Anthony F. Aveni, *Creation Stories: Landscapes and the Human Imagination*


Michael A. Rappenglück
Adult Education Centre and Observatory, Germany
mr@infis.org

Anthony F. Aveni is the author of numerous excellent books on archaeoastronomy, ethnoastronomy and cultural astronomy, and for many years he has always succeeded in inspiring readerships of laypeople as well as professionals. As such, one approaches his latest work, which focuses on myths about the formation and shaping of landscapes, with great anticipation.

In his preface, Aveni explains that creation myths follow a holistic interpretation of the world (p. xi), and he observes that there “is a common denominator that unites us all – the desire for order, for pattern, in the world around us” (p. xii). This includes a desire to know how and for what purpose the world came into being, how it developed and what its future will be, which explains why creation myths still have the power to touch. Creation myths of landscape are a particular type of creation myth; they are not only so-called cosmogonic and cosmological myths, but also aetiological myths (origin or pourquoi stories). Such myths explain the causes of natural phenomena, but also the origin of cultural properties. In five sections, Aveni discusses in turn mountains, waterways, caves, islands and what he calls “extremes”, and he attempts interpretations based on selected examples of creation myths from around the world.

Aveni’s approach is very interesting, although before proceeding further it needs to be understood what is meant by “landscape” as a term, given that the concept can be characterised in different ways (Simensen *et al.* 2018) and the word post-dates the contexts in which creation myths came into being. In terms of ancient cultures, the term “lifeworld” would be more appropriate than “landscape”. Aveni writes:

> But we must think of landscape not simply as what we see when we look around us – mountains, streams, rivers, buildings, a skyline. Instead it is a composite of land and sky and people. In most creation stories you can’t separate places from people.
The landscape is conceived as a distinct whole, with all its parts functioning together. It is animate – breathing, vibrant, interactive. Careful observers of the world around them designed their creation myths as sensible ways to explain the unfolding of politics, history, social relationships, and ideas about life after death (p. 10).

This idea is well known as “living geography” or, if the starry sky is included, “living astronomy”.

Aveni outlines much more clearly what he means by creation landscapes at the end of his introductory chapter, titled “Creation of Landscapes”. In this chapter, he designates specific geographic and geologic, as well as meteorological, elements: mountains – especially volcanoes – rivers, caves, island worlds, coastal formations and snow-ice worlds. This stimulates curiosity about how creation landscapes appear in detail in specific myths and how they might possibly be connected with concrete geographical, geological, mineralogical, biological, meteorological and astronomical factors. He writes: “I will focus on how each story is rooted firmly in things observed in the physical, biological, geological, and celestial environments shared by narrator and listener” (pp. 21–22).

However, reading on, one is disappointed; Aveni leaves one in the dark about how his concept of landscape from the perspective of pre-modern cultures is connected in detail with the category of creation myths, and he falls back into the general topic of cosmogonies and cosmologies, referring to how some creation myths provided justification for sociocultural and value systems. Thus while he lists some cosmogonic ideas of ancient cultures – although without much structure – it is not clear how this relates to the concept of landscape. Also, while he deals briefly with previous studies on creation myths carried out by scholars of religion, anthropologists and depth psychologists, he is dismissive. In his view, their studies mostly exhaust themselves in categorisation, and in the case of depth psychology the approach to myth fails to appreciate how ideas develop from concrete experiences of living (p. 10) rather than emerging from collective unconscious patterns ("archetypes"). This undervalues the value of using different approaches together, and the extensive compilations and discussions in various works by Mircea Eliade or by David Adams Leeming would have provided a good basis for a systematic reappraisal and perhaps graphical presentation of the material.

As such, the presentation and arguments throughout the book repeatedly get into a muddle, because set pieces from myths are jumbled together and after a while the reader sorely misses a structured argument. An example can be found right at the beginning in the Introduction. Here, Aveni discusses the tradition of Genesis and Exodus: Genesis includes a general monotheistical-influenced creation myth (based on older Mesopotamian sources) which contains few elements of the “landscape”, while Exodus can possibly be linked to a local and temporary geomyth – specifically, the Parting of the Red Sea – but this cannot really be associated with a geological event (e.g. a tsunami). It is not clear how many of the details he includes relate to creation myths. Further, he adds that it is perhaps not the interpretations that matter, but the subsequent effect of the interpretation (in the case of Exodus a “miracle”) in cultural memory. This means introducing another category: reception. It would have been exciting to consider this category in each of the individual sections, and to have considered how the myth complexes of different
cultures influenced each other, although at various points he notes how some elements of creation myths have been Christianised.

