

The Myth of Inanna and the Feminine Quest

“Nobody who is not a female will ever understand how painfully saddening, almost physically aching it is for women to have no myths and stories to identify with and where to find a mirror to their psyche, their thinking and their being.” (Angelika Aliti, *Die wilde Frau*, Hoffmann und Campe, Hamburg, 1993. 77 [translation LM]).

This outcry comes from a woman who went all by herself on the journey downward into her inner depths, without any psychotherapeutic help. At the end of the descent she found the Wild Woman in her. In her book about her process and her new outlook on the world she notes that “As women we need female images who would explain the world to us, among them a goddess as well as mythical female figures from whom we can learn.” (Aliti, 78)

At the time of her process she obviously hadn't yet heard of the series of archeological discoveries which had been made in the 1950ies until the 70ies of important Neolithic sites with remains of mostly female deities. Or else these finds might have all the more made her resent the vacuity of today's imagery in this respect and awaken in her, as in numerous women in the West, a hunger for inspiring symbols of a regal, self-assertive, wise femininity.

The Finds

Countless cult objects, statues etc. were found of goddesses in varying guises at first in 2 sites in Anatolia (James Melaart), then in Iraq and Iran (Purushotam Singh) and in Old Europe, from the Black Sea to the Adriatic ((Marija Gimbutas). These ancient cultures dating from the Upper Paleolithic in Europe or the Neolithic in Near East and Anatolia were found to show striking similarities through the millennias as they all revolve around the worship of goddesses as their religious core. Scholars such as Melaart and Gimbutas found between these cultures, extending over 25'000 years until about 3'000 to 1'000 BC (at the latest Cyprus, Crete), a continuity from Anatolia till the great Mother Goddesses of the archaic and classical times (Cybele, Artemis, Aphrodite etc.). Compared to these matrifocal cultures, with their astonishing consistency and duration, the emergence of the patriarchy, about 3'000 years to this day, looks quite new.

Given the scarce information and the lack of written data, modern scholars try to put the bits and pieces together but can give only interpretations of these societies, their way of living, and what their rites and beliefs might have been. Although the opinions about certain cult figures differ f.i. whether male or female, there seems to be an overall agreement that these societies were possibly cooperative between genders; that the cultures were polytheistic and centered mostly on the worship of goddesses. All in all women seem to have had a more honored status, the figures of priestesses outnumbered those of priests, and women were obviously the ones in control of agriculture and of the artifacts, of spinning, weaving, terra cotta. The first publications about these finds hit the scientific world in the late 60ies then in the 70ies and the 80ies. C.G.Jung could not have any knowledge of them and so it is up to us, his followers, to reexamine and discuss anew the concepts of anima and the Feminine on this new ground.

Recovering and revalidating the Feminine seems to be an urgent task in our inventive, speedy, knowledgeable but also tormented and self-destructive world. The discovery of the manuscript about *The Descent of Inanna*, first published by scholars in the 1960ies and 70ies, followed by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer with *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (1983) represented a milestone in the search of modern women and men concerned about the future of our planet and of humankind. The manuscript about the myth of Inanna had been found around 1900 in the course of excavations in the ruins of Nippur, Sumer's spiritual and cultural center (southern Irak). The text, dated around 2'300 BC, is the first piece of writing known to this date. The 30 clay tablets with cuneiform writing needed 60 years of gradual reconstruction, translation and interpretation by many scholars before it

finally came to light in its final version. It tells of the many adventures of the fascinating goddess Inanna in her long standing fight to gain her powers. The story of the descent in the underworld is the last of the many episodes which the goddess goes through. It could well be the crowning of the maturing process of the goddess since it enables her at the end to give the underworld its place in the natural world. If we want to understand the story of the descent, we have to have a look at Inanna's ancestors, the many goddesses worshipped before her.

What do these figures of ancient goddesses tell us?

