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## KEEPING FAITH WITH LIFE: MOTHER EARTH IN POPULAR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

### Popular Religious Traditions

There is in our time an unprecedented explosion of interest in all facets of the genre religious tradition commonly termed "popular" or "folk".<sup>1</sup> Analyses of the complex reasons for this concern are outside the scope of our present task, but a few tentative observations may be proffered. Every society exhibits divisions and segmentations based on the classification of its members and their activities, functions, and relationships, such as, gender, work, knowledge, and so on. However, it was long a universally common assumption that the meaning of any institution within the society, or the meaning of the society as a whole, was the privileged province of the upper, or elite, levels of the society. Indeed, the idea that social meaning could be gained from any other level, especially, the lower levels of social structure, is a relatively new notion. The setting forth of the notion that a positive and necessary knowledge of society could be gained from its lower levels defined this strata as a locus of interpretation, meaning and value.

The idea that the positive meaning of a society is represented by the "common people," "the folk," may be seen as an expression of "cultural primitivism," the dissatisfaction of the civilized with the quality and style of civilization and the expression of a desire to return for orientation to the archaic roots of the culture. This "discovery of the people," to use Peter Burke's apt phrase, began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe. The philosophical justification for this orientation can be seen in the writings of Giovanni Battista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>2</sup> Probably more than any others, these

1. To avoid the misleading and pejorative adjective "primitive," many observers now use expressions - not entirely satisfactory - such as "peasant," "primal," "preliterate," "ethnic," etc., to refer to this genre of religious tradition.
2. For interpretations of the philosophical impact of Vico and Herder, Isalah Berlin's *Vico and Herder* (London, 1976) is the best introduction I know.

two thinkers represented new theoretical approaches to the nature of history, religion, and society. It was they who distinguished the notions of the *popolari* and the *volk* as the basis for an alternate and new meaning of humanism apart from the rationalising and civilising processes set in motion by the European Enlightenment.

In this context, the notion of popular religion is associated with the discovery of archaic forms, and it is at this level that the meaning of popular religion forms a continuum with both primal religions and peasant and folk cultures in all parts of the world. The continuum is based on structural similarities defined by the organic nature of all these types of societies rather than upon historical or genetic causation.

Primal and peasant/folk societies tend to be, relatively speaking, demographically small. The relationships among people in these societies were thought to be personal in nature. Underlying all modes of communication is an intuitive or empathetic understanding of the ultimate nature and purpose of life.

This is what Herder meant by "the organic mode of life," an idea given methodological precision by the social philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies, who made a typological distinction between communities ordered in terms of *gemeinschaft* and those expressing a *gesellschaft* orientation to life and the world.<sup>3</sup> *Gemeinschaft* represents community as organic form; *gesellschaft* is society as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. A similar distinction is made by the anthropologist Robert Redfield when he describes preurban cultures as those in which the moral order predominates over the technical order.<sup>4</sup> The moral order, in this interpretation, is the common understanding of the ultimate nature and purpose of life within the community. The notions of the organic nature of community, or *gemeinschaft* and the primacy of the moral order lead to different meanings of the religious life in primal and folk or peasant cultures as compared to societies in urban *gesellschaft* orientations. Further-more, the relationship or the distinction between the religious and the cognitive within the two kinds of societies differ.

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3. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Association*, trans. and ed. Charles P. Loomis (London, 1955).

4. See Robert Redfield, *The Little Community* (Chicago, 1956).

While it can be said that religion is present when a distinction is made between the sacred and the profane, the locus of this distinction in primal and folk/peasant cultures is a commonly shared one. There is a unified sense of those objects, actions, sentiments that are sacred and those that are profane. The religious and the moral orders tend to be synonymous; thus, the expression of religious faith on the ordinary and extraordinary levels of these cultures form a continuum. The extraordinary expressions are those that commemorate important punctuations of the temporal and social cycles, for instance, a new year, the harvest and first fruits, birth, marriage, and death. The ordinary modes are expressed in customs, traditions, and mundane activities that maintain the culture on a daily basis.

One of the goals of the early studies of folk, peasant, and popular cultures was to come to an understanding of the qualitative meaning of religion in human cultures of this kind. Attention was focussed on the meaning of custom and tradition, on the one hand, and on the qualitative meaning and mode of transmission of the traditional values in cultures that are not predominantly literate.

The two early innovators, Herder and especially Vico, had already emphasised the modes and genres of language of the nonliterate. Vico based his entire philosophical corpus on the origin and development of language, or, to be more exact, of rhetoric. By the term *rhetoric* Vico made reference to the manner in which language was produced as a mode of constituting bonds between human beings, the world and other beings outside the community. Closely related to Herder's philosophy of culture and history is the work of the Grimm brothers in the philological studies of the Germanic languages.<sup>5</sup> Their collection of fairy tales, *Marchen*, and folk tales represents the beginning of serious scholarly study of oral traditions. In the work of the Grimms, the first articulation of the relationship between genres of oral literature and modes of transmission are raised. This relationship is important, for, given the presupposed organic form of nonliterate societies, the genres of transmission of ultimate meaning, whether ordinary or extra-

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5. Though highly critical of the Grimm brothers, scholarship and methodology, John M. Ellis' *One Fairy Story Too Many* (Chicago, 1983) is nevertheless useful for understanding the impact of the Grimm brothers on the study of modern literature.

ordinary, defined the locus of the religious. The romantic notion – present in Herder and in the theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich – namely that religion is the ultimate ground and substance of culture, underlies the importance given to transmission, manifestation, and expression of this form of culture as religion. Religion is thus understood to be pervasive in society and culture, finding its expression not only in religious institutions, but in all dimensions of cultural life.

