

GODDESSES AROUND THE WORLD

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Goddess spirituality is one of the fastest growing spiritual movements in the world today. Like a creative fountain, Goddess spirituality overflows into contemporary music, dance, visual arts, film, fiction, scholarly works and ritual celebrations. It is a primary spiritual path that can lead to personal, social and ecological relationships of balance, compassion, justice, ecstasy and love—and it one of the best aspects of living in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area, where every day, women and men, supported by our thriving local Goddess community, recover their sense of wholeness and their Divine connection as they awaken to the Goddess within.

Why is the Goddess so important? There is no panacea for all our modern ailments, yet to many, the Goddess symbolizes our best hope for a viable, sustainable future. This is because she represents an antidote to the imbalances that so grievously plague the world: imbalances between the sexes, humans and other species, the rich and poor, different races, cultures and religions, war and peace. Given the appalling spoiling of the environment, the difficulty of inter-personal relationships, racial and class conflict, escalating violence between the sexes, the lack of conflict-resolution skills, the massive extinction of species and the lack of respect for future generations, many have turned to the Goddess and her wisdom traditions out of frustration with the limitations of the religious as well as secular choices offered by the dominant cultures of the world, which might be characterized as patriarchal fundamentalisms.

If flaws in modern culture result largely from over-masculinization, over-population, over-exploitation of labor and natural resources, over-militarization, etc., then the Goddess is a powerful symbol and catalyst for what is most needed. She represents the sacredness of the feminine, keeping population in balance with the natural environment, honoring each person's innate talents and creativity, seeing that all people are well-nurtured, resolving conflicts peaceably, recycling and protecting resources for future generations, and successfully building multi-cultural societies with harmony among different races and cultures.

Many people assume that violence and warfare have always been primary modes of self-defense and wealth-acquisition, that survival and progress depend on these above all else; and that there are no other choices. But if we look at non-traditional history, for example, if we look at the herstory of women's spirituality around the world, we find there are other possibilities that recommend themselves to us. We learn of cultures where humans live in balance with the rest of nature, where men and women live harmoniously together, where there is a strong sense of community and a shared development of social well-being. This is why a deeper look at Goddess cultures, past and present, is relevant to us today.

AFRICAN COSMOLOGICAL GODDESSES OF CREATION AND ABUNDANCE

The work of Dr. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, in concert with others, documents the migration of peoples with their religion of the "dark mother" out of Africa to all continents of the world during the Old Stone Age, beginning c. 50, 000 BCE. Thus humans share not only a common biological inheritance but also a common spiritual heritage. If we could acknowledge and affirm this common ground, it might have the power to heal our divisions and guide us to a better future.

Black Goddesses, sacred ancestors and holy queens have peopled Africa from Egypt in the north to Zimbabwe in the south. Powerful examples of the African Goddess are found everywhere. A running or dancing Goddess with a field of grain between the horns of her headdress from which falls a shower of seeds or rain, has been called the Horned Goddess, but might as easily been named the Goddess of Abundance. Pre-dynastic Egypt offers another marvelous image: a bird-headed, human breasted Goddess who stands with arms outstretched as if about to take flight. Might the ancient belief that a bird symbolized the human soul, help us now safeguard the declining flocks of birds and their migratory routes?

Neith, like Nut, is an Egyptian Sky Goddess, Queen of Heaven, whose body births the sun and moon each day, and from whose breasts falls the rain that nurtures all life. The Great Mother Goddess Isis, with her male counterpart Osiris, is the "Giver of Life". When Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, Isis searched everywhere for her beloved and, gathering the scattered fragments of his dismembered body, restored him to life; she then bore their son Horus. Isis is the original Black Madonna. Her loving partnership with Osiris annually restored fertility to the Nile Valley so all people would find abundance.