Thank to Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade and many others, we know that myths and divine figures are the expression of how a given culture perceives the world and human existence and what meaning they give them.

If we look at the many figures of the goddesses, we find her consistently associated with death and life, or death and birth at the same time. Her buttocks and breasts are overly big, she sits with legs widely apart, showing her vulva, she gives birth, holds her infant, presses her breasts for milk. A pretty gruesome relief shows breasts covered with the beaks of vultures close to dead corpses. Many figures of a goddess with owl's eyes or just the eyes on bones or other objects were found on funeral sites in Old Europe. Her large, round eyes are closely associated with death but also with wetness and the sun. Also associated with death and birth were the stiff white statues of the goddess with a pronounced lower abdomen which have been found in funeral grounds.

Frequent motifs are spirals and meanders. They evoke the unending cycles of life and death as well as the snakes which are often found in connection with the goddesses. Snakes are pictured on objects as symbols of the goddess. Or she bears one coiled around her waist. Or she has the head of a snake herself, or the baby she carries is a snake. The snake can be understood as a symbol for non-human forces rooted in the primordial mystery of the dark. Worshipping the snake together with the goddess would mean honouring and surrendering to what IS, to the impersonal reality and the givenness of the natural world which cannot be changed, to the autonomous life force moving through our bodies and nature.

As a numinous power representing the opposites of existence, the goddess in her many aspects expresses the facts of nature. She tempers the aspects of love, nurturing and relatedness with a grounding in impersonal reality. She stands not only for fertility and abundance, but also for scarcity, misfortune and death. Connected to her is the motif of the natural cycle of life/ destruction/ renewal. One of her many names is Lady of the Round. Like nature, she can be fierce and grim as well as lovable, horrifying as well as energizing.

Many millennias later, we can still feel the impact of the pictures. However painful or embarrassing or puzzling they may seem, as long as we react to them, the symbol of the Goddess lives ! I would say she can inspire in her different guises as various and conflicting emotions as nature does, such as fascination, ravishment but also bewilderment, repulsion, unease or fright.

(Pictures of the ancient Goddesses)

Inanna

And so is Inanna. She can be grim and fierce as well as seductive and lovable – horrifying as well as energizing.

The myth of *The Descent of Inanna*, the Sumerian queen of heaven and earth (Southern Mesopotamia, Irak), reaches probably into far earlier times and the myth roots in an ancient oral tradition. It was written in the 3rd millennium BC by a Priestress of Inanna, called Enheduanna, the very first poet we know of. Inanna's cult lasted 500 more years. After that Ishtar was the highest goddess, worshipped in Babylone. Enheduanna's time was already a time of transition, where the patriarchy was beginning to emerge and the male gods were gaining in importance. The preceding stories about Inanna tell of her many fights against the gods, where she matures from maiden to full grown goddess, then to married woman and mother and finally enthrones her husband Dumuzi as king on her side. At the beginning of

our story Inanna was an accomplished woman, could we say.

The songs about Inanna root deeply in the tradition of the Great Goddess, and she bears many traits reminding of her great ancestor. I. is the most celebrated deity in Sumer. She is said to be the queen of heaven and earth, she is also sung as Venus, the Lady of the Morning and the Lady of the Evening, is also called the first daughter of the moon. She controls corn and the storehouses as well as the plants. One song describes how she pours out grain and plants from her womb before her lover Dumuzi. She is also the queen of the land and its fertility. As the Lady of Heaven she reigns as well over the sweet rain as the terrible storms and floods. The clouds are said to be her breasts. As evening and morning star, she watches over the changes of the night into the day and of the day into the night, hers are the transitions. As evening star she holds court at the time of the new moon to hear the gods' petitions and to be celebrated with music, feasting and staged, bloody battles. She is judge and "decrees fate" and "tramples the disobedient". She controls the ordering principles, potencies, talents and rites of the civilized world.

