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BIG HISTORY PROJECT

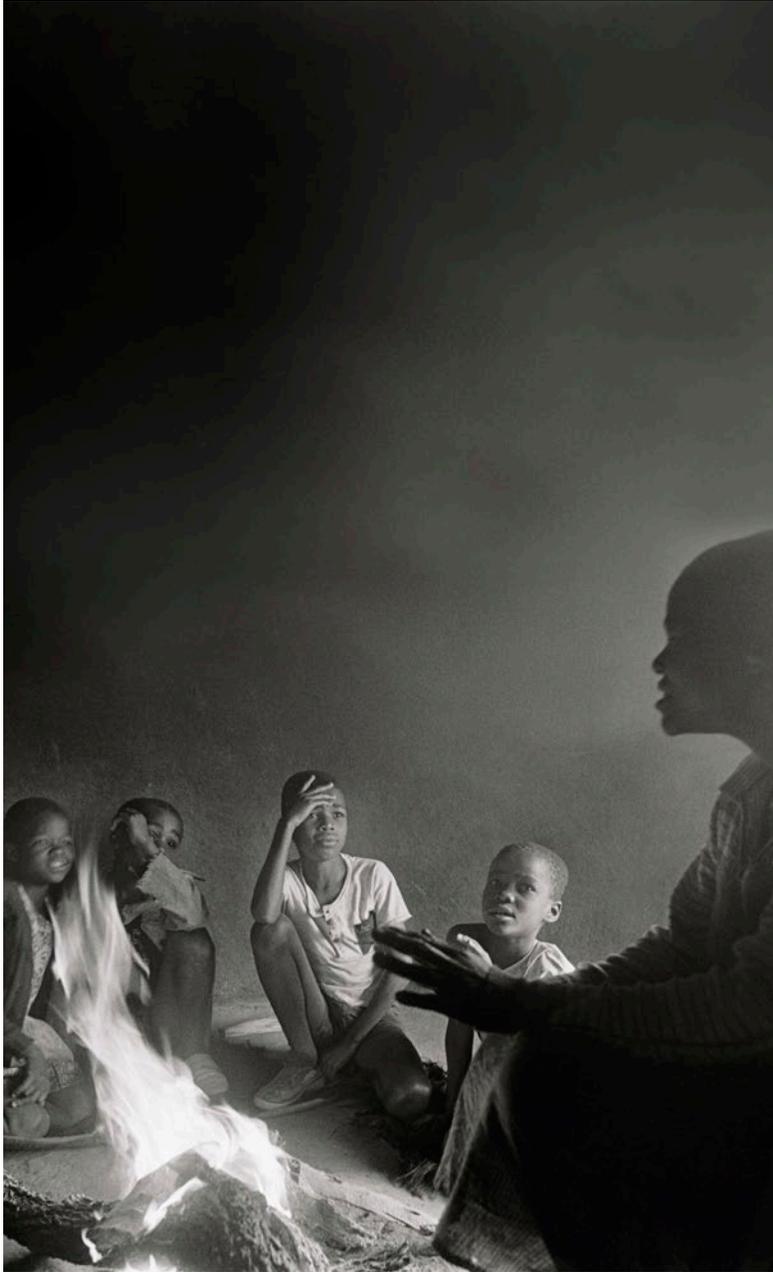


ORIGIN STORIES

INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

All humans yearn to know
where we came from
and how our world began.
We may have different
stories, but they all serve
a similar purpose.



Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the Universe began and how humans came into being. Anthropologists, who study humans — past and present — call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.” In comic books there is a special meaning for “origin stories.” They are the original story that tells what made superheroes who they are and how they got their superpowers.

Human origin stories tell where a particular culture came from. Some origin stories are based on real people and events. Others, however, are based on more imaginative accounts. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols. They can feature heroes and gods with great powers. They may tell deep truths, but not be stories based on fact.

In the United States, people tell stories about Santa Claus. But everyone, except young children, knows that he doesn’t actually exist. What he represents is a symbol of love and generosity. Many cultures tell stories that seem strange to outsiders. However, to members of a culture they may have a deep meaning. They help explain where that culture came from and how it fits into the Universe.

When people in a culture learn to read, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records. Before a group of people could write, they told stories to each other and handed them down verbally to others. This is called an “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist, since people may change them slightly as they retell them. From group to group and generation to generation stories change. I have chosen to summarize five origin stories. They come from a wide number of places and eras. Feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

The sixth story I have written myself. It is a short version of Big History, told as a modern origin story. This one is based on scientific evidence and gathered by humans throughout planet Earth.

Origin stories comparison chart

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

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

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An illustration of the Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving

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

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Planetary nebula NGC6210, in Hercules constellation

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Telling stories by the fire

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