In many African nations it was the power of the Goddess that supported the emergence of historic queens, just as early Pharaohs of Egypt drew their legitimacy and their power to rule from the Great Mother. Makeda, Queen of Sheba, is an example of the wisdom and magic embodied in the historic and mythological queens of the African continent. Her poetry invoked Holy Lady Wisdom as, “*sweeter than honey, more joyful than wine, more illuminating than the sun – causing the heart to understand.*” How do we find the wisdom of an understanding heart, not only in our daily lives but in social and international affairs as well? Why don’t we demand that today’s heads of nations pursue the same purposes as the great African queens and Goddesses: to feed the people, raise the children with love, celebrate the sexual union of partners, and foster the creative talents and arts of each individual! Might the growing presence of the Goddess today support the emergence of more politically empowered women and men committed to these same values?

MIDDLE EASTERN GODDESSES OF SACRED MARRIAGE AND FREEDOM

The Sacred Marriage of the Goddess Inanna and her beloved Damuzi was central to the religion of ancient Mesopotamia, where (as in Egypt) divine lovemaking caused the fertility of the land and the people to be renewed each year. To this myth of celebration was added, during the rise of patriarchy in Sumer, the story of the Descent of Inanna.

Descending to the Underworld ruled by her sister Eriskigal, herself dragged down as the “spoils” of a warrior, Inanna loses all earthly attributes and powers, dies, and hangs on a hook as rotting flesh; until rescued by her faithful woman attendant. Since Damuzi had been unwilling to offer his life to save Inanna, he is consigned to stay in the Underworld for half of each year. Sacred stories invite multiple interpretations. The myth seems to say that if one woman is abducted and

raped, no woman is free to live her life unscathed, but must somehow reunite with her underworld sister in order to restore personal and social wholeness. And, if a man pursues his own power with disregard for the Goddess, he will be able enjoy those powers only half of the time, but spend the other half with the shadowy dead.

The historical spread of patriarchy is further seen in the myth where the young God Marduk destroys his mother, the primal Goddess Tiamat of the Deep, recreates the cosmos out of her body, then makes humans into his slaves. It is not surprising, then, that the Sumerian word for 'freedom', '*amargi*', means 'return to the Mother'.

For over a thousand years, from the 18th to 7th century, the Goddess Ishtar was praised with a beautiful salutation: "*Ishtar, Queen, Goddess of All, Lady of Heaven and Earth, Queen of Heaven, Goddess of the Universe, who walked in Terrible Chaos and brought life by the law of Love. Out of Chaos bring us Harmony, and from Chaos lead us by the hand.*" We might want to pray this prayer also, to clarify our intentions so that a social order of love rather than of fear and greed will prevail.

NEAR EASTERN GODDESSES OF COSMIC ORDER AND CULTURE

In ancient Anatolia, now Turkey, there was an abundance of Goddess reverence for at least 7 millennia, from the Agrarian Age until the Christian era. She was called Anna, Mother, and Hannah, Grandmother; Arrinna, Sun Goddess; Cybele, Aphrodite, Artemis. Her priestesses were called *Melissai*, honey-bees, producers of sweetness. At Ephesus, people built a magnificent temple for Cybele-Artemis, where hundreds of inscriptions refer to her as "founder, saviour, commander, guide, advisor, legislator, queen, spreader of light, controller of fate, great, magnificent..." (Ergener Anatolia: 49). What it would be like if we had such a role model who was consulted in everyday matters and celebrated in community festivals!

The great temple of Cybele-Artemis was finally destroyed during the Christian era, but Ephesus was declared the birthplace of Mary, Mother of Christ, and a church was built nearby.

The Mother of Mary and Grand Mother of Jesus was Saint Anne, Anna. It is important that religions honor mothers, grandmothers and daughters, as well as fathers and sons and grandfathers!

CYPRUS AND CRETE: GODDESSES OF PARTNERSHIP, PEACE, AND ARTISTRY

The 5th century BCE philosopher Empedocles wrote of the pre-patriarchal peoples of Cyprus: “*No war-god Ares was worshiped, nor the battle-cry; Nor was Zeus their king nor Kronos nor Poseidon; but Cypris [Goddess of Love] was Queen.*” They brought their artistry as offerings to the Goddess, not animal sacrifices; nor was it their custom to eat animal meat.

