

## CHAPTER 6

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# COSMOGONY

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

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COSMOGONY as a term is derived from the two Greek words *kosmos* and *genesis*. *Kosmos* refers to the order of the universe and/or the universe as the order, whereas *genesis* refers to the process of coming into being (Long 1993: 94). Thus, cosmogony has to do with founding myths and the origin and the creation of the gods and cosmos and how the world came into existence. There are schematically several different types of cosmogenic myths classified according to their symbolic structure: (1) creation from nothing, (2) creation from chaos, (3) creation from a cosmic egg, (4) creation from world parents, (5) creation through a process of emergence, and (6) creation through the agency of an earth diver. Several of these motifs and typological forms may be present in a given cosmogenic myth-system, and these types are not mutually exclusive but may rather be used in parallel in creation or origin myths (Long 1993: 94).

There are cosmogenic myths in all religions. In the Hebrew myth, there is creation from nothing: 'And God said. "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen. 1: 3). Importantly, in transcendental religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam the omnipotent god exists totally independent of its own creation (Trigger 2003: 473), but still there are cosmogenic myths. Usually, however, cosmogony refers to a divine structuring principle where cosmos and the world are not independent of its original creation, but dependent upon the outcome of the *ritual relation* between humans and deities for its future existence, and such religions are traditionally called cosmogenic, putting the emphasis on human *rituals*. Thus, there are differences between cosmogenic and transcendental religions with regards to structures of beliefs and practices. A cosmogenic religion links humans' rituals in the present with the divine glory in the past and cosmic stability and prosperity in the future. Hence, a cosmogenic religion enables and prescribes particular types of ritual practices which are archaeologically manifest in the material culture, and all the early civilizations have been cosmogenic (Trigger 2003: 444–5) together with the majority of prehistoric religions.

Although cosmogony had been an analytical term before Mircea Eliade developed these perspectives, his writings in the 1950s (e.g. Eliade 1954, 1959a [1987]) have strongly influenced researchers' views of peoples' beliefs of the world and universe in early civilizations (Trigger 2003: 445). Cosmogony as a religious framework for understanding the world and the universe necessitates specific types of interactions and rituals with the divinities. Hence, due to the strong influence of Eliade's work on cosmogony as a principle and process, this article will focus on (1) his premises and analyses, (2) criticism and development of cosmogony as a concept, and (3) how it is possible to analyse cosmogenic rituals and religious practices as manifest in the archaeological record. This will include: (a) *rituals*, with particular emphasis on death and sacrifices in the Aztec civilization; and (b) *monuments*, with particular emphasis on the pyramids in the ancient Egyptian civilization, since these are processes and places where the dual interaction between humans and divinities took place, which recreated cosmos against the threat of chaos. Together, these case studies will illuminate the possibilities of a cosmogenic perspective in the archaeology of ritual and religion despite the difficulties with Eliade's structural universalism.

## 2 COSMOGONY IN CONTEXT

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Leach argued once that 'myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same' (Leach 1954: 13). Today, most researchers argue that the relationship is more complex, and that myths and rituals possess qualitatively different aspects (e.g. Bell 1992, 1997; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Rappaport 2001). Following Alan Dundes, 'a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form' (Dundes 1984: 1) and the creation myths give answers to the most profound human questions such as who are we, why are we here, what is the purpose of life and death, and how are humans placed in the world and cosmos in time and space? (Sproul 1979: 1). Although transcendental religions have cosmogenic myths, these do not define the ritual practice as they do in cosmogenic religions. According to Eliade, cosmogony is the dual recreation of the world and cosmos uniting micro- and macrocosmos. Thus, in cosmogenic religions the commemoration of the Creation is a re-actualization of the cosmogenic act in the rituals (Eliade 1987: 77) where 'cosmogony is the supreme divine manifestation' (Eliade 1987: 80). Cosmogony is an intimate process where humans ritually partake in the recreation of cosmos and the divinities recreate humans and the world. All creations of life, including humans, are processes in which all the forces of the universe partake, and consequently the regeneration of life and humans is also a recreation of cosmos. This approach to cosmos and the divinities has at least three consequences for an understanding of the function and importance of rituals.

