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Goddess Traditions (MS 601)

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Embracing our Treasure

“Let none of the gods vanish.
We need each and everyone.
Every one should matter to us,
Every perfected image.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

I have come across many writings concerning the existence of a prehistoric matriarchy. Many of the writers are feminists who with little, if any, direct evidence are sure that from the beginning of humankind to until recently God was considered to be a woman. It makes it clear that we women need the goddess. The representation of female power and the affirmation of the female body helps us to attain our deepest experiences of spirituality as well as the understanding of the rhythms of our own bodies, sexuality, childbirth and strength.

Jane Ellen Harrison, Carol Christ and Marija Gimbutas, for example, are brave and important pioneers who taught us how to see and express ourselves as women in a patriarchal world. Gimbutas, being a great artist, archaeologist, and mythologist was not completely satisfied with her focus on the Neolithic period. With evidence clearly showing the predominance of female figures among the artifacts found at Neolithic archaeological sites, she then extended her focus to include the Paleolithic period seeing

the goddess religion(s) beginning about 25,000 years ago. This was long before the beginnings of horticulture, an important point to notice.

Despite criticism, Gimbutas is not alone in her enthusiastic search for the golden goddess era. Cynthia Eller quotes Heide Gottner-Abendroth, Monica Sjoo, Barbara Mor, Diane Stein and Matthew Fox:

Heide Gottner-Abendroth, author of a four-volume opus on matriarchal prehistory, imagines a timeline of human history two meters long, on which “man’s rule” occupies only the last millimeter. As if the disproportion in matriarchy’s favor weren’t already commanding enough, feminist matriarchalists seem to experience an unstoppable desire to expand it even farther. In their voluminous work *The Great Cosmic Mother*, Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor tell us on page 46 that “the mysteries of female biology dominated human religious and artistic thought, as well as social organization, for at least the first 200,000 years of human life on earth.” By page 235, “the original Goddess religion” is said to have “dominated human thought and feeling for at least 300,000 years.” On page 424, as they arrive at the end of their recounting of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, this number has increased to 500,000 years. Some feminist matriarchalists go even farther. Diane Stein says the matriarchal era began incarnating on the earthplane ten and a half million years ago. Meanwhile, Matthew Fox contrasts the “original blessing” of the 18 billion years of the cosmos’s existence as over against the appearance of sin “with the rise of the patriarchy some four thousand to six thousand years ago.” Patriarchy is thus reduced to a veritable blip on the radar screen, inspiring in feminists great hope for this future overthrow. (*The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* 20)

“Too old”, Cynthia Eller says. The patriarchy can be seen as relatively young nowadays thanks to the feminists’ belief that woman-centered, goddess-worship comes from at least the Paleolithic era, 1.5 to 2 million years ago, and lasted until sometime around 3000 BCE. Eller doesn’t feel that we need a mythical time of women’s past greatness to get rid of sexism and in fact believes that the myth of matriarchal prehistory is not plausible to those who aren’t already ardently hoping that is true. For her it does not represent historical truth, that is, it is not a story built from solid evidence, and presents a scenario for prehistory that, if not demonstrably false, is at least highly unlikely. She says:

We cannot know nearly as much as we would like to about prehistory. Interpretation of “gendered” data especially is so over burdened by observers’ wishes and assumptions that it is very difficult to bracket off present concerns and discover past reality. But what we do know (or can judge to be probable) about gender in prehistory is not particularly encouraging regarding the status of women. Ethnographic analogies to contemporary groups with lifeways similar to those of prehistoric times (hunting and gathering or horticulture, practiced in small groups) show little sex egalitarianism and no matriarchy. Indeed, these societies always discriminate in some way between women and men, usually to women’s detriment. Women may have powerful roles, but their power does not undermine or seriously challenge an overall system of male dominance in either these groups or ours, and there is no reason to believe that it would have in prehistoric societies either. If there are in fact societies where women’s positions is high and secure, these exceptions cannot lead us to believe that it was this pattern (rather than the more prevalent pattern of discrimination against women) which held in prehistory. (180)

This may be true. But adopting an ahistorical and achronological view, I find in my own innermost being a deep sense of the sacred arts having been created by women. This just seems natural and is in accordance with my own personal feelings and experiences.