But Inanna is also goddess of war. Battle is "the dance of Inanna". Giving victory, she is "the quiver ready at hand, the heart of the battle and the arm of the warriors". She is passionate and wild, of the same vene as Artemis in later Greece. In one hymn she is described as "all-devouring in power attacking like the attacking storm", having an awesome face and angry heart. She sings with abandoned delight of her own glory and prowess: "Heaven is mine, earth is mine - I, a warrior am I. Is there a god who can vie with me?" Her companion animal is the lion and seven of them pull her chariot.

Equally passionately she is goddess of sexual love. She sings ecstatic songs of self-adornment and desire and of the delights of love-making. She calls to her beloved Dumuzi, her "honey-man" who "sweetens her ever", invites him to her "holy lap" to savor her life-giving caresses and the sweetness of sex with her. She sings praise to her vulva and requests of her lover to come and "plow my vulva, man of my heart". S. Perera finds her more extraverted than Aphrodite for she will not seduce but rather claim her needs assertively and take what she desires. She is also the goddess of courtesans, and is called bridesmaid and high priestess and ritual prostitute of the gods in heaven.

She is healer, life-giver, creative in all realms. All emotions, the whole range of them, are hers. As says this song of praise:

To pester, insult, deride, desecrate – and to venerate – is your domain, Inanna.
Downheartedness, calamity, heartache – and joy and good cheer – is your domain, Inanna.
Tremble, afright, terror – and dazzling and glory – is your domain, Inanna...

(Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* in: Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess*, 18)

The Feminine which Inanna embodies is playful, passionately sensuous, independent, self-willed, ambitious, regal and many-sided – a Feminine, notes Sylvia Perera, that got completely lost in the course of time up to christianity, first divided and minimized among the Greek goddesses, and later on desacralized in the West or over idealized by the patriarchal system of values. It is interesting though that what we call motherly qualities - like softness, selflessness, concern, empathy – do not belong to her way of being, inspite of her motherhood.

The Descent

In the Sumerian poem Inanna decides to go into the underworld; she "set her heart from highest heaven on earth's deepest ground", "abandoned heaven, abandoned earth-to the Netherworld she descended." As a precaution, she instructs Ninshubur, her trusted female executive, to appeal to the father gods for help in securing her release if she does not return within three days.

At the first gate to the Netherworld, Inanna is stopped and asked to declare herself. The gatekeeper informs Ereshkigal, queen of the Great Below, that Inanna, "Queen of Heaven, of the place where the sun rises", asks for admission to the "land of no return" to witness the funeral of Gugalanna, husband of Ereshkigal. Ereshkigal becomes furious, and insists that the upper-world goddess be treated according to the laws and rites for anyone entering her kingdom - that she be brought "naked and bowed low".

The gatekeeper follows orders. He removes one piece of Inanna's magnificent regalia at each of the seven gates. "Crouched and stripped bare", as the Sumerians were laid in the

grave, Inanna is judged by the seven judges. Ereshkigal kills her. Her corpse is hung on a peg, where it turns into a side of green, rotting meat. After three days, when Inanna fails to return, her assistant Ninshubur sets in motion her instructions to rouse the people and gods with dirge drums and lamenting.

Ninshubur goes to Enlil, the highest god of sky and earth, and to Nanna, the moon god and Inanna's father. Both refuse to meddle in the exacting ways of the underworld. Finally Enki, the god of waters and wisdom, hears Ninshubur's plea and rescues Inanna, using two little mourners he creates from the dirt under his fingernail. They slip unnoticed into the Netherworld, carrying the food and water of life with which Enki provides them, and they secure Inanna's release by commiserating with Ereshkigal, who is groaning - over the dead, or with her own birth pangs. She is so grateful for empathy that she finally hands over Inanna's corpse. Restored to life, Inanna is reminded that she will need to send a substitute to take her place. Demons to seize this scapegoat surround her as she returns through the seven gates and reclaims her vestments.

