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The Earth Goddess



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Introduction

In humanity's long and varied history, few entities have been revered with such fervent worship and devotion as the Earth Goddess. Also commonly referred to as the Great Mother, this figure would find expression in multiple forms throughout the world's innumerable cultural traditions and historical epics, and would in her most essential representation symbolize the sanctity and provenance of the earth itself. This intimate interrelationship between human cultural manifestation and the natural world is beautifully enunciated in the words of Marija Gimbutas (1989) in her seminal work *The Language of the Goddess*:

The Goddess in all her manifestations was the symbol of the unity of life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, tress, and flowers. Hence the holistic and mythopoeic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on earth. (p. 321)

The legacy of the Earth Goddess stretches back many thousands of years and is widely understood to exemplify the evolution of nature worship as expressed in human artistic representation and religious ritual (Baring and Cashford 1993).

Although her origins are thought to date back as far as the period of the Upper Paleolithic (c. 50,000 BCE), it was during the ensuing Neolithic Era between 7000 and 3000 BCE that she came to full prominence. Her many symbolic depictions included the following:

Statues in stone, bone and ivory, tiny figures with long bodies and falling breasts, rounded motherly figures pregnant with birth, figures with signs scratched upon them—lines, triangles, zigzags, circles, nets, leaves, spirals, holes—graceful figures rising out of rock and painted with red ochre—all these have survived through the unrecorded generations of human beings who compose the history of the race. (p. 1)

Such depictions variously portrayed the bringing forth and sustaining of life, as well as its decay and renewal, and included common features of the natural environment such as stones, trees, rivers, mountains, and animals. Further, all such features, as manifestations of the Great Mother, were understood as sacred, and in this sense “the most ancient of religious impulses was that of animism, in which natural phenomena and the land and all within it, animate or inanimate, were seen as being suffused with spiritual qualities, as being ensouled” (Devereux 2000, p. 20). In referring to such characteristics, Eric Neumann (1955/1983) emphasized that:

numinous sites of a preorganic life, which were experienced in *participation mystique* with the Great Mother, are mountain, cave stone, pillar, and rock—including the childbearing rock—and throne, seat, dwelling place, and incarnation of the Great

Mother. . . . It is no accident that ‘stones’ are among the oldest symbols of the Great Mother Goddess, from Cybele and the stone of Pessinus (moved to Rome) to the Islamic Kaaba and the stone of the temple in Jerusalem, not to mention the *omphaloi*, the navel stones, which we find in so many parts of the world. (p. 260)

The Earth Goddess in World Culture

As outlined above, it was through stones and other symbolic representations of the Earth Goddess that this sense of sanctity was expressed, and this process continued unabated over the centuries and later developed into many of the iconic symbols that can still be found today in cultural and religious disciplines throughout the world (Neumann 1955/1983). In European based cultures, for example, the most immediate example of this phenomenon is represented by the Christmas tree, which derives from the immensely old and widespread practice of tree worship:

The numinous-feminine character of the tree speaks to us in the romanticism not only of Greece and the Germanic countries but also of the Old Testament. We know of the veneration of which the tree was held among the Semites—the tree cult on the heights; the worship of the cult pole of Asherah, the goddess of heaven; and the ritual dance around the tree—from the polemics against it in the Old Testament. . . . In this aspect the tree belongs to that stratum of life which is most directly attached to the earth. Older than this stratum is only that of the sacred stones and mountains, which along with water are direct incarnations of the great Earth Mother. (pp. 259–260)

In the Americas, as elsewhere, animals also held great sway as representatives of the Earth Goddess and her sacred covenant with humanity. The inherent strengths and survival instincts of a particular animal species were ascribed to and psychologically absorbed by a given people, and this life-rendering association of an animal species with an individual or tribe exists as a pervasive phenomenon in humanity’s long and diverse cultural history. This totemic affiliation is especially apparent in the primal mythologies of the Western Hemisphere:

North and South American Indian mythology is permeated with animal characters in tales that tell

not of the adventures of *a* coyote, *a* raven, or *a* bear, but of the adventures of Coyote, Raven, and Bear. In other words, the individual characters represent entire species or larger classes of animals. This is analogous to the unity of one’s individual guardian animal spirit with the entire genus or species to which it belongs. This unity means that a person usually possesses not just the power of a bear, or of an eagle, but the power of Bear or of Eagle. The possessor of a guardian animal normally draws upon the spiritual power of its entire genus or species, although he is indeed connected into that power by an individualized manifestation of it. (Harner 1980, p. 74)