Moreover, Cynthia Eller has valuable scientific work which must be considered, but I doubt if she really understands the deep meaning of myth. Every time she uses the word “myth”, as in, “the myth of matriarchal prehistory,” it sounds to me to have the connotation of a lie. We know that myth may not be historical truth, but it is not a lie. Even though Gimbutas has been criticized, I would like to make it clear that Gimbutas’ work expresses “our felt need for a spirituality that puts earth at the center, *that honors women as well as men* (emphasis mine), that recognizes the sacred authority of the body and that venerates the interconnectedness of all life.” (Starhawk, Marija Gimbutas’ Work and the Question of the Sacred 522)

It is always good to remember that women in a sense propagates life. This goes beyond the evident roles of the nurturing mother and ideal wife. Let’s “remember *and*

invent”, as Christine Downing suggests. Eller is probably right, as well as Christine Downing:

I have even suspected that unifying prehistory under the authority of a single maternal figure may reflect our twentieth or twenty-first century longing for an undifferentiated stage of existence, for primal bliss. I would also question whether the goddesses were ever seen in such completely beneficent ways – whether the Neolithic recognition of our dependence on the natural world did not include fear as well as gratitude. And I wonder whether speaking of the goddess rather than the many different goddesses reflects a longing to have One Goddess of equal importance to the ONE GOD? If it reflects a view that a valorizing of the singular and abstract that some feminists have described as a “masculine” prejudice? (“Revisiting the Goddesses” 7)

Being conscious of this doesn’t mean we cannot have connections and parallels shaped to our own needs, hopes, and fears. This is the very essence of what it means to be human. And, yes, mythologies are based on inferences, intuitions and fantasies. I bring up all of this preliminary discussion here because I want to make a short visit to the ancient Black Land, Egypt, to learn a bit with the “oldest of the old”, Isis.

The fertile Nile and its dark rich mud, revived each year by Isis, unifies the two Kingdoms of Lower and Upper Egypt. Year by year the Nile performs the miracle of inundation and it was popularly believed that during the night Isis shed tears and that as she sorrowed the Nile began rising. The river that seemed dead as Osiris was reborn as the living water, Horus, emerging to rejuvenate the whole land. Throughout the 4000 years of Egyptian history every Pharaoh was the incarnation of the youthful Horus, and therefore was the son of Isis. There, in the beginning was Isis. She is The Great Lady – Mistress of the Two Lands of Egypt, Mistress of Shelter, Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of the House of Life, Mistress of the Word of God, The Unique, The Goddess of Love, The Cosmic Ground, The Patron Saint of Pregnant Women, The Nature Goddess, The Queen

of the Underworld and The First Lady of Heaven. She establishes laws, transmits knowledge of skill, makes possible the knowledge of the nature of all things. Her nurturing love pervaded both the earth and the afterworld. She is The Great Sorceress, the art of medicine was hers, not merely for health but immortality. Besides that, Egypt is the land of matriarchy since its whole culture is built essentially on the mother cult, on the primacy of Isis over Osiris.