First, rites are reproductions of the original creation but on a microcosmic scale. The creation of this world has the creation of the universe and the mythological beginning as its reference point. The consecration of a place is a repetition of the cosmogony and holy sites are therefore perceived as the centres of the world and temples as links between earth and heaven, but also connecting the lower realms to this world (Eliade 1987: 32–9). In the

words of Eliade, 'every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model. The creation of the world becomes the archetype of every creative human gesture, whatever its plane of reference may be' (Eliade 1987: 45). Hence, every temple, holy place, or rituals which are constructed or conducted are repeating the original creation at a micro-scale and thereby humans unite and partake in the macro-cosmos. Consequently, every new town, house, temple or altar that is built stands at the 'centre of world' since these constructions involve rituals based on the original creation myth (Eliade 1993: 379), and through ritualization, these places and processes become the centre of the world—the *axis mundi* (Eliade 1987: 36–9).

Second, by 'participating ritually in the end of the world and its recreation, any . . . [man] was born anew, he began life over again with his reserve of vital forces intact, as it was at the moment of his birth' (Eliade 1987: 80). Almost all rituals include the mythological beginning and hence become cosmogenic, uniting humans with the divine spheres. Following this line of thought, life cannot be repaired, but only recreated through the symbolic repetition of the cosmogony (Eliade 1987: 82). '*The ritual makes creation over again*' (Eliade 1993: 346, original emphasis) and this is particularly seen in rites involving water ablutions. Water washes away sins and thereby purifies and gives new life to the devotee. The ritual use of water brings the devotee to 'that time' when the creation took place, but as soon as the ritual participants separate them from the water, 'every "form" loses its potentiality, falls under the law of time and of life; it is limited, enters history, shares in the universal law of change, decays, and would cease to be itself altogether were it not regenerated by being periodically immersed in the waters again' (Eliade 1993: 212). Thus, the rites are indefinite and the devotees have to conduct rituals continuously to retain their purity and spirituality as well as the proximity to the divine. With the repetition of the act of creation the sacrificer gets beyond the human state and becomes immortal by the creation ritual (Eliade 1993: 96).

Third, not only humans, but also the divinities and cosmos are dependent upon these cosmogenic myths because 'The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living, and sacred' (Eliade 1987: 117). Since cosmos means, literally, ordered universe, the whole universe is interlinked and in equilibrium uniting microcosm to macrocosm through human ritual obligation. What humans do when they sin affects the cosmos since they are intimately related and indeed identical, and unless humans perform rituals there will be disequilibrium (Carrasco 1999: 184), which may even threaten the whole existence of cosmos as created by the divinities and 'by virtue of these paradigmatic models revealed to men in mythical times, the Cosmos and society are periodically regenerated' (Eliade 1954: xiv). Thus, there is a ritual reciprocity where the cosmic order created by the divinities depends upon the rituals performed: without humans' ritual engagements the divine order—cosmos—is brought into disequilibrium and deteriorates towards chaos. A cosmogenic religion prescribes certain and continuous rituals not only for the purity and the spirituality of the devotee who will be rewarded or penalized in another existence after death, but because the whole universal order depends on it, and this is an important difference between cosmogenic and transcendental religions.

### 3 CREMATION, CRITICISM, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

That ‘every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model’ (Eliade 1987: 45), uniting the regeneration of humans, the world, and cosmos through rituals, is in particular seen in Hindu cremations (Oestigaard 2005). Varanasi in India is not only a microcosm of the universe, but also a macrocosm of the body (Parry 1982: 356). Kashi (Varanasi) is the site of cosmic creation and the place where time began—it ‘is both the origin-point and a microcosm of the universe; that it stands outside space and time yet all space is contained within it’ (Parry 1994: 11). Death is a cosmic regeneration, and the most important cremation *ghat*—Manikarnika—is the place where the genesis of the universe occurred at the beginning of time and the place where the corpses will burn at the end of time (Parry 1994: 14). This process and place where the cosmos was created and where it will be destroyed is continuously repeated by the more than 40,000 cremations which are annually conducted (Figure 6.1). The cremation pyres burn day and night, and ‘man is a replica of cosmos and is constituted by the five elements, and the life cycle and mode of thought are governed by the cosmic laws’ (Prasad 1995: 99). Kashi is a microcosm of the universe and a macrocosm of the body and there is an ‘equivalence between the cremation which destroys the microcosm of the physical body and the general conflagration which



