

The Cave: A Channel for Journeying toward Ego Development

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Abstract

This study offers a discussion of the symbolic meanings of caves for human beings, as represented in mythology and folklore as well as modern psychological concepts, especially the mother archetype. The cave's associations with birth and rebirth are examined through a Jungian framework, and it is identified as a channel for the development of ego. The author uses her own life history as a case study, especially her struggle to become independent from her mother, leading to a highly personal analysis of the symbolism of caves.

Key words : Cave, Mythology, Mother Archetype, Ego Development

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My field trip to a cave is one of my favorite memories of high school. The entrance was narrow but as I stepped inside a vast space appeared before me. The cave was lit up and so I saw its irregular structures. Stalagmites hung from the ceiling, as if they were about to rain on me. Water streamed down the wall and there was a small puddle on the floor. Before entering, I had felt somewhat afraid but afterwards the stalagmites and puddles intrigued me.

My interest in caves and their elements led me to explore them further through this paper on symbols. Caves have diverse meanings. They symbolize femininity, the heart of the world, unconsciousness, an entrance to the underworld or threshold to another realm (Fontana, 1993).

The cave often conveys an image of wet darkness. Although the one I visited was lit, often they are places with no light. Had I been in a place where I could see nothing, I would have felt very uneasy. I am anxious about things that I cannot perceive. Writing this, I find it curious that I am interested in dark caves. What is going to happen in the dark? What lurks in the darkness?

In January 2008, after a year of working and studying, I quit my job. I had grown physically and mentally exhausted, so I decided to escape the hustle and bustle of my life and try to relax. Working and going to classes had been challenging. I could not afford to pay attention to many different things at the same time. It was when I relaxed that I began to look into myself. I wanted to hear what I had to say, instead of the stories of other people. I realized that I had begun to hate myself. There were only a few things that I could do without my mother's help. I loathed myself for not being able to separate myself from my mother, and for the titles that defined me – good daughter, good friend and diligent colleague. These titles did not reflect the genuine me; they were just the image that other people had of me. On the other hand, I was afraid to change and lead a separate life from my mother. It was at this time when I was struggling to change and find the real me that I began to grow interested in the symbolic meaning of the cave.

The Characteristics of the Cave

People generally think of the cave as a wet, dark and mysterious underground world with scary secrets. Not everything about caves is known, even with the aid of modern science. It is a world of mystery where mysterious entities are thought to rule. It is a world unknown to us, instilling an image of darkness in our minds.

Since ancient times human beings have lived in caves, hiding from the fierce wind, rain and cold. Primitive men drew pictures on the walls to celebrate their hunts and victories. During the

Paleolithic era people did not live in permanently constructed homes but roamed in search of food, and thus caves served as homes for them. Furthermore, the cave was used as a hideout, monastery, military base, tomb or a place where people abandoned their old and dying parents. The cave also played a part in magical rituals in the prehistoric age. The cave was a suitable place for burying the dead and thus it became regarded as the “world of the dead” (Choi, 1999).

The cave is a natural cavity in the earth’s surface formed by Nature. Descriptions of caves include different characteristics: an underground chamber where an underground water flow begins or ends; a naturally-formed cavity that is large enough for humans to enter; and an entrance that is usually round. This last characteristic is interesting as a circle symbolizes harmony, balance and oneness. From outside, the entrance to a cave usually looks small but as soon as you enter a large void opens up before you.

These days, caves are often tourist attractions and are lit artificially so that people can see and be awed by such spectacular natural structures. Water flows underneath and the ceiling is covered with ragged stalagmites – both mysterious and beautiful. In Korea, there are limestone caves, sea caves, lava caves and so on. Limestone caves are formed when limestone is melted by rainwater; lava caves are formed when magma erupts above the earth’s surface and then cools down and solidifies. Put simply, caves are formed around the voids that lava leaves behind. Sea caves are created by waves along the coast. All caves are different, reflecting the surrounding geography and environment (<http://cave.pe.kr>).