As an introduction to this adventure, I would like to mention some Egyptian mythic differences from that of Greek consciousness with which we are more familiar. I know that Egypt is not literally the beginning, but literally here will not mean a lot. What we have as evidence to work with are temples, tombs, reliefs, statues and the inscriptions accompanying these monuments as well as ritual texts - all this predates Homer by more than two millennia. I believe that the fact of the absence of a literary Egyptian tradition made it even more mythic, working more directly on our imagination, in accordance with the transformative process of life itself. The Egyptian deities were alive and the mythology expressed itself in a truly polytheistic manner revealed in the non-human multifaceted forms. There is no fixed or final form associated with any major divinity. Yet, everything, even the gods, comes to an end. Christine Downing says:

The immanent, concrete focus of the Egyptian's imaginations meant that they did not conceive of the survival of a soul apart from some physical substratum, which might be the mummified body but could also be some other tangible representation, a sculpture or a painting. From our perspective their way of conjoining the longlasting and the changing may easily seem strange, for what they imitate in stone are the perishable artifacts of their everyday existence; the models for their enormous granite pillars are living forms like the papyrus plant and the lotus.

We are likely to misjudge the Egyptian attitude toward death because its monuments have survived, whereas little of the material evidence of their everyday existence has. Thus we may read morbidity and fear in what appears like an obsession with death and may not perceive that it is precisely because they so delighted in life here that

they sought to perpetuate it. It is important to understand that the longing for continued life was not a longing for fixity. [...]

In Egypt, since eternity and existence were experienced as contradictions, even the gods will die. The scale of the gods' lifespan is of a different order from ours but not endless. "Decay and disappearance await every god, every goddess, all animals, and all insects." [...]

The Egyptians knew that everything eventually comes to an end – even the gods, even the *ba* that survives the death of the body. For them endlessness was itself death, nonexistence. Yet they also loved life, ordinary daily life in this world – loved it so passionately that they did everything they could to extend it, even after death. The tombs, the funerary temples, the elaborate death cult, all mark a celebration of *life*. (Beginning at the Beginning 33-34, 37)

This is very special. A clear and beautiful celebration of life that silences me. Besides this attitude towards death, the Egyptians have other striking perceptions of world. They used the elements of the natural world – sun, earth, sky, air and water. As Christine Downing says "the universe was alive; the divine was immanent in the natural world. This immanence facilitated recognition of the correlations between human and natural life" (28). The divine was seen not only in the elements, but also in the animals; the earliest cults focused on animal gods: cats, lions, vultures, cobras, scorpions, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, and cows were all worshipped as feminine deities. Isis and Horus were bird gods. It is interesting to note that there was neither sentimentality or fear regarding those animals. They represented a "mysterious nonhuman, and thus superhuman, mode of being, a radical otherness" (31). Concerning Egypt we must recognize the sacredness of life in all its forms. From the earliest times non-human forms of life were tended with deep religious care. Downing, once more explains:

What is unique to Egypt is not the association between the appearance of anthropomorphic divinities and political development but the persistence of theriomorphic and hybrid forms as equally valid and powerful.

The hybrid forms (which the later Greek visitor to Egypt found so barbaric and repellent) were common in Old Europe and may even have originally been brought to Egypt from Mesopotamia. But whereas elsewhere they disappeared

after the Indo-European invasions, in Egypt they persist. Obviously the Egyptians did not believe that there are such creatures. They used these hybrid representations to express their sense of the simultaneous presence in a divinity of complementary attributes and powers. The same divinity could be represented in animal form, in hybrid form, in human form; the same term, *neteru*, was applied to all these forms of divinity. Hathor might be a cow giving suck to a pharaoh, a human with cow face, or a beautiful human female. No one of these forms is felt to be a true representation. Nor was there any development among the Egyptians toward a purely anthropomorphic nor an abstract conception of divinity; the images were seen as the most telling representation. (30)

The Egyptian goddesses were intimately identified with the natural world, aside from the fact that they created one another (they are mothers of their mothers, fathers of their fathers). The animalistic forms and characteristics of the deities denoted a kind of impersonality, the forms and familiars being interchangeable. At the same time it reminds us that there are darker energies in us as natural beings, not meaning bad or evil, but a part of a whole. Different from the Greeks, it is their function and sphere of action, instead of their character, which makes them so easily combined. In the ancient Egyptian religion there was nothing to prevent any deity from acquiring more than one creature as a sacred symbol.