The last part of the myth involves the search for her substitute. Inanna does not hand over anyone who mourned for her. But finally she comes upon her primary consort Dumuzi (later called Tammuz), who sits enjoying himself on his throne. Inanna looks on him with the same eyes of death Ereshkigal had set on her, and the demons seize him. Dumuzi flees with the help of Utu, who is the sun god and Inanna's brother. Utu transforms him into a snake to permit escape. In a related poem, Dumuzi dreams of his downfall. He goes to his sister, Geshtinanna, who helps him to interpret his dream and urges him to flee. When flight proves useless, she shelters him and finally offers to sacrifice herself in his stead. Inanna decrees that they shall divide the fate and spend half a year each in the underworld. The final poem ends with the words:

Inanna placed Dumuzi in the hands of the eternal.
Holy Ereshkigal! Sweet is your praise!

(Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess*, Inter City Books, Toronto, Canada, 1981. 9-10)

Let's first examine the descent and I's death.

I's decision seems utterly unexplainable. She has everything and yet ... Something seems to leave her no other choice.

It reminds me of the words of many women clients saying : "I am so ungrateful (or stupid or irrational), I have everything, a nice living, a family etc. – and still I don't know why, I feel depressed (or empty or lost)." They feel as though some force would press them down or deprive their lives of any meaning. This is the sign for the beginning of a transformation process guided by the unconscious. A client actually dreamed of falling in the night after having told me "Thank you for letting me die. I do not want to kill myself. But I want none of the life I have been living until now." She dreams that she is falling at a tremendous speed. She tries to hold on to a tree, then to her father, to her husband, to a woman friend, to money. But it does not work and she keeps falling. This was the beginning of a long process of many years.

The story of Golden Mary begins also with a fall as she stumbles head first in a pit where she meets Frau Holle and can show her true qualities before being sent back in the upper world free and enriched.

Persephone was abducted into the underworld by Hades and finally forced to stay with him half of the year.

I. is not forced by anyone to go to this ordeal. She begins the descent by her own free will, this again makes her regal. This is namely an important thing: if your unconscious pushes you into such a process, then make this journey yours, do not wait until you are being bullied into doing it. The image of the fall or the descent in the dark evokes a sinking into one's own depths, it evokes also the womb or the cavern of the goddess. It is a crawling back into something familiar, the realm where birth and death touch. In this introverted, regressive process one can use little of the capacities learned in the bright light of day. Just as Inanna has to drop her garments and jewels one by one, so prove the rational tools, the trained mind of no help.

Inanna obviously has to make the paradoxical experience of surrendering completely and enduring freely things she had never wanted and always avoided. She has to let go of

everything which makes out her identity (beauty, capacities, strength) and to face her death-like sister Ereshkigal who finally reduces her to a corpse. Who is this sister and what does she kill I. for ?

How she does it is just horrifying:

The holy Ereshkigal seated herself upon her throne...
She fastened her eyes upon her [Inanna], the eyes of death,
Spoke the word against her, the cry of guilt,
Struck her, turned her into a corpse.
The corpse was hung from a nail.
(Perera, 30)

Ereshkigal's frightening being expresses something radical, less "human" than I., unrelated, primal and totally isolated. With her closeness to death, she embodies the most difficult aspects of the Great Goddess for us to comprehend. Her eyes, the eyes of death, remind us of the impersonal, wide glance of the owl or of the snake (who both see in the dark), symbolizing the fateful aspect of the goddess.