Since it is often unexplored, a cave can be compared to the unconscious deep in the psyches of people. Many people do not have a sense of their unconscious although it profoundly impacts on their lives. Sometimes the contents of the unconscious rise spontaneously into their consciousness and so they decide to find out more about their unconscious. We can see the entrance to a cave as the threshold between the unconscious and consciousness, inviting people to embark on a symbolic and psychological journey.

The Cave: A Mother Archetype

The cave is said to represent the Mother archetype. The idea underlying the Mother archetype is that the Mother provides protection. According to Jung (1985), the Mother embodies magical authority, wisdom, sublimity, benevolence, care, nurturance, growth and enrichment. It is the venue of magical transfiguration and regeneration. It is the instinct or impulse to give help, as well as

secrecy, hiding, darkness, abyss, world of the dead, devouring, seduction, poisoning, fear and something you cannot avoid. The warm, comforting and round cave resembles a mother's belly and provides refuge to those who seek to hide; however, it is dark and terrifying on the other hand. Thus, like the figure of Janus, the cave is two-faced.

Unless it is artificially lit, inside a cave you can see nothing in the dark. You do not know what to expect because of the dark, which may provoke fear and anxiety. Death, destruction, danger, pain, starvation and poverty may seem trivial before the dark mother of fear. The womb of the earth is the deadly mouth of the underworld that devours you. Furthermore, the cave – the conceiving womb, protected by land and mountain – gapes wide open, ready to devour you in the abyss of hell, the deep dark hole, the tomb, death, darkness without light and unconsciousness (Neumann, 1959).

Eliade (1959) observed that all caves were sacred and believed to be wombs of the earth where all beings are born into life. Therefore a cave can be seen as the Sacred Center of Life (Turner, 2005). A cave resembles the round belly of a pregnant mother. Inside the womb, a new life waits with its mother for nine months, preparing to come out into the world. Ideally, unless some prenatal trauma occurs, the womb is a comforting place just like the cave. This is not something that needs to be taught or instilled in us, but is a meaning derived from an accumulation of people's experiences over years since the dawn of humanity.

The cave is a warm, comforting space where people take refuge. Moreover, a cave is a place of possibilities. New life comes into being in the earth's womb. Children make caves when playing with sand and it is where something novel is born. However, it needs conception, as with the process of birth. Conception is possible when opposites are united. Going into a cave, and reaching the sacred center where this union occurs, is transcendence over what is known. By going into the cave, you may mentally conceive a whole new possibility from deep within (Turner, 2005). The world, life, nature and spirit provide the feminine experience – spontaneity, enrichment, protection and warmth.

However, the dark cave is also where mysterious monsters live. It is the mother of life and the unconscious, and because it is where sacredness meets humanity, gods or saviors come back to life in the cave. It is feminine and refers to the womb of Mother Earth and its protector. At the same time, the cave is where the dead are buried and may come back to life. It is a place of mystery, proliferation and revival. Humanity came into being in the cave and returns to be buried in the stone tomb. The cave looks like the female genitals, an inverted triangle (Cooper, 1978). Disappearing into and hiding in the cave means to die and be reborn (Jung, 1985). New life blooms

in the cave.

The Cave and Birth

The cave is a place of birth. As I tried to make sense of what I was learning about caves in relation to my own experiences, I wondered: Does this mean that something new was being born in me? Many things changed as I studied and worked away from my family. There were conflicts and struggles, and my head always felt cluttered, desperately wanting composure. I wanted to be myself, not somebody else. And yet I wanted to go back into the arms of my mother and relax, and maybe be born again. Why did I remember the cave when I began to relax? I believe that my inner conflicts, complexities and struggles brought change. Change is often accompanied by conflicts and struggles, and yet I do not like conflicts and struggles because they reveal my negative emotions. I used to keep these feelings to myself, and so I repressed and denied my emotions until that repression and denial became almost natural. However, I realized that it was now time to accept my negative emotions and transform them into positive and creative energy.