Crete, during its Goddess epoch from c. 6000 BCE to 1450 BCE, was a highly artistic multi-racial society settled by peoples from Anatolia, the Middle East, North Africa and Old Europe. The people's love of nature and devotion to the Goddess were expressed in their open sensuality and pleasure in adornment, lively, beautiful art and writing. The internal harmony of this multi-cultural civilization was evidenced by the lack of defensive fortifications of the temple cultural centers and the absence of any images of war or military rulers. An Archaic hymn asserts that peace and justice were attributes of Nature herself, and that “*all wild living things were held about by wealth-loving peace.*”

This graceful civilization of the Goddess was dominated by warriors from mainland Greece, beginning c.1450 BCE. After 1100 BCE, the culture not only in Crete but also Greece collapsed into a Dark Age that lasted some 300 years. Then, after another millennium, warfare again overran populations and ecosystems to such an extent that Europe descended into another Dark Age, this time lasting a thousand years. Now, only a few centuries since modern cultures began expanding, chronic warfare and the decimation of peoples and environments threaten us with another massive regression. When will humans become collectively wise enough to interrupt these cycles of violence? Perhaps memories of the ancient Goddess cultures can inspire us to create new alternatives.

FAR EASTERN GODDESSES, GENTLE AND FIERCE

In the Far East, as in most other cultures, we find both gentle and fierce Goddesses.

Tibetans revere the Buddhist Bodhisattva Green Tara, Goddess of Com-*passion*, as well as the wrathful Red Tara, who acts out the rage that results from karmic pain. In Tibet, returning to the womb of the Mother Goddess is a meditation for union of the human spirit with the divine; as is the tantric spiritual-sexual union of woman and man.

In India, the Goddess has ten thousand names, at least. Prakriti is Mother Nature. Lakshmi is Goddess of Abundance, Great Mother who feeds all. Shakti is the Goddess of activating energy who stimulates her male partner Shiva to contemplate the divine unity of all that is. Durga is Earth Mother, and Kali her fierce warrior daughter, who like Durga, feels compelled to protect her people against evil forces. Goddess devotees today often call upon Durga or Kali to find the courage, strength and fierce compassion needed to work against rape, child incest, the sexual traffic in women, destruction of forests and clean rivers, and other desecrations that plague us. Devotions to the Goddesses continue today, and their sacred festivals are enthusiastically attended by millions of men and women, where priestesses dance to embody the Sacred Feminine.

In China, the descendant of the Goddess of Nature is Kuan Yin, Goddess of mercy and compassion. Her redemptive powers use the skillful means of wisdom and compassion to purge all karmic woes. In Japan, the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion becomes known as Kwannon.

In Japan's Shinto religion, Kami spirits – the awesome powers of nature and all auspicious beings and events – are revered. Since the 7th century CE, Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, has been chief Kami, and until the last century, Japanese Emperors claimed divinity by tracing their lineage directly to her. A few years ago, during inauguration ceremonies, the Japanese Emperor is said to have participated in a secret ritual of sexual union (symbolic or otherwise) with the Sun Goddess – as the means to become empowered to rule.

EUROPEAN GODDESSES OF THE MYSTERIES OF BIRTH, SEXUALITY, DEATH AND REBIRTH-

In Greece, the Great Goddess held all within the cycles of birth, death and re-generation, and she was worshiped as Creator of the Universe, Earth Mother, Mother of the Gods, Goddess of the Hearth, Love, Social Justice, Arts, Crafts, Plants and Animals, Moon, and more. By the time of classical Greece, the earlier Goddess cultures were firmly subordinated to Olympian Zeus, who was worshiped for bringing success in battle to his followers, and who also established rape as the standard for sexual relations.

The Goddess religion continued to share its Mysteries of Love through the rites of Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, Beauty and the Arts; and of the Earth Mother Demeter and her Daughter Kore-Persephone, who birthed, raised and fed the people, and gave the laws of a peaceful and civilized way of life. Although their sacred story became overshadowed by the Daughter's abduction and rape and the Mother's grief, the primary transmission of the Goddesses' rites was to bring humans to the major gateways of life – birth, sexuality, death and rebirth – with love. Demeter, Goddess of Abundance, “*mingled in love-making and sleep*” with

a mortal man of Crete, then gave birth to Plutos, Plenty. Plenty was depicted in Greek art cradled in the arms of Irene, Goddess of Peace – expressing the profound belief that peace, not war, brings the fruits of prosperity.