Another interesting difference from the Greeks is their sense of the masculine and feminine:

The sky seems always to have been a female domain, to have been associated with the goddess Hathor or with Nut, while the earth was envisioned as a male divinity, Geb. In Egypt both sun and moon were also male. The sun was Re or Atum or Amun; the moon was associated with Thoth, the mathematician; messenger and magician, and with shavenheaded Khonsu. The moon is also Re's placenta, his afterbirth, or the weaker, left eye of Horus. In Egypt, as in Gimbutas's Old Europe, the oldest female divinities were not earth mother goddesses but goddesses of the air. The most ancient goddess was probably Hathor, whose name depicts her as the deified heavenly home of the gods: she is the House of Horus, that part of the sky through which the hawk flies. Even in the prehistoric period this goddess of the sky was represented as a cow which gives birth each day to the bull of heaven. Also echoing the Old Europe

pattern are Egypt's very ancient bird and serpent goddesses; later these divinities often appear in the hybrid animal-human form so characteristic of dynastic Egyptian iconography. (24)

I find this particularly interesting. The non-terrestrial aspect making another way to the stars has a connection, I believe, with the mistress of all the world. This frees us from the prejudice of the chthonic world that women are so dark mysterious, impossible to handle, if not completely mad in opposition to the bright and beautiful sky. They combined the celestial aspect without taking apart our darker energies symbolized by the animals. Yet, the only thing that was never perceived as divine was the living human individual. There are no mythological heroes. In my point of view this means it goes beyond the ego-self to a realization of soul consciousness. The Hero Myth emerges together with a new state of ego consciousness by 1500 BCE, and then follows the repression of Great Goddess.

I would now like to look at Isis a bit more closely. Isis is the female principle of Nature and as such is the receptacle for every kind of shape and form. None of the Egyptian deities attracted a more varied assortment of sacred animals than Isis. The bird goddesses were seen as life-restoring, "their flapping wings waft breath into the nostrils of the deceased. The archaic wide-winged vulture eventually became wing-enfolding Isis" (25). In the later period of the ancient world her cult creatures included the falcon, the vulture, and the ibis. She could charm the crocodile. The gazelle, the goose, and the swallow were hers. Everything that drew breath and whatever held sap could praise Isis. In the Graeco-Roman period she lost her cosmic power, but, in the first dynasty she was recognized as the source:

As the deity of the earth, or rather the soil that the Nile fructified, she could coalesce with the Eleusinian Demeter and her daughter Persephone the Queen of

the Underworld. Already identified in Egypt with Neith of Sais, she could be equated with Pallas Athena of Attica. A very early text had shown her expressing delight with what she beholds. Naturally, therefore, she could become Aphrodite and Venus, goddess of beauty and love. She could assume the queenly office of Hera consort of Zeus (himself identified with Sarapis) ruling as mistress of all three dominions – heaven, earth and hell. As can be seen in the novel by Xenophon of Ephesus she could enter into a peculiarly close union with Artemis, goddess of virginity, the divinity with lunar powers who presided over childbirth and whose light shone upon dead men in the darkness of Tartarus. She could be worshipped as the Great Mother of all Nature. She could be the personification of Wisdom (*Sophia*) and Philosophy. She could be said to establish her son Horus Apollo as the youthful Pantocrator of the world. (Witt, Isis in the Graeco-Roman World 20)

She was recognized as the seat of divine and royal power. Her hieroglyph is a throne and in reliefs and sculptures she is most often shown wearing the throne on her head:

But the throne symbol gives a delusive hold on our understanding, for she was originally not a political but a nature goddess, identified with the annually renewed rise of the Nile. She represented the feminine creative power which conceived every living creature. Her nurturing love pervaded both earth and afterworld. As descendent of the prehistoric bird goddess, she often wore a vulture head dress and bore the vulture's widespreading protecting wings. She carried a papyrus scepter in her hand and horns and the solar disc on her head. (Downing, 35)