The genres of the folk tale, folk song, art and myth became the expressive forms of popular religion. The investigation of poetic meaning and wisdom, and of metaphorical, symbolic expressions, emerged as sources of the religious sentiment in the traditions of popular religion. The initial "discovery of the people" as an approach to the interpretation of culture and society, and as a new form of human value was made under the aegis of intuitive methods within literary studies and from the perspective of a speculative philosophy of history. Once serious scholarly attention was given to the data of the popular, however, certain ambiguities were noted. The original discovery of the people was based, by and large, on a contrast between the popular and the urban, or the artificiality of the urban mode was a form of civilisation. In this sense, the popular represented the archaic and original forms of culture; it was its roots. However, the meaning of the popular could not be limited to the conservative, value-retaining, residual, self-contained unit of a society or culture. One of the basic elements in the meaning of a popular cultural tradition was the mode of its transmission, and it was precisely this element that allowed the meaning of such a tradition to be extended beyond that of the nonliterate strata of society – the rural peasants and the folk.

Critical investigations of the meaning of popular culture and religion from the disciplinary orientations of the anthropology and history of religion, and from the sociology of knowledge, have revealed a wide variety of the forms of popular religion. From the anthropological and historical perspectives, one is able to delineate and describe the characteristic modes of experience and expression of religion at the various levels of the cultural strata, and to show the dynamics of the interrelationships of the popular forms with other cultural strata. The sociology of knowledge provides an understanding of the genesis, contents, and mode of thought and imagination present in popular religion, and demonstrates how various strata within a social order participate in the values, meanings, and structures of popular religion. But I digress from our central concern.

Though scholarly, disciplinary approaches led to a more precise definition of the popular, and to a critique of the original meaning of the popular and popular religion, such studies have also brought about a proliferation of different meanings and interpretations of popular religion.<sup>6</sup> However, for the purposes of our present enquiry we shall understand popular religion as that which is identical with the organic - usually rural and peasant form of a society. The religious and moral orders are also identical. In this sense popular religion is closely related to the meanings of "primal" and "folk" religion.

This is the original meaning of popular religion, as the religion of folk/peasant culture. Though the distinction between folk/peasant religion and the religion of the urban areas is clear-cut in the industrial periods of all cultures, such a distinction does not simply rest on this basis. In feudal periods of various cultures the elite classes, in order to control events not only in politics and economics, but also on the religious scene, participated in and controlled a form of literacy that was confined within these upper classes. In various cultures, this meant access to an orientation of religious meaning revolving around sacred texts couched in classical languages.<sup>7</sup>

The limitation of the modes of literacy seem to suggest, however, that though there are authoritative sacred texts, they are situated in a context that is often dominated by illiteracy and oral traditions. Certainly, the line of demarcation between the culture of literacy and that

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6. Popular religion has been understood as the religion of the laity in a religious community, in contrast to that of the clergy. Or again, it has been seen as the pervasive beliefs, rituals, and values of a society; a kind of civil religion or religion of the public, *a la* Bellah. Others have taken popular religion to be an amalgam of esoteric beliefs and practices differing from the common or civil religion, but usually located in the lower strata of society. Yet another interpretation of popular religion is that of the religion of a subclass or minority group in a culture. Popular religion is also seen as the religion of the masses in opposition to the religion of the sophisticated, discriminating, and learned within a society. C.W.E. Bigsby, ed. *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1976) presents an illuminating group of essays which demonstrate the ambiguity and difficulty of formulating a clear definition of the meaning of popular culture.

7. To point to the Confucian classics in China, the Sanskritic literary tradition in our own culture, the Biblical tradition of Palestine or the Our'anic tradition of Arabia, and so on is to indicate the obvious.

of the oral traditions is seldom clear-cut. In many cases, the traditions of literacy embody a great deal of the content, form, and style of the commoner oral traditions.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if clear demarcations between folk and elite religions are not insisted on, and if one looks at levels where religions maintained their vitality and creativity, the development seems to follow a circular, rather than linear course. Local beliefs and practices are reinterpreted and codified by the elites and then, in more elaborate form, superimposed on the original local religious tradition. Thus, on the one hand, local beliefs and practices gain legitimacy through the acceptance and patronage by the elites and, on the other, normative religions are kept alive by local practices. Prior to the universalisation of modes of literacy in many cultures, the prestige of literacy was to be found in the belief in and regard for the sacred text, which itself was considered to have a supernatural, authoritative meaning in addition to the content of its particular writings. The written words of the god or gods (the authoritative canonical text) resided with, and was under the control of elites within the culture.