For many of the myths discussed there are many different interpretations in the quite extensive relevant literature, and it is a weakness not to have listed and discussed this. For example, Classical beliefs about the hyperborean region do not derive solely from astronomical ideas but must also relate to the journeys of early explorers (see below). Reasonably good long-distance communications also must be considered. References to the topic of “landscape” are often absent, and even when present are somewhat forced. For example, in Part One, “Mountains”, his chapter “Creation Battles in the Andean Highlands” mentions the “complementary dualism of verticality” (p. 60) as an important component of the creation landscape, but the topic is not then addressed any more deeply and is instead followed by a lengthy retelling of certain creation myths. This is a general problem running through the book. Occasionally, the one or other summarising thought appears, but is then again very quickly lost in voluminous narratives.

Aveni is more successful in the next chapter, “Salt of the Earth: Amazonian Beginnings”, where he relates salt to creation and to a partially specific landscape. This continues in the chapters of Part Two, “Waterways”, although it is always difficult to follow the stringing together of aspects that have little to do with “landscape”. In Part Three, “Caves”, Aveni again tells some creation myths in detail (of the Maya, Inca and Australian indigenous peoples), and he recognises they are related to “the magical power of transformation – the ability to shift shape and form” (p. 104). However, there is no detailed consideration of the types of creation caves. Again, he could have drawn on existing studies here, and a structured analysis of creation myths with reference to cave landscapes and the entire cosmos as a cave would have been a highly original contribution. It is a pity that this chapter remains very much on the surface and exhausts itself in retellings.

Part Four is titled “Islands”, and its chapters retell myths from Polynesia (from Dobu Island, Hawaii, New Zealand), Japan (Shinto) and North America (Haudenosaunee/Iroquois and Cherokee). Here, he comes much closer to his theme of creation landscapes by looking at the geological motifs of cosmogonical myths; for example, the formation and transformation of islands through volcanism. Aveni also indicates other geological, oceanographic, meteorological or even biological-geographical elements in island creation myths; examples include seismic uplift events and earthquake zones, extreme tidal ranges, violent water swirls, storms and particular phenomena in the life of aquatic animals (for example, the appearance of the Samoan palolo worm). It would have been very interesting had Aveni gone more into the question of whether there is evidence that the extensive geographic and special oceanographic knowledge of the seafaring cultures of Polynesia had found partial expression in the creation myths.

In his detailed retelling of myths of the Dobu Islanders, Aveni is more successful in explaining the relevance of the landscapes of the island world of Dobu (part of the D’Entrecasteaux Islands of Papua New Guinea). Also well done is Chapter 17, where the Japanese creation myth of Izanagi and Izanami is described with reference to geographical, geological and oceanographic elements. However, the two concluding chapters of the section again stay at a surface level. Again, this is a pity: myths similar to the earth-
diver myths of the Haudenosaunee/Iroquois and Cherokee are present throughout the northern hemisphere, and the literature is very extensive and in places very structured.

In Part Five, “Extremes”, Aveni starts his discussion of Thule with reference to “Ultima Thule”, an unofficial name that has been given both to the transneptunian object (486958) Arrokoth and to the town Qaanaaq in Greenland. However, he does not mention that the name does not come from the Vikings, but from the ancient Greek merchant, seafarer and geographer Pytheas of Massalia, who lived in the second half of the fourth century BC. Pytheas reports of an island six days’ journey north of Britain (Strabo, Geography 1.4.2); whether his report is based on his own travels or on even older stories told by the Celts is unclear. The name “Thule” for the world’s northernmost town Qaanaaq was given by the explorers Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933) and Peter Freuchen (1886–1957) as late as 1910. In this chapter, Aveni deals with Norse and Inuit creation myths and those of the extinct Haush culture, at the highest northern as well as southern latitudes. However, the narration of the world’s creation from the body of a giant (“Ymir” in the Norse myth, which Aveni has chosen) needed to be elaborated in connection with other similar myths worldwide. This is essential for understanding a creation landscape that, as Aveni has correctly pointed out before, was alive for ancient cultures. The world created and existing as a huge living being could have been thematised here in more detail.

In his chapter “Arctic Inuit Creation”, Aveni briefly touches on some special landscape features (e.g., niaquqaak: mounds of earth), but then moves on to other myths related to meteorological and astronomical phenomena (special winds, auroras) associated with the extreme snow and ice landscapes of the far north. Chapter 22, on the Haush myths (Tierra Del Fuego, South America) is quite interesting: here, aetiological myths concerning the characteristics of the rough landscape, oceanographic features (water currents) and meteoritical phenomena (heavy storm zone), also partially related to the creation topic, are obvious and well elaborated.