FIGURE 6.1 Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi by the River Ganges, India.

destroys the macrocosm at the end of time' (Parry 1994: 30). Cosmic dissolution and cremation are not only an end, but also a beginning and renewal of both the deceased who gain a new life and of cosmos itself, since 'the body is the cosmos the last rites become the symbolical equivalent of the destruction *and rejuvenation* of the universe' (Parry 1994: 31). Cremation is a sacrifice and on the cremation ground the creation is continuously repeated. Thus, in Varanasi time and the whole cosmos is regenerated in death by the body and the cremation rites, linking humans, gods, and cosmos through the cosmogenic event which is continuously repeated (Parry 1994: 31).

In Hindu thought, the cosmogenic model fits perfectly well, and herein lies some of the difficulties with Eliade's theories. Born in 1907, Eliade studied Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy at the University of Calcutta from 1928 to 1931 before he lived for six months in an ashram (hermitage). In 1933 he got his doctorate with the dissertation *Yoga: Essai sur les origines de la mystique indienne* (revised and published in English as *Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom* in 1958) and he was an assistant professor at the University of Bucharest from 1933 to 1939. Thus, his Hindu background has influenced the interpretations of other religions (Allen 1988: 550–1) and he emphasized non-historical universal structures rather than the historical and particular, which has been highly criticized particularly from the hermeneutical tradition (e.g. Altizer 1963; Allen 1978). Moreover, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religions have either ignored Eliade or simply dismissed his works, claiming that his method is uncritical, arbitrary, and subjective and hence his works cannot be taken seriously. His sweeping generalizations and universal structures are not historically falsifiable and his phenomenology is as normative as theology. Eliade's approach is, however, consistent in the way that his aim is to interpret transhistorical meaning and religious experiences making ontological claims about human nature and being as such (Allen 1988), although this is difficult within the history of religion as a human science. Eliade has, nevertheless, precisely emphasized the irreducible character of religious experience, and he has stressed that it is impossible to grasp the essence of religious experiences by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, etc. (Morris 1987: 176). Nevertheless, although one may be sympathetic to this position where one aims to understand religion on religious criteria only, 'to accept religion in its own terms is really to deny that it has any ideological function' (Morris 1987: 177) since all religious phenomena are historical and all data are conditioned and consequently religious phenomena cannot be understood outside of its 'history' (Allen 1988: 552).

A sympathetic reading of Eliade may reveal, however, new insights and knowledge of the past because, according to him, it is impossible to understand history except through imaginative recreations, and hence the method becomes 'essentially philosophical because it is concerned with essence, experience and meaning' (Berger 1986: 156). Both the reading and criticism of Eliade share some similar challenges with those surrounding interpretative archaeology. On the one hand, 'we [archaeologists] have to find our own path. The question that we need to consider is of interest outside archaeology, but the ethnographic evidence soon runs out. If they can be answered at all, it will be by archaeology alone' (Bradley 2000: 17), and archaeology has been described as science fiction because we are not simply studying the Other, but rather the *unknown*. Hence, it is possible to pursue an interpretative approach based on fictions rather than contemporary data (Fahlander 2001: 41). On the other hand, following Hodder, 'all archaeology is based on analogy and the process of analogical reasoning can be explicit or rigorous. But we cannot strictly test the

analogies and hypotheses, which result from their use. Archaeologists cannot prove or falsify their hypotheses on independent data. All they can achieve is a demonstration that one hypothesis or analogy is better or worse than another, both theoretically and in relation to data' (Hodder 1982: 9). Thus, archaeology is situated in between the unknown past and known present, and this challenges our conceptions for interpretations of the past (Insoll 2007). Importantly, 'no matter how appetising some theories might appear on a meta-level, they are still useless if we cannot link them to the archaeological data' (Fahlander 2001: 11).