Another characteristic of folk/peasant societies is that they define the lives of their members within the context of a certain ecological niche – agricultural, pastoral, and so on – and the modes and genres of their existence are attached to this context by ties of tradition and sentiment. The group and the ecological structure thus define a continuity of relationships. The sentiment and the moral order of communities of this kind are synonymous with the meaning of their religion. In agricultural folk/peasant cultures, the rhythms of the agricultural seasons are woven into the patterns of human relationships and sociability. The symbols and archetypes of religion are expressions of the alternation and integration of the human community, the techniques of production, and the reality of the natural world. In most cultures, this type of popular religion carries the connotation of religion as *ab origine* and archaic. Robert Redfield has suggested that the folk/peasant mode of life is an enduring

8. The number of studies which demonstrate this is large and growing. B.K. Sarkar, *The Folk Element in Hindu Culture*. (London, 1917) is an early and pioneering study. More recently, one could cite, for example, Abraham Ayyrookuzhiel, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism*. (Bangalore, 1983); Fred Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan*. (The Hague, 1978); A. Eschmann, H. Kulke, G.C. Tripathi (eds.), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, (New Delhi, 1978); Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, vols. 1 & 2. (Chicago; 1988 & 1991); Sitakant Mahapatra, ed., *The Realm of the Sacred*. (Delhi, 1992); G. Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. (Chicago, 1984).

structure of human community found in every part of the world.<sup>9</sup> As such it is not only an empirical datum of a type of human community, but may represent an enduring source of religious and moral values. But our more immediate concern lies elsewhere, in the manner in which folk/peasant religious traditions "keep faith with life," in how they relate to "Mother Earth."

Lest this seem simple and straightforward, however, we need to give heed to Mircea Eliade's contention that, in fact, the initial consciousness of the religious significance of the earth was probably "indistinct".<sup>10</sup> Sacredness seems not to have been localised in the earth as such, but encompassed a whole complex of hierophanies in nature as it lay around – earth, stones, trees, water, everything. The primary intuition of the earth as a "religious form" was likely the entire cosmos, the repository of a whole panoply of sacred forces. All that is on earth is united with everything else, and all make up one great whole.

Indeed, the basic cosmic structure of these elemental intuitions makes it difficult, almost impossible, for us to discern the constituent of earth as such. People lived in their surroundings as a whole, and it is extremely perplexing to distinguish, in such intuitions, that which pertains distinctly to the earth from that which is merely manifested through the earth – mountains, forests, water, vegetation, and so forth. Nevertheless, Eliade argues, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that these primary intuitions, whose religious nature has already been indicated, appear as "forms". That is to say that they "reveal realities," they "obtrude" themselves, they "strike" the mind. The earth, with all it supports and contains, has probably been seen from the earliest of times as an inexhaustible fount of existences, and of existences what reveal themselves directly to human beings.

The case for the cosmic character of the hierophany of the earth, prior to its being truly chthonian – probably with the emergence of agriculture – depends on the history of beliefs concerning the origin of children.<sup>11</sup> Before the physiological causes of conception were known, people thought that maternity resulted from the direct introduction

9. See the chapter on "Anthropology and the Primitive Community" (I) in Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, 1956).

10. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland, 1967), pp. 242 ff.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

of the child into a woman's womb. Whether seed, or fully developed fetus, the point is that children were not conceived by their father, but by woman's contact with some natural object or animal. We shall have more to say about this.

### **Feminine Sacrality**

Attributing gender to manifestations of sacred power in the world has been a longstanding human practice. In his massive and provocative study of feminine symbols and divinities the analytical psychologist Erich Neumann<sup>12</sup> distinguished two fundamental aspects of feminine power that such symbols and divinities manifest; on the one hand this power is source, giving rise to the multiple forms of life, while on the other it is process, an agent of growth and transformation. We intend both in the present investigation. Generally, then, such manifestations are said to be "feminine" when they function in ways analogous to women's most common modes of physiological and/or cultural activity. That which contains, as does a womb, is commonly considered feminine, particularly if the containment can be perceived as a gestation - for instance, the growth of seeds in the earth. That which nurtures by providing food and shelter or spiritual sustenance, as a mother offers milk and refuge to her child, may also be considered feminine. That which changes may be feminine, especially if it changes periodically, as a woman's body changes through its monthly cycle, or swells in pregnancy with developing life, or replaces its own innocent smoothness in childhood with the voluptuous fullness of maturity, and later replaces this with the flaccidity of old age. Similarly, that which works changes on materials outside itself may be feminine, as a woman's care changes her infant into a self-sufficient child, or as a woman's processing changes raw materials into food and clothing. Feminine symbols and divinities seem to have been especially prominent in the religious traditions of ancient cultures; they continue to be important in folk/peasant societies.