E. bears similarities with the Indian goddess Kali. Ajit Mokerjee describes her in her book *Kali, the Feminine Force*: "[Mahakali] is there for swiftness, for immediate and effective action, for the direct assault that carries everything before it. Awe-inspiring, determined and ruthless, she destroys evil force." (Ajit Mookerjee, *Kali The Feminine Force*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988. 61) "[Kali] is the archetypal image of birth-and-death, giver of life and its destroyer, the vital principles of the visible universe which has many faces – gracious, cruel, destructive, loving, indifferent – the endless possibility of the active energy at the heart of the world." (Mookerjee, 62-3) About the fear of Kali, the author's remark can help understand what the ultimate wisdom of the Goddess may be : "For the Mother [Kali] is only terrible to those who are living in the illusion of separateness; who have not yet realized their unity with her, and known that all her forms are for enlightenment" (Mookerjee, 97) A poem to *Kali the Mother* by Vivekananda expresses an amazing combination of love and fear:

(...) For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.
Thou 'Time', the All-Destroyer
Come, o Mother, come.

Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.

(Mookerjee, 108)

Ereshkigal might well represent the crone, the hag, this third aspect of the goddess which is the most frightening of all, and was later in history to be demonized as the ugly Gorgo, the evil witch, the blood thirsty dragon or Satan's advocate (snake). The killing of the Gorgo or of the dragon will then become THE heroic deed, symbolizing the victory of Ego strength, rationality and will against the urges and needs; the intellect overcoming the instinctual forces rooted in our primal functions, themselves connected to the reptilian brain. Truly, these forces obey no human laws, no moral rules. They just follow the necessities of the natural cycles of life, destruction and rebirth. Now the sacrifice of I. gains some meaning. Inanna had yet to go through the third and final phase of her divine being, and suffer the downfall after her zenith, i.e. the crone and her end. The queen of corn and plants had yet to fulfill the circle and rot before coming eventually back to life. New qualities are being requested in E's dark world, no heroic act, no claiming, no cheating, just patience and endurance.

In the course of such an inner process, one has to learn to rely on intuition and feeling. There is also a lot of waiting, for the right time, for a sign for the next move. Surrendering to a higher power, showing endurance and fortitude are certainly no patriarchal virtues expected from the warrior. But aren't these just what is required during child birth ? Many women

report their feeling towards the end of labor at the paroxysm of the pain of being as close to death as to life, not even concerned about the final outcome, whether life or death. The process develops in close connection to bodily functions, to bowels, after, menstruation and sexuality, to smells and sounds. We have learned in early childhood that these things were evil, base, dirty, ugly, vulgar, foul smelling etc. and most of us have kept the habit of ignoring and repressing our sensations on that level. So at this point a whole bundle of negative feelings: repulsion, shame, guilt etc. has to be overcome if we are to get further. Nancy Friday has analyzed with great insight the influence exerted by the unconscious messages of the mother to the daughter in this matter.

At best, sex is an anxious business. Now that we're married, the center of life shifts from the troublesome vagina, out here to home, church, family. Life is pleasant. Why do we feel there is a void at its heart?

That so many women give up on men after pursuing them all our lives, cannot just be that men fail us. Perhaps we are as bloody minded as they. We say they fuck us and leave us. But once we've gotten them to father our children, don't we lose interest in the penis that has served what we see as its prime function?

"If we can repress and police a young girl enough about her genitals", says Jessie Potter, "she'll never find them. Even if she does, she is going to have had so many negative messages, she will have been anesthetized from knees to belly button. After we've taught her that part of her body is so awful you can't even call it by name, that it smells bad and she'd better not even look at it, then we tell her she must save it for the man she loves. Women must be pardoned for being less than enthusiastic about such a gift."

(...) "One thing mothers tend to do", says pioneer sex educator Dr. Mary S. Calderone, "is to get between their child's body and the child's self. (...) Eventually they get between the child and her [the child's] desire to touch and enjoy her genitals. We interpose ourselves: we forget that we don't own that child's body. *She* [the child] owns her body and our efforts should be limited to helping *her* socialize her own control of it. Early, rigid training lays the groundwork for later feeling that sexuality is wrong, enjoyment of the body is wrong, masturbation is wrong, intercourse is wrong!"

