliance as aid for calculating the time of year to organize agricultural processes.⁴³ In addition to the spiritual aspect of ordering the space, Maya rulers soon took advantage of these concepts and structures and incorporated their people's universal worldview into political ideologies. By utilizing art and architecture based on spiritual beliefs, rulers could present themselves as being privileged with access to the supernatural, easing the path to political success.⁴⁴ Many tried to create a 'sanctified materialization of the union of space and time,' the two being eternally connected through the Tzolkin, through recreating and perpetuating the cosmic order in an earthly environment.⁴⁵ By, for example, building certain public spaces or temples aligned with natural phenomena, like the sunrise, sundown or astronomical constellations which reflected the beliefs of their people and essentially illustrated the cosmic order and unification of time and space in a physical environment, they managed to reinforce social cohesion and preserve the existing political order.⁴⁶ The architectural orientation with natural monuments like mountains also shows the importance of agricultural beliefs, including fertility symbolism, in Mayan cosmology as 'astro-

nomical considerations were intertwined with meanings of landscape features and sides of the world.'⁴⁷

The Maya thought of the world as a giant net through which all is connected, and of which all is made. According to Magda Wimmer, this concept can be found in the belief systems of many, if not all, indigenous communities worldwide, which is why I have chosen the Maya as an example for these communities.³¹ The most obvious parallel to other cosmological concepts studied in this paper is to the principle of *maat*, the metaphysical structure that organizes the universe in the Ancient Egyptian worldview, but also the Yekuana and indigenous groups in, for example, Bali, believed in the connection and interplay of different worlds that create, order, and influence reality. This further provides evidence for a universal need for order, meaning, and an explanation for how the world and humanity originated.

Geo-Cosmology in Bali:

In Bali, and other parts of Southeast Asia, certain indigenous groups organized their villages according to a specific, geo-cosmologically based model to live in harmony with the cosmos and utilize its powers, which is restructured and rebuilt to comply with and reflect changes in the aristocracy.⁴⁸ The village structure and the specific positioning of different complexes was essential for social, political, and economic success. They believed that there is a connection between the powers of the earth and the powers of the cosmos and that there must be a positive flux of potency between the two, not too different from the astronomical alignments of Egypt or Central America or the defined *atta* structure in Yekuana communities.⁴⁹ This geo-cosmological model was influenced by political and spiritual leaders, making it into a political playball used to further personal interests.⁵⁰

The most important aspect of this organization is the cardinal directions, which are vital in many religious and spiritual concepts, that influence societal status and, especially in the case of the three village temples, can help establish a new social order by means of manipulating sacred space.⁵⁰ Different ideals are associated with cardinal directions, locations and the layout universe. The center of these cardinal directions integrates the various values and gods corresponding to them. It thus ranks above all else, which explains why one of the main temples and the current ruler's palace are always in the center of villages structured according to these beliefs.⁵¹ This center relies on two intersecting axes, crossroads, that make up the center with important compounds built around it. These core complexes represent a condensed version of the village, a 'small world' both mirroring and intertwined with the 'big world', comparable to the role and structure of the Yekuana gardens and houses that represent their perception of the universe in various, interwoven contexts.⁵²

This perception, divided into the big and small worlds, makes up the microcosm reflecting the power pathways of the universe, which the village, but also every individual house, mirrors. Therefore, the configuration of the perceived universe is reflected on varied scales. Firstly, the different compounds and houses are structured in space guided by the organization of the big world while simultaneously reflecting the cosmos

with its alignment with geo-cosmological forces.⁵³ Walking through such a village becomes like walking along a series of individual cosmoses lined up like a chain of recurrent micro-cosmos within a bigger version of that cosmic reflection.⁵⁴ This model is applied to the human body, where another dimension, in addition to the cardinal directions, comes into play - verticality. In this context, the regions of the body become hierarchical, ranging from high and pure to low and impure.⁵⁴ The human body being part of a more complex cosmological model shows clear parallels to the Yekuana, who adorn their bodies in a way that replicates the universe's structure which supports both their social structure and spiritual beliefs.

The analogies between the body, the house and the village show that these worlds are identically perceived and organized and mutually based on laws and powers of nature, which are, in turn, based on the cultural, religious perception of the universe.⁵⁴ To achieve harmony, every component of the 'big world' and the 'small world' needs to be properly aligned with the divine potency of the different worlds and the universe. This practice is called geomancy and parallels how Yekuana villages are structured.