Hence, if a distinction is made between Eliade's theories as structural and universal explanations on the one hand, premises that have rightly been criticized, and on the other hand his theories as theoretical tools for analytical purposes, his concept of cosmogony can work as an ideal type or model for certain religious premises enabling one to gain new insights into the distant past. Therefore, the question is whether this approach to religion may contribute to other and better interpretations of the past than if one were to base one's understanding on transcendental religious or Christian prejudices. Cosmogony as a principle opens up entrances to the past since it puts the emphasis on rituals and practices which have direct material traces in the archaeological record. Death, in particular, is a dual interaction between humans and divinities where cosmos and society are recreated, and hence funerals and sacrifices as *rituals* and the construction of *monuments* unite micro- and macrocosmos through the cosmogenic myths.

## 4 CONSUMING HUMANS AS COSMOGONY

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The difference between transcendental and cosmogony-centred religions is important because in transcendental religions the omnipotent god exists independent of his own creation. Consequently, sacrifice as a ritual practice has a minor ritual function in religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as opposed to cosmogenic religions where sacrifice has been one of the central features. In the early civilizations the main rationale for conducting sacrifices was to return the life-giving energy back to its divine sources and thus rejuvenate the power contrary to the rites in transcendental religions. 'In early civilizations, individual deities were not viewed as being sufficiently powerful to render them independent of human support . . . deities and humans were regarded as depending on each other' (Trigger 2003: 473). Sacrifice is a gift to the gods and is part of a process of exchange between gods and humans; and the logical limit of any sacrificial system, which gives it the fullest meaning, is the sacrificer's own death (Valeri 1985: 49, 62). Cosmogenically, a sacrifice is 'a religious rite in which an object is offered to a divinity in order to establish, maintain or restore a right relationship to the sacred order' (Faherty 1974: 128), and human sacrifices have been seen as the most precious offering which nourished the gods, and throughout Mesoamerica, sacrifice was seen as a form of debt repayment restoring the original harmony and balance in society and cosmos (Trigger 2003: 475–81).

Regarding the sacrifices in the Aztec cosmos (Figure 6.2), the life-giving and transformative processes necessitated that old things were destroyed and 'eaten' in order to create new things, which also included humans, as Read notes. 'Sacrifice was not just an act of destroying one thing to make another; it also was an act of eating one thing to create another, an act where living beings in this cosmos reciprocally feed each other'



FIGURE 6.2 The Aztec city Teotihuacán seen from the Moon Pyramid, Mexico. Photo: Rune Oestigaard.

(Read 1998: 134). This cosmogenic meal was a process where sacrificial bonds united death and the creation of further life. Cosmos was an ongoing and continuous production where ‘transformative sacrificial acts destroy in order to create, but they also cause life-giving powers to flow’ (Read 1998: 145). It was an interchange of powers between humans and non-humans (Read 1998: 147), and this had to be kept in equilibrium. ‘When a child eats the substance that comes from the interior of the earth, the child ingests the weight and quality of death. All that comes from Earth Mother comes from the death that produces life. In this way, the life that is maintained at the cost of death has to be transformed into death’, Carrasco argues, and ‘if a human eats corn, he is required to pay his debt to the earth by giving his body when he dies. Throughout life, the human being is sinning on the earth, is building up a debt to the earth. This debt is disequilibrium, which must be paid or set back’ (Carrasco 1999: 184).

Thus, it was commonly believed among the Aztecs that the gods were starved of life-giving forces, and therefore the divinities needed a continuous sacrificial cult where they were offered humans in order to sustain and maintain cosmos. Only through sacrifices could humans return the energy to the gods which the deities had given to the humans. Sacrifices of humans had therefore a rationale in the fact that flesh and blood were formed from corn and the sacrificial victims were referred to as ‘tortillas for the gods’ (Trigger 2003: 482–3). The human sacrifice was ‘their response, and the only response that they could conceive, to the instability of a continually threatened world. Blood was necessary to save this world and the men in it’ (Soustelle 2002: 99). The Aztec civilization, then, seems to have all the important characteristics of a cosmogenic religion and consequently, from an

archaeology of religion point of view, cosmogony as a principle and process was not only the basis for the civilization, but one may also say that the Aztecs suffered a 'cosmic paranoia' where their striving for cosmic stability and security led to cultural and religious extremities (Carrasco 1999: 55).