Howard Clark Kee, in his book *Miracle in the Early Christian World*, refers to Plutarch telling that Egyptian gods and goddess are the discoverers of wisdom, the inventors of grammar and music, and links them with justice providing the foundation for civilization:

The true devotee of Isis is not known by the linen garment or the shaved head, but by the exercise of reason and the study of philosophy in order to discern the truth within the mysteries revealed by her. An important reason for the intellectual to give careful consideration to the Egyptian mythological traditions is that the wisest of the Greeks all learned their truth from the Egyptians. (142)

As we see, Isis seems really to embrace oneness. She has not only the throne but even the solar disc on her head. Marion Woodman, differing from Christine Downing, sees The Great Mother as the "One," the creatrix of all things and the ultimate source of life and

death. Woodman considers Isis and Sophia as the best known for the sense of oneness and for the sense of absolute authority. She bases it on the aretalogies:

‘I am Isis, sole ruler forever, and I oversee the ends of the sea and the earth. I have authority, and though I am but one I oversee them (Cyrene 4)’ [...] ‘I divided earth from heaven. I set forth the paths of the stars. I established the course of the sun and moon...’ (Cyme 12-14)... ‘Whatever I determine, this too will be performed for me: all things obey me’ (Cyme 46). (Dancing in the Flames 19)

In my understanding, the Egyptian mythology is so polytheistic that it seems impossible for only one to prevail, even if it is Isis. Recognizing and honoring all her powers I also see the multiplicity of the Egyptian religion. Moreover, I agree with Christine Downing when she says we also need to free ourselves from the nurturing mother and start to experience life. Although, there is no doubt that the Great Mother is still very much alive in our deep unconscious. Marion Woodman:

The image “mother” is a tuning fork that sets off vibrations far beyond the realm of the personal mother. It resonates in the creative matrix at the core of the psyche – the matrix that contains both the devouring mother and the cherishing mother. It is the ego’s fear of being sucked into an earlier unconscious state that makes it regard the Great Mother as negative. When the ego is strong enough to relate to the Mother without losing its own identity, then Mothers becomes the source of all creativity. (24)

I would like now to move to another aspect of Isis, the Black Goddess of the Black Land. A friend of mine let me know that February 14th is the Black Isis’ Day. February 14th is also my birthday. I didn’t know anything about Black Isis and it was a good reason to find out.

Beginning in the eleventh century, the Crusades brought back to Europe statues of the Black Goddess, Isis. They were enshrined as the Black Virgin. These Black Virgins are often considered to be much more powerful than conventional representations of the Virgin and it is said that the early images of the Madonna and Child were based on those

of Isis and Horus. I am now remembering that the Brazil's Patron Saint is Nossa Senhora Aparecida and that my hometown's Patron Saint is Nossa Senhora do Rosario, both Black Virgins. I also have learned that it is undeniable that a remarkably high proportion of Madonnas over 200 years old, are credited with miraculous power, are black. Ean

Begg:

Our ancient, battered, much-loved, little-understood Black Virgins are a still-living archetypal image that lies at the heart of our civilization and has a message for us. The feminine principle is not a theory but real and it has a will of its own which we ignore at our peril. It is an independent principle and cannot be forced against its will to go anywhere or do anything without bringing retribution on the perpetrator. She brings forth, nourishes, protects, heals, receives at death and immortalizes her children who follow the way of nature. This is no different from the law of their own nature, the logos in psychology, biology, cosmology, and yet, paradoxically, it is also a work against nature. The light of nature tells us that life is a pilgrimage, a journey to the stars along the Milky Way. Her hero-path, a voyage across the great water in which she is ship, rudder, and guiding star. As the spirit of light in darkness she comes to break the chains of those who live in the prison of unconsciousness and restore them to their true home. In the trackless forest she is both the underground magnetism and the intuition that senses it, pointing the traveler in the right direction. She is, traditionally, the compassionate one. (The Cult of the Black Virgin 134)

Black Isis combines aspects of the pure force of the Isis of Nature. It seems that Black Isis is the most challenging, and yet most powerful, of the aspects of Isis.