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12. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, 2nd ed. (1963; Princeton, 1972). Neumann's data is embedded in a controversial theory of the evolution of human consciousness; hence the reader needs to remain critically alert. Two valuable collections of essays that update Neumann's information on goddesses are James J. Preston, ed., *Mother Worship* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982) and Carl Olson, ed., *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present* (New York, 1983).



Perhaps the best known, and most frequently cited forms of feminine sacrality have been those connected with that portion of the world at large which produces and reproduces itself without human intervention. Many peoples have experienced this "natural" world as a constellation of powers and realities that both limit human beings and define their opportunities. Often such powers and realities in nature are perceived as female. In fact, the entire natural realm may be experienced as female. People acknowledge such an experience when they speak of "Mother Nature." But the experience of the feminine in nature is more commonly restricted to certain sectors. It seems useful to examine some of the more prominent of these as a way of understanding popular religious experiences/symbols of "Mother Earth." We begin with Earth herself.

### The Earth As Living Mother

According to Basilus Valentinius, the earth (*as prima materia*) is not a dead body, but is inhabited by a spirit that is its life and soul. All created things, minerals included, draw their strength from the earth spirit. This spirit is life, . . . and it gives nourishment to all the living things it shelters in its womb.<sup>13</sup>

Keeping in mind Eliade's observation that, in fact, the initial consciousness of the religious significance of the earth was probably indistinct, it is nevertheless true to point out the common experience of many people in an amazing variety of cultures that the earth is a living organism, and the ultimate source of all other organisms that inhabit its crevices and surface. As such it must be acknowledged as the ultimate womb and mother of us all. Indeed, a great many beliefs, myths and rituals are to be found in popular religious traditions which relate to the earth, its divinities, to the Great Mother. As the foundation, in a sense, of the universe, the earth is endowed with manifold religious significance. It has been / is esteemed because of its permanence, because all things come from it and return to it. If one were to study the history of a single religious tradition, one might manage to state fairly exactly the function and development of its beliefs about the Great Mother. But since we are concerned with a

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13. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 12, (Princeton, 1953) p. 329.

variety of popular religious traditions found in folk/peasant societies and cultures of various parts of the world, we can only look at general principal trends. We shall attempt not only to see the main threads but also to discern a pattern.<sup>14</sup>

We turn initially, yet randomly to the nomadic Baiga tribe of Central India, among whom there are yet remnants of the custom of sowing seeds only in the ashes, after a section of the jungle has been set on fire to clear it. Many among Baiga still feel keenly that it is cruelly wrong to tear their mother's bosom with a plough.

An Identical conviction/sentiment is to be found among the Bhumia, neighbours of the Baiga, who maintain that the practice of shifting cultivation among them is due to the prohibition of wounding the breasts of Mother Earth with a plough. Also, the same Bhumia do not now build houses with fired brick as they are forbidden to burn the Earth Mother in a kiln.<sup>15</sup> This is given as the reason why Bhumia build their houses of sun-dried bricks and cover them with thatch or straw, rather than tile, which also involves firing Earth.

Offerings to Mother Earth are made by both the Bhumia and their fellow tribespeople, the Gonds, on many occasions. Whenever a member of either tribe drinks liquor, a few drops are first spilt on the ground as an offering to the Earth Mother. Again, as part of the agricultural sowing ceremony, a black chicken is sacrificed to Mother Earth by pressing the victim's head in the loose earth until it suffocates. At the time of harvest, a ritual offering to Mother Earth is performed before the new grain is eaten. Further, it is believed that these occasional offerings are not sufficient. After many years of cultivation, the Earth Mother feels exhausted and needs rejuvenation. This can only be achieved by human hecatombs. The tradition is that Mother Earth can only be achieved by human hecatombs. The tradition is that Mother Earth then says to the Great God, "Give me an offering of human

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14. In what follows there will be reference to many and varied beliefs, myths, rites, and so on, drawn from a wide range of sources, including the author's own personal experience. To provide a reference note for each seems, not only tedious, but unnecessary. Hence, citations will be supplied only for direct quotations.

15. This indicates a strong belief persisting in the face of pressures toward modern conformity, as houses constructed of kiln-fired bricks are certainly important status symbols in the villages of Madhya Pradesh.

beings". The Great God causes an earthquake, invariably accompanied by a widespread and deadly contagious disease, from which innumerable people perish. They are not, as usual, burned on the pyre, but buried in the ground, as a fertilising sacrifice to Mother Earth. When the epidemic subsides it can be taken as a sign that the Earth Mother is now satisfied and that the next few years will yield bumper crops. Later in our discussion there will be a further examination of rituals involving human sacrifice.

James Mooney has documented a similar mystical devotion to Mother Earth among the Native American Umatilla tribe. He cites the instance of Smohalla, an Umatilla prophet who enjoined his followers from digging the earth, teaching that it is sin to cut, tear, even scratch, or any other way wound our common mother in the process of farming. He justified his anti-agricultural stance by arguing:

You ask me to plough the ground? Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone? Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?<sup>16</sup>

In the same way some Altaic and Finno-Ugric peoples have thought it a terrible sin to extract grass because it hurt the Earth as much as it would hurt a human being to pluck her/his hair.