## 5 COSMOGENIC CONSTRUCTIONS?

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In ancient Egypt, as in all the other early civilizations, it was believed that the deities who had created the universe kept it functioning (Trigger 2003: 473). The mortuary cult in the Egyptian civilization has intrigued scholars and laymen from time immemorial, and the Great Pyramid in Giza is the only remainder of the ancient Seven Wonders of the World. The building of pyramids started at the beginning of the third Dynasty during the reign of Djoser (c.2650 BC). Sneferu, the first king of the fourth Dynasty (c.2625–2585 BC), was the greatest pyramid builder of all the pharaohs. He constructed four pyramids; the Bent and Red pyramids at Dashur, one in Meidum, and one in Seila. Together, these pyramids consist of 3.7 million cubic metres of stone (Verner 2003: 154), which together contained more cubic metres of stone than the Great Pyramid of his son Khufu (c.2585–2560 BC). Khufu's pyramid is the world's largest pyramid with an original height measuring 146.5 m (Figure 6.3). His successor Khafre (c.2555–2532 BC) built the second largest pyramid at Giza, and the third major pyramid in Giza was the smaller one built by Menkaure. The Old Kingdom lasted only a few centuries, but from this period 21 of the 23 major pyramids were built, standing within a 20 km stretch (Lehner 1997: 14–15). The ever-returning question of why the pyramids were built is not the focus here, but rather to highlight what a cosmogenic perspective may add to our knowledge of ancient Egyptian religion.

The Egyptian mortuary cult is exceptional in world history not only because of its size and monumentality, but also *when* the construction of the monuments took place. Contrary to most monuments of death, which are built by the descendants and the successors *after* death, the pharaohs had to build the monuments themselves while they were alive. On the one hand, one may argue that a pyramid like the one of Khufu, which is estimated to have been built by some 30,000 men (Verner 2003: 81), would have been more difficult to build by his descendants. On the other hand, the Taj Mahal in Agra in India was built over a 20-year period between c.1632–54 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. It is estimated that some 20,000 workers were employed in the construction of the monument. Hence, it would have been possible for the descendants to build the pyramids, even such massive monuments as Khufu's and Khafre's pyramids, but this was not the case. Statues of pharaohs placed in temples or the ancient kings were occasionally worshipped for centuries after their death (Frankfort 1948: 55), but the overall cult put the emphasis on the pharaoh himself as an acting god. Menkaure died before he was able to complete his pyramid complex, and it was Shepseskaf who completed his father's complex in Giza, but the fact that he used mudbricks rather than stone indicates the great haste and probably reduced means he had to fulfill his duty (Verner 2003: 157–8), and there are numerous unfinished pyramids. Thus the pyramids had to be built continuously in the Old Kingdom, and this was the living pharaoh's religious obligation, not that of his successors.



FIGURE 6.3 Khufu's pyramid at Giza, Egypt.

There may be two main reasons for this in a cosmogenic perspective. First, it seems that it was the person who conducted the funeral for the late king who became the legitimate successor. This is seen in a unique scene in the burial chamber of Tutankhamun where the mummified king receives the last rites from his successor Ay, and this practice seems to have its origin in the cosmogenic myth of Osiris and Horus where Horus buried and avenged his father before he took his place as the ruler on earth (Dodson 2007: 81). Therefore, the pyramids needed to be completed when the funeral took place because otherwise the successor would not become a legitimate heir. Nevertheless, although the pharaohs' motto was 'to go beyond everything that was accomplished in the time of his predecessors' (Verner 2003: 24) and that 'ideology needs architecture for its fullest expression' (Kemp 2006: 248), there is a distinct difference if one builds the most magnificent monuments for the deceased king after his death or if the living pharaoh builds it for himself while being alive. Since the latter was the case, it may give testimony to a cosmogony where the world and cosmos had to be maintained *here and now* and not postponed for 20–30 years after a pharaoh's death.