I am prone to becoming frightened and nervous, especially when I start something new. This was one of the reasons why I did not like change. I relaxed when my environment and routine were familiar. I also did not try to leave my family. I did not like doing things independently, and I thought that I could not succeed in overcoming challenges. Usually I turned to my mother and family when I needed help, feeling that I needed to be protected. Perhaps I was afraid to grow up. I was not ready to let go of my mother. As far as I was concerned, I was still in her arms. Like all children, I was always with my mother when I was young. Without her, I panicked and always depended on her. There was nothing I could do alone, and this pattern continued even after I grew up. It was not until the time when I felt confused and became interested in caves that I slowly separated from my mother.

According to Freud, anxiety reminds people of the suffocating and bloody moment of birth, when they were separated physically from their mothers. In other words, separation and birth trigger anxiety. I, too, was in a state of confusion when I became intrigued by the cave and perhaps that anxiety triggered my separation and rebirth. The following poem is from Jung's "Heroes and the Mother Archetype", and I quote it since the poem describes the pain that is necessary to open and pass through the door of rebirth:

*How dare you open the door,
When all others struggle to sneak through that door!
It is time to prove the man's dignity in action, that he does not avoid the sacredness of gods.
Fear not before the dark caves
Where fantasy forces upon you the pain you alone must suffer.
As you go toward the channel,
The fiery bell burns beside the narrow passage.
You quicken your step decisively
But there lies the danger of futility*

As the poem says, it is not easy to separate when you have never been apart. Pain is necessary to change. But rebirth began to take place as I felt terrified and comforted at the same time in the cave. Something deep within me rose to find my ego.

The Cave: A Channel for the Development of Ego

The cave represents a world unknown to us; that is, the unconscious. When we enter the cave, we face inside what we have never seen before. According to Turner (2005), becoming aware is the fundamental element to self-realization where ego, the centre of consciousness, is related to the Self, the centre of the psyche that includes consciousness and the unconscious. The ego can approach the hidden mind and raise its contents into consciousness. Many aspects of the mind that are not reflected by the ego remain in the unconscious. If the ego does not help, these aspects cannot emerge into consciousness. Without ego, no human can be mature, and so it is with Jungian self-realization. In other words, in order to bring something out of the unconscious, we need our ego, the centre of consciousness (Lee, 1978).

The development of ego is a lifelong challenge, and the cave can be seen as a channel for us to go forward in its development. That is what happened to me; I embarked on a journey through that channel to find myself. I was reborn in the cave, feeling both comfort and anxiety, which helped me to separate from my mother. The “me” that I did not know encountered the “me” that I have always known, and together they started a whole new journey.

I learned that the cave is not only a place or structure, it also involves process. According to Lee (2002), the cave is about death, rebirth and shamanism. The underground cave is the territory of

death. In many cultures, the cave is used as a place to bury the dead. The catacombs in Paris and Rome are good examples of caves that were used to bury the deceased. The Romans and French placed the bodies of their dead in underground chambers, instead of burying them in the ground. Another example is the cave-tombs that were built by the Etruscans, the ancestors of the Romans, in Italy. The Etruscans placed the daily necessities they assumed they would need in the afterlife neatly on benches along the inner walls of their cave-tombs, along with religious items. The Etruscans sent the dead back to the ground so they could continue their life underground. Going into the cave means going back to the darkness from where we came from. Doing so is dangerous and terrifying because coming face-to-face with ourselves consequently kills a part of our ego. That may be why many cultures have rites of passage in sacred caves. A man goes into the cave and comes out again as a re-born man (Turner, 2005).