Again, Joseph Brown narrates how the Oglala of the upper Great Plains in North America are solemnly admonished: "For the Earth is your Grandmother and Mother and she is sacred. Every step you take on her should be as a prayer".<sup>17</sup> Heeding the admonition, the Oglala regularly pray "O you, Grandmother, from whom all things come, and O you Mother Earth, who bear and nourish all fruits, behold us and listen."<sup>18</sup> Popular perceptions of earth as a living mother are common and widespread.

16. James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," *Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, XIV (Washington, 1896) p. 721, quoted in Eliade, *Patterns*, p. 246.

17. Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (Norman, Okla., 1953) pp. 5-6.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

### Virginal Maternity

There are a great many primal myths which describe a distant time when the Earth produced, or helped create life in the world. But this raises the natural question concerning how the offspring thus born of Mother Earth are first engendered? It seems evident that she does not, in fact, necessarily require a partner to help her produce her children. Thus, Bronislaw Malinowski's acclaimed studies of the Trobriand Islands report myths in which no mention is made of a genitor who fertilises the great genetrix. Nor were Trobriand males believed to fertilise females. Like the Earth from which they were descended, Trobriand women received the spirits of departed ancestors directly into their wombs and returned them to life as children. Man had no part in conception. Both Earth and women accomplished a form of parthenogenesis-virgin birth.

Although this question arguably belongs as much, or more, to ethnology than to the history of religion, it is nevertheless relevant to our discussion. The father was father to his children solely in a legal sense, not biological. Men were related to each other through their mothers only, and that relationship was amply precarious. But they were related to their natural surroundings far more intimately than is possible for our modern, profane minds to conceive. They were literally, and not in a mere allegorical sense, "sons of the soil." Either they were brought by water animals - fish, frogs, crocodiles, swans, cranes, or some such - or they grew among the rocks, in chasms, or in caves. Here again, fecund Earth, the fertility of cosmic being, is represented by specific fruits or forms that take life from her. A human mother simply receives children in their embryonic state. She is the container that assists the larval life of the earth attain a specifically human form. The belief is that the subterranean womb is the true *fons et origo* of life; and once that is understood many other religious beliefs, myths and ritual practices make sense.

For example, Albrecht Dieterich notes, in this connection, the custom in the Abruzzi Region of Italy of placing newly born babies on the earth as soon as they are washed and clothed.<sup>19</sup> The child was subse-

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19. Albrecht Dieterich's *magnum opus*, *Mutter Erde: Ein Versuch Über Volksreligion*, (1905), 3rd ed. (Leipzig, 1925) is basically a defense of the thesis that rites of birth and death can be explained as functions of a fundamental belief, a primitive and universal given in the history of religions.

quently picked up by the father. Similar observances take place among the Scandinavians, the Germans, the Japanese, and the Parsis of India. Dieterich interprets this rite as a way of dedicating the child to the Earth, its true mother, and the recognition of this fact by the father. Some argue that the placing of a baby on the ground does not necessarily imply any descent from the Earth, nor even any consecration to the Earth Mother, but is simply intended to make contact with the magical powers in the soil. Still others contend that the rite is meant to procure for the child a soul, the source of which is Earth. However, the interpretations are only superficially contradictory, as all are based on the same primordial understanding that Earth is the source at once of power, of souls, and of fecundity.

Lying on the ground for childbirth is a custom found frequently and among a great many peoples. Among the Gurions of the Caucasus, and in some parts of China, women lie on the ground as soon as the pains of childbirth begin, so that they will be on the ground when their child is born. The Maori women of New Zealand have their children beside a stream, in the bushes. Among many African, North and South American, Australian and South Asian tribes it is usual for women to give birth in forest or field, squatting on the ground. The basic meaning of this very widespread ritual is undoubtedly the maternity of Earth. Indeed, it seems clear that the conception and birth of human individuals are perceived as scaled-down versions of the creative process performed by the earth since the beginning of time. Human mothers simply repeat that successful first act by which life first appeared in the womb of Mother Earth. In this way human mothers partake as fully as possible of Earth's powers and remain under her protection. Earth Mother must be the one who gives birth to every human being.

### **Androgynous/Hierogamous Maternity**

We must recall once again that the role of earth is frequently indistinct. In cosmogonic myths, chaos often represents the perfect totality, the undifferentiated unity, on which all subsequent existence bases itself. In fact, every beginning must commence in the wholeness of being. In such circumstances - those of androgyny - the creative role of earth is obscure but discernible. Earth exists "in germ".

Such is the case in the well known Japanese myth of Izanagi and Izanami. In the beginning heaven and earth were inseparably mingled. The male (heaven) and female (earth) principles formed a perfect androgynous totality within an egglike chaos. Eventually, a tiny, amorphous island was precipitated out of the chaos. In this island was a reed, a development of the germ that first existed at the centre of the cosmic egg. The reed was the first articulate transformation undertaken by the earth, and it generated a number of divine beings. Later, when heaven and earth separated definitely from one another they took on human forms of a man and a woman, Izanagi and Izanami. The union of the two generated the world. When the woman died giving birth to the fire god, the deities of local places, hearths and vegetation arose from her body.