Second, the Egyptian world order had continuously to be defended against the destructive forces of chaos, and it was only the pharaoh who could secure the divine order through rituals (Verner 2003: 22). Chaotic forces and disorder had to be controlled and tamed in order to maintain *maat* or the principle of law and order (Hornung 1982: 212–13). Building

funerary monuments must therefore have had a religious and cosmogonical role in itself. The monuments were not only commemorative sepulchres, but materialized efforts to stabilize cosmos and secure welfare and prosperity through the mortuary cult. The pharaoh's power resided in him only as long as he was alive. The continuous pyramid-building in the Old Kingdom may therefore be seen as an extreme cosmogony or renewal of cosmos and rejuvenation of the pharaoh's power in his successor. Logically, since it seems that it was impossible for the successor to build the complete pyramid for the deceased king after his death, which is the usual practice in mortuary cults worldwide, it may indicate the pervasiveness of the belief and fear of cosmic threat and chaos; it was real and it was here and now. It was impossible to postpone the rituals or the funerary cult and everything had to be completed before the living pharaoh died. Thus, if Aztecs suffered a 'cosmic paranoia', one may equally label the Old Kingdom in the same way. Traditionally, the Old Kingdom has been seen as a period of stability and later changes as reflecting religious uncertainty or crises (e.g. Malek 2000: 97), but there is no correspondence between the belief in cosmic stability and actual political stability (Trigger 2003: 471). From a cosmogenic point of view, the fact that *each of the pharaohs had to build their own pyramid while they still were living*, indicates a cosmogony where literally all forces in the world and cosmos had to be employed at all times to secure the divine balance of law and order—*maat*.

## 6 CONCLUSION

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Cosmogony as a religious theory and principle puts the emphasis on ritual dynamics and the dramatic importance of conducting rites when the cosmos is threatened by chaos. As a conceptual perspective, particularly in studies of early civilizations, cosmogony is an analytical tool for better understanding parts of the historic, religious processes which were at work. However, due to the heavy influence of Eliade and his works, a cosmogenic approach has its pitfalls. Although Eliade emphasized that a comparative approach is necessary in order to grasp 'the essence and the structure of religious phenomena' (Eliade 1959a: 177), the problem is that the empirical data has shown more variation than Eliade incorporated in his theories (Trigger 2003: 470–1). Moreover, when Eliade claims that the only function of myths is to create a sacred cosmos from the primordial chaos, and that all rituals are repetitions of the cosmogenic myths, he gives these structural patterns a privileged ontological status and denies that religion can be understood on other premises in terms of social, cultural, or psychological factors (Morris 1987: 181). This was in fact Eliade's project since, according to him, religious experience is always existential: 'Understanding is ecstatic and contemplative, not reductionist and analytical. Understanding is given to us, from somewhere within ourselves or from the outside, but it is not known through thinking' (Berger 1986: 151). Such a position is perhaps right from a religious point of view, but it makes religious studies difficult if not impossible.

Hence, one may say that much of the criticism of Eliade is based on his premises and not necessarily on his ideas as interpretive perspectives. The belief in universal structures was commonly held in anthropology in the 1950s, and from the 1960s in archaeology. Therefore, although 'cosmogony' is closely related to Eliade and his works, one must not dismiss it out of hand just because it was written by Eliade. Cosmogony as an analytical concept opens up

new perspectives for understanding prehistoric religions. The alternative will often be to analyse religious phenomena on static, transcendental, or Christian religious terms and premises, which hinder an understanding of the function of rituals in maintaining cosmos. It is precisely because of this that a cosmogenic perspective is important in archaeological interpretation; but, as with all theory, it should be used as an entrance to gain new knowledge and not as a dogma where one religious pattern is used statically in all prehistoric societies regardless of time and space. The usefulness of cosmogony is therefore that it highlights the active and dynamic ritual processes thus stressing that it is necessary to conduct meticulous empirical analyses in order to understand how cosmogony as a process may have worked.

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