The cave is a passage to the underworld. Going down into the underworld is the necessary rite of passage for our ego to become heroic. According to Neumann, the hero has to travel to the underworld to meet his new ego. The act is central to the rite of passage for *centroversion*, which means to find one's center or to fulfill one's mind (Neumann, 1994). When we are young and our egos are developing, the ego and consciousness are dominant, a kind of ego-self around which the personality settles. Later in our lives, the personalization process involves a shift in centre from ego to self. According to Neumann (1990), the expansion and integration of consciousness, and the integration of personality, happen through the process of *centroversion*, a movement towards the centre (Neumann, 1990). A common theme in mythology is the hero's journey to the underworld, where he meets terrifying aspects that he has not known previously, things that have been unconscious. But by confronting them, he is able to make them conscious. His consciousness and unconscious communicate with each other, allowing the ego to connect with deep inner resources and the Self to find a way to manifest in outer reality (Neumann, 1954).

This relationship between the Self and ego-consciousness enables the expression of the collective unconscious, along with that of the various desires resulting from an individual's subjective and objective circumstances, toward the outer world. The stronger the relationship between self and ego, the more harmonious can be this expression. There is a need for a group consciousness of the cultural protocol – the system of values required by a group. In order to fulfill its integrated function, ego-integrity must strike a balance between the conflicts of the inner and outer worlds, as well as the conflicts of the group and the individual (Neumann, 1990). This striving towards balance is not without conflict. Conflict may result in failure and pain, and people are bound to reflect more

and hopefully obtain insight into oneself, as noted by von Franz (Lee, 2002).

The actual process of personalization (self-realization) – the conscious communication with the Self and ego, the center of the psyche and the centre of consciousness – begins with the wounded character and their pain. The rite of passage is a repetition of life and death. Countless lives and deaths follow. With every death, the old world is destroyed and the new world, deeper and wider than before, opens up. Death is a prerequisite to the birth of a new world. Over and over again, we journey to find our real identity (Goh, 2006). Psychologically, in the cave we experience a rite of passage, coming of age, healing power, and a symbol of unity of the two extremes and self-purification (Lee, 2002).

The Cave in Mythology and Folk Tales

Cooper (1978) discusses how many cultures around the world interpret the symbolism of the cave. The Native Americans viewed the world as a network of interconnected caves. The ancient Celts believed that the cave was a door to another world. In China, people deem a mountain positive, or *yang*, and a cave negative and feminine, or *yin*. The cave is the heart and center to the Hindus; their deity Atman lives in the secret caves of the heart. To the Mithraists, the cave was where worship and initiation took place, the place where flowers and water were offered to Mithra, the father of all things and the creator. The cave was the model of the universe that Mithras had created. In Platonism, the cave represented the reality where it was dark and full of illusions.

The cave appears often in Korean mythology and folk tales. It is a symbol of the Mother archetype and the place of birth. It is the channel to another world and to the development of ego. One example is the story of *Dangun*, the creation myth of Korea. In this story Hwanin, the Lord of the Heavens, had a son named Hwanung, who desired the world of man. The father knew of his son's desire and let him rule the world. Thus Hwanung came to the world with his servants and established himself under the Divine Altar Tree atop Taebaek Mountain, from where he ruled and enlightened the people. A bear and a tiger lived in a cave on the mountain and they always prayed to Hwanung to turn them into humans. Hwanung gave a bundle of sacred mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic to this pair of beasts and said to them: "Eat these and do not look at the sun for a hundred days, and you will become humans." Both of the beasts ate the garlic and mugwort, but the tiger became bored and restless and so he gave up, while the bear endured and became a woman after twenty-one days.

In this myth, the cave provides the place of rebirth. Both the tiger and the bear wished to become humans, but only the bear received her wish because she alone endured the hardship of living on mugwort and garlic in the dark cave. Just as the bear endured her suffering and became human, the cave can be a place where we are reborn. An animal turning into a human in the cave can refer to the development of consciousness beyond the energy of animal instinct – differentiation and ego development. Ego in the state of unconsciousness is nothing more than a beast. This humanization of the animal represents the coming of age in primitive society (Lee, 2002). Seen within this mythological frame, the cave is the site of initiation and a place for rebirth.