For the moment we focus on the first stage of creation and on the incipient, androgynous being that embraces the sacred powers of the earth. These are not yet clearly defined, but they include all possibilities of life. As such, the divine androgyny, in which earth shares at the most primordial stage of creation is the ultimate ground of all.

Perhaps the most lavish, and numerous myths depicting the role of earth in creation are those that describe a marriage between heaven and earth. Myths of this sort are reported all the way from Oceania, through Asia, the Americas, Africa to Europe. When heaven encounters earth, life flows forth in innumerable forms. Indeed, the union of heaven and earth is a fundamental act of creation; it generates life on a cosmic and biological scale. The Japanese myths concerning Izanami indicate that the conceptions of androgyny, parthenogenesis and hierogamy are related and often even overlap one another. All of these images, which are expressions of a *coincidentia oppositorum*, struggle to express the notion of creativity and of the cosmic fecundity of the earth. According to Maori tradition, *in illo tempore*, to borrow Eliade's now classic expression, the sky, Rangi, and the earth Papa were locked together in perpetual sexual union. Their children longed for the light of day, and in the eternal darkness of their earthen womb, they plotted a way to separate their parents. Eventually their children severed the bonds that tied heaven to earth and pushed their father into the air until light appeared.

Creation by the coupling of a primeval pair, Heaven and Earth, is one of the leitmotifs of universal mythology. In some places one also meets the motif of the sky and earth separated by force. In Tahiti, for instance, it is believed that this was effected by a plant which, by growing raised the sky. We find the primeval couple also in Africa; for instance the Nzambi and Nzambi-Mpungu of the Bawili tribe in the Gabon, Olorun and Oduna among the Yoruba of Nigeria. In an interesting, if uncommon reversal, the Egyptians had a goddess, Nut, to represent the sky (the term for sky being feminine), and a god Geb, for the earth.

In North American Zuni accounts is to be found a rather more developed myth. The creator Awonawilono, contained all being within himself. At first he existed alone in the universe, but then changed himself into the sun and produced two seeds from his own substance. With these he inseminated the waters. Under his warmth, the sea turned green and grew in size until it became the Earth Mother on the one hand and the all-covering Sky Father on the other. These cosmic twins coupled to produce the countless numbers of creatures. After many complications, the sun, and the first ancestors he created managed to free the creatures germinating in the dark womb of the earth. Previously they had crawled over one another like reptiles, hissing and spitting out indecent words. Eventually, when the sky was lifted off the earth, these children escaped along a ladder to freedom and light.

In myths of hierogamy, a sacred union with heaven, often symbolised by lightning, hail or rain, is indispensable to the fruitfulness of the earth. It also serves as the model of fruitful human marriage. Hierogamy explains creation from some primordial whole that precedes it. The separation of heaven from heaven is the first cosmogonic act, the fundamental shearing of primordial unity.

### **Myths and Rites of Emergence**

But Earth's motherhood is not to be taken as metaphor only. There are in a great variety of cultures numerous myths which maintain that human beings and other creatures first emerged out of a womb in her depths. The Oglala, for example, relate how the people were initially tricked into leaving their Earth-womb as a result of a conspiracy between Inktomi, the crafty Spider, and Anukite, the double-faced Deer Woman, the paradigmatic Oglala seductress. It seems that Inktomi

and Anukite enticed the people out of the depths with gifts of meat and clothing, and promises of unending prosperity. But then winter came, the buffalo grew scarce, and the people could not find their way back into the womb.

Similarly, the Mohawk relate how human beings were once confined in the dark womb of the Earth, without sunlight and in a strange form. One day, during a hunt, one of the intraterrestrials accidentally discovered a hole that led to the surface of the earth. On the surface, this huntsman secured a deer. Drawn by the good tasting game and the fine countryside, the subterranean creatures decided to emerge into the light of day. Only the groundhog remained in the earth. Similarly, Peruvian aborigines believed that they were descended from mountains and stones.

The previously mentioned studies of the Trobriand Islands report that peoples of each village traced their ancestry to a sister and brother who had come out of a hole in the ground in that village's vicinity. In West Africa, the Ashanti, likewise, claim that their ancestors had come from holes in the earth.

Frequently a people identifies a cave or grotto within its ancestral territory as its own place of origin. Thus, for example, the North American Oglala, to whom we have formerly referred, tell how their ancestors emerged at Wind Cave in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Again, Armenian peasants thought Earth was the "maternal womb," from which human beings emerged. Indeed, it is beliefs such as this which may have been responsible for the great cave sanctuaries of Paleolithic times. The sections of these caves which bear splendid paintings of animals and the hunt are quite frequently difficult to access and located some distance from the entrance. This has led some to argue that these caverns may have been utilised for some sort of "birthing" from the earth.