Because of this system, the different worlds and social groups are intertwined and independent in the villages' space, resulting in the connection of physical space to social status. Since, in Balinese indigenous communities, the east/west movement of the sun is equivalent to a person's life cycle, there is no fixed, pre-disposed social hierarchy, and the vertical axis of a person becomes an unending circle. The reproduction of life and the Balinese belief in reincarnation are thus represented in an idealized, self-generating and dynamic system.⁵⁵ Additionally, this geo-cosmological system uses the connection between physical and social space to show differences in social life. The notions of station that emerge in the competition for symbolic capital, like titles and status, in turn create a dynamic society where moving between social classes is possible and represented by one's physical location in the village.⁵⁶ Because the structure of the physical space reflects the structure of social space, the organization of the village must be changed accordingly when a new ruler takes power. This interplay of different actors competing for power turns the geo-cosmological system into a political and spiritual tool.

To sum up, the connection between social space and physical space as a reflection of political order and spiritual beliefs is clear in the structure of the villages and the utilization of these geo-cosmological beliefs in a political context.⁵⁷ Macrococosms and microcosms are repeated on various scales and in multiple ways in a village's sacred landscape, making their society a complex interplay of socio-political and spiritual forces structuring their surroundings based on their beliefs. Furthermore, the flow of potency, with which the physical world needs to be aligned, signifies a connection between the earth and the universe, and the order and harmony of the world are goals worth rebuilding an entire village for. These findings support the main themes identifiable throughout cosmologies. The parallels to other indigenous communities, in terms of using physical representations of the universe to reinforce and

actualize spirituality, belief systems, and social structures are noteworthy.

■ Results and Discussion

It is a fact that every human is unique. A human's DNA, psyche, beliefs, dreams, hopes and aspirations differ. This uniqueness is what makes humanity human. However, despite the differences, in many regards, members of humankind are similar as well. Both on a personal scale, like the life cycle of individuals, and on a global scale, like the similarities between divergent cultures. The above-discussed cultures and cosmologies are proof of the universal human need to explain where we come from, an order or system according to which our world is structured, the demand for something to give existence meaning, and the utilization of beliefs in politics. In addition to these social, spiritual, and psychological demands, many common patterns, ideas, or concepts can be found throughout various cultures worldwide. In my opinion, the fact that communities that have had no contact with each other have similar beliefs, and even similar manifestations of these values is fascinating. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss made one theoretical explanation for this phenomenon through his ideas on structuralism, which infers that certain universal structures are replicated throughout cultures due to the invariant structure of the human mind.⁵⁸ I will not delve into his ideas in detail. Still, I believe his texts provide a substantial amount of viable information for those that want to think about the structuralist theory in the context of common themes and patterns found across different cosmologies.

Often, cosmologies and the structures based on them try to connect the metaphysical and physical to find and explain the meaning of existence and the universe's structure. The notion that everything is somehow physically and spiritually connected is one of the most prominent ideas found throughout cultures. It indicates that humanity has a somewhat universal need for an explanation for the universe and how it was created. In modern times, scientific theories like the Big Bang theory are similarly popular, like religious or spiritual origin stories about how the universe was created. These beliefs are inherently specific, differently interpreted, and re-interpreted over time and across communities. They are all equally valid and important for understanding the interactions of cultures and attempting to interpret them differently to understand the theories of the origin of the world, and the differences and similarities connecting humanity. In the case of Ancient Egypt, time represents the invisible metaphysical and space the visible physical, both connected by the belief that the sun is a fixed point parting the sky and that the principle of order, maat, organizes everything in the universe.²⁴ The Maya did not think of time as linear as well. For them, time was just another part of the time-free and space-free cosmic web that made up the universe.³¹ The interconnectedness between the metaphysical and physical in the worldview of the Yekuana is especially pronounced. Their entire perception of reality is based on the idea that the invisible world and visible world are in the same space at the same time and, consequently, reality is a product or illusion of the interplay of the two.¹⁹ Those fundamental beliefs are intricately represented in how they structure

their surroundings, from the roundhouses and gardens to body adornments. Although these extreme physical reflections of beliefs are not evident in most cultures, theoretical ideas like the world tree Yggdrasil also represent the spiritual or philosophical connection. In addition to the ancient cultures in Africa, Indonesia and South- and Mesoamerica, the Catholic Church intends to visually show the connection between Heaven and Earth in the design of their churches. Thus, they included colored glass, from the early Gothic period onward, to transform the light and atmosphere when stepping inside a church into something holy. Furthermore, one common way to connect different planes of existence is by visualizing ideas about the structure of the world. The replication and reflection of the universe on varying scales and how a culture sees the universe, either in theoretical concepts or actual physical microcosms, can be found around the world in various, otherwise completely different cultures. This is one of the main themes that connects cultures and proves that humankind is more similar than discernible on the surface. Many try to connect different worlds or spheres, make sense of the universe, and figure out their role through artistic manifestations. Additionally, many of these complexes are aligned with astronomical constellations, the sun, the moon, or the cardinal directions, further showing the association of the tangible world with cosmic order and the metaphysical and spiritual.