Although, Black Isis and Bright Isis are ideally bound together, both are needed. De Traci

Regula says:

Black Isis is ancient and primeval, concerned with necessity and primary survival, whereas Bright Isis is concerned with enhancement and resurrection. Each needs the other, feeds off the other, but Black Isis is the more ancient. Black Isis makes it possible for Bright Isis to be born from the bones of Her black mother. Black Isis is the heat of caves, the light of the luminescence of stones and of decay, the harsh heat and unnatural light of flowing lava that runs like the blood of the planet. She is oceanic, volcanic, large, and great. Her tides are too vast to be perceived, far from the hourly and daily solar and lunar tides of which the bright Isis, in all Her aspects, is mistress. (The Mysteries of Isis 199)

It seems that Black Isis is seen as the black soul of the word, the great woman of the shadow, the savage and eternal blackness of night and chaos. How do we face it? With prejudice? With fear? As a negative mother who can destroy us? Marion Woodman says that “the chaos that we fear is the very thing that can free us” (45). It is good to remember that Isis is also love, which is the antithesis of fear. If we trust, even not knowing where we are going, I believe the blackness will reveal its gold as the secret of eternal life that is the gold at the end of the alchemical process. Marion Woodman:

It is within this chaos that a deeper, intrinsic order reveals itself. This is not the imposed order that we have become so accustomed to in a patriarchal, conceptualized world, an order that is not connected to the creative matrix. Rather, it is an order that emerges instead of being imposed. When we are connected to this emerging order we are physically living from the incarnate feminine energy that has within it the possibility of transformation. We are in touch with the rhythm of matter and its deepest wisdom. (39)

We have to enter chaos if we are looking for our own creativity. The transformation is not an easy task. It requires change, growth, and possibly the death of the old. This is possible only by experience. There are many dark secrets waiting to be revealed in each curve of our bodies and psyche. Making this connection between the truth of the body and the truth of the mind with a transparent heart we are raised to a new level of consciousness. Let’s start to see things as they really are. If we begin to change by doing our inner work and by seeing our bodies as a mythical vessel, accepting our own darkness, a different energy would emanate. This is a wisdom which connects body and spirit in soul. Embodiment; what is missing is embodiment. Marion Woodman:

By breaking through the either/or rigidities, the Black Goddess creates the space for spontaneity, for new experience, for new insight. Intellect can give us knowledge, but wisdom is based on experience that, if reflected on deeply enough, lead us to paradox and the recognition of the unity that exists. It is to bring forth wisdom that goes beyond conventional concepts that the dakini works “*directly with the energy of the body, speech and mind*” (50).

What a gift. The blackness, however, was never well accepted. The Catholic Church says that most of the black statues were not originally intended to be black, and only became so by accident later. In fact, almost all Black Virgins are carved in wood, either of indigenous timber such as oak, apple, pear, or in cedar. Ebony was virtually unknown in Western Europe until the thirteenth century. Doesn't it sound even more powerful? If originally it was not black it became naturally black anyway. Within or without, chaos reigns.

Returning to our preliminary discussion about "women-centered" I recognize that soul has been thought of as feminine in women and men. About the "One Goddess", I find the One is at least two, and multiplying it for each of our cells it becomes many. Matriarchal? What about Androgynous or Ecological? This is a subject for the next paper.

“Letting go is embracing the Black Goddess, she who will open your eyes to our illusions, she who will make us see that our treasure lies in the repressed feminine energies that we once labeled weak, irrational, disorganized, supersensitive, and all the other thoughtless labels – naïve, stupid, slow, melodramatic. Descending in to her territory demands the death of a rigidly controlled life. Dancing with her means finding a new discipline that allows the new life to sprout and grow.”

Marion Woodman, in Dancing in the Flames.

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