(Nancy Friday, *My Mother Myself*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1977. 132-133)

Surely women's perception of the feminine is rooted in their mother complex, i.e. in their relationship to their mothers. But then N. Friday makes clear how strongly collective values imposed on their mothers contribute to colour negatively the daughters' perception of the feminine, all the more so as their mothers not only repress their natural sexuality but build up a tight system of rationalization and pretense.

The amount of control menstruation has over our lives is indeed so profound emotionally and physically that we can only deal with it in silence and denial. We douse ourselves with perfume - *against what smell?* We make a fetish of clean, clean, clean underwear - *against what soiling?* After telling me the story of her first day - a memory still alive with anger, pride, accomplishment, whatever - every woman I interviewed, including women doctors, then says "What's there to discuss? It's like fingernails, hair - they grow. It's just a fact of life. What's there to feel?"

(Friday, 149)

To prepare for writing this chapter, I play back a taped interview with Dr. Sanger; I hear myself break up in laughter when he says, "It's a shame more women can't see the beauty of their menstrual cycles. How can a woman not want to learn what's going on in her body? The beauty of the ovaries, the fantastic performance of the Fallopian tube..." On the tape, my voice interrupts, changing the subject. Do you too find his comments nervously funny? What does that say about us as women?

(Friday, 150-151)

The psychoanalysts Nancy Chodorow and Lucie Irigaray believe that daughters have in the pre-oedipal phase until 2 a privileged relationship from same to same to their mothers and make therefore the experience of an archaic, complete recognition. This special, feminine recognition has then to be repressed or devalued and to give way to the patriarchal definition of the feminine. If Betty De Shong Meador is right when she regards in this complete recognition the experience of the archetypal feminine, it would mean that for practically all women the search for the feminine means in fact a return to familiar ground, an uncovering

of long gone memories. The experience of the feminine they will bring up to light will bear the specific qualities of the mother's own relationship to her body.

As the process deepens and lasts, things may become confusing and distressing. It is very important to find appropriate ways of expressing oneself. It can be through talking to someone trustworthy or writing, or non-verbally through painting, sand play, dancing etc.

The Return

Inanna comes back from her journey another person. She has been given a task – watched over by these disgusting demons. She will have to designate her successor in the underworld. She will point to Dumuzi whose arrogance has angered her, thus sacrificing herself the pleasurable love-making of her spouse every other half of the year, resulting in the bare season. Her happiness has now been given limitations, her love for her spouse will be mixed with the grief of having to part from him. This is what the ultimate wisdom of the Great Goddess is about: learning to renounce the youthful dream of perfection, happiness and powerfulness and accepting limitations and constant change.

Sylvia Perera and Betty De Shong Meador have pondered about the eyes of death as the gift of the Great Goddess to Inanna on her return to the upper world. These eyes are clear and unflinching. They know about death – I's own – and will not be fooled. They acknowledge the necessities of nature, see things as they are, no matter how painful.

Another gift of the Great Goddess is to be found in the ending of the story. Dumuzi's sister comes out as the truly matured feminine. Geshtinanna has had pity on her brother and decides of her own will to take his place in one half of the year so that both of them will share their lives between the upper and the underworld. Unlike Dumuzi and Inanna, his sister has not only shown compassion but has also readily accepted the necessary round of life and death, the constant oscillation between consciousness and unconscious, action and passivity. She relates lovingly to the masculine while remaining in contact with her own depths.

On one's return of this search, things do not look the same any more and one's reactions change, also to men. One's sensitiveness is sharpened, feeling and thinking habits are being scrutinized. In her story *She Unnames Them*, Ursula Le Guin describes such a process of watching for one's conventional words while keeping in contact with one's true feelings. Eve leaves Adam after having taken the names of all animals and plants away

I'm going now. With the –“ I hesitated, and finally said “With them, you know,” and went on out. In fact, I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining.

(Ursula Le Guin, “She unnames Them” in: Irene Zahava, Ed., *Hear The Silence*, The Crossing Press, New York, 1986. 194)