This theme is linked with the concept of a fundamental power or system that defines and essentially creates everything. The idea can manifest as *maat* or *Tzolkin*, literally believed to be the cosmic order of the universe in their cultural context, but also as gods or spirits with the supernatural power to create and destroy. Everything is connected because everything is made by and of that invisible power. Whether one calls it Karma, the Butterfly Effect or Final Judgment, the belief that one's actions can influence the future and/or define the present proves that every culture has some version of an idea that every part of the universe is connected or united. By following specific rules or guidelines, like a certain spiritual dress code, a hierarchy in a social/physical setting, or by designing the environment by those cosmology-based practices, many societies believe that they can balance the powers of the world or utilize its potential forces to their advantage.

Moreover, using physical and social structures based on belief systems for political and socio-economic purposes is prevalent, which is why these concepts and practices are still important today. Balinese, Egyptian and Maya rulers built their cities, villages, palaces, and temples in a way that would reinforce and reflect their power. By replicating certain cosmological concepts, they would symbolically show that they can order the universe and thus attribute themselves to a god-like power that justifies their reign. The usage of personal, spiritual, or cultural beliefs is still prominent today in, for example, Capitalist societies that instill the belief that one must go to college to live a fulfilled life in many children from a very young age. A person's cultural upbringing defines their beliefs, ideas and goals, and hence, is a powerful tool in the political game of power.

Directly related to the idea of utilizing one's surroundings in a social or political setting is the approach of visualizing and reinforcing beliefs through art, architecture and literature. Myths and legends, for example, are nothing if not creative reflections of what people of a community believe in. Many use them to share their faith, educate their children, and ensure their interpretations of the world live on forever. In the case of Norse mythology, very few people of today's Western society believe in the gods and giants and the world tree Yggdrasil connecting the worlds. However, those ideas live on through literature and prose and everyone can decide for themselves if they deem it real. The religious artworks found in churches were also commissioned to visualize the religious ideals in a way accessible to every member and non-member. The structure of certain complexes, like the roundhouses of the Yekuana or the village organizations in Bali, which are based on certain spiritual beliefs, affect the communities themselves and the 'outside' world in a similar way. The reinforcement of a world-view for everyone to see ensures that a culture lives on - both in practice and in theory.

■ Conclusion

One might wonder why all of this is important. Why should theoretical ideas of the universe in different cosmologies occupy our thoughts in a changing world? The answer is quite simple. Merely if humanity realizes that every culture and unique individual is similar and completely different simultaneously, and that these differences should be accepted and respected instead of strived to be eradicated, diverse communities can live and coexist in peace despite possible prejudice and evident diversity. This has always mattered and will always matter because although societies, from an anthropological viewpoint, may change and adapt, as is the natural consequence of time, how cosmologies function will most likely never truly change. By creating a distinct world view for a community to believe in, cosmologies give life structure and existence meaning, which humanity will presumably always need. The cultural differences between those cosmologies and social structures are simultaneously what unite different cultures simply because they have belief systems. Thus, everyone is similar to everyone while also being individual and unique. While the question of why cultures that have had virtually no contact with each other have developed similar belief systems will most likely never be factually answered, one can still think about the different implications of this thesis. This paper merely gives an overview of examples that prove the common themes in otherwise distinct cultures. Still, there are plenty of opportunities to research and explore these ideas in other instances and/or in more detail. Understanding of the past is key when designing the future, cultural and social beliefs are at the foundation of interactions with other communities and the environment, hence a vital consideration in the face of current global issues. Nowadays, there is often discussion of what should be done for my generation, generation Z, to have a prosperous future. I think that before a reasonable answer can be agreed on, we must think about what different communities believe the world to be, its origin and its meaning, on top of what is important to them,

so that we can work on a better future together, united by both our differences and similarities.

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