The Goddess' Mysteries were also celebrated in Italy. The primary Goddess of the pre-patriarchal Etruscans was Turin, Goddess of Love. Later in Rome, she was Magna Mater, Ceres, Juno, Diana, Venus. Sicily serves as a living museum of the many treasures and layers of the European cultural history of the Holy Mother. Its folklore and popular icons of the Black Madonna carry the memory of the Dark Mother from Africa into the present.

In the British Isles, the Goddess was Brigid, Lady of the Lake, Rhiannon, Morrigan, and Mab, Queen of Fairies. In Scandanavia She was Freya, Goddess of Love; Ilmatar, divine Creatress; and Mielikki, Goddess of the Forest. Especially in France, the Holy Mother was worshiped in great medieval cathedrals built in honor of Our Lady. Even after the effort was made to deny all divinity to the feminine, as witnessed by the burning of witches, devotion to the Goddess persisted (albeit disguised) in reverence for the Shekinah, the Indwelling Presence of God; Hochma and Sophia, Holy Wisdom; and Mary, Queen of Heaven, Mother of God.

THE AMERICAS' GRANDMOTHERS AND OTHER GODDESSES

In our own homeland, America, we see many faces of the Goddess and come to realize they are all ultimately One. In Native American cultures, while different male and female deities may be worshiped, it is understood they are part of the Great Mystery. Spirit grandmothers and grandfathers, Goddesses and Gods, are here to help us see we are all held within the unspeakable beauty and infinite intelligence of the Great Mysterious.

In Mexico, the Goddess was Chicomecaatl, Heart of the Earth; Tlazolteotle, Birth-Giver; and Tonantsin, whose indigenous roots blended with the Virgin Mary of the Spanish invaders to become the Virgin of Guadalupe, probably the most powerful spiritual influence in all Mexico. Today, those suffering persecution in Latin America pray to the Black Madonna as the Mother of the Disappeared.

In North America, for the Eskimos, the Goddess is Sedna, ruler of the Sea and all its creatures. To the Algonquin, she is Nokomis, Grandmother, who feeds all. To the Hopi she is Spider Grandmother, Creator of the Universe, Earth Mother and Corn Mother. The Hopi, whose name means "peaceful people," are a matrilineal and egalitarian farming community. Their cooperative and mutually supportive way of life is explained by the understanding that, *"Any time, anyone may need help. So we all help one another."* Hopi are taught not to be aggressive and not to kill, except when necessary for food, and then, nothing is to be wasted. The indigenous belief that humans are relatives to all that live, is powerful medicine for our survival.

Coming again to our home region of the Greater San Francisco Bay Area, we find that many of the leading practitioners, ritualists, artists and authors of the contemporary Goddess spirituality movement live right here! These include Jennifer Berezan, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Sandy Boucher, Z Budapest, Pamela Eakins, Riane Eisler, Rose Wognam Frances, Elinor Gadon, China Galland, Judy Grahn, Tricia Grame, Miri Hunter Huruach, Hallie Iglehart, Diane Jenett, Mary Mackey, Alexis Masters, Vicki Noble, Mayumi Oda, Arisika Razak, Charlene Spretnak, Starhawk, Luisah Teish, Alice Walker, and Patrice Wynne. A new generation of voices is emerging from the wonderful students of our sister

graduate programs in Women's Spirituality in San Francisco at the California Institute of Integral Studies and New College.

We believe the world's Goddesses have a great deal to offer of truth and wisdom, pleasure and joy. While an understanding of Goddess spirituality around the world gives us deeper insights into human cultural evolution, the contemporary practices of women and men in circles honoring the Goddess and God are creating a new spiritual and social ethos that intends to transform the present, with its increasingly threatening military and economic woes, to a more peaceful and enlightened global culture, where humans and other species can thrive.

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