The cave is also featured in the Korean folk tale of *Yeoni and Beodeul*. In this tale, Yeoni's stepmother abused her, making her work constantly. The stepmother forced Yeoni to pick some spring herbs in the dead of the winter, just to make her life miserable. Yeoni listened to her mother and went into the woods. After she had searched in vain for the herbs, she went into a cave to escape the cold. As she began to venture deeper, the inside of the cave began to feel warm. Somehow she fell asleep but a sound awoke her. Beodeul called her name and so Yeoni followed her voice further into the cave where she found and opened a stone door. A beautiful garden appeared beyond the doorway. She found the herbs that her mother had asked for, and then Beodeul gave her a small gift – a potion that could raise the dead. When Yeoni brought the herbs back, her stepmother grew curious and told Yeoni to leave and fetch some more herbs. Soon the stepmother found out the secret and the next day she killed Beodeul. When Yeoni returned to the cave, she found only his skeleton. But she remembered the potion and sprinkled it over Beodeul and brought him back to life. Together they walked across the rainbow and ascended into the sky.

In this tale, the cave served as a bridge between the consciousness and the unconscious. The cave was the beginning of a journey for Yeoni, who needed to develop her ego in order to separate from her mother and, by extension, the state of being unconscious. As the story progressed, she consciously chose to enter the cave, open the door and enter her unconscious. In the tale, the stepmother did not have a name, but it could be interpreted that Yeoni represents the ego and her stepmother represents the inhumane, instinctive and transcendental unconsciousness that Yeoni cannot integrate with herself. The integration of unconsciousness and consciousness is seen in stark contrast to each other. Yeoni enters the cave and a conflict with her stepmother arises. This is the moment where consciousness is expanded as the conflict is resolved. Such conflict is the pain necessary for the birth of Yeoni's new femininity. After Beodeul lives again, and takes Yeoni into the sky over the rainbow, Yeoni has her moment of self-realization. In the end, the conflict between

Yeoni and the stepmother had led her to go to the sky with Beodeul.

A journey into the sky is greatly different from a journey into the underground world. However, both are worthy endeavors. They just represent qualitatively different aspects; both are spiritual journeys on either side of the line of discontinuity. Our personalization process involves experiences in both domains. Demands under a given condition accompany capabilities to go upward or downward. Ascendance is a breakthrough toward the new aspects of an existence. It involves going beyond the limits of this world and aiming at divinity. Ascendance is a symbolic movement toward the absolute existence (Turner, 2005).

As I thought about this tale in relation to my own life, I was able to understand that the real or more developed “me” could be found through despair, but not by staying in what was comfortable and easy. If the stepmother had not murdered Beodeul, Yeoni would not have been able to find herself. In the aforementioned Dangun myth, the bear became a woman because she endured a hundred days of mugwort and garlic as well as no sunlight in the cave. Suffering and despair harbor an opportunity, a chance for us to make ourselves anew. Ironically, pain leads to birth. Although it is difficult to endure the pain from facing the inner “me”, I know that it will make me stronger.

Conclusion

The cave is not artificial; it is a cavity formed by natural phenomena. The narrow entrance seems small but, once we pass through it, the vast space inside amazes us all. It is a mystical place hidden from us. People study caves because they would like to know more about what lies within the earth and themselves. I was curious and wanted to learn about its mysteries because I sensed there was a connection with my deeper self. The cave represents the unconscious and its entrance is a bridge to our consciousness. It is where life and death repeat themselves. Death is an integral part of the birth of a new world. The cave provides a place for birth to occur. It is the place for rites of passage, integration and self-realization. The cave has helped me to change, to separate myself from my mother. Furthermore, I gained enough confidence to try new activities. For example, I now go shopping and do hobbies alone. I began to recognize my negative emotions. I can now express my thoughts in front of others. It was the cave that guided me in my pursuit of the real “me”. This is the power of a symbol.

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