The Great Mother Goddess in the Evolution of Consciousness

In the tradition of Jungian depth psychology the feminine principle exists as an essential component not only in the process of individual spiritual development but also in the collective evolution of the human species (Jung 1963). Erich Neumann (1954; 1955/1983), one of Jung’s students and most trusted colleagues, produced an extensive study on this subject that outlines the period of the Great Mother as one of the most fundamental stages in human history. It was during this time that human beings are thought to have ascended for the first time to transpersonal levels of consciousness, especially in the form of shamanic trance. This emphasis on heightened spirituality found expression in personified forms that included “figurines representing certain deities, priestesses, and other mythical persona” (Gimbutas and Dexter 1999, p. 4). Central to this experience of ascent into higher celestial domains is the theme of the world axis, or *axis mundi*, and for these ancient cultures “the archetype of the world axis not only produced cosmological models and rituals and was projected onto natural features like trees and mountains, it also gave rise to specific monumental structures” (Devereux 2000, p. 33).

These colossal stone structures first arose in the Middle East, and are architectural representations of the *world mountain* motif, which symbolizes the union of earth and heaven in the form of a temple tower that reaches up into the ethereal realms (Campbell 1964). The expanded heights of spiritual

exploration and experience that arose during this period were correspondingly represented through such structures as the Ziggurats of Mesopotamia, which signified a momentous transformation and extension of the powers of the Earth Goddess. Campbell articulated this critical development as follows:

In the Neolithic village stage of this development and dispersal, the focal figure of all mythology and worship was the bountiful goddess Earth, as the mother and nourisher of life and receiver of the dead for rebirth. In the earliest period of her cult . . . such a mother-goddess may have been thought of only as a local patroness of fertility, as many anthropologists suppose. However, in the temples even of the higher civilizations (Sumer, c. 3500–2350 B.C.), the Great Goddess of highest concern was certainly more than that. She was already, as she is now in the Orient, a metaphysical symbol: the arch personification of the power of Space, Time, and Matter, within whose bounds all beings arise and die: the substance of their bodies, configuration of their lives and thoughts, and receiver of their dead. And everything having form or name—including God personified as good or evil, merciful or wrathful—was her child, within her womb. (p. 7)

In the above framework one observes the transformation of the Great Mother, with her emphasis on fertility, nourishment, and the sacrality of the earth, into the personified and exalted deity of the Great Goddess, with her markedly expanded spiritual powers and cosmological functions. This metamorphosis resulted in the emergence of such iconic figures as Isis, Shakti, Prakriti, and Sophia, which all belong to this widely pervasive archetype of transcendent and spiritually advanced insight (Neumann 1955/1983). And with this evolutionary transformation of the Great Goddess, it thus becomes necessary “to distinguish these two characters of the Feminine, which in their interpenetration, coexistence, and antagonism, are an essential part of the Feminine as a whole. These are the elementary and the transformative characters of the Feminine” (p. 24).

Conclusion

The Great Mother’s evolution in mythic form from fertility figure to icon of spiritual transformation

would transcend numerous incarnations spanning thousands of years, and represented, according to Joseph Campbell, “a prodigious transformation, certainly the most important in the history of the world” (quoted in Wilber 1981/1996, p. 93). In her many beguiling images, and in symbolic structures such as the world mountain, her fundamental qualities found compelling expression in a manner that ultimately confirms a divine union between all of the earth’s creatures and creations—world tree, cosmic mountain, personified divinity, animal deity, and sacred stone. Indeed, so extensive was her proliferation and dispersal throughout world history that no other mythic figure can be said to have held greater sway or reverence. And despite the degradation suffered by the earth in recent centuries and the attendant subjugation of the feminine principle, such mythic images speak to us still, mirroring a place within and pointing to the sacredness of the natural world of which they are divine and eternal reflections. They speak to the very nature of our beings—to the deep and abiding awareness that humanity and the earth are one—and they reveal the earth as a *sacred place* that awaits our redemptive return. In the words of Gimbutas (1989):

The Goddess gradually retreated into the depths of forests or onto mountaintops, where she remains to this day in beliefs and fairy stories. Human alienation from the vital roots of earthly life ensued, the results of which are clear in our contemporary society. But the cycles never stop turning, and now we find the Goddess reemerging from the forests and mountains, bringing us hope for the future, returning us to our most ancient human roots. (p. 321)

See Also

- ▶ [Goddess Spirituality](#)
- ▶ [Great Mother](#)
- ▶ [Participation Mystique](#)

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