Certainly, since Paleolithic times caves have been preferred places for many rites of passage. Symbols of passage into another world, they are the scene of initiation rites for shamans - among Australian medicine men, among the Araucanian of Chile, among the Inuit (Eskimo), among indigenous people of North America, and the tribal people of Central India. The *iruntarinia*, or "spirits" of Central Australia create a medicine man when a Aranda candidate goes to sleep at the mouth of a cave; he is dragged into it by one of the spirits and



dismembered, and his internal organs are exchanged for others. For instance, a fragment of rock crystal, important to shamanic power in Oceania and the Americas, is placed in his body, which is then returned to the village.<sup>20</sup>

A number of North American tribes have developed complex emergence myths which describe how the people evolved into higher and higher levels of refinement as they ascended through a succession of wombs before finally emerging on the face of the earth. Hopi mythology tells of three worlds under the earth where the Hopi lived with the Ant People before they found their way up to the fourth, or present, world. The Zuni, with the same traditions, call the place of emergence *hepatina*, or "middle place," and the last world—which they classify as still underground—the "fourth womb". The modern *kiva* of these and other Pueblo tribes is an artificial cave, the ceremonial centre of the village, in which there is also a small hole in the ground, symbolic of the place of emergence. Maze designs, symbols of the Earth Mother, found in a number of primal cultures, also represent the myth of emergence.

These myths and rites of emergence from the earth illustrate the extent to which Earth is seen as Mother. In fact, the gestation of the fetus and the act of parturition are viewed as recapitulations of the cosmic birth of humankind and the creation of life in general, when human beings emerged from the deepest chambers of the earth. Within the earth humanity lived an embryonic existence; for that matter, all the forms of creation existed as embryos within the earth. All living beings passed through the various stages of development in a "ripening" process that is not yet complete. For that reason the fruits of the earth reflect different degrees of transmutation.

This passage from the darkness of unconscious and preformal life to articulate form through emergence becomes a model for many human activities. When cultures wish to create something new, restore something worn, or regenerate a being, they reenact the pattern that was powerful enough to produce life in the first

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20. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. rev. & enl. ed. (New York, 1964), pp. 46, 139.

place: Rites of initiation into a society are excellent examples of this. The act of procreation and birth of individual human beings in a culture is considered a reenactment of the primordial drama of emergence. The condition of the unborn child parallels the preexistence of humanity in the Earth's womb. Every fetal child relives the primal experience of humanity through its signs - darkness, water, enclosure, larval form, and so on. In other words, in and through emergence myths cultures recognise that every individual possesses a firsthand experience of the entire significant history of humanity. The human mother and her fertile powers are brought radically within the compass and sacredness of the great Earth Mother.

### **Myths and Rites of Death and Regeneration**

As a form of regenerative darkness, Earth, in her sacredness and fertility, includes the reality of death. This is evident in a good bit of popular ritual activity. We have seen how by being in touch with the earth human mothers repeat the successful first act by which life first appeared in the womb of Mother Earth. But placement on the earth is also an integral part of healing rites. Sick persons are restored to health when they are recreated anew, remade in the image of ancestral beings in their primordial situation within the earth. In both India and China it is a common practice to place a dying person on the ground, for Earth represents powers both of birth and rebirth to a new existence. Another example of this is to be seen among the Huichol of Mexico, who on pilgrimage to Wirikuta, their place of mythic origins, stop at pools of water that open into the creative depths of the earth. The healer asks patients, especially barren women, to stretch out full length on the ground so as to be intimately in contact with the powerful body of the Earth Mother.

The reality of death encompasses not only human beings. This is evident in some myths of creation in which Earth herself appears as a primordial victim of destruction, for example, through deluge, conflagration, earthquake, and so forth, but especially through sacrifice or even self-sacrifice. In such circumstances, however, the fertility of the earth is never suppressed, for from the immolated or dismembered remains spring the species of plants, animals, and the races of humankind. The mystery of creation of plants through the sacrifice of an earth goddess was frequently reenacted in agrarian rituals.

Most often, ritual sacrifices associated with the fertility of earth have been symbolic or used an animal or fowl as the victim. There is, however, evidence of actual sacrifice of human beings by certain peoples of Central and North America, in some parts of Africa, a few Pacific Islands, and some tribes in India. Such was the case, for example, among the Khonds of Eastern India who offered sacrifices to the Earth Mother, Tari Pennu.<sup>21</sup> The voluntary victim – a person who had lived in the community for a number of years, was married and had fathered children – was known as the *meriah*. He was either bought from his parents, or was born of parents who had themselves been victims. In the days preceding his sacrifice the *meriah* was ritually identified with the sacrificed divinity and was revered through anointing, decoration, and often orgiastic dancing. The actual sacrifice took place in a virgin forest, where Tari Pennu was first addressed. "O God we offer you this sacrifice. Give us good crops, good weather, and good health." In the presence of representatives of every village in the area, the *meriah* was slain, after which a priest distributed pieces of the sacrificed body to the delegates. These fragments were swiftly taken to all the villages and ceremonially buried in the fields. The remnants were burned and the ashes spread over plowed fields to guarantee a plentiful harvest. Other similar examples are to be had in the maize rites of the Aztecs of Mexico, the Pawnees of North America, and certain African tribes, who also place segments of a sacrificed victim in agricultural fields.