In his Epilogue, Aveni rounds off his walk through creation myths’ references to landscape with the profound change that took place due to the transition from myth to logos in the time of Ionian natural philosophy, which prepared the development of today’s scientific-technical worldview. He cites a detailed account of the development of the world by the first-century BC Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who in turn drew on strands of tradition from Ionian philosophy, especially Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550–c. 476 BC). Mythical cosmogonies and cosmologies are based on a consistently living cosmos that stands in a fundamental interrelation to human life, but through logos sacred interpretations of reality related to human beings become profane explanations. Moreover, with the Abrahamic religions’ conception of salvation history, the cyclical time of the mythical worldview is increasingly replaced by a linear conception of time.

This Epilogue complements a discussion in the Introduction on essential differences between mythical and scientific views of the world. He asks why modern sciences, especially cosmology, follow the mathematically (and I add experimentally) supported methodology of “explaining”, whereas the myths were intended to interpret natural phenomena in relation to human life. This issue, which is also important for us today given our position within planet Earth’s ecosystem, is only touched upon; a full discussion
would require more precise explanation of what distinguishes “explaining” and “understanding”, drawing on already existing philosophical and scientific-theoretical studies, as well as hermeneutics and anthropological contexts.

From today’s perspective, myths that explain various phenomena are primarily geographical, geological, mineralogical, palaeontological or even meteorological: so-called geomyths, such as the Exodus myth described above. Such myths are not always just fantasy, but may also convey insights consistent with today’s earth sciences, even though they derive from detailed visualisation of phenomena rather than scientific method. The term “geomythology” was coined by Vitaliano in 1968 and further elaborated in 2007 (Vitaliano 1968, 2007). In recent years, the literature on geomyths has grown slowly but steadily (Krajick 2005; Villagrán and Videla 2018; Liritzis et al. 2019; Nocek 2019). However, in only a few individual cases is it possible to prove clear connections between geological and geographical findings with corresponding myths. It should be noted that there are geomyths that provide localised or regionalised models of interpretation and are occasionally linked to creation myths. On the other hand, there are also creation myths that are not geomyths, though thematising general landscape elements.

Aveni’s book is just the latest academic compilation of creation myths. Previous examples include Long’s Alpha: The Myths of Creation (Long 1963), Sproul’s Primal Myths: Creating the World (Sproul 1979) and Leeming’s Creation Myths of the World (Leeming 2010). More detailed accounts of cosmogonic and cosmological myths can be found in Yves Bonnefoy’s edited two-volume collection Mythologies (Bonnefoy 1991). Unfortunately, Aveni did not include any information from this last work, nor is it listed in the bibliography. It would also have been desirable to have included Harley and Woodward’s (1987) two-volume History of Cartography, which contains a great deal of evidence for the connection between landscape and myths, especially creation myths.

Another aspect of the book worth noting is that the prologue briefly deals with cave painting in Altamira in Spain and Lascaux and Chauvet in France. Aveni assumes that these represent the beginnings of myth (pp. 6–8). There is indeed evidence that myths, especially creation myths, existed in those distant epochs. However, Aveni’s interpretation with reference to ritual hunting magic or pure aesthetics is scientifically untenable. The possible interpretations of Palaeolithic art on mobile carriers as well as on rocks in and outside the caves is extremely complex, and a proper discussion would have required a thorough chapter of its own. Yes, one can well agree with Aveni that it is not reasonable to deny that early prehistoric peoples had the ability to preserve experiential knowledge and the representation of phenomena in their living world; but Aveni makes no distinction whatsoever between the different genera of Homo (e.g., Homo erectus, Homo neanderthalensis, Homo sapiens) when he writes that we “know that at least a million years before the cave paintings, people were fabricating tools and jewelry, developing complex burials to care for their dead, and even making drawings” (p. 8). Here the evidence for Aveni’s claim is missing from the footnotes. This assertion is only partially correct: so far back in time, no complex burials or drawings can be documented (Pettitt 2010; Bednarik 2013a, 2013b, 2014). Evidence of intentionally applied notches on bones is evidenced in
one case (Guadelli 2004), and the use of jewellery is clearly more recent than one million years ago (Bednarik 2015).

Aveni’s examination of creation myths by way of examples to see how the genesis and shape of “landscape” are thematised within them and related to human life is commendable. It also helps to illustrate the special way in which archaic worldviews are fundamentally concerned with interpreting the world in relation to human beings and not, as in the sciences of today, with “pure” explanations. From the conception of the book and the presentation of the individual myths in the form of retellings with interspersed interpretations, it can be inferred that the book is not intended for experts, but for interested laypersons or students who want to study this exciting field of cultural cosmology. It is a pity that the book lacks a more precise structure, that topics that would be just as exciting and important for a deeper discussion are only touched upon and that detailed references to further literature are not given in a somewhat more extensive scientific apparatus in the appendix. Despite this, however, the book is a recommended read.

References