In these sacrifices there is a ritual reenactment of the creation scenario, in which the violent death of a primordial earth gave rise to new forms of life. Out to pieces, the victim's body is identified with the mythic being whose death gave life.

### The Grim Aspect of Mother Earth

Thus far we have concentrated on positive aspects of Mother Earth – her role in producing life and nourishing growth. But in

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21. Based on the description given in Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 344–45, which was in turn drawn from the work of James G. Frazer, cf. *The Golden Bough*, abridged. (London, 1957), pp. 571–2. It is well to recall a perceptive assessment of *The Golden Bough*, also cited by Eliade: "Negligible as theory, indispensable as a collection of material on primitive religion."

exploring notions of Earth as feminine power one discovers what some would perceive as a darker aspect. The mother who brings forth life also reabsorbs it into herself as the dread goddess who rules the subterranean land of the dead. Moreover, the terrible aspect is not merely a product of association with the bowels of the Earth Mother. Rather it is the other side of the processes of growth and transformation that we have clearly seen associated with Earth. For life and growth inevitably entail death and decay. Indeed, many of the terrifying aspects of the Earth Mother, in the form of the goddess of death or the recipient of violent sacrifices, are firmly rooted in her status as the universal womb. Death itself is not an annihilation, but rather the state of the seed in the bosom of Earth. This helps to explain why in so many cultures bodies of the dead are buried, and especially in fetal positions. These "embryos" are expected to come back to life.

In all of this, a trio reflecting the horrors implicit in the Aztec cult of war and human sacrifice is instructive. But first, to understand their role as the dark side of the same process that generates life, one must understand the Aztec presupposition that human sacrifice was necessary to replenish the swiftly waning vitality of the cosmos, and that war was also necessary to provide victims for the sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> Coatlicue, or "snake skirt," was mother to the war god Huitzilopochtli. She wears a skirt of writhing snakes from which, of course, she derives her name. Her hands are the heads of serpents, and her feet are the claws of a predatory bird. She is headless, with twin spurts of blood gushing from her neck into the mouths of waiting rattlesnakes. Closely related to Coatlicue is Cihuacoatl, or "snake woman," said to "preside over and personify the collective hunger of the gods for human victims." She was also sometimes designated the war god's mother, for she incited the wars over which he presided. In Aztec iconography, the lower jaw of her gaping mouth is that of a bare human skeleton. Her clothes and body are the chalky white of a heap of bleached bones. She prowls at night shrieking and screaming insanely; on her back is the knife of sacrifice, swaddled like an Aztec babe. This knife is itself a transformation of the third terrible goddess, Itzpapalotl, or "obsidian knife butterfly. She wears a skirt fringed

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22. See Burr C. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun* (Austin, Texas, 1979), pp. 170, ff.

with knives and has the wings and tail of a bird. Similarly, her hands and feet have a predatory bird's sharp talons.

High above the plains of Central India is situated Maihar, the hilltop home of earthy Shardamai. She possesses devotees and causes them to do various things they would not ordinarily do. The writer once watched with horror as a young man cut off the tip of his tongue as an offering to the goddess. She is also said to change into a beautiful young woman, seducing men who withered and died after they had intercourse with her. Even if a man not leave the heights of her abode by dusk, it is believed, he will not live to see the light of another day. The ambiguity of response to the power of Earth—the recognition that it holds both constructive and destructive potential—is clearly evident in the dark side of Mother Earth.

### **Cosmic Solidarity of Life**

Finally, then, sufficient evidence has been marshalled to appreciate that popular religious imagery of Mother Earth engenders a kinship among all forms of life, for they are all generated in the same matrix. The intimate relationship between Earth and human, animal, and vegetal life forms inheres in the popular religious realisation that the life force is identical in all of them. They are all united on the biological plane; their fates, consequently are intertwined. Pollution or sterility on one level of existence affects all other modes of life. Because of their common origin, all life-forms constitute a whole. Unlike the sacredness of the sky, which appears vividly in the myths of the separation of the sky from the creaturely forms dependent on it, there is no rupture between the Earth and the forms she engenders.

Furthermore, Earth protects the existence of all life in myriad forms, and safeguards against abuses, such as incest or murder, that threaten the good order of generation and regeneration. Orgiastic behaviour is restricted to decisive moments of the ritual calendar. During the rest of the time, the Earth Mother is often patroness of morality and a guardian of the norms conducive to fruitful existence. In some cases, as in ancient Greece, the shedding of blood on Earth and incest could render her barren, with catastrophic consequences. Thus, at the opening of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, a priest laments the fate of Thebes because women suffer birth pangs without living issue, and the fruits of the earth and the oxen in the fields are dying, as, indeed, is the city itself.